

Beginnings are always messy.
— John Galsworthy

The beginning of wisdom is silence.
— Pirkei Avot

*The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need
and the unreasonable silence of the world.*
— Albert Camus

[PRESENT DAY]

PROLOGUE

Behind silver-rimmed glasses, his wide, unblinking eyes reflected the golden glow of the Ner Tamid—the synagogue’s eternal flame.

Flickering glints played across his pupils, as if his gaze followed something unseen.

His lips parted slightly, caught between thought and speech—as if wrestling with a revelation he wasn’t sure should be spoken.

The familiar lines of his face—usually lit with warmth and wisdom—were unreadable now. His expression revealed neither peace nor resistance—only a silent acquiescence.

Silence hung heavy in the synagogue—thick with waiting. It was the kind of quiet that often preceded Rabbi Shapiro’s unraveling of some hidden meaning from scripture, or the profound calm before one of his graveside eulogies.

But this silence stretched—beyond the natural pause of reflection.

This was a silence Rabbi Shapiro would never break. Whatever thoughts he held would remain unspoken—forever. Or perhaps another would speak them—at his own interment.

Then—a flash split the darkness.

A police photographer’s camera fired, shattering the stillness with mechanical precision.

Each burst of light laid the terrible truth bare—then darkness swallowed it whole.

On the far wall behind the bimah, dark red symbols appeared for a heartbeat with each flash—crude, finger-drawn shapes that seemed more ancient than accidental, as if caught by surprise. Then they vanished again, recoiling into shadow—unwilling to be seen.

For a moment, the dripping symbols left a ghosted afterimage—tears trailing from the shapes, as if the wall itself were weeping at the macabre sight.

Flash

Rabbi Shapiro's pale skin and thick white beard glowed faintly in the dim light—a stark contrast to the blood pooling beneath his head, like a medieval painting of the saints.

Flash

His body lay in a cruciform pose, arms outstretched, as though prepared for sacrifice.

Flash

His salmon-colored linen shirt—still neatly pressed, with its row of brown wooden buttons—lay over dark blue jeans, a strangely serene counterpoint to the stillness below.

The shirt had ridden up, revealing a pallid belly—the same stark white as his spotless Stan Smiths.

Flash

His white yarmulke—knocked loose in the struggle—now lay nearby.

A few inches away, its once-white silk turned crimson—drinking from the slow red stream winding down the gray-carpeted steps.
