

Chapter Six

Maryam Vráchos

Joe was not going to squander the opportunity that presented itself. Ashley was never in a good mood these days. Hell, he hardly even saw her anymore. The last time they had sex was ten weeks ago when she not only took the top spot in the ratings but crossed the four million viewers mark. That was the pattern. There was never a chance for physical intimacy unless Ashley wanted to celebrate a triumph.

As his wife grew more and more distant, he needed sex more. It was not the physical release he wanted, he needed the intimacy. In his mind, if they still had sex, they were still married. She still loved him. Then he could cling on to the future for one more day. He could hold on to the delusion that things would change once they got to the next plateau. He would win this election and then they would be in D.C. together. Once they were together every day, life would settle back into normalcy.

In Joe's mind for this night to be a success they needed to have sex. He needed her to want him and he thought he had a chance. As they walked into their suite at the Lodge, Ashley sashayed through the door. She kicked off her heels and started dancing. No music was needed. Ashley could just feel it. She threw her arms up and dipped her knees as she swished her hips. Then she looked over her shoulder at him and blew a small kiss.

Joe came up behind her and put his hands on top of hers that were resting on her hips. She continued to sway as she backed into him. Then she reached her arms up behind her and caressed his hair. Joe leaned down to kiss the nape of her neck. But just then she turned around and as their eyes met, he felt the passion evaporate. Joe could see something she had forgotten came back into her mind. He thought he could force the moment back and kept dancing with renewed intensity. Ashley appreciated the effort, but the spark was gone. She tipped up to give him what she intended to be a quick kiss, but Joe tried harder to reinvigorate the passion.

As their lips met, Ashley intended to withdraw, but Joe opened his mouth hoping she would reciprocate. She held on for another second while he kissed the bottom of her closed lip and then she pulled away lightly bouncing off trying to pretend like she did not just rip his heart by trying to keep the mood light.

Joe shifted from desperate longing to panic. He did everything right today. Everything. What more could he do? He was making a mental list of everything that could have displeased her trying to steel himself against the criticism he knew was coming. Somehow when he could predict what upset her, it made the blow easier to absorb.

“Listen, I meant to discuss something with you,” she said.

Here it comes, Joe thought.

“I heard you made an unscheduled campaign stop at Buddy’s this morning. Is that true?”

How the hell had she even heard about that? Joe realized he was living in a pit of vipers. Did those little pissants report every time he had a bowel movement? He knew he could not lie about it so he hoped against hope that he could minimize it against tonight's success.

"Well, yeah, you know it's a tradition and Buddy's is iconic in this community and, you know, I thought..."

She cut him off, "what the fuck, Joe? Seriously. Why is this so hard for you?"

She must have caught on to the Evervine research and he realized that he should just put it all out there and hopefully this fight would not last too long.

"Ash, he's my kid brother and, just so you know, they are doing some really amazing things in the community. It's not just a housing project anymore. He has medical volunteers and even banking volunteers now and their footprint is getting huge. We have identified over two dozen affiliated entities across the country implementing their model. If Agape could get a stake in those programs and put our brand on it that would go a long way to silencing some of our biggest critics..."

Ashley interrupted again, "I don't give a *fuck* about your burnout brother and his stupid hippie friends, Joe. Don't change the subject. This is about Buddy's."

Joe had absolutely no idea why a campaign event at a local diner would piss her off. "What?" he managed to get out incredulously.

"*Whut?*" she shot back to him mockingly. "You fucking know *what*. I'm talking about this," and she grabbed the broken button on his suit jacket. "Did you have another eight thousand calorie omelet, Joe?"

He knew he was not overreacting about the jacket. Desperately he grappled for a response. He knew the best thing was to just take his lumps so the fight would be over faster, but, to cope with the panic, he needed to believe that he could say some magic words to get out of the verbal beratement.

"Ash, it's all this campaign food. Everywhere I go it's just garbage food and they expect me to eat it. If I don't choke down their slop, I'll look like an elitist..."

Ashley was not about to let him off without total contrition. She had to deal with this problem with force now or it would get out of hand. "Don't give me that shit, Joe. My schedule is just as hectic as yours and I still keep myself in shape. And why do I do it? *Why?* Do you know the pressure on me? I do it for us. Remember us, Joe? How many times do we have to have this conversation? People may vote for a fat senator, but they won't vote for a fat president. Moreover, why should I kill myself to fit into this dress and then you go and get too fat to wear people clothes?"

Joe just cowered. It was the only way he was going to get through this moment. Fighting back just made it worse. "I'm sorry Ash. You do so much for us. You sacrifice so much for us. I could eat less and get up earlier to exercise. I know that now. I'll..."

"I don't want to fucking hear it Joe," she said knowing that preventing him from completing his thought while driving hers home with a ball-peen hammer consolidated her

power. The contrition set in and now it was time to deliver the big blow so he did not forget it again.

“I am just so tired of having to ask you to think about (a) your own health, (b) your own appearance, and (c) our mission together. That’s what this is about, Joe. I am just so fucking done trying to...” Her point was interrupted by a sharp, short knock at the door.

“Ah, that will be Maryam,” she said. “To be continued.”

That’s the second she’s saved my ass time tonight, Joe thought but did not have the courage to say.

Ashley could flip her demeanor like a light switch. “Maryam!” she cried when she opened the door as if she were greeting an old sorority sister she had not seen in years.

Ashley then grabbed Maryam and embraced her hard. Maryam stood there in her charcoal suit and black blouse trying to hide her discomfort as this woman who was at least a foot shorter than her buried the side of her face into her breasts. She managed a quick pat on Ashley’s shoulder and when that did not result in a release, rubbed the shoulder followed by another quick series of pats. She felt like a fawn caught in the coils of a giant constrictor. When Ashley loosened her grip, Maryam had to fight the urge to bolt.

Ashley took half a step back and when Maryam saw the tears welling in her eyes, pity replaced her disquiet. Ashley picked up on this demeanor and turned red with embarrassment. She did not like to be out of control and she quickly wiped her eyes and put on her best television smile.

Maryam sought a diversion to give Ashley time to recover. “Good evening Mrs. Hughes,” Maryam said with her best approximation of a smile, “it was kind of you to invite me over this evening.”

The cordiality realigned Ashley’s social trigonometry and as she slipped back into comfort she said, “oh Maryam, please call me Ashley. Or Ash. Heck, you can call me anything you like!” Ashley said forcing a laugh and then with a mock wagging finger said, “just don’t call me a bitch!” She then laughed unconvincingly at her own joke.

Maryam forced a smile again saying, “no, I won’t be doing that.” She then sat in an uncomfortable silence waiting for the next beat of the conversation to be advanced. Joe, happy for the opportunity to pick up the social football Ashley fumbled, obliged as Maryam said, “good evening, Mr. Hughes.”

“Maryam, you saved our lives. It’s Joe.” Then he added quickly, “or I can call you Eddie and Eddie when you call me, you can call me Al.”

Maryam genuinely chuckled and said matter of factly, “that’s very funny. Paul Simon. *If You’ll Be My Bodyguard?*” She deliberately misstated the title of the song knowing that Joe must have made that error in his mind when thinking up his joke. Joe nodded and Ashley grew frustrated that he elicited an authentic laugh from their new protector with a joke that she did not understand.

“I think that’s Joe’s way of saying... you got the job!” Ashley exclaimed, raising her arms, expecting a reciprocal gleeful outburst. When the anticipated reaction was not

delivered Ashley grew even more impressed with this statuesque Semitic goddess standing before her with a polite smile. She was all business and Ashley was enamored with her style and the cache she would bring to their campaign far more than her skill.

“Thank you, Ashley,” she said. “I am thankful for the opportunity.”

Ashley then motioned her to the living room seating area and offered her something to drink. When Maryam requested water, Ashley brought two bottles from the fridge and left the bottle of Valpolicella she hoped to open on the counter. Joe grabbed a beer. He needed one and he had earned it today. More than that, he knew by the time they finished with Maryam, Ashley would forget to rebuke him for the calories. He was so pleased with his cunning that he did not even feel the need to make eye contact with Ashley for approval when he sat down.

The Hugheses sunk into their deep, plush sofa. Instead of sitting in the love seat perpendicular to them, Maryam grabbed an extra dining room chair resting on the wall and brought it to sit directly across from them.

Ashley said, “Moishe spoke so highly of you. He said that you are one of Mossad’s most valuable assets and he hates to lose you, but he knows you wanted to make a change. So, why do you want to leave Mossad?”

Maryam struggled to contain her frustration both at Ashley’s casual reference to the Prime Minister of Israel by his first name, but more to her speaking of Mossad as if it were a rival country club. Before she began speaking, Maryam folded her arms and crossed her long legs exposing a stylish pair of black heels. Ashley almost succumbed to the temptation to ask her where they were acquired before she began to speak.

“First,” Maryam said calmly, but resolutely, “Mossad is not something we should speak about.” Maryam observed that her remonstration had the desired effect as she observed Ashley calculate the two dozen or so people who *really* needed to know in her head.

After Ashley put her hand to her mouth with the pantomime of zipping her lip and throwing away the key, Maryam continued in a softer tone. “My life’s work has been to protect my home from those who wish to destroy it,” she said as she uncrossed her legs and sat forward in her chair sensing Ashley’s gaze shift to her foot.

Maryam continued, “in America you are blessed to have two mighty oceans and plenty of space for your own. In my part of the world many people who want to destroy each other must co-exist. But, you must understand that this is not just a reality for my country, but for my people all over the world. From the beginning of civilization, we have lived among people who do not like us. We have learned through the ages that our survival requires more than just force of arms. We must rely on cunning, intelligence, and constant diligence. Those skills translate very well into personal protection.”

Ashley was confused. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but since we’re a Christian organization and, I’m not saying you have to be a Christian to work for us, but Moishe told me that you are a Christian.” Ashley then fumbled not exactly sure how to ask the next

question, “so, are you Jewish or are you a Christian?” she asked with an upward inflection belying her confusion.

Joe knew better than to interject anything when Ashley was commanding a meeting so he stayed silent to this point. He tried to hide his rolling eyes by drowning the remainder of his beer and got up to get another one rather than having to look Maryam in the eyes while she tried to explain the situation.

Maryam took it in stride. Recrossing her legs, she sat back in her chair and said, “indeed I am a Christian, but my faith and my ethnicity are two different things, even though ethnicity may be closely related to one’s faith.” Maryam continued the explanation after a brief pause, “[a]fter the time of Christ my family settled in what today is part of Turkey, in some of the very first Christian communities. As the region changed, we migrated back down to Israel, but we have never left the Levante.”

Ashley was enthralled. “So, after all those centuries why do you want to leave Israel now?”

“Well, Ashley, I want to leave precisely because of my beliefs,” Maryam said as Ashley beamed.

Maryam continued, “we have taken different paths but, at the core, I think our missions are very similar. To now, I have spent my life protecting the people of my own country. Now, I want to devote my life to protecting those who want to share my beliefs with the world.”

Ashley practically cooed with delight. Seeing that his wife was too smitten to speak intelligibly, Joe jumped in, “so, Maryam, what do we need to do to improve our security?”

Maryam said, “let me show you something” and she reached inside her jacket and produced the pistol she took from the attempted assassin.

“This is the weapon I took from the man who tried to attack you,” and she held the small pistol before them. “As an initial matter, I never should have walked out of there with this pistol. Until I introduced myself, you did not even know who I was. Moreover, this is evidence of a crime. The people you have protecting you never should have let me have this, but none of them questioned me or even asked if I had it.”

Ashley became indignant. Turning to Joe she said, “I knew it. I told you, didn’t I? That liberal socialist scumbag governor doesn’t have the guts to do it himself, but he deliberately assigns incompetent people to protect you and then tells them to turn a blind eye.”

Joe assuming that Maryam was not familiar with security for senatorial candidates explained, “you see security is provided by the state troopers and...”

“The governor is a Democrat and you suspect that he has sabotaged your protection,” Maryam said, completing his thought.

“Exactly,” Ashley exclaimed while pointing at Maryam. “Joe thinks I’m paranoid, but I think the signs are unmistakable.”

Striking a diplomatic tone Maryam said, “perhaps you are being paranoid, but ultimately, placing your safety in the hands of someone else, particularly if that someone else stands to benefit from your destruction, sows the seeds of doubt. Ultimately, Joe’s security, your security, and the security of all of your people is *your* responsibility.”

Internally, Joe felt it was his responsibility to be a statesman and kept a skeptical mind about the conspiracy theories Ashley peddled every night, but he dared not say anything about it now. Ashley on the other hand was fully deluded. Her own mind was the maximum authority she needed. She rationalized to herself that if everyone else took her reports as the gospel truth, that must mean something. If four million people each night trusted her implicitly, then she should trust herself. At this point, if Ashley reasoned out the truth, then it was the truth. Not the truth to her. *The truth.*

Maryam continued, “here is another problem” and being sure to keep the pistol pointed away from the Hugheses, rocked back the slide and emptied ten rounds of ammunition. The bullets made repeated loud clangs on the glass top of the coffee table.

When she finished emptying the magazine, she held up the pistol again and gesturing to it said, “this is a Sig Sauer P365. The barrel is only three point one inches long and it has a standard ten plus one round capacity. It only weighs a little over a pound and a half fully loaded. This weapon is so small that it can be easily concealed and gives the shooter eleven 9mm rounds that can be shot in a matter of seconds.” She then handed the empty weapon to Joe.

Joe held it pretending to know what he was talking about and said, “so is this a special forces weapon? How did this guy get ahold of one?”

Ashley, who knew far more about firearms, just put her face in her hands.

Maryam replied, “this has been the best-selling firearm for the past five years in this country.” Joe looked terrified as she continued, “the other top guns are the Glock 19 and the Springfield Hellcat which are very similar pistols. Same size and capacity. There are tens of millions of these guns in circulation.”

Maryam took the pistol back, did one more chamber check, and returned it to her waistband. The prop had served its purpose and she had their attention.

She continued, “I could tell you that you need to increase screening and improve the perimeter security at your events along with half a dozen other measures, and while all of that is true and should be done, you have the capacity to do more.”

Ashley asked, “like body scanners or facial recognition or what are you thinking?”

“New technologies are incredibly beneficial and put in the hands of well-trained people it can be a powerful tool, but you have a resource more valuable than any infrared scanner or drone or anything like that.”

Ashley and Joe looked at each other and then back to Maryam completely confused.

“People,” Maryam said, “you have tens of *thousands* of well-armed people all across the nation who would march anywhere for you. You have already started to marshal them. I

have seen your recruitment efforts and you are making remarkable progress for so short a time.”

“Recruitment efforts?” Joe asked in confusion, completely unaware of any such initiative.

“Shhh!” Ashley hissed curtly seeking to express annoyance at the interruption, but more to silence any additional questions of this ilk.

“The problem is that they are completely untrained, undisciplined, and have no command structure. If Agape devotes the resources to correct those problems, you could have a protection force that could meet any challenge. Imagine how tonight might have been different if you had a thousand armed security personnel monitoring the crowd, trained to look for suspicious activity.”

Ashley was instantly invested in the idea. “Plus, a regulated force would be a visible deterrent to anyone who would harm us.”

“Exactly,” Maryam said pointing at Ashley.

“Yes, *yes!*” Ashley exclaimed. Turning to Joe she said, “this is exactly what I had in mind. Imagine it. We would not have to rely on anyone for our security. All of those fat, bearded losers playing soldier could actually be turned into them. They would eat that up. It would be a force of... of... Christian soldiers with their loyalty to Christ and his church above all else.”

Joe downed the rest of his beer and said, “so you want to build your own private army?”

Ashley was in no mood to be challenged. “Don’t be so naïve Joe. Fuck. Are you even invested in what we are trying to do? If we don’t marshal our resources like Maryam says we will always be pushed around by the goddamned swamp.”

Maryam was quickly learning the diplomacy needed in this couple’s dynamic. She said, “it would not be anything so grandiose, Joe. Plus, there is another factor you should consider. These men are in complete chaos right now. As your movement grows, the threats to it will too. These thousands of men armed to the teeth will start trouble. They are dying to do it. You can see it in their eyes that they are looking for a reason to fight. If you establish a command structure and discipline over them, you will be protecting innocent people who might get caught in the crossfire of a riot. You need control.”

Ashley added, “I think we have a moral responsibility to do this. We have been negligent to this point. We have the ability to whip these men into shape and we’re the only ones who can do it.”

Joe exhaled a deep breath and stood up extending a hand to Maryam, “when can you start?”

Ashley clapped with glee as if she had just received a new toy.

“The authorities are not releasing the name of the suspect at this time, but they report that he is a thirty-six-year-old unemployed man from Newark, New Jersey. Apparently, this man’s social media feeds are filled with left wing socialist propaganda,” the Vincere breaking news anchor reported on the television in the Evervine common room.

“Typical. So typical. When are we going to stop these atheist terrorists targeting Christian leaders like Ashley and José Hughes,” his blond colleague said as she tugged at the bottom of her skirt slightly as it rode up her thigh when she crossed her legs. She continued to discuss the war of religious intolerance loosed by anti-religious bigots as she thought about her approaching forty-second birthday as if it were the sword of Damocles from which her Columbia journalism school degree could not protect her.

Her seventy-one-year-old colleague felt particularly invigorated that day given the excellent work of his new colorist and seven-year contract extension his agent had just secured. He decided to have a full rack of ribs for dinner instead of the half rack, so unconsciously he felt the need to spread his legs wide on the sofa they shared to give his belly a little more breathing room. He then took a whack at the ball she put on the tee for him. She was a good girl. Always gave good set ups and didn’t talk too much when he wanted to make a point.

“But you see what happens when these cowards try something like this. They just wet the bed. Look at this pathetic quivering sissy,” he bellowed at the replay on the display screen behind the couch. “Compare that to a real man like José Hughes. Just look at that! As soon as that pistol comes out, look, look what he does.”

“He protects his woman,” his colleague said as she started her next sentence but was cut off.

“He protects his woman! That’s right. He doesn’t think about his own safety. He throws himself in front of his wife. That’s a real man. That’s a real leader right there and you know that threw the assassin off his game” the anchor said.

“Threw him off his game, exactly,” his colleague nodded in agreement.

“Then when this waste of life saw what a real man does in the face of danger, he didn’t know what to do!” the anchor cackled. “These thugs don’t understand true acts of courage. They don’t understand...” the last resolution of his homily on masculine heroism faded as Lily turned down the volume on the remote.

“Well, it’s a good thing that cunt is so fat. His massive gut hides his tiny erection,” Lily said. She stood up and went to the television on the credenza. Pointing to the man’s crotch she said, “oi, look there! Right there! Gaw, I thought it might be a chapstick, but that’s his prick. She sees it. She’s trying not to look at it, but it’s fascinating. So small, yet so hard. It’s like a diamond thimble that is.”

Jude chuckled at the effort, but Auri remained silent.

Humor failed to lighten Auri’s mood, so Lily changed tack, “Auri, do not beat yourself up for ducking out on him this morning. He ambushed you. You didn’t ask to be in that situation, much less to be cornered into your brother trying to fucking buy Evervine. Look,

he's fine and maybe next time you talk it can be on better terms because he had this brush. I..."

Lily stopped talking as Auri looked up from the floor at her. "Lils, that's not it," he said. "I ought to be thinking about that, but in all honesty, I..." he trailed off before plucking up the courage to finish his thought, "I just keep thinking that it might be better if that guy had done it."

Lily plopped down in the armchair without the will to even pretend like she disagreed with him. She knew that for both of their souls she ought to say something about not wishing harm on another human, not less one's own brother, but she could not do it.

"Good god, just thinking about what Ashley said fucking terrifies me. She flat out declared her intention to begin a theocracy and Joe's just marching right along like a good little soldier. This is bigger than the standard demagoguery. They're going to do it and be hailed as heroes," Auri said despondently.

"The dominoes have been set up for a long time, Auri. Martyrdom would only set events in motion even faster," Jude replied.

Auri sat back on the couch beside him and ran his hand through his hair stopping halfway to hold his head. "Of course, you're right," he said, "but I can't just sit here and watch this. I have to do something."

Jude looked at Lily and said, "do you? Do you really want to do something about it?"

Lily responded to Jude saying, "he never says that without actually doing something." Her words were delivered in a tone of validation, not rebuke.

Auri just shook his head, "how am I supposed to compete with billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of followers, and a fucking propaganda network? Remember, Jude, I gave away all of my money. I don't have the resources to fight this."

"You cannot defeat this by writing a check," Jude replied.

"What then? Should we raise an army shod with Birkenstocks and armed with righteous indignation?" Auri asked in reply.

"Why not?" Lily said. "Seriously, why not?"

Jude looked at them both and said, "you cannot overcome what has been put in place with a counter political movement or even with a bigger army. You need more help than that."

Auri looked up and saw a change in Jude's countenance. He was resolute, but calm. Auri had the same feeling when they met. He felt like this man somehow had answers to insurmountable problems.

Jude looked at him intently and said, "Auri, the time has come. I know some people you should meet. There is a path you can take, but I need you to come with me if I am to show it to you."

Auri looked at Lily and then back to Jude and was surprised when Jude stood up. He thought Jude was speaking metaphorically. "I... what, right now?" he asked.

"Yes, let's go right now," Jude said.

Auri looked at Lily who just nodded at him encouragingly. At this he got up and Jude gave him a quick press of the shoulder and immediately started down the hallway toward the rear exit. Jude walked swiftly and looked at his watch as if he was hurrying to catch a train. Lily followed beside Auri putting a hand on his shoulder and encouraged him to keep up.

Jude walked swiftly through the outdoor mess and past the bonfire pit. As they passed the pit, the light of the house started to fade and Jude turned on a small red light which provided illumination as they walked but allowed their vision to adjust to the darkness.

He continued to stride with purpose through the meadow down to the hill with the lone poplar tree. Auri followed along but did so in great confusion.

“Jude, wait, where are we going? Okay, why... why are we headed out to the cow pasture?” Auri asked.

Jude stopped and turned to him saying, “Auri, this is going to be a little weird. You’re not in danger but I need you to trust me. We are going now to meet my friends.” He then turned around and continued down the path. Lily came up behind Auri thinking she might need to nudge him again, but he took off following without reservation.

As they arrived at the poplar, a ring of soft lights slowly illuminated the area around the base of the tree to Auri’s great confusion. Jude then reached into his pocket and held something enclosed in his hand. Turning to Auri he said, “I know this is coming at you very fast, Auri, and I am sorry for that. Things have developed more quickly than I anticipated and I don’t have time to ease you into this.”

He then opened his hand and produced a necklace with a small silver symbol as a pendant. He then opened the clasp and put it around Auri’s neck. “It’s time for us to go.”

Auri held up the pendant and examined it. He did not recognize the symbol but thought it looked like a little olive floating in a martini glass.

He then looked at Lily who said, “I can’t go Auri. We can’t both just bugger off without a word to anyone. I’ll be fine. You should go.”

With that Auri turned back to Jude and said, “I guess I am ready, but I, I don’t know what’s happening. Where are...? How are...?”

“It will be easier just to show you,” Jude said.

He then took Auri’s hand and pressed the trunk of the tree. At that moment, a symbol that matched the pendant around Auri’s neck began to glow. It was hidden in the very graine of the bark itself, but now shone brightly in the dark night. Jude closed his eyes and the light emanating from the tree flooded Auri’s sight and consumed his consciousness.