

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

*Captivating stories full of Yiras Shamayim taken from Shmuessin that
Reb Kalman Krohn z'tl gave in Adelpia Yeshiva*

Home at Last

CHAPTER ONE

R' Nesanel *Hatzadik* was not born with this noble title. His was a difficult upbringing, but he utilized his challenges as rungs on the ladder of his personal growth, ascending higher and higher. His difficulties forced him to work on his character and better his *middos*, and soon the young man became known as a genuine tzaddik.

How young Nesanel loved to learn! He cherished nothing more than the hours he spent before his beloved *sefarim*, toiling in the intricacies of a difficult *sugya*. Torah was his lifeblood, Torah was the air he breathed, and he wished that he had no other responsibilities infringing on his time for learning.

However, as a young man on the cusp of adulthood, he knew he needed to find a source of *parnasah* in order to support his future family. He looked for an option that would afford him the most hours in the *bais medrash*, and decided to try sales for a short while each afternoon. He would learn from early in the morning until late afternoon, after which he worked for one hour as a merchant, buying and selling. Hashem blessed him with extraordinary success, and within a short time, the young man became extremely wealthy.

“Nesanel, Nesanel, you have it all backward,” his friends would chide admiringly when they came to the *bais medrash* after a long day of work and found him learning in front of his Gemara. “The way to do it is to first go to work, earn your livelihood, and then devote the rest of the day to Torah.”

Nesanel would just smile. “By me, it’s the opposite,” he would respond. “The first nine hours of my day are devoted to Torah. Then, for about an hour before *Minchah*, I take care of my business.” With that, he would return to the *sugya* before him, continuing to learn for another few minutes until he needed to deal in business.

At night, the young *talmid chacham* would give tzedakah. In addition to his generous response to every request that came to his door, and there were many, he would give vast sums of money to *rabbanim* to give out to their needy congregants. He gave with such generosity of spirit that his takers almost felt like they were doing him the biggest favor by accepting his gifts.

Learned, wealthy, and with beautiful *middos*, Nesanel was considered a great catch on the shidduch market. Wealthy, smart, talented girls from the best of homes were suggested to him, but he was not interested. All Nesanel wanted was a modest and refined girl, one who would remain at home with the children and not let his wealth go to her head.

To that end, the matchmakers found him a poor girl from a poor home. Though a genuine *tzenuah* with a kind soul, Shulamis had no dowry, and people had therefore predicted she would remain single forever. Their engagement shocked the community.

As the months and then years passed, however, it became clear that R' Nesanel's choice had been a wise one. Shulamis was as kindhearted as she was refined, a true *baalas chesed* in every way. Wealth meant little to her; she saw it only as a means for enhancing the lives of others.

Knowing exactly how it felt to be hungry and cold, she was just the right person to dispense tzedakah. She knew what to say, how to say, and how to give to lift up the spirits of the needy. With Nesanel away for so many hours each day, toiling in the *bais medrash*, Shulamis filled her time with *chesed*.

She went from house to house, heating frozen homes and repairing leaking roofs as she warmed the hearts of her recipients with her gracious words and genuine interest in their challenges. Lonely widows and overworked housewives looked forward to her visits, taking strength from her quiet dignity and the knowledge that somebody cared about them.

Indeed, R' Nesanel and Shulamis were the perfect pair, and their marriage was a happy one.

The one thing marring their joy was the endless silence that permeated their home. There were no delicious giggles, playful chatter, or even incessant crying that is part and parcel with the precious gift of children. Their friends had child after child, yet Shulamis's arms remained empty.

The couple longed for children with every fiber of their beings. They prayed and cried and prayed some more, beseeching Hashem to fulfill their deepest desire and grant them even just one child! They increased their efforts in *avodas Hashem*,

giving more tzedakah, learning more Torah, and performing more acts of *chesed*.

But it appeared that the gates of Heaven were closed before them.

The years kept passing, and Shulamis continued aging. Time was running out, and the couple knew they needed to do something more.

"We must work on breaking our desires," R' Nesanel told his wife one evening. "Any time you or I want to turn down a *chesed* opportunity, or snub someone, or do any act that is not completely positive, we must fight ourselves and break those evil desires.

"If I feel that someone is asking for too much tzedakah and want to turn him down," he explained. "Then I should give him more than he asks for. Or if you think of a *chesed* idea but decide that you prefer some peace and quiet, go for the *chesed* anyway. By breaking through our instinctive *middos*, hopefully Hashem will repay us by doing the same, and breaking through this difficult decree against us.

"Additionally, we must redouble our efforts in praying and also fasting. We must storm the heavens, because time is not on our side. There's no time to lose. We must increase our davening, accept fasts upon ourselves, and increase in good deeds. Hopefully, we will merit to see salvation." "Certainly," Shulamis whispered painfully.

The couple redoubled their efforts even more, becoming bigger and better people in the process. And when they learned that their greatest dream was to become a reality, there was no one more grateful or joyous than they were. They continued davening and fasting for a healthy child.

The day arrived, and Shulamis gave birth, not just to one child, but to two beautiful boys. The entire city rejoiced with R' Nesanel and Shulamis, coming out to dance in the streets in honor of the tremendous *simchah*. The grateful new father, his

face damp with tears of emotion, could not stop praising Hashem for the miracle.

The night before the twins' bris, R' Nesanel arranged for a the greatest *talmidei chachamim* of the city to join him in learning Torah near the babies' cradles for the entire night. On that night, before they entered the covenant of Avrohom, the tiny infants absorbed the *kol* Torah of tens of righteous scholars, starting their lives from the start upon a foundation of holiness.

The bris itself resembled a wedding. There were rows and rows of tables, enough to seat the entire Jewish community; and indeed, everyone came. From paupers in need of a meal, to wealthy men wanting to congratulate their friend, to yeshiva bachurim and businessmen and everyone in between, the bris was a packed affair.

Later that day, after everyone had gone home and things had settled down, R' Nesanel sat with his wife, each of them holding one of the twins. For the next while, the two of them just sat there without uttering a word, in awe of the miracle Hashem had performed for them.

The *pidyon haben* for Menachem, the older twin, was an equally large affair. Once again, the entire community was invited, and attendance was full. R' Nesanel and Shulamis had done so much for the community, and for so many years, their friends had been praying for them to have children. Now, there was not a person who begrudged the couple's happiness.

The next months and then years passed in a blur of giggles and tears. Menachem and his brother Kalman were bright and delightful toddlers, bringing much joy and life to their proud parents. They passed each of their childhood milestones as they aged from one year to two and then to three.

As is customary, when the twins' third birthday came around, R' Nesanel wrapped the two boys in *talleisim*, and carried one in each hand to

cheder. The *aleph-bais* rebbi greeted the two boys and proceeded to begin teaching them the *aleph bais* as their emotional parents looked on.

"This is an *aleph*," he began.

"*Aleph*," the twins repeated.

The *rebbe* opened a bottle of honey and smeared some with a stick over the aleph. "Look how zeesh the aleph is!" he cooed, offering the boys a taste. When each of the twins had licked the honey, he continued. "This is a *bais*."

"*Bais*," the two echoed, watching eagerly as the *rebbe* spread the honey, waiting for their next delicious lick.

After going through all the *aleph bais*, the *rebbe* began teaching them the first few *pesukim* of *Vayikra*. The twins listened carefully, their eyes wide and round.

When the ceremony was over, R' Nesanel wrapped them up again and carried them home. Their hair was cut, after which they enjoyed a small *seudah* to celebrate the occasion. R' Nesanel did not stop thanking Hashem for the double miracle of his delightful twin sons.

When the twins became four years old, it was time for them to begin attending *cheder*. While the one-room house that served as the *cheder* was not far from his home, it was unthinkable to R' Nesanel and Shulamis that the twins walk alone.

"What a merit to be able to carry out the mitzvah of *v'shinantam l'vanecha*," R' Nesanel would declare each morning as he lifted his sons onto his shoulders and carried them to *cheder*. At pickup, he would be waiting outside the building for his sons, and would carry them home once again on his shoulders.

People would point him out on the street, "Look, there's R' Nesanel *Hatzadik*. And look how he's taking his sons to *cheder*!" They would ask him

directly, “Why are you walking your sons like this? You can drive them in your horse and wagon, or better yet, have one of your servants drive them.”

But R’ Nesanel would shrug off all comments with a smile. “I want to take my boys myself, all by myself. Not with my servant, not with the horse and wagon. This is my *zchus!*”

This went on for more than a year, until one day, five-year-old Kalman began to notice that he and his brother were the only ones arriving at *cheder* on their father’s shoulders. “Menachem,” he whispered as the two lay in bed one night trying to fall asleep. “Are you embarrassed that Tatte takes us to *cheder* each morning on his shoulders?”

“Yes,” Menachem admitted.

“I’m also embarrassed,” Kalman said. “Let’s ask Tatte not to carry us anymore.”

“We can’t do that,” Menachem disagreed. “It’s the highlight of Tatte’s day. Don’t you know how much he loves carrying us to *cheder*? It’s embarrassing, but not enough that it’s worth it to take the pleasure away from Tatte.”

“I don’t see why we can’t ask Tatte to walk with us,” Kalman argued. “It’s almost the same as carrying us, and it’s a lot less embarrassing.”

“Whatever,” Menachem said, turning over. He didn’t like fighting with his brother. “I’m very tired. Let’s go to sleep.”

In the morning, as the twins got ready to leave, Kalman snuck a glance at Menachem and turned to his father. “Tatte, Menachem and me are very big already. No one our age gets carried to *cheder*, and we are embarrassed. Can we walk together instead?”

R’ Nesanel seemed slightly taken aback, but he recovered quickly and hugged Kalman close. “Of course we can walk together,” he said lovingly. “It is my pleasure to carry you on my shoulders, but I would never want to cause you shame. From now on, we’ll walk together every day.”

And so, every day, R’ Nesanel would accompany his sons to and from *cheder*. The boys were smart, with bright eyes and beautiful *peyos*, and the frequent reports their *rebbe* gave their father were glowing. As the months passed and they turned six and then seven years old, the three continued their daily walks together to and from *cheder*.

R’ Nesanel and his wife raised their sons in a simple, luxury-free environment. Not wanting their wealth to impact their children’s upbringing, the twins had no idea that their father was one of the wealthiest men in the city. R’ Nesanel didn’t want their minds to dwell on anything other than Torah and holiness.

By the time the twins were nine, their father was already forty-nine years old. It wasn’t easy to continue to escort his children every day to *cheder*, in the rain and snow and scorching sun, but R’ Nesanel persisted. For him, this had become a tradition that he loathed to give up.

Kalman, however, was still conscious of the social norms around him, and he was ashamed that his father needed to walk him to *cheder* each morning. “We’re not babies,” he explained earnestly to his father as Menachem listened silently, holding his breath. “Everyone else’s parents allow them to walk alone. We know the way; we’re big boys. It’s not... it’s a little embarrassing for Menachem and me.”

“I’m okay with it,” Menachem quickly contradicted, afraid of hurting his father.

“But don’t you enjoy the time we spend together?” R’ Nesanel asked them.

“Of course we do,” Menachem responded empathetically.

“Of course we do,” Kalman reiterated. “We do! But we spend time reviewing the Gemara together every night. And it’s such a waste of time for you! You’ll be able to spend more time learning if we walk alone.”

“Look, boys, I don’t feel so comfortable with the two of you walking alone,” R’ Nesanel said hesitantly. “I understand how you feel, but the *cheder* is a long walk from here, and I’d worry about you too much. Would it help if I asked Ivan, one of the stable boys, to drive you to school instead of me walking you there?”

Kalman gave his father a big hug in response. “Thank you, Tatte!”

“It’s hard to believe the boys are up to the next stage already,” Shulamis said wistfully. She thought back to the days when their home was silent, empty of the joys of children and smiled. Her heart was full.

The next morning, after R’ Nesanel came back from *Shacharis* with one of his stablemen in tow. “Boys, Ivan will be driving you to *cheder* now and will pick you up when it is time to go home.”

The twins kissed their father goodbye and followed Ivan outside excitedly. “Now no one can make fun of us, that we are babies who come with our Tatte,” Kalman whispered to his twin as they settled into their seats.

Ivan took his place at the front of the wagon and turned around for a moment to face the boys. “Hello, my name is Ivan,” he introduced himself. “I’ve been working for your father for a long time, but this is the first time we’ve gotten to speak to each other. Usually, I’m out in the fields, caring for your father’s horses.”

“I’m Menachem,” the older twin said shyly, wary of the gentile driver.

“Kalman,” his brother added.

Ivan whipped the horses and they began moving. “Well, nice to meet the two of you. I’m happy to be of service to your father. I’ve never met a more special man. What a noble human being! I’m telling you, there aren’t too many millionaires like your father, who retain their piety and righteousness once they become wealthy.”

Behind him, the twins exchanged glances. “Millionaire?!” they both exclaimed together. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?” Ivan twisted his head around for a moment to glance at the shocked boys. “Don’t you know how many horses your father owns? How much cattle? How much land?!”

“It can’t be,” Menachem said firmly. “We live in a simple house.”

“Ha, I wish I was born into that kind of simple house,” Ivan replied, his eyes trained on the road ahead. “Hashem should bless your father with many long years, but one day, the two of you will be millionaires, too.”

Both boys just stared at the back of his neck blankly, not comprehending how this was possible.

“Listen,” Ivan said, eager to prove his point.

“How long does it take you to get to school?”

“It took us twenty minutes to walk, sometimes longer,” Kalman said. “Why?”

“With a horse and wagon, it won’t take us more than five minutes,” Ivan explained. “We have an extra fifteen minutes. If you’d like, I can take a

short detour and show you a small portion of what your father owns.”

Menachem shrugged. “I’m not interested. Can you take us straight to *cheder*, please?”

“Why?” Kalman protested. “I want to see. You’ll take us to *cheder* right afterward, right, mister?”

“Of course!” Ivan confirmed. “I’m not about to risk my job with your father by not taking you to *cheder*. We’re not even going to get out of the wagon; I’ll just drive a little out of the way.”

Neither boy protested, so he took that as their acquiescence and veered onto a different road.

CHAPTER TWO

“Look down there, boys,” Ivan commented, pointing at a herd of horses grazing in the distance. “How many horses do you see?”

The twins squinted at the animals. “There are too many,” Menachem said, giving up after a moment of trying. “And they’re too far away.”

“There are eighty horses,” Ivan informed them. “They all belong to your father. I’m in charge of caring for them, in fact. I raise them and care for them, and eventually, we sell them. We have a lot of fun with the horses. Do you want to see?”

“But we need to get to *cheder*,” Kalman reminded him.

“Sure, sure,” Ivan said agreeably, jumping down from the wagon and disconnecting the horse. “I’ll take you in just a minute. Let me just show you some exciting tricks. Watch me!”

He mounted the horse and began galloping around the empty field. With the reins in Ivan’s capable hands, the horse jumped gracefully over bush after bush.

“Wow!” Kalman breathed.

“How do you do that?” Menachem asked in admiration.

“This is nothing,” Ivan called back modestly. “You should see how the real professionals do it, in real horse races. Should I do it again?”

“Yes!” Kalman cried.

“No!” Menachem yelled at the same time. “We need to go to *cheder*!”

“Your right,” Ivan agreed, jumping off the horse and removing the saddle. “You do need to get to

cheder. If you’d like, we can do this again a different time.”

“Does our father really own all this?” Menachem asked doubtfully.

“All of it,” Ivan confirmed. “And lots more besides. But do me a favor and don’t tell your father that I told you about this, okay? If he never told you, he obviously didn’t want you to know, and I don’t want to get into trouble. I can’t afford to lose my job.”

“We won’t tell,” Kalman promised.

Ivan dropped them off at the small house that served as the *cheder* with a cheerful wave. The boys waved back and went inside.

But that day, for the first time, they didn’t learn a word.

Their *rebbe* spoke and taught and explained, and they nodded obediently in all the right places, chanting the *mishanyos* with the rest of their classmates, but their heads were not in it.

Instead, their tender minds were occupied with thoughts about horses and races and tremendous wealth. Ideas that had never occurred to them before were suddenly racing around their heads.

When Ivan came to pick them up, he twisted around in his seat to see them and asked them how their day was.

“Good,” they responded together.

“Did you learn well?”

They looked at each other and shrugged. “Yes.”

Back at home, Reb Nesanel had the same question for them. “Welcome back, my budding *talmidei chachamim*,” he cried, greeting them warmly.

“Did you learn well today? How was it?”

“Great, *baruch hashem*,” the twins responded.

Their father accepted this response joyfully, completely not noticing the spark that had dulled in their eyes.

Kalman climbed onto the wagon and sat down on the bench, moving toward the wall to leave room for his twin. Moments later, Menachem clambered up and joined him.

“Ready, boys?” Ivan called from the front seat, tugging at the reins. The horses began to move. “Ready,” Menachem called back.

“Oh, Ivan, *please* take us back to where you took us yesterday,” Kalman entreated. “It was so beautiful!”

“Yes, can you take us back there?” Menachem echoed eagerly. “You’re so good at riding horses! It was so fun to watch!”

“Well, boys, we don’t have much time,” Ivan replied, turning the horses in the direction of the field. “Just about fifteen minutes or so, and then I need to head toward the *cheder* to drop you off.”

“Thank you, Ivan!” both boys exclaimed together. Ivan stopped the wagon on the same meadow they had been to the day before. He disconnected one of the horses from the wagon and saddled it. “Okay, boys, how would you like to learn how to ride a horse?”

Menachem shrank back. “I’m afraid,” he admitted. “I could fall off and get hurt.”

“Don’t be scared; I’ll stand next to you the whole time,” Ivan said soothingly. “Here, I’ll help you mount the horse and I’ll walk alongside it holding your hand.”

“No,” Menachem said, panic in his voice. “What if the horse starts to run and I get hurt?”

Ivan lifted his hands in defeat. “Okay, okay. No one is forcing you to ride if you don’t want to. What about you, Kalman? Would you like to learn how to ride a horse?”

Kalman gave a hesitant nod. “I’ll try it,” he said bravely. “But you stand next to me the entire time, alright? You’ll make sure I don’t fall off?”

“Of course,” Ivan declared. “You aren’t going to fall off, I promise you. Here, take my hands, and I’ll help you mount.”

Moments later, Kalman was shakily astride the horse. He felt vulnerable and powerful at the same time, clinging to the saddle for dear life as he observed the view from his high vantage point.

Ivan gave the stallion a firm pat and it began to slowly walk across the plain. Kalman’s breathing slowly returned to regular and he relaxed, enjoying the pleasant walk across the meadow on the horse’s back.

Soon, he was comfortable enough to increase the horse’s pace to a trot. “Hey, Menachem,” Kalman called proudly. “Look at me, look at me!”

Menachem waved, clearly in awe of his brother’s feat. After watching Kalman ride the horse around the field for some time, he began to feel more and more comfortable with the idea of doing the same.

“Menachem, would you like a turn now?” Ivan asked.

“Yes,” Menachem said eagerly. Kalman slid off the horse’s back and Ivan helped Menachem mount. “I’m falling! I’m falling!” Menachem yelled.

“You’re not falling,” Ivan said firmly, one hand around the boy’s waist. “You are doing fine,

Menachem. Great! See if you can leave go of my hand and hold the saddle over here.”

It took a little longer and a lot more nerves than it had for Kalman, but soon, Menachem, too was trotting around the plain astride the horse.

“Look at that!” Ivan cried in satisfaction. “The two of you are born riders! You’ve learned in just one day!”

The two brothers exchanged pleased glances, gratified at the compliment. Kalman could already envision himself arriving at *cheder* in horseback to the envy of his friends. “*Cheder!*” he suddenly remembered frantically. “Ivan! We’ve been here for hours! We forgot all about *cheder!*”

Menachem pulled the reins sharply and the horse halted. “Oh, no!” he cried, desperately sliding off the horse and back onto solid ground.

Ivan looked up. The sun was high in the sky. They had been enjoying themselves so much that he had completely forgotten about everything else. The boys were at least two hours late to *cheder*, and he knew that if Reb Nesanel found out, he would be in big trouble.

With deft fingers, he unsaddled the horse and connected it back to the wagon. “Hop in, boys. I’ll take you right now.”

The boys didn’t need a second invitation. They clambered hastily into the wagon and Ivan began to drive.

“What do you think will happen to us when Tatte finds out?” Menachem fretted. “We’ve never been late before!”

“I don’t know,” Kalman replied, equally terrified. “Do you think he’ll use that whip on us? The one he has hanging in the stable?”

“Boys, I think it would be best if this little episode remains between us,” Ivan suggested, his eyes on the road ahead. “I’ll drop you off at *cheder*, none of us will ever tell your father what happened, and he’ll be none the wiser.”

The twins nodded. It was a wise idea, but what if their teacher would ask them about their lateness and then inform their father?

After Ivan dropped them off outside the *cheder*, Kalman turned to his brother. “Menachem, I’m afraid that *rebbe* will get us into trouble. Do you think we should go across the street and learn together in the *beis midrash* until the end of the day?”

“Good idea,” Menachem agreed. “Everyone at *cheder* will probably just assume we are sick. We’ll review the Gemara together in the *beis midrash*, and we’ll go home at the same time that *cheder* ends.”

They entered the *beis midrash* together. Men of varying ages sat and learned, mostly in pairs. The twins chose seats in an empty corner and opened their Gemaras, but once again found it difficult to focus on the ancient text before them.

“I can mount a horse on my own,” Kalman boasted. “I don’t need Ivan’s help, like a baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” Menachem protested. “Anyway, you only figured out how to mount it on your own two seconds before we left. And you ride so slowly! Did you see how I was galloping?” “Galloping? That’s not called galloping!” Kalman retorted. “Ivan knows how to gallop *and* how to jump the horse over obstacles.”

“I know,” Menachem said dreamily. “I wish he could teach us how to do it.”

“Next time, I’ll ask him,” Kalman decided.

“Anyway, I’m curious how it feels to ride a pony. The stallion was big, and riding it felt like sitting on the top of the world, but a pony might be more graceful and easier to control.”

Their neighbor, R’ Pinchos, suddenly walked by them on his way to the bookshelf to retrieve a volume he needed. He stopped in his tracks, recognizing the twins and overhearing part of their discussion about horses. He quickly deduced that the pair had probably gotten into trouble with their *rebbe* and had been suspended from *cheder* for a day.

“Hey, boys,” he called to them. The twins looked up, startled, a guilty look in their eyes. “I don’t know what you did that made your teacher send you out of class to learn here on your own, but I’m certain he did not mean for you to sit here and talk about horses. You’d better buckle down and learn before I let him know what I found you doing.”

Terrified that R’ Pinchos would carry out his threat, the boys abandoned their conversation and began to learn.

When they returned home that evening, R’ Nesanel was waiting for them eagerly. “How was your day, my *tzaddikim*?”

“Great,” they responded, not meeting his eyes.

They thought back to the exciting riding lesson in the morning and the enjoyable learning session together in the afternoon. It had been a great day, just not entirely as their father had envisioned.

The next morning, Ivan refused to bring them to the meadow. No matter how much they begged and pleaded with him to let them ride the horses again, he wouldn’t budge. “I’m dropping you straight off at *cheder*, and that’s that,” he said firmly. “What happened yesterday was bad enough. Do you want me to lose my job?”

So the twins went straight to *cheder*, and they tried to concentrate and participate, but there was another topic jostling for space in their minds, making it more difficult to learn. Somehow, their learning had changed, and it would never be the same again.

Ivan might have been firm in his refusal, but the twins would not give up. They longed, pined, for another taste of the enjoyable riding, and they could not get the experience out of the heads. Every morning, they pestered him and begged him and nagged him ceaselessly to take them back to the meadow.

Finally, Ivan allowed himself to be persuaded. It was a harmless activity, after all, and it was good for the boys to air out a little and have some fun. Besides, he wouldn’t let them miss *cheder* every day, just for an hour or two every week or so.

The twins cheered when he made the turn onto the empty field. For the next enjoyable hour, they learned riding techniques from Ivan and took turns trotting around the plain. When their time had run out, he shepherded them onto the wagon and drove them to school.

Kalman looked over at his brother. There were stray bits of grass clinging to Menachem’s clothing and his hair was windswept. A small sunburn had crept up across his nose.

“Menachem,” Kalman whispered. “Let’s go to the shul again and learn together. If *Rebbi* sees us like this, he’ll surely figure out what happened.”

“You have grass in your hair,” Menachem pointed out helpfully. “I agree. It worked out perfectly last time. There’s no reason anyone will suspect anything.”

Things soon fell into a predictable routine. Every morning, Ivan would pick up the boys to drive them to *cheder*, but every few days, he would first take them riding. They became proficient riders

who galloped around the plain and even managed to jump the smaller hurdles Ivan had in place for them. Sometimes, they competed against each other and against Ivan, racing from one end of the field to the other on horseback.

Whenever they spent their mornings with the horses, they would skip *cheder* and learn together in the shul across the street instead, trying to evade the prying eyes of the other people learning in shul. They would return home with Ivan like they always did, but never found the courage to tell their father what they had really been up to.

Their teacher, a graying *talmid chacham* who had been teaching the village children as far back as anyone could remember, wondered briefly about their frequent absences, but quickly chalked it up to illness. After all, childhood illnesses were rampant, and whatever germs one twin caught were likely to be shared by his brother.

This continued for the next few months, until the twins began to prefer their own learning sessions to the days they went to *cheder*.

“We learn much better that way,” Kalman explained earnestly to Ivan. “When Menachem and I learn together, everything clicks. Both of us understand the material much better.”

“That’s good,” Ivan said absently, saddling the horse with Menachem’s saddle.

“I know,” Kalman continued. “It’s great! I don’t see why we have to go to *cheder* at all! Let’s come here every morning, and afterward, we’ll go to the shul and learn together.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Ivan replied, brushing off his pants.

“You have to understand that Kalman and I grasp things much quicker than the rest of our class,” Menachem tried explaining. “When we learn in *cheder*, the *rebbe* has to make sure everyone

understands before moving on. When I learn with Kalman, we can move much quicker.”

“So we learn more, and we get to ride,” Kalman concluded. “What do you say, Ivan? Please? Can we come back again tomorrow?”

“We’ll see,” Ivan said noncommittally.

The next morning, the boys began nagging him to take them to the field, and Ivan was at a loss of what to do. “Look, boys, I can’t be responsible for your truancy,” he finally said. “I’ll drop you off at *cheder* and you can do whatever you want. If you come back here and ride the horses, I certainly won’t tell your father. But I can’t take responsibility for this.”

“Thank you, Ivan!” the twins cried excitedly.

It took them no more than ten minutes to walk from the block of their *cheder* to the meadow. They found their horses already saddled, grazing. The twins spent an enjoyable two hours racing each other around the field. Ivan, grooming horses at the opposite end of the plain, near the stables, waved from afar.

“This is great,” Menachem enthused as they walked back to the block of the *cheder*, where the shul was located. “We should do this every day!” “We will,” Kalman reminded him. “Now that it’s up to us, we most certainly will!”

At first, the twins’ absence had been sporadic, and their *rebbe* had chalked it up to illness. However, when the two boys failed to show up for three weeks straight, he began to wonder if something else was going on.

“Reb Nesanel is a *tzaddik* and is smart enough to make his own decisions,” the *rebbe* said to himself as he walked home from *cheder* one day, some three and half weeks since the twins had last put in their appearance. “He must have decided to teach his children himself, or hire a private

teacher who would learn with them at a faster pace.”

He was so confident in his assumptions that he saw no need to confirm them with Reb Nesanel. With that, his thoughts turned to other things and he promptly forgot about the two boys who had until recently been his students.

One morning, as Ivan drove the twins to *cheder*, he told them about the major hunt that was currently taking place in the forest just a half hour’s drive from the village.

“What’s a hunt?” Kalman asked.

“It’s a huge, festive affair,” Ivan explained. “People shoot at deer and bears with arrows, and prizes are awarded to those who manage to take down an animal. “

Menachem shuddered. “I would never want to try killing a bear,” he said. “It would probably eat me alive first.”

Ivan laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. You wouldn’t approach the bear from up close. You would be riding on your horse, and shoot from a distance. If you miss, the bear will run away from you, not toward you. I happened to think you would be very good at it.”

“He’s never held a bow and arrow in his life,” Kalman informed the stable boy. “And neither have I.”

“I still think you would both be excellent marksmen,” Ivan insisted. “The two of you have rare talents in these kinds of things. I’ve never seen anyone learn to ride so quickly, and your hands are incredibly steady. I’ve been thinking about joining the hunt, and it would be great if the two of you could join me.”

The twins looked at each other. “Why not?” Kalman finally responded. “But we’d have to be

back by the regular dismissal time. I don’t want my father to realize anything.”

“I told you already that it’s not far,” Ivan reminded him. “We’ll leave now, stay for a few hours, and be back before you know it. Who knows? You might even win a prize, and even if not, it’s a new skill learned and a good time all around.”

They parked the wagon in the grassy meadow and all three mounted horses. Before the twins could have a second thought, they were off, galloping down the road in the direction of the hunt.

CHAPTER THREE

The Duke of Avignon sat in an easy chair in his luxurious hotel room, just relaxing and enjoying the quiet. It had been a stressful week of negotiations, and while the return trip would be difficult, he looked forward to returning to his native land.

As the seventh-highest nobleman in Spain, he was often called upon by the king to perform missions in foreign countries, and he fulfilled his duties with the devotion and dedication expected of him. Still, it would be nice to be back home, in his own bed, after so many weeks away.

“Your Excellency?” It was his chief of staff, who had joined him for the diplomatic mission along with a slew of soldiers and servants.

The duke gave a sigh. “Yes, Pedro?”

“There’s a major hunt scheduled to take place in three days, along our route home,” Pedro began. He knew his superior’s great love of hunting and thought that the experience would be nice for the duke, who had been through a tense week.

As expected, the duke perked up eagerly. “Is this for noblemen or common folk?”

“I believe it is open to all, Your Excellency,” said Pedro. “Sir, if I make speak freely...”

“Speak.”

“We are not in Spain, and I don’t think it will do any harm if you participate in a hunting competition with common folk,” Pedro said hesitantly. “Your face is not well known, and your identity is completely obscured.”

“I would like to participate,” the duke said. “Add it to my schedule, Pedro. I will need to be accompanied by an armed escort, but the rest of

you will be free for a few hours if you would prefer not to participate in the hunt.”

“Very well.”

“When are we scheduled to depart?” the duke asked, closing his eyes.

“In an hour, sir,” came the response.

“Wake me,” the duke ordered. “I’ll be sleeping, but I do not want to delay. Wake me when we are ready to set out.”

The duke and his entourage set out on the first leg of their return journey an hour later, stopping off at a hotel for the night. For the next two days, they traveled until they reached the hunting competition.

The forest where the hunt would take place was famous for its excellent game, and as an avid hunter, the duke had always desired to try out his skills there. It was more than convenient that his return journey coincided with a hunting festival in precisely this forest.

Flanked by two soldiers atop horses, the duke rode up the entrance of the clearing where the competition headquarters had been set up. About fifty other hunters were gathered in the clearing, and a crier was calling out the rules of the game.

“If you kill a black bear, the prize will be...” the crier called out, naming the prize. There were cheers. “And the prize for a brown bear is... and a deer... and mountain lion...”

The duke lost interest and tuned out for the rest. He was competing for the sport of it and was wealthy enough to afford all of the prizes on his own, many times over. He looked around at the excited competitors around him, trying to judge their experience and skill based on their appearance.

There was a tall, muscular man with a small scar across his left cheek mounted on a beautiful mare. He looked as strong as he looked determined, and the duke pegged him as an experienced hunter.

Near the heavysset man were a pair of riders, obviously competing together. They looked to be in their mid-twenties and seemed confident.

The duke turned to the left and raised his eyebrows. There was youth who could not have been older than a teenager, looking very wet behind the ears, sitting on a horse and listening intently to the list of prizes. He was accompanied by two children who could not have been more than ten years old.

The duke's first thought was, *how could little children participate in such a dangerous sport?* His second thought was about their Jewishness. The boys, with their long side locks, were obviously Jewish.

He nudged his horse closer to the trio. "Hello," he called to the teenager. "Are these our brothers?"

"No," Ivan responded, his eyes flicking to the twins. "They are friends."

The duke raised his brows slightly. "I see. And you are here because..."

"We came to participate in the hunt," Ivan responded politely, not appreciating the stranger's questions.

"You look like nice boys," the duke said, speaking directly to Kalman and Menachem. "Where are you from?"

The twins were rendered speechless. Other than Ivan, who was their father's employee, they had never had any interactions with gentiles before.

"Don't worry, I am taking care of them," Ivan assured the duke. "We just want to enjoy ourselves a little and watch the hunting."

"Well, then, I hope you have a nice time," the duke said cordially before turning and riding back to his escort.

The crier finished the list of prizes and had moved on to various rules and regulations concerning how and if and when they were permitted to shoot. The duke watched the two boys for a few moments, something in his heart twisting painfully.

They were sweet children, the boys, with beautiful eyes and light-colored hair. If he cut off their side locks and dressed them in the fashion of Spanish aristocracy, the duke could almost imagine them being his children.

How he and his wife, the noble Duchess Anna, had longed for children! How many tears had they shed, how many doctors had they visited in their quest for children of their own! Alas, their home was still empty, empty of the laughter and chatter of children.

As he studied the twins, an idea began to take seed in the duke's mind. When the hunt began, they would be going into the dense forest. It would be the perfect opportunity to grab the boys and then take them back to Spain with him to be his children. He would give them everything their hearts desired and they would inherit his title and wealth after he passed on.

The more he thought about it, the more the duke liked the idea. He thought briefly about the children's parents, but reminded himself that they were only Jews. There was nothing wrong with stealing from Jews. In fact, he would be doing them a favor by saving their sons' souls.

In hushed tones, he described his plan to the two soldiers accompanying him. They would follow

the teenager and the children into the forest and when the moment arose, each soldier would grab one child and leave the forest immediately. Kidnapping children, even Jewish children, was illegal, but the duke was confident that as a foreign nobleman, he would never be caught. The authorities would perform a token search for the children before giving up.

The bugle was sounded and the crowd began to move into the forest. Kalman and Menachem moved slowly, afraid. They had never ventured into the forest before. As they were swallowed in by the trees, the greenery crowded out the sunlight, making it dark as night.

Ivan hummed merrily. While he had never been to a hunting competition before, he had grown up on stories about hunting parties just like this one. For him, it was a childhood dream coming true.

Suddenly, he heard Kalman shout. He turned, but before he could process what was happening, Menachem let out a desperate cry. Ivan's face drained of all color as he watched two armed soldiers lift the boys off their horses and gallop off with them.

"Kill the youth!" he heard the duke order, and Ivan needed no second warning. He turned and fled for his life deep into the forest. He knew that even if he succeeded in successfully dodging the kidnapers, he could never return home without the children. There was no way he could face R' Nesanel. He would run away, far away, away from the haunted looks and recriminations R' Nesanel and his wife were sure to bear.

Kalman and Menachem were led, kicking and crying, to where the caravan of carriages were waiting for the duke on the outskirts of the village. Their hands were bound, their mouths stuffed with rags, and they were placed in an empty wagon which soon began to move.

The boys were terrified. They had no idea who had kidnapped them or where they were going. How deeply they regretted the first time they allowed Ivan to take them on a detour on the way to cheder! If only they'd known where it would lead them, they would have been wary from the start.

They sincerely regretted misleading their father, making a mockery out of their rebbi, and ditching *cheder*. They had never imagined that anything like this could have happened! Their hearts broke when they thought of their elderly parents, waiting in vain for them to come home.

After endless hours of traveling, the wagon suddenly stopped and a lavishly dressed man entered. "I am Duke Diego of Avignon," he introduced himself. "I don't want you boys to worry. Everything will be okay."

"What do you want from us?" Kalman cried, the moment the gag was removed from his mouth. "Our father is very wealthy. He can pay you any ransom you require. Please take us home!"

The duke just smiled at them. "Don't worry," he kept repeating. "Everything will be alright."

The caravan traveled for another week, not daring to stop off at hotels for the night for the fear that the twins would escape. At last, it reached the port, and the duke's entire entourage boarded a ship for the two-week journey back to Spain.

It was on the ship that the twins realized their fate was doomed. Even if they managed to evade the constant eyes of the duke's men, there was nowhere to escape to other than the blue expanse of the ocean below. They were stuck and helpless. There was no way out.

The ship was a luxury liner, as befit the duke's high status in the government. There were hot, gourmet meals, but the twins refused to partake of the non-kosher fare. Instead, they subsisted on

fruits and vegetables. The duke tried to persuade them to taste the delicious food, but respected their decision to keep kosher, realizing that it was the wisest course of action.

Two weeks later, they docked in Spain. Grateful to be home again at last, the duke sent his chief of staff to report to the king about the success of their diplomatic mission and headed straight home with the twins. He imagined the look of delight on his wife's face when she saw the gift he had brought back for her.

The duchess's reaction, however, was not what the duke had hoped for. She stared at the children, taking in their Jewish appearance, and turned to her husband. "I don't understand," she said worriedly. "Where did you get these children?"

"They are exhausted," the duke said, evading her question. "Let's get them upstairs to bed and we'll talk after their sleeping."

A troubled expression crossed the duchess's face. Something smelled wrong about the whole affair, and her suspicions were sharply aroused by the telltale signs of crying on the boys' faces. "Very well," she said and went to call for a maid.

The boys were taken upstairs and given a room to sleep in. Though the room was comfortable and far more luxurious than their simple room back home, they were too distraught to appreciate it.

They said Shema and cried themselves to sleep.

Once the children were safely out of earshot, the duke and duchess sat down to talk.

"I saw them at a hunt," the duke explained. "And something about their expressions just had me captivated. These are exactly the way our own children would look, if we had any, Anna!"

"They are darling little things," she admitted, the maternal part of her that had been dormant for so

long suddenly becoming active. "But I don't understand how it came to be that you took them home. And why are they so sad?"

"They're sad because I didn't exactly give them the choice whether or not to come with me," the duke explained. "But I have no regrets. I did this for their own good, Anna. What kind of irresponsible parent lets their children go to a dangerous hunt? Never mind the fact that they are *Jews*." Though he had never been an anti-Semite, he said the last word with disgust.

"But their parents!" the duchess cried in protest. "Diego, think of their poor parents!"

"It's too late for that now, my dear," the duke said soothingly. "Even if we wanted to, how would we ever find their parents? We may as well enjoy them now that they are here. We're saving their souls, don't forget."

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "It's wrong." The duke became frustrated. "Look, Anna, I brought you a present that I thought you would appreciate very much. We both know how badly you wanted a child, and I brought you two, two charming and smart little boys. I see now that perhaps my gift was not the best idea, but at this point, there is no turning the clock back. Would you rather I brought them to the orphanage tomorrow morning?"

"No, no, of course not," the duchess said hastily. Her husband was right. The kidnapping had been unethical and illegal and just plain wrong, but now that the children were here, there was little she could do to reverse the injustice. Instead, she would offer the boys all the maternal love festered inside her and try to make their childhood as happy as possible.

The duke sighed with relief as the expression on his wife's face changed from anger to acceptance and finally, joy.

“Children!” she trilled joyfully. “After all these years, children of our own!”

“Twins,” he reminded her. “And leave the legalities to me. I’ll take care of the adoption paperwork first thing tomorrow morning.”

The next morning, the duke and duchess went up to the boys’ room and knocked on the door. “May we come in?”

“Come in,” Menachem called in a voice hoarse from crying.

The duke entered first and took a seat on a stiff chair facing the beds. The duchess sat down at the end of Kalman’s bed, regarding both boys with an expression of extreme fondness. She barely knew them but found that she already loved them deeply.

“As you already know, I am the Duke of Avignon, and this is my wife, the duchess,” the duke began. “I am seventh to the king of Spain, and I’m extremely wealthy, a lot wealthier than your father. The duchess and I have never been blessed with children, and we would be very happy if you would agree to be our sons.”

Menachem, usually the less daring of the twins, found his tongue first. “Sir, we like you very much and you have treated us with great kindness. However, we would like to go home. We are Jewish children and belong in a Jewish home.”

“I’m sorry, my child,” the duchess said softly, moving to sit on Menachem’s bed. “You are very far from home, and it is unlikely that we will ever be able to find your parents. Please, as long as you are living with us anyway, allow us to treat you like our own children.”

The boys were quiet. There was nothing to say. “What is your name, child?” the duchess asked Menachem.

“Menachem,” he said.

She was silent for a moment. “There is no name Menachem in Spain,” she said. “Here, we will call you Manuel. And, you, child, what is your name?”

“Kalman,” the boy said, his voice barely audible. “Wonderful,” said the duchess. “We will call you Carlos. I’m sure you boys are still very tired from your journey. We’ll leave you here to rest, and whenever you are ready, you can join us downstairs.”

The twins nodded sadly and the noble couple rose to leave.

The duchess looked back at the boys, her heart aching at their pain. “We won’t force you to change your religion,” she promised. “I just want you to be happy.” With that, she closed the door, leaving them alone.

“What is going to be?” Menachem cried, flinging himself down on Kalman’s bed. “How are we ever going to remain Jewish in this place? We don’t have any *seforim*, not even a *siddur*!”

Kalman’s tears mixed with his twins, but he didn’t have a solution. “We’ll learn as much as we can from memory,” he said finally. “Do you want to start?”

For the next few minutes, the boys struggled to recall the Gemara by heart, partially succeeding. Fatigued by their efforts, they soon fell asleep.

When they awoke some hours later, they found they were very hungry. They hadn’t eaten anything since docking in Spain. They donned their shoes and crept out of the room together, somewhat lost in the massive mansion and its long corridors.

A maid, dusting the woodwork, noticed them. “I’ll take you to the mistress,” she offered, leading

them down the stairs into a cavernous room. An ornate table stood at its center, where the duke and duchess were seated, apparently in the middle of a meal.

“Welcome,” the duchess greeted them warmly, standing up. “Please sit down. What would you like to eat?”

“We want to go home!” Kalman burst out. “Our father will give you tons of money if you bring us back to him!”

The duke gave a dry chuckle. “I am your father now,” he declared, banging his water glass down on the table. “I don’t want to keep hearing about your father back home.”

“We eat only kosher,” Menachem managed to stammer.

“That’s fine,” the duchess said soothingly. “No one is forcing you to eat anything.”

The boys pined for home, but as the days passed, they submitted to their new reality. They dressed in the clothing the duchess had made for them and ate their meals together with the duke and duchess, although they refrained from eating any meat or poultry.

For a few days, they refused to go outside, feeling extremely self-conscious with their long *payos*. The duke encouraged them to have the *payos* removed, and at first they resisted. Eventually, though, they submitted to their desire to fit in with everyone else, and with guilty feelings, allowed the barber to cut them off. Each snip of his scissors felt like a knife to their hearts and a betrayal to their parents.

But they were so young and so alone, and the memory of their parents was growing lighter and more distant every day. At first, they would cry all night and for large parts of the day. Slowly,

their tears subsided and they began to adjust to their new life in the duke’s mansion.

Over the passage of time, their resolve weakened, and they integrated fully into their new lives.

Within a few months, they were calling the duke and duchess ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’, eating non-kosher food, and receiving an education that befit young aristocrats.

Kalman and Menachem were gone, replaced by little aristocrats named Carlos and Manuel.

CHAPTER FOUR

It had been a good day. R' Nesanel had spent the better part of the day working out a difficult *sugya*, after which he had closed a lucrative business deal. With a grateful sigh, he walked down the block and hurried home to greet his children, who would be returning from *cheder* shortly.

Shulamis was in middle of setting the table for supper. The meal was cooked and waiting, ready for her to serve the hungry boys the moment they came home.

"It gives me such *nachas* to see the boys come home from *cheder* with a sparkle in their eyes," R' Nesanel confided. "I sometimes think back to those days when our home was silent. What a *brachah* we have received! What wonderful *nachas*!"

Shulamis wiped her hands on a towel and came to sit beside her husband. "I constantly think of those days," she said, tears of emotion pricking at her eyes. "I will never forget the loneliness, the emptiness, of those years. We are truly blessed to have two beautiful treasures."

"The boys are usually home by now," R' Nesanel remarked after a moment. "I wonder why they're late?"

"They're probably schmoozing with Dudi or Zev," Shulamis suggested fondly. "Or maybe they found an injured bird again and are caring for it. I'm sure Ivan will be here any minute to drop them off."

But the minutes ticked by, and the boys still did not come home.

Reb Nesanel began pacing the length of the room, a small kernel of worry blooming inside him. What if the boys were in danger? What if they were lost? He tried to calm himself. Boys were

boys, and sometimes they were late without realizing how worried their parents would be.

Another hour passed. Still no sign of the twins.

"Please send for Ivan," R' Nesanel instructed one of his workers. "He drives my kids home from *cheder*, and they still haven't returned."

The worker returned a half-hour later, breathless. "Ivan's not in the stable," he reported. "His horse is not there either. Maybe he went to pick up the boys and something happened on the way back?"

The worry mushroomed into full-scale panic. "Shulamis, I'm going to the *cheder*," R' Nesanel called to his wife. "If the boys come home, send someone after me."

She nodded, sitting down with her *tehillim*. If something was wrong, they needed all the *tefillot* they could get.

R' Nesanel got onto a horse and raced to the *cheder*. The building was dark and utterly silent. There was no one there. "Menachem? Kalman?" he called into the emptiness, but all he got in response was an echo.

Jumping back up onto the horse, R' Nesanel rushed to the *rebbe's* home. Perhaps he would have some clue as to the boys' whereabouts?

The *rebbe* squinted up at R' Nesanel in confusion. "What do you mean, where are your children? They haven't been to *cheder* in over three weeks! I had thought you'd hired a private teacher for them."

"What?" R' Nesanel didn't know how to understand this piece of news. "A private teacher? I sent them every morning here, to *cheder*, and they came home every night. How could it be that they haven't shown up for so long?"

The *rebbe* had no more information to impart, and R' Nesanel tore *kriah*, realizing that something sinister was at play. He felt as though he was losing his mind.

“Where are my children?!” he screamed over and over, running in the streets back to his home. “Where are my children?”

Shulamis came out, her face white as a ghost. She didn't need to be told that her sons had disappeared. The pain in her husband's voice told her everything she needed to know.

They had waited so long for their children, and now, after only nine years, the boys were gone. R' Nesanel felt no control over his actions. He fell to the floor and began rolling over and over in agony. “WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?!”

The neighbors organized a search, checking every nook and cranny, but no clues turned up. It was as though the twins, along with Ivan the stable boy, had been swallowed up by thin air.

R' Nesanel was brought into his home, and people came to comfort him, but he was inconsolable. His children hadn't perished; they were missing! It was a tragedy that he didn't wish upon anyone.

For months and years, the grief did not leave R' Nesanel and Shulamis. Every day, they would look out the window, waiting to see their sons bounce down the front walk. Every day, they hoped that the time had come for their sons to be returned to them.

They cried, they prayed, they fasted, and they gave *tzedakah*, but Hashem didn't grant them their requests. The boys did not return.

The Duke of Avignon went about his duties with a joyful spring in his step. It had been a wise idea, bringing the twins back with him to Spain.

Despite her initial resistance, Duchess Anna loved the boys and vested all her maternal love into them.

Manuel and Carlos had adjusted beautifully, even giving up their Jewish customs to fit in better with their new family. They were fine boys, the duke thought. Clever and talented, and they would make fine noblemen when they grew up. The king had given his approval to their adoption, and they legally stood to inherit his title.

“Boys, I have a surprise for you,” he announced one morning during breakfast.

The boys looked up with interest. “What is it, Father?” Carlos asked curiously.

The duke's heart sang. It sang each time anew when the boys called him ‘Father’. How he had longed for this title for so many years! How lucky he was to have received such wonderful sons!

“Well, boys, today I will be taking you to meet the king,” he said ceremoniously.

The twin's faces lit up excitedly. “We've never seen a king before,” Manuel admitted.

“Well, then, you boys will need a little instruction before you go,” the duchess said. “We wouldn't want to embarrass Father, would we?”

“Of course not,” the boys said together.

“There's not much to it,” the duke assured them. “When I introduce you to the king, you'll kneel and bow, and you'll remain that way until the king tells you to rise. You will not speak unless you are addressed directly, in which case you'll refer to the king as ‘His Majesty’ and speak to him only in third person.”

The brothers exchanged glances. “But Father,” Manuel said hesitantly. “We are Jews, and we are forbidden to bow before idols.”

“The king is not an idol!” the duke exclaimed. The twins could be so silly sometimes. “This is the way we show honor to the king.”

They looked extremely uncomfortable.

“I’m sure Jews don’t kneel,” Carlos insisted. “We’ve never done that at home.”

“You’ve never been to a king before, you said,” the duchess reminded him. “We’re talking about the king, here, remember. I’m sure it’s allowed.”

The twins looked at each other again, but the truth was that they didn’t know what Halacha dictated. They were so young, and they had already been away from home for so many months. The non-kosher food they had eaten had dulled their sensitivities, and they felt their resolve weakening.

The mansion was not far from the king’s palace, and the boys rode together with the duke in his ornate carriage. “Remember, third person,” the duke reminded them as they were ushered into the king’s antechamber.

The duke entered first, bowing low. “This is Carlos,” he said, and Carlos stepped forward, kneeling before the king and bowing his head.

“Rise,” said the king, and Carlos stood up. “Welcome. I am glad you have found such a wonderful father. Where is your brother?”

“This is Manuel,” the duke continued, urging the younger twin forward. Manuel knelt and bowed.

“Rise,” the king said again. “And welcome to you too. I was happy to hear the news. Your parents have been waiting for a long time for the two of you. Tell me, how are you liking your new home?”

“I thank his Majesty for his kind words,” Manuel said humbly, and the duke flushed with pride.

“Our new father and mother have been very kind to us.”

“And you, Carlos?” the king asked.

Carlos hesitated, unsure if he should bring up their deepest desire to return to their parents, R’ Nesanel and Shulamis. Afraid of the duke’s wrath, he said merely, “I am grateful to the duke and duchess for providing us with a home.”

The king smiled, taking in the boys’ bright, beautiful eyes and rosy cheeks. “Children, I’d like to ask you a question,” he said, throwing out a riddle.

To his delight, the boys came up with clever responses to his riddle. The king actually laughed out loud. “Duke Diego, you have done well for yourself,” he said. “Congratulations on such clever and beautiful children!”

He turned back to the twins. “Boys, your father is the seventh in command in this country. It is your responsibility, as his sons, to train properly so that you’ll one day inherit and succeed in his high office, or in a position even higher. I am sure that your father will provide you with appropriate tutors. I expect great things from the two of you!”

Both boys were nudged forward and they kissed the king’s hand. Then they were dismissed and backed out of the room.

The duke’s smile was broad. “Well, children, what do you have to say?” he asked on the way home.

The boys were quiet, overwhelmed by the majesty and splendor and the experience of speaking to the king.

When they got home, the duke called for the duchess. “The boys were excellent!” he exclaimed. “If I hadn’t known they’d never addressed a king directly before, I would have

thought they had experience. And best of all, the king approves! You know what that means...”

“Well, boys, the king has approved you as your father’s inheritors,” the duchess said, beaming. “We will have to get you properly outfitted, not just as future noblemen, but as the future leaders of this country.”

“And tutors,” the duke reminded her. “I will work on that right away. The boys need suitable tutors to bring them up to par and advance their education.”

“What do you say to your parents for everything they are doing for you?” prompted the governess, who had been hired to look after the children shortly after their arrival.

“Thank you,” Manuel and Carlos said together.

Inside, however, they weren’t sure what they felt. On the one hand, it all felt so exciting. In the culture they were now living in, titles and power were everything, and they were destined for exactly that.

On the other hand, a hazy picture of their parents still hovered over everything. They were Jewish boys, living in a foreign culture. Would they ever get out?

CHAPTER FIVE

One morning, terrible tidings were heard in the capital city. The king had died in the middle of sleep. His personal servant found him lifeless in bed early in the morning.

The country was plunged into mourning. The king had been wise and fair, and he had led the country into much economic growth. But the running of the country had to be continued, and with the absence of any sons, the late king's second was chosen to replace him.

With the second moving into first place, all the other noblemen in line moved up in office. The Duke of Avignon, once seventh in line, became sixth in command.

The twins got older, grew taller, and absorbed their specialized education. They no longer thought about their real parents and became full-fledged members of the noble class.

When they were fourteen years old, an enemy of the king managed to slip a vial of poison into the king's water. Hours later, the king was dead. He too, had not had any children, and so after the period of mourning, all the noblemen moved up in rank. The Duke of Avignon moved into fifth place.

The next king reigned for a mere two years before resigning. The pressures of kingship were affecting his health, and he preferred to live out his years in the peace and quiet of his countryside mansion.

A new king was instated, and Duke Diego moved up to fourth place.

Less than six months later, the king was fatally shot during a tour of a new racetrack on the outskirts of Madrid. The minister who was his third, just above the duke in rank, had been

standing alongside the king at the time and was shot together with him.

The viceroy was promoted to king, and the Duke of Avignon jumped two places, now the king's second and official viceroy. For a country who had transitioned through four kings in as many years, the one thing the people craved was stability of governance. Indeed, the new king held onto his power for longer than his predecessors, ruling with a firm, yet fair hand.

As sons of the second most powerful man in Spain, Carlos and Manuel were treated with utmost respect wherever they went. When they turned eighteen, they joined the army and were immediately trained as officers. Despite their youth, both boys were very smart and talented, and with a dose of reminders from the upper Spanish aristocracy, they swiftly moved up in rank.

When the news came of the king's death after six years of reign, Carlos was at the southern border, where he had been deployed along with his troops. Now twenty-two, tall and handsome, he understood immediately what the news meant. Manuel, who was training junior officers in an army training camp in Madrid, heard the news with an equal feeling of shock. Somehow, despite the fact that they'd been born to righteous Jewish parents far away, their father was now king of Spain.

Unlike the six kings before him, King Diego II of Spain, had sons, successors. Immediately upon ascending the throne, he named the elder of the twins, Carlos, as his viceroy. Manuel received the title of Duke of Avignon, no shabby office, and was installed in third place on the line of command, just below his brother.

At twenty-two years old, good looking and powerful, the twins were very sought after with marriage suggestions. Carlos married first, accepting the offer of the King of France to marry

his young daughter, the beautiful Princess Marie. King Diego and Queen Anna were beside themselves with joy as they married off their son. Watching the tall, handsome young man dressed aristocratically and carrying himself so royally, no one would imagine the pitiful Jewish child he had once been, least of all Carlos himself.

Carlos barely had any memories of the early chapter of his childhood and considered the king and queen his true parents. He was quite content in his pampered life, where hundreds of servants and soldiers were waiting on his every beck and call. As he settled into married life with his new wife, he never thought once about the fact that she was not Jewish. The young Kalman of old had vanished completely.

A year later, the royal family celebrated the marriage of Manuel to a Portuguese princess. He purchased a beautiful palace for his wife and the two of them settled in. Queen Anna, his mother, loved to visit and bask in the happiness of the newlyweds. Manuel had always been the more sensitive of the twins, and she was so happy to see him so joyous.

Fifteen peaceful, prosperous years passed in this manner. Manuel's wife birthed a daughter, the first royal grandchild. While Carlos's own house remained empty of the joys of children, he occupied himself with assisting his father in running the kingdom and shut out the pain.

One day, the aging queen took ill and passed away a short while later. The twins, who regarded her as their mother, took her passing very hard, but the king took it even harder. He sunk into a deep depression, pining for his beloved wife, and passed away from heartache a mere few weeks after her.

At just thirty-seven years old, Carlos ascended to the throne.

He was the youngest king in recent Spanish history, but he had fifteen years of experience helping his father run the country. Thanks to his youth, he was fresh and innovative, instituting reforms to move the country forward. Manuel, who was now viceroy, was his brother's right hand in every way.

However, peace did reign for long.

Low rumblings of a revolution began to simmer in the hearts of the highest-ranking cabinet members. In the past, the death of the king meant a promotion for all of them, but when King Diego had ascended to power, they had all been set back two places since he had instated his two young upstart sons as second and third in command. No one had the temerity or bravery to challenge the king's decision, so they'd bit their tongues and bided their time.

Now, however, King Diego was gone, and his whippersnapper of a son had seized power. The nobles along the line of power began to hatch a plan to overthrow the young King Carlos, rid themselves of his brother, and return the chain of power to the line of nobles who made up the king's cabinet.

They turned to the people, mostly conservatives who lived in the countryside and were less than enamored of King Carlos's progressive policies, and persuaded them to join the mutiny. A large part of the Spanish population had been turned against the new king.

Word of the planned rebellion reached the ears of the young king, and he called together his best generals. "We will need to nip this revolution in the bud," he told them grimly. "We must attack first and wipe out the rebels before the mutiny has a chance to take root."

The generals, all loyal to the king, nodded.

“General Fernandez,” the king said, addressing one of the military officers. “When will your battalions be ready for war?”

“Tomorrow,” the general said. His men were always prepared for battle. They just needed to be organized and properly armed, and the battle could begin.

“Very well,” the king said. “Tomorrow, we shall declare war on the rebels and wipe them out.”

As planned, the battalions of General Fernandez, numbering a few thousand men, marched off to battle the following morning. They fought fiercely to defend the king, but quickly realized they were outnumbered. The rebels were many, a significantly larger force than they were. They would need a lot more soldiers to succeed in obliterating them completely.

A messenger was sent to the king, asking for immediate reinforcements. Another ten battalions and two generals joined the war. The reinforcements were like life-giving oxygen to the starved fire of the king’s soldiers, but it was still not enough. The army was bleeding casualties, its numbers dwindling, as the rebels racked up more and more support.

Another request for reinforcements was sent, which King Carlos quickly approved, deploying almost all of his soldiers to the front lines. However, the law of the land was that the third time a king sent additional soldiers to the same battle, he was required to join them, fighting alongside his men.

The young king prepared for battle, dressing in his gilded armor until he resembled a metallic robot. Armed to the teeth, he rode out to battle on his warhorse. Manuel, the viceroy, galloped behind them, and if the long ago stable boy Ivan would have been there to witness how they rode into battle, he would have been proud of his protégées’ unparalleled equestrian skills.

The battle was difficult and bloody. Men on both sides were slain, their bodies piling up on the side of the battlefield. The rebels were well-armed and prepared for battle, an equal match to the king’s well-trained army.

As the king’s brother and successor, Manuel was an equal target of the revolution’s arrows, and as he was fighting to defend his brother’s power, an arrow struck him fatally, severing a vital artery.

The king watched as his beloved twin brother crumpled off his horse, lifeless, and he let out a cry. Manuel! His beloved twin brother! The two always did everything together. They had grown up together! A wave of pain so strong washed over him before turning into a boiling rage. How dare the rebels kill his beloved brother!

Manuel’s body was quickly removed from the battlefield and sent in a coffin back to the capital, where he would be honored with a royal funeral once the battle was over.

On the battlefield, the king’s soldiers roared forward with a fresh burst of energy, motivated by the sight of the dead viceroy. They showed no mercy to the hapless rebels, picking them off one after the other in seething revenge.

“We will not cease until every last one of them is dead!” the king declared, and his men set out to do his bidding. There was no leniency, no prisoners of war. Every member of the revolution’s army was killed before the king declared victory. The death toll was tremendous, but Carlos didn’t care. No amount of lives was worth that of his beloved twin brother, Manuel.

The king looked around the silent battlefield. All around him were dead bodies, with the occasional moan of an injured soldier breaking the silence. “Medic,” he snapped at a soldier riding beside him. “There’s an injured man here.”

He trotted on, surveying the damage and looking to see if anyone else needed help.

From the nearby forest, he could hear faint shouting, and the king turned his horse in the direction of the cries. His bodyguards, silent as shadows, followed after him.

Lying on the floor beside the brush was a man who was severely injured. "Help me!" he was shouting with the last vestiges of his strength. "Kill me! Please kill me! I am in so much pain!"

The king dismounted and knelt down beside the injured man, flooded by compassion. "The battle is over," he said. "You survived."

"No, kill me," the man moaned. "I am in too much pain. I can't bear the pain! Please, put me out of my misery!"

The king took in the man's peculiar dress with a strange sense of *déjà vu*. With a start, he realized why. "You are a Jew," he said aloud.

"Yes," the man confirmed. "Please, I am in so much pain... Just kill me!"

"I can do better than that," the king said. This was a Jew! The first Jew he'd encountered in decades, since he and his brother had been abducted by the duke. "I want to help you heal."

He instructed a soldier to help the injured man onto a carriage with strict instructions to bring him directly to the palace. "The royal physician will help you heal," he told the injured Jew. "When I return to the palace, I will come check up on you."

The victory march back to the capital was bittersweet. While the rebellion had been quashed, there were many casualties among the king's men, chief amongst them Manuel. The king was drowning in grief and anger, but there was another emotion that had been thrown into

the mix. His encounter with the Jew on the battlefield brought all sorts of forgotten memories up to the forefront.

Upon his return to the capital, King Carlos had the members of his cabinet, all leaders of the revolution, hanged in a public ceremony to deter future revolts. He selected a viceroy from the ranks of his loyal generals and appointed the rest of his ministers, but a Manuel-sized void had been cut into his heart, one he could not easily mend.

Manuel was given a royal funeral, escorted to his burial by a military parade and thousands of noblemen and citizens. He was laid to rest in the royal cemetery, and the king tried to rise above his grief.

The morning after Manuel's funeral, the king visited the infirmary to check up on the injured Jew. The doctors, it seemed, had been working tirelessly to save him, operating on him four times to set his broken bones and remove the shrapnel from his body. He was lying in bed, bandages covering most of his body, his breathing shallow, but he was breathing.

"We put him into an induced sleep," the chief physician explained to the king. "He'll heal better if he doesn't feel the pain."

"Wonderful," the king said dryly. "I'm glad to see him alive. I would like to be informed of any progress or improvement in his condition."

The doctor nodded. "Certainly. Your Majesty will be informed right away."

Three days later, the king received the welcome news that the injured Jew had awoken. He was weak and in pain, but he was doing well. The next week, the physician sent a message that his patient was sitting up in bed and eating on his own. Just two weeks later, the news arrived that the Jew was back to himself and ready to travel home.

“Excellent,” said the king. “I will come see for myself.”

He found the Jew sitting in bed, propped up by pillows. He tried to rise when the king entered, but Carlos stopped him. “Remain seated,” he ordered. “You have just recovered. I don’t want you to exert yourself.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the Jew said, bowing his head.

“What is your name?” the king asked.

“Moshe, Sire,” said the Jew.

“And what were you doing at the scene of the battle?” the king wanted to know. His tone was friendly, not accusatory. Jews were not permitted to serve in the army. How had Moshe end up on the battlefield?

“I am a shoemaker by profession, Your Majesty,” Moshe said. His voice was low and weak. “Not long ago, I began to sew leather cases in addition to shoes. They were fine, strong cases made from cowhide leather, but they were expensive to produce and didn’t sell well. I had taken out loans to produce the bags, and I had no idea how I would repay my debts.

“Then war broke out, and I realized that my product could be very useful for soldiers. I packed up my entire inventory, over a hundred pieces, and made my way to the battlefield. Indeed, there was a strong market for the durable leather pouches, and the soldiers snatched them up before I knew it.”

“And then you were hit by enemy fire?” the king asked.

Moshe shook his head. “No, Your Majesty. I was hit by friendly fire. Some soldiers noticed me carrying two bulging money sacks, the profit from my sales. My plan was to pay up the loan and use

the rest to support my family. However, the soldiers wanted the money for themselves. They injured me, grabbed the money, and left me at the edge of the forest to die.”

“And your creditors?” the king asked. “How will you pay them back when you return home?”

“The One above will help me,” Moshe said. “The theft of my profits have rendered me penniless.”

“I will repay you,” the king said. “It was my soldiers who stole your money, and it is therefore my responsibility to ensure that you are compensated. How much did you earn from your sales?”

Moshe thought for a moment and named a sum.

“Very well,” the king said. He turned to the aide at his elbow. “Please have the treasury prepare a case with exactly that sum for our friend here. When he is ready to return home, I would like him to be accompanied by an armed guard to ensure nothing happens to him or the money.”

He turned to Moshe. “How does that sound?”

“I can’t thank His Majesty enough for his generosity,” the Jew said gratefully. “But I am not worthy of such kindness. I am a simple Jew, and His Majesty has already restored my health—.”

“Nonsense,” the king said. “I’m glad to do this for you. Have a safe trip, Moshe.”

Moshe scrambled out of bed and stood respectfully as the king turned and left the room. He shook his head, pondering the king’s unusual kindness.

King Carlos’s mind, too, was occupied. He thought about Moshe, about the nation he represented, a nation that he and Manuel had once been a part of. Suddenly, he remembered the face of his father, the righteous R’ Nesanel. Then his mother’s face swam before his eyes.

The king sat down at his worktable and put his head in his hands. *Manuel*, he thought bitterly. *Where are you when I need you? Just when you leave me, a Jew comes along and awakens a long-forgotten past. What am I supposed to do with these memories?*

A sudden thought entered his mind. His parents! When he had been ten years old, there was nothing he could do to escape the duke's home and return to his parents, but now he was the king of Spain. Surely as king he could find his parents and be reunited with them!

CHAPTER SIX

King Carlos paced the garden but found no solace in the beautiful blooms and crisp air. The episode with the injured Moshe had awakened so many dormant memories. He suddenly recalled the carefree years of his early childhood, when he and his brother would ride on their father's shoulders to *cheder* each morning.

One thought led to the next. He pictured the *seder* table, set with their best silver, his father presiding over it like a king. Then a forgotten memory made its way to the forefront of his mind. *Simchas Torah!* How had he'd ever forgotten the spirited dancing with the entire village?

He sat down on a decorative bench and let the memories wash over him. He pictured himself as a young child, romping with Menachem in the back of their house as their mother looked on. He could see his mother's hands covering her face as she whispered the prayers before the Shabbos candles.

As king, Carlos had the resources to find his parents at his fingertips. How he longed to run back into their embrace, to show them how successful he'd become, how much he had grown and accomplished during the years of their separation.

At the same time, he knew it was not so simple. He was the king of Spain, not a private citizen, and his actions were carefully monitored. How could he just disappear and go back to his parents? Besides, what would be with his wife, Marie? Even if she would agree to join him, she wasn't Jewish, and he could hardly present his parents with a non-Jewish daughter-in-law.

The biggest question was if he even wanted to throw the kingship away for the sake of a few memories. He barely remembered how to live as a Jew. Why should he throw away his life of

comfort and power for a lifestyle of persecution and laws he barely knew?

A pained sigh emerged from his throat. But how could he remain here, so far from his parents, when he had the means and ability to go back to them? How could he willingly choose all over again the separation that had been forced upon him as a child?

That evening, as he sat with the queen at a private meal together, she noticed the distress he was struggling to hide. "Tell me what's bothering you, Carlos," the queen said gently. "You seem so troubled."

"Thank you, Marie, but I rather not discuss it," the king replied, heaving another long sigh.

"Are you sure?" she asked doubtfully. "Sometime just talking things over can provide relief, even if I won't be able to offer any practical help."

The king forced a half-smile. "I know," he said. "I value your listening ear. But I'm not ready to talk about it right now. I need another day."

"Whatever pleases the king," she responded, respecting his desire for privacy.

Since Manuel had been killed on the battlefield, the king had been having trouble sleeping. But that night, for the first time since he'd returned from battle, King Carlos fell into a deep sleep.

Suddenly, he saw an elderly man with a long white beard approach him. "Come home," the man said. "Come home. *Yiddishkeit* is waiting for you. Look at where you are now. What kind of life do you have? Come home, back to *yiddishkeit*."

"But I am a king," Carlos protested in his dream. "That is the best sort of life a person could want, isn't it?"

“A king! That’s nothing,” the man scoffed. “You are giving up worldly treasures for a cheap necklace of wooden beads. The smallest Jew is a thousand times greater than the biggest gentile. Come back to *yiddishkeit!*”

Carlos sat up abruptly, shaking the cobwebs of sleep from his eyes. Who was the man in his dream? His face had been so radiant! He pushed away his blanket and stepped out of bed, going onto the balcony for some fresh air. For the rest of the night, he could not fall back asleep.

“Your Majesty, my husband,” Queen Marie tried the next day at breakfast. “You seem even more troubled now than you did yesterday. Please, tell me what is on your mind. I want to help you.”

“Thank you, Marie,” the king said wanly. “I will share everything with you when I am ready. But I’m not ready yet.”

To his eternal gratitude, the queen accepted his wishes and did not press him further. His schedule that day was particularly full, and the king bid his wife goodbye as he hurried to begin his tasks, grateful for the distractions to the relentless cycle of his thoughts.

That night, when he fell asleep, the same radiant man came to see him in his dream. “Take your money, take your wealth, but go. You must go home. Your kingship is but empty value. Don’t give up true valuables for items of now worth!”

“Who are you?” the dream-Carlos asked his visitor.

“I am an angel,” the man said. “I am the angel you created.”

“How did I create an angel?” Carlos wondered.

“You performed one mitzvah,” the angel told him. “You saved the life of Moshe. And I am the angel that was created when you performed that

mitzvah. Please, I implore you to go back to the ways of your fathers!”

“Why do you care so much?” the king demanded, frustrated at the internal conflict being waged within him.

“Because I am not allowed my rightful place on High with the rest of the angels,” the angel explained. “Since you, the man who created me, are married to a gentile, eat non-kosher food, and desecrate the Shabbos, I am not allowed to ascend higher. You are living a filthy life, mired in the muck of impurity. Repent! Do teshuva! Then I will merit atonement and so will you.”

The king woke up. He didn’t know what to do. He sat up in bed and closed his eyes, lost in his thoughts.

“Carlos? Is everything okay?” the queen called sleepily, hearing him pacing the room.

“Shh, everything’s fine. Go back to sleep,” he whispered. But everything was not fine. What on earth would he do?

The queen kept silent the next day, even as she worriedly observed her husband’s grayish pallor and the dark circles around his eyes. Something was wrong, but if the king wasn’t ready to share it with her, she would have to wait patiently until the time came.

Then, for the third night in a row, the king’s sleep was interrupted by the visit of the same angel. “Come,” the angel pleaded. “Come home and repent! You have done a tremendous mitzvah, by saving a Jew’s life. In fact, it is as though you saved an entire world, because of the hundreds of generations that will now come forth from Moshe.”

“I can’t,” Carlos moaned. “I can’t! It’s too hard!”

“You created me,” the angel continued. “You are responsible for my creation. Why did you create me and then doom me to misery by not allowing me to ascend to my rightful place? You must repent! You *must* repent!”

It was near dawn when the king awoke, bathed in sweat. He was tormented by the angel in his dream, accusing him of holding the angel hostage and not letting him ascend. What would he do? How could he obey the angel? He was a king, prisoner in his palace. The people would never accept a Jewish king; they would kill him on the spot.

He dressed hastily and went out to the garden. The morning breeze was cool against his skin, but he could not relax. The shadows of his bodyguards followed him as he paced the length of the garden, but the king barely noticed them. His mind had transported him far away, to the hometown of his youth.

He thought about his father, who had loved him unconditionally, and his dear mother, who had earnestly prayed for him to grow up to be an honest Jew who would make Hashem proud. His heart twisted. What was he supposed to do? Who could guide him? Who could advise him? Despite being constantly surrounded by aides and advisors who only wanted to assist him, King Carlos felt utterly alone.

Then and there, he began to sob. He cried bitterly, for the terrible first days on the wagon, when he and Menachem had first been abducted. He cried for the mother and father he’d lost when the duke had so cruelly kidnapped him. He cried for the new kind of education he’d received, now responsible for his terrible confusion.

Suddenly, he sensed someone’s presence before him. He looked up. Marie, the non-Jewish woman who was his wife, was standing there, wringing her hands. “Carlos,” she whispered helplessly. “I’ve never seen you like this before! I’m very

worried about you! Please tell me what happened!”

“I need to be alone,” the king said stiffly, not looking at her.

She took the hint and went back into the palace, but didn’t go back to sleep. Instead, she took up vigil by the window, watching her royal husband pace back and forth, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“The king is crying,” her chief of staff came to inform her moments later.

“I know,” the queen said quietly. “I think he must be mourning the death of his brother, the late Prince Manuel. It’s alright. It’s good for him to cry.”

When the king came into the dining room for breakfast, he found his wife waiting for him with wide, questioning eyes. “I’m fine,” he told her. “I’m fine.”

The queen nodded. Though she didn’t believe him, she was powerless to force him to share his burden.

That night, the king decided to remain awake all night. He was afraid to go to sleep and have to contend with the accusing angel. He went through the motions of getting ready for bed, just to allay the queen’s suspicions, but forced himself to remain awake in bed.

Still, he was very tired from his sleepless nights, and without him meaning it, sleep overcame him. “Kalman, Kalman, wake up!” the angel roared at him. “Wake up and go back home! You are living with a gentile! You are committing endless sins! Repent and return!”

“I can’t! I can’t!” the king cried desperately. “You are asking me to do the impossible!”

He woke up abruptly. The conflicting emotions were pulling at him from both sides, tearing him apart. The Torah was calling him, tugging at his heartstrings, but the power and glory of his rule was equally strong. Once again, he headed out for a nocturnal stroll through the garden.

The queen watched him leave but decided against following him. Sleepily, she went to the window and opened it, watching her husband from above. The king was crying again, his tears falling to the ground as he strolled down the garden paths. He was so torn, so lost. Who could he turn to?

And then, unbidden, a strangled cry emerged from the depths of his heart. "Hashem!" It was the first time in decades that he had prayed as he had been taught by his righteous parents, R' Nesanel and Shulamis. He stopped short, his breath ragged, but it felt so right, so he continued.

"Hashem, help me!" the king cried out. "Help me! Hashem, please help me! I can't do this alone!"

The queen's eyebrows jumped up worriedly. Hashem? Who was that? There was no one in the garden other than the silent bodyguards, waiting inconspicuously in the background. Who was the king speaking to? Was he losing his mind?

The guards, too, exchanged anxious glances. The king was not the same man he'd been before the revolt, and it was troubling. Something was weighing on his mind, and they were afraid he might lose it completely.

The queen gathered her skirts and rushed out into the garden. "Carlos, you must calm down," she said soothingly. "You must calm yourself, Carlos."

The king stopped his pacing and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He acknowledged her presence with a nod, but didn't offer any insight into the matter that was troubling him.

At a loss of what to do, the queen decided to consult with royal priest. He was sure to know how to soothe the king's trouble spirit.

The priest listened to her story with concerned expression on his face. "He's been like this since he returned from battle, you say?"

"I'm pretty sure that's when it began," the queen confirmed worriedly. "I think he must be depressed over the death of his brother. They were twins, you know, and extremely close. I've never met two brothers as close as my husband and the late Prince Manuel."

"What happens when you tried discussing it with him?" the priest asked.

"Nothing," the queen said dejectedly. "He refuses to let me in to his mind. He's so troubled, and he won't let me share the burden. To be honest, I'm beginning to get concerned about his sanity. You should have heard him in the gardens today, speaking to the thin air as though it was a living thing. 'Hashem, help me!' he cried. 'You must help me, Hashem!' It was downright frightening to witness."

The priest paled. Unlike the queen, he was aware of the significance of the king's impassioned plea. How could it be that the king of Spain was praying to the G-d of the Jews? It couldn't be that King Carlos was a Jew, could it?

No matter. If the king really was under Jewish influence, he would have to neutralize the threat immediately. "Leave it to me," he told the queen. "I will speak to the king and try to soothe his spirit."

"Thank you," the queen said gratefully. "But don't tell my husband that I sent you."

"Of course not," the priest said immediately.

As soon as the queen left, the priest got to work. He took some 'holy' water, blessed with impurity, and put it into a bucket. Then he added in some human blood from a vial and some lard and mixed it all together into a thick liquid. It was the perfect syrup to 'heal' the king of whatever heretical thoughts were in his mind.

"The priest is here to see His Majesty," the king's usher announced later that day, as the king sat in his antechamber, accepting appointments.

"I didn't see him on the list of appointments this morning," the king said in annoyance. The last person he wanted to see was the priest, who would only manage to confuse him further.

"I apologize," the usher said. "It seems that someone has added him to the schedule. I see that this was signed off by the chief of staff, Sire. Would His Majesty like me to tell the priest to reschedule?"

"No, that is not necessary," the king said tiredly. Perhaps it would be a good idea to speak to the priest about his doubts. "Send him in."

The priest stepped in moments later, carrying a small bottle. He knelt and bowed before the king. "Rise," King Carlos said, and the priest rose.

"Your Majesty," the priest began. "It has come to my attention that something is bothering the king deeply. I would like to be of assistance, with the king's permission."

"Thank you, Father, but this is not something I am willing to discuss with anyone," the king said quietly. "It is true that I am troubled, but it is a personal matter, something I have to go through alone."

"As His Majesty desires," the priest responded. "However, with Your Majesty's permission, I will give you something to drink to calm your spirit and help you feel better."

The king nodded his consent. If only he could be calm and relaxed again! "Thank you, Father, that sounds wonderful."

The priest handed him a small cup to drink, and the king downed it without protest. Immediately, he felt himself relax. The impurity in the liquid erased all the doubts he had been having until now. He was king of Spain, and there was no need to give it all up because of some nostalgic reflections.

"Thank you, Father," the king said again, his voice sounding happier and more relaxed than it had in a while. "It did me wonders. I feel so much better already."

The priest smiled. The formula had worked! He understood just how impure human blood was considered by Jews, and he had hoped it would dull whatever Jewish nonsense that had sprouted in the king's mind. "I'm honored to be of assistance," he told the king. "With the king's permission, I'll just sprinkle a bit more of this calming liquid over you to ensure that its effect continues to last."

"Go ahead."

The priest sprinkled the impure mixture over the king and then closed the bottle. He bowed low and backed out of the room. He would have to keep a close eye on the king, he realized. The grief the king felt over his brother's death was normal, but he would have to be watched to ensure that he didn't do anything radical out of intense emotional pain.

For the first time in weeks, the king was able to perform his duties with a calm mind. The queen noticed the change in him immediately when they sat down to the evening meal together. Carlos was relaxed, chatting easily and laughing at an amusing story she shared. She breathed a sigh of relief. Evidently, the priest had made good on his

promise. Hopefully, things would return to normal.

It was a lighthearted King Carlos who went to sleep that night, more relaxed than he'd been in a long time. He fell into a deep, calming sleep...

CHAPTER SEVEN

“*Rasha! Rasha!*” There was someone yelling viciously into his ear. “You despicable *rasha!* What did you do? How did you allow yourself to be tainted with the impurity from the priest so easily?”

“Wh..what?” Carlos, numb from sleep, turned to his accuser. It was the angel, the angel he’d created by saving the Jew, whom he’d ignored four times.

“*Rasha!*” the angel yelled again. “I am warning you! I am *warning* you! If you don’t repent and return to your roots, you will die! You will die just as your predecessors died before you, the seven kings to rule before you! This is your chance to *save your life!*”

Carlos sat up, the dream he had just woken up from eerily real. The room was suddenly so stuffy. Air, he needed air! He could barely breathe! He rushed outside to the garden, hoping the cool night air would soothe him and restore the equilibrium he had finally gained after the priest’s visit that day.

He hurried down to the garden in his night robe and slippers and sat down on large rock in the corner of the garden. He tried to calm himself down. *Breathe*, he reminded himself. *Just breathe.*

As he sat on the stone, staring into space, he suddenly saw the old man from his dream. *I must be losing my mind*, he thought to himself. He was certainly awake, sitting in the garden. How could it be the man from his dream had appeared?

He stifled a scream, standing up and walking toward the angel, but the angel was not approachable. The king couldn’t understand what was happening. He could clearly see the angel standing before him, but when he tried to reach out and touch him, his hands met the empty air.

“This is your last warning,” the angel said, his voice low and ominous. “This is your last opportunity. If you don’t repent immediately, you will die. I will not be coming to warn you again.”

“But what should I do?” the king asked. “My wife is not Jewish. Should I just leave her and run away?”

“Because you have done such a wonderful act by saving the injured Jew, we will give your wife the opportunity to join you,” the angel told him. “If she chooses to join the Jewish people, she will be allowed to come with you. But you must hurry. If you do not start on your return journey soon, you will be killed.”

“I will do it,” the king promised, although he had no idea how. “I will repent and go home.”

The angel disappeared.

King Carlos headed back inside, deep in thought. He went to his study and sat down on the plush chair, his head between his hands as he tried to come up with a plausible plan to escape along with his money. By daybreak, he would have to put some sort of plan into action.

It was shortly before sunrise when there was a knock on his study door. The door was pushed open hesitantly and the queen’s face peeked in.

“Come in,” he invited, and she walked all the way in. Her face was very pale, and the king realized that somehow, she knew.

“I had a dream,” she said quietly. “An angel came to see me in the dream, and he told me that you are not the natural son of the late King Diego and Queen Anna, but rather that you were a Jewish child kidnapped by the late King and raised as his own son.”

The king inclined his head. “That’s true,” he confirmed in a low voice. “My parents were devout Jews from a faraway country.”

“The angel told me that there is nothing higher than a Jewish soul,” the queen continued. “He offered me a choice: to remain here without you, or to join you and the Jewish nation. He told me to go along with you, taking our wealth with us.”

Carlos lifted his red-rimmed eyes. “I must leave today, or else I will die,” he told her. “What will you choose? To join me, or to remain behind?”

The queen was silent for a moment. She thought about her childhood in her father’s palace and the wonderful life she had led since her marriage to the prince from Spain. Royalty was the only life she had ever known, and Jews had always been scorned in her father’s house.

But the angel had been so radiant, and his talk of a Jewish soul had been captivating. “My place is with my husband,” she said slowly. “If you are leaving, then I will leave with you.”

“We’ll take our wealth with us, but our lives would be a far cry from what it has been until now,” the king said warningly. “We’ll have to travel alone, anonymously, without any servants or drivers, for one. And once we reach the Jewish community and learn the laws and customs, we’ll have to live a fully Jewish life. We’ll be ordinary citizens, living amongst the common folk, with no power over policy or over anyone, for that matter.”

The queen set her jaw. “My place is with my husband,” she repeated. “I understand that there will be many difficulties, but I will get used to them.”

A broad smile crossed the king’s face. “Alright, then,” he said. “I will work on setting a plan into motion. You pack up your jewels and have a trunk prepared with some clothing for both of us.

Nothing too royal-looking, of course. If anyone asks why, tell them we are going on vacation.”

“Vacation,” she repeated. “Very well.”

When morning dawned, the king called his chief of staff and asked him to call a cabinet meeting with all his ministers. This was arranged fairly quickly, and the king went to the conference room to address his ministers.

He walked into the room, his regal gait commanding respect, and the ministers all stood up and bowed. The king took his seat and the others followed suit.

“My dear ministers,” the king began, looking around the table and meeting each pair of eyes. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that I haven’t been myself for a while now. The death of my twin brother Manuel has been very difficult for me, interfering with my ability to eat and sleep, let alone govern the kingdom properly.

“I am in desperate need of a break,” the king continued. “Away from the hubbub of governance and politics. I will be setting out with the queen on vacation to an undisclosed destination. The viceroy, my dear cousin, the Duke of Madrid, will be responsible for my duties in my absence.”

The viceroy nodded. “Certainly, Your Majesty.” “Thank you, Duke,” the king said. “Are there any questions?”

“When does His Majesty plan to return?” the minister fifth in command asked.

The king lifted his hands. “I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “I will remain away for as long as I need to regain my strength and spirit, be it two weeks or two months or even longer.”

“Will news of the king’s leave of absence be publicized?” the Minister of Security wanted to know.

“No,” the king said firmly. “None of you are to publicize the information. I will inform anyone who needs to know about it, but for the stability of the kingdom, it is best if it remains private.”

“How will we be able to reach the king before he returns, in case of great need?” someone else asked.

“You won’t be able to reach me,” the king said shortly. “The viceroy will be serving as acting king until my return, and that is who you will turn to in case of great need. Are there any other questions?”

There were none, and so the meeting was adjourned.

The king’s next stop was to see the priest and inform him of his vacation. “Thank you for the calming liquid,” he told the priest. “I have been feeling so much better since I drank it. I just wanted to let you know that the queen and I will be going on a small vacation to rest up and relax. We’ve been through a lot these past few weeks, and we need a break to recoup our energy.”

“Wonderful,” the priest said sincerely. He’d been thinking about asking the doctor to suggest it the king. The death of the king’s brother had affected him greatly, and the priest was afraid he would snap if he didn’t take the time off to let himself grieve and relive the memories of his brother.

With that taken care of, the king moved on to the treasury. He greeted the treasurer and asked to see the ledgers.

Although the king didn’t usually involve himself with the numbers, the treasurer swallowed his surprise and allowed him to inspect the books.

Though they had borrowed money to finance the war against the rebels, the treasury was doing quite nicely. They were making their payments on time and there was a huge stash of wealth left over besides.

The king looked over the numbers, making calculations in his mind. He calculated the full cost of the treasury’s debt, not just the next payment that was coming due, and subtracted it from the bottom line. There was still plenty left over, more than enough for him and his wife to live comfortably in civilian life.

“I would like to withdraw a large sum from the treasury,” the king told the treasurer, naming the amount.

The treasurer’s eyes widened. “Certainly,” he agreed. The money belonged to the king, and he had no right to question the king’s withdrawals. “What expense should I put it down for, in the ledgers?”

“Put it down as unknown,” the king said. “I am not in the position to reveal to you what it is for. In fact, I’d much prefer if no one was to know that I withdrew the money. You can categorize it as war effort, or whatever you think makes sense. When the quarterly taxes come due, the coffers will be refilled.”

The treasurer complied without a word. It was the king’s money, after all, and it was his right to throw it into the sea or distribute it to charity or spend it as he saw fit. “It’ll take me an hour or two to prepare the withdrawal,” he told the king.

The king gave a brief nod. “Very well. I’ll be back in an hour, then.”

On the other side of palace, the queen was busy supervising the packing of the single trunk they would be taking with them on their ‘vacation’. It proved to be a very difficult task. “Remember,” she kept reminding her maid. “Only light, easy

clothing that won't give us away. The king doesn't want us to be recognized when we are off duty."

For a woman used to a closet filled with endless gowns ever since she was a toddler, choosing just three dresses to bring along, and the plainest ones she owned, was not easy for the queen. *This is what my new life will be like*, she reminded herself, blinking back tears.

She thought about having to wash the clothing herself and shuddered. How would she ever manage? She had no idea how to cook, how to mend, how to get stains out of clothing and then press them to perfection. *You will learn with time*, she told herself. *And in the worst case, Carlos will hire someone to help us.*

The stableman was asked to procure a simple, sturdy, covered wagon, which he harnessed to equally simple and sturdy horses. The trunk containing just a few sets of clothing, some food, the queen's jewels and most of the wealth from the treasury was discreetly loaded onto the wagon.

In the dead of the night, when most of the palace staff was sleeping, the king and queen slipped out of the palace and onto the waiting wagon. The members of the guard, who knew about their secret vacation, allowed them to leave.

For once, there were no bodyguards following them in the shadows.

"How does it feel to drive this wagon?" the queen teased, trying to keep her spirits up when all she wanted to do was run back to her comfortable bed and pretend it all was a bad dream.

"Just as excellent as it feels to be sitting in it," Carlos replied, winking. "It actually does feel good, to get away together without anyone else."

"It feels strange," she corrected. "A little adventurous, maybe."

"And scary," he admitted. "With an unknown future ahead of us."

She was silent, thinking about the life she had left behind.

"I purchased ship tickets for the two of us in the names of Kalman and Miriam," he told her shyly. "I couldn't well order tickets under the names of the king and queen of Spain, could I?"

"Was that what you were called as a child? Kalman?" she asked, tasting the name on her tongue.

"Yes," he said, staring at the road ahead. "I was Kalman back then."

"And what was Manuel called?" she asked softly. He continued looking straight ahead. "Menachem."

Marie's eyes filled with compassion. "Tell me what your parents were like," she requested.

His voice took on a nostalgic note as he described his father as best as he could remember. "He was noble and righteous," he concluded. "I wish I could remember him better." Then he began to tell her about his mother, and the memories he had of his early childhood.

"Wow," she said quietly. "I have never met any Jews before, but if I am supposed to convert and join your nation, I suppose I should learn as much as I can about it."

He gave a light chuckle. "I'm hardly the right person to teach you. I haven't lived among Jews since I was ten years old."

"Tell me whatever you remember," she begged. And so he did.

They boarded their ship and sailed for two weeks until they reached the country of his youth. Then, they made their way by horse to the town where he grew up.

The journey, without any servants, was extremely difficult, but they weathered the challenges with determination and the knowledge that they were doing the right thing.

By the time they reached their destination, King Carlos of Spain had ceased to exist, replaced by Kalman, son of Nesanel Hatzaddik.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They drove along the streets of the shtetl, sticking out like a carrot in a pile of potatoes. The streets were mostly empty, save for a few Jews hurrying along to their destinations and some children playing in the courtyards.

“I don’t recognize a thing,” Kalman told his wife as they drove through the streets. “I wouldn’t even be able to pick out the house I grew up in. Everything looks completely unfamiliar.”

“Uh, Carlos,” his wife said slowly. “Have you ever thought about the fact that your parents may not be alive?”

He nodded. “I did think about that,” he said. “I am already in my forties, and my parents weren’t young when Menachem and I were born. I’m not sure how old they were exactly, but we certainly thought they were old. If they are alive, they must be in their seventies or eighties. Or maybe even nineties.”

“Few people are blessed with such longevity,” she pointed out.

“I know.” He was silent for a moment. “Let’s just hope they are alive, right? And if not, we’ll deal with it then.”

A man was walking on the side of the street up ahead. Kalman pulled up beside him and slowed the wagon. “Excuse me!”

“Yes?” the man’s expression was wary. Despite his best efforts not to dress like an aristocrat, Kalman did not appear Jewish at all, and his knowledge of the language of his childhood was extremely rusty.

“Do you know if R’ Nesanel is alive, and if so, where he lives?” Kalman asked, the longing evident in his voice.

“Who is R’ Nesanel?” the man asked suspiciously.

“You know, R’ Nesanel, the wealthy man,” Kalman said, somewhat desperately.

“I’m sorry, I don’t believe I know who you are talking about,” the man said, walking off.

“That’s strange,” Kalman said aloud. “Growing up, it felt as though everyone in town knew my father.”

“That might have been just a childish perception,” Marie suggested. “Most children think that their fathers are the strongest, bravest, most famous people out there.”

Kalman thought about it and had to agree. “My father could do anything, to my childish mind,” he recalled. “Although I think he really was extremely capable and knowledgeable. He was a great scholar and a wealthy businessman. To me, he epitomized everything.”

Marie suddenly gestured to a man walking up from behind them. “Look,” she pointed. “There’s an elderly gentleman. There’s more of a chance that an older person would know your father.”

“You’re right,” Kalman agreed. “You stay here in the wagon. I’ll go and speak to him.” He parked the wagon and got out, walking toward the elderly man.

“Shalom aleichem,” the elderly man greeted him. “Aleichem shalom,” Kalman responded. “I’m looking for an elderly man named R’ Nesanel Hatzadik. He’s a wealthy landowner and great scholar.”

“R’ Nesanel!” the man’s eyes took on a faraway look. “Oy, dear, dear R’ Nesanel. How he much he suffered! He waited so many years for children, and then both his sons disappeared one day never to come back.”

“Is he alive?” Kalman asked, daring to hope. “Does he still live here in town?”

The man heaved a heavy sigh. “R’ Nesanel died of a broken heart just a few weeks after his sons disappeared.”

“And his wife?”

“His wife passed away just a few days later,” the man said, sighing again. “What a terrible story. They were such a special couple...”

Kalman closed his eyes and took a deep breath, forcing himself to remain in control of himself. “Their estate?” he asked. “Their home, business, and property?”

“Donated,” the man said. “R’ Nesanel left a will donating everything he owned to the poor. With his sons and heirs gone, it was the best legacy he could hope for.”

“What about his younger brother, Baruch?” Kalman asked, panicking. “Did he die, too? Why wasn’t the inheritance left to him?”

“No, no, R’ Baruch is alive and well, until a hundred twenty years,” the man murmured. “But R’ Baruch is an aesthetic, a great *tzaddik* and *rav* who abhors materialism. And what better merit would R’ Nesanel get than to support of hundreds of widows and orphans?”

“Where does R’ Baruch live?” Kalman managed to ask.

The man gave him his address, and although Kalman had no idea where that was, he asked no more questions. Thanking him quickly, he hastily returned to the wagon, sat down in the driver’s seat, and began to sob quietly.

Marie instantly understood. “They passed away,” she stated, and he gave a small nod. “Both of them?”

“Both of them,” he echoed. “They died from broken hearts, anguished over our disappearance.”

There was nothing to say, so she just waited quietly and let him grieve until he was ready to speak again.

“Fortunately, my father’s younger brother is still alive,” Kalman said hoarsely after a few minutes. “He lives somewhere in town. He’s a big rabbi.”

“Do you want to go there now?” she asked, somewhat nervous. She was not Jewish, at least not yet, and she worried how his family would accept her.

He closed his eyes again, the memories washing over him. “I think so,” he said carefully. “If that is okay with you...”

“It’s fine,” she said hastily. It would be fine, she assured herself. She had adjusted to civilian life, and she would adjust to her husband’s family, too.

“Let me go catch that elderly man,” Kalman said, pulling the reins. The horses started to move again. “He gave me the address, but I need directions.” He pulled up beside the elderly man and called out, “Reb Yid!”

“Yes?” the old man asked, coming up to the wagon to speak to him face to face.

“Can you give me directions to R’ Baruch’s home?” Kalman asked.

The man’s expression became guarded. “I can,” he said carefully. “I can take you to R’ Baruch. But if you don’t mind my asking, why are you so interested in this family? You don’t look like you are from the Jewish community, and you have a foreign accent.” He didn’t mention anything about Marie, who, with her uncovered hair, did not look Jewish at all.

“I have a message from a relative of his,” Kalman said. “Please, come onto my wagon and direct us.”

The man climbed up, leaning on the railing for support. “Turn left at the corner,” he directed. “Now make a right here.”

About ten minutes later, they pulled up in front of a small cottage. “This is it,” the man announced. He got off the wagon and began walking back in the direction they had come as they called their thanks after him.

Kalman looked at his wife and inhaled a long breath. It wasn’t going to be easy, meeting his uncle after so many years, and having a gentile wife was not going to make it easier. He could see that Marie, too, was embarrassed that she didn’t belong, at least as embarrassed as he was. He took another breath. It was now or never.

Their trunk, containing all their possessions and a tremendous amount of money, couldn’t be left on the wagon unsupervised. Hoisting it onto his shoulder, he walked up to front door, Marie trailing hesitantly behind him. He set the trunk down and knocked.

The door was pulled open and an elderly woman stood there looking at them in wonderment. “Can I help you?” she asked politely, and Marie felt herself flush under the *rebbitzen’s* scrutiny.

“We would like to speak to R’ Baruch,” Kalman said, with as much confidence as he could muster. His voice came out unsteady, afraid, and he kicked himself inwardly. He was an adult, a king! Where was his self-confidence?

“I’m sorry, but R’ Baruch is learning now and it is impossible to disturb him,” the *rebbitzen* said apologetically. “The only time he sees visitors is at night, for an hour after Maariv.”

Maariv! Kalman suddenly recalled walking to shul with his father for Maariv each evening, his small hand tucked securely into his father’s larger one. He had completely forgotten about Maariv, not having *davened* for years and years.

“I really must speak to R’ Baruch,” Kalman insisted. There was no way they could wait outside until after Maariv. They had been traveling for weeks already, he had just found out that he had lost his parents. “I must. This is a matter of life and death.”

“Life and death,” she repeated. “I see. Well, if it is truly an emergency, I will allow you to interrupt my husband’s learning. However, we have a small problem. R’ Baruch is extremely particular with the laws of modesty, and no immodestly dressed woman has ever crossed this threshold, Jewish or not Jewish.”

Marie flushed a deeper shade of red. She wasn’t sure how the *rebbitzen* had realized that she was a gentile, and she was even less sure of what was immodest about her attire.

“I’m very sorry,” the *rebbitzen* continued. “But my husband is not permitted to see a woman whose hair is uncovered.”

“I didn’t know,” Marie managed to say, feeling utterly stupid. “I wasn’t aware of this law. Would you perhaps have something for me to use to cover my hair?”

The *rebbitzen* nodded and disappeared inside the house, returning a few moments later with a kerchief. She gave it to Marie, who hastily tied it over her hair.

“You look just like my mother looked,” Kalman whispered, his eyes welling up. “She wore exactly this kind of kerchief over her hair.”

The *rebbitzen* led them into the house and poked her head into the doorway of her husband’s study.

“Reb Baruch, there are two people who need to speak to you.” She lowered her voice. “They aren’t religious, and maybe they aren’t even Jewish, but they said it is a matter of life and death. Can you come out to speak to them?”

“Who are they?” he asked, looking up from his *sefer* and the words ‘life and death.’

“A man and a woman,” she replied.

“A woman!” his tone was aghast. “Lifsha, you know my stringency not to speak to women from outside the family. How could you have allowed her to come inside?”

“They said it is a matter of life and death,” the *rebbitzin* reminded him. “Surely saving a life takes precedence over a stringency.”

R’ Baruch stood up. “That’s true. In that case, I will go out and listen to what they have to say.” He donned his frock and hat and walked out of his study into the main room of the house.

Kalman looked up and saw his uncle and his heart caught in his throat. This was exactly how his father had looked, exactly the way he’d remembered him. The resemblance was uncanny, and Kalman suddenly felt like he could no longer bear it. The tears came, unstoppable, flowing in twin rivers down his cheeks. Before being able to utter a word, he suddenly collapsed on the floor in a faint.

“Please bring water,” R’ Boruch called to his wife, getting down on the floor besides the collapsed man. He poured cold water over his face, and Kalman opened his eyes, but he still could not speak. They helped him up onto a chair, and he just sat there, motionless.

Something was wrong, and they had no idea what it was. “What’s going on?” R’ Boruch asked the woman. “Who is this? Who are you? I can see that something strange is at play here.”

Marie blushed furiously and tried to think of what to say. As the daughter of the king of France, her education had included the languages of many countries, and she therefore had no problem conversing with her husband’s relatives, but she was afraid to tell them that she was their niece and she wasn’t Jewish.

“What’s the matter?” R’ Boruch tried again, concerned. “What’s bothering him? Why did he faint?”

Desperately afraid of getting herself into trouble, she decided to stay on the safe side. “I can’t speak for him,” she finally said. “You’ll have to wait until he gets to himself.”

“This is a matter of life and death?” R’ Baruch asked, trying to understand what was going on.

Marie just nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“And before he could tell me anything, he fainted,” R’ Baruch noted. “*Rebbitzin*, do we have something warm for this man to drink?”

“I have hot soup on the fire,” the *rebbitzin* said, hurrying to the kitchen and returning moments later with a steaming bowl.

R’ Baruch dipped a spoon into the bowl and brought a spoonful of rich, nourishing soup to his guest’s mouth. “Here, make a *brachah*. This will make you feel so much better.”

But Kalman could not make a *brachah*. His jaws seemed to be frozen, and no matter how much he willed them to speak, the words just would not get out.

CHAPTER NINE

Kalman swallowed and tried to speak. Once, twice, three times. Finally, he managed to say, “Uncle, Uncle Baruch!”

R’ Baruch dropped the spoon back into the bowl and almost dropped the bowl. Uncle Baruch? He hadn’t been called uncle in years! His only nephews had disappeared over three decades earlier, and no one had heard from them since.

“Uncle, Uncle,” Kalman continued to murmur. They were the only words he could manage to get out of his clogged throat.

R’ Baruch almost stopped breathing. Could it be? He took a closer look at his guest. He could make out Nesanel’s wide eyes and narrow lips. Could this possibly be one of his brother’s lost children? He began to tremble. “Who are you?” he asked in a tremulous whisper. “Are you perhaps my brother Nesanel’s son?”

Kalman nodded wordless and the dam burst. Both men began crying and crying, unable to stop their emotions from pouring forth.

“But where were you, child?” R’ Baruch kept asking over and over. “Where were you?”

The *rebbitzen* could barely believe what she was hearing. She took a better look at their guest. He had Shulamis’s pert nose and thin face. This was her nephew! “Is he Kalman or Menachem?” she asked the woman who had shown up along with her nephew.

“Kalman,” Marie said. This was one question she could answer confidently.

“And you are...” the *rebbitzen* prodded, taking her hand. “You are his wife?”

Marie felt trapped. She didn’t know what to say. “I am a queen,” she finally said for lack of an alternative answer.

The *rebbitzen*’s brows rose. “You are a *queen*?” “Yes, I am a queen,” Marie repeated. “And he is a king.”

The *rebbitzen* just gaped at her. “Kalman? A *king*?!” The thought was so ludicrous and the events of the evening so emotional that she suddenly started to cry. Marie joined her, and soon all of them were crying.

There was a light rapping on the door and a middle aged man walked in. “Shalom aleichem, Tatte, Mamme,” he called. He stopped short at the scene in the middle of the room. Both his parents were sitting together with an unfamiliar couple, and all four of them were weeping together.

“What’s going on?” he asked in puzzlement. “Tatte, are you alright?”

His father nodded, but a lump in his throat did not allow him to speak. He continued crying.

The son, Elya, rushed out to notify his brother Mordechai of the strange scene he had encountered. Soon, R’ Baruch’s small house was filled with the families of his two sons, who had come rushing over in concern. “Tatte, what’s going on?” they asked.

At that moment, Kalman finally felt his senses returning, but his throat was burning, terribly dry. “Can I please have a drink?” he asked hoarsely.

R’ Baruch jumped up to bring him a cup of water, which he gratefully lifted to his lips.

“No, no,” R’ Baruch interrupted. “You need to say a *brachah*, Kalman.”

Kalman put the cup down and looked sheepishly at his lap. "I don't remember how to say a *brachah*, Uncle," he admitted.

As R' Baruch helped him with the *brachah*, the family understood what was going on. Their lost cousin Kalman had returned! Elya and Mordechai rushed forward to embrace him. "Where were you? Where were you all these years?"

"It's a long story, a long and wild story," Kalman said. "The story is so fantastic sounding that I'm afraid you won't believe me."

The daughters-in-law turned to Marie, who was sitting quietly and trying to make herself inconspicuous. "And who are you?"

"I...I'm... I am a queen," she stammered, giving them the same answer she had given the *rebbitzen* minutes earlier.

"What is that supposed to mean, you are a queen?" Both daughters-in-law looked at her as though she'd lost her mind. "Which country are you the queen of?"

"The queen of Spain," she said softly. If they didn't want to believe her and thought she was crazy, she was fine with that.

"I told you the story is unbelievable," Kalman said quietly as a silence of disbelief settled in the room. He began to recount the story of Ivan, who taught them how to ride and brought them to the hunting festival. "There was a Spanish duke at the hunt," he said. "Duke Diego of Avignon. He kidnapped Menachem and I, and brought us home to be his children. We had absolutely no choice in the matter, and we tried to stay true to our upbringing as much as possible."

"Oy, my poor children," R' Baruch murmured. "Growing up in a non-Jewish home devoid of *yiddishkeit*."

"As time went on, we slowly forgot our heritage," Kalman continued uneasily. "We didn't have a calendar and had no way of knowing when the *yomim tovim* were. There was no Shabbos and no kosher food in the duke's mansion. Eventually, we forgot our past and became the duke's children, living as gentiles."

The room was utterly still as they waited for Kalman to continue. "The duke was high up in the government, and eventually, he became king. When he passed away, I took over as king of Spain."

"King of Spain!" someone cried out in astonishment.

He told them about Menachem's death on the battlefield and his encounter with Moshe, the injured soldier. Then he told them about the angel that had haunted his dreams. "Finally, I worked up the courage to obey the angel, and I escaped from Spain. This is my wife, the queen, who escaped together with me. She is willing to become a *giyores*."

The family jumped back, as though stung by a bee, at the word '*giyores*'. Their cousin, the son of the righteous R' Nesanel, had married a gentile! The woman sitting in the room with them was not Jewish.

Marie began to cry. "Please," she pleaded. "Accept me into the family. I was a queen. I could have let Kalman escape without me and remain in Spain, a respected monarch, but I gave it all up to join him and join his nation. I want to become a Jew. Please accept me."

The *rebbitzen* put her arm around Marie's shoulder comfortingly. "I will teach you," she promised. "You can move into my home, and I will teach you all about *yiddishkeit*. Once you are ready and convert, we will arrange a wedding for you and Kalman and you will be able to move into your own home."

“Thank you,” Marie said gratefully.

When news that one of R’ Nesanel’s missing sons had reappeared, the town was bursting with joy. So many people recalled the tragedy that had stolen an entire family from their midst, and they rejoiced in Kalman’s homecoming.

Two months later, a feast was held. It served a double purpose, as it was both the wedding feast for Kalman and his wife Miriam, who had been married again according to Jewish law, and it was a *seudas hodaah* to thank Hashem that they had been reunited with their family and heritage.

R’ Baruch allocated a large portion of his time each day to learn with his nephew. Kalman had a lot of catching up to do, and he wanted to make up as much as possible for all the lost time. Additionally, he wanted his uncle’s guidance on how to atone for all the sins he had committed while living in Spain.

Although it was not his fault, Kalman understood that his heart and mind had been sullied by the sins he had committed, and he wanted to become whole and pure again. R’ Baruch advised him to fast once a week and to give *tzedakah* to the poor.

“Uncle Baruch, I haven’t mentioned this before, but I brought with me from Spain a tremendous amount of money and jewels,” Kalman told his uncle. “Tell me how much to give, and I’ll give it. The most important thing is that my soul become pristine again.”

R’ Baruch ruled on how much charity would be best for him to give, and Kalman gladly donated the money to the poor. R’ Baruch advised him to put away the remainder of his wealth to live on, and spend as much time as possible learning.

Slowly, Kalman and Miriam adjusted into their new lives. Miriam was accepted with open arms by the community and Kalman became a respected member of the shul and *kollel*. With his

sharp mind, he quickly progressed in learning until he was on par with the other members of the *kollel*.

Although most of the community was warm and welcoming, there were a few people who were secretly jealous of Kalman. His clothing was always perfectly pressed, his words just as professional and polished as his shoes. He had money, lots of money, and a good head on his shoulders besides. And, as a nephew of the famed R’ Baruch, he merited to spend hours and hours with the rav. Kalman, they thought, was perfect, too perfect. And they hated perfect people. Frankly, they were jealous.

One day, a new pauper came to town. While beggars and paupers wandering from town to town was hardly an uncommon thing, there was something strange about the new pauper, and it made the people uneasy.

It started on the beggar’s first day in town. He was collecting money outside the shul in a raspy voice when Shimon the watercarrier walked by.

Suddenly, a deep voice emerged from the pauper’s voice and he called out to Shimon, “*Rasha!* You drank non-kosher wine last night!” Shimon turned red in embarrassment and hurried away. How did the pauper know about that? He had been desperate for a drink, after a long, hard day, but could not afford kosher wine. As the pauper had accused him, he had fallen for his temptation and purchased non-kosher wine for half the price.

It happened again a few hours later. Luzer the shoemaker was in middle of stitching a whole in a customer’s shoes when the pauper opened the door of his shop and screamed, in the strange, deep voice, “*Rasha!* You spoke *lashon harah* about a *talmid chacham!* For ten minutes, you spoke all about a *talmid chacham* with your friends, joking and scorning him. *Rasha!*” He spit at Luzer and left the shop.

When a *talmid chacham* passed by him one evening, even he was not spared from the pauper's criticism. "You think you're such a great scholar, huh?" the pauper taunted. "I know that the *dvar* Torah you said over today, the one that wowed your audience, was stolen from you old *chavrusah*! It was not your own Torah at all, and you said it in your own name without a word of credit to the one who it really belongs to!"

The people began to avoid the pauper as much as they could. He had an uncanny ability to read their minds, it seemed, and to know about events that had happened when he was not present. Anyone who came into the beggar's line of vision was fodder for his criticism, and it was unpleasant and embarrassing to be exposed in public.

One day, the people who were jealous of Kalman came up with a great plan to teach him a lesson. "Kalman thinks he's so great, doesn't he?" one of them told his friend. "Let's get him in front of the pauper, who will expose him once and for all! It'll knock him off his high horse."

"Fantastic!" The other man was pleased with the idea. "But how will we get Kalman to leave his house? He spends all his time learning inside."

His friend gave a small frown. "I know. That's a problem. How about this? We'll go to his house on the pretense of doing business with him. Meanwhile, we'll bribe the crazy pauper with candies or something to come stand in front of Kalman's house, and we'll arrange for a bunch of passersby to be hanging around to watch the show. When Kalman comes out, the beggar will start giving it to him. It'll be great!"

The next afternoon, Kalman was in middle of learning in his dining room when persistent knocking drew him to the front door.

"R' Kalman, how are you?" the man at the door asked. "I wanted to discuss a business deal with you."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not available now," Kalman replied. "I only do business in the evenings. I am in the middle of learning now."

"But my investor is leaving the city shortly," the man said. "If you don't come now, you'll lose the deal of a lifetime."

"I have more than enough money to last me the rest of my life," Kalman said. "If I lose a deal, I lose a deal. I'm learning now."

"R' Kalman, you are not the only one who will profit by doing this deal," the man tried. "So many *yidden* will earn their *parnasah* through a chain reaction. If you close the deal with this investor, he will put money into other industries as well."

Kalman shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I'm in middle of learning."

"A tremendous Kiddush Hashem will come out of this," the man tried.

"I already told you, I only do business in the evenings," Kalman said. "I really have to get back to learning. You can come back with your investor later if you'd like."

The man was getting desperate. "R' Kalman," he implored. "Please! So many people are relying on this! Why don't you do your business now, and learn during your business hour instead? Please?" Kalman let out a heavy sigh. "Alright," he said. "I'll do it for you this time, but don't try this again."

"I won't," the man promised.

They walked outside together and Kalman looked around, trying to find the investor in the crowd of people on his front lawn. Someone nudged the pauper forward and everyone waited gleefully for him to finally tell Kalman off.

The pauper walked up to Kalman. "Hello," he said. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine, *baruch* Hashem," Kalman said, confused. "Who is the one who is supposed to be doing business with me?"

The others looked at each other. What was going on? Why was the beggar greeting Kalman like an old friend instead of exposing his faults? They waited a beat.

"Business?" the pauper asked. "I don't know about business, but I would certainly like to speak to you."

"Tell him off," someone hissed to the pauper. "Tell him off!"

But things were going according to the script.

"I want to speak to you privately," the pauper said, his voice strangely deep. "May I please come in to your house?"

Kalman still looked bewildered. "I was called out for a business deal," he tried explaining to the pauper, rummaging through his pockets for some money. "But it looks you might want a donation. I'll be happy to give you a donation."

"I need to speak to you," the pauper said urgently. "It's important."

"What's the matter?" Kalman asked.

"And private," the pauper continued. "Please can we go inside?"

"I thought you wanted me to meet an investor," Kalman complained to the man who had pulled him away from learning. "I don't understand why there are so many people here. You can all go now."

The man didn't know how to respond. Somehow, their plan had gone awry, but what was he supposed to say now? "Uh, maybe this, uh, gentleman here wants to talk to you privately about a business deal?"

Kalman gave him a strange look and turned back to the beggar. "Come inside." He led the man into his home and closed the door. "How can I help you?"

"I need to speak to you privately," the beggar said, stressing the last word.

"You can talk to me now," Kalman said.

The pauper shook his head. "I can't. Your wife is eavesdropping behind me."

Kalman's eyebrows shot up. "How in the world do you know that? Miriam? Are you here?"

"I'm here," his wife responded from behind the door.

"You see what I mean?" the pauper asked.

Kalman got up and went to tell his wife to go to the other side of the house, where she couldn't possibly overhear them. "How did you know she was listening?" he asked when he returned.

The pauper shrugged. "I was able to see."

"See through the door?!" Kalman's tone was incredulous.

The beggar shrugged again. "Now that we are completely alone, I want to ask you this. Do you recognize me?"

"Recognize you? Not at all. Where am I supposed to know you from?"

"You don't recognize my voice?"

Kalman gave a slight shake of his head. "I'm sorry, I don't. Who are you?"

"I'm your brother," the beggar said.

"My brother?!" Kalman stood up and looked closely at his guest. "You're not... you're not... Menachem died!"

"I know," the pauper said. "But I am the soul of Menachem, and I have been sent down into the body of this pauper as a *dybbuk*. I am speaking to you from within the pauper's mouth."

Kalman was stunned. "You do have Menachem's voice," he realized. "I don't understand. If you are Menachem's soul, why are you not in *Olam Habah*?"

"You must help me!" Menachem's voice cried from within the pauper. "When you did *teshuvah*, the *bais din shel maalah* said, 'Look at the son of the righteous R' Nesanel and Shulamis! He has repented! But what about their other son? He died before he had the opportunity to do teshuva!' It was decided to send me back down as a *dybbuk* to correct the sins of my youth."

"How can I help you?" Kalman asked, suddenly afraid to be alone in the room with the pauper with Menachem's voice. "How can you repent if you already died?"

"There are things that could be done to atone for me," Menachem said. "If you don't know what they are, perhaps Uncle Baruch can help me. Please, I am in so much pain. I have no rest. You must help me!"

"Wait here," Kalman ordered. He left the room and hurried down the block to his uncle's home.

"Uncle Baruch! Uncle Baruch!" he cried urgently.

"Kalman!" his uncle stood up to greet him, concern written all over his face. "You look terrible! What's the matter?"

"My brother's soul came to me," Kalman said, hoping his uncle would understand without too much elaboration. "He is trapped in the body of that crazy pauper who came to town. He needs us to help him!"

"That's the soul of your brother Menachem?" R' Baruch asked in disbelief. He had heard about the pauper, and it had been obvious to him that there was a *dybbuk* inside it. It had clearly been able to see things from a lofty plain, and by exposing people's faults, it hoped to inspire them to repentance, which would serve as a merit for it. He had understood that the pauper was possessed by a *dybbuk*, but he had never dreamed the *dybbuk* was Menachem!

R' Baruch grabbed his *tallis* and *tefillin* and rushed out of the house after Kalman. Indeed, they found the pauper waiting for them in Kalman's home.

R' Baruch donned the *tallis* and *tefillin* and began speaking to the soul trapped in the beggar's body. "Nephew," he called. "Tell me what was your judgement."

"Uncle, you cannot begin to imagine the intensity of my suffering," Menachem's voice responded. "Although I was only a little boy when I was taken captive and it was not my fault, I committed so many sins! I married a gentile. I never kept Shabbos. I lived like a regular gentile. Please, I need to achieve atonement! Help me!"

R' Baruch turned to Kalman. "The only solution I can offer is that you hire eighteen people to learn *mishnayos* day and night. The pauper will sit in the middle of all of them, surrounded by the nonstop learning. I will say *kaddish* in the morning and you will say *kaddish* at night. We

will continue this until the *dybbuk* leaves. Once it leaves, it will be clear that it reached its *tikkun*.”

Kalman wasted no time fulfilling his uncle’s bidding. He quickly rounded up eighteen *talmidei chachimim* whom he paid to learn *mishnayos* for the elevation of his brother Menachem’s soul. For thirty days straight, they surrounded the pauper and learned *mishnayos*. R’ Baruch recited *kaddish* every morning, and Kalman recited *kaddish* every evening.

And then, on the thirtieth day, the eighteen scholars were learning as usual when the pauper sitting in the middle of them suddenly gave a scream, clutching his pinkie. Seconds later, the window broke.

“He’s gone,” R’ Baruch whispered. “Menachem’s soul is gone. It appears that he has reached his *tikkun*.”

That night, R’ Baruch made a *shailas chalom* to try to find out what happened to Menachem. In the dream, Menachem came to him and thanked him. “You have granted me atonement,” he exclaimed, his face glowing. “In the merit of my holy father, I was given a chance to rectify that which I hadn’t repented in my lifetime, and thanks to you and my dear brother, I have now achieved full atonement. My soul is at peace.”

And so it was, that after so many years, both brothers had finally come home.

Have a Wonderful Yom Tov!
This story is taken from tape # A370

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