

Devorah Talia Gordon



# Fortieth

“Why don’t you go out with that Sommers boy? Remember him? Joannie brought it up again. Her son’s best friend. With the red hair.” Her mother squinted around the empty restaurant, and then her eyes rested on Ilana Barzilai, stacking plates behind the counter. She whispered, “Kayla, it’s so *quiet*. Too quiet. And Ilana seems sort of sad, doesn’t she?”

Kayla glanced at Ilana, whose dark eyes were somewhere far off, distant. And she hadn’t made the usual small talk. “You’re right. When was the last time we were here?”

Her mother stabbed a piece of lettuce and looked to the ceiling. “Was it six months ago already?”

Kayla thought back; yes, it had been that long since they’d done lunch. “Time goes fast,” Kayla said softly, making a mental note to bring her mother back to The Coffee Barrel next month.

“*Nu?* What about Sommers?”

“It’s nice Joannie thought of me. But, Mom, he’s not a *boy*. Must be about 50 by now.” Kayla sank into the booth and tried to find her deep, peaceful breath.

Her mother dipped the lettuce gingerly into a ramekin of Caesar salad. On Sunday nights, so long ago, she always got the Caesar

salad. Kayla ordered eggplant parmigiana, and Rachel and her father got onion soup and fettuccine. “If I remember correctly, he is a successful attorney and spends a great deal of time in Israel. And has a second home. At the beach.”

Kayla pictured the waves cresting and falling onto the smooth sand, the sun warming her face. She hadn’t been to the beach in almost two years. Pia, her old friend from seminary, had suggested Kayla take herself there for her birthday. “I told you we’re going, me and Dassi? Right after this, we’re going to the beach. For two days.” Looking down at her phone, she checked the time — one-thirty — but no missed calls or texts. Nothing from the *shadchan*.

Her mother’s eyes widened. “Really? I’m glad to hear they gave you off. You work too hard, Kayla.”

Kayla was about to defend her boss, who was happy to accommodate her, but instead she took a bite of Greek salad (Ilana was out of eggplant) and washed it down with a long swallow of soda. *Everything doesn’t have to be a thing*, she thought, smiling to herself. *Just enjoy*.

Her mother put down her fork and took a sip of coffee, and then smacked her lips closed a few times, her face scrunched up. “Oy, this coffee is bitter like nobody’s business. And lukewarm. What happened to the cinnamon?” Her eyes shot around the restaurant. Ilana was nowhere to be seen.

Kayla felt her shoulders rise to her ears and with great effort eased them back down. She took her mother’s cup and got up. “Thank you, dear.” Her mother took a little mirror and lipstick tube from her purse. “Wow! My baby is for-ty! Four-zero. I must be getting old!” Peering into the mirror, she smoothed her *sheitel* and sighed. “Yes, sure am.”

“You look great, Mom. Be right back.” Kayla glanced around for Ilana as she strode to the counter. Ilana had taken over for her father, Ezra, when he’d had a stroke years ago. Kayla remembered Ezra flipping pancakes and frying eggs, joking with her father. Now, the large griddle was clean and empty. Leaning against the counter was a large chalkboard with faded words: *spinach salad, mushroom cauliflower soup, Moroccan salmon*.

Kayla lifted the countertop where it hinged at one end and went behind the counter. The coffee pot was full, but the trace of cinnamon was missing. Kayla inhaled deeply as she poured her mother a cup, and then took one for herself. *Might as well*, she thought. *We’re going to be here for a while*. She knew how it went once her mother started talking *shidduchim*.

Kayla thought of Doniel, hoped Mrs. Zalutsky would call soon to let her know what was going on. It was not a good sign that she hadn’t heard from the *shadchan* yet. It had been approximately 59 hours and 23 minutes since their

second date.

As Kayla slid into the booth, her mother took a sip of coffee. Her eyes lit up. “Ah, Kay. Now we’re talking. You’re a good cook!”

“See! Write *that* on my *shidduch* resumé.” They both laughed, and Kayla rubbed her palm along the red vinyl cushion, remembering how, as kids, she and Rachel would lie down on the booth after dinner, lulled by her parents shmoozing with Ezra and his wife Chavi after all the other customers had left.

Her mother’s face brightened. She unfolded a napkin, took a pen from her purse and wrote on the top: IDEAS. First under the word she wrote: Aaron Sommers. When Kayla winced, her mother said, “You’re right, ten years is a lot. But these are just *ideas*.” She held up the napkin and waved it in the air, flaglike. “This is just a *napkin*.”

“Ideas,” Kayla said, nodding. “Fine.” *Let her do it, she’ll feel better*.

Tapping her pen on the table, her mother’s raised eyebrows beckoned above her reading glasses. “Next?”

“Mr...Berg! Yes, Berg. You know, the widower from Aunt Breindy’s shul? He’s what, just shy of 70? But Aunt Breindy told me he’s youthful and I think he got *semichah* on *Yoreh De’ah* last year.”

Her mother looked at Kayla for a moment, her brow wrinkled. Then she began to write, B-E...

“Mommy! I was *joking*.”

Winking, her mother crossed out the letters. “You know those dating sites and apps? You go on them? Joannie knows a few nice couples that met that way.” She took a sip of coffee.

“Mom, I know...I just, well, I’m doing it the old-fashioned way. Using *shadchanim*.”

Kayla pushed her plate away and met her mother’s eyes. She thought she saw a glimmer of approval. “So, any other prospects?”

Kayla’s mind flashed to Doniel’s dark eyes and wry smile. They’d had two fine dates and regular conversation and he was even around her age. He had a job at one of the good schools in town and had learned in a solid yeshivah.

*But why isn’t he married? What’s wrong with him...?* Kayla heard the questions in her head and then asked herself: *Well, what about you? Why aren’t you married yet?* “Kayla?”

She wanted to tell her mother but closed her lips. She remembered Avi, the one she’d almost married eight years ago. Her mother would call or text almost daily to see how it was going. But now, with each passing year of singlehood, the space she’d carved for herself had become too delicate to breach. Kayla breathed deeply, and felt her stomach expand with air. *You’ll know when and if you can*

say something to her, she thought. *Trust yourself.*

Her mother smiled. “Hmmm. Kayla, there is this nice young man, a *really nice* young man who works at the JCC. About your age. He lectures to the seniors, a social worker. Very warm. And intelligent. I can ask Sorah, the director, about him.” Her mother jotted JCC SOCIAL WORKER on the paper. Then she held the napkin with two hands, nodding at it.

Kayla sighed. She finished her salad and glanced down at her phone. Swiping at the screen, the little boxes and circles came to life. No missed calls from the *shadchan*. A text from Dassi about exercise class being canceled on Thursday night due to the Bregman wedding.

Right, Shani Bregman and Dovi Kowolsky. Kayla flipped the phone over onto the booth and watched the pink glitter swim and finally settle into the plastic case. She pictured little Shani and her brother Moishe, giggling as she twisted the tire swing as tight as she could, round and round, and t h e n hearing them squeal in delight when she

let it go. She remembered the perfection of that summer; the crisp, blue ices the Bregmans always stocked in the freezer, feeling so big as a mother’s helper for the first time. One day, she’d thought back then, she’d have her

own kids as delicious as Shani and Moishe, or even more.

A sadness wrapped itself around her shoulders. She shook the memory, and tears, away by blinking hard. *That was long ago. I am here now...anything is possible.*

“Oh! Kayla, oh, wow! Why didn’t I think of this before! Such a good idea.” Her mother fished in her purse for her cell.

Kayla got up; she couldn’t imagine what this good idea was going to be, and Ilana was back behind the counter, thin fingers wrapped around a huge jar of mayonnaise.

“Going to say hi,” Kayla mumbled, wiping her eyes with a napkin. She put on a smile as she approached Ilana, whose smile back barely reached her cheeks. “Ilana, hi. How are you? It’s been too long.”

Ilana shrugged one shoulder. “What you see?” She turned to the counter behind her and filled two fresh mugs with coffee, her silver-threaded *tichel* dangling down her back.

Kayla’s smile faded when Ilana turned back with tears in her eyes. “We are...” — Ilana crossed both hands in front of her, then stretched out her arms — “closing.”

“No way. Ilana... Why?”

“Look around. Everyone moving to the other side, you know, where it’s more religious. They want to tear down our place and the three other businesses here to make the Target.”

Kayla shook her head as Ilana set the cups on the tray with a thick slice of caramel cheesecake, their specialty. She lifted her chin toward their table. “Your mom looks good. She doesn’t age.”

“Can you tell her that?”

Ilana giggled.

“It’s my birthday.”

“Ah! *Yom huledet same’ach! Mazel tov!* Why didn’t you say? You need *more* dessert!” Ilana held up a finger. “Wait. Let me guess. I remember when you were little Kayla. You and Rachel would climb all over the booths, under the tables...” She fished around in a drawer and came out with a pink candle, and sliced another piece of cake.

“Ilana, that’s okay.”

Ilana tsked and carefully pushed the candle through the layer of caramel on one of the slices, and then took a lighter from her pocket. “If I was 20 then, you were about 10... Thirty-eight?”

“Forty.” Kayla quietly said the number she’d been running from all of these years. She remembered the trauma of turning 30, but feeling better about 31, 32...and as 40 crept closer she’d put it out of her mind. She was “in her 30s” for all intents and purposes. But now...

She had thought something drastic might happen when she woke up today. She’d said *Modeh Ani*, washed and started her day and...she was fine. Happy, even; warmed by the gold-papered box and card Dassi had left on her doorstep last night, knowing that after lunch they had the drive up the coast for her “birthday *retreat*,” as Dassi had dubbed it.



*That was long ago. I am here now...anything is possible.*

"Ah, I remember 40! I thought I was old. But I was so young!"

Kayla followed Ilana back to the table and slid into the booth as Ilana started to sing "Yom huledet same'ach, yom huledet same'ach..." Her mother's face broke into a grin and she hummed along. At the end, the two of them clapped and Ilana wished her *mazel tov*.

"This looks good," her mother said, but frowned at the plate. "I thought we were going to share. You know I could never eat a whole slice."

"Ilana wouldn't let. Eat what you want. I'll take the rest on my getaway."

"Here's the situation, Kay. I called Sharon from my book group and she's going to call Alisa Schneider's friend Leah, the one who lives in Baltimore and has the brother. I think his name is Shmuel or Shimon, whatever, and he's a part-time stockbroker and learns at Ner, and he was only married for a brief time ten years ago, or something." Her mother wrote "Shimon/Shmuel" on the napkin, and then shaved off a paper-thin slice of cake with the edge of her fork. "How does that sound?"

Kayla felt her stomach clench tight. "How is that book group? What are you reading?"

"Kayla, doesn't that sound *good*? I mean, he is even learning half-day. That's right up your alley!"

"Mom, no! I mean, learning's good. But..."

"But what? What's the matter?"

"Can we just stop with the napkin? Can't we just talk? Please?"

*She had thought something drastic might happen when she woke up today.*

Her mother slowly took a bite of cheesecake. "We are reading some new book about antisemitism written by the daughter of a survivor. But mostly I just listen to the discussion and knit." She kept her eyes on her mug.

"Listen. I didn't mean to get upset. It's just...I know you mean well. Thank you for trying. What are you knitting?"

"I've got a lovely maroon shawl almost finished. And after that, I told Rachel I'd knit a hat for the new baby. We just don't know if I should do blue or pink. We settled

on green."

Right, the next baby. "When is she due again?" Kayla had been meaning to message her sister who lived in Eretz Yisrael for a few weeks now.



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“November. Maybe you want to come with us? When was the last time you were in Israel?”

“Yaakov’s bar mitzvah.” How could she forget? Six years ago, his name was Chaim or Duvid. He was nice, but the fact that he didn’t speak any English and lived in Bnei Brak...well, it wasn’t a match.

“That long ago! Yaakov is in America now, you know? Some excellent yeshivah in Lakewood. So, come. We could stay at that big hotel, the new one.” Her mother took out her phone. “Let me tell your father.”

Shaking her head, Kayla forced a lightness into her voice that wasn’t there. “November’s a *really* bad time. We have a big contract to complete by December first.” As soon as she mentioned work, she knew she was in trouble. Funny, yesterday she’d even considered telling her mother about the nice raise she’d gotten.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed and she whipped off her glasses. “This work just takes up *all* of your time. Don’t they realize you have other things to do? What if you wanted to just take a break? You could always move to New York for a few months, you know, for dating purposes.”

She had no desire to do any such thing. Designing houses was her lifeline; as she sat at her desk and drew kitchens, archways and great rooms, she was transported into those new miniature worlds. When she was working, she forgot everything else.

“If you had a more flexible schedule, things might be different.”

Kayla crossed her legs under the table and waited for the shaking to come. “It’s not so bad, Mommy,” she mumbled. But she wasn’t shaking. And then she noticed...she was breathing deep, steady inhales and exhales. She smiled to herself. “Mom?”

Her mother raised her chin.

Kayla lifted her shoulders high in apology. “I’m so sorry. I have to meet Dassi in an hour to get to the hotel. Can we pay?”

Her mother glanced down at the almost whole cheesecake. Then she blinked a few times and looked up at Kayla. “I feel like I didn’t even get to hear what’s going on with you!”

“Oh, just the same old stuff, Mom. I’m fine.”

“Really? Come on, what’s new?” Her mom gave her biggest smile, the one that reminded her of almost every photograph she posed for.

Kayla tossed the idea around very gently. Maybe she should tell her she wasn’t fine. That she was tired of being alone and tired of dating. Maybe she should tell her about Doniel.

Her mother leaned forward and put the pen down, pushing the napkin to one side.

There was so much she could tell her: that she was scared to be 40, that she woke up at night and stared into

the darkness of her quiet room and wondered if she’d ever be woken up by a baby’s howl or a toddler’s nightmare. Maybe she should tell her, too, that in the morning the sun came up and the birds sang and the *siddur* beckoned, and once she was at her desk, drawing and dreaming, maybe then all the pain floated away.

Maybe.

“Mom?”

Her phone beeped. A text from Mrs. Zalutsky. *Sorry, I’ve been under the weather. Heard back from Doniel this morning. Call me.*

Kayla’s heart started to pound.

“Yes, Kayla?”

Happy face. Happy face! Kayla wiped her damp hands on her napkin and cleared her throat. “I have to make a quick call. Really quick...” She hurried to the back of the restaurant and stood beside “their table,” the L-shaped corner booth with two sections — one for her and one for Rachel — underneath the pictures of the old shuls of Tzfas. She stood by her favorite, the Abuhav, with its carved white archways and delicate paintings of trees on the ceiling of the *bimah*.

“Mrs. Zalutsky? Hi, it’s Kayla.”

“Hi, Kayla. Thanks so much for calling.”

Her voice was warmer than she’d remembered. “Doniel had a great time. He said you’re very smart. And introspective. And something about ‘liking where this is headed.’ Can you go out again tomorrow night?”



The Abuhav became a blur of blue and white. *Tomorrow? Great time...?* She blinked hard. "Yes, tomorrow. Fine, that should be fine." Something niggled at her. "Wait. I'm, oh, I'm going out of town until Thursday. Thursday night?"

"I'll see what I can do. Call you right back."

Kayla went back to the table, spun the saltshaker around and let out a giggle.

Her mother stared. "What was that all about? You suddenly perked up."

"I...just had to return a call. From a *shadchan*."

"Oh?" Her mother picked up her pen, a twinkle in her eye. "Do we have another name?"

"We do, Mom. But..." Kayla took a breath. *Trust yourself. You'll know when and if.* "Can I tell you later? Can we just wait and see?"

Her mother smiled. "Sure, of course."

"It's just that we get our hopes up and then..."

Her mother put her hand on top of hers and brought a finger to her lips. "I get it," she said softly.

Kayla felt herself sink into the cushion. She squeezed her mother's hand.

"You've got to get going! Ilana!? Where is she? I'll just go up there." She dug into her purse for her wallet.

"I'll go, Mom."

But her mother was already out of her seat, pulling her back straight. "Nah, I've been sitting too long." As she walked to the counter, she said, "Anyway, it's my birthday treat!"

Kayla exhaled and sent Dassi a quick text: *Almost done with lunch! Excited!* as her mother approached the counter and Ilana appeared. After speaking for a few minutes, her mother reached out and hugged Ilana.

A chill went down Kayla's spine to her toes. This was the last time they'd be here. Kayla glanced back to their table. She could almost hear Rachel's laughter as she crawled underneath, waving Kayla over to join, the two of them sucking on the peppermint candies from the big glass bowl on the counter.

*The end of an era*, Kayla thought. Saying goodbye to The Coffee Barrel was just another step away from childhood, stepping into turning 40, stepping into whatever would come next.

She decided she'd better enjoy it. She took a large bite of cheesecake, letting it slowly move around on her tongue before swallowing. It was even better than she'd remembered. ●

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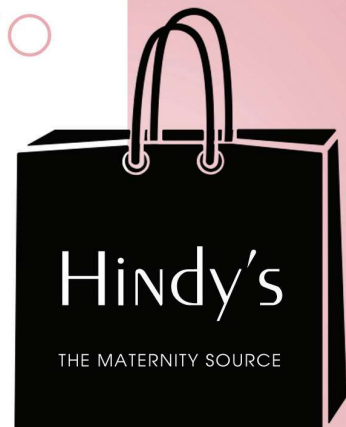
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