



## The Golem of Hollywood

By Jonathan Kellerman, Jesse Kellerman

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A burned-out L.A. detective . . . a woman of mystery who is far more than she seems . . . a grotesque, ancient monster bent on a mission of retribution. When these three collide, a new standard of suspense is born.

The legend of the Golem of Prague has endured through the ages, a creature fashioned by a sixteenth-century rabbi to protect his congregation, now lying dormant in the garret of a synagogue. But the Golem is dormant no longer.

Detective Jacob Lev wakes one morning, dazed and confused: He seems to have picked up a beautiful woman in a bar the night before, but he can’t remember anything about the encounter, and before he knows it, she has gone. But this mystery pales in comparison to the one he’s about to be called on to solve. Newly reassigned to a Special Projects squad he didn’t even know existed, he’s sent to a murder scene far up in the hills of Hollywood Division. There is no body, only an unidentified head lying on the floor of a house. Seared into a kitchen counter nearby is a single word: the Hebrew for *justice*.

Detective Lev is about to embark on an odyssey—through Los Angeles, through many parts of the United States, through London and Prague, but most of all, through himself. All that he has believed to be true will be upended—and not only his world, but the world itself, will be changed.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

##### Praise for *The Golem of Hollywood*

“An extraordinary work of detection, suspense, and supernatural mystery. I spent three days totally lost in the world Jonathan and Jesse Kellerman have created. This is brilliant, page-turning fiction with mythic underpinnings that give it a special resonance; a rare collaboration where the sum is truly greater than the parts. The book is like nothing I’ve ever read before. It sort of took my breath away.”—Stephen King

“One of the craziest, wildest, and most compelling works of popular fiction in years. . . It traverses genres, blasts them wide open, and moves on to explode yet another cliche. It’s a pretty remarkable thing, this *Golem of Hollywood*. Give it a go.”—*Commentary Magazine*

“I had very high and, yes, unrealistic expectations for THE GOLEM OF HOLLYWOOD . . . [and] the Kellermans met my expectations and blew the roof off of them. . . THE GOLEM OF HOLLYWOOD transcends genre. It’s a whole that exceeds the sum of its very considerable parts, creative and otherwise. It’s a religious tale that doubters and non-believers will love, a mystery that literary snobs will appreciate, and a story so wonderfully told that your bookshelf must have it.”—*bookreporter.com*

“Two masters of psychological suspense weave a sprawling contemporary whodunit steeped in religious mythology, gruesome violence and the supernatural. . . [This] is a witty, propulsive and frequently chilling read; its phantasmagorical elements are blended seamlessly enough with its up-to-the-minute crime-genre trappings to give its imaginative speculations some eerie plausibility.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Combining the procedural structure of Jonathan Kellerman’s Alex Delaware novels with the character-driven plotting of son Jesse’s fiction, the novel is a solidly plotted thriller that takes its compelling lead character, Detective Lev, deep into some Old World mysteries. Very nicely done.”—*Booklist*

“Jonathan Kellerman and his son Jesse Kellerman have already distinguished themselves as ace storytellers, but they’ve outdone themselves with this genre-bending, impossible-to-put-down epic. . . a rare and original novel, one that upsets and transcends expectations and manages to surprise more often than one has the right to reasonably expect in a work of fiction. And it never disappoints. The story moves along with an urgency and intelligence that marks it as a work that is superior to most and worthy of the legacy that both authors have already established for themselves. For a work of its scope and length, it probes as many questions and beliefs and hopes and fears as it raises, and thus reveals itself as a work in which not one word is wasted.”—*popmatters.com*

“They have a way of scaring you, of chasing sleep away, these psychological thrillers that send your heart thumping. Imagine, then, what you are in for when two masters of the genre decide to collaborate. The result is *The Golem of Hollywood*. . . [a] a complicated, often chilling journey of discovery.”—*Huffington Post*

“Shaped by biblical and historical mythology as well as the supernatural, *The Golem of Hollywood* is essentially a story of love, of the bonds between father and son, of family secrets and mysteries. Rich in detail, originality and depth, the book is a pleasure to read.”—*Hadassah Magazine*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

#### About the Author

Jonathan Kellerman is one of the world's most popular authors, with more than three dozen "New York Times"-bestselling crime novels, most recently "Guilt" and "Killer." He has won the Goldwyn, Edgar, and Anthony awards, and been nominated for the Shamus Award. Jonathan and his wife, bestselling novelist Faye Kellerman, live in California, New Mexico, and New York.

Jesse Kellerman won the Princess Grace Award for best young American playwright and is the author of "Sunstroke," "Trouble," "The Genius" (for which he won the 2010 Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle), "The Executor," and "Potboiler" (for which he was nominated for the Edgar Award for Best Novel). He lives in California.

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#### Chapter One

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

SPRING 2011

Heap had followed the girl for days.

The watch was an important part of it, the most delicious part:  
sinking into the background while that wonderful brain of his roared in  
high gear, eyes, ears, everything finely tuned.

People tended to underestimate him. They always had. At Eton: two  
nights locked in a broom closet. At Oxford, they laughed, they did, the  
horsefaced girls and the cooing boys. And dear Papa, Lord of the Manor,  
Chancellor of the Purse Strings. All that school and you a bloody office boy.

But underestimated is close to unnoticed.

Heap capitalized on that.

She could be any girl who struck his fancy.

Eye the herd.

Cull.

The bright-eyed brunette in Brussels.

Her virtual twin in Barcelona.

The early work, glorious countryside afternoons, honing his technique.

The unmistakable tingle came on him like a fit of sick. Though Heap  
wasn't fool enough to deny that he preferred a certain species: dark hair,  
sharp features. Lower class, not too bright, not bad-looking but well shy  
of pretty.

Smallish body, except he demanded a big chest. The soft, yielding pressure never failed to excite.

This one was perfect.

He had first spotted her walking east along the Charles Bridge. He'd been skulking round for two weeks by then, taking in the sights, waiting for an opportunity to present itself. He liked Prague. He'd visited before and never left disappointed.

Among the jean-clad magpies, the wattled American tourists, the leather-voiced buskers, and the minimally talented portrait artists, she had stood out for her modesty. Limp skirt, tight hair, focused and grim, she hurried along, cheeks carved out by the midmorning glare off the Vltava.

Perfect.

He tried to follow her but she melted into the crowd. The next day, he returned, hopeful, prepared, attentive. Opening his guidebook, he pretended to reread a gray box headed Did you know? The bridge had eggs mixed into its concrete for added strength. Good King Charles IV had commandeered every last egg in the kingdom, and they had obeyed, the stupid, slobbering masses, showing up to place them obsequiously at his royal feet.

Did Heap know?

Yes, he did. He knew everything worth knowing and much besides.

Even the guidebook underestimated him.

She passed again at the same time. And the day after that. Three days running he watched her. A girl of fixed habits. Lovely.

Her first stop was a café near the bridge. She donned a red apron, cleared tables for change. At dusk, she left Old Town for New Town, exchanged the red apron for a black one, bussing trays and refilling steins at a beer hall that, by the smell of it, catered to the locals. Photos of the entrées in the window showed sausages smothered in that vile, muddy sauce they put on everything.

From beneath the trolley stand, Heap watched her flit here and there. Twice passersby paused to ask him a question in Czech, which Heap took to mean that he appeared, as ever, unremarkable. He replied, in French, that he spoke no Czech.

At midnight, the girl finished mopping up. She doused the restaurant's lights, and a few minutes later, a window two floors up blinked yellow, and her pale arm drew the blind.

It would be a squalid rented room, then. A sad and hopeless life.

Delicious.

He considered finding a way into her flat. Blitzing her in her own bedroom.

Appealing notion. But Heap despised senseless risk. It came of watching Papa burn thousands on football, cricket, anything involving imbeciles and a ball, pouring the fortune of centuries down the grimy throats of bookmakers. Never the most discriminating chap, Papa. How he loved to remind Heap that it would all be gone before Heap saw a penny. Heap was nothing like him and therefore deserved nothing.

Someday Heap would let him know what he thought of that.

To the task at hand: no sense changing the pattern. The pattern worked. He'd take her on the street like the others.

Leaving an empty-eyed shell propped against a dustbin or a wall, waiting to be discovered by some privileged citizen of the free world.

Heap examined an unmarked door to the right of the restaurant, six anonymous buzzer pushes. Never mind her name. He preferred to think of them numerically. Easier to catalog. He had the librarian's spirit in him, he did. She would be number nine.

On the seventh night, a Thursday, Number Nine went up to her room as usual but reemerged soon after, a feather duster in one hand, a folded square of white cloth in the other.

He gave her slack, then followed north as she crossed into Old Town

Square, uncomfortably alive with pedestrians. He clung to shadows on Maiselova as they entered Josefov, the former Jewish quarter.

He had come this way days before, while reacquainting himself with the city. It was the thing to do, see the old Jewish places. Dutifully he had elbowed through the revolting gawking swarms, tour guides prattling about Slavic tolerance while their charges snap snap snapped away. Heap didn't care enough about Jews as a group to summon genuine loathing. He regarded them with the same contempt he had for all lesser humanity, which included everyone except himself and a select few. Those Jews he'd known at school were self-satisfied twits laboring to be more Christian than the Christians.

The girl turned right at a shambling yellow wreck of a building. The Old-New Synagogue. Curious name to go along with a curious design.

Part Gothic, part Renaissance, the result a rather clumsy porridge, homely crenellated roof and skimpy windows. Far more old than new. But then Prague had no end of old buildings. They were common as streetwalkers. He'd drunk his fill.

An alleyway unfurled along the synagogue's south side, ending at a wide set of ten steps that in turn ran up to the shuttered shops of Parížská Street. Heap wondered if Nine was headed there, to tidy up at one of the boutiques.

Instead she went left at the foot of the steps, disappearing behind the synagogue. Heap crept along the alley in crepe-soled shoes, reaching the steps and stealing a glance.

She stood on a small cobbled terrace, facing the rear of the synagogue, into which was set an arched iron door, rudely studded. A trio of rubbish bins constituted the exterior decor. She had flapped open the white cloth and was tying it around her waist: yet another apron. Heap smiled to imagine her closet, nothing but aprons in every color. So many secret identities she had, each more wretched than the last.

She picked up the feather duster from where she'd laid it, against the wall. She shook it out. Shook her head, as well, as if banishing drowsiness.

Industrious little charwoman. Two full-time jobs and now this.

Who said the work ethic was dead?

He might have taken her right then, but a duet of drunken laughter came bounding along Parížská, and Heap continued slowly up the steps, watching the girl peripherally.

She withdrew a key from her jeans and let herself into the synagogue through the iron door. The lock clanked.

He took up a vigil beneath a lamppost, opposite the synagogue's dark visage. A series of metal rungs in the brick ran up to a second arched door, a shabby wooden echo of the iron one, thirty-five feet off the ground and opening illogically onto thin air.

The garret. Did you know? There, the world-famous (according to whom, Heap wondered) Rabbi Loew had conjured the golem, a mythical mud-creature who roamed the ghetto, protecting its inhabitants. The selfsame rabbi had a statue of himself in a grand square, he did. While following the girl, Heap had pretended to stop and take its picture.

Hideously undignified, really. Mud was one step above shit.

The legend had become the wellspring of a gaudy commercialism, the

monster's lumpy form cropping up on signs and menus, mugs and pennants. In one particularly rank bistro near Heap's hotel you could buy a brown-sauce-soaked Golem Burger and wash it down with Golemtinis enough to rot your liver.

People would pay for anything.

People were disgusting.

The laughter of the couple had faded in the warm wind.

Heap decided to give it one more night. More foreplay made for a better climax.

Friday evening, the Old-New was a busy place, worshippers filing in, some stopping to talk to a blond man stationed out front with a walkie-talkie. With smiles all around, and everyone afforded entry, the attempt at security struck Heap as a bit of a sham.

Nevertheless he'd come prepared, his better suit (his only decent suit since Papa had screwed tight the tap), a mild white shirt, and his old school tie, plus inoffensive flat-lensed specs. Approaching the entrance, he hunched to take off some height, blousing his jacket, eliminating the bulge of his inside pocket.

The blond guard was more of a boy, hardly out of nappies. He shifted his body to block Heap's progress, addressing him in a throaty, vulgar accent. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to pray," Heap said.

"Pray," the guard said, as if that were the strangest reason to visit a house of worship.

"You know. Give thanks. Praise God." Heap smiled. "Perhaps it'll help."

"Help?"

"World a mess and all that."

The guard studied him. "You want to come into the shul ?"

Dense little turd. "Indeed."

"To pray for the world."

Heap lowered the level a few notches. "That and personal good fortune, mate."

“You are Jewish?”

“I’m here, am I not?”

The guard smiled. “Please, you can tell me: what is the last holiday?”

“Sorry?”

“The most recent Jewish holiday.”

A furious moment while Heap ransacked the files. A light sweat broke out on his forehead. He resisted the urge to wipe it away. Aware that he was taking an awfully long time, he coughed up what he had. “Well, then, that would be Passover, would it not?”

The guard said, “Passover.”

“Reckon so, yes.”

The guard said, “You are British.”

There’s a clever lad. Heap nodded.

“I can see your passport, please?”

“One wouldn’t think one would need it to pray.”

The guard made a show of taking out his keys and locking the synagogue door. He gave Heap a condescending pat on the shoulder. “Wait here, please.”

He sauntered off down the street, murmuring into his walkie-talkie while Heap swam in the red tide of his mind. The sheer nerve: to touch him. He puffed his chest against the bulge. Stag bone handle. Six-inch blade. Ought to give thanks of your own, mate.

Twenty yards hence, the guard stopped at a doorway. A second man materialized and the two of them conferred, appraising him openly. The sweat kept oozing. Sometimes the sweat was a problem. A drop ran in Heap’s eye and stung and he blinked it away. He knew when he wasn’t wanted. He could be patient. He left the guards talking and went on his way.

Every man has his limits, though. After six more days without a fair chance, he was aroused to the brink of madness, and he decided that tonight would be the night, come what may, and how lovely it would be.

By three a.m., she’d been inside the synagogue for over two hours. Heap slouched in darkness near the steps, listening to distant bleats from

somewhere well beyond the Jewish quarter, rolling the knife handle between his fingers. He began to wonder if she'd snuck in a brief nap. Busy girl, she must be falling off her feet.

The iron door screamed on its hinges.

Number Nine stepped out toting a sizable plastic tub. She turned her back to him, headed for the rubbish bins, hoisted the tub and dumped it out noisily, clanking cans and rushing paper, and he unfolded the blade (oiled and silent, a welcome release it was, like his lungs filling with fresh air) and moved on her.

Halfway to her, a muffled clap froze him in panic.

He glanced back.

The alley was empty.

As for the girl, she hadn't noticed the noise; she continued about her business, raking out the last of the rubbish with her fingers.

She set the tub down.

She untied her hair and began to regather it, and her raised arms formed a wide-hipped lyre, oh lovely lovely shape, and his blood boiled afresh and he started forward again. Too eager: his shoe caught the cobblestone and sent a pebble clicking toward her and she went rigid and turned, her mouth already poised to scream.

She didn't have time enough before his hand mashed against her lips and he twirled her, her back to his belly and his stiffening prick. Practical hardworking girl, she kept her nails cut short; hard rounded calluses clawed ineffectually at his arms and face before a deeper prey instinct took hold of her and she sought his instep to stomp it.

He was ready. Number Four, Edinburgh, had done the same. A sharp little heel; a broken metatarsal; a good pair of loafers, ruined. Heap had learned his lesson. He had his feet splayed as he braced against her. He twined his fingers in her hair and yanked her head back to form a graceful convexity of her gullet.

He reached up to stroke the blade.

But she was a resourceful lass, and it seemed she must have fingernails after all, because she made a spittly hiss and he felt a hideous stab in his eye, like an awl driving through the lens and the jelly to scrape his optic nerve. False colors gushed. The pain made him gag and loosen his grip on her hair and his hand went up to protect his face. He had prey instincts,

too.

Her distorted form broke away from him and ran for the steps.

Groaning, he lurched forth, grabbing at her.

Another hiss; another stab of pain, his other eye, driving him stumbling into the rubbish bins, both eyes streaming, the knife flung from his hands. He could not understand. Had she shot him? Thrown something at him? He blinked forcefully to clear the blurriness and he saw the girl reaching the top of the steps, disappearing round the corner onto Parížská, and her wan form brought the awareness of a dawning catastrophe.

She had seen his face.

He struggled to his feet and started after her, and from behind he heard a hiss and pain knocked him flat, as if someone had buried a claw hammer in the base of his skull, and as he pitched against the hard ground, his fine roaring brain grasped that something was happening to him, something wrong, because the girl was long gone.

Sprawled on his stomach in scattered rubbish, he opened his tearing eyes and saw it, half a foot away, a coin-sized spot, glittering blackly on the cobblestones.

A hard-domed insect, shimmering antennae, long black thorn sprouting from its head.

It charged him, driving itself into the center of Heap's forehead.

He screamed and swatted at it and tried to stand up, but the thing kept coming at him, fast and vicious, the growl of its wings audible in every direction, like a cattle prod touched to Heap's neck, his spine, the backs of his knees, herding him away from the steps and backing him into the wall of the synagogue, where he balled up with his arms thrown over his head.

Abruptly, the assault broke off, and the night went still save a faint wooden clapping noise. Heap waited, shaking. Puncture wounds seeped along his hairline, blood trickling along the side of his nose and into his mouth.

He uncovered his head.

Down on the cobblestones, the bug squatted, peering up at him.

Full of hate, Heap rose to his full height.

Raised his foot to crush it to pulp.

Brought his foot down.

Missed.

It had dodged and was waiting, several inches to the right.

He tried again, and again it moved, and again, and they engaged in an absurd little wrathful dance, Heap stamping and jerking while the foul creature darted in mocking circles.

At last he came to his senses. He was chasing an insect, and meanwhile the girl who had seen his face was God knows where, saying God knows what to God knows whom.

He had to leave. Now. Never mind his things. Catch a taxi straight to the airport and depart posthaste for jolly old, never to return to this awful place.

He turned and ran and crashed into a wall.

A wall that hadn't been there before.

A wall of mud.

Broad as an avenue, taller than the synagogue, soaring upward like some manic cancer, climbing, expanding, ballooning, reeking of stagnant waters, rotting fish, mold, oily reeds.

He slipped and fled in the opposite direction, hitting another wall.

And then it surrounded him, the mud, mud walls, a city of mud, a megalopolis, vast and dense and formless. He raised his gaze to an indifferent sky, the stars blotted out by mud. Weeping, he cast his eyes down to the earth, where mud black as dried blood began to creep across his shoes, starting at the toes and inching upward. He screamed. He tried to lift his feet and found his shoes cemented to the stones; tried to kick them off but the mud had reached his ankles and grasped his shins and begun to climb. It was the source of the smell, viscous and putrid. It was an absence of color and an absence of space, an aggressive burning emptiness swallowing him alive.

He screamed and screamed and his voice came back close and wet and dead.

The blackness rose to his knees, grinding his bones in their joints; it moved up his thighs like too-tight stockings rolled incrementally up, and Heap's bowels opened of their own accord, and he felt his genitals

pressed, slowly, back up into his body cavity; he felt his abdomen cinched and his ribs snapped and his windpipe collapsing and his innards forced up into his neck, and he ceased to scream because he could no longer draw breath.

In the wall of mud, two slits yawned, a pair of cherry-red holes at eye level.

Studying him. As he had once studied his own prey.

Heap could not speak, but he could move his lips.

He mouthed, "No."

The answer came: a weary sigh.

Muddy fingers closed around him and squeezed.

As Heap's skull popped free of its spinal moorings, millions of neurons made their final salvo, and he experienced several sensations at once.

There was, of course, pain, and beyond that, the agony of insight. His was a death without benefit of ignorance, for he understood that he understood nothing, that his sins had not gone unnoticed, and that something unspeakable waited for him on the other side.

Finally there were the fugitive images that imprinted themselves on his fizzling, fading brain as his gape-mouthed head spun in the air: a night sky flocked with gentle clouds; the saffron glow of the lamps along the riverbank; the door to the synagogue garret, flapping open in the breeze.

## Chapter Two

LOS ANGELES  
SPRING 2012

The brunette puzzled Jacob.

First off, his memory of last night—a stunted memory, admittedly—featured a blonde. Now, in the light of morning, sitting at his kitchenette table, she was clearly dark-haired.

Second, while he could recall some frantic groping in a sticky vinyl booth, he was pretty sure he had gone home alone. And if he hadn't, he couldn't remember it, and that was a bad sign, a sign that the time had come to cut back.

Third, she was museum-quality gorgeous. As a rule he gravitated more toward average. It went beyond low standards: all that need and vulnerability and mutual comfort could turn the act more than physical. Two people agreeing to make the world a kinder place.

Looking at her, so far above his pay grade, he decided he could make an exception.

The fourth thing was that she was wearing his tallis.

The fifth thing was that she wasn't wearing anything else.

He smelled fresh coffee.

He said, "I'm sorry I don't know your name."

She placed a hand on her throat. "I'm wounded."

"Please try to be forgiving. I can't remember much."

"There isn't much to remember. You were absolutely coherent and then you put your head down and it was lights-out."

"Sounds about right," he said.

He slid past her to fetch down a pair of handmade mugs, along with a lidded jar.

"Those're pretty," she said.

"Thanks. Milk? Sugar?"

"Nothing for me, thanks. You go on ahead."

He put the jar and one mug back, pouring himself a half cup, sipping it black. "Let's try this again. I'm Jacob."

"I know," she said. The tallis slipped a few inches, exposing smooth shoulder, delicate collarbone, a side swell of breast. She didn't put it back. "You can call me Mai. With an i."

"Top of the morning to you, Mai."

"Likewise, Jacob Lev."

Jacob eyed the prayer shawl. He hadn't taken it out in years, let alone put it on. At one point in his life, the idea of covering a nude body with it would have smacked of sacrilege. Now it was just a sheet of wool.

All the same, he found her choice of covering profoundly weird. He kept the tallis in the bottom drawer of his bureau, along with his disused tefillin and a retired corps of sweaters, acquired in Boston and never shown the light of an L.A. day. If she'd wanted to borrow clothes, she would've had to dig through a host of better options first.

He said, "Remind me how we got here?"

"In your car." She pointed to his wallet and keys on the counter. "I drove."

"Wise," he said. He finished his coffee, poured another half cup. "Are you a cop?"

"Me? No. Why?"

"Two types of people at 187. Cops and cop groupies."

"Jacob Lev, your manners." Her eyes brightened: an iridescent brown, shot through with green. "I'm just a nice young lady who came down for some fun."

"Down from?"

"Up," she said. "That's where you come down from."

He sat opposite her, careful not to get too close. No telling what this one was about.

"How'd you get me into the car?" he asked.

"Interestingly, you were able to walk on your own and follow my in

structions. It was strange. Like having my own personal robot, or an automaton. Is that how you always are?"

"How's that?"

"Obedient."

"Not the word that springs to mind."

"I thought not. I enjoyed it while it lasted, though. A nice change for me. Actually, I had a selfish motivation. I was stranded. My friend—she is a cop groupie—she left with some meathead. In her car. So now I've spent three hours chatting you up, I've got no ride, the place is closing, and I don't want to give anyone any ideas. Nor do I relish forking over money for a cab." Her smile brought her into brilliant focus. "Abracadabra, here I am."

She'd chatted him up? "Here we are."

Long languid fingers stroked the soft white wool of the tallis. "I'm sorry," she said. "I got cold in the middle of the night."

"You could've put on some clothes," he said, and then he thought: moron, because that was the last thing he wanted her to do.

She rubbed the braided fringes against her cheek. "It feels old," she said.

"It belonged to my grandfather. His grandfather, if you believe family stories."

"I do," she said. "Of course I do. What else do we have, besides our stories?"

She stood up and removed the tallis, exposing her body, a masterwork, shining and limber as satin.

Jacob instinctively averted his eyes. He wished like hell he could remember what had happened—any part of it. It would provide fuel for fantasies for months on end. The ease with which she stripped bare felt somehow less seductive than childlike. She sure enough didn't appear ashamed to show herself; why should he be ashamed to look? He might as well take her in while he had the chance.

He watched her reduce the tallis to the size of a placemat with three precise folds. She squared it over a chairback, kissing her fingertips when she was done—a Hebrew school habit.

"Jewish," he said.

Her eyes took on more green. "Just another shiksa."

"Shiksas don't call themselves shiksas," he said.

She regarded his straining boxer shorts with amusement. "Have you brushed your teeth?"

"First thing I do when I wake up."

"What's the second?"

"Pee."

"What's the third?"

"I guess that's up to you," he said.

“Did you wash?”

“My face.”

“Hands?”

The question threw him. “I will if you want.”

She stretched lazily, elongating her form, unbridled perfection.

“You’re a nice-looking man, Jacob Lev. Go take a shower.”

He was under the spray before it had warmed, vigorously scrubbing pebbled skin, emerging rosy and alert and ready.

She wasn’t in the bedroom.

Not in the kitchen, either.

Two-room apartment, you don’t need a search party.

His tallis was gone, too.

A klepto with a fetish for religious paraphernalia?

He should have known. Girl like that, something had to be off. The laws of the universe, the balance of justice, demanded it.

His head throbbed. He poured more coffee and was reaching into the cabinet for bourbon when he decided that it was, no question, time to cut back. He uncapped the bottle and let it glug into the sink, then returned to the bedroom to check the sweater drawer.

She’d replaced the tallis, snugging it neatly between a blue cableknit and the thread-worn velvet tefillin bag. As a gesture, it seemed either an act of kindness or a kind of rebuke.

He thought about it for a while, settled on the latter. After all, she’d voted with her feet.

Welcome to the club.

Chapter three

He was still crouching there, naked and perplexed, when his doorbell

rang.

She'd had a change of heart?

Not about to argue.

He hurried over to answer the door, preoccupied with cooking up a witty opening line and hence unprepared for the sight of two huge men in equally huge dark suits.

One golden brown, with a wiry, well-trimmed black mustache.

His companion, squarer and ruddy, with sad cow eyes and long, feminine lashes.

They looked like linebackers gone to seed. Their coats could have doubled as car covers.

They were smiling.

Two huge, friendly dudes, smiling at Jacob while his cock shriveled.

The dark one said, "How's it hanging, Detective Lev."

Jacob said, "One second."

He shut the door. Put on a towel. Came back.

The men hadn't moved. Jacob didn't blame them. Guys their size, it probably took a lot of energy to move. They'd really have to want to go somewhere. Otherwise don't bother. Stay put. Grow moss.

"Paul Schott," the dark one said.

"Mel Subach," the ruddy one said. "We're from Special Projects."

"I'm not familiar," Jacob said.

"You want to see some ID?" Subach asked.

Jacob nodded.

Subach said, "This will entail opening our jackets. And offering you a glimpse of our sidearms. You okay with that?"

"One at a time," Jacob said.

First Subach, then Schott showed a gold badge clipped to an inside pocket. Holsters held standard-issue Glock 17s.

"Good?" Subach said.

Good, as in, did he believe they were cops? He did. The badges were real.

But good? He thought of Samuel Beckett's response when a friend commented that it was the kind of day that made one glad to be alive: I wouldn't go that far.

Jacob said, "What can I do for you?"

"If you wouldn't mind coming with us," Schott said.

"It's my day off."

"It's important," Schott said.

"Can you be more specific?"

"Unfortunately not," Subach said. "Have you eaten anything? You want maybe grab a muffin or something?"

"Not hungry," Jacob said.

"We're parked down by the corner," Schott said.

"Black Crown Vic," Subach said. "Get your car, follow us."

"Wear pants," Schott said.

The Crown Vic kept a moderate pace and signaled without fail, allowing Jacob to stay close behind in his Honda. His best guess for their destination was Hollywood Division, until recently his home base. A northward turn on Vine scuttled that theory, though, and as they headed toward Los Feliz, he fiddled with rising unease.

Seven years on the job, he was green for Robbery-Homicide, the beneficiary first of a departmental memo prioritizing four-year college grads, and second of a plum spot vacated by a veteran D keeling over after three decades of three packs a day.

That he had performed admirably—his clearance rate was consistently near the top of the department—could not erase those two facts from his captain's mind. For reasons not entirely clear to Jacob, Teddy Mendoza had a king-sized hard-on for him, and a few months prior, he'd called Jacob into his office and waved a manila file at him.

"I read your Follow-Up, Lev. 'Frangible'? The fuck are you talking about?"

"It means 'fragile,' sir."

“I know what it means. I have a master’s degree. Which I believe is more than you can claim.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know what my master’s is in? Don’t look at the wall.”

“That would be communications, sir.”

“Very good. You know what you learn to do in communications?”

“Communicate, sir.”

“Bull’s-fucking-eye. You mean ‘fragile,’ write ‘fragile.’”

“Yes, sir.”

“They didn’t teach you that at Harvard?”

“I must’ve missed that class, sir.”

“I guess they don’t get to that till sophomore year.”

“I wouldn’t know, sir.”

“Refresh my memory: how come you didn’t finish Harvard, Harvard?”

“I lacked willpower, sir.”

“That’s the kind of smart-ass answer you give someone when you want to shut them up. Is that what you want? To shut me up?”

“No, sir.”

“Sure you do. I ever tell you I had a cousin who got into Harvard?”

“You’ve mentioned that in the past, sir.”

“Have I?”

“Once or twice.”

“Then I must’ve told you he didn’t go.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did I say why?”

“It was cost-prohibitive, sir.”

“Expensive place, Harvard.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You had a scholarship, if I recall.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lessee . . . An athletic scholarship. You lettered in Ping-Pong.”

“No, sir.”

“Varsity nut juggling . . . ? No? What kind of scholarship was it, Detective?”

“Merit-based, sir.”

“Merit-based.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Merit-based . . . Hunh. I guess my cousin didn’t have as much merit as you.”

“I wouldn’t assume that, sir.”

“How come you got it, and he didn’t?”

“You’d have to ask the financial aid office, sir.”

“Merit-based. See, in my mind, that’s a lot worse than not getting a scholarship. In my mind, that’s the worst thing, when you have something and you piss it away. No excuse for that. Not even a lack of willpower.”

Jacob did not reply.

“Maybe you could finish up online. Like a GED. They got a GED for Harvard? You should look into that.”

“I will, sir. Thank you for the suggestion.”

“Till that day comes, though, you and I, our diplomas say the same thing. Cal State Northridge.”

“That’s true, sir.”

“No. It isn’t. Mine says master.” Mendoza kicked back in his chair.

“So. Feeling burnt out, are we?”

Jacob stiffened. “I don’t know why you’d think that, sir.”

“I think it cause that’s what I heard.”

“Can I ask who you heard it from?”

“No, you may not. I also heard you’re thinking about putting in for some time off.”

Jacob did not reply.

“I’m giving you the opportunity to share your feelings,” Mendoza said.

“I’d rather not, sir.”

“Work’s got you down.”

Jacob shrugged. “It’s a stressful job.”

“Indeed it is, Detective. I got a whole bunch of cops out there who feel the same way. I don’t hear any of them asking for time off. It’s almost like you think you’re special.”

“I don’t think that, sir.”

“Sure you do.”

“Okay, sir.”

“See? That’s it. Right there. That’s exactly the kind of tone I’m talking about.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

“And again. ‘Not sure I gah gah gah gah.’ How old are you, Lev?”

“Thirty-one, sir.”

“You know what you sound like? You sound like my son. My son is sixteen. You know what a sixteen-year-old boy is? Basically, he’s an asshole. An arrogant, entitled, snotty little asshole.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

Mendoza reached for his phone. “You want time off, you got it. You’re

being transferred.”

“Transferred where?”

“I haven’t decided. Someplace with cubicles. Fight it if you want.”

He didn’t fight. A cubicle sounded fine to him.

Strictly speaking, burnout wasn’t the correct term. The correct term was major depression. He’d lost weight. He prowled his apartment, exhausted but unable to sleep. His attention drifted, words dribbling from his mouth, syrupy and foreign.

These were the outward signs. He knew them well, and he knew how to hide them. He drew up a curtain of aloofness. He spoke to no one, because he couldn’t be sure how short his fuse was on any given day. He ceased to nourish his few friendships. And in the process he made himself out to be exactly what Mendoza thought he was: a snob.

Not as obvious, and harder to conceal, was the dull sorrow that shook him awake before dawn; that sat beside him at lunch, turning his ramen into an inedible repugnant wormy mass; that chuckled as it tucked him in at night: Good luck with that. It revealed the raw injustice of the world and made a mockery of policework. How could he hope to correct a worldly imbalance when he could not get his own mind right? His sadness made him loathsome to himself and to others. It was a sick badge of honor, a family inheritance to be taken out every few years, dusted off, and worn in private, a tattered black ribbon, the needle stuck through naked flesh.

Up ahead, in the Crown Vic, he could see the outlines of the two men.

Apes. Heavies, in case things got heavy.

It was all he could do not to wheel right around and go home. Special Projects had to be a euphemism for fates best avoided.

It sounded like what you got when you thought you were special.

Maybe he hadn’t vetted them thoroughly enough.

He could send a text, let someone know where he was going. Just in case.

Who?

Renee?

Stacy?

A jittery message to the ex-wives would make their respective days.

Mr. Sunshine.

Renee's title for him, imbued with nuclear scorn. Stacy had adopted it, too, after he'd made the mistake of telling Wife Number Two about Wife Number One's nagging and Wife Two came to empathize with "the crap you put her through."

Everything turned to shit in the end.

So he was bound for someplace unpleasant. What else was new.

Determined beyond all reason to enjoy the ride, he eased back in his seat, nudged his mind toward Mai. He put her in street clothes, then removed them, piece by piece. That body, injection-molded, freakishly proportional. He was about to rip the tallis off when the Crown Vic made a sharp turn and Jacob swerved after it, hitting a pothole.

The sign said odyssey ave, an ambitious name for a grimy, two-block afterthought. Wholesale toy dealers, import-exports with Chinese signage, a shuttered "Dance Studio" that looked as if no feet, agile or otherwise, had crossed its threshold in ages.

The Crown Vic pulled over outside a set of rolling steel doors. A smaller glass door was inscribed 3636. A man in the dress of LAPD brass stood on the sidewalk, shading his eyes. Like Subach and Schott, he cut an imposing figure—towering, gaunt, pallid, with two frothy white tufts over his ears, suggestive of wings. He wore ash-gray pants, a luminous white shirt, a service firearm in a lightweight mesh holster. As he approached the Honda and bent to open Jacob's door, the gold badge around his neck swung forward, clicking against the window, commander in blue enamel.

"Detective Lev," the man said. "Mike Mallick."

Jacob got out and shook his hand, feeling like a different species. He was six feet tall, but Mallick was six-six, easy.

Maybe Special Projects was where they put the freak shows.

In which case, he'd fit right in.

The Crown Vic honked once and drove off.

"Come on in, out of the sun," Mallick said, and he glided into number 3636.

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