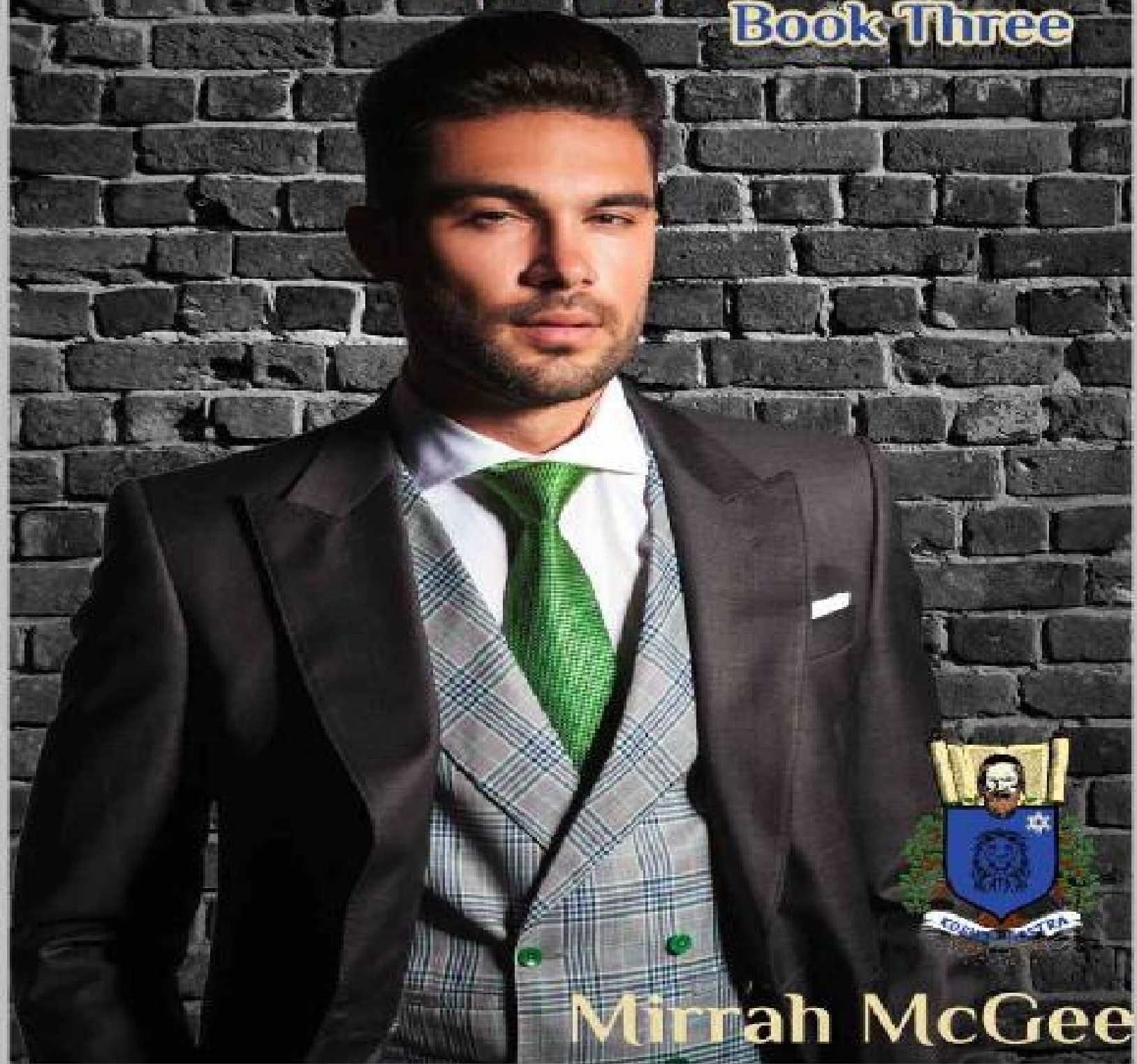


Zeppa

**Kosher Nostra
Book Three**



Mirrah McGee

Zeppo

Covenant of Ascent; Kosher Nostra Book Three

Mirrah McGee

Mirrah, Mirrah on the Shelf

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Prologue - Ruth Holofcener

“You’re a pathetic cunt.”

The whispered words in my ear are not surprising. I knew she’d find me before the night was over. She always does. And my plan to escape was paltry at best.

“It makes us sick to watch you pant after him. Lovesick little girl. He needs a woman. He needs me. He wants a real woman, with the body of a goddess to worship, not an overweight gluttonous blob.”

Not surprising, but they hurt just the same. Like hot blades piercing my skin...my heart. The way they talk about me behind my back. When they are alone in his bed, naked and sated, laughing at me and my childish crush.

“Can you imagine the shame he’d feel with you weighing him down? He has a reputation to uphold, and you would ruin him in seconds. You’d ruin the whole Kosher Nostra.”

I don’t want to believe her, but have I not felt this way most of my life? How could she know this if it wasn’t glaringly obvious to everyone else that I don’t fit in here? I want nothing more in life than for Zeppo to be happy. Only the Zeppo I know and love with all my heart could never find peace in the arms of such a soulless creature. Could he? I hasten my steps, desperate to get to the servant staircase so I can hide in the kitchen. She wouldn’t dare follow me there. She believes associating with the help is akin to catching the Ebola virus.

“Why are you still here? Why haven’t you done the world a favor and slit your wrists?”

I ask myself that every day. I tried, I moved into my own apartment, but then...

“Zeppo might be too kind to push you away, but I’m not. You will not interfere in our lives any longer. Your family will thank me when you’re dead and buried that I had the strength to do what no one else did.”

Ruth 1.

Several months ago

“This movie is horrible!” I screech, covering my face with my hands and burrowing further into Zeppo’s firm body. He smells amazing, as usual, but I can’t focus on that, or how warm he is, or his muscles... “AHH!” I jump when I hear the screaming and carnage on the screen. Zeppo’s big body just shakes with laughter at my expense. “Why do I keep watching these with you?”

He pats my back, his breath tickling the top of my head as he says, “Because you love me.” That is true. Very true. Probably not the kind of love he feels for me but love just the same. Zeppo Kraus has owned me body and soul for as long as I can remember. And while I can accept that I am like a little sister to him, he is still the man of my dreams. Always has been, always will be. 9 years older than me, our age difference never mattered much to him, he included me in anything and everything, often defending my presence against my brothers and cousins.

Zeppo is not related to us by blood, thank God for that, but he is a part of our family all the same. His father Aaron, served as a *kapitan* to my father when he was the Avinu of the Kosher Nostra before he passed the torch to my eldest brother Moshe several years ago. Beyond their working relationship, Uncle Aaron and my *tate* are best friends, along with Uncle Morris and Uncle Steven who are related to us by marriage through my mom’s sisters.

So, he’s always been here, there, and everywhere, and now he serves as *kapitan* to my brother. He is a dangerous man to those outside of our family, feared, respected, and given a wide berth. To me, he is my tender-hearted defender and cuddle buddy.

I’m not like most of the other women in our family, and I’m certainly a far cry from the women Zeppo dates. I learned a long time ago to accept my platonic role in his life, because he doesn’t go for tall, wide-hipped, large breasted women with addictive sweet tooth. He likes them dainty, thin, athletic, and starving. I won’t say it doesn’t hurt, because it does, however, as long as he doesn’t bring them around the family compound, I can deal with it.

Sort of. Sometimes.

Moving on...

“Why can’t we just watch a cute rom-com with a quick butt-shot?”

Zeppo pauses the movie, then shifts on the couch in the huge entertainment room until he’s wedged in the corner, and I’m draped over his expansive chest. “First of all, *freyd*, you don’t squeal and hide behind me when we watch rom-coms and I happen to like being your shield against nefarious movie villains.” Giggling, I rub my cheek against the soft material of his t-shirt and snuggle in. “Second,” My giggle turns into a gasp when he smacks my big butt, “why do you need to see someone’s ass on screen? You want to see an ass; I’ll show you mine. You don’t need to see any man’s naked behind.”

My cheeks flame, but I ignore my reaction to the thought of seeing his butt, “I don’t *need* to see someone’s butt, it’s just a nice bonus. Also, I’m 22, Zep, I can see naked behinds and naked fronts...if I want to.”

“No.” He says succinctly, like that’s the end of that.

“What?” I arch my neck to look him in the eye, but he’s glaring at the screen, his jaw clenching, and nostrils flaring.

“No. No naked men or sex...at home or out there,” he points to the windows, “and the only time you’ll see it on a screen is right before someone gets murdered or mutilated like the gods of horror intended.”

“Zep—”

“Hush, *freyd*, I think that young woman who engaged in sinful, premarital sex is about to die at the hands of the mutant leprechaun. Should be a lesson to us all...”

I’m not sure whether to laugh or not. He engages in “sinful, premarital sex”, hell, everyone one does but me. I decide to keep my mouth shut and just enjoy the rest of my evening with Zeppo when he wraps me up tighter in his arms and hums contentedly.

He might not be my boyfriend or husband, but he’s my best friend and that’s good enough...for now.

Zeppo Kraus 2.

Mid-May

“Well...that was...” I trail off with a smirk, shaking my head as we walk out of the meeting. The meeting in which the prominent family heads in the surrounding areas witnessed exactly what happens when you disrespect Moshe, the Avraham Avinu of the Kosher Nostra, and his beloved Seril.

Tevye snorts behind me, “...about as necessary as another hole in the head.” Our group, minus Ezra and Zilv who have to stay and clean up the mess left behind by the bullet that exploded out of the back of Gerald Wittinger’s head, groan at Tev’s dark humor.

Jonah barely pauses to smack Tev before he’s rushing out of the restaurant where our *12 Angry Men* meeting was held. The life of a Porn King.

“Anyone else notice Junior’s fury?” Yakov, our security and tech expert, asks in a low voice when we’re on the sidewalk outside. Our phones ping at the same time. We chuckle reading Jonah’s text. “So, Jonah noticed it. Anyone else?”

“Yeah. I did. Do you think he’ll be a problem?” Yak meets my eyes and shrugs, but I see the gears turning.

“Time will tell.” He responds casually.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Yak, the boy doesn’t even piss without his daddy’s say so.”

Yakov turns on Tev and raises his hands, “His daddy ain’t here anymore, now, is he?”

Tev cocks his head to the side after a moment of consideration. “Alright, we’ll keep an eye on him.”

“*Kapitans*. Our business is concluded. Zeppo, you’ll come with me back to my office.”

“I’ve gotta head over to the nursery—”

“You’ll come with me back to my office.” Sighing, I follow Moshe to his Wagoneer and pat his driver Ernie on the head as I slide into the back seat after my fearless leader.

“What was so urgent it couldn’t wait?”

“Your plants will not wilt in the next few hours.”

“No, will you?” I tease but drop my smile when I see he isn’t sharing my humor. “Moshe?”

“We’ll speak in the office.”

I look at Ernie in the driver’s seat and back to Moshe, raising an eyebrow in question. Ernie is family and loyal to the Kosher Nostra, especially Moshe. For a brief moment, I see uncertainty flash across Moshe’s normally controlled face. “I’d rather not be in an enclosed space with you when we talk.”

Shit. I sit next to Moshe for the duration of the ride to Mishpocheh Consortium on North Church in the heart of Charlotte. This city has been my home since birth. It is in my blood, just as much as Armenia where my family is from. I have lived and breathed this life for 31 years. And I know that Moshe is about to change everything as sure as I know the sun will set regardless of my wants or desires.

“I have kept my relationship with Ruthie platonic as you commanded.”

“I said we’ll talk about this at the office.”

“Moshe—”

“Silence.” He has been softer since he found Seril, but today I am reminded why I pledged my allegiance to him as a child. Moshe was born to lead the Kosher Nostra, the Jewish mafia. It isn’t just in his blood; it is in every strand of his DNA. He is a loving man with his family, but as Gerald Wittinger’s dead body can attest, he is not a man with which to trifle. My respect for him is the only reason I shut my mouth right now, it is the only reason I cast aside my heart years ago.

Tension bleeds into every corner of the vehicle and it follows like a heavy rain cloud above our heads as we make our way into the family business headquarters. The 12 story building blends in nicely with the others around it, however it has a roof-top pool and patio for those in our employ who live in the lavish apartments on the upper 5 floors. Moshe, much like his father David, treats those who work for the Mishpocheh Consortium’s varied businesses like family. Fear is an excellent motivator, but respect inspires loyalty that no amount of money can dispel.

Ernie gives me a chin nod as he shuts the door to Moshe’s office, leaving me alone with my Avinu. I’ve never been unsettled in Moshe’s presence. I’ve been furious, hurt, and sad, but never uncomfortable. I fidget in the leather seat across from his expansive desk.

Neither of us speaks for several long seconds, perhaps minutes. With a firm grip on the arm rests, I lean forward, “I assume this isn’t about the upcoming NFL fantasy draft.” He doesn’t even crack a smile.

“I have had my eye on Keppelman for some time.” I sit back, not expecting that. Ralph Keppelman was at the meeting earlier; he is head of one of the families we deal with in the area. He’s always been agreeable, respectful even. “He is plotting and planning and I want to know what his endgame is.”

“Moshe?”

“Today, he reached for his phone during the meeting, eyed each of my *kapitans*, and made mental notes.”

“Ok?” I’m not sure where he’s going with this but knowing Moshe, he’s thought this through.

“After Wittinger’s ridiculous idea of arranged marriage.”

Resting my elbows on my knees, I meet Moshe’s hard stare. “You think he wants to set up someone in his family with one of your men? To what end? Power? Invincibility? Leverage? He’s always been amenable in our dealings —”

“A man has many faces, Zeppo, as you are aware. You look me in the eye every day while fucking your fist at night to thoughts of my baby sister. You represent the Kosher Nostra in my stead while dreaming of defiling the most innocent creature on earth and casting her aside when you’ve used her up.”

“Moshe—” I raise my voice as I stand. Avinu or not, friend or not, he is crossing a line.

“Keppelman covets what is mine and I will not allow him to take it from underneath me. Saturday night you will go to *TrackBar*, find Keppelman’s niece Nayosha, and seduce her.”

“NO!” I slam my fist on the desk, but he continues as if my outrage means nothing. As if I mean nothing.

“You will begin a relationship with her to spy on Keppelman and gain inside information about the man and his plans.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You will do what I tell you or you will forfeit your place in the Kosher Nostra.”

My knees give out and I flop back into my chair. I scrub my hands through my hair and pull at the ends. This can’t be happening. “Do you have any idea what this will do to Ruthie? To me? Moshe, please, you know how I feel... I’ve waited—”

“My denial did not come with an expiration date. I know the man you are in the bedroom; I’ve witnessed it a time or two with the women we’ve shared, I will NOT subject my sister to your sexual proclivities. You are not worthy of Ruth. She is my sister, the baby of the family, and the daughter of the previous Avinu, she is a princess and too good for a soldier like you.”

I swallow hard, my heart lurching at the way he truly sees me. “If I forfeit my place in the Kosher Nostra, I lose my family, my parents, my brother... dammit, Moshe, even if I do this...I will lose Ruthie...forever.” That thought has my stomach churning and bile rising up my throat. I have loved Ruth Holofcener in some way my entire life. For so long it was like Smeagol loved the ring. She is precious and pure. Sunshine in human form. And I wanted to be the one to protect her, make her smile and keep her happy. Then, about three years ago, she and I were snuggling on the couch like we always did, watching a movie and I dipped my nose in her hair and the scent of her made my blood boil. The feel of her lush body, curves and all, against my hard muscle, the way her laughter vibrated along my skin, the acknowledgement that every good thing in my life included her and I never wanted that to change. It was an instant, but I felt like I had been falling for her for years. I kept all of that to myself, afraid she was too young at 19, afraid I’d tarnish her. I couldn’t stay away though, the thought of not having her in my life is more terrifying than anything I can imagine.

“You never had her and you never will, not while I am the Avraham Avinu.”

“Why do you hate me so much?”

Moshe sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I don’t hate you. I love you like a brother. But as I’ve said, I’ve fucked women with you, and I won’t have you using Ruthie the same way and crushing her beneath your boot for fun. Besides, you are nine years older than her.”

“You have Seril now. You changed, why can’t I? I haven’t been with anyone in over 2 years, not since I fully realized my feelings for Ruthie. I love her.”

Moshe scoffs and the sound is unkind. “You love the idea of her virginity.” I leap across the desk, but he moves faster dodging my hand.

“You are a fucking asshole.”

Moshe fixes his tie and straightens the lapels of his suit jacket, eyeing me like an animal about to strike. “Yes. I am. But I am also your Avinu, and you will bait this woman in several days’ time and bring her into the family so we may keep a closer eye on our enemies.”

Ruth 3.

“Tovah, I wanna get married.”

“I know, I know. Just wait.” My cousin is 5 years older than me. She’s like an adult. I can’t wait to be 12 like her. She also takes a long time to play because she wants to do it right, she says. “You don’t even have a groom.”

“Uh-huh. I’m gonna marry Zeppo.”

Tovah looks up from the papers she’s writing on and turns her head to see the living room. “He’s not here...does he even know?”

“No. I didn’t tell him. But can’t I marry him anyway?”

Tovah laughs loudly. She does that around me a lot. She says it’s because I’m neve or something, I think it means stupid. I don’t like it. “You can’t get married unless both of you agree and he has to be here to say, ‘I do’ or it isn’t legal.”

I snort, “It isn’t legal anyway. You aren’t a rabbi.”

“Judges can marry people; they are called Justices of Peace.”

“Ok!” I throw my hands up, “You aren’t a judge either!”

“Tovah! Are you upsetting my freyd?” My skin dots with goosebumps when I hear Zeppo’s voice from the hall. He calls me “joy” in Yiddish, and I love it. It makes my tummy flip and my heart speed up. I drop my hands quickly and smooth down my white dress before adjusting the flower headband in my hair. Zeppo walks in with a small smile on his handsome face.

“Ruthie...you look beautiful.” He stops a few feet away from me and stares at my short heels, ankle length dress and finally my hair. His smile grows and my skin feels too tight. I’m only 7, but I know what love is. Mame and Tate talk about it all the time, so do my aunts and uncles. Tate always dances around the house with mame in his arms, and the way they smile at each other...that’s how Zeppo smiles at me. He’s 16 and wonderful to look at and he’s been exercising a lot and his voice is changing and gah! I love him so much.

“Thank you. I’m getting married.” His jaw drops for a second. He turns in a circle around the room and then meets my eyes.

“Who are you marrying?”

“Well...uh...” Shoot. Tovah said he had to agree, but I don’t think the girl is supposed to ask the boy.

“She currently has an opening for a groom. You interested?” Tovah is tall, a lot taller than me. She pushes her shoulder into Zeppo’s and meanly smiles at me. I don’t like her touching him. He isn’t hers.

“If you’re getting married, freyd, then I guess so am I.” Tovah’s jaw drops in shock, and I snicker. When Zeppo turns his back to me, I stick my tongue out at Tovah. She rolls her eyes and huffs.

“Whatever, your funeral.”

“Wedding. It’s a wedding.” I correct her.

“Zeppo, sign here.”

“What is this?” He asks, following her to the coffee table. “Is this a marriage contract? I thought this was pretend?”

“Just because we’re pretending doesn’t mean we can’t be accurate. Now, sign.” She hands him a pen and he grins at me while he signs his name on the notebook paper. He hands it to me, and I sign where Tovah points. She signs after me on the witness line.

“Rabbi Zilv!” Zeppo spins around to watch my brother walk into the living room with a bible in his hand.

“Zeppo, good boy, I’m surprised to see you here. Are you Ruth’s intended?”

“Who are you and what have you done with my friend?” Zeppo jokes but Zilv is in character.

“Let us take our places, so we may begin the ceremony.” Zilv points to the doorway where my tate stands. “Ruth, tate will walk you down the aisle. Zeppo, do you have any family coming? We can wait a few minutes for them.”

Zeppo shakes his head, his mouth flaps but no sound comes out. I walk closer to him and whisper, “You don’t have to marry me, Zeppo.” That snaps him out of it, I guess, because he pulls me into a hug and squeezes tight.

“Nonsense. Of course, we’re getting married, I just didn’t realize how... proper everything was going to be.” I shrug, unable to explain how serious Tovah is when she plays with me.

He lets me go and I go into the hallway with my dad. “You sure about this, baby Ruth? You’re so young, you don’t have to decide on a husband now.” Giggling, I hug my dad.

“He’s the one, tate.”

“I know, pumpkin.”

Tovah plays some music on her phone, tate walks me down the aisle in the living room and Rabbi Zilv performs the ceremony. When he announces us

husband and wife, my heart feels too big for my chest. I know it isn't real, but what if it was? What if one day I was Mrs. Zeppo Kraus. Ruth Kraus. Ruthie Kraus. That would be amazing.

"You may now kiss the bride." All my happiness dies when my brother teases us. With wide eyes I look at my tate and then to Zeppo. I swallow hard and shake my head. He glares at my brother, but when he looks at me, he's smiling. With a wink, he leans down, I close my eyes, and sigh when his lips touch my cheek.

"Hello, Mrs. Kraus." He whispers.

"H-h-hi."

"Treat her right, son or they will never find your body." Tate tells Zeppo.

"You won't touch him!" I poke my tate in the chest and frown at him.

"It's ok, freyd, he's just worried about his daughter. I would be too if I had one. But don't worry, sir, Ruth is the most important thing in the world to me, she's my joy."

"She's mine too." Tate kisses me on the top of the head and pats Zeppo on the shoulder. "We'll have a feast tonight to celebrate! Your mother will be so upset she missed your wedding."

"I recorded it. It's part of my services as the wedding planner." Tovah follows after him with her phone in her hand.

"Dude, don't you have a date with Katie tonight?" I hate my brother. He's mean and evil and has ruined my wedding day.

"Shit. Yeah, I'm supposed to pick her up at 7." Zeppo leans down so we are eye to eye. "We can still have dinner; I'll just leave after. You wanna watch a movie until it's time to eat?"

My shoulders lift and fall, and he takes that as a yes. Is it normal for brides to hang out with their husbands on their wedding days until it's time for their date?

I slowly wake up, stretching my toes and then my legs and arms. I probably look like a starfish, but I don't care. I'm a happy starfish. Moshe is getting married in a couple of weeks to Seril. My future sister-in-law is fantastic and I'm so glad that Moshe found her. And Jonah brought a girl to the compound a few days ago. She's a cam-girl Swingin' Schlay Productions just hired, but she's also being stalked. I've never seen my cousin go all territorial and alpha before. It's amusing to watch. Just like Seril, Harper is great. I know it's early days, but I'm hoping she sticks around.

My dream, though, is why I'm smiling from ear to ear. I guess it's more of a

memory since it actually happened. I'd be embarrassed about playing make-believe if Zeppo wasn't such a sweetheart about it all. For weeks after, he'd joke about me being his wife, the old ball and chain, or having to ask the Mrs. for permission before he did something.

And I'm not as naïve anymore. I know it was fake, I know it will never happen in real life. I'm fat, sheltered, and too young for someone like Zeppo, but he makes me feel special regardless. He doesn't kiss me, or touch me, or...have sex with me like he does the women he dates, but I know I matter to him far more than anyone who shares his bed. I'm a permanent fixture in his life and he is one in mine. A constant I can count on, always.

Checking the clock, I hurry out of bed and into the shower. I don't want to miss breakfast. 20 minutes later, I'm walking out of the door to my suite in the family compound and run right into a firm chest. I stumble back, looking up into the dark eyes of one of my bodyguards.

"Hi, Chas. Sorry." I drop my gaze to the floor and play with the hem of my button-down shirt.

"Never apologize for touching me, Miss Ruth." I laugh nervously, he makes comments like that all the time. I'd think it was flirting, but no one flirts with me. Even if I was pretty enough, I am a Jewish American Mafia Princess. Smart people know to stay away. It's a little lonely, but I have my family. "Here, these are for you. To replace last week's." Instinctively I reach my hand out to take the bouquet of lilies from Chas. For the last month or so, he's brought me a new bouquet every week. Again, it seems like flirting, but it doesn't make any sense.

"Thank you." I quickly unlock my door and rush to the kitchen. I grab the vase from my small kitchen table and turn to the sink, nearly dropping the glass and flowers to the ground when I see Chas has followed me in.

"Let me help." In moments, he's got the old flowers in the garbage, and the new ones in fresh water and centered on my table. He's never come into my suite before, no one has, really. Certainly not a boy...er, man. "Ruth?"

"Yes?" I glance up, my eyes connecting with his for a second, before darting over his shoulder. He makes me nervous and I'm not sure if that's good or not. I just know he isn't Zeppo.

"You are so fucking beautiful." He rasps and my spine snaps straight. Closing the distance between us, he's not touching me, but he's too near. I'm up against the counter with nowhere to go. His hand comes up and I swallow hard, releasing a shaky breath when his calloused fingers make contact with

my skin.

“What...wh-what are you doing?” I could knee him in the balls, but I don’t. He’s not unattractive. Dark eyes, dark hair, straight white teeth, his suits fit well. He’s been with the Kosher Nostra for several years if I remember correctly. My bodyguard for a year now. But he’s never been this bold.

“I’m going to kiss you.” I shake my head, adamant that I don’t want that. I don’t want my first kiss to be with him. I want Zeppo. All my firsts are his. But Chas doesn’t pay attention, just drops his lips to mine, pressing harder and harder with every second that passes. I’m frozen, my heart in my throat. “Let me in, babe.” I don’t know what that means. Let him in where? My mouth? I’ve never kissed anyone before. Definitely never played tonsil hockey with someone. I shake my head again and my arms finally move, coming up to his chest and pushing him back.

“No. No. No. You can’t kiss me. You’re my bodyguard.”

“I enjoy guarding your body. I wanna do more to it though.”

“Uh...” my brain short circuits and I start giggling. Uncontrollably. “My father...my brother will kill you. You know that.”

“Some risks are worth it.”

“I’m not. I promise.” I force my feet to action, taking long strides to the front door of my suite. “Thank you for the flowers. I’m going to be late for breakfast.”

“Wouldn’t want that.” He mutters and I look at him over my shoulder, his eyes glued to my butt, his upper lip pulled into a snarl. Facing forward, I quicken my steps through the compound. I hear him follow, but he doesn’t speak to me again.

“Morning, pumpkin.” I smile at my *tate* and rush into his open arms.

“Good morning.” I’m not sure what just happened with Chas. And honestly, I don’t want to think about it.

“Ruthie, dear, were you able to finalize...” *Mame* brings me into a discussion of wedding details and I’m grateful for the reprieve. Chas is clearly having an off day and it’s best just to push it aside. Moshe and Seril’s wedding is a good distraction.

Zeppo 4.

My stomach churns as I sit in the back of the Waggoneer. My driver Paul weaves his way through Saturday night Charlotte traffic. The closer we get to TrackBar, owned by Ralph Keppelman, the more nausea and anger I feel. After delivering his edict, my Avinu forbade me from speaking of this to anyone. He wants to keep this under wraps for now, claiming the less people know, the less likely for me to fuck it up and Keppelman find out we're on to him. There's truth to it, but it doesn't mean I like it.

I have been with Moshe since the day he was born. I'm three years older and have always looked out for him. My life has been in service to him and the mishpocheh. More than a duty, it is a privilege. The Holofceners rescued my father and mother from certain death during the Sumgait Pogrom in Armenia in 1990, however, not soon enough to save my older sister. She died just months after her birth in an explosion and David, Moshe's dad, has never forgiven himself for not being able to get to my parent's sooner. Mom and dad never blamed David, knowing he acted as swiftly as he could, with great danger to himself and his men, and the moment they set foot on American soil, they pledged their life to the Holofceners and the Kosher Nostra, and their children.

Until my feelings for Ruthie changed, I never questioned my loyalty, never questioned Moshe's right and ability to lead. I know he is protecting his sister, and I respect that, but it cuts to the quick that he feels she needs protection from me. I am good enough to die in his honor but not live by his sister's side. And what hurts the most is the longing I see in Ruthie's eyes when we are together. I know she feels the same for me because love shines through her every pore and she's fucking radiant.

And yet for over two years, I have held back, I have refrained to the detriment of myself and my *freyd*. And now...now I must whore myself out for the good of the family and it sickens me.

"Are you alright, sir?" Paul's question draws me from my thoughts. I sigh, good-naturedly and stare at him through the rearview mirror. His smirk is unappreciated.

"Zeppo. Not sir. How many times must we go over this? You are older than I am and have been in the family longer than me."

“Yes, but you outrank me and I’m happy to admit it. The weight on your shoulders looks unpleasant to carry. Anything I can help with?”

I shake my head and look out the window at the passing lights of the city.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Perhaps Miss Ruthie can help? Have you spoken to her?” I have not. I’ve avoided her for a couple of days because I can’t look her in the eye and tell her what I am to do. And I don’t want to lie to her either. I am going to lose her, and I will not survive it. I feel it in my gut. And yet, I am afraid to go against my Avinu’s orders. Fuck. I rub my hands up and down my face and dig my knuckles into my eyes. I’m a fucking coward. Maybe Moshe’s right. I don’t deserve her.

“No. I haven’t.” My phone rings a second later and Paul smiles at Ruthie’s special ringtone. It’s the theme song from “Super Why”, a popular kids tv show that she was obsessed with. I’ve watched every episode with her at least three times. Normally, it brings a smile of my own to my face, right now, my mouth tastes as if I’ve swallowed something sour.

“Sir?”

With a sigh I feel down to my toes, I answer Ruthie’s video call. Her bright expression dims when she takes in my attire and location. “You seem awfully dressed up for movie night.” I hear the disappointment in her voice, but I don’t look her in the eye, I can’t. I fix my eyes to the side of my screen and offer her a small, pitiful smile in return.

“Uh, yeah. I’m gonna have to take a raincheck, unfortunately.”

“Oh, well, that’s alright. Work happens.”

I should just let it go, let her think I’m working. I mean, in a way I am. But she’s gonna find out sooner or later, sooner if Moshe has anything to say about it. With a heavy heart and a strong urge to vomit, I correct her. “I’m going to a club actually.”

“Huh.” She says in a small voice. She’s killing me. I chance a quick glance at her face and see she’s crestfallen. Like so many times before, my *freyd* rallies and pastes on a fake grin. “Have fun, I guess. If you get bored, come over and we’ll watch something gory.”

A genuine laugh bubbles out of me and her eyes light up for a moment. “I will. Night, *freyd*. Sleep well.”

“Uh...you too?” I click to end the call, the lilt of her voice echoing in my mind long moments after I’ve hung up.

“Zeppo?” I meet Paul’s eyes once more and the intensity of his stare surprises

me. “Shit is going to hit the fan, isn’t it?”

We pull up in front of the club. I wave him off when he moves to get out first. “I’ve got it. I’ll call you when I’m ready to leave.” He nods once and I open the door, placing one foot on the pavement of the sidewalk. “Paul, I’d find a hazmat suit if I were you.”

“Fuck.”

Yeah, that’s my sentiment exactly.

Inside the club, my head pounds from the music and noxious smells of cologne, perfume, and body odor. At 31, I know many of my peers are still into this scene, but not me. As a well-known member and representative of the Jewish mafia and a local businessman, being in public is an exhausting experience. I am always on, never a chance to kick back and relax.

Recalling the photo Moshe sent me of Nayosha, Keppelman’s niece and my target, I scan the bar and high-top tables. I find her arguing with a bartender at the far end. She’s statuesque, thin, tall, her long black hair perfectly styled and laying against the swell of her ass. Her dress is red and leaves little to the imagination. Like I can clearly see she’s not wearing undergarments, not that her surgically enhanced tits need them. Fucking hell.

I inhale deeply, instantly regretting it and exhaling slowly. It takes effort to get my feet moving, but eventually, I make my way over to her. Pressing in close, I lean across her to grab a drink’s menu. She glares up at me, obviously irritated to be interrupted from ripping the bartender a new one, but her expression shifts to sultry as her eyes widen in recognition. Shit. Moshe may have been right about Keppelman wanting to arrange a marriage between our families.

“Excuse me.” I offer with a smirk, my voice low and husky.

“Hello, handsome.” Nayosha shifts on her high heeled feet, her breasts resting on my forearm, her pelvis against my hip.

“May I buy you a drink?”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.” She bats her thickly mascaraed eyes at me and pulls her plump, glossy bottom lip into her mouth. I might vomit.

I’m going to break Ruthie’s heart and my own. But it won’t matter, because my mother is going to kill me when I bring this nafka home to meet the family.

Ruth 5.

Monday is probably my favorite day of the week. The entire family, extended and blood, eat breakfast together in the large dining room in the compound. All of my favorite people gathered in one room eating and communing.

I've never had big plans for my life. I knew my parents wouldn't marry me off for the good of the family or any such nonsense. My mama would castrate my *tate* in an instant if he tried anything like that. However, I've wanted to be a wife and mother for as long as I remember. During elementary school, we would have to write down what we wanted to be when we grew up and everyone, especially the girls, dreamed of being a scientist, a professional athlete, a lawyer, a dinosaur wrangler, or a tarantula shaver...I always wrote Mrs. Zeppo Kraus, wife and mommy. For as insecure as I am about my height and weight, I have never been insecure or embarrassed about my plans for the future. Eventually, I'll need to start exploring other options in the husband department. The older I get, the more I realize Zeppo doesn't want me like that. If he did, I imagine he would have acted by now. I've been legal for four years, out of college for two after I got an associate degree in business to help at Exodus, the family shipping company. Nothing to hold him back, except his lack of romantic feelings for me.

I'll move on...just not yet.

I sit up straight in my chair when he walks into the dining room, my hand poised to wave, my mouth stretching into a smile until I catch the woman holding onto his hand. Instantly deflating, I slump into my chair as everyone quiets and stares at the couple in shock. I know he went to the club on Saturday. I know he's a man with needs...but Monday family breakfasts are sacred.

She must be very special for him to bring her.

He's my best friend and right now our entire family is gawking at him like he's a circus freak. I push my chair back and drop my napkin on the table. "Good morning, Zep." He hugs me awkwardly with one arm, the woman still firmly clinging to the other. I offer her a bright smile and hold out my hand. "Hello. I'm Ruth." She sneers at my hand, for only a second, before plastering on a fake smile of her own and returning the handshake. She squeezes my hand tight, and I have to tug hard to get her to let go.

“Ruth. Zeppy has told me so much about you. Nayosha Wallace.”

“Nice to meet you.” I look up at Zeppo and find his eyes burning into mine. He looks angry. Maybe I should have waited until he introduced her to everyone instead of coming up here and ruining his moment. It’s the first time he’s ever brought anyone to Monday breakfast, let alone to meet the family.

She’s beautiful. Shiny dark hair down her back. Exotic features. Perky boobs. Itty bitty waist and long toned legs. I can see why Zeppo is taken with her. Taking a step back, I allow them to fully enter the room and watch as Zeppo introduces her to everyone. They look good together, they look right. I swallow down the disappointment clogging my throat and blink away the tears that threaten to fall. Retaking my seat, I pick up my fork and resume eating.

Conversation is stilted. It’s obvious no one knows what to say. They are all as surprised as I am and it’s clear the women of the family are trying to figure out why Zeppo would bring her here. Why her and none of the others he’s... bedded.

Apparently, I’m going to have to move on much sooner than I anticipated. He’s 31, I didn’t expect him to be single forever, just until he suddenly confessed his undying love and erotic sexual attraction to me and we got married and had babies and copious amounts of coitus and lived happily ever after.

You know what they say: You plan, and God laughs.

I’m getting tired of being laughed at.

Zeppo 6.

Breakfast the other morning was a fucking disaster. Of epic proportions. The women in the family are not easily impressed. You'd think so, given how quickly they took to Seril and now Harper, Jonah's woman. But don't be fooled. They are ruthless in their selection process for the inner circle and Nayosha did not pass the test. Not surprising since she's a dreadful harpy.

And Ruthie. My *freyd*. God, she was heartbroken and tried to hide it, but I know her. I *know* her. I watched the light in her eyes dim until there was nothing but darkness as she took in Nayosha's hand in mine. She tried though and I'll admit she's stronger than me. Ruthie walks in with a man by her side, my fist is meeting his face immediately. She's mine. I just...

Fucking Moshe.

Life in the mafia isn't glitter and rainbows, it's death and destruction and loyalty and trust. That's what makes Ruthie so fascinating. Everyone in the family, from her parents to the foot soldiers to the drivers, have worked hard to preserve her innocence and shield her from the ugliness of the world. No one is better suited to protect her than me and yet I cannot protect her from myself. Moshe's edict as Avinu is law and to break it is suicide. I can't be in her life if I'm dead. So, I've towed the line, I've kept my mouth shut, I've stopped war from breaking out between our bloodlines by being a good little *kapitan*.

And it's killing me regardless. And hurting her.

Tonight is only going to push the knife deeper into her fragile heart and there isn't anything I can do about it. The Avraham Avinu has demanded Nayosha and I join everyone for dinner. I want to be anywhere but with this woman. Her voice grates on my nerves, the thinly veiled insults she hurls in everyone's direction are like tiny paper cuts, and I swear she's part octopus, I can't keep her hands off me.

The only upside to this whole debacle is that I was able to download Yakov's software to her phone which will track not only her location, but her keystrokes, text messages, voicemails, and phone calls. However, I'm still the only one who knows what's going on, so I'm having to sift through all the data myself. Moshe was right, and yes, that's as painful to admit as you would think. Her uncle, the respectable businessman Ralph Keppelman, is

whoring her out for financial gain and security. He is pushing her to trap me by any means necessary to ensure an alliance between our families by marriage...or children.

I'm not touching her with a 12-foot dildo, let alone my own cock. The closest she's gotten in the last several days is a kiss to her cheek. She'd have turned her head for it to be on her lips if I hadn't held her throat in my hand.

Moshe wants her comfortable around those that are important to me so she will relax and slip vital information. I have access to her phone, so the only thing she's going to be slipping is her panties which are currently in my lap. Paul is as unimpressed as I am, but he continues to drive Nayosha and I to the family compound in terse silence.

Her hand plays with my tie, lightly grazing my chest. "Will your whole family be there?"

"Yes." I've already told her that.

"Ruth?" I slowly turn my head to stare her down. My *freyd's* name coming from her mouth sounds wrong, dirty. I don't like it.

"Why?" She sidles a little closer, not heeding the warning in my eyes.

"You've talked about her a lot; I gather she's important to you. I want to get to know her." I'm already shaking my head before she finishes.

"Not a good idea." She stomps her foot lightly on the carpeted floor and crosses her arms over her ample chest. Her nipples almost pop out. Who wears a tube-top mini skirt thing to a family dinner? Especially if you want to ingratiate yourself to them. This tramp.

Ugh. Actual tramps don't deserve to be lumped into the same category as her. I'm not sure why Keppelman chose her, he has other nieces. He has to know she won't succeed. Although, going up against Moshe and the Koshers implies he isn't that smart to begin with.

"Why not?" I close my eyes and breathe deeply through my nose. Her whining is so fucking annoying.

"Drop it." My voice is deadly and low. She wisely heeds my words. I would never hurt a woman physically, but I'm not above having Paul drop her on the side of the road.

We travel the rest of the way in silence. Blessed silence. The tension in the car continues as we are ushered into the dining room. No one engages Nayosha in conversation more than a quick greeting. If my mother ever gets me alone, she's going to rip me a new one for bringing this creature home. Well, she can take it up with Moshe. Wasn't my fucking idea.

Name tags dot the plates on the large table and I bite back a curse when I find my name and Nayosha's next to Ruthie. My *freyd* offers me a small closed-mouth smile, her eyes shuttered. My body is immediately on alert, something is wrong with her. I lean in once I've taken my seat, "Ruthie, what's wrong?" She shakes her head and stares down into her lap. My eyes roam her body looking for injury and I feel my brow rise in confusion when her attire registers. She's wearing a turtleneck. In late May. In North Carolina. What the fuck?

Conversation is stilted but flows around me. I pay no one any attention, not even my date, as I focus on Ruthie. She can feel my stare, but she ignores me, instead feigning interest in a heated debate between Seril and Moshe about the activities Seril has planned for their honeymoon in Australia. She wants to sight see, he wants to fuck her...anywhere and everywhere. However, I'll admit it's humorous watching Avinu figure out tactful ways of explaining his intentions knowing the entire family, including his parents, are listening.

"Aren't you afraid of the bugs?" Ruthie asks, seemingly unable to hold back her question. It surprises her and her face flushes bright red. It's not the question that concerns everyone, and me, it's the rasp and painful quality to her voice.

"Pumpkin? Are you ill?" her father tosses his napkin to the table and stands up to check on his daughter. Like a deer-in-headlights, Ruthie glances around the room with wide eyes, biting her bottom lip.

"Sorry, yes. I must be coming down with something. Excuse me." Before any one of us can move, she's gone. I move to stand but Nayosha's hand is on my thigh. I'm about to shake her off, when Esther, Ruthie's mom waves me to sit down.

"I'll check on her later, Zeppo. You wouldn't want to abandon your date... and leave us with her...I mean, leave her alone." Nice save, Aunt Esther.

"Kind of rude to come to dinner if you weren't feeling well. I cannot get sick right now. I have too much going on." Nayosha states casually, pushing her food around on her plate. She's completely oblivious to the ire she's drawing from the others at the table.

"You know what, I'm done eating and I've got some business to attend to." I stand and offer my hand to Nayosha. "Why don't you wait in the car while I speak with Moshe? I'll be right out." I can feel the collective relief of my family at our imminent departure. Thank God I'll never need to bring a date home for real. My family is a bunch of vultures.

“Thank you for a...meal.” Nayosha says with a wave as she high-tails it out of the dining room.

“I’m eating, Zeppo. We’ll speak later.” Moshe tries to brush me off, but I’m not having it.

“Avinu. It’s imperative I speak to you now.” I don’t wait for him, instead stomping my way to his home office. I don’t bother sitting. As soon as he’s over the threshold, I slam the door shut and I’m in his face. “I can’t do this. I’m done. Moshe—”

“I have not relieved you of your duties.” He says in a deceptively calm voice. He’s as fired up as I am.

“She’s insufferable. I’ve already tagged her devices, and we know Keppelman wants an in with the family. What more do you need?”

“I need to know the lengths he’s willing to go to. What is he willing to do and sacrifice to ensure his survival? How is he going to betray me? Do you have any of that information?”

“No.” I answer through clenched teeth.

“Then your job is not done. If you are frustrated with your assignment, I suggest you relieve your stress between the willing thighs of that woman you just sent to your vehicle.”

I take a halting step back, “Who are you?” I don’t even recognize him right now.

“The Avinu.”

“You would whore me out to achieve your goals? I think the better question is what you are willing to sacrifice to ensure your own survival.” With that, I throw open his door and leave the house. Paul shuts the door to the backseat of the Waggoner once I’m inside. He doesn’t say a word as he begins to drive us to Nayosha’s apartment.

“I understand they are important to you; family should be.” There isn’t an ounce of sincerity in her nasally tone. “However, I’m not a fan of some of the food they serve. Breakfast is tolerable, dinner is not. Too much fat and sugar. Obviously, your family enjoys it quite a bit, but I don’t.” I think she just insulted the weight of my entire family. God, she’s a peach.

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on having you attend another family dinner.”

“Thank God.” She pauses a moment, “I mean, I’m sure we can find other ways to spend time with them.” Nayosha slides across the backseat and rests her hand on my thigh. It is unwelcome. The only woman I want touching me is Ruthie. And God knows that will never happen now. I know she was sick,

but she was still the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen. Her red turtleneck did nothing to hide the swell of her tits. They're too big for my hands. I bet her nipples are fat and a dark berry color like her lips. "Now all that unpleasantness is over, why don't we see what kind of fun we can have, just the two of us." Her hand inches toward my cock and I'm ashamed to admit it reacts to her touch. Not because of her, but because I was thinking of Ruthie. Fast as lightning, I grip her wrist none too friendly and remove it from my person. "It is not time yet."

"Why not? Why won't you fuck me?" She arches her neck and breathes against the shell of my ear. "I can make you feel so good, Zeppy." That fucking nickname.

"I'm sure you think you can. However, I told you, I see a future for us," she doesn't know it will likely end in blood and death, "and I do not want to rush things." I cannot answer Moshe's questions, so unfortunately, I'm still on the clock.

"I thought you liked sex. Women talk. And they talk about your stamina and equipment more than anything. I want to see it for myself."

"Women should keep their traps shut." I mutter. "I am a changed man, Nayosha. I promise, all in due time." I pat her hand and leave it on her thigh, then scoot over a few more inches until I'm pressed against the door. I don't miss Paul's satisfied snicker at my predicament. He loves Ruthie just like everyone else in the organization. And while he hasn't said as much, I know he's unhappy about my supposed girlfriend.

I grudgingly press a kiss to her overly made-up cheek and wait for her to enter her apartment before I head back out to the vehicle. Paul eyes me for a moment then opens my door for me.

"There's a special place in hell for men who toy with women's hearts." At first, I think he's referring to Nayosha and I'm shocked to say the least. "I always figured you'd be her knight in shining armor in Ruthie's story, I never expected you to be the dragon."

Me neither. I truly hate Moshe right now. And even more, I hate myself.

Ruth 7.

I don't even recognize the woman staring back at me from the bathroom mirror. The bruises around my neck are more pronounced and I can barely lift my upper arms. I swallow hard and wince at the pain. Sitting on the edge of the tub, I allow the tears to fall. I don't know what to do.

I did a bad thing and set something in motion, and I can't stop it. To do so would be almost certain death, but for whom I'm not sure.

He says such lovely things to me, words I've longed to hear from anyone, from Zeppo. But they sound wrong coming from him. He's not the man I want, not the man I love and afterward...I feel dirty. I can't shower enough and no matter how hard I scrub, his touch, his taste, his scent, they won't go away, they won't wash down the drain. I carry his marks with me all day, every day. And he keeps adding new ones before the old ones have healed.

I've watched some of the videos on the Swingin' Schlay Productions site, and I've heard my cousins talk about sex. My aunts and mom aren't shy either. And they all appear to enjoy it, love it, crave it. They don't fear the next encounter with their partners or husbands. They encourage sex and kissing and whatever else they do. Am I doing it wrong? Or is he? I'm so confused. And scared. And hurt.

He said if anyone found out, he would be in danger. And it's true. My dad, uncles, brothers, cousins, would probably kill him if they found out. But then he says that they would have to answer for his pain and suffering. They would be held responsible for his death and that's the part that keeps my lips firmly shut. At least until he forcefully pries them open.

I stand up on shaky legs and examine myself once more. Am I a woman now? I don't think I want to be one if it hurts this bad.

My phone beeps letting me know I'm going to be late for family breakfast if I don't hurry up. This is the last one before Seril and Moshe get married this weekend. I couldn't have chosen a better partner for my brother. Seril is strong, resilient, and confident. She's who I want to be when I grow up. She would know what to do. Heck, she'd never have allowed herself to be in this situation in the first place.

I shake it off and hurriedly brush my teeth, pull my hair into a top knot, and get dressed in black ankle pants, a long-sleeve button down shirt, scarf, and

ballet flats. I gingerly walk out of my suite, my eyes scanning the hall for him. I breathe a sigh of relief when I find my other bodyguard Manny.

Immanuel Ohana is in his late forties and has been my bodyguard for as long as I can remember. He is another uncle to me, and I love him dearly. He and Uncle Petesy-Pie were with me everywhere I went. Sadly, Pete passed almost two years ago after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He was eventually replaced with...

“Morning, sunshine!” Manny pulls me into a gruff hug that I soak up.

“Morning, Unca-man.” His laughter echoes through his barrel chest beneath my ear. This is exactly what I needed this morning.

“It’s 90 degrees out already, girly, why are you wearing long sleeves?”

“Just haven’t felt well.” I murmur, dipping my head and pulling on the bottom of my shirt.

“I noticed.” He says and his tone snaps my head up to meet his eyes. He’s concerned, for sure, and maybe angry. “Anything you want to talk about, pretty girl?”

“Nah, I’ll be ok. Just under the weather.” I slide out of his embrace and quickly head to breakfast.

“Right.” He doesn’t believe me, and he shouldn’t. I’m a lying liar who lies. And I’m bad at it. But I can’t tell anyone, not yet. I can’t risk...my feet stop in the doorway of the dining room. Pretty much everyone is here already, including her. Nayosha is becoming a regular around here. Yippee. I take a deep breath, force a simple smile, and greet my *mame* and *tate* with kisses to their cheeks.

“Pumpkin. My girl. Come eat. I feel like I haven’t seen you. Are you still sick? Do we need to call the doctor?”

“No, *tate*.” My smile grows at my dad’s fretting. “I’m sure it’s just a bug that’s going around.”

Anger, weighted and nasty, unfurls in my gut when Nayosha pats the empty seat next to her. As if she has a right to invite me to sit at my own table. And she’s sitting in Zeppo’s seat. We’ve sat next to each other since I’ve been out of a highchair. Taking the offered seat, I nod to Nayosha and lean forward to greet Zeppo.

“*Freyd*, it’s been over a week. Maybe you should—”

“Zeppy, if she doesn’t want to see a doctor, let it go. She’s an adult, right?” A perfectly manicured eyebrow rises slowly as she stares at me. I nod, not trusting my voice to speak. I’d probably squeak and ruin the whole adult

thing. “And why do you call her frayed?”

“It’s Yiddish, *Nayosha*. It means ‘joy’.” Zeppo’s mom Judy informs her. Judging by the pursed lips and narrowed eyes, I’m guessing *Nayosha* does not like the meaning.

“I see. Because she’s such a joy to have around?” You could cut the sarcasm with a knife...and then I think she’d stab me with it. I sit back in my chair and quietly eat my eggs benedict. We might be the *Kosher Nostra*, but ham is darn good. Sorry, not sorry. Except today it’s not sitting well with me. Nausea churns and bile threatens to rise, so I push my plate away, barely a quarter eaten.

“Ahh!” I scream and nearly fall out of my chair when Zeppo places his hand on the back of my neck. He startled me, but he also touched a bruise. “Sorry! Sorry!” I rush to apologize not wanting to worry anyone. “I must have been in my head, you scared me is all.” Zeppo’s full lips purse, his strong jaw clenches, as his dark eyes attempt to drill a hole in the side of my head so he can read my mind. He knows me well, very well. I’ve never had too much of a filter with Zeppo, except for my feelings regarding him. That I’ve kept to myself, though I’m sure if I examine it enough, I could admit he probably already knows...I think everyone in a 20 mile radius knows how I feel about Zeppo Kraus.

His brows dip as he narrows his eyes, a lock of hair falling onto his forehead. I want to push it back, like I’ve always done, but his girlfriend is here and glaring at me. I offer an embarrassed grin and shrug.

“Excuse me, I’ve forgotten the fruit salad.” *Mame* breaks the tension, sliding her chair back and moving to rise. I wave my hand and stand up faster than she can.

“I’ve got it, *mame*.”

She smiles fondly at me, “Thank you, pumpkin.”

“I’ll help.” *Nayosha* announces and matches my strides out of the dining room. In the kitchen, I place my hands on either side of the large tray of fruit salad, when her bony hand grips my shoulder and squeezes hard.

“It’s cute, really.” I’m not sure what she’s talking about, but her tone implies it’s anything but cute. “How your eyes follow him around like a cute little puppy. At least they all think your childish crush is adorable, I think it’s pathetic. You’re 22 years old, Ruth, and you’re drooling over a man who thinks you are nothing more than his baby sister.” That actually hurts worse than my neck. “He’s in his 30s, he’s a real man, with a real job, and real

responsibilities. He'd never be interested in a child, but he thinks of you as one of his responsibilities. It's uncomfortable to watch, and even more to be the intended target of such an obviously unrequited crush. He doesn't want to hurt your feelings, but I've always believed in honesty, you know. And I wanted you to know, woman to woman, it ain't gonna happen, Ruth. Time to move on. Move out. Perhaps focus on whoever gave you the hickeys you're trying to hide with your ugly scarf." She flicks the soft fabric with her hand, picks up the spoons for the salad and saunters out of the kitchen.

They've talked about me? He knows I love him, and it makes him uncomfortable? I'm his responsibility? Am I holding him back? Tears burn my eyes and my throat aches as emotion swells like a tsunami threatening to drown me. I carry the tray into the dining room, gently set it on the table and wipe my hands on my pants. My brother Zilv meets my eyes and I frown.

"I'm sorry, Zilv, I won't be at work today, I'm not feeling good again. I'm just going to go lay down, if I feel better later, I'll text you I'm coming in." He nods, his brows furrowed, but he doesn't question me. I rub *tate's* shoulder as I pass him. "Don't worry, *tate*, it's just a bug. I'll call the doctor in a couple of days if I'm still not better."

"*Freyd!*" Zeppo calls my name, but I place my hand over my mouth and speed walk out of the kitchen like I'm going to puke. It's a distinct possibility. I'm able to get to my suite, shut and lock the door before the tears fall over my lashes and down my cheeks.

My heart is broken. I'm losing Zeppo, my best friend, but now I'm wondering if I ever had him.

"Babe. You're back early." I spin around, my back plastering to the door. Chas is leaning on the door jamb to my bedroom, an ugly smirk on his face.

"Chas...I don't think...you have to stop—" He stands up straight, his smirk slipping off his face in an instant. My pulse races with every step he takes, my throat and neck throb in agony, remembering how much it hurts when he shoves—

"Ruth. Poor baby Ruth. You don't understand, do you?" I shake my head, I don't understand. My life has taken a sharp left turn and I can't seem to gain control. "We can't stop. We can never stop. And even if we could," he's inches from my face now, his warm breath ghosting over the tracks of my tears, "it wouldn't be up to you. You aren't in charge here. I am. I make the rules because you've teased me and tortured me for more than a year with that cock-sucking mouth, and these huge tits." He cups them hard, twisting

them painfully until I cry out and hunch to get away from him. He just laughs. “This wide fucking ass that taunts me when I follow you around.” Chas drops his hands with a sigh, stepping back, and sitting on my couch like he doesn’t have a care in the world, his arms spread along the back. “Your mouth and tits have been punished; I think it’s time for your ass.”

“No. No. No.” I turn around and fumble with the lock on my front door. In seconds, I’m pushed against it as his body covers mine and his hands wrap around my throat.

“You. Aren’t. In. Charge.” He thrusts his erection into my covered butt. I want to puke. I want to scream. I want to...I want to be anywhere but here.

“You’ve driven me to madness, Ruth, this is your punishment. You’ve made my cock hard, and now you have to drain it. If you weren’t so beautiful. So tempting. I have no control when it comes to you. I want you too much.” His words are almost sweet, in a psychotic kind of way and it muddles my brain.

“You’re gonna take me in your ass and squeeze tight until I bust my nut and you’re gonna do it without making a sound. Anyone catches us, Ruth, their blood will be on your hands, not mine. One button on my phone and the Kosher Nostra is gone. Your family...gone.”

So, I keep my mouth closed. And I hate myself for it, but I love my family more.

Zeppo 8.

June 3, 2023

“May you always find a refuge tucked within your love – a place to hide out, and a place to reflect. Blessed is the Source of Safety, who brings joy to the brides.” I close my eyes and revel in the rush of emotions that skitter across my skin at the sound of her voice. It’s not her normal boisterous, energetic tone. Ruth is subdued, a fraction of her normal self and it pains me to see her this way. Especially, because I am not entirely sure of the cause.

Is it me? Have I done this to her? Is it Nayosha’s continued presence? Or am I conceited beyond belief, and it has nothing to do with me at all?

She won’t talk to me, and from what I gather, she isn’t talking to anyone else either.

On this day, Moshe’s wedding, I will put aside my anger and grief, and celebrate my best friend and Avinu finding his Sarai Ima, the rightful mother of the Kosher Nostra, and his soul mate. Because she is that. Seril is perfect for Moshe, grounds him, humbles him, and supports him. My eyes track Ruth as she shuffles back into her place in the circle that surrounds the couple. She is my soulmate and I have been denied the opportunity to bask in her love.

Fuck, that’s some poetic sappy ass shit. Don’t make it any less true. A cough from the guests draws my attention and ire. I know that sound. I have become well acquainted with the obnoxious owner. I feel my lips and brows dip down into a harsh scowl as I dart my eyes to Nayosha. She purses her lips and shakes her head in disappointment, and I can’t stop the snort that rises at the ridiculous thought I might care what she thinks of me. She is a means to an end. An end that can’t come soon enough.

Three rows back and on the opposite side of the aisle, I find her uncle staring between the two of us. His eyes narrow at his niece, and I know what he’s thinking. He isn’t shy when they communicate, whether by phone or text, about his frustration with his spoiled niece. And it’s clear he does not understand nor respect boundaries, asking her invasive questions about her menstrual cycle and reprimanding her for not fucking me yet. He went as far as to say she should see a doctor after her Brazilian Wax appointment to

handle any off-putting odors that are keeping me from using her like every other schmuck in Charlotte.

I've never had any problems with Keppelman. He's always presented himself as gracious, respectful, and a family man. I'd nominate him for an Oscar if I figured he'd live long enough to accept it. Moshe is quite pleased with my findings so far, yet, he hasn't committed any offense against the family, other than being a spineless weasel. In order to justify his elimination, Moshe requires solid proof of what his end game is, and so far, we don't have it.

The ceremony is quite lovely, at least the parts where my mind isn't elsewhere. Moshe picks Seril up into his arms amidst the cheers of "Mazel Tov!" and whisks her away for their "Private Reflection". He's going to fuck her fast and hard and have her screaming his name in a matter of minutes. Once they are redressed, they will join us at the reception.

I make a beeline for Ruth but am intercepted by my date. I glare at her for a moment, my eyes unable to resist watching Ruth as she walks with her head down. I hear myself growl when her bodyguard Chas lays his hand on the lower part of her back and guides her into the house. He's too familiar with her. I catch Manny's eye and he nods at me before following them. Normally they switch off, so one is with her at all times, while the other is sleeping, but with this many people here today, everyone has extra security.

"Zeppy!" I growl again when Nayosha snaps her fingers in my face. "Don't make that sound, you are a man, not an animal, act like it. I swear..." she continues to berate me, while my eyes focus on the entrance Ruthie disappeared into, my mind running over every detail of the last several weeks, wondering at what moment exactly I began to lose my *freyd*.

"Keep your hands to yourself. We are at a wedding, you are a grown ass woman, *act like it*." I snap at Nayosha, my hand tightly holding her wrist to stop her from touching my cock again. It isn't even hard...oh, and WE. ARE. AT. A. WEDDING. WITH. MY. FAMILY. IN. BROAD. DAYLIGHT!

She flutters her fake eyelashes and smiles coyly up at me, "Weddings make me horny. You make me horny. Why won't you touch me? We could sneak away, and I'll suck your cock. I'll swallow it down and let you fuck my face. Would you like that?"

I shake my head and take a large step back from her. "Have some self-respect, Nayosha." I'm not ashamed to admit, I hide. I find our friends from The Four Families in New York and the O'Sheerans from Florida and position myself in the middle of their groups and hide like a little boy from a

bully. A bully with too many hands and no sense of decorum.

Fuck. Now I sound like an 1800's aristocratic lady.

I'm grateful when the reception begins and Nayosha is seated far, far away from me. After speeches, and dinner, and the happy couple's first dance, I find Ruthie and hold out my hand to her. She stares at it like it's a snake about to strike, then looks up at me with such hesitancy in her eyes. She has never held back when she's with me, why would she start now?

"May I have this dance?" I ask, my voice husky even to my own ears. But fuck, I'm desperate to be near her, hold her, breathe her in. Her eyes dart to the side and flare before she places her hand in mine and allows me to help her stand. It's as natural as slitting a traitor's throat, from holding hands, to her full luscious body pressed against me, to my arm around her lower back. When she finally relaxes and rests her head on my shoulder, I feel like I'm able to take my first full breath in too long. I love how tall she is without heels. And her smile, fucking hell, her smile is infectious and pure sunshine on a cloudy day. It's been dimmed lately, like a solar eclipse and I'm not the only one to miss the warmth of her presence. We don't speak for so long and I'd be content to stay with her like this for the rest of my days. I know the song is about to end and my mouth opens without my permission, "Come back to me, *freyd*, I cannot survive without you."

Her shoulders hunch as she gasps, I get a quick look at her face, tears staining her precious cheeks before she's out my arms and at the edge of the dance floor. And then she's gone.

By the time I realize what's happening, another body is pressed against me and digging her nails into my neck. "You are embarrassing me, Zeppo." Nayosha hisses in my ear, a strained smile stretching her Botoxed lips. "You dance with her before you dance with me? Do you have any idea what that looks like to everyone here?"

"It looks like I have taste." I mutter, extracting her hands, and holding them between us while stepping back. "Excuse me." I stride with purpose to the bar and order a double shot of vodka.

"Gotta tell you, brother, she ain't right for you." My brother Ezra nudges his shoulder against mine, leaning on the bar top next to me. I grunt in response, tossing back the shot and tapping it against the wood for another. The bartender quickly obliges, and I drink it down just as fast. "What the hell is going on with you?"

"Ask our benevolent leader." I mutter.

Ez snorts and nods his head at the dance floor. “He’s too busy trying to fuck his wife through layers of tulle for God and all to see.”

“Lucky him. He gets the woman of his dreams, and we get to watch what happiness looks like...never getting it for ourselves.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You see Jonah and Harper?” Glancing over my shoulder, I see the porn king himself entangled with his girlfriend, laughing and kissing, and living their best lives.

“Fuck this shit.” I’m only a few steps away from the edge of freedom, when I’m snagged by long red talons and swung into a tight embrace.

“We are going to dance together. For the entire song. Or I will cause such a scene, your precious Avinu’s wedding will be ruined, and he will remove your head for retribution.”

Vapid kitty has verbal claws.

Ruth 9.

I've got to stop crying. I'm emotional, always have been, but this is ridiculous. It's just...his words...they felt so good but caused such agony.

Like Chas.

How could Zeppo say such a thing to me when he lies naked with that woman and talks about me behind my back? He gives his body to her and shares something with her he and I will never have, and they gossip together about my silly crush.

I'm thankful for Manny's presence tonight. I have no doubt I will pay for my dance with Zeppo later, but for now Manny is keeping Chas in check. And he doesn't even know it. I'm a glutton because when Zeppo looked at me and asked me to dance like there was nothing else he'd rather do, I couldn't say no. I saw the fire in Chas' eyes from his place along the perimeter of the dance floor, but even his wrath isn't a strong enough deterrent to deny myself a moment with Zeppo.

But then he spoke, and reality came crashing down and I had made a fool of myself once again. He probably offered to be polite, out of obligation and expectation. Despite my make up, I splash cold water on my face and breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth to quell the urge to vomit. I'm a mess.

Calm enough, I exit the house with Manny and Chas on my heels and go straight to the dessert table. I need something sweet. Something chocolate. I make the mistake of glancing across the dancers. Zeppo has his thick arms around Nayosha's slender body, their faces are mere inches apart and the intensity in which they watch each other is startling. They complement one another so well in appearance. She's at Moshe's wedding as Zeppo's date, that must mean they are quite serious.

The song ends and so does the agonizing trance I'm under. I shake my head and grab a small plate, picking my way across the treats and loading up my plate with sugary goodness. I will drown myself in carbs and pray it will numb the pain. At my table, I sit alone and grab a mini-caramel cheesecake and plop it into my mouth. The seat next to me slides and a cloying perfume fills my nose. The cheesecake is like sawdust in my mouth as she begins to speak in a hushed tone.

“He’s a wonderful man, isn’t he? So selfless. As his woman, soon his fiancé, it is up to me to protect him from himself.” I nearly choke on the word fiancé. “Dancing with you was like trying to wrestle an elephant.” She waves to someone with a bright smile before continuing. “But he owes your family so much. And they pity you. They know no one else will ask you to dance. Watch movies with you on a Saturday night. He serves the Kosher Nostra in so many ways, and babysitting you is one of them.”

“Why?” I ask, the lump of cheesecake a lead ball in my throat. I’m flushed with embarrassment, my heart aches, and my chest heaves with the effort to breathe. “Why can’t he tell me this himself?” It can’t be true. My entire family? My *mame* and *tate*, my brothers? I think back to the many times in my life I’d asked one of them to hang out or do something with me and they told me to find Zeppo. They knew he’d go to the museum with me, or a show, or shopping if they were busy. Because that was one of his jobs?

“Oh honey.” She says pityingly, patting my hand. “Who wants to watch a blubbery whale cry?” She stands and presses a kiss to my cheek, swinging her narrow hips as she saunters away.

A second later, Tovah and Sophie join me with conspiratorial grins. “I can’t believe he’s still keeping her around. Is she as awful to talk to one on one as she is at family meals?”

I shrug, my voice hiding in shame.

“Zeppo must really like her. He never brings anyone around.” My sentiments exactly. Although, hearing it from someone else hurts a lot worse.

Tovah breaks a roll apart and shoves a piece in her mouth. She’s voluptuous. Tall like me, taller in fact, with curves I envy. And she’s confident like no one I’ve ever met. She and her twin Tevye are truly two halves of a whole.

“Woman must suck like a Hoover because God knows she’s an insufferable twit.”

Sophie gasps in shock. I don’t know why; Tovah has zero filter. “Tovah!”

“What?” She lifts a shoulder, grabs an unfinished glass of beer from the table and chugs it down, letting out a lady-like burp after. It brings a smile to my lips, and I decide to focus on my cousins rather than my shattered heart.

Ruth 10.

Sophie: *You. Me. Tovah. Tonight. Movies. Wine. Gossip. Marker to the face for whoever falls asleep first.*

Ruth: *I'm glad you eventually remembered how sentences work. Thank you for the cavewoman invitation, but I must politely decline.*

I can't sit with them. Not without giving something away. Not without spewing everything crashing like a hurricane into the shore of my mind. And everyone already knows how pathetic I am, I don't need to give them a front row seat to my new level of low.

Sophie: *Shove that polite decline up your flattish ass.*

Ruth: *Sophie, you should know better than to let Tovah touch your phone. She is liable to foam at the mouth and ruin it again. How many phones do you have to buy before you learn this valuable lesson?*

Sophie: *Sorry, she sat on me and then farted in my face. I'm probably going to get pink eye now. I'm going to disinfect my eye and my phone. But I miss you. We miss you. Why won't you hang out with us? Don't you love us?*

I love them more than they know.

Ruth: *We'll hang out soon. Besides, you might be contagious, and I don't want pink eye or hand, foot, and mouth disease, or Tovah-syphil-itis.*

My phone beeps with her response, but I can't lift my head from my desk to check it. Saying no to my family is difficult, I genuinely enjoy spending time with them. And the girls know how to Netflix-And-Wine like no one else. But I...I just can't. Except I miss them. Like a phantom limb. Or a persistent hemorrhoid that hibernates for a while.

"Dorkus." I roll my forehead on my desk so I can look at my brother Zilv. He stares at me with undisguised irritation, and I can't blame him. Looking at the clock, I'm ashamed to note, I have been sitting at my desk for the last hour with my head down feeling sorry for myself. Being sad. Just as pathetic as Nayosha has accused.

I should be working. I typically love my job at our shipping company, Dag Gadol Maritime Merchants. It means "big fish" in Hebrew, and we ship anything and everything all around the world. I am technically Zilv's personal assistant and secretary, but I kind of do it all around here. It feeds my love of organization, customer service, and using color coded schedules.

Not today. Honestly, not for the last several weeks. I think the last three days, since Moshe and Seril's wedding, have been the worst. I'm a mama's girl and a daddy's girl, even an uncle and aunt girl. I usually have a hug and a smile for everyone, pick flowers from the garden for my aunts, gossip with my uncles...but I can't without giving something away. I can't risk losing them, any of them. Especially not Zeppo. Though I think I've lost him already.

Why did Zeppo dance with me? Why did he say such sweet things to me if he didn't mean them? Why build me up to have his girlfriend tear me right back down? It doesn't make any sense.

"Ruth!" Right, Zilv is standing in front of my desk.

"Sorry!"

"Dude...are you on the rag? What the fuck is wrong with you lately?"

"Zilv! I cannot begin to tell you how inappropriate that question is!"

He shrugs unconcerned. It's not like HR is going to tell him to stop being mean to his little sister. I mean, I could, but it would be weird, and he doesn't listen to me anyway. Reason #37 why I'm happy he added head of HR to my job description.

That was sarcasm.

"And what's with the long sleeves and turtlenecks? It's fucking June in North Carolina." I roll my eyes at him and bite my bottom lip to stop myself from engaging in this conversation. He doesn't need to see the bruises all over my body from Chas. I knew I would pay for dancing with Zeppo, and I did. More than I bargained for. Between my heartache over Zeppo and the physical injuries from Chas, most of my weekend was spent in bed with ice packs and chocolate. Zilv is...an acquired taste and annoying to most, but I love him, just like the rest of my family. And I don't want anything bad to happen to any of them, not because of me. I couldn't live with myself if they were hurt or worse because I went behind Chas' back.

"Did you need something, Zilv?"

"Yes—" I jump in my chair and nearly knock it over when the office door is thrown open. Men in all black storm in with guns raised, yelling at us to put our hands up and get down on the ground.

"Zilv!" I scream, but he shakes his head at me and nods to the ground. Carefully, I raise my arms above my head and slowly slide off the wheeled office chair and onto the soft carpet. I don't move fast enough for their liking, I guess, because one shoves my chair away and kicks me in the back.

"Don't fucking touch her!" Zilv snarls, but several men hold him down at

gunpoint.

“It’s ok. I’m ok.” I reassure him or myself, I’m not sure.

“We’re supposed to search their containers, should we search her too? She’s big enough to haul a few shipping containers across the ocean.” The man who kicked me says to a round of laughter from his buddies. Tears well in my eyes, but I fight to keep them back. No use in crying, won’t earn me any leniency, won’t do Zilv or I any good.

“She’s already being taken care of, release her.” A short man with a gray beard and beady eyes orders when he walks into the office. He turns to survey the room and I notice “AFT” on the back of his jacket in yellow letters. What is AFT?

Someone grabs my arms and hoists me up none too gently. On my feet, I turn to Zilv to help him but I’m being pushed out the door. “Zilv! I’m not leaving without him.”

“I suggest you get your fat ass out of this building and on your way home before I order my men to strip you and perform a cavity search.” My eyes widen as a gasp falls from my lips.

“Who are you?” Zilv asks from between clenched teeth. His face is an angry red and the veins in his neck are bulging. My brother is about to explode.

“FBI, ICE, DEA. The Holofceners and their ‘family businesses’ are of interest to just about every agency in the United States government and several abroad.” I tilt my head to the side, my eyes wandering over the short man’s jacket. He didn’t say AFT. Why wouldn’t he announce his own organization?

“Tick-tock.” One of the men points at his watch and then me.

“Zilv?” I don’t want to leave him, but I really don’t want to be stripped and touched.

“Go, Ruth. I’ll be fine.” I nod, hesitant to leave, but again I’m pushed in the direction and shoved out of the office, my purse thrown after me. The entire warehouse, offices, and the parking lot are flooded with men in black tactical uniforms. They are searching everywhere and everything. Crates are busted, equipment is broken; it will take weeks to put everything right and replace what’s broken. And for what? We don’t have anything illegal here...we are trained professional criminals for goodness sake.

Manny drove me to work this morning. I text him I need to be picked up and thankfully he’s not far. I watch with my stomach in my throat as Dag Gadol is torn apart. A few minutes later, Manny pulls up in front of me at the edge

of the parking lot.

“Sunshine—”

“Drive, Manny, please.”

I sense his aggravation, not at me, just being in the dark, but I can't talk right now. My throat is closing up and bile is churning in my tummy. What the heck is going on? This doesn't feel like my life. Nothing has felt right for weeks.

At the compound, I swiftly move through the halls and enter my suite undisturbed. Locking it behind me, I head into the bathroom, strip, and take a hot shower. They didn't touch me, really, but their words...

Out of the shower, I pull on a tank top and shorts and crawl into bed. It won't be long before Tevye or Yakov come to talk to me, they'll want my version of events, even though Dag Gadol has security cameras. And I'll tell them about the AFT, I don't know if Zilv caught it or not. For now, I'm going to burrow into my bed, close my eyes, and wish I'd thought to grab some chocolate on my way past the kitchen.

Zeppo 11.

Why is no one more concerned about Ruthie? Why didn't she call me or come to me when she returned to the compound?

"Is Ruthie hurt?" I shout, trying to get Zilv's attention. Ezra, Zilv, Tevye, my uncles, and my dad are talking over one another trying to figure out why several supposed government agencies invaded our shipping company this morning. The only quiet ones in the war room are Jonah and Yakov. Mostly because Jonah is wrapped up in his own shit with Harper and nothing rattles Yakov except shitty vodka.

When no one answers me, I grab my chair and throw it against the wall. In the ensuing silence, Jonah the bastard mumbles "dramatic much?", not affected in the least by my glare.

"Is. Ruthie. Hurt?" I repeat myself, which is not something I enjoy.

I'm going to punch Zilv in his fucking smarmy mouth...or rip it from his shrugging shoulders. "She's upset, obviously, containers, vehicles, Dag Gadol offices were raided by the fucking Department of Homeland Security, ICE, DEA, ABC, and 123."

That doesn't calm the beast awakening in my chest at the thought of someone touching my *freyd*. "Did they touch her?" I will remove every one of their fingers and shove them down their throats before I Flex-Seal their mouth and anuses when we find the fuckers who threatened her.

Yak shuts Zilv up with a cookie and answers for him. "They strongly urged her to exit the building while they conducted their search, but she promised she was unharmed. Though...it's not my place, but she's not as bubbly as usual."

She's lying. I haven't spoken to her, but I know she is. They touched her, harmed her, either physically or verbally, and she's covering it up. His words should soothe me that I'm not the only one to notice her withdrawal, instead it incenses me. She comes to me about everything...but whatever this is... she's hiding it from me. Running a hand through my hair, I pull on the end in frustration.

"I've noticed it too; she barely even talks to me." I admit quietly, shame evident in my voice.

Ezra snorts, "Maybe that's because that fucking harpy is always siphoning

your soul through your mouth.” I will fucking end him. My muscles twitch as I prepare to rise from my seat and do just that, but Uncle David slaps a hand on the table.

“I love my daughter, but can we focus on the problem at hand?”

I tune out the conversation that flows around me. My mind focused on a certain stacked female who won't talk to me...or anyone else it appears. I catch snippets of the back and forth, enough to know that Gerald Wittinger's son may have it out for the Kosher Nostra and is impersonating government officials, including fucking up their own disguise by misspelling ATF, to hack into our databases and bring us down from the inside. Not happening. Moshe might be on his honeymoon, but his father isn't so far removed from this time as head of the Jewish Mafia that he can't handle a snake in the grass.

Just as well no one includes me in the game plan because I have nothing to bring to this particular situation. When the war room meeting is finally adjourned, I rush out of the room, winding through the hallways, until I'm standing outside Ruthie's suite. Knocking on the door, I wait for her to answer. My heart in my throat with the burning need to see her, lay eyes on her, and assure myself she's safe and sound. Only she doesn't open the door. There's no noise from inside her rooms. So, I text her.

Zeppo: *Freyd, I'm outside your door. Answer and I'll take you to dinner.*

The bubbles appear and disappear, only to reappear a second later.

Freyd: *I'm not available, raincheck.*

That's a load of horse shit I can smell through the fucking phone.

Zeppo: *Come on, don't make me eat alone.*

I regret it the moment it's sent.

Freyd: *I imagine your girlfriend would love to spend time with you. We'll get together soon.*

Nayosha's very existence is putting a wedge between us, and I knew this would happen. I tried to tell Moshe, but he's so caught up in the notion that I think so little of his baby sister that I would use and discard her, rather than treasure her for the gift she is. No matter what I do, I lose. I feel powerless for the first time in my life...except I'm not powerless, I'm just a fucking coward.

Zeppo: *At least tell me you're ok after the raid this morning? Did they hurt you?*

Freyd: *I'm good, I promise.*

Zeppo: *You, me, and a movie marathon tomorrow night?*

Freyd: *Maybe. I'll probably be busy at the office trying to fix what they did today. I'll text you.*

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Ruth 12.

“Pumpkin? Can you open the door please? I’ve forgotten what you look like.” A smile comes unbidden at my *mame*’s teasing. Esther Holofcener is a tiny tornado. Oftentimes growing up, she was my best friend. I’m younger than my cousins and brothers and...softer. I don’t have the grit they do. *Mame* made time to play with me, color, bake, sew, whatever I needed or wanted. And if she wasn’t available, being the busy wife of a mafia boss, Zeppo usually was.

I feel like those days are gone. And it’s weird, painful and weird, because I don’t remember thinking “this is the last time it’ll be like this”. You never know the last time; I would have savored it if I had.

I don’t normally stay in my rooms, at least not this much. I can’t bring myself to leave though. I’ve gone to work, but I keep to myself. I’m getting used to the strange looks from everyone at work and the staff here at the compound. But my family...it physically hurts to be around them. To keep so much inside and not blurt it out. The moment I think about telling someone, Chas’ words haunt me, the ghost of his rough hands on me, and I see my family, the people I love most in the world shot or stabbed or tortured...I see them taken away from me and I can’t do it. The catch is, I’m losing them anyway. I’m losing myself.

“I’m ok, *mame*.” I tell her through the locked door.

“Shaifeleh, please.” Blinking rapidly to clear the tears from my eyes, I unlock the door and open it. My mom barrels into my suite and grips my upper arms quickly. I stifle my wince when her hands land on my bruises. “Ruth, we’re taking you to the doctor. Better yet, I’ll have Dr. Penifield come here.”

“No.” I back away, shaking my head, pasting on a bright smile. “Chas took me to a clinic on my way back from work the other day. Everything was fine. Just run down.”

I’m not a good liar.

Her lips smush to the side in confusion, “Why wouldn’t you see Dr. Penifield? A clinic? Ruthie—”

“I’m fine, *mame*. A little less sunshiny than normal.” I pin her with a hard stare, “I’m allowed to be down.” I’ve never spoken so forcefully to my mother before; it curdles my stomach to do so now. But I watch blood bloom

on her pristine white blouse in my mind as her eyes dim near death and I know it's what I have to do.

Her features soften immediately, "Of course you are. It's just...I want to help you, pumpkin. I'm your mother, let me help you." She steps toward me again and I back up, putting the couch between us.

"I know you do, and it means so much to me. But this...this is something I have to do on my own. I'll be alright, just give me some time."

"It's been weeks, Ruth—"

"I know how long it's been!" I yell, my hand covering my mouth in regret.

"I love you, Ruth Barucha Holofcener. Your *tate* and I love you so very much. We are right here. Please..."

"I love you too, *mame*. Both of you, more than you will ever know." I wipe furiously under my eyes to stop the tears from falling any further, then I shake my shoulders and tilt my head as I give my mom a small smile. "I'm gonna be late for Zeppo. He's been after me for weeks to get dinner or lunch with him. Don't want him to think I've changed my mind."

The mention of Zeppo instantly has my mom screwing up her face like she ate a lemon. It would be funny if...

"I'm glad you're getting out with Zeppo at least. He treats your happiness like it's his job." Pain, hot and sharp in my heart nearly doubles me over. Confirmation that I'm a responsibility to Zeppo. "Maybe while you're at lunch, you can convince him to drop that dreadful woman."

My eyes fall to the floor. "He's happy, I'm not going to interfere—"

"Anyone with eyes can see that man is anything but happy. If I didn't know Zeppo, I'd think he was being forced to date her. You can't make him, or any of the men here do anything they don't want to do."

Snickering, a genuine smile stretches my lips. "You can't force the women either." *Mame* returns my smile, but her eyes narrow as she looks at me.

"Most of the women anyway."

Shoot.

"I'm going to be late." I wave my hands to shoo her out of my suite. In the hall, she turns, and extends her hands to cup my cheeks. I bend a little so she can reach. A soft kiss to my cheek has my entire body threatening to collapse. I miss her. I miss *tate*. I miss my Zeppo.

"You are the best parts of us all. A pure soul and a soft squishy heart. I worry we haven't guarded it well enough. You aren't just Zeppo's joy, you are the joy of the entire Kosher Nostra. We would do anything for you, pumpkin,

sacrifice whatever or whoever necessary to ensure your continued happiness.”

“I would do the same for any of you.” I whisper hoarsely.

Sadness overwhelms her features as she presses another kiss to my cheek. “That is what I’m afraid of.” She releases me, turns, and walks down the hall, disappearing in the direction of her and *tate*’s suite.

I did not need all this emotionally heavy stuff before meeting Zeppo. I’ve avoided him as long as possible. With a mental shake, I head for the foyer. Zeppo is impatiently waiting for me when I arrive, rushing to me and enveloping me in a hug. I don’t understand how he can hold me like this, badger me with texts, phone calls, and knock on my door if he complains about me to his girlfriend. Is it an act?

“*Freyd*. I feel as if it’s been a lifetime since I’ve seen you.” He breathes into my hair. For a moment, I allow myself to soak up his warmth, his spicy scent, desperate for the safety I once felt in his arms, his presence. It’s tainted now. Everything is tainted. Chas tells me beautiful, possessive, erotic things while he hurts me and threatens my family. Zeppo loves me like a sister and then laments about my existence during pillow talk with the woman he’s going to marry one day. My brother Moshe is a respectable businessman who loves his wife to distraction, who beheads people for disrespect. No one is as they seem. People are multi-faced and confusing. How do you know which version, which face is real?

“Where are we going?” I ask a minute later, pushing him away so I can compose myself.

“Chinese?”

“Miss Ruthie.” I spin around, a gasp leaving my mouth when I see Chas standing in one of the doorways. “You were not in your room, do you have plans I was unaware of?”

“We’re going to lunch.” Zeppo tells him, placing his arm over my shoulders and bringing me to his side. “Is that a problem?”

“No, sir.” Chas replies. His voice is calm enough, but I see the fire in his eyes...I will be burned by it later.

Without acknowledging Chas, Zeppo leads me from the house and down the front steps. His vehicle is idling in the driveway. Paul opens the back door with a broad grin. “Miss Ruth, so good to see you again. You look lovely.”

“Thank you, Paul.” He’s a sweet man. A liar, but a sweet man. I have dark circles around my eyes from lack of sleep, my hair is limp and dull despite

being freshly washed and conditioned, and my clothes sag on my large frame. I think I've lost a few pounds, which happens when you're afraid to venture out into your own home.

Inches separate us in the backseat on the drive to the restaurant. And thick silence fills the space. I'm not sure what to say, which has never been a problem with Zeppo. Usually, it's like a live stream of my consciousness, my mouth moving a mile a minute. But right now, it feels like I'm on the edge of a minefield and I'm not sure where it's safe to step.

"Ruthie—" He's going to ask what's wrong, and I can't answer that.

"How's Nayosha? You two seem...serious."

His jaw snaps shut, his eyes glitter with an unidentified emotion. "She'll be around for the foreseeable future."

Um. Ok. That's an odd response. "You two are always touching. I've never seen you in a relationship before..." I trail off, unsure where I was going with that observation.

"It feels like I'm being forced."

"You mean you've never responded this way to a...female companion?"

"No. This is definitely out of character for me." I chance a look at his face and find his eyes trained on me with an intensity that steals my breath.

"I want you to be happy, Zeppo. You deserve a good life with someone you love by your side."

"One day...I'll have that one day. No matter what I have to do or sacrifice to get it."

I don't know what to say to that, the yawning pit of despair in my gut widening at the thought of him with Nayosha in wedded bliss, babies, and explosive sex and me with a front row seat to everything I can't have.

At the restaurant, it doesn't get any better. This distance between us grows and I don't know how to stop it. I pick at my food, basically just pushing it around my plate. The thought of actually eating is making me sick to my stomach. He reaches across the table and places his hand on mine and the feel of his skin burns me. Brands me. Leaves me wanting even as it hurts worse than anything Chas has done to me. I pull my hand away and fold it in my lap.

"Ruth. Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong so I can fix it." I shake my head, my eyes downcast, my tongue thick in my mouth.

"Zeppy!" I choke on my own saliva when her voice registers. My head snaps up to watch Nayosha approach with a big grin on her perfectly made-up face,

her body encased in a flattering boho dress with tall boots on her long legs.

“Nayosha? What are you doing here?” Zeppo stands, tossing his napkin on the table, placing his hands on her shoulders. She leans up and presses a kiss to his underjaw, giggling when she wipes away her lipstick from his stubbled skin.

“I came in for lunch, since you said you weren’t available today. I can see why...wanting to keep this sweetheart to yourself. How am I going to be Ruthie’s BFF if you won’t let me hang out with her?” She’s laughing, but I can hear the accusation in her tone. Is he keeping her from me? I’m not upset, because she’s mean, but maybe she’s jealous of my friendship with him. She just wants to get to know me, then she’ll know I’m not a threat. He doesn’t feel that way about me. If she and I can be friends, or at least civil, maybe I can stand to be around them as a couple.

Honestly, I don’t see that happening, but I don’t want to avoid Zeppo forever. I just need to keep my feelings for him in check. Above anything else, his happiness is important to me. In theory, that sounds good. Practical application may be a bit harder.

“Will you order me a steamed chicken with broccoli and tonic water?” She bats her eyelashes at him with a sultry smile. I could never pull that look off in a million years. “You’re the best, Zeppy. That’s why I love you so much!” His eyes dart to me for a brief second and I’d swear there was shame and guilt in his expression, but he blinks, and it’s gone.

“Girl, let me tell you. I appreciate you finally meeting him for a meal. I needed a break!” She fans herself. “You wouldn’t eat with him, so he ate me instead...every time! And my kitty and I are pleasantly sore. That man is an animal. And his stamina...I’m going to need to invest in some electrolyte pouches or something.” I don’t say anything, I physically cannot open my mouth right now. It’s glued shut. Icky feelings dripping down my throat and dropping into the Grand Canyon of despair in my gut. “You’re being smart though. Putting distance between you two. Everyone can see how lovesick you are for him, and this is for the best. Don’t you think? Soon, the strings holding Zeppo back will be cut, and he can be the man he was always meant to be.”

As she’s talking, I text Manny to come get me, my phone in my lap.

“I’ll be right back.” She says, standing and striding to Zeppo’s side. She winds her arms around his waist and nuzzles into his chest. His arms wrap around her thin body, and he whispers something into her ear. She arches her

neck to look up at him, briefly glancing at me first, then she licks her pouty lips and whispers something back.

My phone beeps. Manny tells me he's a couple minutes out. So, I jump up, grab my crossbody bag and try to escape without notice. Shouldn't be too hard since they're consumed with one another.

"Ruthie!" Zeppo calls after me, I wave my hand in the air and run out of the restaurant like my butt is on fire. I text Manny back and tell him to meet me around the corner. I speed walk down the block and find Manny already there. I quickly get in the backseat and freeze when I find Chas glaring at me through the rear-view mirror from the driver's seat.

"Sunshine, are you alright? I thought you were with Zeppo?"

"I was, um, something came up and he had to cut lunch short. No biggie. We can head back to the compound." Manny nods but reaches back to hold my hand. I grasp his like the lifeline it is and hold tight for the duration of the drive home.

Chas' glare promises pain and at this point, I think I'll welcome it. If nothing else, to drown out the scene I just witnessed and the vivid picture she painted for me.

Zeppo 13.

“Just what the fuck are you playing at, little girl?” I hiss into Nayosha’s ear as I stand at the counter in the restaurant.

She looks up at me and licks her lips. “Nothing, baby. Just missed my man. Haven’t seen you much.” She rubs her nose into my chest. “Mmm, you smell so good. I want to taste you. Let’s go in the bathroom, I’ll suck your soul out through your dick.”

“I like my soul exactly where it is, thank you.” Movement catches my eye, and I call out to stop Ruthie from leaving. Where is she going? Nayosha won’t let me go, she clings tighter, keeping me where I am.

“Do not chase after her. It’s bad enough you were eating with her without me, but you will not leave me alone now that I’m here.”

“I didn’t invite you.”

“Which is strange for someone in a relationship, don’t you think?”

I cinch my arms around her skeletal waist and lean down under the guise of kissing her neck. “Why are you dating me?” Her body stiffens for just a second, but I felt it. She forces herself to relax and meet my eyes with a coy smile.

“You are handsome, strong, wealthy, and powerful, Zeppo Kraus. I would be a fool not to want you.”

“Nayosha—”

“I’m attracted to you, obviously. And...I...think...I think that when we marry, perhaps you and the Kosher Nostra could work out a business deal with my Uncle Ralph that would benefit both families. It would be one more way to tie us together...permanently.”

“When we marry?” I splutter.

“And then have kids.” I feel the color drain from my face. I’ve heard her and her uncle talk about it, but to hear it directly from her lips...ugh, it’s upsetting.

“Is the arrangement we have with your uncle not acceptable?”

She backpedals, her cheeks flushing, “No. No, it is. He’s quite happy. But he...respects and admires the closeness of the Kosher Nostra and would like to be a part of that. He wants that for me especially. You know my dad skipped out when I was young and my mom...well she’s not like her brother

Ralph, that's for sure."

"And if I can't marry you or give you children?"

"You mean won't."

"Semantics."

"I think you'll find that if you do a little soul searching, I'm the best woman to have at your side. I understand the weight of power on a man's shoulders. Even one as strong as you. I can ease that burden for you. Use me, exorcise your demons with my body, and let me help you rise like you are destined to do."

"Rise?" I drop my arms and step back. I drop money on the counter even though I've already paid for her meal. "Give it to someone else. Sorry." I turn to her and my lips curl on their own. "Think of me as a matzah, flat and content. I'm not looking to rise," I lazily peruse her body from head to toes and back again, "...in any way."

She screeches and I just chuckle, pushing open the door and walking into the sunshine of mid-summer. Paul hails me from across the street, I jog over to join him. He grabs me by the collar of my shirt and pulls me close. "You want to tell me why Ruthie's detail picked her up in a hurry a block away?"

"Release me, Paul."

"I don't think I will. My life be damned, you've upset that girl enough. Man the fuck up." Without thought, I cock my fist back and punch him in the nose. It isn't broken, but it sure bleeds quite a bit.

"Fuck you."

His smile is bloody and off-putting, and it distracts me enough that I don't dodge his punch, taking it on the chin. Amidst the stars that dance in front of my eyes, his face is clear only inches from me.

"Report me or don't. Kill me or don't. I don't care. I've wanted to do that for more than a month now. And you deserve a whole lot more."

I can't disagree. "Yeah. I do."

Ruth 14.

Standing against the wall in the main living room of the compound, I'm breathing easier than I have in days. My entire family, everyone I love, is in this room and I'm grateful. So very grateful.

I watch with a sappy grin as my cousins and Zilv fight over the gifts Moshe and Seril have brought home from their Australian honeymoon. I know there is at least one for me, but I'm content to listen to the bickering, the laughter, the overwhelming joy at being together.

For days, I didn't know if this would ever happen. All I've seen when I close my eyes is my parents, my uncles and aunts, my cousins, our trusted guards, compound staff...in the crosshairs of a gun.

I've been living in a new kind of hell since Manny and Chas picked me up from the failed lunch with Zeppo. I knew I would be punished for meeting with another man, especially when I planned it without Chas' knowledge and tried to sneak out. But his hatred for Zeppo is unlike anything I've ever seen. My body paid a price, as usual. It was the pictures he showed me as I lay on the ground naked, bruised, and tender that scared me. Truly scared me for the first time in my life.

Moshe and Seril in Australia. *Mame* and *tate* at a diner they like to sneak away to for milkshakes. Harper and Jonah coming out of SSP studios. Zilv doing his morning laps in the pool. Ezra, Tevye, and Yakov in a gym. All seen through the lens of a scope. All a finger-pull away from certain death.

His message was clear, though he took the time to explain it to me just in case. His people, whoever they are, can get to the Kosher Nostra anywhere, anytime. So easy for him to order the extermination of everyone I hold dear to me. The Holofceners and their associates wiped off the face of the earth and only I remain to bear the guilt of their deaths. I've lost my virginity, my innocence, my best friend, my dignity, but at that moment, I lost hope. The only thing I had left.

"Why are you doing this? Why?"

Chas shrugs, placing the photos back into the manilla envelope and smirking down at me on the floor. "Because it's fun. At first, fucking a virgin, no matter how fucking fat, was hot." His eyes run the length of my body and if possible, I feel dirtier. "But now...it's not worth it. A hole is a hole, but if I'm

going to think of someone sexy, I might as well just fuck them and fuck with your mind instead. Though I do like to hear you cry and whimper when that tight asshole cinches around my dick.”

I can't even cry. What's the point? "I'm nobody. I don't do anything important, I'm not in charge of anything. What could I possibly give you that would make all of this worthwhile?"

"You are a distraction. And that's all you'll ever be."

Moshe and Seril returned though. They are home, safe and sound. And Seril is pregnant. I'm going to be an aunt. There is a little spark of hope, a flicker trying to reignite, but I don't dare fan it in the least. I do not know who Chas works for or with, I do not know his ultimate goal. My family may be under one roof at this moment, but how long will it last? How long before my usefulness as a distraction is used up?

With a shake of my head, I push aside the memories of the photos and focus on Seril welcoming Harper into the family, taking well to her role as Sarai Ima, mother of the Kosher Nostra. A verklempt Harper is amusing to see.

"Never Ending Story!" Tate calls the men to the war room to give Moshe an update on all that he missed. And honestly, he missed quite a lot. They'll be a while, no doubt.

I move toward the doorway, knowing the women will retire to the entertainment room for the ceremonial spilling of the tea. The world sees the women of my family as polished, philanthropic, menschen...yentehs, the lot of them. Gossiping busybodies who bathe in the spilt tea of others and swear by the restorative properties of a proper gab-session. It's a time-honored tradition.

"What's going on?" Harper whispers out of the side of her mouth.

I offer her a small smile and explain, "They are going to update Moshe on all that's happened since he's been gone."

"Wouldn't it have been more apt to use Kelly Clarkson's "Since You've Been Gone"?" That brings a genuine smile to my face and makes me chuckle.

Tovah bumps my hip as she answers, "Yes, but that's not a movie, and they're weird." Her arm over my shoulder, my cousin stares down at me, taller by a couple of inches and well over 6 feet tall in her wardrobe staple heels. "Looking a little thinner there, Ruthie. Anything you want to talk about?"

Shoot. Tovah does not subscribe to social norms and etiquette. I shake my

head and walk swiftly out of the room, down the hall, and into the entertainment room. Now more than ever I cannot tell anyone about Chas. I won't risk their lives. I told him the truth, I'm nobody. In the entirety of the Kosher Nostra, I'm the base of the totem pole. My suffering, even my death, would be a footnote in the history of the organization. My immediate family would grieve, but life would move on with very little disruption. The same cannot be said for anyone else.

The room fills a few minutes later, my aunts and cousins grilling Seril about her honeymoon and Moshe's sex drive. Ew. It's bad enough just about everyone has seen Jonah and Harper's sex video, I don't need to hear about the various positions Moshe took Seril. When the focus shifts to me after *mame* updates Seril on the raid at the shipyard, I struggle to get us onto other topics.

"I'm fine. Is there...is there anything else you can tell us about Australia that doesn't involve my brother railing you?"

Seril gazes at the ceiling as she pretends to think about it, "Not really." Turning her attention to Harper, my heart rate slows, as she says, "Now, you. Harper, Harper, Harper. You have many things to tell, so start spilling. I'm thirsty for tea."

Told you.

Before Harper can commence with the spilling, Seril kicks her off the couch next to me and takes her place. She snuggles into me, and I let the weight of my sister-in-law comfort me. I missed her while she was gone. She, more than anyone under this roof in our generation, understands what someone is willing to sacrifice for the ones they love. She's spent the last several years caring for her mother who suffered a traumatic brain injury and working at least two jobs all because her brother is a monumental jerk.

Moshe isn't a jerk, but he's always busy. Has been since before he took over for our father. My cousins and Zilv have friends beyond the family, they have full and rich lives that don't include their baby cousin or little sister. The beginning of Seril and Moshe's relationship was rocky, with lethal interference from someone outside of the family, and then their wedding. Jonah's got his hands full with Harper and whoever is stalking her.

I realize I've zoned out when I hear Zeppo's name. Tovah is leaning forward on the couch, a glass of wine in her long-fingered delicate hand and a devious quirk to her manicured eyebrow. Whatever she said about him has earned a glare from everyone in the room. That in and of itself is not unusual. "She's

sticking around longer than I expected. And the other day, Sophie caught them in his—"

That's my cue to leave. I think I've had enough socialization for one day. I know Tovah isn't saying it to be mean. She knows how I feel about him, but in Tovah's mind, the feelings are unrequited, which they are, and I should have moved on by now, which I should. It doesn't compute in her brain to waste time and emotion on someone who doesn't feel the same, she just moves on to the next guy.

I'm obviously built differently. In more ways than one.

Once ensconced in my suite, I change into pajamas and crawl into bed. I'm getting tired of these same walls, my own company, but it's the only place I feel remotely free to be me. I don't have to guard my expression, my words, or actions. And I don't have to hear or see anyone I don't want to. Which is ironic, maybe, since it's the only place Chas feels bold enough to act.

Zeppo 15.

I haven't been in the best of moods lately. I think you can guess when it all turned sour. Anyway, I'll admit, grudgingly, that it's good to have Moshe back. I hate him, hate what he's stolen from me, but I hate myself more for allowing him to do it in the first place. I have no one to blame but myself for the rift between Ruth and I. I created it and every time Nayosha is near, it only drives us farther apart. Living without my *freyd* is like living without a soul. I didn't think I had one, really, doing what I do, the blood on my hands. Not until Ruth started pulling away. When I truly lost her, I realized she is my soul, and I am not human without her. I'm becoming a rabid animal. A creature in the mirror I barely recognize.

And honestly, I really like my Crocodile Dundee hat. I can just imagine wearing it while I slide through the puffy slit between Ruthie's thick thighs—"Zeppo. Stay for a minute." I glance up and see everyone leaving the war room. I missed the entire recap. Fuck. I wasn't paying any fucking attention. I remain in my seat as Moshe closes the door behind his father, the last to leave the room. "Anything to add?"

"I think they just about covered it." For a split second, Moshe grins and I see my best friend. The man I pledged my life to serve and protect. But in a blink, he's gone, and a mask comes over his face.

"You were thinking of fucking her, weren't you?" He asks bluntly. My throat tightens as I consider my options. "I know the look; I see it every day in the mirror. Seril is my everything. Just as you believe Ruthie is yours." His voice is calm, which is what worries me. I stiffen in the chair, my body ready to defend or attack depending on his actions. He slams a fist down on the table. I don't react. I don't blink. I don't even breathe. "You should be thinking of fucking Nayosha! Your only thoughts should be on prying the information I need from her cold loose gash! The Kosher Nostra is your priority! It's survival is your only fucking concern! Now tell me what I want to know."

There he is.

In a flat voice, I tell him, "Nayosha is under strict orders to bed me, trap me with an unplanned pregnancy, force me into marriage and secure her uncle's place at your side. 50/50 partners moving forward. However, it hasn't been said plainly, but I gather your replacement as head of the Kosher Nostra is

also on the table, and I'm a suitable candidate. I would be his trained monkey, enticed into following commands via continued threats against my children. He wants the entire pie of our expansive business portfolio, but he'll settle for a piece...for now."

Moshe drops into the closest chair, exhaling a heavy sigh. "Well, shit." Cocking his head, he meets my eyes, "You got all this, and you haven't fucked her?"

"Moshe—" He waves off my threatening tone.

"No, it's perfect actually. His plan isn't working. His mole isn't infiltrating our operation. He's going to get desperate."

"Moshe, you know as well as I do, that desperate men—"

"Die just as easily. But not yet. I want to see what he'll do next."

"This isn't a game—"

"Oh, but it is. Zep, all the world's a game and we are mere players."

"That isn't the quote at all."

"I'm paraphrasing."

"No, you're rewriting and badly." I rub my face with my hands, dragging them down my jaw. "I can't do this anymore." I admit lowly. "It's killing me, Moshe, please."

"You've done well, Zeppo. You don't need to see Nayosha anymore."

"Ruth—"

"No."

"She's not well—"

"She's not your concern."

"Dammit!" I stand up, my chair falls over behind me. "She is. She's mine."

"She belongs to my parents, to Zilv, to me."

"Then help her! She's wasting away. Something is wrong. It hurts to see—"

"You shouldn't be looking at her! I have made myself clear."

Nostrils flaring, chests heaving, we glare at one another over the hardwood table between us. "She is my purpose, Moshe. My everything. I love her and she deserves—"

"WE ARE SHEDIM! DEMONS COVERED IN BLOOD! DEATH AND DESTRUCTION! GOD'S MISTAKES SET FREE ON HIS CHILDREN! Seril is an angel on earth, bringing a new life into this world and my love taints her. Taints them."

I swear my heart stops at his words. I had no idea he felt that way. That he sees us, him, as a plague on earth. He thinks Seril is an angel, no doubt he

considers Ruth one too. “Mosh—”

His eyes wide and darting from left to right across the room, he stumbles back and braces his hands on the door frame, his voice trembling. “You no longer need to pretend with Nayosha, but you will stay away from Ruthie.”

Ruth 16.

I take a deep breath before I knock on Harper's bedroom door. I don't know what to say to her...nothing seems adequate or enough. What do you say to someone when their entire world has turned upside down and they are now drowning in a tumultuous sea of never-ending guilt and depression?

What would I want someone to say to me?

I'm sorry you were kidnapped, tortured, and shot at. Want to watch a movie? Degradation, humiliation, and violence...Oh, my! Let's eat.

There are no words to comfort someone when they have survived what Harper has endured. I know for a fact that I've hidden for the last month, grateful that Jonah and Harper and Seril's pregnancy have overshadowed anything else, and I've been able to fly under the radar. Tucked away in my room, slowly spiraling into madness.

Guilt eats at me when I remember what my obscurity has cost Harper, even Jonah. I've never seen my cousin so...unhinged. Desperate. Feral. To be loved by someone so completely, it must be overwhelming. In the best kind of way. To be the center of someone's universe the way Harper is for Jonah, or Seril for my brother...

I will never know that for myself. Should there come a day when Chas is no longer a threat to my family, I will still be the ugly fat one, scarred and dirty and used. Even if a man should want me, how can anyone live with the knowledge of my repeated abuse? How can they touch me or look at me with desire in their eyes knowing that I've bled and wept for someone's sick purpose?

And that's if I can tolerate the touch of someone else. The thought of hugging my *mame* or *tate* causes my heart to race and my back to sweat. I threw up a few nights ago after Chas...*after* and he kicked me repeatedly for being more disgusting than usual. At first, he said so many nice things, conflicting as they were to his actions. But I thought, well, I thought in his own way that I mattered to him. That he wanted me so much it messed with his brain. How freaking stupid could I have been? When he finally came clean about his intentions, he laughed at me. Made me strip naked and drew all over my body with permanent marker, circling and pointing out every single one of my flaws. Every reason why I could never be worthy of a man's attention. The

ink has faded but it is still there. I can't get it off no matter how hard I scrub. Deciding I've spent enough time out here like an idiot, I knock on Harper's door and wait for a response. Knowing she's been in bed, since Jonah won't stop complaining about it, I slowly open the door a crack and poke my head in. There's a spark in her eyes, just a small one, but it's there. She smiles softly and I take that as a good sign I'm welcome.

I still don't know what to say to her, not that I've spoken much in the last several weeks. My voice is rusty from disuse, only speaking when necessary. Not trusting myself to keep the despair, the rage, the agony inside. But I have this long, and I plan to continue as long as I have breath in my lungs. I will keep my family safe no matter what happens to me.

At the side of her bed, I'm not sure if I should sit or not, but Harper makes the decision for me, drawing back the blanket and nodding her head at the empty space. I quickly toe off my shoes, and crawl in beside Harper. My head on her shoulder is as natural as breathing. Harper wraps her arm around my back and holds me. It's the only non-violent contact I've had in so long. A few minutes ago, I thought I'd never want anyone to touch me again, but I take full advantage of Harper's invitation and snuggle in.

For long minutes, we lay in silence, wrapped together, the only sound is the beating of her heart beneath my ear and the harshness of my breathing. I hiccup once, feeling the tidal wave of emotion swell within me and another hiccup becomes a broken sob as my body shudders uncontrollably. I can't verbalize a thing of what I'm feeling, but Harper doesn't need me to. She may not know the specifics of why I'm here, but it isn't necessary for her to understand I'm a human being in an immense amount of pain. And I know she feels the same.

My eyelids grow heavy, and I feel safe in her arms, in her bed, with her to keep watch. My lips tip up when she presses a soft kiss to my forehead and cinches her arms around me tighter. I fall asleep just like that and I sleep the whole night, knowing he can't get to me in here. And for the briefest of moments, I don't feel alone in the world.

Ruth 17.

I've been a busy little reclusive beaver the last couple of weeks. After flooding Harper's bed with my eye-rain, I had an epiphany. If Harp can survive the horrific events of her stalking and abduction, I can woman-up and take charge of some of my life. I'm 22, I'm not a child. I'm naïve, yes, but I come from a long line of strong women, surely some of that must have been passed down to me. Baby steps first, though. I gotta crawl before I can walk. Harper and Jonah, Seril and her pregnancy have occupied most of the family. Not to mention cleaning up what Wittinger's son and daughter did to us and Harper. It's sad, sort of, that I'm able to blend in so well with the background, but I'm grateful that it's afforded me the opportunity to make some changes in my life.

I have money tucked away in savings from my job at Dag Gadol. I live at the family compound rent free and I've been working for several years. I don't have any credit to speak of, but six months of rent upfront, plus security deposit was enough to put the rental agency at ease. I am now the proud renter of a lovely one-bedroom apartment in the heart of University City in a gated complex.

Manny was instrumental in helping me secure a safe and reliable vehicle of my own...I just have to pass my driver's license test. Which is what he and I are doing now in an empty parking lot.

"You know how young people always speak loud and slow when they are talking to someone they consider elderly?" I sniffle back my tears and stare at him from the driver's seat, my chest constricting when I notice his hand white-knuckling the Oh-Shoot bar. He interprets my shrug at confirmation and continues. "This is a newish car; the brake and gas pedals are not old and deaf. You don't have to shout at them by slamming your foot against them to get them to do what you want." Despite the frustration and sadness I'm feeling from being completely inept behind a wheel, I laugh at his analogy.

I meet his eyes and hold them as I shout slowly, "Thank. You. Manny. For. The. Advice." He growls at my insolence, and we spend the next hour attempting to get me comfortable driving a vehicle. It's painful and I might have given us both whiplash, however, by the time I'm pulling into the circular driveway of the compound, I'm feeling much more confident about

my ability to function as an adult on my own.

I haven't seen much of anyone, really, but even less of Nayosha, though her words continue to plague me daily. She's right, I'm an adult and I should act like it. It's time to spread my wings and figure out how to fly...and if as a result, I get Chas away from my family, all the better.

"Why are you driving? Manny, why is my daughter driving? And what is she driving? Is that your car? We pay you better than that? Are you in trouble? Do you need money?" *Mame* assaults us both with rapid fire questions before we've even shut the car doors. Her short legs are a blur as she races down the front steps to stand in front of us. How she manages to look down her nose at Manny while being a foot shorter is a skill I will never master.

Manny opens his mouth, but I'm not letting him take the fall for me. He knows I haven't told them anything of what I've done, but he hasn't pushed me to either. Unca-Man respects my need to be independent, though I see the concern in his dark eyes. He also knows I'm not telling him the whole story.

"It's mine." Silence fills the early evening North Carolina summer air, even the birds and bugs are quiet as they await my mother's response. I swear I hear a cricket murmur, "She's done it now."

Mame's perfectly made-up lips flap in the breeze as her brain tries valiantly to catch up. "Yours?"

"Yes. Mine. I needed a car to get back and forth to work."

"But...Zilv takes you, or Manny, or the other one...Chas." I barely hide my grimace at the mention of his name.

"It is out of their way to pick me up from my new apartment in University City. It will be easier to drive myself." Manny moves quickly, catching my *mame* before she faints to the ground and knocks her head against the cobblestone. "That was dramatic." I murmur before jogging up to the front door to open it for Manny. He carries her to the sitting room couch, gently laying her upon it while I press the intercom button on the wall. "Can I have a glass of ice-cold water brought to the sitting room, please?"

"Right away, Miss Ruthie." A voice answers immediately, I vaguely recognize as our long-time house manager, Devorah, since my mom is stirring on the couch, groaning as if she's been shot.

"I had such a horrific nightmare..." *mame* begins theatrically. Manny and I smirk at one another and roll our eyes in unison. I'll miss my parents so much, but moving out is the right thing to do.

"Not a nightmare, *mame*. Just your adult daughter leaving the nest. Like she's

supposed to.”

“NO!” Anakin Skywalker would be jealous of my mother’s lung control.

“ESTHER!” I plop down on the other couch and wait for my *tate* to join us. He screams her name down the hall, his feet stuttering to a halt when he sees her on the couch with her hand over her eyes. “My darling, what is it? Are you ill? Too hot? Too cold?” He steps back and eyes her stomach for a moment. I watch, as if in slow motion, as he grins and asks, “Are you pregnant?”, completely oblivious to his imminent demise.

Mame flies off the couch and smacks him repeatedly in the chest and shoulders. “No, I’m not pregnant! You know I had my tubes done after Ruthie, not to mention I’m way too fucking ol...mature to get pregnant!” Gasping, she lays her hand on her stomach, flat as ever. “Why? Do I look like I am? Do I have a pouch?”

Manny comes up behind me and lays his hand on my shoulder. “Sure you want to leave all this?” He whispers. I can hear his smile.

“It’ll be hard.” Sarcasm lacing every syllable of my response.

“Tell him, Ruth Barucha Holofcener. Tell him how you plan to drive away in your used car to God knows where, leaving your parents alone and wondering where they went wrong that their only daughter would sell a kidney just to get away from them.”

Tate looks at me and I shake my head. “I still have both kidneys.”

He waves me off, pinning me with a scowl. “You bought a used car? Used? Does your brother not pay you enough at Dag Gadol to afford a new vehicle? Or a driver? And what does she mean you’re moving? Moving where? Why? With whom?”

I sigh, waiting to be sure he’s done. Standing, I approach them slowly, my hands coming up to rest on their shoulders. “*Mame, tate*, I love you both so very much. You are my North Stars.” This is suddenly much more difficult than I expected. Tears well in my eyes and I’m powerless to stop their descent down my cheeks. “I’m not a child anymore and it’s time I behave like a functioning, independent adult.”

“Says who? I’ll fucking gut them like a fish—”

“*Tate*.” I throw my arms around his neck and hold on tight. “It’s a nice one-bedroom apartment in a secure, gated building. Manny came with me and inspected not only the apartment, but the vehicle and helped me get a great deal on it. I’m not leaving you, not really. I’m just...I’m gonna find my footing in the world and you two have given me the strength to know I’ll find

it soon.”

“Pumpkin, you’re so young.”

Snorting, I remind him, “I’m 22.”

“Still a wee bubbeleh.” He whispers, cupping my cheek, running his thumb over the apple of it. His softened eyes narrow and I see the Avinu he was still lurking in the darkness of his pupils. “You will have bodyguards around the clock. I will arrange for them to live in the building with you.” I open my mouth to tell him that isn’t necessary, but he places his finger over my lips. “You are too precious to leave unprotected. You are the heart of the Kosher Nostra, pumpkin. We are the ribs that keep you safe.”

“Ok.” My voice catches and the word comes out warbly. He pulls me back into his arms and I rest my head on his shoulder, feeling my *mame* wrap herself around my back.

Ugh. I know I can do this; I have to. But God, I don’t want to.

Zeppo 18.

“Ruth! Ruthie!” I barrel past Ezra, Tevye, Tovah, Sophie, Harper, and Jonah in the foyer, chasing after my joy. She’s standing by her car, bent over so her mom can hook a necklace around her neck. They both look at me with wide eyes when I skid to a halt just inches from Ruthie.

“Zep—” Uncle David begins, but I ignore him for probably the first time in my life.

“Ruth.” I drag her into a fierce hug, my arms burning with how tightly I hold her to me. “Why?” She wrote me a letter. A fucking letter to tell me she’s moving out. A few short sentences that made no sense to me. My heart bursting in my chest, knowing I will see her less and less. How you can see someone less than never, I’m not sure, but I know in my gut if she leaves, I will lose her forever.

The last month should have been bliss, not having to deal with Nayosha and her bullshit. Her roving hands and snide remarks. I stopped responding to her, stopped answering her calls. She’s been by the compound, but the guards are under strict instructions that she is not to be allowed on the property. Sophie has taken great pleasure in kicking her out of the Burning Bush Medical Dispensary’s office. Even Keppelman has reached out a few times trying to broker a reconciliation between his “precious” niece and myself. His anger was palpable, even over text message.

However, I never found bliss. Instead, I watched one of my best friends nearly die, his girl violated and almost shot, and the two of them struggled to get back to each other. My anger toward Moshe lessened greatly in those harrowing moments, knowing that I would lay down my life for Ruthie’s, but perhaps it is better to keep her far away from the ugliness of our business. The world would burn if she were hurt because of me and then I would gladly allow the flames to consume me as I would have nothing to live for.

I can’t have her, I can’t touch her, but I can protect her. Though, that is infinitely more difficult if she leaves The. Family. Compound!

Over her shoulder, I catch the eye of the fucker that’s been assigned to her security detail with Manny. His narrowed gaze is irresponsible. The few glimpses I’ve seen of her, he’s always overly familiar with her, standing too close, and directing her with a firm hand. But she hasn’t complained that I’m

aware of, and Manny hasn't said anything either.

Everyone is worried, they speak of her in hushed whispers. Withdrawn. Gaunt. Losing weight at an unhealthy rate. She's folded in on herself and no one knows how to help her. She won't let us in. Won't talk about whatever is bothering her. It's slowly killing me watching her waste away. Lose her bright shining light. Like the sun has been eclipsed. A permanent midnight. She struggles in my arms, so I lean back and give her space. The necklace nestled between her still ripe tits is a beautiful glass mezuzah. A reminder of her connection to God and to her family. Lifting my eyes to meet hers, I find her gazing at me with confusion. She blinks it away quickly and further pushes against me to release her.

"Don't you think it's time I grew up, Zeppo?" She forces a smile, but I don't miss the bite to her words. Grow up? Who told her she wasn't?

"I think you belong here, with your family. We haven't had a movie night in weeks, *freyd*." She winces and I stutter a step back knowing that my nickname for her causes her pain. I've called her that since the moment I saw her in the nursery at the hospital. Why would it hurt her now?

"I'm sure you will have no trouble finding someone else to watch them with you." She glances behind her, her body stiffening at whatever she sees. When I follow her gaze, I find Manny and Chas in a whispered conversation. "I have to go. It's not like you'll never see me anymore. I'm not moving to another state, just another part of the city. I'll be back for breakfasts and family dinners." She pitches her voice and turns her back on me to address the rest of those gathered to say their goodbyes.

"Wear this at all times, pumpkin. Keep it with you and let it remind you of how treasured and loved you are."

"Thanks, *mame*." They hug once more, and she slides behind the wheel of her compact SUV without acknowledging me again. It seems stupidly obvious to say, but something is very, very wrong. And I intend to fix it, by any means necessary.

My phone beeps with an alert from the surveillance software Yakov designed. Certain phrases or keywords trigger a notification so I can check them quickly. Stepping off to the side, I pull up the program and open the alert.

Nayosha: *I've tried, uncle. He won't see me. I don't know what else I can do?*

Keppelman: *How hard is it to spread your legs and trap him like every other*

opportunistic gold digger in history?

Nayosha: *He won't touch me! I can't make him! He's bigger and stronger than me.*

Keppelman: *If a marriage won't work, then I will have to take my place by force. You have one month to tie Zeppo down, or you won't have to worry about the fall fashion line because you'll be six feet under buried in a knockoff.*

Motherfucker. He's desperate. And he's given her all the incentive she needs to step up her game. Glancing up, I just catch the taillights of Manny's vehicle following Ruthie at the end of the driveway. I flick through the transcription once more, going back further...Ruthie is probably safer away from the compound, away from me.

Ruth 19.

I hug the pillow closer to my chest and stare at the night sky from my balcony. It's truly lovely here. The courtyard of the apartment complex is lit by torches. The glistening pool water in the moonlight. The laughter of a young couple on a balcony across the way. It eases the ache of loneliness.

I've been here almost two weeks and so far, so good. My boxes are unpacked, my belongings settling into their new homes. Cooking dinner for one is an adjustment, but I kind of like it. The novelty hasn't worn off yet, I guess. And best yet, Manny changed the schedule, so he's been on nights and Chas is with me during the day. I don't know if Manny suspects anything, but I'm grateful all the same. I'm at work or visiting my parents most of the time during his shifts and it hasn't given him much chance to...

Shaking my head, not wanting to think of any of that, I lift my wrist and frown at the time. I need to work in the morning, so I better head to bed. Zilv hasn't sighed at me in frustration for a few weeks and I'd like to keep the streak going. Giggling at my brother, I step into my living room, close, and lock the balcony door. I breathe deep, the Peach Bellini candle divine. Padding across the wooden floors, I double check the locks on the front door, including the deadbolt, then turn off the lights as I make my way into the bathroom. I brush my teeth, hang up my pajamas on the back of the bathroom door, and pee one last time. Who am I kidding, I'll be up in a couple of hours to pee again, I have been cursed with a tiny bladder. It's quiet, something I'm still getting used to. Once in bed, I pull up my Kindle App and read until my eyes refuse to cooperate.

I startle awake when something presses over my nose and mouth. I blink, but it's too dark to make anything out. A hand cups my breast through my sleep bra and squeezes until I squeal in pain.

"Did you miss me?"

No. I didn't. I wisely choose not to respond. Chas licks the side of my face before sinking his teeth into my ear, drawing blood.

"You didn't think the old man would be able to keep me away forever, did you? I will always, always, find a way to get to you, princess. You can't hide and let's face it, you won't run." He snickers at his own joke. He slides the hand on my breast down until he's cupping my vagina roughly, digging his

fingers into my flesh. It's going to bruise. "It's been weeks, let's see if you're any tighter."

Zeppo 20.

I'm losing my patience. My anger and self-loathing reaching an all-time high the longer I'm without Ruthie. There isn't a single cell of my body that doesn't yearn for her and I'm tired of fighting it. I can't live like this. What's the point of remaining loyal to Moshe if I'm fucking miserable and I've lost her anyway? What is the fucking point of any of this?

In the war room, the others discuss the dissolving of Wittinger's business holdings, his wife's suicide, and other such bullshit.

Uncle David asks, "We have the manpower for all these newly acquired businesses?"

Moshe grins like a child, "They've been split between us, O'Brien, and Stone." I whisper a curse at Moshe's gloating. No one in this room is stupid, not even Zilv. They won't miss the exception.

"Not the Keppelmans?" Uncle raises his eyebrow at his son.

Moshe shakes his head. "No, I'm holding off on including the Keppelmans. I believe there will be a change of leadership in the not-too-distant future." I sit up straighter when Moshe looks directly at me for several long seconds before glancing around the table at the others.

"What's going on?" Like a dog with a bone, uncle is not going to let it go.

"We have something in the works. When we know more, Zeppo and I will bring everyone up to speed."

That burns in my gut, and I spring up from my chair, "No, let's do it now, *Avinu*. How about we tell everyone your brilliant fucking—"

Moshe slams his hand down on the table, his nostrils flaring. "That is enough! You do not have to like my plans, but as your *Avinu*, you will follow my orders without complaint!" We hold each other hostage, snarling, baring our teeth as the room silences around us. This isn't normal. We do not fight like this. Especially with the *Avinu*. His word is law. As it should be. But... but...

Moshe straightens, fixing his suit jacket, "I think we're done here."

"We absolutely fucking are." For now. Soon, though, soon there will be a reckoning. I'm not sure if the *Kosher Nostra* will survive it. Keppelman may get his wish, rebuilding on our ashes. Spinning on my heel, I stomp out of the room and down the hall toward the foyer and front door. I can't be here any

longer. I'll blow up and I need to be calm when I dismantle the only life I've ever known.

"Zeppo!" Fucking Ezra. I'm suddenly up against the wall with his arm against my chest to keep me in place. I'm bigger than him, I could easily move him, but I don't. "What has gotten into you? Do you have a death wish?" I snort, which he does not appreciate. "Seriously, *ahkper*, what do you need?" The fight leaks out of me, and I drop my forehead to his. We rarely speak Armenian, but it does something to me when I hear it.

"Ruthie. I need my *freyd*."

"Why are you sulking like a lion with a thorn in his paw? Go get her. I don't know why you've waited this long." My head snaps back and I smack it into the wall, surprised to hear him say such things. He chuckles, moving his arm to grip my neck. "You aren't subtle. Neither is she. I don't know what that fucking mess with Nayosha was, but she's gone. Thank God. Apologize to Ruthie, get on your knees, and beg forgiveness." He wiggles his eyebrows and I choke on a laugh. I'd love nothing more than to drop to my knees in front of her—

"It is forbidden." I murmur, remembering why I can't have her.

"Uncle David told you to stay away from her?" I try to rear back, his words like a slap in the face, but the wall is at my back. Uncle David?

"He isn't Avinu."

Ezra throws his head back and laughs so hard, tears gather in the corners of his eyes. "So fucking what? This isn't the 17th century, and as Moshe recently and so violently pointed out, the Kosher Nostra does not engage in arranged marriages. He has no fucking say over Ruthie's love life. Now, her father on the other hand. He doesn't either, she's a grown ass woman, but he might have a few choice words for you or fists."

"Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. I'm a fucking idiot!"

"Since birth."

"Fuck you." I say without heat. Hope swelling in my chest for the first time since I sniffed her hair and got rock fucking hard over two years ago. Could it really be that easy? Moshe will be angry, he will threaten, and probably get violent. But Ezra's right, he doesn't have a say in her love life. He can try to kick me out, try to ostracize me, maybe even try to kill me, but the others won't let him. At least, I don't think so. What the fuck is wrong with me? I've tortured myself--- Oh fuck! Ruthie...I've caused her so much pain and agony. She thinks I love Nayosha. That we are a real couple. How will she

ever forgive me?

“I’m not sure, honestly. She isn’t doing well, but I don’t think it has to do with you. At least not entirely. It’ll work itself out. It has to. You are Zeppo and Ruthie. It’s like right out of a fairytale or some shit.”

“Villains are buy-one-get-one-free.”

“Wait? Who are the villains?” I shake my head curtly, knowing I don’t want to get into this with him right now. I need time to sort out a few things. Get rid of Keppelman and Nayosha for good. I don’t want their shit touching my *freyd*.

Only I’m allowed to touch her, and I have to earn that right first.

Ruth 21.

“I’m getting tired of your attitude, Princess.” Chas growls in my ear as I walk up the steps to the front door of the family compound.

“I’m sorry.” I reply automatically, internally berating myself for being so weak. I should stand up for myself, I should scream at the top of my lungs the abuse and degradation I’ve suffered over the last several months, but he still holds the cards. Something he reminds me of every chance he gets. The lives of my loved ones hang in the balance, dependent on me towing the line. It got old a long time ago, but I still haven’t figured a way out where my family doesn’t pay for my insolence.

“You’ll get what’s coming to you. Your time is almost up.” Cryptic and vague. It’s the sinister grin on his face that worries me the most. There was always every chance I would outgrow my usefulness, whatever that was, I’m still not sure. I am not looking forward to what happens now that I apparently have. Will he kill me? How will I die? Will I have a chance to say goodbye first? Or will it be worse than death? Will I be sold and trafficked to far off lands with no chance of rescue? The possibilities are endless, and I find my stomach churning with trepidation. The idea of sitting down for family dinner suddenly doesn’t appeal much to me.

Inside the house, Chas makes himself scarce, as usual, while I follow the loud sounds of my family, gathered in the sitting room, talking over one another and laughing. Such a jovial scene. My eyes sting and I blink rapidly to clear the tears before they fall. Now isn’t the time.

“Ruthie! Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!” Uncle Steven, Tevye and Tovah’s father, notices me first. He pulls me into a bear hug and kisses the top of my head, his scotch held in his other hand away from my body. Spilling a drink on a female member of this family is a mistake you only make once.

“Uncle. It’s good to see you.” I’m passed around to my other uncles, Morris and Aaron, then enveloped in my *tate*’s arms where my entire body sags in relief. He has smelled the same my entire life, sandalwood and vanilla. My dad is safety and security, at least while I’m in his arms.

Reluctantly, I step away before I’m too verklempt to function and force a smile at my *mame* and aunts. I greet each with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, even though I saw everyone at the beginning of the week for Monday

breakfast. My living away from home has hit differently than I expected. They all act as if my sleeping elsewhere is a tragedy and each pepper me with questions about when I'm moving home...every time I see them. I was excited at first to be on my own, but I think Chas has disavowed me of that. Maybe it would be different if he wasn't blackmailing me, so to speak. Perhaps, being independent would be a wonderful adventure if I weren't constantly on alert for my next assault.

"Bitch, get over here." Tovah yells from across the room. Sophie smacks her in the arm but waves me over. A genuine grin spreads my lips at the sight of my cousins. Tov drags me into her ample chest and nearly smothers me in a tight hug. "I miss your face." She whispers brokenly in my ear. Heart in my throat, I lean back and nod. She isn't one to show emotion of any kind, so this is a rare treat. And it's because of me. Weird. But nice.

"Quit hogging her." Sophie whines, prying me from Tovah's grip. I giggle as she wraps her tiny body around me, hiccupping when I return the embrace. "Ruthie, *please*. Let us help."

Cold dread suffuses my body until my fingers and toes feel numb. I take a shaky step back and shake my head. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." Seril says from behind me, scaring the crap out of me. "We've let this go on long enough. It's time to come clean, little missy."

"You are going to be a mother, but you aren't my mother." I sass with a smirk. Reaching out, I place my hand on her mostly flat stomach through her summer dress. "How's my niece or nephew?"

"Irritated because their aunt is keeping secrets." Seril attempts to glare, but it's adorable on her itty-bitty face.

"Hmm." I spin around and nearly walk right into a broad firm chest. Zeppo. I slowly lift my eyes to his and gasp at the shocking intensity staring back at me. Nostrils flaring. Jaw clenching. Eyes glittering with some strong emotion I can't name. Have I upset him? I haven't seen him, for goodness sake.

"*Freyd*." Zeppo groans my name and it's like a bolt of electricity to my...*down there*.

"Be right back." I mutter, sidestepping the big man and darting out of the sitting room. I rush up the stairs and find a familiar hiding spot I've used since I was a child. An alcove by the servants quarters just before the back steps that lead to the kitchen.

After a series of deep breaths and a mean internal pep talk, I finally manage to calm myself down. I knew I'd see him. I've seen him at least once a week

for the last few months. But just now...he's never looked at me like that before. I can't imagine what I've done to warrant such fury.

"Where is she?" My entire body snaps to attention at the sound of her voice. Why is she here? She hasn't been around lately, maybe a month or so, and I thought maybe they broke up. But if she's here... Is he mad that I'm here because it will upset his girlfriend? She doesn't like me, that much is obvious.

"She's here. Somewhere. Take off your fucking heels, they'll hear it on the tile." That cold dread from earlier returns immediately, seeping into every molecule of my body. Chas and Nayosha know each other?

"Don't tell me what to do. I have to get downstairs before dinner starts."

"I'm aware of the plan. I saw her come up here, she can't have gone far and she's not hard to miss. Check the rooms." Over the sound of my blood rushing in my ears, I listen for their footfalls. Once I'm sure they are at the other end of the hall, I slip off my shoes, and sneak through the curtain.

"You're a pathetic cunt."

My time is up. And I didn't get to say goodbye.

Zeppo 22.

“You glare any harder and you’ll burst a blood vessel.” My father says casually from beside me. We’re in the sitting room, waiting for dinner to be served. Except I’m not hungry, not for food anyway. Ruth. My *freyd*. She looked beautiful and beautifully broken a bit ago. Her clothes hang loosely on her body, her frame noticeably thinner than it used to be. No matter what she wears or weighs, she’s always the most stunning creature in any room.

“You love me?” I ask, ignoring his comment about how I’m looking at Moshe as he talks with Seril and their moms.

“Zep?”

“Do you love me?”

“More than there are stars in the sky, son. What’s going on?” Facing him, I stare into his eyes and let him see everything I’ve hidden for far too long.

“Do you want me to be happy?”

“Is this about Ruthie?” I nod. His grin is blinding, the hug suffocating. “It’s about fucking time.”

“Dad?”

“We thought you’d have gone after her as soon as she turned 18. Then when you didn’t make a move, we figured 21 or graduating from college. Still nothing. I’m not sure what took you so long—”

A feminine growl interrupts my father. We turn to the doorway and my jaw drops in shock when I see Nayosha in a too short, too tight red dress, smiling seductively at me.

“What the fuck?” Dad mutters and I second the sentiment.

“Nayosha. How wonderful you could join us.” Moshe stands to greet her, his wife looking on with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. Blood boils in my veins when I realize he invited her. What is he playing at?

“Couldn’t turn down an invitation from the Avraham Avinu himself, even if I wanted to.” She replies coyly, batting her fake eyelashes.

“Zeppo, did you know she was—”

“Not a fucking clue.” I bite out, answering my mother’s question.

“Dinner is ready, Avinu.” Devorah steps into the room behind Nayosha, an unpleasant curl to her lips. “Shall I set another place at the table?”

“Of course. Thank you, Devorah. We’ll be right in.” I’m going to kill him.

Avinu or not. Friend or not. He's played with fire for too long not to get burnt. Waving Nayosha on with a flourish, Moshe helps his wife up from the couch, ignoring her scowl, and leads them both through to the dining room.

"Tell me, how is your uncle?"

Nayosha's steps falter for a second. She offers a strained smile. "He is well, thank you. Wishes he had more opportunity to spend with his friends in the Kosher Nostra."

I roll my eyes and my father chuffs. I hear Seril and Aunt Esther whispering as we follow along into the dining room.

"Better be content with the one I'm cooking, because I'm gonna castrate him as soon as I get him alone."

"My *tokhter*, age before beauty. Get in line!"

"What does that boy think he's doing?" My father asks me in a low voice.

"He is the Avinu, omnipotent and wise." My father reaches out a hand to grip my shoulder, making a show of tripping over his own feet.

"Sorry, I tripped on your sarcasm."

The room is eerily silent, fraught with tension, as we take our seats. I frown at Ruthie's empty chair next to me. "Where's Ruthie?"

"Always so concerned about your joy." Nayosha says pleasantly enough, but her eyes are as hard as her jaw.

"I'm sure she'll be along shortly." Zilv says, already grabbing a dish to serve himself. "Dinner is one of her favorite 6 meals a day."

I'm out of my chair and in his face in seconds; the spoon from the spinach casserole clattering to the table, and my hand on the back of his head. I slam it into the table once, twice, three times before letting him up. Blood drips from his nose onto the pristine white tablecloth. My chest heaves from anger and effort. Slowly, I glance around the room meeting everyone's shock and awe, before focusing on Moshe.

"No one says another fucking word about Ruthie. She's perfect and beautiful and a better person than you will ever hope to be." I finish with my hardened gaze on Zilv. He uses a napkin to wipe away the blood from his face, picks up the serving spoon and shrugs.

"Well, duh."

"Zeppo." Moshe's voice is low and lethal, and I welcome his wrath. He and I have a few things to discuss...preferably with our fists.

"Zilv. I've told you a thousand times, do not comment on a woman's weight...ever. Men with small hands and feet in glass houses shouldn't throw

stones.” Tovah smirks, sitting back in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest.

“My feet and hands are normal for someone of my size and endowment, thank you very much.”

“Is that why Rebecca Kohen told me and Soph in the 10th grade that it was so nice of the carnival to let you get an education.”

“I do not have carny hands!” Zilv turns to his mother, “*Mame*, tell them I have a big dick! Tell them how difficult it was for you to buy diapers because of my massive shlong.”

“Lying is so distasteful, Zilv.” The entire table erupts in laughter, but I don’t share in the humor, my mind still focused on Ruthie’s absence.

“AVINU! DAVID! ESTHER!” Devorah screams from the kitchen and for a moment none of us move. Then all at once, we are on our feet and running into the kitchen. “RUTHIE! SOMEONE Call 911!”

My heart stops right then and there. It ceases to beat in my chest. And yet, somehow, my feet move of their own accord and I’m shoving people out of the way, dropping to my knees as Uncle David and Aunt Esther already have around the motionless body of my *freyd* at the bottom of the back stairs. Screams fill the thick air, guttural sobs, and frantic orders, but all I can focus on is...

Her left arm is at an unnatural angle. Her right ankle is already grossly swollen. Blood pools around her head, matting her long dark brown hair. It’s the way her skirt is rucked up from the fall that has bile rising up my throat. The faded bruising on her inner thighs, a ghastly backdrop to fresh contusions and open wounds. She fell down the stairs, but that isn’t all that’s been done to her.

Someone has violated her and that someone will pay for what they’ve done in pain and blood.

Zeppo 23.

“Merciful one, restore her, heal her, strengthen her, enliven her. Send her a complete healing from the heavenly realm, a healing of body and a healing of soul, together with all who are ill soon, speedily, without delay.”

“Amen.” My eyes open and I glance around the waiting room of the hospital, feeling as if I’m seeing it for the first time, since... The family is gathered, including bodyguards, house staff, and close friends. I’ve been sitting in my seat for hours, waiting, praying, hoping. And apparently, others have been listening. I blink several times as my father’s worn face comes into focus. “God will hear your words, son, he will restore her. What are we without a beating heart?” He smiles, but it’s tinged with sadness.

Looking more closely at everyone here for Ruthie, I notice empty boxes of tissues litter every surface. Coffee cups, snack wrappers, a few take out containers. A cold hand slides between my clasped palms and I jerk at the touch. The sound I emit is more animal than human.

“Zeppy. I’m here. It’s ok. I’m here with you.”

“Yeah, you are. Why is that again?” Tovah snarks from a few seats down, her eyes puffy, streaks run through her makeup from tears. I don’t think I’ve ever known Tovah to cry.

“Zeppy needs me. He’s heartbroken for his friend.”

“Right. Of course.” Tovah stands, towering over Nayosha as she sits uncomfortably close to me. “Because when your best friend and soulmate is lying unconscious after falling suspiciously down a set of stairs, a walking STD with too much perfume is exactly what the fucking doctor orders.”

“How dare you—”

“Bitch. I dare. I double dare. Get the fuck out. You don’t belong here.” Sophie moves to stand behind Tovah, aiming a scowl at Nayosha.

“I belong with Zeppy!”

“It’s ZEPPO!” Seril screams, the entire room silencing at her outburst.

“Seril, the baby—”

“Shut up.” She turns her ire on her husband. It’s not the right time, but I’m downright gleeful at the way he shrinks in on himself. Fucker deserves it and more. “I don’t know exactly what is happening and what your plan is with...*this*,” she waves a pointed finger at Nayosha, “but you are already on

my shit list. Any lower and I'm gonna start shooting."

"Lady boner." Harper and Tovah whisper in unison, then high five while giggling.

"Ruth Holofcener." A doctor in bloody scrubs stands in the doorway of the waiting room, sweat dotting his face, his bandana in his hands. He isn't smiling, he isn't frowning, he's just neutral. How can you have been in Ruthie's presence, even if she is unconscious, and not be affected by her?

"Yes, doctor. I am her brother—" Moshe sticks his hand out, but Uncle David smacks him out of the way and hip checks him so Aunt Esther and he can speak with the doctor.

"I am David Holofcener, Ruthie's father. Her mother, Esther."

"Mr. and Mrs. Holofcener," the doc gazes around the room, "do I have permission to discuss her case with you here, or would you prefer a private room?"

Aunt Esther reaches out to squeeze the doc upper arm gently. A gracious smile tipping her lips, "Thank you for your consideration, however, we are a big family."

"Yes, I've heard." Our reputation precedes us. How wonderful.

"My daughter...is she..." Uncle David stutters out uncharacteristically. Although, he's never been waiting to hear if one of his children has died. I stumble back into my seat at the thought. No. She isn't. I would know. I would feel it.

"She's stable. Doing quite well, actually. The wound to her head was superficial. We stitched it up, however, we will rescan every 4 hours for the next 24 hours to ensure there is no swelling or brain bleeds. Her scan an hour ago was clean. Her ankle is a clean break, it's been reset and plastered. Her arm was trickier, which is what took so long in surgery. You said she fell down a flight of carpeted stairs?"

"Yes." My uncle replies automatically.

"Could she have been pushed?"

Uncle David exhales through clenching teeth. "We are unsure."

"The way her arm was broken is consistent with a fall, however, based on my experience, her shoulder separation was caused by her arm being wrenched behind her back first. And the amount of trauma indicates more force than typically tripping."

"Thank you for the information."

Harper clears her throat, "What about the other injuries?" She avoids eye

contact with anyone as she asks the question I'm sure is on everyone's mind. The doctor takes a step toward my aunt and uncle, lowering his voice, but I'm not the only one still able to hear him. "I cannot speak to the nature or cause...I will say that her body has endured significant trauma over an extended period of time...weeks if not months."

Gasps echo around the room, Seril's knees give out, but Moshe is there to catch her. Growls sound from the men. Tovah lifts her heeled foot and kicks the nearest wall, imbedding her red soled high heel into the plaster.

Tov's shoulders heave as her head hangs down. "I'll pay for the damage." She tells the doctor in a hoarse voice thick with emotion.

"You heal my daughter and I'll buy you a new fucking wing."

Doc's wide eyes flit to my aunt, "Updated equipment and a pay raise for the nurses would be better." Several laugh, except the doc is 100% legit in his request. Aunt Esther produces a business card from somewhere and hands it over to him. Get in touch with me once she's discharged."

"Yes, ma'am." With a subtle shake of his head, the doctor seems to regain his composure, "She is currently awake but very sleepy and will remain that way probably into late morning. Hospital policy is that one person may remain with her overnight, however, given the *size* of your family," yeah, he's heard of us, "we can allow two people to stay, at least the first night."

Aunt Esther and Uncle David both look over their shoulders at me, then each other, then back at the doctor. "Thank you."

"We'll let you go in to see her in a few minutes."

Somehow, these few minutes seem interminably longer than the hours we waited earlier. When the nurse comes to get us, we all follow like she's Moses leading us out of Egypt. I let others go ahead of me, knowing once I see her, I won't leave her side. At the mouth of her room, I hear her tinkling laughter, and I grin remembering how loopy she was when she had her wisdom teeth out several years ago. As everyone moves further into the room, finding places to stand or sit, I step over the threshold and stop in my tracks at the sight of her. She's the same Ruthie I've always known and loved, and yet...

"Zeppo." She whispers, her pupils blown from the meds. Her eyes widen alarmingly the closer I get to her. Only she's not looking at me, but rather something behind me.

Ruthie's voice rises in pitch, "Get out." I glance behind me to find Nayosha at my back.

“Get the fuck out. And leave me the fuck alone.” I growl menacingly at the stupid woman.

“Both of you. Get out. Don’t come back. I don’t want to see either of you. Ever again.”

“Ruthie, pumpkin, the meds—”

“NO! Get out! Get out! Get out!” She screams over and over again. Ezra, Tevye, and Yakov form a barrier between Ruthie and I. They use their bodies to push me back, Nayosha stumbling behind me.

“*Freyd—*”

“Don’t call me that!” My aunt and uncle attempt to hold her down, calm her. My gut churns. My soul withers. I’m causing her pain. Just the sight of me hurts her. What has happened? How did everything get so fucked up?

“Zeppo. Leave. She doesn’t want you here.” Instinct has me spinning on my heel and planting my fist in Moshe’s face.

“Because of you! She hates me because of you!” My brother and cousins pull me away from Moshe, and haul me kicking and screaming from the room, down the hall and into the stairwell. Tevye uses his massive paw to hold me against the wall with his hand on my throat, squeezing until I settle down.

“I don’t know what the fuck that was about, and I don’t care. Right now, you need to calm the fuck down and get gone. Ruthie doesn’t need you and whatever bullshit you’ve got going on with Moshe. Sort your shit before she gets home.” Several deep breaths and I have more control over myself. I nod in understanding. I rub my sore neck and wince when I swallow.

“I failed her.”

“We all did.” Yakov says gravely.

Zeppo 24.

Driving home is difficult. Tears blur my vision, and I can't wipe them away fast enough. Guilt sits like a lead ball in my gut. My brain moves a mile a minute running through everything I can remember since Moshe demanded my soul for his own selfish purposes.

Halfway to the family compound, I change my mind and head to my condo instead. I want to drink myself to death. If my mere existence hurts Ruthie, then I will cease to exist. I won't be the reason she experiences another second of sorrow and pain.

I'm missing something. We all are. Keppelman is planning a hostile takeover, but why would he hurt Ruthie? And who would do it in the family compound? It makes no sense why someone would go after her. And who's been abusing her? *Raping* her? It hasn't been confirmed, but I can't think of many reasons she would have such bruising between her thighs.

I park my vehicle, happy that I drove myself to the hospital. Paul offered, but I didn't want anyone else in the car with me. I wanted to be alone. Still do.

So, imagine my surprise when I get off the elevator on my floor and find Nayosha leaning against my door.

"No." I grunt out, pushing her aside none too gently, and unlock my front door. Before I can kick it shut, she slips in through the narrow opening. "Fuck off."

"You're hurt. Angry. Sad. Let me help you." Bitch doesn't fucking give up. She must hate the thought of being forever entombed in off label clothing.

"No."

"They cast you aside. Your *joy* can't even look at you. No one tried to convince her to let you stay. They just pushed you out. Told you to get lost. That's not family. They don't love you. Not like I do."

That's rich. I snort into my freshly poured rocks glass of whiskey.

"You love me?" I ask, quirking my brow as I turn around, my back against the bar.

"With all my heart. Zeppo, you are an incredible man, and I can't imagine my life without you." Because without me, there won't be a life...or a heartbeat.

"Strip." The word rips its way up my throat before I can stop it. Nayosha's mouth opens for a second, before she's slipping the straps of her dress off her

slender shoulders. A shimmy side to side and it pools on the floor at her heeled feet. Her bare tits are perky, she got her money's worth. A scrap of transparent fabric covers her hairless pussy. The sight of her does nothing for me. And yet...

"Open the balcony door." I'm on the 10th and top floor of my building. No one will see her, but honestly, I don't care if they do. The fear in Ruthie's eyes flashes in my mind but I shake it away. Moshe's right, I'm a monster. I don't deserve her. And she finally knows it too. Why else would she kick me out of her hospital room? Why else would she look at me and Nayosha like we were *shedim*?

"Zeppo?"

"OPEN IT!" I roar, letting everything that has plagued me for the last few months bubble to the surface. She obeys with a small yelp, sliding open the glass door and hesitantly stepping onto the balcony. "Put your hands on the rail and stick that boney ass in the air."

Fuck Moshe. Fuck The Kosher Nostra. Fuck loyalty. Fuck love. And fuck Nayosha.

Her eyes meet mine over her shoulder, then she faces the railing once more. She doesn't move. I throw my empty glass at her feet, relishing the way it shatters on the tile, the sound of her fear. She should be afraid. Hasn't she heard? I'm a fucking monster.

The soles of my dress shoes crunch through the shards as I step up behind her. My hands tear at my belt and the fly of my pants, her naked body trembling in the late-night breeze. I'm flaccid, not even the prospect of rough angry sex after years of celibacy can inflate my lifeless cock.

Anger and shame fight for dominance as I stare at the bones of her spine. I close my eyes and think of my *freyd*. Laying against me on the couch, burrowing into my side during a scary part, the heat of her cheeks when a sex scene played on the screen, the smell of her hair as it tickled my chin.

I grab a condom from my wallet and rip it open with my teeth. I roll it down my now hard length, ignoring the fact that shame won the fight. It and despair slither through my veins as I lift her legs up around my hips and line up my cock with her entrance, knowing I'm hard for Ruthie and I'm about to fuck someone else. Someone who isn't her. No one is her and the realization that I've lost her well and truly for good settles into the marrow of my bones.

"*Can't do this with that fat fucking bitch.*" I almost miss it. Over the chaos in my mind and the destruction of my sanity, but I do. Nayosha's whispered

words are like a shot of adrenaline to my system. The fog lifts and I drop her legs. She falls to the ground, scuttling back toward the balcony doors. She cries out, the glass digging into the heels of her hands, but it doesn't stop her. "I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." She beats me to the door, slamming it shut and locking it in my face.

"Run." I mouth to her, pulling out my phone. She picks up her dress, clutching it to her chest, grabs her purse and runs out of my condo like the bats of hell are chasing her. Soon they will be. I pull off the unused condom from my softened dick, all the blood now back in my brain where it belongs.

"Yeah?"

"Yak, have you pulled the surveillance from the compound of the back stairs?"

"I just got back from the hospital; I'm doing it now. Why?"

"A hunch." I breathe out, running my free hand through my hair. "Have someone talk to her bodyguards too, especially that fucker Chas. They should have been with her, watching her."

"She was in the house; they don't normally stick so close at home."

I understood his point, but still didn't mean there wasn't something going on.

"Just check their whereabouts. And bank records, phone logs, any communication you can access."

"Zeppo? What are you thinking?"

"*Cheaper by the Dozen.*"

"A family meeting?"

"Yeah. ASAP."

"Roger that."

"Yak?"

"Yeah?"

"Do we have a guy that can replace a sliding glass door on short notice?"

Zeppo 25.

I'm the last to arrive at the war room. Turns out breaking through a patio glass door is more difficult than I anticipated. It would have been helpful to remember that I had bulletproof glass installed when I moved in. I woke the building manager up and convinced him to have security unlock the door for me.

"Where are Uncle David and Aunt Esther?"

Moshe narrows his right eye at me, his left eye swollen shut and already bruising from my earlier punch. "They are with my sister, trying to keep her calm, no thanks to you."

"Watch it, or I'll give you a matching set." I lift my chin to his face and smirk.

"You will remember your place." He growls back but I'm not in the mood.

"My place is at Ruthie's side...just as soon as a few things are taken care of."

I turn to Yakov, "You review the footage?"

He nods grimly, his jaw set tight. "Yes." He's not normally one to hold back, so I take my seat and prepare for my assumptions to be confirmed. Closing his eyes for a moment, he opens them, his gaze on Moshe. "The cameras in the hall and on the steps were on a loop, showing an empty hallway. Obviously, we know that's not true since Ruthie was...anyway, I checked the other cameras in the house and found Nayosha had snuck inside the house through the door in the kitchen about 20 minutes prior, nothing to show who or when the door was unlocked to grant her access."

"We have a traitor in the compound?"

"I'd say we have several." I tell the room, my eyes on Moshe.

"Zeppo." My father sternly calls my name. I look at Yakov once again.

"Chas."

"Chas Montgomery has been with the Kosher Nostra for more than 5 years."

Yak responds.

"There's no time limit on corruption, I assume no one offered him a sweet enough deal until recently." I meet his eyes again. They've widened, as if he's putting things together. "Keppelman."

Uncle Steven snorts, "Ralph Keppelman?"

"Would you like to explain Moshe, or should I?" He sits back in his chair, his

head slowly moving back and forth.

Seril pokes his arm, “What is he talking about?”

“Who’s on security at the hospital?”

Yak answers me, “Manny and your parent’s detail.”

Moshe stirs, sits up straight and takes command of the room. “Tovah and Harper, I want you both to stay with Ruthie tomorrow during the day.”

“Someone tried to kill Ruthie, you are NOT sending my woman to stand guard. She was abducted only weeks ago—”

“Jonah, love.” Harper smoothly moves from her seat to straddle Jonah and cup his face. “First, so cute you want to protect me. Second, I’m a grown ass woman so you don’t answer for me. Third, have you met Tovah? Ain’t nothing and no one getting past her. I swear she’s like those fembots from *Austin Powers*, complete with machine gun ta-tas to mow down the bad guys.”

“Your faith in me is hot as fuck.” Tovah purrs despite Jonah’s possessive growl. It’s amusing, but more important matters need to be discussed.

“Jonah.” Moshe barks. “Manny will need a break, though I doubt he’ll take it. Until we know who all is involved with Keppelman, there aren’t many I trust. Not to mention, Ruthie’s comfort...I don’t know how comfortable she’d feel with an unknown male guarding her. This way she’s with people she can lean on who will keep her safe until we can sort out a few things.”

Harper grins at Jonah and leans in to whisper loudly, “Hugo.” Jonah’s entire body shudders as his eyes darken with lust. Gross.

“Jonah’s getting his p-spot tickled!” Tevye and his father, Uncle Steven yell at the same time. They exchange wary glances and turn away from each other. Apparently, kink is hereditary. I avoid looking at my own father, not wanting to know what he and my mom get up to.

“Right. Moving on. Women, please leave the war room.”

“Nice try, Moshe.” Seril says with a bite to her tone. “This isn’t something you can keep from us. We are all in danger if there is a traitor in our organization. But aside from that, I’m getting the feeling you are involved with Ruthie’s fall and whatever hell she’s been silently enduring for the past several months. I’m not leaving until I know everything.”

“Seril—”

“I AM THE SARAI IMA! You will not keep me in the dark and you will not filter the truth with me.”

“Calm down.”

My mom shakes her head in disappointment, tsking Moshe. “In the history of womankind, the words ‘calm down’ have always had the exact opposite effect. When will men learn that?”

“The day after never.” Sophie mutters from down the table.

When Moshe stays tight lipped, I decide I’ve got nothing to lose. “During the meeting when Moshe shot Wittinger, Keppelman’s behavior was off. Moshe ordered me to seduce Keppelman’s niece and find out what he had planned. I refused. I am in love with Ruthie. I have been for years. He knew that and demanded my obedience anyway. He pulled rank, told me exactly how little he thinks of me and told me to whore myself out for the greater good. Out of respect for him and the family, I pursued Nayosha Wallace, but I never kissed her or fucked her.” My stomach threatens to revolt at the memories of earlier when I almost did. “Moshe invited her here for meals and family gatherings. I used Yakov’s software to track her phone, surveil her messages and phone calls. Keppelman’s initial plan was to marry his niece into our family and secure a place a little higher on the food chain. When his niece failed to trap me with pregnancy or blackmail, he threatened to kill her if she didn’t succeed. He told her in no uncertain terms that if she failed, he would find violent and destructive ways of taking us down and claiming the throne of the new Kosher Nostra. Moshe’s plan was to drag this out and get him desperate enough to get caught in the act. About a month ago, he told me I could end it with her, that her absence would increase his desperation. And then imagine my surprise when she shows up at dinner tonight...at the behest of our scheming leader.”

“Before we dive into the shit show Moshe created...where is Nayosha now?” my father asks.

“I don’t know. She fled my apartment tonight after locking me out on the balcony. If Keppelman gets his hands on her before us, she’ll be dead, guaranteed.”

With pursed lips, Sophie asks, “Why was she at your apartment?”

“She was waiting outside my door when I got home and slipped in behind me.” I answer as truthfully as I can.

“How’d she lock you out?”

“That’s not important right now.” I start, but Sophie isn’t letting this go.

“How. Did. She. Lock. You. Out?”

I stand up quickly, my chair flying back against the wall. My hands sweep across the tabletop, knocking papers, pens, and glasses of water everywhere

before banging my fist into the hard and unforgiving wood. “Because I have nothing left! Ruthie won’t even look at me! She can’t be in the same room as me! I can’t trust my Avinu or even be in the same room as him without wanting to cause him bodily harm. My entire world is turned on its axis and I’m losing my grip! I almost fucked her! Up against the railing, I almost...”

“It’s ok, son.”

“NO!” I throw my dad’s hands off my shoulders. “It won’t ever be ok! I failed her. I failed her at every turn! Moshe forbade me from being with Ruthie and I listened to him. I left her vulnerable and alone because of loyalty to a man who thinks I’m good enough to serve him but not enough to love his sister!”

“Is that true, Moshe?” Seril’s voice is soft and penetrates the agony rushing like wildfire through my body.

“It’s...I didn’t...”

Seril stands slowly, stepping out from her chair and sliding it neatly under the table. With a shaky breath, she proceeds to shred Moshe’s heart until there’s nothing left, and I find it’s not as satisfying as I’d hoped.

“You are not the man I married. Not the man I fell in love with. I can’t even look at you right now. I’m going to stay at Ruthie’s apartment.”

“You can’t leave, you’re pregnant with my child. You are my wife!”

“You gonna use the baby too? Marry her off or whore him out for business? Teach them that human emotions are irrelevant, and no one matters more than the Kosher Nostra? This is on you!” she points a finger at him. “You invited that viper into our lives, our home. She was at our wedding! She might be the one who broke Ruthie’s body, but you broke her spirit. Her heart. You denied her love from a man—”

“He’s not good enough for her! We’ve shared women before, I know what he’s capable of!”

“He’s not good enough or you aren’t? If you can change, why can’t he? You knew how he felt, how she felt, and you asked him to do this anyway. Because you wanted to prove he wasn’t worthy? And he followed along, because despite everything, he loved you, respected you. Does it make you happy that he chose you over her? Does it make you giddy inside that he chose this fucking boy’s club over the woman he loves? Your mother told me once that you weren’t always on the right side of the law, but you were always on the right side of those that count on you. I believed her. Stupid, naïve girl. I can take a lot, my shoulders may be slim, but they are strong,

Moshe, but this...I don't know you. My respect for you, my trust...gone. And now, so am I."

She strides out of the room with her head held high, the women of the family following behind her without a word to any of us. Tovah turns at the last second and flips us off, crossing her arms over her crotch, thrusting, and finally leaving.

In the ensuing silence, I yank my t-shirt over my head and stand up. I pull my pocketknife and a lighter from my pants and slam them on the table in front of Moshe.

"What the fuck?" He whispers, his voice broken, defeated, hopeless.

"Remove it. Cut it off. Burn it. I love her with everything I've got. I've made so many mistakes and she's the only one who has paid the price. My loyalty is to her from now until God removes me from this earth. So, take my tat, and free me from your reign."

"Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, why is everyone so dramatic? This isn't a Shakespearean play!" Ezra snaps. "He isn't going to release you from the family, or burn off your tat, or do anything else drastic, because Moshe knows that he will have a revolt on his hands. You are a valued member of this organization, and he's already going to have to re-earn the trust and loyalty of his men and women when they find out he's responsible for the attacks on our beloved Ruthie."

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, Moshe?" his dad asks, his voice clear, even though he isn't in the room. "Steven, put me closer so he can feel the weight of my glare." My dad positions the phone a foot away from Moshe, propping it up against the basket of snacks at his end of the table.

"I didn't mean to hurt her. I was protecting her. She might be upset now but in the long run, Zeppo would have only hurt her more." I swivel to hit him again, but he holds up his hands. "I mean, that's what I thought. It's difficult enough to look Seril in the eye knowing what I've done, what I know I will continue to do for our family. Her brother and the circumstances around her mother's accident have already dirtied her view of the world, but Ruthie...I thought I could spare her from knowing how black our souls are if I kept you two apart."

Tev snorts, "How'd that work out for you?"

"Not well." Moshe mutters. "I can't fix this. I can't go back and choose differently. But I will do everything I can to bring the life back into her eyes, to give her the best life she can have...with you."

“She can’t even fucking look at me, man.”

“She will. Once I explain the circumstances.”

“You mean how you ordered and Zeppo obeyed?” Zilv shakes his head with a frown. “I don’t know much about women besides where the g-spot is, but even I know she isn’t forgiving either of you in this millennia.”

“Hate to perpetuate the stereotype of cold, emotionless Russians, but can we focus on the traitors in our midst and the imminent danger Keppelman poses?” Yak’s eyebrows rise higher with each word, his eyes darting from Moshe to me.

“Yak, you and Tev comb through security footage of the compound, particularly Ruthie’s door since mid-May. Find that fucker Chas and bring him to me. I want Nayosha captured and brought to the consortium ASAP. It is imperative that we find her before Keppelman. I want the current whereabouts of Keppelman and a broader surveillance of his phone calls, messages, emails, etc. Check his financials, see if he’s making any big moves. And do a cursory check of all our employees to see if anyone else has been turned.”

“Oh, is that all?” Several of us throw whatever we can grab at Tevye’s head. He doesn’t dodge everything, taking a stapler to the chin.

Someone knocks on the door. It opens a moment later, and one of our guards peeks his head around the door. “Sorry to interrupt, Avinu, but the Sarai Ima has left the property with the BAB’s.”

Zilv grunts, “Who’s babs?”

“Bad Ass Bitches, sir.” The guard answers quickly.

“And who told you to call them that?” Zilv asks, although it’s not hard to guess who is responsible.

“The MOABABS.”

Uncle Steven chuckles, “And that is?”

The young guard looks uncomfortable, but he doesn’t shy away from answering, “The Mother of All Bad Ass Bitches, sir. Tovah.”

Ruth 26.

My skin crawls the longer I remain in this hospital bed. My time was up, I should have died at the bottom of those stairs and a part of me wishes I had. A small part. I woke slowly, confused by the wires, beeping, and immobility. It took a few seconds to understand what had happened and the nurses were helpful in filling me in on my injuries and surgeries.

Oddly enough, my broken arm doesn't hurt that much. It's the constant headache and throbbing in my ankle that's most irritating. The bruises all over feel like old news for me so I don't pay them much mind. No, what hurt the most was seeing Zeppo walk into my room, his face a mask of worry and relief, followed by the woman responsible for my current predicament.

She's a bold woman walking into my hospital room. Or maybe she just knew that I wouldn't say anything about her involvement for fear of retribution against my family now that I know she's working with Chas. Barely cognizant because of the anesthesia, my body reacted violently at their combined presence, and I flipped out. It took quite a while for me to relax, my *mame* crawling into bed with me to hold me while I hiccupped and stuttered. My *tate* watching helplessly.

I woke several times during the night, screaming and thrashing. My poor *mame* nearly fell out of the narrow bed more than once. *Tate* was gone more than he was in my room, I assume it was too hard to look at me broken and battered, an embarrassment and failure.

In the bright light of the morning, I manage to sit up with some help and pick at my breakfast. *Mame* hovers, stabbing me in the cheek with the fork when she tries to feed me herself.

"*Mame.*"

"You will let me feed you. I need this, pumpkin. I've never been so scared in my life..."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." I shrug, not able to talk about why it is. "Ruth." She lifts my chin with her finger and thumb, "It is not your fault."

"Can you tell us what happened?" *Tate* speaks just above a whisper from the doorway. I shake my head, dislodging my *mame*'s hand and turning awkwardly on my side, bumping into the tray over my bed.

“My baby girl...as your father I want to know, I *need* to know what has been done to you, what has caused my precious daughter to disappear before my very eyes.” I’ve rarely heard my *tate* so emotional. We are a demonstrative family, I’ve never lacked hugs and kisses and snuggles, but to hear him struggle...it hurts my heart. “As the previous Avinu to the Kosher Nostra, I *must* know who dared betray us in our own home. Ruth...I can’t imagine how difficult this is for you, but you cannot remain quiet any longer.”

I know he’s right, but the words won’t come out. I still fear for their safety, their lives. Seril and the baby. Since I did not die at the bottom of those stairs, I can assume whoever is behind Chas and Nayosha will try harder to eliminate those who stand in their way.

Tate’s hand on my hip burns through the layers of fabric, urging me to speak up, to purge the ugliness that has taken up residence in my soul. But there is a dam clogging my throat, keeping it all inside me until I become sick with it and throw up over the side of my bed.

“David, give her time. She’s distressed.”

“Esther, it cannot wait. Every moment we delay is a moment longer our enemy lives. They tried to kill my daughter! I will not—”

“She is my daughter too!” Great, now my parents are arguing because of me. “I gave her life, I brought her into this world, and I want to wrap my hands around the throats of those who dared to take her from me! And we will have our chance at vengeance, David, but clearly this is too much for her. She needs a minute. I don’t know what happened, but they convinced her that we are no longer a safe haven for her. They took away her safety net and we have to weave it back together for her.”

“*B’shert*.” My back to them, a little smile graces my lips as I hear them move closer to one another and kiss. It should probably gross me out, but their love has always been life goals for me. They love one another unashamedly, completely, and passionately. I hoped one day I might have that with a man, with Zeppo. For him to believe I was the sun, the moon, and the stars...

Those days are gone.

A few minutes later, they both kiss my forehead and cheek. My eyes drift closed at the tenderness, and I don’t fight to reopen them, letting myself fall asleep.

My body jerks painfully awake some time later, a heavy weight pinning me down on the hospital bed, a hand over my mouth and nose. I struggle to breathe, to wrench the hand away but I can’t.

“Make a fucking sound and I will slit you from ear to ear and then take everyone out one by one as they come to save you.” I instantly still, knowing Chas is not threatening, he’s promising. And I know him well enough to understand he will follow through with giddy excitement. “Good girl. I told him this was stupid, but he didn’t listen. He thinks he knows best. They all do. Fuckers think because they were born with a silver fucking spoon, they’re the smartest in the room.” Chas shifts on the bed, digging his knees into the thin mattress and inching awkwardly up to my head. I’m hooked up to monitors, so I take deep breaths through my nose, since he’s still covering my mouth, and force myself to remain calm. “If you were out of the picture, she had a chance to convince that pompous fucker to marry her. He was never going to marry her, he knew from the beginning, how they didn’t see that she was the mark, not the other way around, I’ll never know. I just did what I was told. I didn’t think I’d be able to get it up for you. You’ve got a decent face, but way too fat for me.” I swallow hard at the sound of his zipper. “Who knew big chicks had such deep pussies? I only needed to break you...turns out forcing you is much hotter than I thought. Now, open wide.” His hand on my mouth moves to my throat and he squeezes. “No teeth.” Flashing his knife, I get his meaning.

I open my mouth and close my eyes, preparing to find some happy memory to block out—

“Oh, hell no!” My eyes snap open just in time to see Tovah leap, her body colliding with Chas, the momentum taking them both to the floor. I don’t look but I can hear something thump into the floor repeatedly, Tovah’s snarls, “You won’t be needing this.”, a click, and then a strained whimper.

“Tovah! Did you just saw off his dick?” Sophie screeches from the end of the bed.

Harper steps carefully over Tovah and Chas and urges me to scoot over so she can get into bed with me. She lays on her side facing me, blocking me from whatever is happening on the ground, and I am eternally grateful for her presence. I’m not sure why she calms me so much, but she does. Jonah is going to have to share her. She runs her hand over my hair, pushing it back from my face and a soft smile. “It’s ok, Ruthie, it’s going to be ok now. Tovah’s...immobilized him and the men will be here soon to take him away.” “The police—”

“Shh. Don’t worry about it. Your family will take care of everything. All you have to do is close your eyes and go back to sleep. I’ll be here when you

wake up.”

“*Mame*—”

“Your parents just went down to get some breakfast of their own since you were sleeping.” She sighs. “They’ll be upset to know he used that opportunity to hurt you again.” Tears fall silently down my cheeks, and she brushes a few of them away with her fingers. “Luckily, he’s been detained so they can take out their frustrations on him.” I chuckle lightly, knowing she’s right.

In my sleep, I swear I can hear Zeppo screaming my name, but his voice never gets closer and then it’s gone. I snuggle deeper into Harper’s hold and let go.

Zeppo 27.

“Zep! Zeppo, man, he can’t answer if he’s dead.” Ezra pulls me off Chas’ unconscious body. The Pharaoh barely had him restrained when I pushed the big fucker out of the way and let loose.

Dropping my chin to my chest, my hands on my hips, I breathe in and out several times trying to get myself under control. I lost control. And, yeah, he deserves pain, but not until we’ve extracted the information we need from him. He’s already lost his dick and some blood, which is a start, but not nearly enough for what he’s done to Ruth. He tried to snuff out my *frejd*, and I will not allow that to go unpunished.

And judging by everyone’s darkened expressions in the room, no one else can either.

I lift my head to meet The Pharaoh’s soulless, fathomless eyes. A chill racing down my spine when he nods at me in understanding, a big meaty hand on my shoulder in commiseration.

“I’m sorry.” He squeezes once, then dismisses me as he turns to face his next victim. The man takes pride in his work, and it’s well earned. In a matter of minutes, between agonizing screams and pleas for mercy, Chas confirms most of our theories.

Keppelman approached him in April, before the meeting where Wittinger lost his life. Needing an inside man and he was willing to pay a hefty price for Chas’ betrayal. His 30 pieces of silver, if you will. He was supposed to just pass along anything interesting he heard, but then in May, Keppelman reached out again and renegotiated terms. Break the Kosher princess and destroy the family from the inside out. Keppelman wanted to tie the families together, and originally wanted Zilv, thinking him an easy mark considering how dumb everyone thought he was.

Not surprisingly, Zilv took offense to that and cut off several of Chas’ fingers before The Pharaoh lost his patience and forcibly removed Zilv.

However, Zilv was quickly vetoed because he’s expressed many times that he has no desire to take over the Kosher Nostra, he doesn’t want to be in charge. So, they set their sights on someone else. And in I walked, heading straight to my mark at the bar Keppelman owns, sealing my fate as their patsy. Because of Moshe. Because of my own cowardice.

Nayosha's role, we knew from the beginning. Chas is able to fill in the blanks and put context to some of the conversations between niece and uncle. We practically served up familial tension and discord on a fucking platter to Keppelman. The rift between Moshe and I grew every day, while Ruthie slowly rotted away, sacrificing herself in the name of the family. If Ruthie died, Moshe and I'd fight, and I'd swear revenge for my beloved *freyd*, killing Moshe and taking over as Avraham Avinu. Distraught, I'd fall into bed with Nayosha, impregnating her, and be susceptible to Keppelman using me as a pawn for his own selfish gain.

Moshe made mistakes, not the Kosher Nostra. Keppelman is foolish to think I would ever turn my back on the family, or ever look to him for guidance.

A few hours later, Zilv, Ezra, Tev and Yak are explaining all of this to Ruthie, Esther, Tovah, Sophie and Harper. Seril refuses to come home, preferring to remain at Ruthie's apartment and be there when she returns. Moshe is disheveled in appearance, like I've never seen him. A scraggly beard covers his weathered and haggard face, his clothes hang limply on his hunched body. The man is not taking any of this well. And I know he deserves it, yet I itch to reach out and console him. Sometimes the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The crowded war room is silent for several beats before Tovah slams her hand on the table and throws her head back laughing. We all turn to her, stunned at her reaction. She waves us off and grins at Ruthie. "Well, bitch, he loves you. I'm sorry I doubted you." Tovah raises her arms beside her head and then bows down. "You're like Helena of Troy, pitting man against man in an effort to win or preserve your virtue."

With Ruth's good hand, she chucks a pen at Tovah and shakes her head.

"You have Chas, where is Nayosha? Keppelman?" Esther asks, getting us back on track.

Yak exhales heavily, "We don't know. Both are in the wind, but I don't think they are together. There are murmurs, Keppelman is looking for his niece as well."

"We have to find her before he does." Esther, ever the Sarai Ima, hisses. "She will pay for what she has done to my daughter. To my family."

"Hate the game, Aunt Esther, not the player." Tovah sits back, her eyes glittering with amusement still, but otherwise composed. "Yes, she's an insufferable cow, but she only took advantage of the opportunity that presented itself. Moshe, murderous reformed playboys in glass houses

shouldn't throw stones. You fucked up and fucked up good."

"I know." His voice is raspy, hoarse, and holds so much regret.

"Get some new material, Tov, you used the glass houses thing already."

"When the Louboutin fits..."

"Kick it through the wall of a hospital."

My eyes have been on Ruthie the whole time. Watching everything play across her face. She pushes back from the table and with Harper's help, uses her crutch to hobble her way over to Moshe.

Too quick to stop her, she hauls back and slaps Moshe across his face. "I love you, brother, but I do not like you. I do not like who you have become. Two separate operatives identified me as the easiest way to dismantle our empire, what does that say about me? That I was naïve and sheltered. You all say that I am the heart of the Kosher Nostra, you are the ribs that protect me. Bullshit!" She screams, tears dropping rapidly from her eyes. "Where were you when he was in my room at night? Where were you when he raped me? Over and over again? Beat me? Threatened everyone I love! I know I should have spoken to someone; I know I should have come to you or *tate*. But...he showed me time and again how easy it would be to get to Seril, the baby, our parents. I couldn't let that happen. But I was vulnerable in the first place because you played God with my life, my happiness. You kept him from me, and I will never forgive you for that."

She shifts around to stare at me, and an anguished grunt escapes me at the look in her eyes. "I've loved you for as long as I can remember. And I still do. You have always been the man I thought I was going to marry, the man who would share my happily ever after. Now, I don't think you are a man at all. You chose Moshe over me. You chose duty over love. You lied to me. You kept things from me. The things she said to me...I don't know what to do with it all. I don't know what's true and what's a trick."

"I love you, Ruthie, that is not a trick. I love you with everything I am." I drop to my knees at her feet and grab her hips, pleading to her. "You are my joy, my world, my reason for existence."

"I want to believe you, God, do I want to. But I don't trust you. How can I?"

I deflate instantly. My hands falling to my sides, my chin dipping down. "I don't know."

"I want to go to my apartment."

"I'll take you." Ezra volunteers, giving me a curt shake of his head when I open my mouth to object.

“I’ll go too.” Jonah stands from the table, then helps Harper to her feet. All the women join them, even Esther.

“Esther.” Uncle David says her name like a prayer.

“I’m going with my daughter. Both of my daughters need me.” She means Ruthie and Seril. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Moshe nod to his mom.

“Moshe, I love you, son. And I know this is not what you intended. You are a good man. But you let your own insecurities, your own demons dictate your actions, and I’ve always told you actions speak louder than words. And some actions are deafening.” She addresses the room. “We will be at Ruthie’s apartment for the foreseeable future. Our security details will be with us. Sort your shit, clean house, and give all of us a reason to come home.”

We watch helplessly as they leave the room. *Deja vu* hits me hard, Seril having done this just the other day. Why does it feel like they’ve taken all the oxygen with them?

Manny slips into the door after the ladies leave. He’s strung tight like a bow. You can see despair in every line of his body. He comes to a stop between Moshe and Uncle David. Dropping to his knees, he offers up his gun and his knife.

“I am not fit to be a member of the Kasher Nostra anymore. I am not fit to be a man. I failed her. My *precious* sunshine. I knew something was wrong. I didn’t push. She was...*hurt* because of my inaction. Please, I beg you, take my life in exchange for your forgiveness.”

Moshe and his father share an intense stare over Manny’s bowed head. Uncle David grunts at Moshe, who adamantly shakes his head in denial. A second later, Moshe raises his right leg and hisses in pain. I’m guessing his father kicked him in the shin. Reluctantly, Moshe lifts the knife from Manny’s palm and strikes himself across the cheek with the blade, then does the same to Manny.

“No one is more to blame than myself.” Moshe begins solemnly. “Let the mark upon our cheeks be a reminder every time we look in the mirror of the mistakes we have made so they may never be repeated. Take your gun, Manny, your charge is leaving, and she requires your protection.”

“Avinu—”

“It is done, Immanuel. Take care of my sister, my wife, and my unborn child. They are all that matter.” Manny bows to Moshe and Uncle David, then quickly rises to catch up to the women.

Moshe takes me by surprise when he rises from his chair and kneels on one

knee at my own feet. “I am the Avinu. I have been given great power and responsibility by you and the others that follow me. And I have taken advantage of your trust and loyalty. I am truly sorry, Zeppo, for all that I have done to you and Ruthie. I love you, brother, blood or not, I love you. And I know, I have always known, that you and Ruthie belong together, but I couldn’t...I worried how this world would tarnish her, devour her spirit, and spit her out, how it would break her. And despite everything I did, it broke her anyway. I broke her. I hid this plan from everyone because I knew it was wrong. No one would have agreed with me, so I cut them out and forced you to choose. I had no right to do that to you. I know I...I know that every man in this room would choose their wife, their children over the Kosher Nostra, and they should. We are mishpocheh, we are a family, and I will work every day to prove to you all that family is all that matters.”

His words burrow deep into my chest and stir my battered heart. But they are not enough. He has set in motion a series of events that can never be undone, never be forgotten. But it is a start. If I ever hope for Ruthie to forgive me, I have to be willing to forgive others first. With that decided, I lift my foot and kick him in the chest. Hard.

He falls back to the floor, spluttering and gasping for breath.

“Oh good, we’ve gotten to the violent part of the proceedings.” Zilv says casually as he stands up and rounds the table. Leaning down, he punches Moshe in the stomach. He does a good impersonation of Vanna White, waving over Moshe’s huddled form on the floor and calling out, “Next!”

The men in the room take their turn, one hit a piece. Uncle David is last, straddling Moshe’s legs and leaning in close. “Zeppo Kraus is one of the best men I have ever known. Anyone with eyes can see how dearly he loves your sister. All I’ve ever wanted for my children is for them to find the other half of their soul like I did with your mother. You stole years from them. You will grovel and beg your sister, not on your behalf, but on Zeppo’s. They deserve their happily ever after and you are going to make it happen.”

I barely have time to register his words before the man is on his feet and punching me in the face. “And you! She deserves better than a spineless coward who would cast her aside just because someone told him no. If you love her, you fight for her. Till your last fucking breath. Have you taken your last breath?” He asks and I shake my head in the negative. “Then get to fucking work, son. She needs you more than ever. She needs you to erase what he...” Uncle David bites on his lip as he chokes back his emotions.

“You cleanse her in every way possible and show her what the love of the right man should feel like.”

“Yes, sir.” Now, where the hell am I supposed to start?

Ruth 28.

“Thank you, Stan. Such a mensch.” *Mame* chuckles as she taps her phone and shoves it under her shirt and into her bra. She retakes her seat next to me on my couch in my living room. Grabbing my hand, she brings it to her lips and then settles our clasped hands on her lap.

“Is it done, Esther?” Aunt Gertie, Tovah and Tevye’s mom, asks. *Mame* gives her a closed lip smile.

“Almost. She’ll get back to me shortly.”

Sophie looks between the older women, “What’s going on?”

“The *Golden Girls* are plotting again!” Tov cackles, twisting her palms together like a movie villain.

“Ruth.” Aunt Judy, Zeppo’s mom sits on my other side and takes my free hand. “You can’t hold it in, sweetheart. It will fester and grow and consume you before long. Let it out. Tell us.”

“I can’t.” I whisper to her, knowing everyone is listening.

“You fucking can!” Tov roars. “You’ve been silent long enough, woman, and look where that got ya. Almost dead. Now, you’re gonna open that mouth and tell us everything or I will pry it open and rip it out of you.”

Seril smacks Tovah in the back of the head and sits on the ottoman in front of me. “What your dear cousin, who loves you fiercely, means is...we are strong. We can shoulder the burden you’ve carried. You are not alone. You never have been.”

“It’s too...embarrassing. Shameful. I’m so stupid!”

“You remember my dear Rachel?” Judy asks. Over thirty years later and the pain in her voice sounds as fresh as I imagine it did when it happened.

“I remember hearing stories, and I’ve seen photos.”

“That is all I have of her. She was less than 7 months old when we...when she... I didn’t speak for almost a year. Sometimes the agony of life is so great that it silences our voice, it steals our joy. It wasn’t until I heard Zeppo’s caterwauling in the hospital when he was born that I found the strength to break through my grief and regain my voice. The human body endures. We are physically resilient. But mentally...that’s where the scars remain. But they are scars all the same. And that thick tissue can be broken up, exercised, massaged, and you can slowly begin to function again. You won’t ever be the

same, Ruthie, every day, everything we experience changes us. Better. Worse. Decide right now that this has changed you for the better. Find your voice and use it. It is the most powerful weapon we possess.”

“Besides Tovah.” Harper mutters, earning a laugh from all of us and breaking some of the tension in the room. The women in the mishpocheh have rallied around me. They are here for me. They have stepped away from their significant others for me. I don’t owe them, I owe myself. I don’t know how I can ever forgive Moshe and Zeppo for what they’ve done, but I know I can’t do that until I forgive myself.

“He said such wonderful things at first. But...he hurt me even as he said them. It messed me up. Confused me. Flowers. Kisses. Attention. Gullible and naïve, I sucked it up even when the pain was unbearable. And it paled in comparison to watching Zeppo with...*her*. I felt like I deserved it for wanting someone that was never meant to be mine. Like a punishment. Then, she... she would tell me how they talked about me after he pleased her, how pathetic they thought I was for pining after him. As if someone as fat and young and silly as me could ever be what he needed. Who he wanted. I should take pity on everyone and just kill myself. Free them of a lifetime’s burden. Or at least, move out and grow up. I made him uncomfortable. I aggravated him. I was a responsibility, a duty to the Kosher Nostra and nothing more. He only spent time with me because no one else wanted to and it was his job. I tried to distance myself from Zeppo, but he kept asking me to lunch or dinner and when I finally caved, she showed up and explained explicitly how grateful she was I accepted his invitation. I wouldn’t have a meal with him, so he’d have her for a meal instead and she needed a break. And all the while, no matter what I did or where I went, Chas was right there. Taking. Taking. Taking. I tried to stop him, I tried to tell him no. But then he showed me...he had pictures of all of you. In crosshairs. He showed me how easy it would be to get to you. Seril and the baby. I couldn’t let that happen. I needed to grow up, protect my family. I needed to be useful for once!” *Mame* tries to wrap her arms around me, but I shake her off, not ready for comfort. Now that I’ve started, I can’t stop. “So, I got an apartment. I thought if he was with me at the apartment, he wouldn’t be near any of you. That night...at the house...Zeppo said...he was so different, looked at me so intently and I got scared. I knew I was his job, but he was so angry with me. I ran upstairs to the alcove by the servant stairs. And I heard them...Nayosha and Chas speaking, looking for me. I kept hidden until I thought they were gone and

when I went to run down the stairs, they caught me. She was so mean, the vitriol she spit at me. Chas said he'd taken care of the cameras, but they didn't have long. She grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back, then they pushed me so hard. I knew I was going to die."

"But you didn't." Harper whispers from behind me, twining her arms around my neck to hug me. I clasp her hands against my chest and give way to the gut-wrenching sobs that have been bubbling up since I started. In seconds, I'm surrounded by the women of my family. The strongest women I have ever met. And they hold me, lend me their strength, and start putting some of my broken pieces back together.

"Esther, your vagina is vibrating."

And the moment is over. With the exception of me, since I'm hindered by my injuries, everyone else jumps back like they've been shocked by electricity.

"Not my vagina, my phone." She flips off Aunt Sarah and answers the call.

"Stan? Oh, hello dear. Good to meet you too. Yes, that would be perfect. Are you sure you don't mind? I don't want to cause any problems between you and Rico...yes, they do tend to get in the way." *Mame* laughs heartily at whoever is on the other end. "Excellent. I'm looking forward to it as well. See you soon."

"Seriously, what the hell is going on?" Sophie throws her hands up in exasperation.

Mame smirks, hand on her slender hip. "Girls weekend in NYC!"

"Uh...now might not be the best time." Harper begins, waving her hand at my crippled state. "Ruthie isn't exactly—"

"Believe me. I am her mother. And a therapeutic girls trip is exactly what she needs."

Ruth 29.

I sit quietly in the backseat of the SUV on our way to the airport and the private hangar. *Mame* and my aunts are in the SUV in front of us, leaving my cousins and I to ride together. Harper holds my hand, squeezing every now and then, while chatting with Seril, Tovah, Sophie, Becks, and her wife Cora. Apparently, my NYC cousin Emaline, Ernie's sister, is joining us for the weekend festivities.

I catch snippets of their conversation, but my mind replays the events of the last few days, heck, the last few months over and over again. Zeppo's every word, every facial expression, every touch...seen in a new light. After *mame* announced our plans, my aunts were on their phones assigning their New York personal shoppers to gather a suitable wardrobe for all of us, so we didn't have to pack. I received a text message from Zeppo, and I almost didn't read it, but like a moth to a flame I cannot resist him. I caved after a few seconds and read it. His words sent me spinning and I don't know what to do with them. With the truth. I've lived amongst lies for so long...

***Zeppo:** I held you for the first time, your face all squished and red from crying, your little fists balled up and shaking at the mean, mean world, and I fell in love. There hasn't been a moment in my life since then that I haven't loved you. Small ways, big ways, all the ways a boy can love a girl, and later all the ways a man can love a woman. You are a beautiful star in a dark sky. Lighting the way home. I cannot take back my actions, nor the pain they have caused you. Yet, I hope...I pray...that in time you will shine bright again and guide me back to you. Because with you is the only home I've ever known. You are my heart, my joy, and my future. I love you, Ruth Barucha Holofcener and there isn't a force on earth or in the heavens that can ever change that.*

***Zeppo:** Also, not the right time, but I wanted to be honest and transparent. I was never intimate with Nayosha. She was a means to an end, but I could never betray you like that. Even if you were never going to be mine. When you kicked me out of the hospital, I had a moment of weakness, and I came close to having sex with her, but I didn't. And I never kissed her, never spoke to her about you, never confided in her. You are the only person who knows the real me.*

They were never...? But she said... How can he love me? I am...me. Tall, fat, broken, and used. Naïve and gullible. I am not like Seril. Tovah. Harper

—
“It is not weakness to forgive him.” Seril interrupts my thoughts. I look at her with tears in my eyes, unsure where to go from here. “I will forgive Moshe... eventually. The thing about men, and some women, is that their intentions are honorable, their execution is where they fuck up. Zeppo’s loyalty to Moshe isn’t the only reason he abided by his Avinu’s ruling. If he felt worthy of your heart, your affections, if he felt without a doubt, he was the right man for you, he’d have laughed in Moshe’s face and spit on his shoes before sweeping you off your feet. But men—”

“Are fucking stupid!” Tovah snarls from the rear of the SUV as we pull into the airport.

“You switching to our team, cousin?” Becks teases.

“Bitch, I’ve been playing for every team for a long time. Catch up!” She snaps her fingers obnoxiously in Becks and Cora’s faces.

“What I’m saying is you aren’t the only one with low self-esteem. Self-doubt and insecurity make it difficult for a person to act rationally.”

“I think I’ve already forgiven him. Which makes me feel like a wuss and a punching bag. Weak. I’m mad at myself for letting things continue as long as they did.”

“Ruth.” Harper squeezes my hand tight. “You did the best you could with the information you had. There are a million shoulda, coulda, woulda’s and none of them can change what’s already past. You lived through your own personal hell and came out the other side. Don’t waste the second chance with useless emotions.” Leaning my head on Harper’s shoulder, I sigh, knowing that she had to do the same thing not long ago. It’s a process. A work in progress. We all are. I made mistakes, and I’m going to learn from them. Same as Moshe and Zeppo.

The SUV comes to a stop inside the private hangar. Our driver opens the doors and helps us out. Harper is ready with my crutch. I hobble to the stairs of the plane and wait my turn to board.

Another vehicle pulls in behind us and I turn back to watch Manny step out of the backseat. At the trunk, he lifts a large suitcase with great effort, then slams the trunk closed and wheels it to the back of the plane. On his way back a moment later, he hands something to my mom, bows to her, and then is at my side.

“Sunshine. Let me help you onto the plane.”

“Everything ok, Unca-Man?” I’ve never seen him so weighed down before.

“Not right now, but it will be.” He moves too fast for me to protest, picking me up bridal style and carrying me up the steps. He sits me down on the couch along the side of the plane. Grabs a blanket and pillows and helps me get comfortable.

I take his hand before he can step away to take his seat. “It isn’t your fault, Unca-Man.”

“Agree to disagree, sunshine.” A kiss to my forehead and he’s gone. I doze off, comfy and warm on the couch while my favorite women in the world chit-chat, gossip, and make fun of each other. It’s the symphony of my life and it’s beautiful.

Two hours later, we’re taxiing to our gate, when *mame* starts going over the itinerary. “Stan has arranged transportation for us to our private accommodations. I’m looking forward to meeting her dad’s woman, Bex. She’ll be our tour guide, along with Stan.”

I’m confused. Constance is around my age and a hoot. I know that because we’ve spent time in New York City. We have family that live here. We have a very large spacious apartment. We do not require a tour guide. Mom and her sisters can probably navigate the streets with their eyes closed.

“To give us a chance at a nice girls weekend, leave your phones here on the plane. We don’t want the boys tracking us down.” She winks at her sisters and Aunt Judy, giving me an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

We deplane and find a shiny limo waiting for us. Manny transfers the suitcase we brought and then we are on our way. We don’t head to the apartment though, nor do we go to Rico’s place. Instead, I watch through the window as the buildings get shorter and spaced out and one of the rivers comes into view. We stop in an industrial park with warehouses as far as the eye can see.

Getting out of the limo is tricky, but Manny helps me. “Thank you.”

“Always, sunshine.”

“RUTHIE!” I giggle at Stan’s enthusiasm. She’s awesome and I’m genuinely happy to see her. She barrels into me and hugs me tight. “I forbid you from getting hurt again. It’s too much.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She releases me and we smile at one another. “Do you know why we’re here?”

She glances at *mame* and shrugs. Motioning behind her, another woman steps

forward and envelops me in a hesitant hug. “Meet my step-monster, Bex!”

“I don’t think you should call her that to her face.” I whisper to Stan over Bex’s shoulder.

“It is said with love.” Stan assures me. And I can see the affection between the two women. It’s nice that they get along. Her relationship with her mother was always...strained.

Bex claps her hand after being introduced to everyone. “Let’s get this party started.”

“Party?” Seril asks warily. “What kind of party?”

“The kind with a human pinata.” Aunt Sarah says with a bounce in her step.

Once inside the building, we follow behind Bex and Stan through lighted hallways until the space opens up into a nearly empty room with a large drain in the middle of the floor and three chairs. That uneasiness from earlier rears its ugly head.

“*Mame?*”

“Come sit down.” She guides me to one of the folding chairs closest to the entrance. “This belongs around your neck, pumpkin.” From her pocket, she pulls out my mezuzah necklace. I gasp, my limbs going numb and my heart racing as I stare at the piece of jewelry.

“How did you get this?” My voice trembles. “They took—”

I cut myself off when Manny enters the room wheeling in the suitcase. He sets it down in front of me. Thank God I’m sitting down, because when he unzips the case and Nayosha’s motionless body is in view I nearly blackout.

“MOTHER! What did you do?” Manny, *mame*, and Aunt Gertie carefully lift Nayosha out of the suitcase and place her on the chair that sits by itself over the drain. She is secured with zip ties. An iv in one arm and tubes coming out from between her legs. “WHAT IS THAT?” I ask, pointing to her crotch.

“A catheter. Didn’t want her pissing everywhere. Urine lingers no matter how well you think you’ve cleaned.”

“Are you going to kill her?” I whisper, afraid to know the answer.

Mame stands back, wiping a few hairs from her forehead that escaped during the effort of moving Nayosha’s body. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m told Bex is an expert, so I’ll defer to her.”

“Oh no, no, no.” Bex holds up her hands. “Not an expert. And not keen on participating.”

“Is it true that you read people? Can tell if they’re lying or hiding something?”

“Well, yes.”

“That is what I need. Nayosha’s life hangs on how truthfully she answers my questions. And whether I like those answers or not.” *Mame* bends low to look me in the eye. “She must pay with blood and tears for what she did to my baby girl.”

“Ok.” Not going to argue with her. I don’t know that I want Nayosha to die, but I also don’t want to upset my mom when she’s on the warpath.

Seril scraps the other chair along the floor until it’s next to mine. She’s smiling from ear to ear, her eyes practically twinkling with merriment. “This is so exciting. My first torture and interrogation. I wish I’d brought snacks.”

“Oh, I’ve got some.” Bex drops a large duffel at our feet. She unzips it and my jaw drops.

“Did you raid a vending machine?” Seril asks, greedily eyeing the contents of the bag.

Bex shrugs, “I get hangry sometimes.” Don’t we all.

The door slams open and four women stride into the room. “Bex, why are we meeting here?” They stop in their tracks just feet over the threshold.

“Brett. You’re just in time.”

Brett’s eyes dart from Nayosha to me and Seril, to Manny, and then back to Bex. “Nope. Are you torturing someone? Or is this like a sex tape thing? Please tell me it’s a sex tape thing.”

“Not a sex tape. My stepdaughter is right there.” Bex points at Stan, who waves happily toward the four women.

“I can’t be here.” Brett spins around but stops with her back to us. “Wear gloves, hairnets, face shields, and change your clothes before you start. Do not cut too deeply or she’ll bleed out and you’ll waste too much time stemming the blood flow and lose out on getting any answers. Give her body a chance to catch up between methods or she’ll pass out frequently. And for the love of all that is holy, burn anything with fingerprints, DNA, or identifying markers then dump the remains in the river. Peace out.” She throws two fingers over her shoulder, and she’s gone.

The other three, who look like they are related to each other, step forward. “I didn’t expect to torture anyone today, I only have three hairnets and sets of gloves.”

“We...we brought our own.” *Mame* stutters out, watching them move into the circle to join us.

“My, my, my, who do we have here?” Tovah licks her lips, her gaze hungrily

assessing each woman.

“Ilaria. Alessia. And Serena.” Bex points to each one, introducing us in turn.

“Alessia.” I roll my eyes at Tovah’s seductive purring. “Beautiful name. Love how it tastes...anything else you got I can taste?”

Sophie slaps her hands against her thighs, “Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, can we get on with the maiming and the cutting and the bleeding?”

Zeppo 30.

“Where the fuck is Ruthie?”

“Why don’t you have eyes on my wife?!?”

“Yakov, you better find the women, or you will never find your cock and balls again.”

Between Moshe, my uncles, my father, and myself, Yakov and Tevye are about to lose their shit. It’s bad enough the women disappeared two nights ago, but we aren’t giving them even a chance to start looking before we’re demanding answers. To be fair, however, they are in charge of mishpocheh security and our mishpocheh is not secure.

“Their security details are with them and assure us that everyone is unharmed and safe.”

“Where are they?” I ask. Yak gives me a chin lift in appreciation for lowering my voice and changing my tone to something less threatening. I can hold my own against most men, but Yakov is not one of them. He will crush me like a bug and flick me away.

“I have been instructed by the Sarai Imas to withhold that particular information.”

“You do not answer to them! You answer to me!”

“Technically, we answer to both of you. You were explicit in your instructions that we are to treat Seril’s word as your own. So...”

“Semantics!” Moshe slams his hand down on the table.

“And semantics are what get yummy food on the table to eat and delicious pastries for treats when we’re good boys.” I don’t have the will to hit Tev. This is the end; I must be dying. Ruthie hates me and she’s left town and I’m terminal. Moshe folds in his chair...shit, it’s something in the water. We’ve been poisoned.

Glancing at Jonah, I see he’s perfectly healthy, laughing at something Ezra says. Why isn’t he dying too? Fuck.

“Someone...attack him!” I order like a weak kitten. “He knows where the women folk are!”

Jonah shakes his head at me with a shitty grin. I loathe that grin. “You two are pathetic.”

“Oh, please. You were moping around here not that long ago.” Zilv says,

crumbs from a donut flying from his mouth.

“That was different.” Jonah replies haughtily, though he loses the grin.

“These two fucked up, I didn’t.”

“They are safe?” Uncle David questions Yakov once more.

“Yes, sir.”

My uncle sighs in defeat. “Then that will have to be good enough for now.”

Rubbing a hand over his face, he sits up in his chair and looks at Moshe.

“What is your plan with Keppelman, now that we know more?”

“We have to find him. He’s still off the grid.” Moshe glares at Yakov. He’s unconcerned.

“I’m working on it. And before you tell me to give it to you yesterday, this isn’t *Back to the Future*, and I won’t fit in a DeLorean.”

“Big bastard.” Moshe mutters. “I want to send Chas’ remains as a message, but honestly, I don’t think Keppelman would care. And I want Nayosha brought in because she tried to kill Ruthie, but I’m not sure what her punishment will be. The Pharaoh can’t cut off her dick, so I’m not sure how we would torture her.”

“You know there is more to torture than removing genitals?” Ezra stares at our leader like he’s a toy short of a *Happy Meal*.

“It’s so effective, though. And a classic. Kids these days...” We ignore Uncle Steven as he laments about the good old days before us whippersnappers took over.

A knock on the door to the war room silences him, thank God. “Enter.” Moshe calls out. Devorah opens the door and stands in the doorway, wringing her hands with her head down.

“Avinu...I’m sorry to disturb you. But there is an urgent...*package* at the front gate.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes, Devorah, thank you.”

Devorah doesn’t take her leave, however. “It is for Tevye, sir. And I’m afraid it cannot wait.”

“Package? I didn’t order anything.” Tev says, standing up and brushing crumbs from his clothes.

“Not recently...no. But perhaps some time ago.” Devorah responds cryptically.

“Shit!” Yak hisses, staring at the screen of his tablet.

“What is it? Did you find Keppelman?”

“Sorry, Avinu. No, not yet. I just pulled up the surveillance from the gate.

Devorah's right, Tev. I'd say this was ordered about 15 to 18 months ago."

Curious, we leave the war room and follow Devorah out of the house and down the long driveway. Before we reach the gate, I hear a baby crying. Quickening my steps, I reach the gate first.

"Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Tevye's got a son!" I shout with glee. This is crazy.

"I most certainly do not." He replies adamantly, his head going side to side in denial.

"Well, then what do you call this?" I point to the baby carrier and the small person making a hell of a racket.

"A prank. A mistake. A cruel joke."

"For you, sir." One of the guards hands Tevye a letter. He scans it, then reads it again slower, his eyes growing larger by the second.

"It can't...I didn't...nope. Not my kid." He crumples the paper in his hand and throws it at the ground. "Get rid of it. It ain't mine."

"Tevye Frenkel, you get back here right this instant."

"Doesn't work anymore, pops, I'm a grown man, remember."

"A grown man accepts responsibility for his actions." Tevye stops in his tracks at his father's words. Slowly, scarily slow, Tevye swivels on his heels to face his father. His face mottled red with fury.

Closing the distance between them, he bends just past his dad and picks up the carrier, holding it up for them to look at. "See! This isn't my—Holy fuck, I have a son." He and Uncle Steven stare down at the little one who has stopped crying. It's freaky, like one of those pictures of someone holding a picture of themselves holding a picture of themselves.

"Pops...I need mom."

"I need her too."

"And my sister."

Zilv clutches his chest, "Summon the beast! Wake the kraken! Call forth the demon Tovahbub!"

Ruth 31.

“I don’t know about this one.” I swivel back and forth in the full-length double mirror in our apartment in New York City. The girls are all here, even Bex, Stan, Brett, who is awesome, and the sisters, Ilaria, Alessia, Serena. My cousin Emaline, Ernie’s sister, is here too.

After an upsetting and violent evening two nights ago, we’ve had a delightful girls’ weekend as promised. Spa treatments, incredible food, and lots of shopping. Which is why I’m staring at my reflection unable to come up with exactly why this outfit is wrong. I know it is, but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Come out so we can see it and judge it for ourselves.” Sighing in defeat, I listen to Seril and step out of my walk-in closet and into my bedroom. The ladies have taken up every available space in my room, lounging on my vanity chair, on the bed, the floor, and standing up against the wall.

“Oh God, you look like one of the *Mario Brothers!*” Brett resembles one of those inflatable flailing arm guys outside car dealerships as she waves erratically at my person and cackles like a hyena. It does wonders for my self-esteem.

I’m wearing a trendy loose cotton jumper, like overalls but supposed to be cute and flowy. Except on me... “I do!” I wail, realizing she’s right, that’s what I was trying to figure out in the closet, which brother I am, Mario or Luigi. My jumper is a fall yellow color though.

“It’sa me, Jewigi!” Tovah’s voice is all high-pitched and obnoxious. And I can’t help but laugh.

Aunt Gertie snorts, “I don’t remember camel toe being one of the power-ups!”

“Shoot!” I screech, covering my pelvis with my hands, still laughing.

“Is it on wrong?”

“I think it’s backward.” Stan says, spinning me around and reaching into the jumper for the tag. “Yup, you have it backward.”

“That can’t be right.” I tell her, spinning back to face everyone. “Why would this zipper pocket be in the back?”

“So, whoever you’re with can store snacks.” Bex adds hopefully.

“I think it’s safe to say, this is a no. Even if you turn it around, this is not a flattering cut...for anyone with boobs, hips, and no ass.”

“Thank you, *mame*. That’s helpful.”

“Sorry, pumpkin, the assless gene is strong on both sides of the family, you come by it honestly.”

“Let’s hope Zeppo will be cumming on it soon!” Tovah raises her glass of champagne in the air, and no one follows suit. She shrugs, downs the rest of the glass, and slams it on the table like it’s a shot. “Get changed, Jewigi, it’s time to go.”

Groans all around as I go back into the closet and change into a new outfit, I know will look good. Roll-cuff dark capri jeans, a burnt orange V-neck t-shirt that says, “The book was better”, and brown and orange slip on sneakers. I know what you’re wearing or how you look shouldn’t make a difference in how you feel about yourself, but there’s just something about the right outfit and hairstyle that buoys the spirit.

“There’s my pumpkin.” *Mame* wraps her slender arms around my waist and buries her face in my cleavage. “I love you. More than you will ever know.”

“Love you too, *mame*.”

“I’ve scheduled an appointment with a therapist for you on Tuesday.”

“*Mame*—”

“Moshe’s appointment is after yours.”

I narrow one eye at her, “Zilv?”

“He’s beyond therapy, dear.” With a laugh, I draw her back into my arms and squeeze her tight. She taps out on my back, and I let her go. My eyes scan the room, “Bex...thank you.”

Bex allows me to hug her, and though she’s stiff in my arms, she pats me on the shoulder and whispers, “They didn’t win.”

“No, they didn’t.”

Mame and Bex hug as well. “Rico and Twat-knot won’t be upset about the disposal of *her* body?”

Bex and Stan wave off *mame*’s concern. “Nah, just another day at the office.”

“All the same, please pass along our gratitude.”

We say our goodbyes, hugs, tears, laughter, and higher spirits than when we arrived. I have a mountain to climb in the healing process, but I have an amazing support system with me every step of the way.

Mame’s phone rings when we’re on the sidewalk outside our building, about to enter our SUVs.

“Dav—” *Mame* bites her lip, her eyes bugging out of her head at whatever my *tate* is telling her. Instantly, we’re on alert, my heart racing in fear. “Did

you say baby?” Gathering around her, we wait on bated breath. “Gertie, come here.”

Aunt Gertie takes the phone from *mame*’s hand and holds it to her ear. She makes some garbled noises and then nearly passes out; her sisters catch her before she and the phone hit the ground.

Tovah takes the phone out of Aunt Sarah’s hand and barks, “What the fuck?” A minute later, she grins wickedly, “We’re on our way to the airport. Be home in a few hours.” Disconnecting the call, she passes the phone back to *mame*, and starts dancing. Right there on the sidewalk.

“TOVAH!” Her mother yells, but Tovah’s too busy doing the running man to care.

“Sorry, Seril, Tevye beat you to it! He’s got a son, less than a year old, dropped off this morning at the gate of the compound!”

“Tovah, the baby is sick! Did Uncle David not tell you that?”

“He did.”

“That is your nephew, young lady—”

“He’s sick, yes, but he’s Kosher Nostra, we’ll get him squared away in no time.”

And that’s the crux of the matter. Of every matter. What I forgot...we are family, mishpocheh, and no matter what, we have each other’s back. None of us fight alone. I lost sight of that amidst my grief over losing Zeppo and myself.

I won’t forget again.

More eager than ever to get home and rally around Tevye and his child, we squish into the SUVs and head to the airport. We’re all talking over one another about what Tevye’s son might be like, who the mom is, why she would leave the child, what is his diagnosis, which doctors would be best for him to see and so on.

My head bangs into the window as a truck hits us on the passenger side. I blink away the blurry vision and dive over Seril, along with Harper, to protect her and the baby when the truck backs up and rams us again. I hear *mame* and my aunts screaming from the other SUV, having been on speakerphone with us during the drive.

The doors are thrown open and hands reach in, gripping us hard as they drag us out of the vehicle. Tovah is in the third row in the back with Cora and Becks, and no door. I have only a second after she yells, “Cover” to put my hands over my ears before she’s firing her gun and taking out three of the

men in masks.

I'm on the ground in the next second, the guy lifting me out now dead. My leg and arm protest. Someone grabs me by my hair and starts to tug. I scream and yell, kick and punch blindly and when another gunshot goes off, the grip on my hair is gone.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" I vaguely hear Sophie yell from the other side of the SUV.

Tovah jumps out, shooting two more men. She's tackled by another, and her gun flies out of her hand and lands near me on the ground, amongst the debris and shattered glass and blood. I stare at it, my body frozen in place as the chaos swirls around me.

"GET THE FAT ONE!" That's when I realize I've had enough.

"I'M NOT FAT! I'M VOLUPTUOUS!" I scream, pick up the gun and aim it at the covered head I can see through the backseat. I pull the trigger and keep pulling as I find target after target. Gunshots sound around me; I know my aunts and cousins are doing the same.

It's only minutes but feels like hours when the silence descends, and I realize there are no more bad guys to shoot.

"RUTHIE! SERIL!"

"*Mame!*" I yell back. Like a freaking turtle on its back, the adrenaline is leaking out of me and I'm having trouble getting up off the ground. My mom holds out her hand and she and my aunts help me up.

"That was...you all...that was incredible." Seril mutters, her hands over her belly, her face pale.

"We like to shoot." Tovah says like she's Garth from *Wayne's World*. I hiccup a laugh, then another, until I'm hysterical, bent over unsteadily on one good leg.

"Tovah, call Bex, tell her what's happened and that we need new transport to the airport, if they don't mind, and a cleanup crew. Probably schmoozing for the cops and a hefty donation. I'm calling David."

"Where's my phone?" I ask no one in particular. "I can call Evan and Emaline, see if they can help."

"Good idea, pumpkin."

No sooner do I get off the phone with my NYC cousins, the cracked screen lights up with an incoming call from Zeppo. My heart stutters in my chest at the sight of his name. "Ruthie!" His voice, though frantic, is a balm to my soul.

“Did you mean it?” I ask him without greeting.

“What?”

“Did you mean it?”

He breathes a sigh of relief and I hear the smile in his voice when he answers,

“Every. Fucking. Word.”

“I’m scraped up but fine. We’ll be home in a few hours. I expect quality level groveling and patience.”

“Anything, baby, anything you want or need, I’m your man. And Ruthie?”

“Yeah?”

“I just watched the footage...I’ve never seen anything more erotic than you killing the bad guys.” His voice is like melted chocolate over caramel.

“I love you, Zeppo.”

The emotion in his voice is overwhelming, in the very best of ways. “I love you more, *freyd*.”

Zeppo 32.

“What the fuck is taking them so long to open the door?” Moshe bitches next to me, both of us on our toes, our bodies taut with tension, ready to run.

“Safety. Protocol. Government regulations.”

“SHUT UP, JONAH!” Moshe and I yell in unison.

“Geesh. You two are hard up.”

“Why aren’t you? Your woman’s life was in danger just the same.” Moshe snarls at his cousin.

“Because we sext and have video sex. Did it while she was on the plane.” He smirks at the two of us and our dropped jaws. “Some of us didn’t put ourselves in the celibate doghouse by actin’ a fool.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“HA!” Jonah chuckles. “Are you sharing a brain now? Must be weird, what with all the dirty things he wants to do to your sister, Mosh.”

“I’ll hold him down.” I tell Moshe, making a move to grab Jonah.

“KINKY!” He yells, running to hide behind the uncles and his dad.

Finally, the stairs are connected to the private plane and the door opens. Aunts deplane first, my uncles all walking at a clipped pace to find their wives. Then Tovah and Sophie come limping down, Sophie’s upper arm bandaged and Tovah sporting a nasty bruise on the right side of her face. Cora and Becks hold hands, beaming at one another with sappy grins.

“Fuck this.” I mutter, running full tilt to the plane. I’m up the steps and bumping into Harper and Seril in a matter of seconds. I push them aside and drop to my knees in front of Ruthie, who is still sitting on the couch. She’s surprised but doesn’t deny me when I lay my head in her lap and push my hands behind her back to hold her. I feel her deep intake of breath, my entire body loosening when she begins carding her fingers through my thick dark hair.

After a few minutes, I lift my face to hers, cup her cheeks and pull her to me until I’m centimeters from her plump lips. Our eyes meet and a thousand words are spoken in silence. She slowly lowers her lids and angles her head just slightly, giving me permission. She’s right here, finally, in my arms, the way she was always meant to be. With my eyes open, not wanting to miss a thing, I fuse our mouths together. Ecstasy. Nirvana. Heaven on Earth. My

holy land. My home.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.” She whispers into my mouth.

“Yeah, you do.” I reassure her and dive back in. Showing her how to part her lips, drawing her tongue out with mine and exploring every inch of her mouth. Passion, need, a desperation to connect with her drives me to dive deeper. She whimpers in the back of her throat and responds just as eagerly. Her hands settle on my chest, my hands tangled in her long silky hair. She tastes like joy.

“Dude.” Moshe’s whine interrupts our moment. “I know I fucked up, but she’s still my sister. Come on.”

“You don’t get an opinion.” Seril smacks him in the arm. “Now, help Zeppo get her off the plane. She’s in a lot of pain and trying to pretend she’s not. The attack on our vehicles did a number on her. I think she needs the hospital.”

“No, I don’t—” Ruthie begins to protest, but I silence her with my mouth.

“We’ll have the doctor meet us at the compound.” She nods her head, her eyes still closed with a blissful expression on her face...until she moves to get up. Her wince has me springing into action, along with Moshe and we get her off the plane and immediately set her down in one of the limos.

“Zeppo?” She asks halfway home.

“Yeah, baby?” I’m sitting on the floor of the limo in front of her, my hand tracing the contours of her face as she lays with her eyes closed.

“Will you kiss me again? I...I...I liked it.”

“As often as you let me.” Shifting to my knees, I hover above her and grin as I take her lips again. Our kiss grows heated just like on the plane and this time, I’m able to...

“Fuck.” I curse, backing away and wiping my mouth.

“Are you ok?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Did I do it wrong?”

“Absolutely not, *freyd*. You’re hurt and have been through a horrendous ordeal and I don’t...”

“You’re in pain, Zeppo, I can see it on your face.” Her eyes drift to my crotch and her head tilts the longer she stares. “Huh.”

“My eyes are up here!” I tell her, trying to avoid this conversation for a little longer.

“I know!” Her entire body blushes and it’s damn adorable. “It’s just...what’s

up with your penis?”

I collapse to the floor of the limo and laugh my ass off.

“Zeppo! It’s not funny. There is something seriously wrong with your... your...crotch area.” She gasps, “Are you wearing a diaper?”

“NO!” God, this is funnier than I ever imagined. “I did a thing.”

“A thing?”

“Yes, as funishment.”

“Funishment? What’s that?”

“I got a Jacob’s ladder.”

“Ok.” It’s clear she has no idea what I’m talking about. “Are you hanging something in your condo? Did you fall off of it?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She replies, her features going all soft and gooey.

“A Jacob’s Ladder is a piercing.”

“Oh.”

“On my dick.”

“WHAT!” She sits upright and whimpers at the pain from doing so. I’m right there to help her, sitting next to her on the bench seat and holding her. “Why would you do that? Why would anyone do that?”

“Funishment.”

She blows out an exasperated breath. “Saying the same word repeatedly doesn’t give me the definition.”

“A funishment is a punishment that is also meant to be fun.” I switch positions again and kneel in front of her so she can see the sincerity of my words. “I made a lot of mistakes, Ruth. I hurt you, hurt us. And I can never take them back, but I will do everything I can every day to show you how loved you are. How right we are together. The Jacob’s Ladder piercing is... painful and takes quite a bit of time to heal. Once it does, we might be at a point in our relationship to be physical, and the piercing will be quite pleasurable for you. In the meantime, my willy is off limits for like three months, so I can focus entirely on you and earning your trust and faith.”

She sags into the leather seat and stares over my shoulder with a contemplative look in her eyes. “So, three months at least with no penile interaction?” Snorting at her phrasing, I nod in agreement. “But that doesn’t mean vaginal interaction is off the table?”

“Vaginal interaction is most definitely on the table.” I reply huskily, liking where she’s going with this.

“I had it all wrong. I confused so much. But the girls...they set me straight this weekend. It was very informative. And I’m interested in interacting vaginally with you...soon.”

“Can we stop saying it like that?” I’m smiling so she knows I’m not mad or irritated. Her blush deepens as she nods. “You want me to play with your pussy? With my fingers? Or my tongue?”

“Both?”

“Just tell me when, Ruthie, and I’ll kiss your sopping wet pussy as often as I do your mouth.”

“O-ok.” She stutters out, her chest heaving. Those fucking glorious tits tempting me to lose control. “For now, can we interact orally?”

“Cheeky brat.”

Zeppo 33.

“Let me help you into the shower, Ruthie.”

“No. I’m not...not yet.” She insists, struggling to get into the bathroom on her own. “Tovah can help me.”

“Tovah and the others are being patched up by the doctor or safely tucked away with their hubbies.” I step in front of her, impeding her snail’s pace progress. “Baby, I’m not going anywhere. You are it for me, always have been. Let me help you.”

“I don’t want you to see me naked.” She squeezes her eyes shut as if the thought is painful.

“But in the car...”

“I said soon. I’ll be ready soon. It’s not gone yet, and I don’t want you to see it.”

I have no idea what’s talking about. “See what? Scars? Baby, I have scars, we all have them. Or imperfections we’d rather weren’t there. But I promise you, there isn’t a single cell of your body I don’t love with my whole heart.”

“The marker.” The fight drains right out of her. I scoop her up and take her to her bed in her suite at the compound, cradling her in my lap, despite her protests.

“What marker?” I maintain a normal tone, but inside I’m seething.

“He used...he used permanent marker. Circled and pointed out...he wrote such nasty, hurtful things on my skin. And no matter how many times I shower and what products I use, I can’t get it to go away completely.” Her body trembles in my arms, or maybe that’s my rage.

“Baby...fuck.” I shake my head and press a kiss to the top of hers. “None of what he wrote is true. You are so fucking beautiful it makes my heart ache. Your tits and hips, I can’t wait to trace them with my tongue, have you crying out my name as I suckle on your juicy nipples. Don’t you know that I fell in love with your soul first? God, you are the sweetest, kindest, most loving, and selfless person I’ve ever met. You radiate sunshine and warmth, and people fucking gravitate to it. I don’t care what your skin looks like, what’s written on it by that fucker or by nature, it’s just your wrapping. The gift is what’s inside.”

“You have to be patient. Zeppo. I’m scared. I want you; I always have. And

now that you're here and I'm allowed to touch you and taste you...my mind is telling me it's not real, it won't last. You'll get sick of me, you'll get bored. Nayosha—”

“Is a fucking cunt and waste of oxygen.”

“Was.” She corrects me, a little sadly.

“Does her death upset you?”

“Yes. And no. She was a human being, and her death is sad for that reason, not to mention, it is clear she was manipulated by her uncle. I feel bad for her, she grew up as a commodity, always having to prove her worth to those who were meant to love her unconditionally. But then...she tried to kill me, so there's that.”

“Everyone has a choice; they just might not be the ones you want. I chose to follow Moshe instead of following my heart. It is a regret I will carry with me for the rest of my days. She chose to stay, to bend to her uncle's will, and that's on her. You can't carry guilt, or shame, or any other emotion for someone else. That's their burden, not yours.”

“I hear her voice, and his. Kids from school. The things they write about me in the paper. I'm too big. Too fat. Too naïve.”

“FUCK NO!” I carefully lay her down and cover her with my body. Her thick thighs cradling my body like they were always meant to. “You are exactly as you should be. You are Zeppo sized, made for me, my perfect dream girl. And you aren't naïve, you are optimistic, trusting, and forgiving. We can choose sorrow and anger, or we can choose happiness and joy. I choose joy.”

I nip her nose with my teeth, making her giggle. She leans up and initiates our kiss. We kiss for long seconds, and I wish we could continue, but Jacob's trying to raise the ladder and we're heading into territory she isn't ready for.

I pat her hip and dismount. “Let's get you showered. No one sees you naked but me from now on.”

“You won't leave me when you see what I look like?”

“Never. Nothing could ever make me leave you again.”

I help her up from the bed, she leans on me as we make our way into the bathroom. I close the door gently, then start the shower. With a deep breath, I pull the shirt over her head and toss it into the hamper. Her tits are encased in red lace, her nipples playing peek-a-boo through the fabric. Fucking hell. I groan as my dick jerks in my pants but keep going. This isn't about me. On my knees, I unbutton her jean capris, and tug them down her long, long legs. I'm weak, so sue me. I lean in and bury my face in the apex of her thighs, the

softness of her matching lace panties causing goosebumps to erupt over my flesh.

“Zeppo. What are you doing?”

“Helping you in the shower.”

“The nurses didn’t do this in the hospital.” She snaps, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed.

“I should certainly hope not.” Like I’m opening the Covenant of the Ark, slowly and carefully, I peel the lace from her hips and slide it down until it pools at her feet. Feet I want to feel wrapped around my cock someday. She’s got a thatch of dark curls and my mouth waters with the urge to taste her. But I refrain.

I let my eyes do a slow perusal of her body, then stand up and help her walk into the shower. I strip my own shirt and pants off, leaving myself in my boxer briefs and join her. She squeaks but doesn’t push me out.

“Baby?” I ask conversationally, as I lather her hair with shampoo. She hums in response. “Where did he write on you?”

“Everywhere. Zeppo, that’s not funny. It’s everywhere.”

“No, Ruth, it’s not.” Her skin is scarred yes, bruises in different stages of healing, and some cuts and scrapes from the car accident. But no marker, not even fading.

“Yes, it is!” She covers herself with her hands and huddles into the corner of the stall.

“Ruth. Look at me.” It takes her a second, but she finally does. The anguish in her eyes has me locking my knees so they don’t give out. This woman is my undoing. “It’s all gone. There is nothing left. You have scars, yes, and healing wounds, but nothing from a marker.”

Dropping her hands, she glances down at the front of her body, pointing at different spots. Bare spots. “Right there. Boobs too big. Nipples too fat. Here. Stomach too soft. Can’t you see the circles over my gut! And my thighs! Didn’t you see them on my butt?”

“Oh, Ruth.” I lose the fight against my tears, letting the water wash them away as I drag her into my arms and hold her tight, sinking to the floor as she breaks into sobs. Each one a blow to my heart.

She’s not ready for us to progress and frankly, neither am I. She needs someone to help her process what she’s been through, the emotional and physical pain. And I need someone to help me navigate the best way to be there for her as she heals. This isn’t something that can be fixed with some

pretty words and gestures. It's going to take time. And frankly, I've got nowhere else I'd rather be.

Ruth 34.

“I love you, Seril, really I do.” My sister-in-law stops fidgeting on the couch and stares up at me expectantly. “But you can go home. To your husband. The father of your child.”

“I know.” She replies, looking out the window of my balcony wistfully. We’ve been home for two weeks. I spent a week at the compound, we all did. And I thought things were good between Moshe and Seril again. But when I left to come back to my apartment, she came with me. Zeppo is here too most of the time, but at least he leaves for work every day. “I just can’t...every time I look at Moshe, I think about what he did to you. To Zeppo. I worry about our child. Would he ever use them like he did Zeppo?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“How have you forgiven Moshe and Zeppo that easily?”

“You’re the one who told me I was allowed to.”

“I know what I said.” She stands, her back to me. Shoulders tense. “Not forgive...how do you move on?”

“We were t-boned by a truck, dragged from our vehicle, shot at, and I shot someone. Several someones. It puts things in perspective. I have forgiven Zeppo and Moshe, because I know they didn’t do it maliciously. Moshe thought he was protecting me. And so did Zeppo. This life...is rough. I guess, I just realized, cliché as it sounds, that I can lose them in an instant. I don’t want to regret anything once they are gone.”

“I love him. So much. And what he did scared the shit out of me. I’ve never seen that callousness directed to someone he loves before.”

I awkwardly sit next to her on the couch, my casted leg sticking out. Taking her hand in mine, I tell her, “He would never, ever hurt you or your children. He doesn’t just love you, Seril, he worships you. He acted rashly out of his own fear. That you would wake up one day and realize you married a monster.”

“I did.”

“Yes. But he is your monster. Just as Zeppo is mine...wow, that’s taking some getting used to. I don’t know that I’ll ever truly accept that we’re together.” I force a laugh.

“You will. Just give it time. I know you’re right. Maybe it’s because this

thing with Keppelman isn't resolved. He's still in the wind. The info Nayosha gave us didn't pan out exactly how the men had hoped."

"You wanna go get lunch?"

"I could eat." That's an understatement. Moshe's baby is always hungry. We grab our purses, and she opens the door to my apartment for me. Manny is standing outside in the hall.

"Hey, Unca-Man. We're getting some lunch."

"Where to, ladies?"

We decide on a little bistro a couple of blocks away. I insist on walking because I'm tired of sitting in the back of cars. Besides, I've gotten pretty good with my crutch. A few doors down from the restaurant, a dark sedan pulls up to the curb and a window rolls down. Seril and I glance at it and do a double take when we notice the barrel of a gun pointed right at us.

"Get in the car, Seril."

"Michael?" Seril leans down to look through the open window and snarls at whoever she sees. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Get in the car, Seril. Or I'll shoot the big one." I roll my eyes despite fearing I'll be shot any second.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Yes, you are. I have my orders and I don't intend to fail. I lost everything because of you, this is my shot to get it all back plus interest."

"Ok." Seril accepts the invitation like they're going to an afternoon movie rather than her imminent death.

"Seril!"

"Bring her too!" Michael says, pointing at me with his gun. I look at Manny and Seril's bodyguard, but she waves them off.

"You still got your mezuzah necklace, Ruthie?" I don't understand why she's asking, but nod anyway. I haven't taken it off since *mame* gave it back to me.

"Good. Now, come with me."

Once in the backseat, Seril takes my bad hand and holds it gingerly. "What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Hold the mezuzah in your hand and pray."

"Seril."

"Just do it." I do. I hold the slender glass tube in my hand and pray we make it out of this alive and unharmed. Especially my niece or nephew. Manny is on the phone as we pass by him, a bewildered expression on his face. His Sarai Ima told him to back off, so he did. But it goes against every instinct.

“I can’t believe you just got in the car with me. How fucking stupid are you? I told him it wouldn’t work, but he said to do it anyway.” Michael speaks more to himself in the front seat than to us.

“Yeah, I can’t believe we did either.”

“It will be alright, don’t worry, Ruthie. You were right earlier. He’s my monster and Zeppo is yours. And our monsters get very angry when people touch what is theirs.”

Zeppo 35.

“Yakov, I need you to start making sense. Right the fuck now.” Moshe demands, his hand on the butt of his gun in its holster at his side.

“You aren’t going to shoot me.” Moshe glares at him. “Avinu.”

“They were at Ruthie’s apartment. They were going out to eat. Then they got into a dark sedan with stolen plates and an unknown male aiming a gun at them and drove off after waving their security to remain and not interfere. Manny called you and reported it immediately and now we are what? Waiting around for a ransom?” I seethe, tired of having to find my *freyd*. Why is she always disappearing? I want her by my side at all times. Unfortunately, we’ve had the little problem of Keppelman to deal with and I’ve been working more than I’ve been with her.

Except for the nights. They are torturous bliss. My body wrapped around hers like a shield in the darkness and softness of her bed. Warm. A comforting weight in my arms. My throbbing dick between us, ignored because he doesn’t deserve to play yet.

“We are not waiting around. We are tracking them.”

“Using what?” Moshe waves his arms around erratically. “Do we employ a seer now? A witch who can pull their location out of the ether?”

Yakov looks unimpressed at our leader. “No. Here, in the real world, we use tracking devices.”

Moshe deflates, swiping his hand through his hair and slumping back into his chair. “Right. Of course. I just...”

“Your woman is missing and even if she wasn’t, she’s still not forgiven you and isn’t sleeping at home.” I sum up succinctly.

“Yup.” I pat Moshe on his shoulder and dart my gaze back to Yak.

“The previous Sarai Ima and the new Sarai Ima are formidable adversaries.”

“Sun Tzu, can you get to the fucking point!” Zilv snaps.

“The mezuzah necklace that Ruthie wears is a tracking device. That is how Esther was able to find Nayosha when I couldn’t. She had taken it from Ruthie before she pushed her down the steps and kept it with her. It has been returned to Ruthie. Seril wears a similar bracelet. A gift from her mother-in-law.”

“You know where they are?”

“I do. But not where they are going.” He spins his tablet. A map of the area is on the screen, with a blue dot moving along the Catawba River heading south.

“Who has them?”

“Michael Manoff.”

“Seril’s brother? What the fuck?” Moshe stands up and kicks his chair back.

“I’m going to rip his spine out from his throat.”

“All in due time.” Yak says patiently. “He’s working for someone else. That’s who we are waiting on. I already have two vehicles of men following them at a discrete distance.”

“I’m going. You can’t stop me.”

“Wasn’t going to.” Yak leans back in his chair and motions toward the door.

“Keep it up, and you’ll get Jerkoff Vodka for Hanukkah!”

“Off brands are the work of the devil!” Yakov shouts at our backs, Moshe and I already halfway down the hall.

“What’s the plan?” I ask him as we jump into his Rolls-Royce Cullinan.

“We find them, kill Michael and whoever he’s working with. Then I take my wife back home and fuck her until she can’t leave me again. I don’t want to know what you are going to do to my sister.”

“Probably the same.” I’m not. Ruthie isn’t ready for that. But Moshe doesn’t need to know that. He groans but drives without replying. I get a text from Yakov a few minutes into the drive with real time coordinates. Moshe and I don’t speak beyond me relaying directions.

We turn into the mouth of a commercial development along the Catawba River. It’s supposed to be a massive district with planned neighborhoods, eateries, shopping, and businesses. They haven’t progressed much, but there are a few large industrial buildings at the far end of the property. A high-price Genesis G90 and a significantly cheaper dark sedan are parked outside of one and I’d guess that’s our destination.

Moshe cuts the engine, and we step out, drawing our weapons and softly closing the doors. I spin around, gun aimed, when two vehicles pull in behind us. Then another. I relax my hold and lower my arms when our brothers, Zilv and Ezra jump out of the last one and two tactical teams pour out of the other two.

“Sir—”

“My wife. And child.”

“Understood, sir.” The commander in charge nods to Moshe in deference. I

don't miss his hand signals to keep close to us.

"What are you two doing here?" I ask our brothers.

"Same reason as you two." Ezra smirks, "You think either of them will give me a blowie as a thank you for saving their lives?"

"Dude." Zilv smacks him in the back of the head, and I swear for a moment the world spins backward. Zilv just reprimanded someone for being inappropriate. "They are your Sarai Ima and your future sister-in-law. Don't say blowie, use fellatio instead. It's more respectful."

"Do any of you have Flex-Seal in your tactical bags?" I ask the group at large and two raise their hands. Awesome.

"I'm gonna need it."

"It was a fucking joke, man." Ezra holds his hands up in surrender. Zilv does the same.

"Not for you. Unless you piss me off."

"Three men inside. Michael Manoff. Ralph Keppelman. One unknown. All armed. Olive Oyl and Mindy are restrained in chairs, however, appear unharmed. Yakov said to put your earpieces in."

"Thanks." Moshe says to one of the commandos.

"Explain to me again why if Moshe is Popeye, Seril is Olive Oyl, Zeppo is Mork and Ruthie is Mindy, why Harper is Teddy Roosevelt and Jonah is Sacagawea?"

"Because Ezra, we love Robin Williams and it's endlessly funny to irritate Jonah."

"Makes me smile every time." Ezra grins obnoxiously.

"I give you permission to use the Flex-Seal on them." I nod at Moshe and follow him to the sliding door on the side of the building. Two commandos slide open the door and three slip in guns blazing. Moshe and I step in after them and make a beeline for our women. Using my pocketknife, I slash through Ruthie's zip ties and pull her into my chest.

"Baby. Are you ok? Did they hurt you?"

"Just my shoulder." She releases a shaky breath. "I'm so glad you're here. Seril is fucking crazy. She just got into that car with, like, no argument. Girl has no sense of self-preservation!"

"Ruthie." Seril detaches from Moshe to approach Ruthie. Moshe just slides his arms around her from behind and cups her belly. "I would never put us in danger. I knew Yakov would find us and I also knew that my brother is a spineless piece of weasel excrement!" She rears back and kicks him square in

the nuts where he's kneeling on the ground, his hands cuffed behind his back. "Yeah, but you didn't know what he would do!" Ruthie points at Keppelman, who is in the same position as Michael, just mightily pissed off.

"Load the two of them up and bring them to the consortium. I believe my friend and I have some creative plans for these two." Moshe pats me on the shoulder, then picks up his wife and carries her out of the building.

"We weren't in any real danger?"

"Of course, you were. A psychotic power-hungry mobster had an unhinged and desperate man kidnap you off the street!"

"That isn't making me feel better!" Ruthie screeches, smacking me in the chest.

I slam my mouth on hers and kiss her until neither of us can breathe.

"That...was...better." I do it again. Once in the backseat of Moshe's SUV, I do it some more. And I continue even when Moshe starts gagging.

Zeppo 36.

I won't go into the details, let's just say that Michael Manoff was dealt with...permanently. And will not be bothering Seril ever again.

And Keppelman. Stupid, stupid, Keppelman. Well, it was far more disgusting than I thought it would be when you pour laxative and ipecac down someone's throat, along with their severed fingers and toes, then Flex-Seal any possible exit holes.

Ruth 37.

Four months later

I'm giving him my best puppy dog eyes. I'm blinking slowly and exaggeratedly like Seril taught me. I stick out my lips in a pout and dip my head so I can look up at him through my eyelashes.

"I don't like you spending so much time with the girls."

"They are our family."

"They are horrible people and corrupting you."

"No. They are teaching me."

"I don't want to go, Ruthie. I'd do anything for your love...but I won't do that."

I'm trying here. Not to manipulate him, though I am, but I'm trying not to take his refusal personally. My cousins and brothers, we're all going out to a club tonight to get Tevye out of the house and a few last hurrahs for Seril before the baby comes in a few months. She's popped out in the last couple of weeks, waddling with that basketball stuffed down her shirt and throwing her off balance. The morale in the house is...not good.

Tevye is having a hard time adjusting to parenthood, and little Arlo is totally adorable. But he's a sick little guy and it takes its toll on Tevye, his parents, and his twin Tovah. We all take turns to give them a break, but I'm not the only one who thinks Tev and Tov need to get out of the house and let loose. Hence, the night club idea.

Except, my grumpy boyfriend doesn't want to go. He used to go to the clubs all the time. And I know he's changed a lot in the last several years, since he realized his feelings for me, but it's difficult, despite the immense amount of therapy I've had over the months, not to think it's because of me. We don't go out often in public, just the two of us. Normally content to have a movie night at my apartment, or family night at the compound. We sleep together every night, and I love being his little spoon more than words can express. But we haven't had sex. We haven't made love. We've had a few heavy make out sessions and that's it. My lady garden is withering, and I need his powerful hose to water it.

Darn it. I need to stop listening to Tovah give Jonah ideas for the porn studio. “Is it me? You don’t want to go out with me?” I immediately want to take the words back, but that’s not how things work. So, I close my eyes tight and wait for his response.

“No, I want to stay here.” Oh. Well. I was actually not expecting that. You know, the worst possible answer ever.

“Ok.” I respond, stand up and walk into my bedroom. I slam the door shut and proceed to get dressed because frick him. I’m still going out and I’m going to have a darn tootin’ good time. Maybe. Possibly. I’ll probably sip at a lousy drink and struggle to hear anyone speak over the loud ridiculous music watching bodies writhe together on the dance floor wishing he was with me, but I’m going anyway.

“Shit! Ruthie! No, that’s not what I meant!” He busts open the door and rushes over to me, ripping the clothes from my hand and tossing them over his shoulder. His hands cup my face, and he kisses me hard and fast. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m a fucking ass. I need to use my big boy words. I hate going out, to eat, shop, get fucking gas.”

“But you go out all the time—”

“Because I have to. For work. It’s expected of me. Zeppo of the Kosher Nostra. I’d rather be with you. Here. Curled up on the couch, watching a movie and making out. Maybe copping a feel of your tits and getting to second base.”

“You aren’t ashamed to be seen with me?”

“Fuck no! I’m ashamed of who I am out there. Who everyone expects me to be. Who I used to be. That’s not the real me. And I don’t want to subject you to that. You’ve been through too much—”

“Do you love me, Zeppo?”

“Down to my last atom.” He responds immediately, like it’s as natural as breathing. My heart flutters in my chest at the beauty of it all.

“Then I can face anything. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life locked away. Afraid. Sheltered. Hidden. I want to get a drink spilled on me, get into a fight with a woman who can’t keep her hands to herself, dance badly with my cousins, feel you up in the back of a ride share, and have my boyfriend make tippy love to me when we get back. I want to love you in the open.”

“Ruthie, people will...women will—”

“Wish they were me.” I interrupt with a smug smile. “I’ve come to terms with your past. And my own. I may have moments of insecurity now and then, but

I'm getting there."

He looks over his shoulder at the clothes he threw. "You were gonna go without me?" He's not mad, if his broad grin is any indication. He seems... proud.

"I was."

"Good girl." A slow, lingering kiss, a squeeze of my ass as he rubs against me with his hardened...penis. Oh, leave me alone, I'm working on my dirty language. "Alright. Give me a minute to get dressed. Wear something that covers you from head to toe, woman, I don't want to get arrested for beating a man to death for staring at your tits." That's not going to happen, but it's sweet he thinks so. "And Ruthie?"

"Yeah?" I'm so excited! We're going clubbing!

"No one will get close enough to spill a drink on you, but how does dousing Moshe in sticky liquor sound?"

"Like delicious revenge."

Ruth 38.

I can't believe I'm actually dancing at a club! This is so exciting and loud. It's very loud. And it smells like stale sweat and body odor. But I'm dancing! With my man. Where people can see us. And I don't care what any one of them thinks. I'm happy. Truly happy.

"Baby, you keep rubbing that ass against my cock and I'm gonna get indecent on this dancefloor."

The husky tones of Zeppo's voice does deliciously naughty things to my insides. I want him. I want all of him. Right now. My blood is beating fast, adrenaline coursing through my veins, and my panties completely soaked. We've been grinding and swaying and practically dry humping for the last several songs and I feel liberated and sexy and bold.

"Take me home, Zeppo. I want to feel you move inside me."

"Fuck. *Fuck.*" My head snaps back as he takes my hand and drags me off the dance floor. He tosses a two-finger salute to our family and starts running once we're on the sidewalk. I giggle and rush to keep up with him.

In the backseat, Paul driving, I straddle Zeppo's lap and kiss him. His hands run over my body, molding to my breasts, my ass, urging me down until our pelvises meet. The friction through our clothing is amazing. I don't care about our audience, I don't care about breaking traffic laws, I just want to be with Zeppo in the way I've dreamed of my whole life. Even before I knew what sex was.

Reaching between us, my fingers touch his belt buckle, and suddenly I'm airborne and on my own seat. Zeppo is glaring at me, and Paul is laughing his ass off. "Not funny." He snaps at his guard, then he meets my eyes and my breath catches. I know that look. That's the same look he gave me in the dining room right before...Oh. I'm an idiot. It's lust. Desire. Arousal. Want. Need. Love.

"You stay over there." He points a finger at me like I'm a bad dog and I join Paul in laughter.

It's a tense drive home. Uncomfortably silent. Except for the occasional snicker from Paul at our current predicament. Manny greets us at the front doors of my apartment building.

"Apartment has been cleared. Enjoy your evening." He tips an imaginary hat

to Zeppo and winks at me.

In the elevator, we stand on opposite sides for a heartbeat, two, then we collide in the middle in a tangle of hands and tongues and teeth and legs. Stumbling out into the hallway, I manage to stick my thumb on the keypad and unlock the door. Zeppo throws it open and steps us through the doorway, his lips never leaving mine, then kicks it closed behind him.

I reach for his belt buckle again and he knocks my hand away. "I'm starting to get a complex."

"I'm sorry. Wait. There's something I want to do...something I want to give you before we..."

"Fornicate like rabbits?" He throws his head back on a laugh, his Adam's apple tempting me as it bobs in his throat.

"Go to your bedroom. Don't undress. That's my pleasure." I nod, biting my bottom lip and do as I'm told. I sit on the edge of the bed and cross my ankles, squeezing my thighs together. I giggle quietly, feeling how wet I am. I worked hard to get to this point. Talked to my therapist ad nauseum. Zeppo's touch never bothered me. But after Chas...what he did to me...it's taken me a while to accept that Zeppo wasn't my first. That my dream to be only his would never come true. I think that's one of the things that was hardest to forgive Moshe. I should have been able to freely give all my firsts to the man who has owned my heart for my entire life. But they were taken from me, and I'll never get them back.

And yet...they aren't what's most important. My virginity was a thin barrier of tissue. My first kiss was just a meeting of flesh. Normally, wonderful in their sentimentality, but not important in the scheme of things. My heart. Now, that's what's important. And I gave it to him a long time ago.

Zeppo darkens the doorway of my bedroom, a frame in his hand. His face, cast in shadows, sends a giddy chill down my spine. He's so handsome. Beautifully made. Placing the frame on my dresser to the right, he unbuttons his dress shirt, pulling it free from his slacks and letting it fall from his arms. Arms that have held me together when I thought I was shattered beyond repair. Arms that bulge and flex and tease me as he undoes his belt and pants. His shoes and socks are gone. His bare feet unbelievably sexy.

Pants still on, he picks up the frame and saunters over to me. His eyes locked on mine, never wavering. The certainty in his gaze, the flare of arousal, the adoration I've always known in those dark depths.

"Ruth Barucha Holofcener. Words are not enough to convey the depths of my

feelings for you. A lifetime would never be enough to show you. You vowed to love, honor, and obey once...Would you be willing to make it official?" I stare up at him in bewilderment, not sure I understand what he's asking. At least not daring to hope. He hands me the frame and I have to blink several times to see it clearly. Emotion swells in my chest and overwhelms me as I stare at our marriage certificate from years ago. Zilv's signature scrawled in colored pencil as officiant. Tovah's as witness. And Zeppo's and mine as husband and wife.

"You kept this?"

"Well, I wasn't sure if it was legally binding. You know how thorough Tovah is. For all I know, Zilv had been ordained to perform marriages." I chuckle through hiccupping sobs. Joy and happiness just leaking willy nilly from my eyes. "Ruth." I meet his gaze once more. "I have never been more sure of anything in my life, than I was that day I said 'I do'. I knew it would be years before we could do it for real, but I think I knew then that you were the only woman I would ever marry." He drops to one knee, his broad chest distracting as he removes a ring box from his pants pocket. "Marry me again. Wear my ring. Let me tell the world I belong to you and only you from now until forever."

"Zeppo." I pinch the skin on the back of my hand and jump when it hurts like the dickens. "This is real. You're really kneeling in front of me and asking me to marry you right before we're about to make love for the first time."

"Yes, you're all caught up."

"Holy fuzz balls." Zeppo waits patiently for me to get my act together. Giving me an endearing smile, holding the ring box steady between us. "Yes. Of course, yes!" I bounce on the bed and clap my hands. "Quick, put it on before you change your mind or a meteor strikes or the world ends!"

"None of those are going to happen, *freyd*. Stick your hand out." I do, it shakes uncontrollably. Excitement and nervousness and elation and worry all jumbled up in my head and my stomach.

"Fuck, *freyd*, seeing it on you...you make me so fucking hard anyway, but with my ring on you, knowing you're going to have my last name...fucking hell." I have no time to admire the ring or the way it glints in the lamplight. He's on me in a second, his mouth everywhere all at once, his hands shredding my clothes and driving me crazy with need.

His tongue parts my lips forcefully, his body pressing me into the mattress. He breaks the kiss and nibbles down my throat, licking across my collarbone.

He circles the tip of my breast once, twice, and on the third time he sucks it into his mouth and rolls it with his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“FUCK!” I shout to the heavens and the manie stops what he’s doing to look at me.

“Did you just cuss?”

“Zeppo.”

“Sorry, sorry. Just a proud moment.” He switches to the other nipple and uses his hands to massage both breasts. He buries his face between them and smooshes my boobs together, humming contentedly against my sternum.

“What are you doing?”

“Something I’ve dreamt of for years.”

My body stiffens the lower he moves. His face level with my...pussy. Ahh. That’s freaky as heck. I pee out of that thing. But, oh my. The growl he emits, the sound vibrating through my naughty bits...now that’s nice. My back bows with the first swipe of his tongue.

“Hey, now. Ho, there.” He takes me for a delicious ride. Up and down the rollercoaster. Licking every inch of my pussy, dipping his tongue inside me, tracing my anus, and going back for seconds. Thirds. When he reaches up and begins twisting my nipples with his hands, I realize the crescendo is building to something big. Something substantial. I’m going to cum. Orgasm. My lady garden is going to bloom.

“Zeppo!” I don’t know what to do. My arms flail and my thighs quake.

“Let it happen, Ruthie. Don’t fight it.” I take a deep breath, force myself to relax and lean into the sensations rioting through my body. He sucks my clit into his mouth and works it with his tongue and that does it. The pleasure snaps and becomes something else. Something indescribably wonderful.

“Damn, baby, that was fucking hot. You’re gonna do it again, this time with my cock inside you.”

“Hurry. I might fall asleep.” I tell him honestly. That orgasm really wiped me out. My body is loose and noodley. He slides up my body, positioning himself between my spread thighs and I feel the blunt head of his cock at my entrance. That wakes me right up. I grip his shoulders in trepidation, peering down at the glinting metal hardware. The feral look in his eyes fades into something tender.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” He pushes himself forward, slowly, gently, giving me time to adjust. It’s not my first time, but it’s still a stretch, and it feels good. He

belongs here and my body wants nothing more than to welcome him home. Every thick inch of him glides against my sensitive channel until I'm full of him and so darn happy.

He and I stare into one another's eyes as he makes love to me. It's everything I thought it would be and so much better at the same time. I wrap my legs around his back and lift my pelvis to meet his. He grunts and drops his head, breaking our eye contact.

"Dammit, baby. It's so good. So damn good."

"It is." I whisper, my voice light and airy with wonder. "Will you cum inside me?" He groans again, dropping his entire body to mine and grinding his hips. His pubic bone or the root of his penis, something, is rubbing against my clit and it's really nice.

"Do you want that? Want me to fill up your tight little pussy with my cum? Want to feel it slip out of you and remind you who owns this pussy?" He moves faster and faster. Deeper and harder. "Can you take me harder, baby? Can you take more?"

"I can take all of you. I'm yours."

"Fuckin' yeah, you are." He sits back on his knees, grabs my hips, and pulls me closer until my thighs are over his hips. With a sinful smirk, he reaches over me and holds the headboard. "Brace." I'm not prepared, and I squeak and squeal when he begins hamming into me, using the headboard for leverage. He pounds and pounds. His eyes following my tits as they bounce and sway. "God, look at 'em. Big and juicy. Ripe. Bounce for me baby, bounce."

I scramble to hold onto something and find his knees. I latch on and enjoy the ride. This is amazing. No wonder my cousins and aunts are sex crazed.

He releases one hand and zeros in on my clit. He rubs it back and forth, in tight circles, and then his hand is a blur between my legs and I'm cumming. It's so much more powerful than the one he gave me with his mouth. His cock is hitting something inside me, and I can't control my screams of ecstasy as I toss my head back into the pillow.

"There we go." Zeppo groans long and low, his hips stuttering as he drives into me a few more times before stilling. Muscles twitch all over his body, his abs convulsing. I feel it then. His release and I feel whole. It's the only way to describe it. Complete.

"*Freyd. My freyd.*" He murmurs, his face buried in my neck, his hands stroking my hair and dewy flesh. "I never want to leave."

With a satisfied grin, I close my eyes, tighten my legs around his waist and whisper, “Then don’t.”

Zeppo 39.

“It really is stunning.” Ruthie examines her ring as we walk up the steps to the family compound. It’s been a couple of days. We didn’t want to get out of bed. Sinking inside her was absolute perfection. And I made sure to repeat the experience as often as possible. She welcomed me each and every time.

I’ve noticed her growth over the last several months. She’s got a lightness to her that she didn’t have even before Chas and Nayosha. There has been a lot of personal acceptance and forgiveness. I’ve accompanied her to several sessions, and we talked about ways I can continue to support her, how to hold her up on off days, and how best to move forward together.

Moshe went with her once as well. They both walked out with blotchy faces and swollen eyes, but they were hugging and laughing, and they’ve been better since. Moshe and I are still feeling our way around each other. I lost my trust in him and it’s going to take time to build it back up again. So long as he continues to treat Ruthie well, it’ll build a lot faster.

Tonight, we are having a family dinner. Mandatory family dinner. There was quite a bit of work to do after Keppelman’s death. But we reached an agreement between the remaining families that benefits everyone. And Aunt Esther...uh, I guess I can’t call her aunt anymore since she’ll be my mother-in-law. Anyway, she insisted we get the mishpocheh together to celebrate.

Great time to announce our engagement.

“It belonged to my mother’s grandmother. One of the few things my mom was able to salvage when they left Armenia.”

“I can’t believe she’d want to part with it. Are you sure she’s ok with you giving it to me?”

“I believe her exact words were, ‘Give this to the daughter of my heart.’”

“Oh. Well.” Ruthie snuffles and leans her head on my shoulder. “That’s really nice.”

We walk into the foyer. I remove our coats and hang them up. We follow the voices to the sitting room and stand in the entrance watching our family. Months ago, knowing the anger and hate I harbored toward Moshe, feeling as though I’d lost Ruthie, I didn’t think we’d ever have this again. The whole mishegas mishpocheh. Tev with a baby boy. Moshe just months from fatherhood. Jonah monogamous and anxious to wed his woman. And me. I

turn to Ruthie and lean down to press a lingering kiss to her upturned lips. Engaged to the woman I was born to love.

“What is on your finger?” Tovah barks from across the room, shoving people and furniture out of the way like a high-heeled linebacker. “Is that a ring?”

“Yes, it is.” Ruthie says hoarsely. Then clears her throat and states proudly, “Zeppo and I are getting married!” The room erupts in cheers, and we are swarmed by our loved ones.

Ruthie’s father pats me on the shoulder. “Try not to fuck it up this time.”

“Never again.”

Zilv taps his glass, “Can I perform the ceremony again?”

Ruthie looks at her brother with a fond smile. “Are you a rabbi?”

He shakes his head, “No.”

“There’s your answer.”

“Tovah, tell them to let me marry them! Tovah? Where’s Tovah?”

“I’m right here! Had to get the updated wedding binder. And no, you can’t officiate, you are grossly unprofessional.”

“I am not!”

“You made out with her bridesmaid last time.”

Ruthie and I whip around to stare at Zilv. “I...I didn’t have a bridesmaid. Tovah?”

“He made out with one of your dolls.”

Zilv makes an unnatural sound and squawks, “I was practicing!”

“That doll slept in your bed for months...naked.”

“Like I said...PRACTICING!”

Epilogue - Ruth

One month later

“Why do you have to use that machine gun in the backyard?”

Laughter pops my sleep bubble and I blink several times. I’m in our bedroom. In bed. In my underwear and sleep tank. Zeppo is behind me. He’s the one laughing.

I turn over and catch a whiff of something heinous. “OH MY GOD! Did you fart?” He shakes his head and laughs harder. His face all red and eyes shiny. Why is he—“I FARTED!”

I know it before he can shake his head to confirm it. We’ve been sleeping in the same bed for almost 6 months, and I’ve never farted before. At least not that I know of and he’s never mentioned it. This is so embarrassing. I jump up from the bed and speed walk into the bathroom. He’s cackling.

“It’s just a fart, it’s not funny!” I yell through the bathroom door.

“Did...did you...oh God!... Did you shit yourself?”

“WHAT?!” I immediately reach around and feel my underwear, checking for unauthorized deposits. None. My underwear is dry and empty. “NO, I DID NOT!”

“Your panties are all saggy in the back, it looked like you were carrying a load!” I’m going to kill him. As soon as my face returns to a natural skin tone and my heart stops trying to beat out of my chest.

“It’s because I have no ass!” He knows this. We’ve talked about this. He’s seen my flat backside, but he loves me anyway. He’s said so many, many times.

“Then what made all that noise?”

“You are such a jerk!” I throw open the bathroom door and stomp over to the bed. I jump on top of him and grab a pillow. I start beating him with it, but his arms are up and he’s blocking most of the shots. Which is impressive because he can barely breathe, what with all the chortling.

A minute later, he takes the pillow and tosses it aside, grabs my hands and gives me a sultry look. He is ridiculous. And sexy. Grr. “Since you didn’t shit yourself and you’re already on top...” I grind down against his growing

erection, tossing him a sassy smirk and a wink.
“Where’s your Crocodile Dundee hat, mate?”

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-xoxo Mirrah