

## CHAPTER

# 1

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Most of the time I called my grandfather Max Levene. Some people might have thought it was disrespectful, but Grampa never did, and I never meant it to be.

He used to call me on the telephone and he'd say, "Hello, Duvid"—that's how he pronounced David—"this is Max Levene, your grandfather." I always thought that was the biggest riot. I mean, it wasn't as if I knew fifteen other guys named Max Levene. I liked to tease Max and I would say, "Levene? Levene? That does sound familiar," and Max would say, "Duvid, it's me, Max Levene, your grandfather. Me, Max Levene." We would go on like that for a while, until finally I'd admit that I knew it was Grampa all along. We had some great times, me and Max.

Now he was dead.

And I still hadn't cried.

I sat at the back of the small parlor, trembling as if I were freezing cold, but not crying. Nana, my grandmother, sat beside me. She was crying enough for the two of us. In fact, Nana was wailing like a wounded animal, and the pitiful sound she made must have echoed all through the funeral home, where hundreds of other people had come for Max Levene's funeral.

*David and Max*

Well, David, I thought, the doctors were right. They had said Max would die soon from his weak heart. I had gone around telling people that those doctors were way off base. "Hey, not Max Levene," I would say. "He's indestructible," and people would look at me with pity in their eyes, probably because they could tell I was scared. Anyhow, the doctors were right and I was wrong and now my grampa was there inside that long wooden box at the front of the room, lying quiet and still, like a thing instead of a person.

This small quiet room was for close family members, so we could be alone with Max before we had to go and face all the second cousins and distant nephews and friends from the synagogue. And, of course, all the odd characters Max had known over the years. Max was like that. Nana would send him to the store for a quart of milk and he'd come home an hour later and say, "I met this very interesting man. Walberg's the name. He collects bathtubs."

My mother and father, my younger brother, Markie, Nana, and I were all together in the little parlor, but I bet we all felt as if we were alone. I did. Aunt Nancy and Uncle Danny had been there, too, but now they had gone to greet some of the mourners and talk to the funeral director about something. Max Levene is dead, I thought, so what could possibly matter?

Ma was still at the front of the room by the casket, like a soldier standing guard while Markie crouched behind Dad as though he were hiding from what was happening.

Suddenly Ma's body convulsed as if a bolt of lightning had struck her. She started sobbing. Dad rushed up to her and held her. He touched her cheeks with a handkerchief.

"Oy, my God," Nana moaned.

## Chapter 1

Markie spun around and stared at Nana. His eyes were full of fright. Poor Markie, I thought. I wanted to go and put an arm around him and tell him that everything would be okay.

But my orders were plain.

“David, stay with your grandmother,” Dad had said on the drive over. “Take care of Nana, that’s your job. You’re a young man now and I’m counting on you.”

A young man. Even at thirteen, with Max dead I felt as if I were five years old again.

Nana moaned louder than before. It was a bone-chilling sound. “Don’t cry, Nana,” I pleaded. “Please don’t cry.”

When she moaned again, I jumped to my feet.

“I can’t take this,” I yelled.

“David!” my dad said, “get a grip on yourself.”

“I’m sorry!” I said, and then I dashed out of the room, feeling as if something were chasing me.

I ran through the lobby. It was filled with people who had loved Max Levene. But not like me, I thought. They didn’t love him the way I loved him. When I spotted the men’s room, I hurried in, praying that it would be empty. I needed to be alone. The room was empty—and white and gleaming, and so clean you could probably perform surgery in it. Heart surgery, I thought sadly.

“Damn it, Max,” I shouted. “Damn you. Why did you have to die? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

My words didn’t make any sense, but they felt right. I pounded my fists in the air as if there were ghosts that I had to fight off.

After a minute I was exhausted. I bent over the sink and splashed cold water on my face. “You idiot!” I told myself.

It's not as if no one told you Grampa was dying. Everyone knew. Even Grampa. Especially Grampa.

"You must not upset yourself, Duvid," I heard Max say again in my mind, as he had so many times. "Be happy, not sad. You hear what I'm telling you? Your heart must be filled with good things, not this business of dying."

That was easy for him to say. He wasn't the one being left behind. I kept staring at myself in the mirror. But I kept seeing Max. "He's a regular little Max Levene," everyone always said. "The image."

I felt as if a lump the size of a tennis ball had gotten caught in my throat, and when I tried to swallow, my eyes stung and a strange sound erupted in the room. It was a big booming cry, as if someone were in awful pain, and it ricocheted across the slick tile walls of the men's room. A moment passed before I realized the terrifying sound was me crying. It was being wrenched out of me like a tumor, and to me it was as frightening as Nana's wailing. When it was gone, I felt as if someone had been choking me and had finally stopped, and the tears rushed out of me like water from a fire hose.

When I stopped crying, I splashed more water on my face. While I was drying myself I saw my reflection in the mirror. Markie was standing behind me.

"How long have you been there?" I asked.

"It's okay," Markie said. "You had to cry sooner or later. Dad sent me to get you. They're starting the service."

"Damn."

"You okay now?" Markie asked.

"Yeah. You?"

"I guess," he said, but he sounded pathetic. As we stepped into the lobby I put an arm around Markie's shoulder.

## Chapter 1

In the chapel I found Nana sitting in the first row with the rest of our little family. I sat beside her again, feeling now as if I understood the strange sounds she had made.

The chapel was packed. I turned around to see Max's friends. Max sure was loved. A couple of rows back I saw my best friend, Randy. He smiled sadly. Even Randy came, I thought, and I waved to him to say hey. Dad leaned across Nana and snapped his fingers at me. "Turn around and pay attention," he whispered.

"I know."

"Shh."

I couldn't believe it. What did Dad think, that I didn't care? Nobody loves Max Levene more than I do.

*Did.*

I looked up at the rabbi who began to talk about what a great guy Max was.

And then it hit me.

That face. I had seen that face.

I peeked over my shoulder and looked for it again. It had been there, right near Randy. Yes, there it was. That white fluffy hair, those white bushy eyebrows, the thin, bony nose. For an instant the man's eyes met mine. Then he shifted in his seat and he was out of view. My heart pounded. It was Bernie Bauer. "B.B."

I was sure of it.