

Chapter Twenty-two

Pedro drove me to Brooklyn on Sunday. My closest colleagues knew about my new reading regimen and my interest in Lavender Williams, but they thought it was just a passing phase. I didn't want to bring Rabbi Gutmacher to the office before I made my decision. Instead, we had agreed to meet in Crown Heights.

Before meeting with Rabbi Gutmacher, I wanted to see the school where Lavender Williams had taught and the place where she lived. My knowledge of Brooklyn, except for Park Slope, was limited. I asked Pedro if Bed-Stuy was on the way to Crown Heights, and he said it was if he took a different route.

We took the Williamsburg Bridge into Brooklyn. It was unfamiliar to me; I didn't remember the last time I'd been on the bridge. It was a stately old bridge, a venerable gateway into a different world.

We came off the bridge and proceeded on Broadway under the elevated tracks. There was a luster to the darkened avenue as the sunlight filtered through the tracks, sweeping across the hood of the car in long slender stripes. The first few blocks featured stores that catered to Chassidic people, but then the street became Hispanic. Small clusters of men and an occasional woman stood on the sidewalks, smoking, laughing, taking clandestine sips from bottles in paper bags. The car turned into Tompkins Avenue, and we arrived at Berkeley Place a few minutes later.

Berkeley Place was a quiet tree-lined street of tidy row houses, an island of gentility in the mostly disadvantaged Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn. Lavender Williams lived in a freshly painted walk-up duplex. The stone steps gleamed, and the shrubbery in the pocket garden was carefully

trimmed. Most of the cars parked along the street were late model, probably leased, as well as a small number of luxury vehicles and older cars. No jalopies. The people walking on the street were African American middle class. I didn't see any white people.

I saw as much as I could see in a pass-by inspection, and we headed for the Cushman Middle School on Reid Avenue and Willoughby Street. It was an aging brick fortress free of litter and graffiti. Young black men were playing basketball in the yard.

We followed the Utica Avenue bus down Reid Avenue into Crown Heights. Rabbi Gutmacher was waiting for me in a kosher restaurant on the corner of Nostrand Avenue and Crown Street called Alenbi. I gave Pedro a few dollars to take care of himself while I met with the rabbi. I did not know how long the meeting would take.

The restaurant served something called Modern Israeli cuisine. The place had a Middle Eastern décor, and Middle Eastern music played softly in the background. Rabbi Gutmacher recommended dishes called drunk liver, yassu soflakisitis and chicken mushakan. They were strange and exotic and altogether excellent.

We ordered coffee and the conversation turned to the business at hand.

"So tell me, Mr. Taylor," said the rabbi, "have you reached a decision?"

"Almost, but not quite."

"How does your wife feel about it?" he asked.

"She assured me that, since she won't be personally affected either way, she supports any decision I make."

"Did she give you any advice?"

I shook my head. "I asked for her advice, but she declined. She said the decision should be mine alone. She trusts my judgment."

"Smart lady. So, what's your judgment?"

"I'm conflicted. The safest choice is to decline."

"But the safest choice is not the route to greatness, is it, Mr. Taylor?"

I nodded. "No, it's not. I know that to take this case and win it would be

a great thing. It would be historic. But the chances of a victory are remote. Is it worth the risk? It could backfire.”

“That doesn’t sound like an almost.”

“But it is. Your idea is bold and ingenious. And high risk. I’m inclined to do it. Almost inclined to do it. But! I have to overcome my reservations. I’m not quite ready to pull the trigger.”

“And how do we accomplish that? Do you have any ideas?”

“I do,” I said. “I think you should make an approach to Mrs. Williams. See if she’s interested in this battle. If she is, arrange a meeting of the three of us. Also her husband if he’s available. No commitments on anyone’s part. If I think she’d be a really good client, and that her husband would not be a liability, I’d probably make my decision right then and there.”

“What do you mean by a very good client? Does she have to gain the sympathy of the jury?”

“Actually, she does. Juries are influenced by their perception of the client. Do they want to reward them? Or do they want to punish them? So, if she turns out to be an overbearing, angry, untelegenic woman, I think I’ll take a pass. But there’s something else ...”

The rabbi just sat there with quiet patience. He did not prompt me.

“You have to see this trial in the context of what’s happening with the American Identity Party these days,” I said. “There will inevitably be white people on the jury who secretly, perhaps subconsciously, sympathize with some of the positions of the AIP, at least to some degree. If they see Ms. Williams as a threat ...” I shrugged. “Well, you understand.”

“I do. So let’s move this forward. We’ll meet her, and you’ll decide.” He gave me a curious look and cocked his head. “Do you have any other reservations, Mr. Taylor?”

I smiled. He was quite perceptive.

“Not really a reservation,” I said. “Just a concern. We’re going to sue for, let’s say, fifty million dollars. But it’s not about the money, of course. It’s about striking a blow at the American Identity Party and the Church of

Natural Humanism. But fifty million dollars is a lot of money. It's quite possible that we may be offered a settlement during the trial."

Rabbi Gutmacher shook his head. "No, we can't accept a settlement. It will defeat the whole purpose of the trial."

"But what if Mrs. Williams wants to settle?"

He stroked his beard. "I see the problem. Can we have her sign an agreement not to settle?"

It was my turn to shake my head. "It's not legal."

"Maybe she can give us a verbal commitment not to accept a settlement if it's offered. Maybe she'll buy into what we're trying to accomplish. We'll ask her to give us her solemn word."

I couldn't help but smile. "In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, verbal agreements aren't worth the paper they're written on. Solemn words are wonderful, but if there's an offer of three or four million on the table, how reliable are they? I wouldn't fault her for changing her mind."

His shoulders sagged, and he gave me a doubtful look. "So what do we do? Should we take a chance on her?"

"No, it's too risky. But there is a way. She can sell her prospects in the lawsuit. Let us say, for argument's sake, that I pay her two million dollars for whatever she wins in the lawsuit. The money is put into escrow. She gets the two million regardless of whether we win or lose as long as she goes through with the lawsuit until the end. She would not be in a position to settle, because the reward would not be hers. Any settlement would have to go through me, and I would reject it."

"Do you have two million dollars to offer her?"

"I do."

"And are you willing to risk it?"

"I am."

His eyes lit up. "So it's solved! We can go ahead."

"Except for one detail. As her lawyer, I cannot make such an agreement with my client. Someone else would have to offer her the two million."

“Do you know anyone who would do it?”

“I do, but I would have to ask him.”

“Who is it?”

“It’s you. More precisely, your yeshivah.”

“My yeshivah? We don’t have two million dollars! We don’t have even a small fraction of it.”

He was getting frustrated. I don’t know why I couldn’t have told him my plan straight out without all the drama. It’s just a bad habit of mine. June does not tolerate it.

“Relax, rabbi,” I said. “I’ll donate two million dollars to your yeshivah, anonymously, on the condition that you use it to buy the rights from Mrs. Williams. I hope we win and that my donation will translate into many millions for you. Is that acceptable?”

He grabbed my hand. “It’s a deal,” he said. “Now let me go find Mrs. Williams. I’ll call you if she wants to meet. Do you want dessert?”

I heard from Rabbi Gutmacher two days later. Lavender Williams and her husband were willing to meet with us on Sunday.