

CHAPTER 1

Brooklyn, New York, Present Day
Gavriel Mayer Kleinman

AS GAVI KLEINMAN PARKED HIS MOTHER'S CAR down the block from his friend's apartment, his mind was full of both holy thoughts and more practical considerations. In less than one day, he would be landing in Eretz Yisrael, where he would spend the next year engrossed in learning Torah. He had only been gone a few weeks but could not wait to be back.

Keeping in mind that he needed to arrive two hours before his flight, Gavi had only a few hours until he had to head to the airport. He was stopping at the home of his closest friend, Moshe Bernstein. Moshe, like Gavi, lived in Brooklyn. The two young men had been in high school together, then spent the previous year at the same Jerusalem yeshivah. They were very close and shared many of the same hopes and goals.

Though Gavi had been born and raised in New York, Israel was his home. If he could find a wife who shared his feelings, he would make his life in the holiest land on earth.

During his boyhood, he had been to Israel only once. When he was fourteen, his family traveled to Jerusalem for the wedding of a close cousin, the daughter of his mother's sister. On that trip, Gavi had fallen in love with the Jewish homeland. He remembered

telling his parents, as they neared the end of their two-week stay, that he did not want to go home to America. His mother said that she understood his sentiment, but their lives were in New York. However, if he still felt that way when he was a man, she would not stand in his way if he decided to make aliyah. Gavi had spent the year after high school learning in a yeshivah in Jerusalem, then decided to return for a second year.

Moshe would have loved to return to Israel with Gavi, but his family was unable to afford the cost. This week, he had started classes at Brooklyn College. He still wanted to go back to Israel, but it would have to wait.

Now, Gavi was eager to see Moshe before he left for Israel. It would be many months before he would see his good friend again. When Gavi left Moshe's apartment, he'd make another few quick stops, then drive his mother's car to JFK. Aryeh, Gavi's older brother, would meet him at the airport to see him off. The plan was for Aryeh to come with his new wife, Shoshy, in their own car. Then Aryeh would pick up his mother's car and drive it back to their parents' house in Brooklyn after Gavi's flight took off. Shoshy would drive their car so they would have a way to get back to their own home.

Mrs. Kleinman's car was a small one that she used mostly for local driving. Its trunk was full of Gavi's luggage, so he had to put his carry-on bag on the back seat of the car. As he parked near Moshe's building, Gavi debated taking the carry-on in with him, but decided against it. The bag was very heavy. He took out his passport and ticket and put them in an inside jacket pocket, then left the bag on the back seat, assuring himself that it was a safe neighborhood before getting out of the car and carefully locking it behind him with a satisfying beep.

Once up in Moshe's apartment, Gavi gratefully took a comfortable seat in the kitchen. He had been rushing around all week, doing errands in preparation for the trip. This morning, he had awakened early, too anxious to sleep. The overly busy schedule of

the past week plus fatigue had caught up with him, and he was happy to take a short break to visit with Moshe.

Moshe was short and chubby with dark hair and glasses, whereas Gavi was taller, thinner, and fairer. Moshe had managed to grow a full beard, while Gavi still had the soft facial hair of youth, with spots that still needed to fill in as he continued to mature. He was nineteen years old and thought he should have a full beard as well, but his mother assured him that it would not be long before his face would be as fully covered as his father's.

"You look beat," Moshe said to Gavi.

"Running all over the place, getting ready," Gavi explained.

"I can make you a coffee."

"Not too much trouble?"

"It's instant," Moshe said, and he went about preparing his friend a steaming mug. As soon as Gavi smelled the coffee, he felt more alert.

"How's school so far?" Gavi asked as Moshe set the mug on the table in front of him.

"So far, so good," Moshe replied. He took a seat across from Gavi, so they could talk. "I've only had two days of classes."

"I wish you were coming back with me," Gavi said, and he meant it with all his heart. He and Moshe had been in the same *chavrusa*, learning group, in yeshivah, and they had also been roommates in the dorm. It was hard going back knowing that Moshe would not be there with him.

"*You wish?*" Moshe replied, shaking his head. "Just be happy that you're able to go."

Gavi frowned, sorry that he had reminded his friend about the situation and had caused unintentional jealousy.

"You'll go back," Gavi assured Moshe.

"I can hope."

Gavi sipped his coffee, which really hit the spot, and he sighed deeply. He did not relish the long flight ahead of him, jammed into a small coach seat with crying babies, noisy children, and

inconsiderate adults. This brief visit was the quiet before the storm.

The two friends reminisced about happy times when they were in yeshivah together, then went on to share details about what former classmates from high school were doing now. One was getting married, another was working in his father's business, and others were continuing with their education, both secular as well as religious. It was all bittersweet, as Gavi knew how much he would be missing his friend.

After about an hour, Gavi checked his watch. Moshe noticed and asked, "What time's your flight?"

"Not until seven fifteen tonight," Gavi said, "but I still have a few other stops to make. I promised my cousin I would bring a package for her daughter who lives in Israel, and I still have to stop at her house to pick it up." There were other stops he would have to make as well, but there was no point in boring Moshe with specifics.

"I hope you have a great year," Moshe said, with no small degree of longing.

Gavi gave him a goofy grin, then slapped his friend lightly on the upper arm. "Thanks," he said. "I'd better get going."

"I understand," Moshe said. "Let me walk you to your car. Oh, but first," Moshe took out his wallet and put two one-dollar bills on the table, "for tzedakah."

It was customary to give a person traveling to Israel some money that would be given to charity in Israel. That would make Gavi's trip a holy mission and hopefully protect him from harm. Gavi nodded and carefully pocketed the money, putting it together with other money that would be going to tzedakah.

The two young men rose from their seats and made their way out of Moshe's building. As they walked toward Gavi's car, Gavi suddenly noticed that something was dreadfully amiss. He hastened his pace, then noticed damage on the car as he neared the vehicle. One of the back windows had been smashed, and there were bits of broken glass scattered on the sidewalk and on the inside of the car.

Additionally, someone had gone through his carry-on. The bag was unzipped, and the contents were strewn all over the back seat.

“Oh no!” Moshe exclaimed. “What happened?”

It was obvious what had occurred. Gavi immediately opened the door and began to look through his belongings, while silently praying that nothing would be missing. He had been careful to remove all his money, credit cards, and documents; would anything that had been left tempt a thief?

“Is everything there?” Moshe asked. “Did you leave any valuables?”

“I didn’t think so,” Gavi replied, pushing around a spare shirt and jacket, two books he had taken to read on the long flight, a bag with sandwiches his mother had packed for him that morning, and a small bag of toiletries.

“I had a plastic shopping bag with gifts for my relatives,” Gavi said. “It’s not here.”

“What was in it?” Moshe asked.

“I’m not sure exactly,” Gavi said. “My mom packed it. It had a sweater she bought for her sister and some small toys for the kids. My mother won’t be happy.”

“I’m sorry,” Moshe said. “You should probably call her and tell her.”

“I also have to tell her that her car was damaged.” Gavi frowned and shook his head. Then, he realized another item was missing. Frantically, he repeated his search.

“What?” Moshe asked, noting his friend’s sudden panic.

“Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!” Gavi exclaimed, sweat swiftly covering his brow as the realization of what he’d lost swept through him. His heart hammered as he tossed aside a pair of socks, spare shoelaces, and a blank journal he was bringing to record the events of the year ahead. A T-shirt went flying, followed by a mini flashlight and a pair of sunglasses.

“What’s missing, Gavi?” Moshe asked.

“I can’t believe it! Why would they take that? Who would take it?”

“Take what?” Moshe wrinkled his brow. “Your passport?”

“No,” Gavi replied. “I have that and my ticket in my jacket pocket. I’m missing my tefillin!”

“Are you sure? Maybe they fell. Look on the floor.”

“They’re not here!” Gavi’s voice rose with distress. “They were my great-grandfather’s *and* my great-great-grandfather’s. They were handed down to me, given to me for my bar mitzvah. They’ve been in my family for over a hundred years, and now they’re gone. I can’t believe this!”

Tears seeped from his eyes. The tefillin were his prized possession! How had he left them unprotected in the bag? He should have taken them with him when he went into Moshe’s building. He had been so stupid!

“They have to be there,” Moshe said, trying to ease Gavi’s anxiety. “Let’s look slowly, go through everything one more time before we get upset.”

“They are not here,” Gavi repeated, a queasy feeling overwhelming him. He felt like there was a rock in his belly, heavy and unforgiving.

“Why would someone take those?” Moshe asked. “Who would want them? Only a Jewish man could use them, and what religious Jew would steal another man’s tefillin?”

Gavi moaned again, still rifling through the mess in the back seat, hoping against hope that maybe, somehow, he had missed the tefillin. He thought of the day his grandfather had given them to him, months before his bar mitzvah. His father had been so proud, and Gavi had been so honored. It had been important to all of them that the tefillin stayed in the family. Gavi felt so fortunate to have received them. They would normally have gone to his older brother, but Aryeh received a new pair before his great-grandfather’s death, so Gavi had been blessed to receive the heirloom set, which were infinitely more valuable in sentimentality and family history.

“My father is going to be so upset,” Gavi whimpered. “They were antiques, family heirlooms.”

"I'm so sorry, Gavi," Moshe said.

"I have to call my parents," Gavi said, collecting himself. *And my brother*, he silently added. Everyone was going to be upset with him, but no one was going to be more aggravated than he already was. He had lost something dear, something one of a kind. Something that could never be replaced.

Gavi returned to Moshe's apartment. He slumped into a chair in the kitchen and put his head in his hands, staring down at the floor. Moshe poured him a glass of water, placing it before him on the kitchen table. Gavi looked up and gave his friend a joyless smile.

"I know you're upset," Moshe said, "but no one has been hurt. It's not that bad."

Gavi just shook his head. "It's very bad," he replied. He wanted to cry again but would not let himself break down in front of his friend. "You don't understand, Moshe."

"Then tell me," Moshe said, taking a seat across from Gavi. "But first take a deep breath. Drink some water."

Gavi reluctantly picked up the glass and took a short sip. The water was cold and refreshing, so he took several more long gulps and steadied himself.

"Feel better?" Moshe asked.

"A little," Gavi admitted. Then he added, "My tefillin were a gift from my grandfather for my bar mitzvah."

Moshe smiled. "Mine, too!"

"But yours were not family heirlooms. My family is going to be so upset that I lost them."

"You didn't lose them," Moshe objected. "They got stolen. You can't blame yourself."

"I should have taken them up with me, like I did my passport and plane ticket." Gavi frowned.

"It was in your bag, and that bag must have been heavy," Moshe reasoned.

"It *was* heavy," Gavi conceded. "But I should have taken the tefillin out and kept them with me. They are my most valued

possession!" Then, after a pause, he added, "At least they *were*."

"You have a lot on your mind; you weren't thinking. You have a lot to do today, even before you head out to the airport."

"But I should have been thinking. If you only knew all the *me-siras nefesh* that my ancestors suffered, but still, they managed to hold on to what was most valuable. Those tefillin have seen so much danger."

"Why are these tefillin so valuable, Gavi?" Moshe asked. "What happened to their previous owners?"

"The first one to own them was my great-great-grandfather, my Alter Zeidy Shalom Zvi. He died long ago, *al kiddush Hashem*. He was a real tzaddik."

"Wow," Moshe replied. "I'm sure he was a pious and learned man."

"More than that," Gavi said. "He sacrificed himself to save a fellow Jew."

"You never told me that story," Moshe responded with interest.

"Another time, Moshe," Gavi said. "I'm too upset right now. But those tefillin were purchased in a shtetl in Poland for Shalom Zvi's bar mitzvah in 1912. He carried them with him when he came to America and wore them every day throughout his life. Then they were passed down through the generations. I knew I had to live up to their examples and told my *zeidy* that I would take good care of them. Now, I've gone and lost them!"

"Don't give up hope," Moshe said. "I doubt whoever stole them had any idea of their value, and they might just return them when they don't know what to do with them."

Gavi frowned and shook his head again. "I pray you're right, Moshe, but I doubt I'll ever see them again. My father is going to be so mad at me. And my *zeidy* — oh my goodness! Zeidy is going to be devastated!"

"Call your father now," Moshe advised. "Explain what happened. I know your father very well, and he is an understanding man."

"That's true, but he's going to be very upset," Gavi replied.