

Mitzvah

That Rabbi David Cohen wasn't Jewish had ceased, over time, to be a problem. He hardly even thought of it anymore except when ordering breakfast down at the Bagel Café. He'd sit there across from Bennie Savone, that fat fuck, watching him wolf down ham and scrambled eggs, or French toast with a steaming side of greasy link sausage, and his mouth would actually start to water, like he was some kind of fucking golden retriever. He didn't even think Bennie liked pork all that much—sometimes Bennie would order a cup of coffee and a side of bacon and would leave the bacon uneaten, David assumed, in not-so-benign mockery—but David knew Bennie liked letting him know who was in control of the situation.

But now, as he sat in his normal booth in the back corner facing the busy intersection of Buffalo and Westcliff, waiting for Bennie to roll up in his absurd black Mercedes that might as well have a personalized plate that said MOBSTER on it, he thought that he probably qualified as a Jew by now, if not in the eyes of God, then at least in his own eyes. It still wasn't that he gave a fuck about religion—his personal motto, before all of this shit, had been “everybody dies”—but he probably knew far more about the Torah and the culture in general than the people who belonged to the Temple. And had

he grown up with it, David was fairly certain he would have appreciated the subtle nuance of kugel.

After fifteen years, though, he still couldn't get used to the idea of baked noodles, raisins, apples, and cinnamon as a fucking entrée. Now pork loin. Pork loin was something he could get behind, especially this time of year, what with Christmas coming up. Back in the day, his wife Jennifer knew how to make it just how he liked. Brined in salt overnight, covered with juniper berries, a bit of garlic, maybe some thyme, and then slow roasted for three hours, until even the garage smelled like it.

Christ.

Fifteen fucking years and for what? He understood that his situation was fairly untenable these days, that those fucking Muslims had changed the way Family business was handled, particularly as it related to guys like David whose fake paperwork was fine in a company town like Las Vegas but wouldn't pass muster even in Reno. David wasn't inclined to give too much thought to the whole Israel-Palestine issue, but he had to keep abreast of shit in case someone dared ask his opinion, though he never could confide in anyone that he shared some anger issues with the Palestinians at least as it related to real estate, confined as he was to Las Vegas.

“Can I get you something, Rabbi?”

David looked up from his reverie and saw the smiling face of Shoshana Goldblatt. Her parents, Stan and Alta, were two of the biggest donors Temple Beth Israel had, and yet here she was busting her ass on a Tuesday morning running tables. And that was an ass, David had to admit. She was only eighteen and he'd known her since she was five, but . . . damn.

“A cup of coffee would be fine, Shoshana,” David said. “I’m waiting on Mr. Savone, as usual, so maybe just a toasted onion bagel for now.”

Shoshana took down his order, but he could tell that something was bothering the girl. It was the way it took her nearly an entire minute to write the words “coffee” and “bagel” on her pad, her eyes welling up with tears the entire time. It was always like this. He’d go somewhere to just chill out, maybe smoke a cigar and catch a ballgame over at J.C. Wooloughan’s pub, and next thing he knew one of his fucking Israelites would pull up next to him with some metaphysical calamity.

“Is there something wrong, Shoshana?” he asked. When she slid into the booth across from him and deposited her head into her hands, thick phlegmy sobs spilling out of that beautiful mouth he’d just sort of imagined his dick in, he felt himself wince and hoped she didn’t notice. He’d spent the better part of his life avoiding crying women of all ages, never really knowing what to say to them other than “Shut the fuck up, you stupid whore,” and that hadn’t seemed to help anyone, least of all himself. Whatever was wrong with Shoshana Goldblatt would invariably ruin David’s whole fucking day. First there’d be the guilt he felt hearing her secrets, and then there’d be the guilt associated with him finding it all rather humorous.

“Oh, Rabbi,” she said. “I wanted to just come in and talk to you in private, but there’s always such a crowd, and my mom, you know, she’s always telling me to not bother you with my problems, that you’re a busy man and all, so I’m like, okay, I’ll just figure it out for myself, but then, like, you’re always saying that we should trust that the Torah has answers to all of our problems, right?”

“That’s right, Shoshana,” he said, though he wasn’t sure if he’d ever said such a thing. Most of the time, he just downloaded shit off the Internet now, but it seemed plausible that at some point he said something like that.

“I’m just so confused,” she said, before explaining to David a scenario that involved, as best as David could suss out, her having sex with three different black guys from the UNLV basketball team while a graduate assistant coach filmed the whole thing on his camera phone. It was hard for David to concentrate completely on the story since Bennie Savone had entered the restaurant about five minutes in and was stalking angrily about the bakery area, dragging his black attaché case against the pastry windows, like he was banging his cup against the prison bars. So when David sensed that Shoshana had come to the basic conclusion of the issue—that she’d liked it, that she wondered what was wrong with her, but that she wanted to do it again, and with more guys—he reached across the table and took both of her hands in his.

“There’s a part of the Midrash that says, essentially, we are all allowed to find enjoyment in the company of others,” David said. He’d found that if he simply dropped the Midrash into conversation, rejoined with the word “essentially,” and then paraphrased Neil Young or Bruce Springsteen, people left him feeling like they’d learned something. It was true that he knew a few things from the Midrash, had even read a great deal of it, but, in dealing with an eighteen-year-old girl just learning the joys of a filmed gangbang, he didn’t feel the need to reach too deep. “Is a dream a lie if it doesn’t come true, Shoshana? Of course not. It’s something far, far worse. Do you understand?”

He let go of the girl's hands then and handed her the handkerchief from the breast pocket of his sport coat. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and smiled wanly at David, though now he couldn't even look her in the eye. "Thank you so much, Rabbi Cohen. I think I see that path now," she said and slid out of the booth, not even bothering to return his hanky to him.

Bennie, unfortunately, took her spot. "Fuck's wrong with her?"

"Confused about love," David said.

Bennie nodded. "Who isn't?"

It was weird. Over the course of their rather unconventional business relationship, Bennie Savone had found it necessary to use David as his father confessor, too, even though he knew that Rabbi David Cohen was previously Sal Cupertine; that before he was a fake rabbi, he was a Chicago "associate" who'd accidentally killed three undercover Donnie Brasco motherfuckers on the same botched contract, and that, barring a sudden religious experience the likes of which only happened in prison movies, David's moral center was still pretty opaque. Still, David reasoned that Bennie needed to talk to someone, particularly since the one person Bennie could depend on previously had been the rabbi David replaced three years ago, Rabbi Ronald Kales, who also happened to be Bennie's father-in-law . . . or was, until that unfortunate "boating accident" on Lake Meade claimed his life.

David knew that Bennie's decision not to fish out of the same shallow, polluted pond of local and loyal Italian women or coke-whore strippers most of his friends and co-workers had, opting instead to get connected with the real

Las Vegas money—the Summerlin Jews—was still a source of some lingering organizational shame; an issue David was certainly intimate with.

“Yes, well,” David said. “She’s still young.”

“My daughter tells me Shoshana likes black guys,” Bennie says.

Sometimes David tried to imagine what his life would be like if he were still in Chicago, but he’d somehow had a different kind of upbringing, so that now he was selling real estate on the North Shore or running a sports bar or deli or was just a fucking Culligan Man, his ends meeting, his life happy. Would he still end up on Tuesday mornings gossiping about whom eighteen-year-old girls were or were not fucking?

“I have to prepare for a talk at the Senior Center this afternoon,” David said, “so I’m afraid I don’t have much time to chat. Can we get down to business?”

“Of course, Rabbi,” Bennie said. “I’d hate to get in the way of your busy schedule of dick and ribbon cuttings.” Bennie reached into his attaché and pulled out a manila envelope and slid it across the table. “You got a funeral on Thursday and one coming up next week, too. Maybe two. Have to see how that one shakes out. Got a very sick relative. Could go anytime.”

David just nodded. The holidays tended to be Bennie’s busy season with murder, and now that they were flying bodies (or at least parts of them) in on private jets periodically from Chicago or driving them up from Los Angeles, David expected the news. Plus, David sort of marveled at Bennie’s ingenuity; the guy seemed like a dumb crook from the outside, but on the inside Bennie had a real aptitude for business. Stan and Alta Goldblatt might have been big donors, but Bennie Savone,

with his Jewish wife and three Jewish children, was like fucking UNICEF to Temple Beth Israel. He single-handedly financed the building of Summerlin's first Jewish mortuary and cemetery behind the Temple's expansive campus on Hillpointe, championed the new high school that was breaking ground in the spring, and, of course, regularly met with the Temple's esteemed rabbi over at the Bagel Café to discuss the livelihood of the Jewish faith (or whatever the fuck that shit rag mob columnist John L. Smith in the *Review-Journal* said in one of his weekly innuendo-fests. If David ever had the desire to start killing people again, he'd start with that hack) and issues related to the regular laundering of over fifteen million dollars every year through the Temple's coffers. David imagined that Bennie's long-range foresight could help a lot of Fortune 500 companies—it's not like any other mobsters had the fucking chutzpah to bury their enemies and war dead in a cemetery, nor the willingness to put all the pieces in place years before they'd even see them in action. That Bennie earned most of his living from strip clubs didn't bother anyone at the Temple. That's where everyone did business anyway.

"Fine," David said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Bennie said. "My wife wants to know what your Hanukkah plans are this year."

"I'll be staying home," David said, though the truth was that at least half the time would be spent at the Temple making sure the young rabbi he'd entrusted with most of the social activities didn't burn the fucking place down, literally. That kid was a menace around an open flame.

"You know you got an open invitation," Bennie said. "Come over all eight nights. Spin the fucking dreidel. Eat

fucking pancakes. Listen to Neil Diamond sing ‘Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.’ You like Neil Diamond, right, Rabbi?”

What David really wanted, more than anything, was to get up from the booth, climb into his Range Rover, and drive it into a brick wall, just to feel something authentic again, even if it was pain. “The Jewish Sinatra,” David said.

Shoshana brought David his bagel and coffee and discreetly set his hanky back down on the table. He looked up at her and she seemed . . . happy. Like she’d had a tremendous weight lifted from her shoulders and now could go on living her life in perfect happiness, her every orifice filled with big black cock. David felt something shift in his bowels; something he thought might be his conscience picking up enema speed.

“Listen,” David said quietly after Shoshana left. “I gotta get out of here. A vacation. Something. I’m about to lose my mind. Promise me, after Christmas, you’ll look at this situation. It’s been fifteen years, Benjamin.” He said Bennie’s full first name just to piss him off a little. “You realize I haven’t even left the *city limits* since 9/11?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bennie said, “sure. Talk to me again after the holidays. We’ll see what we can do. Don’t want you getting soft . . . Sally.”

Rabbi David Cohen looked out the window again and wondered how it was he was the only fucking person who *happened* in Vegas and now had to fucking stay in Vegas. Put his old mug shot on a tourist brochure then see how many people kept visiting.

When David first came to Las Vegas in 1993—back when he was still Sal Cupertine—he couldn’t get over how wide open

the desert was, how at night, if you weren't on the Strip or downtown, the sky seemed to stretch for miles unimpeded. At dusk, Red Rock Canyon would glow golden with strands of dying sunlight, and he'd imagine what his wife, Jennifer, would have made of the vision. She was always taking art classes at the community college in Chicago, though never with much success, but he thought then that if she were with him in Las Vegas and tried to paint the sunset, well, he'd pretend to love her interpretation. Used to be pretending was hard work. He was only thirty-five when he got to Las Vegas, but still felt seventeen, which meant he wasn't scared of anyone and didn't give a damn if he hurt people's feelings. It was a good skill set for his previous line of work, but David had long ago concluded it was shit on his interpersonal relationships. And the irony, of course, was that now all he ever did anymore was pretend while listening to people's problems. David was inclined to believe that his adopted religion was right about heaven and hell being a place on Earth.

It was four o'clock on Wednesday, and David was already late for a meeting at the Temple about next year's Jewish Book Fair, but he couldn't seem to shake the feeling that the previous morning's conversation with Shoshana, and the one directly following it with Bennie, had somehow clarified a few things that had been gnawing at his mind the last several weeks. So instead of attending the meeting, he drove his Temple-purchased Range Rover the four blocks from his Temple-purchased home on the fifteenth hole at TPC over to Bruce Trent Park, where he wandered among the stalls being set up for the Farmer's Market and tried to line up his priorities.

He stopped and smelled some apples, made idle talk about funnel cakes with the Mexican girl fixing them over what looked like a Bunsen burner, watched children fling themselves over and under the monkey bars. If he closed his eyes and just focused on what he could hear and smell, it was almost like he was back in Chicago, though by now the sounds and smells tended to mostly remind him of his first days in Las Vegas when he spent all of his time foolishly searching for things that reminded him of home. It had grown increasingly difficult for David to even conjure *that* memory accurately, since the landscape, both mental and physical, had changed so drastically in the intervening years. Where there used to be open vistas, the Howard Hughes Corporation had built the master-planned community of Summerlin, filling in the desert with thousands of houses, absurd traffic circles instead of stop signs, acres of green grass, and the commerce such development demanded: looming casinos that eroded his favorite mountain views, Target after Target, a Starbucks every thirty paces, and shopping centers anchored on one corner by a Smith's and on the other by some bar that was just a video poker machine with a roof.

But something about today seemed to cloak everything in radiance. Orthodox Jews tended to talk about such things as if they were moments of vast spiritual enlightenment, though David tended to think the Orthodox Jews were a little on the fruity side of things—always dropping Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Bones like that guy wasn't a fucking whack job of the first order—so it was a good thing Temple Beth Israel was reform, which meant David just had to know some of that hocus-pocus shit, but didn't have to talk about

it too much and certainly didn't have to dress in that stupid black getup. Still, his mind felt clear today, and whether it was a religious experience or just the settling of some internal debts didn't particularly vex David, because the result was the same: chiefly, that he knew he needed to get the fuck out of Las Vegas before he killed himself and took twenty or thirty motherfuckers with him in the process.

That his life had become a suffocation of ironies didn't bother him. No, it was the realization that in just three weeks he'd turn fifty, and yet he constantly waited for his front door to be kicked in by U.S. Marshals; that he wasn't some dumb punk anymore who could just live his life in blindness while other people controlled his exterior life; and that, well, he missed his wife more and more with each passing moment.

The Savone family had been good to him, he couldn't deny that. They'd set him up in this life when they could have scattered him over the Midwest one tendon at a time—even had Rabbi Kales privately tutor him for two years before he started this long con, first as an assistant at the Temple's Children's Center (where he actually had responsibilities for the first time in his life), and then, steadily, they pushed him up through the Temple's ranks until, when it became clear that Rabbi Kales's old age and inability to shut the fuck up had become a liability, he ascended to the top spot.

He had a beautiful home. A beautiful car. If he needed a woman, Bennie took care of that, too. The problem was that the world around him was changing. Locally, only Bennie knew he was a fake anymore, all the other players having gone down in a fit of meshugass over at the WildHorse strip club that left a tourist dead and another one without the ability

to speak. Eventually, Bennie would end up getting busted on some RICO shit (or, praise be, Bennie's wife Rachel would get a fucking sliver of conscience and/or retrospect and would roll on that fat fuck), and then one morning David would wake up and the U.S. Marshals would shove a big hook in his mouth and dangle him all over the press, the big fish that got away finally on the line.

And then there was the paralyzing issue of technology. When the Savone family moved him out of Chicago after the fuck-up, he had to leave everything behind, including his wife, Jennifer, and his infant son, William. At first, it was easy to keep them out of his mind—it was either forget them or get the death penalty, which would probably be meted out by about fifteen cops in a very small cell. But as time went on and his life became a mundane series of mornings spent holding babies' bloody dicks, brunch meetings filled with whiny plasticized rich bitches who couldn't decide which charity should get the glory of their attention, afternoons spent in pink and yellow polo shirts as he golfed with men who would have fucking spit on him in Chicago, and nights spent alone in his Ethan Allen-showroom living room, flipping channels, jerking off to Cinemax, thinking about disappearing, just getting the fuck out, moving to Mexico, or Canada, or even Los Angeles, he began paving roads toward Jennifer and William.

It was so easy: he just typed their names into Google and came up with William's MySpace page. William was seventeen now and, if his pictures were any judge, was in desperate need of some guidance. Every single picture, his fucking pants were halfway down his ass, he was throwing some fucking gang sign that actually spelled out MOB, and he

had a Yankees cap—a fucking Yankees cap!—turned sideways on his head, which made him look like a fucking retard, though not unlike half the kids David saw Saturdays at the Temple. He only saw Jennifer in the background of a few photos, and it broke his heart to see how old she'd become, how her straight blond hair was now silver, how her body had grown frumpy. Time and pressure had turned her into an old woman while he was busy fucking strippers and running a goddamned Jewish empire in the middle of the desert.

But she was there. He could see her. She existed. He checked the archives of the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times* to see if her name had been in any marriage announcements but came up empty. David knew that didn't mean anything concrete, but he also thought that if she had remarried, William wouldn't have turned into such a fucking putz.

Over the last several months, he'd started looking at Google satellite photos of his old house (where, according to a simple public record search, Jennifer and William still lived). Though all he could really see was the roof and the general outline of the house, he could make out bits of himself, too: the pool, which he'd purchased after he got paid for his first substantial hit (a guy he ran track with in high school, Gil Williams, whose father was city councilman); the towering blue ash tree in the front yard, where he hung a tire swing for William; the brick driveway, Jennifer's dream, which he laid brick by brick over the course of a long weekend. Before he understood that the photos were static and not updated regularly, David would return each day to refresh the image, hoping to catch a glimpse of his wife, who he was sure he could recognize even from outer space.

Did she know he was still alive? Did she spend nights searching for him, too? Did she know he'd turned gray, too, but that he'd stayed in shape all of these years, working out, still hitting the heavy bag at the gym when he could, keeping himself ready, just in case—knowing, waiting, thinking that eventually, if he had to, he could kill someone with his hands again, just like in the day. Happy with the thought. Thinking, yesterday: *You think I'm soft? I could shove that attaché case up your ass, Bennie.* And now. Now. When would things ever be tenable if they weren't now? Life, David realized, had reached a terminal point. Years ago, Rabbi Kales explained to David that when the end of days came, the Jews would be resurrected into a perfect state and the whole of the world would take on the status of Israel, and the Jews, he told him, would live in peace there. "What about me?" David had asked then, and Rabbi Kales just shook his head and said that he'd likely just rot in the ground, right beside him probably, in light of the experience they were embroiled in. He laughed when he said it, but David was pretty sure he meant it. Well, fuck that, David thought now. It was time to get tenable.

David purchased a small bundle of sweet smelling incense from a hippie-looking girl with a barbell through her tongue. He'd seen this girl before—maybe fifty times, actually, since he was pretty sure she'd been there every single time he'd visited the Farmer's Market—but had never bothered to really notice her apart from the fact that she always stood there placidly selling fucking incense. What kind of life was that? Selling smell. She smiled sweetly at him, and David wondered how much kids today knew about the fucking world, about how things really *were*, how it wasn't all just iPods and

MySpace and throwing gang signs on the Internet, that there was something permanent about the decisions being made around them. Ramifications. Spiritual and physical. If kids wanted to know what it meant to be tough, they'd take a look at the Torah, see how the Jews rolled, see how revenge and power were really exerted. David liked thinking about the Jews as Chosen People, liked thinking that maybe, after all these years, he'd been chosen, too. You wander the desert for forty years—or just fifteen—you begin to change your perspective on things, begin to appreciate what you had before you got lost, begin to see signs, warnings, omens. Not everything was so obvious. Not everything had to be digitized to be real. Sometimes, man, you had to look inside of things.

“Let me ask you a question,” David said to the girl with the pierced tongue. “Do you know me?”

“Am I supposed to?”

When he was young, he liked a girl with a little sass, but now it just annoyed him. “You see me here every week.”

She shrugged. “If you say so.”

“What do you think I do for a living?”

“Is this some sort of market research bullshit?”

Rabbi David Cohen—who, for thirty-five years had been a guy named Sal Cupertine, who used to like to hurt people just for the hell of it, who killed three cops and really didn't think about that at all, never even really considered it, not even after they did an episode of *Cold Case* about it that he caught one night as he was drifting off to sleep after a long wedding at Temple Beth Israel—leaned across the small table and stared into the girl's face. “I look like a market researcher to you?”

“Everyone in Vegas is so tough,” she said, and now she was laughing at him, tears filling up her eyes, and he could tell that she wasn’t a girl at all, was closer to thirty, had pinched lines at the corner of her right eye, smelled like baby powder and cigarettes and dried sweat. “I’ll say you sell cell phones at the Meadows Mall. Am I close?”

Thursdays were always busy for David. The children at Barer Academy—the elementary school on the Temple’s campus—visited the main Temple every Thursday for lunch, and it was David’s job to come by and smile at the children, say a few words to each, make them feel like God had just strolled in for a bite, and thus ensure that their parents wrote out a big fat check at the end of the month for no other reason than that their children were happy.

In truth, it was David’s favorite time of the week. It wasn’t that he loved children all that much—he didn’t especially, not other people’s kids, anyway—but that for the hour he spent going kid to kid, he didn’t have to pretend. He just sat down next to them and asked them about their day, their life, how things were *going* and never how things *had been*, which was different from what he dealt with normally. With the people of parenting age, it was always about their childhood, how someone had fucked them up and only God or, if he wasn’t available, David could help them deal with the past, like it was some constant growling beast that lived next door that only needed to be fed and watered and everything would be okay. The senior citizens all wanted to bitch about how things were better back then, whenever the fuck that was, and then wanted assurances that they were right, that the world had turned to shit, but that they, of course, weren’t to blame.

Today, though, David had a feeling he wouldn't be able to find the focus to deal with the kids, not with what he saw on the embalmer's table down at the Temple mortuary. At three o'clock he was supposed to bury someone named Vincent Castiglione, whose tombstone would read Vincent Castleberg, since Bennie liked to keep things simple. Bennie told David that morning that it was a Chicago guy so they didn't need to worry about putting on too much of a show. "I rounded up a couple old timers to throw dirt," he told David. "So just keep it short and sweet on the last words crap. Believe me, this guy doesn't deserve what we're giving him."

David went down to the Temple's mortuary at 11:30 to check on the stiff, like he always did with the Chicago guys if they came in whole, so that way he wouldn't be surprised if it was someone he grew up with, on the off chance the casket opened. Since it was a Jewish cemetery, it was always closed casket, but in the years David had been attending to the funerals, particularly those embalmed and entombed by employees of Bennie's, he noticed slightly less attention to detail when it concerned enemies of state. Still, when he got down to the mortuary and found Vincent Castiglione belly up on the embalming table still fully dressed in his police uniform, right down to his holster and gun, even though Vincent's head was sitting on the counter inside a plastic bag, the ligature marks on his neck bright purple, it took David a bit by surprise.

"Sorry, Rabbi," the kid working the table said. "Mr. Savone said this is how he asked to be buried and so, we, uh, we, just, uh . . ."

David put a hand up to stop the kid from speaking. He could never remember this dumb fuck's name. He was a

Mexican, some gangbanger Bennie rescued from the pound a few years back and set up in mortuary science classes out in Arizona. Two years later he was wearing a shirt and tie and was cleaning the dead for the Family. A good job, probably. Ruben Something Or Other. He'd done a nice job on Rabbi Kales, David remembered that. "Shut the fuck up," David said, and Ruben's eyes opened wide. David couldn't remember the last time he swore out loud in public, but from the look on Ruben's face, it had the desired effect. "Strip this motherfucker clean, you hear me?"

"Yes, Rabbi," he said.

"You get his clothes, personal effects, all that shit on his belt, including the gun, put it in a bag, something heavy. You got something canvas here?"

"Yes, Rabbi," he said. Ruben reached under a cupboard and came up with a large black canvas bag marked with hazardous waste symbols on either side. "We use these for our uniform cleaning."

David paused, tried to think, looked at Ruben, saw that the kid had a jade pinkie ring, two-carat diamond earrings, a thick platinum bracelet. Fucking thief was probably making six figures and he was still pinching from the dead. "You keep anything?"

"Like his organs?"

"No, you stupid wetback motherfucker," David said, feeling it now, finding the parlance again, how easy it was to hear Sal's voice in his mouth after so many years, though he felt a little sorry for calling the kid a wetback, particularly since he was probably born in Las Vegas. "You steal a clip? Maybe his badge? Something to show the boys later?"

Ruben exhaled deeply, walked back to a small desk in the corner of the embalming room, and pulled open a drawer, rifled around a bit, like he couldn't find what he was looking for, though David knew better so he kept his glare on the kid, and eventually came out with a wallet. "I think Bennie said I could hold onto this," Ruben said, though he handed it to David like it was contagious.

"From now on," David said, because it just felt so good to be on this train again, "you don't think. Got it?"

"Yes, Rabbi," Ruben said.

David watched as Ruben removed all the clothes from the body. Aware that Ruben was probably coming to conclusions of his own today, David tried to remain nonchalant with the process, absently thumbing through the officer's wallet. There was over three grand in folded hundreds in the wallet, along with a handful of gold credit cards. Fucking Chicago cops. When he was younger, David thought of them as the enemy even though half of them were more crooked than he was, but now he understood they were just guys with shitty jobs trying, like he had, to make the grass green. You earned it, partner.

When Ruben was finished stripping the body, he stuffed everything into the bag and then sealed it up with medical tape and set it down in front of David. "That's all of it," Ruben said.

David hefted the bag up and bounced it a little, making sure he could feel the weight of the gun, probably a Glock. Ruben was still standing in front of him, though he didn't look too terribly respectful. He had this sneer on his face that David thought made the kid look like he'd eaten some bad clams, but which probably scared a lot of people

not used to seeing how people really looked when they were angry. The one thing about being a thug and a rabbi, David had learned, was that it was nice always feeling vaguely feared and respected at the same time. Now, though, he'd have to do a little bridge building, as Rabbi Kales used to say, if he wanted to make sure things didn't get beyond his control.

"I'm sorry I called you a wetback," David said and handed Ruben the cash from the wallet. Ruben nodded and pocketed the money. "I got a little caught up in the moment." Ruben nodded again. Didn't anyone know how to accept an apology anymore? David took one last look around, figuring that the next time he saw a room like this, he'd be the one on the table, and then realized he'd forgotten something important. "Tell me something, Ruben," David said, back in the voice of Rabbi David Cohen. "What do you intend to do with the head?"

Ruben just shrugged. "I dunno, Rabbi. What are you going to do with the uniform and gun?"

David thought about this, figured the truth would serve him here; figured that was where he was now, toward a path of more obvious truth. "I'm going to take them home, wash both, and then go from there."

As far as exit strategies went, David had to admit that his was a little hastily drawn, but when it's go time, it's go time. It was 3:15, and though he didn't need to do it, he'd gone full bore with his eulogy of the newly minted Vincent Castleberg, which didn't seem to bother the five octogenarians Bennie had assembled for the funeral. He recognized a couple of the men from other funerals, but now couldn't remember if they

were for real funerals or fake ones. It didn't really matter, since these guys were so old and so mobbed up that even if he'd pulled out his dick and jerked off onto the casket, they'd keep quiet about it. Bennie always plied the old wise guys with lunch and a couple bucks for their time and then had his boys chauffer them back to their houses at Sun City.

But since David had decided that today was his last fucking day cutting dicks and burying pricks and listening to the world's problems while completely ignoring his own issues—the Hasidic rabbis always talked about this, David realized, saying that if you had proper remorse for your sin, you actually got closer to God, actually became a better person, whereas depression made you a sad, violent, insolent fuck, or, well, something a lot like that—he figured he ought to put things in proper perspective for the late Vincent Castiglione, née Castleberg. So he eulogized himself, instead.

He told the five men about his family life, about his father working as a union millwright, dying young from smoking and drinking (though he'd actually been thrown off of a building), about how he ended up running with some guys from the neighborhood who taught him which joints broke the easiest (this got a knowing nod from the guys), how his mom ended up remarrying and moving to Florida after he graduated from high school, how he fell in love with this sweet girl named Jennifer who made him happy, how he ended up getting into the business and made some poor choices in regards to an important contract and ended up “retiring” to Las Vegas, finding God, and, well, the rest was history. David changed a few important details, naturally, but found that the more he told his story, the better he felt about the choice he was about to make.

David finished with the burial Kaddish, surprised to hear the men each mutter “amen” at the proper times, and then watched as the faux mourners went about tossing clumps of dirt on the coffin. The most ambulatory of the men, dressed smartly in light blue slacks and a white shirt, both originally purchased sometime in the 1970s, walked over and shook David’s hand. “A fine service,” he said. “Really got the spirit of the poor fucker, if you pardon the expression. I’m not a Jew, but ten, fifteen years from now, if I die, I’d be happy to have you put me in the dirt.”

David drove back to his house and packed up what he’d need for his trip—he’d been paid in cash for fifteen years and didn’t spend too much of his own money, so he had enough to last him a long time if he was able to last a long time, or, at least, Jennifer and William might have a chance for a decent life; a better life, anyway—and then took his laptop outside to poach his neighbor’s wi-fi signal, purchased a one-way ticket back to Chicago using Vincent Castiglione’s Visa card, first class, leaving McCarron at 7:00 PM, a little over three hours from now, plenty of time for him to do what he needed to do and then hit the highway. And then David destroyed his laptop, beating it to death with the butt of Castiglione’s Glock.

It felt good smashing the computer, but it felt better to have a gun in his hand again. David tried to think of the last time he’d really beaten someone good with a gun, but couldn’t draw a bead. Used to be . . . Well, fuck it, David thought, used to be’s don’t count anymore, just like Neil Diamond said. David worked up a nice sweat pounding on the computer, got himself warm for the task at hand.

Vincent Castiglione was a little thicker through the middle than David, but his uniform fit well enough. If he had more time, David would run it through the washer and dryer again, see if he could get the uniform to shrink, get some more of that dead stink out of it, too. Still, he did stop to look at himself in the mirror before leaving the house, and it was like getting a glimpse at an alternate life: Sal Cupertine looked pretty good as a cop, David decided. He checked his watch. It was nearly five o'clock. He thought about what Bennie would look like when he saw David in a cop's uniform; what Bennie would look like with a hole in the middle of his fat fucking face courtesy of Vincent Castiglione's service Glock. He thought about how, once he was on the road, cops would search airports in Las Vegas and Chicago for Castiglione; how they would swarm the home of Bennie Savone, once Bennie's wife found him without his face. David was sure they'd recognize the uniform on Bennie's video surveillance. He took one last look around his own home. Sal Cupertine could have been Sgt. Cupertine. A real fucking mensch.