

CHAPTER 1

The first time Jacob Fisher saw someone shoot up he was twelve years old. He was sitting on the couch in Lenny's basement apartment, eating the only snack Lenny ever provided, saltine crackers. Lenny was the superintendent of the Brooklyn building where the Fisher family lived. All of the people in Jacob's life were observant Jews and lifelong New Yorkers. Lenny was other, an older African American with a hint of the South about him.

Most everyone Jacob knew rushed words, determined to avoid someone else's selfish interruption. Lenny's cadence was different. He never hurried his thoughts or opinions. He listened when Jacob spoke, nodding his head, encouraging further response. When Lenny found out that Jacob studied piano, he made a point of sharing his love of the blues and jazz. Although Jacob's parents were unaware of the frequent visits, he stole time to visit Lenny in the musty apartment with the peculiar smell. Today, a sandalwood candle burned in an attempt to neutralize the odor of fried fish and beans.

Jacob polished off his wax-paper sleeve of crackers while he listened to Lenny ramble a twenty-minute love letter to Billie Holiday's imperfect genius. As he spoke, Lenny loaded one of her records onto an old-fashioned turntable, and a mournful plea for love flooded the small space. Lenny, arms stretched wide, greeted her voice. As if Jacob were invisible, Lenny poured a small envelope of powder into a bent spoon and held it over the lit candle

until the powder turned into an amber liquid. Suddenly, Lenny announced to the walls and furniture that he was diabetic and that the injection was insulin. He sat on a kitchen chair, loaded a syringe, and injected the fluid into a protruding vein in his ankle. The only time he lifted his head from the task at hand was to tap an air bubble out of the syringe. He never made eye contact. Jacob knew he was lying. His uncle was diabetic, and the insulin came out of a small glass bottle.

The top of Lenny's bent head shone dark brown through his gray close-cropped curls. His body swayed with the recording's seductive, hypnotic melody. As soon as he injected the liquid, Lenny looked completely happy, like someone who had just tasted the most delicious chocolate cake. He took a deep, satisfied breath and dozed off with his eyes half open.

Out of respect, Jacob stayed on the couch until the last notes faded. Handling the vinyl like Lenny had taught him, touching only the paper disc in the center and the rim where there was no groove, he removed the record from the turntable and carefully slipped it back into its cardboard cover. Quietly, he let himself out. Ever since that day, Jacob couldn't listen to Billie Holiday without thinking of saltines, Lenny, and heroin.



Jacob's hand cradled a sheet of sandpaper as he finished the fine details on the bookcase he was building. At thirty-two, he was a man at ease with his body: long, well-muscled limbs, deeply intelligent blue eyes, thick, dark hair and beard. His even strokes matched the rhythm of Ray Charles's "Come Rain or Come Shine" wafting gently from a speaker. The pain in the cry of a minor key resonated deep within him like an untold secret. Indeed, for all these years, the blues had to be a secret. The world of Orthodox Judaism forbade him to listen; the rabbis condemned any music that wasn't related to prayer as *narishkeit*. In Yiddish, that meant foolishness.

There was no higher insult for a learned man than to be labeled a fool, but Jacob didn't care what anyone else thought about his taste in music. He defiantly ignored the rabbis' judgment. He felt a primal connection to the sound of the blues.

When he was a child, Jacob's parents had marked him as difficult. He was a constant drip of disappointment, the son who'd openly defied religious rules and scoffed at tradition. Some rebellion was expected in all religious homes, but Jacob had relished any opportunity to challenge the status quo. Obstinate, he'd watch television on the Sabbath to follow his beloved Yankees, and he'd openly neglect to say mandatory prayers. He'd provoke, prod, and irritate until he got a response. When his father accused him of being intentionally argumentative, he wore the label like a compliment.

Even with the comfort of his music and his woodwork, Jacob couldn't get Trench McGinnis out of his mind. Only this afternoon he thought he'd spotted him on the street. He hadn't laid eyes on Trench in the fourteen years since he got clean. But the instant he registered his face, a tinny taste in his mouth forced him to remember the feeling of smack entering his body. Ever since the sighting, that tinny taste kept popping in uninvited. He focused on the music to get rid of the sensation.

Jacob sang a quiet duet with Ray Charles as the angled work light revealed the hand-carved details of his latest piece of furniture. The light illuminated him as well. On his head, a *kipah*, the skullcap that marked him as an observant Jew. He hunched, alone and diligent, over the unfinished bookcase, coaxing it into beauty. The repeated back-and-forth of the #2 sandpaper smoothed the surface of the wood. Soon, it could be stained. His sweat mingled with the vaguely acrid smell of the freshly scraped lumber, enveloping him in a cloud of testosterone familiarity.

Years ago, when he was at the rehab program in Israel, he'd learned to work with wood. He grew to appreciate the marbled

grains, the sensuous textures, and the life to be charmed from something no longer alive. This skill had proven essential. In his Orthodox community, being a scholar and cantor was well respected, but he never earned enough money to provide for his family. The woodworking filled the gaps.

Finishing a piece comforted him; all intrusive thoughts dissipated, and his concentration narrowed. Gone were the minutia of daily obligations, the needs and wants of his three young children, the meticulous lesson plans for the classes he taught at the yeshiva, the politics of his religious community. This piece of wood and this moment in time were all that mattered.

Jacob was unaware that his wife, Julia, had quietly opened the door to the back room that masqueraded as a wood shop. She stood there, barefoot, a full-length cotton nightgown skimming the floor, her body outlined through the fabric by the soft glow of the hall light. There were curves to this woman, but not those of too much food and too little exercise—rather, the soft contours of childbearing and health. In every way she was a woman best described as ripe. Her intellect was honed; her features, pleasing, eyes wide, lips full, rounded breasts and hips willing to welcome husband and child.

Now was the time for husband.

Julia's soft voice intruded on Jacob's meditation. "Come to bed, Jacob. You've been hiding in here for hours."

His attention never leaving the wood, his rhythm never faltering, Jacob responded. "I promised Mrs. Shapiro I'd have this finished by the weekend."

Julia gently entered the room and moved to his side. "It's beautiful," she whispered, one hand on his shoulder, the other moving lightly over the finely carved details.

There was need in her touch. The way her hand moved from his shoulder to the back of his neck spoke of animal hunger. It would be impossible for him to finish now.

“It has to be stained,” Jacob said, drawing out the seduction.

Julia leaned in to share her veiled invitation. “Not now. I can’t sleep without you in bed...it’s cold.” She leaned over him to turn off the music. Jacob’s breath stopped in his throat. He was filled with wonder and gratitude as he absorbed the feel of her lips against his ear, the brush of her breasts against his arm. After nine years of married life, he still longed for her.

The bookshelf could wait.



The morning sun forced Jacob to squint as he stepped out of his modest Williamsburg row house and headed for the synagogue. His fedora, white shirt, dark suit, and black shoes were his unofficial uniform. The threads of his *tsitses*, the fringed undergarment worn by observant Jews, peeked from beneath his suit. The clothing helped the Orthodox recognize one another and stand apart from secular society.

Morning rush hour in Brooklyn was better than a cup of coffee. Within minutes of his front door, Jacob was keenly aware of all his senses. He was greeted by the pungent smell of the Korean market, where ducks hung by their feet, and salsa music blasting from the corner bodega. Turban-swathed Sikhs waited for fares in their cabs while hipsters, punksters, and gangsters weaved in and out in their choreographed daily migration. As Jacob moved with the herd, he passed a corner newsstand and stopped to read a *New York Post* headline: “Fear of Homegrown Terrorism Escalates.” He handed the wizened news jockey a dollar as he flipped the paper under his arm. Unlike most of his generation, Jacob preferred the feel of newsprint to electronic scrolling.

“Morning.”

“Same to you, Rabbi,” the man growled over the cigar stub in his mouth.

Jacob was surprised. He bought the paper here often, yet

today this grizzled old man had chosen to speak to him for the first time.

“I’m not a rabbi, I’m a cantor,” Jacob answered politely.

The guardian of the news flashed a yellow-toothed grin and removed the stogie. “What’s the difference?”

Jacob momentarily debated if the effort of an answer was worthwhile. He decided to continue the civility.

“One talks, the other sings...I’m the singer.”

The old man slipped the cigar back in place, leaned on a stack of newspapers, and challenged him. “Oh yeah? So sing something.”

Instantly, Jacob’s eyebrows arched, and the corners of his mouth hinted at a private joke waiting to be delivered. Jacob turned up the portable radio on the newsstand’s back shelf. In a pure tenor voice he sang along with the Rolling Stones.

You can’t always get what you wa-ant.

No, you can’t always get what you wa-ant.

But if you try sometime,

You just might find,

You get what you need.

The old man rumbled a smoker’s laugh. “Love those oldies.”

Jacob tipped his fedora. “Me too.”

Newspaper under his arm, he stood at a crosswalk waiting for the light to change. A swarm of Orthodox men poured out of a nearby synagogue. Across the street he spotted Trench McGinnis—this time he was sure. Jacob was amazed that Trench was still alive. He must have moved back to the neighborhood. Trench was an anomaly in the sea of Orthodox men—a bright red baseball cap bobbing among black fedoras. The cap was only part of the reason Jacob recognized him. Trench was tiny, maybe five foot one, and wiry. He walked quickly, darting between the other

pedestrians. Jacob lifted his hand to wave but changed his mind, pretending to adjust his hat instead. What could he say to Trench after all these years?

And why should he want to connect again? Trench had been the one to lead him into drugs, a slow march from weed, to oxycontin, to heroin. Trench wasn't a dealer...just a user. The phrase *just a user* made Jacob shake his head in wry disbelief. They met in a jazz club. Trench had recognized Jacob's musical gift—from a trained classical pianist to a self-taught player of blues and jazz. He encouraged him to pursue his talent, dragging him to basement clubs in the outer boroughs, pretending not to notice Jacob's nervous performances. Trench had fed him and let him crash on his couch when Jacob's father kicked him out. Trench was the one who taught him about the opposite sex, even smoothing the way for his first experience.

There were a lot of firsts under Trench's tutelage. The first time Trench showed him how to smoke heroin was a casual transition. There was no nodding off like he remembered with Lenny, no gutless, drooling junkie behavior like he'd seen on television. The first time he did heroin, all he felt was content. He was on top of the "bads" that happened in everyday life: his disappointments, his ineptitudes, his failures. Heroin tricked him into believing that he was the person he wished he were. Jacob could do heroin and still create music, still perform in clubs. He felt alive and the world was beautiful. And heroin was cheap—ten, maybe twenty dollars and he was set for the weekend. But the drug was insidious. Soon the ten-dollar hit didn't work the same. He needed more of the drug each time and that was costly. Smoking heroin no longer put him in the right place. Shooting it did.

The next steps were a blur: dealers, back alleys, asking his mother for money, stealing from relatives and friends. Trench redeemed himself by calling 911 and Jacob's parents on the night he overdosed. That saved his life. He owed Trench for that.

Jacob could have yelled Trench's name. He could have grinned and offered a casual " 'sup?" Trench would laugh his ass off when he recognized him under the beard. Trench's laugh was easy and contagious, and even after all these years, Jacob could conjure the sound.

The light changed, and the pedestrians upstream and downstream flowed by one another. Jacob resisted the impulse to connect with his old friend, watching him enter a building next to the Tip Top Cleaners. When Jacob got straight, he'd learned that all the old friends had to go. Best not to poke the dragon.