

DEVORIE KREIMAN

Step by Step



He needed to make a change...but who would help him do that?

Their fifth anniversary is in ten days. At 2:00 pm on Friday, Noam hangs the “Closed” sign on the door of Schiener’s Dry Cleaning and goes to the computer in the back room to finalize the details of the surprise trip to the Poconos next week. He’s already booked a room at a luxurious resort, planned the menu and reserved a boat ride. Now, he’s studying hiking trails. Risa loves nature. She’ll relax on the trip. They’ll talk.

He gets home an hour before Shabbos, turns his key in the front door, holds up the bouquet of hydrangeas and calls, “Risa, I’m here.” No response. Risa could be taking a shower. Or napping. He walks quietly into the kitchen.

A stab of panic. Something is very wrong. It’s Erev Shabbos, but there’s no smell of challah, soup or kugel. No covered cake on the counter. “Risa? You okay?” He runs through the living room and dining room to the bedroom and bathroom. “Risa? Risa?”

He calls her phone. It goes to voicemail. He texts her. His fingers are slippery on the tiny keyboard, and he has to retype his words a few times.

She responds immediately. *I’m at my mother’s for Shabbos. Need a break. There’s soup in the freezer and chicken and rice in the fridge and vegetables for salad.*

He texts: *What’s going on?* Then he calls her. Voicemail again. He calls again. Again no answer.

She texts: *We’ll talk on Sunday. Turning phone off.*

He looks at the clock. Risa’s mother lives 65 miles away. There won’t be time to drive there before Shabbos.

Is that why she ran out on Friday afternoon?

His mind does a frantic sift through the last few days: *What did I do wrong this time?*

It’s like watching a creepy video. Someone else heats up the oven, puts a pan of food in and forgets to take it out in time. Someone else stays home from *shul*, hears the words of *Kiddush* echo in the emptiness, forces down a piece of challah and throws the

rest of the meal away without tasting it. Someone else walks from room to room in the apartment, all night, telling himself, “It’s Shabbos,” and “This isn’t happening.”

On Shabbos morning, he has a headache from lack of sleep, but he pushes himself to go to *shul*. He thinks of approaching the *rav*, but he’s not sure what to ask.

She took a Shabbos off... People do...

No point in embarrassing her. Or myself.

She’s never left before. Not even in the worst times...

We’ll discuss it when she comes back.

His older brother Zev’s house is on the way home from *shul*. Noam walks up to Zev’s front door, knocks, then considers leaving. But he’s hungry, and Zev’s wife, Nechama, makes a tomatoey and garlicky cholent that’s better than any he’s ever tasted.

Nechama opens the door, her baby in her arms, and smiles, “Good Shabbos. What a nice surprise!”

Noam steps into the dining room and shrugs out of his coat. “I’m on my own today. Risa is by her mother.”

Nechama says, “You’re just in time. We’re about to make *Kiddush*.”

Zev is in his seat at the head of the table. His mop-headed toddler is on his lap, and his four-year-old is standing on a chair next to him. Zev looks up. “Risa went away without you? What’s going on?”

Noam looks away and mumbles. “It’s fine.” Because the kids are listening. Also, because Zev might be very quick to point out all the things he could have done to avoid this...

When they were kids, Zev used to call him Noam Doam. To Noam it had always sounded like Numb Dumb.

Noam sleeps the rest of Shabbos away, misses the *rav’s shiur* and the *minyan* for *Minchab*. Then he stays up much too late on Motzaei Shabbos. Risa is still not answering calls or texts.

He stumbles out of bed, bleary-eyed and groggy,

on Sunday morning. He’s standing by the open fridge wondering if the milk is still good, thinking about going to The Bagel Spot for coffee instead of making a mess in the kitchen, when his phone buzzes. Risa. He hits the speaker and says, “Hi. Finally! I miss you. What time will you be back? I can pick up bagels if you—”

“I want a divorce.”

“Huh?”

“Noam, I’m not coming home. I want a divorce.”

He brings his phone close to his face. “Risa, you’re upset? Something happened?”

“You never listen. I’m staying here.”

“When did you come up with this? Over Shabbos?”

She sighs. He knows that sigh. It holds eons of disappointment.

She says, “I’m not getting into it now. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Why, Risa? Why?” He’s whining like a child. “Just answer me. Why?”

“A hundred reasons,” she says. “I’ve told you all of them already.”

A hundred reasons.

You don’t get it... You’re not a go-getter... You’re insecure... You don’t speak up for yourself... You let people walk all over you... You have no sense of adventure... You’re afraid to try anything new...

And the reason to end all reasons... *the babies they never got to meet...*

After the terrifying rush to the hospital and the shell-shocked drive back to the desolation of home, he’d tried to figure out how to be helpful. Risa had stayed in bed for months afterwards. He’d hovered helplessly, offered food, bought her diamond earrings that Nechama had assured him were stunning. He’d never seen Risa wearing them.

He types long texts to Risa’s WhatsApp and waits for the little blue arrows. None. He calls her phone and speaks into her voicemail. “We’ll go back to ther-

apy. Try again. Whatever you want, I’ll do it.” Message after message, until he hears, “The mailbox of the subscriber you are trying to reach is full.”

The house is too quiet. He slams out of the front door, not knowing where he’s planning to go. His breaths come hard and fast.

Just like that? She decides it’s over and it’s over?

He walks. Block after block. The wind stirs up the leaves around his feet and stings his cheeks. He keeps walking. Away from it all.

I don’t know what to do.

Zeide. In a rough spot, his “go-to” has always been Zeide. No one listened the way Zeide did or knew exactly what to say to make the world feel less scary. In the early days of their marriage, Risa had grumbled about how often he went to Zeide—who’d been housebound since Bubby passed away.

He sighs. Zeide passed away last year. He misses him every day.

Who to talk to?

Not Abba or Ima. Abba’s heart condition and Ima’s anxiety... And they have enough on their plate trying to marry off the girls and keeping the business afloat...

Zev would know what to do... No. Not Zev. Because he has a way of helping me and hurting me at the same time.

The rav? My friends? No. No.

No one can know.

He types long texts to Risa’s WhatsApp and waits for the little blue arrows. None. He calls her phone and speaks into her voicemail.

The speaker focuses his gaze on Noam and gives him a slight nod. Noam sits up straighter, aware of being fully seen.

He plods on, turning random corners. The streets change. Single and two-family homes give way to apartment buildings and strip malls.

She'll change her mind.

Divorce. They'd never used the word before. In a few of the stormier therapy sessions, Risa had threatened him with, "The big D," but only as a worst-case scenario they were working to prevent. At least, that's how he'd understood it.

Why now?

Risa had seemed happier lately, excited about her new project. Decluttering. She'd been going through the house, pulling out things and driving carloads of boxes to her mother's garage for storage. He'd commented on how empty the closets were, and she'd answered that she was organizing everything they owned.

Not organizing. Packing. Preparing to leave...

The betrayal hits him in the gut. The way he'd felt when Zev had punched him when they were teenagers. They'd rarely fought. But that night, Zev had said something—he has no memory of what—and without thinking, Noam shoved him backwards into the wall and Zev punched him in the stomach with so much force that he'd folded over, gasping for air and unable to straighten.

Numb Dumb... planning a surprise anniversary trip while the marriage is unraveling like a skein of yarn tugged by harsh words, icy silences, and, of course, the grief they didn't talk about.

Noam stops walking. His hands are red and sore. He rubs them together and looks around for a warm place to sit. Above the door of a brick building, a large banner reads: Want to transform your life? Enjoy meaningful relationships? Take a leap! Ask about our free introductory course. All are welcome.

You have no sense of adventure... Afraid to try anything new...

He pulls open one of the spotless glass doors. The warmth of the lobby reaches him as he hesitates in the doorway. A woman behind a large desk smiles broadly, "Hello. Come in."

And that's how Noam walks into the Center for Personal Growth.

There are piles of brochures on the table along with coffee and tea. The secretary says, "There's an introductory course going on right now. You can listen in. It will feel good to be out of the cold." She walks him down the hall and opens a wooden door into a lecture hall with rows of velvet chairs facing a stage where a man is speaking and pointing to a chart on a whiteboard. Noam settles into a seat in the back row.

There are about 20 people in the audience, mostly young and middle-aged men. Noam is the only one wearing a yarmulke.

The speaker is wearing a dark suit and a gold tie. His forehead is wrinkled and he's slightly stooped, but his blue eyes are clear and sharp. Noam follows the pointer on the chart marked Self-Actualization. The speaker is explaining the step that reads: Authenticity. His voice gets softer as the lecture progresses, and Noam stands up and moves down a few rows so he can hear him. The speaker focuses his gaze on Noam and gives him a slight nod. Noam sits up straighter, aware of being fully seen.

He hears people in the audience address the speaker as Leader. From the emphasis they put on the word, he understands that it's a title of distinction: Leader. With a capital L.

After the lecture, the Leader asks questions and

points at people in the audience, smiling at their responses.

In grade school, when his teachers asked questions, and Noam's classmates waved their hands, eager to be called upon, Noam often thought of the answers but kept his hand weighed down in his lap—unwilling to chance getting it wrong.

You're insecure... You don't speak up...

Now, he's actually hoping the Leader will direct a question to him.

The Leader tells them that they're going to break into small groups for discussion. He points to a cluster of round tables and chairs at the side of the room. There's something about the hush around him that affects Noam, and, like all the others, he moves without speaking. One of the tables has five men seated around it. Noam slips into the last empty chair.

A man at the table introduces himself as Henry and says, "Let's go around and say our names." Noam realizes that Henry is a staff member. The other two tables are full too. All of them have someone in charge.

At his table are Julius, Bill, Nicky, Salvatore, and a young man—heavy-set, with dark hair pulled into a ponytail—who looks right at Noam and says, "I'm Shlomo."

Henry says, "To have more productive lives, we have to work through the rough stuff that gets in the way. We'll take turns sharing a personal challenge and, as a group, we'll support each other. Julius, we'll start with you."

Julius describes his decade-long struggle with alcoholism. Afterwards, Henry tells the group. "Hold hands and close your eyes. Send messages of energy and healing to Julius in your minds."

Holding hands with strangers makes Noam squirm, but before he has a chance to bow out, Nicky takes one of his hands and Bill takes the other. They sit in silence for a long time. Noam wonders if he's the only one who has no idea how to send energy

and healing. He stays very still until he hears Henry's order to open their eyes and let go.

Bill tells the group about his dog who died. Nicky and Salvatore are brothers who joined the center to learn how to grow their restaurant. Shlomo shares his tale of surviving childhood abuse. After each story, they hold hands and send support.

When it's Noam's turn, he's ready. "My wife left me. She's been planning this for a while, but I had no idea." The impact of saying the words out loud is devastating. He's terrified that he might break down. He takes a shuddering breath and wills himself to continue. "We wanted children so badly and were thrilled when we found out she was expecting twins. We lost them in the second trimester. It was a horrible time. But even before that, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make her happy. She was always angry at me for something. We were going to therapy and working on our relationship. At least I thought we were."

When the class ends, Noam is shocked to see that it's already 4:30. He orders an Uber, types in his address and sees that he walked over three miles from home to the center. On his way out, he picks up a brochure.

At night, after eating dinner—three bowls of corn flakes—he reads the brochure. The Center for Personal Growth offers an eight-week beginner seminar: Raising Productivity. It takes place on Sunday mornings.

On Sundays, when Risa was up to it, they'd visit the zoo or a park. Once, a friend recommended an emu farm. Neither of them had heard of emus before that trip. They'd giggled at the funny faces of those birds; some were nearly as tall as him. On those Sunday outings it was easy to remember the giddy joy of their early days of marriage—when he'd been awestruck that Risa, who was so talented and capable, had chosen him...

He fills out the paperwork for the \$1,200 seminar.

There's a 50% discount for first-timers.

At work, he's distracted. He calls Risa every day, gets the voicemail, and leaves messages and texts. She waits, sometimes many hours, before responding. Her answers are generally the same. *Yes, I'm sure. I'll be in touch to discuss next steps.*

Once, she texts: *I'm sorry*, and he feels a flutter of hope. If she's sorry then she's reconsidering. He leaves a long voice message letting her know he's not angry and that he's looking forward to talking to her. She texts back: *Here's a list of frum divorce mediators. Choose one. Or I will.*

On Sunday at the center, they break into small groups after the lecture again, and Noam ends up at the same table as before. Except that Shlomo is missing. He glances at the other tables. Shlomo isn't at any of them.

Henry hands out pens and cards and instructs them. "Name a person who's been an important influence in your life and describe the impact they had on you."

Easy.

Zeide. He writes and writes. The way Zeide used to sing to him, "*Neshamale, neshamale, der Eibershter hut dir lib...* Hashem loves you. *Punkt vi ir zent...* exactly how you are. *Far kayn sibah...* For no reason.

His pen slides across the card. There's so much to say about Zeide, whose dark eyes shone whenever Noam walked in. Zeide who loved him, exactly as he was, for no reason.

His writing is neat and tiny. When he was a student, some of his teachers lowered his grades because they couldn't read his answers. His mother bought him a notebook with thin broken lines to guide him to fill the spaces, but his letters stayed small. His eighth-grade *rebbe* called him over for a *shmuess*, asking him, "Do you write this way because you're afraid to let others know what you're thinking?" He'd answered, "I don't know. The letters just come out small."

He writes how he used to complain to Zeide that school was hard, that knowing how to get along with friends was hard... Zeide would say, "It's hard. But you can do hard things."

He's nearing the bottom of the card, when he hears the sound in his ear, so unexpected that he jumps in alarm. The Leader is standing behind him, whispering, "The way you express yourself is exquisite. I'd like to use your card as a model for my next group."

Noam feels a flush of pride heat his face.

The Leader leans in closer. "Your name?"

"Noam."

The Leader says, "Hebrew. A soulful language and a nation of wise men." He picks up Noam's card and pads away soundlessly over the thick carpet.

Maybe if I'd joined the Center for Personal Growth earlier, Risa would still be with me.

All week, he finds himself looking forward to Sunday. He's not sure why, but he doesn't tell anyone about the center. Or that Risa left. At Zev's son's *upsheerin*, he tells his parents, "Risa is with her family. Something came up." Which is true, technically.

He avoids Zev's house, eats takeout by himself on Friday nights and stays for the *Kiddush in shul* every Shabbos.

Six weeks go by. His unease grows.

I have to tell them.

Before they hear from someone else.

He chooses Ima. It will be uncomfortable, but by telling Ima he's pretty much guaranteeing that the rest of the family will find out right away—like ripping a bandage off a sticky wound all at once.

Ima cries. A lot. Every other word from Noam is an apology—for the heartache, for waiting so long to tell them, for being... well... himself... not good enough for Risa to want to stay married to him...

On the last Sunday of the first session of classes, he stops at the front desk and fills out the paperwork for the advanced classes that run on Sunday and Tuesday afternoons. He attaches a check for \$2,400.

The advanced level classes are taught by a group of men who wear long white shirts over white pants; the members are told to address each of them as Genius—with a capital G.

In the new course, Family Dynamics, the Genius explains, "Dysfunction is prevalent in family life; divorce, neglect, abuse and control ruin lives. It's why we created the Center for Personal Growth. We won't divorce or abandon you. We'll be your forever family."

During one of the group sessions, the Genius takes them through an exercise in vulnerability. The members are told to share a secret about themselves or about someone else—a truth that would have negative ramifications if it were known. The Genius explains, "When you reveal a secret, you achieve vulnerability, which is a stepping stone to mastery."

Noam listens as the members around him share their secrets. Outpourings of missteps and shameful behavior. After every revelation, the group applauds. He's horrified. It becomes too painful for him to listen. He reaches for his coat—planning to walk out quietly, and, if anyone asks, to say he's not feeling well—when the Genius approaches and puts his arm around Noam's shoulder. "You are a man who flees from discomfort. The more you run from it, the stronger is its grip on you. Tell us a secret. It will set you free in a way you've never experienced before."

The other members are looking at him. Expectant. Noam reminds himself that the center is a world of its own. He can say what he wants and no one outside of it will find out. He says, "I manage a dry cleaning business, and there's something I've noticed. Uh... I'm not sure. I feel like it's wrong to talk about this..."

The Genius says, "Allow yourself to be vulnerable. Trust us."

Noam keeps his eyes on the carpet as he speaks. "A few of the workers, like the drivers who pick up and deliver clothes and pick up cleaning chemicals, are

not on the payroll and don't get paid by check. I suspect they're illegals. I see my employer handing them envelopes stuffed with cash. He might be breaking the law."

The noise catches him off guard. The other members are standing in a tight circle around him, clapping loudly. He sits on his hands to stop them from shaking.

The Genius says, "That's an empowering breakthrough."

That night, Noam has trouble sleeping. *I don't feel empowered. I feel guilty. What if Mr. Schiener gets in trouble because of my big mouth?*

He watches the clock. Gets up to drink a cup of tea. Paces.

I'm a moser. The lowest of the low.

Finally, as the first slivers of morning light peek around the window shades, he makes up his mind. He'll come clean with Mr. Schiener, apologize, and offer to set it right—even if it costs him.

Zeide used to say, "From mistakes, we learn and we grow." Zeide also liked to joke, "Pobody's nerfect." Even when Noam gave Zeide a haircut and used the wrong blade, leaving Zeide with a bald spot for weeks. Even when Noam begged Bubby to let him help make the cake for Chana's bas mitzvah and he forgot to put in the eggs...

Pobody's nerfect.

Mr. Schiener agrees to stop by the business after hours. All day, Noam worries: Will he be fired? Will Mr. Schiener take him to *beis din? Cheirem?*

Mr. Schiener comes through the door with a smile, "*Shalom aleichem*. What's up?"

Noam's voice is ragged with fear. "I was at a seminar on vulnerability, and they asked us to share something that no one knows. I did something terrible. I'll fix it. Just give me a chance. I'll make—"

"Nu, Noam. What already?"

"I *masered*. I told them about the workers who are paid cash. The illegals."

“Divorce, neglect, abuse
and control ruin lives.
It’s why we created the
Center for Personal
Growth. We won’t divorce
or abandon you. We’ll be
your forever family.”

Mr. Schiener laughs. Laughs and laughs so hard his body shakes. “Oish! You scared me for a minute. Those guys work as independent contractors. Freelance. Their immigration status isn’t relevant, and the cash is reported in my expenses. Every red cent.” He wipes his eyes. “For this you went *meshugah*?”

The relief is physical. An actual letting go. Noam hadn’t realized how tightly he’d been holding his shoulders, his arms, his neck. “Oh good, good. *Baruch Hashem*. Believe me, I learned my lesson. It won’t happen again. No matter how much pressure they put.”

Mr. Schiener isn’t laughing anymore. “Noam, this class you’re taking, is it a *Yiddishe* organization?”

“No. But also not *goyish*. It’s an educational center.”

“Part of a university?”

“No. It’s seminars on personal development.”

Mr. Schiener strokes his long red beard. “Something about this feels dangerous. Why would they force you to give up a secret?”

“They didn’t force me. It was an exercise in vulnerability.”

“Sounds a little like a cult.”

“A cult? No. It’s nothing like that. I wouldn’t join a cult!”

That night, Zev calls. “You all right? I haven’t seen you in ages. Ima told me. Want me to come over?”

He hears himself say “Okay” and immediately wishes he could take it back.

Zev is at his door half an hour later. He’s carrying a large paper bag. “Nechama sent hot lentil soup. I know it sounds healthy, but it’s very tasty. She also made meatballs and potato puffs and something green. And I sneaked some kokosh from the freezer.”

Noam busies himself pouring seltzer, getting dishes and cutlery, and opening the neatly packed containers. Moving. Moving. So he doesn’t have to look at Zev.

Zev says, “When I heard that Risa left, I wasn’t surprised.”

Noam ladles the soup into two bowls and lifts a spoonful to his mouth. “This soup is really good.”

Zev doesn’t touch his soup. “Noam, talk to me.”

Noam says, “What do you want to hear?” And, without warning, a monstrous rage rears up in him and he shrieks. “That I messed up? That I should have known this would happen? What? What did you come here for? To tell me that it’s my fault?”

Zev eyes go wide. He doesn’t move.

Noam is suddenly flooded with shame. He says, “Oy. I don’t know where that came from. It’s all so confusing.”

Zev says, “I was trying to say that I wasn’t surprised because Risa is very strong. She’s a lot and—”

“And I’m dull. I’m not adventurous. I’m not feisty. I’m not—”

Zev bangs on the table. “Stop it. Let me talk. I meant that you’re considerate and sweet. I wish I could be more like you. Everyone likes you.”

“Not everyone.” Noam sighs. “Not Risa.”

“Risa is impossible to please. I used to hear her putting you down, and my heart would break. I wanted to tell you to stick up for yourself, but I was afraid to mix in. Especially after... you know... I just wish you’d told me earlier. I would have been there for you.”

Noam says, “She has mood swings and sometimes she threatens to end it, but then she changes her mind.”

Zev is shaking his head. “Not this time. Her father spoke to Abba.”

Noam says, “How could she do this? How can she leave me all alone?”

“You have a family who cares about you. You’re not alone.”

Noam shakes his head. “Risa is my family and she’s gone.”

Zev stays until past midnight. Before he leaves, he gives Noam a hug and says, “I got you,” which is so atypical that Noam’s throat swells. “Yeah. Thanks.”

The next round of classes at the center is taught by the Masters for four evenings a week for six weeks and costs \$3,800. The Masters wear white tunics that reach their knees, white baggy pants and silver belts.

Noam realizes that if he commits to the master level, he’ll have to leave work early and *daven Minchah* and *Maariv* without a *minyan*. He’s trying to decide if it’s worth it when he sees the text from Risa. It reads like a summons. *Mediator is Mr. Shubov. He’s available Thursday evening at 6:00. Here’s the address.*

His heart pounds so hard, he’s actually afraid.

What if I have a heart attack and no one knows? Alone.

He doesn’t answer Risa’s text. Instead, he fills out the paperwork and writes a check to the Center for Personal Growth for \$3,800.

A forever family.

After the lecture on Connections and Caring, the Master asks Noam to stay back for a few minutes. Another man joins them. The Master says, “Noam, I heard that you’re going through a divorce. This is Edward. He’s a long-time member at the center and an attorney. He’ll help you.”

Noam says, “Thank you, but we’re using a com-

munity mediator. An attorney is unnecessary and expensive.”

The Master says, “Family helps family. No charge.”

Edward nods. “Tomorrow, please bring in a recent bank statement, proof of salary, and a list of all your assets such as real estate, jewelry and anything like that, along with paperwork for savings accounts, retirement accounts and trusts. We’ll set up your finances so that you’re protected.”

Noam startles. “Protected from what?”

Edward says, “Being left penniless.”

The next day, the Master and Edward go through Noam’s paperwork. Edward says, “The \$75,000 from Mr. Muller was yours before you were married. It’s not community property. It’s in your best interests to divest yourself of it for the time being. Otherwise, you’re likely to lose it.”

Zeide had set up a savings account for every grandchild, but he hadn’t told them about it. After Zeide passed away, they found the papers arranged neatly on his desk. The older grandchildren got more than the younger ones. Noam’s name was on an account that held \$75,000.

The Master’s eyes are bright. “I have good news for you. The center is opening a branch for children. It’s a profitable venture that will double your money in a short time. If you invest what you have in your savings account, it won’t be part of the divorce settlement. All you have to do is sign it over to the center. You’ll get back \$150,000 free and clear.”

Noam looks at Edward. “Is it legal?”

Edward says, “Legal and advisable. I invested my retirement account in the center. Best thing I ever did. I’ll draw up the paperwork.”

“What if Risa changes her mind and we want the money back right away? What if the divorce goes through and I decide to split it with her?”

Edward says, “You can’t lose. Your money will be safe. Anytime you want, you can take it back. Along with the profits.”

The next day, Edward gives him a few papers. “This is a retainer agreement, and this allows me to invest your funds on your behalf. Sign here and here and here.”

Noam signs where Edward points. He doesn’t read any of the papers.

His father calls a few days later. Noam barely gets out a “Hello, Abba” when his father launches into a tirade. “Risa’s father called me. They found a *frum* mediator who works with the *rabbanim* in *beis din*. That’s the right way to do it. Now he tells me you hired a lawyer who’s asking for all kinds of paperwork, which means they have to hire a lawyer to respond. It’s costing them a fortune. Why do we need lawyers? I know you’re hurt by what Risa did, but that doesn’t make it okay to be cruel. No one wins now. Only the lawyers. They end up with all the money from both sides. What did you do this for?”

Noam feels dizzy. “I just... I didn’t hire him. He offered... I didn’t know...”

“Don’t we have enough *tzaros*? Now, while we’re looking for *shidduchim* for Chana and Tziri? Who’s going to want to marry into a family that does ugly things like this? Why couldn’t you stay *mentchlich*? You of all people!”

“I’m sorry, Abba. I didn’t realize. He’s a friend. He was trying to help. I’ll tell him to stop.”

That night, Zev calls. Noam ignores the call. Zev calls again. Texts. Then he shows up at Noam’s door.

When Zev brings up the lawyer, Noam finally tells him about the center. “I’m learning about personal development and relationships. That’s where I met Edward, the lawyer. He’s nice. This is just a misunderstanding. He isn’t even charging me. All the members of the center are family.”

Zev says, “The members are family? Because you’re taking some classes? What kind of place is this?”

“It’s hard to explain. There are lectures and group discussions and people get close. I needed that.”

Zev asks, “If it’s so wonderful, why haven’t you said

anything about it until now?”

And that, Noam has to admit, is a very good question.

“I’m not sure.” He pauses. “I guess I was afraid you’d make fun of it.”

“Why would I make fun of you taking classes? Something is off here. I’m looking up this center. I want to see for myself.”

The center has a bare-bones website. An address and a list of courses. No phone number. No names of staff members. No photos.

Zev says, “They’re very careful about what they put out for the public to see. You pay for these classes? They take credit cards?”

“Checks.” He doesn’t say anything about the savings account. But at the memory of all the paperwork he signed without reading, his body tenses and he wonders if he did something foolish.

Zev is watching him carefully. He says, “Hmm... you know what I’m thinking? That I’d like to go there with you. We’ll talk to the lawyer together and get him to stop hassling Risa. What day is your class?”

Noam decides not to tell Zev that he goes to the center four days a week. “Tomorrow at 4:30. I’ll tell Edward myself. You don’t need to come.”

Zev has never been good about backing down. “I’ll pick you up and we’ll drive together.”

It won’t go well. Noam is sure of this.

He’s right.

Zev insists on seeing all of “this center place,” and when he catches a glimpse of the Master giving the class, he grabs Noam by the arm and hisses, “Seriously! Men in white robes?”

Noam says, “Those are the Masters”

Zev does a mock bow. “The Masters! You walked in and saw them dressed in robes, and you thought it was a good idea to take classes from them?”

“No. The Leader teaches the introductory course. He wears a suit.”

“Ah.” Now Zev is smirking. “Smart, that leader. He

stays in his suit. It’s his followers who are loonies.”

Zev demands to see Edward. When Edward appears and puts his hand out in greeting, Zev doesn’t shake his hand. Instead, he demands, “Who asked you to go after that family? You will cease all of the legal actions immediately. Understood?”

Edward doesn’t flinch, doesn’t back away, doesn’t raise his voice to match Zev’s. He says, “My agreement is between me and my client. I have no dealings with you.”

A group of Masters appear and stand next to Edward. One of them says, “Sir, no one comes in here screaming and threatening. We’re asking you to leave the premises. If you don’t, our security will remove you.”

Noam panics. What if Zev refuses? But Zev turns, muttering, and stalks out of the back entrance to the parking lot. Noam apologizes to the group and follows Zev. As he’s leaving, the Master says, “Noam, we don’t blame you for this. We are your family. Come back by yourself. We’ll take care of you.”

In the car, Noam is about to tell Zev how wrong it was to humiliate him, but Zev is the one who explodes first. “How in the world did you fall into that? Who’s going to explain this to Abba and Ima? Those people can destroy us. You hear me? Destroy us. You’re his client? You hired him? What did you sign? Tell me what you signed.”

Noam opens the car door and gets out. “I’m a grown up. I don’t need you to tell me what to do. I’ll talk to Edward. Go home.” He slams the car door.

As he walks away, it occurs to Noam that he finally stood up for himself.

Too little, too late. But it’s a start...

And Zev is right. There’s something off about the center.

I was clueless... What else is new?

No! No more putting myself down.

I’ll fix this.

He waits outside the center. Zev waits in the car.

They used to wait each other out as kids. Who can hold a stare longer without blinking? Who can stay up

later at night? Who can...

Noam finally walks off. But he doesn’t go into the center, because he’s afraid Zev will come in after him. Instead, he heads down the street and around the block.

The \$75,000 from Zeide. They’d been hoping to use it, one day, to help towards a down payment for a house.

I’ll take back the money and split it with Risa. 50-50 everything.

And, after I clean up this mess, we can both move on.

Separately.

He circles the block twice on foot and then walks through the front entrance of the center. He finds Edward in middle of group discussion and taps him on the shoulder. The Master frowns, but Noam is beyond caring. “Edward, I have to talk to you.”

Edward looks at the Master. The two of them walk out with Noam. They stop in a small alcove. Noam says, “We’re not using lawyers in our divorce. Please don’t contact Risa again.”

Edward says, “If that’s what you want. It’s to your detriment.”

“Yes. And I’d like my money back. The funds from the savings account.”

“Sure,” Edward says. “But it will take time. There’s a clause that specifies that initial investments are held for a set period.”

“Who’s going to want to marry into a family that does ugly things like this? Why couldn’t you stay *mentchlich*? You of all people!”

"You gave your word that I could get my money whenever I want." Noam's voice squeaks with nervousness. "I want to take it all out now."

Edward says, "The papers you signed stipulate that the funds remain under the center's control until the ground-breaking stage is complete."

"When is that?"

"Depends. Anywhere from ten months to a couple of years. Longer if the permits are held up."

You let people walk all over you...

Noam looks him in the eye and speaks slowly and clearly, "No! I won't allow this. I'll take you to court."

Edward replies, "You can try, but we have a number of attorneys in our membership. Your court costs will be higher than the amount you invested." He takes a step closer to Noam. "Our influence reaches deeper and wider than you can imagine. If you tangle with us, you don't stand a chance of coming out on top."

And this, Noam knows, is the truest thing he's heard from anyone at the center.

He looks from the Master to Edward. Their faces are expressionless, as if they're wearing masks.

He says, "How many people have you done this to? I'll fight back. I'll warn everyone about what goes on here."

The Master says, "Remember that you shared a secret about your employer's business practices. All we have to do is pass it along. The ADA is a member here. He'll prosecute him."

At this, Noam laughs. Not the way Mr. Schiener laughed. Noam's laugh is sour. He brushes past Edward and the Master, says, "Share the secret. Shout it from the rooftops," and heads to the exit.

I made a terrible mistake.

The money may be a kapparab.

But I'll push back. Go public. Give them a run for their money...for my money...

Make sure others hear what happened. So they're spared from making the same mistake.

It will be humiliating.

I'll do it anyway.

From our mistakes, we learn.

Oh, Zeide. How much learning?

His legs are wobbly. He sinks down on the sidewalk in front of the center, feels the sadness pushing against his eyes.

Grown men don't cry. Grown men don't cry.

He covers his face with his hands and lets the sobs come.

Eventually, he stops crying. He feels a sense of clarity, a cleansing that follows the storm.

It's not too late. He'll come clean with Abba and Ima and cooperate with the mediator for a settlement with Risa. He'll confide in his *rav* and work to understand how he came so close to losing the most important thing a man can lose: himself.

The sky is darkening around him. He's still sitting on the sidewalk, his head down. Around him, he sees a pageant of shoes. Some rush past him. Others take slow, deliberate steps. Sneakers, dress shoes, work boots, loafers... shiny and scuffed and muddy. Lives going and coming.

One pair of shoes gets very close to him and stops. Black shoes with worn soles and straggly laces.

Zev lowers himself to the sidewalk. He *kvetches*, "Ach, you can't find a more comfortable place for us to hang out?"

An inexplicable gladness bubbles up in Noam.

Not alone.

Loved.

Exactly as I am.

Imperfect. As we all are.

They sit. Side by side. Gathering strength for what comes next.

Because it will be hard—but they can do hard things.

Eventually, Noam feels ready. He stands up and holds out his hand to help Zev to his feet. They take a step, and then another step. Beyond the ending. To the beginning that shows itself only after the ending. ●