

CHAPTER ONE

Eddie Shapiro walked briskly toward his destination. He was a man on a mission determined to be on time for his appointment, for a change. Eddie was the kind of guy who always tried to fit one more thing in before leaving for appointments; hence, he was perennially late. Dressed in black jeans, a black T-shirt, a Yankees' cap, and a black hoodie, he stood at about five foot eight with a close-cropped head of gray hair—which he was always rubbing. He was a spry, slim, youthful septuagenarian who was constantly on the go. If he were a superhero, he would be called The Blur.

Eddie darted into the crowded Los Angeles deli, scanning the 1950s-style red vinyl-covered booths with Formica-topped tables, craning his neck to see whether his buddies were already seated. Sure enough, Billy Thompson and Johnny Rodriguez sat in their usual corner booth sipping their morning coffee. They tipped their cups toward him as he approached.

Eddie glanced at his watch, then at his longtime buddies, mouthing the letters *WTF*. “I think you guys do this on purpose just to mess with my head.”

“Do what?” said Billy with a grin.

“Yeah, what?” asked Johnny, feigning innocence. “We didn’t do nuthin’, just enjoying a cup of Joe.”

Smiling, Eddie slid into the booth. “I think you guys time it so you beat me no matter when I get here. It’s not even nine o’clock and you’re already drinking your first cup.” He removed his cap and gave his scalp a good scratch.

Billy held up two fingers.

“Two cups of coffee? Jeez, did you sleep here?” asked Eddie, shaking his head in disbelief.

Before Billy could answer, Mort Liebman, the Brooklyn-born, white-haired deli owner, approached their table.

“So, a rabbi, a minister, and a priest walk into a deli...” began Mort, giving them a wide smile. “How youse guys doin’? I didn’t see you here last week. You okay?”

“That’s because you weren’t here when we were here,” said Johnny, raising his eyebrows over his coffee cup. “Gracie told us you were over at the country club playing a round of golf.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot,” said Mort, shrugging. “As I get older, I forget what I had for breakfast by the time dinner rolls around.”

The old friends chuckled in commiseration.

“Life is good, huh, Mort?” asked Billy. “Golf during the week? Not like back in Brooklyn.”

“Hey, don’t bust my balls,” replied Mort, a little on the defensive. “I worked my ass off to get here. At seventy-four I’m entitled to a little time off, right?”

Just like the three guys and many of his customers, Mort was an ex-New Yorker. He’d created the deli to look and feel like the New York delis he’d grown up with in Brooklyn, complete with a New York vibe, where servers regularly teased patrons in what many non-New Yorkers might think of as insulting. A significant number of Mort’s customers were Big Apple transplants. They talked loud and fast, hands and arms moving as they talked, food spilling from their mouths as they spoke. The patrons ranged from millennials to nonagenarians. Tatted-up young men with purple hair sat

alongside orange-haired eighty-year-old women, all chowing down on pastrami on rye or bagels slathered with cream cheese. The crowd varied depending on the time of day.

Gracie, the short, overweight, pink-haired waitress who'd worked in the deli for thirty years, waddled to the table and, with one of her oversize hips, nudged her boss out of the way.

"Mort, why don't you do something useful, like take out the trash?" she said as she put a cup in front of Eddie and filled it with coffee. She refilled the other cups as well.

"Like Rodney Dangerfield, I get no respect," said Mort, feigning a pout. He waved his hand over his shoulder as he walked away.

"What'll you have, guys?" asked Gracie. "Same old or are you gonna live dangerously and try something different?"

"I'll have my usual," said Billy.

"Same for me, Gracie," said Johnny. "I'm a creature of habit."

"And you?" asked Grace, nodding toward Eddie.

"I'm gonna live dangerously, change it up a bit," said Eddie. "How about waffles instead of pancakes, with some fruit?"

Grace looked at him with a grin. "Big change. I'm not sure my heart can handle it. Okay then. Eggs over easy for Reverend Billy, oatmeal for Father Johnny, and waffles for Rabbi Eddie. Got it."

"With fruit," added Eddie.

"Yeah, yeah, with fruit," said Gracie.

She put her pencil in her hair, the order pad in her apron pocket, and walked to the order counter, leaving the three clerics, old friends since their youth in the Bronx, to their coffee.

“So what’s the latest and greatest?” asked Reverend Billy, smiling.

“I’m pissed,” replied Rabbi Eddie, rubbing his head. His brow furrowed.

“So what else is new?” said Father Johnny. “What’s it this time?”

Johnny and Billy were accustomed to Eddie’s harangues. They often referred to their friend’s regular tirades about some political or social injustice as *The Daily Rant*.

“Sometimes I get so tired of listening to people plead poverty when we ask them to help support the synagogue activities while, at the same time, they’re bragging about how much money they made in their latest deal,” replied Eddie, his deep brown eyes flashing as he spoke. He was irate. “These guys drive around in their fancy cars, send their kids to elite private schools, and live in their mansions, but every time I ask them to contribute to one of our charities or support the temple, they always tell me their business sucks. They’re all full of crap. I’m tired of preaching about the joys and responsibilities of charitable contributions and lecturing about *tikkun olam*—the obligation of Jews to heal the world. I know these guys are making all that money the old-fashioned way: they’re stealing it. How do you two deal with it?”

“I hear you, bro,” said Billy. “I get the same lame excuses from the high rollers in my congregation. I know they’re dealing in whatever. All that bling they wear around their necks didn’t come from righteous living. What about you, Johnny? Are the rich Catholics any better than the Baptists or the Jews when it comes to parting with their money?”

“Are you kidding me?” replied the priest. “My congregation includes some of the major players in investment banking, business, and entertainment. Even a few in organized crime. The only time they give big is when they want something from the church. Or when they feel extra guilty about something they’ve done. The bigger the sin, the bigger the donation.”

“As a black Baptist minister, I can tell you it doesn’t matter what religion, race, or ethnicity,” began Billy. “When it comes to parting with money for charity, people are all the same. A small number of good people do the bulk of the giving. The rest, no matter how rich, plead poverty when it comes to giving to help others.”

“Yet these very same people love to brag about what vacations they’ve taken, how much they spent on their home renovation, and what it cost for their kids’ educations,” added Eddie. “They always find a way to let you know they’ve made it big, from the size of their home to the car they drive or the watch they wear.”

“I often wondered if I were a white priest asking for money instead of a brown-skinned Puerto Rican would it make a difference in my congregation,” said Johnny. “But when I asked the previous priest, Father Patrick O’Chauncey, who’s as white as snow, he said except for a few people, the congregation was mostly a bunch of rich tightwads.”

“I’ve often wanted to bitch slap some of them,” said Billy, letting out a heavy sigh. “But honestly there’s not much we can do about it. We can preach about the value of charity and generosity, but we can’t force ‘em to give.”

Rabbi Eddie stared at him. “What if we could?” he said, his voice low and somber.

Now it was his friends' turn to stare. "What're you talkin' about, *what if we could?*" asked Johnny.

"Just what I said," Eddie replied with a smirk as he leaned across the table and lowered his voice to just above a whisper. "What if there was a way we could lean on these deadbeats and encourage them to give...and to give big?"

Eddie caught their attention. But before he said another word, Gracie returned with their breakfast. She placed the oatmeal in front of Johnny. "I gave you extra raisins and sliced bananas," she said with a wink. "Maybe you'll put in a good word for me with the man upstairs, Father Johnny." Her eyes looked upward as she pointed toward the ceiling with her thumb.

She gave Reverend Billy his eggs over easy with bacon and placed Rabbi Eddie's waffles with a side of fruit in front of him. "Anything else, gentlemen?"

"I think we're good, Gracie," said Eddie, wanting to return to the conversation.

Grace nodded, smiled, turned, and left.

As soon as she was gone, Eddie continued. "As I was sayin', what if there was a way we could convince some of these guys to be more philanthropic?"

"Okay, I'll bite," said Billy. "What's your latest pitch for turning tightwads into philanthropists? Anything that would bring in more money to the church would be worth thinking about."

"I'm not talking only about tightwads," replied Eddie, becoming more animated. "I'm thinking more about those guys we know are earning their money either illegally or by taking advantage of others through schemes and cons. I'm thinking about the drug dealers, the shady businesspeople, the pimps, the Bernie Madoffs, inside traders, the

slumlords—those types. We all know 'em. I suspect all large, urban religious congregations have their fair share of unsavory folks.”

Father Johnny nodded. “Yeah, I know the type.” The priest shook his head in disgust. “I hear their confessions. They tell me about people they’ve hurt, illegal card games, underground brothels, and real estate scams. And there’s nothing I can do about it. The seal of the confessional is immutable. No matter what they do, even if it’s murder, my mouth must remain closed. What makes matters worse, if they confess and promise to repent, I have to forgive them.”

“And what about all of those who are embezzling, money laundering, cheating on their spouses, taking bribes, doctoring the books—we hear it all and keep our mouths shut, right?” whispered Eddie.

The two other clerics nodded in acknowledgment.

“But what if we didn’t?” asked Eddie. “What if we told these guys if they want our silence, they’re gonna have to pay for it?”

Johnny and Billy stopped eating, their forks not quite making it to their mouths. They stared at their friend, mouths agape. Finally, Johnny found his tongue. “Are you nuts? Are you suggesting blackmail?” he said in disbelief, turning his head to see if anyone else could hear him.

“Why not?” replied the rabbi. “These guys sure as hell won’t say anything. They don’t want their indiscretions, thievery, and scamming to get out. They sure wouldn’t want their name in the news.”

Furrowing his brow, Billy put down his fork. “Eddie, what happened? What brought this to mind now? Today?”

“It’s been on my mind for a while,” began Eddie, scratching his head. “But yesterday one of my congregants who had scheduled an appointment to see me in my office came by. He had said there was something very important he wanted to discuss with me. When he showed up, we talked about this and that for a few minutes, and then he asked me whether I remembered a conversation he claimed we’d had about two weeks previous. I had no recollection of ever having had a private conversation with him about anything. I was about to tell him so when, without saying a word, he slid a check across my desk, made payable to me, in the amount of a hundred thousand dollars. I just looked at him not understanding why he was giving me this money. But before I could say anything, he stared at me with a conspiratorial look and proceeded to remind me of the content of our conversation and the exact date and time it took place. A lawyer would have said he was leading the witness. Then, like the proverbial light bulb going on in my head, I realized he was asking me to be his alibi for a specific day and time. Though I was tempted to take the money, I slid the check back to him, saying I didn’t remember any such conversation. After a few minutes of trying to refresh my memory, he left, but not before saying that if I eventually recalled the conversation, I should give him a call.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Reverend Billy, leaning back in his seat. “I’ve never had such a direct bribe come my way. Most of my parishioners simply drop a few hundred bucks, sometimes more, into the donation box. Several have gone so far as handing me an envelope stuffed with cash. I viewed it as absolution money. You did the right thing, Eddie.”

“Yeah, you did right, Eddie,” said Father Johnny. “I can understand how it could be tempting. A hundred large could go a long way toward helping the synagogue. Or buying yourself a luxury car. But you’d have to lie for him, and then he’d have something on you to use against you down the road. Not a good idea to go to bed with these people.”

“I understand that,” said Eddie, nodding. “But it got me thinking. What if we could figure out how to use what we know about guys like this to raise some needed cash without it being traced to us personally? What if we could help the needy, our houses of worship, and make a little for ourselves on the side in such a way that we come away clean? When that guy offered me a hundred grand, I realized there are probably many more guys who’d cough up serious money. I’m sick and tired of having the bad guys walk away with all the cash while there are so many needy people, not to mention our own struggles to make ends meet on a cleric’s salary.”

Both of his friends lapsed into silence. The breakfast conversation had taken a dark turn from their customary light-hearted chit-chat, talk about health concerns, general gossip, and Eddie’s occasional rants, to something far more serious. Billy rubbed his chin while shaking his head. Johnny placed his hands on the table in front of him, spreading his fingers before beginning to speak.

“You’re going bonkers, Eddie,” he began. “What’s wrong with you? You’re talking about blackmail. That’s a felony. You’re suggesting we use the privilege of being clerics, of hearing things our parishioners tell us, to extort money from them and then put some in our pockets and use the rest to help the needy. Am I understanding you right?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” replied Eddie, grinning as he shoved a piece of waffle with a strawberry on it into his mouth. It was common for him to talk with his mouth full. “We could set up a charitable foundation with a bank account in the Caymans or some such place and direct all money there. We’ll manage the foundation and distribute the cash to those in need. I’m sure we could work it so the money couldn’t be traced to us, and if push came to shove, it would be our word against theirs. And we’d get these assholes to pay for their sins. Sitting quietly on the sidelines while crimes are being executed against others is just as bad as committing the crime. So, if we’re going to sit by and do nothing, we might as well make some money and help a lot of other people in need.”

“You’re nuts,” said Johnny, leaning back. “Besides, I didn’t take my vows in order to end up strongarming people into giving me money and using secrets learned in the confessional for economic gain regardless of how many people it might help. Everything about this idea runs afoul of all I stand for.”

“I agree, at least in principle, with Johnny,” said Billy. “What you’re proposing is not only illegal but also immoral. Yet, despite that, I must say there is something intriguing about what you’re suggesting.”

A look of dismay spread across Johnny’s face as he stared at his friend. “What are you talking about, *intriguing!*” exclaimed the priest.

“Money,” said Billy in a soft voice. “I could use some extra cash. As you know, Martha isn’t well and isn’t getting better. She’s been struggling for a few years now with the effects of liver damage from the hit-and-run accident she was in. Treatments and

care are expensive. She's on a waiting list for a transplant. Meantime, the bills are stacking up."

"Jeez, I'm so sorry, my friend," replied Johnny, putting his hand on his Billy's arm.

"Yeah, I'm so sorry too," said Eddie. "I thought she was on the mend."

"So did we," said Billy. "But then she developed an infection and took a turn for the worse. We hope we're on top of it now, but it'll take a while to know for sure."

"Doesn't Medicare cover the cost?" asked Johnny.

"Unfortunately not all of it," said Billy.

"I imagine you could turn to your congregation for financial assistance," said Johnny. "Rather than having to resort to blackmail. Just ask for help."

"I've already done that, but it's not enough," said Billy, his eyes misting over. "As we've been saying, deep pockets and short arms. Eddie's idea could put pressure on those who have the financial resources to step up. My wife isn't the only one in the congregation who could use help. There are others. It's not just about me and my troubles."

Johnny nodded. "I hear you. I get it," he said. "But still..." His voice trailed off.

"Look," began Eddie, "we all struggle with these moral dilemmas. We all have a light and dark side. Even the most righteous among us aren't a hundred percent pure. Most of the time the light side wins and we do the right thing. But sometimes the right thing may not always be clearly visible. It might be couched in darkness. Is it right for Martha to have to suffer at the hands of some hit-and-run son of a bitch while the crooks in our congregations get away with murder? What's the right thing for Billy to do for her? Where's the justice in that?"

Johnny stared at his friend. "Doing what's right isn't always easy."

Eddie continued his rant. "Is it the right thing for us who are in the position of helping those like Martha who are in serious need to look the other way? In Judaism, we're told that if we stand idly by while a crime is being committed without taking action, we're as guilty as the perpetrator of the crime. Does your faith require that you feign ignorance about those who are known to be committing crimes? Isn't that immoral?"

Both the minister and priest remained quiet.

Reverend Billy thought about his wife as well as the other congregants who were ill, many without health insurance, and those who were living on the edge of poverty. Just because the church was in an affluent area of LA didn't mean there was no poverty. Many people lived on fixed incomes living in rent-controlled apartments. Some lived in homes they couldn't afford to keep up. These people could be helped by those congregants who were making their money on the backs of those who need it most. *And I have enough information on these guys to put them away for a long time, he thought. Or I might be able to persuade them it would be in their best interests to up their donations to the church.*

Father Johnny reflected on his experience with the church. He knew what Eddie was proposing was wrong. But he also knew it was wrong to look the other way when a crime was being committed or when people were being hurt. He knew about the church's hypocrisies; he knew how the church had accepted blood money from the mob without saying a word. He knew firsthand how priests sexually exploited young boys and how bishops and cardinals covered it up. He knew the church would cover for the bad priest because of all the good the priest had done and because the publicity would

damage the church's image. He also knew the church amassed much of its wealth at the expense of those it served. He understood the church professed to be less about the individual and more about the general good the money could do for the greater number of people in need. Yet he also knew that history, going back to the Crusades and earlier, had demonstrated the church's interest in self-preservation over individual salvation.

The Catholic church is one of the wealthiest institutions on earth, Father Johnny thought. Yet it encourages millions of Catholics worldwide to support the church with their meager earnings and allows even more millions to go hungry. In addition to cash, the church owns billions in real estate, art, gems, gold, and other valuables. I wonder how many people could be fed, housed, and educated with the billions that continue to pour into the church's treasury in order to embellish buildings. If the church was really interested in helping the most impoverished of its flock, wouldn't it distribute its wealth rather than amass it? Is what Eddie's suggesting any worse than what the church has been doing for centuries? I've never known the church to turn away money received from organized crime. Perhaps his approach is the more Christian thing to do; distributing the wealth to those most in need.

Billy interrupted the silence. "Threatening heavy hitters could be dangerous to our health. What would stop any of these guys from taking out a contract on us? Do we want to live out our days with targets on our backs?"

"We've always lived our lives as targets," said Eddie. "It's dangerous to drive while being black." He looked at Johnny. "You're a gay, Hispanic priest. Fair game in

many sections of town. And I'm a Jew who's familiar with anti-Semitism. Your collar, your crucifix, and my yarmulke aren't going to protect any of us."

"That's all true, Eddie," said Johnny. "But having one of these guys putting out a hit on us is different. It's very specific. For some of them, it's just the cost of doing business. What kind of assurance would we have that they wouldn't have us popped? Remember, we'd be playing their game. When it comes to crime, they're the pros. We're just humble servants of God."

"There are lots of details we'd have to work out," said Billy. "The one you raised about coming up with some sort of insurance against being whacked is an important one."

"First of all, not all of the bad guys are dangerous," said Eddie. "Most of them are white-collar types. They don't engage in physical violence. I suggest we come up with a list of potential targets for this operation. The list should include the sort of crime or secret, ranging from crooked investments to domestic issues, to street crimes such as drug dealing. We all have a lot of high-profile celebrities in our congregations. You know, entertainers, movie stars, congressional leaders, real estate moguls; many of them have talked about having affairs, paying off commissioners to their build high-rise apartment and office buildings, and other sorts of things they wouldn't want to be made public. They should be willing to pay to keep their secrets. We'd start with those who are the least likely to retaliate in a violent way."

"This gives new meaning to the adage, we pay for our sins," quipped Billy.

"We put everything we know about our potential marks into a spreadsheet," continued Eddie without skipping a beat. "Maybe we could record some conversations.

We could create a joint video explaining everything we did, to whom, and why. We could put all of it in a safe that could be accessed upon our death. If anything happens to us, the information is released, and they're all suspects. This could be our insurance policy. If anything happens to any one of us, they all go down."

"Jeez, Eddie, you've been giving this some serious thought," said Billy. "Watching a lot of crime shows lately?"

Eddie smiled, rubbing his head. "It seems you guys are saying you're willing to work with me on this plan despite your reservations. Is that right?"

"I think it's a nutty and dangerous idea," replied Johnny. "But all things considered, it does have some merit." He smirked.

Billy slowly nodded.

The rabbi, minister, and the priest returned to their food.

"Are you ever going to have some bacon with your waffles or pancakes, Rabbi?" asked the priest.

"Definitely," replied Rabbi Eddie with a twinkle in his eye, "at your wedding."