

*Beginnings are always messy.*

*~John Galsworthy*

[PRESENT DAY]

## PROLOGUE

Behind the silver-rimmed glasses, his chocolate-brown eyes stared wide—unblinking—reflecting the golden glow of the Ner Tamid, the synagogue’s eternal flame. Flickering glints danced playfully across his large dark pupils, as if his gaze followed something unseen.

His thin lips parted slightly, shimmering in the shadows—caught in the moment 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 some hidden meaning from scripture or sharing a profound insight like those he delivered as graveside eulogies.

But this silence stretched too long—beyond the natural pause of contemplation.

This was a silence that Rabbi Shapiro would never break. Whatever thoughts he had in mind would remain unspoken—forever. Or perhaps they would be spoken by another—at his own interment.

Then—a flash of light split the darkness. The police photographer's camera fired, shattering the stillness with mechanical precision. Each flash cast sinister shadows throughout the room, briefly illuminating the walls.

With each burst of white light, the terrible truth was briefly laid bare—exposed for the briefest moment before darkness swallowed it again.

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

His lifeless body was splayed in a cruciform pose, arms outstretched, as though prepared for sacrifice.

A salmon-colored linen shirt, still neatly pressed with its row of brown wooden buttons, draped over dark blue jeans, an oddly serene contrast to the stillness beneath. The shirt had fallen back over his right pocket, exposing a pallid flabby belly—the same stark white as his spotless Stan Smith sneakers.

His white yarmulke, the small skullcap worn in reverence to God, had been knocked loose in the struggle and fall. Now it lay a few inches away, its once-white silk turning crimson—drinking from the red stream flowing down the gray carpeted steps.