

Chapter One

The End

Tuesday, May 16, 2000.

A typical L.A. morning. Hazy brown sunshine, breezeless, a chill in the air. The freeways are frantic. Shimmering four lanes of bumper cars.

I'm up, as usual, at 4:30 A.M.

Eyes slammed shut, I murmur my morning prayers. I shower, dress, hit my local Starbucks, swig back-to-back-to-back Rabbi Red-Eyes (one shot decaf, two shots decaf espresso), and flip through the paper at a table outside. I pop into the office by 5:15, surf through my e-mails, outline this week's Torah portion. At seven I strut into the sanctuary for my weekly men's Torah study. By eight I'm back in the office working the phones.

I argue with a D.A. in Kansas, plead with a judge in Kentucky, deal with a drug addict in North Hollywood. At eleven I return to the sanctuary to facilitate a weekly group on relationships.

I break up the group at noon, graze through a chicken salad, settle into the conference room at twelve-thirty for our weekly staff meeting. By two, I'm at my desk banging more phone calls.

This day, at two-thirty, Harriet pokes her head in. She wears a charcoal-gray Donna Karan suit with subtle pinstripes and a smile that could light a night game.

"Mark," she says, "it's time."

She winks and goes. I grope under the mountain range of papers on my desk for my wallet. My intercom blinks. I pick up the phone. My secretary, Susan, announces that Lois, the mother of one of our residents, is on the line.

"Put her through," I say.

My chair groans as I lean back. I tuck a Stimudent into the corner of my mouth and click Solitaire onto my sleek flat computer monitor. I concentrate better when I doodle and Solitaire's my way of doodling.

Lois speaks slowly, solemnly. Her son has been living at Beit T'Shuvah for less than two weeks and is threatening to leave. If he does, he will violate his court order and will likely wind up in jail.

I don't see the kid bolting. He seems comfortable here, more so than in the parking structure where we found him, eating his dinner out of a garbage can. Amazing. This is a Beverly Hills family, entertainment business, big money. The dad produced a couple of movies you've seen, one of which was nominated for an Academy Award. Meanwhile their seventeen-year-old is popping uppers, drinking a six-pack of beer a day, financing his habit by hustling gay men on Hollywood Boulevard. One night the kid packed up and moved out of his six-thousand-square-foot mansion and into a doorway downtown.

"I'm so afraid he's going to leave," Lois says. "I don't know what to do."

"I know you're worried," I say. "I am, too."

"You are?" Her voice rises, veers toward panic.

"Yes." I scratch my forehead. "Lois, your son is an addict. With addicts there is only one thing you know absolutely and that is that you never know." I hold. "So I always worry. I'm always on my guard. And I don't feel that in your son's case, his main issue is leaving the facility. I think he feels secure here and that he wants to try. That's not to say we won't keep our eyes open. You know what I mean?"

Lois's breath whistles through the receiver. On my computer screen, all four aces line up at attention. I roll my mouse forward.

"Okay," Lois says. "Okay." Another rush of breath. "I feel better. I always feel better when I talk to you. Jesus, this is hard."

"You know it," I say. "And it's gonna get harder."

Lois swallows. "You don't mind if I call you when I get like this? When I get scared?"

"You *have* to call me. And I have to call you. Always. Constantly. Now that you have him back, you cannot let him go. So we'll be calling each other. And I will be talking to your son. Lois, he's here because he wants to be here. He wants to change."

"Thank you, Rabbi." A small laugh. "Not yet, right?"

"A few more hours. Then it's official."

"Well, early congratulations."

"Thank you. And Lois ... "

"Yes?"

"Hang in there with him."

"I will."

"Remember," I say, "he is your son."

A click. Her throat? The phone? The line hums. I look up. Harriet appears in the doorway. She taps her watch. "Mark, we gotta go."

I stand, stretch, snag my coat from the hanger on the inside of my office door. I grin at Harriet like a game show host. "Yes, *dear*."

I drive. I pull out of our parking lot, turn right onto Venice, and stop at a red light at Robertson. I drum my fingers on the steering wheel and lower my window. I crane my neck into the air and for the first time today, I allow myself a moment.

One moment. One memory. A memory of another moment fourteen years ago ...

Abus we called the Gray Goose, methodical, rickety, grinds up a back road to Chino State Prison, steaming into the barren brown horizon, the ground fluttering dreamlike outside the window.

This is a bus of fools -- silent, stoical, and severe men, men who have stolen, conned, or killed.

I am one.

The driver is a ghost. The silence cloaks all of us like a mist. I have taken this ride before, driven by other ghosts. Today, though, I know everything is different, everything has changed. I have been shaken into an otherworldly state of calm -- of reverence -- by a massive unseen force. A force that has spoken in a slow, deliberate Voice, delivering to me one simple and final truth: I will never take this ride again.

Because if I do, I will die.