

AN ANCIENT WHISPER

Daniella Levy

"I can't believe she's making me do this," I muttered, surveying the storage room of my late grandfather's Judaica store in dismay. The naked bulb hanging from the ceiling cast a gloomy light on the pile of dusty boxes. A sea of cardboard, packing paper, and bubble wrap lay at my feet. And did I mention dust?

I coughed, holding my sleeve against my mouth. My chest constricted in a dull, heavy pain. I drew my inhaler from my pocket and took two hearty puffs. *Couldn't she get one of her other workers to organize this disaster?* I thought.

"Of course," I said aloud, shoving past the pile of boxes in the center of the floor, "if I wanted to use asthma as an excuse for anything, I shouldn't have transferred to a university in Manhattan. Or moved in with Grandma."

My foot caught on the corner of one of the boxes and knocked me off balance. I grabbed at one of the shelves to my left to steady myself. That turned out to be a pretty bad idea; the shelf rested precariously on a pair of metal supports, and it gave when I grabbed it. Not only did I fall on my face, I ended up with a big box landing squarely on my back. It knocked the wind out of me and I couldn't even yelp in pain.

I extricated myself from underneath it, straightening my glasses and cursing under my breath. I was just about ready to give up on the whole endeavor when something odd caught my eye.

The box that fell on me had been concealing a small metal door built into the wall. It looked like the door to a safe.

"Huh," I said aloud. I inspected the round knob in the center of the door. There was a little keyhole underneath it. My heart started pounding in excitement. The one advantage of digging through the storage room was that sometimes real treasures turned up—tarnished silver menorahs, crystal candlesticks studded with rhinestones, or rare, out-of-print editions of Jewish scholarly volumes. And if those things were lying around in boxes, what would my grandparents have hidden in a safe?

I groped in the pocket of my denim skirt for the keys to the store, and then started going through them one by one, searching for a key that looked like it might match. After a few tries, I found one that slid neatly into the hole, and with a little jiggling, I managed to turn it in the lock and swing the safe door open.

Inside was a plain, rather flat wooden box. I scrunched my mouth to one side in disappointment. "Well, that's anticlimactic." I slid the box out of the safe and pulled off the lid.

The inside was lined with maroon velvet, and resting in it was a pile of what looked like old parchments. I squinted at the one on top through my glasses. It was a formal Jewish document of some kind, inscribed in beautiful Hebrew calligraphy. Mustering all my twelve years of Hebrew school, I scanned it, trying to figure out what it was. It didn't take me long to spot my grandfather's name. "*Haḥatan hana'im... Gershon ben Moshe l'mishpaḥat Dahan, amar la lakala, Alma bat David...*" I read. "Grandma's *ketuba*. This is weird. Why would she be storing it here?" I peeked underneath it and saw a very similar document. Underneath it was another. They all looked like *ketubot*, Jewish marriage contracts; and when I examined

the dates on top, they seemed to be going back a generation each time. My eyes widened as I noticed that the pile was pretty thick. "How far back does this go?" I wondered aloud. I carefully lifted the pile from the box and let the parchment on the bottom fall gently onto the velvet. I squinted at it in the dim light.

On the third of the seventh month, five thousand, two hundred, fifty and two years to the creation of the world...

5252. What Jewish year was that? Math was not my forte, but I did know that we were somewhere in the 5770's.

My eyes widened.

This ketuba is five hundred years old.

"Grandma!" I called, bursting into my grandmother's Lower East Side apartment, the wooden box tucked carefully under my arm. I heard no response. "Grandma?" A heavy, sweet aroma I couldn't quite place wafted from the kitchen.

I crossed the small living room, past the old leather couches tucked around the walls, and walked through the open doorway that led to the kitchen. My grandmother was sitting on one of the wicker chairs by the tiny breakfast table, her head rolled to one side, her headscarf askew and her wispy white hairs peaking out underneath. Her walker was parked by the wall next to the doorway. She was snoring loudly.

I bit my lip, unsure what to do. On the one hand, I wanted answers, and I wanted them now. On the other hand, if there was one rule I'd internalized growing up, it was that if you valued your life, you never, ever woke Grandma.

I tried to distract myself by turning my attention to the pot on the stove. There was some diced fruit, maybe apples or pears, boiling in water. The water was a kind of deep orange and seemed pretty boiled down. I looked at my grandmother and then back at the pot. With my free hand, I slid open the silverware drawer next to the stove, took out a fork and was about to poke one of the chunks of fruit.

"NO NO!"

I jumped, almost dropping the fork, and whirled to see my grandmother, perfectly alert, shaking her finger at me with one hand and fixing her headscarf with the other.

"Top silverware drawer is dairy! That pot is meat! Don't you go *treifing* my kitchen!"

My shoulders slumped sheepishly. "Sorry, I didn't notice the red tape."

Her weathered olive-colored face relaxed and she let out a laugh, swinging her upper body forward to heave out of the chair. "How are those quinces doing? Mmmm, they smell good."

It took me a few good seconds to remember the box in my arms.

"Grandma!" I exclaimed, holding it up. "Care to explain this?"

Grandma glanced at it and then did a double take. She reached out and took the box from me, her pale green eyes widening.

"This," she breathed. "Is this..." She put the box on the breakfast table and pulled off the lid. She gasped. "It is! I thought I'd never see this again! Where did you find this?" she demanded, her voice suddenly sharp.

"In a safe in the storage room! Is it really what I think it is?"

I watched her gently finger the edges of the parchments, counting under her breath in Arabic. "Twenty-four," she said finally. "Thank God. They're all here." Her eyes widened again and she suddenly pulled the papers back out, her eyes scanning the bottom of the

box, and then she started digging around the corners with her fingers. “Oh, please let it be here,” she pleaded. “Please, please, please... yes!” she called in triumph. I leaned closer to see what she was holding. It looked like a gold ring.

“What is that?”

She looked up at me, as if suddenly remembering I was there. “Do you realize how long I have been looking for this box?”

“Are they really all the *ketubot*? Going back twenty-four generations?”

“Yes... yes they are. Your grandfather—*alav hashalom*—must have put it in there when we moved. I hadn’t been able to find it since, I thought it was lost forever...”

“How on earth do you have five hundred years’ worth of *ketubot*?” I pressed.

“Well,” she said, placing the ring delicately on the papers and closing the box. “Our family was very careful about keeping the records. My grandmother gave me this box before she passed away and told me to add my mother’s *ketuba*, and mine, when the time came.”

“But why did you never tell me about it?!” I demanded, my voice high-pitched. “You’ve been talking about researching our Sephardic heritage for my entire life. It’s because of you that I transferred to NYU for the Spanish Heritage Project—”

“That’s the special genealogy program with the semester in Madrid, right?” she interrupted me, giving the box one last pat before hobbling over to the stove.

“Yes, but—”

“Then this timing is very fortunate, wouldn’t you say?” She turned off the flame and began rummaging in the silverware drawer.

“Why aren’t you answering my question?!”

“I was afraid it was lost, Alma.” Grandma turned to me, her expression stern. “Wouldn’t be of any use if it didn’t exist.”

“But maybe I could have tried to find it—”

“Also,” Grandma cut me off, scooping the pieces of fruit out of the pot with a slotted spoon, “if anyone else were to find out we had those...” She jerked her head towards the box on the table. “I’d never hear the end of it. Someone would insist I donate it to a museum, or a university, or something.”

“Maybe at least that way it wouldn’t get lost.”

“Don’t you start,” she warned, stabbing the spoon in my direction. “I am not giving those to anybody until the mystery is solved.”

I blinked at her. “Mystery? What mystery?”

“Why do you think I wanted someone to research our genealogy?” she retorted, reaching for a knife. “To find a bunch of names?”

I furrowed my brow. “Um... well... that’s kind of what genealogy is...”

“Oh, no, mi Alma.” Grandma smiled, chopping the cores off of the fruit pieces. “It’s much more than that.” I watched her hunched figure as she worked. Her multicolored scarf clashed horribly with the baby pink housecoat that stopped short right above her bare ankles. She had a remarkable amount of energy for cooking projects at 78 years old, especially when virtually every other task garnered many groans and complaints.

“So what’s this mystery?” I asked, grabbing one of the pieces of fruit and popping it into my mouth. “Hmm. And what are these things?”

“Quinces. *Al-safarjal*. You’ve never had *bimbriyo*?”

“I don’t think I understood half the words in that sentence you said just now.”

Grandma shot me an exasperated look. "What does your mother *do* in her kitchen?"

"Wait, wait, but the mystery," I insisted.

"Are you planning to go to Madrid this spring?"

"I... yes, but I have to actually, you know, apply for the program, and—"

"Then I'll tell you before you leave." She scooped the quince back into the pot and began mashing it with a fork.

"Grandma!" I groaned. "Why can't you just tell me?"

"Because." She banged the fork on the pot, making it clear that there would be no more questioning on the matter.

"But what if I don't end up going?"

She gave me a thoughtful look. After a moment, she said, "You'll go." She put down the fork and waddled back to the breakfast table. "Stir that," she instructed, scooping up the box. She tucked it under her arm and grasped the handles of her walker, which had been standing by the doorway.

"Hey, wait, where are you taking that?" I protested. "I want to see..."

"You saw enough. I'm putting them away. Exposure to this damp air is bad for them." She wheeled out. "Just keep stirring," she tossed over her shoulder. After a beat, she added: "With a *meat* spoon."

Manuel

Usually when I walked past a Judaica shop I averted my gaze.

Okay, maybe sometimes I would sort of peek at it out of the corner of my eyes, just to catch a glimpse of the strange and beautiful items on display. After all, where I came from, such things were more likely to be found in museums, not stores.

Something was different this time, though. I wish I could say I didn't know what it was. Or that it was something about the shop itself... but it was very much like the dozens of other Judaica shops I'd passed on the grimy, bustling streets of New York City. Peeling black Hebrew print on the display window, polished silver and ceramic items arranged just so on the dusty blue velvet.

But no. I did know what it was.

It was the girl behind the counter.

In my defense, it wasn't that she was pretty. Well, I should say it wasn't *just* that she was pretty. She had shoulder-length black hair that curled gently at the ends; her skin was a creamy sort of complexion, a shade closer to olive than to white, and she had these thick, dark eyelashes that were so long they brushed against her glasses when she blinked. She had a short but stocky frame with a full figure, and these full, pale lips, pursed in concentration as she turned the page of the book she was reading.

Where was I?

Oh yes. It wasn't just that she was pretty. There was an odd familiarity to her that I couldn't quite place. She did look kind of Mediterranean... maybe even Hispanic? I started racking my brain trying to figure out where I might have seen her before. And it was as I did this that I found my hand pressing against the glass of the door. And pushing it open. And setting off a faint sound of bells.

The girl looked up from her book.

Oh no. My heart leapt to my throat. Now there was no backing out.

"Hi," she greeted me cheerfully.

Well I guess I have to walk in now. I cleared my throat, smiling uncertainly, and mumbled something incomprehensible as I headed for the nearest aisle. I ducked behind it, facing away from her, trying to regroup and figure out what on earth I was going to do next. But I was distracted by the shelves in front of me. The top one contained what appeared to be sets... of what, I couldn't imagine. The only items I recognized were goblets and plates for the trinkets to rest on. On the shelf beneath them were stacks of brown and white leatherbound books. There was Hebrew print embossed in gold on the covers. I breathed in their scent—new paper, fresh ink, and leather—and extended a hand to touch them. But I stopped midway. This was not what I walked in here for.

Wait. What did I walk in here for?

I straightened my back and turned slowly to peek over the shelf behind me at the girl. She had resumed her reading, but as I turned my gaze on her, she looked up again.

"Hey, can I help with something?" she offered.

I panicked. “Ah...” In desperation I reached behind me, groped on the shelf and plucked on odd-looking silver item from it, my mind racing. “Ehm... I was wondering what this is.” I held it up.

Her eyes shot between me and the object over her glasses. “It’s a *besamim* holder.”

I blinked. “Sorry?”

“A container for the *besamim*. The spices for *havdala*.”

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry. For... what?” I stepped out from behind the aisle, my footstep muffled on the threadbare brown carpet. All right, so I sounded like a total idiot, but we were talking now.

Her face melted into a friendly smile. “*Havdala*,” she repeated. “It’s the ritual for closing the Sabbath.”

“Ah.” I had no idea what she was talking about, but never mind. I inspected it. It was a curious little thing, a sort of silver cage on a stand crowned by a little conical tier, and a silver flag on top. “Ehm... how do you use it?”

She studied me. I was close enough now to see that her eyes were a pale sea green. I was too fascinated with the way they contrasted with her dark hair to focus on what she said next. When I realized she had asked a question, I started. “Sorry?”

She paused, still surveying me over the glasses. “I asked if you have any idea what I’m talking about.”

I gave a sheepish grin. “Now that you mention it, no.”

She removed her glasses and put them on her desk, rubbing her nose where the glasses had left little indents. “I suppose you know that the Jewish Sabbath is Saturday. We have a little ritual to end it, called *havdala*, which means ‘differentiation’.”

She stood up behind the desk, reached out and took the trinket from me. I found myself watching the way her hair spilled toward the base of her neck as she leaned forward.

Dios mío. Focus, Manuel.

“You put spices in this. Cloves are easiest.” She pulled off the tier, showing me the empty silver cage. “And then, during the ritual, you smell it.” She closed it and demonstrated sniffing it.

She handed it back to me. “I suppose you want to know what you do that for.”

“I... yes, thank you.”

“So...” She eyed me uncertainly, as if not sure how I was going to take what she said next. “According to our tradition, one of the special things about the Sabbath is that we get a kind of extra soul—a *neschama yetera*. It’s sort of an amplification of our spiritual selves. When we make *havdala*, we return to our normal state of being and our spiritual selves are diminished, and this can be kind of depressing. So to help us feel better, we smell something nice.”

“Hmm.” I leaned an elbow on her desk, taking a few moments to contemplate this strange explanation. “Sort of like... aromatherapy.”

She brightened. “Exactly. I think it’s also to remind us of the incense in the Temple.”

I studied the whatsit holder again, biting the inside of my lip. I mustered every ounce of courage I had.

I looked up. “I know this sounds crazy, but have we met before?”

The girl blinked, then narrowed her eyes, studying me carefully. “Hmm... I don’t think so. I’m pretty new here. I just transferred from Empire State in Albany. I’m starting Iberian studies at NYU this semester.”

My eyes widened, my heart pounding. “You’re kidding. I’m starting my second year in that exact program.”

“Oh really?” Her voice squeaked a little in enthusiasm. “Small world!”

I smiled. “Well, that explains it. Maybe I have seen you on campus.”

She pursed her lips and shook her head. “I haven’t actually been there yet. But that sure is a funny coincidence.”

I nodded, staring back at my hands that were absently fingering the object I had grabbed.

“Have you ever been to Albany?” she offered.

I shook my head. “Haven’t been anywhere else in the USA since I moved here five years ago.”

“Five years? Really?” she exclaimed. “Your English is great!”

I felt my face get warm and waved away the compliment. “My accent is very strong.”

“No, it’s adorable!” she blurted, and then flushed a little and cleared her throat.

“Where are you from?”

“Granada. Andalusia.”

“You’re from Spain?” she laughed. “Why would you come all the way from Iberia to New York to study... Iberia?”

“Well, I just thought it would be easier to study something familiar. With a lot of material in Spanish.”

“I guess that makes sense. Is there a Jewish community in Granada?”

I hesitated, my heart starting to pound again. “I... honestly have no idea.”

She watched me earnestly.

I cleared my throat. “I’m a Roman Catholic.”

She nodded, not skipping a beat. “So, looking for a gift?”

“Ah... no, actually. Just curious.” I watched her carefully, trying to gauge her reaction to this new information. She looked down at her book, smoothing its cover. I looked back at the holder. “Well, this is beautiful.” I stepped back towards the aisle and replaced it carefully on the shelf.

“Curious about the *besamim* holder or about Judaism?”

I looked back at her, surprised at the straightforwardness of the question. I paused, unsure what to say. “Both, I suppose,” I answered slowly.

She raised an eyebrow, her smile almost teasing. “So just how Catholic are you?”

I laughed, my shoulders relaxing a little. “I was seriously considering attending seminary before we left Granada.”

“That bad, huh.” She laughed too. “To be a priest?”

“Yes.”

“What made you decide not to?”

“I haven’t really decided not to. Just put off the decision for now.” I smiled. “And just how Jewish are *you*?”

She shrugged. “Oh, you know... traditional. I keep kosher and Shabbat and all that. We Sephardim don’t buy into the Ashkenazi obsession with labels and boxes, but if you

insist, I might fall somewhere between Orthodox and Conservative. Conservadox, if you will.”

She gestured a lot as she spoke and it was pretty adorable.

“I... see.”

She seemed to register that I didn’t—at all—because she smiled apologetically. “Never mind. Jews. We’re a complicated bunch.” She regarded me for a few moments. “So... um. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Well, I’m actually in this part of town because I’m looking for books for school,” I said. “They are so expensive this year!”

“Yeah, there are a few secondhand stores around. I got mine from one down the block that way.” She jabbed a thumb behind her. “But even so, the prices were crazy. Did you try down there?”

“I think so. They were out.”

“That sucks.” There were a few moments of awkward silence.

I cleared my throat. “I think I forgot to ask your name,” I said.

She laughed. “Alma.”

“Alma,” I repeated. “Uncommon name for a young American woman, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that’s silly, really, because it means ‘young woman’ in Hebrew.”

“And it means ‘soul’ in Spanish,” I interjected, a little too eagerly.

“I know.” She winked. “My grandmother speaks it fluently.”

My eyes widened. “You are of Spanish heritage? I had a strange feeling...”

She laughed. “Well... in which century?”

I stared at her.

“My grandmother’s family lived in Morocco under the Spanish protectorate. They moved here in the 40’s before Morocco gained independence.”

“Ahh.”

“But,” she added, “her grandparents did very well under the Spaniards because they already spoke *Ḥaketía*.”

I blinked. “What’s that?”

“The Judeo-Spanish of North Africa. It’s like Ladino.”

I scratched my chin. “Why would your Moroccan ancestors speak Judeo-Spanish?”

“Well, you know... after the expulsion, the Spanish Jews really dominated the culture. Especially in places like Tétouan. My grandmother’s family has a strong tradition of being descended from Spanish Jews.”

“But... that’s... how many generations removed from Spain?” I asked slowly. “How did they still speak Spanish after all that time?”

“The Sephardic Jews never forgot Spain.” Her eyes took on a distant look. “The language, the culture, the food... You and I probably have more in common than you could possibly imagine.”

“Well... Iberian studies, for one thing.” I smiled.

“Right! So I guess I’ll see you around at school?”

“Ah... yes!” I took a step back towards the door. “It was lovely to meet you.”

“You too,” she sang, turning back to her book. I shoved the door open, lingered for a moment, then turned and walked out, swallowing hard as the door swung closed behind me. I stood there, trying to reorient myself and figure out what on earth just happened. Then the door behind me burst open, hitting me in the hip.

“Ooh! Sorry!” she gushed, covering her mouth with her hand in embarrassment.

“That’s all right, I’m fine...”

“I just, um, I realized I hadn’t gotten your name either.”

“Ah.” I smiled widely, warmth rushing to my cheeks in pleasure. “Manuel. Manuel Aguilar.”

“Manuel Aguilar,” she repeated slowly, squinting her eyes. “Manuel.” And she went back into the shop, lost in thought. Then she turned and opened the door again, as if remembering that she hadn’t finished the conversation yet. “Nice to meet you! Good luck with the books!”

“Thank you.”

And she closed the door again and went back to her perch behind the desk. I watched her, smiling, for a little longer before taking off back down the street.

3

Miriam
Lorca, Murcia, Castile
 1491

"Mmm. Are those quinces I smell?" Abraham de Carmona pulled back the curtain hanging over the doorway to his neighbors' kitchen. His daughter Miriam and their neighbor, Hanna, were huddled over a ceramic pot on the fire. Miriam turned and smiled at him, her eyes widening with joy. Wisps of her dark hair peeked out from under her headscarf, matted against her sweaty brow, and her apron was covered in flour. She dusted it off as she crossed the kitchen.

"You can smell them a league away, can't you, Abba." She embraced him. "I missed you."

Abraham kissed her and held her close. "I missed you as well. I'm so glad to make it home in time for Rosh Hashana."

"So are we," Hanna piped up from behind them. "When you were gone last year, Jacob Aventuriel was the *hazzan*. It was a musical experience I'd rather not repeat."

"Oh, he wasn't that bad." Miriam pulled back and untied her apron, smoothing out the folds of her plain brown linen dress. Abraham smiled, straightening the hat atop his graying hair. He peered around the room.

"Where are your little charges?"

"We sent them with Solomon to the butcher."

"I hope you asked him to pick up a lamb's head for us as well."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hanna didn't bother to turn from the pot. "You are having the meal with us. We're counting on your stories from Cartagena."

Abraham laughed. "You have never said no to me, Hanna. How could I say no to you?" He held Miriam at arm's length, his brown eyes twinkling. "You are looking well, my girl."

"Thank you, Abba. How did your business go?"

"Well. Very well. Thank God."

"I hope that means you've found her a match," Hanna piped up again. Miriam turned to shoot her a sour look. Hanna did not turn around. "Sixteen years old, beautiful, from a pious family... the neighbors are starting to talk."

Abraham looked thoughtfully at his daughter. "Let them talk."

"No, let *us* talk," Miriam said. "I want to hear about Cartagena."

"Come, help me unload the spices from my cart and I'll tell you how it went."

Miriam followed him through the narrow entrance room and out of the house towards the street. The Jewish quarter of Lorca was alive with holiday preparations. The sounds and smells of washing and cooking wafted from every household, and the wild laughter of excited children echoed off the thick stone walls of the fortress in which the *judería* was tucked. Miriam could not remember the last time she had set foot beyond the Fisheries' Gate where the *judería* ended and the outside world began. But she had never really given much thought to what lay beyond it. The *judería* was her world: the

whitewashed plaster walls of the houses, with brown tile roofs scattered haphazardly over the uneven terrain of the hill, the zigzagging paths and steps connecting them, and at the center, the pride of the Jewry, the synagogue, with its high arched ceilings and decorative tile flooring, its expensive glass lamps and elaborate plasterwork. Across the courtyard was the *beit hamidrash*, the house of learning, which was always buzzing with the sound of men discussing the words of the Torah and the Sages; and up the road to the northeast was the building that housed the *mikveh*, the ritual bath, where Miriam had accompanied several of her friends celebrating their ritual purification before their wedding night.

She could smell her father's cart before she saw it; a rich harmony of exotic scents from faraway lands. There was nothing more wonderful than helping him unload his wares, breathing in the aromas, imagining the dishes she could flavor with the small samplings of spices that he would let her keep. She surveyed the wooden cart, piled high with fat sacks.

"Did Don Tomás have anything new this time?" she asked her father.

"No, not in particular. But you can always count on Aguilar to get his hands on the best cloves and cinnamon on the market. Here, smell this." He hoisted a large sack from the top of the cart and offered it to Miriam, who paused and made the blessing over smelling something pleasant, then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

"Mmmm. We should use these for *besamim* for *havdala*."

"He insisted that I stop by his estate to rest before starting up the hill towards home." Abraham looked up, beyond the roofs of the Jewish quarter at the square tower that loomed over them, stroking his graying black beard. "I know the *judería* is up here because the fortress protects us, and I am grateful for that... especially these days. But do I wish it were not such a steep climb!"

"I bet Moreno feels the same way." Miriam grabbed one of the sacks and hoisted it onto her shoulder.

"Oh yes. He's the most exhausted donkey in all of Murcia."

"I'm sure he'll be... glad... for a few days' rest thanks to Rosh Hashana," Miriam grunted, carrying the sack towards the door to the cellar. She lifted the door handle with her foot and kicked it open, then descended the stairs, blinking to adjust her eyes to the dim light. She threw the bag onto one of the empty shelves and turned around to get more, but something caught her eye and made her turn around to look at the wine barrels. She narrowed her eyes at them. Something wasn't right. She stepped closer, counting them.

"Abba," she called up to her father, who was a few steps behind with a giant sack of his own.

"Yes, dear."

"The wine."

Abraham continued to the shelf and threw down his sack. "What about the wine?"

"Two barrels are missing." She put her hands on her hips, narrowing her eyes at him accusingly. He didn't turn to face her.

"Are you sure?" he asked absently.

"Abba!" Miriam scolded. "Where are they? Did you take them before you left, or have you not delivered them yet?"

Abraham sighed deeply and finally turned to her. "I dropped them off at the secret passageway. Sanchez has probably collected them by now."

Miriam glared at him. "You know what will happen if you get caught!" she hissed.

He lowered his eyes. "I know."

“Forget what will happen to *you*... what will happen to *me*? Isn't it enough that I lost one parent?”

Abraham raised a hand. “Miriam, please.”

“You know you are all I have in the world. And for what? For those *marranos*, those pig-eaters, to have a sip of kosher wine on the holiday?”

Abraham's eyes flashed. “Do *not* call them that. Don't you think for a moment that you are better than them, Miriam. You have never stood in their place. It is only by the grace of God that we did not have to face what they faced. We were simply in the right place at the right time, and they weren't.”

Miriam exhaled and lowered her eyes. “I'm sorry. I just don't understand why it's so important that they have kosher wine when the rest of the time they are eating everything the Christians eat.”

“That's exactly why I said you have never stood in their place. You don't understand.” Abraham's eyes almost glowed in the dim light of the cellar. “You don't understand what it is like to face the choice between death and baptism. You don't understand what it is like to wear a mask every moment, to be a pretender, in order to keep your own life and protect your family. You don't understand what it is like to feel that you can do no right in the eyes of anyone—not the Christians, not the Jews, and certainly not God... you are a sinner no matter what you do. Holding on to that spark of Torah is what is keeping those *conversos* alive, Miriam. That kosher wine I've been giving them is quenching their parched souls. They know that at least they can sanctify the holidays in silence by bringing pure wine to their lips. And you will never understand how much comfort this brings them.”

Miriam felt angry tears welling in her eyes and quickly brushed them away. “But Abba... who will comfort me if you are caught by the Inquisition? Who will comfort me if I have to watch you burn at the stake? You may feel sorry for them, but they *are* sinners. Who are they that you should sacrifice yourself for them?”

“Who are you that you should judge them?!”

Miriam winced and shushed him, looking up at the cellar door. He followed her gaze, then turned back to her, taking a deep breath.

“I just...” he went on quietly, “I can't stand by idly and watch them disappear. Who knows... if maybe we help them hold onto their Judaism... maybe one day the Christians will become more tolerant, and they will be able to cast off their masks and live free as Jews again...”

“Will you stand by idly and leave your daughter an orphan?” Despite her efforts to hold her tears back, several escaped and streamed down her face. Abraham saw them, and gathered her into his arms.

“Miriam... Miriam... I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You're right. I'm being selfish. I will tell Sanchez that this is the last time. All right? Just please... don't weep anymore. I can't stand it.”

Miriam took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Thank you, Abba,” she murmured into his shoulder. “Please. I worry about you enough without your sneaking around under the noses of the Tribunal. You know they watch those *conversos* with particular scrutiny.”

Abraham sighed, pulling away and giving her a sad smile. "You worry too much. Maybe Hanna is right and it is time to find you a husband you can worry about instead of me."

Miriam half-sobbed, half-laughed. Abraham drew a handkerchief from his belt and handed it to her.

"Here. Sit here and calm down. I'll unload the spices, and when I'm done we will have some coffee and I'll tell you all about Cartagena. All right?"

Manuel

The aroma of frying eggs greeted me as I opened the door and shoved past the coats in the hallway of our Brooklyn apartment. I tossed my shoulder bag aside and took the two steps towards the kitchen. Sure enough, my mother was bent over the stove, the sizzling and crackling of eggs issuing from a pan she was swirling. Her dark brown hair, streaked with just a few strands of gray, was pulled into a tight bun on the back of her head. Combined with her tan sport jacket and pencil skirt, she wore her no-nonsense, high-school-Spanish-teacher look with not an ounce of shame.

She glanced up.

"Did you know that blood spots in eggs mean that the chickens laying them were distressed?" she boomed in her strong Murcian Spanish. "Makes you wonder what they worry about, no?"

My father taught me a long time ago that when it came to Mama, you just needed to smile and nod a lot.

I smiled and nodded.

"Have a seat, *cariño*." I sat. The table wobbled a little as I brushed against it. "You hungry?"

"No, Mama."

"So just one egg?"

Mostly, it's just no use to argue with the woman.

She dumped the egg onto a plate in front of me and stood there. I stared at it. She stared at me.

"I told you, Manuel. We can borrow the books from the Steinberg boy. He took almost all the history courses you're planning on taking this year. He even told me he would be willing to lend you his notes."

I shrugged, poking at the egg with my fork.

"Did you at least find a second-hand store?"

"Yes. But it was still too expensive. And they were missing half of the books."

Mama sat down across from me with a sigh, clunking the frying pan on the black marble counter right next to us. She fixed me with an annoyed look, her dark brown eyes boring into mine. "How expensive is too expensive, Manuel?"

I shrugged again, setting the fork down. "Expensive."

"I've told you a thousand times, there is no such thing as too expensive when it comes to your education."

"Just seemed silly to get only some of them and so overpriced."

"I still don't see why you can't just swallow your pride and ask Joshua. He's a nice boy." I was silent. My mother sat back from me, clucking her tongue in disgust. "Men. Your father was just the same. Never asking for directions. Never accepting help. I had to trick him into staying home sick. I brought you to America so you would unlearn that kind of pride."

I shoved my plate away and met her eyes, my eyebrows knitted in annoyance. “It’s not about pride, Mama. It’s about independence. I don’t want to have to rely on the neighbors for everything.”

“Everything? We’re talking about a bunch of books, Manuel.”

“No we’re not, Mama.”

We watched each other for a few tense moments.

“No. You’re right. It’s because he’s Jewish, that’s why.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Yes. Clearly, I am an anti-Semitic bigot.”

“A true student of Padre Carlos.”

“Mama!” I exclaimed, glaring at her.

“Look, he was a wonderful man, but I don’t like the attitude he preached about people outside the faith. That’s the other reason I brought you to America. And I want you to show me you did not absorb any of that garbage.”

A surge of anger washed over me and I shoved the plate at her, standing up from the table. “I can’t believe the way you talk about the man who was like a father to me after Papa passed away. Especially after he passed away himself last year.”

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips into a thin line in her most defiant expression. “Yes. Clearly, I am an insensitive, ungrateful heretic. But I’m also your mother, so watch your tongue and eat your egg.” She shoved it back at me and stood up, turning back to the stove with an air of finality. But as she stood by the stove, she sighed and her shoulders softened. She sat back down.

“Listen.” She leaned in, her voice softer. “I know you’re still not used to the way things are here. But I brought you here because I knew it would be worth getting used to. If you don’t feel comfortable with Joshua, there must be someone else in the program you can borrow from. Do you know anyone else in a different year of Iberian studies?”

As my anger melted away, the image of Alma drifted to the front of my mind and I smiled idly. “I met someone today, actually... but I’m not sure what year.”

Mama leaned back, a sly grin on her face. “Ah, I see. And what did this attractive young woman have to say about acquiring her books? Or did you not get around to asking?”

Sometimes I hate my mother.

“We were... I was...”

“Ay ay ay.” She laughed and stood up from the table. “Padre Carlos was right after all. I truly have corrupted you. ‘Look at your little boy,’ he’d say to me, ‘he was all purity of soul and mind, wanting nothing more than to become a priest, and now—’”

“Mama!” I rolled my eyes, burying my forehead in my hand.

“Don’t worry, *cariño*, I won’t tell him.” She winked, grabbing the frying pan and dumping it in the sink on her way out of the kitchen. “Won’t tell him my son’s fraternizing with Jews and flirting with young American women. Ay, *Dios mío*, what have I done!”

Her cackling laughter faded away down the hall.

I slumped back over the egg, stabbing at it and shoving a forkful into my mouth.

It’s not funny, Mama.

“Okay. This is ridiculous,” I blurted aloud when finding myself, for the fourth time, facing the fountain at the center of Washington Square Park. I buried my face in my hands, trying to take a deep breath, and once again, drew my crumpled campus map from the back pocket of my skirt. I brushed my bangs out of my eyes and squinted at the map. I looked up again at the buildings around me. The trees obscured my view, the buildings felt incredibly vast and sprawling, and no matter how hard I tried, I could not figure out which side of that stupid arch I was on.

This is hopeless.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a guy in sunglasses sitting on a bench under one of the trees. He seemed to be craning his neck to look at me. I walked towards him.

“Hi,” I called. “Can you tell me how to get to the Academic Resource Center?” He stood up and took off his sunglasses. I stopped in my tracks. Recognition jolted through me, but I couldn’t place him. He was tall and kind of lanky, with a rather dark complexion and a shock of wavy black hair that fell lightly around his face. But the thing that was really burned into my memory was the honey brown, soulful eyes. Where had I seen those before? I cocked my head at him. “Hey. Have we met before?”

“Yes. I believe we have.” A wide smile brightened his face, and at the sound of his accent, I remembered.

“Oh! Yes! You’re the Spaniard who walked into my grandmother’s shop a couple weeks ago!” I was surprised at how much relief I felt. I guess any vaguely familiar face will do when you’re lost in Manhattan. “I remember everything about our conversation, but...” I winced, biting my lip apologetically. “I’m really terrible with names.”

“Manuel.”

“Yes! Manuel. So good to see you!”

He leaned back, sizing me up. “You seem lost.”

“Yes. I am.” I grinned sheepishly.

“So you are terrible with names, and have a terrible sense of direction.”

“*Exactly.* You have me all figured out there.”

“Well, I am pleased to assist a lady in distress. The Academic Resource Center,” he turned and pointed, “is that building right there.”

I looked where he was pointing and felt my cheeks burn. “You mean, the one that says ‘Academic Resource Center’ in extremely clear lettering visible from the spot we are standing on?”

He laughed. “Yes. That’s the one. Maybe I better walk you there so you don’t get lost on the way.”

“I... would love that.”

He stuffed the book he had been holding into his shoulder bag, hoisted the bag onto his shoulder, gathered his coat in the crook of his arm and began walking towards the building. I fell in step next to him, finally feeling able to enjoy the smell of the fresh cut grass and the cool, moist shade of the trees as we walked.

“So. You are going to class?” he asked.

“No, I’m actually meeting with the director of the Spanish Heritage Project.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like an honors program associated with NYU Madrid. In the first semester they prepare you to research the historical archives in Spain, and then in spring semester you go to Madrid and research your genealogy.”

“Ah,” he exclaimed, and we walked in silence for a few moments. He seemed deep in thought. Then he said, “You would be researching your Spanish ancestry? From five hundred years ago?”

“That’s the plan,” I nodded.

We had arrived at the glass door to the building. He swung it open and held it, then looked at me expectantly.

“Aww,” I said.

His thick eyebrows knitted in confusion. “What?”

“Nothing.” I walked in, biting back a smile, and he followed. I paused in the lobby and glanced at my watch. “Well, thanks to you I still have ten minutes.”

There was an awkward pause. I fiddled with the map in my hands.

“You, um... want to sit?” I gestured to the little coffee tables nearby.

He hesitated.

“I don’t want to keep you if you’re busy,” I said quickly.

“No, no. Not busy. I want to hear more about the archives.” He headed for the nearest vacant table, pulling out a leather seat for me and setting his bag on the opposite end of the table before sitting down. I smiled again at this old-fashioned chivalrous behavior. *Gotta love Europeans.*

“What are you hoping to find there?” he asked.

“Well...” I sat down across from him. “I know it’s a long shot. I know they probably don’t have records from the time period I need. But my grandmother is really adamant that I have to go and look. I can’t really explain it...” My voice trailed off as I looked at him. “Well, you’re from that part of the world. You probably get it. There’s this really strong sense of family lore in my grandmother’s family. It was kind of lost in the last generation, so I think I’m kind of her last hope.”

“Hope for what?” He rested his chin on his hand, watching me thoughtfully.

“I’m not even sure.” I sighed in frustration. “She said something about solving a mystery, but she won’t even tell me what it is. Her love for keeping a good secret really gets out of hand sometimes.”

He nodded slowly. “So... what you’re telling me is that you transferred to New York University to spend a semester in Madrid, not because you want to travel or study there, but because your grandmother told you to.”

I blinked. “Well, when you put it that way...”

He laughed. “No, you’re right. As a Spaniard, I get it. *I’m* only here because of my mother.”

“Where would you—oh, right, seminary. Granada. I remember. Why did she want you to come here, though?”

“I... don’t know.” It was pretty remarkable how his whole manner changed. He crossed his arms and his mouth pursed in irritation. “She’s a little crazy, my mother.”

“So it’s crazy to live in America?” I smiled.

"No no, I didn't—" he protested, eyes wide.

"I'm joking, I'm joking."

"Ah, sorry."

"It's fine. Quit apologizing."

"Sorry? I mean..." He put his hand over his mouth, his cheeks reddening.

Aww. He is so cute. Too bad he's not Jewish.

I laughed. "You don't need to apologize for not understanding. You've been here how many years?"

"Five."

"There are people who've known me for twenty years and still don't get my humor. You're ahead of the curve." I glanced at my watch. "I gotta go." I paused, surveying him.

"Um. Catch you later?"

"Ah... sure," he replied. I couldn't tell whether he looked relieved or disappointed that I was leaving. Maybe a little of both?

"Nice to see you again," I said, and headed off towards the staircase.

Two days later, I headed down the same staircase for the program introduction. Professor Rodriguez had told me that it didn't guarantee anything, but I'd meet the other students considering the program, and get a feel for what kind of work would be involved. I had tried my hardest to convince him that my Spanish grades from Empire State were only so-so because the professor was evil and that I would work really hard to improve my language skills. He did not seem particularly convinced.

As I walked into the classroom, though, and heard the chatter of the students already sitting there, I started to wonder if maybe he was right to be skeptical. There were six students sitting there, four girls, two guys, all of them talking animatedly in rapid-fire Spanish. I couldn't understand a word. Well, of course they were Hispanic. They were all there to research their Spanish heritage, weren't they?

One of the girls facing the door noticed me and looked up, smiling. "*Hola*," she said, and then something else in Spanish I didn't quite catch.

I cleared my throat nervously. "Um. I actually don't speak Spanish that well." Five other faces turned towards me, all bearing expressions with varying levels of perplexity. "I'm Alma."

The girl exchanged glances with the girl sitting next to her. "This class is an introduction to the Spanish Heritage Project," she said. "Is that what you were trying to find?"

"Um, yes. I actually do have Spanish heritage, but..."

"Where from?" the girl asked.

"Um... Morocco. That is... it's complicated. I'm a Sephardic Jew..." I registered six blank stares, and after a few moments of awkward silence, I found myself launching into a rambling speech about Sephardim and Morocco and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. By the time I was wrapping it up, the two guys had returned to their conversation, the girl who had spoken to me was playing with her phone, and the remaining three were watching me and looking politely confused.

Finally one of them cleared her throat. “So what you’re saying,” she said slowly, “is that your family is originally from Morocco, but they probably came from Spain before that.”

Well, when she put it that way, it sounded awfully simple.

“Um... right,” I said. I sat down in the empty seat next to her. “So... what about you guys?”

We chatted for a few minutes about their own backgrounds—all of them Latin American—but the conversation soon seemed to melt back into Spanish and I got left behind. The twinge of doubt I had felt when entering the room grew stronger. I grit my teeth and forced myself to listen, trying to pick out words I recognized from the river of sounds. I did this for about three minutes until I finally noticed that there was someone sitting to my right. I glanced at him, and then did a double take. It was Manuel.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

He gave me a shy smile. “You gave me the idea,” he said. “My father did a lot of genealogical research before he died, and I had always thought about continuing his work.”

“It would never have occurred to me that you’d want to go to Madrid,” I said, surveying him curiously. “You’re from... where again? Somewhere in the south...”

“Yes, Granada. It hadn’t occurred to me that I might want to go either, until two days ago.”

“Good afternoon,” came a voice from the door, and Professor Rodriguez walked in carrying a stack of papers. He dumped the stack onto the desk at the front of the classroom, and surveyed us, counting under his breath. “Six... seven... eight. Good, you’re all here.”

He spent the next half hour explaining about the NYU Madrid program and how our program would integrate with it, and what the grade requirements would be. “I imagine you—well, most of you,” he said, his eyes lingering on me, “will be taking the advanced Spanish classes. You, on the other hand,” he said directly to me, “will probably want to take the Spanish language track.” I nodded, shrinking a little in embarrassment at being singled out as the dumb one.

He went on to introduce us to Spanish paleography, showing us slides of various documents from the different periods. The closer we got to the 15th century, the more my stomach tied in nervous knots. How on earth was I ever going to be able to read that illegible scribble? Alongside the document was a chart with the letters, and he asked us to take a few minutes to try and see if we could figure out what the top sentence said. I squinted at it, then flopped back against my seat in resign.

“Are we really ever supposed to figure out how to read what that says?” Andrea spoke up from next to me.

“That’s what we’re going to be working on for a major portion of this semester,” Professor Rodriguez said.

Manuel cleared his throat next to me. “Professor,” he said quietly. “Doesn’t it say, ‘*pater noster, qui es in caelis*’? The Lord’s Prayer in Latin?”

We all turned to stare at him.

Professor Rodriguez’s face lit up.

“Yes,” he exclaimed, “yes it does! Very well done, Mr....”

“Aguilar,” Manuel reminded him.

"Muy bien. Can you read this one?" He clicked to the next slide. Manuel took a moment to look it over and to study the chart, and then, very slowly, began successfully identifying words from the sentence.

"Very impressive! Is this your first time reading 15th century documents, Mr. Aguilar?"

"Yes, Professor." Manuel squirmed a little under all our astonished gazes.

Professor Rodriguez shook his head, grinning widely. "Some people just have a knack for it," he said. "You are very fortunate, Mr. Aguilar. This will make your work much easier."

The professor continued to explain a little more about the structure of the research, but I was having trouble concentrating. My chest was constricting with anxiety. Of the eight of us, I was clearly at the greatest disadvantage. If I ever did manage to get to a point where researching the archives would be in the realm of possibility for me, I would be working at half the speed of the other students.

Then I caught half a sentence the professor was saying: "...so, I really recommend trying to work in pairs or small groups and helping each other out with your respective projects. It may seem to take up more of your time, but it usually ends up making you more efficient because another pair of eyes can often make a big difference."

I glanced over at Manuel. He was fiddling absently with a pencil, his forehead wrinkled a little in concentration.

If I could get him to help me... I thought.

And the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. He was a Spanish speaker. His Spanish, in fact, was probably closer to medieval Castilian than anybody else's, because he was actually from Spain. And if he could read the script like that on his first try, he'd be reading them like his own handwriting by the beginning of next semester.

I glanced around the room, wondering how many of the other students were having the same thought. I felt another wave of anxiety. I had to make sure to get to him first. My entire mission depended on it.

On the other hand...

I bit my lip, feeling guilty about the fact that I even considered the fact that he was Catholic a reason to hesitate. I mean... it's not like I hadn't had non-Jewish friends in the past. But they were all female. *Oh, don't be ridiculous,* said a voice in my head. *He wants to be a priest. A Catholic priest. That's, like, only a notch less safe than a gay male friend.*

Not that I've ever actually had a gay male friend. But theoretically...

It was at that point in my inner monologue that I noticed that the professor had dismissed us and the students were standing up to leave. I jumped up, looking for Manuel, and caught sight of his shoulder bag as it disappeared around the doorframe. I grabbed my backpack and sprinted after him.

"Manuel!" I called as I skidded out into the hall. He stopped and turned around, his eyebrows raised in surprise. I jogged up to him.

"Um..." I started, feeling my cheeks get warm. "Hi."

"Hi," he answered with an uncertain smile.

"So listen," I blurted. "Remember the list of my faults you already have?"

He blinked.

"You know, that I'm really bad at directions..." I reminded him.

"And you are terrible with names?"

“Right! So I have another thing to add to that list. My Spanish. It sucks.”

He squinted at me in confusion. “Okay...” he said slowly.

“My chances of staying in this program, never mind having any success whatsoever with the genealogical research, are fairly abysmal. So... um. I noticed how good you are at paleography and between that and your Spanish I was wondering if you’d be willing to pair up with me for the research,” I said breathlessly.

Now it was his turn to blush a little. “Ah...” he said with an embarrassed smile. A group of students jostled past us.

“I... it’s totally okay to say no,” I said quickly. “Or to think about it. You don’t need to tell me now. I just, um, wanted to put it out there...”

“I think I see what is going on here,” he said. “You want to exploit me for my ability to read 15th century manuscripts.” He was still smiling.

“Well, yeah,” I answered. “What else would I exploit you for?”

He laughed. “I’m just still not sure I’m going,” he said. “My mother is not going to be happy when she finds out I’m even thinking about it.”

“Why, you think she’d mind?” I asked.

He studied me for a moment. “I’m her only son,” he said. “My father is dead and so are my grandparents, and if she even has living cousins, my grandmother was completely cut off from her family when she married my grandfather. So... yes, my mother would mind.”

“O...kay,” I said. “I’m hearing a lot of stories there. But I still don’t understand what that has to do with you going to Spain. She’s going to have to face the fact that you’re an adult someday. How old are you?”

“Twenty three. But you don’t realize how much she sacrificed for me to finish college here.”

“You will. You’ll just do one semester in Madrid. What’s the big deal?”

“Well, you are very persuasive,” he said. “Maybe I’ll just give you her phone number, and you’ll work it out between you.” He pulled his phone jokingly from his back pocket.

“Yeah, I’ll take her on! So is that a yes?” I peered at him over my glasses.

“I was joking about my mother. I have yet to meet her match.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Sorry, what was the question?”

“If we could work together. Like, as research partners. If you do end up going.”

He paused, and his hesitation made me hesitate, too. Maybe he also felt some discomfort with our religious differences.

“Ah... yes. That would be lovely,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes slightly. “You sure? You okay working with a Jesus killer? ‘Cause I don’t want to ruin your priesthood prospects or something.” I hoped my voice was more playful than stinging, but I wasn’t sure it came out right.

He leaned away, looking a little surprised and maybe a little offended. Then he fired right back. “And what about you? You’re okay working with a Christian boy? I don’t want to invoke the wrath of a Jewish mother.”

We regarded each other awkwardly for a few moments.

“That was a joke, Alma.”

I felt my cheeks get warm, and let out an awkward laugh, not meeting his eyes. “Yeah, I know. While you have that out,” I said, nodding at the phone in his hand and pulling mine from the pocket of my skirt, “let’s exchange phone numbers.”

6

Miriam

The next day Miriam was up bright and early to help Hanna with the preparations for the two-day holiday. This mostly involved entertaining the children so that Hanna could work in the kitchen in peace, and usually she would bring them over to her house to play. But today Rabbi Meir was going to teach a special class for all the kids aged three and up, so it was only two-year-old Rebeca who needed minding. Miriam attempted to slice vegetables and knead dough while keeping an eye on her, but she constantly had to get up to pull her away from the fireplace, and it was getting very frustrating.

"Just leave it," Hanna said. Her eyes had dark circles underneath them and she rubbed them wearily. She was the midwife of the *judería*, and had been up most of the night attending a birth. "Take her outside, let her play in the mud, I don't care. They're all getting a bath later anyway. I need to lie down for a little while."

Miriam carried Rebeca over to the doorway to her house, and stopped short when she saw a young man standing there shifting his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other, peering towards the window. He was tall, with wavy black hair that fell gently about his face and a wide-brimmed hat with a large plume. His cloak was elaborately embroidered. Miriam didn't need to note the absence of the red circle badge that Jews were required to wear to know that he was Christian. She hung back, not sure what to do. He noticed her out of the corner of his eye and turned to face her. His eyes were honey brown and had this intense soulful quality to them that made Miriam lower her eyes.

"Pardon me, señorita," he said, sweeping off his hat and bowing. "Is this the residence of Abraham de Carmona?"

"Yes, señor." She eyed him apprehensively.

"My father sent me to show him some documents. We understand that you have a holiday this evening and sincerely apologize, but it is urgent."

"Ah. Is your father Don Tomás Aguilar?" Miriam asked, starting to catch on.

"My apologies. Yes. My name is León. Are you Abraham's daughter?"

"Yes." Miriam felt her shoulders relax a little. Tomás Aguilar had been business partners and friends with her father since shortly after they had arrived in Lorca, and she knew that her father trusted him. "He is at the *beit midrash* studying."

"I'm sorry, at the what?"

"The house of learning. The building across the courtyard from the synagogue." She pointed up the street. "Up that way, turn right and then right again into the courtyard. The entrance is up the stairs to your right."

"I'm... not sure I will recognize the synagogue," he said uncertainly.

"You can't miss it."

"*Gracias, señorita.*" He bowed again and took off in the direction she had pointed. She watched him for a few moments, then swung open the door to her house and carried Rebeca in.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. Miriam got up from the bench built into the wall of the living room and went to answer it. It was León again, his cheeks reddened and his head bowed.

"I am so sorry to bother you again. I have some difficulty following directions. Could you explain again..."

Miriam smiled, feeling her discomfort with him slowly melting away. "Why don't I take you there?"

He looked up, his shoulders relaxing in relief. "I would be so grateful."

"Come, Rebeca!" Miriam called to the little girl, who had been spreading a pile of cloth scarves all over the floor. Rebeca ignored her. Miriam sighed in frustration and went to pick her up. As she brought her back towards the door, Rebeca grabbed her headscarf and yanked hard. Miriam gasped as her hair spilled over her shoulders in a long black sheet, curling gently at the ends near her waist. She blushed profusely, putting Rebeca down and feverishly wrapping her hair back again. León stared politely at the ground. When Miriam had firmly tied the scarf back on, she picked Rebeca up and swept past León.

She closed the door behind her. Rebeca, who apparently felt she had not filled her quota of mischief, reached out and snatched León's hat right off his head.

"No, no, Rebeca!" Miriam scolded, wresting the hat from her. León's eyes softened and he smiled.

"That's all right," he said. "She can carry it if she wants."

Miriam cleared her throat. "This way." Rebeca stared at León from over Miriam's shoulder, the hat swinging from her hand.

"I really appreciate your accompanying me." León fell in step behind her. "People seem very suspicious of me here."

It was true. As they passed by Miriam's neighbors, many of them stopped what they were doing to cast funny looks in their direction. Miriam ignored them.

"We are suspicious of anyone who isn't Jewish. And I'm sure you can imagine why."

León shrugged. "These days, everyone is suspicious of everyone else."

They continued in silence down the street. Rebeca lost interest in the hat and dropped it on the ground. León stooped to retrieve it and dusted it off, jogging to keep up. Miriam led him past the houses into the synagogue's courtyard, and then up to the steps of the *beit midrash*. As they approached, the hum of voices became louder and louder. To Miriam it sounded like a lively discussion of the rabbi's lecture, but León looked a little alarmed.

"Are they fighting?" he asked.

Miriam laughed. "No, they are studying."

León raised his thick eyebrows, looking at her skeptically. "By yelling at each other?"

"Well... it's more... yelling *with* each other."

"This explains a lot," León mumbled.

"Meaning what?" Miriam asked sharply, shifting Rebeca to her other hip.

"Never mind. Will he even hear me if I call him?"

"You'll have to go in and get his attention."

He hesitated. "Is it okay for me to go in? I'm a Christian..."

"And I'm a woman, so between the two of us, you might as well go." Miriam turned and began walking back towards her house.

"Señorita?" He called. She stopped and turned around. "I'm sorry, I don't remember your name."

"I didn't give it." She paused. "It's Miriam."

"Miriam. Thank you so much for your assistance."

Miriam hesitated, giving him a scrutinizing look. "You're welcome." And she turned back and left, leaving him to watch her a few moments before entering the *beit midrash*.

"What is this?"

I looked up slowly from the cup of coffee I was nursing at the kitchen table. My mother was glowering down at me. She tapped the pile of papers she had just flopped in front of me and I peered around my mug to see what they were. My stomach dropped. The pamphlets for the Madrid program. *I knew I should have hid them somewhere.*

I turned my gaze back to my mother. She had her hands on her hips, her eyes wide and her nostrils flared. Her unbrushed dark brown hair wisped wildly around her face.

"Well?" she demanded.

"They're... pamphlets. For a university program."

"In Madrid!"

"New York University in Madrid."

"And you are thinking of attending this program?"

I didn't answer.

"If I had wanted you to attend university in Madrid, we would have moved to Madrid!"

"It's just a semester, Mama."

"Granada has a perfectly good university! I could have sent you there! Do you think I'm stupid?"

"What is the problem, Mama? It's still an American university. And I'll still have to spend another two years on the New York campus to complete the program, so it's not like I'm moving back."

She gave me a piercing look, her eyes narrowing. "Why the sudden interest in this? You never even mentioned it before."

I narrowed my eyes right back. "Contrary to what you may believe, you don't always know what I am thinking."

We glared at each other until a slow, sly smile began to spread over her face. My heart started to pound. This couldn't be good.

"I know what is going on. It's a girl, isn't it."

I threw my head back in disgust. "Why is it always about a *girl!*"

"Yes. An American girl who wants to go to Madrid and you want to go with her to be her little Spanish-speaking hero to help her with her studies."

I took a deep breath, trying to regain composure. "A *friend* mentioned that she was going to join this program to research her genealogy in the national archives. I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to do the same."

She narrowed her eyes again. "Her Spanish genealogy?"

"Her Sephardic genealogy."

"Ahhhh!" Mama's whole demeanor changed, her eyes twinkling playfully. "A *Jewish* girl?"

"A friend."

"Very nice, *cariño*. Maybe my plan is working after all."

"What plan?"

"You would never be dating a Jewish girl under Padre Carlos's watch."

"I am not *dating* her. I couldn't date her even if I wanted to."

Mama knitted her brow. "Why not?"

"Because Jews don't date non-Jews."

"What are you talking about? I saw the Rosenberg boy going with an Asian girl not two days ago. She was definitely not Jewish."

"Maybe secular Jews do. Not religious ones."

"She is religious?"

"Yes. But it doesn't—"

"Well, maybe you can change her mind."

"I don't *want*—wait. Why are you so excited about the idea of me dating a Jewish girl?" I demanded.

She shrugged, turning to the coffee maker on the counter to pour herself a cup. Finally, she said simply, "I like Jews."

I sipped my coffee, contemplating her. I mean, I knew this about her; back in Spain she constantly complained about anti-Semitism, more than other forms of racism, even though racism against immigrants was far worse than anti-Semitism where we lived. And she got along really well with all our Jewish neighbors here in Brooklyn.

"Why Jews in particular?" I asked.

"I don't know, *cariño*. There's something about them." She laughed softly, joining me at the table with her mug. "When I was a girl, kids at my school used to sing about Jews having tails. I always thought that was ridiculous, seeing as Jesus was a Jew, and the Bible never mentions *him* having a tail."

"And if he did, we should all want to have tails."

"Exactly. I just don't understand what people have against them." She sipped, staring out the window absently. Then her eyes drifted back to the pamphlets on the table. She lifted them again, her face hardening, and without another word, tossed them behind her into the trash.

"Mama!" I yelled. "I was supposed to return some of those to the professor!" I jumped up from the table and ran to the garbage can. I stared down in dismay, seeing that the papers had already soaked up stains from the remainders of breakfast.

"Ah, I'm sorry," my mother said, idly sipping her coffee and not sounding sorry at all.

"You still don't want me to go?!" I leaned back against the counter, glaring at her again.

"No. I don't want you to go."

"Why not?!"

"Because I don't want you to go back to Spain. That's why."

"This is ridiculous, Mama!" I leaned forward and snatched her coffee from her hand, spilling a little on the floor as I set it behind me.

"Hey!"

"Listen to me." I leaned in, looking her straight in the eye. She looked at me, one eyebrow raised, her lips in a thin line. "You wanted me to come here so I could learn American ideals, right? Well you can't choose *which* American ideals you want me to learn. Americans are all about independence, right? *Let freedom ring?*" I said in English, twirling my fingers sarcastically. "So here's your Americanized son. Are you ready?"

Her eyebrow arched further.

"I am an adult and therefore I make my own decisions. So it doesn't really matter what you think. Whether I go to Madrid is up to me, and there is nothing you can do about that."

She continued to watch me, unimpressed.

"Are you finished?" she asked dryly.

"For now."

"There's just one little thing you're forgetting, *cariño*." She reached into her pocket and pulled out her wallet. She waved it in front of me. "You're an adult now? That's cute. Pay for it yourself." She stood up and reached behind me, grabbing her coffee cup. She sat back down, ceremoniously stuffing her wallet back in her pocket.

I shrugged. "Fine. Some of the money in our college fund was earned by me anyway. I could use that."

She opened her mouth to protest, but apparently couldn't think of anything to say.

"I just don't understand what the big deal is!" I blurted. "What do you have against me going back to Spain? Why does it make any sense for you to stop me from finishing Papa's work and researching our family? You have always been curious about it too!"

"I am fine with researching your father's family, I just don't want you to go back there now. I know you will be attracted to stay because it is easier to remain in a place with a familiar culture. Especially since you haven't really been all that happy here."

I stared at her. I hadn't realized that she understood that.

"Why don't you want me to be happy, Mama?" I asked softly, my voice shaking slightly in anger.

"My job is not to make you happy, boy. My job is to make you a good person. And that is why I want you to stay in America."

"So let's just put this plainly, Mama. You don't want me to go, because you think Spain is inherently evil."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," she snapped. "There are plenty of good things about Spain. But there are more good things about America and this is where I want you to get your education."

"How many times do I have to repeat that it's an *American program*?"

"An American program teaching about Spanish culture! What do you need to know from Spanish culture? You know enough."

"It's a little late to protest my studying Spanish culture, Mama. If you haven't noticed, that is the main subject of my degree."

"It's not the same."

"You don't make an ounce of sense." I grabbed my coffee—which was now cold—and poured it slowly into the sink. Then I turned around and met her eyes again. "Maybe you just don't want me to go because you'll be lonely."

"I'll cry every night," she said, and I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. She buried her face in her hands and sighed deeply. "Maybe you're right. I don't know. I need to think about this."

Aha. Progress.

She looked up suddenly. Her sly grin was back. "Wait, so tell me about this Jewish girl."

I rolled my eyes, slung my bag over my shoulder, grabbed my coat, and stalked out of the apartment without another word.

I was sitting in my grandmother's living room, hunched over the coffee table. I was concentrating so hard on my Spanish grammar worksheet that I didn't even notice her wheeling into the room on her walker and regarding me, one hand on her hip.

"You work too hard," she said, startling me. I looked up at her, blinking.

"If you want me to get into the honors program so I can do the research, you're gonna have to live with me working too hard."

"No se aprende un nuevo idioma estudiando en los libros. ¡Se aprende practicando! Ven, vamos a cocinar cúscus."

"I understand well enough, it's speaking that's the problem."

"Nu? *¿Qué te acabo de decir? ¡Háblame en castellano!*"

"I can't talk to you in Spanish, Grandma. It's just too weird."

"Fine, so don't learn. Come make couscous with me."

"I'm busy, Grandma."

"Fine," she sighed, slowly wheeling herself into the kitchen. "The art will be forever lost to freeze dried instant sand, but at least you will have finished your homework."

"Oh, don't pull the Jewish grandmother thing on me!" I moaned, smiling and gathering my papers to follow her into the kitchen. "I'll watch while I work."

I set myself up on the little kitchen table while she pulled out her equipment: the double steamer, the wide-mesh couscous sieve, and several bowls.

"This is not as labor-intensive as people think," she said as she opened the bag of semolina and peered inside.

"The problem is that you don't follow recipes, Grandma. If I could write down what you do..."

"Recipes are for people who don't really understand food. I'll show you in a minute how a recipe would only complicate this process." She dumped the semolina into a bowl and then started pouring in oil. She fluffed the oily semolina with her hand. "See? Don't cook by the book. Cook by *feel*. Stick your hand in here. Eh eh eh, wash your hand first!" She caught my wrist as I was about to stick it in the bowl. I giggled and walked to the sink to wash my hands. "Here, feel this."

I put my hand in the bowl and felt the soft, squishy mass of wet semolina. "I feel it. But how am I supposed to remember what it feels like?"

"Make it ten thousand times. Then you can't go wrong."

"Oh, that's helpful."

She laughed, tossed in a generous pinch of salt, and then started pouring in water.

"If you just threw in half a cup of water, who knows how much the semolina would absorb? It absorbs different amounts of water according to the crop or season, and unless you're gonna call the Ministry of Agriculture or something and ask how the semolina is doing this season, you really have to do it by feel. Now watch this." She placed the couscous sieve into a bowl and poured the semolina into it. With the expertise of a woman who had truly done this thousands of times, she gently rolled the semolina around, creating little pellets through the holes of the sieve. When she was done, she emptied the bowl into the

top pot of her steamer. “Just gonna let this steam for about half an hour over a medium flame.”

I returned to my worksheet. Grandma sat down across from me and hummed to herself. A few minutes later, I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket, and fished it out. My heart skipped a beat when I saw the name “Manuel” next to the little envelope symbol that meant I had a text message from him.

It read: *Hello Alma, this is Manuel. If you were wondering how the negotiations were going, my mother threw the pamphlets in the garbage this morning.*

I laughed out loud. My grandmother looked up and shook her head slightly with a questioning look.

I shook my head in a gesture of “Never mind”, texting back: *Oy. Good luck!*

“Who is he?” my grandmother prodded.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “What do you mean, ‘he’?”

“Am I wrong?” She was grinning knowingly.

I was tongue-tied for a moment. “Well, um, technically it is a he,” I said finally. “How did you know it wasn’t Dana or Julie or anyone else I text with regularly?”

She winked. “You had a look.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“Well... it’s not what you think. Just someone who might be joining the Spanish Heritage Project. He seems really talented at paleography and I asked him to be my research partner.”

“Oh! That’s a good idea!”

“Well, we’ll see. I really hope he can help because I felt pretty hopeless looking at the samples of 15th century script the professor showed us. It’s barely legible.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I dunno, Grandma.” I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes. “I really don’t know why you think I’m up for this. I’m a clueless little sophomore who can hardly string a sentence together in Spanish. Why can’t we just hire a researcher in Spain...”

“This is not about whether the research gets done or not, Alma.” Grandma grabbed my glasses from the table and started cleaning them with her shirt. “It’s about *you* doing the research. You are the heir to the legacy and whether you’re successful or not—it has to be you.”

I rested my forehead on my index finger and thumb in exasperation. “When are you going to explain what that even means, Grandma?”

“When it’s time.” She handed me my glasses, and I put them back on.

“Why all the mystery? Why can’t you just tell me the story?”

“I love mysteries.” Grandma’s eyes were twinkling. She heaved herself out of the chair to check on the couscous. “Okay, this is good. Now watch.” She emptied the steamer into a bowl, and then gently and gradually stirred in some water. “Here. This is the right consistency. See?” I looked. Looked like mush to me. “Now we let this sit for another half hour, and then we’re going to steam again.” She sat back down with a sigh and regarded me. “Oh come on, you know you love mysteries too.”

“Only when I actually have to solve them. I feel like you’re just torturing me.”

“I’m not. The truth is... I only want to tell you after you’ve found something. I just...” Her eyes glazed over. “I just don’t want to tell you unless I know there is some basis in truth.”

I sighed deeply, burying my face in my arms.

“Oh, cheer up, mi Alma. Good things come to those who wait.”

“Like couscous, for instance?”

“Exactly. Now you’re talking.” My grandmother let out a rolling laugh and reached out to muss up my hair. “Like couscous.”

9

Manuel

I found it hard to concentrate at church that Sunday. It was an overcast day and the combination of the dim light of the sanctuary and the soft singing made me feel very sleepy.

Moreover, I couldn't get the image of Padre Carlos's face out of my mind. My mother's voice was ringing in my ears from that morning. I knew this was the point where I would have wanted to consult Padre Carlos about Madrid and my mother and Alma... but he was gone.

I felt tears form as I walked up the aisle to get in line for communion, the familiar ache clutching my chest. Throughout my adolescence I had gotten used to that ache, the longing for my father. Now I felt it for both of them.

I looked up and saw the priest smile at a little boy a few paces ahead of me. Father Greg had kind but piercing blue eyes and brown hair that was thinning and graying around the edges. His skin was pasty white under the sun streaming through the tall, narrow windows on the opposite wall. I watched as he handed the boy his wafer. He was so much more relaxed, less solemn, than I remember Padre Carlos being during communion. And he had been so patient in that first year or so when I struggled to confess in English.

Maybe I should talk to him, I thought.

When the service was over, I hung back, watching Father Greg bid good-bye and chat with the congregants slowly shuffling out through the heavy wooden double doors. I sat on one of the pews nearby, idly grabbing a book of Psalms that had been sitting there and scanning the cover as I waited. Finally, I caught his eye and walked over to him. He extended his hand.

"Manuel, right?" he said. I nodded, offering my hand. He held it between both of his. "How are you?"

"Good, thank you, Father. I was wondering if you have some time to talk."

Father Greg's office was a small room on the second floor of the building. It contained two leather chairs at forty-five degree angles to each other, and a very cluttered antique desk with an office chair squeezed in behind it. He gestured to one of the chairs.

"So," he said, sitting down in opposite chair. "How can I help you, Manuel?"

I paused. "When I lived in Granada," I started slowly, "my priest was like a father figure to me, and I used to consult him about many things, not just about practicing our faith. When we moved here, I would call him sometimes. But he passed away last year."

"I am sorry to hear that. May God rest his soul."

"Amen. Is that kind of consultation customary in your church too?"

"Absolutely. You know our faith touches all areas of life. And all priests have training in counseling. But I should mention that if it seems to be something that would be better handled by a professional, I will refer you to someone who is better qualified."

"Oh, it's nothing that serious," I assured him. "I just... I have been..." I sighed. "I don't even know where to start."

“Well, pick a spot, and we’ll take it from there.” He smiled.

“I suppose it starts...” I allowed my eyes to drift towards the window. The shades were drawn. “Ever since I was a little boy, I always found Judaism fascinating. I know it is strange because there are not many Jews where I came from. But in Spain it is like... there is this echo of them there. There are these streets still called by Jewish names, and buildings that have been churches for centuries that are still called *sinagoga*... I grew up in the Realejo district in the center of town. It was the old Jewish quarter before the Catholic Monarchs conquered Granada and expelled the Jews from there. I remember spending a lot of time looking up at the statue of Yehuda ibn Tibon that stands there, wondering about all these ghosts of Jewish culture that remain in that place.” I finally turned back to look at Father Greg to gauge his reaction. He just nodded, still looking pleasantly curious. “I don’t know how to explain it. Every time I came across something Jewish it was like I could not tear my eyes away.” I stopped.

He waited, watching me patiently, and when I didn’t continue, he said, “Well, you know Judaism is the root of our faith.”

I was a little taken aback. “Well, yes, I know. But Padre Carlos discouraged me from this interest... he said the Jews are misguided and getting too close to them might increase temptation and confusion.”

Father Greg’s brow furrowed slightly. “What did he mean by getting close to them?”

“Well... when I told him I had always wanted to go into a functioning synagogue and speak to the rabbi, he told me that was a very bad idea.”

“Because he thought it would lead you astray?”

“Yes.”

“So...” Father Greg shifted in his chair. “What brings you to me on this issue?”

“I... I met this girl in college... well actually I met her when I walked into her grandmother’s Judaica shop in Manhattan. It was the first time I had ever gone into a place like that. It turned out that she is descended from Spanish Jews who fled to Morocco. She is the first Jew I have really spoken to.”

Father Greg’s expression did not change. He just kept watching me thoughtfully, resting his chin on his hand.

“She is planning to go to Madrid to research her family, and when she mentioned the project she was joining, I remembered the genealogical work that my own father had done before he died and how I had always wanted to dig deeper. So I met with the director and attended the introduction. Afterwards she ran up to me and asked if I’d be willing to be her research partner. She does not speak much Spanish and I know I could be of help to her. But the problem is...” I sighed. “I don’t know if I want to do this for the right reasons.”

Father Greg uncrossed his arms. “What would the right reasons be?”

“To finish my father’s work. To have a chance to go back to Granada and visit his grave. It’s an honors program, and I think it will be very interesting.”

“And the wrong reasons?”

“To get away from my mother.” I hesitated. “And to get closer to this Jew... and maybe Judaism, too.”

Father Greg nodded and drew a deep breath. “So let’s make some order here. Getting away from your mother is not a sin, as long as you are not disrespecting her.”

“Well, that’s the trouble. She doesn’t want me to go.”

“Why not?”

"I don't know, Father. I'm not sure even she knows. She doesn't want me to go back to Spain now. I think she feels that the culture there is a bad influence, or something. But mostly I think she would be lonely here in New York by herself."

"You have no other family here?"

"No."

"I see. Well, that makes it a little more complicated, but I don't think that in and of itself should be a reason not to go. As for the question of Judaism and this Jewish girl..." He smiled. "Well, that also depends. Are you attracted to her?"

I opened my mouth to answer but wasn't sure what to say.

"Let me ask another way. Do you think there is a reasonable possibility of some kind of romantic relationship between you?"

Well, that's easier. "No. Basically zero chance. Religious Jews don't date non-Jews. And I am still considering attending seminary after I finish my degree. So it's a pretty mutual no."

"Do you think either one of you might be tempted away from those commitments, though?"

I paused, feeling uncomfortable. "I don't know her well enough to say."

He smiled again. "I like you, Manuel. You are a very honest man. I think you have a lot of self-awareness, and that leads to refinement and self-control. In my opinion, you don't need to worry about this."

"About what?"

"About going to Madrid. Many of us are moved to make decisions for reasons we don't entirely understand, some of which are pure and some of which are impure. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter, so long as we remain conscious of our conduct and always strive to do God's will. It sounds to me like something is calling you to join this young woman in Madrid and finish your father's work. And it definitely sounds like the Jewish roots of the Christian faith are calling to you for you to explore them. I respectfully disagree with Padre Carlos. I think it can be very positive to connect with those roots. Jesus himself was a Jew, you know. I am good friends with a number of rabbis myself." He nodded towards my chest, which is when I noticed that I had been absentmindedly fiddling with the crucifix hanging there. It was a simple gold pendant that had belonged to my father. "Just be sure to keep in mind what those roots grew into. That part the Jews aren't so clear on." He smiled. "Who knows, maybe you will influence her to come closer to your faith."

My stomach turned a little in discomfort at that.

"As for your mother, you'll just have to see if she comes around. Try your best to stay respectful."

I gave a wry smile. "As you know, that one is hard for me."

He grinned. "Do your best, and if not, well, that's what confession is for." He winked, and I laughed, feeling a lot lighter in the chest. "Is there anything else, Manuel?"

"No. No, thank you, Father. You have given me a lot to think about."

10

Alma

"Hashem yishmor!" Grandma shrieked, invoking Divine protection as I slammed the brakes, narrowly avoiding the bumper of the car that had just swerved into my lane. *"Ya mahabool!"* she shouted, rolling down her window to gesture angrily at the driver. *"Yikhrib beytak!"*

I took a deep breath to calm my own elevated heart rate, and then rolled her window back up. "Grandma, I don't think cursing at him in Arabic is going to improve the situation."

She continued muttering to herself in a mixture of Hebrew, Arabic and Ḥaketía, until she finally closed her eyes, let out a deep sigh and said in English, "I hate these roads. Next time we're taking the train."

"Sure, Grandma. We'll just leave three days earlier so we have time for you to go down the stairs."

"Not funny." Grandma gave me a playful smack on the thigh. She leaned back against the seat and was silent for a few moments. "Sometimes I think your mother is right. Maybe I should just move to Albany."

I raised both eyebrows.

"Don't you dare tell her I said that," she added quickly.

"My lips are sealed." I bit back a smile. "Anyway, I need you to stay in Manhattan for three more years. Then you can move back."

"Well, you know, I don't actually have to *be* there for you to live there."

"Yeah but I'll be so sad!" I glanced over at her. "This is the first time we've really been able to spend this kind of time together, you know? It almost makes me not want to go to Madrid in the spring." I sighed. "I wish you could come with me!"

"Oh, me too, honey." She patted my knee. "I'll be honest with you, I am not looking forward to the noise and bustle of Rosh Hashana at Simon's this year. I've been enjoying our quiet Shabbatot, just the two of us."

"Me too. I wish they would get over the whole-family-needing-to-be-together-for-the-holiday thing. Couldn't we do rotations or something?"

Grandma snorted. "We're Sephardim, Alma."

By the time we managed to get all the adults and about a third of the kids sitting down to eat the festive evening Rosh Hashana meal, I was so exhausted from trying to keep track of what was going on, who was saying what, and who was yelling at who that it was all I could do to keep from burying my face in Grandma's shoulder and refusing to move. Uncle Simon and Aunt Gila had one of the smaller dining rooms of my grandmother's seven children, so all thirty-six of us were crammed around their table, extended to its fullest length and then with two full-sized plastic foldable tables. The table was basically divided by level of religious observance. Over on the far corner were the rebellious teens constantly getting yelled at to put away their phones and have some respect—including my brother

Zack. My grandmother was ceremoniously placed at the other end of the table, and sitting next to her were me, my cousin Eliezer in his black and white ultra-Orthodox garb, and my sister Shoshana—who was constantly getting up to rescue the houseplants from her two-year-old—and her husband Josh. My aunts were bustling around, squeezing between the chairs to deliver and remove platters of salads, appetizers and entrees. Shoshana's newborn was in a baby seat placed a little precariously on the couch, and I was really jealous of how the hum of constant chatter was actually keeping her fast asleep.

"So, Alma," my sister Miriam shouted at me from across the table. "Are you going to Spain in the end next semester?"

I opened my mouth to respond but threw up my hands in despair as my Aunt Ziona let out a loud, percussive laugh that drowned out pretty much everything else. I pointed at the vacant seat next to mine where Shoshana had been sitting, and Mimi got up and walked around the table to sit next to me.

"Almost for sure yes," I shouted into her ear. "Whether I'm going to be able to do the research for Grandma is another question..."

"You said you found a research partner!" Grandma yelled from next to us. I turned, surprised she had managed to make out anything we had said over the din. Our end of the table quieted a little as my cousins and aunts picked up on what we were talking about.

"No," I said, and I found myself flushing a little. "I said I found someone who might be able to. He's not sure yet."

"He, huh?" Mimi elbowed me. I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, I know you think this whole college business is all about meeting boys, don't you."

"You know I've been dying for you to find a boyfriend already."

"Well, this isn't it, okay?"

"Why not?"

I paused as a twinge of foreboding tugged at my chest. "He's Catholic."

The table suddenly got a lot quieter.

"Who's Catholic?" my mother asked from five seats down.

Manuel's voice echoed in my head: *I don't want to invoke the wrath of a Jewish mother.*

"Nobody, guys. Geez. Why are you all listening all of the sudden?"

Mimi narrowed her eyes at me. "You're seriously considering traveling to Spain with a Catholic guy to do research?"

"Oh my God!" I groaned in frustration. "First of all, I'm not traveling to Spain with a Catholic guy to do research. I am traveling to Spain to do research in the framework of an academic project, and said Catholic guy may—or may not—be my research partner within that group. For credit. It's not like we're going to be frolicking on the beaches, drinking martinis. Come to think of it, Madrid isn't even anywhere near the coast..."

Mimi raised an eyebrow. "Yeah. Because frolicking on beaches is totally your idea of a perfect date. As opposed to getting cozy with some old books in a library somewhere."

I rolled my eyes. "It's the *books* I'd be getting cozy with, okay? I mean really. Medieval records of trials and torture. Sounds way romantic."

"Anything sounds romantic in Spanish," my fifteen-year-old cousin Elisheva piped up from the cellphone end of the table. I glared at her.

I heard some complaining sounds coming from the baby seat and glanced back towards baby Karen on the couch. She appeared to be stirring. As I turned back to look for Shoshana, I caught a glimpse of my grandmother. She was giving me a very odd look.

"What?" I demanded.

"You didn't tell me he wasn't Jewish," she said.

"Well what did you expect?" I snapped. "It's a Spanish heritage program. Everyone but me is Hispanic. How many Hispanic Jews do you know?"

"I know someone from Cuba," Uncle Shalom offered.

"Don't you think it would be wiser to work with a girl?" my grandmother asked.

"Oh come *on!*" I groaned. "This is ridiculous! I'm not David, okay?"

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. The table was very quiet now.

"Is there a problem with David?" My cousin Rachel's voice was very sharp.

"Of course there's a problem with David!" my grandmother shouted at her, knocking over her wineglass and spilling red wine all over the white tablecloth. Miriam and I rushed to soak up the spreading stain with our napkins but my grandmother ignored it. "You'll notice that he doesn't even have the courage to show his face around here on Rosh Hashana—"

"If you would let him bring Cathy—"

"I want nothing to do with his *shiksa* girlfriend!"

"STOP IT!" Shoshana yelled, rushing into the room with Jonah on her hip. "Stop it! We are *not* having this conversation again. Not on Rosh Hashana. Please. Please. Can't we just enjoy the meal?"

Both Rachel and Grandma shot her very dirty looks, but they both picked up their forks and shoved more food in their mouths.

"We're not talking about David," my mother snapped, glaring around the table at her six younger siblings, their spouses and their children. "We're talking about Alma." She fixed me with an appraising look. "It's different."

"That's what I'm saying," I quickly agreed. But my father's brow was knitted and his lips pressed together in an unmistakably disapproving look. "Come on, guys," I insisted, "don't you trust me?"

"This isn't about trust, child," Grandma cut in. I turned to look at her. She was eying me warily. "It's about wisdom."

"So you're saying I'm stupid."

"No. I'm saying don't *be* stupid."

"I'm *not*. I have no intention whatsoever of getting romantically involved with someone who's not Jewish. You know Jewish continuity is extremely important to me, and you know that I know what happens after a few generations of intermarriage."

"You know what they say about good intentions, right?" my Abba mumbled.

"So you're saying that traveling to Spain with some random guy I hardly know will inevitably end in my falling desperately in love with him, despite everything I believe and hold dear? Geez, hasn't anyone here ever had a friend of the opposite sex? If only it were that easy, I'd totally be fishing around for a nice Jewish guy to drag there with me..."

"I'm..." Grandma sighed. "Just forget it. You said he's not sure. I'm saying, why don't you just try to find someone else?"

My father shook his head. "If anyone is asking me, the whole Iberian studies thing is a waste of time anyway."

"Now that you mention it, no one *is* asking you," my grandmother shot at him. "We all know your opinion."

"I'm just saying, it's not a career," he continued. I sighed deeply and looked at Miriam, who rolled her eyes and mouthed, *Here we go*. "Your sisters have solid career paths. In this economy—"

"Enough, Isaac." My mother elbowed him.

"In this economy?" my grandmother boomed. "Do you have any idea what kind of riches we're rolling in compared to what I grew up with?"

"That's not the point—"

"No, you listen to me, son," Grandma pressed, pushing her plate away, her pale green eyes flashing. "There are riches far more valuable than money. Your daughter is the only one in this family who has even bothered to take an interest in our heritage—"

"Can we please stop talking about me?" I pleaded. But they ignored me and continued to bicker about the merits of my choices, in the way of mothers- and sons-in-law. I buried my face in my hand. *This is why I was so glad to leave Albany*, I reminded myself. *At least they stopped being scandalized about Manuel.*

I flopped against the back of my seat and stared at my plate, rage surging in my chest again. *And what was up with that?* I thought. They knew nothing about him. Nothing at all. Heck, even *I* hardly knew anything about him. *So what if he's Catholic?*

I looked at my grandmother, who was now standing, waving her arms in the air and shouting something about her dead relatives as more of my aunts and uncles joined the argument. I shot a glance towards Rachel, who was now engaged in conversation with our cousin Tova. I couldn't help but think that she was right to be angry about my family's attitude towards her brother since he'd started dating Cathy. Sure, I was sad that he didn't feel strongly enough about Judaism to want to marry within the faith, but were we really so hostile to non-Jews that we couldn't at least treat Cathy like a human being?

The more I thought about it, stabbing my fork into my stuffed artichoke, the more determined I became that Manuel *would* be my research partner.

I'll show them.

11

Miriam

Rosh Hashana was always one of Miriam's favorite holidays. Her father served as the *hazzan*, the cantor, during services. She watched him through the wooden lattices of the women's section on the second floor of the synagogue, overlooking the main hall. The men sat around the benches along the walls, wrapped in their wool prayer shawls, swaying back and forth in concentration. Her father stood at the wooden podium in the center and led the congregation in the prayers in his low, rich voice.

She found her thoughts drifting to the Sanchez family, down in the main part of the city, and the other *converso* families that would be drinking her father's wine tonight. Their ancestors were forced to convert during the wave of riots and massacres across Iberia a hundred years before. Once baptized, they could not change their minds and rejoin the Jewish community even if they wanted to—especially now that the Inquisition was in operation.

Miriam tried to turn her attention back to the prayers, feeling a wave of fear rising within her. *Well*, she thought, *at least Abba promised me he won't help them again.*

After the service, they met in the courtyard with their neighbor Solomon Guerson and walked together back towards his house. It was very dark out, being a new moon, but the holiday lamps from all the houses glowed in the windows and cast soft shadows on the grass and rocks. A gentle breeze was weaving through the houses, bringing the salty smell of the sea from the coast about seven leagues from the city.

Hanna was waiting for them, the table set with her decorative ceramics and her finest cloth, the fireplace burning high with all the extra wood that would hopefully last through the holiday. The younger two children were in bed already, but Azaria, the six-year-old, and Mose, the eight-year-old, were roaring through the house in vigorous play.

"Aguilar made a stop in Almería and inquired about the siege," Abraham was telling Solomon as Hanna brought out the salads. "Granada will fall any day now. Mark my words."

"We all knew it was a matter of time," Solomon sighed. "It's going to be a major upheaval. A lot of Jews in this area are depending on their cross-border commerce or spy work. When the Alhambra falls, Castile won't need us here anymore."

"And not needing us, and not wanting us... that's a bad combination." Abraham nodded in agreement. "I've heard talk..."

"Yes, I've heard it too."

"Talk of what?" Miriam asked.

"That the monarchs are considering an edict of expulsion."

Miriam dropped her stuffed grape leaf and stared at Solomon. "Expulsion? Again?"

"Not just from a specific region. From the entire joint kingdom of Castile and Aragon."

Hanna shook her head and clucked her tongue. "Nonsense. It must be gossip. Why would they do such a thing? Jews are an irreplaceable part of the economy."

"That hasn't stopped them from supporting mass conversions and massacres in the past, has it?" Solomon said wryly, scooping some pomegranate seeds onto his plate.

“Well, the mass conversions are what they want,” Hanna said. “And the queen hasn’t supported the massacres. She has tried to protect us.”

“Are you forgetting the La Guardia blood libel?” Solomon challenged.

“That was Torquemada’s doing, not the queen’s,” Hanna replied.

“Acting under her orders,” Solomon insisted.

“Things are changing, Hanna.” Abraham looked up thoughtfully from his eggplant salad. “Queen Isabel has been giving more and more power to the Inquisition. King Fernando will surely do the same in Aragon once he is not distracted by the war with Granada. The church is very concerned about our influence on Christians. They think we are a corrupting force, especially for the *conversos*.”

Miriam exchanged a pointed glance with him.

“And when Granada falls, they will no longer have a need for our ties to our brethren in the Emirate,” he continued. “They might as well expel us.”

“God forbid. You shouldn’t even mention such things on Rosh Hashana.” Hanna spit three times onto the floor to ward off the Evil Eye.

Abraham chuckled. “I think God has other things to take into consideration while writing the decrees for the coming year. And besides, He is on *our* side.”

“Is He really?” Miriam spoke up. Everyone looked at her. “I don’t know, Abba. It is hard to feel like we are the chosen people when we are constantly being oppressed, slaughtered, expelled and exploited. He did not stop the massacres of 5151. He did not prevent the executions of the innocent Jews who were accused of killing the child of La Guardia.”

“The mythical child of La Guardia,” Solomon cut in. “They never even named him. There was no body. He never existed.”

“We know, we know, Solomon.” Hanna sighed. “It is amazing what people are willing to believe about Jews.”

“Those are important questions,” Abraham addressed Miriam. “We have no way of knowing what God’s calculations are. All we know is that we have survived this long, despite every enemy that has risen to destroy us. In every generation. *For not just one has risen to destroy us...*” he began in Hebrew.

“*But in every generation they rise up to destroy us,*” Miriam continued the quote from the Passover Haggadah. “*And the Holy One, Blessed Be He, saves us from their hands.*”

“Exactly.” Abraham’s eyes shone in the lamplight. “It has been true for thousands of years. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, will never abandon us, even though it may feel like He has. We have suffered greatly, but we have survived... and we have thrived. Look at us.” He gestured around the table. “Jews have lived here since before Christianity even existed. We’ve seen the rise and fall of many different kingdoms, and have been forced to constantly adapt to the drastic religious and political changes over the years. And yet, here we are, still celebrating the same holiday our God commanded us at Mount Sinai so long ago. Despite the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans... despite the crusades... this is nothing new. He will see us through.”

Miriam closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “Your words give me comfort, Abba. But it is hard to feel protected when there is still so much suffering. Where would we go if the monarchs expelled us?”

“Let’s just focus on where we are right now,” Abraham said, reaching toward her and giving her chin a gentle stroke. “It’s Rosh Hashana, and here’s to a sweet new year.” He raised his goblet. “*L’shana tova u’metuka.*”

12

Manuel

I spotted her at the back of the lecture hall, scribbling furiously in a notebook. I took a deep breath and climbed the stairs to join her in the back row.

“Well, hello.”

She started, jerking her head up from her notebook, and then recognized me and relaxed into a smile.

“Well, hello!” she echoed, lifting her bag from the seat next to her so I could sit. “I forgot that you’re taking this class too.”

“Where have you been? We missed you at the project meeting last Tuesday.”

“Could have called me. Well, on second thought, that wouldn’t have helped. It was Rosh Hashana. I was in Albany with my crazy family.” She must have registered the confused look on my face, because she continued, “We don’t use electronic devices on Biblical holidays or on the Sabbath. Rosh Hashana was Tuesday and Wednesday, so it all kind of ran together.”

I sat down. “Rosh Hashana is the Jewish new year, right?”

“Right.”

“So, happy new year.”

“Thank you.” She scanned her notebook again, then sighed and flipped it closed.

I reached for my laptop and set it on my desk. “How do you celebrate it?”

She smiled at me. “Oh, you know, the usual.”

“Forgive my ignorance, but what would that be?”

“Okay. Crash course in Judaism: it’s all about food. Okay, and in the case of Rosh Hashana, a lot of praying. And also blowing a ram’s horn, called a shofar. But mostly food.”

Silence fell over the hall as the professor entered and greeted us. My heart sank as Alma smiled apologetically and opened her notebook again. I opened my laptop and found my notes file for the class, but as the professor began talking, my mind was wandering. I wanted to ask more questions. In fact, my mind was suddenly flooding with questions. I tried to focus on the professor’s voice and the slides he was showing but I just couldn’t. I glanced over at Alma and noticed that she had paused in her note-taking, staring ahead at the professor. I reached over tentatively and slid her notebook towards me. She cast me a bewildered look. I fished a pen out of my pocket, wrote on the margins of her notebook, and slid it back towards her:

Biblical holidays? What other kinds of holidays are there?

She read my question and smiled mischievously.

I wasn’t under the impression that this class was supposed to cover that... she wrote, passing her notebook back to me.

I don’t care. This is more interesting than 18th century Spanish literature.

Will there be a test?

Are you purposely not answering my question?

There are also rabbinical holidays, like Chanukah and Purim.

So Biblical holidays are ones mentioned in the Bible, and rabbinical holidays were instated by rabbis?

Basically. Purim is mentioned in the Bible too. But not in the Torah.

Isn't the Bible the Torah?

Nope. Just the first five books.

Funny, I thought Chanukah was "the" Jewish holiday.

That's because it happens to be so close to Christmas. Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Succot, Passover and Shavuot are all more important.

You Jews have a lot of holidays.

She drew a checkmark.

You don't even know the half of it, she wrote.

We scribbled back and forth through the entire class, discussing the intricacies of Jewish holidays and how they related to the Christian ones. By the time it was over, we both had only an extremely vague idea of what the class we were actually supposedly attending was about.

"Maybe you should join my minor," Alma said, winking at me, as we stood up and stretched.

"Your minor?"

"Judaic studies. There are a good handful of non-Jews in my classes. Some of the classes count towards Iberian Studies too—like Hebrew language and Sephardic medieval poetry."

"I think I'm having enough trouble with my second language to start studying a third."

"Oh, shut up, your English is better than my Spanish will ever be." We shuffled out from behind the desks and descended the stairs together. "So... anyway." Alma cleared her throat. "Any progress with your mom?"

I sighed. "I'm not sure. We haven't talked about it since that morning."

"You mean the morning she threw out the pamphlets?" Alma giggled. "Yeah... not sounding good."

"No... I think she actually is softening a little bit."

"I told you, I'm totally willing to call her. I want to have this finalized."

I turned to look at her in surprise. "You mean the trip? Or me being your research partner?"

"Both. Honestly I don't think I will make any headway at all without your skills." She stopped and turned to me, and I noticed that we were standing in the hallway. "Where are you headed?"

"Mm... not sure. My next class is in an hour."

"Let's go to the library." She turned and started walking down the hall.

"Ah... Alma."

She spun back around. "What?"

"The library is that way." I jerked my head in the opposite direction.

She gave me a sheepish look. "See? What would I do without you?" She jogged back over to me. "Seriously, can you imagine me in a foreign country? I'd be lost in about three minutes."

I had thought she wanted to sit in the library and talk, but she actually took me over to the Jewish bookshelves and started introducing me to all the Jewish literature. She

handed me the Hebrew Bible—what she called the *Tanakh*—and a tingle ran down my spine as I opened it and saw the pages of Hebrew print.

“Such a beautiful alphabet.” I breathed in its scent, old paper and ink and leather. I had always loved the smell and feel of books... the older the better.

“I told you you should take Hebrew.” She winked. “So when we Jews refer to the Torah, we may either be referring specifically to the first five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—which is known as the ‘written Torah’, or to all the literature that explains the written Torah, which we also believe is of Divine origin and was passed down through the centuries from rabbi to rabbi. So it was known as the ‘oral Torah’, and we weren’t even supposed to write it down because it is meant to be spoken and taught and lived and not just read from a book. But we eventually had to, because our great teachers were getting killed off and we were afraid the information would get lost. So that became what we call the Talmud.” She pointed to a row of tall leatherbound volumes, and selected one to pull off the shelf and hand to me. “Have you ever heard the joke, ‘two Jews, three opinions’?”

I smiled. “No.”

She tapped the large, heavy book in my hands. “It all starts here. The whole text is basically a bunch of rabbis arguing over the correct way to keep the commandments. We’ve been sitting around arguing with each other since long before your buddy Jesus turned up—and in the best tradition of our people, he argued right along with them.”

“You are a funny people.”

She laughed. “You have no idea,” she said. “We practically invented comedy. Dark humor is our number two coping mechanism.”

I waited for a moment, then asked the obvious question: “So... what’s number one?”

“Complaining.” She winked. “Goes back millennia. You’ll find both in there, too. Many people are surprised to find out that the Talmud is full of jokes.” She turned back to the shelves and scanned them. “The rest of this stuff is basically commentary, commentary on the commentary, and commentary on the commentary on the commentary...”

I replaced the books on the shelf. “I think we Catholics have a similar kind of system.”

“Yeah?”

“But don’t ask me to tell you about it, because I really don’t know.”

Alma tilted her head at me. “You want to be a priest, but you don’t know about your own religion’s system of Biblical interpretation?”

“It seems to me that Judaism is much more knowledge-focused than Christianity is. I would learn that stuff if I went to seminary, probably. But it wasn’t covered in Sunday school.”

“What did they teach you in Sunday school then?”

“You know... stories, prayers... we rarely opened the Bible and read from it directly.”

“Weird. We are all about hitting the books.”

“I see that. I guess they call you the People of the Book for a reason.”

“Yup.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in the library scent again. Then I opened them and turned to smile at Alma. “Thank you for showing me.”

“My pleasure, Manuel.” She turned and started walking down the aisle. “Your name has too many syllables. Don’t you have a nickname?”

"Mm... no."

"Your mother doesn't call you Mani or something?" She headed for the chairs next to the glass wall that overlooked the park.

"No." I made a face. "It's only one more syllable than yours..."

"Well, now's your turn," she said, sitting down and unzipping her backpack. "I need help with my Spanish homework." She froze and looked up at me. "Unless you have some other work to do."

I did.

"No, that's fine, I'm happy to help you."

Her Spanish really was pretty awful. I tried not to wince too much but she could tell I was finding this painful, and she kept burying her face in her hands and moaning that she'd never get it.

"Don't be so negative! You will learn," I tried to comfort her.

She sighed deeply. "All my friends from high school spoke it fluently because they loved to watch those terrible Latin American telenovellas."

"So maybe it's time to watch some terrible telenovellas?"

She shot me a look of horror. "I would rather scrub every toilet in Madrid."

"I don't blame you."

Alma looked over my shoulder, her eyes narrowing. "I think that lady is calling you."

I turned around and my heart sank as I watched my mother approaching us. She was dressed up smartly in her gray suit, her hair in her usual tight bun at the back of her head, her footsteps so heavy and sure that her stilettos clunked audibly even on the carpet. I stood up, trying to move in front of Alma so as to block her from my mother's view. *This is not going to be good.*

"Mama? ¿Qué haces aquí?"

"Necesito que me ayudes con estos papeles del banco." She shoved a piece of paper in my hands. "*Se supone que debo devolver esto al banco hoy, y no sé que...*" her voice trailed off as she spotted Alma behind me. "My apologies." She switched to her heavily accented English. "I am being rude. I am Raquel Elvira, Manuel's mother." She extended a hand. Alma's face lit up and she jumped up and pushed past me to shake my mother's hand.

"Manuel's mother!" she exclaimed. "So happy to meet you. I'm Alma Ben-Ami." Then her forehead scrunched in confusion. "Elvira? I thought your last name was... Ag... um... something else?"

"Manuel's is Aguilar. Mine isn't." She smiled. "In Spain, women don't change their family names when they get married."

"Oh... I wondered how that worked out, with all the confusion of inheriting both the paternal and the maternal family names. So you just keep the names you're born with."

"Exactly."

My mother glanced appraisingly between the two of us. I hid my face in the form, scanning it to see if she had filled it out correctly.

"*Está bien, mamá.*" I tried to hand it back to her. She ignored me.

"So," she shot at Alma. "You are the girl who is trying to drag my son to Madrid, ah?" Alma didn't even flinch.

"Yes! Listen, I know you're concerned, but this is really, really important to both of us." She was gesturing excitedly. My mother watched her with her eyebrows raised. "I

know your late husband—may he rest in peace—would be proud of Manuel for continuing his work in researching his family.”

I caught a sparkle in my mother’s eye. “Nice try,” she said evenly, “but...”

“I promise you I won’t let him get into trouble, and I’ll take good care of him, and I’ll make sure he stays around Americans as much as possible, and...”

I stared at Alma in dismay. She was talking like I was my mother’s prize poodle. But my mother’s face had taken on a thoughtful look, and I stopped myself from protesting.

“You are Jewish, yes?” she asked.

Alma blinked. “Umm... yes.”

“So you will keep him away from the Opus Dei.”

I buried my face in my hand.

“Uh, I don’t even know what that is. But, um, sure.”

“Mama...” I groaned.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” my mother said to Alma, continuing to ignore me. “And you will make sure he comes back with you. After *one* semester.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Alma’s hands were clasped at her chest and she was looking up at my mother expectantly. My mother stared right at me, and I could almost hear the cogs in her head turning.

“All right, Manuel Aguilar y Elvira. But remember, you are paying for the tickets.” She snatched the form from my hand and turned on her heel, stalking off in her stilettos. I turned back to Alma. She was doing a little victory dance, pumping her fists and bouncing up and down. She flushed when she saw me looking at her in amusement and cleared her throat.

“We’re going to Madrid! Score!” She raised her hand for a hi-five, and I gave it. “So funny...” she said, examining me. “You look nothing like her.”

“You were right,” I admitted. “I should have let you talk to her in the first place.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I just... she...” I felt my face grow a little warm. “I think it’s her passive-aggressive way to persuade me not to become a priest. Whenever I so much as mention a woman, she automatically assumes that I am interested in dating her.”

Alma snorted, sitting back down. “Well, that one’s easy. Just tell her that religious Jews don’t date non-Jews.”

“I did,” I answered, a little too quickly. “She’s not buying it. I told you, she’s a little crazy.”

Alma paused, as if deliberating whether to say something or not. “Well if it helps, my family basically freaked out when I told them my potential research partner was a Catholic guy. It was really disconcerting. And kind of infuriating. Like, sheesh, don’t they trust me?”

I wasn’t at all sure how to feel about this information.

“Hey, um...” Alma was studying the clock on the wall behind me. “Aren’t you late for class?”

I gasped and shot a look at my watch. “Yes! Thank you!” I grabbed my bag and took off, tossing a “So sorry, see you later!” over my shoulder.

The leaves in Washington Square Park turned red, orange and gray, fell off the trees and carpeted the grassy areas, and then disappeared as the snow began to fall. The Spanish Heritage Project group met every three weeks, and with each meeting, my sense of inferiority faded a bit. That is, when I wasn't sitting next to Manuel and watching him breeze through the transcriptions. Zoe and I seemed to make a pretty good team; believe it or not, I was better at identifying letters than she was, so when I was able to make out parts of the word, she was able to complete it if she recognized it from Spanish.

"Then why don't you switch and be partners with her?" Grandma asked when I told her this. She was dropping balls of dough into a pot of boiling oil on the stove. I scowled at her from my usual spot at the kitchen table.

"Because she and Nicole are cousins. They're working on the same family tree. It would be stupid for them not to work together."

"Well it doesn't have to be pairs, right? Ow!" She jumped back from the pot, flapping her hand around.

"Grandma! Careful!" I ran to her and herded her over to the sink, turning on the cold water, grabbing her hand and plunging it into the stream. "*Sfinj* is totally not worth another trip to the emergency room, okay?"

"Oh, calm down!" She shoved me away with her shoulder, but kept her hand under the water. "I'm all right. Always happens when I deep fry. It's one of the prices you have to pay for Chanukah."

"I wasn't aware that Chanukah was about paying prices," I grumbled, watching her warily.

"Being Jewish is about paying prices." She took her hand out of the water and frowned at the blister forming on her thumb.

"Sit down, Grandma. I'll get you some aloe and take over from here." She sighed, but shuffled over to the table without protesting. I rummaged through the cupboard for the first aid kit and brought it over to her. "You okay managing with that?"

"For goodness' sake, I'm not dying. Go mind the *sfinj*. They might be ready to flip by now."

I turned to the pot and peered in, trying to keep a safe distance myself as I grabbed the slotted spoon and gingerly poked at the doughnuts.

"I don't want to find a different research partner," I said. "I have no reason to. This is really my only hope for getting anything out of this whole adventure. And with his help, I've been able to maintain my average enough to stay in the program. You should be thrilled."

"I *am* thrilled. I am. I'm really excited for you." Grandma was intently wrapping her finger in a bandage.

"You sound ecstatic," I said sarcastically. "Where's the 'but'?"

"Did I say 'but'?"

"I'm not an idiot. You're worried about me getting too friendly with Manuel."

"You said it, child, not me."

"Did I mention that he wants to become a priest?"

"How does that help matters exactly?"

"Catholic priests are celibate."

My grandmother finally looked up, her eyebrows so high they almost disappeared into her headscarf, and then just turned back to her finger without another word.

"*Ida ħalf al-kammar, tab l'abbu,*" she mumbled.

It was never a good sign when she talked to herself in Arabic.

"What did you just say?" I demanded.

"When the gambler swears he'll stop betting, that's when his bets increase."

"What in the world is that supposed to mean?"

"If you didn't think there was a grain of danger in this, you wouldn't be getting so upset about it."

"*No.* I'm upset because this is going to be the most important thing I've ever done in my entire life and the fulfillment of your own family legacy and something that's been important to you and your family since *forever*—because *I'm* the only one who cares enough about our heritage to get off my lazy butt and fly it over to Spain, even though I really struggle with Spanish and I could totally have chosen to do something easier with my time in college... and *you* think that my friendship with a Christian is what's going to make me break with tradition."

My grandmother looked up at me, pursing her lips. "I think you better flip those."

I rolled my eyes and did as she told me, but I refused to change the subject. "It's insulting. Really. I can't believe you think I don't have the self-control to maintain proper boundaries. That you automatically assume there has to be romantic potential there just because he happens to be male. You don't even know him."

"No, I don't know him, and I'm sure he's a lovely fellow."

I stared at my grandmother.

"This is weird. Why are you being so diplomatic?" I demanded. She looked like she was struggling with whether to say something or not, and then shook her head.

"I don't know, Alma. Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm overreacting. I do trust you. You know I do. I just want to make sure you know that sometimes these things are out of our control. Love is funny that way."

"But you know that love and infatuation are not the same thing. You're the one who always told me this. You don't 'fall in love' like you fall in a hole. Love isn't the butterflies and the fireworks, it's the commitment and the choosing every day to stay committed. Right? It's a choice."

"Yes. Absolutely." She paused. "But this infatuation business... can be very powerful too."

I shrugged and turned back to the *sfinj*. "Well, it's not relevant. So relax." I looked up at the kitchen window. In the fading light, I could hardly make out the bare branches of the maple tree in the alley between our building and the next. "Hey, it's almost time for candlelighting."

14

Manuel

I studied my reflection in the bathroom mirror, straightening my tie and rubbing the three-day stubble on my face. *I think I need a haircut*, I thought, casting a dismayed look at my wayward locks, which were really starting to get out of control. I ran my hand through them, trying to get them to fall a little more neatly. *More ruggedly handsome. Less scraggly caveman*. My attempts were rather futile.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I sighed and drew it out, but my heart instantly lightened when I saw who the text was from.

Hey, Merry Christmas, Catholic boy.

I smiled.

"You need a haircut." My mother's voice startled me and I whirled to see her standing at the bathroom door.

"Do you mind not standing there watching me? It's creepy."

"I ran into your priest yesterday," Mama said, ignoring me as usual. "Father Greg. I liked him. He was a nice man."

I studied her. "Is this your way of proposing coming with me to mass tonight?"

"No no." Mama stepped back, and I swept past her into the hallway. She followed me to the kitchen. "You know I don't do church."

"Why not, Mama?" I looked up at her. "It's Christmas. Papa used to go."

"I didn't go with him. Even when the cancer got worse. I see no reason to start now."

"It's never too late to start."

"Oh stop it, you sound like a priest." She sighed and reached out to tug at my tie. Before she turned away, I saw her eyes glistening with tears. "And you look just like him."

The air in the room suddenly became heavy and crushing. I felt like I was struggling to breathe. I drew the air in deep and slow, having grown accustomed to these moments. They were less frequent now, but they did come, especially around the holidays when my father's empty place at the table burned open the scar that never could quite heal.

My mother was leaning against the back of the chair, her back turned to me, her shoulders shaking. I put my hand on her back.

"Mama."

She turned and hugged me furiously, burying her face into my chest. "I just miss him so much, Manuel."

There it was, the familiar burning ache in my chest, the prickling in my eyes. Thirteen years had passed, but I was still that little boy, holding onto his sobbing mother in the hospital ward, not understanding how the world could possibly move forward from here.

My tears dripped onto her hair. "I miss him too, Mama," I choked.

"Do you remember how he used to sing..."

"Pero mira cómo beben los peces en el río..."

"Yes, and he used to make that ridiculous fish face to make you laugh..."

"I remember, Mama..."

She pulled back, reaching for the box of tissues on the countertop, not meeting my eyes. “Every Christmas... I just can’t hold it together...” She blew her nose and tried to dry her face. “Is my makeup running?” She turned her face up to me.

“A little.”

She muttered an expletive and shoved past me towards the bathroom. I drifted towards the doorway and began putting on my coat, scarf and hat.

“You sure you don’t want to come, Mama?” I called to her. “It’s a really nice service.”

“I’m sure, *cariño*. You go. Go pray for all of us.”

15

Miriam

It was a warm morning the week after Rosh Hashana, and Miriam hummed to herself as she shifted the weight of the heavy water jug from one hip to the other. She spotted her friend Basseva hanging laundry outside her family's house and tried to get her attention, but she seemed too engrossed in her work to notice.

Miriam approached the front door of their modest home, noting that the wooden shutters on the window to the bedroom were coming loose and she would have to try and fix it later. She almost walked inside before something black caught her eye. She turned to look and gasped. The jug slipped from her grasp and shattered on the stone step at her feet, splashing water all over the bottom of her dress.

A man was leaning against the wall of the house, his arms crossed, looking straight at her with a cold smile on his face. His dark moustache and beard were neatly trimmed. He was wearing black robes, a wide-brimmed hat and a huge silver crucifix, and while Miriam had rarely been outside the walls of the *judería* and had never seen one before, she was absolutely certain that she was looking at an official of the Inquisition.

She stood there staring at him, trembling, for what felt like an eternity.

Finally, he spoke. "Is this the de Carmona residence?" His voice was soft and even.

Miriam's voice shook as she answered that it was. She glanced around her, looking desperately to see if there was someone around who could help her. But she knew that no one could.

"I hear," said the official, in the same hair-raisingly soft voice, unfolding his arms and taking a step forward, "that Abraham de Carmona makes an excellent wine."

Miriam's heart leapt to her throat. Her chest constricted in fear and she felt like she could hardly breathe.

The official nodded towards the cellar door in the ground to the right of the house. "Is this his cellar?"

Miriam glanced at the door and back again, not knowing what to do.

"Would you be so kind as to show me where this... mythical wine is kept?"

Miriam's mind raced. She understood that if she cooperated, it might lead to her father's arrest. But if she didn't cooperate, the consequences would probably be worse. The Inquisition did not make arrests without evidence, and even so there was usually a grace period. There should be time to warn her father. On the other hand, he was a Jew, and the laws of the Inquisition were supposed to be only for Christians. Who knew what they would do to a Jew who had been helping *conversos* maintain their Jewish traditions?

Nevertheless... there was no way to know what they knew, and whether the remaining wine in the cellar would be evidence enough to condemn him.

Miriam took a deep breath. "With pleasure, señor." She stepped gingerly over the shards of the broken jug, swept past the official, and bent down to open the cellar door. She felt almost nauseated with fear but tried to keep focused. The official followed her down the stone steps. Once her eyes had adjusted to the gloom, she pointed to the five small barrels to the right. He took a step towards them, removed one of his gloves and ran his hand over the wood.

“Andalusian willow, ah?”

Miriam cleared her throat. “We brought them with us from Seville.”

His hand hovered over the cork and Miriam half-shouted, “*No!*”

He looked up, his eyebrows raised, more in amusement than anything else.

Miriam flushed furiously and looked at the ground. “It’s just... if you open it... it won’t be kosher anymore...”

He smiled a sinister sort of smile, letting out a little laugh. “Is that so.” He pulled the cork out. Miriam’s shoulders sank. He closed his eyes and took a deep sniff. Then he dipped his finger into the hole and took a taste.

“Hmm.” He straightened and squinted at Miriam. “Not bad for a Jew.”

Miriam blinked back tears, staring at his boots.

“Well. Since you apparently have no more use for this barrel, I’m sure you wouldn’t mind if I took it with me. Would you?” He shoved the cork back in the hole and picked up the barrel without waiting for an answer. He started up the stairs. Miriam paused, then followed him. As she swung the door shut, he stopped and turned back to her.

“Yom Kippur is tomorrow night, is it not?” he asked.

She blinked in surprise.

“Good thing Jews don’t eat or drink on Yom Kippur... isn’t it.”

She did not respond.

“Well. Thank you for your generosity, señorita.” He lifted the barrel with that same sinister smile, and swept off, his black robe billowing in the wind.

Miriam stood, frozen in place, and waited until he rounded a corner and disappeared from sight before she bolted into the house, shutting the door behind her. She leaned against the back of the door and sunk to the ground, burying her face in her hands.

“Master of the Universe,” she sobbed. “What should I do?!”

She had half a mind to go tell Hanna, but she didn’t want anyone else to know about what her father had been doing, because it might endanger them as well. But she also knew that she had to get word to her father immediately. She didn’t know how, but he had to know right away. Going down to Plaza de Santa María herself was risky in all kinds of ways; single Jewish women simply did not do that, and she was sure to arouse suspicion. Maybe she could find a boy to send with a message.

She stood up and went outside the house again. She wandered through the narrow streets of the *judería*, trying to maintain her composure, and looked for potential messengers, but all she could see were women and young children. Finally, she spotted Yehuda, a ten-year-old neighbor who was playing quietly with sticks in the courtyard of the synagogue.

“Hey, Yehuda!” she called. “Can you do me a favor?”

Yehuda eyed her suspiciously. “For what?”

“I’ll give you some quince sweetmeats. I need you to run as fast as your legs can carry you and deliver an important message to my father at Plaza de Santa María. Can you do that?”

Yehuda stood up. “What should I tell him?”

“Tell him...” Miriam paused. “Tell him that I told you to say that a man in black took some wine, and that he is in danger.”

Yehuda screwed up his face in confusion. “What? A man in black?”

“Repeat it after me: a man in black took some wine.”

“A man in black took some wine.”

“And my father is in danger.”

“Your father is in danger.”

“Say it again.”

“A man in black took some wine and your father is in danger.”

“Good. Now go. And come back to me immediately and tell me what he says, and I will give you some sweetmeats.”

Yehuda took off towards the Fisheries' Gate. Miriam watched him, then walked back to her house to clean up the broken jug... and to wait.

16

Alma

I sat on the floor of my room in Grandma's apartment with a sigh, kicking up a cloud of dust from the carpet. I coughed furiously, clutching my chest.

"Everything okay in there?" I heard my grandmother call from the living room. I struggled to slow my breath, then reached for my inhaler and took two puffs.

"It would be," I wheezed, "if you'd get this carpet vacuumed once in a while."

"'Get' the carpet vacuumed, huh?" she called. "I think I should file a complaint with the lazy granddaughter who's supposed to be keeping my house..."

"Very funny."

"Are you done packing?"

I glanced over at the suitcase next to me. "I guess. For now."

"Then come over here."

I struggled to stand up, still coughing, and walked to the living room. Grandma was sitting on her armchair. On her lap was the wooden box I had found in her store six months earlier, the one with the *ketubot*. My heart pounded in excitement.

"Finally!" I exclaimed. I inched around the coffee table to sit on the leather couch next to her, and reached out for the box.

"Ah ah!" She snatched it away. "Let me show you first."

She gently pulled off the cover.

"Oh my God, this is so exciting," I squeaked.

Grandma grinned up at me. "I know!" She set the box on the coffee table. "Twenty-four generations," she said, tapping the pile on her lap. "Starting with my *ketuba*." She tenderly picked up the parchment at the top of the pile, scanning it with a gentle smile. "Now obviously, I'm not letting you take the originals to Land of the Pickpockets over there. I had them copied for you." She nodded at a large folder that had been resting on the coffee table.

"Photocopied?!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Oh no. I had them professionally scanned." I let out a breath of relief, and Grandma chuckled. "Take out a notebook now and start drawing the family tree. You probably won't need all the names, I just want you to visualize the connections."

"Hold on, let me get one of my notebooks." I stood up and ran back to my room, grabbing one of the new spiral notebooks I had packed for school and returning to my spot on the couch. "Oops. I'll need a pen too."

"Here." My grandmother handed me one. "Start by writing yourself."

I wrote my name on the top of the front page. *Alma Ben-Ami*.

"Now your mother." *Hannah Dahan*. "Married to?" *Isaac Ben-Ami*.

"Now me." I smiled. *Alma Solomon, m. Gershon Dahan*. "Put the date as well. June 9th, 1956. 30th of Sivan, 5716." I added the dates. "Okay. Now this is my mother's." My grandmother slipped her marriage certificate under the rest of the pile and handed me the next one. We worked through the pile and I wrote down the names carefully. After twenty-three certificates, we finally reached the oldest one, which Grandma handed me very, very carefully. My heart pounded as I examined it for the second time.

"*Miriam bat Abraham v'Orosol hy"d, l'veit mishpachat de Carmona,*" I read. "The 3rd of Elul, 5252... which would be..."

"Summer of 1492."

"So we know her mother was dead... Orosol? I've never heard that name before..."

"It's Spanish. It means—"

"'Gold sun'. My Spanish isn't *that* bad. But it doesn't sound like a Jewish name..."

"Sure it is. Like Yiddish names like Gittel and Frida..."

"But Yiddish is a Jewish language."

"And what is *Haketia*? Buddhist?!"

"Oh. Right. Well, you said Spanish, not Judeo-Spanish."

"Judeo-Spanish was only developed after the expulsion. Spanish Jews spoke Castilian. Anyway, the point is, we know that this probably means she and her father arrived in Morocco before the expulsion. With a family name like 'de Carmona', I would assume they were of Andalusian origin, but Jews moved around a lot during that period so it's basically impossible to know how they got to Morocco."

"Do we know for sure that they escaped the Inquisition? Maybe they didn't even come from Spain..."

"Well, that's the whole point, *mi Alma*." Grandma took off her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes. "Beyond these documents, we don't know anything for sure. All I have is the family legend."

"So what's the family legend?"

Grandma looked up at me and smiled, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Um, yes!" I exclaimed. "Are you seriously not going to tell me?!"

"Patience, patience." She reached behind her neck and unclasped a chain that I hadn't even noticed was there. She drew it out from underneath her shirt, and dangled it so the pendant slid off into the palm of her hand. I leaned closer and saw that it wasn't a pendant, but a ring—the ring that she had found in the box when I had brought it to the apartment. It was a thick gold band flattened at the top, with some kind of impression on it. She handed it to me and I took a closer look. The impression looked like a kind of bird.

"What is this?" I asked.

"The legend goes that there was a Christian family that helped our family escape from the Inquisition. This ring belonged to them, and our hope is to return it to them one day."

I stared up at her. "Return it to them? Are you freaking serious? Not only are you sending me off on a wild goose chase to see if I can find out more about our own family, you want me to find out who helped them, track down their descendants, and physically deliver this ring to them?!"

"I said 'our hope'. I am aware that it's very unlikely you'll be able to complete all that in one semester."

"So a Christian family helped our family escape? That's the legend?"

Grandma nodded. "And the questions we'd like answered are as follows. Write this down."

I dutifully placed my pen to my notebook and looked up at her expectantly.

"We want to know *when* and *where* they sailed from Spain, and where they had lived before that. We want to know *if* and *why* they were actually being pursued by the

Inquisition, and if so, *how* they managed to escape. If the Christian family does exist, than we want to know how they helped them.”

“When... where... if... why... how.”

“And lastly, again *if* the Christian family does exist... we want to know if they have any living descendants, and if it would be possible to give them that ring.” She nodded towards the ring in my hand, and held out the chain as well. “Here. You should wear this under your shirt. I’ve never had it appraised, but if my grandmother was right, it’s an extremely valuable historical artifact. You don’t want it getting lost.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t take it with me...”

“Of course you’re taking it with you. It’ll inspire you. And who knows, maybe by some miracle you’ll be able to answer all the questions by May.” Grandma smiled at me, her eyes sparkling.

“Hope springs eternal,” I sighed, threading the ring onto the chain and clasping it around my neck.

My grandmother leaned over to me and reached out for my hand. I gave it, and she clasped it in both of hers. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’re doing this, Alma.”

“You don’t have to.” I smiled back at her and saw her eyes welling with tears. “Oh, Grandma, don’t cry!”

“Come over here and let me give you a blessing.” I stood up and knelt by her chair. She placed her hands on my head. “*May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah,*” she said in Hebrew. “*May God bless you and guard you; may God shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you; may God lift His countenance to you and give you peace.*” She took a deep breath. “*May you journey in peace, may you return in peace.* And may God assist you on your journey, opening your eyes to the path that you seek,” she continued in English. “May He protect you from evil, and from confusion, and from fear. And may He grant you joy always.” She leaned down and kissed the top of my head. By this point, tears were streaming down my own face, and Grandma saw them as I rose. “Who was just telling me not to cry?” she scolded, grinning through her tears. I leaned over and wrapped her in a hug.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” I sobbed.

“Me too, sweetie. But you’ll be back before you know it, and then we’ll have another two years to get completely sick of each other.”

I laughed, standing up and wiping my eyes on my sleeves.

“Now,” she said, pulling a tissue out of her pocket and blowing her nose. “When is that cab supposed to come for you?”

“Six o’clock.”

“Let’s eat something then.”

17

Manuel

There is always something surreal about the atmosphere of an airport, especially at nighttime. The vast space, the murmurs and echoes of voices and footsteps, the bright lights against the darkened floor-to-ceiling windows. My mother accompanied me to the security line, wringing her hands and plucking at my clothes whenever I let her near enough. "Don't forget to let me know when you work out a plan for your phone service. Did I give you that letter to send to Marta when you get there? I thought I put it in your backpack..."

"Yes, I have it. Mama, calm down. You can always mail something to me if I forgot."

"I know. I know. I just get so nervous about traveling."

I laughed. "I'm the one traveling, not you!"

She gave me a weary look. "It's much the same thing." She sighed and scanned the line. "This is ridiculous. It'll take you an hour to get through here. Maybe we can sit and wait until it gets a little better..."

"It won't get better. It's the TSA, Mama. Inefficiency is their modus operandi. If I wait longer I might miss the flight."

"How is the Jewish girl getting here?"

"By taxi, I think."

"I liked her, you know."

"Yes, I know. You should go, Mama."

She just sort of stood there, looking small and uncertain and restrained. Then she straightened and reached up to put her hands on my shoulders. "You're right." She pulled me down and kissed me on each cheek. Then she cupped my face in her hands and looked into my eyes. "You know he would be so proud of you."

She gave my face two sharp pats, turned around and walked off abruptly.

"*Adiós*, Mama."

She paused and turned, giving me one last appraising look. "*Adiós, cariño*. And for the love of God, get a haircut when you get there."

And with that, she disappeared into the crowd.

I waited for Alma at the gate, watching the other passengers to see if I could spot other NYU students heading for the spring semester in Madrid. The other students in the Spanish Heritage Project arrived in pairs; the cousins Zoe and Nicole, Andrea and Melissa, and then Lucas and Lorenzo. I let their flirtatious chatter wash over me, compulsively checking my watch. Boarding time was approaching and I was contemplating giving Alma a call when I saw her jogging towards us, breathless, her ponytail a mess and her glasses askew.

"Random security check," she was mumbling as she plopped down next to me. "God Almighty. Do I look like a terrorist to you?"

"That's why it's random, no?"

"They *claim* it's random. I tell you, the guy had it in for me the moment I explained that my luggage is so heavy because it contains pots and pans."

I blinked. "Why does your luggage contain pots and pans?"

“How else am I going to keep kosher in a non-kosher kitchen?”

“Even if the pots are clean?”

“If you haven’t noticed yet, Judaism is the most obsessive-compulsive religion on the planet...” She paused, registering the blank look on my face, then drew a deep breath and launched into one of her long-winded explanations: “Kashrut is like a spiritual allergy. According to the laws of kashrut, metal pots and pans and ovens absorb the flavors of the non-kosher food that was cooked there, so we’re not allowed to use anything that’s been used to cook non-kosher food.”

“What if the kitchen is vegetarian?”

“There are still cheeses and other products that may contain non-kosher ingredients... and there are a bunch of other issues besides non-kosher meat and separation of milk and meat... it’s really complicated.”

“Ah. For a second maybe I thought it would be okay for you to eat in my kitchen.”

She shot me a suspicious look. “Does that mean you’re a vegetarian?”

I nodded. “My mother always has been. We never had meat in the house.”

She raised her eyebrows and nodded slowly.

“What? Is there a problem?”

“No, no problem,” she said, her voice kind of high pitched. “No problem. All I’m saying is... good thing I can’t marry you.”

I opened my mouth wordlessly for a moment, then collected myself and cleared my throat. “Was this... a... possibility you had considered before this devastating revelation?” I grinned.

She blinked, looking a little flustered. “Well... possibility would imply that it were, you know... possible.”

I bit my lip and nodded, smiling at the ground. I was enjoying this a little too much. “I think...” I turned back to her. “You did not answer my question.”

“I think...” she said, “you really don’t need an answer. I’m gonna go get a Coke.” She jumped up and took off for the nearest newsstand.

I sighed as I approached my row and double checked my ticket. Yes. Middle seat.

I glanced around. Alma was sitting in the middle seat across the aisle, between Lucas and a girl I didn’t recognize. Lucas seemed a little disappointed with the arrangements too, and when I followed his gaze I had a hunch I knew why. I studied him for a few moments, a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth, then glanced between him and Melissa, who was in the seat next to mine.

I approached him.

“Would you mind switching seats with me, *amigo*?” I asked him. He looked up in surprise.

“Where is your seat?” he asked skeptically.

“There,” I said, nodding casually in Melissa’s direction. I almost laughed when his eyes lit up.

“Sure, no problem,” he said, scooping up his bag and standing up.

I shoved my bag in the overhead compartment and sat down next to Alma. She was engaged in conversation with the girl next to her, who noticed me and smiled in my direction.

“Hi,” she said.

Alma turned around and blinked in surprise. “Manuel! Wasn’t Lucas sitting here a second ago?”

“He was kindly willing to switch with me.”

“You keep popping up next to me unexpectedly.”

“Much as I appreciate your company, I’m afraid my motivation was the aisle seat.”

“Ahh,” she said, nodding. “Tall person problems.” She turned back to the girl next to her. “Olivia, this is my friend Manuel. He’s in the Spanish Heritage Project too.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Olivia, grinning widely. She had a round sort of face, olive skin and very straight black hair the spilled around her shoulders.

“Manuel, this is Olivia. We just figured out that we’re roommates.”

I nodded politely.

“¿*Hablas español?*” Olivia addressed me.

“He’s from Andalusia, so *castellano*,” Alma answered.

“Ahh. I’m from Arizona, but my parents are Mexican,” Olivia said, still looking right at me.

I gave another polite nod, feeling increasingly uncomfortable. I leaned forward to dig a book from my bag and began to read as Alma and Olivia continued chatting. Eventually their chatter died down. I continued reading in silence.

“So have you been back to Spain at all since you moved here?”

It took me several seconds to realize that Alma had spoken to me. I looked up from the book, blinking in surprise.

“Back to Spain?” I echoed, trying to register her question. “Ahh... no.”

“Geez, this must be exciting then!” she continued. “Are you planning to meet up with friends and family in Granada?”

“I don’t really have any family. And I haven’t stayed in touch with my friends.” I paused, studying her. “But I’m definitely planning to go visit my father when I can. His grave, that is.”

She nodded. “How far away is Granada from Madrid?”

“Not sure exactly. It’s a different part of the country. Several hours by train, probably. Spain is a lot smaller than the USA.” I smiled at her. “Maybe you should come with me. It’s a beautiful city.”

“I bet. Well, we’ll have to see. Religious Jews do not make great travel companions, you know.”

“You should have warned me before we got on this plane. Why not?”

“We’re a pain in the butt. We can’t eat anywhere. We can’t do anything on Saturdays. And this makes us totally obsessed with finding other Jews with whom we can share our bad food and whine about it all. Not to mention visiting Jewish heritage sites, which are all extremely depressing in Europe.”

“I wouldn’t mind showing you some Jewish heritage sites. My mother dragged me to all of the ones near us when I was growing up.”

Alma cocked her head at me. “Your mom has a thing for Jews too, huh?”

“She has a thing for all underdogs. Anyone or anything that’s ever been oppressed. You wouldn’t believe how many stray animals she adopted when we lived in Granada. Good thing we’re not allowed pets in our apartment in Brooklyn.”

“She’s a funny lady.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

Alma reached forward and started rummaging through her bag under the seat in front of her. Finally she fished out a digital video camera.

“What are you doing?” I asked suspiciously.

She turned the camera on and twisted the lens around to face her, then clicked record. “Semester in Madrid, day one!” she said to the camera. “As you can see, we are all settled here on the plane, waiting for the engines to get started... and here is Manuel...” she turned the camera towards me. “Looking... exasperated...”

“Are you going to be doing this the entire time?” I asked, rubbing my forehead.

“Well, someone’s grumpy!” She turned the camera back to herself and smiled at it. “And this here is our new friend Olivia...” Olivia started at the sound of her name and looked up, smiled and waved for the camera. “And we should be taking off very soon! See you in Madrid!” Then she turned it off, her smile abruptly disappearing, and turned to me. “Listen, buster, I’ll never hear the end of it from my family if this trip isn’t extremely well documented. And I expect you to be fully compliant.”

“Did I sign for this? I don’t think this was in the contract...”

“Oh, quiet.”

“I hate being on camera.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are pleased to welcome you to flight 750F to Madrid...”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe this is really happening,” Alma clapped her hands in excitement. “You know I’ve never flown internationally before?”

“Then maybe you should pay attention while she explains the safety protocols.”

“You’re just trying to get me to shut up.”

“Mm, yes. I’d like to listen.”

“You’re such a goody-two-shoes.”

“Shh.”

The flight was pretty uneventful, unless you count Alma’s occasional outbursts of “I need to get out of here” –clawing past me to pace up and down the aisle—as events. It was just as well because I could not get comfortable enough to sleep for more than twenty minutes at a time. It certainly didn’t help when Alma poked me awake to inform me that I was snoring.

We were greeted in baggage claim by a guy holding a sign and introducing himself as Dave, but as more and more of us joined the group with our luggage, Alma was left standing, increasingly agitated, by the carousel.

“It happens sometimes,” Dave told her. “Don’t worry, we haven’t had a student yet whose bags were permanently lost. It might take another day or two.”

“Great, well, I guess it’ll be all packaged food for the next few days...” she grumbled as I accompanied her to the lost luggage desk.

“Oh right, your pots...”

“I told you that security guy had it in for me. That’s probably why the bag was delayed.”

She filled out the forms and the guy behind the desk told her they’d be in touch. We rejoined the NYU group, where Dave was giving out keys and maps and helping students figure out how to get to their lodgings. Alma was in an independent rental, along with two other female students, a block down the road from my homestay.

"Is there a way to make the kitchen kosher?" I asked. "Maybe they'd be willing to keep it kosher for a few days..."

Alma gave me a sarcastic grin. "Yeah, sure, there's a way, but trust me, it ain't gonna happen."

"Why not?"

"Just trust me."

"No, I want to know. What would you have to do?"

She looked up at me over her glasses. "You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Well... *you* asked." She shrugged. "So first, you'd have to scrub everything completely clean..." and she launched into a complicated and rambling explanation that involved scrubbing, boiling, pouring boiling water, leaving ovens on, and torching, and while getting into the finer details of which materials could and could not be kashered, she skidded to a stop and stared at me. "Why are you even still *listening* to me?"

I blinked. "Why not? It's interesting!"

"No! It really isn't!" She looked me up and down. "Are you *sure* you're Christian?"

"Manuel, right?" came a voice from behind me. I turned around. It was a well-built guy with a long curly ponytail, and he extended a hand. "I'm Rob, we're gonna be roommates at Señora Ortega's."

"Pleased to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. "This is my friend Alma."

"Nice to meet you." They shook hands. "So..." he turned back to me. "I was gonna head over there now. I thought you might want to tag along."

I hesitated.

"Go ahead," Alma said. "I'll be fine."

I regarded her. Her ponytail was coming apart, strands of black hair frizzed wildly around her face, and her pale green eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Go on. I should go meet my roommates." She pulled her phone from her pocket. "Just give me your new number."

As we boarded the shuttle, I realized that it felt very strange to be surrounded by people speaking Spanish. I hadn't even realized how much more mental strain was involved in simply walking around among English speakers. In the USA, my ears automatically picked out a Spanish conversation among the hubbub of English, as if my brain was thirsty for its most comfortable language. Here, everything suddenly became so much easier to understand.

Fortunately for me, Rob was not very talkative, and I was able to stare out the windows and contemplate the view as we approached the city. I had visited Madrid a few times in my life, but it was so long ago that I didn't really recognize anything. What did feel comforting and familiar was the huge sky. Spending all my time in Brooklyn and New York City, I was used to seeing only strips of it above the towering skyline. Madrid's architecture was lower, more quaint. The pace was slower; people on the street were strolling, not rushing. The city definitely felt more like home than Brooklyn did, but it was not Granada. The sunlight was more gentle.

Rob and I navigated the streets with little trouble and found ourselves on the sidewalk in front of a yellow brick building about five stories high. We entered, climbed the

stairs to the second floor, and knocked on the door. A short, round lady in her sixties greeted us and introduced herself as María Ortega. She seemed more disappointed than anything else to learn that I was a Spaniard, especially when she heard my Andalusian accent. Northerners tend to associate the “lazy, sound-swallowing” southern accent with the lower class—similar to the perception of southerners in the USA. I wondered if I should take my mother’s advice while I was here, and use the “refined” Castilian Spanish she had insisted I master when I was a teenager.

Señora Ortega’s apartment was cramped but meticulously tidy. She showed us our rooms, and told us that when we were done unpacking, she would show us around the kitchen.

Rob and I each had a small room with a wardrobe, a bed and a desk. I set down my suitcase and sat on the bed, patting the mattress. I had forgotten how much narrower European beds were. Light streamed in from a small window above the desk. I walked towards it and peered out. A little grassy park lay below, with a swing set and slide. A woman sat on a bench and read while a little boy ran around the equipment. Another apartment building rose behind it, red brick with flourishes in white plaster around the windows.

I turned back to the room and unzipped my suitcase.

When about half the contents were put away in the wardrobe, my phone rang. I dug through my bag and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Manuel?”

This didn’t sound good. Her voice was shaking.

“Alma? What’s wrong?”

“I just... I’m not... I’m tired and hungry and I can’t think straight, and I don’t know what to do about the food, I forgot to pack the list of packaged kosher products in my carry-on and our Internet here isn’t set up yet and even if it was I don’t know how to get to the nearest supermarket and I can’t decide if I’m more tired or hungry and I might just fall asleep on the way there anyhow but I’m so hungry and—”

“Alma, I can’t understand a word you are saying... what can I do to help you?”

“I don’t know!” she sobbed.

“You said something about a list of kosher products. If I find it for you, will that help?”

“I don’t know because I don’t even remember if it had anything useful on it and honestly I just need an actual meal right now and I have no idea what to do...”

“Wow. You Jews really are awful travel companions.”

“Don’t mock me in my hour of distress!” I couldn’t tell whether she was laughing or crying.

“Look, give me the address of your apartment and I’ll come over there and see if I can help you. Okay?”

Two minutes later I found myself sitting on Señora Ortega’s couch with my phone in one hand and the yellow pages open in front of me. *This really shouldn’t be so hard, I thought. Just do it.*

Why can’t she do it? Call her and give her the number.

But... her Spanish. And I heard what kind of a state she's in. She won't be able to string two words together.

Oh, but he has to speak English. Come on. He must interact with Jewish tourists all day.

Why is this so hard for me? What's the big deal? He's just a rabbi. A Jew like Alma. They don't bite.

But... a rabbi.

I'm not going to marry him, I'm just going to talk on the phone! Even Padre Carlos wouldn't have a problem with this...

But he would have a problem with the reason I'm calling.

I'm just helping a friend!

"¡Basta!" I said aloud.

"Sorry?" Rob called from the other room.

"Nothing." I sighed, dialed the number and paused only for a moment more before pressing "call" and putting the phone to my ear.

18

Miriam

Miriam paced through the house, back and forth, back and forth. It had never been so agonizing waiting for someone to come back from the market for her. It had to have been two, three hours already, and soon it would have been time for her father to return from his stand there anyway. She couldn't bring herself to do housework or even to eat anything.

Finally, she heard footsteps approaching her door. She flung it open and saw little Yehuda standing there, red-faced and out of breath.

"Well?" she prompted him.

"I'm so sorry, Miriam. I looked everywhere for him. I couldn't find him."

Miriam's stomach dropped.

"His stand was there and his spices were on display. People were just helping themselves. I asked them where he was and no one knew."

Miriam felt dizzy and leaned against the doorframe for support.

"Yehuda..." she said. "Here... come here... I'll give you the sweetmeats..." She pointed to the shallow ceramic jar on the table in the center of the room. "Take what you like... just listen..." She grabbed his shoulder and turned him to face her. "Don't tell anyone about this. Okay? Not a word to anyone. At least not for the next few days. You promise me?"

Yehuda gave her a funny look, but he promised.

"Okay. Go take the sweetmeats and go home to your mother."

He did as he was told, and when he had left, Miriam bolted the door shut and stumbled to the bedroom, collapsing on her bed by the front window. She hugged her knees to her chest and cried, rocking back and forth, trying to gain some control of her thoughts.

Maybe he was warned by someone else. Maybe he has already fled.

Or maybe he was already arrested. There is no way to know.

All I can do is wait. All I can do is wait.

The sun was setting over the mountains. She sat on the bed by the window and watched it sink below the roofs of the houses across the street. She couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. She just sat in the dark, waiting, waiting.

Eventually she must have drifted off because she was awoken by a rustling sound outside the window. She bolted upright, listening carefully. There was a very gentle knock on her door.

Her head spun. *What if it's the Inquisition?* She didn't move.

The knock came again, this time louder.

The Inquisition would not knock gently.

She tiptoed towards the door, resting her ear against it. The knock came again, and this time a voice.

"Miriam de Carmona," the voice whispered. "Are you there?"

That definitely doesn't sound like the Inquisition.

"Who are you?" she called through the door.

"It's León Aguilar."

Miriam jumped back from the door in astonishment. *León Aguilar? What is he doing here at this hour?*

"Miriam, please open the door and let me in." His voice was very quiet and so muffled through the door she could hardly hear him. "I know where your father is. It is dangerous for me to be out here. Please let me in."

Miriam opened the door. León swept inside, closing the door behind him and removing his dark hood. He fumbled for the lock.

"Don't lock the door," Miriam blurted. León looked at her in confusion.

"I'm just trying to keep—"

"I know. But it's forbidden." She did not feel like explaining. He raised his hands in defeat. He was all dressed in black, and she could hardly make out his silhouette against the door in the dark. "Where is my father?"

"Hidden at our estate. There's an extra room in one of the towers, where the seamstress and her assistant used to sleep."

Miriam stared at León. "Your family is hiding him?"

He took a deep breath. "Yes."

Miriam was at a loss for words. Giving refuge to a fugitive of the Inquisition was treason of the highest order. After a few moments, she whispered, "Is your father out of his mind?"

León pressed his lips together and lowered his eyes. "To tell you the truth, that's exactly what I asked him." He regarded her. "But he is my father and I do what he says. He sent me to come get you." He tossed a black piece of cloth at her. She caught it and examined it. "Put that on and we'll go. Your father explained where the secret passageway is."

Miriam eyed him skeptically. "Aren't you the one who has difficulty following directions?"

His face broke into a smile, and somehow Miriam started to feel a little better. "Yes, but I tend to come through when it really matters."

Miriam took a step back. "I'm just going to go get some of my things..."

"No, no. No time. We have everything you need. Just put on the cloak and come now."

Miriam hesitated for a moment, sizing him up. "How do I know I can trust you?" she asked plainly.

León sighed. "You don't really have a choice, do you?"

She slipped on the cloak, and with one last glance back at her home of nine years, she followed him out into the night.

The first thing I noticed when I started to wake up was the nausea of jet-lagged grogginess. That was pretty awful. It took me a few seconds to figure out that I had passed out on the couch of my apartment, apparently with my glasses on, because they were digging into my face and squishing my nose at an awkward angle. I rolled onto my back, adjusting the glasses and rubbing my eyes. Then, I realized that I was smelling something delicious—something like beef and vegetables—and that’s what made my eyes pop open.

Right across from me, on the kitchen table, was a bag of what looked like takeout food, steaming away and smelling excruciatingly appetizing. I lifted my head and saw that someone was seated next to it, his hands folded in his lap.

“Manuel,” I groaned. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“It’s for you.”

I stared at him. “But I can’t—”

“It’s kosher. I called the local rabbi and asked if there was a place to get you food. He directed me to this place.” He tapped the business card stapled onto the bag. “I hope you like couscous with meatballs.”

I pulled myself up and lurched over to the bag, examining the business card. It did, indeed, say it was kosher, under supervision of Rabbi Uri Maimón.

I swiveled my gaze onto Manuel, who was watching me with a little smile on his face.

“Did you ride here on a white horse or what?” I furiously tore at the bag and removed the Styrofoam containers. “You’re my freaking hero. Oh my God this smells so good.” I sat down and started wolfing the food down. Manuel sat there and watched me, his eyes twinkling. “You want some?” I said with my mouth half full, offering him one of the extra plastic forks. He shook his head.

“I’m a vegetarian, remember?”

“Oh right!” I lowered my eyes back to my food, remembering that really awkward moment at the airport when I said that thing about not marrying him. I gave myself a mental kick in the pants. Sometimes I astonish myself with the tactless stupidity that comes out of my mouth.

“How is it?” Manuel asked.

“I’ll let you know when I’m not starving anymore. Right now it tastes like the fruits of Eden.” I looked back up at him. “You called the rabbi?”

“Yes. And he said to tell you that you are most welcome to come for Shabbat, and before that if you need anything. Here’s his number.” He dug a slip of paper out of his pocket and slid it across the table to me.

“I dunno, Manuel, does your priest know about this?” I grinned. He shifted uncomfortably. I cleared my throat and shoveled another forkful of food into my mouth. “Well,” I said, chewing thoughtfully. “It’s definitely not my grandmother’s couscous. But it’s not bad. How much was it? I’ll pay you back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

"No, don't you be ridiculous. I'm sure it was expensive and I'm sure I have more money than you to spend on such things. How much?"

"Forget it, Alma."

"Oh no you don't." I stabbed my fork in his direction. He dodged back, eyeing the fork nervously. "We are not dating and I don't have to put up with this from you. Put aside your macho Spanish pride and let me pay for it. Where's the receipt?" I stood up and started digging around for it, but I didn't find it. I threw the bag down and glared at him. "How much?"

He was laughing quietly behind crossed arms. "I'm not telling. Why can't you just accept it as a gift?"

I sighed and sat down, shooting him one last stern look before digging into my food again. Something about this gesture of his felt very, very good, but something about it made me uncomfortable too, and I couldn't quite explain it.

I heard the lock turn in the front door. It opened and in walked my roommates, Olivia and Tessa.

"Hey guys," I greeted them.

"I see you're awake! You're lucky he arrived just as we were leaving." Olivia flashed a big smile at Manuel as she set down the grocery bags she was carrying. He gave an uncertain smile back, and coughed.

"Well, I should get back to my apartment and finish unpacking." He turned to me, his eyes softening and crinkling into a sort of intense affectionate look, and smiled. "Enjoy," he said quietly, then stood up and walked out, nodding at my roommates as he walked past them.

When the door was shut they both burst into giggles. I raised my eyebrows at them.

"Good going, girl." Olivia winked at me as she opened the fridge and started putting away groceries. "Hardly set foot on Spanish soil and you've already snagged a hot Spaniard."

I felt my face get warm. "We're... not..."

"Oh, he's totally into you. It's obvious."

I rolled my eyes. "We're just friends."

"Yeah, yeah," Tessa said, dumping a bag on the counter and opening one of the cabinets. She was a tall African-American with a thin, graceful build and an angled face with high cheekbones. Her thick hair was pulled back into a neat bun.

"Well does that mean he's single?" Olivia leaned back from the fridge, her eyes shining.

I found myself at a loss for words. It took me a good few moments to recover my tongue.

"Um. Yeah. Yeah, he is."

"Awesome." Olivia dove behind the refrigerator door again.

"But he's a religious Catholic and considering becoming a priest," I blurted. Olivia's head reemerged, her eyebrows arched.

"Ohhh," she said. "Now I get it."

"Well, Olivia, there's still hope," Tessa winked at her. "She said 'considering'."

I was not enjoying this conversation at all.

"So which one of you is going to lend me pajamas tonight?" I asked loudly.

My suitcase was delivered the following day, and I found the list of kosher products tucked into one of the pots. Olivia and Tessa were politely curious about my dietary needs, and helped me locate the bakery and butcher where I could get kosher bread and meat. I wouldn't be able to use the oven in our apartment, but I figured a frying pan and a pot each for milk and meat would be enough. I could just put foil over the burners when I used the stove.

I called Rabbi Maimón and accepted his invitation for the upcoming Shabbat. It turned out that he was the *Habad shaliah* (often spelled Chabad, or in this case, being in Spain—Jabad), a representative of a well-known worldwide organization that, among other things, is involved in Jewish outreach. I had known there was a Habad house in Madrid and had been counting on going there for Shabbatot anyway.

"Excellent," he said, in a vaguely Israeli accent. "You are welcome to spend as many Shabbatot with us as you like. I should warn you that there is no *eiruv*."

"Oy," I said. That meant I wouldn't be able to carry anything with me outside, not even in my pockets, from Friday evening until Saturday evening.

"Also... don't wear anything particularly Jewish or Israeli looking."

I hesitated. "Why not?" I asked slowly.

"Anti-Semitism," he answered simply.

That Friday afternoon, I put on a nice, ankle-length dress and high-heeled boots, dabbed on a little mascara and lipstick, emptied my handbag of everything except my passport and prayer book and headed off for Manuel's place.

Señora Ortega answered the door. I took a deep breath and mustered my best Castilian accent.

"*Buenos tardes. ¿Está Manuel por aquí?*"

"*Sí, en su dormitorio.*" She stepped back to let me in and pointed towards an open door tucked in the hall on the other side of the small living room. I walked towards it.

"Knock knock," I said as he came into view, curled up on his bed with a book. He looked up.

"Alma!" He sat up and looked me up and down. "You look nice. What's the occasion?"

"Shabbat comes in in like an hour."

"Ah. I thought the Jewish Sabbath was on Saturday."

"It is and it isn't. Jewish days begin at sundown. Get dressed. We're going to the Habad house for services and dinner."

Manuel blinked at me. "We?"

I walked over to the wardrobe next to his bed and yanked it open. "You've got a suit in here, right?" I scoured the hanging rod and spotted one.

"You want me to come with you to synagogue?!"

"No," I said, snatching the hanger off the rod and tossing the suit at him. "*You* want to come with me to synagogue. Don't be so coy. I know you're curious." I paused. "Also, I need you to carry this for me." I lifted my bag.

He eyed it suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because there's no *eiruv* and I'm not allowed to carry things outside."

"But you're allowed to make me carry things for you?" One of his thick eyebrows was raised skeptically.

"No... but if you were to *happen to feel* like carrying this, for whatever reason, that would be totally fine. Same goes for things like turning on lights and whatever. I'm not allowed to ask you directly."

He narrowed his eyes. "And what if I *don't* feel like it?"

"Hurry up, we need to stop by my place on the way so I can light candles."

I turned and walked out of the room, but before I closed the door, I caught him mumbling something to himself in Spanish about his mother.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing. Admit that the most important reason you're dragging me along is that you'll get hopelessly lost without me."

I shut the door.

We walked, mostly in silence, through the neighborhoods of Madrid. Manuel kept an eye out for street signs, and seemed to know what he was doing, so I gave up trying to figure out where we were going and contemplated my surroundings. I had grown accustomed to the dwarfing urban mass of Manhattan, the feeling of walking through an enormous canyon of brick with just a sliver of sky above me. Madrid was different. Everything felt smaller. The façades of the buildings were painted deep red, pink, yellow and cream; many of the windows were crowned with neoclassical flourishes, the street lamps decorated with ornate wrought iron curves. A chilly breeze wove through the streets and made me wish I'd brought a hat and scarf. Unfortunately, my lungs did not seem much happier in the *madrileño* air than they did in Manhattan.

"Should have brought my inhaler," I mumbled, trying to deepen my breath as I felt my chest constricting.

"Sorry?" Manuel asked.

"Nothing."

"You okay?" He watched me stand there with my hand on my chest, his eyebrows knitted in concern.

"Yeah, yeah. Just a little asthma." I resumed walking. "I'd hoped the air here would be better than the air in Manhattan."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry to say we city Spaniards do not have stellar records for clean air. It used to be a lot worse." He eyed me. "Do you have... ah... what's it called? *El inhalador?*"

"An inhaler. Back at the apartment. It's okay, I don't think I'll need it."

He seemed unconvinced, but did not press the issue. We turned into a narrow, badly-lit alley with graffiti on the painted brick. Manuel took out the piece of paper with the address he'd scribbled down for me.

"I think it's supposed to be here," he said.

"Really?" I squinted around looking for some indication of an address. I couldn't see any sign of a synagogue. I was about to turn around and tease Manuel that he was just as bad at following directions as I was, when I noticed a gruff-looking man standing outside one of the doorways. He was looking at us with obvious suspicion.

"Looking for Habad?" he addressed us in what sounded like an Israeli accent. That was when I noticed his earpiece. Security.

"Yes," I said, drawing closer.

"Are you Jewish?"

I blinked. "Um, yeah..."

"No," Manuel said firmly.

The security guy knitted his brow, looking between the two of us. "He is with you?"

"Yeah, he's my *Shabbos goy*. He's got my passport in there," I pointed to the bag Manuel was carrying for me. The security guy extended his hand, and Manuel produced the passport and handed it to him.

"Alma Neshama Ben-Ami. What are you doing in Madrid?"

"Studying. We're students at NYU Madrid."

"You are from New York?"

"Yes, and so is he, but he's originally from Granada."

"*Su pasaporte*," the guy addressed Manuel, who drew both of his passports out of his pocket and handed them over.

The security guy flipped through them, then narrowed his eyes at Manuel and asked him something in rapid Spanish that I didn't quite catch. Manuel gave him a sardonic grin and answered simply, "*Mujeres*." The security guy softened into a little smile and nodded, chuckling, handing all the passports back to him.

"Shabbat shalom," he said, pulling the door open for us.

"What was that about women?" I hissed at him as we started up the stairs.

"He asked me why you were always answering for me."

I rolled my eyes.

"I knew security is tight," Manuel said. "But I wasn't expecting to be cross-examined."

"Well you know what Monty Python says," I turned and grinned at him. He stared at me blankly.

"Monty Python?"

"No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!" I wiggled my fingers menacingly.

He just blinked. I flopped my hands down in exasperation.

"Don't tell me you've never seen that! Remind me to look it up for you next time we have Internet access. Seriously, this is required material for people in our line of work..." We arrived at the door to the men's section. I peered inside. There were maybe twenty-five guys, most of them in the 40+ crowd, squeezed between the crowded wooden benches. I could see the women's section above—a U-shaped balcony, across which a few women were scattered. "Well, here's your stop." I stepped aside and gestured for him to go in. His eyes widened.

"What do you mean *my* stop?" he hissed. "Why should I go in without you?"

"It's the men's section."

"Your prayers are segregated?!"

"It's an Orthodox shul."

"Let me get this straight—you dragged me here against my will and now you intend to just throw me in there by myself?"

"*Shabbat shalom*." One of the men had drifted towards the door. He looked to be in his fifties, with more than a few gray strands in his bushy black beard and the *payot*, sidecurls, tucked behind his ears. He was wearing a black fedora. "Is there a problem?" His accent sounded vaguely Israeli.

"Are you Rabbi Maimón?" I asked.

"Yes, I am," he bowed his head in greeting. "Can I help?"

"This is Manuel. He's shy. This is his first time in shul. Would you mind helping him?"

"My absolute pleasure, Manuel." Rabbi Maimón extended a hand to him. Manuel hesitated, but shook his hand. Mid-shake, Rabbi Maimón squinted and pointed at him. "*Are you the one who called me about kosher food for your friend?*" He asked in Spanish.

"*Sí.*" Manuel smiled uncomfortably, his shoulder stiff, looking like he really wanted his hand back.

"And you are the friend! Alma, right?" He finally released Manuel's hand and turned his smiling eyes at me.

"Yes. Thanks so much for your help and hospitality."

"*De nada, de nada!*" The women's section is just up that way. My wife Ester is there if you need any help." He turned back to Manuel. "So, Manuel. *¿Tú eres un Cohen? ¿Un Leví?*"

"He's a curious Catholic," I tossed over my shoulder as I headed up the stairs. Manuel shot a desperate glare at me.

"Ahh, I see." Rabbi Maimón had an arm around his shoulder now and was steering him in. I chuckled and continued to the third floor.

Rabbi Maimón's openness made me almost feel guilty for having been so hesitant to call him. He didn't skip a beat when he heard I was Catholic, just steered me right into the synagogue and sat me next to him. Even though the services were clearly in session and he probably should have been praying, he walked to the bookshelves himself and found me a prayer book with a Spanish translation next to the Hebrew, opened it to the right page and showed me where they were in the service. He also handed me a crocheted cap about the size of my hand, yellowed white with a blue design around the rim, and gestured to put it on my head.

Some other guy appeared to be leading the services, standing on a podium at the center of the room and singing the text aloud. It was very different from what I was used to seeing at church.

I looked up at the women's section and spotted Alma by the rail, concentrating on her own prayer book. She looked up and smiled and waved at me. I shook my head at her. She laughed and went back to her prayers.

I scanned the prayer book in front of me. The liturgy appeared to be a sort of combination of passages from the Bible—some of which I recognized—along with some lengthy prayers and poems. I was astonished at how long it was. I flipped back and forth, looking at the prayers for weekdays as well. *Do they really say this entire thing every single day?*

Services ended with some kind of joyful song. I slipped out of the door as the congregation drifted towards Rabbi Maimón to shake his hand and chat, and waited for Alma at the bottom of the stairs. Finally I saw her coming around the corner, and her face lit up into a wide, mischievous grin when she saw me.

"Look who Jews up nicely. The kippa suits you," she said, gesturing to the cap, which I had forgotten was still on my head. Something about the sparkle in her eye as she said this gave me butterflies of pleasure... and something about it gave me a churning sort of discomfort.

I reached self-consciously for the kippa. "Can I take it off now?"

"If you want," she shrugged, "but it's probably more respectful to keep it on for the meal."

"Meal?" I froze. "What meal?"

"I told you we were coming for dinner, didn't I?"

"But... why..."

"Anyone who is here for the *se'udah*—the Sabbath feast," Rabbi Uri's voice boomed over the crowd that had converged on the landing. "Please find your seats downstairs in the dining hall."

"Alma, I think I should go," I said, shaking my head. "I can make my own dinner at home."

"Don't be ridiculous." She grabbed my arm and dragged me towards the stairs. I felt the kippa sliding off and grabbed at my head to keep it on.

“But what if they don’t have vegetarian food?” was the only weak protest I could muster.

“They’re sure to have something you can eat. This is Habad, they cater to everybody. Besides, the meal is more important than the services.” At this point we had reached the bottom floor, and I noticed an open doorway to the right. Several long tables were set up with plasticware, and delicious smells were wafting from somewhere inside. “People are often complaining that women are excluded from the main spheres of religious life, and hey, I’m as upset about that as the next feminist,” Alma continued, leading me into the room and towards the table. “The thing about Judaism, though, is that the main spheres of Jewish life don’t revolve around the synagogue. They revolve around the home. When I said it’s all about food... I wasn’t kidding.”

She chose a spot near the head of the table. Across from her, there was a blue velvet cloth embroidered in gold Hebrew lettering, covering something lumpy. Next to it was a tarnished silver goblet and a bottle of wine. More people started filtering in: a pair of young women bantering loudly in rapid French; an older British couple; a family of Italians. A woman with an olive complexion, wearing an elegant black dress, came in, and greeted every one of them individually with a “Shabbat shalom”, pointing to herself and saying “Ester”.

“That’s the rabbi’s wife,” Alma whispered to me.

Eventually, Rabbi Maimón came in and greeted everyone in Spanish, English, French, Italian, and Hebrew, and then began singing a song that everyone but me seemed to know. Ester opened a little paperback prayer book and placed it on the plate in front of me. I nodded in thanks and tried to follow along. It was a song about greeting angels, and something about the haunting melody raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Next came the Biblical song “Woman of Valor”, which the Rabbi sang in its entirety while gazing at his wife with such visible and intense affection that I could hardly bear to look. Then, he made the prayer over the wine, and we all drank from the grape juice distributed on the tables. He explained that we were going to wash our hands for bread, and that whoever needed help with this was welcome to ask, but that once he had washed he was not allowed to speak until he had eaten. I remained in my seat while Alma went to wash.

The rabbi pulled the velvet cover off to reveal two beautiful braided loaves of bread on a wooden cutting board. He made a blessing over them and began slicing them, eating a piece himself and tossing one to his wife. She gathered the pieces in a basket and when it was full, passed it down the table.

“Remind you a little of communion?” the rabbi winked at me. I gave him a relieved smile, feeling my shoulders relax a little. “Where do you think you Catholics got the idea for bread and wine as part of the observance of the Sabbath?” He looked up at everyone else, raising his voice. “Help yourselves,” he said, gesturing to a table in the corner where several electric hotplates were set up, and upon them some enormous pots and pans of food. “Everything is *pareve* except for the chicken and the brisket.”

“That’s not accurate, Uri.” Ester spoke up. “The bread and wine tradition comes from the gospels about the Last Supper. The Passover Seder.” She looked at me appraisingly. “I grew up Catholic.”

I apparently did not hide my astonishment very well, because she laughed.

“Or at least I thought I did. I was born in Columbia. It turned out that my family are *bnei Anusim*.”

Well, that certainly got our attention.

“Descendants of *conversos*?” Alma squeaked excitedly. Ester nodded. “How did you find out?”

“When I came to America to study, I noticed there were lots of things that we did that other Catholics didn’t do, and at first I thought it was just a cultural difference, but when I started to look into it, I realized that they were *converso* traditions. I confronted my grandmother and she admitted that we were descended from Spanish Jews.”

“What kind of traditions?” I asked.

“Oh, you know, things like lighting candles in the basement on Friday night, separating milk and meat, checking the eggs for blood before cooking them, tossing a bit of dough into the oven to burn while baking bread, observing certain fast days... sweeping towards the center of the room...”

“How on earth did your family manage to hold onto their identity in secret for five hundred years?” Alma breathed. “I mean... so... my family is also descended from Spanish Jews, but they apparently left Spain before the expulsion. I’m actually here to research them and find out what happened to them here.”

Ester smiled. “*La sangre te llama*,” she said, and I felt a shiver go down my spine. “The blood calls to you. It’s in our DNA. The first time my mother heard me recite *Shema Yisrael*, she burst into uncontrollable tears. We couldn’t calm her for an hour. She had never heard it before in her life.”

Alma was staring at her with her hand over her mouth. I couldn’t quite name or explain the emotion that was washing over me, listening to this story. A mixture of warmth and sadness and... was it longing?

“We can’t ever forget who we truly are,” Ester continued. “Our ancestors died for their Jewish identity all over the world, in every period of history. My family knew that it was something too powerful to let go of, even under pain of death.”

“But then why did they keep hiding it?” Alma asked.

Ester sighed. “Unfortunately, another thing they inherited, along with the identity, was the fear. Fear became a completely integral part of keeping those practices and passing them on. It was inextricably linked with Judaism for my family. Even when I finally managed to get my grandmother to admit it, she warned me that being a Jew is dangerous and that I should never tell anyone. She was horrified when I decided to have my Judaism formally recognized.”

“How did you do that?”

“I wanted to convert, but it turned out I didn’t have to. Our family was fortunate enough to have documented proof—detailed family trees, old letters from people who were known to have been Jewish, things like that, that proved it beyond a doubt. I came to Israel with the help of a few organizations involved in helping *bnei Anusim*, and I was granted a ‘certificate of return’.”

“What an incredible story!”

I was feeling really overwhelmed. I struggled to stand up from the table.

“To this day, every time my grandmother speaks to me, she warns me to be careful...” Ester went on.

“Alma, I am going to get something to eat, would you like me to bring you something?” I interrupted. She looked up at me, blinking.

“Oh, no, that’s okay! I’ll go with you.” She stood up and followed me to the buffet. She was eyeing me. “Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine. I think I’m just hungry.” My stomach really was growling. I approached the table and surveyed the options.

“Can you believe it? A real live descendant of crypto-Jews...”

“I didn’t even know that was possible,” I said, peering into the pot of soup. “Can you tell if this has meat in it?”

“He said everything is vegetarian except the actual meat.”

“Ah, so that’s what he said.”

“But yeah—to have preserved their Jewishness for five hundred years! I feel like I should interview her for a project or something...”

“You should,” I smiled at her. “It fits right in both your major and your minor.”

“Maybe that can be my fallback plan if and when I discover that there is no evidence whatsoever of my ancestors in the national archives.” She dumped a generous helping of brisket on her plate, and caught me looking at her sideways. She narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you, like, really vegetarian, or just vegetarian because your mom is?”

I raised an eyebrow. “This really bothers you, ah?”

“I love meat. Love. Love. Love meat. And I have a cousin who’s a vegetarian and she is totally self-righteous and unbearable about it.”

“I promise never to be self-righteous and unbearable.”

Alma eyed me skeptically and headed back for her seat.

Alma ended up interrogating Ester for a majority of the meal—well, at least as long as the Maimón kids let her sit down. I found myself drifting into conversation with the rabbi, who asked me about my family and my interest in Judaism. He told me about his personal journey towards his Judaism, having been born in Israel and discovered Ḥabad during a trek in Nepal. At a certain point he led his family in singing Sabbath songs, some of which Alma seemed to know, and before I knew it, Alma and I were the only guests left. The Maimóns recited their grace after meals, and invited the two of us up to their apartment—which turned out to be on the top floor of the building—for drinks. I turned down the offer of scotch but said I would accept a cup of tea, and we climbed the four flights of stairs with the family. Ester busied herself putting the kids to bed as Rabbi Uri fixed our tea, inviting us to sit on his couch.

“So Manuel,” he said, pouring himself a generous glass of scotch. “Have you ever considered conversion?”

I stared at him. “Conversion?”

“To Judaism.”

I was too shocked to say anything. Alma sipped her tea quietly next to me.

“I guess that’s a no,” Rabbi Uri laughed.

“I’m a practicing Catholic,” I said. “I have thought seriously about a career in the church.”

“This might surprise you,” he said, “but practicing Catholics have a lot in common with observant Jews. Well, maybe that wouldn’t surprise you.” He smiled at Alma. “It’s fine, I’m just asking. Unlike your faith, Judaism doesn’t actively encourage conversion. We believe that every nation has its place in the world.”

My shoulders relaxed a little in relief. “Well... I had never really thought about it before.”

“Well, look, if you’re interested, I teach a sort of Judaism 101 class in Spanish on Sunday evenings. I’ve had a few students who did end up converting, but most are just there to satisfy some curiosity. It’s free, and you are welcome to come should it interest you.”

“I dunno, Rabbi, maybe if it would earn him some college credit...” Alma winked at me. “I’ve been telling him he should switch to my Judaic studies minor.”

Rabbi Uri laughed. “Well, I’m afraid I can’t offer that. But it would certainly enrich the ‘Judeo’ part of your Judeo-Christian education, should you decide to go to seminary.” He raised his glass. “*L’haim.*” He closed his eyes in concentration and chanted something else in Hebrew. Alma answered “amen”, and he took a swig.

“I appreciate the offer,” I said slowly. “I’ll think about it.”

21

Miriam

Miriam and León tiptoed through the streets, down past the butcher's house and towards the southern wall of the fortress, trying to stay in the shadows. The secret passageway was a tunnel in the fortress wall, accessible through a loose stone by the Benyemíni family's house. León shimmied the stone out of place, then looked back at Miriam.

"I'll go through ahead of you," he whispered. "It's not far. But remember to pull the stone back into place, there's a rope on the other side."

Miriam nodded and he crawled into the tunnel. She waited a few seconds, then glanced back at the *judería* one last time and followed him in.

The rocks were moist and slippery with moss and mud. She fumbled around in the pitch black for the rope León had mentioned and managed to find it, throwing her full weight forward to pull the rock back into place. She slipped around, trying to find something to brace herself against, and eventually she managed to get the stone to close behind her. The air was heavy in the tunnel and the darkness was so thick, it reminded her of the story of the ninth plague in Egypt... that the darkness was so heavy that the Egyptians could not move in it. She heard León's boots scraping against the stones up ahead, and followed the sound, using the narrow walls to guide her forward.

Finally she saw an opening clear up ahead as León's shadow moved out of the way. The moon was a sliver up ahead and the stars were bright. It had been many years since she had left the *judería*, and she had never done so at night. The clouds were reflecting the moonlight onto the mountains in the distance. She stepped out of the crevice in the rock, and León shoved the stone closed. They were at the base of the fortress wall now, and the dark hill stretched treacherously below them. Miriam swallowed. It looked very, very steep.

"Keep close to the wall," León whispered, pointing to the top of the wall. "There are guards up there and they're less likely to see."

"Which way?" Miriam whispered.

León gestured and she followed. She stepped very carefully, gripping the wall as she walked, terrified to lose her balance and slip down the hill.

"How on earth are we going to climb down in the dark?" she hissed.

"We'll walk along the side of the road. It's not as steep there."

"When can I ask you more questions about what happened?"

"When we get there. We are in very grave danger right now."

They approached the road and used the cover of the trees to start descending the hill. It was less steep, but Miriam still walked very slowly, carefully setting one foot down and making sure it was steady before taking the next step. The night air was cold and crisp, the rocks still damp from a recent rainfall, and several times Miriam almost lost her balance and slipped on them. It was very dark under the trees and she could only just make out León's silhouette in front of her.

After what felt like hours, they finally reached the base of the mountain. Miriam was very relieved to feel level ground beneath her. León gave a low whistle, and Miriam heard

the sound of a horse's whinny not far away. León followed the sound, and led her to the horse, which was tied to a tree. He stopped and turned to her.

"My apologies, señorita. There is only one horse and we both must ride."

Miriam froze. This was definitely not allowed. Wandering around at night in the forest with a man—not to mention a non-Jewish man—was problematic enough. But riding behind him on a horse?

"I can't do that, Don León."

"Your father said you'd say that. And he told me to tell you that it's... I'm trying to remember the Hebrew phrase he used. *Piku... pikua...*"

"*Pikuaḥ nefesh?*" Miriam asked.

"Yes, I think so."

Miriam sighed.

"What does it mean?"

"It refers to a situation where someone is in mortal danger, and we are allowed to transgress most commandments to save a life."

"Well, that does seem to apply here." He had reached the horse now, a dark mare, and offered his hand. "Señorita."

Miriam just looked at him, and then up at the horse. "Listen," she said. "I'm not really supposed to touch you. At all."

"Because I'm not Jewish?" She couldn't really make out his face, but his voice sounded a little sharp.

"No," she said, a little more defensive than she had wanted to sound. "Because you're a man."

"Ah." He paused. "Well, that's going to be difficult under the circumstances."

"This entire enterprise is rather scandalous, to be honest with you. But I don't have a choice, do I."

"If you want to try to climb up yourself, you are welcome to. But I'm assuming you have never mounted a horse before."

Miriam paused, then sighed and took his hand. He braced her as she climbed onto the horse. She arranged her skirts as modestly as she could.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

He placed his foot on the stirrup and gracefully swung himself on the horse's back in front of her.

"Try and find something to hold on to," he said. "And it's certainly *pikuaḥ nefesh* if it has to be me."

It took her about two of the horse's steps to realize that that was her only safe option. She gasped and clutched León's waist, and as the horse picked up speed she found herself clinging to him for dear life. She felt very uncomfortable in every imaginable way, but she breathed deeply and thought of her father as they galloped towards the outskirts of Lorca.

Classes began the following week and things started to move into their own rhythm. Manuel and I were studying in different educational tracks, so we rarely saw each other in class. I was focusing on Spanish for Dummies, as I referred to it, and Manuel was taking classes in Spanish about literature and culture and all sorts of other (way more interesting) stuff. Olivia was in most of his classes and truth be told this made me a little uncomfortable.

On Tuesday we had a meeting scheduled with the Madrid supervisor for the Spanish Heritage Project. I found Manuel already sitting in the classroom, ignoring Zoe and Nicole's giggling and thumbing through a large pile of papers in front of him. I smiled and slapped my own pile of papers on the desk next to his. He looked up, smiled in greeting, and then looked at my papers.

"Are those your family records? Can I see?"

"Only if I can see yours." We swapped piles and examined each other's records. "So what's the story with your family?" I asked.

"I don't really know if there's a story..." he said. "My father used to say that we are descended from a wealthy and important family—possibly nobility—but he was never able to find any evidence of this. I have always wondered if the Inquisition had anything to do with it."

"What do you mean?"

"It would explain how a family would go from being wealthy and important to... well, what we've been for the last five centuries." He gave me a wry smile. "It just makes sense. So many families were affected who were not actually practicing Judaism, in secret or otherwise." He paused. "Not... that I think Judaizing was actually a crime or anything."

I raised an eyebrow. "Well, you've certainly made some progress."

He shifted uncomfortably, his eyes on the desk, and after a few moments he said, "I am sorry for what my ancestors did to yours."

I laughed. "I was kidding, Manuel. It's been half a millennium. I think I'm over it." He gave a relieved smile. "Besides, sounds like your ancestors didn't exactly benefit from the Holy Office either."

"There is only one way to find out." Manuel tapped my pile of documents. "What are these?"

"*Ketubot*. Jewish marriage contracts. It was the craziest thing. I stumbled across them completely by accident in the storage room of my grandmother's store this summer. She had never told me about them! Can you believe it?"

"Even though she knew you were about to do this research? How did she expect you to make any progress?"

"She had the family trees copied down somewhere, so it's not like we didn't have the information, but these..."

"How far back do they go?"

"All the way to 1492! Look!" I slipped out the copy of the *ketuba* at the bottom of the pile and handed it to him.

"What does it say?"

I leaned in and pointed to the name of my maternal ancestor. “Miriam, daughter of Abraham and Orosol, from the house of de Carmona. The marriage was in 1492 in Fez.”

“This is amazing, Alma!”

Something gold glinted in the sun from the window and caught my eye. I looked at Manuel’s shirt and realized I was staring right at a gold crucifix. I recoiled a little. He followed my gaze.

“Ah, this.” He studied me. “Does it offend you? I could tuck it in.”

“No... no, it’s fine.” I wasn’t entirely sure about that though. I had always felt a squirming discomfort around Christian symbols. But it did remind me of something else.

“Oh, and I should show you!” I reached around my own neck and pulled the ring my grandmother had given me out of my shirt. I held it out to him with the chain still on my neck, and he leaned in to examine it.

“Looks like a signet ring. Where did you get it?” He was a little too close and it was making my heart pound, but I waited for him to pull back before taking the ring and tucking it back into my shirt.

“My grandmother gave this to me along with the records,” I said. “She said it’s been passed down through our family since my ancestors left Spain. According to the family legend, it belonged to a Christian family that helped my ancestors escape the Inquisition, and my grandmother hopes to find the descendants of that family and return it to them.”

“That’s a fascinating story,” said Manuel. “But the chances of finding the records of such a thing, much less the descendants...”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. She said she knows it’s unlikely, but it’s worth a shot, and to just do what I can.” I glanced at my watch. “Where’s the professor? Wasn’t the meeting supposed to start at ten?”

“Welcome to Spain,” Manuel smiled.

As if on cue, a woman with shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair strolled into the classroom. She had a thin frame, but there was a very solid quality to her presence. “*Buenas días,*” she said, setting her briefcase firmly on the table at the front of the room. “I am Professor Paula García.”

She took about fifteen minutes to explain how the program was going to work. She gave us a general idea of how things worked at the National Historical Archive, where we’d be working at first to get a feel for researching historical documents. She then proceeded to give us a brief introduction to the other main historical archives in Spain. She explained that once we really got started, many of us may have to take trips to other archives across the country, depending on the origins of our families.

“I have to tell you,” she said, surveying us all sternly. “This is an extremely ambitious project for a bunch of undergrads. Professor Rodriguez did not have an easy time convincing me to take this on.” She began packing up her briefcase. “I hope you are prepared to work hard.”

Manuel and I exchanged a disgruntled look as she left the classroom.

The next day we met at the National Historical Archive. I was trembling in so much excitement I could hardly walk straight as we crossed the lawn towards the old brick building with its elegant gray arch above the entrance. Manuel and I paused for a minute by the door, looking up at the building’s façade as the other students streamed past us into the building. We looked at each other.

“Well, here we go,” Manuel said, pulling the door open and looking at me expectantly. But I was busy digging through my backpack. “What are you doing?”

“Aha!” I pulled out my video camera.

“*Dios mío*,” Manuel muttered and quickly walked through the door.

“No no no! Get back here! I want to film you walking in!”

Manuel ignored me and disappeared into the lobby. I rolled my eyes and turned on the camera.

“We are about to enter the Archivo Histórico Nacional building,” I told the camera. I pulled the door back open and walked in slowly, filming all the way. “And there...” I zoomed in on Manuel, who was waiting for me with a sour look. “Is Mr. I Hate Cameras, who ran in ahead before I could properly record this historical moment.” I turned off the camera.

“One of these days I am going to steal that thing from you and throw it out the window,” Manuel grumbled at me.

Professor García was waiting for us on an armchair in the lobby. She introduced us to the head archivist, and then led us up the stairs to a heavy metal door. She pulled it open and the first thing I noticed was the scent of old paper, ink, and dust. Shelves stretched in front of us in dimly lit corridors, books and files stacked floor to ceiling. I charged forward, but Professor García grabbed my arm firmly and yanked me away from the doorway.

“Uh uh uh,” she said. “No one but authorized staff is allowed in there.”

She released my arm from her iron grip. I rubbed my arm, mouthing “Ow” to Zoe as the professor pulled the door closed.

After her tour of the building, she took us back to the lobby. We huddled around her as she gave us a quick explanation about the rules and policies of the archives. Then she excused us so she could sit with Lucas and Melissa to talk about their individual projects. The rest of us filed outside and set up camp on the steps, chatting. Well, everyone except Manuel. He was sitting off in the corner, staring out at the lawn, apparently deep in thought.

Andrea and Lorenzo went in next, and then Zoe and Nicole. When it was just me and Manuel, I wandered over to where he sat, still daydreaming.

“Earth to Manuel,” I said.

He looked up at me, startled.

“What are you looking so pensive about?”

He looked flustered. “I... I don’t know,” he stammered.

I flopped down next to him and started chatting excitedly about the research and the archives and how amazing this was going to be and how I was so excited and nervous. He just watched my emphatic gesturing with amusement. At some point I noticed I’d been monologuing for about five minutes straight and skidded to a stop, studying him suspiciously.

“Are you actually even listening to a word I’m saying?”

He blinked in surprise. “Every one! Do I look uninterested?”

I shrugged. “I guess not. I’m used to people’s eyes glazing over pretty quick when I start launching into rambling monologues.”

“I like your monologues. I like listening better than talking.”

“Alma? Manuel? Your turn,” Nicole called from behind us. I sprang up from the step and offered my hand to help Manuel up. He looked at me uncertainly.

“What, not manly enough to be helped up by a girl?” I teased.

“Your gender has nothing to do with it,” he said, ignoring my hand and standing up. “You’re like half my size.”

I made an offended noise. “I’m small, but tough!” I insisted.

He just laughed.

We sat next to Professor García on the leather armchairs in the lobby and started off with Manuel’s family. When Manuel handed her the oldest record he had, her eyebrows shot up. It was a record from the archdiocese of Granada, where it listed four names: León Aguilar y Angel, who married Ana María Sampedro y Tueros in 1502, and died in 1523; and León’s parents, Tomás Aguilar y Alvarez, and María Pilar Angel y Hernando.

“Your father saved you a lot of work,” she said. “The problem is, we don’t have any idea where to look for the previous generation.”

Manuel’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“Granada was under Moorish rule until 1492. This wedding was only ten years after that. Do the math. León here was probably not born in Granada.” She handed the page back to him. “My guess is that they moved to Granada shortly after the conquest,” she said. “There are a few reasons they may have chosen to do that, but if your father was right and they were an important—maybe even noble—family, there’s a very good chance that they were running away from something.”

“That something being the Inquisition?” I asked.

“Very well could be. There are no noble titles here, so if they *were* hidalgos, the Inquisition is a good explanation. We know that it took quite a while before the Inquisition really set itself up in Granada, and it was a good refuge for people who wanted to start over.”

“So you’re saying that you think they were stripped of their titles and importance by the Inquisition and then came to Granada to start over?” Manuel asked.

“That’s my theory, based on what you’ve told me, but remember that we have no proof at all of your father’s claim that your family was important once. And we have no way of knowing why they came to Granada. The only thing I’m confident about is that they probably moved there sometime between 1492 and 1502, when León here married Ana María.”

“So you think we should search the Inquisition records for their names?”

Professor García sighed. “Well... yes, but it’s not that simple. We shouldn’t rule out other types of documents either. Inquisition records are easier because they are better catalogued, but we have no idea where your ancestors were before they moved to Granada. We could focus in on the tribunals in the surrounding districts, but there are so many of them. Not to mention that our chances of recovering them are greatly reduced the older they are, since many archives were destroyed in the wars. How are you at reading 15th century Castilian script, Manuel?”

He shrugged.

“Oh, don’t be so modest.” I elbowed him and turned to Professor García. “He’s a natural. Professor Rodriguez was having kittens over him. Why do you think I snatched him up as my research partner?”

“I’m good at identifying letters in different hands,” Manuel muttered.

“Excellent. Between that and your Spanish you’ll probably need a lot less of my help than Alma will.”

“Speaking of which,” I said pointedly.

“Right.” She nodded and I slid the *ketubas* towards her. Her eyebrows shot up again. “Hebrew calligraphy. Interesting. *Ketubot?*” she asked, eyeing me over her glasses. I nodded, impressed.

“Do you read Hebrew?” I asked.

“No, do you?”

“Yeah. Should I translate for you?”

“Please do.”

I pulled out the notebook with the family tree I’d drawn with Grandma, and the list of questions we wanted to answer, and went over them with Professor García. When we were done, she sighed and removed her glasses.

“I’m sorry to say this,” she began, and my heart sank. “I am even less hopeful about your project.” She pulled my ancestor’s *ketuba* before her and put her glasses back on, surveying the document. “The only clue we have about where to search is the last name de Carmona, which implies that they were originally from Carmona or somewhere around there. But that’s not necessarily true, because as I said, people moved around a lot in that era, especially Jews... and what makes it even more complicated is that the Jews were expelled from Andalusia in 1483, long before the Alhambra Decree. Now, it wasn’t exactly enforced, but it still makes your grandmother’s story all the more unlikely, because many of the Jews of Andalusia went straight to the Maghreb at that time. In all likelihood, your family left Spain before the Inquisition really got started.”

I stared at the floor, trying to hold back a frown.

“However,” she went on, “Carmona is close to Seville, where the first *auto-da-fé* happened in 1481, so it’s not entirely impossible. But... there’s another problem.”

I pursed my lips. “What’s that?”

“Your grandmother also claims that your ancestors never converted. The Inquisition’s authority was really only over Christians. The only reason a Jew might be investigated by the Inquisition is if he was involved in helping a Christian in Judaizing, or something like that. And when that did happen... who knows how well they followed protocol? They may not have bothered keeping records of it, or holding a proper trial. Often they passed the case to the local authorities to deal with. And that’s without getting into the same issue we have with Manuel’s records: the fact that it is very rare to find records from before the 16th century.”

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. “So basically you’re saying that we’re both on wild goose chases here.”

Professor García smiled. “This is often the case with things like this. It’s why I was so skeptical about Professor Rodriguez’s idea for the project. But it’s all right. I still think it’s worth giving it a try. I have a few ideas of places we might want to start.” She paused, eyeing the two of us, her eyes lingering on Manuel’s crucifix. “And... you know... a little prayer can’t hurt.”

“So how’s the new job?” I asked Mimi, clenching my phone between my shoulder and my ear as I stuffed clean laundry into my wardrobe.

“Really demanding,” she answered. “But really interesting too. You should see how Abba’s chest puffs out whenever he tells someone I just became the youngest attorney at Meyer & Gold. Ima flits around at the shul *kiddush* telling anyone who’s willing to listen.”

“If I were your mother, I’d do the same,” I said. “Between the doctor and the hotshot lawyer, she’s every Jewish mother’s dream come true.”

I didn’t ask her if Ima was flitting around at *kiddush* boasting about her daughter in Madrid who was researching her Sephardic ancestry. I knew the answer.

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“What about you?” Mimi asked. “Met any cute Jewish guys yet?”

“How about, ‘How’s your research going? Find anything totally amazing that will blow my mind about my own history?’” I retorted.

“Come on, Alma. You only just started. I know what research is like.”

“How’s Aryeh?”

“Good,” she said, and there was a pause. I shut the door to my wardrobe and sat on my bed. “So... I did want to talk to you about something. You know we’ve been pretty serious for a while, and we’re starting to talk about... the next step.”

“Mimi, don’t you dare get engaged while I’m in Spain!” I jumped off the bed, suddenly filled with giddy excitement.

“Look, Alma... we both just started steady jobs, we’ve been dating for almost a year... the time is right. I don’t want to have to wait until the summer just to get engaged. We won’t get married until September at least.”

I paced back and forth. “Great. This is sure to seal my fate as the black sheep forever. ‘Where’s Alma in the engagement photos?’ ‘Oh, you know, off in Spain...’”

“I love you dearly, sis, and I hate to break it to you, but this isn’t about you.”

I sighed. “I know, I know. I’m just sad that I won’t be there to celebrate with you.”

“You’ll be here for the *henna* and the wedding. You’ll be my maid of honor.”

“What are you talking about? Jews don’t have maids of honor.”

“A minor technicality!” Mimi laughed.

“You’re such a lawyer.”

“I just wanted to tell you...”

“I know. I appreciate it. And I better not be the last one to hear about it when he proposes. I don’t care if it’s four in the morning here when it happens.”

“Noted,” Mimi said, and there was a smile in her voice. “I gotta go, my lunch break is over. Love you, sis.”

“Love you too. Give everyone kisses for me.”

“I will.”

23

Manuel

For reasons not entirely clear to me, Alma insisted that I accompany her to Plaza Mayor one day after we were done at the archives. I tried to convince her that there was nothing to see there except flocks of tourists, but she didn't care. So we took the bus, and entered through one of the brick archways. As predicted, the plaza was swarming with people, and as we pushed our way through, I noticed that it was lined with little stands selling paintings, sculptures, jewelry, and of course, the corny souvenirs. I looked up, taking in the red brick walls, the columns, and the cobblestones, but Alma dragged me right into the center of the activity, pointing out bizarre trinkets and people speaking languages neither of us recognized. Finally she stopped at one of the souvenir stands. My eyes widened as she scooped up an entire box of refrigerator magnets with pictures of Madrid and proceeded to buy it.

"What are you doing, setting up a tourist shop?" I asked. She gave me a sour look over her glasses.

"I told you I come from a huge family. This will probably cover my aunts, uncles and cousins, maybe some of my friends from Albany." She shoved it into my arms. "Here, put it in your backpack. It won't fit in mine." She turned away from the stand, squinting across the plaza at the area under the porticoes. "Is there a café there? Let's go sit down."

We found a relatively quiet table and sat down for coffee. Well, *I* sat down for coffee. Alma stared at a glass of orange juice.

"Is it just me or is this seriously depressing?" she sighed.

"What's depressing?" I asked. "The fact that you can't drink coffee here?"

"Well... that too." She narrowed her eyes at me. "Seriously. Why do you Spaniards have to put pig in everything?"

I peered into my cup in mock suspicion. "I don't see any pigs in here."

"Pig's milk. I was told that I can't drink the milk in this godforsaken country because you put pig's milk in with the cow's milk. Why on earth would anyone do that? What is it with you people and pigs?"

I took a sip thoughtfully. "I bet it's not true. Why are you Jews so hysterical about food?"

"Says the vegetarian," Alma shot back, taking a sip of her juice. I had no idea what my vegetarianism had to do with anything. "Anyway. I was talking about our wild goose chase research project."

"Ah, that." I shrugged. "I don't know if it's depressing, but it's pretty frustrating. It takes forever to work through those documents... and it could be for nothing."

"I don't even want to imagine what it would have been like without your paleographical genius. Seriously. I'd never make any headway at all."

"That's not true," I insisted. "You did remarkably well by yourself on that contract you were looking at today." She just scowled at me. "What?"

"Don't even try," she said.

There was a pause. I figured it was a good opportunity to change the subject. "Why are you Jews so paranoid about food, anyway?" I asked, sipping my coffee. "I may be a

vegetarian, but I don't take my pots to a molecular biologist to determine whether they had ever come in contact with a product that may or may not have been derived from an animal."

"Take it up with the Big Guy, not with me," Alma said, pointing at arched ceiling above us.

"Where does it say in the Bible that you can't eat from the same pot that once cooked something non-kosher?"

"I told you, the Bible's not the whole Torah. God gave us an oral tradition as well, passed down by the rabbis to the best of their ability."

"Or so you claim."

"Hey." Alma raised an eyebrow at me. "Wasn't it your buddy Jesus who said, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone'? You Christians also claim lots of things that are a far cry from what God said in the Old Testament."

"Well..." I smiled wryly. "That's why there's a New Testament."

"Or so you claim."

"Didn't you just quote it?"

We regarded each other for a moment, our smiles fading a little.

"You know," Alma blurted. "You're gonna miss me when you get to Heaven."

I blinked at her. "What?"

"You're gonna miss me." She was still smiling, but there was a sting in her voice. "At least the way I understand it, according to y'all, I can be a completely wonderful and righteous and kind human being, but without that little dunk you took as a baby, and without accepting your buddy Jesus as my so-called savior, I'm headed straight for Hell."

I sat in silence for a few moments. I regarded Alma, and I couldn't help thinking, *Do I really believe that she deserves eternal damnation because she is a believing Jew?*

"And in case you're wondering," she added, "we Jews believe that non-Jews are just as privy to the afterlife as we are. And our concept of the afterlife is completely different from yours. But whatever."

There was an awkward silence. Alma examined her nails.

"Well," I said, trying to gather my thoughts. "At least that means you won't miss me in your Heaven?"

Alma gave me a wry smile. "Here's hoping we Jews are right, then, huh?"

"Maybe you should consider being baptized, just to cover all our bases."

I meant it as a joke, but I should have realized by that point that Alma was not in the mood. Her brow furrowed in anger and she shoved her chair back from the table.

"Don't even joke about that, Manuel," she hissed. She jabbed her finger towards the plaza. "Don't you even realize where we are? This is Plaza Mayor. Do you have any idea how many Jews were burned alive *right—there*—because someone thought they should consider being *baptized?*"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "Alma, please, I'm sorry, I was joking... it was a stupid joke. I'm sorry. Of course I didn't mean it."

Alma took a deep breath and pulled her chair back in, waving away my apology. "No... no... it's okay... I'm sorry... I'm being oversensitive." She cleared her throat and took a gulp of juice. "I'm just frustrated about the research project." She looked out through the gray columns, scowling at the tourists who were mulling around the stands in the center of the plaza, laughing and eating ice cream. "It's bad enough that they turned this square into

some kind of carnival. A statue of King Phillip? Seriously? That's all you people have to say about the history of this horrible place?"

I stared down at my coffee. I didn't like the feeling that was stirring in my chest, the doubts that were filling my mind, thinking about Heaven and Hell and Alma. I looked up, feeling a surge of anger myself.

"You know, it's funny. It's not okay for me to joke about you converting to Christianity, but it's okay for you to drag me to your synagogue and for your rabbi to talk to *me* about conversion to Judaism?"

Alma looked up from her juice, her eyes wide. "Manuel..."

"No, really, there's a double standard. You expect me to respect your faith, admire it even, immerse myself in it, but you don't respect mine. You recoil from it."

"Manuel..." Alma's eyes were welling with tears. "I respect you and your faith. I took you to Habad because I thought you were interested..."

"Did you even ask me if I was interested? Do you even care about the struggle I am having with the conflicts between my interest in Judaism and my devotion to Catholicism? All you want is for me to think and feel like you do." I stood up, grabbed my backpack and tossed a few Euros on the table to pay for my coffee. "Keep the change," I told her and stalked out of the plaza.

24

Miriam

The ride was not long but to Miriam it felt like an eternity. Her arms were sore from holding onto León, her legs and seat were sore from holding onto the horse and bouncing up and down in the saddle, and her back ached from the effort of trying not to lean on León as she held on. She tried to ask him how much further, but she couldn't hear herself over the pounding of the hooves, and she didn't want to shout.

Finally, León pulled the reins and the horse slowed to a trot, and Miriam looked up. She couldn't see much in the dark, but there were torches up ahead, casting light on some tall stone structures. It appeared to be a large house. She heard the crank of a chain, and the thud of a drawbridge lowering. They galloped across the bridge, and the drawbridge was raised behind them. They trotted into what appeared to be a large courtyard, right outside the entrance to the house.

"Praise God," said a voice behind them. Miriam turned to look. From what she could make out in the gloom, it was a man dressed like León, his hair and beard neatly trimmed. He stretched his arms out to them. "Come, let us go inside quickly."

León hoisted himself off the horse and climbed down, then offered Miriam a hand. She ignored it, struggling to get off the horse herself, and predictably, ended up slipping. She gasped and fell straight into his arms.

"Whoa," he said. "Careful." He steadied her on her feet.

"Thank you," she said, stepping back a little too quickly and almost walking into the horse. She looked up at him, for the first time pausing to think about all he had risked for her, even though he thought his father was crazy for hiding them. He walked around the mare, grabbing the reins and patting her on the neck. "No, really, León. Thank you." He turned to look at her, and gave her a nod.

"You are welcome, señorita."

"Come with me, señorita," the other man said. "I will take you to your father and then we will explain everything."

She followed him into the house. The heavy wooden doors opened up to what seemed like a vast reception hall. There were only a few small lamps lit near the windows, so it was hard to see anything, but the echoes of their footsteps gave the impression of a high ceiling. The man led her to a spiral stone staircase on the right corner of the room, and they ascended in silence. Down a dark hallway was a narrower wooden staircase leading up into what seemed like one of the manor's towers. The steps led to a small landing, and to the right was a closed door. The man knocked on the door in an odd rhythm, and after a few moments, Miriam heard a lock slide. The door opened, and standing behind it was her father.

"Abba!" Miriam gasped and fell into his arms.

"Miriam," he breathed, holding her as she began to cry in relief. "Don't cry, it's all right... I'm all right."

She pulled away, wiping her eyes. "What happened? How did you know to come here? I sent Yehuda to come warn you but he said he couldn't find you..."

Abraham pulled back in astonishment. “How did *you* know to send someone to warn me?”

“An Inquisition officer came by... was it this afternoon? My sense of time is a complete jumble. He took one of our wine barrels.”

Abraham exchanged a glance with the man behind Miriam. Miriam turned to look at the man, as if only just realizing he was there.

“I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself,” he said. “Though you probably guessed that I am Tomás Aguilar.”

“So pleased to meet you, Don Tomás.” Miriam gave a curtsy. “We are greatly indebted to you.”

“We were at the market today,” Tomás said, “and someone told your father that Sanchez had been arrested. I had never seen your father look so white! I insisted that he tell me what was wrong. We decided it would be safest for him to come and stay here while we wait to see if Sanchez implicates him and if the Inquisition decides to pursue it...”

“But from what you say, Miriam, it sounds like they are already gathering evidence against me.” Abraham stepped back into the room and sunk onto the bed.

“A barrel of wine is not exactly evidence,” Tomás said.

“Of course it is,” Abraham said. “They’ll be able to see very plainly that it was the same type of barrel, and they should be able to taste that it’s the same wine.”

“Maybe it wasn’t evidence against you, but against Sanchez?” I offered. “To prove that it was kosher wine he was drinking. After all... the Inquisition isn’t supposed to pursue Jews.”

Abraham sighed. “I don’t know, Miriam. We don’t know what they will do.”

“Well,” Tomás cut in. “It is almost dawn and I’m sure you are both very tired. Sleep now, and we will talk again tomorrow when I have gathered more information about Sanchez’s trial.”

“You are right, Tomás.” Abraham stood from the bed and embraced his friend. “Please give your son my profoundest thanks for bringing my daughter here safely.”

“I will. Have a good rest.” Tomás closed the door, and Abraham slid the lock shut behind him. He turned to Miriam.

“Why is he doing this?” she whispered. “He is risking his life and his family’s lives for us. Is he a *converso*?”

“No,” said Abraham. “Just a good Christian.”

“Isn’t a good Christian the opposite of someone who defies the Inquisition...?”

“Not according to his beliefs.” Abraham held her at arm’s length. A bluish glow was filtering through shaded window, and she could see his eyes now, tired, bloodshot and sad. “Miriam... I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. I don’t think I truly understood how right you were until I sat here waiting for León to bring you here... not knowing what might become of you, all alone in the *judería* and then sneaking down the mountainside in the dead of night with a young Christian man. And now both of us are in danger, and it’s all my fault.” The first rays of the sun caught the tears dripping down his cheeks.

Miriam sighed and put her arms around him again. “I know why you did it, Abba. You love God and you love the Jewish people and those loves come before anything else.”

“No, my girl. Not before family. I should have realized that.”

“Still. You are a good man, Abba. A righteous man. I hope to raise my sons to be like you one day.”

“May it be His will.”

They stood there together for a few moments, and then Abraham pulled back, wiping his face.

“You must be exhausted. There is a bed for you right there. We should sleep now. When we wake, there will be plenty of time to talk.”

When Miriam awoke the sunlight was already streaming brightly through the window. It took a while for her eyes to adjust to the light. She was not used to waking at such an hour.

She cast a look at her surroundings. The room was small and simple, with a slanted roof, white plaster walls, and a rug on the floor. She looked over at her father’s bed. He was sitting up, hunched over a small pile of parchment. She smiled. *Good thing he carries some of his manuscripts with him everywhere. At least he has some Torah to study.*

He noticed her movements and looked up from the scroll. His eyes crinkled as he smiled.

“Good... morning. I suppose it might still be morning,” he said.

“Good morning, Abba.” She stretched and sat up. “Any news?”

“No. I assume they’ll be up to bring us food soon. Well... I certainly hope so. Yom Kippur is tonight.”

Miriam’s eyes widened. “Oh, yes. I had completely forgotten about Yom Kippur.” Her heart sank as she thought about the *judería*... all the men going to bathe in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath for purification... the community wondering what happened to their cantor and his daughter, who disappeared overnight. She thought of Hanna Guerson and the children and how worried and confused they must be.

“You look troubled, Miriam.”

She gave her father a sad smile. “I’m just... things are going to be very different this Yom Kippur.”

Tomás did eventually come upstairs to bring food, which he had cooked himself in a new ceramic pot he had bought for the purpose. Miriam cast an uncertain look at her father as she accepted the bowl. Yes, the new pot solved the problem of non-kosher ingredients and utensils, but there was a rabbinic restriction prohibiting Jews from eating food cooked by non-Jews.

Abraham accepted his bowl without a word. Miriam watched him lift the bowl to his mouth, and then turned to her own porridge and began to eat. There was, after all, the principle of *pikuah nefesh*. They had to eat to live, and they didn’t really have any other options. At least it was preferable, on the hierarchy of Jewish law, to eating food cooked with non-kosher utensils or ingredients.

Unfortunately, Tomás had no news to share. He had, however, brought a pair of candles for Miriam to light for the holiday. He warned her to light them in the corner so the light wouldn’t show through the window, and then he left. Miriam and her father ate, and talked a little, and studied a little, and did a lot of staring at the four walls around them.

Miriam lit the candles in the corner with a sinking heart. Lighting candles for a holiday or Shabbat always made her think of her mother, dressed in her Sabbath finery, drawing her hands over the candles three times, then covering her eyes to make the blessing.

“One candle for *shamor*, one for *zakhor*,” her mother’s voice echoed in her head. “Corresponding to the two different versions of the fourth commandment: ‘*Keep the Sabbath day holy...*’ and ‘*Remember the Sabbath day in its holiness...*’” She remembered her mother pointing to the candles that shone brightly through the window of their old house in Seville. She could see the flames reflected in her mother’s pale green eyes, so much like her own. “*Remember*: for the past. For our mothers and our mothers’ mothers, the generations of Jewish women who lovingly kept the Sabbath, sacrificing everything, sometimes their own lives, to pass it down to us. *Keep*: for the future. For our daughters, and our daughters’ daughters, who will someday light the Sabbath candles and think of us, and how much *we* sacrificed to keep this sign of the eternal love between us and God.”

Then her mother would place her hands on Miriam’s head and bless her with the traditional blessing that parents gave their daughters every Sabbath. *May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah... may God bless you and guard you... may God shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you... may God lift His countenance to you and give you peace...*

Miriam’s lip quivered as she stood up, watching the shadows flicker against the wall. Abraham saw the expression on her face in the candlelight.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Miriam shook her head. “It’s just... I think... Ima would be so sad to see me hiding them like this.”

Saying the words out loud made the pain that much more real, and a wave of overwhelming sadness overtook her. She sank onto the bed. Her father sat by her and put his arm around her, kissing her temple.

“You are right,” Abraham said. He was silent for a long moment, and then said, very slowly, “I don’t know if I ever told you this... but we were offered the choice to convert rather than leave Seville.”

Miriam shrugged. “I knew that they usually offer that.”

Abraham shifted uncomfortably, pulling his arm away and smoothing out his tunic. “Yes, but you didn’t know that I seriously considered taking the offer.”

Miriam turned and stared at him, her eyes wide.

“You considered converting to Christianity?!” she exclaimed.

“Not sincerely, of course. But your mother... I don’t know if you remember... she was already sickly before we left. I was afraid she wouldn’t survive.” He took a deep breath and wiped away the tear that had forced its way out of his eye.

Miriam was too stunned to say anything.

“I thought that we could pretend, and live like many of our neighbors and friends had been forced to, keeping the Torah in secret. But your mother... she would hear none of it. She told me she would rather die on the way out of Andalusia than raise you as a *conversa*.”

Miriam stared at the candles, her eyes unfocused.

“I have often asked myself if I should have refused to listen to her...” Abraham’s voice cracked. He took another deep breath. “But only God knows what might have been had we stayed in Seville.” He smiled sadly. “And you know what God said to our father Abraham about listening to his wife... ‘*All that your wife Sarah says to you, heed her voice.*’”

Miriam turned back to her father. "I think you made the right choice, Abba," she said gently. "She may very well have died in Seville anyway. And then I would be a false Christian *and* an orphan..."

He nodded. Miriam leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I think I understand a little better now why you gave the wine to Sanchez."

Abraham leaned his head against hers and sighed. "I would have hated to see her cooped up in here," he said. "She was always so full of energy, always doing things. She would go crazy." He looked out towards the window, where the light was fading through the blinds. "Still... I can't help but wish she were with us now."

They sat in silence for a while, and then Abraham began to softly chant the words of *Kol Nidrei* and the evening prayer service. Miriam closed her eyes and listened, pretending she was in the women's section of their beloved and beautiful synagogue... and dwelling on the memories and emotions that made the presence of her mother almost tangible in the darkness.

I sat on the couch in my apartment, starting and deleting a gazillion attempts at text messages to Manuel. Finally I dropped my phone into my lap in exasperation and started playing with my hair instead.

Well, he started it. That comment about Jews and food.

Um, no. That was in response to my comment about Spaniards and pigs.

...It was funny at the time.

His comment about getting baptized would have been funny too if I hadn't been so cranky.

My phone buzzed, interrupting my internal argument, and I jumped. It bounced in my lap and I fumbled around trying to catch it, then looked at the screen, hoping to see Manuel's name. It wasn't him, but I was no less happy to see who it was.

"Grandma!" I exclaimed.

"Hi, sweetie! How are you? What time is it there?"

"Just about noon. What are you doing calling me at six in the morning?"

"Oh, you know me. Been up since five cooking."

"What are you making?"

"Stuffed vegetables."

"Mmmm. Red peppers?"

"And zucchini, and onions."

"This is making me hungry," I grinned. "I have to conserve my ground beef though. You wouldn't believe how expensive the kosher meat is here."

"Oh, I believe it. How's your research going?"

"Well..." I sighed, my heart sinking a little. "We haven't made much progress. Been sifting through documents, trying to get some leads, but... I'm not optimistic."

Grandma was silent for a moment. I felt my heart sink even further. There was nothing more painful than her disappointment.

"Well..." she said. "That's all right. Remember to enjoy the process. It's okay if you don't find anything."

"It's just really frustrating. I was really hoping. I feel like if I could just get my hands on the right file..."

"You've only been searching for a few weeks. You've got lots of time."

"I know... I know."

I struggled to find the words to explain the frustration I was feeling. My grandmother was being very kind about it, but nonetheless I could not help but feel that she had placed this huge weight on my shoulders and was expecting me to carry it alone. Spending Rosh Hashana with our family really emphasized for me how I was the only one in the family who was really interested in our Sephardic heritage. Even Eliezer, the cousin who had become ultra-Orthodox, studied at an Ashkenazi yeshiva and spoke in Yiddishisms. Sephardi Jews are a small minority in the United States, and the once-rich culture of our family was fizzling out. I couldn't help but feel it was up to me to carry the

torch, and it was a lot of pressure, especially for a young woman not two years out of high school who still hadn't entirely figured out who she wanted to be.

There was a knock on the door.

"Look, Grandma, someone's at the door so I gotta go. But I'm really glad to hear from you, and we'll talk later, okay?"

"Okay *mami*. Love you."

"Love you Grandma. Bye." I hung up and jogged to the door, calling, "*¡Un momento!*" I unlocked it and pulled it open. It was Manuel, his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"Manuel!" I had completely forgotten about him.

"You better be careful with that Spanish," he said, peering at me from behind the stray lock of hair that fell over his eye. "I'm going to start refusing to speak to you in English."

"Your mom would kill you." I regarded him for a moment. "Come on in." I stepped back. He came in and sat on the couch. I sat next to him and cleared my throat.

"Well—"

"I wanted—"

We both started at once, then both fell silent at once, then broke into a smile and a giggle.

"I'm sorry," said Manuel. "I just..."

"It's okay. This interfaith friendship thing is hard. Especially since we both feel so deeply about our faiths. We're gonna step on each other's proverbial toes every once in a while."

Manuel took a deep breath, looking like he wanted to say something, but he didn't, so I continued.

"I'm sorry too," I went on. "I hadn't realized at all that you were struggling with your interest in Judaism. I thought you were just shy and needed someone to kind of guide you to it. I didn't mean to be pushy about it."

"Well, you couldn't have known, because I didn't tell you. It's okay. I appreciate what you have done for me. I don't think you were pushy." He paused. "Well. Not *too* pushy."

I snorted.

"I think I got defensive..." he said slowly, "because I was struggling with what you said about Heaven and Hell." I cocked my head at him curiously. He pursed his lips, looking like he was weighing his words carefully, and went on. "One of the things I am coming to understand about Judaism is that Judaism is a lot in your head," he said, tapping his head with his finger. "Very logical, very precise, lots of thinking and calculation. I think Christianity puts a lot more weight on what you believe, what you feel in your heart." He put his hand on his heart and looked at me. "So when your head has doubts, you are supposed to look to your heart, and say, this is what I believe, even when it doesn't make any sense."

"Well, there's plenty of that in Judaism too..." I said.

"I know, I know, it's not completely different that way. But I think our faiths address the subject of doubt differently. I was taught to see doubt as something that keeps us away from God, something to fight and suppress. You see doubt as the beginning of a question, and Jews seem to love nothing more than a good question."

I smiled. "Well, it's really a matter of dispute in Jewish philosophy..."

“Well that’s exactly what I mean! Everything is a debate. Questioning is what you do best.”

“Okay, let’s say that’s true for the sake of the argument. What’s your point?”

“My point is that earlier today I experienced doubt about my faith, and instead of silencing it and saying, if God says so, it must be this way, and it must be for the best... I thought about it and said, it can’t be that this is true. I don’t want this to be true.”

I watched him, not really sure what to make of what he was saying.

“How can it be that a kind, caring, devout woman like you would be condemned to eternal damnation? This doesn’t make any sense.”

I felt my face get warm. “Well, gee.”

“I had struggled with that question before in the past—about unbaptized babies and such, and we believe that God has mercy on children, and other such ways to squirm out of the problem, but the fact is, that there really is no satisfying answer, at least not that I know of, in the Catholic faith. But it’s just one of those things you live with. I’m sure there are struggles like this in Judaism too. But it hadn’t mattered to me nearly as much before I actually sat in front of someone I care about, who I believe absolutely does not deserve an eternity of suffering, and contemplated this question.”

It took me a good few moments to gather my thoughts together.

“So... um. Does this mean you’re not going to be a priest?”

Manuel let out a hearty laugh, and I joined him, relieved for the break in the tension.

“Would you be disappointed if I didn’t become a priest, Alma?”

“Oh totally! I was really looking forward to boasting to all my friends... ‘Some of my best friends are Catholic... in fact I’m really tight with this one priest...’”

“Honestly, though, I decided that I’m going to Rabbi Uri’s class this coming Sunday. Just to see if I like it.”

I raised my eyebrows, surprised, feeling a kind of warm glow in my chest. “Boy, you’re really dancing with the Devil now, aren’t you?”

“You know, I’ll be totally honest with you, when we first met I was a little afraid to be friends with you because I was afraid you would corrupt me.”

I smiled wryly. “And you were right, huh!”

“Well...” He looked across the living room towards the window, resting his elbows on his knees. “I was right that knowing you has stirred up some doubt. But it was doubt that was there anyway. And I’m realizing now that ignoring it is not what is going to bring me closer to God.” He looked back at me and smiled. “And maybe doubt is not all that bad after all.”

“You should give your priest a call too,” I said. He raised an eyebrow at me. “You know, just to give Christianity a fighting chance.” I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Look, I’ve gotta go. Conversational Spanish for Complete Idiots, I believe the course is called.” I stood up and picked up the backpack that had been resting by my feet. I paused and contemplated him. “Manuel...” I struggled to find the words. “I just want to say that I really admire... your courage.” I felt really dumb, but I kept going. “In facing your doubt like that.”

His eyes lit up, and he nodded briefly in thanks.

“You are welcome to stay here if you want, but I wouldn’t advise it, because my roommates will be here soon and as you may have noticed, they’re... um... kind of into you.”

He blinked at me, looking alarmed, and jumped off the couch to follow me out the door.

26

Manuel

I found it pretty bizarre, going from Sunday mass at the local church to Rabbi Uri's class that evening. He greeted me warmly and introduced me to the other six students, two of whom were secular Jews who wanted to learn more, and four of whom were a random assortment of non-Jews like me. Then he began teaching about the concept of kashrut, taking us from the Biblical sources down through the rabbinical sources and into the practices of religious Jews today regarding the separation of milk and meat and the transference of "*ta'am*", "taste" in Hebrew. It was interesting to see how Jewish law—which he called *halakha*—worked, and it gave me a much better understanding of Alma's situation at her apartment. Even with her rambling explanation at the airport, I had no idea how involved these laws were. I found myself feeling admiration for her. It was clearly very difficult to keep these laws, and she was doing it, and refusing to compromise.

As I left, Rabbi Uri asked if he would see me next week, and I said yes.

I even showed up at Alma's doorstep the following Friday afternoon in my suit. She opened the door and looked me up and down.

"You, um, realize that today isn't Sunday, right?"

"Really?!" I exclaimed in mock astonishment. "I was sure it was! And also that your apartment was my church. But I guess I must be mistaken, because you don't look like my priest."

"I... should hope not."

"Well, I suppose I'll just have to go to synagogue instead."

"Tough luck, huh."

"Fortunate for you, though," I said, stepping past her into the apartment. "Wouldn't want you walking over to the Habad without your *Shabbos goy* to carry your passport."

"Um. Well, I did without for the past three weeks..." She winced. "And please, don't ever say '*Shabbos*': You speaking in Hebrew with an Ashkenazi accent... it makes my brain explode."

Olivia and Tessa were at the table hunched over some papers. My heart sank as they looked up and waved at me.

"Hey, look who cleans up nicely!" Olivia sang, and I did not like way she was surveying me. "You guys going on a date, or what?"

Alma rolled her eyes and shot me a commiserating look. "We're going to synagogue, Olivia. It's Friday night."

"Strange date," Tessa piped up.

"Aren't you Catholic?" Olivia asked, squinting at me.

"It's not a date, yes I am Catholic, and did you light candles yet?" I said all this while looking pointedly at Alma.

"No, because it's not really time yet..." she trailed off, casting a look at her roommates. "But maybe I'll bring Shabbat in early today and we can wander around town a little before we get to the Habad."

We first walked to the Habad to make sure we knew where we were, and then wandered off through the adjacent streets, not aiming anywhere in particular. Alma told me about her lack of progress with the records she was looking through, and I told her about what I'd been learning in Rabbi Uri's class.

"I hope you don't mind my asking," I said, "but... doesn't it drive you crazy to keep all these laws? So many details that dictate practically every moment of your day. All for something that you can't prove."

Alma gave me a wry smile. "Weren't you planning to become a priest?"

"That's different. I would be actively choosing to be a clergyman. Taking on extra restrictions because I choose to. And even so, it doesn't even come close to halakha."

"In some ways it's worse. What's with the creepy celibacy thing?"

I raised an eyebrow, unsure whether to be more amused, insulted, or flustered. "What do you mean, 'creepy'?" I demanded.

"I—never mind," she stuttered. Did I detect a little pink in her cheeks? She cleared her throat and quickly steered the conversation back to where it started. "Anyway, your question. I have lots of reasons for keeping halakha, some of them rational and some of them emotional or spiritual. Most of all... I don't know, Manuel. My ancestors suffered a lot throughout the centuries. They really should have disappeared as a nation after the first exile, but they didn't. The fact that we still exist today as an identifiable group with a common religion and heritage is nothing short of a miracle. And I have to ask myself, what is this thing they lived and died for? Why was it important enough to them to risk so much, and sacrifice so much, to preserve it all this time? If someone went through hell and high water for two and a half millennia just to pass you a letter, wouldn't you want to read it?"

"Reading it is one thing. Doing what it says is another."

"Sure. And that's where you have to ask yourself if it makes sense to do this. To me, it does. The benefits greatly outweigh the inconveniences. At least in my experience. And I really feel that it's what God wants from me."

I considered this for a moment. "I guess I can identify with that," I said.

I asked a little about the laws of the Sabbath, and we were getting into the finer points of exactly what the problem with using electricity was when I stopped short, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. There was a group of young men in the street ahead of us, and something about their behavior and appearance put me on guard.

Alma looked up at me questioningly. "What?"

I squinted ahead. There were maybe five or six of them, dressed in leather jackets and jeans, all of them with shaved heads, and all of them acting rowdy. They were clearly drunk—most of them, anyway—and I don't know what tipped me off, but I was having a very strong gut feeling that they were neo-Nazis. I stopped and looked down at Alma, my eyes wide.

She is a Jew.

"What is it?" Her pale green eyes were wide behind her glasses, her voice low. She could clearly tell that I was shaken.

I surveyed her carefully. She wasn't wearing anything incriminating, and you definitely couldn't tell she was Jewish by looking at her.

"I think we should head back," I said slowly.

The group of young men was drifting closer, and now I was weighing whether it would be a good idea to turn our backs on them. It was clear that they had seen us, and running away would arouse suspicion.

"Never mind," I said. "Stay close to me and act as casual as you can."

"Manuel," she hissed, staring straight in front of her, "would you mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"I think they might be neo-Nazis," I hissed back.

"Neo-*what?*"

"Shh." They were drawing close now. I stared straight ahead, trying to find an opening between them for us to slip past them. But they were grinning, heading straight for us, cracking their knuckles and chuckling, and it was clear they were not going to let us past. All of us stopped in our tracks. I could feel Alma trembling next to me. I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. She held on tight.

"*Buenos tardes, caballeros,*" I said, trying to keep my voice steady and mustering my clearest Castilian. The last thing I needed was for them to make fun of my Andalusian accent. "*Perdonad.*"

"*What's the hurry?*" The thug in front of me sneered. He looked Alma up and down. "*Fancy date?*"

"*Excuse us, please.*" I moved to the left of him, pulling Alma with me, but he moved to block me.

"*Or perhaps you are on your way to the synagogue.*" He gave me a toothy menacing grin.

I stared at him. *What on earth would make him suspect us?*

I cleared my throat and reached for my collar. "*Soy católico, amigo.*" I pulled my crucifix from beneath my shirt and held it in his face. He stepped back, stumbling a little, his grin unfading. He gave a wild sweeping gesture, and the six of them parted like the Sea of Reeds. I pulled Alma through. "*Gracias.*" We broke into a jog, and then a run, not daring to look back until we had turned a corner.

We stopped to catch our breath, and Alma finally noticed that she still had a death grip on my hand and let go very suddenly, awkwardly clearing her throat and brushing her hair behind her ear. Then she released a string of curses I never thought I would ever hear coming out of a good Jewish girl's mouth. I gaped at her.

"Sorry," she said, bracing herself on the wall next to her. "Oh my God. I never thought I'd see the day I'd be overjoyed to see a crucifix."

"I had actually really debated whether to wear it today, out of respect for the synagogue. But I try not to take it off. It was my father's."

She straightened, taking a deep breath and tugging at her coat. She glanced behind us at the street we had just come from. "They're heading towards the Habad. Maybe we should call the police."

"Weren't we just talking about how you're not allowed to use a telephone?" I asked.

"*Pikuah nefesh.* We're allowed to transgress most commandments to save a life, and if they really are neo-Nazis, which they did seem to be, and if they're out looking for potential synagogue-goers..." Her voice trailed off and she blinked, as if suddenly noticing I was there. "Well, hey, what kind of a *Shabbos goy* are you anyway?"

“Ah! Right. I’ll call them.” I slipped my phone out of my pocket and dialed 112. The responder thanked me and said there was already a patrol in the area and that she would direct them to the street we had just left.

“Can we just wait here for a few minutes?” Alma said. “I don’t mind being late for services... I just don’t want to run into them again before the police do.” She walked over to a nearby bench, plopped down, and then looked up at me over her glasses. “That’s the second time in a month you’ve been my hero. I’m gonna have to start calling you Zorro.”

“My God, please don’t.”

“We need to get you a cape and sword.”

“Stop it. I didn’t do anything.”

Alma jabbed her fist in front of her. “Back! Back, Nazis!” She pretended to ward off an imaginary thug with an imaginary cross, in a ridiculous low voice and a not-too-painful imitation of my accent. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost! *Soy católico*, suckers!”

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

When we had calmed down, she leaned back against the bench and sighed.

“Why do they all hate us, Manuel?”

I let out a deep breath, staring at my hands. I shook my head. “I don’t know, Alma. I really don’t know.” I reached for my collar and carefully tucked my cross back into my shirt. “I’ve never seen this kind of outright anti-Semitism before, you know. Usually it manifests itself more subtly.”

Alma cocked her head at me. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Just... the way people talk, certain expressions, certain attitudes... it drives my mother crazy. I wouldn’t even have noticed if she hadn’t ranted about it all the time. I remember you saying once that the Sephardic Jews never forgot Spain, right? Not even after five hundred years?”

“Right...”

“So Spain didn’t forget them, either. Unfortunately... it wasn’t with fondness. Even before the Edict of Expulsion was finally revoked in 1968—”

“Wait, what?! You mean to tell me that the Alhambra Decree was still in effect until not even fifty years ago?!”

I raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you an Iberian Studies major?”

“I haven’t covered modern history yet! That’s insane!”

I looked at her incredulously. “What do they teach you in those Jewish day schools of yours?”

“You know, the Holocaust! Judging by my high school modern history classes, Europe pretty much stops at France.”

I gave an ironic snort. “Then boy do you have some unpleasant surprises waiting for you. The point is, even though there was literally not a single Jew living here for almost five hundred years, the hatred remained deeply ingrained in the culture.”

Alma was rubbing her temples, looking as though she was trying to massage this absurd information into her head.

“Did you know, for example,” I went on, “that in northern Spain they still have a festival on Good Friday called ‘*matar judíos*’?”

Alma’s eyes went wide. “*What?* ‘Kill Jews’? Are you serious?!”

“Well... it’s an expression. It just means drinking spiked lemonade. At least... that’s what it means now.”

“Spiked lemonade?” she spluttered. She squinted into the distance, trying to make sense of this. “And that’s symbolic of... what? When life gives you Jews, make lemonade?”

I burst into laughter.

“I mean...” she continued, “I know killing Jews—I mean, actually killing Jews—was a popular Easter activity back in the day...”

“That’s the thing,” I cut in. “There were no Jews to kill for hundreds of years. But somehow the tradition remained. Up until the ‘70’s there were still villages all over Spain where they would go throw stones at where the *judería* used to be.”

“What the heck, Spain?!” Alma exclaimed, throwing herself against the back of the bench and crossing her arms. “Can you imagine if there was still a festival in, like, Louisiana, called ‘lynch Negroes’? ‘It’s just an expression! We’re just drinking lemonade!’”

I sighed. “Yes. Americans are a lot more sensitive about these things.”

“Sheesh. No wonder your mom wanted to get you out of here.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but then closed it. Honestly I had never really thought about it in depth before. I knew my mother was upset about the flippant racism and especially the anti-Semitism, but I had always shrugged it off as making a big deal out of nothing. It’s not like there were many Jews around to be offended by it. But she had insisted that wherever there was anti-Semitism, there was evil... that it was an expression of the dark side of man’s nature. I had thought she was crazy.

“My mother grew up in a small village near Cartagena,” I said slowly, more to myself than to Alma. “She told me she used to go throw stones at the old *judería* with her friends until her mother found out. It was my grandmother who sat her down and explained to her what the Jews were... that they were people who had contributed a great deal to Spanish culture and economy, who wrote philosophy and poetry and managed the kingdom’s finances very well... that they were cruelly expelled the same year Columbus sailed. My mother says she was completely shocked to learn this.”

“So that’s how she became a Jew lover?” Alma grinned.

“I think she was teased a lot in school, and I imagine when she started speaking up about anti-Semitism it got worse. But you know her. If there’s anything that makes her dig her heels in deeper, it’s someone else telling her she should stop.”

Alma gave me a thoughtful look. “Kind of like you.”

I stared at her. I had never thought of myself as being in any way like my mother before.

Alma cleared her throat and stood up. “Let’s go. I’m hungry.”

The holiday passed mostly in silence. After they prayed together, there was little else to do but sit, talk, and sleep. By the time it was evening and Tomás finally came with some food for them to break their fast, Miriam felt she was starting to go out of her mind from boredom.

“Don Tomás,” she said, taking a breath in between ravenous bites of the porridge he had brought them. He turned to her, his eyebrows raised. “I know it makes sense for my father to stay here in hiding. But perhaps I could pretend to be a new maid and do some housework for you? No one here has ever seen me. They won’t know.”

Tomás looked at her thoughtfully. Then his eyes lit up. “Is it true that you can read, Miriam?”

Miriam’s eyes widened. “Yes, I can read. Hebrew and Castilian, and a little Arabic.”

“Your father told me you are unusually educated for a young woman. Well, I have this library of records and documents that has been waiting to be sorted for years. None of the other maids or servants can read. I was having León do it, but he has other pursuits, and it’s taking him an awfully long time. Do you think you would be interested in putting those documents in order?”

Miriam stood up from the bed. “Oh, yes, señor! It would be my pleasure, and the least I can do to return the great kindnesses you have done with me and my father.”

“Well, that’s settled, then.” He regarded her, his eyes resting on the red patch over her heart. “You’ll need to remove that.”

She glanced down at it. She’d hardly ever given a thought to the badge she always pinned to the front of her clothes. All Jews wore them, and she’d never had any reason to feel resentful about being forced to distinguish herself visually from Christians. In fact, the idea of removing it and wandering about without one made her stomach turn in discomfort. She thought of her hidden Sabbath candles. This was another way she was being forced to hide her identity.

“Most of our maids wear wimples. I’ll find you one, and I’ll send León for you tomorrow morning to show you where the library is. But be very careful around the other servants. You’ll need to invent a story about where you come from and who you are. And never let anyone see you coming up here.”

“Of course not, señor,” she said. “Thank you for the opportunity.”

Early the next morning, the secret knock sounded at the door. Miriam cracked it open and saw León standing in the hall.

“Señorita.” He looked down at her. His hair fell softly about his face, his beard neatly trimmed, and she couldn’t help but notice, especially in the soft morning light, that he really was quite a handsome fellow. He was wearing a doublet of embroidered damask, very clean and perfectly pressed, and a shirt with billowing sleeves. Miriam was used to the flowing robes and modest tunics worn by the men in the *judería*.

“Come.” He gestured for her to follow him and she slipped out, waving to her father before closing it.

León turned towards the end of the hallway where the stairs led down to the next floor. Miriam followed him down the steps and into the main part of the house, adjusting the wimple as she walked. She had always hated the restrictive cloth around her neck. She tried to keep her eyes down as she walked but she just couldn't help staring at her surroundings. She had never seen such wealth before. Elaborate tapestries hung from the walls. There were high arched doorways adorned with decorative Moorish-style plasterwork, and servants bustled in and out of every room, cleaning and dusting.

The library was a stuffy little room on the bottom floor, down a narrow, mostly empty corridor from the main reception hall. There was a battered wooden table in the middle, piled high with crates of paper and parchment, and wooden shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, most of them empty. A few leatherbound books were tucked onto one of them. Miriam approached these and ran her hand over their covers. They reminded her of the books kept in the *beit midrash* next to the synagogue... and that beautiful leatherbound Talmud that her father had studied when she was a child. It had been confiscated and burned by the civil authorities in Seville, along with hundreds of other Jewish and Muslim books and manuscripts accused of containing heresy.

"It's such a mess," León said. "Makes my head spin just looking at it." He pointed to the far corner of the room, where a few piles of paper were lined up neatly on the shelf. "That's as far as I've gotten. Financial papers from 1487." He pointed at one of the piles of loose papers on the table. "There are probably more of those in there. You'll want to catalogue them according to date."

"Well, this is going to take forever," Miriam said, frowning. "I really hope I won't be here long enough to finish the job."

León raised an eyebrow at her. "Exactly where do you think you're going to go?"

Miriam just looked at him. It hadn't even occurred to her to think about this, but he was right. If the Inquisition was after her father, the only option would be to flee Castile. And how would they do that? Her father had business contacts in the Maghreb and Italy, and she knew he had two brothers in Fez and several cousins in Cairo, but how would they get to them? They had absolutely nothing. Their property had probably already been seized, and it would be filling the pockets of the Tribunal. They couldn't even afford to sail to Genoa or Tangier, if they somehow managed to get to a seaport.

"Well..." She glanced at the door, to make sure no one was nearby, and lowered her voice. "We can't stay here in hiding forever..."

"May I ask you a question?" León blurted. Miriam raised her eyebrows. "I apologize if this is forward. I have never really had an opportunity to speak plainly with a Jew before. Why don't you just convert?"

Miriam gave him a look of utter disgust. "Why on earth would I want to do that?"

León shrugged, pulling up one of the chairs and sitting down. He crossed his arms in front of him. "Aren't you tired of God constantly punishing you?"

Miriam sighed in irritation, picking up the papers on the table and thumbing through them. "What gives you the impression that God is constantly punishing us?"

León laughed. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No," Miriam said loudly, then winced and lowered her voice. "God is protecting us."

"And by God, you mean my father?" León gave a cynical grin.

Miriam narrowed her eyes at him. "You're one to talk about confusing certain men with God."

He just frowned. She thumbed through the papers again, but she was having trouble concentrating with him sitting there. After a few moments, she looked up at him.

“If you’re hoping to convert me, I’ll have you know that you are wasting your time.”

León threw his palms up in a gesture of bewilderment. “I just don’t understand why you are so stubborn about this. Even if you have a hard time accepting the concept of Jesus as the son of God, wouldn’t it make your life easier to be a Christian?”

“My life would be easier if I were a Christian. But I’m not a Christian. And I have no desire to be one. Ease is not my greatest priority. Besides, it wouldn’t help very much. Haven’t you heard what the Inquisition is doing to *conversos*?”

“Only the insincere ones.”

“How exactly is it heretical to drink kosher wine?” Her eyes flashed. “Didn’t Jesus himself only eat kosher?”

He fell silent again. She didn’t bother going back to the documents. She just scowled at him.

“But all these traditions... the food... the holidays... the Sabbath... not touching men.”

Miriam raised an eyebrow, feeling her cheeks get a little warm.

“It seems like an awful lot of bother, and for what?” he continued. “Plenty of Jews have converted and God didn’t strike them down. There are many *conversos* who are successful and prosperous. Why bother holding on to these traditions?”

Miriam glared at him.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said. “I know that the primary goal of Christians is to get Jews to convert. Stop it. It’s not going to work.”

“I’m not trying to convert you. For Heaven’s sake.” León leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. “I’m just curious.”

Miriam squinted at him appraisingly. There were a few moments of silence as they regarded each other.

“Really?” she asked quietly.

“Really,” he answered.

Miriam fiddled with the papers for a moment, unsure of what to say. “Because...” She sighed. “It’s hard to explain, León. It’s something so deep, so much a part of who I am, I’m not sure I can really put it in words.” She paused. “I believe very strongly in God. I believe that He gave us the Torah as a gift of His love. I believe that He shows us His love every day, with every breath we draw. The least I can do is to show Him I love Him by doing what He asks me to do. Even when it is hard. Even when I don’t understand.”

León’s eyes had taken on a soft look.

“I think I can relate to that,” he said slowly. “There are many things about Christianity that I don’t understand. But trusting in God when He guides you into the unknown, and accepting it with love—that’s really the definition of faith, isn’t it?”

They looked at each other for a moment, feeling a sort of warmth pass between them. Faith was such a central part of both of their lives, and especially in this era of hatred and suspicion over their religious differences... there was something deeply comforting about discovering what they shared.

“How do you know how to read, Miriam?” León asked.

Miriam shrugged. “My father taught me.”

“Do all Jewish women know how to read?”

“No. Most women aren’t knowledgeable at all. It’s just that my father didn’t have any sons to teach, and he really wanted to teach someone, so...” her voice trailed off. She sighed. “After my mother died, we had a lot of time to spend alone together on the road. There wasn’t much better to do than discuss the manuscripts he was carrying with him.”

He was watching her with that intense gaze of his that made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. “How old were you when your mother died?”

“Seven.” Miriam bit her lip, returning to the paper. There were a few moments of silence.

“I was eight.”

Miriam looked up in surprise. He lowered his eyes.

“I... I didn’t realize.”

He shrugged. “Ten years ago. In childbirth. My sister didn’t survive either.”

Miriam was speechless for a moment. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. Then she found herself continuing: “My mother fell ill. On the road from Seville, after we were expelled from Andalusia. We buried her somewhere in La Mancha.”

He raised his eyes again to meet hers. “It must have been hard.”

She nodded slowly. “We had lost enough.”

He nodded, staring at the floor. “I really loved my mother.”

They sat there awkwardly for a few minutes. Eventually Miriam tried to go back to her work, but she couldn’t concentrate.

“What is your Heaven like?” León asked suddenly.

Miriam furrowed her brow, resting her cheek in her hand. “I’m not... sure.”

León looked very confused. “What do you mean?”

“We have the concept of the Garden of Eden, or of sitting in God’s presence... but honestly, we are not that focused on what happens after we die. We’re more focused on what happens before.”

“Don’t you wonder where she is sometimes?”

Miriam’s eyes darkened. “Of course I do.”

“Do you think she is looking down on you? Watching you?”

“I... yes, I think so.” She looked over at him. He was still staring at the floor. “I was just thinking about her the other day. I think she would have hated to be hiding here like this.”

León stood up from the chair. “Well. I should probably be going. Good luck with the files.”

“Wait, León.” Miriam didn’t even really mean to stall him, but the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. He turned back and looked at her in surprise. She flushed a bright red. “I... I’m just...” she stuttered. “Never mind. Good day to you.”

He paused, sizing her up. “Do you want me to stay and help?” he offered gently. “I could. If you want.”

“I...” Miriam struggled to understand what she wanted. She didn’t really need his help. But she kind of wanted him to stay. She was nervous about the other servants coming in and asking her questions. And she had never really talked about her mother’s death with anyone but her father before. It was comforting to talk about it with someone who had gone through the same thing... and even if their beliefs were very different, there was a sense that they shared a common hope and connection to God.

And... she was curious about León. He was refined and polite, but somehow very candid at the same time. No one had ever asked her so directly about such personal things before, and curiously, it didn't make her feel uncomfortable; it made her feel seen. Validated. Cared about. Which was more than she was ever expecting to feel in this situation. Especially considering that he was Christian.

She cleared her throat. "If it's no trouble... I suppose," she said slowly.

He pulled the chair over to the table, sat down, and grabbed half of the pile of papers in front of her.

So the neo-Nazi thing really freaked me out and I was kind of paranoid about walking outside alone after that. My roommates were appropriately appalled when I related the story to them—Tessa in particular.

“No one even mentioned that I should worry about racism here,” she said, her dark eyes wide. I regarded her sienna skin. It hadn’t occurred to me that it would be a problem for her, but now that she mentioned it, she would have been in more trouble with the neo-Nazis than I was.

“I’m guessing you’re not a soccer fan?” Olivia said dryly. We both turned to look at her, our eyes blank. “My brother’s obsessed with the Barcelona team. Spanish soccer fans throw bananas at black players. Happens all the time.”

Tessa just stared at her, her mouth agape in horror.

“I would argue that sports fans don’t count as humans,” I said.

“I would argue,” Olivia said, “that sports fans express the underlying ugliness in whatever culture they’re from. I’ve got to tell you,” she said uncertainly, watching Tessa, “I’ve overheard some conversations and remarks here that I would rather not repeat.”

Tessa glared at her. “What? You heard people making racist comments about me and didn’t say anything?!”

“Not necessarily about you,” Olivia said quickly, shrinking back in guilt. “Just... in general.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t say anything.”

“Why should I have said anything? It just would have made you upset.”

“At least I would have known to be careful!”

“I don’t know,” Olivia frowned. “You’d think the school would have said something if you needed to be careful, right? I mean, they explicitly told us that we should go out late at night because the nightlife starts so late here... it’s not like they haven’t had black students before...”

“Well, sure, but they didn’t tell Alma she should be discreet about being Jewish, did they?”

“Rabbi Maimón told me that.”

Tessa undid her ponytail and ran her hand through her thick cloud of black hair. “Who knows what those neo-Nazis would have done if Manuel hadn’t whipped out his white boy card,” she said, studying me with quiet concern.

I snorted. “White boy? I’m whiter than he is.”

“You know what I mean.” She flopped back against the couch, closing her eyes. “This sucks. I thought racism was bad in America.”

“It’s all relative.” Olivia examined her empty coffee cup, and got up to place it in the sink. “It’s funny. In the States I’m considered to belong to a minority, and I’ve definitely had people tell me to go back to Mexico and stupid things like that. But here no one bats an eyelash at me.”

“Well sure, you’ve got ‘American college student’ written all over you,” I said. “Even your Spanish has hints of American in it. I bet if they thought you were just a random Mexican immigrant they’d hate you like the rest of us.”

“Why are people such morons?” Tessa demanded. I glanced out the window, noticing that it was dark and probably time for *havdala*.

“I don’t know,” I sighed, getting up to look for my three-wicked candle and bottle of cloves. “I really don’t know.”

One morning I was working on a really frustrating Spanish paper at the small wooden desk in my room when Tessa called to me from the living room.

“Alma?”

“Yeah?”

“Come here for a sec?”

I sighed, made a dismissive gesture at my laptop and got up.

“What’s up?” I asked, poking my head out of the door and peering down the hallway. She was standing by the open door to the apartment. A uniformed man was standing there, with a big box next to him and a clipboard in his hand.

“Alma Ben-Ami?” The man asked.

“Sí...” I said. “*Es para mí?*”

“*Sí, señorita. Firme aquí, por favor.*” He offered me the clipboard and pen. I signed. “*Gracias. Buenas días.*”

“*Gracias, adiós,*” I said, staring down at the package.

“Were you expecting something?” Tessa asked, peering over at the box.

“No...” I squatted down and squinted at the cover, then smiled as I read the return address. “It’s from my grandmother.” I lifted it, grunting, surprised at how heavy it was. “Geez... what could she have sent that would be so heavy?”

I lugged it to the table and found a pair of scissors to cut through the tape. I ripped open the box and peered inside, then let out a squeal of delight.

“A couscous steamer!” I cried. I pulled it out. It looked just like the one she had used at home: a pair of nesting stainless steel pots, one with small holes in the bottom, and a tight fitting lid. Under it was, of course, a wire couscous sifter.

“And... flour?” Tessa scrunched her nose in confusion, lifting two paper packages out of the box and examining them.

“Wheat semolina. She must have thought I might not be able to get it that easily here.” I took it from her, warmth bubbling in my chest. The rest of the box contained several of my grandmother’s favorite spice and herb mixes, a jar of her homemade preserved lemons, and another jar of arissa. Tucked in the side was a little note that read,

“*Just a little taste of home. Love, Grandma*”

I reached into my pocket for my phone, but stopped short as I noted the time and tried counting six hours back.

“It’s like three in the morning in New York,” Tessa said. “Call her later. This stuff looks awesome.” She opened one of the bags of spice mix and sniffed. “Do you know how to make couscous from scratch?”

"Um..." I surveyed the goods. "Well, sort of... she showed me once. Problem is, she refused to give me a proper recipe."

"I bet you can Google one."

"Good point. But it'll never come out like hers."

"It won't come out like hers no matter what you do." Tessa smiled. "My grandmother's Ethiopian. Trust me, I know."

I returned the smile, carrying the box to the little cupboard in the corner of the kitchen marked "KOSHER ONLY!" where I kept my stuff.

"Well I'm looking forward to a kosher Moroccan couscous feast tonight," Tessa winked at me. "Let's make it after class."

Simply put, it was a disaster. I couldn't get the dough to be the right consistency. My little couscous pellets came out in completely different sizes, so even if they *had* held together, they would have cooked really unevenly. At the end, it was basically a semolina pudding the consistency of really thick mashed potatoes. I was so frustrated, I was at the verge of tears. I kept calling Grandma in a panic and she tried to explain how to fix it, but without her hands, it was futile.

"Don't worry about it," she said through the speakerphone on the counter as I poked at the lump of semolina. "My first couscous was pretty awful too."

"You liar," I accused her. "I bet your first couscous was perfect."

"It just takes practice, Alma."

"I like how you deflected my accusation there."

"My first couscous wasn't perfect. It was all right."

"I knew it." I flopped into a chair and buried my face in my hands.

"Hey, this isn't so bad," Tessa said, tasting the couscous pudding.

"It's just semolina, oil, water and salt. You can't really go wrong. Who are you?"

Tessa laughed. "I'm Tessa. Alma's roommate."

"Hi, Tessa. You know, Alma, you could add a little milk and butter and call it semolina porridge."

"I was going to have it with chickpeas..."

"So just add some milk and salt and butter and pour the chickpeas over. It'll be fine. You have paprika and cumin for the chickpeas, right?"

"Yeah."

"Throw in some turmeric too. And cilantro goes without saying."

"I'm not sure I have any. I have parsley."

"That'll do. Garlic?"

"You insult me, Grandma. Of course garlic." I sighed. "I'll take a picture of this and e-mail it to you, so you can see how badly I have failed my Moroccan ancestry."

"Oh, Alma, don't be ridiculous."

"Together with the total lack of progress on the research, I'm really batting zero for two on the Sephardic heritage front."

"Alma." Grandma's voice was stern. "I sent you the steamer so that you would learn, not because I was expecting you to be some kind of couscous genius. And I sent you to Spain so you would have a chance to do research, not because I was expecting you to magically uncover a story that was buried there five hundred years ago. I think you need to

lower your own expectations. Sometimes, you get couscous. Sometimes, you get semolina porridge. Whatever it is, it's what's for dinner. Got it?"

"But, Grandma..." I sighed again, smiling a little. "It's mushy."

"Get over it. And don't worry about the research. Okay?"

I didn't answer.

"Alma?"

"I just... I feel like... no one else is going to do this, and if I don't succeed, the opportunity will be lost forever, and..." I bit my lip, looking uncertainly at Tessa, who appeared to be pretending not to hear as she washed dishes.

"It won't be lost forever. If you don't succeed we can always hire someone."

Grandma paused. "I think you're taking this a little too seriously, child."

I pursed my lips. "Oh, Grandma. How could I not take it seriously? You've been psyching me up for this my entire life. With all your mysteries and family legends and whatever. You've always made me feel like I'm our family's last hope."

There was a silence on the other end.

Finally, Grandma said, "I didn't mean to put so much pressure on you, Alma. Really. I can't help but be dramatic about it. I'm a Jewish grandmother, aren't I?"

I smiled. "A Moroccan Jewish grandmother, no less."

"Stop thinking of yourself as our family's last hope. For Heaven's sake. Our family is thriving and happy and I am blessed to have all of you. So far all my grandkids still identify strongly as Jewish and have some connection to our tradition and culture, and that's more than I could hope for in this day and age, with all the interculturalism and interfaith and interwhatever. I want you to be doing this research thing for yourself, not for me. Understand?"

I nodded, then realized that she couldn't see me over the phone. "Yes, Grandma. Thanks."

"Listen, the delivery boy's here and I need to tell him where to put the groceries. Enjoy your mush, *mami*. And cheer up."

I giggled. "All right, Grandma."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

The religious dissonance that characterized my weekends was starting to get confusing. For the first few weeks after the neo-Nazi incident, Alma insisted that I escort her to synagogue, keeping my crucifix in full view before we entered the building. Sometimes I'd stay, and sometimes I'd go home and drop in afterwards for the meal. We often ended up staying and chatting with the Maimóns late into the night. Saturdays were lazy and slow and usually spent resting or studying on my part. Then, Sunday morning, I'd get up early and go to the local church for mass... and in the evening, head back to the Habad for Rabbi Uri's class. The class was fairly practical and at least as of yet was not addressing the fundamental differences between Christianity and Judaism, and for the time being, I was happy with that.

Still, I found myself thinking about church the whole time I was in the synagogue, and about the synagogue the whole time I was in church. The church, obviously, felt more comfortable and familiar. The softly colored light streaming through the stained-glass windows, the scent of the incense wafting through the sanctuary, the gentle harmony of the choir... the architecture and ambiance were definitely more conducive to spiritual contemplation. But something about the passivity of mass versus the engagement of the Jewish services bothered me. It wasn't that the congregation didn't participate at church—we sang and chanted and prayed. But I couldn't help but acknowledge that the main point of the entire service was really communion, and that was something the priest had to do for me. A Jewish service doesn't even need a rabbi. I learned that the person leading the Jewish services was called a *hazzan*, a cantor, and the only requirements were that he know the liturgy and have a decent voice. In fact there was a lot about Judaism that was just a lot more direct. In some ways the idea of facing the Creator of the World with no guide or intermediary was very intimidating... and in some ways, it felt right.

I sat in church so lost in thought about these things that I didn't even notice that a young woman had come to sit down next to me until it was time to line up for communion. I did a double take as I stood up and saw her. It was Alma's roommate Olivia. She gave me a little smile and wave and got in line ahead of me. I stared at her long, sleek sheet of black hair as the line moved forward, my stomach filling with dread.

Just as I feared, when mass was over, she was waiting for me by the door.

"*Hola*," she said. She had a wide, dimpled smile with perfect white teeth. "I suspected I might find you here," she continued in Spanish.

I swallowed. "Were you looking for me?"

"No, actually, I was looking for Jesus." She winked. I relaxed a little.

"Did you find him?" I smiled.

"Yes, I think I did." We hung back as the rest of the congregation spilled out onto the street and went their separate ways. "I'm not a practicing Catholic, but my parents are very religious, and when I get homesick I always find a church. Never fails to bring me some comfort." She paused. "Are you hurrying somewhere, or do you want to go grab a cup of coffee?"

I hesitated. I was definitely not interested in a relationship with her. Well... except that I didn't really know why, and I thought about that as I looked at her. True, I found her interest in me intimidating and kind of annoying. She had been insisting on sitting next to me in every single advanced Spanish class, and seemed especially talented at asking only tangentially related questions that sidetracked the lecturer for twenty minutes. But... she was pretty, and seemed intelligent and sweet. A Spanish speaker too, and yet fully American culturally. My mother would like that.

And it wasn't like I had taken any vows yet.

"Ah... sure," I said. She flashed a brilliant smile and led me to a nearby café. We sat down outside and ordered lattes.

"So... can I ask you something?" Olivia asked, giving me kind of a mischievous grin. She took my uncomfortable silence as a yes. "You and Alma. Is it just because she's Jewish that you're not... you know..."

I gave a frustrated sigh. "Because she's Jewish... because I'm a practicing Catholic... because... it's not relevant."

"But if she were Catholic?"

I shrugged, trying to pull off an air of nonchalance. "I don't know."

"She said you were thinking of going to seminary."

"I was."

"Was?"

"Am. More or less. I'm not sure."

"What's giving you trouble in deciding?"

I studied her, wondering if this was really information I felt like sharing with her. She was watching me in earnest curiosity. "Well... lots of things. I feel like I know so little. It is interesting getting to know Jews and how they relate to their faith... you have to know *so* much to be an observant Jew. I'm taking these classes with the rabbi here on Sunday evenings just to get to know a little more... it's totally overwhelming, the amount of information you need to have just to get through the day."

"I see it at our apartment. The whole kosher business is totally baffling to me. *Gracias,*" she addressed the waiter who had just placed her latte in front of her. That brought my attention to the fact that he had already given me my latte, so I thanked him also, then turned back to Olivia.

"You don't really need to know very much to be a good Catholic," I went on. "You get baptized, you go to church, you take communion, you confess, you try not to sin, and that's pretty much it. The information is there if you want it, but you don't need it to function spiritually. Our faith is very much about feeling. But there's something I really connect to about Judaism's 'culture of knowing and doing'."

She sipped her coffee. "Well... then maybe you should be Jewish."

I sighed, and gave her a wry smile. "But... Jesus."

She laughed. "Yes. I know. I dated this Jewish guy once... not religious at all, definitely not like Alma. I really liked him, and you know, I'm not religious myself and I have no problem with interfaith relationships... but at the end of the day, I just couldn't see myself being with someone who doesn't believe in Jesus. Someone who doesn't 'get' that part of me. Not to mention who could not relate at all to my family culture."

I nodded, taking a sip. "It's the one thing I know I can never talk to Alma about." I rolled my eyes. "She always refers to him as '*your buddy Jesus*,'" I quoted her in English.

Olivia laughed. "What's the problem? Isn't he your '*buddy*'?"

I shook my head. "She just doesn't get it."

"No. It's a completely foreign concept to Jews. Even secular ones. Danny was agnostic, so he looked at all religions critically, but while he could understand believing in God, he found the idea of the Trinity totally beyond his grasp."

"Well, even I don't really get it. Is God one, or is He three?"

"He is three that are one."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It's not supposed to. No religion makes sense. It's not about sense, it's about faith. Having a relationship with God. Honestly, all this 'knowing' you're talking about in Judaism sounds so dry to me. I see Alma so caught up in her little rules about food and the Sabbath... I just don't see the connection between that and spirituality."

I sat back, scratching my chin. "I kind of get it, actually. Relationships are not just about feelings, they're also about practical details. My parents had a really good marriage, and I could see this even as a child before my father passed away. It's the little things, the routine things, that make it work. He never bought her flowers. He never wrote her love poetry. He swept the floor. He cleaned up after dinner. He got up with me in the morning and took me to school. They weren't romantic gestures in the classical sense, and I'm sure they didn't feel nearly as good to either of them as the flowers or poetry would have in the moment. But they meant a lot more in the long run."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like maybe you should be spending more time at that synagogue."

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. "I don't know. Maybe."

"So is that why you're not sure you want to be a priest? Because you think you might want to be a rabbi instead?"

"No... well, I don't know. In some ways I feel like I connected to Catholicism because that's what was there. And because I needed a father after my own passed away... and it wasn't just Padre Carlos. He was a priest who became my friend after my father passed away," I explained at her questioning look. "I think there is a lot about Christianity that is very 'fatherly'. Judaism..." I smiled. "It's more like my mother." I mimicked her in a sharp falsetto: "'Eat this.' 'Don't touch that.' 'Say 'please'.' 'For the love of God, get a haircut.'"

Olivia laughed. "So I think the answer to my question was actually 'yes'," she said.

I blinked. "I don't remember. What was your question?"

"That maybe you want to be a rabbi, not a priest. Hey, at least rabbis aren't celibate. Big advantage there." She winked. I stared down at my coffee, my face growing warm. I cleared my throat.

"Depends who you ask," I mumbled.

"I'm sure," Olivia said, leaning in confidentially, "if you asked Alma, she would agree wholeheartedly that it's an advantage." My face got even warmer and Olivia started to giggle. I looked up at her, smiling hopelessly.

"You think so?"

Olivia laughed triumphantly. "Oh, I know so." She cleared her throat. "But look, if you do decide to stay Catholic, I'd love to do this again sometime." She flagged the waiter and gestured for the check. She turned back to me. "It's funny, even though I'm not really religious anymore I really appreciate having someone to talk to about faith. People are so

cynical about this stuff. So if you ever want someone to talk to about Jesus..." She winked again.

I smiled back. "I will know who to call."

30

Miriam

“May I ask you something?”

Miriam turned from the shelf, her eyebrows raised. León had been sitting quietly next to her for the past half hour, sorting through documents, and she had almost forgotten he was there. He had been coming to help her almost every day since she had begun, mostly sitting in silence, but sometimes asking a question or two.

“I’ve come to understand a little more about what makes food kosher—separating milk and meat, and certain animals slaughtered a certain way, and all that. But what about wine? What makes a wine kosher or not kosher? Isn’t it just fermented fruit juice?”

Miriam faltered, watching him warily. “Well... it has to do with the special spiritual status of wine. Not just for us, but for other religions, too. It was used a lot during pagan rituals. The Sages ruled that wine must only be handled by a Jew, from the moment the grapes are squeezed until it is drunk, to make sure it wasn’t contaminated with idolatry.”

“So it becomes non-kosher if a non-Jew comes into contact with it?” he asked.

Miriam studied his expression closely, trying to determine whether he found this offensive. She couldn’t tell.

“Yes.”

“Even if he’s not an idolater?”

Miriam hesitated again. “Well...” she said, “I think it’s one of a series of laws about food that the Sages prefer to keep in place to prevent close relationships between Jews and non-Jews.”

Both of them stiffened, and there was a tense silence.

“Because you’re afraid we’ll convert you?” León asked finally.

Miriam swallowed, taking a moment to think about how best to answer. “Mostly. Not being able to eat or drink socially is a major obstacle in forming the sort of relationships that lead to conversion and intermarriage. You have to understand... for us, this isn’t only about faith. It’s about our preservation as a nation. Every other nation I know of has a homeland. We were banished from ours a thousand and several hundred years ago. Maintaining our identity as a unified group is not a simple task when we are scattered all over the world.”

León was staring, his eyes unfocused, at the pages before him. Miriam still couldn’t read his expression.

“Given the odds,” he said finally, “you have been remarkably successful.” He looked up at her. “I hope this doesn’t offend you, but according to our beliefs, the fact that you still exist as a group is proof that you are being punished by God for rejecting Jesus.”

Miriam smiled uncertainly. “That’s funny. According to our beliefs, it’s proof of the exact opposite. That we are still the Chosen, Eternal People.”

They both contemplated this for a few moments.

“Interesting how each of us interprets reality differently, according to our beliefs,” León said, resting his chin on his folded hands.

“Yes,” Miriam agreed, watching him carefully. “It is interesting.”

The next day, as she was rummaging through a crate of old letters, she found a stack that was folded and bound together in twine. She turned it around in her hands, trying to get a better look, and loosened the twine to slip one of the letters out. It had been sealed with the eagle emblem of the Aguilar family, but the handwriting did not look like that of Don Tomás. She opened it up and began to read, and put her hand to her mouth in delight as she realized what it was. She quickly fished out the next letter and examined it, then the next, and the next. She looked up and ran to the doorway, poking her head out to look for León. She didn't see him, so she slipped out the side door to the courtyard. She spotted him across the grass leading his horse to the stable. She had half a mind to run and catch him, but that would be immodest, so she walked as quickly as she could.

"León!" she called once she was within earshot. He waited as she rushed up to him, her face flushed and her breathing heavy, her eyes shining. "You will not believe what I just found."

She handed him the pile of letters. He furrowed his brow, looking from Miriam to the letters and back again.

"I would have given them straight to your father... but I thought you might want them before he knows about them."

He took one of the letters off the pile and opened it. His eyes widened and he stared up at Miriam. "My mother..."

"Love letters. From your mother to your father while he was traveling."

León turned back to the letter, then swallowed and tore his eyes away, folding it and stuffing the letters into his doublet. Miriam thought she saw tears welling in his eyes, but he blinked them away very quickly. He smiled at her.

"Thank you. That was very kind of you to give them to me."

She stared at the ground. "I know how much it must mean to you. The only thing I have from my mother... well, had..." She sighed. "A little blue book of Psalms. Her father was a *sofer*—a scribe—and he made this little book of Psalms for her, which she bound with an embroidered cover she made herself. It was one of the things I would have brought with me if you had let me."

León shifted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. My instructions were not to let you pack, to bring you right away. If I had known..."

"I know. I'm not mad at you." She looked up at him. "You are very serious about honoring your father."

He smiled. "It is the fourth commandment."

She hesitated. "Isn't it the fifth?"

"It is possible that we count differently."

"Whichever one, it is admirable."

He studied her, looking unsure what to make of this compliment. "Thank you. I do the best I can."

"I just... I think it is incredible that you are willing to put yourself at risk like this just because your father believes it's right, even if you don't."

He shook his head. "I do believe it's right. I don't think your father deserves to be tried by the Inquisition. I was just not sure it was worth the risk." He gave her a shy smile. "I'm starting to... change my mind."

She stared at the ground again, a rush of warmth flowing up in a flurry through her chest and to her cheeks.

“Thank you so much for the letters, Miriam.” He gave his mare a slap on the rump and followed her away to the stable.

31

Alma

"Yes!" I called out in triumph upon opening the couscous steamer. I poked at the couscous with a spoon. It was perfect: even grains, fluffy, and smelling delicious. "Success!" I did a victory dance and high-fived Tessa, who had been anxiously peering over my shoulder.

"All right!" she exclaimed. "What are we going to eat with it?"

"I'm thinking chicken with dried fruit and cinnamon. Classic Moroccan dish. If only I had a tagine... but the pot will have to do."

I heard the door to the apartment open, and Olivia's voice calling, "Hey."

"Hey," Tessa and I echoed.

"Alma made couscous!" Tessa reported. Olivia strolled into the kitchen and peered into the pot.

"Huh. So that's couscous."

I stared at her. "You've never had couscous?"

She shook her head.

"This must be rectified," I announced. I shoved the couscous steamer aside and bustled over to the fridge, yanking it open and examining the "kosher" shelf to see how much chicken I had left.

"Where were you?" Tessa asked Olivia.

"Church. I was homesick."

"Aww. Did it help?"

"Yeah. And you'll never guess who I ran into there, Alma."

I looked up, raising an eyebrow.

"Yup," Olivia grinned, studying me. "We sat down for coffee afterwards."

A pause.

"Did you." I looked back into the fridge, not really seeing what I was looking at, suddenly a little sick to my stomach.

"This Manuel of yours..." Olivia said, walking over to the couch and opening the laptop on the coffee table. "He's awfully sweet and thoughtful, and gorgeous goes without saying..."

"God, those dreamy eyes," Tessa chimed in. I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw in irritation.

"But geez, is he tightly wound," Olivia continued. "Can he talk about anything other than his deep spiritual struggles or the woes of humankind?"

I slammed the fridge shut. "Well for God's sake, Olivia, I *told* you he's thinking of becoming a priest. What were you expecting, a party boy?"

Olivia gave me a vague grin. "I wouldn't be so sure about those priestly aspirations, hun."

I stood there with my mouth hanging slightly open, not sure what to say, as she turned back to her computer and started typing.

What did he tell her that he's not telling me?

Tuesday morning I sat in the reading room of the national archives building, my elbows on the table, my hands in my hair, staring blankly at the page in front of me. I sighed, took off my glasses and placed them next to my document, then rubbed my eyes furiously.

Professor García had left an hour ago, and she had gently suggested that after I finished transcribing this record, we should start talking about an alternative project. I had mentioned my idea of doing a paper about Ester Maimón's family and she seemed to like the idea. I would have gotten excited about it if it weren't for the sinking disappointment of realizing I was going to have to abandon the entire reason I had gotten into all this in the first place.

But really, she had been generous. It was already March; mid-terms were coming up, and spring break shortly thereafter. It would be a shame to have nothing to show for all this work at the end of the semester.

Manuel sidled in and sat down next to me with a sigh, resting the document he was working on in front of him.

"Well, hey there." I whispered, looking at him sideways. I picked up my glasses and examined them. "I hear you found a church buddy this Sunday."

He glanced around the room nervously at the other researchers, who were working in complete silence. Then he grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil, and wrote: *Yes, your roommate Olivia was there.* He returned to his document.

"She said you went out for coffee afterwards," I whispered. I put on the glasses and stared at the page in front of me.

He froze for a moment, then grabbed the paper again and wrote, *Yes. She's nice, you know.*

I shrugged. "I thought you found her annoying."

I did. Less so now.

"Well, mazal tov."

He pushed back against the table, turning to look at me and finally whispering, "It wasn't a date, if that's what you're implying." He paused. "At least not as far as I knew."

I raised my eyebrows, still staring at the page. "It's none of my business."

"Shh!"

I glanced in the direction of the hiss. Two other researchers were glaring at us.

We sat there awkwardly for a few minutes. Manuel turned back to his document and read for a while.

Then he cleared his throat and grabbed the paper again. *Alma, if I didn't know any better, I'd have thought you were jealous or something.*

I gave him a pointed look over my glasses. "Well it's a good thing you know better," I whispered. "I don't have a problem with you dating Olivia." I turned back to my work. "I was just... surprised."

"Shhh!" came another hiss. It was a balding man in a plaid shirt two tables down, glaring at me through his big square glasses. I gave him a sheepish look and put my finger to my lips, indicating that I'd be quiet.

We worked for another few minutes. And by “worked”, I mean Manuel worked, while I stared blankly at the nonsensical scribbles posing as text in front of me. Finally I turned to him and whispered, “Well, are you interested in dating her?”

He studied me carefully, a little smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He grabbed the paper and wrote, *Didn't you just say it's none of your business?*

I wagged my head from side to side. “Well okay then, Mr. Cryptic. Sheesh. I’m just asking. You know she’s gonna be all over me trying to figure out how to make her next move.”

Manuel paused, then scribbled, *I just have a feeling that no matter what answer I give, you're not going to like it.*

I took off my glasses again, throwing them on the table and pushing back in my chair. “Just because you think I might not like to hear something, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t tell me,” I hissed.

“*¡Ya basta!*” the balding man said aloud, making everyone jump. “*Si queréis hablar, hablad fuera!*” Now everyone was staring at us, nodding in irritated agreement.

“*Lo siento, lo siento,*” Manuel stammered, standing up and scooping up both of our documents. “*Ya terminamos.*” He nodded at the archivist, a very stern lady in her sixties with a slight, hunched figure, cropped salt-and-pepper hair, and the token pair of librarian spectacles dangling on a chain around her neck. She came over to take the documents from him, frowning in deep disapproval.

“But I’m not...” I protested weakly.

Manuel grabbed my arm and dragged me up from my chair. I barely had a chance to grab my glasses. He pulled me out of the reading room, past the archivist who was muttering something about *estudiantes*, and out to the hallway.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“You clearly have a burning need to talk about this,” he said, pulling off the vinyl gloves we were required to wear when handling the documents and stuffing them in his pocket. He folded his arms, leaning against the wall and fixing me with a gaze. I couldn’t tell whether it was an exasperated look, or maybe slightly amused? “So, talk.”

“Well... you...” I said, shoving my glasses back on my face, pulling off my own gloves, and trying to regain composure. “You’ve been completely avoiding talking about Christianity with me since we had that argument. It’s stupid.” His eyebrows went up. “The whole awesome thing about having a friend from another faith,” I went on, “is getting to talk about this stuff. I don’t know anything about where you are in terms of your religious beliefs right now. I feel like you’re just humoring me, asking me all about Judaism, hanging out with my Jew friends and taking Jew classes, but I have no idea what you actually think about all of it because you never tell me.” I crossed my arms. “You know I don’t care what you decide to do religiously. I was joking about wanting you to be a priest. I’m getting the sense that you’ve pretty much decided not to be one, since you’re talking about dating—”

“I’m not talking about dating!” he protested. “You’re the one who’s talking about me dating.”

“Well? So what’s the story?” I glared at him.

“The story is that I’m... just not sure, I don’t know where I am religiously,” he fumbled, staring at the floor and absently digging into the tile with his sneakers. “I’m in a kind of unstable place, and I’m not sure that’s the best place to be for starting a serious

relationship with someone. Especially when several of the paths I am thinking about would rule out that relationship. And... I'm not interested in a relationship that isn't serious."

"Well, that was easy, couldn't you have just said that?" I retorted.

"Why are you mad at me, Alma?" He finally met my eyes with that intense look of his. "I really don't understand. I'm not hiding anything from you."

I just looked at him, taking a deep breath and trying to calm my irritation. I didn't really know what I was so worked up about either. "Wait, so what are these paths you are thinking about? One is being a priest, that one I know."

"Another is not being a priest. And another..." He paused, studying me apprehensively.

"What?"

"Well, Judaism."

I couldn't deny the distinct sense of pleasure that washed over me at those words. "*I don't care what you decide to do religiously, huh?*" I scolded myself.

I raised my eyebrows. "See, I had no idea that was an option."

"Well, it's not a very likely one. But I'm enjoying what I'm learning, and..." He narrowed his eyes at me. "Please. Don't tell me this comes as a total surprise to you. Don't you remember how we met?"

I blinked and tried to think back.

"Your grandmother's store."

"Oh, right! Well... no, it's not a surprise. It's just that you never talk about it."

"I didn't realize you were interested."

"Oh, baloney." I gave him a playful shove. "You know perfectly well that I'm interested in the ins and outs of your spiritual journey." I turned and started off down the hallway. He jogged after me. "But you know, I understand if it's easier to talk to Olivia about Catholic stuff. You know... you love Jesus... she loves Jesus... you all love Jesus together..."

He laughed kind of nervously, falling into step next to me. We walked towards the lobby in awkward silence. Then I said, "You know, Manuel..."

He glanced at me, his expression a little apprehensive.

"Sometimes I wonder if these records were left here as the Inquisition's one last method of torture."

That made him laugh, and my footsteps felt a little lighter.

"Seriously," I said. "If I have to read one more testimony waxing poetic on some lady's culinary habits..."

"What *is* *adajina*?" he cut in. "Or maybe '*adasina*', or '*adafina*? This entire trial I was reading revolves around whether the stew this lady made on Fridays resembled it. The details could rival a cookbook."

"I think it's *adafina*," I said. "*Dafina* is like the Sephardic—and far superior—version of *cholent*."

He gave me a blank look.

"You know, that slow-cooked beef and bean stew the Maimóns serve at lunch... oh, I guess you've never been there for lunch."

"Well apparently, it's grounds for burning at the stake," he said wryly.

"What?!" I exclaimed. "They burned her at the stake just for making a stew that resembled *adafina*?" I snorted. "That's ridiculous! What if she just liked Jewish food? What does that have to do with Christianity?"

"You're asking me?" Manuel shook his head.

"Good thing we're in the 21st century. You'd have been put to death long ago by that inquisitor. You Judaizer you."

"You'd be burning right next to me," he retorted, "for luring me into that synagogue."

"I'd probably be excommunicated by my community for hanging out with you anyway."

This was heading in an awkward direction again, but thankfully Manuel seemed to not have heard me. He was squinting at something on the floor near the heavy metal door that led to the archives. I followed his gaze. It looked like an old piece of paper. He strode over to it and stared at it for a moment. Then he pulled his gloves out of his pocket, put them on and picked the paper up carefully.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It looks far too old to be lying here on the floor," he murmured, gingerly unfolding it. He scanned the first few lines, and his eyes widened. He shook his head. "*No lo creo.*"

"What? What?!" I crouched next to him and squinted at the page. It was definitely too old to be lying on the floor. It looked like a letter, but I couldn't make out a word. The color was draining from Manuel's face.

"You are not going to believe this," he breathed.

"What?! What is it? You're killing me!"

He pointed to the scribbles on the top. "It's dated September 5th, 1480. And it's addressed to *Don Tomás Aguilar y Alverez...*"

I let out a shriek, which made Manuel jump. He pointed to the bottom.

"From *Doña María Pilar Angel y Hernando.*"

"Oh my God! Manuel!" We stared at each other.

"*¿Qué pasa aquí?*" a sharp voice came from behind us.

I could not follow what happened next, but it was pandemonium. Manuel later explained to me that the archivist absolutely refused to believe that he had found it on the floor and accused him of trying to steal a precious document from the establishment. She almost called security on us, and the process of convincing her that we really had not tried to steal it literally involved Manuel kneeling on the floor and giving an impassioned speech with his hands over his heart. By some miracle, the archivist was convinced enough by his sincerity to speak to Professor García on the phone. She finally allowed us to take the letter into the reading room, but she told us not to dare move from that spot until she had found out where that letter came from and why it had been on the floor.

"Heads are going to roll for this," Manuel whispered to me as we pulled the door open.

"As long as they're not ours," I whispered back. "Do you have any idea how insane this is?! I guess all those hours you've been putting in at various houses of worship have been paying off..."

Manuel grinned and kissed his hand, looking up at the ceiling in a gesture of gratitude to God.

It took us several hours to work through the letter. I worked on deciphering the script and transcribing it, and Alma wrote down my whispered translation, while snickering at me and throwing out comments about my mushy ancestors. Doña María Pilar's handwriting was mercifully clear, but it became apparent early on that this letter was meant for Don Tomás's eyes only, and it made both of us blush in several places. Fortunately, the cranky researcher who had yelled at us earlier finished his work and left, and the others didn't seem to mind our whispering. But after all that work, we found ourselves with a page of saccharine prose with not a single hint as to where they were living at the time, or any other names that might have led us somewhere.

When the archivist came to take the letter, she refused to give me any details, and told me I'd have to speak to Professor García if I wanted information. She just herded us out of the reading room and stalked off, cradling the letter like a newborn baby.

"Well, phooey!" said Alma as we reached the lobby. "That was really annoying, and we don't have any added information at all, except for the fact that we've confirmed that they were a noble family." She looked at me. "But at least now you have something to write home about. Something romantic, no less. You should call your mom."

"She calls me every Saturday. I'll tell her then."

Alma rolled her eyes. "Ugh! You are such a man. Call your poor mother."

"We should talk to Professor García..."

"Your mom first, you bum! You want me to call her?" She pulled her phone out of her pocket threateningly.

"All right, all right!" I glared at her. "Lord help me. It's like having two mothers." I took out my phone and did as I was told.

"¿Qué pasa?" My mother's voice was sharp and tense.

"Nada, mamá," I said quickly. "*That is... nothing bad. I just have some news about the research.*"

"Ah," she said, audibly relieved. "*You scared me for a minute. My son? Calling me? Maybe he was taken hostage by terrorists...*"

"*I just wanted to tell you that we found a letter from María Pilar to Tomás, and it confirms that they were hidalgos.*"

"Ah! *That's very exciting! Congratulations, cariño! Thank you for calling me,*" she said, her voice incredulous. "*That was quite considerate of you.*" A pause. "*Ahh, I know.*" She chuckled. "*The Jewish girl made you call me.*"

I shot an exasperated look at Alma, who was hanging on my every word, apparently trying to understand the Spanish.

"*I knew I could trust her with you. Thank her for me. Is there anything else? Are you okay?*"

"*Yes, Mama, I'm fine. I have to go now. We'll talk on Saturday.*"

"*Sí, sí. Te quiero, cariño.*"

"*Te quiero, mamá. Adiós.*" I hung up and cleared my throat. "Now, let's call Professor García."

“Well?” Alma demanded. “Did you tell her it was a love letter? Did you tell her how you found it?”

I blinked. “No. Was I supposed to?”

Alma rolled her eyes again. “*Hombres*,” she said. She studied me. “You are really hard to understand when you speak to your mother.”

“It’s the southern accent. Do you want to call Professor García or should I?”

We spent the next hour playing broken telephone with Professor García and the archivist. From what I was able to gather, someone had recently brought in a shipment of boxes from Murcia to have a bunch of documents digitized, and the highest likelihood was that the letter had somehow fallen out of the box while it was transported. I begged the archivist to let us go through the files to see if there was anything else helpful about my family. She was scandalized at the very thought of letting a pair of miscreant university students anywhere near the piles of unorganized files, but somehow Professor García somehow managed to convince her that we were trustworthy and careful and that she could let us help by cataloguing and organizing them in preparation for the digitization.

And that is how we found ourselves in a dark corner of the basement staring at seven boxes piled with completely random and unorganized files.

“Well,” Alma said. “At least we know they might have found it in Murcia?”

“Very helpful,” I grumbled.

She cleared her throat. “I’m kind of embarrassed to ask this as an Iberian studies major... but... um... can you jog my memory? Where exactly is Murcia?”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “It’s one of the autonomous regions on the southeast coast, between Andalusia and Valencia.”

“Oh, right. Cartagena, right?”

“Exactly. Cartagena is its major port.”

“Well, have you looked through the Inquisition records for Murcia?”

I snorted. “Have you counted every blade of grass on the front lawn? I didn’t find anything in the catalogues. We don’t even know if this letter actually fell out of these boxes. It’s like you said, it’s a wild goose chase.” I sank into a nearby chair, pulling off my vinyl gloves and running my hand through my hair.

“Well, here. Let’s get this letter digitized, and tomorrow we’ll meet with Professor García and talk to her about what to do now.” She reached out for the cardboard folder where the archivist had stored the letter, which was resting on top of the nearest box. She opened it, examining the contents. “I dunno, she’s an expert, maybe she can magically divine things from the way the paper crinkles, or something.”

Professor García had no magic divinations for us, but she did encourage us that my finding was very exciting. “Listen,” she said, replacing the letter on the top of the box and removing her gloves. “Genealogical research is often like this. You toil for months and months and you have no idea if all the time and effort you’re putting in is going to turn out anything. Sometimes it doesn’t, and it’s very frustrating. But sometimes it does, and it’s the best feeling in the world.”

Alma was looking at her with her mouth scrunched to one side. “Remind me never to go into genealogical research as a career. Ever.”

Professor García ignored her. “The question is, what do you want to do now?” She looked over at me.

“I don’t know... it seems like such a waste of time to catalogue these documents. It’ll take us weeks, and what if nothing comes up? We have to have a paper at the end of the semester...”

Professor García watched me thoughtfully. “Well, that’s up to me, not to you. I grade for effort, not for results.” She paused, scanning the digitized copy of letter that she’d had printed for us. “If I abandoned genealogy projects just because I was afraid of getting sidetracked and not delivering results on time, I would never find anything. I think if you guys are serious about finding answers, you’re going to need to take the risk.” She handed the copy of the letter to me. “And I think cataloguing these original documents is an important and exciting educational opportunity. It’s a great privilege to be able to handle these outside the reading room.” She looked over at Alma. “What do you say? Are you willing to abandon your project for now and help Manuel focus on his?”

Alma’s shoulders slumped. “When you say it like that...” she sighed. Then she took a deep breath. “Well, I was just about to abandon it anyway. Yeah... let’s hit these boxes.”

Unfortunately, we did not have a whole lot of spare time for digging around in the basement of the National Historical Archives. Mid-term exams were upon us and both of us were stressed out and using every extra minute for studying. I even skipped both church and Rabbi Uri’s class one Sunday, feverishly trying to finish a paper for one of my classes that was due Monday morning. I turned it in on time, but I couldn’t shake the guilt; it had been many years since I had missed communion.

When the end of mid-terms was finally in sight, I started to look forward to spring break. It would be my chance to go visit Granada. True, the only people I actually wanted to visit there were dead... but I wanted to see my childhood home, to visit Padre Carlos’s church, to walk the streets where I grew up and let them flood me with memory.

And the more I thought about it the more I realized that I was fantasizing about showing Alma these places, more than I was fantasizing about being there alone. I wanted to share these memories with her. I wanted to connect my old life with my new one.

The following Friday I put on my suit and walked to Alma’s apartment to accompany her to the synagogue. I found her dressed in her normal clothes, sitting at her desk with her books in front of her.

“What are you doing?” I asked, peering over her shoulder. “Twenty minutes ‘til candlelighting and you’re not even dressed for synagogue.”

She turned around slowly, her eyes wild with dark circles underneath them.

“Well geez, Mom, thanks for stopping by!” she said. She turned back to her books. “I wasn’t going to go today. I just have so much to do...”

“What is this nonsense?” I demanded. “You aren’t allowed to write on Shabbat.”

“But I’m allowed to read...”

“You Jews and your technicalities.” I started shutting all the books on her desk. “Why do you think God gave you the Sabbath? So you could torture yourself studying? It’s supposed to be a day of rest. Rest, joy, and pleasure. No studying. Get dressed. I’m waiting for you in the living room.”

She stared at me as I strode towards the door. “Holy mackerel,” she muttered. “I’ve created a monster.”

“So what’s got you all high on the Sabbath spirit?” Alma wanted to know as we descended the stairs of her building to the street.

“What’s got you in such a bad mood?” I countered.

She looked up at me wearily. “What, mid-terms aren’t enough?”

“To skip Shabbat dinner? I doubt it. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

She was shaking her head. “Sometimes I think you know me better than I do.” She stopped and leaned against the glass door to the building. “My sister just got engaged.”

I paused. “Ah... congratulations? Why is this a bad thing?”

“It’s not... it’s not.” She pushed the door open and walked out.

“Then why are you upset about it?”

She sighed again and turned to me. “Because I’m a self-absorbed brat, that’s why.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“They’re having the party next week. I’m just really sad that I won’t be able to be there. And kind of mad that they couldn’t postpone it a few weeks until spring break, so I could go.”

“Are you planning to go to New York during spring break?” I asked, feeling a sinking disappointment.

“Sort of. I didn’t buy tickets yet.”

“Why aren’t they willing to wait?”

Alma’s mouth tightened. “Oh, you know... scheduling conflicts, blah blah blah, ‘It’s just the engagement, Alma, lots of people won’t make it, this isn’t about you...’” She shrugged. “What can I say? She’s right. It isn’t about me. Nothing in my family ever is.” Her voice was sharp. “I mean... she’s completely right that this one shouldn’t be, either. I’m just tired of being ignored by them. That’s all.”

I was silent for a few moments. Then I cleared my throat.

“Well, if you’re not sure about going to New York... I have a different proposal.”

She raised an eyebrow at me.

“I’ve been planning my trip to Granada during spring break,” I said. “And I was thinking that I’d like you to come with me.”

Alma’s expression brightened. “Huh,” she said. “Granada. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“It’s a long train ride, and I don’t really have any friends left there to visit. All I really need to see is the cemetery, but I also just want to visit some places from my childhood. And I enjoy your company and I would like you to come.”

“How long were you planning to be there?”

“A few days. I called my mother’s friend Marta and she said we are welcome. She has a guest room, and a fold-out couch in the living room.” Alma’s step seemed to get lighter and lighter as I spoke. “I looked around for kosher restaurants and couldn’t find anything in Granada, but I figured you could bring food with you and maybe some cookware to use on Marta’s stove, since that’s the easiest thing to kosher. Right?”

“Sounds like you’ve really thought this through,” she said, her eyes shining. “Well... now that I know I’m going to miss the engagement party, going to Granada with you definitely sounds like more fun.”

“And less expensive,” I added. “And no jet lag.”

“And no family fawning over Mimi’s general awesomeness and whining about how useless I am.”

I laughed. "I don't know... how would they feel about you traveling around Europe with a Catholic boy?"

She gave me a sour look over her glasses. "Who cares?"

We walked in silence for a few minutes, each of us deep in thought.

"Is this why I never hear about them?" I asked finally.

"Who?"

"Your parents and siblings. For someone so obsessed with her ancestors, you talk surprisingly little about your immediate family."

She sighed. "Look. My dad's an engineer. My mom's a dentist. Shoshana is in residency to become a cardiologist and I don't even know how she does it with a toddler and a baby. Mimi—she's the one who just got engaged—had hardly passed her bar exam before she got a job with the most prestigious law firm in Albany. Zack is in high school but he's already a gifted programmer. My parents are very practical people and they pretty much think my interests are nonsense and that I'm never going to get my act together and choose a solid career."

"Good thing you're not an artist," I grinned.

"At least that might have made me interesting. Compared to my siblings, I'm painfully ordinary, and if my parents ever tried to hide their disappointment, they didn't do a very good job." She was smiling, but there was a distinct edge to her voice. I stopped walking and turned to her. She looked at me quizzically.

"Alma," I said firmly, looking into her eyes. "You are not ordinary. Painfully or otherwise."

She shrugged and lowered her gaze. "Mimi and I get along okay, but the rest of them... I don't know. We're not on the same wavelength. I grew up pretty close to my cousins but they've all gone in very different ways and we don't have much in common anymore. They're all about the present and the future and they think my obsession with the past is a waste of time. Naturally, my grandmother is the only one who appreciates it."

I smiled. "Not the only one."

"Well, you don't count. You have a vested interest in my obsession with the past." Alma resumed walking. I fell in step beside her.

"Maybe so, but I also think it's an admirable trait," I said. "One that comes with a variety of other valuable traits, like determination and persistence."

" 'Determination and persistence'. Sounds like a nice way to call me stubborn."

"How about your ability to brighten any room you walk into?"

"It's called, 'turning on the light'."

"Then how do you do it on Shabbat?"

"Very poetic. You Spaniard." Alma gave me a playful shove. "You sound like you're about to whip out a guitar and serenade me under the moonlight. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were hitting on me."

"I—" I stammered. *Where did that come from?* "Well, it's a good thing you know better," I recovered, glancing at her. Her smile was fading and she was staring straight ahead. "I... didn't mean it like that. I was trying to point out that—"

"I know, I know. I'm just bad at accepting compliments. Thank you."

But the silence that followed left me wondering which one of us had said too much.

33

Miriam

"It's just infuriating," Don Tomás was saying, pacing back and forth between the beds. Abraham and Miriam were sitting next to each other on Miriam's bed, staring grimly at the floor. "There has been no official announcement of any kind. But yesterday I heard that your property was seized. With no warrant!"

"Even the wares that I was storing for you?"

"Yes! Exactly! So at least I had an excuse to go down to their offices and demand that they release my property to me. They were apologetic and told me where it was all being kept and gave me a letter for the guards so they would let me take it. I'm sending León to get them today, because I'm due in Cartagena tonight and I'm not going to have time to waste on this scandalous nonsense." He turned towards them, sighing deeply. "I wish there was something I could do to protect all your things for you. I can't believe their audacity. It's like they'll take any excuse to take advantage of a Jew."

Abraham sighed. "This is nothing new, my friend."

Don Tomás crossed his arms, his brow furrowed. "I just can't stand it. I can't stand the corruption, the hatred, the injustice, and it's not by some heathen tribes somewhere or some petty peasantry—it's the most elevated, respected members of the Church! How can they act this way in the name of God? How can they pretend to represent Jesus?"

"There is corruption everywhere, Tomás, and especially in places of power. This has always been true."

Don Tomás gave him a weary look. "Maybe it's just that you are used to it."

Abraham smiled sadly. "Maybe so."

"Well, I don't want to get used to it." Don Tomás peered out the window and sighed. "I must go." He looked at Abraham and Miriam, his face wrinkled in concern. "I don't want to be leaving you here like this."

"I'm sure León will take good care of us," Abraham said gently. He stood and embraced his friend. "You have done more than your share for us. God will surely reward you."

"I hope to be able to bring better news when I get back."

"May it be His will."

Don Tomás regarded Abraham carefully. "Have you thought about what you might do if you need to flee?"

Abraham frowned and sank to the bed.

"I assume Fez would be the best option for you," Don Tomás continued quietly. "You could join your brothers' trade."

"You're probably right." Abraham glanced at Miriam, his brow knitted in worry. "But the situation is not so good there. They have lost several children to plagues and bandits. I would not want to have to bring Miriam to that place."

Miriam swallowed and stared at her feet.

"Well," Don Tomás said, "let us pray you will not need to consider it."

With León left alone to run the estate, Miriam expected that she wouldn't see much of him over the next few days. So she was surprised when she turned from the bookshelves to see him standing in the doorway. Her heart pounded a little faster.

"Good day, señor." She curtsied. "I wasn't expecting to see you."

"I can't stay and help today," he said, "but I have something for you." She noticed that he was holding something small wrapped in a white handkerchief. He handed it to her. She looked up at him curiously, and slowly unwrapped it. When she caught a glimpse of sky blue, she gasped.

"How...?!"

It was her mother's book of Psalms. Brilliant threads of gold, green, purple and red were painstakingly stitched in elaborate patterns around the Hebrew letters that spelled the world for Psalms, *Tehillim*. She ran her hand over them, caressing this little piece of her mother she thought had been gone forever. A wave of mixed emotions—sadness, despair, relief, gratitude—washed over her. She tried to brace herself against it, blinking the tears away, but she had been holding back so much pain and fear and grief, for so long, that it was impossible to stop them. Before she knew it she was sitting on the nearest chair, sobbing like the day her mother died. Crying as she'd only cried as a child in her father's arms as the shadows grew longer in the drab wastelands of La Mancha... her mother's body freshly buried under a pile of earth, and almost everything they had ever owned, known, or loved left behind them.

She was mortified to be losing control like this in front of León. She was afraid he would be alarmed or embarrassed by her outburst. But he just stood there quietly, waiting for the storm to pass. After a few minutes he sat next to her, his hands folded in his lap, and stayed there until she finally spoke.

"I'm sorry..." she said. "I'm just... so grateful."

"I was returning your favor." León gave her a little smile.

"How did you get this?" She hugged it to her chest.

"So I may have taken a few liberties at the storehouse where they kept the confiscated property. They let me in to collect my father's spices."

"How on earth did you find it among all our things?"

"By the grace of God and with a little patience."

"León, I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"I think I know." They studied each other for a few moments. "Well, I must be going. Good day, señorita."

The next day, Miriam was working in the library and heard a commotion on the other side of the house. She froze, unsure whether to try and find out what was happening, or to lay low and wait. She tiptoed to the door and peeked down the hallway, listening carefully.

A moment later León burst out of the kitchen and came sprinting towards her. "María," he called. It took a few moments before she realized he was calling her by her false name.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Have you ever attended a birth?!" He stopped in front of her. His face was very pale, his hands shaking.

She almost giggled, but then she remembered the circumstances of his own mother's death, and her smile melted away.

"Yes," she said. "My neighbor was the *judería's* midwife and I often assisted her. Is someone having a baby?"

"One of the maids—come quickly—we sent for a midwife but the baby is coming quickly..." They jogged towards the kitchen. "Why do these things *always* happen when my father is away?"

Miriam shoved the door open. A very pregnant woman was leaning against the wall, red-faced and drenched in sweat, letting out a low, loud, grunting sort of moan. Three other maids were scurrying around, shouting at each other in high-pitched voices. There were grains and vegetables scattered all over the table and the floor.

Miriam stepped forward.

"Everybody calm down!" She commanded. Everyone froze and looked up at her. She pointed at one of the maids. "You! Get a large bowl of clean, warm water." The maid turned right around to do as she was told. "You!" She pointed at the next maid. "Clean cloths and blankets. You! Clean this up." She gestured at the food that was on the floor near the woman in labor. The third maid went right to work.

"Ahhhhh!" The pregnant woman let out a howl. Miriam rushed to her side and put a firm hand on the small of her back. "Deep breath now, señora. Everything will be just fine." The woman breathed deeply and her shoulders relaxed a little. "Now you just tell me when you feel that baby's head. It sounds like you are pushing already." The woman nodded.

Miriam suddenly noticed a movement behind her, and whirled around to see that León was still standing there, staring at her.

"Some privacy, señor!" she scolded.

He turned and bolted from the room.

Within a few minutes, the woman let out a high-pitched cry and said she was feeling the baby. Miriam delicately lifted her skirts and put her hands on the baby's head.

"Try not to push now," she said. "Better for him to come slowly. Breathe deeply." A few moans later, a beautiful baby girl slid into Miriam's hands, and immediately began to cry. Miriam laughed in triumphant ecstasy, wrapping the baby gently in one of the cloths. "Here, sit down," she said, stuffing some extra cloths underneath the new mother to soak up the blood. "Hold your sweet baby girl."

"Thank you, thank you... oh, look at her!" The maid murmured in a high-pitched, breathless voice as she took her baby into her arms. She looked up at Miriam with wide eyes. "Are you the midwife?"

Miriam chuckled. "No... but I attended many of my neighbors' births."

As if on cue, the real midwife burst through the door and bustled over to the mother and baby. Miriam stepped back, then looked at her hands, covered in blood, and washed them in the bowl the other maid had brought. She backed out of the kitchen, leaving the maids and the midwife to fuss over the mess, and walked out into the hallway where León was pacing nervously back and forth. He looked up.

"Well?"

"It's a girl." She smiled. "They are both fine, thank God."

He let out a long breath. "Thank God for you. They were in such hysterics, I don't know what would have happened..." He looked down at her, his eyes dancing between hers. "I had no idea you could... do that."

“What, catch a baby?” She laughed. “It’s not much harder than catching anything else... they come out quite slowly.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He was looking at her intensely. It sent a pleasant sort of shiver up and down her spine. “I’ve never met a woman quite like you.”

She blushed and lowered her eyes. She wasn’t sure what to say to that. So she cleared her throat and mumbled something about getting back to work, and started walking towards the library. But he followed her.

“How is it that you are not married yet?” he asked when they were in the relative privacy of the room. She looked up at him, her heart pounding. *Why would he ask me that? That’s hardly an appropriate question.*

“Well... to be honest,” she said slowly, “it’s probably that I am too well educated. It’s uncommon in our circles and it makes people suspicious. I don’t know about Christian men, but Jewish men tend to prefer their wives silent, obedient, and not too bright. My father never got any offers and he didn’t really seek them.” She studied him. “But I should ask the same of you.”

He shrugged.

“I think my father just hasn’t been quite ready to bring another lady into the house after my mother’s death. So he hasn’t tried very hard either.” He paused. “And the eligible women I have met match your description of an ideal Jewish wife for the most part... which frankly I find tiresome.”

There was an awkward silence, and it became clear that León felt he had said too much.

“Well, ah, thank you for your help. You were wonderful.” And he left her to stand there, chewing her lip and thinking about this conversation.

The fact was that he was the only Christian she had ever befriended in this way. She had never really had the opportunity to connect with people outside of her insular community. And she liked him. And found herself thinking about him more than she thought she should. About the way his eyes squinted when he smiled. About his blunt, straightforward manner of asking her questions and sharing his thoughts. About the look on his face when he gave her the book of Psalms.

She shook her head, trying to clear it of these images. He was a Christian. He should not even have mentioned the concept of marriage around her. Marrying him was completely out of the question on every imaginable level. Both Jewish and Castilian law forbade such a union in the severest of terms; the Inquisition burned such couples at the stake. The only way it would become possible would be for one of them to convert to the other’s religion, and the idea of that happening—on either end—was preposterous. And that was without the issues of social status and what their fathers might think of it all.

And yet...

No. Don’t even think about it, she scolded herself. She sank down into the chair, feeling a heavy despair settle over her. She stared, unseeing, at the piles of pages on the table.

No. I can’t believe I’m even thinking about this. How could I be thinking about this? With all my knowledge, all my conviction, all my commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people... all my devotion to the Torah and to God... how could I be thinking this way about a Christian man I met a few weeks ago? How could this have happened to me?

She buried her face in her hands, trying to erase the image of his face from in front of her, but it would not budge. And where for most young women, the way she felt about him might bring butterflies, or giddiness, or some sort of joy, all she could feel was the crushing weight of the “neverness”.

Never. We could never be. Never, ever, ever.

“God help me,” she whispered. “How could I be so foolish?”

I should never have let him stay and talk with me. I should never have become his friend. I should never have given him those letters or talked to him about my mother or about the book of Psalms. I should never have let these boundaries become blurred enough for me to grow to love him.

Never.

Never.

Never.

34

Alma

Once mid-terms were over, we were able to start digging through the boxes in the basement of the national archive building. It was extremely tedious work, to say the least. Many of the documents were arranged in files, but they were kind of haphazard and not marked very well. There were lots of loose documents that we had to pore over to figure out what they were. And predictably, we did not find anything like the letter that Manuel had miraculously found on the floor of the library, nor anything remotely connected to an Aguilar family. Worst of all, the archivist who had been involved was supervising us carefully, and having her breathing down our necks was pretty unnerving.

So at 10 o'clock in the morning on the Thursday before spring break, both of us were exhausted, frustrated and profoundly bored. The archivist was delivering our latest batch of catalogued documents to the digitization staff. Manuel was sitting listlessly on the floor, whining that his back was hurting and that he hadn't eaten breakfast.

"Go find a vending machine," I told him. "We are almost at the bottom of this box and I am not giving up until it is empty."

"Why? What's the point?" He pulled off his gloves, dropping them in his lap, and ran his hands through his hair, which was growing pretty wild as he consistently ignored his mother's pleas to get his hair cut. "We have three more boxes to go through. Endless piles of pure historical drivel."

"Because the next file could always be 'the one', Manuel," I scolded him. "Come on, you're supposed to be cheering me on here. This is *your* family we're researching."

He sighed and rubbed his eyes furiously. I turned back to the box and dove in, pulling out a thick file... and that was when a certain word caught my eye. I froze and looked back at the file underneath the one I had just removed. I stared at the index card that had been stapled to the front and the words written there in clear blue print.

"No."

My tone of voice must have conveyed my incredulousness because Manuel's head popped right up out of his hands.

"What? Did you find something?" He grabbed the gloves, jumped to his feet and peered into the box. I backed away from it, blinking, thinking my mind must be playing tricks on me.

"Tell me that doesn't say what I think it says."

He snapped on the gloves, pulled out the file and squinted at it. His jaw dropped, and he stared up at me.

"De Carmona, Abraham? Isn't that..."

"No no no no. It can't be him. It must be someone else. There's no freaking way."

Manuel opened the file and squinted at the cover page. He looked up at me with a huge grin.

"Tribunal of Lorca. Protocols from 'the trial of Abraham de Carmona, the Jew...'" He looked back down at the page. "'...Who in all appearances escaped the city with his daughter before the warrant for his arrest was granted.' The trial took place in his absence

on the fifth of September, 1492. It looks very similar to other Inquisition trials we have read.”

“Oh my God!” I shrieked, and then immediately winced as I earned several glares from the people working quietly at desks and copy machines nearby. I tried to lower my voice. “How... I... how is this even... I can’t... it... oh my God! Let me see!” He handed me the file. It contained a relatively thick pile of papers. And yes, *Abraham de Carmona, el judío* was written in very clear lettering on the first page.

Manuel and I just gaped at each other in total astonishment.

“Oh my God!” I started jumping up and down. “I can’t believe this! How did this... how... we found the file! We found the file! I can’t even... ahhh!”

Manuel stood there watching me freak out, his arms crossed and a big smile on his face.

“Oh my God. I have to call my Grandma.” I whipped out my phone and dialed quickly. The phone rang a few times, and then a very, very groggy voice answered.

“This better be important,” my grandmother croaked.

“Oh!” I clapped my hand to my mouth. “Oops! What time is it there?”

“Four in the morning. Is this Alma?”

“Yes! Oh I’m so sorry! I totally forgot about the time difference. But yes, it’s important!”

“Speak.”

“I am here in the National Historical Archive with Manuel. You know how we had given up on our family and started focusing on his? And we were going through these boxes from Murcia?”

“Get to the point, child.”

“We found the file! The de Carmona file!”

“Wait, what?” Her voice was suddenly sharp. “The de Carmona file? I thought you said—”

“Yes! It was here in these boxes! I know, it’s totally crazy, but it’s true! It’s protocols from the Tribunal of... what was the name of the city?”

“Lorca,” Manuel said.

“Lorca! It says that the trial took place in his absence after he disappeared from his house before the warrant was granted!”

“*Yishtabah shmo!* This is wonderful! Give me details! What did he do?! Are you sure it’s the right de Carmona?”

“We haven’t read the file yet, but how many Abraham de Carmonas could there be who were Jewish and tried by the Inquisition? It says he was tried in September of 1492...”

“So it fits?”

“It fits!”

“Oh, Alma! This is incredible! Thank God!”

“I know!”

“Now I’m never going to be able to go back to sleep...”

“I’m so sorry about that, Grandma...”

“No, it’s all right, it was worth it! Well you get right to work reading that file, child. And I want all the details as you come across them. Okay? I’ll call you later today at a decent hour and we’ll talk more.”

“Okay, Grandma, love you!”

I hung up and did another little victory dance.

“¿Qué haces?” came the archivist’s sharp whisper behind me.

As with every interaction with this lady, it took us about thirty minutes to calm her down, explain what we were doing, and ask her to help. Manuel managed to convince her to bump the file to the front of the digitization line, so we could at least have a couple copies to take with us on our trip to Granada.

“Good thinking!” I exclaimed when he explained this to me after she had left with the file. “Well... so... what now?”

Manuel pulled off his gloves and tossed them in a nearby garbage pail. “Now, we find more information about Lorca.”

“Oh right! Lorca! Computers!” I got rid of my gloves and charged towards the only vacant computer in the corner of the room. I plopped down in the seat and stared at the screen. “Um...” It was a very old machine, with some ancient version of Windows that I wasn’t sure what to do with, especially since everything was in Spanish.

“Allow me,” Manuel offered. I stood up and let him take my place. The computer was impossibly slow and I tapped my foot impatiently as we waited for the browser to load.

“Well, this certainly shifts the focus of our project, doesn’t it?” Manuel said.

I paused and looked at him. “Uh... yeah. Sorry to... um... steal your thunder. Are you disappointed?”

He shrugged. “A little. But I’m very happy for you. And once we’ve worked through the file, we can check out the rest of these boxes. Maybe there is hope for me yet.” The browser finally loaded and Manuel started tapping at the keyboard. I leaned over, eagerly looking at the screen in front of him. After a few seconds I noticed that he had stopped what he was doing, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, his shoulders looking very tense.

“What?” I asked. “Why’d you stop?”

“I... just...” He closed his eyes, wincing a little. “Could you... not lean over my shoulder like that?”

I jerked upright. “Oh.” I cleared my throat. “Sorry.”

I looked around for another chair and dragged one over to the desk.

“Okay, Alma, look at this.” He twisted the computer screen towards me. “Turns out the fortress I mentioned housed the *judería*, and there are ongoing excavations there, uncovering all this amazing stuff. Apparently it boasts the only synagogue in the region that was never converted into a church or mosque.”

I skimmed the page, looking at pictures, and then turned, wild-eyed, to Manuel.

“We are going there.”

He blinked at me.

“We are so going there. How far is it from Granada?”

“Um...”

“Look it up and put it into our itinerary. We are totally going there.”

He typed some more, and finally announced that it was two and a half hours from Granada by bus.

“Not exactly close enough for a day trip,” he said. “But maybe we could go on our way back.”

“That is exactly what we are going to do,” I informed him. “I am not leaving this country without seeing that place.”

Manuel pulled back, finally looking at me.

“Well, you know what this means,” I said. He blinked in confusion. “Celebratory lunch at the kosher place. Now. On me.” I glared at him, lest he even consider protesting.

Exciting as Alma's find was, we did not have a lot of time to work on it before our trip. We were planning to leave Monday, as I was determined not to miss either church or Rabbi Uri's class. We'd have time to work on the file on the train to Granada.

Olivia was in church again that Sunday. When she asked if I'd like to join her for coffee again, I agreed, but as we crossed the bustling street I felt a sort of pang of guilt. It was followed immediately with a wave of exasperation. *This is ridiculous*, I told myself as we sat down. *There is no reason to feel guilty for spending time with a girl I am not dating, because another girl I am not dating is apparently uncomfortable with it.*

"So," Olivia said. "Really nice service today."

"I think they overdid it a bit with the incense. Good thing Alma doesn't come to church. She'd be coughing for a week."

"They don't have incense in synagogues?"

"No. They can't light fires on the Sabbath, and it's not part of the prayer service anyway."

Olivia watched me as I emptied a sugar packet into my coffee and stirred. Finally she said, "Have you decided which service you like better yet?"

"It's not a matter of liking it better. It's a matter of which one feels more right."

"Well?"

I sighed. "I don't know." I took a sip. "In many senses the synagogue does. But... you know. It's more complicated than just how I prefer to relate to God from within a community."

"What do Jews think about Jesus?" Olivia asked. "I know Muslims think of him as a prophet."

I stared into my coffee. "I don't really know, Olivia. I've been afraid to ask."

Olivia laughed. "Afraid to ask? Don't you think the answer to that question might help you solve this dilemma once and for all?"

I looked at her thoughtfully. "Maybe that's what I'm afraid of."

"What? That it'll change your views?"

"That I'll hear an answer that will force me to rethink everything. Or that will create some kind of certainty. I know that seems like what I'm looking for, but there's something scary about it. It closes doors. It's a sort of point of no return. Nothing will ever be quite the same, no matter what I decide."

"I hate to tell you this," she said, "but you're already there."

I blinked. "Where?"

"The point of no return. You already think differently than you used to about religion. Even if you decide to pursue your previous goal and become a priest, it will never be the same for you as it was. You already can't go back."

I swallowed.

"But I think it's a good thing," she went on.

"Maybe in the long run," I said. "It's just... once I'm in, I'm in, and my entire life could turn on its head. I'm not sure I'm ready for that right now."

Olivia laughed. “Manuel,” she said, “will you ever be sure you’re ready for that?”

That evening, after the last of Rabbi Uri’s students had bid him goodbye, I approached him and took a deep breath.

“I want to talk to you about Jesus,” I said.

Rabbi Uri looked at me, his bushy eyebrows raised, and laughed. “I hope you don’t mean that in the way it’s usually meant!”

So he sat down with me, took out a few sources from the Bible and the Talmud and reviewed them with me. I appreciated his style; he wasn’t pushy about his viewpoint, he just presented it as “the way we see things”. And I had to admit, after about forty-five minutes of this, that I was feeling pretty confused.

I let out a long breath. “This Trinity business... it never made much sense to me,” I said slowly. “And the Messiah thing... I think what you believe makes a lot of sense. But...”

He nodded. “I know. I’ve taught a number of Christians who really struggled with this. Particularly Evangelicals... they really emphasize the personal relationship with him as savior. I know, it’s a very intense, personal sort of relationship that is hard to let go of.”

I sighed in relief. *He gets it.*

“It is much easier to relate to a God who is—at least in part—embodied in a person, than a God who is unknowable, unreachable, completely beyond identification or human understanding. It is not the only thing about Christianity that is easier... as I’m sure you have learned by now.”

I stared at my hands, discomfort churning in my chest.

“But we Jews simply cannot accept this concept. It is directly contrary to the commandment to believe in one unitary God. The first two of the Ten Commandments. We can’t reconcile this.”

I chewed on my lip and said nothing.

He studied me. “So... have I answered your questions?”

I gave him a sad smile. “I think you’ve created more questions than you’ve answered.”

He laughed. “Great! That’s what I like to hear.” He took a book off the pile he had collected from his library for the conversation and slid it across the desk to me. *The Real Messiah?: A Jewish Response to Missionaries*. “It’s a collection of essays tackling this issue from various angles, most of which we touched on, but if you want to read about it more in depth...” His voice trailed off as he studied the cover. “I’ll warn you, it doesn’t pull any punches. You might be a little upset by some of the things it says. But it raises some very important questions about Christian theology that you may already be asking yourself. It’s up to you whether you want to explore it from the Jewish perspective. Maybe your priest can recommend something from the Christian perspective.”

I picked up the book and studied it for a long moment, pursing my lips, torn between curiosity and foreboding.

Finally, I looked up at Rabbi Uri.

“Thank you,” I said, and slipped it into my bag. “I will think about it.”

He took a long pause, staring at his folded hands on the table, and then looked up. “Well... if we’re already talking about this, then I think this might be the right time to have

this conversation.” He smiled, and after another few moments, took a deep breath and said, “So... you and Alma.”

I looked away, feeling dread filling the pit of my stomach. I cleared my throat and looked back at him. “Me and Alma?”

He paused again, and then continued very slowly and carefully. “I can’t help but notice this really great chemistry you guys have. You seem to get along really well, and... well... I think it’s pretty obvious that there’s potential for something there.”

I didn’t answer. I just stared down at the floor.

“The thing is...”

“I know what the thing is,” I interrupted him.

“Okay. But let’s just put everything on the table so we can be totally honest here. Alma is an observant Jewish girl. She is very devoted to her faith and her heritage. But I can’t help but wonder if she and you are not being careful enough about boundaries.”

Anger started to rise in my chest.

“What kind of boundaries, Rabbi?” I asked, not looking at him.

“This trip to Granada, for example. Or really... all that time working alone together in the basement of the archives...”

“We’re not alone there,” I protested through gritted teeth. “There are plenty of other people around.”

“Still. It’s very intense, and kind of... intimate. I’m not sure it’s such a good idea. I don’t want either of you to get hurt.”

I pursed my lips, trying to swallow the anger. “Let’s say, in theory, that we would want to do something about this... ‘potential’, as you call it,” I said slowly. “Couldn’t I convert?”

“See... that’s the thing.” He rested a gentle hand on my arm. “If you do decide to convert, having Alma there as an ulterior motive is very problematic for the rabbinical court. We don’t want people to convert just to marry; we want them to convert only if they absolutely cannot see themselves living any other kind of life. So either way... I think it would be wise to kind of... keep your distance.”

I turned towards him, pushing my chair back a little. “Keep my distance?”

He nodded, watching me apprehensively.

“What does that even mean?” I demanded.

He sighed, pushing his black velvet skullcap back to scratch the bald spot on the top of his head.

I couldn’t hold back my anger any longer. “It’s fine for you to be interested in Judaism and to learn, but stay away from our women? That is what you are telling me?” I spat.

“Manuel... please. I know you’re upset.”

“She is too good for me?”

“It’s not about that at all! No one is better than anyone else...”

“You call yourselves ‘the chosen people’...”

“That’s not about quality, it’s about our mission in the world. A dog is no better than a cat, but they fill different functions—”

“So I’m a dog and Alma is a cat?!”

“It’s a metaphor—”

"It is a terrible and racist metaphor!" I raged, standing up in my chair. "We are two human beings!"

"Manuel, please sit down. I know this is upsetting and I'm sorry, but please hear me out."

I hesitated, and then sat down slowly, trying to breathe deeply to calm the pulsing in my forehead.

"Jews have lived under an existential threat since the destruction of the First Temple. For most of history, that threat expressed itself through hatred, violence, oppression, and genocide. That does still exist today, more in some places than others, but modern Jews are facing a very different kind of existential threat now. Assimilation rates in the USA are alarming beyond all measure. This isn't about individuals and how they might feel about each other. This is about our destiny as a nation."

I folded my arms. "What if a couple decided to raise their kids Jewish? Isn't Judaism passed down only through the mother?"

"Yes, and that might work for the first generation. But even they might look at their parents and say, 'Well, if this Judaism thing is so important, why is my dad not Jewish?' It certainly wouldn't be important enough to them to marry Jewish themselves. So what about the next generation, and the next? Jews are disappearing this way, Manuel. I'm not talking theoretically. This is very real and it is happening right now all over the modern Jewish world."

I just sat there scowling at him.

"This isn't only about Alma's commitment to Jewish continuity either. As a person who values Jews and Judaism and who believes they have something important to contribute to the world, now and in the future... this should be important to you, too."

I stood up again and fixed him with a glare. "I don't need you to tell me what is important to me... Rabbi."

Rabbi Uri looked up at me with sad eyes. "Please, Manuel. I mean no offense. I just don't want either of you to get hurt."

"Well," I said coldly, scooping up my shoulder bag and coat. "I appreciate your concern."

I stalked out.

36

Miriam

Miriam was tying her apron in preparation to go downstairs to the library when she heard voices from the stairway. She exchanged glances with her father, and they both froze, listening carefully.

Thump. Someone tried to open the door.

“Unlock it,” came a voice, and it made Miriam’s blood run cold. She recognized its smooth, sinister, soft quality.

Miriam cast a desperate look around the room and saw a pile of cloths and blankets lying next to her bed. Trying to keep totally silent, she wildly gestured to her father to come hide with her under the blankets.

“I’m sorry, señor,” came León’s voice. “My father keeps this locked all the time. I don’t know where there is a key. As I told you, we are expecting him home this afternoon... perhaps that would be a better time...”

Thump. It was much louder this time, as if someone was throwing his full weight against the door. Miriam tucked herself under the pile next to her father and started whispering every chapter of Psalms she could think of. Abraham grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight.

“Señor, please, is this really necessary? I don’t want my father coming home to broken furniture...”

Crash. The door burst open. From underneath the cloth, Miriam could see a mass of black. Heavy boots clumped along the floor in slow, deliberate steps. Miriam could hear her heart pounding and tried to breathe as slowly and quietly as she could. Her body shook.

“Are you quite satisfied, Señor Giménez?” León’s voice was weary and Miriam sensed some relief in it.

Giménez stood still and said nothing.

Then he turned suddenly.

“You realize why I am here, Don León, don’t you?”

“No, señor. And I do not appreciate this interruption at all.”

“You know your father was friends with the Jew de Carmona.”

Miriam’s heart pounded faster. Her father’s hand was clammy in her grip.

“De Carmona, señor? Yes. I heard that he disappeared the day the Tribunal decided to investigate him.”

Giménez began pacing again. “Do you not think it odd, Don León, that he and his daughter vanished so quickly from the *judería* on the very same day? I myself went to the house to collect the wine from the daughter on the very day that Sanchez confessed about it. There was no way she could have warned him so quickly.”

León was silent for a few moments. “Was that supposed to be some kind of explanation?” he asked.

“All I am saying, señor, is that your father had known ties with the Jew, and had every motive to hide him.”

“Ahh, I see. So you stormed in here knowing that my father was away in the hopes that you would find the Jew hiding in some corner of my estate?” León’s voice was sharp.

“Let me ask you something, señor.” Miriam saw the blob of brown that was León’s boots step closer to the blob of black. León lowered his voice to a menacing whisper. “Is it really God you fear, Giménez? Or is it, perhaps, the information that we have on you and your colleagues regarding the allocation of certain funds?”

Giménez was silent.

“I know how the Holy Office operates. I have seen it time and again. Your operations are funded by the property you confiscate, so it is natural for you to target wealthy families in your so-called ‘investigations’. And what better than a wealthy family that possesses information that might be dangerous to you? I know exactly why you are here. De Carmona is an excellent excuse. Well played, my good man.”

A pause. Giménez cleared his throat. “Don León, I will forgive you your deeply insulting accusations. God will be my witness that I am here only to protect the purity of the Christian faith.” His boots thudded towards the door.

“As far as I know, there hasn’t even been a proper denunciation for the Jew,” León continued. “This is just an excuse.”

“My good sir,” Giménez said, stopping by the doorway. “He is a Jew, and his denunciation was made centuries ago by Jesus himself. He should be grateful we are even offering the opportunity for a trial.” He was silent for a few moments, and Miriam wasn’t sure whether he had left or not. Then she heard him speak again: “What is this?”

León cleared his throat. “What do you mean? It is a circle of cloth.”

Miriam almost gasped. The red badge she had removed from her dress must have been on the floor.

“It looks like a Jew badge.”

“As does every other circle of red cloth in the world,” León’s voice was sharp and ridiculing. “Good Heavens, Giménez. Will you accuse me of stealing your horse if you find a horseshoe in my stable?”

After a pause, the boots clumped out of the room. León lingered a moment, then followed him, trying to close the broken door behind him.

The door swung back open on its hinge. Miriam flung the blanket off herself and ran to close the door, trying to find something to brace against it. She found a wooden plank under the bed and propped it against the wooden frame. Then she turned to face her father.

Abraham’s face was red and dripping with sweat. He wiped his brow with the cloth next to him. Both of them didn’t dare speak. Miriam pulled the little book of Psalms from underneath her pillow and handed it to him. They prayed silently together, side by side on the bed.

Hours later, the secret knock came at the door. They stood and removed the plank that was bracing the door closed. Don Tomás entered the room, examining the damage to the lock. León was right behind him.

Don Tomás faced Abraham and let out a deep sigh. “Praise the Lord. Where did you hide?”

Abraham pointed to the pile of blankets. “Good thing my daughter kept her wits about her.”

León’s eyes met Miriam’s. A surge of warmth rose in her chest and she quickly lowered her gaze, her heart pounding.

“Well, one thing is clear,” Don Tomás said. “You are no longer safe here. You need to leave.”

Miriam looked up at Don Tomás in horror.

“Leave?” she breathed.

“I have a ship ready to leave for Tangier at the port in Cartagena. It was supposed to set sail in a week but I can invent some reason it needs to leave now. I trust the captain and he will keep you safe and fed until you arrive in Tangier. Kadosh will be there and he should be able to arrange passage to Fez.”

Abraham took a deep breath and nodded. “How would we get to Cartagena?”

“We will leave tonight. You will be hidden in the back of my cart. I will come for you after sunset.”

“Don Tomás...” Abraham grasped his friend by the elbows. “Don’t you realize what this might mean for you?”

Don Tomás waved dismissively. “They won’t dare touch us. We have sensitive information that they wouldn’t risk us releasing just for the sake of a Jew. You know how they are.”

Abraham’s eyes welled with tears. “My friend, I cannot thank you enough...”

They embraced. León was standing behind his father in the doorway, his eyes burning into Miriam’s, but they did not say a word or move a muscle. A crushing sadness was settling over Miriam again, and she bowed her head and looked away.

Finally, Don Tomás released Abraham and gathered León with him to go down the stairs and make his preparations to leave.

Miriam stood by the window, watching the sky light up in shades of rich gold as the sun sank closer and closer to the misty mountains in the distance. There were thick clouds blowing in from the north.

“What is it like in the Maghreb?” she asked quietly.

Abraham looked up from his Hebrew manuscripts and thought for a few moments.

“Hot. Dry. Dirty.”

Miriam tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

“I won’t lie to you, my daughter. The situation is not so good there. The Moors have been more gracious with us than the Christians have, but Fez... your uncles’ descriptions are... not heartening.”

A tear streamed down Miriam’s cheek. “We don’t have a choice, do we.”

“Even if we did... who’s to say that Portugal or Rome would be a better choice in the long run?”

“I meant staying in Castile.”

Abraham sighed. “No.” He paused. “To tell you the truth, my feeling is that by this time next year, there will be no more Jews in Castile or Aragon.”

“It’s just not fair,” Miriam whispered, furiously wiping the tears from her face. “I love this land. Our family has lived here for a thousand years. We are Sephardim in our hearts and our souls. How could they force us to leave like this?”

“It’s not the first time and it won’t be the last. This is the story of our people.” Abraham stood up to join her at the window. “But you know, the story of our people is not just about oppression and suffering. It is the story of thriving, of joy, and of great faith. It is the story of a people that spins straw into gold, that makes the desert bloom. God promised

our father Abraham that he would curse whoever curses us and bless whoever blesses us. The Spaniards have long prospered from the blessings we brought, and now that they curse us, they will feel the consequences in time. You wait and see.”

Just after nightfall, the secret knock came at their door. Tomás led them quickly down the stairs, León keeping an eye out for stray servants ahead of them. They slipped out the back door and sprinted across the grass to the stable, where a horse and cart were waiting for them. Miriam felt several fat raindrops on her face as she stopped, trying to catch her breath, next to the cart.

“In the barrels. Quickly,” Don Tomás said, pointing to two large barrels in the back of the cart.

Miriam turned to León. He was standing there, studying her, and in the flickering light of Don Tomás’s torch she could see the helpless expression on his face.

“I... thank you for... everything,” she whispered.

He opened his mouth to answer but no words seemed to come. She swallowed and turned to climb into the cart, her heart heavy. She stood over the barrel, hesitating a moment to try and catch one last glimpse of León’s face, but he had already turned away and was walking towards the house. She bit her lip and blinked back her tears and stuffed herself into the barrel, hugging her knees. Her mother’s book of Psalms pressed against her side through the pouch Don Tomás had given her to carry it. After a few minutes, she felt the cart rattle and bump as the horse began moving.

Rain began to fall heavily and pound on the lid of Miriam’s barrel, seeping through the cracks. Her hair stuck to the back of her neck. She was extremely uncomfortable; her whole body ached from crouching for so long and not being able to stretch her legs. Her lungs felt crushed and she tried to keep her breath steady. Her thoughts kept drifting to León, and she kept trying to push him from her mind. But alone, stuffed in a barrel, there was no escaping her heart, and she could not deny that it throbbed in pain. She leaned her head against the side of the barrel and let the tears flow.

Never.

Never.

I will never see him again. And it’s just as well, because I never should.

Serves me right. Serves me right for letting this happen to me.

“Ima...” she moaned, grateful for the pounding rain to drown out her voice. “Ima... how I have let my heart fail you.”

Exhaustion eventually overcame her and she drifted in and out of sleep. Thoughts of her mother shifted into dreams. She was certain she felt her mother’s arms around her, holding her tight and safe, before jerking awake and remembering where she was.

After an eternity Miriam began to notice a little light seeping in through the cracks of her barrel. The sun was beginning to rise and they hadn’t reached the port yet. But as the light grew stronger, she noticed the sounds of horses and people, and realized they must have arrived in the city. The wagon finally stopped in a shaded place, and she heard Don Tomás climb back to near the barrels and whisper,

“I cannot risk letting you out of here just yet. I know it must be awful in there and I am so sorry. But I need you to stay there until sunset. We can’t risk anyone seeing you in daylight. Once the ship has left the port you will be able to come out of hiding.”

And then he was gone, and Miriam and her father were left to wait, crouched in the barrels. She continued to drift in and out of sleep, drifting between mourning what could never have been with León, the guilt she felt for that mourning, and the physical pain of being crouched in a barrel for so long.

When Don Tomás finally returned and opened the lids of the barrels, Miriam had to stifle a cry of relief. Abraham bent over and helped her stand up. Her legs were asleep and she could not stand. Her father helped her out of the barrel in the torchlight and held her steady until the strength returned to her legs. Miriam looked around her. They seemed to be in some kind of warehouse. The air was dank and smelled of fish and salt. Miriam could hear the pounding of the waves not too far away. She froze in fascination. She had never heard the sea before.

Don Tomás handed them each dark cloaks, and they tiptoed out of the warehouse and out onto the docks.

As they walked, Miriam heard the distant sound of hooves pounding. She looked up at Don Tomás, and he quickly motioned for Miriam and Abraham to get behind him. "Keep your heads down!" he hissed. He held up his torch, squinting at the approaching figure on horseback. "Who goes there?" he called.

The horse galloped closer and Don Tomás stood protectively in front of Miriam and Abraham, his hand drifting to the hilt of his sword.

"Stand down," called the figure. "It's me."

Don Tomás jolted in surprise. "León? What are you doing here?" he hissed as the horse pulled to a halt. Miriam gasped and looked up, her heart filling with a hope she didn't even know how to name.

León jumped off the horse and approached the three of them. His eyes flickered in the torchlight.

"I am so sorry, father," he said. "I just... I can't... I have to..." He looked past his father at Abraham and cleared his throat. "Señor de Carmona, I must speak to you."

Don Tomás stepped aside, looking utterly bewildered, but saying nothing. León and Abraham regarded each other for a few moments.

"I know this is crazy," León said. His eyes were wide and his voice taugth with emotion. "Just... hear me out."

"Well, spit it out, boy! You are endangering all of us!" Don Tomás hissed.

León stepped a little closer to Abraham. "Please, sir. Let me marry her."

Everyone stared at him. Miriam felt as though she couldn't breathe.

"What?" Abraham breathed.

"I know, sir. I know it is unthinkable. But hear me out. I can give her a good life. I can protect her. She will never go hungry. She will want for nothing. Yes, she would have to live as a *conversa*. But I would let her practice your faith in the way she wishes in secret. The Inquisition will never touch her."

Abraham looked incredulously from León to Miriam.

"You know where you are taking her. It is extremely dangerous and you can't guarantee that she will even survive, let alone lead a decent life. I can promise you that she will be safe and that she will thrive. Please, sir."

Abraham's eyes filled with tears. Don Tomás hung back, saying nothing.

Abraham turned to look at his daughter. She could not meet his eyes.

“How can I make this decision?” he whispered. He shook his head, looking back up at León. “How can I let my daughter marry a non-Jew, be baptized, and lead a life of secrecy, so contrary to the Torah and the traditions of our ancestors? How could I betray God this way?” He turned back to Miriam. “On the other hand... how can I condemn my own daughter to a life of poverty and strife... of danger... of misery... when there is an alternative?” Tears splashed down his face. “I cannot. I cannot make this decision.” Miriam finally looked up at him, her own eyes brimming with tears. “I have to leave this up to you, Miriam.”

Miriam’s heart pounded hard as León shifted his gaze from Abraham to her. He stepped closer and knelt down.

“I promise, I will make you happy,” he whispered. “You will want for nothing. You will be safe. I guarantee it. Please. I just... I can’t let you leave.” Miriam finally lifted her eyes from the ground to meet his. They were welling with tears. She looked past him at Don Tomás, who was standing there, his arms crossed, one hand over his mouth, brow furrowed in emotion. She looked at her own father, watching her expectantly. And she looked back down at León, his eyes pleading. “I love you.”

Miriam closed her eyes, hugging herself and bending forward as if in prayer. She felt dizzy with conflicting emotions: sadness, hope, fear, foreboding, guilt. Her mind was flooded with voices, flowing and ebbing to the rhythm of the waves...

“Give me... give me a moment,” she stuttered, and she turned away from the three men who waited for her to choose her destiny, and looked out at the sea.

It was pitch black and she could only make out the horizon that separated the black of the sky from the black of the sea if she followed the shifting reflection of the moonlight glimmering on the waves. She looked up at the moon, and then closed her eyes.

God... God... what do you want of me? She thought. I have spent my entire life trying to do what is right in Your eyes. I want nothing more than to please You and to carry out the mission You gave us as Your chosen people...

But I love him... could I ever find someone like him in the Maghreb? Someone I could love, much less someone who could give me a good, comfortable life? I don’t have to give up on the Torah entirely... I can still be a Jew in secret...

But what about our children? What about the future of my people? Raising them as Jews would be dangerous... even if he let me do that... and certainly after a few generations they would not know they were Jewish anymore, and they would assimilate. My own legacy as a Jew would be lost forever. I want my children and my children’s children to be Jewish, to be proud that they are Jews. I want them to carry on the mission God gave us in the world.

But if I don’t survive in the Maghreb, I won’t have any children at all...

Why do You test me like this? Why do You torture me with this most beautiful and powerful of emotions to tempt me away from everything I’ve ever believed in?

She drew a deep breath, opening her eyes and looking out at the twinkling stars. Something about their flickering light brought an image to her mind: the Sabbath candles. The candles burning by the window of their house in Seville, what seemed like several lifetimes ago. And an image of her mother’s face, her eyes filled with sadness, drifted before her.

Remember... for the past... for our mothers and our mothers' mothers, the generations of Jewish women who lovingly kept the Sabbath, sacrificing everything, sometimes their own lives, to pass it down to us...

Keep... for the future... for our daughters, and our daughters' daughters, who will someday light the Sabbath candles and think of us, and how much we sacrificed to keep this sign of the eternal love between us and God...

And she thought of the candles she had been forced to light in the corner these last few weeks, and imagined herself having to hide those candles forever.

We could have converted and stayed in Seville. My mother knew she was not strong but she risked the journey anyway. She sacrificed everything to pass the burden and gift of the Torah down to me. How could I even dream of rejecting it?

Her eyes welled with tears.

I know what I must do. And it is the most painful thing I have ever had to do in my life. But I'm going to do it for You, for Your Torah, for Your people.

For my mother.

She looked up. *Please... help me get through this.*

She lingered a moment longer, eyes lifted in prayer.

Then, she turned back towards León.

"No," she whispered.

The look on León's face shattered her heart into a thousand pieces.

"No," she repeated, and the tears began to flow. She shook her head. "How could I... how could I marry... in a church? How could I live a life of secrecy and lies, hiding who I really am?" She looked back up at León, her voice a trembling whisper. "My mother... she gave everything so that I would be able to live as a Jew. How could I betray her?"

León bit his lip and took a deep breath, then looked deep into her eyes. The sadness in them was more than she could possibly take. "You are sure?" His voice was faint.

"Yes," she whispered, and collapsed into sobs.

León got slowly to his feet. "Then this is all I ask," he said. He slid a gold signet ring off the finger of his left hand and held it out to her. "Take this."

Miriam looked at her father, then back at León.

"As a gift," he said weakly. "To remember me."

Miriam slowly extended her hand to accept it. León placed the ring in her hand, and then suddenly grasped her hand in both of his. She trembled at his firm, warm touch. This was strictly forbidden. But she could not bring herself to pull her hand away. She knew this would be the last time she would ever touch him.

He brought her hand to his face and pressed it to his lips. They stood there like that a few moments, and then he suddenly let go, as if breaking a spell. Miriam quickly pulled her hand away, her cheeks flushing in shame. The sensation of his lips against her skin burned into her fingers.

"Will I never see you again?" he whispered.

She blinked back a fresh wave of tears. She shook her head no.

"Never," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

And she could not take the pain of being in his presence one moment longer. She turned on her heel and ran, ran straight across the dock and up the gangway of the ship that was waiting for them. She crouched behind the rail and collapsed in sobs.

A few minutes later she felt a hand on her back. She jumped and lifted her head, turning around to look. It was her father. They studied each other, and then fell into each other's arms. They embraced and cried, not saying a word.

Don Tomás joined them and led them down into the belly of the boat, where a large, empty wooden chest waited for them. Don Tomás and Abraham embraced one last time, and Miriam and Abraham crouched into the box together. Don Tomás lowered the lid and they were engulfed in darkness.

"I am proud of you," Abraham whispered. "And your mother would be too."

Emptied of tears, Miriam just sighed, burying her head into his shoulder. She felt the ring in her right hand and turned it over and over, fingering its smooth surface.

One day... one day... I will return this to him, she thought as the chest rocked her gently, rising and falling with the waves. *One day, when I have moved on, and prospered, and married a good, devout Jewish man. When I am living a life that will make me happier and more fulfilled than the life I just refused ever could have.*

One day.

I stood over my suitcase on Sunday evening, my hands on my hips and my mouth scrunched to one side.

"Maybe I'm gonna need to lose the couscous idea," I mumbled. Some clothes were crunched into the bottom of the suitcase, and the rest was piled high with cans of tuna and beans, a box of shelf milk, packages of pasta, some granola bars, a loaf of bread, and a few bags of wheat semolina, along with all my dairy cookware and utensils, and yes, the couscous steamer. "I probably have enough in the way of grains... worst comes to worst, I'll have to live on rice or something."

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out.

"Hey Grandma!" I sang.

"Hi, honey. How are you?"

"Good. How was the party yesterday?"

"Loud. Really loud. The food... well, his family was hosting, and it was, you know..."

"Ashkenazi?" I grinned.

"You said it, not me."

"But what about Mimi? Was she happy?"

"Oh, she was glowing. Beautiful. He couldn't take his eyes off her the whole time. I think he can't believe his luck."

"I wouldn't either if I were him. I hope they took lots of pictures."

"You can count on that. We missed you there. You should have heard your parents boasting to the future in-laws about your findings. Your father especially."

I was speechless for a moment. "Really? Abba?"

"Yes. He's very proud of you, you know."

I sat back, a warm glow washing over me. Tears pricked at my eyes.

"So what's new with you?" Grandma asked.

"Well... I just finishing packing for our trip to Granada tomorrow." I glanced back at the suitcase. "I think I might have overdone it in the food department."

"Granada, hmm? Another school trip?"

"Um, no. Just me and Manuel."

There was a pause on the other end. "Oh."

The warm glow from earlier now prickled into irritation.

"What happened to you not frolicking on the beaches drinking martinis?" my grandmother asked. I could hear the smile in her voice but I was not in the mood for joking about this.

"First of all," I said sharply, "Granada is nowhere near the beach. Second of all, I couldn't find a kosher martini there even if I looked really, really hard. Third of all, I will have you know that we are *also* going to be visiting the old Jewish quarter of Lorca, which definitely falls under the general umbrella of our research. And you should be really excited about that."

"That does sound exciting. Have you had more time to read the file?"

“Not much, but we did go through the first page. What Abraham was accused of was aiding *conversos* in keeping their Jewish traditions in secret. They seem to have had concrete evidence of one incident, where he provided kosher wine for some families on a holiday.”

“Good for him!”

“I know, right? But the rest... it’s hard to know what’s true and what isn’t.”

“Any mention of them being aided by a Christian family in their escape?”

“No, nothing that we came across.”

Grandma paused and took a deep breath. “Well... I guess this is probably a good time to tell you the rest of the story.”

I froze. “The rest of the story? What do you mean? I didn’t realize there was more!”

“Well I gave you the short version. The long version is a little... juicier.”

“Grandma! You hid the juicy details from me?! Why would you do that?”

“I just...” she faltered. “I don’t know. The likelihood of it being true... well... I just wanted to wait until you had something, I guess.”

“You are unbearable! What’s the story?”

“Story goes...” She took a deep breath. “So, our maternal ancestor? Miriam?”

“Yeah...”

“The story goes that she fell in love with the son of the Christian family while they were helping her and her father.”

My enthusiasm died down very suddenly and I felt the irritation wash back over me. I chewed my lip. “Uh huh.”

“And that before they escaped, the Christian man offered to marry her, to give her a better life and protection. Apparently, given the circumstances, this would have been a pretty good deal.”

I hugged my chest with my free arm and said nothing.

“But she said no. She chose her devotion to her people and her family and the Torah over love. The story goes that he is the one who gave her that ring.”

There were a few moments of silence.

“Are you there?” my grandmother asked.

“Yeah, I’m here,” I said, my voice biting. “And that’s a pretty good story.”

Grandma paused. “Why do you sound angry?”

“Because I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t believe what?”

“That that’s the actual story. It makes no sense for you to have waited to tell me this until now. I know what you’re doing. This is supposed to be some kind of morality tale and you’re warning me about a relationship with Manuel again.”

Grandma tsked. “Oh Alma, please.”

“Because Mimi is marrying a Jew and you’re afraid that I won’t. When are you going to let this go and just trust me?”

“You don’t believe me when I tell you the family legend I heard with my own ears from my grandmother—*aleha hashalom*—and then you complain that *I* don’t trust *you*?” Grandma’s voice was very sharp.

“Don’t Jewish grandmother me,” I shot back. “If you’ve been waiting your whole life to pass it on to me, you would have done so ages ago.”

“Why is it so hard to believe that I had my reasons?”

“Whatever, Grandma. I’m going to finish packing.” And I hung up the phone without another word. I sat and stared at it and waited for her to call back, but she didn’t.

Manuel and I met at the metro station the following morning. He was carrying a mid-sized backpack, and his eyebrows shot up when he saw the suitcase I was lugging.

“We are going for three days, Alma,” he said. “Did you pack your entire apartment?”

“What do you expect me to live off of for three days? Apples?” I slipped my pass through the machine and walked through the turnstile.

“Actually, I did a little more research,” Manuel said, following me down the stairs to the subway platform. “Turns out, the fastest way to get to Granada is through Málaga anyway. And it turns out that there is a kosher café a fifteen-minute walk from the train station in Málaga.”

I turned to him, grinning. “I like where this is going.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say. The ride is about three hours. We could stop there for lunch, and then continue on to Granada.”

“I told you, you’re definitely starting to think like a Jew,” I shouted as the train pulled up next to us and the doors slid open. We stepped inside and took a seat. Manuel was staring ahead of him, his eyes a little glazed.

“Well,” he said finally, “maybe so, but I think I’ve decided that I’m not going to be one.”

I blinked. “One what?”

“A Jew.”

I looked at the floor. This wasn’t exactly surprising to me, but nonetheless, I couldn’t deny the sinking feeling of disappointment.

“Why, what happened in Rabbi Uri’s class last night?” I asked.

He shrugged, shifting uncomfortably. “Nothing in particular. Well... maybe something. We just had a little argument. It doesn’t matter.” He looked away, and after a few moments he said, “To be honest it’s not so much the idea of *being* Jewish that I have difficulty with. It’s the *becoming* Jewish. There’s just so much to take on at once... it’s so overwhelming. I wish there were a way to explore it and my relationship with it more gradually.” He paused again. “We talked about the Jewish view of Jesus...”

“Ahh,” I said.

“No, actually, that’s not what the argument was about. I thought it made a lot of sense.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Wait. Didn’t you just say you *didn’t* want to be a Jew? But you think the Jews are right about Jesus?”

“I didn’t say I think the Jews are right about Jesus. I said I understand your viewpoint. And it’s forced me to dig around in my own beliefs to work out what I really feel is true. Still not sure.”

I rubbed my forehead in confusion. “At this rate, you’ll end up a Hindu or something. I think we need to get you to seminary pronto.”

He laughed.

“Come on, you already worship cows...”

“I do not worship cows! I just don’t eat them!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He was digging around in his bag. Finally, he pulled out a book and handed it to me. *The Real Messiah? A Jewish Response to Missionaries.*

"Hmm, Aryeh Kaplan. He's awesome," I said. "Rabbi Uri gave this to you?"

"Yes. I haven't read it yet. I kind of want you to first. Then you can tell me how well you think I'll tolerate it."

I studied him. "What does that even mean? How on earth am I supposed to know?"

He shrugged. "I just... I trust you."

I scanned the back cover of the book. "So does this mean you've decided not to go to seminary?"

"No... it doesn't really mean anything. I still want to learn more about both faiths. But I think you're going to have to attend Shabbat meals without me, at least for a while."

Well, there was a legitimate excuse to be disappointed.

"Darn!" I whined. "Who's going to be my *Shabbos goy*?"

"You're a Jew," he said with a mischievous grin. "Improvise. You guys are good at that."

I rolled my eyes and cracked the book open. "What if we read it together? Would that make it easier?"

He paused. "I don't know."

"What are you afraid of, Manuel?" I looked him squarely in the eye. "That it'll turn you off of Christianity once and for all? It's just a book. Propaganda, if we're calling a spade a spade. I bet your priest in Brooklyn could offer some decent counterarguments if you just gave him a call."

"See, this is why I trust you." He smiled at me, his shoulders relaxing somewhat. "You never force your views on me. You have always been neutral and supportive about my exploring things on my own terms."

At least... as far as you know, said a voice in my head. I batted it away.

"I know it's ridiculous," he went on. "It's just very uncomfortable to encounter beliefs that are so contrary to yours, especially when they are presented in a very slick and glossy way, and especially when you're not sure how to counter their arguments." He sighed. "I'm just afraid it'll upset me, and leave me more confused than ever. Maybe it'll turn me off of Judaism too."

"Like I said." I winked. "The Hindus are waiting."

"What is the Hindu heaven like? Would I miss you there?"

I grinned. "Only if you get reincarnated as something really lame."

I pulled my suitcase closer and unzipped one of the outside pockets, dropping the book into it.

"I'll read it and give you my professional opinion."

We sat quietly for a few minutes. Then I spoke up: "Can I just ask you... this might be a hard question to answer. What *is* your spiritual experience of God? Like do you really think He could have been embodied in a person? When you speak to Him, who are you speaking to?"

He nodded, and took a good few minutes before answering. "Well... that's the thing," he said finally. "I was told to picture Jesus when I prayed. To speak to him. But I never did. I never could. For me, I pictured Jesus most easily from the stories in the New Testament. I pictured him as a kind teacher, as a leader. Most of all, as a friend. But I couldn't picture him as being the same as God in any way. And when I prayed, I always felt like I was speaking to

something much bigger, much greater than something that could possibly be embodied in a person. That 'person' of the Trinity is basically the Father, so I figured I was speaking to Him. But it never sat very well with me, this business of dividing Him up into persons. It was very hard for me to see Jesus as being an equal aspect of God. So I suppose the answer to your question is that my spiritual experience of God is almost exclusively that of the Father. And it seems that that is most similar to the concept of God that Jews have."

I nodded slowly. "So... I can see why you are not totally scandalized by what Rabbi Uri said."

"Yes."

"And... well... if you're not sure you believe in the Trinity, how could you consider yourself a Catholic?"

He just sighed. I decided it was best to let it go.

The Atocha train station was huge and airport-like, with high arched ceilings and a big indoor tropical garden in the atrium. Manuel tried to be patient as I took videos of the turtles in the garden as we waited. We boarded the train to Málaga and spent the ride going through Manuel's copy of the de Carmona file. (Mine, of course, had been forgotten at home.)

Málaga was bright and sunny and smelled of the sea. I was overcome with a sudden desire to see the beach, but we didn't have time. We had lunch at the kosher café Manuel had found, and then caught a bus to Granada.

We arrived in late afternoon and took another bus to Marta's apartment. At this point I was more in the mood to collapse in a heap and sleep than anything else, but Marta had other plans. Apparently she had pre-booked tickets to a night tour of the Alhambra, and she and her husband insisted on taking us out somewhere before that. I tried to suggest that they go without me, but Manuel said, "Oh no you don't" and dragged me out the door.

The apartment was in a district that Manuel had said used to be the old Jewish quarter. I didn't see anything indicating as much, but it was an interesting and quaint, if somewhat cramped little neighborhood with very narrow brick streets weaving through rows of small apartment buildings.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Manuel pointed past Marta at a storefront set into the stone wall across the street. I could see people sitting at a bar through the tall windows. "Tapas bar," he said. "Can't be in Granada and not have tapas." He grabbed the handle and swung the door open, gesturing for me to enter. José and Marta filed in after me. I let them ahead of me to take their seats, waiting for Manuel. The dim lighting, jazzy music, and thick, smoky air did not help me feel more awake.

"So," I said, "I guess we finally get to be the joke now."

Manuel furrowed his brow in confusion.

"An American Jew and a Christian Spaniard walk into a bar..."

Manuel cracked up as I grabbed one of the bar stools and perched on it. "So how does the joke end?" Manuel asked, sliding onto the bar stool next to me.

"You tell me." I stared across the bar at the bottles lining the walls. "I think the Jew says, 'I don't drink. Why am I here?'"

"No, I think that's what the Christian is supposed to say..."

"But only if he's a priest, and you're not."

"Still. You're making it sound like Jews don't drink. Rabbi Uri downs that scotch like no tomorrow every Friday night."

"Yes, well, he *is* a Habadnik." I shrugged. "But you're right, it's not true that I don't drink. I'll have a glass of wine or a beer now and then."

"Wine is problematic, I know, but does beer need kosher supervision?"

"No, as long as it doesn't have added flavor. But I hate the drinking culture. I always hated how my uncles and cousins act when they get drunk on Purim."

He gave an ironic smile. "Did you ever go to one of the student parties?" he asked.

"Oh, I know better."

"I wish I had known better when Rob dragged me to one the first week we were here."

Marta grabbed the bartender's attention and started ordering for all of us.

"*Disculpe*," I cut in. "*Nada para mi, gracias*."

Marta gave me a scandalized look and said something in her rapid sound-swallowing Andalusian Spanish that I could not understand. I opened my mouth to ask her to repeat that, but Manuel lifted his hand and responded to her in equally incomprehensible speech. After a brief discussion with the bartender, he turned back to me.

"I ordered you a beer," he said. "In Granada you get free tapas with your drink, and I asked for him to see if there are any fresh fruits or vegetables he can serve you."

I smiled in relief. "Thanks."

The bartender slid two tall glasses of beer in our direction. I took one and examined it.

"What is this?"

"Alhambra Reserva. It's pretty strong."

"I thought we were going to visit the Alhambra, not drink it."

Manuel snorted. "Is that how our joke ends?"

"If it does..." I looked up at him over my glasses. "We make a pretty lame joke."

Manuel laughed and clinked his glass against mine. "*L'haim*."

"*Salud*," I returned.

We took a taxi to the Alhambra, and when we arrived, I understood why Marta had ordered us tickets for the night tour. The atmosphere at night, with the lights reflecting on the fountains and streams, casting shadows on the elaborate tiling and plasterwork, gave the whole thing a mystic air. It was, hands down, the most beautiful building I had ever seen. There was something in the symmetry of it, the way the arches and domes and rooftops aligned and the way they reflected on the still pools, the constant soothing sound of flowing water. Those Moors, they knew what they were doing. On the other hand... this was the place where King Fernando and Queen Isabel signed the edict of the expulsion in 1492. I imagined them strolling alongside me, arm in arm, their footsteps and polite laughter echoing through the halls, as the mournful procession of Jews made its way out of the city.

"Thanks for nothing, guys," I mumbled.

"Did you say something?" Manuel tore his eyes off the ornate patterns on the ceiling to glance at me.

"Nothing," I said. "Just paying my respects to the jerks who humiliated, tortured, exploited, robbed and expelled my ancestors."

"They didn't build this place," Manuel said. "They aren't even buried here."

"Good thing, too, because I'd probably get arrested for spitting on their graves."

"Not that I would stop you," he said, "but you know, it's thanks to them that Columbus discovered America."

"Oh, don't even get me started on Columbus and the colonies in America and what they did to the Native Americans."

"Still, America has been a wonderful place for Jews."

"That's thanks to the originally British founding fathers, not to the Spaniards."

"I'm just saying. It's complex. Isabel was known for being rather sympathetic towards the Jews. She was very hesitant to expel them. It was Torquemada who talked her into it. She was really primarily concerned with the souls of humanity and the purity of the Catholic faith. She had good intentions."

"Oh I'm sure. That's why she signed a document that forbade the Jews to carry gold or silver with them out of the country. Because she was worried about their souls."

"She was probably hoping it would persuade them to stay and convert."

"Okay *why* are you defending Queen Isabel?"

"I'm not. I'm just saying, it's complex."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Spoken like a true historian."

When we finally got back to the apartment, I collapsed into the bed of the spare room and fell right asleep without even changing into pajamas.

38

Manuel

I couldn't sleep.

It's not that the sofa was uncomfortable; it opened up to a decent-sized bed, and the mattress was a little lumpy, but I'd slept fine in much worse conditions.

Part of it was the memories. Marta and José lived in the heart of the Realejo quarter, just a few blocks away from my childhood home, the church, and the park by the river where I spent so much time in my adolescence. I was itching to go see them, but even looking across the living room at small balcony, I saw an image of my father standing there, leaning on the banister, a cigarette dangling from his hand as he looked out over the street. I could almost hear his quiet, husky voice, my mother's boisterous laughter in response. I could almost smell the smoke. I buried my face in the blanket, trying to block out the memory of the smell. It had been those cigarettes that had killed him.

And then there was that argument with Rabbi Uri that for some reason I could not stop playing over and over in my mind. He had been out of line, and offensive, and presumptuous, but I couldn't help but wonder if maybe I wasn't being careful enough about my friendship with Alma. She was becoming extremely important to me and I could not deny that. And I had to admit that if it were up to me, and if the circumstances were different, I would definitely want us to be something more than friends. But things were what they were and I had to live with that.

There was a part of me, though, that wanted to know if she felt the same. Olivia seemed to think so, and she had turned out to be remarkably on target for someone who initially struck me as shallow and giggly. There were those moments, when one of us leaned a little too close, or made an offhand insinuating joke, and the tense silences that followed them. And there was, of course, Alma's strangely hostile behavior whenever Olivia was mentioned. But it would be totally inappropriate to broach the subject. What would it accomplish anyhow? It would be the most awkward conversation of my life, and trust me, there have been a few. It might change everything. It might scare her away. And I didn't want to lose her as a friend. It was getting to a point where the thought of spending a few days away from her made me sad, and that was part of why I had dragged her down here to Granada in the first place. The thought of her cutting off our friendship because of a few misplaced romantic feelings was too painful to bear.

But maybe that was exactly the problem.

I sighed and snuggled into the pillow. My thoughts wandered to the room just down the hall where I knew she was asleep. The image of her sleeping on the couch in her apartment that first evening in Madrid drifted into my mind. The way her hair spilled around her face, her features relaxed, her lips slightly open... her ribs rising and falling with her rhythmic breaths. How I had longed, even then, to cross the room and nestle in beside her, to run my fingers through her hair...

Don't even go there, I scolded myself. Don't you dare.

"*Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo...*" I began to whisper. Padre Carlos had taught me to recite the Lord's Prayer when I found my thoughts straying to places they shouldn't

go. "*Santificado sea tu nombre...*" I stopped and sighed, feeling a heavy, pining sort of sadness settle over me.

This is not good, I thought. This is not good at all.

I think I might be in trouble.

And by 'trouble', I mean love.

"Wakey wakey!"

Something was poking me in the arm. I groaned.

"Come on, you lazy Spaniard, don't '*mañana*' me. If you want to show me around this place you're gonna have to get up. It's nine thirty already."

My eyes fluttered open to see Alma perched on the coffee table in front of me, her black hair wet and smelling like shampoo. She was holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

"There ya go," she said, uncrossing her legs and standing up. "The Valézs...zz...es..." She looked confused, then stopped and tried again. "Marta and José are at work. They left me a key." She held it up.

"You," I croaked, "are the most annoyingly cheerful alarm clock ever."

She cackled and headed off into the kitchen. "You want some eggs?" She called. "I make a mean French omelet, and she has the right kind of butter here."

I hoisted myself up. "Sounds good," I said. I turned to the kitchen and watched her crack two eggs into a glass, examine them, then pour in a little water and beat them vigorously with a fork. I stood up and walked to the kitchen. Alma glanced at me from the stove, which was now totally encased in aluminum foil.

"Your mom is right," she said. "You seriously need a haircut."

"Well it's a good thing she has you as her agent here to tell me what to do."

"Remember, she wouldn't have let you come otherwise!" Alma lifted the frying pan and expertly flipped the omelet with it.

"Wow," I said. "That's impressive."

"I learned from the best," she said, sliding the omelet onto my plate. "So. What are we doing today?" She turned back to the stove, cracking more eggs into the glass.

"Well, I think just... walk around the neighborhood," I said, slicing the omelet and lifting a piece to my mouth. "And then we can take a bus to the cemetery."

"Sounds like a plan," she said.

"Is there anything else in Granada you would like to see?" I asked.

"Well, the Jewish stuff, of course," she said, pouring the eggs into the sizzling pan. "Didn't you say we're in the Jewish quarter?"

"Well... there isn't really anything left from then. It's like in most of the places there used to be significant Jewish communities in Spain. We Spaniards have not been particularly respectful towards your past, I am afraid."

"I noticed that about you," Alma muttered. "Um. That is, not *you*—"

"I know. There's a little museum a few streets over about the *judería*, though. It's in the opposite direction, but maybe if we have time left over we can make a stop there."

The sky was a deep blue and there were occasional white clouds offering intermittent shade from the bright April sun. Not that we needed it in the narrow brick streets of the Realejo district. In a surprising show of tact, Alma had left her video camera at home, and stayed mostly silent as we walked. I led her through the alleys, past the

façades of stucco painted in varying shades of gray, yellow, and red, and stopped in front of a building of brick. It was five stories high, with long, narrow balconies looking out over the street. I stepped back until my back was pressed against the white stucco wall on the opposite side, squinting up at the third story. I couldn't see much from this vantage point, and I could not recognize much of anything. Even the banister had been repainted to a darker shade of green.

I pointed. "*Eso...*" I said, and then gave my head a quick shake and switched back to English. "That balcony, on the third floor. The only home I remember from before we moved to Brooklyn."

Alma smiled at me. "You can say it in Spanish, I'll understand. Probably. Most likely. If you say it slowly."

"Don't tempt me to forget my English."

We stood there for a few moments, leaning against the wall and looking up.

"Speaking of reasons for your mom to kill you," Alma said finally, "I better get a picture of you here."

I sighed.

"Better yet..." She glanced back and forth down the street and spotted a woman walking past on a perpendicular street. "*¡Disculpe!*" she called out, sprinting towards the woman, "*¿puede tomar una foto de nosotros?*" The woman cast her a glance, shook her head and kept walking. Alma turned back to me, disgruntled. "Sheesh, people here are grouchy. Back up and stand in the middle of the street so I can catch as much of the buildings as possible."

I did as I was told, but before Alma had set up her phone to take the picture she turned, apparently having noticed another woman down the street, and called out to her to ask if she would photograph us. This one at least took the phone, even as she pursed her lips in visible irritation. Alma sprinted back towards me, threw her arm across my back and smiled brightly. I felt flustered and disoriented for a good few seconds. I don't think she had ever stood so close to me before. I tentatively put my arm around her and tried to relax my face into a smile. The woman snapped a few pictures and then handed the phone back to Alma.

"*Gracias,*" Alma chirped.

"*De nada,*" the woman replied, finally giving a friendly smile, looking both of us in the eye. As she walked away she tossed over her shoulder: "*Que bonita pareja.*"

I was grateful that Alma seemed to miss both that comment and the subsequent reddening of my face as she examined the photos.

"This'll do," she pronounced, and put her phone away. "So. What now?"

I led her to the wide, two-lane Carrera de la Virgen, and crossed the street towards the church. The trees planted along the sidewalks and in the island dividing the road definitely seemed taller than I remembered. It was modest façade for a church; yellow stucco with white plaster flourishes around the windows, including a statue of the crucifixion over the double oak doors. Two spires rose above the buildings to each side.

"I'll wait out here," Alma said.

I turned to her, my eyebrows raised. "You... don't want to come in with me?"

She shifted uncomfortably.

"It's okay," I said quickly. "You don't have to. I'll be out soon."

But when I pulled the door handle, it didn't budge.

"Strange," I said.

"Is it supposed to be open?" Alma asked.

"Padre Carlos had it remain open all day."

"Maybe the policy has changed."

I stepped back, feeling a lump growing in my throat.

"It's all right," Alma said. "We'll visit him at the cemetery later, right?"

I nodded, looking up at the spires. I sighed, then crossed myself discreetly and kissed my hand. I turned back to Alma, who was looking off down the street.

"Let's go to the park by the river and sit down."

We found an empty bench near the bridge over Río Geníl and Alma produced some pears to snack on. I pointed out the library nearby, and told Alma about how my mother used to walk me there and then meet up with my dad for a picnic lunch by the river. We listened to the rush of the water and breathed in the damp air, and Alma found another person willing to take pictures of us leaning against the stone railing of the bridge. Luckily, this one was a friendly American tourist who did not throw out any embarrassing comments.

As we headed towards the bus stop to start our way to the cemetery, Alma finally spoke.

"So... you never really told me. What happened to your father?" she asked.

I drew a deep breath to meet a fresh wave of the bittersweet longing that had been rising and ebbing since arriving in Granada. "Lung cancer. He was a heavy smoker." I paused, noticing that there were several people at the stop and only one space left on the bench. I gestured to Alma for her to sit.

"That's fine, I'd rather stand. How old were you when he was diagnosed?"

"Eight." I leaned against the post supporting the bus stop shelter, staring down at the pavement in front of me. "At first things looked good. The cancer responded to the chemotherapy and it looked like he'd make it. But a year later things went downhill very fast. It was only about three months from the bad news until he passed away."

"How old were you then?"

"Ten."

"And that's when you met Padre Carlos?"

"Well, no, my father took me to church sometimes and was friendly with him. But I didn't really know him at all until he started coming to visit my father at the hospital. He would bring board games to play with me, giving my mother a chance to go take a walk or visit a friend. When my father died, he was there within the hour. He took care of the funeral arrangements. My mother was hardly functioning for the first month or so, and he arranged for people from the community to send us meals, clean the house, do our laundry. Sometimes he would come do it himself. I have a memory of sitting on my sofa in the living room watching him fold my shirts. He was really an extraordinarily kind man."

Alma studied me. After a moment, she said, "Sounds like a great role model for you, especially after losing your father."

I nodded. "My mother was always very grateful to him, even though she refused to have anything to do with the church and constantly complained about his political and

religious views." I did not feel like elaborating, and fortunately, she did not press the issue. She was fiddling with the zipper on her bag. Finally, she said,

"How do you even survive after that? I'm not exactly close with my father, but if he had passed away when I was a kid, I would have grown up a dysfunctional wreck."

I shrugged, looking at her. "You find strength in yourself that you never knew existed." I looked back out at the street. "You would be surprised what you are capable of coping with."

"You, maybe. Not me."

I turned towards her, looking into her eyes. "You gravely underestimate yourself, Alma."

She looked away. We were silent for a while.

"So what's the story with your mom's side?" Alma asked. "Why doesn't she know any of her aunts or uncles?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that my grandmother was basically excommunicated from her family when she married my grandfather. No one ever told me why. I'm not sure even my mother knows why. She would always get irritable when I asked about it. My grandmother died before I was old enough to ask."

"Sheesh. Why would they hate your grandfather that much?"

"That's what makes it even more baffling. My *abuelo* was the least offensive person I have ever known. He was quiet and very kind, and never said a bad word about anyone. I can't imagine what he possibly could have done to make my *abuela's* family so angry. I think she did have a few siblings, but I don't know anything about them."

"My family has some stories of epic dramas like that, family feuds that lasted a few generations, but nothing quite that extreme," said Alma. "It's such a shame. So much needless anger and hatred imposed on the innocent following generations."

"Well, at least that hatred was not passed down to me. No one ever spoke about the Medranos—negatively or positively. I have thought about trying to find them when I'm done researching my father's line. I might have cousins I never knew existed."

"That would be cool." She was watching me thoughtfully, with an intensity I hadn't remembered seeing before. "It's so... interesting to see you in your natural habitat," she said. "It's like getting to see a side of you that I could never have known otherwise."

I smiled. "Maybe when we get back to New York, you will take me on a tour of Albany."

She snorted. "Yeah. Albany. Way exotic."

"I really have to meet your grandmother."

She looked at me sideways. "Not sure that would be such a great idea."

The bus pulled up with a screech and hiss, and I didn't get a chance to inquire further.

The bus took us up through the city and past the Alhambra, which was even more impressive in broad daylight, crowning the lush green hilltop with its stone towers and walls. The entrance to the cemetery was teeming with tourists who had come to look at the historical monuments and gravestones.

“Do you want to see them?” Manuel asked as we stepped off the bus.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “A bunch of crucifixes and angel sculptures erected for random dead Spaniards? No thanks. We’re here to see your dad.”

He smiled.

I spotted a flower vendor by the entrance and pointed him out to Manuel. He shrugged.

“Papa wasn’t a flower person.”

We crossed to the modern section and made our way in. The graves were marked with large marble slabs over the ground, and there were lots of trees everywhere, and bushes and potted plants with flowers. I followed Manuel as he walked without hesitation through the lots, guided by a memory engraved deeply into his muscles. Finally he stopped, at the corner of one of the lots, looking down at the gravestone and letting out a slow breath.

Miguel Aguilar de Morales
1967 – 2000

Manuel pointed to the graves next to it. “His parents,” he said. I nodded. “My mother’s parents are over there.” He pointed somewhere across the lot.

I knelt down and picked up a pebble, placing it solemnly on the gravestone.

“What are you doing?” Manuel asked.

“Jewish custom.” I stood up. “I’m going to give you two some time.” I turned around and wandered off, examining the other gravestones in the area. I sneaked a glance behind me at Manuel, who was now kneeling next to the grave, his eyes closed and his lips moving. I turned away quickly and stopped in front of a tree, staring at the pattern in its bark.

Something about being with Manuel here in Granada was... I don’t even really know how to describe it. Maybe “intimate” is the right word. I mean, I had known intellectually about his life, but being here with him really immersed me in his world. And brought up all these warm feelings that I wasn’t even sure what to do with. Like, right at that moment, I felt this inexplicable urge to walk over there and give him a big, long hug.

But somehow... even though I hadn’t given a second thought to hugging male friends in the past... it didn’t seem appropriate. We were dancing on the edge of this fuzzy sort of boundary that we had never really gotten around to defining. And maybe we should have.

Because the fact was that I felt closer to him than I had felt to pretty much anyone else in my life. There was something so comforting about him. He put up with me even when I was being bossy or cranky or overexcited. He laughed at my stupid jokes and

made me laugh with his. And how ironic was it that the person I seemed to connect with most deeply on matters of faith was a Christian?

A Christian.

I swallowed, feeling a little twinge of doubt, a creeping sense of foreboding. And a voice in my head said, *Maybe in some ways, Grandma was right. Maybe this trip is a little too much.*

My stomach turned over in guilt as I thought about how I had ended our last conversation. I slipped my phone out of my pocket, counting back six hours in my head, and even though there was a good chance she'd be awake... I thought better of it and put my phone back.

I turned around to look at Manuel again. He was standing up now, and seemed to be wandering off towards his maternal grandparents' grave at the other side of the section. I hesitated, watching him brush back his shock of wavy black hair that had blown in his face in the wind. Then I walked around the other end of the section, spotting a bench near the grave where he had stopped. I reached it and sat down.

As Manuel stood there, a little old lady in an electric wheelchair drove up. She was short and slight and had wispy white hair tied back in a bun. She stopped short right in front of me, apparently having caught sight of Manuel. She stared at him for a few moments, then noticed me out of the corner of her eye and turned to me.

"¿Quién es?" she asked. I blinked.

"Umm..." I said. "Manuel Aguilar?"

"Aguilar y?" she asked.

"Umm..." What was his mother's surname again? "El... El..."

"Elvira?" she prompted.

"Sí!" I exclaimed. "Elvira."

"Su nieto?" she breathed.

She was asking if he was "his grandson", or "her grandson", or maybe even "their grandson". I glanced from her to the grave, feeling thoroughly confused. *"Lo siento..."* I said. *"No sé."*

After a few moments, Manuel looked up and saw her staring at him. He glanced behind him, and once he had determined it was indeed him she was staring at, he took a step closer.

"¿Eres el nieto de Rosa Medrano?" she asked.

He blinked in surprise. "Sí. ¿Y quién usted es?"

"Soy su hermana."

I gasped. His grandmother's sister!

Manuel stood there in utter shock for a few moments, then knelt down and kissed her solidly on each cheek, babbling giddily *"¡Mi tía abuela! ¡Mi tía abuela!"* They ranted at each other in rapid-fire Spanish for a few minutes. She introduced herself as Sara Medrano.

"My parents and sisters were very strict about not being in touch with Rosa," she said in Spanish. *"I was also angry with her. But our last sister Ana just passed away, and it filled me with regret about Rosa. I decided to come visit her and reconcile in the way I can, even though it is too late."* She shook her head in wonder, staring at Manuel wide-eyed.

"What an incredible coincidence."

Manuel blurted out the obvious question: *"Why did they cut off communication with her?"*

Sara studied him with her dark brown eyes, which, I realized, reminded me a lot of Manuel's mother's.

She cast a look around, as if checking to make sure no one was listening.

"Do you not know?" she whispered.

Manuel blinked. *"Know what?"*

She stared at him with wide eyes. *"You really don't know? She never told you?"*

He shook his head.

She looked over at me, as if suddenly remembering I was there. *"You are his wife?"*

I felt my cheeks get very warm.

"No, she is my friend," Manuel said quickly. *"She is American. I live in America now. We are studying in Madrid for the semester, we just came to visit Granada during our break. We are returning to Madrid tomorrow."*

"No no no." She shook her head. *"You must come to my house in Cartagena before you return. You will come, and I will tell you everything."*

Manuel glanced at me. *"We were going to go to Lorca tomorrow,"* he said. *"That's not far from Cartagena, right?"*

"Two and a half hours by train," Sara nodded. *"I'm afraid I can't offer you a place to stay for the night."*

"We'll splurge on a hotel," I said to Manuel in English. "We can stay an extra day. I've had an inexplicable urge to see the sea anyhow." I turned back to Sara, and Manuel and I said in unison: *"We will come."*

40

Manuel

Our final stop at the cemetery was Padre Carlos's grave. I was very distracted, my head still spinning from the serendipity of meeting my great-aunt and the questions she hadn't answered yet about my family. Between that and the vague instructions I had been given at the front desk, I could not figure out where we were supposed to go, and I was at the verge of giving up when Alma spotted his name on a modest gravestone at the corner of one of the lots.

I felt a weary sadness settle over me as I stood over the grave. He had been like a second father to me, and now he, too, rested deep beneath this ground.

I thought about him, about his smile, his hug, his words of comfort and encouragement when I felt so alone.

But with Alma standing next to me, I also thought about his harshness, his rigidity, and his stifling of my curiosity. He would not approve of this friendship, for sure. I realized now, for the first time, with absolute certainty, that I did not feel ashamed or guilty about that anymore.

As I realized that, I felt a weight lift from my chest. I could still love him. I could still feel grateful for everything he had given and taught me. I could still be devoted to God and to finding the truth. That didn't mean I necessarily had to follow his path.

I looked up at the clouds drifting lazily overhead. *Thank you for everything, Padre*, I thought.

I turned to Alma. "Let's go."

I swept past her and walked towards the exit, my steps solid and sure.

We rose early the next morning to catch the bus to Lorca. Marta made quite a scene at the bus stop with her tearful goodbye, repeating again and again to give her love to my mother and kissing my cheeks every time I stood still long enough. Alma finally managed to pry me away and shove me onto the bus, and we settled in an empty bench towards the back. I had brought the de Carmona file with us, but when I pulled it out, Alma said it made her carsick, so I put it away.

"How crazy is it that your great-aunt happened to show up just while we were there?" She shook her head. "Along with the totally insane serendipity we've had with our research, you'd think there was a God or something."

"I still can't get over it!" I exclaimed. "Totally crazy. I'm so annoyed she wouldn't tell us at the cemetery. I'm dying to find out what the big secret is."

"Me too!" She smiled at me. "It's funny, isn't it? We started out researching both of our families, then we picked up a thread on your dad's family... then we lost it and found a thread on my family... and all of the sudden we're learning about your mom's family instead!"

"Not exactly genealogical research," I said. "But yes, you're right. It is funny. Especially since we were just talking about it a few hours before."

She looked out the window at the city fading into the distance. "Are you sad to leave Granada so soon?"

“A little bit.” I paused. “There’s nothing really there for me anymore, though. Just ghosts.” I was silent for a little while. “You know... I had always thought that after I finished my degree at NYU I would come back. Seminary or not. But now I’m not sure. I feel like in many ways, I belong but I don’t belong... in both places.”

“Kind of the story of your life, isn’t it?” Alma looked at me, her face suddenly serious. I cocked my head at her curiously. “You and Spain, you and the US, you and Christianity... even you and Judaism. You’re always caught in between.”

I chewed on that insight for a while.

“In some ways I feel the same about me,” she went on. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t belong... I have a big family that I belong to, but I’ve always been the weird religious one. That’s why my grandmother and I were always so close. I identified with her in ways that my siblings and cousins didn’t. And I’ve always had this obsessive interest in family stories, in our history.”

“Yes, you told me. Your parents think it’s a waste of time.”

I saw a smile twitch at the corner of her mouth. “I think they might be reconsidering that, though.”

We were silent for a while, and eventually I noticed that she had fallen asleep. Her head was drifting towards my shoulder, and at a certain point came to rest on it. I stiffened, not sure whether to nudge her away. Eventually I relaxed and leaned towards her myself, resting my head against hers. I closed my eyes, imagining that for just this moment, the barriers between us were not there.

We arrived in Lorca. The plan had been to walk to the castle, since there was no other public transportation. But Alma took one look at the hill with the fortress, towering above the city, and said “We’re taking a cab.” I looked down at her suitcase—lighter now that part of the food had been eaten, but still not something I would want to drag up that hill—and readily agreed.

I managed to convince the guy at the front desk to let us leave Alma’s suitcase with him, and then we headed straight for the site of the Jewish quarter excavation. We walked in silence through the ancient stone corridors and archways. There was a constant chilly breeze blowing in from the east. As we walked along the walls of the fortress, I looked out over the modern city of Lorca stretched below us. The air was somewhat misty and I could only just make out the vague silhouettes of the other mountains in the distance.

I noticed Alma hugging herself as she walked.

“You cold?” I asked.

Alma scowled at me. “Don’t you dare offer me a sweater, you cliché.”

“I’m not a cliché. I’m a gentleman.”

Alma snorted.

“Fine. Maintain your feminist dignity and be cold. I don’t care.” I shrugged and kept walking, tugging pointedly at my own sweater. We walked for a few more minutes until Alma suddenly stopped.

“Fine. Maintain your pompous chivalry and give me the sweater.” She rolled her eyes and held out her hand in resignation. I cackled triumphantly, dug my extra sweater out of my backpack and handed it to her. I watched her put it on, amused at how its knitted maroon folds drowned her small frame.

“What are you smiling at?” she snapped.

"It's huge on you."

"It's not my fault you're freakishly tall." She tossed her ponytail, her gentle black curls bouncing, and strode ahead of me on the path, trying to roll up the sleeves to free her hands.

"Why, you are most welcome, milady," I called after her.

She stopped and turned around, looking sheepish. "Sorry," she said. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." I watched her as she turned around and kept going. *She likes when I hold doors for her and things like that*, I thought. *I wonder what it is about wearing my sweater that's got her all snippy*. Then I remembered her reaction when I told her to forget about paying me back for the kosher food I brought her our first evening in Madrid. *We are not dating and I don't have to put up with this from you*, she'd said. Maybe it was a similar discomfort with a gesture that was kind of intimate, and might be interpreted as romantic. My heart sank a little.

We tagged along with a group tour of the site. Alma tried to film the entire thing, tripping over herself on several occasions because she forgot that she was supposed to be watching where she was going. I ended up grabbing the camera from her and telling her I'd do the filming if she would just focus on not falling into a ditch and killing herself.

There wasn't a whole lot to see outside, at least from my perspective; just a lot of ruins, which apparently were the foundations for the Jewish homes that once stood there. But soon enough we reached the covered area marked "Restos Sinagoga", and we found ourselves standing, utterly speechless, in the reconstructed synagogue. The lights reflected yellow on the smooth lacquer of the beautiful wooden arched ceiling, and cast shadows through the wooden lattices in front of the women's section. Something about it sent a shiver up my spine.

"Goosebumps," Alma murmured to me, under the reverent hush of the tour group. "I'm having serious goosebumps. This place... it reminds me of what Ester said about the way members of her family felt whenever they saw something related to Judaism..."

"*La llamada de la sangre*," I whispered.

"Yeah. 'The call of the blood'. There's this strange... familiarity about this place."

"You know what's really weird, though?" I said softly. "I have the same feeling."

We looked at each other.

"Well, it's not entirely impossible that the Aguilars were from Lorca too, you know," Alma said. Her eyes lit up. "Hey... how crazy would it be if our ancestors knew each other?"

I shook my head and laughed. "Now you're just getting carried away... even if they did live in Lorca, they definitely didn't live in the Jewish quarter, and they definitely would not have prayed in this synagogue."

"True." Alma nodded, backing up the step to go back outside.

After the tour of the Jewish quarter, we moved on to the rest of the fortress, but we got bored with it pretty quickly and decided to head back down the hill. We took a taxi back into town to visit the Archeological Museum, where some of the items that had been found in the Jewish quarter were on display. Alma struck up a conversation with one of the curators, and when he managed to glean the gist of the de Carmona file from Alma's broken Spanish, he was very enthusiastic and said he would speak to the head archivist at the

National Historical Archives about getting a copy for the museum. Then he gave us a detailed tour of the exhibit.

When we were done there we headed out to catch the bus to Murcia. Alma had found us a decent deal on two rooms in a modest hotel near the beach in Cartagena, and she was determined to have some time to work on the de Carmona file before we headed over to my great-aunt Sara's house in the evening. I was starting to get really sick of all the traveling and almost found myself looking forward to getting back to our normal routine in Madrid.

We finally arrived at the hotel at about four in the afternoon. Alma deposited most of her stuff in her room, and then informed me that we were going to work on the file on the beach. I've never been a big fan of beaches—the sand drives me crazy—but clearly, I did not have much say on the matter. She packed some bread and tuna and red peppers in a plastic bag.

"A picnic of sorts," she said.

"What am I going to put on the bread?" I asked.

"What, you don't like tuna?"

I just looked at her.

She didn't get it. "Why are you looking at me like that?" Then it suddenly clicked. "Oh right! *Fish!* I don't even think of fish as meat..." She dove back into her room and emerged with a jar of peanut butter. "This good?"

I smiled. "That's fine."

She simply turned and began walking towards the elevator. It was only when we were on our way down to the lobby that I realized that she hadn't uttered a single derisive word about vegetarianism.

And it was only when we had walked down to the boardwalk, found a nice bench, and settled in that I realized I had forgotten to bring the de Carmona file downstairs.

"Well, might as well eat first, then you can go get it later." Alma spread a generous helping of tuna on a slice of bread and bit into it. "Oh my God. So hungry." She sighed and looked out over the water. "I wonder if my ancestors escaped through the port here."

I followed her gaze. "We'll probably never know." I cleared my throat. "I remember you mentioning that your grandmother said there was a Christian family who helped your ancestors escape..."

"Yeah..." She sighed again. "I think if any evidence of that exists, we should have seen it by now. They would have mentioned it in the file. Right?"

"Probably."

We sat and ate in silence, enjoying the steady, warm breeze and the strong afternoon sunshine. Alma finished eating and looked out at the horizon. After a few minutes, I heard her voice, soft and low, over the wind and the waves.

"*Hija mía, mi querida, amán, amán, amán...*" she sang, watching the sea as if in a trance. The melody was slow and haunting. "*No te eches a la mar... que la mar está en fortuna, mira que te va llevar...*"

"What is that?" I asked gently. She started and looked at me as though she had forgotten I was there. She flushed a little.

"Um... I don't know," she stuttered. "Just a song... a song in Judeo-Spanish my grandmother used to sing. The sea... it reminded me of the lyrics, and her voice just sort of floated into my head."

"It's pretty," I said. "Keep going."

"*Que me lleve y que me traiga, amán amán,*" she continued softly, "*siete puntas de hondor... que m'engluta pexe preto, para salvar del amor.*" She stopped, pursing her lips. "I had never understood any of the lyrics before."

"I don't understand all of them either, but it's pretty depressing."

"Most Ladino songs are. Either melodramatic or really dumb or both. But yeah. Don't throw yourself into the sea... to save from love...?"

"Seriously, what was your grandmother implying?" I grinned. She responded with something between a cough and a nervous laugh, not meeting my eyes. She turned back to the sea. I watched her, recalling her hesitation when I mentioned that I wanted to meet her grandmother.

Para salvar del amor...

I felt a heavy sadness settle over me again, realizing that I identified with these lyrics far more than I wanted to.

Enough, I scolded myself. *Get it together and move on.* But all that did was pile shame, anger, and guilt on top of the sadness.

I stood up, brushing my hair out of my eyes.

"I'm going to go get the file," I muttered, turning away to walk towards the hotel. I found my feet carrying me faster and faster, feeling almost pursued, until I burst into a full-fledged run.

When I reached my room, I dug the file out of my backpack. I stood there for a moment, looking at it, and for the first time I noticed that something about it wasn't right. It seemed too thick. We were already almost at the sentencing, but there was still a good chunk of material left. Curious, I opened it up and flipped through what was left...

And that was when I realized that there was, indeed, something wrong.

Another Inquisition trial had been mistakenly filed together with the de Carmona records. And I could not believe my eyes when they rested on the name of the accused... and the single line after it that stated what he was accused of.

For a few moments I could not even move. I just stood there, slack-jawed, staring at the pages in front of me.

Then I turned around and took off in a sprint to find Alma.

“Alma.”

Manuel’s voice snapped me out of my reverie. I had been staring at the horizon, hypnotized by the waves and the fading, orangey light of late afternoon. He was running towards me on the boardwalk, the de Carmona file in his hand. He looked pale, his eyes wide, and his hands were shaking.

I blinked. “Whoa. Geez. Are you okay? What’s up?”

It looked like he was having trouble stringing two words together, much less in English. “*Mira*,” was all he could say as he caught his breath, handing me a paper from the file. I took it from him, my heart starting to pound.

“Look at what?” I squinted at the paper, trying to make out what it said. He pointed a quivering finger. I looked closer. I blinked and my heart leapt to my throat.

“Does that say... what... does that say *Aguilar*?”

Manuel could only nod.

“What does it say about Aguilar?”

“They were the ones. A Christian merchant family that lived in the outskirts of Lorca. They smuggled de Carmona out through Cartagena. They were tried in Lorca in 1492.”

My jaw dropped.

“Where does it say they were tried?” I asked.

He handed me the next page. “The protocols were mistakenly filed together with de Carmona’s.”

I stared, open-mouthed, from the page to Manuel and back again. I coughed, trying to gather my thoughts and think critically.

“Well... Aguilar can’t have been that rare a name at the time...”

“Don Tomás Aguilar y Alvarez?” He jabbed a finger at the page in my hand. “Don León Aguilar y Angel?”

I stood from the bench, my hand over my mouth. Manuel and I stared at each other.

“Oh my God.” I started giggling in giddiness. “Oh my God, Manuel. This is crazy. This is totally insane.”

“I know!” He was pacing back and forth, running his hands through his hair. “Am I dreaming? This must be a crazy dream.”

“Holy cow. Yes. I can’t wait to tell the real you about it when I wake up.”

He stopped and looked at me and we both burst into hysterical laughter.

“Oh my God! Manuel! It’s not a dream! It’s true! This is crazy!” I pressed a hand to my chest and sunk back into the bench. My hand landed right on the ring under my shirt. And then I remembered.

Oh my God. The story.

I looked at Manuel, my hand over my mouth. The soft afternoon light lit up his eyes and glowed orange on his tousled black hair. I felt like I was really seeing him for the first time.

He really is gorgeous, isn’t he, I heard myself think.

Wait. What?

"It is like... it is like destiny," he was saying. "When I walked into your grandmother's store that day..."

"There's something else," I breathed. He froze, his eyes wide. "I... there's something else..." I put my hands behind my neck, unclasped the chain and drew the ring out. I stared at it. "My grandmother... last time we spoke she told me this story..."

Manuel sat next to me. I could feel his intense gaze and it gave me goosebumps. I couldn't meet his eyes. But I had to tell him. I had to.

"She said that my ancestor—you know, Miriam—she fell in love with the son of the man who rescued her family. That must have been León. She said that..." I took a deep breath. "She said he wanted to marry her, and let her stay with him, so she could have a good life. But Miriam refused. She chose her commitment to Judaism and the Torah over love." I swallowed, my cheeks growing warm. I felt Manuel shift uncomfortably and turn his gaze away. I finally looked up at him. "She said he's the one who gave her this ring." I held it out towards him. Manuel looked up and leaned in to examine it.

"It's an eagle," he said weakly. I gave him a questioning look. "*Aguilar*, Alma. Our family emblem." He took it from me and looked more closely. I watched him, my hands shaking, my heart pounding. I couldn't even describe the emotion that was welling up in me.

"Well," I said softly, and cleared my throat. "My instructions are to return it to you." I looked down at my lap, holding my head in my hands. "Your family... they lost everything... my family never knew... how much you sacrificed for them."

Manuel was still staring at the ring as though he was in a trance.

"So on behalf of my entire family, from 1491 until today... thank you."

After a few moments he straightened, looked at me, and extended the ring back to me. "I cannot accept this."

"What?"

"It was a gift. From my ancestor to yours."

"Your ancestor gave us our lives."

He was shaking his head, his hand still extended. "He wanted her to have this."

"He wanted to marry her. She refused."

"But she accepted the ring, didn't she?"

"She wanted us to give it back. At least that's what the family legend says. He probably gave it to her to peddle off anyway. Morocco sucked back then."

He shrugged. "What if he just wanted her to have it?"

"In that case I don't think she should have accepted it." Why was my voice so sharp?

"Why not?" Manuel blinked in confusion.

"She said no. She was Jewish. He was Christian. It would not have worked out. There was no reason to accept a gift from him."

Manuel's brow knitted. "Why—"

"Your family sacrificed all their wealth, their titles, everything they ever knew for my family. Can't you at least accept one little token of thanks?"

"This is ridiculous, Alma," he said, and he shoved the ring into my bag. "We're talking about something that happened five hundred years ago."

I swallowed and looked away. He just sat there for a long moment, and then he took a deep breath. He turned to me and looked me square in the eye.

"Aren't we?"

I lowered my eyes. Now I noticed that my whole body was shaking, and I was breaking out in a cold sweat.

"I'm... not... I'm not sure," I whispered.

There was a very tense silence that felt like it lasted a year. I bit my lip and stared out at the sea, willing this conversation to rewind, to go away... praying for him to either disappear or start chattering about the weather or something. He did neither. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him hunched forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his head bowed. I knew we were both thinking the same thing.

God. What now?

Finally Manuel lifted his head and slowly sat up. A pause, another deep breath.

"Alma, I..."

My phone's ringtone interrupted him, making both of us jump. I sprang to my feet, fishing the phone out of my pocket and offering an unspoken prayer of thanks to God for the distraction.

"It's my sister," I said, trying to regain composure and forcing a smile. "Just wait 'til she hears..." I walked around the other side of the bench, accepted the call and lifted the phone to my ear.

"Mimi, you will not believe what I just—"

"Alma, I have some terrible news."

Her tone of voice stopped me cold. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

"What is it, Mimi?"

"It's Grandma."

My heart plummeted.

"The doctors say it was her heart."

I shook my head. My knees felt weak and I braced myself on the back of the bench for support.

"I'm so sorry to have to tell you like this. I assume you'll want to catch the first plane out of there. The funeral is tomorrow afternoon."

An unearthly moan issued from my lips. I felt Manuel's presence behind me.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice was shaking.

"No, Mimi, you don't understand," I pleaded. "I just found out... I solved the mystery... we had a fight... I... it can't be..."

"I'm so sorry, Alma." I could tell she was crying.

"I... I need to... I'll call you back..." I croaked, and hung up the phone with shaking fingers.

The phone fell from my hand and clattered to the ground.

No. Not this. Anything but this.

Manuel bent down, picked up the phone, and slipped it into my bag.

"Alma?" His voice was quiet but he sounded alarmed. "What is going on?"

"My grandmother..." The sob broke from me before I could even understand what was happening to me. I felt his hand on my shoulder, and a few moments later his other hand took my wrist.

"What happened, Alma?"

I sobbed again, tears streaming from my eyes. I felt dizzy and nauseated. I hardly managed to squeeze out the words, "She's gone" in a high-pitched, inelegant squeak.

"Dios mío. Alma. I am so sorry."

I leaned into his comforting touch and before I knew it he had gathered me into his arms. I had only a moment of hesitation as my cheek brushed against his gold crucifix, but then I just sank into his embrace, sobbing. He was whispering into my hair. I have no idea what he was saying. My ears were ringing. I couldn't think. Through the fog of sorrow, the pounding of his heart, pressed up against my ear, was the only steady thing to hold on to. How could I resist his comfort, the woody smell of his sweater, the warmth of his sturdy arms around me?

And when he pulled back... how could I brush his hands away when they wiped the tears from my cheeks, and then gently stroked my head, his fingers running through my hair? And how could I look away when he stared deep into my eyes, his own welling with tears, as they took on a strange glint I had never seen before? Or when he drew closer, and his eyes fluttered shut, and his lips met mine?

How could I do anything but kiss him back, sinking into what had just become both the bitterest and sweetest moment of my life so far?

I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him in, drinking him in like the first sip of sweet cool water after five hundred years of parched desert.

And then, all at once, I finally came to my senses. I gasped and pulled back, pushing him away, and we both stood there, staring at each other in horror and giddiness and shame all at once, our hands clapped to our mouths. Neither of us moved. His eyes brimmed with pain and rejection and I couldn't believe how much it hurt me to see that. But that same question was hanging in the air between us...

What now?

And I knew that I had the answer. I knew what needed to be done. It was the same thing my ancestor did when faced with this dilemma five hundred years ago.

I grabbed my bag, turned on my heel and ran.

I think I cried the entire train ride back to Madrid. I couldn't stop replaying the last conversation I'd had with Grandma in my mind, how needlessly defensive and cold I'd been.

Why didn't I tell her I loved her? Why didn't I tell her I loved her?

And as if the guilt and the grief of losing my beloved grandmother so suddenly did not weigh heavily enough, Manuel's intense honey brown eyes, brimming with sadness and hurt, would drift into my head, and I was totally overwhelmed with despair and shame and other emotions so raw and painful I didn't even know how to name them.

I'm so sorry, Grandma, I thought. You were right all along. I'm such an idiot that I didn't see this coming.

I stared at my phone as it rang over and over and Manuel's name flashed on the screen. Finally the text messages started coming in, and I couldn't bring myself to ignore them.

Alma, please pick up the phone.

Alma, I am so sorry. I know what she meant to you and I know what it is like to lose someone very dear. I couldn't stand to see you in so much pain and I lost my head. Please forgive me. It won't happen again.

Please don't make me lose you as a friend over this.

I just sobbed and sobbed. The other passengers were staring at me but I didn't care.
Alma, can you please at least tell me where you are? The clerk says you checked out and I am starting to get really worried.

I tried to pull myself together. He was right; I should at least let him know I was safe.
I'm on the train to Madrid, I tapped out. Flying to NY for funeral.

Then a few minutes later, I wrote: *I'm so sorry, Manuel. I just can't do this.*

I turned my phone off and slouched against the back of the chair.

I had a sudden sharp memory of that conversation Grandma and I had had shortly before I had left for Madrid...

Love and infatuation are not the same thing... you don't 'fall in love' like you fall in a hole... it's a choice...

Yes... but this infatuation business... can be very powerful too...

I buried my face in my hands. *I'm such an idiot. I can't believe this happened to me. How could this have happened to me?*

I should never have become his friend... I should never have accepted his offer to be my research partner... I should never have talked his mother into letting him come with me to Madrid... I should never have come with him to Granada...

But how could I have done otherwise?

I sighed and stared out the window. He was a great friend. The best I'd ever had. It had made perfect sense to fall for him. But that was exactly the problem. There was no way we could have stayed friends. And that was why I had to leave him. Once and for all. Cold turkey.

A fresh wave of tears came with that thought. *There is nothing in the world that feels worse than this. But I have to. There are things more important, and more powerful, and more meaningful than romantic love.*

I closed my eyes, and an image of my grandmother floated into my mind. She was beckoning three times over Shabbat candles, the traditional gesture indicating the "bringing in" of Shabbat. I remembered the weight of her hands on my head as she gave me the traditional blessing: *May God make you like Sara, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah...*

This, I thought. This is more important. My heritage. My family. The destiny of the Jewish people. This is what I have to hold onto now.

And as I held the image of Grandma and the candles firmly in my mind's eye, I sensed a presence around me... the souls of all my maternal ancestors, whose names I had studied and pored over so many times. Among them, I pictured my ancestor Miriam... a young woman with my grandmother's sparkling green eyes and flowing black locks. She was smiling, reaching out to stroke my cheek.

I am proud of you, she was saying.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

You did not fail us, they said. We are so proud of you.

The funeral was a huge blur. Hundreds of people talking, crying, standing outside huddled under umbrellas in the rain, our shoes sinking in the mud. I'm told I gave a beautiful eulogy. I have no idea what I said. All I remember is the miserably wet, cold, heavy air, the smell of the muddy earth, and the feeling of emptiness and horror as I stood over

the table where she rested. Staring out at the sheet covering the person who I always felt had loved me the most. To whom I hadn't been able to say good-bye. Who I would never, ever see again.

There was so much noise and bustle after the funeral that I didn't really have a chance to sit and process what was happening. People asked me a million questions about my research, but for the most part I weaseled out of answering. I just wasn't ready to share my discovery yet. I was too afraid of what would happen when I mentioned that I had actually found a descendant of the Christian family that had helped our ancestors, and that it was Manuel; every time I even thought of him I was overcome with shame and guilt and sadness, and I just didn't want to go there while grieving for my grandmother.

Not that not talking about it necessarily helped me stop thinking about it.

On the first day of the *shiva*, the seven days of intense mourning, I tried to sit in the room where my mother and her siblings sat on mattresses on the floor, passing around pictures, sharing stories of Grandma. But I just couldn't take it. I pulled Mimi aside to interrogate her about the wedding plans, and eventually I found myself telling her about what I had discovered.

"Wait, wait, wait," Mimi said, holding up her hand. "Let me get this straight. You discovered, through reading these old Inquisition trials, that our Jewish ancestors were rescued by the Christian ancestors of your research partner?!"

"If I hadn't seen the records with my own eyes," I said, "I would not believe a word that came out of your mouth just now."

Mimi was shaking her head. "There is no way that can be true. You must have made a mistake. You guys are hallucinating. I don't know. Do you realize the odds—"

"Mimi, I am telling you, they are the same people. The names are exactly the same, the locations are right. The ring had the Aguilar family emblem on it!"

"*What?*" Mimi got up and started pacing. "This is insane!"

"I know!"

Mimi stopped short. "Well... the ring! Did you give it to Manuel?"

"I—" I gasped, suddenly remembering that he had shoved it in my bag after I had refused to take it back. I bolted up from my bed and ran to the bag I had flung into a corner of the room. I dug through it feverishly. "Oh, please, please be in here..."

"Weren't you wearing it?"

"Yes, I... I had tried to give it to him... ah! Thank God!" I felt relief wash over me as my fingers closed around the smooth band. "It's here. Thank God."

"Why didn't you give it to him?" Mimi asked.

"I tried..." I faltered, wondering how much to say. "He... didn't want to accept it."

"Why not?"

I shrugged, polishing it on my shirt. "I don't know." I studied it in the palm of my hand. "I have to figure out a way to get it to him."

Mimi raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to be seeing him next week when you go back to Madrid?"

I didn't answer, still staring at the ring. No. I would not be seeing him next week. Or ever. I would not be going back to Madrid. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

I guess I could mail it, I thought. But I was afraid to rely on the postal service, and he could always just mail it back.

I replaced the ring on its chain around my neck, and we rejoined the rest of the family. But now I wasn't listening to the stories. I was deep in thought. There was another way to get the ring to him without physically handing it to him. A way that would assure it would stay in his family. I could give it to his mother.

And the more I thought about it the better I felt about it. I felt guilty about abandoning him and kind of wanted to apologize, but I thought it was best not to be in touch with him at all. Maybe I could apologize through her.

It was a Friday morning, but I wanted this over and done with. I figured it might give me a chance to be by myself for a little while and digest what was happening without all the noise and bustle of the *shiva*.

And after all... this was the number one mission my grandmother had given me. I felt I owed it to her to fulfill it without delay.

So I looked up Manuel's street address and set out in search of an unused car. My father was bewildered as to why I felt a sudden need to drive down to Brooklyn, but thankfully, he didn't ask too many questions.

"Why don't you take Grandma's car?" he suggested. "We were thinking, it should probably be yours anyway." He fixed me with a stern look. "Just keep an eye on the clock. It's three hours each way and you need to be back in time for Shabbat."

But as soon as I sat down on the threadbare seat and shut the door, suddenly in the blessed silence of the car's interior, engulfed in the dusty, cinnamony smell that reminded me of my grandmother ... I was overwhelmed with grief. I broke down in tears. I started the car and pulled out the driveway, determined to at least get around the block before anyone saw me crying and tried to comfort me.

"I'm so sorry, Grandma," I found myself sobbing aloud. I stopped at a traffic light and glanced over at her empty seat. It was so easy to feel her presence next to me, as it had been last time I had been in this car. "You know I love you, right?" I whispered. "Even though I was a total jerk last time we spoke? You know it wasn't really about you... I didn't want to believe you. I was in it too deep to see it." I clutched the wheel and took a deep breath. "But do you think I did the right thing, Grandma?" I asked her silent presence. "Poor guy. I left him all alone there. Didn't even give him a chance to say goodbye. Seems to be a theme with me these days. Hurting the people I love most, and then cutting them off forever." My eyes filled with tears again. "Dammit, Grandma," I sobbed. "Why does it have to hurt so much? With both of you..." I wiped my tears away furiously, trying to focus on the road. I sighed. "I miss you so much. At least I know you would forgive me. I don't know if Manuel ever will. I don't know if I ever will."

I fingered the ring hung around my neck.

"But at least I can bring one thing full circle."

It took me a while to find the entrance to the building. It was kind of tucked in on the side. I climbed the two flights of stairs to apartment 4, and stood there, staring at it, for a full minute before working up the courage to knock.

Raquel Elvira pulled the door open. She looked me up and down, and said,

"This explains a lot."

I had no idea what to say to that.

"Come on in. I'm making lunch." She turned right around and disappeared into the apartment. I was left with no choice but to follow her into the narrow entrance, and then into the small, cramped kitchen to the right.

"You keep kosher?" she tossed over her shoulder.

"Um, yes," I said.

"So I'll get you coffee." She pulled out a chair, gesturing for me to sit, and then bustled over to the coffee maker.

I got the sense that there was no use protesting.

"Manuel's plane landed a couple hours ago," she said. "He should be here any minute."

My heart leapt to my throat. "What?! Manuel's coming home?"

She looked over her shoulder at me, her brow furrowed in confusion. "Isn't that why you're here?"

"I... no, I... didn't... why is he coming?"

She turned around, studying me. "He said he made a really important discovery and had to tell me in person. Weren't you with him?"

I mouthed wordlessly, unable to even begin to explain. "We... um... I left..."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You didn't break his heart, did you?" she asked sharply. "I'll kill you." She turned back towards the counter and cracked an egg into a glass. She examined it, and then tossed it into the pan.

In my panic about discovering that Manuel was on his way, I almost missed it.

Almost.

I froze, staring at her.

"Um... Señora Elvira..." I stuttered. She looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "Did you..." I cleared my throat, letting out a nervous laugh at how ridiculous this question was going to be. "Um. Did you just... check that egg?"

She blinked at me. "Of course." She squinted at me, as if trying to gauge how stupid I could possibly have been to have asked. "To make sure it doesn't have blood in it."

No. No. Don't even hope. I tried to stifle the wave of giddiness that washed over me. I cleared my throat again, and was about to ask if she happened to separate her milk and meat, but then my eyes widened. "You're a vegetarian."

"Yes," she said, still looking at me as though I had asked her to lay an egg herself.

"You never had meat in the house."

"That would be... the definition of a vegetarian, yes."

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. "Was your mother... a vegetarian too?"

She blinked. "Yes."

I bit my lip and then asked, my voice shaking, "Is it... possible... that you happen to... light candles in the basement on Friday evenings?"

She stared at me.

"What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?" she demanded. "No, of course I don't light them in the basement. I don't have a basement. I light them in the closet." She clicked her tongue and turned back to the frying pan.

I just sat there, reeling, unable to think, unable to speak. And that, of course, is when the door to the apartment burst open.

"Mama!" Manuel called from the entrance. I stood up from my chair, backing into the corner of the kitchen, as he came hurtling into the room. He froze in his spot when he saw me and his eyes widened. "Alma."

"You..." I stuttered.

And then it clicked.

I gasped. "Your great-aunt... the secret... your grandmother..."

His eyes were shining and a slow grin spread over his face.

"You *idiot!*" I yelled, my voice high-pitched with giddiness. "You *moron!* She checks her eggs for blood!" I jabbed a finger in his mother's direction. "She lights candles in the closet on Fridays!"

Manuel stared at her. "I didn't know..." He scrunched up his face. "In the closet? Isn't that a serious fire hazard?"

I buried my face in my hands.

"Will someone tell me what the hell is going on here?" Raquel barked.

Manuel threw off his backpack, unzipped it, and pulled out a thick manila envelope, very much like the one my grandmother had presented me with before I left for Madrid. He slapped it on the table, and took a step closer to his mother.

"Mama," he breathed. "We are Jewish."

She blinked rapidly and put her hand to her mouth. "What?!"

He yanked the file open and pulled out the pages within it. "It's indisputable. Documented proof going back five hundred years when our ancestors underwent forced conversion. Your mother came from a family of crypto-Jews who held onto their identity and heritage in utmost secrecy for many generations. She was ostracized because she rejected her heritage and married outside the fold. Your father wasn't Jewish, and her family was very upset that she intermarried. But according to Jewish law, Judaism is matrilineal. Your mother was Jewish, so you are Jewish. And you are my mother. So I'm Jewish too."

Raquel just stared at him for a long, long moment.

Then she started to laugh and cry at the same time.

"I should have known," she gasped. "I should have known." She shoved past me and hugged Manuel, and they laughed and cried together.

"*I always felt... I always had this feeling... always felt this connection...*" she murmured in Spanish.

"*I know, Mama, me too... me too...*"

I just stood there, leaning against the wall, holding my head as though that might help it stop spinning.

Raquel pulled back sharply, grasping Manuel by his upper arms. "*How on earth did you find this?*"

"*I met your aunt Sara at the cemetery in Granada,*" Manuel said, picking the papers back up from the table and showing her. "*She invited me to her house in Cartagena and told me, and then she let me copy these documents.*" He handed them to her, and tapped the front page. "*This is her phone number. You should call her.*"

"*I will!*" She grabbed the papers, and then stood and cast a look from me to Manuel and back again. She cleared her throat. "In fact, I'm going to go do that right now," she said in loud English, and strode quickly out of the kitchen.

Manuel and I watched her disappear into her bedroom and close the door pointedly behind her. Then he turned back towards me.

There were a few moments of awkward silence.

“So,” I said. “This is... unexpected.”

He gave a mischievous grin. “Well, you know what they say.”

I just looked at him blankly.

He raised his eyebrows. “Come on. No one expects the Spanish Inquisition?”

I held my hand to my forehead, too stunned to find this funny. “I... you... yeah,” I said weakly.

He regarded me for another moment. “You... ah. Want to take a walk?”

I paused.

He jerked his head back towards the hall. “She’s been known to spy on me.”

I bit my lip, peering up at him, my heart starting to pound. The memory of his arms around me, of the sensation of his lips against mine, surged into my skin. A wave of shame immediately followed and I blinked, looking down, trying to erase it from my mind.

“It’s just a walk, Alma.”

Yeah, I thought. And it was just a research project. Just a trip to Granada. Just a hug. But... technically, he actually appears to be Jewish, said a voice in my head. I glanced up at him again.

Well yes, genetically, maybe. But...

My eyes drifted towards his chest.

“I’m not wearing it,” he said quietly.

I swallowed. “Why not?”

“Do you want to walk or not?”

We walked a full block in total silence, a very careful distance between us. The street was relatively quiet; the air still miserably humid, but a little warmer than the day before. I listened carefully to his heavy footsteps, the swish of his coat as he walked with his hands in his pockets.

Finally I cleared my throat. “I’m... I’m really sorry that I—”

He held up his hand. “It’s okay. I completely understand.”

More awkward silence.

“So... um,” I went on. “What happened after I abandoned you?”

He stopped and looked up at the sky, drawing a deep breath. “Well...” He took another few moments, and then resumed walking. “I stayed on the beach for a while, trying to call you, as I’m sure you are aware.” He cast me a sideways glance. I swallowed.

“Eventually I went back to the hotel to ask if they knew where you were. That’s when the clerk told me you had checked out. Thanks, by the way, for answering that text message, at least.”

“It would have been pretty awkward if you’d sent the police after me.”

“Awkward. That’s one way to put it.” I winced at the bitterness in his voice. I couldn’t tell him what I knew he wanted to hear: that I also couldn’t bear the idea of him worrying about me on top of everything. “We had arranged to visit Tía Sara that evening,” he went on, “and it was already getting close to six. So I figured I might as well go. I took a taxi to her

apartment. She sat me down in her living room and then sat across from me. I waited for her to start talking, but she didn't. We just sort of looked at each other for a long time. Finally I asked her, 'Well? Don't you have something to tell me?'

"So what did she say?" I prodded.

"She looked right at me and asked, 'Are you Christian?' I was kind of surprised by the question. I said, 'Ahh, yes... ahh... aren't you?' I mean, she had a big crucifix hanging on her door."

I furrowed my brow. "She did? Why?"

"Let me continue. She gave me this really intense look and said, 'I am, to everyone except my family and myself.' I was really confused by this. Why would she be pretending to be Christian? It's not like it's a crime to be a non-believer... so I asked, 'What are you to your family and yourself?' And she took out the papers and slid them across the table to me. At first glance I had no idea what I was looking at. There were some family trees written up in Spanish but they looked very strange. You know how a family tree normally branches out, as new people join the family?"

"Yeah..."

"So this one looked more like a spiral. Cousins marrying cousins. It looked like they had been marrying within the family for many generations."

"Like with Ester's family..."

"Exactly. But I didn't understand that at first. It was only when I saw the page underneath it that things started to fall into place. It was a piece of paper with Hebrew scribbled on it. At first I thought I must be hallucinating. Why would she have a paper with Hebrew on it? I looked up at her and asked her what that document was. 'My *ketuba*,' she said."

"A *ketuba*?!" I exclaimed.

"I know! I was reeling. I couldn't even speak for a minute. Then I asked her why she had a *ketuba*. That's when she told me she was Jewish."

"But... but..." I stuttered. "Why would she have a *ketuba* but a cross on her door?"

"That's exactly what I asked. She said that it is dangerous to be a Jew and that our family has been hiding it for centuries. That our ancestors were forced to convert in the 14th century, and had managed to keep the secret and pass it down all these years."

"But..."

"I told her that it wasn't dangerous anymore. I told her that you were openly Jewish, that your ancestors had always been, and it was perfectly safe. She refused to believe me."

"The inherited fear..."

"Exactly. But what happened then was even stranger." He took another deep breath, turning a corner around a red brick building. "She looked at me and said, 'You understand what this means, don't you?' I wasn't sure what to say. 'You are Jewish too,' she said." He stopped and turned to me. "It wasn't like I didn't understand that intellectually before she said it," he said. "I understood that it did mean that I was genetically Jewish, at least according to halakha. But to hear her say, '*Eres judío*...'" His voiced trailed off. He was staring out past me at the street. "At first I was stunned and didn't know what to say. Then I started to argue with her. I told her I was a Catholic, I was baptized, that was how I was born and raised and educated, that was how I had always identified, and that was who I am. She just looked deep into my eyes and said, very simply, 'You know that isn't true. You have always known that isn't true.'"

A shiver ran down my spine. I waited, but he didn't go on.

I coughed. "Well. Um. Was she... was she right?"

He stayed silent for a few minutes. Finally he said, "I think she was, Alma." He kept staring, unseeing, into the street. "I think she was."

I bit my lip, unsure how to take this. "So... like... you and Jesus." I tried to smile. "What's... what's going on there?"

He laughed, snapping out of his reverie. "That reminds me of every single time someone would catch me away from you. 'You and Alma... you and Alma... what's going on there...'"

"What? Like who?"

"Olivia... Rabbi Uri..."

I buried my face in my hands. *Everyone knew but me. I'm such an idiot.*

"So me and Jesus... we're just friends."

I peeked out from between my fingers, my brow furrowed in confusion. I had no idea what he meant by that. "You're... not going to marry Jesus," I said slowly. "Well, um, that's good, because he's dead. According to some prominent opinions, anyway." I looked at him sideways. "Also, he was a dude, and I have some fairly conclusive evidence that you are not, in fact, gay."

He completely ignored my irrelevant rambling. "I want to be Jewish, Alma." He fixed me with his most intense gaze. "I will always love and respect Christianity and feel that it is a part of who I am. But the call to Judaism has been there since before I can remember—even when I knew nothing about it. And now I know why." He sighed. "You are right, there are some things about Christianity I might have trouble letting go of. I know that Judaism totally rejects Jesus as a prophet and a teacher and I'll have trouble accepting that, even if I can let him go as Messiah and the son of God. But I don't think it really takes that much to reconcile any of this. I think Tía Sara was right. I thought I was a Catholic because that's all I'd ever known. But spiritually... I have always been Jewish. I was always curious about Judaism because my soul knew that was where its home was and it yearned to return. And now... that's what I want to do. I want to do what Ester Maimón did. I want to answer the call of my blood. To return to my people." He smiled, his eyes shining. "Did you hear that?"

"*My people.*"

"Yes."

I paused, my heart welling with hope and warmth. "*Our people,*" I whispered.

He watched me thoughtfully.

"Well, you know what this means," I said.

His eyes danced between mine.

"You can't be my *Shabbos goy* anymore."

He burst out laughing, and laughed so hard he had to grab a nearby bench and sit down.

I cleared my throat. "And also, you know, that it's actually okay that I am totally in love with you."

He looked up swiftly, glowing in unmistakable joy and surprise, his eyes welling with tears. He was clearly speechless. He watched me intently as I sank onto the bench next to him, taking my glasses off.

"These, um, got in the way last time," I mumbled. He froze for a moment, registering what I meant, and then leaned towards me, reaching a trembling hand towards my cheek. I

threw my arms around him and kissed him eagerly, my whole body charged with giddy joy. He responded with just as much passion.

When I pulled back, I noticed that my cheeks were wet. His face was streaming with tears.

“Why are you crying?” I murmured, reaching up to brush them away.

“I never thought this could happen,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch, resting his hand over mine. “Never in a thousand years.”

“I gotta say, this entire thing has been outrageously, ridiculously, stupidly unlikely.”

He opened his eyes and smiled, taking my hand off his cheek and holding it in both of his. “You’d think there was a God or something.”

I snuggled up next to him on the bench. He put his arm around me and held me close, resting his head against mine. A peaceful bliss settled over me, melting away the shame and guilt and despair that had been tormenting me since I left Cartagena. We sat that way quietly for a few minutes.

“I don’t know about this, Alma,” he said finally, pulling away and grinning mischievously. “I’m still a vegetarian.”

I burst into laughter. I laughed until I cried. And then I cried... and cried.

Manuel dug into his pocket, pulled out a tissue, and handed it to me. I blew my nose, trying to calm down.

“I wish...” I gasped. “I wish I could tell Grandma... she knew about you and me all along too. Tried to warn me about it ages ago but I was an idiot. If only she could have known that you are Jewish after all... *and* a descendant of the family that rescued our ancestors... she would have gotten such a kick out of it! She would be telling this entire crazy story over and over for the rest of her life... she would be so happy...”

Manuel held me, stroking my hair, as I slowly composed myself. I sighed as the clouds of grief cleared somewhat, and burrowed further into his embrace, knowing that he understood how I felt better than anyone.

“I’m sure she knows,” Manuel murmured. “Wherever she is. I’m sure she’s very happy.”

I sat up, blinking away the last of my tears. “I’m sure she’s laughing her head off at us right now.” I smiled. “Along with your dad.”

“And with our ancestors from Lorca.”

“And Fez. And Granada.”

“And even Padre Carlos.” He grinned. “Well, you know, working on the assumption that the Jews are right about Heaven after all.” He blinked and corrected himself. “That *we* are right about Heaven after all.”

“So relieved I’ve finally got you on my side about that one.”

I suddenly remembered the ring, and reached behind my neck to unclasp the chain. “So listen,” I said, sliding it off the chain, “the entire reason I drove down here today was to convince your mother to take this.”

“Ohh, so that’s why you’re here! I thought I was hallucinating when I saw you standing there in the kitchen. You’re the last person on earth I had expected to see.”

“Any chance I’m going to get you to accept it now?” I held it out to him.

He raised an eyebrow. “Alma, that thing is a priceless historical artifact passed down in your family for twenty-four generations. How could I possibly—”

"It *should* have been passed down in *your* family for twenty-four generations. And I already—"

"Alma," Manuel laughed. "We are not getting into this argument again."

"Listen," I said sharply, "My grandmother's most important pursuit in life revolved around my giving this back to you." I paused, feeling the lump in my throat again. "We had a fight about our trip to Granada right before we left. That was the last time I ever spoke to her. I literally hung up on her."

"Let me guess," Manuel said gently, with a knowing smile. "She warned you that we were not being careful enough about boundaries?"

"Yes..." I gave him a questioning look.

"Funny. Rabbi Uri told me the exact same thing that night."

I stared at him. "What?"

Manuel chuckled. "He gave me the Intermarriage Talk."

"Ohh... so that's why you were mad at him!" I wrinkled my nose in distaste. "Well, that's obnoxious."

"Obnoxious, but right on the mark, as it turns out."

"He's going to have a heart attack when we get back and show him your papers."

"I think he'll actually be quite relieved. He seems to really like both of us." He smiled. "He said we have great chemistry."

I snorted. "Well thanks for the *shiddukh*, rabbi."

"The what?"

"Never mind. Just take the ring. Please. On the soul of my grandmother and the two dozen generations before her." I held it out again.

"All right, all right," he sighed. "How can I refuse?" He opened his hand. I dropped the ring into it. He brought his other hand over and rested it on top of mine, clasping the ring and my hand in both of his. "As long as I get to keep this too."

I smiled up at him. "I don't know, Manuel. You're still a vegetarian." He grinned, his eyes twinkling. "But you know, all things considered, it's a compromise I'm willing to make."