

Chapter 1

**21st century, June
Brooklyn, NY**

Reuven Raz Kahn knelt beside the open cedar chest in his Aunt Rivka Ruby's steamy attic, holding his birth certificate as if it were an unclean beast. His other hand clutched his white shirt, his gut aching like the only time he played soccer—what, nearly 15 years ago—and Pinky had kicked the ball straight into him, knocking him on his backside, to score the only goal of the game. A shaft of light from the triangular slatted window behind him pricked the back of his neck as if prodding him to stare at the pale ink, typed on the watermarked paper. He looked away. Light stabbed his eyes.

Who else knows?

A door opening, shut. Downstairs, family and friends invaded the narrow foyer. They swarmed into the parlor and dining room, rifling the Ruby house with conversation. The noise of their celebration stole upstairs, slinking under the attic door to assault Reuven's ears like mockery. He had heard that the Irish celebrate the memory of their dead with a wake. An alien concept, so unlike sitting Shiva and saying Kaddish, and yet this afternoon's graduation celebration, being held in his honor, would be—for him—a wake. He would be forced to celebrate the memory of the man he had been this morning, the man he could never be again.

The ones who don't know ... what will happen when they find out? He imagined their faces—smiles twisting into frowns, laughter exploding into silence.

This morning, he had held in his hands the evidence of hours, years of study, of work, hope, culminating in a dual degree: a master's degree in library science from Pratt University, coupled with a Juris Doctorate from Brooklyn Law School. The program perfectly suited him, a marriage of his two loves, law and research. The offspring? Each evening, the sleep of satisfaction in sweet anticipation of the dawn. Each day, a path to walk willingly, a race to run joyfully, stretching for the prize of a purpose realized.

Evening then morning, the Jewish day. Diaspora then next year in Jerusalem, the Jewish hope. Sleepless nights of study then comes the dawn, the hard-working Jewish boy's bright future. The sun had shone upon his face this morning. Now it beat upon his back as he knelt, bent over, head bowed. Dawn had come and gone, leaving the sun of his soul black with sackcloth and ashes.

This morning, his father confessed to him that on his midnight refrigerator raids—a bit of apple strudel or tayglach for his sweet tooth—the light seeping beneath Reuven's bedroom door had come to be a cherished companion, accompanying him down the hallway, assuring him of his son's dedication to the love of law, a love they shared. Last night, lampglow from the living room tiptoed down the hall and slipped under Reuven's bedroom door to testify of his abba's love—his abba, writing the perfect toast to announce his son as his newest partner. A Jewish law firm. With Jewish clients.

Now, this afternoon he held in his hands the evidence of his birth. He read his life's story like a law book heavy with precedent, opened to the first page. He read the end from the beginning. Every page was blank. His name had disappeared from the Book of Life, leaving his hands emptied of purpose.

Not like the day he became a bar mitzvah when he witnessed his parents' only argument. Mordecai Kahn explained to his wife, Sarah, that seeing as today the boy is a bar mitzvah, he is a man now, so there is no need to hide the truth from him any longer, and his wife protesting, resisting, but Mordecai insisting. Reuven accepted news of his adoption with indifference. So what if his biological mother was really Abigail, his aunt Rivka's dead daughter? She was a Jewess; therefore, he, Reuven, was nevertheless, undeniably a Jew.

His abba and his imma, who raised him from birth, filled in the story like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle whose box top Reuven had already seen. He knew Abigail and her husband were blown into eternity by a bomb during breakfast. That his own was not a miracle birth like Isaac, born to Sarah in the Torah, dented Reuven's sense of identity merely to the extent his fingers made an impression on his Nerf ball. He tossed the idea into the air and when it came down that he would not need to refer to his imma's sister, Doda Rivka, as his grandmother instead of his aunt, and his adoptive parents would always be Abba and Imma to him, never Dode and Doda, nothing essential had changed.

His parents held hands and held out their hands, as if asking him to lead them. Sensing it was all part of the bar mitzvah, becoming-a-man experience, he took the lead and said, "Okay. So, let's eat lunch." His imma had gotten his shirt collar wet with crying as she hugged him, and his abba, with eyes moist and smile-shining, clapped Reuven on the back as if he, Reuven, had adopted them.

In Reuven's analysis, the law was clear; his status remained secure.

Now, a sharp shaft of light pointed over his shoulder at his real birth mother's maiden name, typed on a certificate stamped by the state of New Hampshire: Marty Ann Hendricks. Illumination's divine finger scrawled its damning graffiti on the walls of his heart: NOT JEWISH.

Under "Father of Child" someone had typed the name of Doda Rivka's son: David Aaron Ruby. The child's name was given as John David Hendricks, but Reuven recognized the date and time of birth—his. *Why did my abba and imma lie to me? How did Doda Rivka get this? Why was it lying on top of the tablecloth like a serpent, waiting to strike?*

The truth bit him, poisoning him with a knowledge of evil. A penetrating numbness descended on his questioning mind as the venom hit his heart, stripping him of all sensation but a gut-writhing pain. The lie exposed had killed his highest hope and deepest desire: Hadassah Ruby. *David's daughter. Not my cousin ... my half-sister. Seven years, waiting, working, dreaming ... this afternoon, I was going to ask her ...* He shut his eyes and saw the image of her, seven years ago, standing before the congregation, reciting her bat mitzvah portion from the Torah. Hebrew dripped from her lips like honey. Her long straight nose and slender neck evoked images of the Song of Songs that was Solomon's. From that moment, he had loved her. Jacob had loved Rachel and worked for her seven years. Seven years, he, Reuven, had waited for Hadassah to grow up while he worked to prepare their future. He had devoted himself to her.

Devoted. In the Torah, a thing devoted was a thing destroyed.

In his devotion to Hadassah, he sought to build a life with her, a Jewish life. In his orthodox devotion to the Torah, as interpreted by the sages, he sought to secure a life hereafter, a Jewish hereafter. Always, he had believed that being a Jew guaranteed him a life—now and eternal—guaranteed it by law. Now the law pronounced him guilty, condemned him to die.

The document he held had overruled him. It served as an ordinance against him. His birth certificate was his death warrant.

His hand trembled, fingers tingled with desire to rip the document and wad its pieces into a compact morsel he could swallow. He longed to destroy the evidence of his crime. His whole life had been a crime, a carefully perpetrated fraud. He had embezzled the rich heritage of the Jew, the wealth of Jewish family life, the privilege of HaShem's chosen people. He, Reuven, was a bastard, having no right to enter the congregation of HaShem—cut off, cut off from the day of his birth. Daily, he committed perjury. The light of truth now shining upon his soul witnessed against him. HaShem had judged him and found him: GUILTY.

He touched the silk tie around his throat and gazed at the rafters, low and accessible. He knew the passage from Dvarim: "*Ki qillat Elohim taluwi*"—"He who is hanged is accursed of GOD." Then, was it not logical that he who was accursed of GOD should hang? His throat tightened.

Like bile, anger rose in his throat, rose from his belly to mingle with the pain in his chest and ignite into flames. The birth certificate named two who bore the greater responsibility for this crime. He was not going to bear this shame alone. They had robbed him of his past, and therefore, of his future. They stole his birthright. They changed his blessing into a curse. He burned to see them pay—particularly his cousin-uncle-father, David.

I should wait for the right moment. I should frame this document, hang it on the wall, hang him with the evidence, show how he framed me.

Laughter shot upstairs like an audible firing squad. *Or like the sound of stone upon stone.* There was a time when Jews stoned one of their own if they found him guilty of lawlessness. A man's rebellion against the law, the Torah, endangered his family. The stones kept falling, falling until his name was blotted out of the earth. *Not like the laws of leprosy. The leper was an outcast, but he suffered the shame of his living death alone.* Downstairs, a door opened and shut. His case was open and shut.

He shut his eyes, opened them, set his jaw. He knew what he must do.

He carefully folded the birth certificate and tucked it in his hip pocket. He fastidiously brushed the dust off the knees of his black slacks. From the cedar chest, he lifted Aunt Rivka's antique lace tablecloth,—the tablecloth she had sent him upstairs to find—draped it over his left arm, and lowered the lid. He stood, straightened his back, and squared his shoulders.

Suddenly, he became conscious of his yarmulke. His hand moved involuntarily to where the small black skullcap perched near the back of his head. He thought about taking it off, but he wouldn't be allowed to sit at the table without it. Besides, he wasn't ready to answer the questions its absence would raise. *Funny, I've never noticed how it feels like a spider, squatting on my head.*

For the first time, the tips of his tzit-tziot, dangling from the four corners of the arba kanfot he wore tucked inside his slacks, chafed the tops of his thighs. He touched its white fringes to his lips every morning. This morning, its thin cotton had felt soft as a spider's web between his shirt and undershirt. Now, it bothered him like burlap, and its fringes—constant reminders of the mitzvot, HaShem's laws—now reminded him only that he was conceived in sin.

Footsteps on the landing. The attic door slowly opened, and a thick ebony braid peered around its edge, followed by two fawnlike brown eyes and a smile as tender as a kiss. Hadassah. Reuven felt his face soften, his lips curve in the smile the sight of her never failed to

prompt from him. She stepped across the threshold. She wore a teal blouse with her long black skirt. *She knows that tropical shade of teal is my favorite color.* The clothes clung to her lithe frame, hinting at the mystery he longed to know. *I'll never know ... what she enjoys ... what she needs ... will never know ... her.*

In a voice shining with good humor, she asked, "Are you coming back downstairs in time for the party, Reuven, or what? Nu, maybe you've found something more interesting in the attic—right? Ah, Reuven, it wouldn't surprise me. Sometimes you really obsess on the past—even more than the average Jew!" Her laughter danced on the dust particles, surfed on the beam of sunlight.

The air was thick with dust and laughter turned to dust and unspoken words fading into dust, clogging his throat, making it impossible for him to answer. His chest tightened, neck veins bulged. The muscle in his jaw twitched as if he had sucked on his cheek, in and out. He rammed his hand into his front pants pocket. His fingers wrapped around his inhaler.

Hadassah leaned against the edge of the door and asked, "What, are you okay, Reuven?"

He nodded and shot the mist into his throat, closed his eyes. *Please know, I would never willingly hurt you, Hadassah.*

Hadassah shook her head. "All this dust, Reuven, whatever are you doing up here so long? They should never have sent you up here."

Slipping the inhaler back into his pocket, he raised his arm,—the one with the tablecloth over it—motioned towards the door, and took a step in her direction.

She smiled again, a caress that brushed his eyes gently, making them moist. He forced himself to return the smile. She turned and descended the polished mahogany staircase. He followed her down, down, down into the pit of noise.