

Chapter 15

And so it was over – yet not quite, because Freddie gently but firmly took the cup of tea meant for Klein and the thinly sliced lemon surrounded by a circle of sweet biscuits from Hilda’s hands and said, “Please let me. You must be worn out.” Hilda neither objected nor resisted but Freddie felt her eyes on her back as she walked away.

Klein was reclining in his customary post-class attitude on the couch, expansive and exhausted, students beside him and on the floor at his feet. Freddie set his refreshments down and his eyes indicated momentary surprise at the change in protocol.

“I wanted to do it,” she said quietly. “Hilda looked drained.”

“Amanda, Miriam,” he said, not looking at either of them as they sat virtually atop his shoes. He trained his famous gaze on Freddie alone. “Make room. Give Freddie a little space. You have something you wish to talk to me about?” he asked, clearly suggesting to those sitting closest to him that they would be wise to give him and his newest disciple some privacy. Within moments, Freddie had taken a seat in the chair opposite him while clusters of devotees redistributed themselves at a distance around the room.

Klein looked at her thoughtfully. “*Nu?*” he said, his tone affable, with only the slightest suggestion of amusement. “Do you need me to draw you out? Would you like me to?”

Moment of truth. A thousand ways to play it and her mind went blank. Freddie could not look at him. She kept her eyes lowered and took a couple of deep breaths. His voice, when next he spoke, was unexpectedly gentle.

“I’m sorry Freddie. I didn’t mean to sound quite so flippant. Just because you’re no longer a student at the university, doesn’t mean things don’t hurt. There are issues. Am I right?”

Freddie nodded. She did not know if she were acting in her capacity as Hoffman’s researcher or if she were responding to the warmth in the man which had the disturbing effect of making her want to bare her soul to his questions.

“Tell me what you need. Tell me what you’d like. I’m here for you.”

She maintained her silence. It was an involuntary response but he seemed to take it as a worthy challenge.

“Freddie,” he said quite gently, “I don’t want to force anything out of you that you don’t feel completely comfortable in sharing. Let me ask you something on a totally different subject. Is that all right with you?”

She nodded again.

“You’re obviously coming to my classes regularly, punctually –” He paused and Freddie looked up at him and smiled. He returned the smile. “That’s better. It’s good, Freddie, to look your rabbi honestly in the eye. Now tell me what is it you’d really like to learn.”

“To – to learn?”

“You’re coming to these classes, but someone of your intelligence must surely realise I only touch the surface here. You read Hebrew?”

“Yes.”

“How well?”

“It’s been a while.”

“Never mind. Whatever you have forgotten, I can restore. So,” he continued, “my question is entirely appropriate. What is it you’d like to learn? If I have a class in that particular subject, you may join it. If

I don't, I'll make one especially for you. If you could choose to learn any subject with me, Freddie, from within our entire canon, what would it be?"

My, she thought, the entire canon at your fingertips.

"Any subject?" she asked.

"Any subject."

"The laws regarding divorce." Freddie did not know where the words had come from except that she heard herself utter them. She noticed how very quiet the room had grown around her.

"Because?" the rabbi asked.

"Because I have a civil divorce, but my husband won't grant me a religious one. It's been over ten years now, Reuven. You know the law. And I can't seem to get the rabbis here to listen."

"I'm listening."

"So will you teach me?"

"I'm not sure such learning would be in your best interests."

"You said I could choose anything!"

"Freddie."

She refused to meet his gaze.

"Come!" he stood up suddenly and offered her his hand. "Let us walk in the garden a little. Hilda," he called, "keep the urn boiling."

Freddie gave him her hand and felt a current of distrust flow through her. He had wanted Hilda to know he was leaving with her. His clasp was warm and firm and she knew he had noticed the vibration of her shudder.

"You need not tremble, Freddie," he said as he held the door open for her. "I am here to help you. I have a class I think would be perfect for you."

Tremble?

"Is that so?" she asked.

They walked into the darkness.

"There are two other women in the group, Hilda and a young woman called Jamie. It is Gemara study."

“But I’ve never looked inside a volume of the Talmud in my life,” Freddie protested.

“It doesn’t matter. Both women were in a similar predicament not so long ago.”

“And what volume are we learning?”

“They are called tractates, Freddie, and we would be learning Tractate *Niddah*.”

She froze. For all her ignorance, she knew enough to be aware that this was the volume elucidating the laws of what was coyly referred to as “Family Purity”. She knew it dealt mainly with the edicts and discussions concerning a woman’s menstrual flow and her intimate relations with her husband.

“You’ve heard of it, I see.”

“Before my marriage I studied some of the laws with the rabbi’s wife, but never from inside the – the tractate.”

“Then it’s time, wouldn’t you say?”

They paced the lawn in diminishing circles. “Stop a moment,” he said and she had no choice but to stand directly facing him, nowhere to cast her eyes but down or directly at him.

“We are on a journey, Freddie,” he said. “We know where it begins. We do not know where it will take us. That is the essence of all worthwhile journeys.”

“I thought it was always better to have a goal.”

“Ah, a goal. Good, very good. I can see you will challenge me – which is as it should be.”

Yes, idiot, he wants you to feel flattered, she told herself, trying to preserve something of the status of the watcher, observing from the outside, maintaining perspective.

“Our goal, you should know, is God, always God. But that is different from embarking on a journey and trusting our destination to God’s discretion. Do you see?” He did not wait for her response. “The *Niddah* class takes place on Tuesday mornings at eight. I hold it in my study at Ben-Gurion House. May I expect you there next week?”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, of course.” She looked at her watch, its luminous hands green and distinct in the ghostly garden with its dying flowers. “It’s late, Reuven. I really ought to go.”

“Two more things and then you may go. Do you permit the lesson to continue?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Firstly, counselling. You are obviously in need. Your position as an *agunah*, a woman chained by divorce, is difficult.”

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow at two I have a free hour. Come to my office and we will discuss it. I am equipped to listen to your heart, Freddie. It is my job. I sense within you a grief so profound that it must soon surely overflow. Isn’t it time you had a safe place into which you could allow it to do so?”

She nodded.

“And finally,” he said very softly, “will you permit me to tell you a story?”

And if she said no? Everyone, it seemed, had a story to tell her.

“Open that sad heart of yours, Freddie, and listen.”

They began to pace the garden again.

“Once, high in the Carpathian mountains, where the snow never entirely melted, there was born a very holy soul. At the moment of her emergence from the womb, when all souls still remember the entire Torah and can still hear clearly the voice of the Divine, God made her a promise: ‘No matter where you are or what you do in your allotted time, know that I will always walk beside you.’

“Her life was far from easy, for her own work, and that of her husband, was humble. It was his duty to assist the *shohet* – the ritual slaughterer – in ascertaining whether or not the animals to be prepared for koshering were indeed whole and pure once they had been killed. If there were even the slightest internal injury – the tiniest perforation of a lung would suffice – this would render the animal *treyf*, literally ‘torn’, and therefore unfit for consumption. In such a

poor community, it was tantamount to condemning a family to starvation, for once an animal was declared *treyf*, it had to be disposed of. A holy task, this supervision, but unpopular.

“For all that, she never forgot God’s promise. Many years passed. And just when she and her husband thought of nothing but spending their old age together in the modest peace and comfort with which their hard lives had rewarded them, the woman found she was pregnant once again. Pious and truly holy, the old couple viewed it as a gift from God, even though they knew it would fill and disrupt the lives they had expected to be allowed to live out quietly.

“Then the madman of Germany swept to power. Even to this remote pocket of the world did the bureaucracy eventually manage to stretch its evil fingers. Her husband was rounded up to work in a labour camp and she could only watch a soldier aim a single bullet through her young daughter’s throat as the child clung to her father’s hands, unwilling to allow him to be taken away.

“That night, the old woman cried until she was feverish with her tears. The heat in her body became unbearable and, almost without realising what she was doing, she went outside into the frozen darkness for relief.

“She walked through the snow, with only the stars to light her way. On and on she staggered until at last she fell sobbing to the ground. There she lay, unable to move, uncaring as to her fate. Eventually she felt a delicious warmth steal over her. This is how it ends, she thought.

“Within the warmth, she felt strong arms lift her. In a rush of scented air, she thought herself to be shooting towards the sky. Eventually, finding herself at a huge window made of the finest crystal, she was able to look down and out upon the entire world while, at the same time, see her little house among the trees in the snow. Through the window of her house she could see her husband and daughter together at the table, studying Torah.

“Didn’t I promise you, sweetest soul, that I would always walk

beside you? Look down and be comforted,' a voice told her. 'Look down, holy one, and see the route of your entire life's journey. Can you not see that on each path you trod, there is an extra set of footprints right beside your own?'

"'Master of the Universe,' she cried out, 'I can see where you walked beside me. Your footprints are truly in the snow beside mine. But I can also see many places where there is but one set of footprints. You forsook me then; there is the evidence. How can You deny it?'

"The voice became gentler still. 'Where you see only one set of footprints – that is where you could no longer walk and I picked you up and carried you in my arms.'"

As Klein fell silent, Freddie felt her emotions buffeted by a tempest of sorrow and pain. A febrile restlessness. Wanting only to turn and walk away, she felt the ground hold her.

"Tomorrow, Freddie. I will expect you at two."

She did not answer. It was he who turned and walked away, leaving her there to contemplate the darkness.

Chapter 22

Freddie felt her newly won freedom warranted a grand celebration, a Passover Seder perhaps, with many people sitting around a laden table singing songs of liberation. Instead, she found herself in the rabbi's office after the fact, standing opposite him, grateful, shaking, trying not to cry.

"Did I tell you you could trust me?" he asked when they were finally alone.

Freddie nodded.

"So will I see you at the class next week? You will come to study Talmud with Hilda and Jamie? With me?"

She nodded again, lost for words or other responses. Compliance was easy, made sense. She thought she might be in shock. He touched a lock of her hair, brushing it away from her forehead. She jumped back, as though his fingers were tipped with fire. She thought she recognised that touch.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I don't understand."

"In return."

"You insult me, Freddie."

He looked insulted, almost distressed, at her words.

"Rabbis should not," she said.

"Indeed, they should not. But perhaps all this has been too much

for you. You need – I don't know. Will I call Ruth? Or Anton? Would you like one of them to come for you? To take you home? You're not yourself, Freddie."

Hearing him speak, it was as though a tornado that had been swirling in an uncontained current a great distance away now reached her. Shiver-drifting in some inchoate space of restless dread her mind was picked up and flung back into her body. She jumped at the reconnection.

"I – I'm sorry," she heard herself say. "I cannot think what came over me. Forgive me, Reuven. If you were my lawyer I'd be writing you a cheque for many thousands of dollars. I somehow feel I owe you more than just confused thanks or awkward apologies."

"Really?"

She could not read him.

"Really," she replied.

"Then do it," he said. "Don't think so much. You do have a tendency to overthink things, you know."

Freddie could not look at him. Taking her cheque book from her bag, she felt dismay and confusion flood her as she scrawled unthinkingly upon the slip of paper before her. She tore it out and held it towards him. He smiled as he took it.

"Nine thousand dollars," he said in some wonderment. "A lot of money. Half *chai*. Half a life – which is what you were living as a chained woman. How appropriate." He ripped the cheque in two and dropped the pieces of paper into her open bag. Now he laughed.

"I test you, you test me. Do we both pass or both fail with such folly? Now can we stop? Come to class next week, Freddie. I told you there was no need for you to learn the intricacies of Jewish divorce law. Jamie and Hilda are expecting you. We will learn together. There is great healing in learning."

For some reason, his voice, his request – a demand dressed in request's clothing – caused her pelvic floor to feel as though it were

dropping away. She clenched tightly, as if to save herself. If she did not, surely she would fall and fall and never feel her feet touch the earth again. Part of her ached to let go, to collapse into the tantalising endlessness of tumbling.

“So you will come?” Klein persisted.

“Yes. Eight in the morning. Wednesday.”

He smiled that she had remembered so precisely and sat behind his desk, looking down at the book lying open there, becoming absorbed in it in an instant. Freddie realised she was dismissed.

“Reuven?”

He looked up as if surprised to see her still there.

“Yes?”

“It feels difficult to leave. I don’t want to be alone.”

Something flickered in his eyes but she could not read it.

“Those times,” he said, “when what we want most is denied us, we grow in ways we never imagined were possible. Go away, Freddie. I am busy and you are so fragile – fragile to breaking. Now is not the time.”

“For what?” she asked.

“Only you know the answer to that. I’ll wait for you to tell me. For the present, I prescribe sleep.”

“Sleep doesn’t always come when it’s asked.”

“Really?”

She shook her head, not trusting her voice.

Again the flicker followed by a smile.

“Please leave, Freddie. Your behaviour is –” he paused, “unworthy of you.”

She flushed deeply and his smile grew warm.

“You please me, Freddie, do you know that? You please me a great deal.”

Once again he dropped his eyes to the text on the desk before him and once again Freddie had no option but to go.

[...]

TUESDAY, 10TH AUGUST

This is not a class like other classes, not a text like other texts, Reuven tells us in preparation for learning from the *Holy Fire*. Who will come? he asks. Who feels ready? Slowly, silently, each one of us sitting around the Rebbe's table raises a hand.

WEDNESDAY, 18TH AUGUST

I am obsessed by the Torah of the Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe. I am obsessed by his *Holy Fire* and can think of nothing else. It burns me, blisters me; I spend long hours trying to decipher its poetic Hebrew on my own – an almost impossible task for someone with my limited skill – because inside that text lie the keys to the doors my father has locked me out of all the days of my childhood, all the days of my life. I beg Reuven to teach me only that, nothing else. I no longer want Talmud and *Niddah*; Midrash is empty, a gaggle of meaningless stories for children who cannot bear the austerity of the original.

THURSDAY, 19TH AUGUST

The rabbi has declined my request and says I must learn moderation; that it is good for me to wrestle with the text on my own, for how else will I learn? I cry that I want him to teach me day and night until I have this text inside me, until I have eaten, swallowed, absorbed and digested it so that it is part of me and I a part of it and I will know the truth behind my father's pain.

When I say this, Reuven holds me very, very gently and he kisses my mouth and cups my breasts in his hands until I think I must surely faint, but all the while he is somehow holding me upright so I cannot fall. It is late at night and I am in his office. Ben-Gurion House is empty but for us and he tells me it is my choice and all I have to do to make it is either to close the door, turn out the light and walk back into his arms, or to walk out of that self-same door. Which latter choice he will totally understand but I should realise that if I make it, I may no longer learn with him.

I hear my self gasp.

–I may no longer learn with you?

–That is entirely up to you. But you see what I am asking, don't you Amy?

And quite suddenly I do. Quite suddenly it is so clear that for an instant all pain vanishes and I cry out with relief until I feel it return with even greater force.

–You ask more than I can give, I tell him.

He is still holding me and shakes his head.

–I don't think so, little Amy, clever, proud Amy. So proud. It's time someone taught you how to kneel. I want you in your totality. Not part of you or some of you but all of you – as you want the *Holy Fire*, so I want you. And I will have you, because I know how deeply you desire the fire to be within you. You have always ached to burn from the inside. I can show you how.

I am silent. I have no words to counter him.

–Turn out the light, he tells me and I do his bidding. I close the

door without being asked, return to his arms and he covers my face with more of those soft kisses until I weep from every tear duct, every cavity, every cleft and fold in my body.

–Until you know this, until I have humbled you, you will never know Torah, he whispers and now his hands are in my hair and he closes them into fists and forces me to my knees. I fight him every inch of the way.

–I will not kneel to you, I gasp through tears that burn my face.

–It is good that you fight, he tells me. –Of what value is your pride if you would relinquish it without a struggle?

And suddenly I am on the floor at his feet, and I am not just kneeling, but my face touches his shoes. His hands are no longer in my hair and he is not even holding me down. Of my own free will, my lips kiss his ankles and my arms hold him in a clasp so tight around his calves that for a moment he is in danger of losing his balance.

He sinks to the floor and raises me so I kneel before him. Now he begins to unbutton and undress me. I am completely naked. He lies me on the floor and stands above me for what seems like an eternity. He is still fully clothed and he reads my vulnerability and smiles. Again he comes back down to me and before I have time even to make myself ready, he thrusts my legs wide apart, unbuckles and undoes but does not undress and he is deep inside me, his tongue in my mouth so I cannot even cry out.

It seems as though we are melded together for an eternity; I am crying and laughing, but in total silence. In whispered commands, he forbids me to make a sound and I am in an agony of silent rapture, wanting this night never to end. His hands are never still, teasing my breasts and my sides and my thighs, pulling my hair as he bites my neck so that I know I will have bruises in the morning. But when I cry out that he should be careful, he covers my mouth with his hand so that I can hardly breathe. I am terrified and he laughs and releases his grip but threatens to beat me if I make another sound, which I

cannot help but do. He makes good his promise and, to a terrible choreography of hands and belt, I rise to orgasm, sink into tears.

He withdraws and tells me it is enough for now, buckling and buttoning himself, leaving me naked on his floor in the dark. I hear him take the lift to the car park. I hear him drive away. It is hours before I can move ...