

Mashe

Kosher Nostra
Book One



Mirrah McGee

Moshe

*Covenant of Ascent; Kosher Nostra; Book
One*

Mirrah McGee



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*To my authors-in-arms, Cee Bowerman and Ciara St. James:
Thank you for including me on this journey into, not only a new genre, but a
whole new world of characters to love, loathe, and root for.
No one else I'd rather traverse the unknown with than you two!*

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Glossary of Terms:

Adank – Yiddish; thank you
Avraham Avinu – Hebrew; our father
Beregitz – Yiddish; peeved and frustrated
Bubbe – Yiddish; grandmother
Bubbeleh – Yiddish; sweetie
Chutzpah – Yiddish; colossal nerve
Donne – Italian; women
Feh! – Yiddish; a word of disgust
Fercockt – Yiddish; fucked up
Ferimtmter – Yiddish; an egomaniac
Fizehnish – Yiddish; a monster
Grobber – Yiddish; an uncouth person
Hoyber – Yiddish; a hunchback; a pitiful sight
Kinder – Yiddish; children
Klippa – Yiddish; a trouble making wife
Kosher – Hebrew; fit or proper
Kosher Nostra – moniker of the Jewish Mafia
Kunnilemmel – Yiddish; a person of low mentality
Mame – Yiddish; mother
Mensch – Yiddish; a person of integrity and honor
Mishegas – Yiddish; a craziness
Mishpocheh – Yiddish; family
Momser – Yiddish; s.o.b.
Nudnik – Yiddish; a goof; a nuisance
Osiyo – Cherokee; hello
Sarai Ima – our mother
Schmuck – Yiddish; a penis
Shaifeleh – Yiddish; a dear, innocent child; a lamb
Shlemiel – Yiddish; jerk
Shmok – Yiddish; penis
Shmutz – Yiddish; dirt

Shnorer – Yiddish; a freeloader; a mooch

Shvegerin – Yiddish; sister-in-law

Shviger – Yiddish; mother-in-law

Tante – Yiddish; aunt

Tate – Yiddish; father

Tokhter – Yiddish; daughter

Tuches – Yiddish; the buttocks

Verklemppt – Yiddish; overcome with emotion

Yenteh – Yiddish; a gossip; a busybody

Yoksh – Yiddish; buffoon

Zayde – Yiddish; grandfather

Zun – Yiddish; son

Moshe “Avraham Avinu” Holofcener 1.

“You seem to be under the impression that legit means soft. It’s a common misconception, I can’t fault you, really. I like to fly under the radar, Tim. I don’t want to give the feds or vice a reason to look at me and mine. So, my businesses are kosher to the penny. That’s why I can still operate less than kosher aspects without scrutinization. And this is where you fucked up. You mistook self-preservation and longevity for weakness.”

Spinning my knife in my hand, I walk slowly and deliberately around Tim’s bound body. His face is bloodied and bruised, several fingers hang at odd angles and broken, his right leg is bleeding profusely from where The Pharaoh’s bullet penetrated the shin just below the kneecap. At this point in the proceedings, Tim should find my knife a welcome sight; however, he continues to tremble and produce piss from somewhere. The man must have a bladder the size of a watermelon.

“Please, don’t do this, my family—” I bark a laugh at his choice in wording. The men standing at my back, snicker as well, knowing this man does not understand the meaning of the word *family*. I turn my head to share an unamused smirk with my enforcer, The Pharaoh, and each of my *kapitans*, Jonah, Tevye, Zilv, and Ezra.

“It’s always, ‘*I got a family, think of my wife, my kids*’. You forgot your family, that’s on you. It isn’t my job to look out for them. I’m not the man of your house. When you stole from me, you were looking out for yourself. And this right here, this is about me being the man of my house and looking after my family.”

I swing my arm in a wide arc and slam the knife blade into the back of his neck, severing his spinal cord. His limp body sags forward in the chair, held in place only by the restraints.

I crouch down in front of him, his eyes unfocused. Death isn’t knocking anymore, it busted down his door and

demanded entry.

“Your family will thank me when I deliver the news that you are dead. They will rejoice that they suffer under your rule no more. Who knows, perhaps I’ll let your wife Annaleigh thank me properly with her mouth. She’ll spread her thighs wide to welcome The Pharaoh into her neglected pussy for setting her free.”

“Moshe, I think he died halfway through your monologue. Too bad.” My younger brother Zilv remarks with a tsk. “Some of your best work.” I ignore him, standing up and walking to the mirror just outside the rooms we use for interrogations. Shit. I’ve got shmutz on my pants. And my shirt.

“I’ve got to go, mame and tate will have my hide if I show up like this.” I wave at the dead man and the mess that surrounds him. “Clean this up. Jonah, go to his house and inform the wife she is now a widow.”

Jonah laughs, “Am I to accept thanks from her mouth or pussy?” I round on him and point my finger, even as he holds his hands up in surrender. “Just a joke, Avinu.”

I drop my hand and smooth out my suit. “We are theatrical to increase their pain and suffering, we never lay hands on women without their expressed consent.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jonah shakes his head, “our mothers, aunts, sisters and cousins would line us up execution style.”

“Except they’d shoot the heads of our dicks instead.”

“There is nothing sweeter than a woman who spreads her thighs willingly, the warm wet welcome of her cunt as you slide inside—”

“Can you not, Tevye. I can’t go to the children’s hospital charity dinner with a cockstand.”

“You could, they would probably just ask that you write a check next time instead of showing up.” I smack him on the back of the head and make my way upstairs to the basement of the office building of Mishpocheh Consortium. My driver, and third cousin, Ernest waits for me with his phone glued to his face. He’s young, but the boy can drive better than any

NASCAR driver I've ever seen. And in our line of work, quick getaways are the difference between freedom and life behind bars.

"We have to make a stop, Ernest." He pockets his phone and jumps to attention, smacking the elevator button repeatedly. I smile to myself at his eagerness.

"Where to, Avinu?"

"I need a new pair of pants, shirt, fuck it, I need a new suit, but I don't have time to go home first. I'm already running fashionably late, as Ruthie would say. Stop at a store on the way."

The elevator doors open, and he holds it so I can step on. Once the doors close, he shifts from foot to foot. "Out with it." I command.

"Off the rack, Avinu? Are you sure Tante Esther will approve?" My head tips back on a laugh, picturing my mother's face when I walk in wearing a suit without designer tags and not handpicked by our personal shopper.

"It's better than cerebrospinal fluid."

2.



“This is the SouthPark Mall?” I ask dumbly, the sign emblazoning the name of the establishment well lit. Ernest hums and wisely does not respond to my inane question. “Huh.” In my 28 years...I don’t think I’ve ever been inside a mall before. There’s never been a reason to.

I wait for Ernest to park the Jeep Wagoneer, and come around to open my door, my eyes never straying from the large building in front of me. “Which store are we going to?”

“Nordstrom, Avinu.”

“Nordstrom?”

“Yes, they sell many brands, including Boss, so I thought this might be a good place to start.” I shrug, his logic sound

enough for me. Out of habit, we both check our shoulder holsters under our suit jackets, my Smith & Wesson M&P 9mm more an extension of my body at this point than a weapon.

The parking lot is full which means the mall will be filled with people. Many in the Charlotte area know exactly who I am. Some wish they didn't. I'm not surprised by the long looks from the women we pass or the hastened footsteps leading in the opposite direction. I am surprised by how big the store is and the sheer volume of products they carry.

I follow Ernest as he guides me to the men's department. My fingers reach out on their own accord to touch the fabrics as we pass, until I catch something out of the corner of my eye and my fingers reach out for an entirely different reason. Fortunately, I keep my hands to myself, since I do not have the time or inclination for a harassment suit. My mouth, however, has a mind of its own.

"Perfect." I say clearly and loud enough to startle the owner of the apple shaped tuches bent over in front of a table of folded shirts. A girlish yelp breaks the otherwise quiet of the area, drawing Ernest's attention as well.

"Avinu?" He calls to me, but I hold up my finger for him to wait.

"Excuse me, sir. I didn't realize anyone was behind me." She stands to her full height, about a foot shorter than my 6'2", spins slowly on her feet, tossing her long auburn hair over her shoulder. Ernest lifts a handkerchief in front of my face, disrupting my perusal of porcelain skin dotted with freckles, slim shoulders, generous B-cups, nipped waist, sensual hips encased in a black lace cap sleeve dress that ends at her knees, showing off short, toned legs and tiny feet in black heels. She's the definition of petite.

"You've got a little drool, Avinu..." He snaps his mouth shut, though his eyes continue to display his humor, as I momentarily glare at him before returning to the beauty in front of me.

The beauty who is not amused or appreciative of my thorough cataloging of her attributes. Huh. How...unusual. A nametag is pinned just above the swell of her breast. I step closer under the guise of reading it, my confidence returning at her sharp inhale and sweet flushing of her cheeks.

“Seril.” I let her name simmer on my tongue, enjoying the way it rolls so easily, imagining myself grunting it as I drive into her tiny body. She clears her throat and squares her shoulders.

“Yes, sir, my name is Seril. How may I assist you today?” She’s using professionalism to hide her interest. Adorable.

I allow my lips to stretch into a seductive smile, my rush to arrive at the charity dinner all but forgotten. “I’m in need of a new suit, urgently, I’m afraid.”

“Of course, sir.” She clasps her hands in front of her delectable body, notices that they are shaking and quickly clasps them at the small of her back instead. “Is there a particular brand you are interested in?”

“What brand would you be interested in seeing me in?” I counter, my smile broadening genuinely when she strides in front of me and huffs at my come on.

“We have a few sales right now—”

“Money is no object.” I interrupt. She inspects me for a moment over her shoulder, continuing to lead me like Moses through the desert to the suit department. I’d wander anywhere with her, but the longer I stare at her, I don’t know that 40 years would be enough.

“We have a trim fit pinstripe suit from Boss in an open blue that I believe would be quite flattering for your...for you.” She stammers over the last bit and I’m gentleman enough to stifle my chuckle. Ernest, not so much. I pin him with a glare and jerk my head to the side. He shrugs at me with a grin and walks around the area while I speak with Seril.

“And you have my size?” I ask, stepping close behind her as she fingers the jacket of the suit she mentioned. The top of her head, through her hair, blushes at my proximity.

“50 Regular? 36x34 pants?” She guesses and quite accurately. I nod, never taking my eyes off hers. They are an interesting shade of blue. I would have thought with her hair they would be green or hazel, not sapphire. She would look stunning in a sapphire and diamond necklace, long enough to nestle between her ti— “I have those sizes. What color shirt would you like? Tie?”

“Consider me your doll. Dress me however you like, Seril.” I offer her a boyish grin and hold my arms out wide. Heat fills her eyes as they take in every inch of my hard body, then just as quickly it’s extinguished with a shake of her head, her pillowy lips pursed in a scowl. She darts around finding a shirt and tie for me. As she grabs a belt, she looks me over from head to toe, then shifts down the aisle and grabs suspenders instead.

“Will you require new shoes, sir?”

Looking at my brown Berluti oxfords, I shake my head no. They don’t appear to have any bodily fluids on them. She nods succinctly, so I take the opportunity to head into the dressing rooms a few feet away. Taking the first stall, I strip to my boxer briefs, and lean against the doorway. A moment later, head down, she runs through the garments in her hands as she enters the dressing rooms.

“Here you ar—Huzzah!” Now a blue so deep they are almost black, her eyes roam hungrily up and down my exposed tanned flesh, over the valleys and crests of hard-earned muscle, lingering with an audible gulp on my cock straining against the fabric of my boxer briefs, before snapping back up to my face. Her teeth clack as she slams her jaw shut and a delightful red blush covers her from décolletage to beyond her raised eyebrows.

“Seril.” I growl, letting every ounce of need lace my voice. She throws the clothes at me and runs out of the dressing room as if the hounds of hell are chasing her. Close.

I am.

Seril Manoff 3.

I threw clothes at the man. I threw a thousand dollars' worth of clothing at the infuriating man. Then I ran. Literally ran through my place of employment. I'm gonna get fired. Cheese and crackers.

"You alright, miss?" The young man I'd seen earlier reappears at my side, an understanding smile on his boyish face.

"I'm fine." I force my lips into a semblance of a smile and nod my head.

"He has that effect on people, women mostly." His words are probably meant to comfort me, but instead they hit me like a bucket of ice-cold water. Of course, the tall, dark, handsome, powerful stranger probably has an extensive line of dropped panties, and maybe a few boxers, trailing behind him.

I have been on this earth for 22 years, and only remember like 17 of them, and have spent most of the time struggling to get by, keeping my nose down, but I know for a fact I have never seen a man with that much...*je ne sais quoi*.

I also know for a fact that I don't have the time or inclination to investigate it further. I internally shake my head, turning my focus on the man next to me. "Is there anything I can help you find, sir?" He stares at me a moment too long, the corners of his lips twitching like he wants to laugh, thankfully, he doesn't.

"No, thank you."

"Should that change, please let me know. I'll be back in a few minutes to check on your...friend."

"No need, I'm right here. This fits perfectly, love the lines and texture. I'll be walking out in it if you'll remove the tagging?" I nearly jump in my high heels when his deep timbre alerts me he is right behind me. How did he sneak up like that?

I turn around slowly, fixing my professional mask in place. I run my eyes up and down his visage, looking for any imperfections in the fit of the suit, the placement of his tie, the length of the pants. Dammit, he's perfect.

Visually speaking. Objectively. Fudge nuggets.

"Absolutely. Please follow me, I'll check you out, I mean, er, I'll ring you up...follow me." I stumble over my words, but thankfully not my feet as I lead the two men to the registers.

"Will this be on your Nordstrom's credit card this evening? You'll save an extra—" I cut off abruptly as they begin laughing. I bite my bottom lip in confusion and bounce my eyes back and forth waiting for someone to explain.

"Sorry, bubbeleh, we mean no disrespect." Tall, dark, and infuriating begins with soft brown eyes. Even with the desk separating us, I get lost in the gold striations I can see under the different lighting. "It's just your question, the implication that I needed to save money..." His companion breaks out into giggles, momentarily subduing my ire as the sound is infectious. I allow a small smile, before directing my full attention to the man in front of me.

I tilt my head as I remember his words, "I'm sorry, should I know who you are?" I study him a moment longer, "I don't believe we've met before. Do you shop here often?" I know I'd remember him...even one hundred years old with dementia, I'd remember this man. His fruit and vanilla scent. His tall frame and hard body, only accentuated by the clean lines and color of the suit. Like it was made specifically for him. The dark purposeful stubble on a square jaw.

It's not just his appearance, although, I can't say I'll be sad to take home the image of him near naked burned into my brain from his stunt in the dressing room. He exudes confidence and competence. Call me a fuddy duddy, but I like...I mean, I can appreciate a man comfortable in his own skin...from afar. I can look but not touch.

"I am not familiar to you?" It's his turn to cock his head in confusion as he stares at me with humor and a bit of...hope?

I slowly shake my head, grab the scissors and step around the counter to retrieve the tagging from his new clothing. “I moved here about 5 months ago...sorry, should I know you? Are you, like, the Mall Casanova or something?”

He and his friend, now holding the soiled clothing he arrived in, crack up again at my inquiry. Not sure what’s so funny, I continue to inspect his body, er, his clothing for tags and stickers. Finding no more, I circle back to the register.

“Mr. Holofcener.” Why? Why me? I look heavenward for an answer, but like so many times in my life, I get no response. My co-worker, not supervisor, Natalie steps up to the counter, laying a manicured, slender hand on the man’s forearm. His openness and mirth disappear instantly, which only slightly warms my belly. I shouldn’t care that her touch is unwanted or that he seems as irritated as I am by her presence.

I shouldn’t...but I do.

“I apologize for Seril’s...rudeness, she’s new to the industry and our caliber of clients. Allow me to assist you.” Her sugary sweet voice grates on my nerves, but I continue to do my job, which I’ve been doing for over 2 years just not at this location, typing in my employee code and beginning his transaction.

“No.” The man, Mr. Holofcener, states succinctly. Natalie, ever the consummate professional...ass kisser, rallies quickly and simpers to the man.

“I insist. We want you to have a pleasant visit to our store and consider stopping by again in the future.” She trails her hand up his arm, around his shoulders, and down the other side while walking behind him to push me out of the way of the register.

“Seril has been most helpful to me. Integral even.” My eyes snap up at the tone of his voice. A growl, deep and visceral, territorial. Yet, I know I’m wrong because he is too much for me. Too gorgeous. Too worldly. Too rich. “In fact, she shall accompany me to my event this evening.” His smile pops a dimple in his right cheek, and though still handsome as ever, I feel like a mouse caught in a trap.

I snort, unladylike and unexpected, before shaking my head side to side. “No. I cannot. I’m working.” I look to Natalie, desperate enough to seek her help.

“She is on shift, I’m afraid.” Natalie says pouting, then bites her bottom lip as if she’s thinking. “However, I am nearly done with mine. I would be happy to accompany you to, what did you say—”

“I didn’t. Because I didn’t invite you.” Mr. Holofcener turns his dark gaze to me, “I invited this lovely creature. So, you will work for her.” All professional pretense flies out the window at his absurd demand. My neck arches, my eyes close, and my mouth opens with a loud laugh. The audacity of this man!

“That’s not how the world works, mister. You can’t waltz into someone’s place of employment and demand they go with you within five minutes of meeting you—”

“But you’ve already seen me naked.” The weasel. Natalie gasps and throws daggers at me as I splutter.

“That is not what happened! You were wearing underwear and about to try on clothing.” He shrugs. Which only fuels the fire growing in my belly. “Besides, I am working, I have a job that I need, I’m not leaving with a stranger to go God knows where. And you don’t own this store, you are not a manager, you can’t just—”

“You’ll find, bubbeleh, that I can do just about whatever I want.” He leans over the counter until he’s inches from my face and it’s too close. Too much. I rear back, putting space between us, though I’m thinking even the Grand Canyon wouldn’t be enough.

“You don’t want Seril to go with you, she wouldn’t know how to behave somewhere fancy, probably use the wrong fork —” Natalie wisely shuts her trap at Mr. Holofcener’s ferocious growl.

“Do you speak about her often in such unflattering ways?” He pins a glare at Natalie, and for once, I see her shrink away from a man. “Do others here disrespect her so easily?”

Wanting to move on from this awkward conversation, I hip check Natalie and stifle a smile when she nearly falls over, resuming my place at the register, and finish ringing up his purchases. Since he won't be using a Nordstrom's credit card, because apparently, he's too good for that, I look up to find him still glaring at Natalie.

"Sir, your total is \$1,364.32." His eyes meet mine and I watch as the tension leaves his face, his lips turning up, his eyes losing their glacial quality.

"That can't be right." It takes me a moment to understand that he's questioning the price.

"I assure you; I rang up each item and checked your order. Like I said, if you would like to open a Nordstrom's card, it would save you—"

"No, that can't be enough." He turns to his friend, "Why is it so cheap?" My jaw drops at his question, he thinks it's too low? I glance around the store, looking for something to let me know I've entered an alternate dimension, I'm dreaming, a display mannequin fell down and knocked me out and now I'm in a coma.

Shoot. Everything looks normal.

He inserts his card into the machine, grumbling too low for me to make out what he's saying. I also think he's speaking Hebrew, and while I'm Jewish, I'm not fluent. I can say a few prayers and some common phrases but that's it. His friend smirks with a chuckle, laying the discarded clothes on the counter.

"Can you put those in a bag for us?" I nod dumbly, opening a large bag and shoving them in. "Thank you."

"Why can't I leave a tip? It didn't give me the option."

"I'm sorry?" Why would he leave a tip?

"I want to leave you a tip, for your assistance, and because you clearly don't make much if this suit costs so little. How can they afford to keep the lights on, let alone pay their employees a decent wage?"

“Excuse me!” What is wrong with him?

“You don’t leave tips at places like this, Avinu. Tante Esther just texted in all caps. All caps, Avinu. We need to go.”

“Right, Ernest. Please let her know we are on our way.” Ernest steps to the side with the bag, while Avinu steps back in front of me. He smells delicious. Like apples and pineapples, vanilla and...jasmine? I don’t know what it is, but I want to shove my nose in his neck and inhale. “Seril, I have greatly enjoyed our first encounter. I look forward to so many more. I’ll see you soon, bubbeleh.” He grabs my hand and brings it to his soft lips for a tender kiss. My heart skips a beat or seven when his breath ghosts across my sensitive skin, wondering what it would be like for him to kiss me elsewhere, everywhere. Ugh, I don’t have time for this. I snatch my hand away, but he doesn’t seem the least bit offended, chuckling and giving me a wink before taking the receipt from my other hand and striding away.

I watch him until he disappears from sight, and only then realize I am holding my breath. It comes out in a gust, my hand rising to my chest over my heart as if that will calm it down.

“What the actual fuck just happened? Did you suck him off in the dressing room? Why would he ask you out? And you said NO! He turned me down! I finally meet him in person—”

I spin around and cut her off, “Who is he?”

She smacks her lips together a few times, processing my apparent faux pas. “Who is he? She’s asking who he is.” I look around to see if someone has joined us, nope. She’s talking to herself. I broke Natalie. “You just turned down the head of the Kosher Nostra.”

I snort, “The Kosher what?”

“It’s not funny. He is arguably the most powerful man in the area, the state even. He has ties up and down the coast.”

“Ties? Ties to what? What are you talking about?”

“That man is Moshe Holofcener. The head of the Jewish Mafia.”

Well, fiddle faddle.

4.



I waste no time once in the backseat of the SUV calling Yakov, the head of my personal security.

“Avinu, boys checked in 30 seconds ago to say you were on the move again.” I laugh at how he answers the phone.

“Relax, Yakov, they are doing their jobs admirably. I need some information.” In the silence, my gut churns with guilt. It’s not an emotion I’m overly familiar with but recognize it for what it is. I’m about to ask for a dossier on the lovely Seril when I know I should wait to get the details of her life directly from her sweet mouth.

“Go ahead?” Yakov prompts.

“Seril at SouthPark Mall Nordstrom.”

“With the candlestick.” He doesn’t miss a beat.

“As long as it’s my candlestick.” I mutter, much to his and Ernest’s amusement. “Drive the vehicle, Ernie, and mind ya business.” This just makes them laugh harder.

“Do you have a last name?”

“No. Just a first and a raging hard on.”

“Can’t, nay, *won’t* help you with the latter, but the former shouldn’t take me long. How much do you want to know?”

I ignore my conscience and answer, “Everything.” With a grunt of acknowledgement, Yakov disconnects. Knowing him, I’ll have everything down to her first solid food as a baby within the hour.

“Avinu...” Ernie hedges. I rub my hand down my face and sigh.

“I know. Not a good way to start a relationship.” He barks out a laugh, quickly sobering when he meets my unimpressed stare in the rearview mirror.

“Relationship? She seemed...ambivalent at best.”

“I know.” I smile, unable to help it, remembering her commitment to remaining unaffected. She was right not to take up acting.

“And you’re happy about that?” He shifts in the seat, checking the road, before moving into the next lane to take the upcoming turn. “You know there’s willing women...literally everywhere. What about Monica?”

I wave my hand to dismiss his mention of the woman. Monica is an “actress” employed by our adult entertainment studio run by my cousin Jonah. I’ll be honest, I’ve had the pleasure of private sessions with several of the women who work at Swingin’ Schlay Productions, but never for very long and never on camera.

Even if Monica’s worn out pussy and clingy nature hadn’t prompted me to end our brief arrangement last weekend, meeting Seril today would have. As cliché as it sounds, she is

like a breath of fresh air, with just a threatening hint of the heat she keeps locked down.

“Is this ‘cause she turned you down? Hard.” I reach forward and smack the back of his head. “Ow! I’m driving here.”

“Yeah, and channeling your inner Bubbe, getting all up in my business.” With a smile he meets my eyes briefly.

“Hate to break it to you, Avinu, but you kind of are my business.” Chuckling, I sit back and stare out the window, watching the city go by. We’re almost to the venue for the charity dinner benefiting the local children’s hospital. My mother is on the board and is heavily involved in the annual event. And exceptionally good at guilt, leaving my siblings, cousins, and I no choice but to attend every year, in addition to large donations.

“There’s just...”

“...something about her.” Ernest finishes my sentiment almost wistfully. “I get it. She’s different from what we’re used to.”

“How do you mean?” I ask, knowing my own reasons for thinking such, but wondering what his are, perhaps he’s noticed something I haven’t.

“I don’t know, she’s tough. But not like muscles or anything, just...fortitude. Maybe? She’s young, I’d say about my age, but even with the lives we lead, I can tell she’s got tons more life experience than I do. Does that make sense?”

I let his words whirl around for a moment before I find myself nodding in agreement. “Fortitude. Yes, I think that is accurate. She isn’t a docile mouse, but she’s not in your face aggressive. It seems those are the only two who flock to us, doesn’t it?”

“I personally like mice.” His face screws up momentarily before he sighs. “I mean, I like the quiet ones. I like feeling like a man.”

I throw my head back and laugh, even though I completely understand his point.

“Quit laughing, dude, I’m baring my soul here.”

“Yes, Bubbe.” I pat his shoulder, giving him a supportive squeeze, “I know what you meant. To be useful, protective, to provide for someone else...to be their entire world. It calls to something deeper than lust, almost primal.” Ernest doesn’t comment, but I don’t miss the flush that causes his neck to redden, or the audible gulp as he swallows. He gets it.

We pull up in front of the venue moments later, I give myself a quick once over in the small mirror, fix a few fly aways in my dark brown hair that’s combed back from my face, and step out when Ernest opens the back door. Flashes blind me as I walk the carpet towards the entrance. I stop and pose a few times when my name is called, a smirk plastered to my face the entire time.

Inside, I let my face relax as I scan the building for my parents. Finding my mother holding court nearby, I approach with a genuine smile, my arms open wide, Ernest chuckling behind me at my theatrics.

“Tate! Mame! Such a beautiful dress.” I take my mother in my arms and rock her back and forth, her body rigid. “I’m so sorry I am late, I was—”

“Busy.” Mame cuts me off in a flat voice. She’s mad, and rightfully so, but she won’t stay that way for long. She never can.

“I was busy with your future daughter-in-law.” Ernie loses all composure, drawing my cousins and siblings to join us. Mame steps back with narrowed eyes, staring into my soul, gauging if I’m pulling her leg. Hand over my heart, I promise, “I swear, I stumbled upon her this evening, and it was difficult tearing myself away in order to support such a worthy cause. But alas, even love at first sight is not enough to quell my philanthropic tendencies.”

“Are you joking?” Mame asks, suspicious as hell. I shake my head and drop a kiss to her forehead. She’s a tiny woman with a large personality.

“I would never joke about such things, mame. She is magnificent—”

“She turned him down. It was beautiful, wish I had recorded it.” I elbow Ernie to push him back, but it’s too late. Everyone starts ribbing me and questioning Ernie on the mystery woman. Except for my parents, my mom clings to my hand, her eyes darting over my face.

“You just met her.” Mame says diplomatically. I nod, she’s not wrong.

“How long did it take you to know Tate was the one?” Mame smiles, soft and tender, sharing an adoring look with my father.

“Two months. He was a pain in the ass, persistent... borderline stalker, really.” She teases him.

“I was no such thing. You wanted me from the moment you met me. Don’t lie to our son. I’m a fucking catch and you’re lucky I bit your hook, temptress.” They have bickered like this for as long as I can remember, both egging the other on. It was love at first sight. The love they share, despite the hardships of being a mafia family, is envious. I want that, I always have.

“I want details, Moshe, but not right now, I have pockets to empty.” Mame taps her lips, so I oblige by bending down so she can kiss my cheek. She cups the other with a small, soft hand, “You’re a good boy, she’ll see it soon enough.” I kiss her cheek again and watch with my father as she begins making her rounds.

“Did you find the leak?” Tate asks me in a low voice, referring to a hole in the accounting books of our medical dispensaries.

“Yes.”

“And is it plugged?” I choke on a laugh, bringing my fist to my mouth.

“Yes, that is why I was late.”

“I thought you said it was because you met the one? If you lied to your mame, I will gut you—”

“I did not lie. I plugged the leak and got dirty in the process. I had Ernie take me to a store on the way here to find a replacement suit since it was too late to go back to the compound.”

Tate sighs fondly, his eyes tracking my mother. “When you tell her the story of how you two met, speak rapidly through the part where you bought off the rack.”

5.



“Fucking cunt.” I settle my purse over the hook by the front door of our apartment and slide my shoes off. Releasing a sigh of relief, I stretch my feet, bend down to touch my toes, and then stand up.

“Hi, mama.” I step into the living room of our one-bedroom apartment and greet my mother with a kiss on her cheek. I don’t move fast enough to avoid the slap to my face, but I grit my teeth and give her a small smile. “How was your day?”

“Oh, Seril, I’m so glad you’re home.” Afraid to blink and miss this moment of clarity, I sit on the couch next to my mother’s recliner and reach out for her hand. “I’m starving, where’s my food? Are you trying to kill me? You bitch!”

And the moment is gone. I stand up on shaky legs and sore feet, shuffling into the kitchen as she mumbles at the tv. When I hear her crying twenty minutes later, I come out of the kitchen with her dinner in my hands. She peers up at me when I place it on the tv table in front of her.

“Thank you, pumpkin. You always take such good care of me.” I smile in return and go back for my own plate. We spend the evening in the living room, watching television. I listen as she berates the characters in the shows, then turns her wicked ire on me. I’m used to it by now, so I tune her out and think about my day.

No, that’s not true. I think about the 30 minutes where I met a man who is as handsome as he is aggravating, over and over again. Seeing his near naked body was the closest I’ve come to anything sexual in over a year. Maybe that’s why I can’t let him go. I’m pent up. I need a dick attached to a real man, not a battery-operated pleasure stick. I giggle to myself, thinking they are basically the same thing.

Except, my BOB doesn’t cuddle with me at night, it doesn’t hug me and tell me everything will be ok, it doesn’t ease the ache of loneliness I experience on an hourly basis.

The remote control to the face reminds me I’m not completely alone. I have my mom. It takes me another hour to force her into the bathroom, bathe her, dress her for bed, and get her tucked in. After I clean up the bathroom, I take a quick shower before the hot water runs out, throw the towels in the hamper, and see my reflection in the mirror. Each cheek is sporting the beginnings of a light bruise. Turning left and right, I figure I should be able to cover it up with makeup. I’ve become an expert over the years.

I have to be up at 7 for work. So, I know I need to go to sleep, but my mind won’t turn off. Was it a game to him? Was he genuinely interested in me? Kosher Nostra? Mafia?

I pull out my ancient Chromebook and wait impatiently for it to load. Opening a browser, I type in Moshe Holofcener and am blown away by the number of hits. I read article after article regarding the generous donations he and his family

have made to improve the community. The various businesses they have that provide needed jobs and income for families. They are puff pieces, underlined with a healthy dose of cautious respect. I find one article from several years ago that talks about his family businesses being investigated for illegal activity, but there's no follow up, or details regarding which illegal activities they might have been involved in.

With a deep breath, I click on the images link and my heart drops to my stomach. Google is mean, I don't like Google. Google is a spirited hateful witch. Women. Everywhere. On his arm, his lap, in his vehicle, at clubs, at formal functions. A picture of him and a scantily clad woman from last week catches my eye and I click on the link. He's dating a porn star? Snapping the chrome book shut, I set it gently down on the floor next to the couch where I sleep.

He and I aren't in the same league, we aren't even playing the same game. I'm struggling to survive and he's thriving. Well...that sucks. I mean, not really. I knew nothing could happen between us, even with his promise to see me soon. I turned him down, like I should have. I have too much to lose right now and don't have the time for anyone, much less a playboy like Moshe Holofcener. It was nice to daydream for a few minutes about the possibilities, but after seeing those pictures...yeah. My BOB may not be able to cuddle, but he also isn't with a different vagina every night. He's mine and I don't have to share him with anyone.

6.



Ernie keeps his mouth shut on our way to SouthPark Mall Saturday morning. However, his choice of music speaks volumes; “I Can’t Make You Love Me” by Bonnie Raitt, “Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield, “Creep” by Radiohead, “Lovefool” by the Cardigans, and “Damn I wish I was Your Lover” by Sophie B. Hawkins to name a few. Schmuck.

My phone rings and I pull it out to see it’s Jonah.

“Yes, *kapitan?*”

“Hello to you too, Avinu.” I remain silent so he’ll get to the point. “Fine.” He huffs out a long-winded sigh but continues. “Got a call from Tim’s widow. Some guys came around the house this morning, demanding to know where her husband was. Said she didn’t know. They left a business card

in case he gets in touch. Strongly urged her to notify them as soon as possible, for her and her children's sake."

I grit my teeth, not liking whoever is threatening a woman and children. "Who is it?"

"The card they left has Zach Armstrong and a phone number on it."

"Vague." I murmur, "Ok, have Yakov look into it, see if he can find anything about this Zach Armstrong. And have Tevye put two people on her and the kids round the clock. If things escalate, we can always relocate her to a safe house."

"I'll call them now." In the pause that follows his words, I pinch the bridge of my nose, waiting for his jokes. "Did you stay up all night cutting letters out of magazines so you could leave her a love note?"

I smile but keep my voice unamused. "I'm not stalking her."

"Right. I often continue to harass a woman after she's so spectacularly turned me down...oh, wait, I've never been turned down before. I have literally no idea what that's like. Does it hurt? Is your ego weeping?"

I hang up on my cousin and glare at the one driving my SUV. "Snitches get stitches."

"No, snitches get homemade butterscotch pie and brisket."

As we walk into Nordstrom's ten minutes later, I know immediately she isn't here. Don't ask me how, I just know. I find a young woman fixing a rack and step in front of her. "Excuse me miss, I'm looking for Seril, is she in today?"

Her dark eyes widen in alarm when she looks at me. She knows who I am. "No, sir. She doesn't work here on the weekends."

I cock my head to the side, "She has another job on the weekends?"

She nods, taking a tentative step closer and whispers, "You aren't going to hurt her, are you? She's really nice and—"

“No, I have no intention of ever hurting her, I promise. Would you be willing to tell me where else she works?” I admire her looking out for Seril, unlike that twit from the other night.

I watch her throat as she swallows hard, then she shakes her head. “No, I’m sorry, I can’t tell you that. It wouldn’t be right.” Her answer makes me smile, I turn to see Ernest staring at the little creature in front of me, an intense furrow between his brows.

“What is your name?” I don’t see a name tag on her person. She wrings her hands in front of her, but answers softly.

“Bailey.”

“Thank you for your help, Bailey, and for being such a good friend to my girl.” Her eyes widen at my words, but she remains silent as I nudge Ernest. “My associate, Ernest, will give you my card. Should you ever need anything, please do not hesitate to contact me.” She turns her focus on my cousin, a small gasp escaping her when she finally meets his eyes. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again soon, Bailey.” As I pass Ernest, I whisper, “Give her your number too.” He glances at me, nods, then removes a business card from his pocket. I leave them alone as I walk around the store, giving him a chance to speak to the young woman who has rendered him speechless.

“Mr. Holofcener, how lovely to see you again so soon.” The viper. I turn slowly, my face devoid of emotion, my eyes hard. “Was there a problem with your suit? I should have helped you—”

“Is Seril here today?” I ask, already knowing the answer. Natalie cocks her hip and places her hand on the dip of her waist.

“No, she’s at Panera. She works there on the weekends. I’ve told my boss repeatedly that she doesn’t fit in here, but he’s thinking with his...well, not his brain that’s for sure.” I swallow the rage that builds in my chest at the thought of this

boss making unwanted advances on my girl and give Natalie a polite smile.

“Thank you.” I turn to leave, but she grabs my wrist. Not a wise move. Whatever she sees in my face when I look at her has her dropping her hand like it’s on fire.

“Where are you going? I can help you—”

“You’ve already been most helpful. In the future, if someone asks you the whereabouts of a co-worker, especially a female, you should keep your botoxed lips firmly shut. And if I hear of you or anyone else making disparaging remarks about Seril...or Bailey,” I add in because she’s clearly caught Ernest’s attention, “you will be hard pressed to find new employment within the great state of North Carolina.”

I leave her flummoxed, waving my hand to signal I’m ready to leave. Ernie sprints to my side, his head bouncing back to Bailey until we’re outside.

“You realize I’m going to tell everyone and make fun of you, right?”

“You can try, but unlike you, I got my girl’s number.”

“Fuck.” I lament as he chuckles. “Is there a Panera near here?”

“I think so.” He pulls out his phone and a moment later, he’s showing me it’s not far away. “You hungry?” His side eye is warranted, we don’t eat out much, at least not at restaurants we or our allies do not own. Certainly not chains.

“Seril works there.” I tell him, unashamed of my behavior, and figuring he’ll find out soon enough anyway.

“Seril at work, Moshe in a tree, S-T-A-L-K-I-N-G. First comes rejection, next comes order of protection, then comes Moshe with a neglected erection.” He can barely finish his ridiculous song before he’s doubled over laughing hysterically.

“The neglected erection comes first.”

“Nope, it doesn’t come at all!”

“You’re fired.”

7.



I'm glad to be working in the kitchen today. My face still hurts a little, and I'm not in the mood to smile at everyone who comes in. However, the heat is melting my makeup off. I've caught a few coworkers staring, but no one has said a word. I've only worked here for three months, and while for most people that would be plenty of time to form friendships, I'm not most people.

I unlocked my mom's bedroom door and fixed her breakfast before leaving this morning at the butt-crack of dawn. No one should be up that early...ever. Spending 8 hours working in a hot kitchen doesn't help.

"Sarah?" One of the front people call through the opening into the kitchen. I don't think we have a Sarah, at least not that I've met. "Sarah? Oh, sorry. Seril." I raise my head to look at

John, see I can remember people's names, and quirk an eyebrow.

“What do you need?” I ask, transferring a pan of dough into the oven.

“Someone is asking for you.” I remove my gloves and wipe my sweaty hands on my apron, stand up and follow him through the swinging doors. My feet stop dead at the sight of Moshe Holofcener looking out of place on the other side of the counter and sin incarnate at the same time. What is he doing here? How did he know I was here?

“Are you stalking me?” I whisper hiss, leaning close to the counter so I'm not overheard. His companion from the night before last giggles next to him. I spare him a small smile before resuming my glare at Mr. Holofcener.

“Not exactly.”

“That answer does not make me feel better.” He sighs, dragging a hand down his face, then plants both hands on the counter and leans in to meet my eyes. He smells better than anything we bake in this place, and I want to lick him...but I don't because I'm an adult who is responsible and stopped licking things that didn't belong to her in kindergarten. Shoot. I don't lick anything, not even the stuff that belongs to me. I'm verklempt around this man and I don't like it.

His gold and brown eyes are soft for several seconds. When he trails his gaze over my face, I swear I can feel it, or maybe that's the firm yet gentle grip on my wrist. “What happened to your face?” My eyes widen in alarm, and I attempt to move back, but he holds tight.

“It's nothing.”

“Not nothing, you're bruised. Who the fuck touched you?” The menacing growl does terribly inappropriate things to me, and I fight to find my voice.

“Nobody touched me, it was an accident.”

“Name. Now, bubbeleh. I will not have you harmed—” I snort a laugh, which apparently is the secret code to get him to

release me. His dark brow creases as he stares at me, obviously taken aback by my reaction to him.

“Do I amuse you?” He questions, his voice low and lethal. I should probably be scared, especially if what Natalie said is true and this man is the head of the Jewish Mafia, but I’m not. Perhaps my self-preservation has malfunctioned.

“Sorry, Mr. Holofcener—”

“Moshe.” He enunciates his first name, moy-shah, moving closer yet again, “Say it, bubbeleh.”

“Moshe.”

“Good girl.” I watch his tongue trace his thick bottom lip, then snap my eyes to his as his lips curl into a smirk. “Now, come have lunch with me.” Ahhh! This guy drives me nuts.

“No.” I answer, then spin on my heel and walk back to the kitchen.

“Seril! I will cause a scene if you do not eat lunch with me right now!” He threatens, my shoulders hunching at being called out in the middle of my job...again.

“Listen here, you arrogant—”

“She would love to join you, Mr. Holofcener, I’ll have someone bring your food right out.” I stare at my manager, Jim, my mouth gaping open in shock.

“I’m working.” I hiss at him, my shoulders inching higher when I see people staring in my periphery.

“It’s time for your break anyway. Go, enjoy lunch. It’s already been paid for.”

I step into Jim’s personal space and look up into his friendly older face. He’s a nice man. However, I’m very close to kicking him in the shin. “My meals are free per my employment.”

Jim’s smile stretches, his eyes twinkling with humor as he whispers, “He doesn’t know that.”

“Jim—”

“You have a half hour, Seril, time’s a wastin’.” I rip my apron off over my head and shove it into Jim’s chest. He takes it with a hearty laugh and pats me on the shoulder as I stomp past him.

“So glad you agreed to join me.” Moshe threads his arm through mine and leads me to an empty booth. “Sit, bubbeleh, what would you like to drink?” He sits down across from me and then Ernest is standing next to us with three empty cups in his hands.

“Mountain Dew.” I make to rise to get my own, but they both insist I stay put. Ernest walks away to fetch our drinks and I stare at everything but Moshe.

“Seril. Look at me.” I slowly raise my chin to meet his penetrating stare. “Why won’t you talk to me...willingly?”

“Because I don’t like you.” He throws his head back and laughs. He laughs. “I like you even less now.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to change your opinion of me.”

“I don’t really have that kind of time. Half hour for lunch, remember? Also...no.” Ernest comes back and sets my drink down, Moshe’s, then turns to take a seat at another table. “Why isn’t he sitting with us? You can’t share a meal with the help? Ernie, come back and pop a squat.”

I don’t know what’s come over me, but I’m all piss and vinegar at the moment. He wants to get to know me, he found out where I worked, and bought my lunch and convinced my fatherly boss to force me into taking a break. What in the name of Betty White is happening right now?

Moshe waves Ernie over to the table and scoots over so he can take a seat. I reach across the table and put my hand out to shake. “Ernest, nice to meet you. I’m Seril.” After a quick look at Moshe, Ernest gives me a brilliant smile and eagerly shakes my hand.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Moshe pulls Ernest’s arm until he releases his hold on my hand. “What would Bailey think?” Ernest loses his smile instantly.

“Bailey? Who’s Bailey?” I ask, taking a sip of my drink. Before they can answer, Tommy drops off our food and scurries away. I dig in right away, taking a giant bite out of my turkey, avocado sandwich, and a hearty spoonful of my broccoli mac and cheese. I only have 23 minutes left and I’m starving anyway.

“Bailey, she works with you at Nordstrom.” Ernie answers after several moments of silence. When I chance a look up from my food, I find both men staring at me, Ernie amused and Moshe...geez, it’s hot out here in the dining room too. I take another sip of my drink and choose to look at Ernest instead of Mr. Sexy Pants.

“You know Bailey? What a small world. She’s so sweet.”

“Just met her today actually, we were looking for you.” Ernie grunts when Moshe elbows him in the ribs but continues undeterred. “She wouldn’t give up your location, though, she’s a loyal friend. And very pretty.” He’s smitten, as he should be, Bailey is one of the few in the store I can stand. She’s also the only one who has made me wish I had more time to do fun things, like have friends...until now. Unfortunately, it is what it is and it ain’t gonna change anytime soon.

“My location?” I snort, taking another bite, “So, how did you know where to find me then?”

“Natalie.” Moshe imbues her name with such disdain I can’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, she’s a...*yenteh*.” His grin at my use of Yiddish is infectious and my own lips stretch without my consent. I force my face back into a scowl and take another bite of my sandwich.

“Bitch. I believe the word you are looking for is bitch.” Ernie whispers conspiratorially with a wink.

“That too.” I whisper back, enjoying the possessive grumble coming from Moshe.

“What time are you finished today?” Moshe inquires, wrapping his lips around his straw and drawing the cold liquid

to his hot mouth...I'm so hot now my vagina is sweating. Yeah, let's go with that.

"No." I tell him when I've swallowed my last bite of sandwich. I pull the bowl of mac and cheese closer and finish that off as well.

"No? What time is that? Ernie, do you know?"

"I do not, Avinu."

"Why does he call you that?" I blurt out, wanting to kick my own shin for engaging in conversation with this man.

"Avinu is Hebrew for 'our father', it's what we call the..."

"...head of your mafia family?" I'm tactful enough to whisper. Moshe's eyes turn hard again and Ernie sucks in a breath, sitting back in his seat. I've crossed a line, but I want him to know I know who he is.

"The CEO of Mishpocheh Consortium." I tilt my head to the side and observe his gritted teeth, the ticking in his sharp jaw, the way his pulse beats in his chorded neck.

"Is that the legal name for the Kosher Nostra?" What the hell am I doing? I need to stop talking. Why am I egging him on like this?

"Bubbeleh, you are walking a fine line." I throw my napkin onto my empty plate, drain my drink, and pick up my garbage.

"I'm not walking anything, Mr. Holofcener. I've got too much going on in my life to add Mafia man's mistress to the list. Thanks for lunch, have a nice day." He doesn't say a word as I walk away, dispose of my garbage, and take my plates back to the kitchen. I grab an apron from the wall, don my gloves, and get back to work. And if I'm a little sad he didn't stop me, well, that's just something I'll have to live with, just like every other disappointment in my life.

8.



Sitting at the island in the expansive main kitchen of the Holofcener compound, I bring my coffee cup to my mouth to hide my smile as my sister, Ruthie, prattles on. Our cousins, Sophie and Tovah are impatiently waiting their turns to animatedly tell me their own versions of the same story. My sister is the youngest in not just my immediate family, but of all the cousins. The boys indulge her, and the girls encourage her.

“There were so many options, everywhere you looked, and so inexpensive. Purses. Women’s casual. Women’s dress. Shoes. So many shoes. Men’s casual. They had the sharpest navy-blue V-neck sweater, Mo, and I bought it, but I wasn’t supposed to say anything, it was supposed to be a birthday gift, but who cares, I bought you a sweater.”

“I’ll pretend to be surprised.” I promise her, but she’s barely paying me any attention.

“Ruthie, get to the point.” Sophie gently urges my sister, but Tovah isn’t having it, taking over the story and grabbing my coffee cup from my hands to put down so she can hold my hands and stare deep into my eyes. Creepy.

“She’s beautiful, Mo. Absolutely gorgeous. Polite, professional, with a hint of sass.”

“A real mensch.” Sophie adds, her hand ruffling my hair. I swat her hand away with a glare, she’s unfazed. “When are you gonna bring her over?”

“Subject her to this mishegas? She can barely stand me.”

“Exactly, so introduce us and we’ll bring her over to the kosher side.” My sister claps her hands and bounces in place.

“Why are you so excited?” Ruthie bites her bottom lip and looks away for a moment.

“You’ve never brought anyone home, really, and you aren’t getting any younger, and the type of women you keep company with—”

“You fuck skanks and gold diggers and it’s gross.” I splutter at Tovah’s bluntness, though I shouldn’t be surprised. She’s exactly like her twin, Tevye.

“What she means is...” Sophie begins, then shrugs, “you spend time with unsuitable females, but you do not share a connection with any of them, thank God. You are a good man, Mo, you deserve a good woman by your side.”

“And you think Seril is that woman?”

Ruthie wraps her arms around my neck from behind, resting her head against mine. “We do, but more importantly, you do too. You knew it the moment you looked at her.”

“That’s true. However, that still doesn’t change the fact that she’s shut me down, more than once.”

“Oh, we know. Ernie is an excellent actor, the way he switches between roles during his reenactment is seamless.”

The girls laugh while I glare at Tovah. She flicks me on the forehead, “She’s not a socialite or an heiress, she has jobs and responsibilities, and you need to show her you respect that and admire her. Ernie said she seemed aware of our...family’s ventures.” I nod solemnly, not enjoying that particular memory. “We are who we are, can’t change that. But you’ve made it better, legitimizing the consortium and expanding our business portfolio legally. Show her you are more than your name and a pretty face.”

“Aw, you think I’m pretty?” I bat my eyelashes at the girls. I hold up my hand to interrupt them when my phone buzzes on the counter.

“Tev, what’s happening?” Tovah snarls at the phone when she hears me address her brother.

“You’re interrupting girl time!” She yells, so I flick her back and move away from the kitchen to hear him better.

“Avinu,” with that one word, my entire body goes on alert, “Tim’s house is on fire.”

“Annaleigh and the kids?” I ask, already walking back through the house and out the front door to get to my vehicle. Ernie’s off today, but my security detail scrambles back into their vehicles as I throw open the driver’s door and slide in.

“We got them out but were unable to stop the fire from spreading. We are enroute to one of the safehouses, now.”

“Anyone injured?”

The silence stretches on too long. “Ivan went back in to get their dog and the ceiling collapsed on him. He’s gone.” I grip the steering wheel tight and curse. Motherfuckers will pay.

“Fire department, police?”

“Interviewed Annaleigh, said they’d be in touch. Fire department was working to contain the damage.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Avinu, don’t go to their house, no one needs to connect you with Tim, meet me at Jeff Goldblum’s.” Despite the anger coursing through me, I snicker at the codename for one of the

safe houses. We have several throughout the state and they are all named after famous Jewish people.

I hang up, using my Bluetooth to call Yakov.

“I’m already on it, Avinu.”

“We all have abysmal phone etiquette.” I murmur. “Tim?” I want to make sure he and I are on the same page, not that much escapes Yakov’s notice.

“I’ve been trying to find where the money went, but I’ve had other projects take priority since we weren’t as concerned with how he was spending it.”

“I’m wondering if the man was in deep with someone else and they’re calling it in.”

“That would explain why the amount of money he liberated from our coffers steadily increased over the last four weeks.”

“Liberated from our coffers? He fucking stole from us! You can cover it in gold, it’s still shit. He took that which did not belong to him. He betrayed our trust...my trust.”

“He’s lucky all you did was take his life.”

“And I ruined a perfectly good suit in the process.”

“But you met your one true love or some shit. That’s what I heard. And now you’re stalking her.”

“Do my *kapitans* gossip before or after the circle jerk?”

“During. Duh. And don’t judge, it’s a great team building exercise.” Chuckling, I take the exit I need, checking my rearview to see my security detail is still close behind.

“Gossiping or jerking off?”

“Those who cum together, stay together.”

9.



I get lost in the mundane task of folding shirts, making sure the sizes are displayed in proper order, then taking a duster to each of the shelves. It's Thursday, which means it's been 5 days since I've seen Moshe. Yet, while he hasn't shown his face, I have no doubt he's been keeping an eye on me. Several in fact.

And here's two more eyes now.

"Seril?" I look up from where I'm wiping a shelf to see a regal middle-aged woman with knowing brown eyes streaked with gold. She's about my height, without her heels, mahogany brown shoulder length curly hair threaded with gray. Her skin is flawless, her jewelry expensive, her dress immaculate and figure flattering. She holds herself with

confidence, surrounded by the same commanding air as her son.

“Mrs. Holofcener, I presume?” I reply in answer, laying down the rag and holding out my clean hand to shake. She clasps mine firmly, pumping twice before releasing, her shrewd eyes never leaving my face.

“Why have you turned down my son?” She just jumps right in, doesn’t she?

“I’m not sure that is any of your business, ma’am.”

“It’s not, but I’m nibby. And his mother. And I find it absolutely delightful that you said no. Repeatedly. My nephew Ernie has been regaling the entire family with the stories of my son’s spectacular rejections.” My face flames with embarrassment that his family knows. “Don’t worry, dear, he had it coming. 28 years is a long time to remain unchallenged, don’t you agree?” I nod dumbly. She looks around the store, then checks the delicate watch on her wrist. “Do you have a break coming up?”

“I already took my break, I’m afraid. I have three more hours on my shift.” She sighs, shrugs, and then turns to survey the store once again.

“Well, then take me shopping.”

“Pardon me?” I’m not sure I understand. What is she doing?

“We can shop as we talk. I have plenty of people to buy for, myself included, nieces, nephews, sisters, brothers, sons, daughter...”

I smirk, picking up my cleaning supplies and leading her to the counter. I put my things away under the desk, lean on the shiny surface and meet her eyes. “I believe I’ve met some of these nieces you speak of, perhaps a daughter as well. Why are you here? No offense intended, but clearly you are not accustomed to shopping in stores. I imagine you have enough personal shoppers to fill a baseball roster.”

“You are astute.” She runs her fingers through her hair, pushing it away from her face. I didn’t really consider Moshe’s

family, but I wouldn't have imagined the wife of a mob boss would be so warm and affable. "My son is quite taken with you—"

"And half the female population of North Carolina." She grimaces momentarily, composing herself quickly.

"My son and many of the young, unmarried men of the family, work hard and play harder. That doesn't mean they are not good men. However, not once has he ever spoken to me about who he spends his time with. He has never sat at a charity dinner and told me about his future wife." I gasp, but she continues, "My Moshe has a full life, at least he thought he did until he met you." Mrs. Holofcener shakes her head and wipes under her eyes. "Spend some time with me over the next few hours, spend my money and maybe learn a thing or two about the man who is trying really hard not to stalk you." She leans in close, like she's sharing a secret, "If nothing else, I could use a friend, how about you?"

Dagnabbit. I like her. I like Moshe's mom. And his sister and cousins too. We spend the next two hours going from department to department, talking, laughing, and shopping. My time with Esther goes by too quickly, leaving me feeling lighter than I've felt in a long time. I miss my mom. I miss the relationship I had with her before...

She said I could learn about Moshe, and I do. She tells me stories of his childhood, some sad, some cute, some I'm sure he would prefer she never repeat. I see a side to the confident playboy that he hasn't shown me yet. Because I haven't given him a chance.

It was the possibility of friendship that intrigued me the most. I don't have any, really, and after tonight, I think I've found one. Esther is impossible not to like, and even harder to say no to. Somehow, I manage.

"Join us at synagogue for the Sabbath tomorrow evening. Services start at 7:30." I shake my head before she even finishes speaking.

"Thank you for the invitation, but I am afraid I will be unable to make it." With a smile, I ask, "How did you know I

was Jewish?”

“Shaifeleh, I recognize the weight of the world you carry on your shoulders, much like my son. Only someone who grew up in the Jewish faith can work so hard and yet feel so guilty.”

Esther pulls me into her arms, my head resting on her shoulder while she rubs my back. Tears cling to my lashes as I fight to hold them back. “When you are ready, I hope you trust me enough to let me in, to help you with what weighs you down.” She pulls back, using her thumbs to brush away my tears. “Now, who’s going to take my bags to the car?”

I snort, covering my nose when snot comes dangerously close to escaping. She laughs, giving me a handkerchief. I’d almost forgotten that she’s a wealthy mafia wife and not just some sweet mom looking for more kids to mother.

“I can assist you to your car.” She waves me off, taps a few buttons on her phone, then hugs me again. A mom hug. They are the best and I’ve missed them over the years. “Absolutely not dear, my guards will handle my purchases. You have my number, Seril, I expect to hear from you soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She growls, much like her son, and pins me with a harsh glare. “You call me Esther, shviger, or mame.”

“Yes...Esther.” I’m not comfortable calling her mother-in-law or mother. Her son and I haven’t even been on a date. Are we going on a date? Have I decided to give him a chance? Ugh, this is too hard.

“We’ll get there. Goodnight, Seril.”

30 minutes later, my shift ends, and I ignore the curious stares of my co-workers, grabbing my jacket and exiting the store to start my walk home. Tonight was enlightening and the most fun I’ve had in a long while. The last 7 years have been nothing short of a nightmare. I’m not naïve enough to think that having a boyfriend or a new friend who happens to be his mother will suddenly turn my life into a Hallmark movie.

Perhaps, though, they can be the sunlight breaking through the clouds every now and then.

When I walk into my apartment, the first thing I notice is the smashed table and lamp by the couch. My mother sits in her recliner, blood dried beneath her nose. “Seril, pumpkin, how was your day?” I inhale deeply, closing my eyes, desperately trying to remember the warmth I felt with Esther earlier. The grin that transforms Moshe’s face from leader of the mafia to handsome suitor. I open my eyes, focus on my mother, and give her a genuine smile.

“I had a great day, mama, what about you?”



“You’ve talked to Ezra?” I ask Vicente Moretti, Junior. For years, the Holofcener family has had close ties to the Italian mafia in New York and the Irish mob in Florida. We’ve developed not only a working relationship exporting stolen vehicles, serving as marijuana suppliers, and providing financial backing, but generations of friendships. Everyone is busy managing their own empire, however, occasionally we get to sit back and shoot the shit...instead of an enemy.

“No, I talked to your scary cousin.” Cento grumbles in my ear, and I can clearly hear him shiver. Tovah is not for the faint at heart. “Ezra was busy with something, and this is routine, besides, we all know who really runs Exodus Freight.” Laughing, I sit back in my home office chair and put my feet up on my desk.

“So, this is a social call?”

“I heard it through the grapevine...” His singing is terrible, I groan and drop my feet because of the yapping yentehs I seem to be surrounded by.

“Who told you?”

“The *donne* have had the phones buzzing for days now. I’m surprised cell towers across the eastern seaboard haven’t shut down from overload. Truthfully, though, Zilv sent out a group text that included a video reenactment performed by Ernie.” Fucker busts out laughing so loud, I have to take the phone away from my ear and place it on speakerphone. This also serves to free up my hands so I can plot Ernie’s demise on paper.

“Are you planning for maximum pain or a slow build?”

Dropping my pen, I lean on my elbows and speak close to the phone in a whisper, “Did you hack into my home security system again?” He and his cousins had a hell of a wonderful time messing with me and mine by changing our alarm tones to animals mating, adjusting the lighting sequences, and causing the appliances to turn on and off while in use. The only bright side to the shenanigans was that Teveye used the hack job as a test run and upgraded our systems security. He and Chaysa have been trying to break into each other’s networks ever since. So far, impenetrable and we’d like it to stay that way.

“No need, it’s what I’d do in your situation. Snitches get stitches.” I sigh, sitting upright and running my hand over my face and through my hair.

“Apparently, in our family they get dinner and dessert.”

“Damn, I’m coming down for a visit and snitching left and right. Your mama’s cooking is worth the retaliation.”

“Ernest agrees with you. Ok, so I met a girl...”

“Yeah, yeah, I got that much. You really going to wife her up?”

Smiling, I think of my Seril. Feisty and composed, beautiful and raw. “As soon as she’ll let me.”

“You gonna stick with one pussy for the rest of your life? Or are you gonna keep—”

“I suggest not finishing that sentence. I always knew I’d get married, it’s not like any of our moms are shy about wanting grandbabies.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.”

“And honestly, you know my parents, my aunts and uncles, their marriages are rock solid and enviable. I fucked around, but it was just a matter of time until I found—”

“*The One?*” He can mock me all he wants, I know what I’ve got, or well, what I’ll have once I can convince her to give me a shot.

“Jealous?”

“Nah man, I’m good with the variety pack.”

“VICENTO MORETTI, I ever hear you talk like that about women again, I’ll tell your mother.” My mame stands in the doorway of my home office, her nostrils flaring, and her arms crossed over her chest. Despite her yoga pants and off the shoulder sweater, her hair is styled and her make up done for a night on the town. She says you never know when guests will stop by unannounced, but I think she just doesn’t want anyone to see her without her war paint. Even when she was giving birth to me, my brother Zilv, and my sister Ruth...hair styled, make up on point, tate says she didn’t even break a sweat. For fuck’s sake, she wears heeled golf shoes to the country club.

“Tante Esther, what a wonderful surprise. Oh, look at the time, I’ve got to go.” Cento hangs up like the coward he is, so I stand to greet my mame.

“Sit down, we need to talk.” Oh. After a half-assed hug, I sit on the couch and pat the seat next to me, but she waves me off and starts pacing. “Seril Manoff.” I sit up straight at the mention of my girl.

“You know her last name?”

“Yakov adores me, *yoksh*.” I bristle at being called a buffoon, but her glare is enough to keep me quiet. “Moshe, she’s perfect for you. I had such a lovely time with her on Thursday—”

“You saw her on Thursday? It’s Saturday afternoon, why am I just hearing about this now?”

“Your tate is resting,” she gives me a wink that has bile rising up my throat, “but I won’t hesitate to wake him to kick your tuchus.” I snap my mouth closed at her empty threat, but my narrow eyes continue to track her. “She will make a wonderful wife to the Avraham Avinu, after she tells you what she’s hiding, and we fix it.” I remain silent, waiting for her to continue, instead she looks at me expectantly.

“Oh, am I allowed to speak now?”

“*Kinder...*” I hold up my hands in surrender with a chuckle.

“She doesn’t give away much about herself.” Mame huffs in agreement.

“That poor child is suffocating, Moshe, and I want nothing more than to lift her burden and give her the chance to breathe.”

“I want the same, mame, and a few other—”

“We are having a moment, don’t sully it.” With a grin, I sit back and cross my legs. “I know you had Yakov look into her background, but I also know you haven’t read the report yet. Why?”

Sighing, I close my eyes and picture Seril’s face, the mesmerizing pattern of freckles that dot the landscape, the ornery smile she gave me at Panera, the way she slammed the door shut in my face when I tried to learn more... “Because I want her to tell me, I want her to open up to me. It would be a violation of privacy and a terrible way to begin a relationship. Yakov knows to tell me anything urgent, if she is in danger, but he hasn’t said anything, so I assume I have time.”

Mame sits down next to me on the couch and pulls me into a bone breaking hug. “You are such a good man, my Moshe.

Do you know why we named you Moshe?"

I shake my head, resting it on top of hers. I know damn well why they did, but I also know that my mother loves to tell the story, so I indulge her.

"Before you were born, when your Zayde served as the Avinu, the Kosher Nostra was deep into illegal activities. They were dark times, and the Four Families and the O'Sheerans were just as bogged down as we were. Your tate knew that the time was coming when things would have to change. Watching brothers, cousins, friends go to prison, watching them die was too much. He was set to take over in a couple of years when you were born. And we both agreed, we both knew the moment we laid eyes on your slimy wrinkled little body and old man face, that you were going to be the one to lead our family, to preserve our legacy, you were our savior. Much like Moses to our people in ancient Egypt."

I give her a moment to collect herself, knowing this story always makes her verklempt. Then I push her gently back until I can see her face and scowl. "I've seen pictures, I did not look like an old man."

"You were the inspiration behind *Benjamin Button*. We almost named you 'Zayde' by accident." I chuckle pushing her away playfully.

"What do I do? She keeps turning me down. You talked to her; do I even have a chance?"

"She's scared, overwhelmed, and alone. But she has us now. I think you do have a chance, especially after we talked, but if not, I'll keep her for myself. She's my new bestie." Mame announces proudly.

"I thought your sisters were your besties, and Tante Judy?" I ask, standing up and gathering my wallet. She thinks I might have a chance, and I'm going to strike while the iron's hot.

Mame stands, smooths out her clothing which are wrinkle free and pats me on the cheek. "I've been around them for decades, I need some fresh meat. Someone who is as young as

I feel.” Her pats become harder, “Why are you laughing? You think I’m old?”

I grin obnoxiously, “Not at all, mame.” Her eyes narrow, her lips purse.

“I’m not too old to wear out your father.” I storm out of my office and through the compound, her evil cackling following me at every turn.



“Behind you hot!” I call out as I maneuver through the kitchen of Panera’s on Saturday afternoon. I’ve got about 20 minutes left in my shift, then I need to run home and feed mama, get a shower, and rest my feet. And do it all again tomorrow. And the next day and the next.

Backing up through the kitchen doors into the bakery area, I spin around and come to a halt when I notice Moshe standing against the wall, his intense eyes trained on the door I just exited. His entire demeanor shifts, lightens, as he takes me in. A small smile playing on his lips that has me licking my own, wondering what he tastes like.

Ok, so I’m not wishy washy. I promise. It’s just...Esther is persuasive. You haven’t met her, don’t judge. I may have held

back on attending synagogue yesterday, but my brain and heart haven't stopped their negotiations since my conversation with her on Thursday. And not gonna lie, he took up way too much real estate in my head even before that.

Stifling a smile, I unload the tray of turnovers, then give him a wink as I turn back into the kitchen. There's a bounce in my step as I clean up from my work, wash my hands and face, clock out and gather my belongings.

He's waiting for me, alone, when I step out from behind the counter. Without a word, he offers me his hand. I stare at it for a moment, just a second, realizing this is it. I either ignore his hand and be done with him, or I take the chance to follow where he leads.

His hand is surprisingly rough, but warm and firm when he wraps his fingers around mine. His eyes glow with happiness, his teeth practically sparkling as he opens the door for me and ushers me outside.

We don't make it far, before he's swinging me around and pulling me close, resting his head on mine and breathing me in. I'm stiff at first, besides Esther, it's been ages since I've had a hug. And no offense to her awesome mom hugs, there is nothing like being engulfed in Moshe's heat and protective embrace. My heart is thumping against my ribs, excitement and near debilitating fear warring with every erratic beat.

"Relax, bubbeleh, I've got you." The low timbre of his voice like warm honey. His scent of fruit and nature comforting. My muscles begin to lose their tension the longer he holds me, the longer his steady heartbeat echoes in my ear.

One hug and I'm gone. I'm in so much trouble.

"I'm only agreeing because I really like your mom." I say to diffuse the heaviness of the moment. He chuckles, sending delicious vibrations down my spine.

"I haven't asked you anything yet, what are you agreeing to?" I pinch his side through his suit, but my fingers rub against something hard. He holds still while I open his jacket slightly to peer inside. My eyes widen and my mouth gapes as

I realize he has a shoulder holster and a gun hidden beneath the clean lines of his attire. “I cannot tell you much, bubbeleh, at least not yet, but please know that while I am not innocent, I do not harm women and children. And we do not work with anyone who does.”

“Am I in danger?” He shrugs which does not make me feel any better about the situation.

“Everyone is in danger, I cannot predict the future, but I can swear to you to always do my best to keep you safe, provided for, and well loved.” His words do make me feel marginally better. It’s a lot to think about. Not just dating, bringing a man into my hectic life, but one who isn’t always on the right side of the law. Although I don’t have great trust in the law, the last few years have disavowed me of that.

“I can get that from your mom.” Pushing me back by my shoulders, he stares down into my eyes, a smile playing at his lips.

“You aren’t her type.”

I sigh with a shrug. “That’s ok, she isn’t mine either.” His smile broadens, his hands moving up and down my arms soothingly.

“And what is your type?”

I bite the inside of my cheek as I think about his question. I haven’t given it much thought, really. Thinking now about my schedule, my responsibilities, I answer honestly, “Dependable. Understanding. Compassionate. Faithful.” He nods his head as I list my requirements. “My life is...there’s a bit I need to explain, but not yet. I don’t want to get into it all if you decide after two dates that I’m not worth keeping around—”

“Why would you think that?” I don’t want to answer because it’s embarrassing. My painful blush gives me away enough for him to know that something is up. “Has someone said that to you before? Name? Now, Seril.”

I know he’s being protective, and his growly demands are certainly messing with the dryness of my panties, but I laugh

anyway. “Anytime someone hurts or offends me, you can’t just go all caveman and demand their names.”

He bends low so his face is just inches, centimeters from mine, his minty breath ghosting across my skin. “I can and I will. I have the means—”

“Keep it holstered, buddy.” His cheeks twitch, then his lips, eyes soften, and his head tips back on a laugh.

“You are unlike anyone I have ever met.” I’m not sure how to reply to that, so instead I just offer him a soft smile and wait for him to finish laughing. “Alright, two dates, then you tell me everything I need to know about you.”

“You are so sure you won’t change your mind about me?” I say it jokingly, but my heart races as I wait for his answer.

“I can’t imagine there is anything, aside from you kicking puppies and being a Neo-Nazi, which would change my mind about you, Seril.” He slowly reaches up, his hands lightly brushing the fly aways from my face before cupping my cheek, his thumb rubbing back and forth over the apple. The sincerity of his tone, the honesty in his eyes...it’s too much.

“Before you go professing your undying love for a woman you barely know, I have one more qualification to be my type.”

His boyish grin as he stands up has my lower half clenching in need. He’s so handsome. Opening his arms wide, he issues his challenge. “Go ahead, give it to me.”

I inhale deeply, lifting my chin to meet his challenge, my face heating as I force the words past my lips, “At least a seven-inch penis, wanna know someone’s down there, however, no longer than 10, I’m not Elastagirl.”

His eyes heat immediately, a sinful curl to his lips as he leans back down, this time his mouth next to my ear, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I’m about 8 ½, 9 on a good day.” Gulping, I imagine him looming above me, naked, his hard body pressing me into the mattress, as he drives his long thickness into me over and over again.

“Have you finished puberty?” Moshe drops his head to my shoulder, his body shaking as he laughs at my stupid question.

“God, I hope so.”

12.



I owe my mame a present. Diamonds. Chocolate. Flowers. Whatever she wants, it's hers. I don't know what she said to Seril, but I'm thankful. Seril might think that I'm gonna get bored after a couple of dates, but that tiny little woman keeps me guessing. She's a puzzle that I won't ever solve.

An aggravatingly independent puzzle. I check my watch again, there's still 10 minutes until we're supposed to meet. However, I detest being late, and I'm anxious to finally take her on a date. The feisty spark I like so much, also equates to wanting to provide her own transportation. She refused my offer of a driver, or to pick her up myself. I do understand we don't know each other well and she may not be comfortable giving a gentleman her address on the first date, but she has to

know that even if she doesn't give me her address personally, I would have no trouble finding it out another way.

Her momentary surprise at discovering I was armed earlier gave me a brief heart attack. I thought for sure she would distance herself immediately and walk away. Especially after what she said at Panera last week regarding my family's business. She surprised me once again by taking it in stride and agreeing to dinner. She assumes there is more to me than my role in organized crime, that she looks forward to getting to know the man behind the whispered rumors and staged photography.

She's probably the first person to ever wish to dive deeper into who I am. Most are content knowing that I'm wealthy, deadly, and generous in bed. My skin crawls as I think about her digging beneath the surface. Am I ready for the vulnerability? That level of trust? To show weakness in our lives is to open yourself up for pain. She could very well be what brings me to my knees.

And as I watch her walk around the corner and come into view, her modest form-fitting black dress and kitten heels... I'm thinking I should invest in knee pads. She's breathtaking. Understated and natural. Her long auburn hair slightly curled at the ends blowing in the slight breeze. The subtle sway of her hips. It's her raised chin and direct eye contact that truly get my cock lengthening in my dress pants. Her quiet strength... that is what the wife of the Avinu needs. Strength. Resiliency. Resourcefulness.

And I wouldn't say no to a tight pussy and lack of a gag-reflex.

I shake my head as she steps close, my arms winding around her waist as if they have been there a thousand times before. I notice the sharp intake of breath as I press my lips to hers, the way her eyes slowly close, the whimper at the back of her throat. Touching her like this, claiming her for everyone to see... I know true power for the first time in my 28 years.

I pull back, nibbling on her bottom lip, as I open my eyes and meet hers. I find my own desire reflected in her sapphire

depths. Her panting breath tickling my short beard. I rub my nose along the length of hers before pulling back completely.

“Hi.” I say with a smile, my voice husky. Her cheeks pinken and I can’t resist leaning back in for one more chaste kiss.

“Hi.” She murmurs when I step back, keeping my left arm around her trim waist. Her hands come up to my chest, moving up and down over my suit jacket as she bites the inside of her cheek and holds my gaze.

“You look absolutely stunning, bubbeleh.” My grin grows at the way her skin flushes darker at my compliment. “Thank you for joining me this evening.”

She shrugs, her lips twisting to the side as her eyes dance with merriment, “You’ve been pretty persistent. Didn’t think I had much choice.”

“I’m a man of action.” I declare to her amusement. “I saw you and...that was it. Everything fell into place.”

“How can you be so sure?” She questions, her head cocked to the side, her voice just above a whisper.

My eyes dart to her mouth, her hair, down her body and back to her face. “One plus one is two, you can never truly escape taxes, my cock is substantial,” I pause for her giggles, “some things just are. They are absolute.” I can tell by the way her jaw and throat work that I’ve stunned her.

She leans her head against my chest, her hands still roaming. “I believe the absolutes in my life are different from yours. And...I’m afraid...I’m unsure how they...”

“Shh. I apologize, I didn’t mean to rush you. I can be patient, I’m sure I’ve tried it a time or two in my life. And for you, I would do anything. Let’s take it one day at a time.”

“One meal at a time, a lot can happen in 24 hours. Did you ever watch the show with Kiefer Sutherland?”

“I always wondered when he went to the bathroom. You know, like those things don’t go away just because you have to save a country.”

“Terrorism does not wait for bladders.”

I lead her into the upscale restaurant, my hand still around her waist, laughing. “I’ll have to remember that one, my *kapitans* will appreciate it.”

“Kapitans?” She asks with an adorable wrinkle of her nose. I kiss the tip before giving my name to the starry-eyed hostess.

“I’ll explain another time.” She nods, turning a smile to the hostess as she guides us to our table. It’s in the back corner, my usual spot. I help Seril into her seat, then take my own. An uncomfortable silence descends on the table. I glance at Seril to see her staring at the hostess, who is standing next to us... still.

“Yes?” She titters at my question, which immediately grates on my nerves. I should have taken her somewhere my family doesn’t own and frequent.

“It’s so good to see you again, Moshe—” I raise a hand to stop her gushing when Seril sucks in a harsh breath.

“Mr. Holofcener.” I correct her.

She leans in closely, licks her lips and whispers, “But I had your cock in my mouth.”

“I once trusted a burp after eating an old taco. Woo. Won’t make that mistake again.” Seril cuts in, the hostess, whose name I can’t remember, and I glance at her, seeing a sweet expression on her face, her chin resting innocently in her hands.

“What?” The hostess regains her voice before I do.

Seril looks between the two of us, and shrugs, “I’m sorry, I thought we were naming things that won’t ever happen again.” She turns to me with an eyebrow cocked, and a sneer on her lips when I choke on a laugh. “Now it’s your turn, Moshe.”

“Uh...One time I took my future wife to a restaurant where I’ve been intimately familiar with the staff.”

“Future wife?” The hostess screeches, then falls all over herself apologizing to Seril. “I’m so sorry, I had no idea. I

would never insult the future wife of the...please, don't fire me. It happened months ago...I mean, it happened before you two got together...when exactly did you get together?"

"Shelly?" Yes, that's it, Shelly. How did Seril know her name? Oh, her name tag is pinned to her apron, how did I miss that? "You are not going to lose your job, I promise. But in the future, when you see a man with whom you have been..." Seril glances at me and rolls her eyes, "intimate, don't mention it to that man if he is with another woman. Unless it was like the day before, or earlier that day, then let the truth fly, because that man is a jackass."

"I understand, thank you. Again, I apologize. Your waitress will be right with you."

"Oh, Shelly?" I want to hide under the table because I know as soon as Shelly leaves Seril is going to rip me a new one, and rightly so, but I also want to watch the show because Seril is outstanding. "Please let the other staff know; male or female, I don't judge, that I'm not interested in being regaled with stories of Mr. Holofcener's prowess."

"Oh my God!" Shelly drops her head and rushes off, probably to spread the word that there's a new queen in town. Those knee pads are looking like a better investment the more time I spend with Seril.

I open my mouth and close it several times, unable to figure out where to start. Seril raises her hand to silence me, and I wisely snap it shut. I've grown up surrounded by strong women, I know when to keep quiet. Usually.

"I've had two previous sexual partners. My most recent was almost a year ago. They do not live in this city, so the likelihood of you ever running into them is slim to none. I understand you have a past, and I can respect that past helped forge you into the man you are today. However, if we decide to see each other again, it might be wise to branch out on your culinary choices and try someplace new...where the staff can't describe the length, girth, and taste of your penis."

"Will you marry me?" I blurt out, but I'm not joking. She's fucking perfect. Diplomatic, tactful, and still able to put

someone in their place and make a joke about it. Where has she been all my life?

“No.” She answers swiftly, but with a small smile as she raises her menu. “What do you recommend?”

The manager, Ira, a distant cousin of my mother’s, takes our orders minutes later, after bringing us a bottle of red wine to share. Seril takes one sip and shakes her head, pushing the glass to the center of the table, then orders a Mountain Dew.

“But...but...that’s a \$7,000 bottle of wine!” Ira stammers in shock. Seril nearly chokes on her tongue and leans across the table to grab his arm.

“People pay \$7,000 just to drink something they’re gonna piss out later?” She drops his hand and meets my widened eyes. “Why would they do that? It’s literally flushing money down the toilet!”

“Marry me?” She snorts a laugh and shakes her head.

“No. Now tell me your version of the time you got caught wearing your mom’s dress, high heels, and pearls.” Ira pats me on the back, then walks briskly from our table, while I drop my head into my hands and whine.

“She did not.” I murmur, more to myself than to her.

“Oh, she did. However, I do believe there are always three versions to every story, so I’d like to hear yours to compare.”

“Can we talk about something else? Literally, anything else?”

“Moshe.” Her serious tone has me snapping my head up to look at her. She reaches across the table to touch my hand; I wrap my fingers around hers and rest it on the table between us. “You insist there’s something between us, something that you are so sure about...then I need to know you. Not the head of the Kosher Nostra. Not the eldest child of the previous Avinu. Moshe Holofcener. Big brother to Zily and Ruth. First born to proud parents Esther and David.”

“And if I bare all, you’ll reciprocate?” I push, even though I know I shouldn’t.

She sighs, letting her eyes drop to our clasped hands before slowly meeting mine again. “Soon. Just give me a chance to wrap my head around this.”

I nod, take a deep breath, and let it all out. “There was a time, when I was younger, much younger, that I thought the women of the family were actually in charge. Tate kept telling me that I would take over for him one day, but I didn’t want to be second in charge, I wanted to be top dog. Like my mame.”

“So, you dressed up in your mother’s clothing to be like her.”

“You’ve met her, how can anyone think she isn’t the one who wears the pants in their relationship?” Seril’s eyes become glassy, her hand squeezing mine.

“You should tell your mame that someday. I bet she’d really like to hear the real reason you dressed up in her clothes. Mothers...it’s good to know when their children appreciate them.”

I know there’s more to her reaction, but I don’t push this time. “Why does she think I did it?” I’m curious to know what my mame told her.

“She thinks it’s because you watched *Mrs. Doubtfire*.” I drop my head back and groan, memories rushing in that I’d forgotten.

“That’s why she signed me up for improv lessons and made me dress as Peter from *Hook* for Halloween.”

“She wasn’t sure if it was a cross dressing thing, or if you wanted to be like Robin Williams.” Her eyes twinkle, the glassiness nearly gone, as she smirks. “I bet you looked cute in your green tights.”

“No, you don’t understand. She dressed me up as Peter Banning, his adult business persona.” I shake my head, sighing. “I had a briefcase that I toted around to collect my candy.”

“Ask me again.” She says breathlessly. It takes me a minute to figure out what she means. But when I do, my heart races, and my cock stirs.

“Marry me.” She shakes her head, and my hopes are dashed, why would she—

“No, but I’ll seriously consider seriously considering it.”

My phone buzzes obnoxiously in my pocket, interrupting the best date I’ve ever had. I dip my chin, “I’m sorry.” She nods in understanding and busies herself with people watching while I take the call.

“Tev, I’m a little bu—”

“You’ve got both of us.” Yakov interjects. “Security detail is on their way in to escort you to a Wagoneer, then bring you back to the compound.”

“Why, what happened?” I squeeze her hand, not sure why, but I like having the connection to her.

Tevye answers, “Someone knows your connection to Tim, and they want answers.”

“Ok, but why do I need to come home?”

“They left a message at the front gate. It’ll have more of an impact if you see it in person, Avinu.” I shoulder the phone and use my free hand to pinch the bridge of my nose. Seriously? Right now? What the fuck.

“Alright, I’ll be there soon. I want answers when I get there.” They disconnect the call as I do. Seril’s sad understanding smile nearly breaks my heart, but if Yakov and Tevye are contacting me to come home, it’s serious. And whoever is after Tim knowing our involvement isn’t good.

“I understand. Do what you gotta do, and we’ll talk again soon.” She says, attempting to stand up. My hold on her hand keeps her sitting.

“Bubbeleh, I don’t want to leave you. But I have business that needs my urgent attention.”

“I know. I’ll go home so you can deal with that. Just call me when you have time. Thank you for a wonderful start to a first date. I hope we get to finish it sometime.”

“Seril. I just got you to agree to go out with me, and to seriously consider seriously considering marrying me, you aren’t going anywhere. Come home with me. My parents and siblings all live at the compound, and my mame and Ruthie would love to see you.”

She’s shaking her head, her lips pursed. “I’m sorry, I can’t. I have to go home. Thank you for the invitation. Please give them my best.”

“You aren’t listening. It’s dangerous. I can’t explain more than that. But I can’t let you go home; it would be safer if you ___”

“Why would I be in danger? No one even knows who I am. Besides, I told you, I have to go home.” My phone buzzes incessantly on the table but I ignore it, I’m making her a priority. I can’t quell the fear that letting her go home would be a mistake.

“Seril, please come home with me, I can explain more there after I’ve—”

“You aren’t listening to me. I CAN NOT go home with you.”

“Do you have a cat or a dog? I can have someone swing by ___”

“Moshe!” I snap my mouth shut and clench my jaw. I do not appreciate her tone. “Did I piss you off? Good. Now maybe you’ll listen. I’m going home...alone. If I decide this behavior of yours was out of character, I will consider answering the phone when you call me in a day or two. Go handle your business. As of now, that does not include me. And if you continue to ignore me, it never will.” She stands, ripping her hand from mine and walking out of the restaurant without a backwards glance.

I jump up and run after her. “Seril. Wait.” She pauses in the foyer, turning to face me with her professional mask in place. Dammit. “At least let Ira pack up the food so you can take it home for dinner.” Her tiny nose twitches as she considers my request, then nods curtly. “Thank you.” I lean

down, press my lips to her cheek and linger for a moment longer than necessary, breathing her in and wishing tonight were ending differently. Her body shivers at my proximity, and it helps to let her go, knowing I affect her still. That I haven't ruined what I'm trying desperately to begin with her.

I stand up and snap for the hostess. Shelly runs over to us, eager to help. "Please let Ira know that our dinners need to be packed up and given to Miss Manoff." I turn to Seril, "Do you need a cab?" She shakes her head no, so I glance back at Shelly and give her a strained smile. "Just the food then, please."

"Right away, Mr. Holofcener."

"Avinu. We need to leave." One of my security team appears behind me, reminding me that I don't have the luxury of time to properly say goodbye to Seril.

"I will call you as soon as I am able, bubbeleh. Be careful on your way home, and text me when you've arrived, please." There's that curt nod again, I hate it. Cupping her cheeks, I lean down to kiss her forehead, then I'm forcing myself to step away from her and out the doors of the restaurant. Once outside, I turn to my team, "I want at least two men on her at all times. Report back to me every hour."

"Yes, Avinu." I'm ushered into the waiting SUV; we begin moving before I've even secured my seatbelt. Finally paying attention to my phone, I have messages and missed calls from my father, uncles, and cousins.

Opening the most recent from my father, I groan out loud, when I read it.

Tate: *Royal Tenenbaums.*

Fuckety fuck fuck. Tate thought we were stupid for implementing a new code system. Using numbers and colors is boring and not always immediately helpful in a situation. So, my siblings, cousins and I devised a code system based on popular movies, like we did with the safe houses. Now, he's the one who comes to me after seeing new movies and trying to figure out how to incorporate them.

Royal Tenenbaums means everyone is coming to the compound to stay, like a lockdown. It's easier to keep track of everyone if we are all together. However, that can also be dangerous, so the compound works for us because it is over 27,000 square feet and on 30 acres of land, with underground shelters.

Still haven't figured out how to incorporate *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* or *Sing 2* to the system.



My body is taut, every nerve ending on fire, my heart pumping as we pull up in front of the compound. The gate is closed, my father and uncles are gathered to the side, while several of our security guards circle a dark figure on the ground. I don't wait for my door to be opened, instead throwing it open and jumping before it's barely parked.

"Who is it?" I bark out, my eyes zeroed in on the obvious corpse. Tevye looks up from the body, rage burning in his eyes.

"Danny." I nod. "Although, we only know that because he's the only one unaccounted for. His face..." He doesn't need to finish now that I'm close enough to see for myself. I've done some heinous things in my life, but the sight of this

young man's brains oozing out of his crushed skull, more resembling a deflated football than a human head, turns my stomach. Maybe it's because he's one of mine.

“Was there an additional message? Did they do this here? How didn't we pick it up on the cameras? Or was this a dump job? Tell me what the fuck happened before I start losing my shit.”

Tev stands, Yakov joining us as he leads me to my father and uncles. The other guards begin covering the body and preparing it for transport. He'll receive a proper burial before sundown tomorrow evening, his family generously compensated for their loss, though I'm not naïve enough to believe that will make anything easier for them at this time.

“Moshe.” My tate engulfs me in his arms, his own rage simmering just below the surface, his body shaking with the need for retribution. Like father, like son.

“Danny had been on watch at Tim's house. He was dumped from an unmarked vehicle at a high speed, no license plate, no identifying features to the vehicle other than it was black and a van. Driver and the one who dumped him out of the open side door were masked and covered in clothing. No visible skin to use as an identifier. We found this in his pocket.” Tev hands over a crumpled piece of paper. I take it, my eyes scanning it once, twice, and then on the third I read it aloud:

Dead men cannot pay their debts. But those who killed them can. As your people say, we want our pound of flesh. The mangled remains at your feet are not enough. Tim owed \$500,000...now, you owe \$750,000 for the trouble you've caused. We'll be in touch.

I drop my head back on my shoulders and roar into the night sky. Who the fuck do these people think they are? “That's from Shakespeare! And he probably never even met a Jew since they were exiled from England before he was born!” I turn to Yakov, my fists clenched at my side, my jaw tight. “Who is Zach Armstrong?”

Uncle Aaron shakes his head, whispering to my father, “Why does he always say that about Shakespeare?” Tate waves him off as we wait for Yakov to answer me.

“He’s an independent contractor. Hired debt collector. And damn good at hiding his tracks. I’m working on a location and accessing his bank accounts and phone records.”

“That does not help me, Yakov, I need fucking answers! I need them now! So, get the fuck out of my sight until you find them!” He doesn’t argue, just jerks his chin, and disappears.

“Zun, he is not to blame for this.” Tate tells me but I’m not in the mood right now.

“The mishpocheh is on lockdown, everyone in the compound until further notice. Tev, I want you—Fuck.” I pull out my buzzing phone and answer it without checking the caller id. “What!”

“Avinu, we’ve followed the girl to her apartment and remained outside. There is yelling coming from her unit, do we engage?” Closing my eyes, and pinching the bridge of my nose, I lament to myself that this is not the time, but Seril’s safety is important.

“Yes. Diffuse the situation, ensure her safety, and report to me with an update as soon as you enter. I’m on my way.” I disconnect the call in time for Tev to get up in my face. With my current mood this is not wise.

“Avinu, you aren’t going anywhere.”

“*Kapitan*, back the fuck up or I will forcibly remove you.” We stare at one another, eyes hard, nostrils flaring, until my tate pushes us apart.

“Moshe, he’s right. You cannot leave. You literally just put us on lockdown.”

“Seril is possibly in danger.”

“And you definitely are!” Tev argues, spitting as he yells. “Let our men extract her and bring her here.”

Tate wraps his hand around the back of my neck and holds me still as he pleads with me, “Mo, I know it’s hard to leave

her safety to someone else, but trust the men who surround you to do their jobs. You are no help to her or anyone else if you are dead.”

I nod once, knowing he’s right. But it doesn’t feel right. The phone barely has a chance to ring before I’m accepting the call and putting it on speakerphone. “Is she safe?”

“Who the heck do you think you are, having your men follow me! Burst into my apartment and scare me!”

“Bubbeleh, a man of mine has been killed, I cannot go into details, but there is a threat to myself and my organization. It would go a long way to ease my stress if you were here with me.”

“I am sorry that someone has died, Moshe, but I cannot leave my home. I already explained that to you.” Her voice is strained, and I know I’m pushing way too hard, but I don’t think she understands the gravity of the situation.

“Seril, please.” Begging isn’t something I’m familiar with, unless it’s extra dessert from my mame, but I’ll do it for her.

“I am not alone.” A growl builds deep in my chest until her next words. “I live with my mother.”

“Ok, so bring her. We have plenty of room at the compound.”

“It isn’t that easy, Moshe.”

“Make it that easy.” My tate starts waving his hands around, I think for me to stop, but I ignore him.

“No.” I’m about to lose my shit.

“Now is not the time to be fucking cute and argue with me, Seril.”

She lets out a strangled scream, her voice lethal as she chews me up and spits me out. “I’ve never tried to be cute in my life, *Mr. Holoferner*. I have been patient in explaining that I am unable to drop everything and cow to your demands, but you refuse to listen or acknowledge that not everyone answers to you.” The click of her disconnecting the call is deafening.

“Did she...she just...” Tate puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Yes, son, she hung up on you, because you’re a kunnilemmel.” Having your own father refer to you as basically an idiot is never a good feeling.

“Have you even fucked her yet? She doesn’t seem wor—” I lunge for Tevye and wrap my hands around his throat before anyone can move.

Inches from his face, I scream, “You will never speak of her like that again! She will be my wife and your queen. Hold your tongue or I will remove it!” I release him as others tug on my arms. Stepping back, I pick up my phone from where it fell and dial my security team. “Is she in danger?”

“No, Avinu. The yelling was between her and her mother. There’s something not right—”

“If there is no immediate threat, I want two people stationed outside all night, your relief will arrive in the morning. If there is any hint of trouble, pack her and her mother up and bring them here. Gag them if you have to.”

“Yes, Avinu.”

“All this trouble over one pussy, he hasn’t even—”

“I fucking warned you.” I swing around and land my fist into Tevye’s jaw, his body crumpling to the ground, eyes rolling back in his head.

“Alright, he’s learned his lesson. Give the guy a break, he’s not used to seeing you like this over a woman.” Tate, ever the diplomat.

“And how would you feel if he was speaking about mame?” My father twists his lips to the side in thought, then turns to face the others still milling around.

“Anyone have a marker? We’re gonna draw dicks on his face.” I choke on a laugh, exactly what I need, what we all need to eliminate the tension. My uncle Steven, Tevye’s father, steps forward with a marker.

“Make it a *big veiny triumphant bastard*.”



I turn off my phone alarm and roll to my side on the couch. I don't think I slept at all last night. Infuriating, sexy, overbearing, pig-headed, sometimes sweet man. He had his men follow me home last night! Ugh, the chutzpah of that man.

They burst into my apartment, thankfully, the door was not locked yet, guns blazing, scaring the stuffing out of mama and I. It was sort of, kind of, maybe nice that he cared enough about my safety to have his men make sure I got home. But... ahh! Anger is better, I like focusing on the anger instead of the warm fuzzy feelings that swarm my belly.

"He's a nincompoop." I nod to myself, throw off my light blanket and drop my feet to the floor to sit up. I have to work

today, so I better start moving. Moshe's symmetrical perfect face, his textured voice, the growl I could hear as we argued... it all swirls through my mind as I go about unlocking mama's door, fixing her breakfast, and getting ready for work.

Walking out of my building, I'm flagged down by a man in a suit standing next to an exceptionally large, shiny SUV. He holds out a fancy cell phone to me. Knowing this is about Moshe, I roll my eyes with a kind smile at the man and put the phone to my ear.

"Yes?"

"Bubbeleh." He breathes a sigh of relief, as if he'd been worried and some of my anger dissipates in the early morning air. "Good morning."

"Mmhmm." His chuckle has goosebumps erupting over my skin. I clench my jaw, hating how I react to him.

"The man who handed you the phone is Hank, he will drive you to work today—I mean, I would be grateful, if you would let Hank drive you to work today." I push aside the urge to laugh at his self-correction, instead humming my agreement. "For my own sanity, I will keep one man on your apartment building for your mother's protection." Dang, there's that sometimes-sweet side. "I will meet you at the end of your shift today. Last night, though the ending of our evening was regrettable, I enjoyed your company immensely, Seril."

I swivel my foot on the sidewalk, wondering how honest I should be. He really upset me yesterday...but there was an emergency and he said someone died. I can't imagine being responsible for the lives of so many. "Until you turned into a donkey, I did too."

He barks a laugh, "Donkey? Hmm, I just noticed, you don't cuss much do you?"

"I do not."

"Any particular reason?" I smile remembering my mother's teasing words growing up.

“My mama always said that intelligent people could find better ways to express themselves.” I put my hand over the phone and lower my voice. “Sometimes, though, saying the word ‘fuck’ is quite cathartic.”

“Bubbeleh, hearing you say that word in that breathy whisper...how long is your shift today?”

I drop my hand and chuckle, “8 hours.”

“Longest 8 hours of my life.”

“I’ll see you later, Moshe. Thank you...uh, thank you for thinking of my safety and that of my mom.”

“Always.”

“Are you ready, miss?” I glance up at Hank, and hand him back the phone. My smile now a permanent accessory, I nod and step on the small stool next to the open backdoor. Hank is a nice older man, in maybe his late forties, who is quite fond of oldies music. He joins me in an off-key rendition of the *Jackson 5*’s “ABC”.

“Don’t quit your day job, Hank.” I tell him with a wave as I get out of the vehicle at work.

“It’s probably best you don’t work at one of those restaurants where the staff sing to the patrons. Can you dance?” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Not an ounce of rhythm.”

Winking, he says, “Guess the kitchen is the best place for you.” I nod, about to shut the door when he says with a smile, “For now at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing, Miss Manoff. Have a good day, I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Avinu’s orders. Besides, singing along with you has been the highlight of my week.”

“You should get out more.” I close the door on his laughter and head into work.

Nothing has changed about my life. I still have the same two jobs. I still live in the same crappy one bedroom apartment. I still take care of my mother. I still have the same responsibilities.

And yet, Moshe gives me hope. Not that he’ll sweep in and fix everything. I am an adult, I can manage. His smile, his tenderness, the kiss we shared yesterday, though, buoy my spirit like nothing has in the last seven years. And I’m gonna hold on to that feeling for as long as I can.



Yakov: Still working on it.

I stare at the words on my screen for the twentieth time in the last few minutes. Nothing has changed since last night, other than my rising levels of frustration and ire.

Noting the time, I open the car door and step out into the early afternoon sun. Before closing, I lean back in and address Ernest. “Remain in the vehicle. We’ll be heading to her apartment when we’re ready.”

“Yes, Avinu.” Everyone is on edge with the threat against us, but I know I have been a bear since last night. Ernest has barely spoken a word to me today, preferring to let me stew.

I offer a grin that I don't quite feel and inquire, "How is Bailey?" Ernie's face lights up at the mention of the young woman that works with Seril.

"She's great. We'll be going on our third date after..." He trails off, but I know what he implies. After this latest mess is cleaned up. After we have neutralized the threat. After...it's always after in our line of work.

"Make sure she understands that your absence is not by choice." He nods as I close the door and lean back against it. I let the heat of the day soak into my skin, waiting for my woman. I might have enjoyed punching Tev yesterday, but he wasn't completely wrong. I have never knowingly put anyone in danger, but I have never cared for anyone as I do for Seril. The women I have been with have always known the fleetingness of our interactions, and my enemies did too. It would not serve them to target any of my previous bed partners, since they do not mean anything to me.

So, for me to be so protective of Seril, who I have done no more than kiss, my behavior is certainly out of character. To feel so much, so soon. My father and uncles have spent years reminding us to trust our gut. Who we are, what we do, will forever draw adversaries. We cannot control those around us, but we can control how we respond. We do not always possess the luxury of time.

I cannot, *will not* allow others to dictate how I live my life. Including pursuing Seril. It may not be the right time, but as I said, it rarely ever is. If you wait for the right moment, you'll still be waiting in the grave.

I look up as the doors open, knowing that she's walking out. The sun glints off her dark red locks tied in a messy bun on the top of her head. Damp tendrils fall to her neck, and I have the strongest urge to run my nose and tongue along the column until I reach her mouth. As soon as she's within reach, I grab her hips and pull her into the vee of my spread legs and do just that. I devour her, giving her no chance to refuse, my tongue demanding entrance between her pillowy lips, reveling in the wet heat of her mouth.

When I break us apart, we both suck in harsh breaths. I rest my forehead to hers and do something I have only done a few times in my life. “I’m sorry, bubbeleh.”

“I know.” Her hand comes up to caress my jaw, her body melting into mine as she traps my erections between us. Seril’s blue eyes darken as she peers at me through her red lashes. “Is that for me?”

I groan, dropping my nose to her neck and breathing in the salty sweet smell of her. “It certainly isn’t for Ernie.”

She chuckles, stepping back, “I should hope not.”

Holding out my hand, I wait for her to place her soft palm in mine, turn to the vehicle and open the back door. “Shall we?”

The first sign of nervousness leaks into her expression. “We can just talk here.” I shake my head, urging her into the SUV.

“I’m taking you to your home, I’d like to meet your mother.” Her eyes widen in alarm, so I joke, “It’s only fair, you’ve met mine.”

“I was ambushed by the females of your family.”

“Ah, not all of them. My aunts were unable to make it. You’ll meet them later.”

Closing her eyes, she settles in the plush leather seat with a harrumph. It’s adorable. “Seril. Look at me.” She slowly opens her eyes and meets mine. I rub my thumb along her cheekbone while Ernie pulls out of the parking lot. “There you are. Everything is going to be alright. You asked for the chance to get to know me, to see another side to me, give me the same opportunity?”

“Ok.” It’s reluctant, but I’ll take it. We sit in silence during the short drive to her apartment. Her body is practically vibrating next to me with nerves, while I’m just content to be with her. After being forced to leave so abruptly last night and dealing with the death of a foot soldier, the threat against my family...it’s nice to just share the same air as her, to feel her hand in mine. Whatever she is so afraid to tell me, whatever

reason she's convinced herself will have me running for the hills, can't scare me. Not when she's my every possible reason to stay.

"Do you only have the one speed?" Her voice breaks the silence when we pull into her complex. I bite my tongue when I see the state in which she's living. There's nothing wrong with it, per se, but she is worth more than this.

"What do you mean?"

"You move at the speed of light. It's difficult to catch my breath." I unbuckle myself, then her.

Leaning into her, I whisper, "When I finally get you naked and under me, you can be sure I'll be taking my time." Sitting up, I open the door and step out. When I hold my hand up to help her out, I say louder, "As for everything else, bubbeleh, why waste precious seconds second-guessing and overthinking, conforming to other's ideals of normal or proper, when everything you ever wanted is within your grasp?"

"You're impossible."

"I believe you mean incredible."

"I didn't stutter." She mumbles, earning a smile from me and a chuckle from Ernie. "Hi, Ernie. I'm sorry I didn't greet you before."

"No worries, Seril. Good to see you again."

"You too, you coming up?" He shakes his head, jerking his chin to the vehicle.

"I'll be out here."

"Do you want me to bring you something to drink?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm good."

Seril winks at Ernie, "Tell Bailey I said hi. She's basically a Disney princess now with all the hearts in her eyes." Ernie ducks his head with a blush. I follow Seril into the building, noting the lack of security as we traverse the stairs to her third-floor apartment. She unlocks the door, but before opening it, she turns to me with tears in her eyes. I don't like it.

“I’ll explain everything. Just give me some time to get settled. We have a routine and it’s best to follow it.” I’m not sure what she means, but I cup her face, wipe my thumbs under her eyes and kiss her softly.

“Do what you gotta do, baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

With a deep sigh that even I feel, she twists the knob and opens the door to her apartment. I close the door behind me, turning the locks, then take in the barren space. Nothing in the dining room besides a folding chair up against the wall. The kitchen is similarly bare on the counters, child proof locks on the cabinets. A dark hallway that I assume leads to the bedrooms and bathroom. In the living room, there is a couch that has seen better days, folded linens on one end, a coffee table, television on a small stand, and a recliner where a woman I’d guess a few years younger than my mother sits. She barely acknowledges us as we enter. Her gray hair is clean, but limp, her face worn, her nightgown hangs loose on her frame.

“Hey, mama. How was your day?”

“It was good, pumpkin. I missed you.” My lips begin to stretch at the sweet moment between mother and daughter, so at odds with the report I received of her yelling at Seril last night. It freezes on my face when her lips curl into a sneer and she spits out, “I’m starving! You’re trying to kill me!”

“I know mama, I’m a little late today. I’ll have your food ready in a few minutes. Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“I can do it myself! Whoring yourself around when you should be here making me dinner!”

“I would never do that, mama. You raised me right. This is my friend Moshe.”

“Hello, Mrs. Manoff.” I step forward and extend my hand. She waves me off with a smile, extending both hands for a hug. I lean down awkwardly, wrapping my arms around her frail body.

“So nice to have my Seril bring home a wonderful man. Are you staying for dinner?” Sitting on the end of the couch

closest to her, I nod.

“I am. Thank you for having me. What are we having tonight?”

“Seril! We have a guest, why isn’t dinner on the table?” I’m too slow to react as the television controller flies in front of me and hits Seril in the chin.

Seril’s kind smile never wavers, her voice never rises, her movements precise and gentle. I sit immobilized on the couch as she prepares a quick pasta dinner for her mom, taking her into the bathroom before it’s finished, and bringing her back to her chair. She cleans up the remnants of a broken plate I hadn’t noticed before on the other side of the recliner. All the while her mother fluctuates between an adoring mother and an ungrateful bitch. I fight the urge to step in, to yell, to take charge, letting Seril do her thing, just as she asked before we entered.

Once her mother is settled back in her chair, her food gone, Seril faces me, tired and weary, “I need to take a quick shower. Then we can talk. Can you wait a bit longer?” I nod numbly, watching her as she drags herself to the bathroom.

“Isn’t my Seril beautiful?” Mrs. Manoff asks me when the door clicks shut.

“Yes, she is.”

“She works so hard.”

“I’m starting to see that.” Mrs. Manoff doesn’t say anything else, her attention back on the television. I take the opportunity to stand and walk through the apartment, ignoring thoughts of Seril naked in the shower. There is only one bedroom. Rumpled double bed. Stained carpeting. Closed closet with lock. It’s clean but has seen better days. There is a lock on the outside of the door that connects to the doorframe. A set of glass doors that open to a small deck off the dining room, but they are locked, with a bar wedged on the top and the bottom to keep them from opening. Taking way longer than I’d like to admit, I finally figure out the child-proof locks and open the cabinets in the kitchen and the refrigerator. Big

jar of peanut butter. Jelly. Fresh fruit. Boxes of pasta, jars of sauce. Large jug of juice. Half empty gallon of white milk. Quick and easy options.

I'm sitting on the folding chair in the dining room when the door to the bathroom opens. Seril steps out with her wet hair falling behind her shoulders, sweats, loose t-shirt, bare feet. Her toenails are unpainted. As are her fingernails.

For some reason I will never be able to explain, that hits me the hardest. She works for everything she has, a devoted daughter to a woman with health issues, and she doesn't have time for herself, let alone the energy to paint her nails.

She avoids eye contact as she sinks to the floor, her back against the wall facing the living room. Her mother in clear sight. Standing from the chair, I fold it back up and lean it where it was, before stretching out next to her on the floor. I smile and chuckle softly at the difference in our sizes. My feet and legs extend far past her own. She's tiny. But I'd wager she's stronger than any man I've ever known.

I reach over and take her hand, bringing it to my lips for a kiss, then laying them joined on my thigh. And I wait. I'll wait as long as she needs me. There is nowhere else I'd rather be.



I'm so angry with him right now. For putting me in this position, for exposing me like this. And yet, there's this urge, this fervent desire to purge all the ugliness of the last several years. The struggle. The heartache. The loneliness. He already knows about my jobs, he's in my apartment, he's met my mother. All that's left is to put it in context.

"I was an oops." I force a dry chuckle, but he only squeezes my hand harder. "I have an older brother; he was ten when I was born. My father didn't want another child, and definitely not a daughter, I guess. He left when I was three. Mama had an excellent job, paid the bills, put food on the table, and activities that we wanted to participate in. Michael, my brother, fought with her constantly. Blaming her for our father leaving. Always wanting more and more. Hated it when

she would tell him no. He wanted to go to an out of state school for college, my mom said her money would stretch more if he stayed in state. At college, he met Diana. Mama and I tolerated her, but she is not a nice woman. When Michael told mama he was going to ask her to marry him, she tried to talk him out of it. He didn't take that well. Nor did Diana when he told her. They demanded she pay for more than half of the wedding costs, which hadn't even been figured out yet. Mama stood her ground, said she would give them a lump sum, they could use it how they saw fit, down payment on a house, wedding expenses, a safety net. She took out \$10,000 from her 401k and handed it over, with the stipulation, she wouldn't give them another cent, for anything."

I pause, gearing up to get to the part where everything falls apart. He must sense I'm having a hard time. Moshe kisses the side of my head, then pulls me into his lap, cradling me to his chest. I won't lie, it helps.

"I was fifteen, mama was on her way home...I'm not entirely sure what happened, but the doctors said she had a seizure, lost control of the car, and rear ended another. My sister-in-law Diana was the other driver. She had mild injuries, but mama..." Tears stream down my cheeks, I can't stop them. Remembering her in the hospital... "Mama suffered a traumatic brain injury. I won't go into the specifics, but it took her months to function again. And even then, it wasn't at full capacity. Her moods swing wildly, she yells and screams, has violent outbursts, then the next second, she's cupping my cheek and telling me how much she loves me. My brother claimed custody of me...but...he...he left me alone in the house to take care of mama. Wouldn't pay for a nurse, wouldn't do anything besides what the state ordered. Threatened me if I turned him in, threatened mama." Clenching my fists, I spit the rest out through gritted teeth. "He was supposed to be my guardian; however, the whole time, he and his wife, her family, were working with a lawyer to sue mama for the car accident. I tried to get a lawyer, but I didn't have any money, and the one that agreed to help was so swamped with other cases and I'm not sure he wasn't on their side."

“Bubbeleh.”

“Michael sold the house, kept the money. Cashed out mom’s retirement, kept the money. Sold our belongings, kept the money. The only good thing he did was help her get disability; however, he can’t touch it, which I promise was not his intention. We owe his wife, the lawyers for the lawsuit and the SSI application...I’ve been working for over 5 years, two jobs at a time at least, to keep us afloat. 6 months ago, Diana cornered me in the grocery store and emptied my cart, telling me that if I can afford snacks, I can afford to pay her what she’s owed. I knew we couldn’t stay any longer, so I asked for a transfer to a different store location, Charlotte had an opening.”

Now that I’ve put it out there, I’m exhausted. Turning my head slightly so I can look at mama in the living room, my heart clenches. “I love her, she’s a really good mother, and she was my best friend. Still is, I suppose. Everything I do is for her, because I know if the roles were reversed, she would do the same for me.”

“Did she have car insurance?” I nod, not taking my eyes off her. “They paid, correct?”

“I guess. I don’t know. We never got our car back.”

“Did you go to court?”

“I wasn’t allowed, because I was a minor.” His chest rumbles beneath my ear, his hold on me tightens almost painfully. “Moshe?” He loosens immediately, rubbing his hands up and down my arm and leg.

“Sorry.” He murmurs, the rumbling in his chest growing louder. He pats my hip, “Let’s go.”

“What?” I rear back and arch my neck to meet his narrowed gaze.

“You and your mama are coming to the compound.” I scramble off his lap, angrier than I’ve ever been and disappointed.

“You didn’t listen to a word I said, did you? You just wanted me to say my piece, so I’d agree to your demands. I’m

not going anywhere with you! This is our home.”

“No.” I’m dangerously close to punching that smirk right off his devilishly handsome face. “Sucks to hear, doesn’t it?”

“Now who’s playing games and being cute?” I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him.

He stalks me through the dining room until I’m pressed against the wall, his imposing body caging me in, his large hands gripping my jaw to hold me still. I’m not scared, I’m sure I should be, but he doesn’t scare me physically. It’s the damage that can’t be readily seen that terrifies me. Trusting him, anyone really, believing the lies that spew from their mouths until they get what they want and leave you in the cold. My own brother has spent far too long ensuring we suffer; how can I expect someone else to behave differently?

His eyes boring into mine, my lips part, my chest heaving, I brace for impact. “You are mine. Mine. From the moment I saw your ass bouncing around while you were bent over straightening a display, I knew you were mine. There is some shit going down due to business and as such, I’ve ordered lockdown for the entire family. My parents, aunts, uncles, cousins...but they aren’t my only family. You are my family. Your mother is my family. I take care of those around me. I’m telling you, I’m here to take care of you. It isn’t because you are weak or incapable, it’s because I’m a selfish man. I want you with me, under me, next to me, and I can’t have that if you are working two jobs, living in an apartment, and taking care of your mama.”

“You want to help me because you’re selfish?” My voice quivers as I ask the question, I already know the answer to. His words hit their mark and my heart, my body, they are ready to hand over the reins and let someone else steer for a while. But my head...

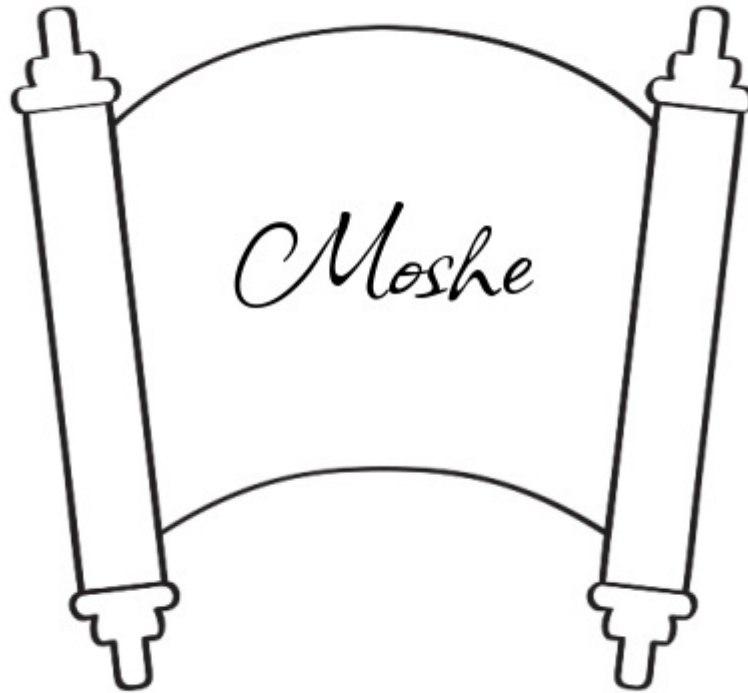
“That’s the main reason. The other...bubbeleh, just listening to you recount your journey, I know something ain’t right. I want my guys to look into it. I want to make it right. Because I care about you, I’m crazy about you, I want to see

you smile every fucking day and if I have the opportunity and ability to make that happen, I'm damn well going to take it."

"You don't know me, we've only ever kissed, and you want me to uproot my mother and my life on a whim?" His eyes harden, his nose brushing the tip of mine as he gets closer.

"Do we feel like a fucking whim?" I shake my head as much as his presence will allow. "No, we don't. I look forward to the day when I can nestle between your spread thighs and feel the clutch of your warm, wet pussy. Feel you undulate beneath me as I push you over the edge. Stroking in and out until I spray your womb and start a family. But I don't need to experience any of that to know that you are mine. I watched you this evening, Seril, with your mama. I saw your heart, and it's fucking magnificent. What more do I need to know?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."



For the first time in 24 hours, I feel like I can breathe properly. Seril has agreed to come to the compound, to be in my home, my bed. While she packs a few days' worth of belongings for her and her mother, I place a phone call to mame.

“Zun, are you with Seril? Is she alright?” I smile at my mother's concern.

“She's fine, mame, well, probably pissed at me for strong-arming her, but she'll get over it. I'm bringing her back to the compound.”

“Oh, that's wonderful. Your aunts are still beregitz I spent time with her without them.”

“Before you all can rejoice about adding another female to the family roster, I need you to get a room ready for her mother. And find a nurse that specializes in traumatic brain injuries.”

Mame gasps, “That poor shaifeleh. Has she been looking after her mother?”

“Yes.” I snap my mouth shut to stop myself from elaborating. I don’t have much time, and nothing I have to say on the subject would be useful at the moment. Not to mention, my tate would not take kindly to cursing in conversation with my mother.

“On her own?”

“Yes.”

“Leave it to me, Moshe, I’ll arrange everything. My poor girl.”

“Adank.”

“I love you, Moshe.”

“Love you too, mame, I’ll see you soon.” We disconnect, and I waste no time pressing the button for Yakov. I check up the stairs to see if Seril is ready, but I don’t see her yet.

“Avinu, I think I found something. Tim’s been spending a lot of time at the casino in King’s Mountain.”

“Feh!” Tim’s in deep with the Native Americans who own the local casino, and they’ve hired a debt collector, Zach Armstrong. “I’ll talk to Tevye, I want a sit down with them.” Sighing, I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. This is not what I fucking need. “That’s not why I called. I need everything you can find on Suzanne Manoff, and Michael and Diana Manoff, especially any court proceedings, judgements, lawsuits, etc. when you have time.”

“Some of that is in the dossier I gave you.”

“I need everything.”

“I’ll update you on both as soon as I find anything more.”

“Moshe?” Seril calls down from outside her apartment for me.

I put my hand over the phone and yell up, “I’m here.” As I walk up the steps, I speak to Yakov, “I have to go, we’ll be back to the compound within the hour.”

“Watch your back.”

I chuckle, “That’s what I pay all the security guards for.” I pocket my phone and walk up the remaining stairs and into Seril’s apartment. She has two small duffle bags by the door. I walk over to her mother and get down on my knee to speak to her as she sits in the recliner.

“Mrs. Manoff—”

“Call me Suzie. If you’re going to be my son-in-law, we should at least be on a first name basis.”

“Mama!” Seril hisses, her exposed skin flushing a bright red.

“You know what, Suzie, I think you’re right. Call me Mo.” Gently grabbing her hand in mine, I explain, “You and Seril are going to come stay with my family and I for a few days. My mother and her sisters are anxious to meet you and begin planning the wedding.” I’m going to pay for this later, but it will be worth Seril’s wrath.

“I can’t wait. Seril, don’t just stand there, grab our bags.” I assist Suzie out of her chair and guide her out of the apartment with one hand on her elbow and the other on her back. She smiles up at me every few feet, at one point, cupping my jaw and telling me how handsome I am and that Seril has good taste.

My bubbeleh follows behind us, bags in hand, after locking the apartment, groaning and sighing and probably wishing the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

Ernie is waiting for us with the building door open. Suzie turns to Seril and sneers, “Are you fucking this one too?”

“No, Suzie, Seril is all mine, I don’t share.” I answer as calmly as I can. Ernie’s eyebrows rise to his hairline, his

mouth hanging open, but he doesn't respond, simply making a weird, strangled noise in his throat.

The car ride to the compound is interesting. I guess it's been quite a while since Suzie has been out and about, and even longer since she was in a vehicle. She oohs and awws at the scenery as we pass. Seril sits between her mother and I, fidgeting, biting her bottom lip until I fear she may break the skin.

“Seril.”

“Hmm?” She doesn't look at me, instead focusing on her hands in her lap.

“Bubbeleh.” Placing one hand on her jaw, I turn her head toward me, the other I slide into her hair and tilt her face until she has no choice but to look at me. My thumb pulls on her lip until it pops from underneath her teeth. “This is mine. Please do not hurt it. That's my job.” Giving her no time to respond, I take her mouth with mine, feeding her my tongue until she's pliant beneath me. She sighs, this time contentedly, her breath ghosting across my beard.

I pull back once I know she's settled and relaxed. Resting my forehead against hers, I realize this is one of my favorite things to do with her. Her eyes slowly open, lids heavy, as if she's waking from a deep sleep. She reaches up to grip my wrists, closes the distance between us and gives me a quick peck.

“Thank you.” She whispers into my mouth. “I needed that.”

“Is that permission to kiss you anytime you're stressed out, mad, sad, happy, horny...” I pray I am given the chance to hear her light tinkling laughter every day until Adonai calls me home.

“I'd be cautious getting too close to my teeth if I'm mad... especially with you.”

“I'll take my chances.”



“Uh...” I say eloquently as we pull through the gate to Moshe’s home. I pictured a mansion, obviously, since it is apparently well known he is wealthy. My imagination is limited, stunted really.

High walls surround the sprawling estate. Men and women patrol the surrounding grounds. I count three guard towers, though designed to blend in, and assume the fourth is on the other side of the immensely massive building in front of me.

“There are 20 one- or two-bedroom suites, 5 single bedrooms, 30 bathrooms, four industrial grade kitchens, entertainment room, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, gym, bowling alley—” I place my finger over Moshe’s mouth to silence him. It’s too much, and I already feel lost. His lips

stretch into a smile before kissing my finger. He draws my hand down to his lap and holds it between his.

“How about we go in and get the introductions out of the way?”

“Introductions?” I ask quietly, dreading what’s about to happen.

“Everyone will want to meet you two, then they’ll find something shinier to focus on.” I snort, covering my mouth with my free hand.

Ernie opens the back door of the SUV for us, then rounds to help my mama out. Moshe fluidly moves from the vehicle, extending his hand to me. He’s so graceful, like he has complete control over his entire body and knows how to use it well. I’m jealous even as my mouth waters, picturing him moving above me, inside me, just as smoothly.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but hold those thoughts until later, bubbeleh. It isn’t proper to address my family with a cockstand.” He subtly adjusts his crotch, a snicker bursting forth from me unbidden that I have that much effect on him.

The imposing front doors swing open, and Esther comes scurrying out of the house, followed by a gaggle of females, all squawking and gently shoving as they make their way to us. His aunts Judy, Gertie, and Sarah gush over how beautiful I am, that our babies will be gorgeous, how wonderful it is to finally have their Moshe settle down. Then they lament how they’ll never have grandbabies of their own since their kids don’t seem in any hurry to find love. They walk away just as fast as they arrived, trying to one up the other on how disappointing their children are.

“Hi. We’re the disappointments.” Dark hair artfully styled, bronzed complexion, broad shoulders, and trim waist...this man is quite striking. He isn’t Moshe, though. He extends his hand, “Zeppo, my mame is Judy, this is my brother Ezra.” He points out a man who looks quite similar, however the shape of their faces is different, and Ezra has more facial hair and wears glasses. “This guy with the artful penis tattoos on his

face, is Tevye, you've met his twin Tovah, their mame is Gertie." Tevye has lighter hair and skin, fuller beard, and is no less attractive than the others, despite the phallic facial enhancements. "Sarah's son, Jonah. His sister is Sophie." He reminds me of a teen movie heartthrob. Sharp nose, dark eyes, longer hair on top parted to the side. "And this guy is Zilv. Moshe's brother." Zeppo wraps his arm around Zilv's neck and rubs the top of his head like a noogie. Zilv bats him away and stands up. Zilv resembles the actor Mark Feuerstein from that concierge doctor show, but darker. I barely register the differences between him and Moshe before he links his arms behind my back and picks me up in a bear hug.

"Shvegerin!" He boasts, calling me his sister-in-law. My mouth drops open in surprise. Once I'm on the ground, Moshe tugs me into his body, and growls at his brother.

"Hands to yourself, Zilvy."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all." I say politely, taking strength from Moshe's presence. Peering up at him, I smirk, "Is there something in the water? Are your mom and aunts witches? How is everyone so good looking?" The others laugh around us, but Moshe narrows his eyes and leans down to put us nose to nose.

"Everyone?" I peck his lips chastely, smiling as I lean back.

"Yup." Clearing my throat, I step away from Moshe and go to my mother's side. She's been busy looking around the grounds, her head on a swivel as she takes everything in. "This is my mama, Suzanne Manoff. Mama, this is Moshe's family."

"Hello. Thank you for having us." She responds politely and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Come in, come in. Let's get you two settled." Despite her size, Esther commands everyone, herding us into the large estate.

"Suzanne, it's so wonderful to meet you. Your daughter is a delight." Esther takes mama's hand and speaks sincerely to her as the others disperse.

“She is.” I smile at mama, my cheeks no doubt blazing red.

“Are you hungry?”

“I...I don’t...” and like a switch is flipped, mama’s eyes narrow and her fists clench, “Don’t touch me! I want to go home. This isn’t my home! Seril, take me home, right now!”

At the commotion, everyone returns to the foyer. I dip my head in embarrassment, swiftly moving to mama’s side. “It’s alright, mama. We are gonna stay here with Moshe and his family for a few days. How about we see where we’re staying. We’ll read what happens next to *Siddhartha* after I get you settled.” My arm around my mother’s shoulder and the other holding her hand, I turn to Moshe with pleading eyes. “Can you show us to our room?”

He nods, stepping to mama’s other side. “This way, Suzie, I have the best room in the house picked out for you.”

“Have you ever read *Siddhartha*, Moshe?” She asks sweetly, staring up at him with a gentle smile.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Oh, it’s a wonderful book, I’ve read it many times, and would read it to Seril when she was younger. Now, she reads it to me.”

“That’s because she’s amazing.” I meet Moshe’s eyes over mama’s head and mouth, ‘thank you.’ He winks at me with an understanding smile and my embarrassment flees.

He’s told me that we are surrounded by family, I have to trust that he was being truthful. Mama always told me to trust others until they give me a reason not to.

“This is where you’ll be staying, Suzie. Our suite is right across the hall, so Seril can get to you quickly if you need anything.”

“No.” I tell him, shaking my head. I’m not staying in his room. I can’t leave mama alone in a new place. She could hurt herself or damage their things.

“You’re cute.” He says, opening the door and stepping in. The room is tastefully decorated in muted oranges, browns,

and yellows. I want to jump on the bed and fall asleep amongst the soft bedding. Mama has the same idea. She leaps on the bed and rolls around laughing.

“This is great!” I laugh watching her, tears stinging my eyes.

Moshe steps behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and bending low to put his chin on my shoulder. He speaks softly, but with authority. “Please, bubbeleh, do not argue. Nothing will happen tonight, I promise. I want to hold you in my arms and know that you are safe.” The fight drains out of me at his tender words. “That’s my girl.” He kisses me below my ear before releasing me. I miss him immediately, which irks me. “I must meet with my *kapitans*, I’ll find you when I’m done.” I nod, not trusting myself to speak, and close the door behind him.

“Seril?” I look up at mama, sitting on the edge of the bed, watching me. She pats next to her. I take the invitation, losing the fight against my tears when she loops her arm around my back and urges me to rest my head on her shoulder. “He seems like a decent fella. And his family is quite attractive.” I giggle at her observation, closing my eyes when I feel her lips in my hair. “Love, no matter how much time you have together, is never a bad thing.”

“What about dad?”

She shrugs, the movement lifting my head slightly. “Sometimes people are in our lives for a reason, and once that reason is fulfilled, they move on. The love I had for your father, gave me you and Michael. I could never regret my time with him.”

“It’s difficult to take the...leap.” She chuckles, kissing my head again.

“Pumpkin, that man of yours will always catch you. I can see it in his eyes.” A knock on the door disrupts our moment. Huffing, I get off the bed and open the bedroom door.

“Esther.”

“Hello again. Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to introduce Pamela, she is a home health nurse, who specializes in traumatic brain injuries.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure how to feel, knowing Moshe set this up behind my back.

“I know that look, don’t get your panties in a twist.” Esther scolds me, pushing past to step into the room, Pamela in tow. “He did this for you, for both of you.” She addresses my mama, “Suzie, meet Pamela. Pam, meet Suzie.” Pamela is a dark-skinned woman with long braids that sway as she moves toward my mother, hand in the air. Mama glances at me before lifting her hand to shake.

“Nice to meet you, Suzie. How do you feel about gin rummy?” Pam produces a deck of cards from her scrub pocket and mama’s eyes light up. She loves to play cards, but sometimes has trouble with the numbers.

“Come with me, Seril, give them time to get to know each other.”

“But I don’t know Pamela, I can’t just leave her—”

“She’s been a nurse for 15 years, and I’ve known her for a few myself, she was a nurse to a friend of mine’s late husband. Your mama is in good hands, I would never expect you to trust someone I haven’t personally vetted.”

I allow Esther to guide me out of the room, closing the door behind us, and lead me into Moshe’s suite. Gadzooks! It’s bigger than our apartment! She walks me to a sitting area, setting me on the comfy couch, then takes a seat in the recliner opposite.

“I told Moshe that I’m only with him because I like you.” I blurt out, feeling the weight of the last few hours lift from my shoulders when Esther laughs. She wipes her eyes, winking at me, just like her son.

“If I wasn’t happily married to my David...and I swung that way.”

“That’s what your son said.”

“We’ve got time,” she says, tucking her feet under her and leaning her head on the chair, “why don’t you tell me a story.”

I’m caught off guard, “A story? About what?” Esther offers me a sad smile, her eyes shiny with tears.

“A story about a strong young woman who struggled through years of shit to become the Kosher queen?”



“Timothy Tseitlin, 48. Wife Annaleigh Gulko, 40. Son Timothy Junior, 12, daughter Serena, 9.” Yakov goes over information we already know. I level with him a hard glare and he gets to the point. “Tim was manager of the dispensary on West Trade. Small increments skimmed off the top for the last two years. Looked like till errors. 8 months ago, Tim made a large withdrawal from his savings account of \$45,000. 4 months ago, his cut from the dispensary increased until last month when he took \$100,000. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Tim has been a frequent visitor of the King’s Mountain Casino over the years. This last year, he got in deep with some underground betting. As the note states, he now owes \$500,000. And they are looking to collect.”

“Who?”

“Yona and Chaske are technically in charge of the casino. However, I do not believe they are in charge of the underground gambling. Yona’s younger brother Nakamo is likely the one running things. And probably who hired Armstrong.”

I sit back in my chair in the war room. The long table stretched out before me, my *kapitans*, uncles, and father fill the other seats. “I worked with Yona several years ago when they did that charity poker game.”

“The one where you got spanked and lost \$250,000?” I grit my teeth and slowly turn to stare at my brother, he just smiles back at me. Nudnik.

“Yes, the one where I graciously bowed out of the tournament and donated \$250,000 to the local Native American reservations.”

“I remember that day differently.”

“Zilv.” My tate barks at his youngest child. “Permit your brother to live in his delusions, they do not hurt anyone. We have more important matters to discuss.” I throw a pen at my father, which he swiftly bats away.

“I want a meeting with Yona and Chaske.”

“I have a call into their office, their secretary is checking with them.”

I lift my chin to Yakov, then ask Tevye, “Are the widow and children settling in alright at the safe house?”

He grins, “They don’t seem to be mourning the loss of ol’ Tim. I’m thinking he was an absent father and husband. They’re good. Anna appreciates our protection.”

“Anna?” I question with a smirk, not missing how he shortened her name with familiarity.

Tevye shares my grin, lifting his hands in the air, “She’s a beautiful woman, and I’m happy to remind her that there are men in the world who enjoy pleasing a woman, but it’s not long term. You’re the only one looking to be tied down.”

“I enjoy a good bondage scene every now and then.” Jonah interjects. Since he runs our porn production company, I know he’s tested out most of the equipment and talent himself.

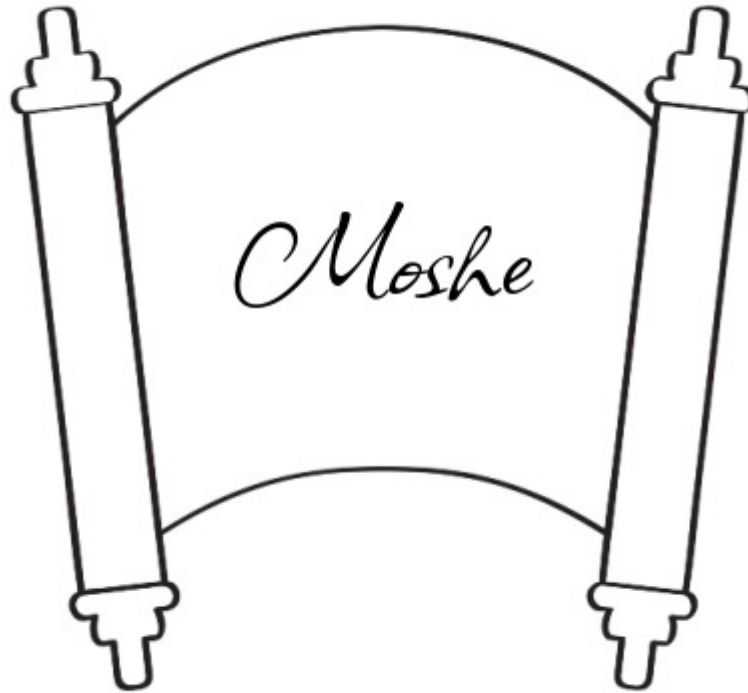
I stand up, ready to get back to my woman, who I finally have in my home, and hopefully in my bed. “Notify me the moment you hear back from Yona. And keep trying to find Armstrong. I want our people to check in every 30 minutes from now on. Yona seemed an intelligent man, he’ll see reason, or he’ll see hell.”

“Say hello to the missus for us!” I throw my hands up and flip everyone off as I walk out of the conference room. It takes me a few minutes to reach my suite. I open the door, locking it behind me, then make my way into my bedroom. My breath stalls in my lungs when I see Seril in my bed, the outline of her curves call to me from beneath the sheets. I force my feet to move in the direction of the bathroom, instead. I shower, ignoring my half-hard cock, and brush my teeth.

Naked, I gently lift the covers and slide in behind Seril. She has on skimpy sleep shorts and a tank top, her skin glowing even in the darkness of the night. Unwilling to ignore my instincts, my arm under her neck, the other on her belly, I pull her back until her apple bottom rests firmly inside the cradle of my pelvis.

She has other ideas. With a sigh, she turns in my arms, her eyes blinking open into slits. “Moshe.” She whispers my name, tucking her head beneath my chin, her hands perched innocently on my chest. I wrap my entire body around her, loving how good she feels against me, her soft porcelain skin, her silky hair, her smooth legs tangled with mine.

I feel whole in a way I never knew I wasn’t.



“Can we talk about Pam?” Seril broaches the subject of her mama’s nurse at breakfast. She keeps her voice low, so our tablemates don’t overhear. Kissing her on the tip of her nose, I sit back and tsk.

“I never knew you were into gossip, Seril. I’m astonished.” I jerk when her foot connects with my shin. “Bubbeleh.” I warn but she doesn’t seem fazed by the tone of my voice.

“Hiring a nurse for my mama should have been something that you discussed with me first. You cannot make unilateral decisions regarding my life. If we are to be in a relationship, we should be partners, not dictator and subject.”

Grabbing her hand and bringing it to my lips to kiss her knuckles, I cup her face with my other and stare deep into her

eyes. She's always beautiful, but after sleeping in my bed, in my arms, all night, she's radiant. There's a glow about her.

Or maybe my dick slipped rose colored glasses over my eyes during the night.

"Seril, I can see you gearing up for a snit, and while I enjoy them greatly, you should probably wait until you hear the rest of what I've done before ripping me a new one." She closes her eyes on a weary sigh.

"Do I want to know?"

"Probably not. But I'm gonna tell you anyway." I release her, picking up my fork and knife to cut off a piece of my Florentine omelet. Once she takes a bite of her own, I lay out what I've done in the last 16 hours or so. "Yakov is looking into your mother's accident."

"What? Why?"

"Because it isn't sitting right with me. I don't appreciate anyone taking advantage of you, let alone putting you through years of hell on your own, even if I hadn't met you yet. Also, I think your brother is a *momser* and his wife a *klippa*." She snorts a surprised laugh at my Yiddish insults, her hand quickly covering her mouth as she stares at me with wide eyes. "Do you want me to eliminate them?"

"Moshe!" Seril gasps, her hand reaching out to smack me on the arm. "No, I don't think homicide is necessary." She hisses at me, making me smile.

"You're right. They should be stripped of their assets and humiliated like you and your mama. Death would be too easy for them."

"You're kind of scary when you go all mafia man..." Fanning her face, she runs her eyes up and down my seated form, "and really hot." I ignore her inflammatory response, not wanting to stir my cock at the breakfast table.

"Also, Pamela will be setting up doctor appointments to reassess your mama. She feels that Suzie could progress and improve if she had the right team of professionals behind her."

“Moshe, we can’t afford that—”

“It is taken care of, and I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

“No.”

“So cute.” I nudge her chin with my fist, and she snarls at me. “This is for your mother. You would do anything for her, would you not?” She nods, her eyes narrowed. “Even accept help from the love of your life who only wants you to be happy and carefree so he can give you lots and lots of orgasms?”

“You aren’t playing fair.”

“Who cares.” I shrug, “Now, about your jobs—”

“I called off today, Moshe, but I will need to return tomorrow. I can’t lose my jobs.”

“No.” I reply succinctly, taking another bite of my delicious breakfast.

“Moshe—”

“Bubbeleh, it is not safe for you to venture far from the compound and certainly not without constant supervision. Which job do you like most?” She isn’t sure how to respond when I change tactics.

“Uh, well, I actually like Nordstrom.”

“Then you’ll quit Panera and reduce your hours at Nordstrom’s. I am not a dictator, despite what you might believe; however, I will not apologize for thinking of your safety at all times. Call into work and tell them that a family emergency has come up and you need the week off. I should be able to work out a solution to the current threat against us, and then you can return to work well rested and suitably fucked.”

“Suitably? Is that how you describe your skills in the bedroom, suitable?” She fans herself again, but this time to mock me, the others around the table tittering at her theatrics. “Oh, my, yes, that’s suitable, real suitable, a little to the left, you are a suitable god!”

Jonah raises his hand in the air, “If you ever want a new job, the studio—”

“Bite your fucking tongue!” I roar, my blood boiling at the thought of her in porn, men looking at what belongs to me, jacking off to her image. No one seems the least put out by my outburst, except Seril. She’s flushed and her pupils are dilated, her chest heaving.

“I’ve never...that was...the veins...I’m gonna take a nap.” She quickly excuses herself from the table. Mame and tate eye me from the other end of the table, shaking their heads in unison.

“What?” I ask, not at all whining, “Shake your heads in disappointment at him,” I point to Jonah, “he’s the one who suggested your future daughter-in-law begin a career in porn!”

21.



It feels so good, I think as my hips rise and my back bows off the cloud like bed. Napping is awesome. Why haven't I been doing this more often? Oh, right, responsibilities.

A pressure builds behind my neglected clit bringing my knees up and sending my hands between my legs. As my fingers encounter thick silky hair, my eyes snap open. I'm no longer asleep.

Dark brown and shimmering gold eyes glance up at me, wicked intent clear in their depths. I feel his beard against my inner thighs, the rough exhales against my sensitive flesh, firm rough fingers that hold me in place. I hear the wetness of his tongue in my opening, growls and grunts of satisfaction from deep in his chest, whimpers of need from my own. He drives

me higher and higher. His lips attach to my clit and his cheeks hollow as he sucks hard. It's the flick of his tongue on my abused nub that sends me over the edge. I cry out to the heavens, my neck arching painfully as I lose control over my body for several long seconds. He laps up my release, his hands rubbing tenderly up and down and all around, gently bringing me back online.

That was... "Suitable." I murmur, his dark chuckle giving my pussy thoughts of round two.

"I'll do better next time."

I reach out my hands, completely unashamed to be begging or of the pout of my lips, "How about you do better right now?"

"Can't, bubbeleh, I have a meeting. Just wanted to give you a proper goodbye before I left."

"Do you have to? What about..." I pointedly look at the obscene bulge in his pants.

He glances at his watch, then at my lips. "You wanna suck my cock?" I nod emphatically, wanting nothing more than to feel the weight of him in my mouth. "You wanna swallow my cum?"

"No." He laughs as he unzips his pants, reaches inside, and pulls out his long, thick erection. "How suitable."

"Seril." My name is a warning, that I don't heed.

"Moshe." I roll to my stomach and army crawl down the bed. When I'm inches from his cock, I sit up, pull my shirt over my head, leaving me naked, the cool air of the room puckering my nipples, then drop to my back. I reach out a hand to his length, encircle it and use my grip to guide him closer until his heavy sac taps my forehead, his musky scent invading my lungs. I lick up the underside of his cock, massaging the part where the foreskin connects to the shaft with the tip of my tongue, before licking back down to the root.

I yelp when the sting of his hand on my breast registers, squeezing my legs together as I feel moisture pooling. "We

don't have the luxury of time, bubbeleh."

"Do you want a rushed blowjob or a suitable blowjob?" His answer is to pry my mouth open with his thumb on my chin and feed me his cock. I take it as far as I can, gagging when he hits the back of my throat.

"Relax your throat, baby. Breathe through your nose." He strokes his hand down my cheek, his eyes, though they burn with lust, are soft and adoring. I try to follow his instructions, my experience with blowjobs is limited. One to be precise. And he was so happy to have lips on his pecker he blew in under a minute.

"Lay still, let me do the work." I meet his gaze and hold it while my body relaxes back into the mattress. Slow, shallow pumps...easy enough to handle. The salty taste, the smooth texture, knowing I am giving him pleasure, even if I am just laying here, I slide my right hand down my torso and spread my legs enough to access my clit.

"You gonna play with my pussy?" I hum a sound of agreement and his hips move faster. "Only the clit, nothing in the hole but me." I circle my clit, pleasure sparking up my spine at the contact. His left hand caresses my breasts, teasing the soft flesh before pinching the nipples and thumbing away the sting. I'm gonna cum again. "Cum for me, baby, and take me with you."

My jaw aches as he pistons in and out, short shallow strokes interspersed with deep thrusts. I inhale through my nose, my fingers stuttering the closer I get to climax. "Relax your throat, Seril, drink me down." I don't know how, but I swear he swells in my mouth before I'm choking on thick salty fluid, unable to stop it as it dribbles down my chin, grunting through my own release.

My limbs lose their tension and drop to the bed. He withdraws from my throat, his cum and my spit a mess on my face. I can't move to clean it up. With my eyes closed, I feel the bed dip on either side of my hips, then his lips leaving soft kisses across my belly.

“Hell of a goodbye. I’m almost afraid of what will happen when I have to leave for longer than a few hours.”

“Don’t leave me.” I whisper, the words spewing from my traitorous mouth before I can stop them. He moves his lips up between my breasts, my neck, and my jaw. Kissing him upside down feels silly and amazing and absolutely perfect.

“I wouldn’t, bubbeleh, if I didn’t have to. Know that I’d rather stay right here with you in bed.”

“But you’re the Avinu.”

“That I am.” He sounds only slightly bitter about it, which makes me feel better. One last kiss to my forehead, then the sound of his zipper being pulled up. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. A few hours at most.”

“Alright. Go Avinu like you’ve never Avinued before.” His laughter echoes down the hall loud enough to hear after he’s shut the door.

After whom knows how long, I decide to get up and check on my mama. She was content when I checked on her before my nap, but I can’t remember the last time I was able to just hang out with her and I don’t want to miss the opportunity.

He says I don’t have to work at all, or cut down my hours at least, which sounds great, but I don’t know what I would do with those empty hours. He has work of his own and it would be selfish to demand he spend all his time with me. Maybe I’ll talk with Esther and the aunts to find out how they spend their free time.

I knock on mama’s door, then push it open to find the room empty. Retracing my steps from this morning, I hear voices coming from one of the sitting rooms. My mama’s laughter hits me square in the gut, loving that sound and missing it so much. I hurry into the room, my heart skipping a beat watching mama hold court with all the females in the family.

“Seril!” Ruthie spots me first. “Sit down, we’re discussing your wedding.”

“My wedding? We haven’t...it’s only been...he hasn’t even asked me.”

“Oh, he will, and when he does, he’ll want a short engagement. Believe me, I know my zun.” Esther pats the spot on the couch between her and mama.

“This all seems a bit...”

“Fercockt.” Tovah supplies helpfully.

Nodding like a bobblehead, I take the offered seat. “Yes.”

“Welcome to the Kosher Nostra.”



“What are you doing?”

“What?” My brother Zilv shrugs, then resumes slurping on his pink milkshake.

“You are drinking a milkshake while we wait for people to arrive who potentially threatened not only a widow and her children, but our entire family and organization, killing two of our own.”

“Did you want one?”

“Chocolate, please.” He moves away from our table to order my milkshake. I scan the diner once more, checking the placement of our men throughout the interior. I trust my men, so I know the perimeter is secured. I don’t want to appear

hostile when I meet with Yona and Chaske, but I do want to impress upon them that the Kosher Nostra is not to be trifled with.

The doors open, and our guests have arrived. Yona is about 5'9", slim build, strong facial features, naturally tan skin, and his long black hair is intricately braided down the back of his head, a sharp contrast in style to his suit. Even though they are tribesmen and not brothers, they bear a striking resemblance to one another. Same size, same build, except Chaske wears his hair short, his attire more casual in a button-down shirt and khakis.

I stand, extending my hand to greet them, which they accept. Yona dips his chin, "Osiyo."

"Good to see you, have a seat." I motion to the booth in the back corner of the diner we've taken over. Once seated, I stare at the two of them, trying to get a read on them. They do the same, before we break out into grins.

"Avinu, your shake." Zilv places my chocolate shake on the table in front of me.

"Ooh, is that chocolate?" Chaske asks.

"Yes, would you like one?" I offer.

"Haven't had a milkshake in years." He turns to Zilv, "Would you mind ordering one for me?"

"I'll have strawberry, if you don't mind." Yona tells Zilv. He nods his head and makes his way back to the counter. I take a long sip of mine and decide to get down to business.

"We have worked together before, Yona, and I believe that we were able to find common ground despite our cultural differences and business dealings." Yona nods guardedly. "Someone from your organization is running underground gambling, large sums of money." Neither appear surprised, however, they sit closer to the table as I continue. "Normally, I would stay out of other's affairs, as they do not concern me and mine, unfortunately, the widow of a mutual acquaintance and her children have been threatened, one of my men died when her house was set on fire, and another of my men has

been beaten, tortured, and killed, and dumped at my front door with a note attached to his corpse demanding we pay the debt of our acquaintance with interest.”

The two men share a long look, before Yona addresses me. “How did the woman become a widow?”

I sit back in my chair, my finger idly tracing the base of my milkshake glass. “He made poor decisions to temporarily rectify other poor decisions.” I don’t look away from Yona, letting him see the anger simmering below the surface, hoping he can read between the lines. He doesn’t disappoint.

“How sizable is this dead man’s debt?”

“Half a mil.” They both suck in through their teeth at the large debt.

Chaske looks to Yona who eventually nods, “We are aware of the extracurricular activities of Yona’s younger brother Nakamo. And saw no reason to curb his behavior as it had no negative impact on our business.” I raise an eyebrow for him to go on. “However, allowing a patron to accrue a debt of that magnitude is unacceptable. As is going after the man’s family.”

“He hired a debt collector by the name of Zach Armstrong.”

“We do not condone the use of outsiders to handle our business. This man died, by whatever means, and Nakamo should have accepted his loss. It is a gamble for anyone involved in these types of activities.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Yona cuts me off, “We will handle Nakamo and dissolve whatever contract he has with Armstrong.” I dip my chin in understanding. “However, I do believe this can be worked out a different way. How would you feel about making a sizable donation to the tribal school to keep peace between our organizations?”

“Why would I need to do that?” This is not unexpected.

“Nakamo made mistakes, and so did you by hiring a man who could so easily break your trust, however, a dead man cannot work out a payment plan. He is not family?”

“No.” They both shrug like that’s what I deserve. It rankles, but they aren’t wrong. “The children are our future, and an educated future is vital to our survival. Send over the information of where I can send the donation and we’ll call it even?”

Zilv silently drops off their milkshakes and straws, before stepping back. I ignore the sound of him slurping the last bit of his.

“Yes.” Yona reaches across the table first to seal the deal with a handshake, then Chaske.

“Gentleman, enjoy your milkshakes, on us.” I stand, buttoning my suit jacket and signaling to my men we are leaving.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Moshe.”

“One more thing,” I plant my fists on the table and lean close, my voice lethal, “should you fail in keeping your brother above board, I will be more than happy to bury him beneath it.”

I stride confidently to the exit, those of my men inside following me out. Once in the SUV, I put the situation behind me for now, and focus on my Seril at home, waiting for me. My stomach flips like I’m riding a roller coaster whenever I think of her. My cock jerks when I remember how I said goodbye to her earlier. That was just a taste of what it will be like between us.

Ernie eyes me in the rearview mirror, “How did it go, Avinu?”

I sigh, closing my eyes, resting my head on the seat. I don’t like leaving this in the hands of others, but I can respect their wishes to handle it inhouse. It’s what I would do. “Time will tell, Ernie, time will tell.”



Today has been...there are no words to describe it. Like a long-held dream that I'd nearly given up hope of ever coming true. I've spent the afternoon with mama, cuddling on the couch and watching movies. She had two outbursts, but they were quickly resolved. I think she's benefited from uninterrupted time with me just as I have. Like a balm to my soul.

I can't thank Moshe enough for giving me this chance. But I will certainly try...on my knees or my back. I stifle a girlish giggle at the ideas that run amok through my head, the many, many ways we can bring pleasure to one another.

"It's not believable. I don't like it." Mama complains about the movie currently playing.

“What’s not believable?” I sit and turn to face her as she thinks about her response. Sometimes the thoughts are right there, but she can’t get her tongue to work.

“He’s a toy, but he doesn’t think he’s a toy, right?” She asks and I nod to confirm. “Then why does he play dead when a human enters the room? If he genuinely believed he wasn’t a toy, why the act?”

“I...uh...well.” She has a point, although something else hits me suddenly. “Out of everything you are seeing on the screen, the toys coming to life, a battery-operated toy car moving the same speed as a real vehicle, how the cowboy stays upright on cloth legs...that’s what you find unbelievable?”

Mama thinks about what I’ve said, shrugs, and goes back to watching the movie. “Yes.”

“Ok.” I smile, so wide it hurts, then settle back down with my head on her lap, her fingers carding through my hair.

“Honey, I’m home!” Moshe announces as he walks in the entertainment room. I bolt back up and find myself running to him before I can even think about it. His arms open wide and catch me when I jump.

“Moshe.” I murmur his name against the warm skin of his throat, his hands cupping my ass and cradling the back of my head.

“I don’t need to see you behave like a slut!” Mama’s outburst causes me to stiffen in his arms. My safe place.

“She is not, Suzie. She missed me, and that’s ok.” He replies gently but firmly. Mama stares at the two of us for a second, her lips pursed in disapproval. Then her features smooth out and she smiles at Moshe.

“Well, of course she did. You’re quite the catch.” She winks at the two of us and resumes watching the movie.

“I missed you too, bubbeleh.” He rasps into my ear, before nudging my face and kissing me soundly. The way his hands tighten on my body, the growl in his throat, I see no reason to doubt him. “How was your afternoon?”

It takes me a second to smile, he's kissed me stupid, but I get there eventually. "The best I can remember. Thank you." I tell him honestly, diving back in for another kiss.

"Anything for you." Carrying me, he walks over to the couch and plops down, situating me like I'm a doll in his lap so I can cuddle him, be close to my mama and still see the screen. "What are we watching? Oh, I love this movie."

And that's how we spend the next several hours, working our way through the sequels until mama can't keep her eyes open. Esther and David join us for a while and bring dinner. During the third movie, Ruthie, Zeppo, Ezra, Tovah, and her brother Penis Face sit down, but Tevye quickly leaves when the incinerator scene begins, claiming he has shit to do. We make fun of him for the sheen in his eyes.

I excuse mama and I and take her to her room to get her ready for bed and tucked in. During her shower, she gushes about how wonderful Moshe's family is, how she always wanted that for me, but it was never in the cards, and then she calls me lazy for not going to work. My mood cannot be dampened.

I'm so happy, I skip into Moshe's room. The door slams behind me, but when I yelp, the wind is knocked out of me as his large, firm, body pins me to the door and assaults my mouth. His hands are everywhere, tugging at my clothes, I think he rips my panties, and then I'm hoisted into the air, and impaled on his cock. I cry out at the intrusion, surprised, and turned on like never before.

"You drive me wild, bubbeleh. I'm always so fucking hard for you. Your body, your heart, your soul." He spits the words out, then bites down on my shoulder, my body shifting up the door with every manic thrust. His hand slips between us and presses against my clit. The pressure, the quick pace, the way his cock fills me completely, it drives me to the edge and tips me over in glorious fashion. He covers my mouth with his own to swallow my scream.

Then we're moving, each step forcing his cock deeper until he sits down on the edge of the bed and drops me to the

hilt. I've never felt so full. "Ride me, Seril. I want to feel you shatter again on the end of my cock." With his hands on my waist to guide me, I rise up and down at a maddening pace, his pubic bone hitting my clit when I swivel my hips on the downward swing. He pushes me back, my arms around his neck, and latches on to my nipple, sucking and biting, licking away the pain and doing it all over again. My second orgasm builds and builds, sweat dampening my hair and back, between my breasts. My thighs ache, but I push myself harder until the pressure explodes between my thighs.

"God. Dammit." He snarls, flipping me on my back and lifting my legs to his shoulders, his hands on my thighs to hold me in place as he ruts like a beast. "I'll be gentle next time. We'll make love. Fuck. I couldn't wait...you're perfect, so fucking perfect."

My tits bounce, my ass jiggling at the impact of thighs, and my breath stalling in my lungs. He's magnificent to watch. Corded muscle. Sweat trailing through the grooves of his abs. His jaw tense, his eyes unfocused, his grip on my body just shy of painful.

His cock taps against something deep in my body and my back bows off the bed. "That's it. One more. Cum with me." My heart threatens to give out. "Your pussy is hungry for it, Seril, once more, baby, together." He releases my left thigh, his thumb moving to my swollen and tender clit, he presses down on it hard and like he demanded earlier, I shatter. My body breaks apart into a million tiny shards, and the warmth of his release filling me up puts me back together...better than I was before.

Moshe slides his hands beneath my back and up to my shoulders, lifting me briefly to roll us to his back. Lips in my hair, harsh breathing in my ear, softening cock in my pussy... "I know it's cliché to announce this after sex, but I love you, Seril, indubitably."

I snort into his muscled chest, tears mixing with sweat as my heart threatens to break through my ribs. I cannot contain my happiness, my joy, so it leaks out of my eyes...and vagina

as I shift and dislodge him. Perching my chin on his sternum, I meet his gaze and lose myself in the dark chocolate depths.

“You are a suitable male companion.” I tease, squealing, when he flips us over and starts tickling me. More of our combined fluid leaks out of me, wetting the bed beneath me, but I don’t care. “Fine. I love you too!” He stops tickling me, resting on his elbows, his face inches from mine.

“Say it again.”

I cup his face, tenderly running my thumb across the apple of his cheek. “I love you with everything I am, Moshe. It belongs to you, all of it.” He captures my lips in a fierce kiss, of need, of devotion, of promise. “Please.” I murmur once we break apart to breathe. “Please don’t hurt me.”

“Bubbeleh, I could never hurt you.” He declares adamantly, brushing his nose along mine. “You are a gift from God himself...to be treasured and adored.”



My eyes open against my will, the sun peeking in through the curtains of my bedroom. Still holding Seril, I arch my neck back to check my clock, I still have 15 minutes before my alarm. I nose aside her long auburn hair and nuzzle the back of her neck. She hums in her sleep, her petite body stretching like a cat along the length of mine. Every soft curve against every hard edge.

This is what makes life worth living.

She came into my life unexpectedly, knocking me on my ass so hard I've seen cartoon hearts floating, as she would say, in the air ever since. She's been through quite a lot, more than anyone her age should ever have to go through. But that's life. She's handled it with grace and poise. Her patience is

envious. And her heart. Well, as I told her, I was instantly attracted to her body, but it's her heart that I fell in love with.

Mame and Tate have spoken to me over the last week about how much they adore her, my cousins, my siblings, aunts, and uncles, they all love her. She will make the perfect wife to the Avinu. Strong yet compassionate.

She shifts, her movement drawing down the covers, exposing her perky tits. The pale pink nipples teasing me in the early morning light. I lick around her areola, the softest skin I've ever felt, puckering under my tongue. She moans, her back arching as her legs begin to scissor. Gently, I take her nipple into my mouth and suckle, slow and steady. She awakens slowly, languorously, her moans turning into whimpers of need.

Under the covers, I dip my hand to trace along the contours of her body until I skim over the small patch of auburn curls to her clit, hidden between the lips of her succulent pussy. Seril blinks open her eyes, her brow furrowed, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, as her legs drop to the sides, baring herself to me.

I continue to suck on her nipple, my other hand snaking underneath her to tease the other, as I work her clit. Her skin flushes from the tops of her alabaster tits to her cheeks as she comes undone.

"Fucking beautiful." I murmur, releasing her nipple to drink from her lips. "Good morning."

"Good morning." She responds shyly, ducking her head. I chuckle into her hair and pull her flush against me, wanting just a few more minutes with her before I have to start my day. She rocks her ass, toying with my morning wood, so I swat her hip.

"Enough of that."

"But you're hard. I can help with that." I groan, checking the clock once more.

"We don't have time, bubbeleh."

“We can make time.” She argues, turning in my arms and cupping my face with her tiny delicate hands. “You have your meeting with your *kapitans*, and I have mama’s doctor appointments. We won’t see each other all day.” Her pout has me caving faster than I’d like. If she knows the power she holds over me...

“In the shower, baby. We’ll experiment with amorous efficiency.”

“Ooh, I love when you multitask.”

After making her cum on my cock twice more in the shower, we finally turn off the water and begin getting ready for the day. “Mame will be going with you to the appointments, I don’t want you to be alone. I hate that I can’t go with you—”

She cuts me off with a sweet kiss. “You have work, Moshe, I understand. Besides, I’m looking forward to spending time with your mom. She is my bestie, after all.”

“You will have six guards with you, don’t argue, I’m not overreacting, I’m cautious. With you, my mom, and yours, all my best girls are going to be together, and I want to make sure you are safe and have whatever help you might need.”

“I love you, Moshe.” I lean down to kiss her, then stand up and hand over my tie. In the last few days, she’s enjoyed being the one to tie it, even though I had to teach her first.

“Love you too, bubbeleh.”

A few minutes later, we’re walking hand in hand out of our suite and into the main part of the estate. Tate is saying goodbye to mama, rather vigorously with tongue, as we enter the foyer. I clear my throat, my dad flips me off, which causes Seril to giggle.

Pamela and Suzie enter a moment later. She gives Seril a hug and a pat on the cheek, then surprises me with a hug next. I kiss her cheek and wish them a good day.

“Call me if you need anything, or if you’re upset, or if you miss me, or if you want to have phone sex—”

“And we’re leaving!” Mame grabs my woman and Suzie, ushering them and Pamela out the front door. Tate and I stand and watch them go, their guards flanking them as they walk to the SUVs.

“Domestic as shit, ain’t it?” Tate mutters, shaking his head. He smacks me in the chest, “Come on, let’s not keep the men waiting.” I follow him through the halls to the conference room, pleased to find everyone here already.

“Nice of you to join us, Avinu.” Jonah says, pointedly looking at my crotch, “Glad you took care of business before...taking care of business.”

“Do you want punched like Tev? Or pretty penises on your face?” Jonah holds his hands up and shakes his head, his shit eating grin stays obnoxiously in place.

“Zep, why don’t you begin.” Zeppo is three years older than me and in charge of our medical marijuana dispensaries.

“I moved Becks into Tim’s position. Yona was right, we never should have trusted our money to someone outside of the family.” I shrug, because there ain’t anything we can do about it now but learn and move on. Putting one of our many, many cousins, and someone as smart as Rebekah, in that position is what we should have done in the first place.

“Be them gentile or Jew, you trust until you get screwed.” We chuckle at my Uncle Steven’s wise words.

“Large shipment heading down Florida way, O’Sheeran is ordering additional for tourists.”

“With Tim’s five finger discount, how are we financially?”

“I won’t lie and say the money wouldn’t be nice to have back, but O’Sheeran’s order makes up the loss.” I nod, waiting for him to say anything else, when he jerks his chin at me, I address Jonah about Swingin’ Schlay Productions, our porn studio.

“Monica misses you, boss.” I throw a pen at Jonah and hit him square in the forehead.

“And you’ve made it abundantly clear that our relationship has ended and that I am no longer a viable option?”

“Yeah, I told her you met a chick with a tighter snatch and more class.” I don’t even have to move; Uncle Morris slaps him in the back of the head and whispers something harshly in his ear. “The situation has been handled.” He tells me, shifting in his seat. We’re family first, so we joke and take the piss all the time, but we don’t disrespect our women. My uncles and father have always been adamant about that. I know it will take my cousins and brother a little while to get used to the fact that my sex life is no longer any of their concern.

“On a totally unrelated issue, the ‘private tutoring’ sessions we started have been a rousing success.” Jonah slides a spreadsheet my way, and my eyebrows nearly rise right off my face when I look at the numbers.

“This many people want to pay to fuck?” A few months ago, we found a loophole which allows us to provide a safe and—fuck it. Prostitution is illegal. Paying for a tutorial with an “actress” or “actor” on how to be a porn star is not. So, we have clients who pay for private sessions with our willing employees in a safe environment. It sounds skeevier than it is. Maybe. Regardless, it’s making us a shit ton of money, our employees receive outstanding salaries, regular health screenings, free medical, dental and vision, bodyguards, company matched 401k, and paid holidays off.

Jonah smirks, “Yup.”

“Awesome. How about Exodus Freight?” Ezra pulls out his phone, before answering.

“Pick up the day after tomorrow from Four Families, then two days back.” He looks to Zilv who speaks next.

“Just waiting on this last haul, then we’ll be ready to depart. Ten ports to unload between Europe and South Africa, including the medical equipment Gersh requested in Liberia.”

“And Tev, Yakov? Anything to add?”

“Armstrong is silent right now. Nakamo hasn’t left the casino since you spoke with Yona and Chaske.” Tev updates,

which is good news for now.

“Avinu, I pulled some information on Seril’s family, do you want me to review this with you now, or in private?”

I glance around the room, knowing that any of these men would protect Seril with their lives, not just because she is my woman, but because they have all come to know her and folded her into the family seamlessly. “Now.”

He sighs, sitting back and tapping his pen on the table. “Suzie had a seizure which caused the accident. Her car insurance handled the cleanup. Suzie was originally denied disability; however, her lawyer was able to appeal successfully. I can’t find any record of a court case. No trial. No civil suit, nothing. And CPS never stepped in on Seril’s behalf.”

“Seril was told that her brother was named her temporary legal guardian, she said he and his wife sued her mother for everything. There were other civil suits against Suzie. Two were from people who had damage from a fender bender due to her accident. And the other was a guy who missed the birth of his child because he was stuck in traffic. She’s been working off the debts ever since.”

“That’s what Seril believes to be true?” I nod, my fists clenching on the table, wondering if my woman hasn’t been deceived more than we thought.

“I’m still looking into it, I wanted to give you an update on what I found or didn’t find so far.”

“Do you want to talk to Seril?” He shakes his head.

“No,” he shares a look with Tevye, “Tev and I are thinking of having a friendly chat with the brother.”

“I’d like to be there when you do...but honestly, I don’t trust myself to let him walk away still breathing.”

“That’s why you’re going to let us do this for you.”

“Is that so?”

“Spend time with your woman, Avinu, we’ll handle the dirty work.”

25.



Snuggling with Moshe is my favorite thing to do. I love when he's inside me, I love when he kisses me, I love laughing with him, but snuggling...in bed, on the couch, him holding me as we stand in the kitchen and chat with his family...it's the bee's knees, as my mama says.

Right now, we're on the couch in the entertainment room, Zilv and Zeppo are playing a video game on another television, Sophie and Ruth are painting each other's toenails, and Ezra is reviewing audition reels with Jonah for the porn studio. Good old fashioned wholesome family fun.

"Tell me what the doctors said when you talked to them earlier?" Moshe whispers in my ear. Bending back to look him in the eye, I raise an eyebrow in question. "I know you already

told me the gist, but I like how excited you get when you talk about it, so tell me again.”

I shrug, happy to share if he’s willing to listen. “They want to start rehab for her as soon as possible. Occupational, physical, speech, and cognitive. A psychiatrist for both of us. Since her blood work came back, they have a cocktail of medications they want her to begin, one at a time. These should help with her irritability, hormones, headaches, cholesterol, and high blood pressure. She’s got a bunch of vitamins they want to incorporate as well, since her blood work was all over the place. She is more than her TBI, and they want to treat her as a whole person.” I shift on the couch until I’m straddling his lap, looping my arms around his neck, and leaning in to rest our foreheads together. “Pamela is amazing, and so are the other two nurses that she recommended. I want to be involved in mama’s treatment, but Pamela and Esther explained that it’s important to give mama and I time to be mother and daughter, not patient and caregiver. I never thought of it that way before...and,” I sniffle, using my shoulder to wipe my eye, “I can never thank them, or you, for giving me this chance, for giving mama her life back. I know it will take time, and I know it is not guaranteed to work, but it’s something...it’s hope. And we’ve been sorely lacking that in our lives.” I press my lips to his, softly, then pull back. “I love you.”

“Love you too, bubbeleh.” He runs his hands up and down my thighs, before cupping my ass and pulling me closer. “Wanna take you on a date. Tonight. Now.”

“A date?” A slow smile stretches my lips at the thought of going out with him. “Is it safe?”

“Can’t answer that.” His eyes shutter, lips tight. “Is that something you can accept?”

“That I’m involved with the head of a mafia family?” He nods curtly. “Yes. There are parts I’m not crazy about.” I graze his cheek with my lips until I’m at his ear. “Your suitable cock more than makes up for it.”

His lips suck on my neck for a second, before he's chuckling and pushing me off him. "Go get dressed. Dress, heels, the works." I nod and run out of the entertainment room, quick footsteps right behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I see Ruth and Sophie chasing me with nail polish.

"What are you doing?" I ask with a light laugh.

"Can't go out without your nails done!" Ruthie insists when they catch up to me.

For the next 45 minutes, they help me get ready. My fingers and toes are painted a sparkly plum, my makeup heavier than my normal routine, smoky eye and plum lipstick, my hair up in an elegant chignon. The girls have the magic touch. My black wrap dress has a borderline indecent v in the front, I normally pair it with a camisole at work but leave that out for tonight, my peep toe heels give me an extra 4 inches and make my short legs look long and lean. Not to mention what they do for my ass! Sophie smacks it as I twirl around after we're finished.

"He's going to swallow his tongue when he sees you." Ruthie claps and bounces on her feet.

"I imagine she'd rather he swallows something else." Sophie whispers, shocking Ruthie and I. They start bickering about how Ruth doesn't need to hear that about her brother and he's Sophie's cousin so it's just weird. Meanwhile, I check myself out in the mirror from every angle, unable to remember a time I ever felt this beautiful.

"Seril." Moshe knocks heavily on the door. "I'm growing gray out here." The girls open the door and squeeze past him to leave. He stands there, his heated gaze running hungrily up and down my body. "Change of plans—"

"No." I hold my hand up to stop him. I want him, I always want him, but he promised me a date and I intend to get one.

He sighs dramatically, holds his hand out for me and laces our fingers together as he leads me through the house to the front doors. Once in the Wagoneer, Moshe pushes the hem of my dress back and rests his hand on my bare thigh. The heat of

his touch is overwhelming. “You look absolutely stunning, bubbeleh.” He rasps harshly in my ear, goosebumps erupting all over my body. “I can be a patient man, but know, as soon as we are home, I’m fucking that sweet snatch beneath this dress...while it’s still on.” I shiver, the image he paints giving me second thoughts about the whole dinner date thing. “And the shoes.”

“Shlemiel.” He laughs when I call him a jerk, sitting back in his seat like he hasn’t a care in the world. Too bad the zipper of his pants is distended so far it looks painful, giving him away.

We eat at a quiet Italian restaurant where the owners personally greet us at our table, gushing over Moshe finally bringing a worthy woman to their establishment. I fight the eye roll when I realize he brought other dates here, until the husband says, “That brother of yours, and your cousins...filthy pigs.”

When they leave us to our meal, Moshe takes my hand over the table and squeezes until I raise my eyes to him. “I learned my lesson, bubbeleh, no dining where—”

“Thank you.” I cut him off, causing him to laugh, not wanting to relive the first time we went out to dinner.

We talk while we enjoy the delicious food. It truly is exquisite, fresh ingredients, and a good vintage of Mountain Dew. The conversation flows naturally, he asks me about work the past week, if I adjusted to the restricted hours, if I miss Panera.

“I like being useful. So often with mama, I was...impotent to help her properly, to make a difference. Working at the store, because I WANT to be there, gives it a new context. I enjoy it. For now.” He seems pleased with my answer, especially with my qualifier. I imagine as we continue in our relationship, if marriage is truly on his agenda, maybe children, I’ll want to work less or not at all.

After dinner, he leads me by the hand toward a park across the street, the sun is just starting to set, drenching the sky in pinks, purples, and yellows. We get ice cream from a vendor

and talk about our childhoods as we make our way back to the SUV. I notice most of his guards following us at a respectable distance and feel safer for knowing that they are there.

Back in the SUV, he wrestles with me playfully, trying to get me on his lap.

“There are seatbelts for a reason, Moshe Holofcener.” I push him away, “You wouldn’t want to break the law, would you?” He and Ernie find this to be particularly funny. Watching Moshe lighthearted, a sparkle in his eye, is breathtaking.

“Avinu—” Ernie begins but is cut off when Moshe’s phone rings.

“What? What the fuck do you mean?” His head whips behind us, his eyes narrowing into hard slits at whatever he sees. “Contact Tev, give him the plates, then do whatever it takes to draw them back.” He hangs up, his lips curled in a snarl. “Ernie, two SUVs are behind us, they cut off our detail.”

“I saw them.”

“Get us the hell out of here and back to the compound.” Once on the highway, the traffic thins out, and we’re jolted when one of the vehicles makes contact with us. I scream, dropping my head to my lap and covering it with my hands. Once more we’re struck, then the rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire, all around the vehicle I can hear the bullets hit, but nothing penetrates. I reach out blindly for Moshe’s hand, he takes it, bending low to reassure me.

“The Wagoneer is bullet resistant. We aren’t invincible, but it should hold out until we get back to the compound. The security detail is coming up fast and they will divert the men shooting at us so we can get away. Just hold on for a few more minutes, bubbeleh, I need you to be brave.” I nod, unable to open my mouth to speak. He grabs my hair and roughly pulls me up until he can take my mouth. It’s quick, and hard, and full of emotion.

When he releases me, I glance up at the passenger window and a scream lodges in my throat. One of the vehicles is next

to us, a man hanging out of the open passenger window with a gun pointed right at me. I know it's tinted, so he probably can't see me, but I will never be able to unsee him and the barrel of the gun. He pulls the trigger and I watch the glass spiderweb from impact. I do not have a bullet in my skull. I'm alive. For now. I think I might have peed myself.

"Took 'em fucking long enough." Ernie spits out from the driver's seat. It's the first time I've ever heard him angry before. I think of Bailey and how much she likes him, and I pray that we make it out of this, so they have a chance to see where their affection takes them.

"We're almost home, Seril. They're gone." I sit up, my back protesting the movement after being tensely hunched for so long, and peer over my shoulder, then all around the perimeter, no one else is in sight. But the windows and windshield resemble mosaics.

Moshe pulls me from the vehicle, cradling me in his arms once we're parked in front of the estate. His parents rush out, uncles and cousins too. Over his shoulder I see the outside of the Wagoneer and send a prayer of gratitude to God. Two tires look flat, the hood and doors are riddled with bullet holes or what would be holes if they hadn't armored the vehicle.

"We could have died. Moshe." I cling to him as he takes me inside, straight to our bedroom. He lays me gently on the bed after kicking our door closed and then he's pushing my dress up and ripping my panties off and unbuckling his pants and pulling himself free of his boxer briefs and driving inside of me within seconds.

It's frantic. It's raw. It's primal. And I know as we both reach our peaks quickly and explosively, that it was exactly what we needed. A reminder. We are alive. We are together.

The expression on his face when he withdraws from my body, causes my stomach to churn and my chest to ache. "No." I say before he even opens his mouth.

"I have to."

“No, you don’t. You stay here, with me, and let your men take care of this.” He towers above me, his nostrils flaring, his eyes wild and unmoored.

“I am the Avinu!”



She doesn't understand. I cannot let this go. It cannot be handled by my men. Others need to know that I will not tolerate this type of attack again. That coming after me and mine would be a grave mistake.

"You are my Moshe."

"I am. But I am the Avinu, this cannot go unpunished!"

"I know." She deflates slightly, her chin still defiantly raised, on her knees pleading with me. "But it doesn't have to be YOU who does the punishing."

"I am not a weak man! I will not hide behind my men and let them go to war on my behalf! This is who I am, Seril."

"I know who you are."

“I am a violent man. I came into your store the day I met you because I killed a man by shoving a blade down his spine and splattered my clothing. That is who I am.”

“You are so much more than that.”

“You don’t get it.” I run my hands through my hair and pinch the bridge of my nose. “This estate. The expensive doctors for your mother. The resources to deal with your brother. Fancy dinners and the luxury of quitting your job, there is a price to that generosity. This is that price.”

My chest is heaving by the time I’m done laying it out for her. Her eyes shine with tears, but my brave girl doesn’t let them fall. No, she keeps them to herself, and I watch with a sinking feeling in my stomach as she shuts down. Shuts me out. I can’t do this right now. I have to contact my men, find out where they are, and deal with the motherfuckers who tried to kill her. Kill me.

I spin on my heel and stomp out of the room, my hands itching to feel the life drain from those responsible. I pass my mama and aunts in the foyer, the hard looks they throw my way, tell me that they heard our conversation. I ignore them, and continue outside, where a new vehicle is waiting for me, Ernie already behind the wheel.

“Tate, uncles, stay here. I’m not sure if they have another plan of attack and I want you all with the women.” They nod in unison, drawing a faint smile from my lips before I slip into the open back door and pull it shut.

I’m on the phone immediately as Ernie pulls down the long driveway. “Avinu, we have them at the Industrial Park location.”

“Who is it?”

“Armstrong. Nakamo.”

“I will be there in 20.” I disconnect the call and tell Ernie where to go. I think back to Seril’s face when I left and my stomach twists. I never, NEVER, want to see her look at me like that again. The emptiness in her eyes. The interminable void. She stared through me, and it chilled me to the bone. I

fucked up. I know that. I knew it the moment the words left my mouth. They are true, but the implications that she asked for any of that, are not. I forced this life on her and then I threw it in her face.

Armstrong and Nakamo were already going to die, but I think I will use them to exorcize my demons.



I wait at the end of the bed on my knees, his seed dripping down my thighs to soak beneath me. I wait for a long time, until I know for sure he is gone. I stand up on shaky legs, and walk to the closet, grabbing my bags from the floor. Efficiently and silently, I make my way through the hanging clothes and the drawers to pack everything I brought with me.

My mind is blank, and my heart is empty.

In my mama's empty room, I do the same. Pack her clothes. Her toiletries. I stare at the medicine bottles for a long time. I want to take them with us, I want her to have them, to get better, but I know we can't afford them on our own. She's only taken two doses of one of the meds, so I hope it won't adversely affect her to stop them suddenly.

I take her bags into our...*his* room and place them next to mine. Given the time, mama is in the entertainment room, about to head to bed. Instead, I'm going to have to drag her out in the night and back to our apartment. It's where we belong. I'm not cut out for this life, apparently.

A gentle knock on the door has me looking up to see Esther poking her head in. She glances from me to the bags on the floor and then opens the door so she can slip inside, closing it with a gentle snick.

“Esther—”

“Shut up and listen.” I rear back like she's slapped me, shocked and a little hurt that she would speak to me that way. “Oh, relax. Just hear me out.” I nod, keeping my mouth shut. “My father was a foot soldier for David's father when he was Avinu. He didn't bring my sisters and I around the compound, we didn't play and grow up with the *family*.” I sit forward despite myself, eager to hear her story. “Solomon, David's father, came to our house one day to drop something off or to tell him something, I'm not sure, but he was headed out with his son, and two of his *kapitans*' boys, who were friends with David. I was seventeen when I saw David for the first time. And that was it. Just one look and I knew I was going to marry that man. Thankfully, he felt the same. I loved him to distraction. I didn't care that he would be the next Avinu, I didn't care what he did for a living, I just wanted to be with him.” She chuckles, “David's friends, Morris and Steven relentlessly pursued my sisters, Gertrude and Sarah. Of course, Sarah was only fifteen, too young to get married. And my father wouldn't let me get married until Gertie did, since she was older. So, I strongly urged her to give Steven a chance, and the rest is history. I was lucky, I had my sisters with me as I learned to navigate this new world we found ourselves in. But nothing prepared me for the first time David came home covered in blood, his knuckles scraped, and a bullet hole in his shoulder.”

I gasp, covering her hand with mine.

“I realized at that moment there were two sides to the man I fell in love with at first sight. He was my sweet husband,

who doted on me, was friskier than a cat in heat, and a gentle uncle to Zeppo and Ezra. But the other side of the coin was the Avinu. He ruled over hundreds, ensured livelihoods for all of those that followed him, was violent when the situation required it, and unforgiving to those that trespassed against him. Moshe, our savior, has led the family into a time of legal prosperity. He has worked tirelessly to ensure that not only his people earn a living, but that they do so without the threat of prison hanging over their heads. He is not always on the right side of the law, but he is always on the right side of those who count on him.”

She pauses for a moment, and I let her words simmer in my head.

“I know you want to run; I know the vitriol he spat at you was uncalled for, and he should be held accountable for his actions. But I want you to remember what it was like in that car, not just for you, but for him. He loves you, and his entire life has been about protecting everyone he loves. As hard as it was for you to be shot at while speeding down the highway, how hard do you think it was for him knowing it was his fault? That he brought you into this life kicking and screaming? His words were said out of fear, Seril, out of desperation. It is often said, thrown around as if weightless, that someone would kill for you. It is rare to meet a man who would literally kill to keep those he loves safe, to keep you safe. This is the life. It has its ups and downs, much like any marriage or relationship. But being with men like my David, or Moshe, is worth the risk.”

She pats my hand, stands up and stares down at me with a kind smile and warm eyes. “I believe that you are exactly what the Avinu needs, but it isn’t enough for others to believe it. You have to feel it deep in your soul. No matter what you decide, I will always be a phone call away, tokhter.”

She leaves as quietly as she arrived, however the impact of her visit is immeasurable. I lay back on the bed, my feet dangling off the edge and stare at the ceiling. Can I leave this place that has felt more like home than anywhere I’ve ever

lived and never look back? Can I live with never seeing Moshe again? Can I function without my heart?



My eyes are fixed on the twitching form of Zach Armstrong. His body, naked, laid out on a bed of dull spikes. Flat circles of various weights once laid atop his body on his legs, torso, and face, to push him down, now rest upon the tips of the spikes. His screams, which have now stopped, still echo in the cavernous room of the warehouse we own for such purposes. His blood coats the floor beneath his skewered body.

After another moment where I soak in the sight of the dead man who once threatened my empire, my family, my woman, I tear my gaze away to watch Nakamo. A boy playing at a man's game. A boy now staring down the grim reaper and wishing he had made better choices.

“Please.” He begs, snot and tears coating his dark skin. “Please. I’ll never bother you again.”

“I know you won’t.” I tell him calmly, my rage near its end now that I’ve sated it with the blood on my hands. “You should have heeded your brother’s warning, Nakamo.”

“I know. I know. I will. From now on.”

“Of course, you will. Dead men can do nothing but listen.” He chokes on a sob, his head turning back to his hired help, now motionless on the table. “Do not worry, you and he do not share the same journey to death. Out of respect for Yona and Chaske, I will make yours quick, but no less permanent.”

I pull out my 9mm and point it at his head, my finger firmly on the trigger.

“I don’t want to die.”

I tilt my head to the side and stare at him incredulously. “Did you think yourself invincible when you came after a widow and her children, when you set their home on fire causing the death of one of my men? When you killed a man belonging to the Kosher Nostra, again, this time in cold blood? When you nearly killed the Avinu and his Sarai Ima?”

“I don’t know what those words mean.” The guys laugh, except for The Pharaoh. Fucker is made of stone.

“A little knowledge for you to take into the afterlife. I am the Avraham Avinu, The Father. And my wife-to-be is my Sarai Ima, The Mother. That concludes our Hebrew lesson for today, let’s dispense with the killing. I have some groveling to do.” The bullet hits him between the eyes as he opens his mouth, the words dying on his tongue.

“As always, gentlemen, thank you for your creativity and strong stomachs.” I give a half ass salute to my men, then address Tevye, “Clean this shit up. I want their bodies buried beneath the billboard near the casino. Leave a note to Yona that I appreciate his effort, but I took care of the problem as promised.” Tev jerks his chin in understanding.

Holstering my gun, I stride out of the warehouse, straight to my vehicle. Ernie opens the door for me, shutting it once

I'm inside. "Home, Avinu?"

"I need to stop at a florist first."

"Buying some apology roses?" I glare at Ernie in the rearview, but he chuckles.

"Something like that."

An hour and ten minutes later, we pull up to the compound. The florist was not thrilled about being woken up in the middle of the night, but he agreed that it was better than me breaking his windows and taking what I wanted instead. Logic for the win!

Armed with my apology in hand, I enter the quiet house and stop in one of the spare bedrooms to shower quickly. I do not want to taint my bubbeleh with the sins of my lifestyle any more than I have to.

Towel secured around my waist, I manage to open my door and enter the suite. I nudge the bedroom door open and the dark objects on the floor grab my attention first. I nearly drop the items in my hand, but it's the creature on my bed that keeps me from acting rashly.

Emptying my hands on the nightstand, I flick on the bedside lamp. The soft light bathes her in a warm glow. Her eyes are puffy, her lips red and raw. And yet, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. And she's mine.

"Seril." I whisper gently, running my hand over her face, pushing some of her dark red locks from her cheek. She blinks slowly, a soft smile gracing her lips for a few seconds before her eyes open all the way and a wary expression mars her perfect features. "Bubbeleh." Kneeling on the bed, I gather her up in my arms and rock us back and forth, my face pressed into her hair, my lungs breathing her in greedily.

"Moshe." The tone of her voice has me rushing to explain, to apologize and set right my actions earlier in the night.

"I was wrong to say what I did. Not just because it hurt you, but because it wasn't true. Yes, I am a violent man, when the need arises, but I know that you are not a gold-digger like I implied. I forced you into this life, I pursued you, stalked you

really, and gave you no choice. Everything I have is yours, Seril, including my heart and soul. When they rammed the Wagoneer...when I saw the terror on your face...the gun pointed at you through the window...something inside me snapped. I did that to you, I put you in that position, and at the moment there was nothing I could do to protect you. Nothing to stop them from taking you away from me. You spoke of impotence with your mother, a helplessness that was debilitating...that was what I felt tonight. I can't lose you. Not because of someone else and certainly not because of my errant mouth. I was afraid. It is no excuse for the things I said to you, but it is the reason."

She sighs, her small arms moving slowly to wrap around my middle, her cheek rubbing back and forth on my chest as if finding the best spot to rest.

"As far as seeking retribution—" She arches her neck and places her lips on mine, cutting me off.

"I understand, Moshe. They needed to pay for what they did. It is important for the family to show others the consequences of acting against the Mishpocheh Consortium. I understood then why you needed to leave. But I, too, was afraid. Scared of losing you when I just found you. You had just been inside me; I had your cum running down my legs, and I might have pissed myself in the car...adrenaline was running high, and I couldn't stomach watching you walk out that door and never seeing you again."

"I love you, Seril. Don't leave. Please." The words tumble from my mouth and despite the vulnerability, I wouldn't take them back. She is my safe place, somewhere I can let my guard down and be myself, talk of my fears and my hopes.

"I wanted to. God, I wanted to. Even before your mother came in to talk to me, I didn't think I could do it. Then...well, you know how convincing your mother is." She chuckles, leaning back again to look me in the eye. "I love you, too, Moshe."

Closing the distance between us, I press my lips to hers and push her down on the bed, my body following her until

I'm nestled between her thighs. She tugs on the towel, so I shift to free it, throwing it to the floor. Her delicate hand slides between us, her slender fingers wrapping around my girth, with a moan and whispered plea she guides me to her entrance. I push in, slow, savoring every fucking inch of her warm wet cunt welcoming me home. I swallow her moans, her whimpers, as I feed her my tongue. We move in sync, our bodies crashing together. Her breasts rub against my chest, the root of my cock hits her clit, her nails drag down my back, my hand bruises her hip as I hold on tight.

"Marry me." I rasp against her throat between sucking kisses. I want to mark her inside and out, for everyone to see.

"Yes!" She cries out, not sure if it's because I hit that special spot inside her or in answer to my question. Semantics aren't important right now, she said yes and I'm running with it.

"Be my wife. My queen. Rule by my side and let the world worship at our feet."

"Or just the state of North Carolina!"

She didn't say no for once. And my blood is boiling with adrenaline and joy. My hips move faster, her tits start bouncing, my forehead beads with sweat, her skin flushes bright red, then her pussy clamps down on my cock and I don't even try to hold back, flooding her womb with my seed and praying it takes root.

We lay tangled for several minutes as our breathing evens out and our hearts slow to a medically acceptable rate. "I don't think you pissed yourself earlier, but, uh, did you happen to take a shower while I was gone?"

She lifts her head from my chest, a cute little scowl bunching her face, her lips parting to speak, but her eyes move to the nightstand, and she tilts her head to the side and bites the inside of her cheek.

"Uh...why is the nightstand covered in potted plants?"

"Oh, well." I move to sit up, my back to the headboard, and pull her up into my lap. I offer her a lascivious grin when I

feel my cum drip from her sated center, she smacks my chest and points at the greenhouse I'm starting in our bedroom. "This is a kalanchoe." I tell her, handing her the succulent with peach buds. "It symbolizes stalking." I wink when she snorts. "It symbolizes eternal love and persistence."

She shrugs, "Ok, stalking." She brings it to her nose, then sets it aside.

"This is a Venus flytrap."

"I figured."

"It symbolizes strength and courage. Because you are one of the strongest human beings I know, and I am proud to have you by my side." Seril's eyes water as she takes the plant from my hand and carefully sets it next to the kalanchoe. "And this is a cactus."

"You don't say?"

"It symbolizes protection and endurance. Because I will always protect you; body and soul."

"Moshe." She cups my face with one hand, holding the cactus in the other. The way she looks at me right now, I want to see that love and adoration in her eyes every day of my life. I don't ever want to be the reason her light is snuffed out again.

"And if I fuck up again, you can stab me with the cactus and feed me to the Venus flytrap."



I shift for the third time on my seat at breakfast. Moshe keeps flashing me knowing grins, the meanie. He took me four times last night, well, early this morning. The man was like a machine programmed for intercourse. He finally gave up when my vagina waved the white flag.

To take my mind off my tender kitty, I wait for Moshe to take a bite of food, then ask, “What did you mean about resources to deal with my brother?” Conversation around the table stops, all eyes flickering between him and I. I pay them no mind and wait for my fiancé to answer. Ahh! I squee internally at being able to say that I’m engaged. He slipped a ring on my finger before we left our suite. It was his bubbe’s and gorgeous. Even if it wasn’t, it has sentimental value which makes it priceless and perfect.

Moshe swallows hard, eyeing his cousin Tevye and Yakov before taking my hand. “I had Yakov look into what you told me, about your mother’s accident and the civil and criminal cases.”

“Ok.”

“You said you were never permitted in court?” Yakov asks me.

I shake my head, “No, my brother wouldn’t allow me there.”

“That’s because there was no actual court case. No criminal charges were brought against your mother because of the seizure.” Yakov stands to move closer, taking Ruthie’s seat next to me, when she gets up to give him space. “The insurance company paid for your sister-in-law’s vehicle repair, her medical bills, and three other people who filed claims due to the accident. They sent her a check to cover the repairs to her own vehicle as well.”

“I...I don’t understand. Michael said—”

“Michael and Diana had a lawyer friend falsify documents to make it appear that there was a court case, in order to justify stealing all of your mother’s assets. He forged documents naming him your guardian and giving him power of attorney over your mother’s affairs. Child services was never notified.”

“I’ve been paying the lawyers—”

“You’ve been paying your brother and those who helped him. He sold the house, cashed out her sizable 401k, took the insurance money, and your portion of the Social Security because of her disability.”

I sit back in my chair, my vision blurred with tears. My stomach threatens to revolt. I start shaking. Moshe thinks I’m sad, he tries to comfort me, but jumps back when I grab my plate and hurl it into the wall, it’s shattered pieces flying everywhere.

“Shnorer. Fizehnish. Grobber. Hoyber. Ferimmter. Shmuck. Mother fucking piece of excrement!”

“Bubbeleh. You cussed.” Moshe’s surprise brings me back to the present.

“I like how she said ‘fucking’ but couldn’t say ‘shit’.” I think that was Zilv.

“I want it back. I want it all. I want him to pay for what he’s done. For the lives he stole. For the pain he’s caused. I don’t want him dead, Moshe, I want him to suffer.”

Moshe stands before me, his hands gripping my face. He descends on my lips and forces his tongue between them. “And so, he will.”

“To the Sarai Ima!” David toasts, raising his glass before clinking it with Esther’s. Everyone follows suit, toasting me. I push my face into Moshe’s chest, hearing his laughter rumble beneath my ear.

“Don’t get shy on us now!”



“Did you eat all of your lunch?” I’m sorting through mail in my office at Mishpocheh Consortium, talking to Seril on her lunch break at work.

“You know I’m not a child, right?”

“If you were a child, I wouldn’t have done what I did to you this morning.”

“Good to know.” I can hear her blush through the phone. She clears her throat, “Yes, I ate all my lunch, even the veggies.”

“Good girl.” I tease, my eyes skimming the return addresses as I go. My fingers stop on one from King’s Mountain. “I’ll be by to pick you up when your shift is over.”

“Make sure you bring Ernie in with you, I think Bailey would like to see him.”

“They see each other all the time.”

“Moshe, we see each other all the time, what’s your excuse?”

“Good point. We’ll be in later. Love you.”

“Love you too.” I place my phone on the desk, then flip the envelope over and over in my hands. I’m not nervous about what the Native American has to say, but I am not in the mood to begin a war. A war he will surely lose. Needless bloodshed has never interested me.

Finally, I slide my finger under the flap of the missive and pull out a single sheet of paper. The casino letterhead is proud and bold at the top.

To Moshe Holofcener,

It is with great honor that I extend our heartfelt gratitude for your recent donation to the tribal school in Hollister, North Carolina. Your generosity will allow for building improvements, updated technology, free breakfast and lunch for every student, and so much more.

The future of our great state’s tribal community thanks you.

While our business at present is concluded, I look forward to working with you again and continuing our prosperous friendship.

Sincerely,

Yona Watike

A small chuckle escapes me as I reread the letter. My muscles relax as I fold the letter and place it in the top drawer of my desk. I’ll have to show it to my *kapitans* later.

Suzie is on the path to progress. It may be an uphill battle and slow, but I can see the light in my woman’s eyes grow brighter every day when she sees her mother. She will never be as she was before the accident, but Seril does not live in the

past, she does not dwell on what could have been, she embraces what's to come with alacrity.

My boys and I, not so much. Based on Ernie's enthusiastic reenactment, the conversation Yakov and Tevye had with her brother Michael went something like this:

"Who are you? Why am I here? Don't touch me!"

"We are the Kosher Nostra. And you, Michael, have been a very bad big brother."

"Brother? This is because of Seril? What the fuck? What has she gotten into? I'm not responsible for her..."

"Oh, but you are. You left her to suffer, along with your mother; destitute, hungry, and overworked. And there are consequences for such actions."

"If she owes you—"

"She owes us nothing. You, however, owe her EVERYTHING!"

"Including your worthless life."

Cue sobbing, begging, snot bubbles, and piss.

And...scene.

Michael and Diana Manoff, who are in the process of filing for divorce, have been dealt with according to my woman's wishes. She wants them to suffer but remain alive, and our lawyers are seeing to it with gusto. They are picking them apart piece by piece, letting them acclimate to their new normal before swooping in for another bite. Seril doesn't want to know the details, simply asks that anything recovered, money or assets, is put aside until the process is complete. At that time, she'll decide how best to disperse the funds; she's researching charities in the meantime.

And with this letter, I can cross off any retribution from Nakamo and Zach Armstrong's unfortunate deaths. I did not expect any from a man of honor such as Yona, but you never can be sure what a man will do when faced with the corpse of a loved one.

Sitting back in my chair, I prop my expensive leather shoes on the corner of my desk and cross my hands behind my head. Closing my eyes, I give myself a moment to revel in the peace. Not just in our lives, but in my heart.

Seril is my peace, and I hope that I am hers. We will marry in two months' time, which is all I am willing to give mame. She might curse my name every day, but she's already got most of the planning done.

All that's left for my world to be complete is for my little swimmers to do their job...



1 month later

I'm bent over the bottom drawer of my dresser when Moshe comes up behind me, his hands gripping my hips, his hard cock grinding into my panty covered bottom.

"Moshe—"

"Shh, just let it happen." I snort at his response, forcibly turning around and standing up. His hands go to my breasts, molding them beneath the satin fabric of my nightgown. My head falls back on a moan, but my brain refuses to stop.

"My period started." His hands freeze, fingers pinching my taut nipples. A frustrated growl rips out of his mouth as he

throws his arms in the air, stomps to the bed, and collapses like a teenager being grounded, draping a hand over his eyes.

“Why? Why aren’t you pregnant yet? This is ridiculous, I am the Avinu, my semen is powerful and mighty—” He cuts himself off when I double over with laughter. It’s high pitched and even my ears hurt. “Are you doubting the potency of my seed?” That doesn’t help; I lean against the dresser gasping for breath.

“You are a kunnilemmel.”

“Excuse you!” He gasps in outrage, and I lose the ability to speak again. He waits impatiently for me to collect myself.

“First of all, pregnancy isn’t something that happens quickly for everyone. Sometimes it takes several months or years.”

“No.” I ignore his refusal of how science works.

“Second of all, you monitor everything in my life, what I eat, what I do, who I talk to—”

“You make me sound like a control freak.” I stare at him until he shrugs and motions for me to continue.

“How have you not noticed that I’ve been on birth control since before we started dating?”

His eyes widen, his mouth gapes like a fish before he stands up and stalks over to me. He strips his clothing off as he moves until he is inches from me completely naked and swelling with testosterone manliness.

“Stop it.”

“What?” I ask, only partially listening as I stare at his muscles flexing and heaving with his every labored breath. Is it hot in here?

“Stop the birth control. I’ve been doing my level best to get you pregnant since the first time I sank into your addictive pussy.”

I look up at his face, my body tensing when I see the inferno blazing in his eyes. “You have?”

“Take off your nightgown, Seril, or it’s getting ripped off.”

“You want to have a baby?” I choke out, “We aren’t married yet.”

“Don’t really give a fuck about a piece of paper, bubbeleh, want my child growing in your belly, wanna fuck you while your big and round, wanna suck on your ripe tits as they fill with milk.”

“Ok.” I whisper, grabbing the hem of my nightgown and drawing it up over my head.

“Fuck.” He murmurs, licking his bottom lip as he stares at my breasts. “Panties.”

“But I’m bleeding—”

“Bathroom. Panties. Unplug. Then come back here with your ass in the air.” My eyes never leave his, as I scurry around him to the bathroom. I’ve never had sex on my period before. When I had it last month, I used my mouth and hands on him, and he sucked my nipples until I climaxed. It really helped with my cramps. I clean myself up and cautiously open the door, wondering if he’s changed his mind.

The sight of him glaring at the bathroom, stroking his impressive erection from root to tip, would indicate he has not.

I slowly step into the bedroom, moving faster when he crooks a finger and points to the foot of the bed in front of him. My hands on the mattress, my legs slightly apart, my ass in the air, I’ve never felt more vulnerable or more powerful. He dizzies my head and heats my body.

His body covers mine, caging me in and keeping me hostage. Not that I have any desire to go anywhere else. His teeth sink into the back of my neck at the same time he surges inside me, bottoming out and punching the breath from my lungs. He’s merciless, he’s feral, he’s glorious as he pounds into my pussy over and over again.

My legs weaken, but he catches me with an arm around the middle before I collapse. He pulls until my back is flush with his chest, plays with my nipple, changes his angle and speed

so many times I become a ball of sensation, my vision blurring and my heart racing.

“Cum, Seril. Open your womb and take me inside. Keep me there until you’re bred.” His words are like gasoline on a fire, the flames licking at my body threatening to consume me. “Do as your Avinu says, and *fucking* cum.” His other hand dips between my thighs to find my clit. He circles it once, twice, then pinches it between his thumb and forefinger, his cock pistoning deeper and deeper, until it all becomes too much, and I give in to the fire.

“Mo! Yes! God, yes!” I scream out into our room, my fingers tingle, my toes curl, my pussy spasms painfully hard, dragging Moshe into the fire with me. If I burn, he burns. His guttural roar fills our bedroom, no doubt it can be heard through the estate, his chanting of, “Mine. Mine. Mine.”, background noise to the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had.

I feel sticky and gross when he pulls us to the floor, his body covering me like a blanket. A hot, sweaty, blanket.

“Do you think it worked?” I can’t help but laugh at his absurd question.

“Moshe, I’m still on birth control. I haven’t even missed one pill yet.”

“Yes, but you will not take another one.”

“I’m also on my period.”

“No matter, now that we are aware of the obstacles in our way, my sperm will work out a more effective strategy.”

“You are a strange man.”

“I am a determined man.”

“You are my man.”

“That I am.”

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Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon or submit your rating on Goodreads.

-xoxo Mirrah