



CHAPTER ONE

SECRET IN ITALY

‘VE NEVER SEEN SUCH A LONG LINE OF PEOPLE IN MY LIFE!’

Yochanan and his twin sister Shifra had just entered the large airport terminal. Behind them were Zeidy and Savta Segal, who were treating the twins to three weeks in Eretz Yisrael this summer.

“Don’t worry.” Zeidy was calm and reassuring. “You would be surprised at how quickly the line moves. Do you see that family over there on the left? Let’s go behind them. That line seems to be the shortest.”

Yochanan helped Zeidy maneuver the cumbersome luggage cart. Oversized suitcases fought for space on the bottom. Lighter carry-on bags were balanced on top. The Segals found their place on line and paused to rest.

“I hope the line doesn’t move too fast,” said Savta. “I still have work to do!”

Yochanan and Shifra looked at each other quizzically. What did

their grandmother still have to do? Zeidy just smiled knowingly. He folded his hands across his chest and watched.

From her overstuffed handbag, Savta removed a roll of red and white polka-dotted ribbon and a small, sharp scissors. She handed the scissors to Shifra and proceeded to unroll the ribbon. When a three-foot piece dangled, Savta held the ribbon between two fingers.

“Here, Shifra,” Savta commanded. “Snip the ribbon right here, between my fingers.”

Shifra obliged and handed the piece of ribbon to Savta. Savta expertly looped the ribbon around the handle of the first big suitcase. Then she tied a large bow with a double knot on top.

“I get it!” Shifra clapped her hands. “This way, when we get to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, we’ll be able to find our luggage in a jiffy. We’ll just look for red and white polka dots!”

“Not bad.” Yochanan was impressed. “For a girl, that was pretty good.”

As Savta continued cutting and tying ribbons, the line slowly moved forward. By the time the Segals neared the front counter, all of their luggage sported red and white ribbons.

“We look like a girls’ color war team,” Yochanan complained.

“It pays to look like a girls’ color war team,” said Zeidy, “if it will help us find our luggage when we arrive.”

Yochanan noticed that Savta returned the ribbon to her handbag but slipped the scissors into an outer pocket of one of the big suitcases.

“Why didn’t you put the scissors back into your pocketbook?” Yochanan wondered. “I’m sure they’ll come in handy on the flight.”

“That’s a good question,” Zeidy answered for Savta. “Up until 2001, Savta could have put them into her pocketbook. But since 9/11, things changed a lot.”

“Wasn’t that when terrorists flew a plane into the Twin Towers?”

Yochanan asked. "What does that have to do with scissors?" He wrinkled his nose in confusion.

"Do you know what the terrorists used to hold up the plane?" replied Zeidy. "They didn't use guns or pistols. They used small, sharp tools, like a box cutter or a pair of scissors. And see how much damage they were able to inflict! Thousands of people lost their lives in the attack. The damage was devastating!"

"I remember that morning," added Savta. "The attack happened a bit before nine o'clock in the morning. I went to the grocery an hour later, and dusty gray ashes were whirling about in the air! I was wearing a blue skirt, and it quickly became covered with soot. And we live miles away from where the Twin Towers stood."

Shifra shivered. "I'm glad I wasn't born yet. It must have been a very scary day."

"It was," admitted Zeidy. "Since then, security at airports is very tight. No scissors, jackknives, or anything similar. No water bottles either, in case a dangerous substance is hiding in the water."

"It was much better years ago," said Savta. "I used to finish half a needlepoint on a trip to Eretz Yisrael! But then again, everything was better years ago," she ended wistfully.

"Passports, please," an unfamiliar voice interrupted.

The Segals looked up. It was finally their turn!

Savta reached into her handbag and removed a large envelope. She took out four passports and handed them to the airline clerk.

The clerk was friendly and efficient. Her starched white blouse looked neat under her blue blazer. She checked the passports, punched a number of buttons on her computer, and pointed to the scale right near the counter. Zeidy and Yochanan were already loading the largest suitcase onto the scale.

"Perfect!" the clerk complimented the group. "You got that suitcase to exactly fifty pounds! You didn't waste an ounce. Next suitcase."

Check-in was completed quickly. Boarding passes in hand, the Segals walked over to a large computer screen affixed to the ceiling. The screen displayed information about many different flights.

“I see our flight!” Yochanan shouted. “It’s on the second to last line. It says that boarding time is twelve thirty. It’s only eleven fifteen now! What in the world are we going to do for a whole hour? Why did we rush to come to the airport?”

Zeidy smiled. He knew that his grandson loved action.

“Well, Yochanan, now we practice patience. Have you ever tried waiting patiently for a whole hour?” Zeidy asked teasingly.

Yochanan thought about it.

“For a whole hour?” He scratched his head, trying to remember. “Nope. I don’t think so. The longest I could remember plain waiting—”

“Who’s talking about ‘plain waiting?’” Zeidy interrupted. “What do you call this?”

Zeidy held up a small Gemara and smiled at his grandson. “A Yid never ‘plain waits.’ We use our time wisely.”

They reached a large waiting area filled with long couches. Savta sank gratefully onto the cushions, wheeling her small carry-on suitcase toward her and parking it at her feet. Shifra plopped down near Savta and removed her purple backpack from her shoulders. She opened the zipper and felt inside for the bag of cookies.

“Is anyone else hungry?” she offered.

“Not for food,” answered her brother. “But some excitement would do.”

“Shalom aleichem, Reb Yid.”

The twins looked up to see an elderly gentleman approaching them. He was wearing a faded brown jacket and a brown cap. A square package was cradled in his arms. Strips of clear packing tape were wrapped around the package. At the corner of the package was a round green sticker.

Yochanan tried to figure out if the man was really Jewish or not. He had spoken like a Jew, but Yochanan wasn't sure. Then Yochanan noticed tzitzis strings peeking out from under the man's jacket.

The stranger addressed Zeidy.

"My name Abie," he began in a broken, accented English. "My niece lives in Yerushalayim. She very sick. I make special herb medicine for her. Here my brother's number. You take this package to Yerushalayim and call my brother. He come for medicine."

"I will not be able to," Zeidy replied. "Please don't ask me again."

Yochanan was shocked. He had always admired his grandfather as a man of Torah and *chesed*. Why would he refuse another Yid such a simple favor?

Abie was shocked as well.

"How you could say no? We all *b'nei Avraham*. Our father a man of *chesed*. We supposed to copy him. Package not heavy. My brother will come right away. It will not bother you."

Zeidy's face became stern. He looked Abie straight in the eye and repeated his refusal.

"If you don't stop pestering me," Zeidy threatened, "I'm going to call airport security."

As Abie shuffled sadly away, Zeidy turned to face his grandchildren. Confusion was written all over their faces.

"Listen carefully," Zeidy spoke in a low, serious tone. "There's a saying, 'Never say never.' But now, I will say 'never.' You are never, ever to take a package from a stranger. Especially not in an airport. This rule has no exception. Should I repeat myself, or did you understand?"

Yochanan and Shifra had never before seen their grandfather look so solemn. They realized the gravity of the situation. But they didn't understand.

Yochanan ventured to ask.

“Okay, Zeidy, we won’t. But can you explain why we should refuse a Yid a simple favor?”

“The reason is because your grandfather said so. But since you’re wondering why, it’s because people sometimes hide dangerous or illegal substances inside innocent-looking packages. And the passenger carrying the package could get caught and arrested and sent to jail.

“I’m telling you, Yochanan, that that’s not the sort of excitement you would enjoy.

“So do we have a deal?” Zeidy smiled at the children, attempting to recreate the upbeat mood of moments before. “Do we agree that no matter how much money we’re offered or how *ehrlich* or desperate the Yid looks, never to take a package from a stranger?”

“Yes, sir!” the children chorused.

“I made it into a poem,” said Shifra. She held her chin up and recited, “Take a package? Never! Don’t you dare, ever!”

“Pretty good.” Yochanan grinned at his sister. “I’ll recite it, too.”

With a very serious face, Yochanan pronounced, “Take a package? Never! Don’t you dare, ever!”

Zeidy nodded his approval. “Perfect!”

“Guess what?” Savta announced. “We could begin boarding. I promise, Zeidy, that I have no packages from strangers!”

Everyone laughed, and they gathered their carry-on luggage pieces together. All around them, the passengers were slowly rising from the couches and heading for Gate B. As the Segals followed the line of passengers, Yochanan noticed that they were passing the restrooms.

“Can I just use the restroom?” Yochanan asked Zeidy. “I’ll catch up to you in a minute.”

“Come,” his grandfather replied. “I’ll walk you.”

Savta and Shifra continued on ahead. Zeidy and Yochanan turned off to the side and entered the large restroom.

As Yochanan was washing his hands, he noticed someone who looked strangely familiar at the next sink. The man was wearing a faded brown jacket and baggy black pants.

Yochanan stared intently at the old man. Zeidy stared, too.

At the same instant, it flashed.

It was Abie!

Yochanan noticed that Abie's balding head was uncovered. There were no longer any tzitzis strings peeking out from under his jacket.

Zeidy put a finger over his lips. Yochanan understood that he was not to do or say anything to this strange, mysterious man. Yochanan remained silent until they left the restroom.

"I can't believe it!" Yochanan tried to keep his voice down so that the whole airport wouldn't turn around. "That man was a fake!"

"I can believe it, Yochanan," answered his wise grandfather. "I suspected it from the first moment."

"So why didn't you contact security?"

"It's not so simple. These people are professional and very slippery. The best thing to do is to just stay away from them."

By now, the two had reached the line of passengers at Gate B. Savta and Shifra were at the front of the line. Zeidy chose to wait with Yochanan at the end.

Before Yochanan knew it, they reached the front of the line. Two smiling flight attendants stood at the entrance to the plane. They greeted every passenger and offered to help them find their assigned seat.

"I see my wife down the aisle," said Zeidy, "so I see where to go. Thank you!"

Yochanan felt like dancing between the rows of seats. He was finally on the plane! This was really happening!

"Can you believe it?" Shifra was already settled in her seat next to Savta. "We're really on the plane! We're almost in Eretz Yisrael!"

“Yes, yes.” Zeidy smiled. “Let’s hope we have a smooth, safe flight, *b’ezras Hashem*. Over here, Yochanan. Do you want the aisle seat or the one next to it?”

“I don’t care. Whatever you think makes more sense.”

Yochanan decided that the plane looked a lot like a school bus, except it was much wider, and the floor was carpeted. It had rows of seats, with two aisles instead of one. There were about four seats on either side of each aisle. Hand rests separated each seat from the adjacent one, and overhead compartments were available for storing hand luggage. In all directions, passengers were finding their seats and getting settled for the ten-hour flight.

Shifra sat in row L near the aisle, with Savta to her left. Zeidy and Yochanan were also in row L, across the aisle. Zeidy gave Yochanan the aisle seat, because Yochanan would probably have more action that way. Zeidy settled into the seat on Yochanan’s right.

“Welcome aboard our 747 jetliner. This is your captain speaking. We are preparing for takeoff. Please direct your attention to the safety demonstration in front of you.”

Yochanan had not noticed it before, but affixed to the back of each seat was a small screen. Instructions about what to do in case of an emergency landing were displayed on the screen.

Yochanan glanced across the aisle at Shifra. Her face was glued to the screen, and she was becoming more and more pale by the minute.

Sometimes I can’t believe that we’re twins, Yochanan thought. Shifra takes these things so seriously, and I never do. It sure is a good thing she doesn’t know the truth about Abie. She would be petrified!

Savta noticed Shifra’s fear.

“You know,” Savta commented. “I’ve flown to Eretz Yisrael and back so many times. It’s so much easier and cheaper for Zeidy and I to visit Aunt Batya than to have her whole family come to us. We