

Jason Siegel thinks his stepfather has gone far enough. First, he allows only kosher food at home. Then, he forces Jason to wear a kippah (yarmulke). Now, no baseball games on Shabbat! Jason is determined to play—no matter what. But when his secret plan backfires, Jason hurts his teammate's feelings and jeopardizes his relationship with his family.

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# Chapter 1

“So long, Wayne, see you tomorrow. I’ll bring over my Ken Griffey rookie for you to look at. It’s awesome.”

“Later, man,” Wayne said, holding his hand up for a companionable slap.

Jason Siegel watched as the tall, husky black boy moved toward the front door of the large Tudor-style house, then started ambling toward his own house two blocks away. The warm breeze ruffled the sunny forsythia shrubs that dotted almost every lawn in Shady Glen, New Jersey, in the April dusk. Baseball practice had run late, and then the two sixth graders had stopped to check out the newest X-Men comics. It had to be after six, Jason thought.

Suddenly, his heart began to beat faster. It was Friday, and his mother had warned him to come home right after practice. He still had to shower and change before his grandparents arrived for Shabbat dinner.

Jason began to run, his backpack thumping with each step. His stepfather David would certainly be home and cleaned up by now, and his mother would have bathed his twin half sisters, Leah and Devorah, and dressed them up in their Shabbat clothes. Jason thought it was the stupidest waste of time and energy he'd ever seen. It was dumb to change clothes for a couple of hours, just to eat a meal. They were only going to hang around the house, the way they did every Shabbat, so why did it matter what he was wearing?

Jason stopped running when he reached his walk, slipped the backpack off his shoulders, and began fumbling in the outside pocket. Where was that *kippah*? David had asked him to wear it, but he always took it off as soon as he left the house. That was another dumb thing David wanted him to do, something he'd never even thought of before his mother remarried a little more than two years earlier.

Finding the skullcap, Jason grabbed his backpack and mitt with one hand and jammed the crocheted *kippah* onto his thick brown hair with the other. One of David's old ladies at the nursing

home where he worked had made it, crocheting “Go, Mets” around the rim. Jason knew his stepfather had hoped that would make it more appealing, but Jason wasn’t buying it. Just because David had discovered Religion with a capital *R* didn’t mean Jason had to turn his life inside out. He scowled as he struggled to grab the doorknob. Let David boss his own kids around; Jason was tired of taking orders from him.

Jason pushed the door open and dropped his stuff on the floor. Stepping quietly into the hall, he glanced right. Sure enough, the dining room table was covered with a tablecloth and set for five, with two high chairs. The Shabbat candles on the sideboard were not lit yet. Maybe he could get into the bathroom before anyone saw him and there wouldn’t be a problem.

“Jasee here! Jasee here!” a voice squealed gleefully, and Jason turned around to see Leah trying to follow him up the stairs. He sat down on a step, smiling despite his anxiety, and waited for the chubby twenty-month-old to reach him. Her white tights were already gray at the knees, and the red

ribbon that should have been around her head was looped dangerously around her neck.

“Hey, cutie pie. How’s my girl?” Jason hugged the little girl and rested his cheek on her silky blonde hair. He loved the twins much more than he’d expected when his mother got pregnant six months after she’d married David. They were the best part of his new family, he often thought. “Where’s your partner in crime?” he asked.

“She’s right here, all ready for Shabbat.” David stood at the bottom of the stairs, his reddish beard neatly combed and his thinning beige hair covered by a *kippah*, holding an identical curly-haired smiling blonde in his arms. Jason gazed at Devorah’s lightly freckled face, so much like her father’s.

“We were wondering where you were,” David said, looking up at Jason.

Jason flushed with irritation. “Practice ran late, but I’ll go get changed now.”

“Make it fast. Mom’s about to light the candles.”

Jason carefully balanced Leah on the stairs, snatching off the red ribbon and tossing it to David. “She’s going to hurt herself with this.” Then

he raced up the stairs to his room, ignoring her squawk of complaint.

As Jason stripped off his sweatpants and T-shirt and threw them toward his hamper, he glanced at the family photograph hanging over his bureau. It showed a woman with dark bushy hair laughing as a little boy tried to shovel snow. A man with long hair leaned on another snow shovel. Jason was about three years old in that picture, so it had to have been taken four years before his father died of leukemia.

Jason gazed at the picture, letting his eyes rest on his father's face, long and thin like his own. Whenever he thought of his father, he saw the face in the picture. It seemed to him that he remembered his father, but at times it was hard to know whether he remembered the man himself or stories and pictures of him. Jason often looked at albums from the time his father was healthy and strong, and when he didn't look at them for a long time, he felt that he'd done something wrong.

Jason stepped quickly in and out of the shower and hurried to put on slacks and a shirt. As he combed his hair, he thought he could hear his

Grandpa Phil's voice downstairs. That meant they would be eating soon. Jason couldn't wait to tell his grandfather about practice and this year's team. Phil loved baseball as much as he did, and his candy store always sponsored one of Shady Glen's junior teams. When he was younger, Phil used to coach. Together, Jason and his grandfather worried about the New York Mets and whether that year's highly paid super-star would deliver.

"Grandpa, guess what?" Jason said, as soon as the whole family was seated around the table and David had finished blessing the wine and hallah. "I'm pitching this year, and Wayne is catching. We are going to be unbeatable. All the way with Jase for Ace!"

"And modest, too," Phil said, smiling, as he put an arm around his grandson's shoulders.

"Why should he be modest?" Grandma Estelle asked seriously. "Everyone knows he's a wonderful pitcher."

"It's okay, Mom," Shari Siegel reassured her mother. "Dad was just kidding Jason." She passed plates loaded with sliced pot roast, mushroom barley, and glazed carrots down the table, blithely

ignoring Leah's hammering on her high chair with a spoon.

When everyone had been served and the girls had settled down to picking up slices of carrot, Phil said, "We have a birthday coming up, if I'm not mistaken. How about if all of us go into the city for Jason's twelfth. We can go to a show and then to Chinatown for dinner."

"Yeah! I'm going to use chopsticks for everything, even the fried rice." Jason bounced up and down in his chair from excitement. He loved Chinese food, and the weirdest and tastiest was to be found in New York's Chinatown.

His excitement was contagious, and shy Devorah began bouncing in her high chair too. David cleared his throat. "That's very generous, Phil, but that would cost a fortune."

"And it's so hard to find a sitter for the two of them," Shari quickly added. "I wanted to throw Jason a birthday party right here at home."

Jason sat very still. What was going on? Mrs. Rosario from next door would be glad to watch Leah and Devorah; she watched them all the time. His mother knew he loved Chinese food. They

used to eat it every Sunday, but David couldn't find much that was kosher on the menu.

Jason watched as David shot his wife a grateful smile. That was it! David didn't want to go to Chinatown because it wasn't kosher enough, so Jason's birthday had to be ruined. It was too much for Jason to bear. "That's not fair," he cried out, jumping up and knocking his chair back. "You can't spoil my birthday," he yelled at David. "I'm sick and tired of all your stupid rules."

Jason ran out of the dining room, making sure to throw his *kippah* on the floor. He slammed the door of the family room shut and clicked on a video game. David had asked him not to play video games or watch TV on Shabbat, but he didn't care about that now. His stepfather's demands were never going to end, Jason was certain, until Jason's life was topsy-turvy.

"Knock, knock," Phil's voice called through the door.

"Who's there?" Jason asked automatically.

"Boo."

"Boo who?"

"Don't cry. It's only a joke."

“Ha, ha,” Jason said, his eyes on the game. He didn’t look over as his grandfather sat down on the couch.

“I know you’re angry at David,” Phil began.

“That’s right, I am,” Jason interrupted, thumbs punching furiously. “He’s trying to mess up my life. Why do we always have to do what he wants? And why does Mommy always stick up for him? She’s never on my side, never. Everything was fine before he showed up, and now everything stinks.”

His grandfather gave a deep sigh. “Jason, you’re still a boy, but you know that’s not true. Your mother went through a very hard time after your father died. It’s not easy to lose a husband and be a parent all alone. It broke my heart to see her so sad. When she met David at that high school reunion, she started to come back to life. I thank God for him. He may be a little serious,” Phil continued, “but he’s good for your mother, and I know he likes you. He’s never been mean to you, has he?”

“I guess not, but this religion thing is driving me crazy. He never asked me if I wanted to be observant! First, we have to be kosher at home, so no cheeseburgers or bacon. Then I can’t have tacos in

school or pepperoni on my pizza. Now, no TV or Nintendo on Saturday. I might as well go to bed when I come home from school on Friday and stay there until Saturday night.”

Jason threw down the game controller in disgust. “That’s it. I’m dead. You know what he did last Saturday? He wouldn’t drive me to the library, and my social studies report was due on Monday! I would have got an F if Mommy didn’t take me.”

Phil looked at him closely. “How long did you have to do this report? Why did you have to wait until Saturday.”

“I just forgot,” Jason mumbled, “but that’s not the point.”

“So what is the point?” Phil asked, standing up. “He wants you to do stuff that he thinks is important, and you don’t. And you want him to do stuff that you think is important. I think both of you need to consider the other guy’s point of view and give your mother some peace. God knows she deserves it.”

Phil held his hand out to Jason and pulled him up. “Let’s go back and see what’s for dessert. Your mother was always a great cook, kosher or not.

God knows where she learned, because Bubby can just about boil a cup of tea.”

Jason giggled in spite of himself. “That’s why you like to eat out so much.”

“You got it, sonny. I know every diner from here to Hoboken.”

When Jason and Phil got back to the dining room, Shari was just cutting up a large chocolate layer cake. “Just in time,” she said, glancing up and smiling. “David reminded me there’s a new kosher Chinese restaurant over in Mayfair, Dad. Why don’t we go there for Jason’s birthday? We’ll bring the girls, and Jase, you can invite some of your friends. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Jason looked at his stepfather, who smiled at him. “I guess. Do they have lo mein?”

“Never heard of a Chinese restaurant worthy of the name that didn’t,” David answered. “We’ll have a good time, and it’s not as big a shlep.”

Jason looked at his mother, who nodded encouragingly. “All right,” he finally said, swallowing the sour taste at the back of his throat. David had won again.

## Chapter 2

Jason stared out his classroom window at the budding trees, tired of the consequences of Reconstruction. His social studies teacher's droning voice reminded him of the sound of cicadas in the summertime. The noise just went on and on, stopping momentarily, then picking up again.

"Jase," a different voice hissed nearby. Jason looked at Michelle Appelbaum from the corner of his eye and casually dropped his hand to grab the note she was holding out to him. Michelle was all right for a girl. She was smart and funny, and she played first base for Ace Hardware. Unlike the only other girl in the league, Michelle took baseball seriously. She wasn't playing just to meet boys, Jason knew.

Jason opened the note under his desk and looked down to read. Yes, he nodded to Michelle, he was going to Ashley McDonnell's birthday party. He wasn't going to miss his first boy-girl party at a