

Chapter One

When my eighty-one-year-old grandfather announced at my son's bar mitzvah that he was selling his house and moving to Florida, I never expected his destination to be an alpaca ranch in the Panhandle. Gladys, my wife, who had been having some hearing issues recently thought he said an alpaca factory and was thrilled to have a link to the wholesale clothing industry. My twin sister Kate, a geriatric nurse, had been lobbying to have the octogenarian put into a home, and was less than thrilled at the prospect of having to fly south every time the old man fell out of bed or stubbed his toe.

My first thought was, please Grandpa Jesse, buy a three-bedroom house. Having suffered through forty-one New Jersey winters, I saw his move as the most logical choice for future winter vacations with my wife and son. Nothing like having free lodging when you travel. Plus, if nothing else, the investment in a three-bedroom versus a single-bedroom house was much wiser in the long run. Not that I was even thinking about moving south, but I knew at some point in the not too distant future, I'd sell the hardware store and retire. Having a preset destination would make the transition much more pleasant.

Kate told me that *her* first thought was, please Grandpa Jesse, move further south where the assisted living facilities had staked their claim. She knew that any other place Grandpa relocated to would still require her nursing skills. The old man had already cost her a husband, and moving forward, she begged him to let her step aside and start her life over again.

Even though we were siblings, twins born seven minutes apart, her name was on every piece of paper and digital report as primary contact in the event the old man came to an untimely end. Both neighbors on either side of Grandpa's house had her number on their speed dial. The local hospital never knew Grandpa Jesse had any other living relatives until I showed up one afternoon when the old man was recovering from a tumble that required a rare overnight hospital stay.

Had my father not run off to Hawaii after my mother died, he would have applauded Grandpa's choice. With the only shackle keeping him from leaving when she was gone, and my father having grown tired of the northeast since he still lived within a ten-mile radius of where he was born for nearly sixty years, his escape was predictable. My mother's sudden demise, a month before my twenty-first birthday, was reason enough for him to pack up and leave his family behind, even with a new grandson. Thus over the years, Frankie came to accept my grandfather, his great-grandfather, as the only limb of his family tree above mine, but he still wondered why his actual grandfather was missing from the most important event of his life.

Truth be told, I had an invitation for my father to Frankie's bar mitzvah sitting on my desk for two months before I threw it in the trash. Without an address, a phone number, or even a clue as to which island he was living on, there was no point in expecting him to show. Gladys had suggested hiring a private investigator to search for her missing father-in-law, but I explained that the cost of sending someone to search for a man who didn't want to be found would probably exceed what we'd budgeted for the bar mitzvah. Making her choose where we should spend our money was a simple task with a preordained outcome.

Shaking hands with the last couple to leave the catering hall, I loosened my tie and shuffled over to the family table. Gladys handed me a tall glass of water with a slice of lemon on the rim.

"I told the caterer that we would be out of here in ten minutes." She smiled. "Is that enough time, sweetheart?"

I pulled a chair out from the table and spun it around. Dropping down onto the seat, I rested my arms on the top of the thick cushion and took a deep breath.

"First question, Grandpa. Why not Boca where all your friends are living?"

"You mean, where all my friends went and then died."

"Theo and Maureen?"

"He stroked out in the McDonald's drive-thru. Paid for his order and died in-between windows." Grandpa shook his head slowly and brushed back a wisp of hair. "They wouldn't even give Maureen a refund."

I whistled softly in an attempt to stifle the laugh. "What about Bob, the carpenter guy who built your four-story birdhouse?"

Grandpa covered his eyes with one hand. "Seventh hole and he was playing his best game ever, there was a bolt of lightning, a clap of thunder, and Bob was toast." He turned to Kate and frowned. "See, God knows when it's time."

"Are you sure God hasn't forgotten about you?" Kate jammed her tongue into her cheek. "Is God telling you to move to Florida, Jesse?"

Knowing what this discussion was decaying into, I slapped my hands on the table. "Okay. This was a wonderful day. Frankie, you have no idea how proud me and your mom are right now. Today, you became a man in the eyes of God and our people."

Gladys, with a smile so wide and pure that I was unprepared for her comment, took Frankie's hands and asked in her happiest voice. "Are you going to have sex with Barbara tonight?"

The limo driver took Grandpa home first and helped me walk my grandfather into the house and upstairs to his bedroom. While I ran into the master bathroom to pee, the driver removed Grandpa's shoes and rotated him onto the bed. The old man was snoring when I walked in.

"He'll be fine. The home care lady will be here at six." I grinned. "With the amount of wine he drank, he'll still be sleeping."

I closed the bedroom door behind us, as my grandfather had done for his entire life, and set the alarm as we left the house. Halfway down the sidewalk, I stopped and turned around to look at Grandpa Jesse's house illuminated by the eight floodlights I'd installed for him twenty years ago.

My Nana, his wife, lived in that house until the tumors caught up with her. Nana taught me how to cook, starting with the simplest of Jewish recipes when I was nine-years-old: chicken soup. For my eleventh birthday, we cooked brisket in her special tomato sauce that we made from scratch. Boiling the tomatoes. Peeling them. Squashing them into a soft pulp without a single seed. Years later, friends and family beg me to cook brisket "Nana style."

Nana's kitchen was my culinary oasis. Not to disparage my mother's cooking, but without frozen meals and a microwave, her cooking skills were limited to breakfast and lunch, as long as lunch involved sandwiches. My father cooked one day a week: Sunday. He only cooked outside on the barbecue grill and turned quality steaks into charcoal.

Rather than have to deal with schlepping an empty tank over to the hardware store to get it refilled, he paid a small fortune to have a gas line brought from the street to the back of our house. I remember watching them dig up the driveway and my mother's flowerbed to reach the exact location my father had selected for his outdoor patio. Another expensive project that he failed to disclose to the family until the day the work commenced. And yet, even with full control over the gas, lamb chops were blackened without seasoning and chicken was cooked so long that even the breast meat was inedible by anyone except the neighborhood squirrels.

Of all my memories about my family, cooking with Nana holds center stage. I remember going to Yankee Stadium with my father and grandfather. If I close my eyes, I can still see the foul ball that zipped over my head and was caught barehanded by the drunk who'd been spilling beer on my Yankee hat since the second inning. My mother's perfume is a memory I've fought to forget. I smelled it every time I went to Macy's in the mall.

Walking past the perfume counter, I can see the pear-shaped bottle with the gold letters, and I know the fragrance is about to hit my nose. The only memory it evokes, the only one I haven't been able to bury after all those years, is the day the toaster-oven set the kitchen on fire.

However, the smells from Nana's kitchen were as clear to me as they were back when I was a teen. Garlic sautéed in schmaltz, chicken soup boiling in the pot with matzo balls so hard that they would bounce, and the delightful odor of her special tomato sauce that she insisted I make with the same herbs and spices, and in the exact same order that she'd been mixing them for over fifty years.

Thinking back to the day that Mom destroyed the kitchen, I shook my head and laughed. If not for the new flat-screen television Dad had installed, the fire would never have happened, but then I'd be missing one of my favorite tales from my youth.

Alone in the house, while both Kate and I were in school, she started cooking a chicken pot pie for her lunch. Deeply involved with her usual daytime soap opera that she had been watching for years on a small, portable TV, she was so excited to have the big flat-screen that she forgot about the potpie until the smoke alarm went off. By the time she got to the kitchen, a small flame from the toaster-oven had ignited a nearby roll of paper towels. The cabinets above went up in flames next, and she ran to the living room to call for help.

The firefighters saved the house, but the kitchen was totaled. Walking up the street with Kate, we saw the fire engines and for a few seconds, we didn't realize that they were in front of our house. I sprinted ahead of her, and my mother saw me coming. She ran over and, instead of throwing her arms around me and reassuring me that she was okay, my mother shoved her hands in her pockets and shrugged.

"Well, you don't have to put up with my cooking anymore."

Taking a step back from my grandfather's house to get a wider view, I blew out soft breath. Four months ago, over Passover dinner, Grandpa had mentioned that a realtor had knocked on his door. She was selling the house across the street from his and asked if he'd like a free appraisal. The woman, a local realtor who had purchased three gallons of the most hideous green paint I'd ever mixed to redo her dining room, spent thirty minutes walking around Grandpa's house and quoted him a ballpark price if he was interested in selling.

Since Passover, I had been tracking sales in nearby houses to his and watched the prices go up as the inventory disappeared. Rarely did I find a house in a five-mile radius that sat on the market for more than thirty days. And then, the house diagonally across the street from Grandpa

Jesse's house broke into the seven-figure range just last weekend, and I took it as a sign from above.

I wonder what an alpaca ranch costs in Florida? I shook my head. And what kind of house comes with it? And what the hell do a bunch of New Jersey Jews know about alpacas, anyhow?

We dropped off Frankie at Barbara's house. Her parents were hosting an after-the-bar-mitzvah party with a DJ. I gave a moment's thought to saying something about Barbara, and sex, and being a man, but Gladys beat me to the punch.

"Do you still have the condom I gave you?"

Kate got out with us when the limo parked at the bottom of our driveway. Her house was a short five-minute-walk through a safe, well-lit neighborhood and she needed some exercise after sitting in shule, sitting at the table during the reception, and sitting squeezed between me and Gladys in the limo for the drive home.

The late July weather had been cooler than normal, but that was attributed to a storm in the Atlantic that had sucked all of the moisture out of the atmosphere. Blazing hot and muggy was predicted for next week. I could see the sweat darkening her blouse as she walked away.

In desperate need of comfortable clothes, Gladys went upstairs to change. I tossed my tuxedo jacket on the couch along with the cummerbund. Grabbing two beers from the mini-fridge in my second-floor office, I walked over to the balcony and slid open the two glass doors.

"Coming?"

Gladys held up her hand. She was listening to messages on her cellphone. Finished. She shook her head and muttered, "Moron" before tossing the phone on the bed.

We sat in the dark, drinking beer and staring at the full moon in silence for a few minutes. It had been a fantastic day. Not a single hitch. The ceremony was one of the most awe-inspiring religious events I'd witnessed in a dozen years. Now, I'm not a religious Jew. I go to temple on the high holidays and we light Chanukah candles, but I have a nine-foot Christmas tree in the hardware store. The jury's still out in my mind as to whether or not I believe in God, but I never discuss religion with anyone: customers, strangers, friends, or family.

Frankie's bar mitzvah ceremony made me a serious Jew while it lasted.

I'd never been to a synagogue with a choir and a live organist. My bar mitzvah and all the ones I went to when I was thirteen featured a cantor who sang the music and a bunch of old men who just mumbled along. And talk about electronics? The rabbi had a wireless microphone. The cantor had one. They even pinned one on Frankie. I was worried that they'd stick one on me. I can sing, but it usually frightens small children and wildlife.

The caterer pulled out all the stops. I thought she was kidding when she said the catering hall was three-stories high inside. How they turned it into a circus was amazing. The trapeze artists jumping from swinging bars, the clowns, the magician, and those dancers. Wow. Could those people move. Talk about limber. I'm still trying to figure out how they didn't tie their arms in knots.

I rubbed my belly as a wave of gas rumbled out. The caterer took my Nana's brisket recipe and duplicated it to perfection. Watching their servers deliver a hundred-and-twenty-five meals at the exact same time was truly a performance not to be missed.

Turning to my wife, I sighed. "It's over."

"You outdid yourself today." She leaned over and punched me in the shoulder. "And the way you dance. Who knew you were Fred Astaire in disguise?"

"I love to dance. In September, after the Labor Day sales are over, I'd like to take line dancing lessons. There's a cowboy bar opening up nearby, and they're advertising line dancing competitions."

"Like Simon sez?"

I shrugged. "I can't imagine."

"Is first prize a farm animal?"

"Maybe an alpaca."

"Speaking of which..."

I shook my head. "He's not crazy."

"Neither was Randolph McMurphy."

"Who?"

"*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Jeezus, sweetheart, you spend too much time focusing on nuts and bolts and cans of paint."

"Well, smarty pants, just so you know, I read the book and McMurphy was certifiably nuts."

"So where does that leave Grandpa Jesse?"

"I don't know." Sucking down the last of my beer, I put the bottle on the patio and tilted back the recliner. "I guess without Nana, he's tired of living here. Maybe he's thinking that spending the rest of his days in a totally new environment is the sort of challenge he needs to prove to himself that he's still alive."

"So, alpacas are the answer?"

I shrugged. "They're kind of big for pets."

"I don't think you could bring one on an airplane. Even if it wore a Service Alpaca vest."

Laughing, I sat forward. "I wonder if they can be house-trained."

"Potty trained."

"I saw a picture of one on the internet wearing a diaper."

Gladys slapped her knee. "Grandpa Jesse can share his Depends."

"Well, he better start buying them by the truckload." I stood and stretched. "Grandpa says there are around fifty alpacas and two full-time ranch hands."

"I heard him say a hundred-and-ten acres."

"But he wasn't sure about the main house."

Gladys got up and stood behind me, rubbing my shoulders. "Was he even sure there was a main house?"

I covered my mouth with a hand. "All he kept talking about was the ranch and the alpacas."

"And the lake." Gladys nodded. "Don't forget the lake stocked with fish."

"Do alpacas eat fish?"

"You're asking me?"

I shrugged. "My phone's inside. Normally, I'd ask Siri."

"Did he say anything about getting there from civilization?"

"Yeah. I was searching the net on our way home. There's an airport in Pensacola Springs and a few local airfields—"

"Local airfields?"

"Small regional airports."

“That are used primarily for crop-dusting?”

I laughed. “Balloon landings and skydiving.”

“How far from Pensacola to the ranch he wants to buy?”

“Just under ninety minutes.”

Gladys shook her head and sighed. “I can see it now. It’ll be the dead of winter up here, and Grandpa Jesse will get bitten by an alpaca that couldn’t squeeze in close enough to the feeding trough. Your sister will have to drive through a foot of snow and fly to some airport that borders on civilization and you-don’t-belong-here. By the time she gets to the alpaca ranch, Grandpa Jesse will be drunk, wearing a soiled Depends, and so badly malnourished that his very life hangs in the balance.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Stewart, I wish I was, but you know I’m not.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets. “So, what do we do?”

Gladys swallowed the last of her beer. “Do what Kate suggested. We put him in a home.”

“He’s already in a home.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “And he doesn’t want to be there anymore.” Smiling, I took the empty bottle from my wife and grabbed mine from the patio. “I’m going to fly down there with him next weekend.”

“And do what?”

“Find a way to talk him out of moving.”

She shook her head and laughed. “Good luck with that. Has anyone, since the beginning of time, ever been able to change your grandfather’s mind?”

I nodded. “Yeah. But she’s not here anymore.”