

BY LIGHT OF HIDDEN CANDLES

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DEDICATION

For Abi,
who, if this book were Catholic,
would be its patron saint;

and in fond memory of Dr. Gloria Mound
(1930–2017), researcher, historian, and activist,
who dedicated her life to helping descendants of
crypto-Jews
find their way home.

— Daniella Levy

HIJA MIA

*Hija mia, mi querida,
aman aman!
ne te eches a la mar;
ke la mar esta en fortuna,
mira ke te va a llevar.*

*¡Ke me lleve y que me traiga,
aman aman!
siete puntas de hondor;
ke me engluta el pexe preto
para salvar del amor.*

*¡Hija mia, mi querida,
aman aman!
no te vayas a lavar
a la fuente de agua fria
onde el cavallero esta
dando agua al su cavallo,
mira que te va a llevar.*

*Ke me lleve y que me traiga,
aman aman
dentre del romero en flor
ke la mi casa es muy chika
y no entra nunca el sol;
de entre estas paredes frias
pedri, madre, la color.*

*Si me lleva es porque kero,
aman aman;
en la mar me vo a kedar,
de mi cuerpo hare una barca
con mandil le vela va,
remos de los brazos haga,
ke en lo preto la luz hay.*

MY DAUGHTER

My daughter, my darling,
alas, alas!
Don't throw yourself in the sea,
For the sea is capricious—
See, it will carry you away.

Let it take me, let it bring me
(alas, alas!)
Seven leagues deep.
Let a black fish swallow me
To save me from love.

My daughter, my darling,
alas, alas!
Don't go to wash
By the spring of cold water.
There's a knight there
Watering his horse—
See, he will carry you away.

Let him take me, let him bring me
(alas, alas!)
Amidst the blooming rosemary—
For my house is very small,
And the sun never enters;
Inside these cold walls,
Mother, I've grown pale.

If he takes me, that's my desire
(alas, alas!)
I'll remain in that sea.
I'll make my body a boat,
My clothing its sail,
My arms its oars—
For in that darkness is the light.

THE KINGDOMS OF IBERIA (1461 - 1492)



**By Light of
Hidden Candles**

One Last Story

“There’s something I never told you.”

Mazal started and lifted her head from the book of Psalms. She had been praying at her grandmother’s side all night, by the light of the Sabbath lamps her mother had lit before sundown. For the past day or so, her grandmother Míriam had been lying motionless, only her chest moving up and down with each shallow breath. But now her eyes were wide open, gazing at her young granddaughter from beneath the scarf that was wrapped around her hair.

“About what?” Mazal closed the book and set it down by the clay lamps. She took her grandmother’s hand.

“The ring,” her grandmother rasped. “You have to try to return the ring.”

Mazal’s eyes scanned the room. One of the lamps was empty, its wick dark, but the other still burned low, casting flickering shadows on the mud walls and the curtain that separated them from the mats on which the rest of the family slept. A hint of light crept in from the window above their heads, already bringing with it the suffocating desert heat. She could barely make out the sparse contents of the room, but she already knew there was no jewelry to speak of, except the few silver bands that were always on her mother’s wrists.

A muezzin sounded in the distance, calling the Muslims to prayer.

“What ring?” Mazal whispered.

Miriam took a shuddering breath, closing her eyes again, and then slowly reached for her collar. She drew a leather cord from beneath her robe. Dangling from it was a wide golden ring. Mazal's eyes widened. She had never seen anything of such value in her grandmother's possession.

"Where did you get that?" she breathed.

"There is something I never told you," Miriam repeated, "about our escape from Spain. Something I have never told anyone. Not even your grandfather." Her breath caught in her chest and she coughed weakly.

Mazal's heart began to pound. "Should I get Mama?" she whispered, shifting her weight as if to stand up.

"No." Miriam grasped her hand tightly. "This is only for you." She beckoned Mazal closer.

"Before I tell you," she whispered, her voice barely audible, "You must promise that you won't tell anyone else."

Mazal swallowed. "I promise."

"And that you will do everything in your power to accomplish what I failed to do in my lifetime... and return this ring to its owner. Or his heir."

Mazal stared at the ring in her grandmother's hand, glinting in the flickering lamplight.

"I... I will try..."

"And if you are not successful... you will pass it to your daughter... or your granddaughter, *inshallah*. And my *ketuba*, and your mother's. And you'll tell her the story. Maybe one day..." Miriam's voice trailed off, and she closed her eyes again, her grip on Mazal's hand going slack.

"Abuela?" Mazal whispered urgently.

Miriam opened her eyes again.

"Tell me the story." Mazal raised her grandmother's hand to

her lips and kissed it. “I promise to do everything I can.”

Miriam looked deep into her granddaughter’s eyes, her own welling with tears. Then she took another rattling breath, and began to speak.

Alma

“Oh hell no. There is no way I’m going in there.”

Mimi was staring into the storage room of our late grandfather’s Judaica store, her lips curled in a look of disgust. I had just flipped on the light, a naked bulb dangling from the ceiling, and it revealed two cramped aisles of shelves buried in cardboard boxes, packing paper, and bubble wrap. And the dust—it was everywhere. Clinging to the walls, the boxes, the peeling laminated wood flooring; floating through the air, filtering the already-faint light from the bulb and making it look even yellower.

I tried to say something snarky, but all that came out was a coughing fit.

“I can’t afford to get that gunk on my clothes,” she went on, smoothing out the skirt of her business suit. She cast a wistful glance at the narrow staircase behind us that led down to the back of the store. “I’m supposed to be heading straight for the job interview of my dreams after this.”

“Well that’s fine,” I wheezed, slipping my inhaler out of my pocket and taking two hearty puffs. “I’ll just sit here and suffocate in the dark.”

Mimi turned to me with an arched perfectly-plucked eyebrow. “Alma, you forfeited the right to use asthma as an excuse for anything the minute you decided to move to Manhattan.”

“I didn’t decide to move to Manhattan,” I protested, covering my mouth with my sleeve and taking a step into the room. A

cloud of dust rose under my shoe in response. “I decided to transfer to NYU. It’s not my fault it happens to be in Manhattan.”

“I came here to help you move in to Grandma’s apartment. Taking a dust bath in my interview suit was definitely not part of the plan.”

“Oh, stop being such a JAP.”

The acronym for Jewish American Princess earned me a playful smack on the back of the head, knocking my glasses askew. But it also hit its mark: she took a tentative step in behind me, teetering on her high heels.

“She really needs to hire someone to organize this,” she said.

“Shhh. Don’t give her ideas, she’ll get me to do it.”

“Gotta earn your keep somehow, li’l sis.” Mimi started scanning the shelves in the aisle on the right, and I stepped into the one on the left. “I can’t believe the supplier didn’t have a website,” she went on. “How does anyone keep track of information when the only record of it is on a piece of paper?”

“You expect Grandma to be entering this stuff into a computer?” I snorted. “See anything that looks like it might have the record books in it?”

“If I were willing to touch anything, I might be able to move some boxes around and look.”

I rolled my eyes.

I paid for my moment of passive-aggressive scorn: my foot caught on the corner of one of the boxes on the floor, and it knocked me off balance. I grabbed at one of the shelves to my left to steady myself. That turned out to be a 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. The box then tilted

over and spilled its contents—heavy books, from the sound of it—onto the floor.

“Whoa, Alma, are you okay?” came Mimi’s voice, muffled by layers of cardboard.

I extricated myself from the mess, straightening my glasses and cursing under my breath. Mimi was standing behind me, but she seemed to be focused on something other than my plight.

“Hey, Alma, look.” She pointed at the wall where the shelf had been. Disgruntled at her lack of sympathy, I followed her gesture. I promptly forgot my irritation; the box had been concealing a small metal door built into the wall. It looked like the door to a safe.

“Huh,” I said. I inspected the round knob in the center of the door. There was a little keyhole underneath it.

My heart started pounding.

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 they have hidden in a safe?” Mimi voiced the rest of my thought.

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 said.

“Nu?” Mimi urged. “Take it out and see what’s inside.”

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, and Mimi leaned over my shoulder to peer at it. 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: “*Hachatan hana’im... Gershon ben Moshe l’mishpachat Dahan, amar la laKalab, Alma bat David...*”

“Grandma’s *ketuba*,” Mimi said. “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 do these 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.

I took a sharp breath.

“Mimi,” I rasped, “This *ketuba* is five hundred years old.”



“Grandma!” I called as we burst into my grandmother’s Lower

East Side apartment with the wooden box tucked carefully under my arm. No response. “Grandma?” A heavy, sweet aroma I couldn’t quite place wafted from the kitchen.

I led Mimi across the small living room, past the old leather couches tucked around the walls, and walked through the open doorway that led to the kitchen. When I saw my grandmother, I stopped short and Mimi almost crashed into me. Grandma 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 peeking out underneath. Her walker was parked by the wall next to the doorway. She was snoring loudly.

Mimi put her finger to her lips, her eyes wide beneath voluminous eyelashes. Her makeup was immaculate for her interview today, and her black hair was ironed perfectly straight. Between that and the suit showing off her figure and long legs, she looked particularly stunning. She had always been the pretty one.

Well... and the smart one.

Well... she and Shoshana were both pretty and both smart.

Is there a third category in this sister-classification system?

Mimi made a “hands off” gesture, and I nodded in agreement. If you valued your life, you never, ever woke Grandma.

Mimi looked at her watch. “I need to go,” she whispered. “You interrogate her for me as soon as she wakes up, and report back.”

“I will.” I gently rested the box on the table next to Grandma. “Hey, Mimi,” I said, turning to her. “Thanks for bringing me and my stuff down here.”

She grinned. “You’re welcome.” She leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“Good luck with the interview.”

“Good luck with Grandma. And school. And... everything.”

She pulled back and took my hands, studying me for a moment.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” she asked.

I groaned in frustration. “Why do you all keep asking me that?”

“You would have made a great nurse.”

“No, I wouldn’t have. Because I never would have passed the boards. I barely scraped by in most of those courses.”

“You’d have pushed through. I just...”

“You think this degree is pointless. I know. I’ve heard it all before. Abba and Ima have lectured my ears off about it. Stop trying. It’s done already. I’m here. Deal with it.”

She crossed her arms, still giving me a piercing look. “This better not be all about David.”

“Even David isn’t all about David,” I countered. “The whole thing just... reminded me how important this is.”

She did not look convinced. But she sighed in defeat and turned toward the door.

“I’ll see you back in Albany for Rosh Hashana, yeah?” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Unfortunately,” I answered.

There was a pause.

“Ima will have a fit if you’re not there,” came her stern voice.

“I’ll be there, I’ll be there.”

I heard the front door shut behind her.

I glanced back at Grandma, who hadn’t moved at all. Then I turned my attention to the pot on the stove. There was some diced fruit, maybe apples or pears, boiling gently. The liquid was a kind of deep orange and seemed pretty thoroughly 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 for meat! That pot is dairy! Don’t you go *treifing* my kitchen!”

My shoulders slumped sheepishly. “Sorry, I didn’t notice the blue tape.”

Her weathered, olive-skinned 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.”

She stirred the pot, and then suddenly froze and looked at me. “Where is Mimi?”

“She left just a minute ago.” But her question reminded me of the box on the table.

“Oh, Grandma!” I exclaimed, crossing the kitchen toward it. “Care to explain this?” I picked it up and turned to face her.

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.

“Look familiar?”

She put the box on the breakfast table and pulled off the lid. She gasped. “The *ketubot!*”

“Are they what I think they are?”

I watched her gently finger the edges of the parchments, counting under her breath in Spanish. “*Veinticuatro,*” she said finally.

“Whose are they?” I insisted.

She looked up at me with wild eyes. “Get me my reading glasses.”

I launched off in the general direction of the kitchen counter, and floundered around for a few moments before realizing I hadn’t the faintest idea where her glasses were. “Um... where are they?”

My grandmother gave me a withering look. “I forgot that I own a priceless historical treasure, and you expect me to remember where my glasses are?”

“So they *are* what I think they are?”

“If you think they’re the original marriage contracts of our maternal ancestors, going back twenty-four generations, then yes.”

“Really?” I squealed.

“I’m pretty sure. My grandmother gave them to me before she died—except for the last one, which is my own.” Her voice was soft and strained with emotion.

I looked back down at the box, and noticed her reading glasses folded neatly right next to it.

“Um, Grandma.” I pointed.

Grandma followed my gesture, spotted the glasses, and sighed deeply, putting them on. “There was something else, though. It wasn’t just the *ketubot*. There was an object... something very valuable.” She pulled the papers back out, her eyes scanning the bottom of the box. I leaned closer, squinting at the maroon velvet, and noticed something glinting gold wedged into padding at one of the corners. I reached for it, pulled it out, and held it up in my palm for both of us to examine. It was a ring, wide and heavy, with a flat bezel featuring an engraving of some sort of bird.

“This feels like solid gold,” I murmured.

Grandma took the ring from me, turning it over in her hand. Her brow was wrinkled deeply.

"There's a story with this. Something my grandmother told me. I just know it. And I remember that it was very important." She gave a frustrated sigh. "But I just don't remember what it was."

"I can't believe you forgot that you had these!" I sank into a chair. "I asked you about seventeen times in the past three months if you had any documentation, and you said you didn't think so!"

"Well, then our timing is rather fortunate, wouldn't you say?" She slipped the ring into her pocket and stacked the *ketubot* back into the box. "When are you starting that genealogy program?"

"I'm not sure. The semester in Madrid is supposed to start in the spring."

"Good! So you'll have these to jump-start your research." She closed the box and hobbled over to the stove.

"But you never even mentioned them to me!" I pressed. "My whole life! Mimi said she'd never heard of them either! Even back before you started having issues with your memory..."

She turned off the flame and began rummaging in the silverware drawer.

"Well... no," she said. "I think... well, if anyone else were to find out that I had them, I'd never hear the end of it. Someone would insist I donate them to a museum or a university or something." She began scooping pieces of fruit out of the pot with a slotted spoon.

"Maybe at least that way they wouldn't get lost."

"Don't you start," she warned, stabbing the spoon in my direction. She turned back to the fruit and began chopping the cores off the fruit pieces. 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 considering that virtually every other task inspired many groans and complaints.

“Seriously, Grandma,” I insisted. “Can you imagine if I hadn’t found them and no one knew about them? They’d be lost forever... what if you forget them again?”

“I’m not giving those to anybody until you figure out what that story is.”

“What story?”

“The one about the ring.”

“The one you can’t remember? How am *I* supposed to figure it out?”

“Aren’t you going to Spain this spring?”

“I... I plan to,” I said, grabbing one of the pieces of fruit, “but I have to actually, you know, apply for the program, and—”

“Maybe something you find there will help jog my memory.”

I shook my head, sighing, and popped the fruit into my mouth. “Hmm,” I said, savoring its flavor. It was somewhere between an apple and a pear, with the texture of a potato. “What are these things?”

“Quinces. *Los membrillos*. You’ve never had *bimbriyo*?”

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

Grandma shot me a look of incredulous exasperation. “What does your mother *do* in her kitchen?”

“Wait, so how is my tracing our family line back to Spain going to help you remember a story your grandmother told you?”

Grandma sighed deeply again, wiping her brow on her sleeve. “I don’t know. I just hope so.” She scooped the quince back into the pot and started mashing it with a fork. “Getting old is awful,

Alma. I don't recommend it."

I blinked. "Well, um. I think it's... probably better than the alternative."

"*B'ezrat haShem*, when you get old, may they have pills that make you feel not a day older than fifty until the moment you die. Peacefully. In your sleep." She pretended to spit on the floor three times, since apparently such a statement required warding off the Evil Eye. Then she grabbed my chin and gave it a little shake, making a high-pitched affectionate noise. "*Kapara*," she said, then released my chin and kissed her hand. 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.

"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 *dairy* spoon."

Miriam

“Mmm. Are those quinces I smell?” Abraham de Carmona pulled back the curtain hanging over the doorway to his neighbors’ kitchen. His daughter Míriam and their neighbor, Hanna, were huddled over a ceramic pot on the fire. Míriam 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 brushed the hair away from her pale green eyes with her bent wrist, trying to avoid smearing more flour on her face with her fingers. She dusted her hands on the apron as she crossed the kitchen.

“You can smell them a league away, can’t you, Papa.” 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 *chazzan*. It was a musical experience I’d rather not repeat.”

“Oh, he wasn’t that bad.” Míriam 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 Míriam at arm’s length, his brown eyes twinkling. “You are looking well, my girl.”

“Thank you, Papa. How did your business go?”

“Well. Very well, thank God.”

“I hope that means you’ve found her a match,” Hanna piped up again. Míriam 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,” Míriam said. “I want to hear about Cartagena.”

“Come, help me unload the spices from my cart and I’ll tell you how it went.”



Míriam followed him through the narrow entrance room and out of the house toward 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. Míriam could not remember the last time she had set foot beyond the Fisheries’ Gate where the *judería* ended and the outside world began; since she and her father had established themselves in Lorca, she had never given much thought to what lay outside the wall. 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 Jewish Quarter: 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 goods, 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 Tomás 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 toward 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 toward 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 another one, 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.

“Papa,” 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.

“Papa!” Miriam scolded. “Where are they?”

Abraham sighed deeply and finally turned to her. “I dropped them off at the secret passageway. Sánchez 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.”

“And besides 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 they are, 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 were not.”

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 one spark of Torah is what is keeping those *conversos* alive, Miriam. 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 it brings them.”

Miriam felt angry tears welling in her eyes and quickly brushed them away. “But Papa... 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... maybe if we help them hold onto a little of 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 Sánchez 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, Papa,” she murmured into his shoulder. “Please. I worry about you enough without your sneaking around under the noses of the Tribunal. You know how closely they watch those *conversos*.”

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 rest of the spices, and when I’m done we will have some coffee and I’ll tell you all about Cartagena. All right?”

Manuel

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

Okay, maybe sometimes I would venture a peek out of the corners 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... only it was very much like the dozens of other Judaica shops I'd passed on the grimy, bustling streets of New York City: frayed 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 and high cheekbones accented by the frames of her glasses. Her large, almond-shaped eyes were narrowed and her full lips were pursed in what looked like annoyance, probably at whoever was on the other end of the cellphone pressed against her ear.

Where was I?

Oh yes. It wasn't just that she was pretty. There was an odd familiarity to her that I couldn't place. She did look more or less Mediterranean... maybe even Spanish? 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 glanced over at me and raised her eyebrows.

My heart leapt to my throat.

She waved a greeting, and then turned her attention back to the phone.

I didn't have to walk in. I could have just turned around and left. In fact, that's exactly what I wanted to do. But somehow, it just did not happen. My feet would not heed my command to turn back. They carried me down the steps into the store.

I ducked into the nearest aisle, facing away from her, trying to regroup and figure out what on earth I was going to do next.

"Listen, Ima," the girl was saying in a sharp tone, "I really can't have this conversation now, I'm at the store, I've got customers here..."

I glanced around to locate these other alleged customers. It seemed that she was referring to me in the plural.

"Yes, I told you, it's right here in the pamphlet in my hand at this very moment, it's legitimately a part of the degree."

Her side of the conversation faded from my awareness as I noticed the contents of the shelves in front of me. The top shelf 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 these were stacks of brown and white leather-bound 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?

“...Do you really think I’d be traipsing off to Spain without making sure of that?”

My ears automatically locked back onto her voice.

“Okay, okay, we’ll talk about it some other time...”

I straightened my back and turned slowly to peek over the shelf behind me at the girl. She lowered the phone from her ear and pressed something on the screen. Then she tossed it carelessly on the counter in front of her and said, “Why are parents so annoying?”

Was she talking to me? I instinctively glanced around for someone else she might have been talking to. But when I turned back, she was looking right at me. “Sorry about that,” she said. “Can I help with something?”

“Eh...” Panicking a little, I reached behind me, groped on the shelf and plucked an odd-looking silver item from it. “Mm... I was wondering what this is.” I held it up.

She glanced at it. “Oh, that? 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 emerged from the aisle, my footstep muffled on the threadbare brown carpet. All right, so I sounded like a total idiot, but at least we were talking now.

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

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

She studied me. I was close enough now to see that her

eyes were a pale sea green, and her eyelashes were so long they brushed against the lenses of her glasses when she blinked. I was too fascinated with this 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 indentations. "We have a little ritual to end the Sabbath, 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 her collarbone as she leaned forward.

Dios mío. Focus, Manuel.

"You put spices in this. Cloves are easiest." She pulled off the spire, 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 studied it, biting the inside of my lip.

I mustered every gram of courage I had and looked up at her.

"I know this sounds crazy, but have we met before?"

"Alma!" A muffled voice came from somewhere near the back of the store.

"Yeah?" the girl called back.

Alma. Her name is Alma.

"When are you going to bring down the *Gemaras* for Mr. Steibel? He's supposed to be here any minute."

An old woman appeared on the narrow wrought-iron staircase at the back of the store, clutching the railing and scowling in our general direction. Her hair was covered in a colorful scarf,

and her skin, like Alma's, looked darker than that of the Jews I'd seen in my neighborhood in Brooklyn. When she caught sight of me, her gray eyebrows rose.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "I see you found me a strapping young man to do the job."

I blinked, glancing at Alma in alarm. She was rubbing her forehead in exasperation.

"Ignore her," she instructed me, sliding off her stool and making her way around the desk. "Coercing random people into hard labor is her idea of customer service. I'll get them, Grandma."

I hesitated, regarding her short but full-figured frame, trying not to notice the way her pale green shirt and denim skirt hugged her curves as she stepped toward the aisle.

Inevitably, I heard my mother's voice screeching in my head: *Manuel! Did I raise a gentleman or a philistine?!*

"No, wait," I stuttered, placing the whatsit-holder on the desk. Alma stopped, raising an eyebrow and looking at me over her glasses. "Please, sit down. I am happy to help."

I turned back and approached the staircase. The old woman smiled down at me triumphantly.

"Now, there's what those Ashkenazim call a *mensch*," she said. She had a vague accent that sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place. "You see, Alma? People love to help. And I worry about you carrying all these heavy loads. You're supposed to be making me great-grandbabies someday."

I cast a glance back toward Alma, who had followed me to the back of the store. She rolled her eyes.

"Grandma, I am perfectly capable of carrying a box of books down the stairs!" she insisted.

"Sit," her grandmother ordered, and Alma obeyed, but not

without some disgruntled muttering. I followed her grandmother up the narrow stairs and found myself facing an enormous cardboard box on the landing. I wrestled with it, finally managing to lift it and start tottering back down the stairs. Good thing I had spent all summer stocking shelves at Garcia's grocery!

When I reached the floor, I tried to minimize the exertion in my voice: "Where do you need this, ma'am?"

"Just put it on the front desk," she said.

"Here," Alma's voice came from behind the box, and I felt its weight lighten somewhat.

In a series of awkward maneuvers, we finally managed to get it through the middle aisle without breaking anything. We set it down carefully on the desk and shook out our arms. The grandmother was slowly lowering herself down the stairs.

"Well, thank you, young man," she said, seizing a cane that was waiting for her on the landing.

"It's nothing," I said quickly.

She gave me an appraising look as she approached me. Then she opened her mouth, and a question in perfect Spanish came out:

"¿Eres hispano, chico?"

That was about the last thing I had expected to hear.

"Sí, señora," I responded, a little taken aback. *"¿Y usted?"*

She laughed. *"I was born under the Spanish protectorate in Tétouan, Morocco,"* she continued in Spanish. *"Castilian is my first language."*

It took me a few seconds to recover from the shock. I had a vague idea that there were Jews in Morocco, but I never would have guessed that they spoke Spanish. *"How is Castilian your first language?"* I finally asked.

"My ancestors fled Castile in the fifteenth century," she said. *"And*

you can take the Jew out of Spain, but you can't take Spain out of the Jew." She winked at me. *"My grandparents and parents spoke a North African dialect of Judeo-Spanish called Haketia. We reverted back to Castilian when the Spaniards took over."* She turned to Alma and switched back to English: "Did you call the cab, *mami?*"

"Yes, he should be here any second," Alma said, grabbing her grandmother's elbow to help her climb the two steps that led up to the street. "Please don't forget to tell the doctor about those spells of shortness of breath, okay?"

"I know, I know." The grandmother pulled open the door and they made their way out to the street.

I stood there, trying to absorb what I had just heard. On the one hand, I still had no idea what had gotten into my head walking in here in the first place. I could almost feel Padre Carlos's disapproving frown. *You ask too many questions about the Jews*, his voice echoed in my head. *This is not good for you.*

On the other hand, my curiosity about Alma had only grown. She and her grandmother were completely different from anything I had known about Jews up until that point. And having lived in Brooklyn for the past five years, you'd think I would know.

"I'm so sorry about that," came a voice from the door. "My grandmother is a little... eccentric."

I realized I had been standing there staring blankly at the candelabras on the shelf behind the register. As my eyes swept the surface of the desk, they caught something I hadn't noticed before: the emblem of NYU on the pamphlets Alma had been looking at before. My eyebrows went up and I reached for them.

"Do you study at NYU?" I asked, turning to her and nodding at the pamphlets. "I'm about to start my second year there."

Iberian studies.”

“No way!” she exclaimed. “I just transferred from SUNY Binghamton to that exact program. I have my heart set on getting into this special honors program.” She tapped the pamphlet I was holding. It read, *The Spanish Heritage Project: Research Your Family’s Past with NYU Madrid*. “In the fall semester, they teach you how to do research in the historical archives in Spain, and then you spend spring semester in Madrid doing just that.”

I riffled through the pages, a strange feeling of urgency rising in my chest. “That actually sounds... really interesting,” I murmured. I was thinking about my father, and the pages of records he had so painstakingly researched, now tucked away in a cabinet somewhere in my mother’s room.

“My father...” I said. “He managed to trace our paternal line back to Granada of the 1500’s.”

“Oh, cool!” Alma exclaimed. “So you wouldn’t even need this program.”

“On the contrary,” I said. “He never achieved his goal. He believed we are related to one of the old noble families in Castilla—our surname is Aguilar—and he wanted to prove it, but never made a definitive connection. The oldest ancestors he was able to find seem to have been commoners.” I flipped the pamphlet over and examined the glossy picture of the National Historical Archive on the back.

“So,” Alma said. “I take it you’re not Jewish.”

The comment caught me off-guard. For a moment I had forgotten that I was standing in a Judaica store, talking to a Jew, for no apparent reason.

“Ehhh, yes,” I stuttered. “That is, no, I’m not. I’m Roman Catholic.” I studied her, trying to gauge her reaction to this information.

“So...” Alma narrowed her eyes at me questioningly. “Were you here looking for a gift, or...?”

“I... no,” I said, my eyes drifting back to the silver object I had grabbed when I first walked in the store. “I was... only curious.” I picked it up and carried it to the shelf, replacing it carefully on the tray.

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

I spun around, surprised by the directness of the question. She was watching me expectantly. 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. “I was seriously considering attending seminary before we left Spain.”

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

“Yes.”

“What made you decide not to?”

“I did not really decide. I 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 observe the Sabbath 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 like.”

She gestured a lot as she spoke. It was 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, you’re from Spain.”

“Yes. Granada, in the south.”

“Of Alhambra Decree fame. Of course.”

I couldn't tell if her voice went somewhat cold or if it was my imagination, but I felt acutely aware of the uncomfortable implications of our common heritage. Had my own ancestors been responsible for her ancestors' expulsion from Spain?

I shifted awkwardly, not meeting her eyes. I had been brought up with an acute awareness of how badly my country had treated its Jews; but never until now had I met a descendent of the victims. Finally I had an opportunity to say what I had been feeling for years: “I am... sorry for what my ancestors did to yours.”

Alma laughed. “It's been half a millennium. I think I'm over it.”

I felt a little lighter in the chest, and gave her a cautious smile.

“How long have you been in the US?” she asked.

“Five years.”

“Five years? No way! 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 herself and cleared her throat. “But... then why are you taking Iberian studies at NYU? Seems a little silly to come all the way from Spain to New York to study... Spain.”

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

“Oh. I guess that makes sense.” She nodded at the pamphlets in my hand. “So... you want to keep those?”

I glanced down at them again, then looked up and grinned. “Actually, I think I do. Is that okay with you?”

“By all means! At least that way I'll be able to tell my grandmother I didn't let a customer leave the store empty-handed.” She winked.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you very much.” I took a step back toward the door. “It was lovely to meet you.”

“You too,” she returned, kind of absently, as something on her phone caught her attention and she leaned over to examine it. 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 had just happened. Then the door behind me burst open, hitting me in the hip. I dropped the pamphlets and they fluttered to the ground.

“Ooh! Sorry!” she gushed, rushing to gather the pamphlets.

“That’s all right, I’m fine...” I tried to bend over to help her, but she snatched up everything first. She stood up quickly and handed them back to me.

“I just, um...” she said, hastily brushing back her hair, “I realized I hadn’t gotten your name.”

“Ah.” I smiled widely, warmth rushing to my cheeks. “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. “I’m Alma.”

“I caught that. It is a Spanish name.” I grinned.

“Actually it’s Hebrew, too,” she said. “Nice to meet you! See you at school, I guess!”

“Ehhh... yes.”

And she closed the door again and went back to her perch behind the desk. I watched her, smiling, for a little longer before folding the pamphlets carefully, tucking them into my pocket, and continuing down the street.

Alma

“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. The trees obscured my view, the buildings seemed 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 toward 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 loose black curls that fell lightly around his face. But the thing that was really burned into my memory was his honey-brown, soulful eyes—there was something in their depth that made my spine tingle. Where had I seen them 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 carried that box down the stairs for my grandmother!” I was surprised at how much relief I felt. I guess any vaguely familiar face is welcome 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. 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 that’s easily visible from the spot we are standing on?”

He laughed. “Yes. That’s the one. It just so happens,” he said, stuffing the book he’d been holding into his bag, “that I should be on my way there myself.”

“Oh, right! Are you coming to the Spanish Heritage Project introduction?”

He nodded.

“Oh, nice!”

He hoisted the bag onto his shoulder and gathered his coat in the crook of his arm. Then he gestured toward the building. “Shall we?”

I fell in step next to him, and we crossed the street together,

leaving behind the smell of the freshly cut grass and the cool, moist shade of the trees as we approached the row of buildings.

“So. What are you hoping to find in the archives?” he asked.

“Well...” I sighed. “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 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 was always this really strong sense of family lore in my grandmother’s family. It was... lost in the last generation in a way, so I think I’m kind of her last hope.”

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... we 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.

Manuel hesitated.

“Unless you, um, I don’t know, have something else to do,” I said quickly. “Or want to go to the classroom first. Or—”

“No... let’s sit. I want to hear more about your grandmother.” He headed for the nearest vacant table, pulling out a chair 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.*

“You were saying that you think you’re your grandmother’s

last hope.”

“Right.”

“So... hope for what?”

“I’m not even sure.” I sighed in frustration. “Her memory isn’t what it used to be, and she says there is something she wants to figure out about how our ancestors left Spain. I don’t know what she’s hoping I’ll find... but I’d like to find proof that they were from Spain in the first place.”

He nodded slowly. “So... what you are 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.

“Actually, it wasn’t just my grandmother,” I went on. “I have this cousin I grew up really close with, and in the past few years he’s been sort of distancing himself from the family and from Judaism in general. I mean, a lot of my cousins aren’t religious, and some of them have very little connection to Judaism. But last year David started dating a—” About half a millisecond before it was too late, I realized who I was talking to. I blushed a little and stuttered, “That is, you know, he just started doing things that really crossed the line for my family, and he isn’t on speaking terms with most of us anymore. It was kind of the straw that broke the camel’s back for me, and I realized I had to do something to preserve our family’s heritage. And maybe...” I shrugged. “Maybe find some information that can get the rest of them excited about it again.”

He was nodding slowly. I wondered if he knew what I’d been about to say before I caught myself.

“Also,” I added quickly, “I kind of hated nursing school.”

“That’s what you were studying before?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

There was a pause. I cleared my throat.

“So! What about you? How did you end up at NYU? Or... New York, for that matter?”

He sighed. “My mother,” he said simply.

“Why did she want you to come here?”

“I... don’t know.” It was 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, that’s not—” 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.

Awaw, I thought. He’s 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, again?”

“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. “Hey, we should go.”



Professor Rodriguez had told me over the phone that attending the introduction didn’t guarantee that I’d be accepted into the program, but I’d meet the other students considering it, 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 Binghamton were only so-so because the professor was evil and that I would work really hard to improve my language skills. He had not seemed particularly convinced.

As Manuel and I walked into the classroom, though, and heard the chatter of the students already sitting there, I started to wonder if maybe Rodriguez was right to be skeptical. There were six students sitting on the hard plastic chairs in front—four girls and 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?

Manuel took a seat and burrowed back into his book.

One of the girls facing the door noticed me standing there 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 toward me, 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 gritted my teeth and forced myself to listen, trying to pick out words I recognized from the river of sounds.

“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 project 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 classes taught in Spanish. 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 class idiot.

He went on to introduce us to Spanish paleography, showing us slides of various documents from different historical periods. The closer we got to the fifteenth century, the more my stomach twisted in nervous knots. How on earth was I ever going to be able to read those illegible scribbles? Projected alongside one

document on the screen was a chart identifying the letters, and Professor Rodriguez 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 resignation.

“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 from two seats over. “Professor,” he said quietly. “Does 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 fifteenth-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 tight 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 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, a stray black curl fallen over his eye.

If I could get him to help me...

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 archaic scripts 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 twenty-six-generation family legacy 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. And... well... an image of my cousin David's face floated into my mind.

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 guy.*

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

It was at that point in my inner monologue that I noticed that the professor had dismissed us and the other 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. Fortunately, being half a head taller than most of the other students, he was easy to spot. 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. "Eh..." 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 fifteenth-century manuscripts." He was still smiling.

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

He laughed. "It's just that I'm still not sure I'm going," he said. "My mother is not going to be happy when she finds out I'm 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 and my mother doesn't know them. 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 simply give you her phone number, and you can resolve it between you." He pulled his phone from his back pocket.

"Sure, hand it over!" I extended my hand helpfully.

He froze, looking a little alarmed. "I... did not... I was joking."

"Why?" My heart sank a little.

"She's... trust me, you don't want me to put you in that position."

I narrowed my eyes at him. This was sounding more and

more like an excuse to get out of telling me he didn't want to be my research partner.

"So, is that a no?" I ventured. "Cause I'm totally serious. I will talk to her if that's the issue."

He shifted uncomfortably.

"It's okay," I said quickly. "You don't owe me an explanation. I understand—"

"It's not just my mother," he interrupted me. He was staring at the floor now, kicking at an empty gum wrapper with the toe of his sneaker. I waited, dread filling my chest. Was it the religious difference? Maybe he felt uncomfortable with my being Jewish? I hadn't really thought about it before then, and the idea made my fists clench.

He cleared his throat. "I'm not sure we can afford it," he said in a small voice.

Guilt immediately washed over me. I nearly kicked myself for making such an uncharitable assumption.

"I'm on financial aid," he went on, "and I'm quite sure it doesn't cover international programs. I have some savings, but..." his voice trailed off. "I certainly would not count on my mother paying for it."

I studied him.

"Listen," I said slowly, "no pressure or anything. But Professor Rodriguez was super impressed with you just now. I bet he would be willing to work on some kind of arrangement to make sure you can participate in the program. I bet there's financial aid for students who want to study abroad."

He fiddled with the zipper on his bag, still not meeting my eyes.

"I get it. You're shy," I said. "I'll come with you and do all the talking."

He peered up at me from beneath his black curls, smiling sheepishly.

“As you may have noticed,” I went on, “talking is pretty much the one thing I’m good at.”

He laughed. “All right,” he said. “You win.”

I cleared my throat. “So, then... is this a yes to my original question?”

He blinked. “What original question?”

“The one about us being research partners. If you do end up going.”

He hesitated again, and my old suspicion resurfaced.

“I... sure,” 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, turning away from him. “Yeah, I know. Come, let’s go find the professor.”