

MAZEL

Tuesday nights, Kristy Levine liked to drink at a cop bar on Sahara called Pour Decisions. Even when she was working undercover, she could pop in there for a sip and no one looked at her twice. She'd been with the FBI for a decade, first working domestic terrorism and now organized crime, the last five years in Las Vegas, which turned out to be a pretty active place to be these days, the beginning of 2001. She'd been in seven gunfights, maybe a dozen physical altercations, and had come away with nothing worse than a broken toe. Which was ironic, because Kristy Levine had just found out she was about to die.

It was a rare small-cell cancer in her lungs. She'd already had a tumor the size of her thumbnail removed over the holidays, telling exactly nobody at her office, had flown to Cedars in LA to get it done, but now was staring down three months of chemo and a prognosis that said she had anywhere between six months and fifteen years to live, depending on whether she chose to listen to her oncologist or the message boards online. Her oncologist, who looked barely old enough to park her car, suggested she should get her affairs in order. The message board on AOL said she should apply for that master's she'd always wanted, because real life was just starting!

So she called her twin brother, Len. Cried with him for ten

minutes before they tried to figure out a way to end the call. He was a Marine. Their whole family was either military or law enforcement. Weird for a Jewish family, but her dad had said from day one that they weren't "hide in the attic" Jews, they were "fight in the streets" Jews. Dad and Mom were both gone already, so it was left to Kristy and Len to fight the invaders, wherever, whenever. And she'd planned to go into HR, then tell the senior special agent what was what, get herself onto medical leave . . . which she knew she'd never come back from, because once the bureau knew you were ill, you may as well be dead, working on a desk until you wanted to die.

So she decided to wait.

"Hey, Secret Agent," the bartender said. Her name was Sarah. "Haven't seen you in forever."

"I went home for Christmas," Kristy said. Not that she celebrated Christmas. She celebrated Hanukkah, but it was easier to just say what everyone else said. It was part of her training. Leave no impression.

"Where's home?"

"Oh," Kristy said, "up north." Kristy had run into Sarah a few times in the real world, Las Vegas not that big of a town if you lived there. The last time was at Gold's Gym, Sarah working the elliptical machine for an hour. They'd had a conversation in the parking lot afterward, Sarah asking her if she was Metro or what, and Kristy told her she worked for the government, that was it. Ever since, she was "Secret Agent."

"Like Minnesota?"

"Washington State."

"I'd love to go to Seattle," Sarah said. "Have you ever been?"

"A thousand times." She'd actually worked in the field office up there for six months.

“I have this dumb idea,” Sarah said, “that I’d go there and become an EMT.”

“Have you taken the classes?”

“No,” Sarah said. “See? It’s a dumb idea. I just feel like if I lived there, I’d get off my ass and do it. Here? It’s too easy to make bank just doing this kind of thing.” She leaned her elbows on the bar, motioned Kristy to come closer. “I’m not trying to be in your business, but you’re like, legit, right? Like, a legit badass? I see you at the gym. You’re like a super-fit Jodie Foster in *Silence of the Lambs*?”

“Yes,” Kristy said. She wasn’t really like Clarice Starling. Kristy had done deep-cover shit before getting on the organized-crime task force. But whatever. It was close enough.

“Could I do what you do?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight,” Sarah said.

“No,” Kristy said. “You’re too late.” Kristy had done eight years of Naval Intelligence before she ended up in the FBI. “But you could be a cop.”

Sarah laughed. “I’d still have to move,” she said. She pointed vaguely around the room. There were maybe two dozen cops in various stages of inebriation and bad judgment already in the place. “I know too many secrets.” She popped up from her elbows. “Anyway. Sorry. I just see you in here sometimes and think, now that’s a person who knows who she is. I’d like to be like that.”

“I don’t, really,” Kristy said. Fact was, last several weeks, she felt like a person wearing a Kristy Levine Halloween costume, everything hot and sticky around her eyes, her face a thick plastic mask, her breathing for shit, her vision clouded. Not sleeping wasn’t helping. Because the thing was, she knew the truth: she was dying. Six months, five years, fifteen, twenty, all that mattered now was there

was something inside of her trying to take her out, and it didn't matter what medical miracles were out there, you didn't survive cancer, you persevered through it, until such time as you did not. It was the wreck of the Levine family. Her mother died of uterine cancer. Her father spinal cancer. Both had grown up in Pasco, downwind from the Hanford nuclear plant in Eastern Washington. Neither died with a speck of self-respect left.

Kristy Levine was not going out like that. She'd even started going to Temple Beth Israel, up the street from her condo in Summerlin. Tomorrow, she had an appointment to walk the cemetery with the rabbi, find her happily-ever-after home, while she waited for the resurrection. Or whatever Jews believed in. She hadn't gotten that far in the Torah.

"Well," Sarah said, then poured Kristy a glass of Johnnie Walker Black, even though Kristy hadn't ordered it, "you fake it better than all these assholes."

HOW DO YOU dress to pick out your final resting place? Kristy opted for jeans and a black sweater, the same necklace she'd been wearing since her sixteenth birthday, a pair of white Chuck Taylors. Can you bring your dog with you? Kristy decided yes and put a leash on her black-and-white cocker spaniel, Bingbing. What about your gun? Kristy never went anywhere without her gun. When she pulled up in front of Temple Beth Israel, however, and saw Rabbi David Cohen standing out front holding a tiny red notebook and wearing a tailored black suit with a silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, she had second thoughts about the gun. Because the rabbi looked . . . concerned. Which is when Kristy realized Rabbi Cohen probably understood what might compel someone who'd been attending his temple for only a few months

to suddenly inquire about a cemetery plot. Why anyone would, for that matter.

But wasn't that the job of a rabbi? To take on the weight of your concerns? To receive your pain and reflect it back in hope? To meet a dying thirty-six-year-old on a Wednesday morning in Las Vegas and show her the fanciest dirt he could offer? And she was so worried that some mob button man might walk up behind her and put one in her ear that she needed her nine? What did it matter? She was already dead.

So Kristy parked, took her gun from her ankle holster, slid it into the glove box before Rabbi Cohen made it to her car. She rolled down her window.

"Do you mind if I bring my dog?" Kristy asked.

"Of course not," Rabbi Cohen said. He put his hand through the window, let Bingbing sniff him. "How old is he?"

"Nine or ten," Kristy said. She got out, let Bingbing bound out after her. "The vet thinks he could be as old as eleven. I got him from that shelter over on Charleston. I've only had him for six months. I just can't imagine who would give up an old dog." Not that she was surprised by how many awful people there are in this world.

"You never know how bad someone else's life has been, what causes them to make decisions we might think are deplorable, but which, to them, are the only reasonable options." Rabbi Cohen stared at her for a moment. He had brown eyes with flecks of green in them, a thick beard, and she saw that he had unusual scarring around his eyes, like maybe he'd been in a fire as a child. Maybe he'd fallen from something. His face had the quality of a jigsaw puzzle with a few pieces jammed into the wrong spots, like she used to do when she was a kid, too frustrated to make it all work out

right. “So,” he continued, “instead we should celebrate the mazel that brought you to Bingbing.”

“Well,” she said, “that is an optimistic worldview, Rabbi.”

“You have a choice in this life,” he said, simply.

For the next twenty minutes, while they walked through the first phase of the cemetery, beyond the founding members of the temple who’d already slipped this life—the Lippincotts, the Goldblatts, the Siegels, the other Siegels, the other-other Siegels, the Winers, the Wolfs, and a seemingly endless line of Kales—Rabbi Cohen told her about the various pricing options. He started at \$2,300 for a single plot with a standard stone—in what looked to Kristy to be an already pretty busy part of town, as it were, three crews of men shoveling dirt at various spots in the field, a backhoe at each spot, which might explain the cost, since it looked like an expensive operation—and up to \$10,000 for a more elaborate plot in a more desirable location.

“What does that mean?” Kristy asked.

“Have you ever been to the penthouse of the Bellagio?” Rabbi Cohen asked.

“No,” she said. “Have you?”

Rabbi Cohen smiled. Or tried to. He had a weird mouth, Kristy saw. It was like half of it worked as it should, and the other half seemed lost in thought and had to be reminded to act. “No,” he said. “But I’m told it’s like no other place in the hotel and has a view of the entire valley.” They walked up a slight rise, which knocked out most of Kristy’s breath, to a portion of the cemetery that was as yet undisturbed by the dead. Red Rock Canyon loomed around them, casting everything in a peaceful amber shadow . . . until you turned and were assaulted by the nearby sprawl of sand-colored homes and, farther away, the jutting spire of the Stratosphere, along with a nice

view of half of humanity landing at and launching from McCarran. “Welcome to the Bellagio,” he said.

“Those houses feel very close to us,” Kristy said. “If I got in early, could pick I which direction I wanted to face?”

“Of course.”

“Because the idea of spending a million years staring at Southwest planes isn’t terribly appetizing, Rabbi.”

Rabbi Cohen marked something in his notebook. “Very well,” he said. “Canyon-facing it is.”

“I’ll need to find \$10,000 first,” she said.

“Can I ask you the impertinent question?” Rabbi Cohen said, but then he didn’t. He just waited for her. It was a method she often used when interrogating people.

“Six months,” Kristy said. She told him about the rare cancer. About her prognosis. About her brother, the only person in her life, really. And she didn’t know where, exactly, he was. The kind of work he did in the Marines was the kind of work one didn’t talk about.

“I see,” Rabbi Cohen said. “Do you have life insurance?”

“The bureau gives me \$203,000 in death benefits,” she said.

“The bureau?” When Kristy didn’t respond, Rabbi David Cohen said, “What you tell me is confidential, Kristy. I’m your rabbi.”

She was allowed to tell people she was an FBI agent. Only the covert parts of her job were classified. But in Las Vegas, where half the people were about an inch away from a RICO charge, it was like telling someone in East Germany that you worked for the Stasi. “I’m an FBI agent,” she said.

“I hope I’m not under investigation,” he said.

“Are you in the Mafia?”

“Mafia doesn’t exist.”

“Then you’ll be fine,” she said. She looked back toward the Strip. “Do I even want to be buried here? Who would come to visit me?”

“I would come,” he said.

“My brother is a Marine,” she said. “He’s never been here. He’s one of those guys who gets dropped into a country, does his job, and gets pulled back out. I don’t see him making a special point to come and leave flowers.”

“I told you,” Rabbi Cohen said, “I will come.”

“You know what’s crazy? \$203,000 is the standard life insurance. If someone murders me, I’ll get an extra \$100,000. I know a lot of married agents who don’t tell their spouses about that. But does that make any sense to you?”

“It doesn’t,” Rabbi Cohen said. He wrote something else in his notebook. “Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I just . . .” Kristy stopped herself. For some reason, she didn’t feel comfortable talking about this in front of Bingbing. She reached down and unclipped the leash from Bingbing’s collar. “Do you mind if I let him run around? He’s been cooped up in the yard.” Rabbi Cohen told her he did not mind. “Go ahead, Bingbing.” Kristy patted Bingbing on his butt, but he just stood there, looking at her. “Go ahead,” she repeated, but he didn’t move.

Rabbi Cohen got down on one knee, in that nice suit of his, and put a hand on top of Bingbing’s head—he had huge hands, his knuckles covered in a latticework of tiny white scars, Kristy thinking maybe he’d been a boxer in a previous life, or maybe he just liked punching trees on the weekends—and stroked the length of her dog’s body, came back up and scratched inside his ears, then pressed his face against Bingbing’s, rubbing his check against the

dog's cheek. Rabbi Cohen stood and Bingbing trotted off toward a murder of crows in the distance, near where two generations of Ulins were lined up like dominoes.

"What happened there?" Kristy said.

"The smell here," Rabbi Cohen said, "is highly disconcerting to dogs. It's on me, constantly, so I thought Bingbing might be reassured if he knew it wasn't something to fear. That it could be on a living thing, too."

Rabbi Cohen had an unusual voice. In it, she detected a hint of the Midwest. But there was also something maddeningly precise in his diction, as if every word he said was constructed in his mouth for the most profound effect. She supposed it was something religious figures were taught. It gave him the presence of thoughtfulness even when he probably didn't give a shit.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"All over," he said. "My father was military."

"Not a lot of Jews in the military," she said.

"I would have gone," he said, "but I felt called to the Torah."

"I'm a terrible Jew, Rabbi. I've been to shul ten times in my life and it's all been in the last two months. How does that position me for whatever comes next?"

"For all the toil of our lives," Rabbi Cohen said, "the only thing we carry into eternity are the fruits of our noble deeds."

"What if I'm not a very noble person?"

"Is that true?"

"I've killed."

"More than once?"

When she was in Naval Intelligence, she'd overseen some dark ops overseas. Probably dozens of people died because of her work. As an FBI agent, she'd killed two men, popped quite a few others.

She wanted to feel bad, in light of where she was in this life, but the plain fact was that she didn't. "I don't know how many," she said. And she was suddenly exhausted. Physically. Mentally. Nothing seemed like reality anymore. She spied a bench shaded beneath a blooming honey locust, so she walked over and sat down, made sure she was still in Bingbing's field of vision.

Rabbi Cohen sat down beside her. "There has always been something terrible coming for you, Kristy." He tried that smile again. This time it actually seemed to take. "Intellectually, you must know that. Your story has already been written. All of our stories have. So tell me what you're *really* scared of. Not what you fear."

For the entirety of her thirty-six years, Kristy Levine had avoided giving almost anyone access to her interior life. Not even Len really knew her . . . and they were once the same person. Her last boyfriend, a lawyer named Seth she met in a chat room for Las Vegas Jewish singles, broke up with her for that very reason, telling her he never felt like she allowed him into her life, even though they lived together for three months.

"I'm scared that I will kill myself," she said. "And I'm scared that I might put myself into a situation where someone else might kill me. One to the back of the head sounds so much better than three months of chemo followed by three months of slow death."

"Don't invite that into your life."

"It is my life," Kristy said, and then she just let it all out. How she'd spent her entire career chasing down the worst-case scenarios, first in the Navy, and then in the FBI. How her days in Las Vegas were spent digging into the worst tendencies of people and how the banality of evil had crusted her over with cynicism and anger and how this fucking thing inside of her was probably growing out of that very cynicism and anger, because she'd never smoked a day in

her life, had never taken anything stronger than a drink. How she ran fifty miles a week at the gym, how she hadn't had a cheeseburger since Reagan was president. How she had let bad people die so that she could lock worse people up. How her own morality had become fungible the longer she'd worked in law enforcement. How her singular focus, for her entire life, was to never be in the attic, while her body was slowly burying her in the basement.

Rabbi Cohen retrieved a small packet of Kleenex from his pocket and handed it to her. She hadn't even realized she was crying. "Tell me," he said. "What month were you born?"

"May," she said.

"Ahhh," he said, as if that solved everything. "Talmud tells us whoever is born under Mars will be a shedder of blood, be it surgeon or assassin. So it was fated. You can't blame yourself for decisions made by God."

"I don't believe that," she said.

"You don't have to," he said, "for it to still be true." He waited a moment, as though he were contemplating an equation, then said, "Do you know of Bennie Savone?"

"I could pick him from a lineup. If he wasn't already in prison."

"I don't know about all that," Rabbi Cohen said, in a way that made Kristy think he did know about *all that*. It was impossible that he didn't. Kristy hadn't worked the case, but Savone had ended up getting nicked on a conspiracy charge and was busy playing spades at a federal prison upstate. He'd been on the front page of the *Review-Journal* for a month. The words *mob* and *boss* always appeared before his name. "He and his wife, who is Jewish, funded the initial expansion of this cemetery."

That was also well-known. Bennie Savone was married to the daughter of Rabbi Cy Kales, the founder of Temple Beth Israel. Kristy

had seen the signs for Savone Construction every time she'd come to temple, had watched the construction foremen pulling away from the work site—they were building a full high school adjacent to the temple—in black-on-black Lincolns, which was not normal. She'd even thought she might run a few plates . . . but then decided, no. She wouldn't go looking for malfeasance in her off-hours. That's how it was in Las Vegas. Everyone on the hustle, everyone OG in something.

"It's good to fund things you're interested in," Kristy said.

"I know you're trying to be amusing. And I appreciate the effort. But let me tell you: This bench you're sitting on, all the benches you might encounter on these grounds, they were paid for by his family. Do I think Mr. Savone pays for all of this because he loves the Jewish people? Well, he loves his wife. He loves his children. But he is not Jewish; he will never be Jewish. Even if he were to convert, he couldn't possibly know what it feels like to truly care about our people." He lifted his chin, as if to point to the cemetery staff across the way, digging a plot. "And certainly not our dead. That is genetic. A link to thousands of years of trauma. That exists in you." Rabbi Cohen squeezed her elbow, to get his point across, and her entire arm went numb, all the way up to her shoulder. "My advice to you is this, Kristy. Cling to the good. That is what the Talmud tells us. Release yourself of the regrets and the anger."

Bingbing came loping back toward them. He had something in his mouth, which Kristy couldn't quite make out until he dropped it at her feet and ran off.

A crow.

Minus its head.

She'd never let Bingbing kiss her ever again.

"Oh my god," Kristy said. "He's never killed anything before. I'm sorry."

“No, no, don’t be ludicrous.” Rabbi David Cohen took the silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and draped it over the bird’s body. “It’s his nature.”

A WEEK LATER, Kristy was sitting at her desk, changing the beneficiaries on her insurance policy—she decided she’d leave Temple Beth Israel \$50,000 for some benches that weren’t bought with blood money—when there was a knock on her open door. She found Senior Special Agent Lee Poremba in her doorway. He ran the organized-crime task force in Chicago, which meant he spent about a third of his time in Las Vegas, the tendrils of both The Family and The Outfit still poking into the strip clubs in town, less so the casinos, since all those were run by multinational hotel companies. And the ones run by individuals like Sheldon Adelson and Steve Wynn might have been ripping people off on video Caribbean Stud, but they were doing it legally, and nobody was getting tossed in Lake Mead for their troubles.

“You have a minute?” Poremba asked.

“One sec,” she said. She saved her changes, sent it off. Just like that, her afterlife was settled. She’d already put down \$1,000 to secure her room in the Bellagio’s penthouse, as it were. She closed her computer. “You in town to pick up Moe Green? Word is he and Fredo are up to no good.”

“The Corleones were supposed to be a New York family,” Poremba said.

“Secret?” Kristy said, “I’ve never seen any of the films.”

Poremba closed the door, sat down across from her. Kristy didn’t know Poremba well but whenever he was in town, he stopped to pick her brain about what was happening on the streets, since Kristy ended up doing a lot of surveillance work. He said, “You’re not well.”

"I just don't like mob movies."

"No," Poremba said. "I mean you're sick."

"Just getting over something," she said. Truth was, she'd lost seven pounds in the last week.

"This morning," Poremba said, "we rode the elevator together."

"We did?"

"I was behind you."

"Okay," Kristy said. She was out of it this morning. The chemo made her brain feel like a hive of bees.

"You live alone." It wasn't a question.

"I have a dog," Kristy said.

"You have a bald spot in the back of your head," Poremba said.

Her first impulse was to reach back and feel for it, but that would be a tell. If you know something isn't true, you wouldn't even bother to check. She'd been taught that by an agent not so different than Poremba, in an interrogation class at Quantico. So she said, "I'm sure it was just the light in the elevator." She'd had two chemo appointments already. Her hair wasn't supposed to start falling out for another week, though she'd proactively purchased two wigs. They both made her look like Barbie's friend Skipper.

Poremba said, "Look at your desk."

She did. Strands of her sandy-blond hair were littered across every surface.

"You want to talk about it?" Poremba asked. "Friend to friend."

"Are we friends?"

"Even if we're not," Poremba said, "you look like you could use one."

"I'm dying," Kristy said.

"Immediately?"

"Eventually."

“You’re in good company, then,” Poremba said. It was the kind of thing agents said to one another. The black humor of the job was that something bad was coming for everyone. Prepare for every day like it might be your last on the job, your last on the planet, too. Just like Rabbi Cohen told her.

“Well,” she said, “I’ve got my own LLC at this point.”

Poremba said, “How long?” She told him her prognosis, the senior special agent never breaking eye contact with her as she put it all down. When she finished, he said, “What are you still doing working?”

“What else am I going to do?” she said. “Play slots at the Frontier all day?”

Poremba said, “It was me, I’d travel.”

“I have to go to the infusion center twice a week.”

“When that’s over.”

“When that’s over,” she said, “if I’m lucky, it will be radiation. And when that’s over, it’ll be too late.”

Poremba thought on that. “Stop wearing dark colors,” he said. “Your hair stands out against the fabric.”

“I’m not going to keep it much longer,” Kristy said.

“You have someone,” Poremba said, “to do it for you?”

“I have friends,” she said, but that wasn’t true. Rabbi Cohen told her about a support group through Temple Beth Israel. She was going to look into that. They gave rides, took care of meals, all that. The temple paid for all of it. Maybe someone in the group had clip-pers. “Don’t worry about me.”

“You don’t make it easy.” He pulled a cassette tape from his jacket pocket, set it on Kristy’s desk. Poremba said, “Reason I’m here, you showed up on a wire.”

“What?”

“We had ears on a house that backs up to the cemetery at Temple Beth Israel,” Poremba said. “We got you and your rabbi talking. Pinged on Bennie Savone.” He pointed at the tape. “That’s the only copy.”

She doubted that. “What is Chicago doing running an op on a cemetery in Summerlin?”

“We weren’t,” he said. Kristy knew how that worked. Get a subpoena to wire a house when your real target might just so happen to walk by it in public, where the assumption of privacy is much harder to prove.

“That conversation with my rabbi is privileged,” she said, “no matter where I am.”

“Fortunately, you’re not being investigated for anything.”

“I’m talking about my job,” she said. “Isn’t that why we’re having this conversation?”

“I’m not here to ruin your life,” Poremba said. “I’m here to help you keep it together, if that’s what you want.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Kristy picked up the tape, turned it over in her hand. “How much did you catch?”

“A couple minutes,” he said. “Enough to know you were buying a plot. Had to run some background, make sure you weren’t being extorted or something, weren’t about to dirt nap yourself to get out of a problem. You came back clean, so I wanted to check on you. So here we are.”

“So you already knew I was sick.” She ran her hand through her hair, out of habit. Loose strands came tumbling out. *Shit*. “What were you listening for?”

“I was working a hunch on the disappearance of Sal Cupertine

and the murder of Jeff Hopper. You familiar with that case?" She told him she was. Cupertine was a hit man known as the Rain Man who'd been piling bodies for The Family for fifteen years. He disappeared after killing three agents in Chicago in 1998. Hopper had tracked the frozen meat truck that ferried Cupertine out of Illinois all the way to Las Vegas, including to the Barer Academy, the private school on the grounds of Temple Beth Israel . . . and then Hopper disappeared. Eventually his decapitated head turned up back in Chicago. Kristy had read the file back and forth. Everyone had. Solve that one, you could pick your assignment. Finding Hoffa would be easier. "Suffice to say, didn't pan out. And it would have been inadmissible anyway."

"So what was the use?"

"Hopper was my friend," Poremba said. "I wanted to know."

"Like we're friends?" Fucking with him a little bit.

"Hopper was an asshole," Poremba said. "But he was good FBI. He doesn't have any advocates left in the bureau. No family to speak of, either. So. It's my duty. To close the case. In my mind or on paper. Doesn't matter to me."

"Bennie Savone's small-game, if that's your worry," Kristy said.

"Half the people who work at the funeral home and cemetery have criminal records," Poremba said. "I'm not talking shoplifting. Legit hard knocks. And one of the rabbis across the street was found floating in Lake Mead. Missing key parts of his anatomy."

"Every synagogue in town has some criminal history," Kristy said.

"That's the point," Poremba said. "*History*. Temple Beth Israel hasn't been around that long. Where Bugsy Siegel got circumcised is not my concern. Metaphorically speaking."

"I hope so," Kristy said. "Look, Bennie Savone wouldn't be

tossed up with Chicago. His influence extends to the edge of Clark County. So he got guys with criminal records to dig holes. Big deal. Harvard MBAs don't typically end up gravediggers."

"You're probably right." He got up, went over to Kristy's window, looked out. The FBI office in Las Vegas was in a building on W. Lake Mead, wedged between a housing development inexplicably called The Whispering Timbers and a Dollar General store. Kristy's office had a view of the Dollar General's parking lot. It was clean and well lit and known by junkies as The Fed. You could score there pretty much 24/7. He tapped the window. "What's happening here?" Poremba said.

"See the camper-van?" Kristy asked. "Far west corner."

Poremba squinted. "Huh. Yeah."

"He's a Metro CI," she said. "They let him do his work. It's just weed." And some pills. A little coke, probably. Poremba didn't need to know that.

"How long?"

"Long as I've had this office," Kristy said. "It's a pretty safe spot. Only two killings since I've been here."

"I need to retire," Poremba said. He turned from the window, regarded Kristy with that steady gaze of his. "Listen. You encounter anything strange at that temple, give me a call, okay? Anything."

"The mayor of this city is a fully owned subsidiary of the Philadelphia crime family and you're worried about a synagogue." Kristy thought about Rabbi Cohen's knuckles, his face, how he brought up Bennie Savone at all. There was surely something off there. But you could also smoke in the grocery store and gamble in the drugstore, and Siegfried & Roy fucked with that white tiger every night. One day, something bad was going to happen. To everyone. "*Everything* is strange."

“We’ve got ears on the mayor’s synagogue, too.”

Kristy couldn’t tell if Poremba was joking. He probably wasn’t. She held the tape up. “I get to keep this?”

“Take it home. Put it through your shredder.” He headed for the door but stopped before opening it. “And listen. Don’t come back to work. If you want, I’ll tell your boss you’re doing undercover for me. Whatever you need.”

“You hardly know me.”

Poremba shrugged. “Your rabbi,” he said. “He gave you good advice. Cling to the good. Nothing here is good, Kristy. Every part of what we do is the worst. The very worst. Disavail yourself of it.”

“Wait,” Kristy said. He was halfway through the door. She got up from behind her desk. “Show me where the bald spot is.”

KRISTY COULDN’T SLEEP that night. The steroids they gave her after chemo were keeping the nausea at bay, but they also had her body and mind running a constant treadmill. So, at 3 a.m., she put a leash on Bingbing, put her nine on her ankle, and walked out her front door. She lived in a condo complex called The Allegro. It was a mile down the road from Temple Beth Israel, so fifteen minutes later, she and Bingbing slid through a gap in the chained-off front gate and made their way to Kristy’s forever home. Both stood panting atop the rise where her grave would be. It was cold outside, barely 45 degrees, but Kristy was clammy with sweat and Bingbing’s tongue lolled out to one side. Six months ago, she was running marathons for fun; now she could barely walk a mile.

This was life. For now.

Tomorrow would be different. She was going to do the right thing and take a medical leave. And then she was going to contact Len and tell him she needed him. That she was alone and needed

someone familiar with her. She wanted to see his face to remind her of her own, because already she was changing.

She tied Bingbing to the leg of the bench and for a few minutes they both sat there, catching their breath, staring out at the lights of the Strip. Her years living in Las Vegas, she'd never played a single hand of blackjack, hadn't put a quarter in a slot, hadn't looked at a roulette wheel. She prided herself on being no one's sucker. And yet, since getting her diagnosis, she was plagued by the idea that she should empty her bank account and put it all on red, as a test of her ability to beat the odds. Though of course, she'd never do that. Because what if she won? She wouldn't be able to handle the notion that her entire life had been a series of lucky breaks and not the result of hard work. Luck is *Them* not finding you in the attic. Hard work is fighting *Them* in the street.

She tipped her head back and stared into the sky, hoping she'd see some stars, like back home in Washington, but even all the way out here, in the shadow of the Red Rocks, there was too much light pollution. All she could make out was the moon, which was no comfort. Stars had a much more compelling story. They were proof that dead things could still be remembered.

A breeze blew down off the Red Rocks. It smelled like damp creosote, but this time of night—of morning—everything did, sprinklers at golf courses and gated communities and parks and cemeteries across the valley timed to go off between 3 and 4 a.m. By the time the sun came up, every blade of grass and desert shrub would glisten, another level to the sheen of surrealism that everyone took for granted here. In Washington, dew existed. In Las Vegas, it was manufactured for effect.

It was a cynical thought, Kristy recognized. It was her pulling back from the beauty of what she loved about this life, the simple

pleasure of a scent. If this life was to have meaning, it had to be that. The mundane magnificence of simplicity.

The breeze swirled past her again. A chill ran down her neck, tickling the sweat there. She reached back reflexively and patted down her hair—Poremba had placed his thumb on her bald spot that afternoon, it was just above her occipital ridge—and came back with strands of hair stuck to her slick palm. *Shit*. She let the strands fall and they were picked up by the wind, whisked into the darkness. Maybe they'd become like the stars, floating out there somewhere, landing on someone, a stranger discovering months of her life in a simple strand, and they would brush her off, and she would go on, over and over again, persisting.

How she loved the feeling of the wind in her hair. Had she ever realized that prior to this morning, in this graveyard? Would she ever feel it again?

She reached down and unstrapped the holster from her ankle, set it and her nine on the bench, stood up, and did the only thing she could think of in that moment: she ran, first in circles, her arms out like wings, letting the wind cover her, feeling it in her hair, in her eyelashes, in her eyebrows, in the salt of the tears that slid from her eyes and into the corners of her mouth. And then she took off down the berm, into the darkness below, the wind pulling the hair from her face, strands blowing into eternity, her whole body tingling, her lungs straining, electrified by a feeling she'd always taken for granted.

She got to the bottom of the tiny hill—it was only a ten-foot slope, but it felt like she'd run down the face of Everest—and doubled over to catch her breath, which is when she saw a pair of black work boots. She raised up and standing there, maybe five feet away, was Rabbi David Cohen. Or she thought it was him. She couldn't

see his face. He wasn't wearing a suit. Instead, he had on jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt, the hood resting lightly on his head. Behind him was a backhoe. Had she not seen that in the dark before? Or had he pulled up in it?

"What do you think you're doing here?" he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. She barely had any voice, her breath not quite back yet.

In the distance, Bingbing began to bark hysterically, like he did when there were coyotes running around outside, but Rabbi Cohen didn't even lift his head in that direction. "Are you alone?"

"How did you know I was here?" Rabbi Cohen didn't answer. Then she realized: the temple was covered in cameras. There must be CCTV cameras mounted in the trees or on top of the buildings. She exhaled through her mouth. Blinked once. Took in Rabbi Cohen standing there. Jesus, he was big. How had she never noticed that? Not that he was tall. No. That wasn't it. He had a . . . presence. It was like staring at a black hole. He was both there and not there. *I'm losing it.* He had something in his hand. A shovel.

"Are you alone?" he said again.

"Alone? I have never been more alone in my life."

"Step toward me," he said.

Kristy ran her fingers through her hair. "Do you see? I'll be gone before I'm even gone."

"Step toward me," he said again, and for some reason, Kristy did. "Are you armed?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. And in that moment, Rabbi Cohen was right in front of her, the distance between them closed from five feet to five inches, and he had hold of her arms, pinning them to her side. "No. I mean. No. I left my gun on the bench. I'm not here to harm myself. I don't think. It's not what you think."

Bingbing was howling now. Could he even see her?

Rabbi Cohen shook the hood from his head. His hair was normally combed perfectly, like he was a Republican congressman, but it was messy and loose.

She looked down at his hands. Even in the dark she could see the scars on his knuckles.

“You need to look at me,” he said.

He had scars around his mouth. She hadn’t noticed that before.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” he said.

He squeezed her arms.

Bingbing made a noise Kristy had never heard before. It sounded like he was barking inside of a blender.

A second later, the dog came snarling down the berm. Half of his leash dragged behind him. Blood pumped from his mouth and stained his chest coat red.

Jesus.

Bingbing had chewed through his leash. And lost some teeth in the process.

Rabbi Cohen stared down at the dog. “Stop making that noise,” he said.

Bingbing did. The dog stood there. Waiting.

“You should have been killed tonight, Agent Levine,” the rabbi said.

And then, he pulled her into his chest, and hugged her.

Softly.

“It’s freezing,” Rabbi Cohen said. “You’re freezing.” He took off his sweatshirt. “Put this on.” Kristy did. “You have no immune system. Breaking into here was dangerous. You know that. Or you know that now. And so you know that you will never do it again, because Agent Levine, on the wrong night, you could die right here

and no one would ever see you again. I want you to understand that. Appreciate this gift you've been given." He looked at his watch. "Sun will be up in two hours. Take your dog and go home. You need rest. And then you can decide to fight or you can give in. Which is it going to be?"

"What was it you said before," Kristy said. "About finding Bing-bing. What did you call it?"

"Mazel," Rabbi Cohen said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means fate," he said. "And luck."

"Where does it come from?"

He pointed up. "Above," he said. "Around. Wherever you find God."

"That," she said. "I'm going to look for more of that. For mazel."

Rabbi Cohen nodded, then turned around, picked up his shovel, got onto the backhoe, and drove off, leaving her there, alive among the dead, in silence, save for the fresh howling of her dog and the whispering of the wind, searching for her mazel.