

CHAPTER 1

IN LATE MORNING the fluffy white snow had turned watery, and by the time Sarah Raab arrived for the four o'clock Delta shuttle at Reagan Airport, an alarming drop in temperature had iced the plane's wings and forced the cancellation of the New York flight. She was overburdened by her laptop bag, a rolling suitcase packed with the creased remains of her three-day wardrobe, and a canvas bag stamped with the Rights Abuse Watch International logo highlighting its acronym "RAW." It was filled with handouts from the conference.

Because of a dinner party scheduled in New York that night, she immediately instituted Plan B and hurried to catch a cab that, with luck, might get her to Union Station in time to catch a train back to Manhattan.

It took her a half hour to reach the front of the taxi line, and as she stepped off the curb and into the taxi, her right foot slipped on an icy patch and she felt herself begin to go down.

The laptop bag slid off her shoulder, but in the split second before she would have hit the ground, she felt suddenly but-tressed under her armpits by a steely grip that seemed to have come from nowhere.

In a moment she was upright, and a man who was standing behind her in the taxi line was handing her the laptop bag. She had dropped the canvas bag as well, which the man quickly retrieved.

“I can’t believe it!” she exclaimed, facing the man. She was too flustered to give him more than a passing glance, but she did note that he was tall and wore a trench coat and a baseball cap without a logo. “I thought surely...”

“No problem,” the man interrupted, nodding and offering a thin smile.

The taxi trunk opened automatically. She placed her laptop bag and rolling suitcase inside and then opened the cab door. She addressed the man again.

“If you’re going to Union Station, I’ll drop you. My treat. I owe you.”

The man surveyed the line and there were no cabs in sight. But he seemed reluctant. Sarah felt his gaze glance over her, more like an inspection. She noted that his eyes concentrated for a brief moment over the logo RAW on her canvas bag.

“Why not?” he asked rhetorically, shrugging off any hesitancy, following her into the taxi.

“Aside from the embarrassment of breaking something,” she said as the cab headed toward Union Station, “I sure am grateful.”

“No problem,” the man repeated. He looked out the window and she saw him in profile. He had a strong square chin and

a chiseled nose, as if his face could be included on Mount Rushmore. She could not see the color of his eyes and the baseball cap was low on his head. He was silent as the taxi moved with the heavy traffic, which slowed further as they crossed the Fourteenth Street Bridge.

“Where are you heading?” she asked. His attitude suggested that he was closed to small talk and did not seem welcoming.

“New York,” he said with a sudden air of assertion.

“Me too,” Sarah said, strangely comforted by the coincidence. She added, “I have this dinner party.” She looked at her watch. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

Naturally curious, she was never too shy to strike up a conversation with a stranger. Her husband Gary had often rebuked her for being too open, too inquisitive, offering unnecessary information to strangers. “A born *yenta*,” he would tell her often. “It will get you in trouble one day,” he had warned. But then Gary was always cautioning, always lecturing. On that score they were two peas in a pod, both believing implicitly that everyone on Earth was entitled to their own opinion.

“You live in New York?” she asked.

“No,” he replied, not turning his head toward her. Except, she sensed when she turned away as if he were secretly appraising her.

“We might get lucky to catch the Acela,” she said, which was the faster train to New York.

“Be nice,” he said.

She waited for further explanation, which never came. *Strong, silent type*, she mused, missing any idea of further conversation. The taxi made its way across the bridge toward Capitol Hill and Union Station. She checked the time on her

watch and then opened her purse, pulled out her cell phone, and punched in Gary's number at the law firm. When he answered, she explained her plight.

"Plane's cancelled. I'm in a cab on my way to the train station. Better go without me, darling. I might make the train. If I do I'll meet you at the Sterns." She waited through a long pause. "I promise. I'll do the best I can. Quite inspiring. The panel went great. Maybe not a giant step, but I think we're getting traction on all fronts. I'll tell you all about it. I'll try. Love you. Bye."

She finished the call and addressed the man, forgetting he was not the engaging type.

"My husband. He was in a meeting," she said as if an explanation were needed. "We're supposed to be with one of his clients. Dinner party. He's a lawyer. Wall Street. Things are pretty tense out there these days."

"So I hear," the man said, facing her. She could see his eyes now, pale blue, the color of Wedgwood. She wondered if his reply was sarcastic. *Probably military*, she speculated, picturing a very short crew cut under his baseball cap.

Typical shkutz, she thought, her grandmother's Yiddish slang for non-Jewish boys. She suppressed a giggle. Nevertheless, he certainly had great reflexes. Again she directed her attention to her cell phone and placed a call.

"Marta. It's me. How is the weather there? It will be worse. I promise you. The storm is moving north. Let me speak to Rachel."

"She do piano lesson."

"Just for a second, Marta."

She smiled at the man. "My daughter. Eleven." There was a moment's pause.