

Chapter Nineteen

The house on Union Street came fully stocked with food and drinks. I asked Rabbi Gutmacher to make sure no people came to pay their respects until the following afternoon. June and I had a light lunch and went to sleep. I woke up after dark. June was still asleep. I roamed the house for an hour or two, unable to get away from my thoughts. There was a pile of newspapers on the coffee table in the living room, but I could not bear to look at them. It was surreal.

After a while, I stumbled back to bed and slept until morning. When I awoke, I found June fully dressed and ready to go to her office. She didn't want to cancel her patient appointments. She prepared a nice breakfast and promised to return in the evening. Pedro would drive her back and forth.

In the afternoon, Rabbi Gutmacher informed me via email that he had posted instructions in the synagogues that the doors would not be open to the public until Tuesday. He asked, however, if he could come with a few important members of the Lubavitch community later that afternoon, and I said yes. I really didn't want to be alone. I was rested and bored. And I wanted to talk about David.

Rabbi Gutmacher arrived with two older men with white beards. I sat in a low chair that had been set up for me, and the men sat in a semicircle around me. No one said a word. They just sat there silently. I didn't understand it. Did they come just to look at me?

"Why doesn't anyone say anything?" I asked after a while.

"According to Jewish tradition," said Rabbi Gutmacher, "the mourner speaks first. A visitor could offer a well-intentioned word of consolation and unwittingly cause the mourner pain. It is safer just to respond."

"You mean something like God takes the good ones?"

“Exactly.”

“I understand. Why don’t you tell me about David as you knew him? This was his life at its end, and I want to know as much about it as I can. David will live forever in my memory. This part cannot be missing.”

The conversation began with David’s time in Crown Heights, but it soon veered to the worsening political situation in the United States. My visitors were intelligent and informed. The discussion went deep into the psychological causes of antisemitism and racial bigotry.

One of the men asked what percentage of American whites were supremacists, either overtly or by unspoken agreement. I speculated that it might be as much as ten percent. He suggested that closer to ninety percent were supremacist sympathizers at least to some degree. I hadn’t seen it from personal experience, but perhaps racial epithets and supremacist sympathies would not be voiced in front of a Jew by middle-class and upper-class people. How could I know what they were saying behind closed doors?

The next two days were exhausting. June had cleared her appointments to stay and take care of me. The house was crowded from morning until late at night. My only respite was the few times that June tore me away to eat something and take a breather.

I didn’t really want a breather. I would never get another opportunity like this. Like a parched traveler in the desert, I drank in wonderful reminiscences of David by friends, neighbors and rabbis. The young men who were with David in Nepal for Passover told numerous stories about the inspiring experience. A cell phone on the table captured every word spoken during the whole time; unfortunately, it reminded me of the meeting with the township committee in Hesterville and made me sad.

Wednesday evening, Pedro drove June and me to Margaret’s house in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn. My entire surviving family was there. Margaret and Gerald sat on a sofa in the den and greeted friends, neighbors and colleagues who came to pay their respects. Margaret looked drawn and sleep-deprived. Her eyes were red and puffy. But she mustered the strength

to be gracious to her visitors. Gerald looked dazed and disoriented, offering only muttered monosyllabic responses to remarks addressed to him. I assumed he was sedated. Margaret was not.

After the door closed behind the last visitor, the family remained together in the den. No one spoke for a while.

Margaret broke the silence. "How is it going in Crown Heights, Dad?" she said. There was a resentful edge in her voice, as if I was usurping her prerogative to be the principal mourner.

"It's been exhausting," I said, "but rewarding. The house was crowded all day with people telling stories about David. There was a lot about Nepal. I have everything recorded."

Her eyes opened wide. "Can you send me the audio?"

"Of course."

She bit her lower lip. "You know, Dad, I still blame you. You got him involved with Hesterville, and look where it led. I've lost my baby, my only child, my reason for living." She fought back her tears. "But I admit, after the fact, that holding the funeral in Crown Heights was the right thing. I've never seen such a funeral. It was a historic event. A real martyr's funeral. It gave my David honor. Maybe his life was not completely wasted, but it was unfairly cut short. We shouldn't be sitting here mourning him. It's not right. It's not —" Her voice broke, and she buried her face in her hands.

My father cleared his throat. "Margaret, sweetheart, maybe we should talk about other things."

She looked up, her face wet with tears. "Other things? What other things? Should we talk about the weather? The elections?" She stopped herself. "I'm sorry, Grandpa. You don't deserve this. You didn't do anything. What other things? What do you mean?"

"Well, what are we going to do? Are we just going to lick our wounds? Or are we going to strike back?"

"Strike back? How can we strike back?"

"We can sue them for a billion dollars. Let the FBI go after the shooters

and the inciters. We can bring a civil lawsuit for wrongful death and violation of civil rights. It will strike a blow against the haters, and it will be a catharsis for the family.”

Margaret looked to me. “Can we do this?”

I nodded. “Yes, we can.”

“Whom will we sue?”

“Everyone,” I said. “The American Identity Party, Frederick Farragut, Sanford Jones, the particular group the shooters belonged to and its leaders and anyone else that comes to mind.”

“You see, Margaret?” said my father. “We can hit them where it hurts.”

I actually thought it was a good idea. We would have to get a different attorney to bring the suit for us since I would be one of the plaintiffs, but my legal expertise and experience would be put to good use.

“Let’s do it,” said Margaret.