

Chapter Twenty-five

Judge Katherine Baker was a thin woman in her fifties with snowy white hair, a very pale face, heavy mascara and crimson lipstick; when I looked at her, I thought I saw only eyes and lips on a white background. I'd known her for many years, and I've always found her fair and reasonable.

The attorney for the defendants was James Calabrese, the corporation counsel for the City of New York, a tall man with a patrician demeanor, pushing seventy, as am I. I'd known him for a long time. Although I wouldn't say we were exactly friends, we were more than acquaintances. Friendly colleagues might be a good way to put it. He was a decent man and a terrific lawyer. I did not have to worry about him playing Hamilton Burger to my Perry Mason. The trial promised to be science versus science. That's the way I wanted it. No histrionics. No posturing. Just an honest examination of the facts, a search for the truth.

Did I believe the Bible was the truth after all my research? It's hard to say. But I did come away convinced that there was at least a kernel of truth in it, that it was not a myth created about a thousand years after it claimed to have been written. I needed to show the jury what I had discovered and to convince them to see it from my point of view.

Before we went to jury selection, I asked the judge for a brief meeting in chambers with my client and opposing counsel. We could have had our conference in the courtroom, but I didn't want Jessica Davis, the reporter, to hear. She gave me a rueful look when we walked back to the judge's chambers, but I didn't feel bad for her. She would have plenty to report once the trial got under way.

Without removing her black robe, the judge took her place at her desk

and asked us to sit.

“What’s on your mind, Mr. Taylor?” she said.

I showed her the agreement between Rabbi Gutmacher’s yeshivah and Mrs. Williams. It was all on a single sheet, short and to the point. She read it carefully and then read it again. She handed it to Calabrese and waited for him to read it.

“Why are you showing this to me?” she asked after he handed it back.

“I think you should be aware of the arrangement,” I said. “It may or may not present an issue later, but I wanted to be up front with you.”

“Do you have any problem with this, Mr. Calabrese?”

“Mr. Taylor has obviously done this,” he said, “because he wants the trial to go through to completion. He wants to prevent Mrs. Williams from taking a settlement. But it seems legal, so I have no problem with this. I guess we’ll just have to win with the jury.”

“And one more thing,” I added. “I want the agreement to be on the record to protect the interests of the yeshivah.”

“Are you their attorney?” she asked. “That would be a conflict of interest.”

“No, judge, I’m not. They have their own attorney. I’m not making any representations on their behalf. I just want to enter the agreement into the record. I can ask their attorney to come here if you wish.”

She shook her head. “That won’t be necessary.” She looked at Lavender. “Mrs. Williams, you signed this agreement?”

“I did.”

“Did you do so of your own free will?”

“Of course.”

“You did not feel coerced? Did Mr. Taylor put any pressure on you?”

“Well, he said he wouldn’t take the case if I didn’t sign it, but that’s his prerogative, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is, Mrs. Williams. Are you satisfied with the terms of this agreement?”

“I am. I’ll get two million dollars regardless of the outcome of the trial. All I have to do is see it through to the end. I just have to sit quietly at the plaintiff’s table and let Mr. Taylor do his work. I’m more than satisfied.”

“Then I have no problem with this agreement. Mr. Taylor, do you have a copy for me and for Mr. Calabrese.”

“I do.”

“What about the depositions? Are the records ready?”

“There are really no records,” said Calabrese. “Almost all the testimony will be given by expert witnesses representing views expressed in different books. Mr. Taylor has given us copies of the books he’ll be using, and we’ve given him copies of ours. There’s nothing more to say.” He shrugged. “If we ask an expert witness what he or she intends to say, they’ll just say that they intend to answer our questions. I’m good with it. Depositions are a pain in the neck.”

“Mr. Taylor?”

“He took the words right out of my mouth,” I said.

She slapped her hands on the desk and stood up.

“Then we’re ready to move ahead,” she said. “Jury selection starts tomorrow.”