

Chapter 1

“So long, Wayne, see you tomorrow. I’ll bring over my Ken Griffey rookie for you to look at. It’s awesome.”

“Later, man,” Wayne said, holding his hand up for a companionable slap.

Jason Siegel watched as the tall, husky black boy moved toward the front door of the large Tudor-style house, then started ambling toward his own house two blocks away. The warm breeze ruffled the sunny forsythia shrubs that dotted almost every lawn in Shady Glen, New Jersey, in the April dusk. Baseball practice had run late, and then the two sixth graders had stopped to check out the newest X-Men comics. It had to be after six, Jason thought.

Suddenly, his heart began to beat faster. It was Friday, and his mother had warned him to come

home right after practice. He still had to shower and change before his grandparents arrived for Shabbat dinner.

Jason began to run, his backpack thumping with each step. His stepfather David would certainly be home and cleaned up by now, and his mother would have bathed his twin half sisters, Leah and Devorah, and dressed them up in their Shabbat clothes. Jason thought it was the stupidest waste of time and energy he'd ever seen. It was dumb to change clothes for a couple of hours, just to eat a meal. They were only going to hang around the house, the way they did every Shabbat, so why did it matter what he was wearing?

Jason stopped running when he reached his walk, slipped the backpack off his shoulders, and began fumbling in the outside pocket. Where was that *kippah*? David had asked him to wear it, but he always took it off as soon as he left the house. That was another dumb thing David wanted him to do,

something he'd never even thought of before his mother remarried a little more than two years earlier.

Finding the skullcap, Jason grabbed his backpack and mitt with one hand and jammed the crocheted *kippah* onto his thick brown hair with the other. One of David's old ladies at the nursing home where he worked had made it, crocheting "Go, Mets" around the rim. Jason knew his stepfather had hoped that would make it more appealing, but Jason wasn't buying it. Just because David had discovered Religion with a capital *R* didn't mean Jason had to turn his life inside out. He scowled as he struggled to grab the doorknob. Let David boss his own kids around; Jason was tired of taking orders from him.

Jason pushed the door open and dropped his stuff on the floor. Stepping quietly into the hall, he glanced right. Sure enough, the dining room table was covered with a tablecloth and set for five, with

two high chairs. The Shabbat candles on the sideboard were not lit yet. Maybe he could get into the bathroom before anyone saw him and there wouldn't be a problem.

“Jasee here! Jasee here!” a voice squealed gleefully, and Jason turned around to see Leah trying to follow him up the stairs. He sat down on a step, smiling despite his anxiety, and waited for the chubby twenty-month-old to reach him. Her white tights were already gray at the knees, and the red ribbon that should have been around her head was looped dangerously around her neck.

“Hey, cutie pie. How's my girl?” Jason hugged the little girl and rested his cheek on her silky blonde hair. He loved the twins much more than he'd expected when his mother got pregnant six months after she'd married David. They were the best part of his new family, he often thought. “Where's your partner in crime?” he asked.



“She’s right here, all ready for Shabbat.” David stood at the bottom of the stairs, his reddish beard neatly combed and his thinning beige hair covered by a *kippah*, holding an identical curly-haired smiling blonde in his arms. Jason gazed at Devorah’s lightly freckled face, so much like her father’s.

“We were wondering where you were,” David said, looking up at Jason.

Jason flushed with irritation. “Practice ran late, but I’ll go get changed now.”

“Make it fast. Mom’s about to light the candles.”

Jason carefully balanced Leah on the stairs, snatching off the red ribbon and tossing it to David. “She’s going to kill herself with this.” Then he raced up the stairs to his room, ignoring her squawk of complaint.

As Jason stripped off his sweatpants and T-shirt and threw them toward his hamper, he glanced at the family photograph hanging over his bureau. It

showed a woman with dark bushy hair laughing as a little boy tried to shovel snow. A man with long hair leaned on another snow shovel. Jason was about three years old in that picture, so it had to have been taken four years before his father died of leukemia.

Jason gazed at the picture, letting his eyes rest on his father's face, long and thin like his own. Whenever he thought of his father, he saw the face in the picture. It seemed to him that he remembered his father, but at times it was hard to know whether he remembered the man himself or stories and pictures of him. Jason often looked at albums from the time his father was healthy and strong, and when he didn't look at them for a long time, he felt that he'd done something wrong.

Jason stepped quickly in and out of the shower and hurried to put on slacks and a shirt. As he combed his hair, he thought he could hear his Grandpa Phil's voice downstairs. That meant they