

PROLOGUE

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Avraham Weisner, known to his friends as “Avi” and to his adoring congregants merely as “Rabbi,” leaned his elbows on the lectern and gazed out over the throng.

He made an imposing picture up there and knew it — and was annoyed that he knew it. He would have preferred the dignity of unawareness: of his charisma, of his talents, of his power over this expectant audience. But part of Avi Weisner’s charm — and perhaps also his flaw — was a certain wry self-consciousness that made a mockery of even his most towering moments. Even now, as he stood before a host of hundreds, everyone agog to drink in his words of wisdom, he was acutely aware of the impression he was making.

What the audience saw, and what Avi Weisner saw in his mind’s eye, was a man of medium height and broad shoulders in a good black suit; dark brown hair, newly minted with silver at the edges and mostly hidden beneath a stylish black hat; neatly trimmed beard, two or three shades lighter than the hair; penetrating brown eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses; and a mouth that could be merry but was solemn at the moment, taking itself seriously.

Even as he tried to review in his mind the various points he would be making tonight, he found himself thinking things like, *There’s Feinziger in the front row — tape recorder all set to go, as usual.*

Hope I remember to pitch my voice low. Recently, he'd been taking elocution lessons from a former operatic tenor-turned-voice teacher. Avi had a tendency to hoarseness, the result of pitching his voice too high when emphasizing a point. Aiming for soaring drama, he would, on occasion, achieve an embarrassing shrillness instead. Mr. Metucci was helping to change all that.

In the big shul, a subdued murmur rose, swelling like the muted roar of an incoming tide. The back rows were filling fast. Each man who entered paused at the wide double doors to stamp the snow off his feet and brush the feathery stuff off his hat brim. The doors stood directly opposite the podium; each time they opened, Avi caught a glimpse of soft-falling white against black velvet. Occasional gusts made the snow dance, but for the most part, it fell slowly, gracefully, hypnotically.

Watching it, the rest of the world fell away. How unearthly the snow looked; how untouched by the pull of the sordid, by the fear and pain that inhabited so much of what the rabbi witnessed daily. Hope seemed to flutter there among the flakes, just as weightless and equally white. How beautiful were the wonders of His creation!

Then the doors swung shut again, locking out the cold, white magic. Avi looked away but found the tall windows framing the same beauty. Irresistibly, the sight brought to mind another winter, long ago, and endless snowy walks together with (though he hadn't known it then, not for several more weeks) his future *kallab*, Malka Chaimowitz. How many years ago now? And how much had happened to them since those first sweet, shy strolls...

He caught himself. There was a time for ambling down memory lane, and this was definitely not it. He couldn't afford the distraction. Tearing his eyes away from the treacherous windows, he looked down instead at the bland, smooth-grained lectern, seeing on its surface, as if in print, the words he would soon be speaking.

His remarkable memory scorned the prop of written notes. Quotes, sources, interesting turns of phrase were at his fingertips after a bare minimum of review. It was a talent that had stymied many a former rebbe in his yeshivah days. As the teachers had soon learned — sometimes to their chagrin, more often with respect — it is a risky business to scold a student for inattention when that student is liable to casually replay the entire lesson, word for word! That same memory was a gold mine when it came to taking tests and, later, conquering the Gemara. From his earliest youth, and without really trying, Avi Weisner had dazzled.

The thing was habit-forming. By his teen years he would not have known how to cope with anything less than the robust homage of his teachers and peers. Admiration became his second shadow. To his credit, he did apply himself, with good result. Hard work honed a natural intelligence into something that bordered on brilliance. The day, nearly twenty years ago now, when he had earned his semichah, his rabbinical ordination, had been a fulfillment — and a promise. On one point all who knew him had agreed: Avi Weisner was a young man with a future.

The rabbi smiled out over his people. The future was now.

When there were no more than ten or twenty unoccupied seats in the generous *beis midrash*, the rabbi cleared his throat and smiled. There fell an instant hush. A ripple of anticipation, almost visible, traveled along the rows of dark-suited men. Above, in the balcony, the women shifted in their seats and were still. Pens hovered near notebooks. Fingers poised over record buttons. Rabbi Weisner focused on an anonymous ginger-bearded face in the third row and smiled.

“Shalom aleichem, everyone. Good evening. Nice weather we’ve been having...”

Laughter rose from the rows; it had been snowing and storming more or less steadily all winter long. Avi smiled again, waited a beat, then continued quietly. "If you remember, last week we were talking about..."

There was a clicking of tape recorders and a happy, if muted, shuffling of feet. The *shiur* had begun.

His words rang out in the big room. Each was like the pure note of a bell, beckoning the listener: *Come with me. Share my journey.* It was an intellectual journey, and a spiritual one, and the rabbi knew even without the testimony of their intent faces that they were with him, step for step.

Elation, no less powerful for being familiar, swept through him. It was the euphoria of fine wine, the exaltation of high places. Surveying the sea of faces raised so fixedly to his own, this vibrant oceanful of people — *his* people — Avi had the sensation of being above the world. He might have been straddling a mountain with his head among the clouds. The feeling filled his chest and brought a sparkle to his eyes. Sometimes some of us are lucky enough to recognize, at a particular moment in time, exactly what it is we were born to do. Avi Weisner knew it every week.

The thrill came, not so much from the sense of holding the rapt multitude in the hollow of his hand — though that was part of it — but from the knowledge that he was reaching them with his words of Torah. Avi was a teacher at heart. His greatest satisfaction came from winning wisdom and then sharing the prize with his fellows. But the life of the classroom was not enough. A simple educator's existence would not have satisfied his need for largeness, for breadth, for sheer *scope*. Avi liked doing things on a grand scale. Here, every Thursday night in this vast shul hall (not his own), he had the chance to educate and elevate and inspire en masse.

No wonder he felt as though he were flying like one of the snowflakes on the wind, when, in fact, he was leaning over the

lectern and posing a series of incisive questions that made his audience frown and nod their heads and try to think. This, more than any other aspect of his rabbinical calling, was what he most loved to do.

He did it very well. And his people — not only his own congregation, but the many neighborhood *shiur*-goers seeking a weekly talk that would both instruct and challenge — loved him for doing it.

Their love lapped over him as he patiently postulated and explained. This was one of Avi's medium-difficult *shiurim*; not as complex as those he could, and did, offer on occasion, but one, nevertheless, that demanded the listener's close and persistent attention. Now, having set up the building blocks of tonight's thesis, he proceeded — slowly in places, in others with a startling intuitive jump, like the leap of the mountain lion across unknowable chasms — to climb them to their logical conclusion. He pulled his audience up after him. With practiced skill, the rabbi brought them to the brink of understanding, felt the exquisite intellectual tension before he coaxed them over the edge. Currents ran their course from rabbi to students and back again, as if some invisible switch had been pulled: a high-voltage closed system of spiritual electricity. The audience was charged, and they, in turn, charged the teacher.

They were learning something, seeing old familiar facts in entirely new ways. He watched them absorb his essence and be nourished by it. They were enthralled. He was uplifted, a man above himself. His people lent him wings.

One person in that audience, in particular, shared that sense of joyous flight. He was a young boy, no older than fifteen or sixteen, with a head of curly brown hair, thickly lashed brown eyes, and a well-formed nose liberally sprinkled with golden freckles. Yehuda Moses hadn't been in this neighborhood long, but he'd heard

enough of this fascinating weekly *shiur* to make him want to see for himself. He'd made sure to come early this evening and had had his pick of empty seats but with sudden diffidence had chosen to sit near the back of the vast room. His view of the rabbi was consequently a little vague — a figure seen more in outline than actual detail. But vision seemed almost redundant at the moment. Every other sense was submerged in a single one tonight: his capacity to hear.

With all the intensity of his youth and the passion of a newly questing mind, young Yudy listened. He stumbled after each concept that the rabbi threw out like markers on some mysterious trail, sometimes losing his way, at others seizing an idea triumphantly by the tail just before it disappeared from view. Slowly, as the pattern of the speaker's thoughts began to emerge, Yudy began unconsciously to smile. He was caught fast in the talons of intellectual excitement — a new feeling for him.

When had it happened, this change of focus from absorption in the physical to delight in the endless possibilities of the mind? Until just a few months ago, the boy had asked for nothing better from life than a good, solid baseball in one hand and the friendly leather of his mitt snug on the other. Then he'd moved to Brooklyn, changed yeshivos, and discovered — or, rather, rediscovered — the wonder of learning Torah.

As pleased with himself as any newly taught swimmer, Yudy swam the sweet tide of the *shiur*, of thesis and counterthesis, of question and discovery. He strained after the rabbi's words and reveled in the rabbi's presence. If there was a touch of hero worship in his reaction, well, that was only natural. Yudy was young; and Avi Weisner, up on his podium, was certainly, in his way, a heroic figure.

The lives of the two were about to be intertwined in the most unexpected way, like the sudden hurling of a rock into a still pool.

Very soon a ripple effect would form, drawing in the lives of those closest and dearest to them. Danger waited to reach out with a clammy finger, as well as its loyal attendants, heartbreak and fear. There was great joy in the wings, too, waiting in its patient way for the cue to step out under the lights.

But that time was not yet come. Right now, it was the rabbi who stood in the spotlight, and the boy was still just another face in the crowd.

Avi Weisner had reached his ringing peroration — modulating his voice and inserting frequent pauses between words, as his voice teacher had taught him, for minimum strain on the vocal cords — when his eye chanced to fall on a figure seated in the second row. The young man had brown hair, lighter than the rabbi's, and was still clean-shaven. He was both slimmer and shorter than the speaker at the podium, and his eyes, though the same deep brown, held a more wistful quality. But the greatest difference between them lay not so much in looks as in manner: Where the rabbi was confident, with large, expressive gestures — a man at the height of his powers — the younger man was more diffident, less secure. He looked at once hopeful and haunted. He was Mordechai “Mutt” Weisner, the rabbi's son.

Acknowledging the look, Mutt smiled slightly — but only slightly, as if afraid to distract his father in his moment of glory. Avi returned an almost imperceptible nod without breaking the rhythm of his speech. There was something at the back of his mind...something he was trying to grasp in connection with his son.

He remembered. Today was Mutt's twenty-first birthday. Right after the *shiur*, Malka was serving a special, “adults only” dinner for the three of them. It was a momentous point in a young man's life, and there would be much to talk about, away from the curious ears and questions of the younger Weisners.

As he drove home his final point (a part of his mind registering automatically its impact on the intent and admiring host), the rabbi stole another glance at his son. Mutty was listening abstractedly now. He looked miles away, sunk in his own thoughts. It was a familiar look, and one that never failed to exasperate the father. He had hoped that, with maturity, the boy would become more alert. More practical. More down-to-earth...

At this intrusion of human frailty, the wings of inspiration faltered, and the rabbi walked for a moment on two trembling legs. No man is invulnerable; reading his son's face, Avi felt the Achilles' heel of his own anxious tenderness plunge him earthward in a sudden painful swoop.

The next moment, frowning, the rabbi pulled himself back up. He looked away from his son, banishing that train of thought firmly and completely. It was his capacity for compartmentalizing the different portions of his life that was responsible, perhaps more than anything else, for his success. Avi Weisner was nothing if not disciplined.

The rabbi brought his attention back to the thirsty hordes. He said pleasantly, "That's it for tonight. Any questions?"

Arms shot up into the air, waving like stalks in a breeze. This was going to take some time.

Beyond the generous windows, the snow winked and beckoned. Rebelliously, discipline wavered. His momentary surrender to weakness earlier had subtly undermined Avi, robbing him of the tiniest fraction of utter dedication to those he taught. He was tired and hungry, and his own human self clamored for attention.

For just an instant, as he pointed at the first urgent hand, Avi allowed himself to wonder what Malka was serving for dinner.

ONE

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Malka Weisner wiped her hands on the front of her apron, in the same spot that was stained a permanent gray from countless other such hand-wipings, and resisted the desire to taste the soup again.

With some trepidation, the rabbi's wife held the lid aloft and peered inside. Long simmering had melded the vegetables and meat into a thick, almost solid mass. Too long — she'd forgotten to turn off the flame. Though she couldn't remember precisely when she'd set the pot on the stove, she had an uneasy feeling it had been more hours ago than she'd care to think about.

Well, she wouldn't think about it. And she definitely wouldn't tell Avi. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. With this comforting thought, she gave in to temptation and ladled out a bit to taste for the fourth time. Yes, it *was* good. Surprisingly so, in fact. Once again, through no merit of her own, the situation had been salvaged. The good old Malka Weisner luck was holding.

The thought, instead of soothing her, put her on edge as she bustled around her big, old-fashioned kitchen, concentrating on putting the last-minute touches to tonight's special dinner. The heavy, wooden cabinets, usually so comforting and maternal, loomed over her now in rebuke, reminding her of the lack of order inside. If the soup had survived her manhandling, it was through

no merit of hers. Homemaking, she brooded, should be more than just an exercise in endurance. Why did she have to depend on luck — or rather, as she well knew, God's good will — just to walk the minefield of her own daily life?

Even her children laughed at her domestic ineptness. Or at least one of them did. And perhaps “laughed” was not precisely the word...

“Ma,” Hindy had said only that afternoon, in the aggrieved tone that had become dismally familiar ever since the girl had turned thirteen or so, “why can't you be like other rebbetzins? I mean, look at Chaya Gitty's mother.” Chaya Gitty Rudman was the eldest of a neighboring rabbi's thriving brood and a close school friend of Hindy's. “Rebbetzin Rudman never overstars her husband's shirts so that they're stiff as a board. She never oversalts the soup and has to throw in potatoes to salvage it. When she says ‘jump,’ her kids jump! She has at least ten guests at every Shabbos meal, and always —”

“Well, we have lots of guests, too,” the mother had interrupted in a desperate bid to break the unflattering flow. “And you'll notice they keep coming back. Hmm...I wonder why that is?”

She didn't really expect an answer, and she didn't get one — unless you counted Hindy's long-suffering sigh. But Malka knew exactly what her daughter meant. She might prepare and hostess lavish Shabbos and holiday feasts, but never with the effortless grace of a Rebbetzin Rudman. Rather, it was with a mixture of eager good intentions and slapdash energy that she threw herself at her domestic duties — and then spent nearly as much time extricating herself from the debris. So far, in a broad, general way, her luck had more or less held. But was this really the way she wanted to spend the rest of her life?

Actually, she thought as she began to virtuously sprinkle Ajax into the sink preparatory to scrubbing it, she knew why Hindy

had chosen that particular afternoon to lodge her complaint. The girl was affronted because she hadn't been invited to Mutty's birthday dinner tonight. At nearly sixteen, she considered herself adult enough to be privy to the family's inner council.

"Shani's not going to be there, either," Malka had pointed out.

"Oh, Shani." Hindy's tone dismissed her sister. "She's only twelve. What do you expect?"

"Well, neither will Shmulie."

That argument was weak as Malka well knew. Hindy treated that observation with the scorn it deserved.

"Shmulie's away at yeshivah, Ma. I'm right here."

Yes, the mother agreed silently; there she was, and all aquiver with righteous indignation. Malka felt tired.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "Tatty said this should be private."

"Then I'll ask *him*." Hindy was smiling again, sure of her ground when it came to beguiling her father into saying yes.

"No," Malka said firmly. "Tatty's giving the *Shiur* tonight." (The other classes he taught during the week were just classes. In the Weisner home, Thursday night was "the *Shiur*.") "He'll be coming home tired and hungry."

"But Ma —"

"No."

Things don't really change, Malka thought, watching her oldest daughter flounce from the kitchen. It had been "I'll ask Tatty" when Hindy was four, and it was the same today. Always it was Malka who had to be the bad one, the naysayer. It was almost funny: in bald fact, she was much softer-hearted than her husband. Her nos were really his, the mother only acting as the father's mouthpiece. But Hindy didn't know that or didn't want to believe it.

Fifteen. It was a tender age, a difficult age. Hindy was confident one moment, insecure the next; beautiful in her good moods,