

THE GALLERY OF MISSING HUSBANDS

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The man next to me screamed and pointed, so I looked up and watched as Ezra Kaufman's body flew downward from the roof. We all knew that it was Ezra because he was the best known psychic on the East Side. His body landed in the street, right in front of a large white horse wearing a straw hat and pulling a milk wagon. The horse, evidently used to death, stared down and then walked casually around the body. A child walked over to the horse and let it lick a lollipop.

I was only there because one of Ezra's clients had felt cheated. She had been told that she would inherit ten thousand dollars. It cost her a quarter to find out that Ezra's powers were not always absolutely accurate. She wanted me to find other people he had cheated and put him out of business. The woman would no doubt be pleased about Ezra's flying finish.

I went over to what was left of Ezra Kaufman and stood there for a few seconds. The street was overwhelmed by the usual odors of the ghetto, the sweet smell of the apples on a nearby pushcart and the rancid smell of garbage. I heard the screams of hungry babies, the cries of boys playing stickball, the endless murmurs of young lovers and chatting neighbors, and the hushed voices of the old comparing agonies. There was the inevitable joke that came a minute later from a young man who wondered if Ezra had seen his death coming.

Then I bent down. Ezra's gray face reeked of the fruity smell of schnapps. There were signs at the edge of his mouth that he had been sick. I wasn't supposed to do it, but I lifted his body. The back of his head was bloody. I ran my hand over his head anyway

and looked at the back of his body. There were no bullet wounds or stabbing marks that I could see. I put the body back down. The Coroner's Physician wouldn't mind my interference. He wouldn't even notice. He liked to smoke a pipe and eat a tuna fish sandwich while he examined bodies. Maybe doing that made the death less horrifying.

Suddenly, bent over, I saw a man run out of the tenement. He disappeared in the crowd. I asked a couple of people if they knew him, but they had been busy with each other and hadn't even noticed him.

One woman said she had seen Patrolman Wilde on the next block, Allen Street, which, not coincidentally, was the very thoroughfare where many of the painted-up ladies dropped their handkerchiefs and waited for a gentleman to pick it up and return to her and, by doing so, silently seal their deal. I saw another woman go into the tenement, presumably to tell Mrs. Kaufman who lived in Room 4, on the first floor in the back. I hoped they told her not to look at the body.

I was waiting because I wanted to talk to Wilde, who knew every bar owner and every opium den manager in the neighborhood and got money from all of them.

I suddenly felt cold, and I couldn't stand the crying and the gossip. If the street had been silent, I wouldn't have been able to stand that either.

I looked across and down Orchard Street. I could see a woman and her young daughter hauling out furniture and putting it on the sidewalk. It was a common enough sight. Another family had been tossed out by the landlord because they couldn't pay their rent. They would stay near the street with a cup next to them sitting down as they begged people for money, hoping to get enough to get back to their tiny apartment. I walked over. The little girl was now sitting on a chair. Her mother had recruited another woman,

and they were continuing to move what little furniture there was to take out. I looked down. The little girl was drawing with a piece of charcoal. I stared at the girl's face. And then she looked up at me. I was hoping for a smile, but her face marked out the geography of despair.

She had the face of a sad-eyed angel.

"Where's your daddy?" I asked.

"He's looking for money. I hope he gets it. He was crying when he left. He's not really my daddy, but he's very nice to me."

The mother came out.

"We just moved in a couple of weeks ago," she said. "I'm sorry I don't know you."

"Daniel Levin," I said.

"I'm Anya Rosenthal. This here's my daughter. She ain't so much help. She can't lift the heavy stuff."

"How much do you need to raise?" I asked.

"Twelve dollars. They told me in Gorlice that the streets of America was paved with gold. So I come here. It turns out the streets ain't paved with gold. They ain't paved at all. And then I find out that we're the ones who are supposed to pave them."

"It's going to rain soon," I said.

She shrugged and spread out her hands. "What can I do? There's a war just started in Europe and nobody could stop it. So what am I supposed to do, stop the rain?"

"I'd like to buy your daughter's picture."

"What are you talking about Mr. Levin? It's nothing."

“It’s a reminder of this moment. That’s important to me.”

“Good. We will get a start. Can you bring yourself to give us a quarter? I know I shouldn’t ask for so much. So maybe a dime?”

I took out twelve dollars and handed it to Anya Rosenthal.

“Go back inside.”

She held her daughter tight and cried.

I heard a sound behind me and turned.

“Oh, papa,” Mrs. Rosenthal said, “This gentleman, Mr. Levin, he just gave us the money we need.”

Rosenthal looked as though a mountain of ashes had fallen on him.

He walked up to me and stared right at my eyes. “I am trying to take care of my family. Herman Rosenthal don’t want the help of nobody.” He held up a few coins in his other hand. “See. I just went out and I begged for this money and I got started.”

“It wasn’t charity,” I said. “It was a transaction.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I bought your daughter’s picture. That’s all. I gave my money to your wife to pay the landlord.”

The man’s face softened. “I’m sorry I got mad,” Herman Rosenthal said, looking down. “It’s...it’s difficult for a man if he can’t take care of his family.”

I was going to talk some more with them, but instead I nodded to Rosenthal and saw Patrolman Wilde across the street bent over the body.

“Don’t forget the picture,” Anya Rosenthal said.

Her daughter gave it to me.

And there it was.

The sad-eyed angel smiled.

CHAPTER TWO

Patrolman Wilde had been drinking. He looked up at me and said, “Mother Mary, what curse has been put upon me that I come across Danny Boy Levin? Don’t tell me. You came to get your palm read. I’ll read your palm, Danny Boy, and it will say to move across the ocean back to where your people came from.”

“Good morning to you, too, Oscar.”

His face turned bright red. “I told you not to call me after that...that...”

“Playwright?” I asked.

“My name is James. It is a good Christian name. Not that you would know about that. But call me Patrolman Wilde or my stick will become friends with your bloody face.”

I ignored him. “Did you go on the roof yet?”

He shrugged. “What for? Even as dumb a fool as you can smell the schnapps. He was on the roof drinking and he fell off. You remember in ’96 during the heat wave? The time Theodore Roosevelt was Police Commissioner and saved the city.”

“I remember. And Roosevelt wasn’t the Commissioner. He was president of the board of New York City Police Commissioners. There were more than one.”

“I hate any wise guy, but especially a Jew wise guy who thinks he’s so smart.”

I didn’t think that was precisely the right moment to note that Roosevelt did implement the idea of distributing ice chips to the poor and that did help them overcome the heat. Only he did it on the last day of the ten-day heat wave. Thirteen hundred citizens died before the city provided any relief.

Wilde went on. "Anyway, because of that heat people slept on their roofs and fell off in the middle of the night, probably in the middle of a beautiful dream of money, knowing your people. That's what happened here. Just substitute schnapps instead of sleep."

"I'm not sure of that," I said.

"Listen, Danny Boy. You ain't on the force. You ain't nothing but a busybody who goes around pretending you know what you're doing. You want to look at dead bodies then you join the force. Yeah, like they would let you on it."

"I think you should look on the roof."

"It's November, Danny Boy. It will get cold. I ain't goin' up there where it's colder still just to see a roof and an edge where a guy trips off."

"I saw a man running from the place."

"Yeah? And who was he?"

"I have no idea."

"What did he look like?"

"Young. Five-seven or so. Maybe a hundred and fifty pounds. Walked slightly bent. He had a bowler hat half a size too small for him which means maybe he got it from someone. Full black beard. Wearing a suit. Nice cap. He didn't wear glasses or wasn't wearing them when I saw him."

He laughed. "That's about ten million of your people. You can pretend to be Sherlock Holmes all you want, Danny Boy. Maybe you can fool some of these Jews who keep asking you to help them for no reason at all. But you can't fool somebody that has got ten years on the job."

“Is the Coroner’s Physician coming?”

“One of his assistants. He’ll do the usual stuff. Attach a tag to every article of clothing and put the guy’s name and today’s date on each tag. He’ll check for weapons and he won’t find nothing. He’ll look the body over and then just take it to the morgue and tell the Coroner’s Physician that there’s no need for any big examination. What happened is easy to say. Another Jew dead. I can’t say the world’s gonna cry all that much.”

He looked down. “I hate waiting here. I could be at Clancy’s Bar on Allen talkin’ to the ladies and exercising my elbow by lifting a heavy glass.”

“You waiting for the assistant?”

“Yeah, and to keep people away from the body.

“I’ll wait.”

He peered at me. “You serious?”

“Sure. I’ll get some men to help me. We’ll make sure nobody disturbs the body.”

“Move it nearer the stoop, will ya? I don’t want some horse to run it over.”

“Shouldn’t the body....?”

“You questioning me again?”

“No, I’m not,” I said.

“You keep an eye on that body. I’ll keep my eye on some bodies that are real alive.”

He pushed somebody out of his way and walked the short distance to the corner to turn right toward Allen Street.

I called a man over. “Listen,” I said handing him a dollar. “Keep everyone away from this body for a bit. I’m going on the roof. I won’t be long. If you’re still here when I get back, I’ll give you another dollar.” I was pretty sure that second dollar would guarantee he’d stay. Otherwise as soon as I was out of sight, he’d be gone. I could trust someone religious to stay, but this guy seemed as though he didn’t think God was looking down on him.

I got to the roof. Sometimes a nurse would be walking on top to get to a sick patient. The roof was a way to avoid the crowds below. I walked over to where Ezra must have been standing when he fell.

There was more evidence that Ezra had been physically ill. I looked for signs of a fight, any blood, some object dropped, the ground disturbed in any way. Maybe a stone on which he had slipped. There was nothing. I walked around the whole roof and couldn’t find any obvious reminder of Ezra Kaufman.

I went back downstairs, and the man I had paid was still with the body.

“Good work,” I said. “You have a choice. I can give you a dollar now or I can go in and talk with the widow and then give you three dollars when I come out.”

He was thinking it over.

“You would be getting a lot for the dollar you give me now if you don’t pay me later.”

I gave him another dollar. “Two more if you’re here and still watching the body to keep people away.”

“Hey, mister, you can talk to everyone on the East Side if you want as long as you keep paying me.”

I went inside the Orchard Street tenement. I was glad I didn't have to climb the stairs the way I had to where I lived

The door to the Kaufman apartment was open. Mrs. Kaufman was in the big room, sitting by the window. She wasn't talking. A young woman was standing next to her. She had heard me and turned around.

The young woman had shiny black curls and large eyes, the kind of eyes where you could fall in and not complain. Her face was a pearl white. She looked like a sweet and innocent heroine one of those films that were getting popular. She looked like she stepped out of a Renaissance painting.

"Are you with the police?" she asked.

I shook my head. "My name is Daniel Levin. I'm just here to see if I can help."

The woman seated, the widow, wasn't cried out yet. But she turned around.

"Mr. Levin. I know you. You're the one who brings food to people when they need it. I've heard all about you. Please sit down. Rebecca, don't just stand there. This is a good man. Help him."

The sweet-faced woman smiled and said, "My name is Rebecca London."

I looked at her.

It was hard to look away from her face, but I noticed she had a ring on one of the fingers of her right hand. There were no rings on her wedding finger.

"A Jew named London?" I asked.

She laughed. "My family came from Russia but stayed in England for a year before moving here, so they took the name London."

I nodded. "Are the children all right?"

Mrs. Kaufman said, "A neighbor has them. How did you know about the children?"

"I knew about your husband a bit."

"Ah, Mr. Levin, don't let the gossip fool you. Ezra was a good man. He made people feel better. We got a little money and he gave everyone hope. We all need hope those of us trapped in this hell. Rebecca, come get Mr. Levin a glass of tea."

"No, thanks," I said. I thought about the body outside and asked, "Do you need anything?"

Mrs. Kaufman held up both hands. "No. Thank God my husband left me with some and Rebecca will move in and take care of me for a little while. After that God will protect me. And I'll get a job."

"I'd like to talk with you about Mr. Kaufman?"

"Why?" his widow asked.

"A friend of mine is a journalist, and I want to help him out."

"I'm too tired. You talk to Rebecca."

I stood up.

"I will, but first I've got to make sure your husband's body is taken care of properly. The police will take it and then they will send it to your burial society."

"It's from his home town, of course," Mrs. Kaufman said.

I went outside. The assistant was already there with his wagon. Everyone was staying away from the dead body. I gave the man guarding it two more dollars and spoke to the assistant.

"I think you should do some tests."

“You a doctor?”

“No.”

He nodded. “Then probably you should leave it to us. Anyway everyone tells me he just drank and fell off the roof. No signs that anyone hurt him.”

I helped him load Ezra Kaufman’s body into the wagon and watched as it went away.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned.

Rebecca London smiled and said, “If either of us can eat, it’s time for lunch.”

CHAPTER THREE

“I’m in the mood for dairy,” Rebecca said. “Is Ratner’s okay?”

“Sure,” I said, absorbing the sweet tones of her voice.

We walked quietly down Orchard to Delancey to Grand and finally to Pitt Street. We walked in perfect rhythm, the way dancers followed each other on stage, the way the shoreline and the roaring ocean move together. We were silent and never did I enjoy silence so much.

We passed half-dead trees and beggars who looked a thousand years old.

We went by pullers, grizzled men who did their best to encourage me to enter a store. They were careful not to grab me too hard out of fear of ripping my jacket. The pullers had perfected a grip tight enough to make it difficult to move on without being too hard.

“I’m in a hurry,” I told one particularly persistent puller. That didn’t discourage him at all. He said, “I swear on the honor of my beloved grandfather, of blessed memory, a Torah scholar admired by all, you will be done in no time at all. You’ll be done in two seconds and you will have a lifetime of happiness.”

“I don’t have money.”

“What, money?” the puller asked. “What we got is practically free.”

I got out of all their grips. It was a form of wrestling.

Police swung their billy clubs. Women held their children close to them as if that offered some protection on these streets.

The chimneys burped clouds of soot. The clotheslines hanging next to the tenements were filled with drying laundry even as the day darkened.

A peddler with a well-developed mustache wanted to sell us a frankfurter.

One particularly handsome man wanted to guess Rebecca's weight. Those guessers were usually out on Saturday nights, but here he was with his machine on wheels that was about five feet tall. It cost two cents to stand up on the machine and get weighed, but there was no charge if the man couldn't guess your weight within three pounds.

A man in front of us agreed. The scaleman grabbed his customer's biceps, and then carefully touched his thighs and patted him over most of his body. Then, a young lady followed. The crowd went crazy with laughter as the scaleman motioned with his hands as though he was going to do a comparably complete physical examination of her. The spectators screamed out for him to pat her down as well. But of course he never did. I must say this particular scaleman was really good.

I asked Rebecca if she wanted to try, but she laughed and said she didn't.

We kept walking. A photographer wanted to take our pictures and put them on buttons.

We finally got to Ratner's. I was once there for brunch on a Sunday morning and there were a thousand people in the place. I stood in line behind the velvet rope for half an hour and then left. Now it was later in the day, and there were seats available.

An old waiter came over and looked down at me. "You don't have to say." He was talking loudly and standing right next to me. "I know a blintz man when I see one. A nice man like you I can see you ordering a couple of servings." He turned to Rebecca.

“I don’t want blintzes,” I said. “I want potato pancakes.”

“Listen,” he said, “I been here almost ten years since we opened. You think I don’t know a man who wants blintzes?”

“I don’t doubt your abilities,” I said, “Bur I want potato pancakes.”

Rebecca nodded. The waiters at Ratner’s were famous for being rude, and Rebecca obviously enjoyed the show.

The waiter held up his hands. “Your loss. And the beautiful young lady?”

“Kreplach,” Rebecca said. Her order was accompanied by a smile as warm as a cabin’s fire on a cold winter’s night.

“Of course,” he said. “A perfect choice. It’s exactly what I would have suggested.”

“And don’t forget the hot onion rolls and black bread.” The restaurant gave a basket of them with every meal, but I wanted to annoy the guy. His face told me I was doing a good job. He stared and his eyes shot the flames of Hell at me.

“Of course, sir. I won’t forget.”

When he had gone, Rebecca said, “My, you have such a way with people.”

“I’m usually better.”

She nodded and said, “You’re staring at me.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I was thinking how Botticelli would have painted your face.”

“I’ll grant you. That’s not the way most men start a conversation with me.”

I figured I better change the subject before I wandered too far. “I appreciate your being willing to speak with me.”

Her voice hardened. Her face got darker. She stared at me quietly for a few seconds. I could hear what was coming as though she were a train just around the bend. “I’m not so much willing to speak with you Mr. Levin as I am willing to tell you not to keep asking about Ezra. My sister and everyone else is going to have to recover. We don’t need a busybody.”

I was unhappy at her change in tone, but I tried to keep my face neutral.

I needed to approach this delicately.

“As I mentioned, Miss London, I have a friend, a journalist. His name is Nathan Belsky. He is a crime reporter for the *New-York Tribune*. He’s a rough character. I was only trying to save you and Mrs. Kaufman from having to deal with him. I thought I would gather the information and pass it along for the story and you both would be saved a bit of his toughness.”

“My, you are a clever one Daniel Levin. I almost believed you. Save us, indeed. Seriously, why are you doing this? What in heaven’s name do you get out of it? Are you just a gossip? Are you a private detective?”

I opened my mouth and a grim smile appeared. “I try to help people. I’m not a detective, just someone who lives in the area. I will be blunt with you Miss London. A woman asked me to help because Mr. Kaufman may have cheated her. That’s why I’m asking questions. She asked me to investigate him.”

“You think Ezra was a cheat? Just how much did you charge this woman who asked you to help her?”

“Life on the East Side is difficult enough, don’t you think? I didn’t charge her.”

Rebecca London sat up.

“A white knight or an idiot? Which one is it, Mr. Levin?”

“Perhaps there’s not much space between the two,” I said.

“And what did you learn about Ezra?”

I knew she was simply trying to find out what I knew about her deceased brother-in-law, but I thought my honesty might soften her.

“I talked to some people. May I speak openly to you?”

“I’m not used to that from most men, but give it a try.”

The waiter returned. He only had Rebecca’s kreplach. He was gentle and careful as he put it beside her. He put the basket with the onion rolls and black bread right next to her.

“I waited for the fresh rolls,” he said to her. “They’re nice and hot. Perfect for a chilly day.”

She smiled.

“Are my potato pancakes on the way?” I asked.

“Of course, sir. Naturally, if you had ordered blintzes they would be here by now.”

He didn’t wait for an answer but walked away.

She took a bite of the onion roll and said to me, “You were going to tell me what you learned about Ezra.”

“You eat and I’ll talk,” I said. “I seem to have the time to talk.”

Rebecca just nodded.

“I know what everyone knows. Ezra claimed to have psychic powers. He told fortunes. From what I’ve been able to determine, he told everyone good news. When

there was bad news, say someone died, Ezra would tell the survivor that all would be fine. People came to him because they had lost a key or a watch their grandmother gave them. They came because they were desperately looking for love and thought he could tell them where to look. Or someone asked them to marry him and they wanted to know if the man was right for them. They wanted to know if they should move. They wanted to know how to make money in this great country. They wanted to know if someone would give them money. Evidently in Ezra's fortunetelling some rich old relative they didn't know about was about to die and leave them thousands of dollars. They wanted to know if they should get a divorce. This was mostly women. In fact, Ezra's clients were mostly women so far as I can tell. Sometimes I'd walk by and a dozen women would be waiting on the stoop waiting to see him. Anyway, these women often didn't like their husbands who didn't listen to them or care about them any more or ignored them. They knew it wasn't so Jewish to get a divorce, but they asked anyway. And I found out about his specialty."

Rebecca looked up.

My potato pancakes came. The waiter dropped the plate from a few inches above the table, and it made quite a sound as it hit. He never looked at me.

I started to eat. .

Finally, Rebecca couldn't stand it.

"His specialty?" she prompted me.

I chewed for a second and put down my fork.

Then I spoke. "Women looking for their missing husbands, the ones who abandoned them. Sometimes there were children involved. Those women on the stoop.

They were all looking for their husbands, who are probably now in California or Texas or someplace else far away. Ezra promised he'd find them for a fee. He charged plenty, but somehow as far as I could tell he never could locate one of those husbands."

I ate for a second. "He got business by going to the *Forward*."

"Really."

"Surely you know that. He read The Gallery of Missing Husbands in the *Forward*." The Gallery was a feature included in the paper once a week. It had grainy pictures of men who had gone on ahead and left their wives and families in the Old Country and then never contacted them. Or left their wives or families here and just disappeared. These women and children were left all alone. Ezra would see who to contact from The Gallery of Missing Husbands. Then he would tell them he could find their husband for a fee. Some couldn't pay. Some wouldn't. But many of them, too many, did pay. Every time they'd ask, he would say he had a good lead and they should just be patient. From what I've heard he could utter that line in his sleep."

"So what you're saying is he gave women hope, a belief that their lives would get better. What a crime."

"Think what you want, Miss London. But Ezra was cheating a lot of innocent people."

"Mr. Levin, it is going to be 1915 in two months. People should be modern enough to understand what they're doing. I think they are. I think they are paying just for the hope, not in the belief that Ezra will really find the husband. The hope keeps them going. It lets them wake up. It lets them take care of a sick child or believe in the idea of a tomorrow. The hope gave them a stirring belief that any minute Ezra would walk

through the door with his arm around the crying husband who would declare what a miserable wretch he was, what a terrible mistake he had made. Then, in their dreams, the husband, still crying, would crawl on his knees and beg to be forgiven and let back in the home. And then the woman, tearful now, would do so. She would stretch out her arms and all would be right again, the way the world was supposed to be. Abandoned women desperately need that fantasy. He was taking money, sure. But he was also providing a service.”

“Only not the one he promised.”

“The one they needed but couldn’t face.”

I was hesitant now. “Maybe one of those wives didn’t like the service.”

“Sure. And she picked him up over her head and tossed him off the roof.” She had finished eating. “Listen, Mr. Levin. Let me speak plainly to you. This is none of your business. You have no woman to help any more. No one will be angry any more about Ezra. And for a simple reason. He is gone. He’s no longer there to investigate. Let us mourn in peace. Nobody gains by blackening his name. He’s not Haman. He was a good and simple man who left behind a family that is grieving. He’s gone. Please don’t keep asking about him.”

I wished she didn’t have that face. I wished I could stop staring at her. I wished I didn’t have so restless a mind. I wished she liked me.

I nodded without saying a word.

I didn’t want to tell her what I was thinking.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was just starting to drizzle. I walked along quickly. I lived on Rivington Street, on the third floor of a four story tenement. There was a grocery store and a butcher shop downstairs. Each floor had four apartments.

I rented some sleeping space from Yetta Klein who lived in the apartment with her husband Feivel. There were three rooms in the apartment, just like in Ezra Kaufman's apartment. The front room, which everyone called the parlor, was the largest. It overlooked the crowded streets below. On Saturdays, I enjoyed looking down at Luigi, the organ grinder. Most of the organ grinders worked over on Second Avenue where there was more money, but Luigi, who looked like he enjoyed five expansive meals a day, came here because he was very kind to the children. He wandered over to Rivington and nearby streets with his monkey Toto. The monkey had an outfit that the children loved. Toto wore a red velvet pillbox hat and had on a matching red velvet suit. A green sash and gold buttons on the suit finished off the outfit. Luigi would play his organ while people would come to their windows in the tenements and toss out coins to Toto, who made valiant efforts to catch the coins in his hat. Some of the youngsters gathered around Luigi and danced to the music. The music was flat, but no one noticed and everyone had fun. After he finished playing, Luigi would pick out one child, often the youngest, maybe one standing off to one side. Then Luigi would ask the child a simple question. The child would get the right answer and Luigi would hand over a two cent prize to the delighted kid who would have a story to tell and a treat to buy at a local store.

There was a table and chair on the side of the window, and in the night when the Kleins were asleep, I would sit at the desk and try to write a novel. They saw me reading every day. I was then reading *Pendennis* by Thackeray and kept the book on the table. I had worked my way through Dickens and Austen and Dostoyevsky and Stendahl and Twain in that room. Twain had died four years earlier, and I was sorry that I would never be able to meet him. I couldn't write like they could. I didn't pretend I could, but I wanted to learn. I didn't tell anyone I was trying to be a writer.

Besides the parlor there was a kitchen area and a back bedroom without windows. That was where the Kleins slept. I had what counted as a bed in the parlor. Mrs. Klein had taken four empty herring barrels, set them up in a rectangle, and put a spring on the barrels. Sleep was not always easy.

There were three rickety chairs, a wooden table scarred by the cuts of heavy knives, an icebox that leaked cold water onto the floor, a bureau that had two broken drawers, and a cast iron coal stove. The parlor included a Victrola to play music. Mrs. Klein, like many others in the neighborhood, played recordings of Enrico Caruso. She was proud of that phonograph. It stood for progress. It was a sign that she had survived in the wilds of America. So she played those records over and over.

Mrs. Klein's children were gone, but five of her grandchildren came each week from Brooklyn for a bath. This was done in the kitchen tub. There wasn't much hot water, so the first grandchild was the only one not to be dipped in the cold tub. The children went in one after the other, so the last one collected all the dirt from the earlier ones and came out worse than when he had entered.

Mrs. Klein was cleaning the kitchen when I walked inside.

“You should be careful, Mr. Levin,” she said, “I clean for two hours. You can’t come in and mess it up in two minutes.”

“I have to walk by the kitchen to get to the parlor, Mrs. Klein.”

“If you kept regular hours like an honest man, Mr. Klein, you would be working still and wouldn’t be home until my floor is dry.”

“I pay you regularly every Friday morning.”

“You do. I agree. But it bothers me you don’t got no job. I have enough trouble with my Rabbi husband who studies all day and don’t work. I don’t like to see it.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Klein.”

“Don’t be so sorry. Go look for a job. I got a friend. Her husband is a big boss. He’s looking for a pants presser. That’s a job.”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Klein. Thank you for your interest in my life.”

She heard the sarcasm.

“What? You think it’s so easy living here, Mr. Klein? We got plenty of everything. Plenty of dirt. Plenty of noise. Plenty of hunger. A curse on Columbus for starting this country and on the liars who printed up those pictures saying how great this country is.”

She paused. “Hey, I got an idea. Why don’t you talk to the Rabbi while my floor dries? He’s in the bedroom so you don’t have to cross the kitchen. You like each other. He’s the same as you. His mind is in the sky instead of down here on the earth. Sure, that’s why you get along. You’re both lazy bums. Life is work, Mr. Levin. Little children, they go out and work long hours in the sweatshops. Women who clean the houses and

run the stores, they take in work on Sunday. And they even work on the Shabbos because they need the money. But you two men, no, you don't work."

I went into the bedroom, and saw Feivel Klein sitting at a desk bent over. He was writing a letter.

He looked up.

He was an elderly and fragile man. His beard was ragged. His yarmulke looked old, as though Moses had worn it. His hand shook a bit as he sat. When he heard me, he turned around.

"Ah, Mr. Levin. You have drops on your shoulders. The good Lord has chosen to water the world. He makes all the vegetables grow. What a miracle."

"It is raining, Rabbi."

"You know, I only let you and Mrs. Klein call me Rabbi. I am no longer in such a job."

He had told me his story. Rabbi Klein was a popular spiritual leader who, at one time at least, had a good job. But one day, without saying why, he just quit. His congregation was befuddled and angry. He just stopped showing up and therefore stopped getting paid. There were whispers, of course. Maybe there was another woman. But anyone who knew him laughed at such an idea. Maybe he had gone meshuggenah in the head. No, he still studied. No one could figure it out. And then another rabbi came along and Rabbi Klein figured less and less in the gossip that took place.

"What are you writing, Rabbi?"

“It’s another letter for someone. They don’t learn English. What? America is suddenly going to become a Yiddish-speaking country? Oy. So I write in English for them.”

“You should charge them.”

“What? Charge for a mitzvah? No, no, Mr. Levin. No one would even think of doing such a thing. When I was a boy in Rava Russka, my mother, of blessed memory, would say to me that she knew I was a good boy, that I would do what was right. And I hear her voice every day in my head saying ‘Good boy’. I never hear her voice saying ‘Bad boy’ even when I do something wrong. Her voice in my head is the sweetest sound in the world.”

“You have learned a lot, Rabbi Klein.”

He shrugged. “Some people have genius. I had desperation. I was hungry to learn. Wherever I went in this world, I couldn’t carry all my money. I couldn’t take my chair or all my clothes. No, Mr. Levin, all I could take wherever I went was my knowledge. And so I was desperate for it and ate like a hungry boarder.”

He smiled at me. “So what have you done today, Mr. Levin?”

“I got tired.”

The Rabbi nodded. “God brushes the dust of the world from your soul. You will be strong again, Mr. Levin. You know what makes me strong? The sound of a child laughing. I highly recommend it. You should listen to the children. Tell me, Mr. Levin, what made you so tired?”

I looked at him. “Ezra Kaufman died. He fell off a roof.”

Mr. Klein's stare begged me to continue. He didn't want to ask for gossip, which was forbidden, but he wanted to hear it. So I told him the parts of the story that I thought he needed to hear. I considered telling him about Rebecca London, but the Rabbi wasn't the one to go to for romantic advice.

"This is terrible. Still, one heard such bad words about Mr. Kaufman. Not that I ever listened."

We talked some more about psychics and books we were reading.

And then suddenly there was a knock on the door.

"Save an old man some steps, Mr. Levin. Would you please answer before that person goes crazy with the knocking?"

I went to the door and opened it.

My sister stared into my eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

My sister, Deborah, was dripping with rain. I wasn't sure where to bring her.

"To the bedroom," Mrs. Klein yelled. "I'm cleaning in there tomorrow."

I opened the bedroom door again. "Rabbi, my sister is here, and we would like to speak in private."

He stood up slowly. His back ached and walking was difficult for him. I couldn't really understand what it meant to suffer like that. I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to get like that, to hurt when I walked. I knew that I couldn't grasp the Rabbi's full anguish with life.

"Come, Mr. Levin," the Rabbi said, "You and your sister shall have your space."

When we were all done shuffling around, Deborah sat in the desk's chair and I sat on the edge of the bed.

My sister and I had a ritual of sorts. We stared at each other for a while with my face blank and hers struggling to hide disappointment and disapproval and radiate love and support instead. She did all this with limited success.

Then, as always when she visited, she handed me an envelope filled with money. I silently took it.

And then, believing she had paid for the right to confront me, began to speak.

"Why do you live like this, Daniel? You have a perfectly beautiful home waiting for you uptown. Even if you don't think so, even if you don't speak to him, you have a father who loves you. He misses you. Neither of us can understand how you can live in this filth. This must be the most crowded area on earth. And it smells like it is. I know

you help people. I know you're mad at Father. So am I. He made a mistake. An unforgivable mistake. But we're his children. We have to forgive him. He is a highly respected chemist. Science is an honorable profession. And he does very well. And he loves you. You have to admit that. Anyway, is living here better?"

"I only blame him for part of it."

This surprised her. "What do you mean?"

"Listen, Deborah, I know you don't have to come here every week and bring me money. You never ask how I use it. You're a perfect sister. I'm deeply grateful to you. I don't know if you want to hear what I mean."

She knew enough to be silent for a few seconds.

I looked down. "It was a Sunday when she did it."

"You think I don't remember that, Daniel? You think I don't miss Mother every single day, every single minute."

I nodded. "You know only part of why she did it, the part where our father decided he needed to collect women the way he collected chemicals. You remember her crying and screaming, begging him to remember his children and to stop."

Her voice was a shadow of its normal sound. "I remember."

"She talked to me the day before she killed herself, Deborah. We were on that white bench outside. She told me she couldn't take it any longer. She remembered a newspaper story from the year before about how a woman all alone wearing a yellow dress walked into a bay and never stopped. Two workers were at a distance and saw her. They ran to save her, but they were too late. Mother asked me how I thought that woman felt. I was an idiot. All I told her was that the woman must have felt very sad. I listened,

but I never thought Mother would ever do anything like that herself. She asked me if I had seen Father with any of his women. I told her I hadn't, but she knew I was lying. She said she was more tired than she realized it was possible to be."

"You couldn't know, Daniel. My God, I didn't realize this. So when she walked into that water, you must have been horrified."

"I should have screamed that the woman didn't know the damage she would be doing not only to herself but to everyone she left behind. I should have told her the woman was like an anarchist with a bomb that exploded and didn't just kill the anarchist but everyone around him. We, the family, were the people who were around. I should have told her she would be drowning all of us. Deborah, I was her son and I didn't know how to recognize what she was going to do or talk her out of it. Don't you see? Father drove her to it, but I was the one who listened to her and in effect told her it was all right. I...I feel as though I gave her emotional permission."

Deborah put her hand over her mouth. "That's why you do it, isn't it? Living like this. You feel so guilty, you moved down here to help people because you couldn't help Mother."

"I don't know if there's a direct line. I like to think I just want to help those who need it independent of what happened to Mother. But, you're right of course. There's certainly a connection."

"You're wrong, Daniel. You don't really know why she...why she took her own life. We think it was Father's behavior. You think it was because you told her how it could be done. But we really don't know."

"We know enough."

Deborah shook her head.

“No. Listen, Daniel. You help people around here. They come to you with a problem, and you try to solve it. I’ve seen you. I’ve heard people. You bring food. You pay for what people need. Maybe they have a bigger problem and you investigate, just like some detective. You’ve solved crimes. Your friend Nathan told me you could be the chief of police if they went on ability. So I’m coming to you with a problem. Only it’s not just my problem. It’s your problem, too. Find out why Mother did this. Find out about Father.”

“Investigate our parents?”

“Yes. Can’t you see that you’re trapped? You’ll never be free until you understand you’re not in any way responsible for her death. And the only way to find that out is to pretend she was someone else’s mother. And I’m the daughter who comes to you asking for help in understanding why my mother did this.”

She smiled at me.

“You were always the brightest one in the family. We both know that. I bet you don’t even play ball even though you were an athlete in school. All you do is brood and try to relieve your guilt. And you need a wife, Daniel. Someone you can love and sacrifice for, someone to make you believe in life again.”

“That sentiment would have a lot more power if you were married yourself.” I regretted my words immediately. I looked grief stricken. “I’m so sorry, Deborah.”

“It’s all right. I have forgiven Mr. Stern. He wanted me for the family money, and I didn’t recognize it. I cried when he left, but I can get onto the next chapter of my life. I

won't keep re-reading the last chapter. I absorbed the lessons, and I will move on. I shall find the right man. I'm looking. Are you looking for a wife, Daniel?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "Now you've made me happy. Will you visit for Chanukah?"

I softly shook my head no. Surprisingly, she nodded just as softly.

"Thank you for telling me about you and Mother, Daniel. We're in this together. The Levin Team. I really do hope you will investigate." She paused. "And you'll consider a visit? When you're ready."

She had earned that. "I will consider it. For you."

As I had with the Rabbi, I thought of mentioning Rebecca, but what would I say? I really find this woman attractive, and she doesn't like me at all? I'd wait until I had good news for my sister.

Then I hesitantly continued. "Someone died today not far from here?"

"My God. How?"

"He fell off a roof."

"That doesn't happen uptown."

"No. I bet it doesn't. I'm somewhat curious about it. Nathan is a really good reporter. We usually meet each weekday about an hour from now. He'll have some news about the death because the dead guy was well-known in the area."

"What did he do?"

"He was a psychic?"

My sister laughed. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't because he's dead and all. It's just..."

“I know,” I said. “People here have their palms read all the time. It’s a different world, Deborah.”

We chatted some more, telling each other memories from what had been a wonderfully happy childhood. We talked about the war in Europe, about President Wilson, about books we were reading.

I loved my sister, and I was deeply unhappy about making her sad.

She got up. “You know, Daniel, as always, that the money came from me not from Father.”

“I know. And I know that I could never have a better sister.”

If anyone in our family ever cried, we both would have at that moment. Instead we hugged each other. I walked her to the door.

It was time for me to walk over and find out some information about Ezra Kaufman from my friend Nathan Belsky.

CHAPTER SIX

We met at the bar on Essex Street. “Silver Dollar” Smith ran the place. He had once been a Republican Assemblyman but switched sides because he got angry at Republican politicians who tried to oppose Jewish immigrants. The bar was right across the street from the Essex Market Courthouse where Nathan Belsky went most days to chat with the cops and the criminals. Nathan always told me the criminals were far more interesting.

When you walked in to “Silver Dollar” Smith’s bar, you wouldn’t mistake it for any place else on Earth. There were one thousand silver dollars embedded in the floor. Another five hundred of them were on a chandelier. When you stood at the bar’s counter you could look at the star and crescent behind it that were also made of silver dollars.

Nate was already there, drinking and laughing with some other reporters. I stepped inside. One of Nate’s friends greeted me with a handshake.

Nate turned around and signaled me to walk with him. We went to a back room and he closed the door.

“You want a nice, tall drink yet Daniel.” He was joking because I never drank.

“I need your help, Daniel.”

I nodded.

“Obviously, I’m writing about Ezra Kaufman. I want to get your impressions since you were there.”

I told Nate all I had seen including about the guy running out the front door. I tried to give him some images like about the white horse. He was satisfied, but only up to a point.

“But I want more, Daniel. And there is more. I just was with a group of reporters listening to the Coroner’s Physician.”

“What did he say?”

“He said the guy got drunk and fell off the roof. So no story. I don’t want to embarrass the widow. No one needs that.”

“But there’s more. I can see it in your eyes, Nate.”

He smiled. “I always said you took up mind reading as a hobby. I spoke to Pat Meadows.”

Lieutenant Patrick Meadows was the Commanding Officer of the Detective Bureau. He was a good friend of Nate’s. Meadows had a reputation at least of being honest and competent.

“Is he investigating?”

“Not officially. But get this. The man you saw attempting to fly had a reputation among the police as a blackmailer. Pat thought it wouldn’t be strange if someone in that world tossed the guy. He was thinking maybe a rival blackmailer decided to put a competitor out of business.”

“Who was he blackmailing?”

Nate shook his head. “There are no sure facts here, Daniel. He was never even arrested. The thing is a blackmailer makes lots of enemies. The people he’s blackmailing, the other blackmailers as Pat says, maybe his family that doesn’t want him to be a

blackmailer. There's a million people. And there's more. Maybe he was cheating with a married woman and the guy's husband figures it out and sends him to psychic Heaven. Or maybe it was that another psychic isn't particularly happy Ezra's stealing business. Or maybe that guy with the beard you saw running out was real friendly with Mrs. Kaufman and it got too far. See, I want to write about a possible murder angle with one small problem."

"The cops aren't looking for a murderer."

"That does get in the way. But that's where you come in, Daniel. The cops don't want me to need them. They like just collecting money from the bars and the girls. Pat can't do anything because there's no evidence. But I could beat out all the other papers if there was only a murder angle. That's why I need you to look."

"I don't have to look so far, Nate. I think Ezra Kaufman may have been murdered. And I think I know how it was done."

"Sure. And I think I'm going to be made an editor at twice my salary."

"I'm not joking."

"You saw the guy fall. What? Did he tell you what happened while he was on the way down?"

"No. But he sort of told me when he was lying on the ground."

"You mean while he was lying on the ground dead?"

"Yes."

"Was Ezra the psychic or are you?"

"I'm no psychic and Ezra was a fake."

"Just tell me."

“Ezra’s face was gray. He had been physically ill. He had been drinking schnapps.”

“I take it he wasn’t shot.”

“Just listen, Nate.”

He couldn’t decide whether he should look down as he was taking notes or look up at my face. The face won.

“Go ahead.”

“The gray face and the being sick are signs of arsenic poisoning.”

“For sure?”

“For maybe.”

“And the schnapps?”

“Say I wanted to poison you with arsenic. I pour it in some alcohol. Schnapps with the fruit smell is perfect. You can’t taste the poison. You get sick. Depends on how much arsenic and your condition. I don’t know enough about the effects in terms of time. But your skin turns gray. You get physically ill maybe. And you die. And then I who put the arsenic in the drink toss you off the roof to make it seem as though you were up there drinking, lost your balance, and fell.”

Nate was thinking. “Great stuff. But I can’t write that. There’s no proof is there?”

“No.”

“And the Coroner’s Physician won’t say Ezra was poisoned because then he’d have to say he missed it and anyway there’s no certainty.”

Nate was thinking.

“How can I get proof, Daniel? I can smell the story. It will be a big one. Ezra Kaufman the famous psychic murdered. You have to get me proof?”

“And how do I do that?”

“That’s my question to ask you.”

I looked at him. “I have a suggestion if Ezra was killed by arsenic.”

There was a broad smile.

“You are the answer man, Daniel.”

I nodded. “If arsenic was used, then you need a sample of Ezra’s hair to prove it. The signs of arsenic poisoning will still be there. Just have some friend at the morgue get it and give a test.”

“Two problems,” he said.

“Only two?”

“That I can think of at the moment. My morgue man went and got himself fired. He’s working at a hospital in Jersey.”

“Great.”

“And the Coroner’s Physician and I are not currently on the best terms. Remember I said I spoke to him with a group of reporters. I asked to speak to him alone and he laughed at me and walked away.”

“I’m shocked, Nate. You think it has to do with that story three weeks ago when you embarrassed him with some mistakes and suggested the morgue be shut down?”

“That might be part of it.”

“So write what you know.”

He shook his head. “My editor is this nasty man. He wants facts. The guy’s no fun at all.” There was a pause.

“You know how...clever you are Daniel?”

I didn’t answer.

“Why for a guy young and athletic like you, it would be easy to sneak into the morgue and just cut off a piece of Ezra’s hair. My guy in Jersey could test it. See, every problem has an easy answer.”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You skipped right over the part of me committing a crime.”

“What? Ezra’s going to miss some locks of his hair? What crime?”

“Breaking into the morgue. Stealing from a dead body.”

“I know you don’t need money, Daniel. But come on. Let’s deal here. You get me some of Ezra’s hair, and I get something you want.”

“Thanks, Nate. But there’s absolutely nothing I...”

He looked at me eagerly. “What? Come on. Have you thought of what you want?”

“I know what I want. I don’t know if you can get it.”

“Try me. I’m very resourceful.”

“Except about breaking into the morgue.”

“I’m not representing just myself. If I was caught my whole paper could go out of business. You’re just representing yourself. Come on, tell me what you need.”

“What I need is the police report about my mother’s death.”

“When did she die?”

“About a year ago.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good, you get... We’ve got a problem.”

“That didn’t take long. What is it?”

“Ezra’s funeral is tomorrow. I’d have to break into the morgue tonight.”

“So what’s the problem.”

“What if I break in and get you the hair only you can’t get me the report about my mother?”

“Daniel. I know this is important to you. I wouldn’t promise if I couldn’t deliver. You get the hair, I’ll get the report.”

I had always been able to trust him.

“All right. One more promise is needed.”

“You’re tough. Okay. What is it?”

“Let’s say I get you the hair. You have it tested, and there’s arsenic in there. You get your big story. Only I won’t go beyond that. Let the police investigate. Leave me out of it.”

“I’m not stupid beyond what is absolutely necessary, Daniel. You want your mother’s chart for a reason. You’re looking at that.”

I nodded. “Do we agree? I don’t get involved after helping you prove there was a murder? That is, if there was. Maybe I’ll get the hair and I’ll be wrong. Maybe your guy will find nothing in there.”

“You get it and find out.”

It was dark when I walked out and onto Essex Street, darker than I ever remembered seeing. I turned my face and walked through the heavy rain to go look among the dead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A rainy, cold, dark night is a thief's best friend. That's what I was after all. Just a common thief. Imagine if I died on the way back. The newspapers would read: "Daniel Levin, an unemployed thief, died after stealing a piece of hair". I'd give readers a good laugh.

The rain kept most people inside, that and the fact that it was approaching midnight. Those still on the street were looking down at their feet. No one was looking at my face.

I had been to the Bellevue Morgue in 1911 after the fire in the Triangle Waist Factory. I knew three of the victims. They had jumped out of the window rather than be burned. I went to the Morgue to see all the victims then. I wanted to get angry, and the visit worked.

Bellevue was the city's first morgue. It was a big place. I got there and thought about entering through one of the iron balconies. Without the rain all the alcoholics treated here who were awake would be outside looking at the horses driving through the streets. If there were horses and if the horses were awake. I didn't want to run into anyone on the wards for the crazy people. While I was thinking, I stood in front and leaned on the iron gate on the sidewalk next to the steps to the entrance. There was a window that was maybe an inch open right behind the gate. I jumped over the gate and pulled the window up. It was stuck, so I found a branch and used it as a lever. The window moved up and I was inside.

I vaguely remembered my way around. The night staff was small in number and thought it unnecessary to wander around the halls.

The smells gave me a headache. The chemicals used to clean the place were overwhelming. Maybe it was the smells that kept the crazy people from getting sane. Suddenly there was a loud cry, and then another one. A patient somewhere was screaming. Maybe if I were locked in here I'd be screaming, too. It was a woman wailing in the night. I couldn't quite hear the words, but it was a cry from her heart. Evidently, she wanted to get out of bed and go to the next room. At least I thought that was what she wanted.

I got to near the bodies when I heard someone walking.

The steps were getting louder.

I found a closet. It was locked. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled. The hallway was dark, but the footsteps sounded as though they were getting closer. I hugged a wall, trying, as if I were some magician, to make myself not only as small as possible, but invisible. The man walked right by me in the dark. I noticed that I had stopped breathing.

Then, about fifteen feet after he passed me, he stopped.

I had this sudden need to sneeze. I focused all my attention on not sneezing.

The man turned around and was walking back toward me.

Another man in the distance screamed, "James, where are you? You can't leave your bed."

The man was now only a few feet from me.

The man in the distance was closer now. The man walking next to me went right by me again.

The man searching for the walker reached him about ten yards after he passed me going the other way.

“Come on James.” The voice was harsh. “You’ve been told a thousand times. Blind men are not allowed to walk around here by themselves. We’ll take you when you need to walk. Now, come on, I’ve got to get you back.”

The two kept walking further and further away from me.

I slumped down on the floor and sat there for several minutes.

Then I was up again and walking. I went as quickly as I could to the room with the dead.

The beds with the dead people on them were lined up side by side. If they could have seen they might have looked at the large windows in front of them.

It was unhealthy to be near the bodies. A few decades ago, the dead would be collected by a horse and carriage. And the carriage would have some bells on it that rang when the wagon was going by. People would hear those bells and know enough to stay away. I remember reading Edgar Allan Poe stories in which there were bells. Readers associated the bells in the story with death.

Besides morgue men, people earned a living with the dead in another way. It still happens but not so much now that we’ve begun the twentieth century. But people used to get buried alive. So the coroners would put a piece of string next to the deceased and pull the string through a hole in the coffin and up through the earth. The strings would be

attached to bells. If you woke up in the coffin you pulled the string and bells rang. The cemeteries hired people to sit in the cemeteries at night and listen for the bells.

I realized I shouldn't have been thinking about this stuff. I struck a match I had been carrying and lit a candle as I walked through the dark room with the bodies. I made an instant vow that I would never do this again.

Ezra's was, of course, the last body I looked at.

I took a knife from my pocket, leaned the candle against the body with the flame facing away, and cut some of Ezra's hair from his head. I had this vision of the candle falling and the whole place going on fire. Now the newspaper story would read; "Daniel Levin, an unemployed thief, died after stealing a piece of hair from the morgue and setting the whole place on fire." That would be quite a legacy by which my family could remember me.

I put the hair in some paper and put the paper in my pocket. Then I picked up the candle and began to reverse my steps.

I was never so glad as when I got on the sidewalk in front of the place.

I was never so happy to see pouring rain and dark the color of a boundless death.

Then I walked over to meet Nate.

"You don't look so good," he said.

I just nodded.

"Look on the sunny side of it, Daniel. You're going to help find a murderer. You're going to get that police report. It was a good night."

It took six hours for me to remember that I was alive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nate's story in the *New-York World* appeared two days later. He had taken the hair to his morgue man in Jersey, and the guy, for more money than Nate could afford, gave the results: the hair had arsenic in it. Who knew arsenic could make someone so happy? Nate was overjoyed.

Against my will, I figured strongly in the newspaper's story. In Nate's version, I was the one who had first seen the body falling even though I wasn't. He said there was a poetic truth to it because I was the real observer of what happened. I don't think he believed that, but he was after drama and sales not accuracy.

There was a full description of the man who ran out the front door. The paper had even gotten someone to make up a drawing based on my description. In the drawing, the guy looked as sinister as possible. I thought if I looked closely I might see blood dripping from his teeth. There was talk of a reward for anyone who could identify this man who was wanted for questioning.

As far as I knew, no one was wanted for anything. The police had opened an investigation, but the guy just walked out the door of the building. There was absolutely no evidence he had done anything else.

Even Mrs. Klein treated me nicely for a whole day. The Rabbi said I was a hero. I wonder what he would have said if he knew I had broken into the morgue.

I was sitting on a chair in the parlor reading Mark Twain when there was a knock on the door.

I got up to answer, opened it, and froze.

Rebecca London was standing in the doorway holding a present.

“May I come in?”

I nodded. I wasn't at that moment certain that if I opened my mouth to speak a sound would emerge.

I walked and signaled that she should sit down in a chair next to mine. It was like I had taken some vow of silence.

“Here, Mr. Levin,” Rebecca said, handing me the present. “It's not much. Just some chocolate. I wanted to make up for how I behaved.”

I nodded, still unable to speak. I thought maybe I should look for a job as a mime.

“You're probably wondering why I'm here. I mean besides wanting to apologize.”

I nodded. What an idiot. I had to speak. If I couldn't I would be really embarrassed, but I had to try.

“It's good to see you.”

What an idiot, I thought to myself. That's what comes out? Maybe I shouldn't have spoken.

“And you too, Mr. Levin. Of course I read about your work in the newspaper. I have to say, my sister and I were completely shocked. No one ever suspected murder. But you did.”

“The story may have exaggerated my abilities,” I said.

“I doubt it. I mean, if it's in the papers it has to be true. Otherwise they couldn't print it. Right?”

“Right,” I said. I wasn't about to school her in the realities of journalism.

“My sister is crying all the time now. It’s difficult enough to have your husband taken from you, but a murder? Who ever thinks that will happen?”

“It doesn’t happen so often,” I said, though I knew it happened more often than reported, more often than suspected, and more often than even realized.

“My sister can’t sleep. That would provide some relief.”

Rebecca began to cry. I wanted to hold her.

“Oh, you do see, don’t you, Mr. Levin? When we thought he had gotten drunk and fallen off the roof, we wanted everyone to forget about what had happened as quickly as possible. We thought then we might be able to get on with our lives. But the murder changes everything. It changes how we feel about the death. When Ezra was just one more dead drunk, we didn’t want to know any more and we certainly didn’t want you to investigate. We didn’t want bad stories coming out just as we were trying to forget and get better. You do understand that, don’t you Mr. Levin?”

“Of course, Miss London. I fully understand.”

I sounded like a complete and utter fool. I think my voice was an octave higher than usual.

“But with the murder...we need you, Mr. Levin.”

“Me?”

Rebecca London needed me?

“Yes. You discovered that it was a murder. You know about Ezra. We want you to investigate the murder, to find out who did it, and have the person arrested.”

“Miss London, I would like to help. I really would. But I have another case I am investigating at the moment. At any case, investigations are...they’re strange. They take

you to places you didn't suspect. They sometimes lead to very uncomfortable findings and any investigation is often embarrassing.”

She looked confused.

“What do you mean, Mr. Levin?”

“I don't want you to get upset or angry at me. I am simply telling you the truth. When the police investigate Ezra's death they will first consider the possibility that someone close to him did him harm, say someone who would get insurance money in case he passed on.”

“But...my God, the police are going to investigate my sister? They think she might have killed Ezra?”

“Not that, Miss London. But they have to determine that she didn't before they look elsewhere?”

“Will they look at me as well?”

“They might.”

The crying began again.

“Don't you see then? The police don't like Jews in the first place. And now they think we killed Ezra? Mr. Levin, we need you. You have to find out who did it. You have to save us. I know you said you have another case, but can't that wait? Or can't you do both at the same time? You're smart. Oh, please, Mr. Levin, please. I would be deeply grateful.”

She was holding my hand in both of hers.

The ring on her right hand stared up at me. Should I ask about it?

I felt my face turning red.

I saw her pleading eyes. It was out of a medieval tale. I would be her knight.

There wasn't a possibility in the world I would refuse her.

"I'll do this," I said. "I will speak with your sister and try to offer some advice."

I was torn a little. I wanted to investigate my mother's death, but there was Rebecca sitting inches away from me holding my hand and needing me. My Mother would tell me that she would want me to look for love.

I stared into Rebecca's wide eyes. "I'm not promising, you understand. But let me look around and ask some questions starting with your sister. The police are the ones to investigate, not me. They have the means to do a proper search for the killer. I just have me. You can trust them. And Nathan Belsky will use the newspaper to keep them honest."

"Please."

"I'll talk to your sister. We'll take it from there. Don't get your hopes up, though. I really have other work to do."

She wasn't letting go of my hand. I didn't withdraw it.

We sat looking into each other's eyes for a few moments.

I think this is what it felt like when they said you could walk into Heaven.

CHAPTER NINE

I was making my way to see Mrs. Kaufman, and felt a thrill at the thought of seeing Rebecca again. The day was cloudy again, but I thought their gloom was for others.

I turned the corner, and there was Patrolman Wilde.

He walked up to me swinging his billy club in a menacing fashion.

“You can’t keep clear of what is none of your business, can you Danny Boy?”

I hoped remaining calm and quiet would help.

It didn’t.

He stood in front of me and pushed his face forward. “I see your good Jew friend put you in the papers. Embarrassing the police again. You two like that, don’t you? You try walking the streets with these criminals and gangs. Let’s see how long you last.”

“There was a murder Wilde. What was I supposed to do, let it go?”

“Yes, that is exactly what you were supposed to do. We say if there was a murder not you. What we say is what counts as the truth, you understand that Danny Boy?”

He paused. “That story is all over the city. Everybody’s talking about it. Everybody wants to know how come the police didn’t see it as a murder. And you know what my chief says? He calls me in and gives me a taste of what is awaiting sinners in the afterlife. He threatens to send me as far from my home as he can. All because this Jew in the papers sees a murder when I was supposed to see it.”

“I’m sorry for your troubles.”

“Sure you are.”

“I have an idea.”

He stepped back a bit until we were at a normal distance.

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“If I hear any information about the killer, I will pass it along to you.”

“And just how are you supposed to hear information? The police are in charge of this. Lieutenant Meadows will solve it faster than you can talk to your Jew friends.”

“You keep talking about Jews, and I won’t tell you anything. I may even have a few more stories about your drinking and your friendships with the French ladies.”

“Ha! My friends on the force do it as well. They’d admire me.”

“The people who read about it in the papers won’t admire you so much.”

“What information?”

“I’m going to talk a little bit to people. Not much. I’m planning to do another case and, like you say, leave this one to the police. But I may hear some stuff that people won’t tell to your investigators. You straighten out about this Jewish stuff, you stop with the name-calling, and I’ll tell you. That will make us even about my embarrassing you with that newspaper story.”

“It’s not so easy. You people are such a tempting target.”

“You decide. And you have to choose right now. Otherwise if I get a lead I go to the papers first.”

He saw the advantages to providing information, to making up for his failure in Ezra Kaufman’s death.

“All right. You provide good information that my sergeant can pass on to Meadows, and you’re forgiven for going to the papers.”

“And the Jewish stuff?”

“That’s harder.”

“It’s also part of your choice.”

“Depends on how good the material is. But if it’s good, I’ll consider it. And that’s the best you’re going to get right now.”

I thought he was right about that.

“Okay, Patrolman Wilde. We have a deal.”

I stuck my hand out.

He wasn’t happy, but he shook it.

I walked past him, looked up, and saw Anya Rosenthal and her daughter crossing the street toward me. Mrs. Rosenthal was waving and smiling. The little girl’s face still had the innocence of an angel but the sadness was tempered by a curiosity, as though she thought the world might be better than she feared and so she wanted to find out about it.

“Mr. Levin, I am so happy to see you. And don’t worry, I didn’t come to beg for no more money. Mr. Rosenthal he found a job. He runs a machine making caps. It’s hard work but at least there is money every week. We can pay our rent. It feels good to be able to do that. You were a lifesaver with the rent, Mr. Levin. You know why?”

“No, Mrs. Rosenthal, I don’t.”

She held her daughter’s shoulders. “She is my gold. She is my diamond ring. And you gave her hope, Mr. Levin.”

“I’m pleased I could help.”

Mrs. Rosenthal and her daughter took a step toward me so we were standing side by side. “I didn’t have it so easy, Mr. Levin. My husband died. I can’t say more in front

of her. But I was alone with a little girl. That is when I met Mr. Rosenthal. Oh, it was a dream. He was so kind. It's not every man who would take a little girl in and treat her like his own child. And now, finally, we are settled. Mr. Rosenthal is working. My little girl is going to find a school. I feel so..."

There was a loud shot. I thought it was a rifle shot from across the street, but I wasn't sure. I turned quickly.

Mrs. Rosenthal had turned her body and bent over so that she was blocking her daughter. I saw the blood dripping from her dress as she collapsed on the sidewalk.

The girl screamed.

People all over yelled.

I bent over to hold Mrs. Rosenthal. She wasn't conscious.

"Mama, mama." The girl was screaming.

Someone ran for a local doctor.

There was blood all over my hands and clothes as I held Mrs. Rosenthal.

The girl was hugging her mother and wouldn't let go.

A doctor arrived and bent down next to me. I let him hold her as I stood up and walked to one side.

Wilde was asking questions of the people around trying to determine where the shot had come from.

A neighbor asked why anyone would want to shoot Mrs. Rosenthal.

I knew the answer to that question.

The shot wasn't aimed at her. It was aimed at me. If I hadn't been in the newspaper, if I hadn't determined that Ezra Kaufman was murdered, then there would

have been no shot. Then the little girl would never have seen her mother shot, bleeding, collapsing to the ground.

I could still hear the reverberation from the shot. I would never get the sight of that blood erased from my memory. I would never cease to hear the cry of the girl.

I would never, ever be able to make this up to the little girl. I felt as though my soul was swirling downward, as though I was in a whirlpool headed toward permanent despair.

And I knew. Just then I knew.

I had to find the man who ran out of the building, the man I described for the newspaper, the man whose picture had been on the front page, the man who must have poisoned Ezra Kaufman, pushed him off the roof, and then run downstairs and out the front door. The man who must have shot Mrs. Rosenthal.

Thoughts of Mother raced through my mind.

My family would have to wait. I could solve this murder without having to worry about how Mother's death affected me. I could put a murderer in jail.

But what, I wondered, could I ever do for the girl who was once again a sad-eyed angel?

CHAPTER TEN

I wasn't a family member and so I was sent off to a waiting room in the hospital.

Herman Rosenthal, holding his daughter's hand, came to the room to speak to those of us who were waiting. The little girl was crying. So were half the people who were waiting.

Rosenthal's pale face looked as though it had aged a decade. He went up to a group of people. One woman looked a lot like Anya Rosenthal, so I assumed the two were sisters.

He saw me and came over. The little girl remembered me and stopped crying.

"Mr. Levin. It is very nice of you to come." His eyes were looking down and away from me.

"How is your wife, Mr. Rosenthal?"

There was a bottomless sigh.

"Almost a miracle, Mr. Levin. That's what the doctor said. Almost a miracle. When she turned, the bullet missed by half an inch...I forget what he called it, but a bad place. She bled too much, but they were supposed to be able to fix that. We thought she would be all right. You understand that, Mr. Levin. We had hope."

He had started crying.

I didn't want to push him.

Then his mind re-grouped its parts and he looked at me. "She died ten minutes ago, Mr. Levin. We had only been wed a short time, but we loved each other so much. I

can't imagine life without my wife, and..." He looked down at his daughter. "How am I going to take care of her? She will grow up without a mother."

There was more crying.

We sat with each other for an hour. He needed to talk, and I guess he had no one else he could speak with.

We got up to walk. The little girl walked beside him holding his hand.

He changed, growing serious, struggling to grab hold of life again.

"I read about you in the newspaper, Mr. Levin. So terrible. And right across the street from us. You know this stranger, the man with the beard who went out the building?"

"No, Mr. Rosenthal, but we're looking for him."

"And this monster, he killed my Anya?"

"I think so, yes, Mr. Rosenthal."

"And he was shooting at you, yes?"

The guy wasn't dumb. His eyes were dry.

"I think he was angry at me for being a witness. It could have been just a crazed killer or someone else."

"I'm not angry at you, Mr. Levin. You didn't do this. It all falls on the man who did the shooting."

I nodded. I hesitated, but the question had to be asked.

"Could someone have wanted to harm your wife, Mr. Rosenthal?"

His face turned red, but I saw him forcing himself not to erupt.

“You tried to help our family, so I will not get mad at you, Mr. Levin. But those are terrible words to say. My wife never harmed a soul. She was the best woman in the world. She took me in. I wasn’t long in this country, and I was a greenhorn. She taught me this funny English language. She gave me a purpose in life. She had to take care of her daughter and was scared no one would marry her.”

“Her first husband died?”

“That is correct. It was an accident where he worked.”

“You understand I am only trying to help. If it was somebody who tried to kill me, you and your daughter will be safe. If, however, it was someone who wished to harm her, we need to know that in order to make sure you both will be all right.”

“I understand.”

“So I need to ask you some questions. Is that all right?”

“Of course.”

“The police will as well. But they won’t care as much as we do.”

Rosenthal just nodded. He had already learned the way of the police even as he knew they were saints compared to the Cossacks where he came from.

“Let’s start with where were you when your wife was shot?”

The red came back to Rosenthal’s face.

“Ow!” His daughter was crying.

“Daddy, you squeezed too hard.”

“I’m sorry, my little baby. Daddy didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He turned to me. “You are a nasty man, Mr. Levin. And you are doing a nasty job.”

“The police will be less careful in their manners.”

He looked down and put his right hand over his forehead. Then he looked up.

“Yes, I suppose they will. I was at my new job. I was sitting with perhaps twenty men.”

He wrote down the address and the name of the man in charge.

“Did you seriously think I would ever hurt my wife, Mr. Levin?”

“I’ve learned to be suspicious of everyone, Mr. Rosenthal. I wish I were living in a more innocent part of my mind.”

He was silent.

“Think, Mr. Rosenthal. Perhaps...”

“Don’t even say it, Mr. Levin. There was no other man, and there was no other woman. You think finding love is so easy here, Mr. Levin?”

“I know it isn’t, Mr. Rosenthal. And I know how difficult these questions are. The police will want to look through your apartment.”

“When? I have to clean it.”

“Soon.”

He hesitated. “I have to go, Mr. Levin. The doctors said I could...could have the body in a little while. I have a funeral to prepare. They said it was almost a miracle, Mr. Levin. How can I ever believe in miracles again?”

“Maybe by looking into your daughter’s face, Mr. Rosenthal.”

He nodded slowly and left.

I couldn’t help it. I was bothered. There was some sort of veil covering the face of the real Herman Rosenthal. He only let me see the veil. And yet, he certainly hadn’t shot his wife. He didn’t look like a drinker. He didn’t look like he went to the opium dens or

went to sample the French girls who were famous in the city. Maybe gambling. Maybe shame. Maybe illness.

And maybe nothing.

I knew there was a danger to the way I lived. I didn't look at people normally. Everyone was a suspect. Everyone was guilty of something. Everyone was no good underneath. My view of life was getting twisted by the people I encountered. I talked to boys in gangs, to criminals, to people who went to synagogue and picked pockets there, and innocent young women who turned out not to be so innocent after all.

Rosenthal was right. It didn't at all make sense that anyone was trying to harm her. And if they were, why with a rifle? They would have stabbed her or shot her.

A rifle. Someone had to be a good shot. Someone had to believe in killing. Someone had to be really angry at me.

The logic of it seemed simple and straightforward. I had seen Ezra Kaufman's killer come out of the tenement and disappear in the crowds. I had reported what I saw to a journalist. He wrote a story about it. The killer had seen the story. If I was dead there were no more witnesses. So the killer tried to kill me.

That was the straightforward explanation and talking with Rosenthal gave me no plausible alternative.

And yet that feeling was there.

I was missing something.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mrs. Kaufman was looking better the day after the funeral. She was sitting shiva and receiving guests who brought food. She had told the police she wouldn't talk to them but would talk to me. They weren't happy, but they weren't going to cause a community uproar. They just wanted the information. I had agreed, and so there I was to say the prayers, to eat the food, to mourn with her, and to ask her questions about her husband's death.

She may have wondered why I was so uneasy sitting there. Maybe she thought it was because Rebecca London was sitting beside me. Rebecca looked pale. She had a dark dress that covered her throat. I had trouble not staring at her, not talking to her, not taking her away from this tenement to a place where the sun never hid, where the temperature remained constantly comfortable, where the reaches of reality had finally found their limits.

Maybe Mrs. Kaufman thought my unease was because I didn't like talking about death, or that I felt embarrassed trying to comfort her, or that I had to ask her questions at a time set aside for grieving not discussing horrible matters.

But she never thought I felt uneasy because I had sneaked into the morgue and cut off a piece of her husband's hair. My private knowledge stuck me like a thousand needles inside my brain.

"I will try to limit the questions, Mrs. Kaufman," I said. Not believing me, she simply nodded. This was one more of the endless terrible tasks she had to undertake.

"I am aware that the police have informed you..."

I stopped myself. I sounded clinical, as though the discussion were about a stranger, not her husband, as though the fact that she would be a widow for the foreseeable future was acceptable to her and not a pain that went to the bottom of her soul and nested there tormenting every waking hour and most hours when she was asleep.

There was no choice. It was almost as though a stranger was speaking for me, as though I had stopped being a human to become someone trying to solve a crime.

I continued. "The police have informed you that they have concluded your husband's death was a homicide."

She gave forth a loud roar. I waited, and then I continued

"I therefore have to ask you a few questions. Is that okay?"

She looked at Rebecca, who nodded.

Mrs. Kaufman stared back at me. "Go ahead, Mr. Levin. I will try. I would rather speak with you than to the police. Rebecca says you are a good man."

And who was I to argue with Rebecca?

"Thank you, Mrs. Kaufman. I first want to ask you about the man the newspaper artist drew. It was on the front page. Did you see it?"

She nodded. This was going to be slow, like getting information from a child through hierarchically arranged questions that slowly built to a revelation.

"All right. That's good. Did you recognize the man?"

She shook her head.

"I saw him," I said. "I saw him running out of this building right after your husband...after I saw your husband."

She nodded again.

She was thinking. I remained silent.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe he looks like the man Mrs. Beller sees sometimes. She’s...I don’t like to say. It’s gossip.”

“This is important gossip,” I said.

“All right. She’s...there are a lot of men who come to her apartment. A lot. You understand?”

“I nodded.”

“So there were a lot of men with beards like the newspaper described. They looked like anarchists to me, those crazy people in Russia.”

She was silent for a moment. “Mr. Levin, I’m not really sure. I didn’t see the men so well, but one man he visits her a lot. I have seen him. He looked like that drawing. I mean the beard and the hat.”

“Would you recognize him if you saw him again?”

“I...I think so, Mr. Levin. I mean I didn’t see him for so long, and he looked like a lot of men around the East Side. You understand?”

“Of course, Mrs. Kaufman.”

I paused. “Let’s consider another question. Can you think of anyone who disliked your husband enough to hurt him?”

“They didn’t understand him.” Her voice had risen.

I let her talk at her own pace.

“Ezra Kaufman was a great man. He brought comfort to many. I know, I know. There were people who grumbled because their hat wasn’t where he told them to look.

But he was a genius. He could see the future, Mr. Levin. He could know when people would get the money they needed. Oh, he helped many people.”

“And those who didn’t like him. Can you think of anyone in particular who might want to hurt him?”

“Not his customers, no. They loved him. But the other psychics. They hated my Ezra. And you know why, Mr. Levin? Because they were fakes and Ezra was real. He took their business and they hated him for it. You want to look for someone who wanted Ezra to get to Heaven early, you look at the other psychics.”

“Good, Mrs. Kaufman. You’re doing very well. Is there one psychic you can think of that could benefit from Mr. Kaufman’s passing. Someone who might get the customers who would be in mourning for so large a loss.”

She looked up triumphantly. “Abie Katz. That’s your man. He hated Ezra. And he knew how to fire rifles. He complained all the time that his customers ran to Ezra. And why shouldn’t they? From Ezra they could get some truth, not made up mumbo-jumbo from Abie Katz.”

“Do you know where Abie Katz lives?”

“It’s Hester Street, but I don’t know the number.”

I was nodding. “I will find it, Mrs. Kaufman.”

The tough part was coming, and I was not happy about asking.

“Mrs. Kaufman, you know how difficult the police can be.”

“Sure. Ezra was always complaining about them. They would bother him, like he was a criminal instead of such a great and noble man.”

“They have asked me to do something very unpleasant. At first I said no, but then they said if I didn’t do it, they would have to. I got scared for you and Ezra. So I said I would ask. But you have to understand if you say no to me, the police will be here tomorrow.”

“What is this terrible task you have, Mr. Levin?”

“I have to look in Mr. Kaufman’s room and look through his papers and belongings. And if there are papers other than in the bedroom, I have to look at those.”

“This is like digging up the dead, Mr. Levin. It goes against Jewish law.”

“I’m not a rabbi, Mrs. Kaufman. I’m trying to make it easier so you don’t have a bunch of the police wandering through your home when you are sitting shiva.”

She was about to tell me to leave when Rebecca spoke up.

“It is better to get it done by a friend. You will be discreet, Mr. Levin?”

“Of course, Miss London. I do not wish to harm Mr. Kaufman’s name. Indeed, I wish to protect it.”

“He didn’t mean for anyone to see it.”

I didn’t want to say, “He didn’t mean to get killed either,” so I had to soften it.

“Unfortunately, the police are legally required to investigate.”

That was good. Hide once again behind the police and this time add to it by also hiding behind vague rhetoric.

“You’ll be quick about it, Mr. Levin? And not mess up his papers?”

“I’ll do it as quickly as I can, Mrs. Kaufman.”

“All right. But remember now that is all I have left of Ezra.”

“I will very much keep that in mind.”

She nodded.

I saw the small pile of papers he kept in what was already a small room. I didn't expect much and went through them slowly. They were straightforward records. A long list of people he had cheated and the amounts he had taken from them under false pretenses.

I had casually looked over the parlor and kitchen areas. It was unlikely he would have hidden any interesting material there because his wife would have come across them while she cooked or cleaned. She could also see stuff in the bedroom, but I couldn't think where else to look.

I went through all his clothes, slowly.

Then I looked at his money drawer. It was a sturdily built piece of brown wood. His name and address were on the top. He kept it for the payments people made when they came to visit it. There were bills in it.

There was also a note book inside. I took out the book and opened it. There were names and addresses, mostly of local businesses.

Sometimes when I investigated, I felt like a very industrious accountant, going through records line by line. And that's what I did, slowly reading each business and address.

Then I got to one listing of a lawyer with an address in the Tenderloin. At one point the Tenderloin ran only from 23rd Street up to 42nd. But it had recently expanded to maybe 60th Street and maybe even a few blocks beyond that. There, from Fifth Avenue up to Seventh or Eighth depending on whether it had expanded since I last checked, there

were a wide variety of houses of pleasure. Some of the reformers among the city's population called the place "Satan's Circus."

I looked in the notebook and saw the lawyer supposedly lived at an address on Sixth Avenue, not far from 30th Street. The Haymarket, a "dance hall" where men could dance with prostitutes and take them into a gallery for private pleasures, and sometimes get robbed by a gang working with the prostitute, had been closed for three years. But the new place that Ezra Kaufman evidently went had its own share of friendly women.

I went back to see Mrs. Kaufman.

"I'm done," I said, keeping as professional tone as I knew how.

"Is everything okay?" she asked. Mrs. Kaufman was clearly worried. Underneath, she knew her husband was not honest, at least in the way most people used the word.

"I've been through all his papers, the ones piled on the chair. All seems in good order."

"Thank you." The relief was plain to see.

"Shall we grab some food?" It was Rebecca.

"I've got an appointment with Nate Belsky," I said.

"Oh."

Progress. She looked disappointed.

"But I'm planning to eat lunch tomorrow. Can we do that?"

A smile. "Of course."

I went over to where Nate was working. At this hour he was working at a bar.

I walked inside and saw he was working hard.

He slapped my shoulder in what counted as a greeting.

“It’s the middle of the day, Nate.”

He held up a glass. “And we shouldn’t celebrate that we made it through another morning?”

“I need you.”

“Okay,” he said. “For what?”

I told him, and he put down his beer.

He seemed very pleased.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I used to know the real Solly Adler,” Nate said.

“Who runs the place today?”

“His twins. They’re nicknamed Ace and Deuce. Don’t make fun of their names, Daniel. You wouldn’t want to look at the faces of people who made fun of their names.”

We got to the building. It looked normal, like a regular residence. We climbed the stairs and Nate knocked on the door.

A man opened it. He was technically a man, I suppose. He looked a lot more like a very large building with eyes.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Belsky. It’s been a while.”

“I’m not like you, Butch. I don’t have such a good job. They expect me to sit at a desk.”

“That there’s just cruel for a man like you, Mr. Belsky.”

“So, I tell them, Butch. So I tell them.”

“It’s a little early. There ain’t many girls here this time of day. You want to come back later. We got a new girl in from Illinois or Indiana, someplace real far away anyway. She’s your type.”

“Butch, let me tell you a secret. My type is any type.”

Butch laughed.

I didn’t.

“The boys here. My friend and I got some business for them.”

“Yeah. Ace is upstairs. Deuce he is...busy.”

“The new girl?”

“You do know Deuce, Mr. Belsky.”

We went upstairs, walked past the rooms where regular business was conducted, turned the corner, and came to an office.

Nate knocked.

“Yeah,” came the scream.

We entered. Ace Adler surprised me. He was dressed in a suit. He looked exactly like a regular businessman.

“Hey, Belsky. That last tip you gave me was a good one. I owe you.” He stared at me. “Or are you here to collect?”

“Naw, Ace. I come here to do you a favor. This here is Daniel Levin. Don’t let his looks fool you. He ain’t stupid.”

Ace laughed.

I didn’t. Again.

“Daniel has a story to tell you. About how without him the cops would be paying you a visit. About a murder.”

That got his attention.

“It’s about Kaufman, isn’t it?”

“It is.” This time I was answering. It was my chance to take over from Nate.

Ace focused on me.

“Mr. Adler, as you have read in the papers, the police are looking for a man with a black beard. Because I know the Kaufman family, I volunteered to get Mrs. Kaufman to let me search the place.”

“If I know the cops, they could force their way inside.”

“Yes, they could. I may have exaggerated the amount of community outrage if they did. I may have suggested that their would be a riot if they tried to search during shiva. I suggested I do it.”

“You got a good Yiddisher kop,” he said, continuously pointing with his finger to his head.

“Thank you, Mr. Adler. The point is I got to search Mr. Belsky’s papers before the police did.”

“I take it my name was in there.”

“No. Instead, Kaufman had a list of places in a little book. He listed this address as belonging to a lawyer. Eventually, the police would have found their way here.”

“And this book?”

“It’s still right there in the Kaufman apartment,” I said.

“So exactly how does this help me?”

“The book is there. The page with your address on it made its way to my pocket.”

I took out the page and put it on the desk in front of him.

He looked at the paper and looked up at me.

“You want a job?”

“No. I want some information, some you may be reluctant to give me. But I wanted to show you that I am on your side.”

He looked over at Nate.

“So what do you want, Levin?”

“Ezra Kaufman was blackmailing people. I want to know who he was blackmailing and how he did it.”

“And you think I know this?”

“I do, Mr. Adler.”

“You think one of these people killed him?”

“It’s a possibility.”

He rubbed his chin. “What about the guy with the black beard?”

“He might be one of those people. Or he might not even be the killer. I don’t know what’s going on right now and I have to follow all the alleys even if some of them end in a brick wall.”

“The files are in the basement. Belsky, tell Levin here how many people go into the basement.”

“Two. You and Deuce.”

“No, Belsky. Three. Me and Deuce and Levin here.” He looked at me.

“The cops aren’t ever going to learn the connection between Kaufman and me.”

I shook my head. “Not from me, Mr. Adler.”

“Not from anyone, or I think it was from you.”

We both knew he was putting me in an impossible situation. I couldn’t guarantee what anyone else knew or whether they would talk. If some gang member got picked up by the police and wanted to make a deal and knew the connection I was lost. But we also both knew I had no choice. It was on me now.

“The cops will never connect you.”

“Okay. I’ll go with you. Belsky, you go downstairs and have a drink.”

“Just what I was going to suggest, Ace.”

Adler and I walked down to the basement. He unlocked its door and we walked into a room. There were no windows. The light was dim.

He walked over to a neat row of files, looked through, took one out and told me to sit at the table.

“No notes. You’re good at sneaking pieces of paper from old ladies. Don’t try that with me. Every page better be here when you’re done. I’ll be back in an hour. And then never come back here. Never mention my name to anyone.”

I was going to ask him, “What about the job offer?” and decided not to do so.

He left, and I began to read.

There were blackmail schemes of all kinds. Criminals that Ezra said he would turn into the cops. Women who had been caught up in white slavery and were now respectable and had to pay for him to remain quiet.

But most of the blackmail victims were the men from The Gallery of Missing Husbands.

As I read, I became more and more horrified. Ezra Kaufman went through the Gallery every week listing all the missing husbands and fathers. And he got others from women who came to hire him, hearing of his success. Then he systematically began searching for these missing men. He evidently paid off the cops, hired a detective, bribed a lot of people. But he found missing husbands. He evaluated them. Some who had no money, he dragged back to their wives who had hired Kaufman to find the men. He got the fees from the woman, which were small, but in this way he also developed a reputation as someone who found the husbands.

Ezra Kaufman had a different plan for the men he found who had some money. He blackmailed them, making them pay and pay or he would report them. Some were afraid of the law. Some had accumulated money and didn't want to share it with their wives and families. Some had started other families. Some just hated their wives. Some were just nasty people. And at least one might have been willing to kill.

There were too many men for me to list, too many men for me to investigate.

And I had to admit to myself, the killer might have been a blackmail victim. He might have been a rival blackmailer. He might have been the man who ran out of the building. He might have been Abie Katz, the other psychic who thought Kaufman was taking his business. It might have been Mrs. Kaufman who knew more than she pretended.

And it might have been Rebecca who was protecting her sister.

I didn't know much, but I did know that Ezra Kaufman was an evil man. I didn't know if he deserved to be murdered, but I did know that whoever did it saved a lot of people from being blackmailed by him.

I read through the information carefully, trying to memorize some of the people Kaufman had blackmailed who lived in the area around him. Strangers might be remembered, although the streets were very crowded. But someone people were used to seeing could just have walked away from the roof without being noticed.

I recognized two or three of the names. They didn't strike me as killers, though I would have to check anyway.

When I got to the end, I saw the latest group of men, but Kaufman had switched. He began using nicknames or initials or some personal code so he could remember, and he didn't use names for them.

I had no choice. There were only eight men listed in this newest group.

I copied the eight nicknames or codes for the men. If Ace Adler had me searched, I would not want to bet on my future.

He came down to the basement just when he said he would.

“You find anything?”

I shook my head. “A few names I'm going to look at. There's not much hope there. I'll have to look elsewhere, I guess.”

“And no one else is going to visit me?”

“No one. Ever.”

We walked up, got Nate, and headed to the door.

Ace Adler walked with us.

When we reached the front door, Ace Adler put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You notice I didn't have Butch search you. That man knows how to search a person. But, you see, Mr. Levin, I trust you. Of course if anyone else ever comes here asking me about Ezra Kaufman I won't be able to trust you any longer. In that case, you're going to disappear one day and no one will ever find you.”

All this was said in a calm even friendly voice.

“I understand,” I said.

“Good.”

He patted my shoulder.

I walked outside into the sun.

Only then did I begin shaking.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nate went to make a call. We were in a bar. I was having some coffee.

He came back.

“Bad news, Daniel.”

I just nodded.

Nate continued. “The cops thought this would be easy. It was arsenic, so they checked all the places in the city that sell arsenic. There aren’t that many. They have a list of all their customers. It’s not a large list. The cops already finished going through the list. Nobody. Worse, the criminal class doesn’t use it. They like a simple revolver or a silent knife or a thick board over a person’s skull. That’s another dead end. We don’t even know how the killer got the arsenic much less who gave it to Ezra Kaufman.”

All of a sudden, I felt a deep depression, as though my soul was collapsing. I didn’t think I would ever be able to move again. The room began to spin.

“What’s the matter, Daniel?”

I couldn’t talk. Maybe it was the police not even having a lead. Maybe it was meeting Ace Adler. Maybe it was the talk with my sister. Maybe it was watching Ezra Kaufman die like that. Maybe it was a combination. But I couldn’t go on.

I began breathing deeply.

My voice came back.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened, Nate. I feel as though I have gotten to the end.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are too many suspects. I feel too overwhelmed. Maybe Ezra Kaufman deserved to die.”

“And did Mrs. Rosenthal deserve to get shot?”

“No, of course not.”

“And didn’t you tell me that you promised Rebecca London you would find the killer?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And the Daniel Levin I know wouldn’t quit under any circumstance ever.”

“Maybe I’m not that Daniel Levin any more.”

“You know what I think, Daniel? No, of course you don’t know. And maybe you don’t care. But I’m going to tell you. Something inside you is interfering with you. Something is like a giant boulder stopping you. Something...”

“It’s my mother,” I said, although my voice was as soft as a disappearing puff of smoke.

“I’m no doctor of the head, Daniel. All I do is watch crimes and write about them. But you have been thinking you could solve this crime without dealing with your mother. And you can’t. You need to accept that her case needs to be solved before you can solve this one. You understand that? You have to find not a murderer but a reason.”

It made sense, although the connection seemed beyond my ability to grasp.

Nate kept talking. “I got you the record of her death. Did you even read it?”

“No.”

“If you were a drinker, I’d be pouring whiskey down your throat about now. For a smart guy, you sure can find a fog the size of Nebraska in which to wander. Deal with your mother. And I don’t mean next week. I mean right now. Where’s that information?”

“I keep it on my bed.”

“Come on. I don’t trust you. I’m walking back with you to Rivington Street and we’ll see that lovely Mrs. Klein.”

“It’s not fair to make me smile,” I said.

“All’s fair in friendship, Daniel.”

We walked in the kind of silence you feel when you look at a rainbow. I felt a kind of awe, a sense that maybe, just maybe, there was a path forward.

The Kleins were out when we got there, so I took the file, and Nate and I sat at the kitchen table.

I read through each line slowly. Nate sat next to me, ready to listen. Mostly the story seemed clear. There were the workers who saw her. I got a painful new fact. When she started walking she had never stopped, never hesitated, never paused, never considered that maybe her daughter or her son would carry a burden imposed by her act. Great. So far my pain had deepened.

I had almost finished the report when I saw the line. It read, “The note was lying on the shore held down by a heavy rock. It was personal.”

Note? What note? I had never heard about any suicide note.

There were no other references to it. Shouldn’t the note be in this folder? Where was it?

I looked up, puzzled.

“She...she left a note.”

Nate wrinkled his brow. “What did it say?”

“I don’t know. It’s not here. Nate, where would it be?”

“They probably gave it back to your father. Why...oh, I forgot. You’re not talking to him. Maybe you should, Daniel. Just to find out about the note.”

“No! I never want to speak with him again, Nate. Never. I...I can ask my sister to ask him.”

“Okay, do that.”

I stumbled over to a telephone and called my home. Deborah, not my father, always answered the telephone. He wanted to be shielded from people with whom he didn’t want to speak, and she was good at that.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Deborah. It’s Daniel.”

We spoke warmly for a few minutes until she said, “Daniel, are you all right? Your voice sounds kind of distant, like your mind is elsewhere.”

“Deborah, I should be talking to you in person, but I can’t wait. So I’m sorry. Did...this is really difficult to say.” I paused for a few seconds. “Did you ever hear of Mother’s suicide note.”

Silence. And then, “No. I didn’t know that there was one.”

“According to the police report there was. The note wasn’t in the official police report. Nate thinks they gave it back to Father.”

“He never mentioned it.”

“Deborah, can you ask him if he has it?”

“He’s on a brief trip to Albany on business. I’ll ask him when he returns.”

“Deborah...”

“What is it?”

“Can you go into his study and look? It will be either in his desk or in his business records. Or maybe by his bed.”

“I could never do that, Daniel. It is a private matter. If Father wanted us to know about it, he would have said.”

“Can I go over and speak with you tonight?”

“I am going to the theater with a friend, this evening. And no more talk about this, Daniel. I’ll ask Father when he gets back.”

We exchanged a few more words, and I hung up.

I told Nate about the conversation.

He shrugged. “So then wait.”

“Nate, he’ll lie. He’ll say there never was a note, or that he burned it, or that he lost it. And, as far as Deborah is concerned, that...”

Nate nodded. “You finally realize you have to search yourself, don’t you?”

“I was blocking that, too, Nate. Tonight when Deborah’s out. I’m going to visit my home again.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The house was dark when I approached. When Deborah went to a play, she always went for food afterward, so I had a lot of time. It wasn't exactly a burglary. It was my home. I had a key. Still, I felt like a stranger going inside.

I turned on the lights. There was no point in sneaking around. In the off chance that Deborah returned I could just say that I was waiting for her.

I decided to start with the desk first. I had made a mental decision not to get distracted but to maintain my aim. I was looking for the suicide note, and I would not look through Father's other papers. But looking at the other papers was inevitable because I had to see what I was reading to make sure whether or not it was the note I was looking for.

It took twenty minutes to go through the papers in his desk. No suicide note. Next I went through his business papers very slowly. There were a lot of them. I realized I had a difficult task if he had hidden the note. It might be inserted in one of the books on the library shelf. It might be under a rug. But why would he hide it?

I tried to think like my Father. Would he have kept it? That in part depended on its contents. But for me to continue I had to assume he kept it.

So, then, where would he put it?

Would he want to read it over often? Yes, I thought he would. And when would he want to read it over. Not while working. Maybe while sleeping. I should have thought about all this earlier.

I went into his bedroom. I felt like an intruder. In fact, I was one.

I imagined him lying on the bed feeling a need to read that cursed letter again. He always slept on the right side of the bed. I stood next to it and considered where he would keep it.

There was a small stand with a drawer. I opened the drawer, but there was no note inside.

I lay down on the bed and put my head down. I'm Father. Here I am unable to sleep, needing desperately to read that note again. I...

I reached under his pillow and found the note.

I closed my eyes, struggling for the strength with which to read it.

"Dear Jacob,

I can face this world no longer. I have drowned in sorrow, and now I will drown in water. You will feel no blame. That is your nature. I am most sorry because as I write this I can see Deborah and Daniel crying. The very worst thought I have is that in some way they will think they are responsible for my act. In fact, I would have done this to myself years ago if not for their love protecting me, keeping me tethered to life. I owe them everything. I gave birth to them, and yet in fact they gave birth to me. They let me be a person. You don't understand, Jacob. You never could. It's very difficult for a woman. And yet when I saw Deborah and Daniel, I saw what my life meant. Jacob, you must tell them that they saved me for a long while, that I am doing this not because of them but despite the deep love I have for them. I am overcome with illness. I blame the illness. You must tell that to the children. You must. And so goodbye, Jacob."

I stood up. I wanted to scream to the stars. I wanted to burn down the house. I wanted my father to die.

He had never shown us the note. He had never told us about it. He had never relieved us of the anguish we felt after her death.

I put the note back and went back out into the night.

The stars twinkled at me. The sounds of the street were like the sweetest music.

I stopped walking.

And then I realized it.

I didn't cause my mother's death. Deborah and I had helped her, prevented her from self-destruction for a long while. I wasn't responsible for her death. Just the opposite.

I felt lighter. The strains in my chest disappeared.

I was free.

Suddenly, I was excited.

Tomorrow, I would go see Abie Katz, the rival psychic.

It was back to the case.

And I wasn't going to stop until I solved it.

I owed that to Mother.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Abie Katz said he was taking his son, Sidney, to the Odeon on Norfolk Street. Candy only cost a penny there, he said, and his son, loved the movies. Someone from outside the area might have been surprised at this because Sidney could not yet read the subtitles of the movies. But the Odeon had an attractive woman holding a microphone crying out the titles. I suspected Abie Katz looked more at the woman than at the screen.

The theater opened at 8:30 in the morning. Little kids were waiting, fighting about how to divide up the five cent cost of admission. Sometimes the crowding got so bad on Saturday mornings that the ushers went up and down the aisles pushing two children onto a single seat. Smart kids would therefore look for a small, skinny kid to go in with.

I met Abie outside.

“Let’s get him settled. Then I’ll talk.”

I reluctantly nodded. We walked inside and found some seats. Abie pushed two children who were sitting down out of the seats he wanted for him and his son.

We sat down. The candy butchers were already working the aisles offering peanuts and oranges.

The theater was showing *Fatty’s Wine Party* with Fatty Arbuckle. There would be a lot of laughter.

The film started, and Abie stuck his elbow in my ribs saying we should go to the back. I didn’t want to leave Fatty. I decided I would go back to see the film another time.

Abie talked to the manager about getting back in and we walked outside and found someplace to sit down.

“I ain’t cryin’ cause that mamzer died. Let’s get that straight. And you ain’t no cop.”

“No, I’m not. Of course, if you’d prefer, I can tell the police that you wish to speak with them instead of me.”

“Very funny. Don’t try to push me around. You’re an amateur at it. I’m talkin’ to you out of respect for the widow. She had to put up with him. I always felt sorry for her.”

. I half-turned to look straight at Katz.

“Tell me about him,” I said.

“Ezra? You want to know about Ezra? He’d steal from a blind man. He’d try to take advantage of any innocent young woman he could. He had gangs that would steal for him. He liked to think of himself as a big criminal. But you probably know about what he liked best. You do know about his blackmailing?”

“A little.”

“Yeah, I see your face. You know. You’re just not tellin’ what you know.”

“Tell me more.”

“Some people are in it for the money. That’s me. Sure I cheat people. But I figure they mostly know they’re bein’ cheated and just enjoy the entertainment. I put on a show for them. That’s why they give me money. Nobody believes I can see the future. My father, he was a thinker in the old country, he reads books all the time, he told me nobody can even really see the past. But people pay. They’re old or they’re scared or like the women Ezra cheated their husbands were no-goodniks, bums who ran away and left their children. I love my children. I wouldn’t leave them all alone.”

Abie Katz kicked some dirt and continued.

“One man he blackmailed, a guy that left his wife, and the guy was so sad about being caught and he wouldn’t pay. So instead what he did is he killed himself. You know how he did it?”

“No,” I said.

“This was in New Jersey, and Ezra would tell the story to customers who didn’t want to pay up. He’d tell them about this other guy who didn’t want to pay up only he got so sad that he jumped off a roof in Jersey. Ain’t that somethin’? Ezra dies by bein’ pushed off a roof. It’s almost like there’s a God around havin’ fun getting’ it all in place.”

Katz looked at me. “Ezra Kaufman was one of that God’s mistakes. The world is better off without him. You understand? If I knew who done it, I’d shake his hand three times. I’d tell him he done a mitzvah if you could call killin’ a bad guy a mitzvah. I ain’t so religious so I can. I know you think we went after the same customers. I know his widow thinks that. But it ain’t the truth. I never blackmailed no one. And now that I see what happens if you do, I ain’t never goin’ to either.”

“I have to ask or the cops will. Where were you when he fell from the roof?”

“Real funny. I was in my place of business talkin’ to clients.”

“And you could provide their names?”

“You think I could remember who was there that day? I don’t. But, guess what? I keep a record. I got it all written down.”

“Don’t lose that record.”

“Yeah. I won’t.”

He paused. “Do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“The widow. I know she don’t like me. She’s the one probably sent you after me. Okay, I get that. But I don’t hold no grudges. You tell her she needs a few dollars, Abie Katz is the one to ask. ‘Cause I’ll help her out. She don’t even really understand the monster she was livin’ with. That’s almost worse than knowin’ the truth.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“I said what I had to say. That’s why I saw you. And if you think you scared me with the police stuff, you’re softer than I thought. You think there’s any cop in the city of New York that can’t be bought you’re like one of the children inside that theater. I wasn’t worried. I just wanted to tell you about Ezra and tell you to tell the widow.”

He stood up.

“I’ll go watch the end of that movie now, Levin. We’re done. Don’t come around again unless you got a message from the widow.”

He walked back into the theater.

And I had one suspect I was pretty sure I could erase from my list.

It was a long shot, but I didn’t have much else to do.

There was another suspect.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I stopped in to see Mrs. Kaufman. She looked like she had aged ten years. Shiva had finished officially, but in her mind the mourning period was going to continue for a long time, maybe forever.

Rebecca had gone back to her home for a few days and would be returning later that night. I asked if there were anything I could do, anything Mrs. Kaufman needed. But as I looked at her I could tell whatever she needed no human being could provide.

I said good-bye and went upstairs to see Mrs. Beller. Maybe the man she was seeing was the one who ran out the front door, or maybe he wasn't. I had to cross that out. What I didn't want to admit to myself is that if he wasn't the man, then I realistically had no way of knowing who the man was. Worse still, if he was not the killer, I had no other obvious suspects. I didn't think Mrs. Kaufman had anything to do with the death. Anyone who looked in her face could see that. Abie Katz, the rival psychic, didn't strike me as any kind of killer. Maybe it was someone Ezra Kaufman blackmailed, but there were a lot in the list and more I didn't know about.

It all seemed to come down to the man with the beard who ran out the door.

And catching him came down to his being Mrs. Beller's friend.

Mrs. Beller surprised me. I don't know who or what I expected, but I didn't expect to see a woman so beautiful. She had brown-blond ringlets of hair. Her face was innocent. Surely, she hadn't really been married for very long, if in fact the Mrs. part wasn't some sort of cover.

"Mrs. Beller?" I began.

“Oh, my. Are you a new customer?”

I smiled. “No.”

“You don’t look like no cop. You’re a handsome lad, ain’t you? Like some movie star.”

“Yeah,” I said, “Like Fatty Arbuckle.”

She laughed. It was a nice laugh. I bet she had a good income.

“I’m not associated with the police, Mrs. Beller. In fact, I’m a friend of Mrs. Kaufman, and I was hoping to keep the police out of the building. I assume you’d like that as well.”

She didn’t immediately answer.

“What is it you want? And what’s your name?”

“My name is Daniel Levin. As I say, I’m a family friend.”

“Ezra Kaufman didn’t have no friends that weren’t dirty in some way. You a confidence man?”

“No. And I’m more a friend of Mrs. Kaufman.”

“She don’t look like she has so many good-looking gentlemen friends. Oh, sorry. I get it. She pays you to be her ‘friend’. Maybe we’re in the same business.”

“No. I don’t want to give you the wrong idea. I just had a few questions, and I’ll be on my way.”

She shook her head.

“You want my time, you pay for it, same as any man. Of course, considering that face maybe I could give you a discount. Come on in, Mr. Levin. Maybe you and me can be real friendly.”

I walked inside and sat down.

“You want me to put some music on the phonograph?”

“No thank you, Mrs. Beller. I just need some information.”

“Two dollars. And I’ll talk to you for fifteen minutes.”

“That’s a lot of money. I’m guessing more than you usually charge.”

“You look like you got it.”

“You have a good eye.”

She laughed. “My eye ain’t the best part of me, Mr. Levin.”

I gave her the two dollars, and it disappeared quickly in the folds of her dress.

“Now you’ve got my attention,” she said.

“There’s a man who comes here. I’m guessing now, but I’d say late twenties.

He’s five-six, five seven, probably the latter. Built strong. A hundred and fifty. What I most noticed is that when he walked he bent forward from the waist just a little bit. Has an attractive black beard, a hat a little too small.”

I could tell she knew him.

“Sorry, Mr. Levin, that describes too many people.”

“Mrs. Beller, you seem to me to be a very shrewd woman. Maybe if I were your brother I’d tell you to put your brains to use in another way.”

“My brother makes about one-tenth what I do, Mr. Levin. You see what women do here for almost no money. You think I like this? You got no idea what it is to be a woman. No idea at all. So don’t go preaching to me. I’m sick of being told how pretty I am, or how I should be doing something more respectable. I’m not doing this because I like it. I’m doing it for the money. You be a woman for five days, you’d be shocked.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I didn’t mean to offend you. I simply want to make a point.”

“You got your two dollars worth, Mr. Levin. You got to look at me and feel sorry for me and tell me how wicked I am and what I should be doing.”

“Mrs. Beller, listen to me. I’m guessing you pay off a local police officer. Probably Patrolman Wilde.”

“What of it?”

“This involves a murder. He can’t give you any protection. Like I said, you’re shrewd. You know he’s a drunk. You know he has no power. Right now, the cops don’t know you’re involved.”

“The cops was here. They spoke to everyone in the building showing that picture that was in the newspaper. I said the same to them as I’m saying to you. I don’t know him.”

“The cops were here for everyone. They don’t know that you had a friend that came here regularly that looked like him.”

“You want money? Ezra Kaufman blackmailed me, only he didn’t want no money.”

“I don’t want money or anything else from you except for a name and some information.”

“Or you go to the cops.”

“You will have given me no choice, Mrs. Beller. You’re not involved. There’s no reason for you to get involved. Let’s work together to keep the police away from you.”

“You like women?”

“You’re asking because most men in my situation would take advantage of you.”

“Yeah, most men. I wanted to know about you.”

“I like women. I don’t like taking advantage of women.”

“You threaten me with the cops. Then you try to reform me. And now you’re trying to play the nice man. Any other approach you plan to take?”

“I think I’ve tried them all.”

“He didn’t kill Kaufman.”

“How do you know?”

“He was here, Mr. Levin. We wasn’t reading a book, but he was here the whole time. He heard some yelling and he’s scared of something I’m not sure what and he run out.”

“Okay. Good. So let me talk to him. I won’t turn him in either, but I can tell the police he wasn’t involved. And your name isn’t even mentioned. If I don’t do this, they will eventually get to you and it will be harder then because you didn’t go ahead and tell them the first time they talked to you. Patrolman Wilde will be given new instructions about how to deal with you. You understand?”

She stared at me for a few seconds.

“His name is Lev Maximoff. He works at The Grand Theater. He’s not an actor. I don’t know what he does. He’s real secretive. He don’t talk to me about his secrets. He’s very excitable. I wouldn’t get him angry if I was you. And you know enough not to say you heard this from me.”

“Why would I? Someone in the crowd recognized him from the Grand. It had nothing to do with you.”

She smiled. “We should go into business together. You could protect me.”

I stood up.

“That’s the nicest offer I’ve had this week, Mrs. Beller. But I’m an independent person. I don’t work with anyone.”

“That’s a nice way of saying you don’t want to work with me.”

“I appreciate your help.”

“You should come by and see me sometime. When it’s not questions on your mind.”

“I’d have to be a different sort of person, Mrs. Beller.”

“You’re interesting, Mr. Levin, very interesting.”

She walked me to the door, gave me a dainty peck on the cheek, and said good-bye.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Grand Theater was at Grand and Chrystie. It was a huge place. Jacob P. Adler and other greats had worked there. Adler was the manager. A comedy about immigrant life was playing.

I wandered inside. There was considerable work on the stage by people building the set. But the real noise came from a man, probably the director, yelling at a woman for being drunk an hour before the performance was supposed to begin.

One woman was standing in the aisle. She was short and clutching a group of photographs in her hand.

I walked up to her.

“They’re really going at it.”

She laughed. “Miss Goldblatt is a just a bit player. She sits at a table. She has all of one line. I think she’s frustrated, Mr....?”

“Levin. Daniel Levin. Are you in the production.”

Another laugh. A nice one. “Oh, no. I work as a receptionist for a photographer. We take pictures of a lot of people in the Yiddish theater. I’m here to deliver the pictures. My name is Sonya Belmont. Well, that’s not really my name. But that’s the name I would use if I could be a famous actress.”

“It’s a good name...Sonya. Say, do you know a fellow who works here by the name of Lev Maximoff.”

“Everyone knows Lev. He’s quite a character.”

“A good actor.”

“Oh, no. He is good building the sets though. Do you know Lev?”

“No. I was told to speak with him however.”

“Good luck. Lev doesn’t speak. He yells. He’s right out of a Yiddish play in fact. He’s an anarchist. He’s been here a year or so from Russia. I’m not sure how long. But he’d shoot the Czar if he could. He’s friends with Emma Goldman. All the anarchists sit together at Sach’s Café. It’s all very polite. There’s no yelling there. It’s Comrade this and Comrade that. Emma Goldman met Alexander Berkman there.”

“Where is it?”

“On Suffolk Street. You can’t miss it. Go at night. Mrs. Sachs serves the best coffee and cheesecake.”

She laughed again. “You know who goes there besides all the great revolutionaries who think they can change the world through cheesecake?”

“Who?”

“The Bomb Squad sends people in the worst disguises. They try to get information. One time...”

“Hey, you, the photographer?” The director was yelling.

“Me,” she said.

“You see any other photographers here? You ever act?”

I whispered, “Say yes.”

“Yes,” she said without an enormous amount of conviction.

“Good. You’re going to sit at this table tonight instead of the drunk. Get up here.”

“Thank you,” she said.”

“I’ll look for you on the stage,” I said.

“I...oh, there’s Lev coming in.”

She pointed.

He saw me walking toward him, must have recognized me from my picture in the paper, and began running.

I’m in pretty good shape. I assumed I was in better shape than an anarchist.

I was wrong.

He was very fast. We ran backstage. It was filled with costumes and handoffs like a fake weapon or a sword that didn’t cut anyone. We raced in and out of aisles. Once I was close to him, so I jumped on top of some clothes and dived onto his head. We both went down. I was maybe three inches taller than he was, so I thought there would be no match, but he must have gone to anarchist boxing school, because he punched me in the stomach and then on the chin and then, to my surprise, my knees buckled and I fell down. He began to run again, heading for the window. It took me a second, but I was up again chasing after him. He was out the window and I was right behind him.

He climbed down the fire escape on the side of the building. But I was faster on those stairs. I had almost caught him when he stopped, turned toward me, and held up a weapon. There’s a story that when you’re about to die the world slows down. That didn’t happen to me. Instead it speeded up.

He fired the shot, and somehow I refused to believe a bullet could stop me so I tried to keep going.

It caught me in the shoulder. I almost fell over the side of the fire escape. It was a long way down to the street, so I grabbed on with my other hand and pulled. I almost lost consciousness when someone dragged me back onto the escape.

That's when the world went blacker than the longest night of my life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I was in a hospital for a day and then was sent home. I thought about staying with my father and sister, but I was feeling better. The wound had been slight. The doctor told me I was young and healthy, but that didn't make the pain go away.

A visit by Rebecca London, however, certainly did help the pain. She brought me soup. She sat next to me and held my hand. She told me that she missed her home, although she only lived in Brooklyn. Still, in some ways Brooklyn and the East Side were far apart. I asked her about her family, and she told me, in a way that seemed to be holding back.

I wasn't sure what to say, and in some ways our conversation seemed halting. Still, when she looked at me and smiled, my heart was, as Shakespeare wrote, like a lark at the break of day rising to Heaven.

Finally, I pointed and said, "I like your ring."

"Thank you, Mr. Levin. It's a friendship ring. Have you finished your soup?"

"Yes, thank you."

She stayed for a long time and then said she had chores to do for her sister.

I watched her go and felt as though a part of me was walking out the door.

I read for a while. Then I sat in the bedroom talking with Rabbi Klein about Pirke Avot, a collection of ethical teachings. The Rabbi read it at the beginning of every new month. I had taken to studying it with him and seeing how its teachings applied to our everyday lives.

Mrs. Klein's face appeared in the door. "You should be resting, Mr. Levin. You know doctors studied for a reason. You think they just walk into a hospital? They say, 'Mr. Levin, you need to rest.' They say, 'Mr. Levin, you need to eat.' So what do you do? You don't eat and you sit and talk with that nice woman and then the Rabbi about, about I don't know what. Rabbi, you're a smart man, tell this boarder of ours he must eat more than soup."

"She doesn't say it right, Mr. Levin, but she's a wise woman. You go eat."

"Come," Mrs. Klein said, "I'll tell you. First, you sit by the big window while I cook. You close your eyes. Get some rest. And then the food will fill your stomach."

I sat down in the chair. She was right. I tried to look at the stories of the street, but my eyes closed

I thought I heard a knock on the door, but then my eyes closed again.

"Mr. Levin...Mr. Levin."

It was the Rabbi's voice. Soft, almost musical.

He was speaking to me. I heard the voice and some garbled words. I thought I heard 'Do you...'" but I wasn't sure.

I tried to sit up. Standing was more difficult.

I turned around.

Mrs. Klein was smiling. "There's a nice package for you. You were sleeping. The Rabbi is opening it. I hope it's a present you will like. I..."

That's when it happened.

There was a giant boom. The explosion filled the whole apartment with smoke.

I screamed out, "Mrs. Klein? Rabbi?"

Her voice came through in a panic. “Mr. Levin, hurry. The Rabbi. He’s on the floor and he’s bleeding.”

I ran over and bent down. The Rabbi was not conscious.

“I called for the doctor,” Mrs. Klein said. “The Rabbi is he going to live?”

I looked up at her. She was crying. The toughest woman on the East Side was crying.

“He’s the man of miracles, Mrs. Klein. But it’s not in his hands and it’s not in our hands. We don’t know. We don’t understand.”

I was babbling. I was offering theology instead of comfort.

The rest was in a sort of dream. The ambulance took the Rabbi to the hospital. Mrs. Klein followed. I went with her.

The last time I was here, Mrs. Rosenthal had died. I pushed that thought out of my mind. Doctors and nurses were all over the place. There didn’t seem to be any logic to their movements to me, but I knew they realized where they had to go.

We waited for hours. Some of the neighbors and Mrs. Klein’s brother were there to comfort her, so I sat by myself. Only then did a slow river of guilt build into a flood. If I had been awake, I would have answered the door. I would have gotten the package. I would have opened it. And Rabbi Klein would be huddled over the Musar literature, the stories of right and wrong, that he loved to ponder. I would be lying in that hospital bed instead of him.

I thought that I caused heartache and death wherever I went. My mother. Mrs. Rosenthal. And now maybe Rabbi Klein. I suddenly felt my mind losing control over itself. There was a panic trying to crash into the center of my brain.

I heard a noise.

Mrs. Klein was standing over me.

“Mr. Levin! Mr. Levin!”

I looked at her, confused, as though I didn't understand what she was doing there.

“Mr. Levin, he's going to live. The Rabbi is going to live.”

It took a while for the news to be absorbed.

I slept in the chair in the hospital all night.

I didn't eat.

Going to live. Going to live. I kept repeating those three words over and over as though they were a prayer to the Heavens that covered all of us.

Finally, I stood up. Bones I didn't even know I had ached.

A doctor came over to me.

“Excuse me, Are you Mr. Levin?”

I grunted that I was.

He smiled. “Good. Rabbi Klein asked to speak with you alone. Is that possible?”

“For me, sure. Is it okay for him to speak?”

“In his case, Mr. Levin, we think it would be therapeutic. I suspect the emotional trauma will have a greater effect than the physical one. The more you can get him to talk about what is important to him, the better. You seem the one who can do that.”

“Where is he?”

“Come. I'll show you.”

We walked around two corners.

The Rabbi was sitting up in the bed. An old man in another bed in the room was sleeping.

I went over.

“Come on, Rabbi. Your page of Talmud isn’t going to get studied without you today.”

He smiled. “This place is for the dying, Mr. Levin. It is not for me.” He pointed. “That man came in this morning. He thought he was in an airplane. Who has gone in an airplane except maybe for the Wright brothers and some other people? He thought he was in an airplane over the mountains. Then he started to speak with some dogs in the room, only there weren’t any dogs. No, no, Mr. Klein, I want to get out of here.”

“You will, Rabbi.”

“Maybe, and maybe this is a sign I don’t have much longer on this Earth. Oh, and I had plans for the end. I wanted to make aliyah to the Land of Israel and be buried among the sages there. I wanted to touch the rough stones of the Wailing Wall and cry for my people. And now I see I won’t do it.”

He paused. “Did you know there is a whole movement to start a Jewish nation there?”

“Yes,” I said, “I have read about the Zionists.”

He nodded. “But it is eighteen years since Herzl wrote *Der Judenstaat* and ten years since he died. I don’t think there will be a Jewish nation as long as the Ottoman Empire controls the land.”

“There is a cunning to history, Rabbi. There’s a war now. Who know what the world will look like once it stops spinning?”

“I made a mistake coming to this Golden Land, Mr. Levin. I do not belong here. I am a partner with God, and here, the people have become partners with greed, with the desire for everything except what is important. The Jews, they come here and they have lost their way. They acquire American parts and try to squeeze those parts in and still call them Jewish. They are beginning to marry the pretty faces not the Jewish souls. They put away their books of Jewish knowledge and pick up books about love. America offers riches and joys. There is a dark side of the American Jewish Dream. The relationship of America and the Jews is a romance gone wrong.

“The Jews who are like children who have been deprived of candy for two thousand years, and America is a big candy store. So these children, they see the candy and they stuff themselves with it. And then they want more.

“Being Jewish is simple, Mr. Levin. There is God. There is study. There is marriage to a Jew. There are children. There is a community. There is kindness and goodness, although, as you know more than others, Mr. Levin, being good is not so easy. It is as complicated as the world itself.”

He paused.

“When I was young I thought it was easy to do good, to be moral. And now, in old age, all the world is twisted to me. I don’t know what’s right any more. I do know what is right is very complicated, like we do right but that’s sometimes wrong, and we do wrong, and that’s sometimes right. It’s enough to give an old Jew a headache.”

“The world gives us all a headache, Rabbi.”

“The Jewish spirit is still alive in America, Mr. Levin. But it is disappearing. You must look for those who have it and form a community with them. Everyone else will lose it. I don’t say tomorrow. But in a hundred and fifty years, that I don’t know.”

He stopped for a moment and then looked at me again. “How do you think God feels about the American Jews, Mr. Levin?”

“God hasn’t been kind enough to inform me,” I said.

He laughed a little. “God is all alone, Mr. Levin. He has his faith. He has his morality. He reaches out to help others. If he were human, he would have a difficult time finding a community to which he can belong. God is kind of like you, Mr. Levin.”

“I think God would consider the comparison an insult, Rabbi.”

“That I don’t think.”

He picked up a newspaper, folded it, and pointed out the pictures to me.

“Do you know The Gallery of Missing Husbands, Mr. Levin?”

I nodded.

“Ah, the Gallery doesn’t show every missing husband. It shows those who have run away from home. But there is another Gallery of Missing Husbands. This is the Gallery of those who have run away from being Jewish. There are more and more in this Gallery.”

I stared at the Gallery. I wasn’t thinking of the husbands who ran away from being Jewish.

I was focused on those who ran away from their wives.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was more than a little awkward. Patrolman James Wilde and two other patrolmen wearing perhaps the ugliest suits I had ever seen, were walking across from Sach's Café. I had to be there because I was the one who had seen him. Wilde wanted me to wear a disguise. I refused, and we settled on a hat that I tried to use to block my forehead and hair. It was silly looking, but I wasn't trying to impress anyone.

I had gone inside and seen some slummers, people from the regular press who had gone there for local color and a story. I had a piece of the cheesecake, and it was really good. I saw a variety of characters who had mastered gestures indicating deep thought, who hungered for the latest slogans and proper beliefs, who sought a justification for their lives, a justification not available in the outside world.

I saw a lot. But I didn't see Lev Maximoff.

I went back outside.

It was cold, even for November. The cops were good. They kept walking.

We had agreed to stay for three hours, and there were twenty minutes left.

I was walking with the cops when I saw a man who might be Maximoff.

I went up to Wilde and pointed across the street.

"I saw a man go in there."

"Congratulations. I saw a lot of men go in there Levin. Was it him?"

"I'm not sure. I think so. He walked like Maximoff. He looked like him, but I need to see his face."

“You see why you should have worn a disguise? Now you have to go in there to make sure, and he might recognize you.”

“Let me borrow your jacket,” I said.

“I’ll be cold. Yours is too thin and too small for me.”

“It’s just for a few minutes.”

He mumbled words in a voice deliberately too low for me to hear, but he gave me his jacket.

I walked inside. There were too many people with too many backs turned to me.

I thought about the Café Royal, where I usually went. Herman, the busboy, was part of the experience of going there. Oscar, the head waiter, had “won” Herman and the whole of Café Royal in a card game. There were people who paid Herman to page them. This would impress whoever the payer was sitting with.

I found the busboy at Sach’s, gave him a dollar, and told him to page Lev Maximoff. He looked at me strangely. Evidently, this was not a common practice there. But the dollar was too much for him.

The busboy’s voice was loud. “Lev Maximoff!”

A man stood, turned to look, and saw me.

He began to run.

Maximoff pushed down some people, jumped up on a table and started to hop on to the next table before he jumped off that and headed for the exit. I tried to cut him off and dive as he ran by, but, even with my arms outstretched I missed him. He was outside, but I wasn’t there to point him out. Wilde would scream at me about this one.

People were in my way, but I got up and worked my way toward the door. When I got out, I saw Maximoff on the corner. I stopped, pointed, and screamed to the police. Luckily they saw me and began running after him.

I knew Maximoff was a good runner from our encounter at the theater. A wild idea went through my head that he would be good at escaping assassination attempts. Maximoff was moving quickly. I was slowly gaining ground when one of the younger police officers ran by me with impressive speed.

Maximoff turned the corner, but the officer was right after him. When I got to the corner, Maximoff had climbed a fire escape and was on the roof with the cop right behind him. I started to climb, felt some pain in my ribs, and kept going.

It's not hard to walk across a roof. It's not so easy to run. I went diagonally and cut the distance. The officer was almost up to him, when I stepped near the edge of the roof. I didn't want to look down.

Then I jumped again right at Maximoff. This time I could wrap my hands around his legs, and we both collapsed. I think he would have been able to kick free, but the officer was there and seemed to have a lot of practice restraining prisoners. Maximoff kept fighting for a few minutes until he realized any further efforts would be futile.

We didn't know what to do. The police officer was afraid that if he tried to take Maximoff to the precinct without help, the anarchist would escape. He decided to wait.

"Why?" I asked the man who had bombed my apartment. "Why did you do it?"

He looked at me strangely.

"You don't know?"

It was my turn to look strange.

“Know what?”

“I’m in this capitalist hell hole illegally. I thought I could escape here. I learned your language in Moscow. Now they will send me back to Russia and the Czar will have me killed. Once I saw my picture in the paper, I had to stop you. You could identify me.”

That was why he didn’t just go to the police and tell them the picture was of him, but that he was with Mrs. Beller so he couldn’t possibly have killed Ezra Kaufman. Even if he were innocent of that crime, the police would have sent him back to Russia.

I stared at him hard. “But you shot a woman.”

“A mistake. Sometimes innocent people have to die for the revolution. It is a truth of the class struggle.”

“Those are just empty words.”

He shook his head. “No, no. There is a world to win. Everyone just looks down and continues with their life. My comrades and I want to make a wonderful world, one in which no one is hungry. Everyone will have a job.

“This is a long, hard task. The woman who died. I am sorry about her, but she wasn’t in any class struggle. She was trying to get along and raise a daughter. She didn’t have any class consciousness, so she wasn’t part of the struggle.”

“You sent a bomb to my apartment.”

Maximoff shrugged. “It wasn’t personal. Let me ask you, Mr. Levin. If your death meant there was a better chance for a just and free world, don’t you understand why I did it?”

“Listen,” I said. “I don’t like any of that. I understand it in a way.”

He looked at me.

I stared back, wondering if I could have ever thought in the way he did.

I asked him, "So why did you kill Ezra Kaufman?"

He shook his head. "I did not kill him. They are blaming me for someone else's crime. Of course, say the anarchist did it. Then they have an excuse to send me back to a firing squad in Russia. You are a tool of the ruling class, Mr. Levin. They used you to frame me and put a drawing of me in the paper. Comrade Lenin had a term for people like you. He would have called you a 'useful idiot.' You do not even see that you serve the rulers."

He paused. "I was not on that roof with Kaufman. I really was paying a visit on Mrs. Beller. I am not lying about that."

"She told me you were there."

"And Mr. Capitalist Stooze, did she tell you I ran to the roof to kill this psychic who I didn't even know?"

"She said you were with her the whole time."

"And she was right. I didn't kill this man who robbed the workers of their tiny wages. If I had known what he did, I would have killed him. The other things you said, I did them and I'm proud. I was trying to defend the revolution. But, this...this psychic, him I didn't kill unfortunately."

The other police had arrived.

I stood up, dumbfounded. It had seemed logical. Whoever killed Kaufman had killed Mrs. Rosenthal while trying to shoot me and tried to kill me again, but this time with the bomb.

And yet it wasn't true.

I made it back home unsure I could get my mind to cooperate.

My head was spinning.

I walked to my block.

Nate Belsky was sitting on the stoop chatting with one of the young women from the neighborhood.

He looked up when he saw me.

I shook my head, and his face got as full of confusion as my own.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Do you believe him?” Nate asked.

I nodded. “You can’t hang him three times. He was proud of trying to kill me. It didn’t bother his conscience at all. Ezra Kaufman, if you didn’t know, Nate, was stealing from the workers. He deserved to die. No, if Lev Maximoff had done it, he would have boasted about it.”

“You know you have two problems, then.”

“And they are?”

“First, Daniel, you have to find the killer. But then you have to prove he did it. One big problem is how did he get the arsenic? The police can’t figure it out. If you can’t show how the murderer got it, how can you prove he’s guilty?”

We sat quietly for a few minutes.

“I have an idea, Daniel, only you’re not going to like it.”

“I love statements that begin like that. Go ahead.”

“We don’t know about arsenic. The police either don’t care or they are too busy. Who’s an expert on arsenic or at least must know about it? Someone you know.”

“No, Nate. Absolutely not.”

“Listen, I know this is difficult. Consider your father an expert you need to consult. Forget that you’re related.”

“I’ll go to another chemist.”

“And how much will they help you? Your father is one of the best chemists in the city. You know that.” He hesitated. “I’m not trying to make you feel guilty, but,

seriously, if you want to solve this case, if you want to help Mrs. Kaufman recover, and help Rebecca, which I think you want to do, then you have to try every possibility.”

“You’re really annoying, do you know that, Nate?”

“You’d be shocked at how many people have used the very same word to describe me.”

What really bothered me is that I knew he was right.

I called my sister and asked her if I could have dinner with her and Father that night, and that I needed to speak with Father on a professional matter.

Deborah was delighted.

When I got there, Deborah told me father was detained but would be along soon.

We sat and talked, and then Deborah took out a photo album.

There I was with Mother. I was making a sandcastle at the beach. Mother was sitting beside me, helping. Mother always sat beside me, helping. I turned the page. There we were in a ride at Coney Island. Then I was eating some enormous piece of candy.

My favorite pictures were those of Mother reading books to me. She must have read a thousand books to me as I sat open-eyed, dazzled by the cascade of words and images in those books.

The best picture was of Mother sitting in a chair. I was snuggling next to her. She was reading to me, and I looked like the world could hold no pain for me. How I wished for such a moment again.

I heard the door open. He was back.

Father looked thinner than I recalled.

I needed him, so I tightened my hand. I wanted to scream at him about my mother's suicide note. I wanted to run over and put my hands around his throat. Instead I kept my fingers forced into a fist and broke our silence.

"Hello, Father."

"Daniel. It is good to see you."

The words were stiff and awkwardly spoken. We stumbled forward for a few minutes. Deborah was the cheerful one, smiling at us, pleased at seeing the three of us together.

"Father," I said after we had spoken for ten minutes, "Could I speak to you in your study about a professional situation?"

He nodded. "Deborah mentioned it. All right, then."

We walked into his study.

"It's about the Ezra Kaufman killing downtown."

"Yes, I have followed it. They never did find the killer."

"No, Father. That's why I'm here. The police are baffled. Ezra was killed by arsenic, but no one can find where the killer got the arsenic. They've checked every dealer in the area. I am looking for some new idea."

He stood up and went to some books, muttering pleasure or displeasure depending on what he found.

Then he sat down.

"I'm not well, Daniel."

Ah, my Father. He wasn't just going to tell me. He had a price for the information. I had to listen to him.

“I’m sorry father.”

He nodded. “It has not been easy. We need to talk about your mother.”

“Some other time. It’s still too early for me, Father.”

His eyes were wide and sad and I think a little wet at the edges.

“But you will talk.”

It was emotional blackmail. Information for a promise.

“Yes. We can talk.”

“Soon.”

“In a few weeks.”

That pleased him.

“All right. First of all, you and the police can thank a British scientist named James Marsh. More than half a century ago, he learned how to detect arsenic in a corpse. That no doubt helped you.”

He was more himself now, in charge. He was Father.

“Arsenic can be easily slipped into some drink. There is a metallic taste if you put it in water.”

“In this case it was put in a fruity tasting alcohol.”

“Very smart.”

“But Father, how did the killer get it?”

“That I don’t know. Assuming the killer is from overseas, however, perhaps the killer read about Frederick Seddon in England. About five years ago, Seddon sent his daughter to buy a packet of flypaper. Then he killed a woman with it.”

“Wait a minute, Father. I don’t understand.”

He smiled. "Seddon soaked the flypaper in water."

"And got wet flypaper?"

"No, Daniel. He got arsenic."

"What?"

"My guess is that instead of looking for someone who bought arsenic, you might look for someone who bought flypaper."

"What happened to Seddon?"

"Oh, he was hanged a year later."

"And this makes sense to you, Father?"

"You've checked the people who sell it. Mr. Kaufman lived in a poor neighborhood. It is not likely that Mr. Kaufman's murderer had contact with chemists who might be able to make it, although I suppose he could have bought some from one of them. Still, once a murder was announced in the area, any chemist would have felt a responsibility to report it. No, I conclude that the killer had to obtain the arsenic in a cheap way, one that was accessible to him. Hence I tell you about the flypaper."

I thought about it.

I assumed that was the method. If it was, the knowledge of the flypaper would be very helpful in proving the case.

And then, an iceberg inside me cracked and words flowed out of it like rushing water.

"Why did you do it, Father? Why did you need these other women?"

He was looking down, ashamed. I came close to feeling sorry for him. But then I resisted the feeling.

“Don’t you think until the end of time I will not be able to forgive myself? Don’t you think I wear shame the way others wear their skin? It made sense at the time. I...I had no idea it would affect your mother that way. I had no idea how it would affect you and Deborah. I had no idea how it would affect me.”

He sighed. “There is no greater need than romance, no deeper mystery. Love stirs the deepest passions, ones that make us forget that we are human beings. Love causes us to act irrationally. Love causes some people to kill. Love...”

I wasn’t listening anymore.

“Love causes some people to kill.”

It was the last possible motive left. Kaufman blackmailed people listed in The Gallery of Missing Husbands or other husbands who were missing. Wives and fiancées contacted him.

My mind raced.

I had to speak with Mrs. Kaufman again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mrs. Kaufman looked much better. We were having tea. Rebecca sat by my side. A nice little family.

“Are you getting closer, Mr. Levin. I saw that the dreadful man with the beard was caught. I don’t know why all these anarchists come here.”

I nodded. “We are getting closer, Mrs. Kaufman. I have an idea, but I need your help.”

“All right.”

“I’m trying to find the names of men your husband was looking for. Missing husbands. Men he hadn’t yet found or spoken with. In particular, I want to find the men he sought around the time of...”

“Of his death.”

“Yes.”

“You searched the papers he had.”

“Yes, I did, Mrs. Kaufman. But I don’t recall anyone from early in November being listed.”

There was silence.

“The detective,” Mrs. Kaufman finally said.

“I’m sorry, what do you mean?”

“Ezra hired a detective sometimes to find these men. Ezra was a good businessman. He wouldn’t pay unless the detective found the man, but then the detective

would get much more money than usual. Ezra would have given the men he was most looking for to the detective.”

“Why didn’t the detective contact the police?”

Mrs. Kaufman shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t want to be associated with a murder. Maybe he didn’t connect that what he was doing for Ezra had anything to do with my husband’s death.”

“Who is this detective?”

Mrs. Kaufman didn’t answer but looked across at her sister.

Rebecca finally spoke up. “The detective is our brother, Mr. Levin.”

Oh.

“I need to speak with him. Is he in Brooklyn.”

“He lives there, but he has an office on Canal Street.”

I had to be delicate. “Can we go there?”

Rebecca was thinking it over. She was caught. She was the one who had asked me, made me promise, to find out who killed Ezra. She couldn’t block my finding out. But now there was a problem. She probably had to calculate the possibility that her brother had killed him or even simply that he wanted to keep his privacy.

“Our brother is an honest and good man, Mr. Levin. I wouldn’t like to see him involved in this mess.”

“And I wouldn’t want to involve him, Miss London. I only need to ask him some questions, and then I won’t bother him.”

“Or mention him to the police.”

“I have no intention of mentioning him to anyone.”

Rebecca wasn't stupid. She saw that I had given myself an out. But she had confidence in her brother.

We went to his office. His name was Sol London. He was beefy from drink and food. His hair was thinning.

He looked at me with narrowing eyes when Rebecca explained that I wanted to speak with him about Ezra.

I sat facing him.

"Mr. London, I appreciate your taking the time to speak with me. I'm trying to help your sisters deal with this tragedy."

"What do you want?"

"You did some work for Mr. Kaufman."

"Right. I work. You're some detective."

"Sol," Rebecca said. "Please."

He turned back to just sullen.

"I'm trying to find out the name or names of men Mr. Kaufman wanted you to find about the time that he was killed."

"What good will that do?"

"Maybe none at all. When you search, you go down every alley. Sometimes, in fact almost all the time, they lead nowhere. But still you have to go down them. The men are one of those alleys."

He wasn't happy, but he searched for a few minutes.

"He didn't hire me all the time. I don't know if he did some searching himself. I think he hired a bunch of different detectives so no one had all the names. Yeah, there

was one letter I got from him about two weeks before he died. I found the guy immediately. Sometimes they change their names or more likely they just move upstate or out west and no one ever finds them. But I found this guy almost immediately.”

“What kind of information did Ezra give you to find him?”

“It was a letter from some Rabbi overseas. I don’t remember the town. There are so many of those towns and cities. Anyway, the Rabbi told some story, and Ezra asked me to find the guy.”

“Do you have the letter?”

He held it up.

“Might I see it?”

“Might I see some cash?”

“Sol, please.” Rebecca was proving very helpful.

He tossed the letter at me.

I read it.

The name of a man was given at the top. The rest of the letter read like this:

“Dear Mr. Kaufman,

How do you do? I am Rabbi Goldhagen from Lublin. A young woman named Miriam has asked you to write about the gentleman listed at the top. You see, I am the one person to go to when they wish to send a letter in English. I lived in your country for three years before I decided it was a country without the Holy One, and I could not live there. I returned home.

“My dear Mr. Kaufman, I do not wish to use the name of this gentleman as I write for reasons you will soon see. The gentleman is a tailor, and he was engaged to Miriam, a

sweet and kind young woman once, now filled with pain and tragedy. Miriam and the gentleman agreed to a plan. He would go ahead to America, get some money, and then he would send for her. She would cross the wide ocean and come to your country and then the two of them would get married. She was very happy for a while. And then the letters stopped coming from him. She feared he was hurt.

“My dear Mr. Kaufman, my cousin Yehuda, he lives in your city. He tells me you are the most famous person for finding the missing men, the ones who ran away from their loved ones. Yehuda tells me you charge money for this. I think it is a mitzvah and I would not charge, but perhaps that is why I had so much trouble in America.

“I told this to Miriam and I am sending you ten dollars, which is all the money she has. Her whole life is in this man. You must find him.”

“That’s some letter,” I said. “And you found him.”

“Sure. Easy. I’m a good detective”

“So did Ezra write back to the Rabbi?”

Sol London laughed. “What are you meshugga? He writes back that he can’t find the man. He’s so sorry. But of course he doesn’t return the money. Then he goes to the man and says he will tell the Rabbi if the man doesn’t pay. That’s how Ezra worked. He found the men, or I did, not for the women but to blackmail them.”

“Sol, that’s terrible,” Rebecca said.

“You’re a little girl if you think that’s terrible. It’s a jungle, Rebecca. I’ve told you that. You fight in this jungle like a strong animal or you get eaten like a weak animal.”

“That’s disgusting, Sol.”

“Can I keep the letter, Mr. London?”

“Sure. Only next time if you come back nothing is free. You understand?”

“Yes, I do. And I appreciate your help.”

Rebecca and I looked up.

“Are we done? Do you know?”

“I am almost done. But I have another task.”

“What’s that?”

“I have to look for flypaper.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I went to his old address and started walking around asking where flypaper was sold. The second store said they sold some. I said I was his friend, and he recommended I get it because that flypaper really worked. The storekeeper said he remembered the sale.

I ate, wandered around, and went shopping. It was now late, after working hours. I walked back to Orchard Street and went into the tenement, and knocked on the door.

Herman Rosenthal opened it.

The little girl was sitting at the table doing some writing.

“Mr. Levin. What a surprise. Come in.”

I smiled slightly and entered.

“You want some tea, yes? Everyone on the East Side drinks tea like it was a sacred matter.”

“No tea,” I said. “Just conversation. And maybe away from the little girl.”

“She writes,” he said. “A story she made up in her head. I don’t want to disturb her. Maybe we go into the bedroom.”

We walked in there and he said.

“What did you want to talk about, Mr. Levin?”

“About Ezra Kaufman.”

I give him credit. He didn’t flinch.

“Oh.”

“I’m trying to help the police and his widow by finding out who did it. I have two theories. Do you want to hear them?”

“Sure. I am personally very interested.”

“Good. Here’s my first theory. There’s a man in Lublin. Let’s call him Jacob. So Jacob is an honorable man, a tailor. He falls in love with a sweet young woman named Miriam. They care for each other. And they agree to a plan. Jacob would go ahead to America and save up enough money to send for Miriam.”

“Can I stop you for a minute, Mr. Levin?”

“Of course.”

“I know this place Lublin and I know the Jewish community. Some there, perhaps this Jacob and Miriam are among them, did not so much fall in love, but their parents arranged the marriage. Perhaps one of them didn’t like the arrangement and came to America to escape this prison of marriage.”

“It’s an interesting possibility, Mr. Rosenthal. I hadn’t thought of that. But let me continue with this first theory of the murder. Our Jacob arrives in America. He meets a very nice young woman whose husband has died. She has a young girl to raise. Love being what it is, who can explain it, but Jacob and this woman fall in love. And Jacob is an excellent father to the young girl.

“All is going along quite well for Jacob and his new family. And then there is great trouble.”

“What is this trouble, Mr. Levin?”

“Ezra Kaufman is the trouble, Mr. Rosenthal. Ezra Kaufman was a terrible, evil man. Among the evil things he did was blackmail people. It turned out that Miriam went to a Rabbi and gave him money, all the money she had, which was ten dollars. The Rabbi knew of Kaufman and sent him money asking him to find Jacob and reunite him with

Miriam. But Kaufman was a blackmailer, Mr. Rosenthal. He wrote back to the Rabbi to say he couldn't find Jacob and then hired a detective to find this Jacob. And the detective found him. And then something strange happened that I can't put into my theory."

"What's that, Mr. Levin?"

"Why Jacob moved right near Kaufman. Why would he move close to his blackmailer? I can't explain that."

"Perhaps this woman he lived, the one with the daughter, wanted to move there to be near a friend. Perhaps that was all they could afford. Perhaps he protested and protested, but they still moved."

"Ah," I said. "That does make sense. And now we get to the part involving the murder."

"You're sure it was murder, Mr. Levin?"

"Oh, I'm sure. Of course, remember, it's all just a theory. But in this theory Jacob buys some flypaper, soaks it in water, and gets arsenic. Then he puts the arsenic in schnapps to hide the taste. He invites Kaufman to the roof of his own building supposedly to pay him the blackmail money. Jacob offers him a drink, and Kaufman has a lot. They stay and talk until the effects of the arsenic become clear. Then Jacob tosses Kaufman off the roof to make it look as though he fell. Jacob then goes back to his home. Sadly, he doesn't have the rent, but a stranger is there and helps him. The stranger buys his daughter's drawing.

"And that, Mr. Rosenthal is my first theory."

"And what's your second theory, Mr. Levin?"

“My second theory is that a crazed killer who is a stranger in New York met Kaufman and for reasons I don’t understand decided to kill him through arsenic. On this theory the killer is long gone, and I suppose we’ll never catch him.”

“And which theory do you intend to tell the police?”

“Oh, I’m sure the second theory is true. In the first theory, what Jacob did was wrong, but he probably was punished. Perhaps his wife passed away. Who would take care of his daughter? By the way, Mr. Rosenthal, what is the name of your daughter? I never did find out.”

“It’s Rebecca.”

I was startled a bit.

“Rebecca can draw. And you tell me she can write. And her natural father died. And her mother died. It’s a good thing you’re around to take care of her.

“Mr. Rosenthal, your daughter is the reason why I believe in my second theory. I was there when she held her mother’s bleeding body. I know what it is like to lose her mother. I wondered what I could possibly do to help your daughter. This is part of it.

“And so surely you can sympathize with Jacob in my first theory, Mr. Rosenthal. Still, it bothers me that he’s not punished for murder. If any crime deserves punishment, it is that.”

“Perhaps he can make up for it in some way, Mr. Levin.”

“Perhaps. A very wise man once told me that being moral is much more complicated than it seems. That what seems bad might really be understandable. And now I understand it. This Jacob in the first theory, he’d have to be a very good man, helping lots of people to make up for doing what he did. And he’d have to send Miriam

the money she sent to Kaufman. And he'd have to write to her and tell her the truth. And he'd have to make sure Mrs. Kaufman is taken care of. Maybe he can shop for her when her sister returns to Brooklyn. Perhaps he can do a lot of good deeds for people in the neighborhood."

"I'm sure Jacob is a good man, Mr. Levin. I'm sure he would do all that."

We walked out of the bedroom.

Rebecca was still writing.

I walked over to her.

"Your father is very proud of you. One day perhaps you'll write a story and I can buy it and put it next to the picture I have."

Her face brightened. "Thanks, mister. You're nice. Just like my daddy."

I nodded.

Then I walked out the front door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“You want what?” Nate said.

He and I were sitting in the Garden Cafeteria on East Broadway. It was after lunchtime, so there weren't many people there. I liked the Garden. It served dairy, and my stomach was rebelling, so I didn't want to go for some thick pastrami sandwich at the great Katz's, a delicacy that normally drove me to drooling when I thought about it. At the Garden, you got a ticket when you came in. Then as you bought food, which in my case was matzoh ball soup and a cup of very hot tea, whoever served you the food punched the ticket. You paid on the way out.

Nate was eating a lot of blintzes and staring at me.

“What are you thinking, Daniel?”

“Look, it's simple Nate. I just need a name if that's all you can get, though the more information the better.”

“And what exactly are you going to do with the name of a violent criminal who died in the last few days?”

“That's for me, Nate.”

“What if there isn't a killer?”

“Like I said, a killer is the best, but if not a guy who beat a bunch of people up. Someone like that. A tough, rough guy. If necessary just get me a gun.” A gun was a pickpocket. “Can you get me a name?”

“Sure. I can do that. All you have to do is read the papers, though.”

I shook my head. "I need someone maybe the papers didn't cover. I don't want any information out there. But the person has to be real."

"And you don't want to tell me what this is about?"

"We're friends."

"And friends don't tell other friends what's going on?"

I didn't answer.

We ate. My stomach still felt like it was getting seasick.

Nate got up to make a call. It took fifteen minutes.

"Sorry it took so long, Daniel. But I got what you need. The guy's name is Arnie 'Choo Choo' Berlin. He's not a killer. Any killer would be in the papers. But I got a good one. It was over in Jersey. Bad guy used to be a doorman muscle for a gambler." A doorman in criminal slang was a lookout, someone keeping alert in case of trouble. "He stumbled into the East River. Of course, maybe the knife sticking out of his back didn't help him any."

"It's a murder, Nate. That goes in the papers."

He shook his head. "Some big shot in Jersey didn't want it. The cops put it down as a drowning. Maybe you should keep it that way. For your health. And for mine."

"A drowning it is then, Nate. And thanks." I hesitated. "Why was he nicknamed Choo-Choo?"

Nate looked at me. "Because he specialized in throwing people in front of a subway car."

"Oh."

We finished the food and talked about people we knew. Nate was working on a good story.

I was back on the streets again, and once more I headed over to see Mrs. Kaufman and Rebecca London.

I walked slowly. There was a dead horse in the street. Children were gathered around it, petting it and playing. Suddenly the streets that I was so used to made me feel dizzy. I felt the crowds surging in on me. The smells added to my already uneasy stomach made me sick.

I was glad to be sitting at the kitchen table in Mrs. Kaufman's apartment.

We were all drinking tea.

Rebecca looked at me eagerly.

"You have some information, Mr. Levin?"

"I do."

Mrs. Kaufman looked at me. The strain showed all over her face.

"It is not a pleasant story. And you have to be ready to face reality."

Mrs. Kaufman nodded. "I know my husband had some faults."

I could have spent the next hour telling her Ezra Kaufman's faults.

"In this case, Mrs. Kaufman, your husband got into trouble with some gamblers from New Jersey."

"He didn't go there."

I shook my head. "No, they came here. They ran games. Your husband got behind and he lost too much money. He couldn't pay them back and so he tried, and this is difficult Mrs. Kaufman, he tried to cheat them."

“That sounds like Ezra,” she said.

“They didn’t like that, Mrs. Kaufman. They sent a man named Arnold Berlin to take care of your husband. He put some arsenic in schnapps, made your husband drink it, and then threw him off the roof.”

“How horrible,” Rebecca said.

Mrs. Kaufman was crying.

“I want to see this Arnold Berlin,” she said.

I shook with head, trying to put sadness in my shaking.

“It’s a kind of justice, Mrs. Kaufman. Berlin drowned in New Jersey just a few days after he killed Mr. Kaufman. He committed murder and he got the death penalty himself. He can never come after you or the children. And he’s punished for the crime. I think in this mean world, Mrs. Kaufman, that’s going to have to pass for justice.”

“It’s very painful, Mr. Levin. But you’ve brought me some comfort. At least it’s over. We can all get on with our lives.”

“I’m glad you feel like that, Mrs. Kaufman.” I held her hand. “Please always feel free to let me know if there’s anything you need. And Mr. Rosenthal who lives across the street will be sympathetic because his wife died too. He told me that if any neighbor ever needs any help, the neighbor can call on him. He’s right there, so don’t hesitate.”

“Oh, Mr. Levin. Rebecca told me you promised her you would find out the truth, and you have done so. We are very grateful.”

Mrs. Kaufman stood up. “You two will excuse me. I must lie down. I will feel better after a nap.”

She moved slowly and then closed the door.

“Mr. Levin, I want to thank you. You are a good man.”

I smiled at her.

“And now I must plan to return to Brooklyn.”

“Perhaps I can see you again, Miss London. A dinner if you wish.”

“Mr. Levin, please do not misunderstand me. I am very grateful for what you have done for my sister and me. I...I have a friend in Brooklyn. We're not engaged or anything.”

She held up her right hand. “It's a friendship ring as I said. But for me, it's much more than a friendship. The thought of him has built a nest in my heart. I came here with the task of helping my sister and that is done.”

“I thought...”

“You think I just used you, don't you? That I pretended to like you so that you would find out what happened. That isn't true, Mr. Levin. I have genuine affection for you. As a loyal friend. As a kind soul. But my feelings have not and are not romantic. I truly apologize if in my desire to help resolve Ezra's death I may have misled you. I meant you no harm. Please tell me you forgive me.”

There was no answer to that, but I nodded numbly.

It was at that moment that my heart began to decay.

I got up to leave.

Rebecca gave me a soft kiss on the cheek.

“I will always remember you and be grateful to you, Mr. Levin.”

I stumbled outside.

The sun was shining in the cold chill of November.

And, as though in a vision, I saw it.

I would have to leave the East Side. I had to go somewhere to look for myself, to think about my love for Rebecca and to ponder the idea of eternal loneliness, to break out of the dirt and havoc of this neighborhood.

I remembered what Rabbi Klein had said. I would look for a community of the spiritual and moral and intellectually daring where I might belong. Who knew? Maybe God would find me in my journey.

I knew I would write.

But first I needed some experience. And I could no longer get that here.

I would say good-bye to the Kleins. I would talk to Father and to my sister Deborah.

And I would light out for a territory I didn't know, someplace where I could be free to chart my imagination and drink deeply of life, to see the stars as friends, to dance in the moonlight of my imagination. And wherever I went I would take the morality at the center of my soul with me and I would seek moral companionship.

I looked up and my eyes gave birth to the uncertain future.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lawrence J. Epstein is the author of a variety of Jewish books. He is a former professor of English and advisor to two members of the U.S. Congress. If you enjoyed this book, you might like the author's *The Land of Eighteen Dreams*:

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