

One

Friday morning, July 21

Rabbi David Cohen threw his pen onto the desk in disgust, uttering a few choice words. He had nearly satisfied his need to vent with the last expletive when he looked up to see Kristen Ferguson, his secretary, standing frozen at the door. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then stopped.

David flashed her an embarrassed smile. "It's okay, Kristen. I'm done now."

She raised an eyebrow, her green eyes appraising. "Is this something I should be getting used to?" she asked in her soft Texas accent.

"Only if I have to keep writing sermons."

"I think you write great *d'var Torahs*." Kristen smiled and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "And I've been here long enough now, you can use the Hebrew with me."

David raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I'm impressed; that's almost perfect. One would be a *d'var Torah*. More than one are *divrei Torah*."

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"Okay, so I almost got it." Kristen gave a half-shrug. "Foreign languages were never my strong point."

"They're not easy to write in any language."

"Ah. Well, I'm sorry to break this to you, David, but I think that's part of your job." She glanced at the blank page on his desk. "Wouldn't it be easier to write if you used a computer?"

David chuckled. "Have you ever seen me type?"

"Come to think of it, no."

"There's a reason for that. Longhand is much faster than these." He held up his two index fingers, stabbing at imaginary keys in the air.

Kristen absently tucked a strand of her copper red hair behind her ear. "But you could learn to type. And you could use a computer for all kinds of things. E-mail with other rabbis, Jewish web sites. You could even create your own web site and publish stuff. Think of all the people you could reach."

"Hang on," David cautioned. "I'm a technical neophyte. Besides, there's no money in the budget for a computer. I'll just stick to pen and paper. So, what's up?"

"Mail just arrived. I thought you might want to see this right away." She handed him a thin white envelope and left his study.

"Thanks," David called after her, noting the return address. It had to be a decision about the grant proposal he had written for a series of weekend seminars and monthly classes on *mitzvot*. Approval meant he could present it to the board as a fully-funded package; denial meant stripping the program to a mere skeleton and dealing with board complaints about finding the money to pay for it. Steeling himself, he opened the envelope, his stomach tightening in knots. He scanned the letter for the expected 'we regret to inform you' and couldn't find it. After reading it twice, the words began to sink in and

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he grinned with relief. The grant was approved for even more money than he'd expected.

The intercom buzzer momentarily startled him. "Yes?"

Kristen's voice was slightly muffled. "Avram Rosenfeld is on the phone. He says it's urgent."

David set down the letter. "I'll take it, thanks." He picked up the phone. "Shalom, Avram, what can I do for you?"

"Rabbi, I need to talk with you!" Avram seemed to be choking on his words. What remained of his German accent made him difficult to understand.

"Slow down, Avram. What's wrong?"

"It is my granddaughter, Anna. No, it is not her; it is me." He stopped for a moment, catching his breath. "It is my fault she has run away. I do not know whom else to call. I need to find her, to bring her home."

David remembered Anna as a shy teenager, overcome with grief when her parents were both killed in a car accident the previous year. He had only seen her once since then, when she attended a Hillel-sponsored discussion he'd led at the nearby University of Minnesota.

"What makes you think she's run away?"

"I am sad to say it, but we were fighting. She was angry when she left, and I have not seen her again. I am afraid it is my fault."

"Let's try to find her instead of assigning blame. Is it possible she went over to the university? Or maybe to a friend's house?"

"She knows no one at the dorms. It is perhaps possible she is at a friend's home. I am so worried, Rabbi. Minneapolis is not a safe place for a girl like Anna. You must help me find her."

"I'll do what I can, Avram." David tore a blank page

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from his writing pad and wrote Anna's name and address on it, adrenaline giving him a rush he found both exciting and disturbing. He asked Avram several questions about Anna's appearance and current interests, writing the answers down on the page. The overall profile gave him a sinking feeling.

"Do you have any idea why she might have left?"

There was a long silence on the other end. "She left because of me. Because I told her I did not want her living here anymore. How could I have said such a thing?" Avram's voice broke. "I cannot live if anything happens to her!"

"I'm sure she's okay, Avram." David made sure his own concern didn't reach his voice. "Start from the beginning, and tell me what happened."

"We had a very big fight the day before *Yom HaShoah*, and it has not been better since. I thought she would get over it, but we keep fighting. Then yesterday morning I wake up and find her cooking bacon, which she eats in front of me. It is a slap in my face. Worse, it is a slap in God's face. I was angry and said many things I should not have said. Then she left for her job at the day care center and I have not seen her again."

"Have you called the day care center?"

"Yes. They said she quit shortly after she came in yesterday."

"What about her friends?" David suggested. "Have you called any of them?"

"Yes. I called her best friend from last year, but she has not seen Anna since they went out last week. I do not have a number for anyone else."

"Does Anna have an address book?"

"Yes! Why did I not think of that? Will you wait for a moment while I find it?"

"Sure." David thought for a moment about all of the teenagers he'd counseled over the years. Anna's recent history

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placed her in the high-risk category, and running away wasn't out of the question.

Avram came back on the line. "I have it here. At least some of her friends are listed in here. I recognize names she has talked about."

"Okay, Avram. Call her other friends, even her classmates. See if any of them know where she is. It's very possible she just went somewhere to cool off and let you do the same."

"Perhaps. And perhaps she will be home tonight. We have a long-standing rule in our house that fights are resolved or at least put aside for *Shabbos*. She has never missed a *Shabbos* dinner. But I will call her friends, as you suggest."

David sensed denial creeping into the older man's voice. "Good. Let me know what you find out. You can reach me here until about four-thirty, but probably not after that since *Shabbat* services start tonight at six."

"I will. I am sure you are right, and I will find her having fun with her friends. Thank you, Rabbi."

David hung up the phone, pain tugging at his heartstrings. Having lost his own father after many years of illness as a direct result of the *Shoah*, he always felt a certain kinship with the older man. And the fact that both his father and Avram came from the same area of Germany added another dimension to their relationship with which David wasn't always comfortable.

He glanced at the clock and drew the curtains of his mind shut against the decades-old memories. Setting aside his concern for Anna, he knew there was nothing more he could do until he heard from Avram again.

He turned back to the *d'var Torah* he'd been trying to write earlier, picked up a pen and scowled at the paper. After staring at it for several minutes, he shoved it aside again,

frustrated, and turned to several other tasks. He reviewed the draft of a *bar mitzvah* speech, looked up a few sources on conversion that a college student had requested, and drafted a letter to the local Jewish Community Center, confirming that he'd co-teach an Introduction to Judaism class there.

After a few more unproductive minutes with the blank page, he stood up, stretched to his full six feet, and walked over to the doorway.

Kristen looked up. "Cantor Kaplan called while you were on the phone and wanted to set up a time to talk with you on Monday."

"Did he leave a number?"

"No, he said he'd call back in a little bit. He didn't want to interrupt you."

David retrieved his calendar from his study and flipped ahead. "Morning is out – I'm going to need that time for paperwork. Any other time is fine. Just let me know so I don't double-book myself. Did Joel say what it was about?"

"Nope. Just that he wanted to talk to you." Kristen turned back to her computer and continued typing a letter.

"Okay." Leaning against the doorjamb, he watched Kristen work and realized that she was dressed up today, wearing a charcoal gray silk dress instead of her usual slacks and blouse. At first, he assumed it was for *Shabbat*, but then had to remind himself that Kristen wasn't Jewish. Maybe she had a date.

He knew he was fortunate to have her. In the eight years he'd been at Beth Israel, he'd worked with many secretaries but he hadn't connected with any of them as well as he had with Kristen. She'd only had the job for six months, but already she had become a trusted friend, and often times he thought that she knew what was going through his head before he did. Most

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of the time that worked to his advantage. He hoped it would again this time.

“Do you have a moment?” he asked tentatively.

Kristen swiveled around in her chair. “You’re still here. Why are you still here? You should be writing.”

“Every year,” he sighed, “why do I do this?”

“You’re procrastinating again, Rabbi. Okay, do what?”

“I’m still working on the *d’var Torah* for the *Tisha b’Av* service.” He shook his head. “I’m not a writer, Kristen. Give me something to teach and people who want to learn, and I could have the time of my life.”

“Do you realize this is the third time this morning you’ve come out here to talk to me?”

“Third?”

“It’s not a problem, David; I enjoy talking with you. But you only started working on that sermon two hours ago.”

“That long already?” he asked, laughter in his blue eyes.

Kristen grinned. “And to think I get paid for this. So tell me what’s really on your mind.”

David’s look turned serious. “I’m afraid I’m wasting my time. Every year I insist we should have a service on the eve of *Tisha b’Av* but I’m not sure the congregation cares one way or the other. So why do I put myself through this?”

“Because it’s important to you. How many showed up last year?”

“About two dozen. I think we’ll be lucky this year to get a *minyan*. Nobody wants to hear about the sadder parts of our history, even in a Conservative *shul*. I’m trying to write a *d’var Torah* that doesn’t ignore the historical importance but doesn’t brood on it either. I can only talk about the destruction of the Temples or the expulsions for so long before people

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start walking out. Even the themes of in-fighting and causeless hatred aren't enough to keep their interest."

He gently fingered the colorful crocheted *kippah* clipped to his wavy, dark brown hair. "But to not mention it at all seems like disregarding our past. I don't want to do that either."

"*Tisha b'Av* is next month, isn't it?"

"Mm hm. Why?"

"It's only July. Why are you working on this so soon?"

"I have just under three weeks. And like I said, Kristen, I'm not a writer. You know me – I'll start working on next year's High Holy Days sermons the day after this year's ends. I only have two hundred and seventy-four writing days this year. Excluding Sabbaths and holidays, of course."

"Of course," Kristen deadpanned. "And don't forget snow days. Why don't you just say what you want to say, and if people don't like it, they can complain? The congregation here isn't exactly known for its passivity."

"I don't know." David left his favorite spot in the doorway and sat down on a beige and blue brocade sofa along the wall between his study and the door to the hallway. Just down the hall, he could hear the sounds from the main synagogue office where Betsy, the office manager, was training yet another temporary secretary. Across from the main office was the cantor's study, and beyond that, the stairs that led down to the sanctuary and, in the basement, the social hall and conference room. David had mixed feelings when he heard Joel singing or playing the piano. The man had a voice like silk: smooth but typically not warm.

His gaze settled on the pink and green leaves of the potted caladium on the floor next to him before he continued. "I think I'm actually nervous about offending the congregation." He looked up at Kristen. "*Tisha b'Av* is different from any other holiday in our calendar; it has a different feel to it. I mean, we

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fast and avoid physical pleasures like we do on Yom Kippur, but it's out of reflection or even mournful remembrance, without that sense of rejuvenation that Yom Kippur brings.

"People expect me to offend them during the Days of Awe, to challenge them to become better people, better Jews. But *Tisha b'Av* is important in its own right. I don't want this congregation to decide that secular summertime is preferable to living Jewishly, or that *Tisha b'Av* is hereafter an optional – or worse yet, an obsolete – observance. I mean, look at the recent racial and ethnic tension, fighting and name-calling between various Jewish movements, stone-throwing at the Western Wall: all these tell me that we haven't yet learned the lessons of *Tisha b'Av*."

"David, it sounds to me like you already know what you want to say; you just don't want to commit it to paper. I bet if I let you go on, based on what you've just said, you could give a pretty good sermon right now."

"What did I just say?"

Kristen gave him a faintly amused smile. "Go write your *d'var Torah*, Rabbi. You'll be saying nothing if you continue to sit there and schmooze. And I'm sure it will turn out fine."

"Thanks," David said, noting that Kristen only used his title of rabbi when she was either chastising or teasing him, and rarely as a sign of respect. Unlike most people, when she wanted to address him respectfully, she used his first name.

It hadn't always been that way. Unlike other rabbis who seemed to enjoy substituting Rabbi for their first names, David much preferred to be an individual around friends, colleagues, and his staff. And every time Kristen called him Rabbi, he sensed an unspoken "permission to speak freely, sir?" in her voice. Finally, he asked her to call him David, and once she got used to the idea, their rapport improved tremendously.

It also liberated her sense of humor, which he found refreshing most days.

Slowly he stood up and went back into his study while loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt collar.

“Can I convince you to close your door?” Kristen called after him. “You have no privacy when you leave it open.”

David poked his head out of the doorway. “What, I’m not being punished enough, having to write this? You want me in solitary confinement, too?”

Kristen laughed. “I have to keep trying, David. I believe privacy is good for everyone, including rabbis.”

Defiantly, he left the door ajar. Rather than sitting down immediately, David began to pace slowly. He knew it tended to annoy everyone around him, but somehow the steady rhythm of his pacing gave clarity to the randomness of his thoughts. Although if he wasn’t careful, he occasionally found himself voicing his thought process aloud, almost chanting in time with his footsteps. The last time that happened, he’d been in a conference with several board members who had rebuked him sharply. “Talmudic singsong is fine for rabbinical school,” one of them had warned him, “but please don’t do it in public, and especially don’t do it around us.” While he suspected it embarrassed them, bringing to mind nineteenth-century rabbis swaying in ecstatic prayer, he’d been self-conscious about it ever since.

Letting out a long sigh, he sat down in his chair and perused book titles. Three of the four walls in his study were covered by floor-to-ceiling bookcases, which in turn were packed sometimes two or three rows deep with books: law, legends, stories, philosophy, ethics, ancient wisdom and modern commentary, oversize books with cracked leather bindings, titles in Hebrew, English, German, even a few children’s books for when parents brought their kids in with them.

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David had strategically placed his desk perpendicular to one of the bookcases, where multiple copies of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, along with a full set of the Talmud, were within an arm's reach. The wall behind him boasted a modest window out of which he rarely looked, and a filing cabinet that contained old sermon notes, handouts for classes, and other papers he couldn't bear to throw out. Facing his desk sat two well-worn ersatz leather chairs, and in front of the far wall, a dark-colored sofa sagged under the weight of countless books and papers. David could always find what he was looking for in the papers on the sofa or his desk, or in the piles that dotted the worn almond-colored carpet. He wouldn't allow anyone to straighten up or file the papers, for fear he'd never find anything again.

Checking the clock again, he stood up resolutely. There was work to be done and *Shabbat* was approaching fast. He selected a book of Jewish law codes and turned to the section concerning *Tisha b'Av*. After reading for a few minutes, he wrote down some thoughts, then stood and scanned his shelves for another title.

He chewed absentmindedly on his thumb, stopping now and then to pull a book off his shelves, leaf through it, and make notes on a legal pad. The mound of books rapidly conquered the top of his desk and, sighing, he began to pace again, writing new thoughts to the cadence of his steps.