

Chapter Twenty-one

We didn't speak again about Lavender Williams for two weeks. The undertaking he proposed would require enormous expense and effort, and the chances of countering a century of academic biblical thinking were slim at best. Rabbi Gutmacher asked me not to respond right away, just to think about it for a while. If he didn't hear from me again, he would know what I had decided.

His idea was a long shot at best, and he knew it. It involved serious risk for me. College-educated people would wonder why I would become a Bible thumper late in life. What had happened to the liberal Congressman from Manhattan, the respected historian, the progressive professor of law? Did I no longer believe in the establishment clause? As for my friends and colleagues, they'd think I'd simply gone off the rails because of David's death, that I was undertaking this quixotic venture for my Chabad grandson who'd been murdered. And who knows, maybe there would be a certain amount of truth in that.

I could defend my reputation by saying that everyone is entitled to legal representation in court, even confessed murderers. Why shouldn't I represent a schoolteacher in Bedford-Stuyvesant who asked for my help? But there was a problem with that. It was a lie.

This mission impossible, if I chose to accept it, would not have been initiated by Ms. Williams. It would be initiated by me. Of course, I could have Rabbi Gutmacher suggest to her that she call me, and then technically, she would be asking for my help. Nonetheless, it would be a lie, something of which I don't approve.

I pride myself on never lying. I don't find it necessary. If I don't want to admit to something, I say nothing at all. Lawyers know how to avoid

answering questions without being pinned down. It's one of the first requirements of being a lawyer; don't lie, but don't tell the truth. I was not going to lie about who initiated the representation. Besides, Ms. Williams was bound to find out that the suggestion had come from me; if we entered on a lawyer-client relationship, it would be difficult to hide it from her. Should I ask her to lie as well?

No, the everyone-is-entitled-to-representation argument would not fly. The public would know that I'd gone after this case, and my academic reputation would be on the line. Defeat would be humiliating. People would either scorn my newfound religious fanaticism or pity me for becoming unsettled by personal tragedy. Did I want to undertake an endeavor with such low prospects for success and vindication and such a high risk of defeat and humiliation? Would a win in this case enhance David's memory by association? Would a defeat tarnish it?

For a full week, I didn't give the question too much thought. I was so depressed I could barely drag myself from bed. I didn't go to the office at all. I knew that all the staff would console me with soulful eyes, hugs and pats on the back, and it would make me even more depressed. I just wanted to wallow in my sorrow.

I am usually not a wallower. I try to take my hits like a man and move on. I don't let my emotions take me over. But now, I gave in to my sorrow and pain. I just accepted my suffering helplessly, without resistance. I actually luxuriated in the agony. Perhaps I was afraid that if I stopped suffering David would fade away. But how long could I continue in this state? Wasn't it inevitable that David would eventually fade into distant memory? Wasn't that the way of the world?

Then it struck me. Lavender Williams! If I took the case, David would be with me for as long as it lasted. It might be months or even years, and when the inevitable time for separation arrived, I would be more ready to say good-bye. I pulled myself together and left my depression behind.

I did not decide then and there to take the case. I decided to explore it.

When I returned to the office Monday morning, I asked Nancy Hannah Mikhail, one of the young associates, to get me as many sources as she could find presenting all views on biblical criticism and archaeology, including Dr. Kitchen's book. I knew that most of the books would reflect the academic orthodoxy, but I was sure there would also be a number of books for the other side. Then I called for Paul Blake, the office investigator.

Paul Blake was a large man with massive arms and a deceptively innocent look. As an army major stationed in Afghanistan, he had served as an investigator for the military police. After the army, he came to us. He was like a tenacious bulldog with a sharp brain. He never accepted failure, even if it meant crossing some lines.

"I have a job for you, Paul," I said. "I want you to investigate a schoolteacher in Bedford-Stuyvesant."

"Really? Is this for a divorce case? Child molestation? Drugs?"

"Nothing of the sort. It's for a civil suit. The schoolteacher is the prospective client. I need to know all about her. Everything."

I handed him a printout of the article, and he read it quickly.

"Should I give this top priority and drop everything else I'm doing?"

I thought for a moment and shook my head. "I'll be patient. It's not especially urgent, but please do it as soon as you can."

"All right, boss. I'm ready. Shoot."

"This is what I know. Her name is Lavender Williams. She teaches sixth-grade in Bed-Stuy. Cushman Middle School, corner of Reid Avenue and Willoughby Street. She was fired for using the Bible in history class. She is African American. I know only what it says in that article. That's it."

Blake stood up. "It's a start. I'll see what I can find on Google, and then I'll get to work. Give me a couple of days."

Nancy Hannah reported that she had found plenty of sources on the subject, including books that were not yet available online. There were too many to carry away, and she was having them delivered. They would arrive

later today. She had placed additional books on order. They would be delivered tomorrow.

The books came late in the afternoon in two large cartons deposited on the floor in my office. I opened one of the cartons. It must have contained a dozen or more books. Dr. Kitchen's book was among them. I love the look and the smell of new books. They're intoxicating. Well-worn books have their own charm. I looked through the collection, picked out four volumes and brought them to my desk. I left Dr. Kitchen's book in the box.

It was past six o'clock, and the office was emptying quickly. I called June and told her I'd be late. Then I began to read.

I spent an hour or so scrolling through the online articles, and then I turned to the books. I looked at the bios of the authors, the tables of contents, read a few paragraphs here and there, and I got a sense of the authors' personalities and points of view. Only one of the four I chose at random supported the Bible to some extent, but I couldn't buy into it if I didn't read the other books as well. I'd start with these four books. There were still two cartons of unread books on the floor, and there'd be more coming tomorrow. I had to go through all of them, maybe not read every word but scan them carefully.

I decided to take one of the books home with me. My first inclination was to take the one that supported the Bible, the point of view I'd be defending, but then I thought it'd be best if I read the books of the detractors first. I'd evaluate them better if I faced the full brunt of their arguments without any defenses.

Over the course of the week, I thoroughly read all the books referenced in other books. These seemed to be the most important. I went through the others as well, but not as thoroughly.

I was surprised to discover that the issue of biblical criticism was far from resolved even in academia. Most critics followed, in one form or another, in the footsteps of Julius Wellhausen, a German professor of theology around the turn of the twentieth century. His most influential book

was *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, an introduction to the history of Israel. Despite its many flaws, it was accepted in academia as the most rational and authoritative reading of the Bible. The case, if I chose to accept it, would revolve around this book and its academic descendants.

On Friday morning, Blake submitted a written report on Lavender Williams. She was forty-five years old, married to Major Marvin Williams, fifty-five years old, a career officer stationed in Afghanistan. He was home on leave for the next two months. Twin daughters, Mahalia and Shawana, ten years old. The Williams family lived in a single-family home at 634 Berkeley Place in Bedford Stuyvesant. They owned the house and carried a small mortgage. Mrs. Williams had a master's degree in education from Brooklyn College and another in history from Columbia University.

Blake had placed her under surveillance the entire week. He'd also spoken to colleagues and neighbors without discovering anything suspicious. His research had uncovered a wealth of financial, educational, familial and other information, which he included in the report. The information was being analyzed and verified by one of Blake's associates. Blake had found no skeletons in her closet, but he would continue digging.

All in all, at first glance, she checked out well. It was time to call Rabbi Gutmacher. I had not yet come to a decision, but further discussions were in order.