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Red Velvet

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Leigh Charmaine Raper

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Thesis Committee:

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To my parents.

One

“Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?” the counselor at North Valley Community College asked. The brochure I picked up at the gym promised ‘individualized attention’ and a focused ‘Opportunities’ meeting providing each prospective student with ‘one-on-one educational guidance.’ That question made it feel more like a job interview than a ‘chance to set a clear path for my future successes.’ The difference between this and my hit list of shitty jobs was this time I had to pay them. I had spent a month at Chuck E. Cheese’s mopping up toddler vomit and eight months behind the counter at Gambini’s Fish Market. Sure, I still have nightmares about suffocating with the Chuck head on and I haven’t eaten a Filet O’Fish since, but I could count on a paycheck every week.

“Did my check not clear? I can give you a credit card.”

The counselor’s face twisted into a frown like he had found a hair in his organic hummus. “We’re not here to talk about money. We’re here to talk about opportunity. Your hopes. Your dreams. Your future.”

#

My future was *Business Economics* three nights a week and Introduction to Accounting on Saturdays. If I was going to get out of the rut of one crap job after another, I had to get my shit together. I needed to know how to run my own operation, keep my own books. My buddy from high school flipped his first house six months after we graduated. He also had a two-year old kid, but he had a plan. Something to work towards. Me, I was still looking for the right opportunity. And not the bullshit kind the North Valley brochure was talking about.

“You need to expose yourself to the humanities,” the counselor had said. “Not just business and numbers. Enrich your schedule.” When I had brushed that off, he had also reminded me that I couldn’t get a Bachelors without a least a couple of liberal arts credits.

So I signed up for *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union*. It was on Tuesdays, which fit in my schedule, and there was no way I was taking the other class at that time: *The Sixties and Social Change*. The Sixties as a decade and as a concept had passed the Costa house right on by. In Pop’s own words he had been “too busy working for a living” to get involved with those “dirty hippies.” The Cold War Russians cut their hair and wore suits like Ed Sullivan, which was way more Pop’s speed. A textbook with a picture of Stalin might stir up a conversation over meatballs and Sunday sauce, but it wouldn’t make Pop think I was smoking weed in my bedroom.

I knew Mo wouldn’t be happy about a class on Tuesdays at five. He had already given me a load of shit about North Valley. Mo Katz of Mo’s Delivery & Storage was my boss. One of Pop’s buddies had hooked me up with Mo. Pop called in some favors when

Ma wouldn't let me in the house after a shift at the fish market without first stripping off my fishy clothes at the back door while old lady Simmons watched from her back window.

Mo's consisted of a fleet of eight panel trucks and a couple of larger long-haul rigs. The whole operation was housed in a warehouse with a loading dock, fuel ports, small diesel shop, and a grimy office. Mo's hadn't been a career choice, more like a work release program. I was intent on racking up some points for good behavior.

"You think you're leaving early on Tuesdays, then you better stay late on Mondays," he said when I showed him my schedule.

"No can do. I got *Business Economics* on Mondays and Wednesday. See?" I showed him the schedule again.

"You're killing me here, Costa." He took the schedule and studied it closely. He laid the schedule on his desk. "Fine, but..." He pinned the schedule down with his index finger and tapped it on the desktop for emphasis. "You get your ass in here an hour earlier every day to make up the time. And I better not catch you trying to read or study or any shit like that while you're on my clock. Or I'll school you myself, if you know what I mean." Now the finger was pointing straight at me. "You got that? Am I clear?"

"Got it." I slipped the schedule off the desk. "You'll see, Mo. This will be good. I'll probably have lots of questions for you. Business questions. You know, so I can start thinking about having my own business someday." Mo enjoyed a good ego stroke. He lowered his finger, but only for a second.

"I don't appreciate questions, Costa. You remember that."

Two

Mo picked up a contract with Donnie's Discount Furniture in January, about the same time I started at North Valley. Donnie's specialized in leatherette sofas where every seat reclines and has its own drink holder. Pop's Naugahyde Barcalounger belonged in *Architectural Digest* by comparison.

Every basement in North Jersey must have needed one though by the way the trucks started rolling off the lot. Mo had to hire four extra drivers and lease another truck just to handle the deliveries the week after Donnie ran his Touchdown promotion in March. If the Giants won the Super Bowl that year, Donnie's TV ad said your sofa and loveseat combo would be free. Of course, some restrictions applied, like the small print that said you had to buy the sofa and the loveseat plus you had to use a Donnie's Discount Furniture credit card, the one with the twenty-one percent interest rate, then, just to top it off, the Giants had to win by fourteen points. I have been a Giants fan my whole life and I wouldn't take that bet.

"I need you to work late on Monday," Mo said, at the end of my shift on Saturday. I had come in after my accounting class to help clean the shop. Mo was sitting

in his usual spot: behind his cherry-veneered desk, piled high with the pink and green duplicate forms from various deliveries. The faint, wet-bark smell of his cigar drifted past each time the fan oscillated in his direction. The whole place was damp and slick from grease.

Mo Katz was no millionaire, but I knew he made more money than his IRS documents would admit. We had just learned about capital gains and losses in my class. I would've bet that Mo was reporting a lot of losses while he watched the trucks keep rolling off the lot. His wife Joan had just finished redoing the kitchen in their faux-Tuscan villa with the four-car garage in Bergen County. I heard from the foreman whose sister-in-law worked at Palmeri's Paint and Wallpaper that Joan was planning on doing the kitchen at the Shore house next. Joan was Jersey all the way. She drove a shiny, white Mercedes with a pink bumper sticker on the window: Jersey Girls Don't Pump Gas. Joan was pushing sixty.

Mo was south of six feet tall and favored SansABelt pants and Penguin golf shirts. Not the hipster versions they wear in Brooklyn. Mo wears the kind they sell at Harry's Haberdashery in Hackensack. As the weather had gotten warmer, he had taken to drinking Gatorade all day because the "elect-o-lights" he lost at work were "causing some detriments in the bedroom department, if you know what I mean."

"You know I have class on Monday."

"What's more important? Some pussy book club or pulling down some cash?" He took a drink of Gatorade. His dentures were starting to develop an orange tint.

"I'll see what I can do."

“You’ll do more than that, or I’ll find someone who can, if you know what I mean.”

“Come on, Mo. I don’t want to be filing shit in a dispatch office my whole life.”

“And you really think these business classes are going to help? You’d probably have a better chance in that communist bullshit class you take of learning how to get shit done.” Another drink of Gatorade. “I got what I got being a businessman, not reading about them. You’re a smart kid. You’re wasting your time with that shit.” He leaned back in his leather swivel chair and brought the Gatorade to his mouth. One of the back wheels rolled off the plastic pad that covered the industrial carpet. The change in elevation knocked Mo off balance and he spilled the syrupy, orange drink down the front of his pale yellow shirt.

“Shit!” He sat up quickly and the chair snapped back upright. “Gina!”

“Whatta you want, Mo? I’m on the phone.” Gina didn’t leave her seat at the receptionist’s desk in the other room.

“Bring me some soda water. I got a stain on my shirt.” He raised his voice a notch or two.

“Soda water? Where the fuck do you think you are, Outback Steakhouse? We ain’t got no soda water.” She raised her voice right back. Then went back to the conversation she was having with her sister.

“I’ll get you some ice from the shop.” I stepped over the file storage boxes blocking my path to the door. I thought about what Mo had said. He had a point. No one ever got rich because he had a degree from North Valley Community College. The

overtime shifts with Mo were serious money, at least to me. I had been saving money to spring for a car since my first check at Chuck E. Cheese's, but books and tuition, even at a shitty community college, had pulled a big chunk of that cash.

Gina was still on the phone with her sister when I got back with the ice. She waved in dismissal. Her gold bracelets rattled as they settled further down her arm. Her long nails click-clacked on the keys of her keyboard as she typed and talked at the same time.

Mo was also on the phone.

"Fuck you, too, Donnie." He motioned for the ice, taking it from me and patting the orange spot while the ice melted and dripped. One cube slipped from his fingers and fell down between his skin and the shirt.

"Shit!" His voice raised an octave or two and sounded like someone had kicked him in the balls. He jumped out of the chair. I laughed. He shot me a threatening look, but his expression changed, like he was listening to a judge reading the charges against him.

"No, not you, you dumb prick. This dumb-ass kid I got working here spilled his water on my desk." When I started the protest the charges that were *actually* being read against me, the threatening look returned.

"I know. I know. Kids these days. My wife's nephew is the same way. He works in her brother's restaurant and is always coming up with these shit-brained ideas about how to save money, if you know what I mean."

I could tell from the turn in the conversation that the storm clouds in their discussion had passed. Thanks to dumb-ass kids like me.

“I hear you. I hear you. I’ll take care of it. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again even if I have to do it myself.”

When he got off the phone, Mo told me that since I was a smart, college boy, I could spend the afternoon cross-referencing the invoices sent to Donnie and the delivery schedules.

#

Besides Mo and Gina and me, the only other employees in the office were the two dispatchers. Joe Wallace worked the day shift and Bobby Kavanaugh covered the nights. I only saw Bobby Kavanaugh if I worked late. He wasn’t that much older than me and built like a brick shithouse. He started driving deliveries for Mo when he was a junior in high school. You have to be eighteen to get a Commercial Driver License. It didn’t take mad math skills to figure that Bobby Kavanaugh spent more than the normal twelve years in the hallowed halls of the Toms River public school system.

Whatever caused his extended stay in Toms River, you couldn’t tell by how he worked. Bobby K was crazy organized. He and Joe shared the dispatch office that looked over both the shop and the loading dock. Joe Wallace was the people person who would mediate disputes between the drivers or take them out for beers after a busy week. Bobby K was the truck person. He had a magnet for every piece of equipment and a grid representing every day of the week and every regular route. There were color-coded markers for types of deliveries and the number of men for each job. Nothing moved in or

out without Bobby K knowing about it and accounting for it on a spreadsheet or a graph or his whiteboard.

He could also fix or modify anything in the shop. Once a driver came back with a dent over the cab on one of the panel vans. Over the course of three nights, Bobby had pounded out the dent and fabricated a new metal guard. The truck didn't look like new, but it probably looked better than it had before it met the oak tree. Shit like that saved Mo a fortune in trips to the body shop.

My job was to make sure the dispatchers knew what deliveries were coming up. I would print out the schedule for the current week and the following week's deliveries. Bobby would double check it with his grid and Joe made the drivers' schedules. If something new came up, I would let them know as soon as it came into the office. Before I started, Gina had been responsible for this, but my arrival had freed her up to do more 'customer service.' Gina's definition of customer service involved a lot of calls to her sister and tracking her husband, one of Mo's drivers, on the dispatch GPS.

One night, about eight o'clock, I climbed the stairs to the dispatch office. I had stayed to help get a load of patio furniture ready for delivery the next day but was beat and covered in sweat. One of the drivers was going to give me a lift, but he still had some paperwork to fill out.

I shut the office door behind me. The whoosh of cool air from the air conditioning felt like Christmas. It was still spring, the calendar on the wall said May, but it was sticky and hot and gross outside. I sat in the chair opposite the big desk Bobby and Joe shared. I wiped my forehead on the sleeve of my Devils t-shirt and stretched to open, with my foot,

the mini-fridge they kept under the desk. I leaned over, pulling out a bottle of water and took a drink, resting the cool plastic on my forehead. I realized that Bobby K was focused on me, looking straight at me. Some people have questioning looks. Bobby K's was more of a rhetorical questioning look. The one the cops give you when they pull you over.

“Shit, dude. Sorry. I should have asked.” I'm not good at talking myself out of situations. I'm much better at talking myself into them.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Fuck you, Costa.” This was a pleasantry for Bobby. “You smell like dog balls.” He went back to the spreadsheet in front of him. I leaned back in the old metal office chair, circa 1982, like just about everything else in the office at Mo's. It was aluminum tubing with scratchy upholstery. There was a black stain in the crotch area.

Bobby looked up when he heard the rustle of the newspaper that I was folding, flattening, and smoothing out. Mo advertised in *The Tri-Town News* because Joan's brother worked there. We always had copies lying around. “Want ads, huh? Looking for a new job?”

“No, man. I'm looking for a car.”

He gave me a suspicious look, then laughed.

“What?” I said, feeling more defensive than was appropriate.

“What kinda car you looking for?”

“Something reliable. Cheap. Good with gas.”

He laughed again. For Bobby K, I'm just a punch line.

“What?” Defensive was turning the corner for offensive even though he could have pounded me into the ground and left nothing but another stain on that ratty chair.

“My grandma was cheap, reliable, and good on gas. You need something with a little style.”

‘A little style’ sounded great, but I wanted something soon. I explained my funding dilemma. He promised to keep his eyes open and said he’d help when I found one.

I appreciated his offer. Maybe Bobby and I could be friends. We could hit the Shore bars together on Friday nights. I kicked back again and put my feet up on the desk.

“Get your fucking feet off my fucking desk before I turn your ass into a hat.”

Okay, so maybe we wouldn’t be hitting those bars anytime soon.

Three

Alexandr Tichy was my professor for *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union*.

Unlike the retired executive and the CPA that taught my other classes, Tichy was the only one of the three that seemed like he chose teaching as a career and not a hobby. He was a first generation Czech immigrant whose family had seen the violence and oppression up close and personal. He and his parents had escaped to France, then found their way to Canada and, eventually, to New Jersey. He wasn't that much older than me, but his were rough road miles compared my smooth turnpike ones.

When discussing anything violent, he would sit on the corner of the metal desk at the front of the classroom. It was the part of his lectures that most of my classmates relished the most. The part that sounded like an Eastern European version of a video game rated M for intense realistic violence and adult situations. He clearly cared for this part the least. He handled maps and troop movement charts with a clinical detachment, but the gory parts, the murders in the street and the torture, those were harder for him and

it showed. Those moments were rare, but we all sat up a little straighter and listened a little more intently, even the stoners did their best to focus.

“Mr. Costa, would you mind sticking around for a minute?” Tichy said one afternoon after he had dismissed the class.

This wasn't the first time a teacher had asked me to 'stick around' but it was the first time I was positive it had nothing to do with attendance or the suspicion that I was letting one of my buddies copy off my paper.

“I know you enjoy this class, so I thought you might enjoy this.” He handed me a flyer. Tichy was writing a novel about an art thief in the Czech Republic. He had mentioned it to us during a lecture on the disappearance of artists and writers charged with crimes against the state. “I'm going to read a couple of things from the book.”

It was for Thursday night at Book 'Em Dano, a mystery bookstore on Route 23.

“Shit...I mean...sorry.” I remembered too late that I was talking to a teacher.

“Yo, man. No problem. I'm only your professor in class. You can call me Alex when I'm off-duty.” He extended his hand and I shook it.

“Does that mean you will quit calling me Mr. Costa? Everyone just calls me Vince.”

He laughed. “You interested, Vince?”

I was, but I had to work. I was pulling as many shifts as I could get at Mo's and Thursdays were a busy night. Restaurants want to get supplies like napkins and ketchup dropped off before the weekend. Mo wants people like me to help make that happen. “I can't. I have to work.”

He slung a beat up satchel with a Black Flag patch sewn across the flap over his shoulder. “That’s too bad. Next time.”

We walked out to the parking lot together. I had never noticed, hell, had never thought about, what kind of car he drove, where he lived, or whether or not he had a girlfriend or a wife. I was still close enough to my years in public school to think of teachers, or professors, in this case, as alien life forms that live on a separate plane of existence. It’s like seeing the local weatherman buying Preparation H at the drug store. Teachers, movie stars and TV weathermen aren’t supposed to shop at the same CVS as the rest of us.

Tichy drove a gold Camry unique only in the long scratch that ran the length of the car from the front wheel well to the passenger door. He noticed me noticing and gave a snort of laughter.

“Sabrina.” His finger traced the deepest part of the gash near the door handle. He pulled the door open, tossed his bag inside and leaned on the frame.

“Keyed?” Like I had to ask.

“Yep. She’s got a bit of a hot streak. Russian.”

If that last bit was supposed to mean something to me, it didn’t. “No kidding. That shit don’t happen by accident.”

I tried to give him my most sympathetic ‘bitches be crazy’ look.

The look I got back was bewildered. His eyes reminded me of the pale, blue ones that wolves always have in *National Geographic*. During class, when he leaned on his desk to talk about Stalin’s purges or how the Romanov children had been murdered and

choked in hole to burn, the blue crystallized and hinted to his family's history. There had only been two chicks in the class but I had overheard one of them say to the other, "Professor Tichy is like a young Paul Newman." Yeah, if Paul Newman had been a KGB contract killer.

Right now, though, his eyes had none of that rage. They had settled on amusement.

"You're all right, Vince."

I shrugged. "Thanks." It came out more like a question for some reason.

He got in the Camry, cranked it, and rolled down the window. "I'm trying to pull something else together. At a bar. Like I said, maybe next time."

"Yeah. For sure. That sounds cool."

I walked away towards the bus stop hoping, but not knowing, if there would be a next time. I also wanted to meet this Sabrina.

Four

Ma shoved a brown paper bag in my hand before I could pull the front door shut.

“Ma, what’s this?” I had a pretty good guess from the faint smell of chocolate on both her and the bag.

“I made cookies. I thought it would be nice. You can share them with your friends at work.”

I rolled my eyes. As an only child, I always felt like I spent more time with my parents than my friends who had brothers and sisters who could share the load. As the only son of Italian-Americans in New Jersey, I not only shouldered the load, but single-handedly carried the legacy from the old country. This responsibility included, but was not limited to: meeting a nice Italian girl; starting a family of my own; knowing how to make wood-carvings of the holy family for under the tree at Christmas and also how to install a new toilet; guarding the family recipes for Sunday gravy, meatloaf, and Nonni’s lemon cake; keeping in the good graces of Father Joseph; and faithfully making confession. If I had only had a sister, she could have at least handled the lemon cake duties.

In addition to the certain inherent responsibilities, being an only child also meant that Ma worried more than the usual share, which for the Italian ladies in our neighborhood was already a super-sized portion. She said the rosary over conventional concerns like whether I would end up in jail like Mary Bucarelli's sons or get dredged up from the bottom of the Old Hook reservoir like Maria Fatone's son Francis or knock up one of the girls that worked at the market. But, she also had to worry about whether I would ever have any friends, since I didn't have brothers to count on. I suspect she blamed that one on herself, so, to make up for it, she has always made cookies and cakes and lasagna for my little league tournaments, Pop Warner football practices, and even if I had detention in school. In her mind, the path to friendship and loyalty is paved with bribes from her kitchen.

I ate one of the cookies while I waited for the bus. When I got to Mo's I noticed Joan's Mercedes was in the lot, next to Gina's minivan.

I knew something was wrong the minute I opened the door.

"Joanie, baby, I need you to get outta here. We've got to deal with this," Mo was saying in a soothing voice.

Gina was on the phone. It was a work call. Something was definitely wrong. I stopped in the doorway. The three of them turned to look at me. Gina rolled her eyes.

"Costa! Where the fuck have you been? We have a crisis here."

"I brought cookies," I said, pulling the paper bag, slowly disintegrating from the butter in the cookies, from my messenger bag.

Mo gave me a strange look. Gina snorted a wicked little laugh. Joan, however, was appreciative.

“How sweet, dear. Did your mother make these?” She and Ma had been confirmed together.

I nodded, still confused.

Joan took the bag and immediately extracted a cookie. She took a bite. “Mo, honey, I’m leaving...” Mo was steering her towards the door. “But with all of this commotion, I think I need to call Andre for a message. He makes house calls.” Joan was no dummy.

Mo mumbled something about how much Andre was costing him, but made no objection. Gina looked like she wanted to say something about Andre’s ‘house calls’ but she didn’t say anything either.

“And I’ll take these, too,” Joan said waving Ma’s cookies in the air.

“Fine,” Mo said before I could object.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Joe. He didn’t show up for work and no one answers at his house,” Gina said. I hadn’t realized she was off the phone. “Probably in some hotel room in Philly, if you ask me.”

“Nobody did.” Mo waved his hand in her direction. “And I don’t give a fuck where he is—I just know that my trucks have deliveries to make and I got drivers with their thumbs up their asses.” Even though Mo started Mo’s Trucking with just himself

and a truck, it had been years since he had worked in the dispatching office. And Gina would hardly set foot in there.

Mo smoothed his comb-over across his sweaty, bald, head. It was a nervous habit, and, according to Bobby K, his poker tell. Gina drummed her nails on her desk. They were a different shade than yesterday. Today they were an electric pink with black tips and reminded me more than ever of talons.

“I can help. I know where Joe keeps the schedules. I can get the trucks out.”

The phone on Gina’s desk rang.

“Mo’s Trucking,” she said. It was another customer upset about the lack of a delivery. I could tell Mo wasn’t all that sure about my offer of help, smoothing his sparse, oily strands, but he was also limited in his options.

“Fine. Just don’t fuck it up.”

#

I spent my morning pulling Joe’s files and getting the trucks on the road. I surprised myself at how quickly things started moving smoothly once I settled into a rhythm. By ten o’clock I was kicked back in Bobby K’s chair watching the last of the trucks roll off the lot. I did a quick calculation in my head, using a formula I had learned at North Valley, about how much the delay had cost Mo. I flipped that number for the bigger number of how much money I had made for Mo by getting the trucks out on the road. We were still behind, but things were moving and moving meant money. I stood up and stretched, then headed back into the office.

Gina was on the phone with her sister. That meant the customers weren't calling to complain. I passed her and didn't resist giving her my best 'how you like me now' smile. From her middle finger response, it was clear she didn't like me any better now than she had yesterday.

"All the trucks are out," I said to Mo. He was fiddling with the lock on one of the drawers of his desk. He jumped when I spoke.

"What the fuck? You don't knock now?"

"I just thought you'd like to know all the trucks are out."

He processed the information. "Good. Good. They'll just have to deal with late."

"Any word on Joe?" I had been too busy this morning to think about it, but it was not like Joe to miss work.

"Yeah. Yeah. Gina talked to his wife. He's in the hospital. Had a heart attack or some shit."

"No shit. Is he okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Gonna be fine. Drove himself to the hospital, but couldn't be bothered to call here and let me know."

This shit hole wouldn't be at the top of my call list either if I thought I was stroking out.

"You think you can handle things while he's gone? Wife said it would be at least a couple of weeks before he came back."

Handling the dispatch desk one morning in a pinch was one thing, but every day was another story. The acid in my stomach swirled. I tried to write it off as hunger since all I had eaten was that cookie. I brushed an imaginary crumb from my t-shirt.

“I guess. I mean, if Bobby K could help me out a bit.”

“Sure. Sure. Good. Good. That’s settled.” Mo returned to fiddling with the drawer. When he realized I was still standing there, he looked me in the eye.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

I turned to leave. I stopped and opened my mouth to speak. *I saved your ass you ungrateful prick.* I didn’t say anything and started moving again.

“Close the door on your way out.”

#

Bobby K came in early and we worked up a plan. He would handle everything and I would do my best not to fuck it all up. I would get the trucks rolling in the morning according to the schedule he wrote at night. I would not schedule anything on my own and I wouldn’t change anything without letting him know.

“You do this right, maybe Mo will throw you a couple of extra bucks. Get you into that ride a little sooner,” Bobby said after we had finished our basic plan development. He was wearing his usual wife beater/cargo pants combo, looking like an extra in a Stallone movie. Since he came here straight from the gym he still smelled like soap. I hadn’t given up hope that we might actually become friends.

“You think?”

“Mo’s tighter than a Brazilian piece of ass, but I guaran-damn-tee he ain’t paying Joe while he’s out.”

Five

“You’ve been putting in a lot of overtime down at Mo’s.”

“I want to buy a car.” I thought the *Autotrader* stack by the toilet made that pretty obvious.

Pop shook his head ‘no.’ “We all know that, Vincent. I mean with school. You’re not missing classes, I hope.”

Ma had been in the kitchen, cleaning up from dinner. She returned with a slice of lemon cake for each of us. She caught Pop’s eye when she gave him his cake. I knew she had been listening to our conversation.

“No. Mo and I talked about it. With Joe out, Mo gave me a little bump. And he signed off on some extra OT.” (“This is temporary situation, Costa. Don’t get any ideas, if you know what I mean.” Mo’s exact words.)

“Okay, so...what’s your plan?”

“Plan, Pop? I don’t know.”

I could almost hear Ma shake her head as she turned to disappear back through the swinging door.

“Vincent, you need a plan. How do you expect to get anywhere if you’ve got no idea where you’re going?” Pop nipped off the corner of a slice of cake with his fork. He savored the bite for a split second before putting it in his mouth. Lemon cake was his favorite.

I stabbed at my slice with my fork. “I mean, I want to do my own thing, maybe have my own business, someday. Maybe trucking, like Mo, or imports, you know. I know a guy from school who imports rum and vodka, sells it to all the upscale places. He makes good money. Don’t know. Maybe could be that...but right now...”

“I know. I know. Right now you want a car.”

“I’m taking the summer off from school. Finals are next week. That means extra money from Mo’s and the stuff I save not being in school.”

He took another bite. “Your mother’s lemon cake is better than Nonni’s. It always has been.”

My grandmother, my father’s mother, had been famous for her desserts. Pop told stories of how all the young men in the village would gather at her house on Saturdays when she was baking sweets. Her dream had been to open a bakery, but instead she had gotten married and pregnant too young. Pop’s father had come to New York from the old country to work in a shipyard. Nonni had followed with Pop when he was two. The three of them, soon joined by my aunt and uncle, lived on the Lower East Side until my grandfather made enough money to move them out to the Bronx.

This talk of Nonni and lemon cake was nice, but not helpful. Besides, I always liked her cookies better than lemon cake.

“Whatever you do, really do it. Don’t waste your time, Vincent. That Mo’s no saint. Don’t let him screw you over. It’s a good place to make some bucks for a while, but it’s not a life. Make sure you get what you came for.”

Six

A sweet, black Chrysler convertible in the *Penny Saver* caught my eye. It was on a lot down near Trenton, EZ Credit Motors, so I asked my cousin to drive me down on Saturday. The overtime at Mo's had been adding up. I had even convinced Mo to give me a little bump. The little bump helped me too even though it pissed me off that Gina made a point of typing "Temporary Adjustment" into the time clock every week. Joe's doctors still hadn't cleared him to come back to work and I doubted if Mrs. Wallace would ever sign off on the paperwork. So, before too long, I had enough for a good down payment and could cover the payments and insurance if the deal was right. Counting on Joe's bum ticker felt kinda shitty, but he was a good guy. He wouldn't have blamed me one bit.

It was parked on the lift, raised, slightly above street level, facing Washington Street. I knew from the description in the *Penny Saver* that the color wasn't just black; it was Midnight Polar Ice with Clearcoat. What the listing didn't do was explain what Clearcoated Midnight Polar Ice looked like when the Central Jersey sun hit it. The body gleamed like a dark mirror or maybe the sequins on the headlining girls at Scores. I could see the reflection of the red and yellow flags that were strung across the lot, their images only distorted by the light breeze.

The salesman cranked the engine. The Chrysler turned over and gave a rumble that hinted to the V6 under the hood. The exhaust fumes mixed with the oil and stale gasoline smell of the lot. To me, it was a cocktail of confidence and freedom. With a car, I could think bigger than Mo's. Bigger than North Valley. Bigger than my neighborhood. When he revved the engine, the gravelly growl was louder than it should have been—maybe a whole in the muffler—but the grimace on my cousin's face brought a smile to my own.

“The prior owner did some after-market modifications,” the salesman said, getting out and walking around to the passenger's side.

I eased into the driver's seat. I made some adjustments: tilting the steering wheel, fiddling with the mirrors, pumping up the lumbar support. Then I took a minute to scan the interior. EZ Credit had obviously had the car detailed. The dash bore the slick sheen of Armor-All and the piney scent of air freshener filled the compartment. I moved the rear-view mirror again and caught a glimpse of my cousin kicking the tires of an Explorer.

#

When I told Pop the story that night, the salesman took a little more convincing, the manager was somewhat more menacing, and the negotiations were a lot more intense. In the fictionalized movie adaptation I reenacted in the living room, I walked out, not once, but twice.

“It's very shiny,” Ma said when she came out to the curb to check the car out.

“That’s the Clearcoat,” I said. I gave the hood a quick polish with the tail of my t-shirt.

“No, *that’s*,” Pop said, pausing for emphasis, “...how they get you.” He circled the car like a rental car jockey looking to cash out your optional insurance. He opened his palm and I tossed him the keys. He climbed in and cranked the car. He grimaced like my cousin at the noisy muffler when he revved the engine.

“Oh, my,” Ma said. “No sneaking around for you, Vincent.”

“That’s a new muffler for sure,” he said over the rumble. He squinted at the odometer and tapped on the temp gauge. After fiddling with the air conditioner, he killed the engine. “Did you have the engine checked?”

I lied. “Bobby Kavanaugh looked at it. He said it was cool.”

Pop shook his head and tossed me the keys. The old ways die hard here in New Jersey. Pop never put much stock in an Irish mechanic. Mechanics in Pop’s world should be Italian. In my humble opinion, the best mechanic I ever knew was a black kid that I took shop with in high school. He rebuilt an engine on a Trans-Am junker he bought for a hundred bucks and saw more action in the back seat of that car than any of the Italian kids I knew.

“Get in, Ma. Check it out.” I opened the door for her. She sat in the passenger seat.

“It is nice, Vincent.” She ran her fingers across the dash and the smooth, glove leather of the seat. She picked at the edges of a cigarette burn. “You should be proud of yourself.”

I was proud of myself. It felt good. I turned to look at Pop, standing on the curb in front of the same house he had lived in for over thirty years—the house I had lived in my whole life. The aluminum siding had been replaced, just like Pop’s left hip, but the only other changes were cosmetic. I thought maybe he was proud of me, too. Maybe.

This was a start for me; hopefully, it was a way out of that house and into a place of my own.

Seven

Mo's door was shut. Gina had been gone for at least half an hour. Bobby K was on the phone with one of his friends who was looking for a job. He had given my Chrysler a once over when he pulled in for his shift, and said, "Seems like a pretty good deal. You probably didn't get fucked." But that had been it. Nobody patted me on the back or said, "wow, cool ride" or "guess that hard work's been paying off." Joe Wallace would have if he had been there, but then, well, you know, he wasn't.

Red Velvet frozen yogurt. That sounded just like the something I deserved for stepping up on the dispatch desk and finally getting my own set of wheels. I cranked up the AC/DC and headed to Fro-Yoz. I pulled into the strip mall in time with the opening riff of "Thunderstruck." I killed the engine, still humming along.

I checked myself in the rear-view—the heat in the shop had done a number on my hair and the gel I had applied so carefully this morning had passed its expiration date. I spit in my hand and managed to sculpt something more acceptable. I smoothed my eyebrows knocking the fuzzy caterpillar look down a notch. I leaned over the passenger seat, popped open the glove box, and pulled out a travel bottle of cologne. *A quick shot*

whether you need it or not. That's what my cousin Tommy says when he hits the beach bars.

Convinced I was presentable, if not for Jimmy's in Avalon, at least for some frozen yogurt. I hit the lock on the key fob and noticed that the parking lot was full. Granted, I was usually here later, but there seemed to be a lot of activity. The other end of the strip mall held a Russian bathhouse that I never paid attention to, what with the hot girl who worked in the yogurt shop and all.

Friendship Spa took up four shop fronts and formed the bottom part of the "L" shape of Routeway Plaza. The windows had mirror film that reflected the cars in the parking lots, mostly Lincolns and Cadillacs. In succession, the windows read "Steam, Spa, Relax, Friendship." I didn't know anyone who had been inside, but had heard it was usually a just a bunch of big, naked, old Russians stewing like beets in their mama's borscht. The police busted the place last year for "contraband." Likely they were smoking Cubans and the local police chief reported four of the five cases and smoked the rest with the City Manager down at his shore house.

There were a couple of teenagers sitting on the red wooden bench Fro-Yoz kept by their front door. The bench was chained to the pillar it sat next to with the sort of chains they use at the impound lot. In an effort to liven it up and distract from the fact that this was the sort of place where people could steal the seat out from under you, someone from Fro-Yoz had painted the chain white.

I pulled open the glass door and rode the wave of air conditioning that hit me smack in the face. The unit in the dispatcher's office at Mo's kept us from melting, it was true, but more like just cooled the sweat after it soaked your shirt.

Fro-Yoz smelled like compressed air and liquid sugar. The soft serve machines pumped a faint gas into the atmosphere, making the air taste a little bit salty. Down the shore, the frozen custard stands on the boardwalk have the same taste only with a hint of fishy-ness from the ocean.

A mom with two kids was in front of me in line, which was okay because it gave me time to look at the menu. Not that I needed to, as long as Fro-Yoz kept up its end of the Red Velvet bargain. Today's flavors: Dutch Chocolate, French Vanilla, Red Velvet Cupcake Batter, New York-Style Cheesecake. Check.

I focused on the mom. She was talking on her cell phone, which happened to be completely covered in rhinestones. She balanced a purse the size of my gym bag and pushed her oldest kid towards the counter.

I caught my girl behind the counter rolling her eyes.

"Marie told me that she saw Carol at the Shoprite and she was driving that new Lexus that she got and she had a new Gucci bag. You know the one. The one nobody has," the mom said into her sparkly phone.

The two kids were shoving each other back and forth against the counter. The bigger kid flicked the smaller one in the ear with his thumb and forefinger, just like my cousin Joey used to do to me during mass.

The younger one cried out and the mother, in a quick ninja move, managed to smack them both without dropping her phone.

“Jackie, hold on.” She cradled the phone between her shoulder and her ear. Her diamond earrings, had to be at least a carat, made the cell phone look even trashier in comparison. “You two, quit jerking around and tell her what you want. You’re starting to really piss me off.” She returned to her phone call. “Sorry, Jackie, my kids are a couple of little assholes like their father.”

I made eye contact with the girl behind the counter, silently agreeing that the mom wasn’t the only one ‘starting to get pissed off’ and that the dad and the kids weren’t the only assholes in the family.

#

I took my Red Velvet to go. I grabbed a seat on the bench, choosing to sit on the words ‘eat shit’ that were carved into the seat instead of reading them over and over while I enjoyed my dessert.

“What flavor you have?” a guy I didn’t recognize said, sitting down on the bench. He stretched his long legs out in front of him.

What the hell? What kind of guy just sits down and asks another guy about his yogurt?

“Red Velvet.”

“Red Velvet?” he said. His accent wasn’t thick, but it was definitely Russian.

“This I have never had. Good, no?”

“No. I’m mean, yeah, it’s alright.” I didn’t turn to face him completely, but just enough to try and get some read on him. Besides the accent, he had an ugly, uneven scar running from his nose to his jawbone. Even with the scar, he looked more like a male model than the Bond villain he sounded like.

“You drove here in that car, right? The Chrysler. Midnight Polar Ice with Clearcoat, no?” He motioned towards the car for emphasis.

I took a bite of yogurt and nodded.

He stood up and walked over to the car. He ran his hand along the hood, stopping on the small, ugly gash just below the driver’s side headlight.

“How much do you want for it?” He rubbed the gash, like kids do for luck with the Buddha at Ming’s Chinese Garden. He repeated his question, coming back to sit next to me on the bench.

“Oh, it’s not for sale. I actually just bought it recently, myself. So…”

“So…how much?”

Maybe his English wasn’t too good, or maybe he didn’t hear me clearly. “I said ‘not for sale.’”

He waved his hand in dismissal. “Come on. Everything is for sale. This is America.”

America or not, I wasn’t interested in selling and I wasn’t interested in spending any more time with this Russian weirdo. I chucked the rest of my yogurt in the trash.

“Look, we’ll make it simple. Whatever you paid, I’ll pay you the same, plus an extra thousand for your trouble.”

I unlocked the car. He moved between me and the curb. He was taller but I was wider. I looked around see if anyone was watching and to check if he was alone. No way I wanted to fight this guy, but I really didn't want to fight him and a group of his friends. I moved to my left to ease between him and the front bumper and get myself closer to the door. He seemed, for a split second, to think about whether or not he was going to let that happen. The horn honked. I realized I had pressed the 'lock' button instead of the 'unlock' one. I hurried to fix my mistake. The mom and her kids came out of Fro-Yoz in a cluster of noise and activity. The mom stopped in front of us to search for the keys to her own car. She looked up from her purse at the sound of the horn. Unlike me, she seemed ready for a fight, the one with her kids just having been the undercard, but the aggression smoothed into a smile when she saw Mr. Moscow.

"Hello," he said to her, flashing a set of perfect white teeth, scar or no scar.

"I can never find my keys in this thing," she said, by way of explanation. Her sons were shoving each other between her SUV and the passenger door of my car.

"It's a lovely bag. Vuitton, right? Was it a gift from your husband?" Was this guy for real?

"No." She rolled her eyes. "It was a gift from myself to myself." With that, she found the keys and her sons pushed and shoved their way inside the back seat the instant she hit the lock.

I had managed to get myself to my car. I opened the driver's side door and then several things happened at once: the mom flashed her best Saturday night club so-long smile, the Russian returned it with one of his own, she disappeared into her SUV

swearing at her boys, the Russian turned to face me, and slammed my own door shut with his left hand.

“Hey!” I’m just not one of these guys that gets into fights. I have friends from high school who spent whole weekends trolling for a reason to drop the gloves. Any insult, real or imagined, would escalate to the point of broken bottles, black eyes, and bruised egos. I kept my distance from that, luckily having ended up with more of Ma’s patience than Pop’s temper. But this guy—this weird Russian asshole who had appeared out of nowhere—he was really starting to piss me off. I took a step closer to him, shaving the distance between us to just under the amount I was really comfortable having. His grin faded as the mom and her SUV backed out. I was left staring at him and his scar. Again, he seemed to give some thought to his next move.

He raised his hands and moved backwards slowly, like he was surrendering to the cops. The thought crossed my mind that he might have some experience with just that.

“I apologize. I’m being rude. My name is Vladimir Andropov.” He waited for me to introduce myself. I didn’t. I just moved to get into the driver’s seat. He continued.

“This car—this car that you are driving—it was my car.”

That made me stop.

“I put a lot of money into the car. Lots of custom things. Made her unique. I would like to have it back.”

Maybe he just couldn’t keep up on the payments. Maybe he lost his license and couldn’t get insurance. Maybe this story had a simple explanation.

“The cops they—what’s the word they used...oh, yes, *seized*—it.”

Maybe not.

“Sorry to hear that, but...” I said.

He interrupted me. “No, no, no...no buts,” he was putting on the same charm he had flashed for the mom just minutes before. “What is your name?”

I sighed. Pop’s voice told me to tell this guy to fuck off and just get in the car and drive away. Ma’s voice said there was no reason not to be civil. “Vincent. Vincent Costa.”

“Good! Vincent!” He slapped me on the shoulder. “Vincent, you think about my offer.” He chuckled and backed onto the sidewalk. “No need to get this done today. I’m sure we will, as they say, see each other around, right?” I was relieved to have some extra space between us, but it also meant he was not a foot taller than me for sure. I was not so relieved to think about ‘seeing each other around.’

Something, or someone, down by Friendship Spas caught his eye, distracting him for a second. I opened the door, happy to have it between Andropov and me. A voice called from the other end of the parking lot. He started to walk in that direction, but stopped after a few paces. “Have you ever had anything ‘seized’ from you before? Taken away? Something that belonged to you? Something you cared about, just stolen from you. And nothing you could do?”

I didn’t answer.

He laughed a laugh that wasn’t at all funny. He turned to walk away again calling “See you around, Vincent. Vincent Costa,” while he walked. He even waved, without ever turning back to face me. The man who had called to him, taller and wider than both

Andropov and me, met him halfway. The two disappeared into Friendship Spa, but not before Andropov gave me one last look.

I got in, cranked the car, and backed out as quickly as I could. I blamed the chill on eating my Red Velvet too quickly.

“Brain freeze,” I said out loud, keeping the windows rolled up and double-checking that the doors were locked.

Eight

When Bobby K came in the next afternoon, I asked him if he had ever heard of Vladimir Andropov.

“Andropov? Is that what you said?” Bobby hadn’t really been listening when I first asked, much more focused on measuring a scoop of protein powder. He stopped to think it over as he replaced the screw top on the enormous tub of raw calories.

“Andropov? Vladimir Andropov?” He tested the name. He licked the protein residue off the tips of his fingers. It tastes like drywall dust to me, but didn’t seem to bother Bobby.

“Yeah, yeah...I know Andropov.”

I was encouraged. A little intelligence would go a long way.

“He’s who the Devils got in that trade with Detroit. A center. Right?” He popped the cap on his drink shaker and started shaking.

“No, Bobby. He’s not a hockey player. He doesn’t play for the Devils.” I looked at him with as much annoyance as I dared.

He popped off the cap, took a big drink, and looked at me expectantly.

I stared back at him.

He cleared his throat. He took another drink. He focused on the chair. I followed his gaze to see if there was something on my shirt or a stain on the chair, when it hit me that he was looking at the chair—his chair—the one I was sitting in, despite the fact that he was Bobby K and I was a ‘dumb ass kid,’ at least according to Mo.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” I got my ass out of the chair as quickly as I could.

“Then who the hell is this guy? This Andropov?” he said, once he had settled into the worn leather and leaned back. He rested his black work boots on the desktop. Three big gulps and that protein shake was almost gone.

“I don’t know. Just some guy. I guess he’s the one that owned the Chrysler before me.” I had a feeling that didn’t come out as chill as I had hoped it would.

“So? Who gives a shit?” Protein shake? History.

“I know, right? He offered to buy the car. He wants it back.” I sat in the other chair and leaned back, mimicking his posture. I had leaned back like that once in the guidance counselor’s office and ended up flat on my back. At the memory, I rested my arm on the dusty bookshelf next to me for support. “I think he might have done time.”

Bobby sat up and tossed the empty shaker into his gym bag. He swiveled to face the board. I could tell he was done with this ‘Case of the Mysterious Russian’ business and was moving on to his actual business.

“Yeah...so...” I leaned forward in my own chair and stirred around in the cup of paper clips on the desk. Bobby swiveled back around to face me. I recognized the look on his face. I had gotten the same one as a kid from Pop when I asked too many ‘but why’s.’

“Costa.” Replace that with a stern “Vincent” and he sounded just like Pop. “You bought the car from a dealer, right? You have the title, right?”

“Yeah.” I felt stupid and my voice sounded sheepish.

“So, don’t sell if you don’t want to sell. Fuck the Russian.” He swiveled again, this time towards the window down into the shop. “Look out there.”

Even though I didn’t quite get the point, I wanted to oblige his indulgence, so I went so far as to get up and walk over to the window.

“See all those guys out there? See Smitty working on that engine?”

I watched Frank Smith wipe his hands, black with grease, on a blue shop towel. “He spent three months in juvie for busting windows on one of those warehouses down on Jefferson.” I didn’t know that Smitty had been in juvie, but I guess that’s the whole point of juvie.

Bobby pointed over to the loading bay. “See Carlos over there?” I followed his point to the driver carrying a clipboard and doing a check on the trailer he was picking up. It was full of furniture from Donnie’s.

“Yeah?”

“He used to be a junkie. Got busted for possession. Ten years clean from rehab.”

Carlos was one of the straightest arrows in our garage. He was a deacon at the Spanish church two towns over from me. I heard that he has a license and actually did the wedding when one of the guys from the loading dock married Carlos’s sister.

“Point is...” Bobby joined me at the window. “Half the guys in this place have done time. Who gives a shit? Like I said, fuck the Russian.” He patted me on the back and went back to his delivery board.

Nine

My concerns about Vladimir Andropov faded, but didn't go away completely, so I decided to take some steps to prepare myself. I wasn't sure what he meant by "see you around" and I still didn't want to sell my car, so I needed to be on my game. The best defense is a strong offense, right? I followed some advice from a set of *Ladies' Safety* videos Ma had in the basement that she had picked up at the senior center. I was like a housewife with a mini-van every time I was in a parking lot alone: I parked under a streetlight and I carried my keys in my hand with one pointing out defensively so I could poke Andropov's eyes out while I kneed him in the groin. The only thing I was missing was a designer handbag to clock him upside the head and a rape whistle. Heaven help me if I needed that rape whistle.

My other strategy was to spend some more time at the gym. A thousand crunches a day do not make much difference if you eat two helpings of lasagna. I figured, in addition to my self-defense plan and the weight lifting I was already doing four days a week, jogging could come in handy. You never know when you might need to run—

away—fast. I even started going to the kickboxing class on Monday nights, thinking maybe I could learn a move or two.

Turns out, not only is it a good workout, but a great place to pick up women. Cardio Kicks Ass at Fitness Fanatics was better than Seaside Heights on Fourth of July weekend—lots of single moms and recent divorcees eager to show off their hard-earned hard bodies.

“Vince, is that you?”

I was leaving Cardio Kicks Ass, wiping the sweat from my forehead with one of the little gym towels. My buddy Dave was standing by the water fountain filling a gallon milk jug. I walked over to him. He took a big swig, emptying a third of the jug, and returned it to the water fountain to refill.

Dave Kowalski got paid by the State of New Jersey to be a highway patrolman, but pumped iron like *that* was his job. Dave had enlisted in the Army right after we got out of school, but only did one tour and then came back to Jersey. His mom, a saint of a woman who made bagel pizzas for Dave and me after school, got breast cancer and Dave came home to take care of her. The only time I’ve ever seen Dave cry was the day we were pallbearers at Rose Kowalski’s funeral. After she died, he became a State Trooper and married a Korean girl he met at the hospital cafeteria during one of his mom’s treatments. Amy is a pediatrician; they bonded over their love of chili cheese fries. I always thought it was strange that the hospital cafeteria served chili cheese fries, but no less strange than the thought of Dave being married to a doctor. We hadn’t seen much of each other since he got married. He generally worked the graveyard shift.

“Did you just come out of the group fitness room?” He gave me a skeptical look and downed another giant gulp of water.

“Yeah. They do a boxing thing on Mondays.”

“I know. It’s called Cardio Kicks Ass.” An obnoxious grin was barely holding in his laughter. A snicker escaped. He pointed to a banner hanging behind me on the wall. In addition to the class name in giant red letters was the picture of three cheerleader-types kicking towards the camera. “Working on your girlish figure?”

“It’s a very demanding cardio workout, in addition to incorporating traditional martial arts and boxing techniques.” I sounded like the damn brochure.

“Vin, dude, I’m sure it is.” He slapped me on the shoulder.

“And there are lots of hot chicks.” I left out the part that I was training like Rocky to fend off my own personal Ivan Drago.

“Now you’re talking.” Dave, unlike me, had never had a problem getting any girl he wanted.

I was anxious to change the subject, since I didn’t have much to report on the topic of hot, single women. “Are you on your way in or out? Wanna grab a beer?”

“Oh, man. I wish I could. I’ve got two more sets to do, then I’m going to work.”

We exchanged promises to get together to watch a game sometime and I headed to the locker room for a shower.

For the second time, I heard someone call my name. It didn’t sound like Dave, but I figured it was and he remembered something he wanted to tell me.

“Yeah?” I turned around, expecting to see Dave’s massive frame. It wasn’t Dave at all. It was Professor Tichy.

“Professor?” I said like I had discovered him deep in the Amazon. He was waiting for a smoothie at the juice bar by the door.

“It’s Alex. And, yeah, it’s me.” He extended his hand to shake mine. He was clearly lifting more than just books.

“Sorry—Alex.”

“I didn’t know you worked out here. I’ve never seen you here before.”

I didn’t want to talk about Cardio Kicks Ass again, so I went with, “I used to come in the mornings, but I thought I’d switch it up.”

Professor Tichy—Alex—looked different under the florescent and neon lights of Fitness Fanatics than he had in Classroom 23-501 at North Valley Community College. His face looked younger, and the harsh eyes looked friendlier. There, he was a guy who read books and tried to step out of the shadows of the violence of his homeland. Here he was just another guy looking for someone to give him a spot at the bench. The girl behind the bar handed him a clear plastic cup with a neon pink straw filled with something green. It smelled like yard clippings.

“I’m glad I ran into you. I thought I might see you around campus, but...” he said. I was happy that he quickly shook off that ‘but’ and continued. “I’m doing another reading. You should come and check it out.” He flipped open the flap of his bag and searched inside. He handed me a postcard. This time his reading was at a wine bar out past the Garden State Mall.

“Thursday, cool. I’ll try and check it out.”

“It’s mostly just people hanging out. My girlfriend’s coming. The reading’s just an excuse. You should come.”

We danced awkwardly around the exit door. I held it open, but from the inside, so that meant he had to squeeze by me to get out. Once we had navigated those rough waters, we sailed into a comfortable walk towards the parking lot. I was parked further out than Alex, since that was the only place there had been a spot by one of the street lamps. We stopped at his Camry.

“Do you need a ride somewhere? I know the busses are tough this late.”

“No, no,” I said. “I finally got my own ride.” I stood there with him by the Camry.

“Is it here?” He sounded confused.

“Oh...yeah.” I stammered, feeling even more self-conscious than I had about Cardio Kicks Ass. “I’m parked a little further out.”

He squinted towards the outer edges of the parking lot. There were no cars anywhere near mine, the streetlight reflecting on the Clearcoat like a cop’s interrogation lamp. He tried to get a better view.

“It looks nice.”

I appreciated the compliment, but at this distance I doubt he could’ve picked the car out of a line-up. If the police questioned him it would have gone somewhere along the lines of, “It was a car. Might have had two doors or maybe four. I think it was black. Might have been a blue or a really dark green. It was shiny. I remember that. It was shiny.”

“She’s pretty sweet. Got a Clearcoat finish. I don’t want it getting scratched.” The explanation for why I was parked in East Kabumfuck turned me into the douche who parks his car sideways across three spots. Better that than ‘I’m afraid a scary Russian is going to jump me and steal my car.’ Again, I was eager to change the subject.

“So, I’ll see you on Thursday, then?”

“Great. And bring somebody if you want. Like I said, Sabrina’s coming.” Did he see me come out of Cardio Kicks Ass?

“Nah, well, I don’t know...probably just me.”

I started the hike out to the north forty. He climbed in his own car. He waved as he drove by. I had just gotten to the Chrysler.

Ten

There are long stretches of highway in North Jersey that are a colorful blur of big mega-malls, smaller strip mini-malls, chain stores, fast food restaurants, big box stores, and gas stations. Despite the constant in and out of parking lots, the speed limit is generally fifty miles per hour. For Jersey, fifty means sixty-five or seventy. And there are no left hand turns, only u-turn lanes and jug handles. Navigating the roads successfully takes confidence, or, as we say, balls. So if you want to go to IHOP but it's on the other side of the road, you have to pass it, jug handle a u-turn and then whip into the parking lot from the road at full speed. Then, when you're ready to leave, you have to gun it out onto the main road for a high-speed merge, fingers crossed that no one started drag racing Hondas while you were eating pancakes.

It was lucky that I spotted The Cellar Wine Bar and Café on my right hand side with enough time to execute an appropriate evasive driving maneuver, managing to make it into the parking lot after an elderly man in a Lincoln pulling out into the road and before the tricked out white SUV behind me ran up my tailpipe. It was 8:00, still relatively early in these parts, so that meant that the nail salon and dry cleaners were

closed, but the Applebee's on the opposite corner of the strip mall was still going strong along with The Cellar and the gourmet taco shop next door.

It was hard to have a first impression at The Cellar. My eyes took a second or two to adjust from the glowing commerce outside to the cool darkness of the wine bar. As details emerged, I was able to make out brick-lined walls and sturdy arches over the doorways. It was far from crowded, which gave me room to move along the edges. There were small round tables in the center of the room, a couple of which were fashioned from wine barrels. Ringing the perimeter were comfortable-looking booths. In a far corner was a small stage, no bigger than a dinette tabletop, with a stool and a microphone stand. The bar took up the entire opposite wall and, instead of the rows of liquor bottles I was used to seeing, behind the bar was a simple mirror in a fancy frame.

I took a seat on one of the massive stools at the bar. These were the fanciest bar stools I had ever come across—real leather and backs—and were a far cry from the hard wooden ones with decades of gum stuck to the bottom of their seats common in the places I usually frequented. Panic struck when the bartender caught my eye and motioned that he would be with me in a minute.

I could count on one hand the number of times, other than Christmas Eve at Nonni's, that I had ever even had a glass of wine. Even though I was pretty sure the wine at Nonni's wasn't the sort they would uncork at a joint like this, I didn't even know what kind of wine it had been. Lots of Italian families pride themselves on serving good Chianti, but mine was not one of them. I didn't know a Pinot from a peanut.

“What can I pour for you?” the bartender asked. He was wearing black pants and a gold brocade vest over a solid red dress shirt. He reminded me of a magician.

“Hmmm...” I tried to sound contemplative and not confused.

“Well, let me show you what I’ve got open.”

“That sounds good,” I said. Aloof and uninterested. That was my play here.

He proceeded to pull three bottles from underneath the bar top and set them carefully on the bar. What followed were in-depth descriptions of things like bouquet and finish and growing seasons and varietal. He used words like fruity, oaky, delicate, and bold. It was like watching a movie on one of the premium channels, not the one where they show the Bourne movies, the one with lots of fuzzy landscapes and English accents.

In our game of three-card monty it was time for me to pick a card. The one in the middle was the one—I think—that he described as bold with a strong finish. I liked how that sounded. I wanted to be bold with a strong finish.

“Let’s try that.”

“Excellent choice,” he said, nodding in approval. I bet you say that to all the girls, I thought. He pulled a glass from overhead and poured carefully. “Can I bring you a menu?” He slid the glass across the bar.

“Sure.” I wasn’t hungry, but I figured that would distract him while I figured out how the hell I was supposed to drink from this giant bowl of a glass balanced on a thin stem. There was a couple, looked to be in their fifties, sharing a bottle a few stools down from me. I watched as the husband picked up his own wine, by the stem, held it up to the soft light coming from above the bar, swirled the liquid inside, and then poked his nose in

the glass. After a second or two, he took a delicate sip. Only then did it look like he actually drank the wine.

I can do this. I held the glass up to the light like he had done. I swirled. I sniffed.

“I wouldn’t have picked you for the fine wine type,” Alex Tichy said, slapping me on the back and pulling up into the stool immediately to my left.

I put the glass on the bar.

“Yeah, right. I have no idea what the hell I’m doing.” Honesty seemed the best policy with Tichy.

“Your secret is safe with me.” He tossed his ever-present satchel on the bar.

“Alex, what can I get you?” the bartender said from the other end of the bar.

“I’ll have what my friend Vince is having.” He slapped me on the back again. “So what do you think of the place? Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s a lot different from the places I usually go.” No big screen TVs. No Buffalo wings. No nachos.

“It’s not really. Alcohol and food. The great social lubricants. Same book. Different cover.” The bartender dropped off Tichy’s wine. He immediately lifted the glass in a toast.

“Na zdravi’.” He looked me directly in the eye, ice blue stare and all. We clinked glasses.

I didn’t say anything, but he must have picked up on my confusion.

“It’s Czech. It means ‘good health.’” He took another drink, so I did the same. “And it’s important to look the other person in the eye. That’s how he knows you are sincere.” Ever the professor.

A woman with long, blonde hair, followed by a friend, also a blonde, appeared from maybe the shadows, but more likely the ladies’ room, on the opposite side of Tichy from where I was sitting. The first blonde leaned in to kiss him softly, her hair falling over the back of his stool. She sat on the stool to his left and I heard her friend pull out the stool next to that.

Tichy turned his attention back to me. “Vince, this is my girlfriend, Sabrina.” He leaned back so Sabrina and I could see each other. “Sabrina, this is Vince, my former student. The one I was telling you about.”

“Oh, right. The one who actually managed to show up and stay awake,” she said with a playful tone. He pretended to be hurt. She kissed him on the cheek.

“This is my friend, Anna,” Sabrina said, gesturing to her own left. Anna leaned forward enough to say hello.

Tichy suggested we move to a table next to the tiny stage and share a bottle. He handled the ordering. The girls and I relocated.

“Ladies first,” I said. Sabrina eased away from Tichy caressing his arm as she moved.

Anna, whose killer legs and knockout face were apparent the second she slid off the barstool, brushed her hair over her shoulder and I got a whiff of coconut shampoo. That faint smell was more intoxicating than the ‘hints of Spanish sunshine’ the bartender

had assured me were in the bouquet of my fifteen-dollar glass of wine. I followed them to a small table by the stage.

From the table, I could get a better view of the small crowd that had started to gather. There were broker and banker types with their pretty little girlfriends, the sort of guys that work in the city and commute in every day from Jersey. The guys were dressed in identical dark suits and designer ties that now hung loose around their necks or were stuffed in their jacket pockets.

Another distinctive group was gathering, in addition to what seemed like the regular crowd. I had expected an academic, intellectual group. I thought maybe some of the other professors from North Valley would show up. The picture in my head on the drive over had been corduroy pants and plaid button down shirts. Maybe some of those hippy sandals worn with socks with holes in them.

I could not have been more wrong.

I have never been to Europe, but, even if I had, I doubt it would have prepared me for the Euro-trash fashion scene that unfolded that night. Each girl who came in had longer legs and a shorter skirt than the one before her. One girl had iron-straight hair that fell past her ass and was actually longer than the skirt she was wearing. The guys all had shiny dress shirts and jeans with weird white stitching. One guy's pants had a giant dragon patch sewn on his thigh like some hard-core tattoo. There was a lot of money being thrown around and more cologne than the first floor of the Macy's in the mall next door.

I also noticed people coming and going from a small room. The room didn't have any kind of sign and only a frosted glass door. Two beefy guys went in and one skinny, shifty looking guy came out.

"Cigars," Tichy said, appearing with a bottle of wine and sliding in next to Sabrina.

"Huh?"

"It's a cigar room."

He motioned to the room with the door. "Cigars. They go in there to smoke. Cigars."

A small light illuminated the corner stage next to our table. Tichy pulled a dog-eared manuscript from his bag and kissed Sabrina. He climbed up on to the stage then settled in on the wood stool. He adjusted the microphone and waited for the room to get quiet. No one introduced him and he never said anything: no 'excuse me', no loud throat clearing. He just waited. And, after a minute or two, everyone just shut up. Even the guys going in and out of the cigar room stopped talking and shut the door softly behind them.

"Thank you all for coming. I am Alexandr Tichy. This is from my new book called *Thief*." Then he said something in either Czech or Russian. There were some cheers and glasses raised in response. Someone whistled.

"He's very popular," Anna said to me in a whisper. "He's very talented."

"Yeah," I said. I had no idea if he was popular or talented. The last time I had heard Tichy speak two people fell asleep and one was watching an internet video of a squirrel waterskiing.

“Not one for pleasantries, Ota fixed his weapon without a word. The bullet tore a gaping wound in Frederick’s new tuxedo and his chest,” Tichy said, beginning to read. “The blackened hole immediately began seeping blood. Ota watched the thick, green carpet of the hotel suite turn a dark, stained color when the blood began to pool. Life left Frederick’s eyes and his last breath, pleas for mercy still on his lips, escaped. Ota gave Frederick a swift kick, surely breaking a few ribs, and spit on the lifeless face.” Tichy paused. He took a deep breath and continued.

“As a final act before returning to the casino downstairs, Ota extinguished his cigarette in the ash tray on the desk and tossed the butt in the direction of Frederick’s corpse.” The story continued in graphic detail with Ota, clearly excited from his fresh kill, raping a cocktail waitress and stealing her tip money. I looked around the room. Everyone was silent. Even the bartender was motionless. I also noticed that some time in the last half hour or so the city bankers and brokers had cleared out.

Tichy looked down at the manuscript and folded the pages. He didn’t look up but seemed to soak in the obvious admiration from the crowd. A few shouted affirmations in other languages. I glanced at Sabrina, obviously still under his spell. It wouldn’t have surprised me to hear that she would suggest a game of murderous art thief and helpless cocktail waitress when she and Tichy got home that night.

The bar burst into applause and he looked up from the manuscript. The look was one of friendly good humor, a marked contrast to the dark, violent story of Ota.

“I told you so,” Anna said.

“I’m surprised. Seems kinda violent. And a little twisted.”

She shrugged. "I think he knows his audience." She waved her hand like one of Barker's Beauties on *The Price is Right*.

Sabrina grabbed Anna's arm and they marched off to the bathroom. Even in this small space, a crowd formed around Tichy as he stepped off the stage. Lots of pats on the back and kisses on both cheeks.

"So? What do you think?" he said to me, dropping the manuscript on the table and turning his chair around so that he could sit straddling it with the back to the table.

"Wow. I had no idea."

"What?"

I wasn't sure whether he couldn't hear me or if he didn't understand what I meant. "I had no idea you were such a big deal." It sounded like a left-handed compliment and I was afraid that he had taken it that way. "I mean, *wow!* Everybody was really into it."

"They were, weren't they?" He laughed, the awkwardness of my misstep forgotten or forgiven. He pounded the table. "We need more wine."

"I'll get it," I said. I noticed over his left shoulder a group of older men approaching, I guessed to give props to Tichy. They could have their moment without me, since they probably wouldn't speak English anyway.

I managed to find a path through the excited throng. The bartender caught my eye. He pulled the cork and handed me the whole bottle. I reached for my wallet but he waved me off. I took the bottle and navigated my way back to our table. Sabrina and Anna had returned, but Tichy was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Alex?" I asked. I put the bottle on the table and Sabrina started to pour.

“He’s in the smoking room.” She paused before adding, “With the men.”

Eleven

I pushed open the door to the smoking room. I took my time closing it behind me and stood against the wall. It was brighter in the smoking room than it had been out in the bar, despite the white-ish haze from the smoke. I could taste the air as well as smell it. It reminded me of the oranges that Ma decorates with at Christmas. The result on my tongue was like someone had brewed tea from potpourri. Ma was big into potpourri when I was a kid so it was in every bathroom in our house for twenty years. I doubted there was a crystal bowl of pink wood chips sitting on a side table in this room though.

“Fuck you,” someone said. I was happy it was in English. That happiness was short-lived when the response came back in either Russian or Czech or something else entirely.

I scanned the leather couches for Tichy. Everyone was leaned back, sinking into the cushions, most puffing on obscenely sized cigars.

“Vincent!” I heard him call through the cloud, towards my left.

I turned and he raised a hand in greeting, holding what looked like a long, slim cigarette. I pulled up a chair. I got a better look at what he was smoking. I still couldn't

tell if it was a cigarette or one of the skinny cigars they sell next to the energy shots on the counter at 7-11. It was rolled in black paper and burned a bright orange. He exhaled and the smell was overwhelming. I coughed, drawing laughter from the Soviet Army types sharing the sofa with Tichy.

“Care for one?” Tichy said. He opened a wooden box on the end table between us.

“What are they?”

More laughter from Tichy’s comrades. Definitely not English.

“Clove cigarettes.” So that explained Ma’s potpourri smell.

“I’m trying to cut back.” I lied and fooled no one.

Tichy closed the box. “No matter.” He exhaled slowly. I managed to turn my head into my shirt, hoping I was being subtle, so at least I wouldn’t cough this time. “Sorry I abandoned you. I was rude. I told you we needed wine and then I took off.”

“Hey, no problem.”

He slapped the shoulder of the East German doping experiment to his immediate left. “Greg here suggested I come join him and his brother for a smoke.” Only now did I realize that they were actually twins. They had to have been at least thirty and they were dressed in identical black dress shirts and dark jeans. Even their Gucci belts were the same. It is strange for three guys to sit a couch together, but when two of them look exactly alike, it’s downright weird.

“And Greg’s a hard man to say ‘no’ to.” Tichy and the twins laughed.

I laughed, too, hoping not to get pounded for offending the twins. Tichy turned to reach for a shot glass from the bottom shelf of the side table. He poured a shot for himself and for me from a bottle of clear liquid. He answered my question before I could ask it.

“Vodka.”

I nodded and downed the shot. He did the same and slammed the glass on the table.

Another vodka shot and I began to relax into the haze. I was enjoying hanging with Tichy and Greg and Greg’s brother who I think they called Ivan. I laughed at Greg’s jokes, even though they were in Russian. At one point Ivan stood and pulled me up for a modified tango, as much as the space would allow. I took this as a sign of endearment, not emasculation, even though I was clearly Ginger Rodgers to his Fred Astaire.

I leaned to pour Tichy another shot when a grey cloud darkened his eyes. I tipped the bottle back up without pouring and set it carefully on the table. I caught, out of the corner of my eye, Greg and Ivan stand. They mumbled something and headed towards the door. A shadow moved to take their place, but it was only one person and he sat on the far end of the sofa from Tichy. Tichy extinguished his cigarette and sat up straighter. Pop would have called it bracing for a fight.

“Everyone seems to enjoy your stories, Alexandr,” the seated man said before taking a sip from a glass of wine he must have brought in with him.

I was surprised he spoke English. I had expected to work a little harder to figure out what the hell was going on. I was more surprised that it was a voice I recognized.

“So it seems.”

Neither man said anything else. I watched a few more men discreetly make for the door. I caught a couple of notes from a Springsteen song filter in from the bar outside. I hadn't realized the room we were in was so sound proof, but it was comforting to know that we were still in New Jersey.

"Who's your friend?" Vladimir Andropov said.

"This is Vincent."

Again there was silence. When it came to Vladimir Andropov I had chucked my manners in the trash with my half-eaten yogurt.

"Hey, man," was the best I could muster.

"Vincent, this is Vladimir Andropov." Tichy gave me a look that I interpreted as 'don't say anything stupid' but could just have easily been 'don't say anything, Stupid.'

Andropov didn't seem to indicate to Tichy that we had already met and I certainly wasn't going to say anything.

"So, Vincent..." He tipped his glass in my direction. "How do you know our resident celebrity here?" He motioned towards Tichy.

"Oh, Alex and I met at..." I started, but Tichy interrupted.

"At work. We've done some work together."

Now, I didn't know why Tichy hadn't wanted me to say he was my professor, but, again, I rolled with it. I thought I detected a whiff of doubt pass over Andropov, but he must have dismissed it as irrelevant.

"So what type of 'work' do you do, Vincent? Are you a writer, too?" Andropov laughed, as did the man standing next to him. I checked him out for the first time and saw

another person leave behind him. Andropov's companion was tall, like Andropov, but without the good looks. He was, instead of being handsome, ordinary and utilitarian. He had either had a bad bout with chicken pox as a kid or zits as a teenager. Andropov's skin was alabaster smooth; his second's shared more in common with the surface of the moon. He wasn't ugly; he just was. And I had watched enough cop shows to recognize the bulge under his shirt to know he was packing. And I also recognized him as the person who had gone into Friendship Spa with Andropov.

"No, I'm not a writer. I leave that to Alex," I said. I cleared my throat. "I work in trucking."

"Trucking? Sergei, did you hear that?" Andropov and Sergei exchanged glances. "I, myself, work in trucking. More specifically, imports and exports."

Tichy said something under his breath that sounded like an oath, not an English one. After a minute or two of tense silence, Tichy flashed a broad grin. He slapped me on my knee.

"Vincent, I think we have some lovely ladies waiting for us on the other side of that door that we should probably attend to." He stood, so I did the same.

"So the enchanting Sabrina is here? I didn't see her on the way in." His statement held a question he didn't ask.

"Yes." Tichy didn't move towards the door like I had started to do. I stopped.

"Is Anna with you?" It came out quietly, almost a whisper. I wouldn't swear to it, but Sergei seemed a little worried. I know I was.

"She is." Tichy moved, blocking the door. Sergei tensed. I had no idea what to do.

Andropov stood and took the three steps he needed to be face to face with Tichy. Alpha wolves had nothing on these two guys. I half expected Andropov to growl and bear his teeth, but, instead, he smiled broadly. The same smile he had had for me at Fro-Yoz.

“Come on, Alex. That was a long time ago. We are friends.” He reached for the handle of the door. Tichy stepped aside, but only after Sergei had moved in their direction.

Andropov patted Tichy on the shoulder. “Friends, Alex. We are all friends. You, me, Sergei, Sabrina, Anna, and Vincent here—friends. Just friends enjoying each other’s company and some good wine.”

#

We were the last people in the bar and it was clear the wait staff was ready for us to leave. I was now completely sober. The minute Andropov had declared us friends, I had stopped drinking. He struck me as the sort of friend that requires you to keep your wits about you. Andropov had slipped the bartender some cash to let us stay past closing time. We had now worn out that welcome. The house lights came up. I pushed back from the table and stood.

“I’m gonna hit the road.”

“Vincent, Vincent, Vincent...” Andropov said, leaning back in his chair and wobbling a bit. Sergei quickly moved behind him. Andropov did not fall, but steadied himself on Sabrina’s arm, giving her a leering smile in the process. She should have sneered, but she didn’t. I glanced at Tichy, but he was sliding his manuscript into his bag and didn’t notice. Anna had asked him to read more, for just the six of us.

Andropov continued his thought. “Vincent, the night is young. I have plenty of drink at my place. Come—we will party.” His accent was in full effect.

“I have to work tomorrow.”

“We should all be getting home,” Anna said. She pulled Sabrina to her feet and Tichy rose to help steady the very unsteady Sabrina.

“Fine,” Andropov said. He managed to stand without Sergei’s help. “But Vincent, you still owe me an answer.”

I don’t know if he meant about the party or the offer he had made on the Chrysler.

Our bizarre band bobbed and weaved through the tables, already wiped down with the chairs balanced on top. We sidestepped the bartender vacuuming the rug at the front door. Andropov paused and whispered something in the bartender’s ear. The bartender recoiled. Our eyes met but all I had for him was a shrug. Sergei slipped him another hundred-dollar bill without saying a word.

Once outside, Sabrina missed a step and almost tumbled headfirst into a drainage gutter. Tichy managed to catch her before any damage had been done. Sabrina shoved her tongue down Tichy’s throat to express her thanks. I hoped she didn’t puke in his mouth, but seeing as his hand was on her ass, he didn’t seem to share my concern.

“It was nice to meet you. Even if it did get a little weird,” I said to Anna. Anna checked Andropov over her shoulder. He was distracted with trying to take a picture of Tichy and Sabrina with his cell phone. Sergei was providing technical support.

“Yeah, sorry about this.” I didn’t know if she meant Andropov, or Tichy and Sabrina, or the whole freak show rolled into one.

“You have nothing to apologize for.” This was the shot with Anna I had been waiting for all night. “Maybe you and me could do something with a little less drama some time. I hear some people go to the movies.” I hoped that sounded cool and clever.

“You and me, huh?”

“Uh...oh...I...”

She punched me in the shoulder. I hoped it was a little harder than she meant for it to be because it kind of hurt and I had to take a step back.

“I’m just busting balls.” Her accent, like Andropov’s, suggested she, too, might have had a little too much to drink. “Sure, call me sometime.”

I started walking to my car, which was, again, in a solitary spotlight from a street lamp at the back of the lot. I turned back to face The Cellar. Tichy was helping Sabrina into the passenger seat of the Camry. Anna was already in the backseat. Andropov was standing by himself on the curb. Watching me. I searched for Sergei and found him unlocking the doors on a dark blue BMW. He must have realized that I was watching him, because he turned in my direction before getting into the Beemer. He waved. It was friendly. I waved back and I climbed into the Chrysler. He and I had hit it off and bonded over our mutual love of the Giants and hatred of the Philadelphia Eagles. His ex-wife was from Philly, so he came by his animosity honestly. I pulled the business card he had given me out of my pocket: *V. Andropov, ALA Expediting*. I slid it under the vanity mirror on the sun visor and turned back towards the building.

Andropov grabbed his crotch and flipped me off. I could hear him laughing—a hyena cackle. A gesture of good will, like Sergei’s friendly wave. I watched the BMW in

my rear view slide up to the curb. The infamous Vladimir Andropov disappeared inside. I waited for Sergei to turn left out of the back entrance of the parking lot before I made my own right turn and headed for home.

Twelve

The first thing I noticed about the store was the smell. Donnie's Discount Furniture smelled like Ma's chocolate chip cookies. More accurately, it smelled like chocolate chip cookies and vinyl cleaner. But mostly chocolate chip cookies. The showroom was roughly the size of a football field and filled with discount (Donnie's word—mine would be cheap) furniture. The vast majority was living room and den-type stuff. But there were mattresses, beds, outdoor furniture, and dining tables. There were cardboard TVs and hollow books on the shelves. You could seal up Donnie's and film a survival-type reality show in here. We'd all have to live on chocolate chip cookies, but I could imagine worse things.

Mo had sent me here to drop off some invoices for Donnie in person and I was early. I took a seat in a massive, blue recliner. I was glad I wasn't wearing the cargo shorts I wore yesterday because, as hot as it was outside, I could guarantee I would have stuck to the vinyl. I fumbled for the large lever on the right side of the chair that popped out the footrest. It jammed, but, eventually I was kicked back with my Chuck Taylors

pointed skyward. I had to admit, in spite of the vinyl, the chair itself was damned comfortable. I could see myself taking a monster nap in this chair.

From my horizontal position, I checked out the other offerings available at Donnie's. There was a sofa that was essentially three of these chairs welded together. Next to that was the big daddy with the storage drawers and the ten cupholders. You could have told me it had a built in party fridge and I would have believed you. There were sleeper sofas, futon, coffee tables, and end tables in black, gold, and chrome. I think most had drink holders. One table had a built in aquarium. There weren't any real fish, just a cardboard cut out of the shark from *Jaws*.

"Can I help you with something? Are you looking for something special?" a voice said, interrupting my train of thought. She stepped between me and the halogen floor lamp next to my recliner. One look at her and I thought maybe the insane (Donnie's word—mine would be cheap) prices weren't the only reason he sold so much furniture. She was wearing a suit. The problem was her suit was more naughty schoolteacher than public defender. She even had the up-do and the watch-what-happens-when-I-take-these-off-glasses. The buttons on the jacket were doing overtime trying to keep her double-d's in check. I fought that damned lever again. It eventually slammed the footrest down and I felt lucky not to have lost a finger.

"I'm Cyndi." She extended a hand to shake mine, which I did.

"Vince. I'm cool. I don't need any furniture."

“Really, Vince? Because it seemed to me that you were getting pretty comfortable. That’s the Mediterranean Coast recliner—overstuffed—in Faux-August Sunset.

“Faux August Sunset?”

She flashed the smile again and leaned forward slightly, giving me a better view of the double d’s. “Yes. It’s a high-quality, faux-leather material.” Her voice sounded conspiratorial, like she and I were the only ones who had figured it out.

“Oh, right.” I winked to let her know I was in on the joke. “See, I’m actually just here to see Donnie.” I waved the manila folder in my hand to illustrate. “I really don’t need any furniture.” It was a lie. I did need a new bed. Cyndi and I weren’t going to have that conversation, though.

She deflated as surely as if I had popped one of her implants with a pin.

“Shit.”

“Sorry.”

“No—oh, shit—I’m sorry.” She seemed to have remembered herself. “I’m not supposed to say ‘shit.’”

That was three, by my count.

“Hey, no problem.”

“It’s the end of the month and if I don’t make my numbers Donnie’s gonna kick my ass.”

“Are you supposed to say ‘ass’?”

Her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes got wide. “I’m just gonna go.” She turned and walked away. Maybe I should have asked her about that new mattress.

A slightly older version of Cyndi sat behind a desk at the back of the store. On the wall behind her was a picture of a slightly younger version of Donnie. He was wearing a navy three-piece suit and a shit-eating grin while sitting at a table with a woman in a gypsy costume. A crystal ball sat on a table between them. Under the picture, it said, in bold-faced type, “It shouldn’t cost a fortune to buy furniture. But you can save a fortune at Donnie’s Discount Furniture!”

“Welcome to Donnie’s where the discounts are insane,” the woman behind the desk said with as much enthusiasm as the lady that takes your picture at the DMV. “I’m Diane.”

“Hi, Diane. My name is Vincent Costa. I’m here to see Donnie...er...Mr. Singer. I work for Mo Katz.”

She picked up the receiver on her multi-line phone. Two other lines were flashing.

“Yeah, Julie. I got a kid here—a Vincent Costa—says he’s here to see Donnie. He works for Mo.” She checked her French manicure while she listened to Julie’s response.

The fact that Diana here in Donnie’s didn’t use ‘dumb-ass kid’ like Mo had taken just a shine to was a small victory. She’s obviously a customer service professional and Mo is just an asshole.

“Thanks, Julie. And don’t forget to bring me the lunch order, so I can call Celebreses before they get busy.” Diane hung up the phone.

My stomach growled at the word lunch. A good chicken parm hero would hit the spot. I had swiped one of Bobby's protein shakes from the fridge in the office for breakfast. It had tasted like kindergarten paste.

"Take a seat over there."

I did as I was told and settled into one of the home theater sets, with the cup holders and the storage drawers. I fiddled with the various levers and compartments.

I watched as a pretty girl, looked to be about my age, appeared from the door labeled "Executive Offices." She was also wearing one of the porn suits, but, unlike Cyndi, she had a white shirt underneath. She dropped off a red and green printed menu with a giant pink Post-it stuck to the front for Diane at the desk then walked over to me.

"You the guy from Mo's?"

"Yep. That's me." I twisted and turned trying to extricate myself from the 'unparalleled lounging comfort' of the 'ultimate home relaxation,' as described on the sign floating suspended above my head. I felt like a turtle flipped on his shell. With more than a little effort, I executed a sort of combination roll and squat maneuver to make it to my feet.

"I see you made yourself comfortable."

"That sofa's like a horse tranquilizer. It does not want you to be vertical." If I couldn't win her over with my suave moves, I could give it a shot with my quick wit.

"Thank you for calling Donnie's Discount Furniture where the discounts are insane," she said. "This is Julie."

"Huh?"

She pointed to a tiny headset clipped over her right ear and rolled her eyes.

“Donnie’s in a meeting right now, can I give you his voicemail?”

She hadn’t broken stride while answering the call and we were now in the “Executive Offices” area. I was surprised to see that it didn’t look all that different from the offices over at Mo’s. There was a little less grease and it didn’t smell like diesel fuel. I wondered where they might be hiding the executives, because it held just one desk, that I assumed was Julie’s, and one office, that I knew was Donnie’s. The giant picture of his disembodied head on the door was a dead giveaway. I recognized the picture from last year’s Super Bowl promotion.

I watched as she transferred the call through a series of button on the small device. She stopped moving so abruptly I almost walked right into her.

“Did you say something about tranquilizers?” She managed to seem confused, annoyed, and bored simultaneously.

“No.”

“Oh.”

She moved to the chair behind the desk and started clicking the mouse from her computer.

“Go on in. He’s waiting for you,” she said, as if this had been obvious.

I silently promised myself to buy my furniture from the Sandoval brothers the next town over.

I knocked on Donnie’s giant forehead and waited.

“Yeah, come on in.”

I always assume that people you see on television are going to be shorter in person, but, from what I could see of him behind the massive oak desk, Donnie was actually taller than he looked in the ads standing next to the Money Tornado Tube they used on Totally Tubular Tuesday. And he clearly worked out more than you would expect. He wasn't big, but he was lean and wiry, like the kind of guy who brought a knife to a fistfight.

“Have a seat.” He motioned towards the leather chair across from the ornately carved desk. Everything else in the office might have looked like Mo's but this furniture, besides being clean and minus cigarette burns, was damned comfortable. It resembled nothing that was out in the showroom.

“Do you have the invoices and the delivery logs? I want to see for myself how that prick Mo is trying to screw me.”

I handed him the folder. Since I had pulled all of the logs together myself, I felt obligated to explain the format.

“You think I've never seen a delivery log before, Vince? I have been selling fine furniture since before your mother was wiping your ass for you.”

I wanted to say something about the 'fine' part of that “fine furniture” statement, but he was a client and Mo would string me up by my balls if I did something to lose this account.

I waited while Donnie went through each log, line by line, and pulled the corresponding invoice. I had done the same thing twice this morning before I left Mo's, so I was confident it was all there.

“Wait a minute. What’s this?” He spun the folder around so that it was facing me. I leaned in to get a better look. He pointed to an entry from last Wednesday and tapped on the page in accusation.

“What about it?” This was a trick I had learned from watching Pop. *Don’t open your mouth and start singing, Vincent, until you know what page you’re on in the songbook.*

Donnie tapped the sheet again. “This right here. It says eleven mattresses were delivered, but there are only two delivery addresses listed on the log.”

“That’s a big order from the EconoLodge on Route 4. They got ten mattresses. And the other was just a house in Morristown.” I had this. Cold.

“Right. Just wanted to make sure you knew your stuff.” He flipped the folder back around to face him, but, after a couple of minutes, was unable to find anything else to question me on. He closed the folder then pulled on his TV pitchman face.

“You can just never be too careful, Vincent. When you’re a small businessman like me, you have to watch every penny.”

“I understand, sir.”

“What’s with all this ‘sir’ business?” He walked around to my side of the desk and leaned in a casual way against that serious piece of furniture. “Call me Donnie. Everyone calls me Donnie.”

“Okay.”

“Come on, try it.” He gave my shoulder a playful shove.

“Okay...Donnie.” I smiled my own best salesman smile but I was an amateur in the presence of a real professional. He stood straight and I took this as my cue to stand as well. He really was a lot taller than he looked on TV, standing a good inch or two above me. I noticed his tie was expensive silk, with a miniature designer logo subtly woven in a color on color pattern. He had paired the gold tie with a blue oxford dress shirt with short sleeves. It was a strange look, especially for a guy with as much money as Donnie. That short sleeves/tie combo is almost the exclusive territory of used car and mobile phone sales guys. I didn’t expect to see it from New Jersey’s self-proclaimed King of Dens.

He flipped it in a self-deprecating way. “You like this tie? It was a gift from my wife. Some fancy designer, she says.”

I knew that he knew exactly which designer. And exactly how much it cost.

“That’s her thing. I’m just punching a clock like everyone else. This shirt...” He tugged at his collar. “I get ‘em wholesale from a guy in Hoboken. Buy ‘em by the gross.”

I’m just a regular guy, he’s saying. Just like you. Just out here trying to make a living. Don’t be distracted by my two hundred dollar tie or my Rolex watch. I’d bet my new car that if I had asked, he’d have told me the watch was a fake he got on Canal Street.

“If you don’t have any other questions, I guess I’ll just head back to Mo’s.”

He put his arm around me and walked me to the door of his office. Just a couple of regular guys, punching a clock and making a living.

“If you ever need any furniture, you just let me know.” I half expected him to break into that song from one of Ma’s favorite Broadway shows, *I Can Get It For You Wholesale*.

“Thanks.”

“Julie, will you help Mr. Costa out?” He turned back towards his office, but just before shutting the door, whirled around. “And Vince?”

“Yes, sir...uh-oh...” I said, tripping on the familiarity of his name. “Donnie?” I finally got it out.

“Keep an eye on those delivery logs for me, will you? Maybe I should get a copy every week? Maybe you could take care of that?” He didn’t hide the menace in his grin.

“Sure thing.” I heard him laugh as he shut the office door. Julie was on her feet and holding the “Executive Offices” door open for me.

“Do you need something else?” she said.

“No, I’m good. Thank you for all of your help.”

“You’re welcome.” The tone indicated I was anything but.

I took a few steps out into the vastness of the showroom, thought of something, and turned on my heel, caught her just as she was about to shut the door.

“Hey, wait—“

“Yeah?”

“Can I get one of those chocolate chip cookies?”

“What?”

“The cookies. I smell chocolate chip cookies. I thought maybe I could get one for the road. I’m starving.” Even mean-girl Julie couldn’t resist the Costa charm when it come to giving me a cookie. And they smelled so good—fresh, right out of the oven.

“What are you talking about? I don’t have any cookies.”

“No? I smelled them when I first came in.”

“Oh, that,” she said, a look of understanding giving way to a shrug. “Donnie has that smell piped in through the air conditioner vents. Says it puts people in a buying mood. I don’t even notice it any more.” She shut the door.

I walked through the dinette sets and bunk beds towards the front door. The cookie smell seemed different now that I knew it was fake. All of the customers in Donnie’s, the two ladies looking at the patio furniture or the young couple with Cyndi testing mattresses, were being drugged with happy gas. For the first time, I noticed the music. It was a pre-recorded loop of lite-jazz covers of pop songs. Instead of Madonna singing *Holiday*, it was a four-part remix. Occasionally, they broke in to play Donnie’s latest radio ad.

Everything at Donnie’s, from the smell, to the music, to the faux-leather, to Cyndi’s double d’s was fake. Donnie himself was a fake, pretending to be just another schmo. I held the door open for the delivery guy from Celebreses. The real smell of pizza, olive oil, and, maybe, a chicken parm sandwich, followed him inside.

Thirteen

The backseat of Tichy's Camry was like an episode of *Hoarders Hits the Road*. When he invited me to a party, then suggested we ride together, I jumped at the chance. When I told him about the Chrysler and Andropov's offer to buy it back, he gave me a heads up that Andropov might be there. His reaction to the car business had been identical to Bobby K's: Fuck Andropov. Coming from Tichy, with history and personal experience with the mad Russian, it gave me some comfort, but I still wasn't excited to hang out with my new friend and his buddy Sergei. On the other hand, Anna was going in the car with us and I jumped at the chance to spend more time with her, Andropov or no Andropov.

What I hadn't expected from Tichy were the layers of fossilized garbage in the floorboard. Coffee cups had begun recycling themselves with newspapers, handouts from his class, and what looked like the remains of some energy bar wrappers. I was unsure of that ID since they were part of an early layer in the strata. Only carbon dating could have told me for sure.

“Sorry about the mess back there, guys,” he said when Anna and I were climbing in.

“It’s a pigsty,” Sabrina said, buckling her seat belt in the front seat. She looked over her shoulder at Anna. “Be careful. Don’t let your heel get caught.”

“You might never see it again,” I said, under my breath.

Anna’s blue eyes flashed irritation that, for a second, I worried was directed at me. My fears subsided watching her carefully maneuver around a white take-out container and over a two-month old copy of *The Newark Star Ledger*. She gracefully crossed her ankles on the only open space of floor, the hump in the middle. The result being that not only was she a little bit closer to me in the confined space, but also that her skirt fell across her legs in a way that showed more skin than she probably originally intended. She noticed me noticing and without even a hint of a blush adjusted the skirt modestly, but not so modestly that I didn’t still get an eyeful. She suppressed a laugh and wagged a finger at me in mock accusation. Even I couldn’t doubt that she was flirting with me.

“Everybody okay back there?” Tichy rested his arm on the passenger seat and turned his body as much as he could to face us.

“We’re good.” His eyes locked onto mine, not with the irritation that Anna had had a moment before, but with an unusual tint of insecurity. “Seriously, dude. We’re all good.”

He smiled, seemingly relieved, but still something was off. He put his hand on Sabrina's shoulder and leaned in for a quick kiss. She touched his cheek more gently than I was used to seeing.

“Cool,” he said in almost a whisper. “Let's go then.”

Tichy sighed as he cranked the car. I was really beginning to wonder. We were going to a cocktail party somewhere out in Northwest Jersey. I've never spent much time out there, so it was all unfamiliar territory to me. The fact that Tichy was giving off some major insecurity vibes was not helping.

When I was in sixth grade the science club at school took a trip to Six Flags Great Adventure and that had been the first time I had ever been south of Interstate 195 in my life. The teacher wrote it off as an educational, engineering field trip. I realized now he was twenty-five, hated that he taught middle-school science, and really liked amusement parks. We did meet with one of the engineers that worked on the roller coasters, but the rest of the time we ate ice cream and rode the rides. I threw up three slices of pizza in the bushes next to the kiddie rides. For weeks my buddies called me Pukeface. The further west we drove, the more the landscape changed. Mid-century strip malls gave way to shopping malls, which then opened up into large expanses of green space. Once we passed under the Garden State Parkway, the green space overtook the developed areas. Grocery stores disappeared and nurseries and farm stands sprouted in their place. The brick apartment buildings that held the summer heat on the streets around my house yielded to mass single-family homes on lots that were bigger than any park in Hoboken. The cars were less like Tichy's and even mine and more like the ones that wait in front of

the private preschool at pick-up time. I glanced over to the car next to us at a stoplight to see an SUV the size of a room at a Holiday Inn. The kids in the back were watching *Finding Nemo* on high-definition video screens.

“So where are we going again?” I asked. I hadn’t listened to many of the details after he had mentioned during his call that Anna was coming along.

“If you don’t even know where we are going—why did you bother to come?” Sabrina bounced a haughty look off the visor mirror she was using to apply more mascara.

I assumed she was just busting my balls so I took a shot of my own. “Just so I could spend more time with you.”

Anna’s expression was like a plastic yellow hazard sign a janitor puts up after he mops the floor: the one with the stick figure in mid-air falling on his ass.

Sabrina snapped the mirror shut and flipped up the visor a little harder than necessary. She turned in slow motion to give me the full force of her evil eye. I guessed my sarcasm hadn’t translated.

“Something you should know about Russian girls, Vincent.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“We don’t like wise guys.”

In New Jersey we have ‘Wise Guys’ like from the movies: the mobbed up kind who run numbers and protection rackets. But more than that, in my experience, we have the kind of wise guys Sabrina was referring to: the smart alecks, the wise-asses, and the ball-busters. Sarcasm and bravado are part of our collective personality. From the

governor in Trenton to the taffy vendor in Ventnor to the beauticians in Ma's beauty parlor, we take pride in snappy comebacks and our mastery of the artistic insult. We call ourselves the Garden State, but more people recognize the swamps of the Meadowlands around Giants Stadium or the bullet-torn row houses of Camden as New Jersey. It gives you an edge, or an 'atty-tude' as they say down in South Jersey. So, if Russian girls don't like wise guys, then the Russian girls need to spend their time somewhere else.

"Socrates said that the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." This time it was Tichy who looked at me and this time it was the rear view mirror. He glanced at Sabrina. "Is that what you mean by wise, sweetheart?"

Anna hid a smile and looked out the window. I caught it in her reflection.

"If knowing nothing is, as you say, wise, then, yes, Vincent is that." She turned back to face forward. I don't think she was happy with Tichy, but she was just as happy to be done talking to me.

I opened my mouth, ready to shed some more Jersey wisdom when Anna put her hand on my knee. She didn't look my way, but I detected her shaking her head no. Okay, I probably wouldn't have said anything harsh to Sabrina—she is my friend's girlfriend after all—but I appreciated the fact that Anna stepped in. Tonight was the night I was going to go all in and ask her on a real date, not that wishy-washy shit I had pulled at The Cellar. Her hand, which stayed on my knee even after the moment had passed, gave me some confidence that she might actually say yes.

My original question of where the hell we were going remained unanswered until Tichy stopped to wait for a stoplight. "We're going to a party. A party of one of my

parents' friends. My parents and lots of their friends and their friends' children will be there. It's sort of a political thing. A fundraiser, if you will. My father's friend wants to be mayor of the town where they live."

Somewhere in my brain, I seemed to remember this part of the evening. "Right. That's it. He's the one who owns all of that real estate. You told me about him."

"And he owns the stores where Friendship Spa is."

I could picture the signs on the windows: Steam, Spa, Friendship, Relax. Friendship Spa. That meant he owned a piece of Fro-Yoz, too. Anna slid her hand off my knee and turned away from the window. I turned my thoughts back to Andropov.

Fourteen

Tichy handed the keys to the Camry to a high school kid wearing a red jacket. The kid was one of a group of well-scrubbed lacrosse-types, each in matching red jackets milling around a temporary valet stand. Kids like these didn't have weekend jobs to help their moms buy groceries. Kids like these worked to buy tricked-out gaming laptops and new bindings for their snowboards. Their fathers would have eventually bought that shit for them anyway, but dear old Dad likes to feel like he is teaching his kid the value of a dollar. We didn't have any of these kids at my school, but we saw them every time we went to the mall.

I checked out the keys already filling the pegboard: Mercedes, Lexus, BMW. We were rolling with a high limit crowd tonight and we were still standing in the driveway with the valets.

Sabrina held tightly to Tichy's hand. She used him to help keep her balance, tottering up the steps to the front door on her five-inch Gucci heels. He also held tightly, but his looked more like a need for emotional balance. I could tell he was nervous. I had no idea why.

“Well?” Anna said.

“Well, what?” I worried that she had said something that I had missed.

“Are we going in or are we just going to wait outside?”

I apologized and offered my arm hoping to appear debonair, like the Argentinean guy who teaches ballroom dancing above Manny’s Dry Cleaning. She shook her head in the dismissive but endearing way that I was beginning to recognize. She touched the handrail lightly and headed up the steps.

This was, without any doubt, the largest private home I had been in that hadn’t wasn’t a museum and hadn’t belonged to a dead Rockefeller. The view from the circular driveway had been deceiving. From there the house looked big, sure, but I wasn’t prepared for the sheer enormity that Anna and I found at the top of the stairs. A uniformed waiter in a black tuxedo greeted us and opened the gigantic, carved wooden double doors. They were probably imported and probably Italian, judging from the elaborate medallions hand-carved into wood. On each was mounted a brass knocker with a ferocious lion bearing his teeth.

I tilted my head to see Anna’s face. I was curious as to whether this was blowing her mind, too. I was worried that this was commonplace for her and my offer of rustic Italian fare at a local joint by my house would seem ridiculous. She had her back to me, taking the tall glass of champagne being offered by one of a line of waiters dressed exactly like the guy who had opened the door. They stood like good-looking dominoes lining the edge of a red carpet. An actual red carpet.

Anna turned and her expression could only be read as “Can you believe this shit?” She took a very unladylike gulp of her drink.

I relaxed—a little—and returned her smile.

“Sir?” The voice came from over my left shoulder. I turned.

It’s a testament to how much I liked Anna that I hadn’t realized that the right side of the red carpet was lined with female waiters. The only difference in the uniform seems to be that the ladies had forgotten the pants part of the tuxedo. The one who had spoken to me was a gorgeous redhead that reminded me of Ann-Margret. Ann-Margret was no Sophia Loren, but, still, *Viva Las Vegas* was one of Pop’s favorite movies. He said it was because he was a fan of Elvis Presley’s music. Even the twelve-year old Vincent knew better. *Jailhouse Rock* has the music. *Viva Las Vegas* has Ann-Margret.

“Would you like some champagne?” She nudged her tray in my direction.

“Oh, sure.” I took a glass. Anna laughed and looped her arm through the crook of my elbow. It felt possessive, in a good way. I would be more than happy for her to stake her claim.

“Come on. We’ve barely made it through the door.”

I took a sip of the sparkly drink. Champagne is not one of my favorite things, but the fizzy sweetness that hit me that night threatened to change my mind. I must have been doing it all wrong. I think the ten-dollar bottle from Shoprite that we drank at my high school graduation party hadn’t represented the proper monetary investment. This was light and sugary and seemed to evaporate instantly in my mouth.

Sabrina and Tichy hadn't made it much further into the house than we had when we caught up with them right at the end of the red carpet. Tichy waved us over to where they were talking to an older couple just through the doorway of a room that might have been a dining room. I couldn't tell for sure because all of the furniture had been removed except for a pair of antiques that flanked the double doorway.

Anna whispered in my ear. "Those are his parents."

Tichy's parents were laughing at something their son had said to them. Sabrina wore a determined smile without a hint of amusement. I watched Tichy rub her back. It was the same move I had seen him pull before. I made a note to myself to ask Anna later if she had noticed. And to ask her why. I suspected Sabrina had "unresolved anger issues" that manifested in "temper control problems." Ma reads a lot of self help books. And I watched a lot of daytime TV for a while.

I thought Tichy's parents would be like Ma and Pop: sturdy immigrant stock who worked hard to make sure they paid their bills on time. That was what the immigrant families I knew were like. They were the Greek family with the pizza place and the Sicilian garbage truck guys. Okay, maybe the Sicilians do more than just trash removal, but they still worked hard. It was a familiar story to me. People whose families had left the Old Country, whatever that country was, to find a better life for their children and grandchildren in the United States. That was the Costa story. I had assumed the Tichy story would be pretty much the same, just a fast-forwarded version, albeit with more war and violence thrown in.

I was wrong. Tichy's mother was beautiful in the quiet way of the silent movie stars. Even in the bright lights of the party, the shadows highlighted her face and fuzzed out her edges. I would have believed she lived in black and white if it hadn't been for the deep burgundy of her lipstick. She was wearing a black dress that emphasized some dynamite curves. If handicapped correctly for her age, she would give Sabrina a run for her money. Maybe having to live up to that high standard was what made Sabrina so jumpy.

His father wasn't good looking in exactly the same way that Tichy wasn't good looking. But I saw now that Tichy was every inch a younger version of the elder Mr. Tichy. And neither looked like they spent much time turning a wrench or unloading a delivery truck.

It only occurred to me now, face to face with the Tichy clan, that I had no idea what Alex's parents did for a living. I didn't know if he had any siblings. I had no idea where he or his parents lived. He knew all about Ma and Pop and my only child Italian heritage. He even knew about Nonni's lemon cake. He knew because he had asked me and I had told him. I had never asked. The war stories he told in class made it seem like I shouldn't ask. Or, more likely, I did like I had always done and figured if someone wanted me to know something about themselves they would tell me.

"Vincent! Come, let me introduce you to my parents." The warmth of his greeting melted over to his parents who both smiled million dollar smiles. Tichy clapped me on the shoulder and pulled me into their little group. "Mom, Dad, this is my friend Vincent Costa." I hadn't expected him to call them Mom and Dad. That seemed too American and

informal. “Vince, this is my dad, Radek, and my mom, Milana.” I shook both of their hands and told them it was nice to get to meet Alex’s parents. It was strange to call him Alex. In my head he was Tichy. But that was before there were three Tichys to deal with.

“Alexandr, is this your student that you were telling us about?” Milana Tichy said. Her voice startled me for no reason other than I hadn’t expected her to speak.

“That’s me, Mrs. Tichy. Alex was a great teacher. I learned a lot.” For a split second, I worried that it hadn’t been me.

“And you work in shipping?” Radek Tichy said. He and his son even sounded similar.

“I guess you could say that. I work in the dispatch office at Mo’s Trucking.”

He nodded as if I had answered some question he had left unasked.

“Anna! Is that you?” Milana Tichy managed to turn everyone’s attention to Anna who had been quietly sipping her champagne just behind me. My novelty had worn off. It was time to return to familiar faces.

Anna and Mrs. Tichy embraced with an intimacy that clearly didn’t exist between the older woman and Sabrina. Sabrina stiffened but the smile stayed in place. Tichy the Younger’s hand resumed its soothing position on her back.

“What are you drinking?” Alex said, taking a sip of his own cocktail. It was Scotch or some other type of whiskey. It was dark and pungent and had ice cubes. It was the opposite of my sparkly champagne.

“Champagne. They gave it us when we walked in.”

“Come, let’s get you a real drink.” After asking who needed a refill, I followed Tichy out of the dining room and towards the back of the house.

“What does your dad do for a living again?”

“Oh, you know how it is, the old cliché, he was a lawyer in the Old Country, but then couldn’t get his license here in the States.”

That was true. It was a familiar story, but usually it was the guy driving a cab telling it to you. And he was a doctor. A millionaire doctor. Pop says they tell you that to get better tips because there’s no way everyone in Pakistan is a doctor. Beats the hell out of me. I’m not even a cab driver.

“So what did he do?”

“He bought real estate. Then sold it. Then bought more. Then he bought a McDonald’s franchise. Then he bought five.”

“McDonald’s?”

“Yep. Radek Tichy, poor immigrant Czech lawyer, is one of the most successful McDonald’s franchisees in the Northeast. He even owns the one down by where you live.” Tichy’s voice had an edge to it.

“I eat there,” I said. “A lot.”

Tichy laughed. “And how does that work for your Cardio Kicks Ass boxing class you go to at the gym?”

I pulled myself together and managed a stern eye roll and an exasperated sigh. Tichy laughed again.

“I’m just giving you a hard time.” He patted me on the shoulder again. “The bar is out here.”

We weaved in and around the growing number of partygoers and emerged outside on the patio.

#

Lots of people in the suburbs have water features in their backyards. Pop says it’s ironic because none of the people on his real estate shows want to buy houses with water features. Pop is an expert on the home remodeling and decorating channels.

“That’s the first thing the landscapers do on the landscaping shows is put in a water feature. But regular people don’t want that,” he said one night during dinner when a husband and wife were in a disagreement about the above ground pool in the backyard of a mid-century split-level on the outskirts of Omaha. I told him a pool wasn’t a water feature. “Eh, regular people don’t want that either.”

By Pop’s logic, then, this was not a house where regular people lived. The entire backyard wasn’t a water feature, but it was damn close. To my left, behind the bar where Tichy and I were headed, was a fountain. It was not the sort of fountain from Pop’s shows but the sort of fountain from Central Park. It looked like marble—*it can’t be marble, can it?*—with a carving of a lion and a bear locked in a fight. The lion had the upper hand pulling the bear’s jaws open with its paws. Water was shooting up from the bear’s open mouth. I turned my head sideways to get a better look. The marble was a translucent ivory. There was no color difference or variation between the lion or the bear. But the carving left no doubt that the water stream was meant to represent the bear’s

blood. Ordinary water. Colorless marble. But a message of violence and gore that was crystal clear.

We fell into the makeshift line at the bar and Tichy told me a story about how his dad had worked the Fry-O-Later for six months at one of his McDonald's. I was listening, but I was also taking in the rest of this private Wet N' Wild right here in someone's backyard in North Jersey.

The pool wasn't shaped like a rectangle or a kidney or any actual pool shape. It had rounded edges and meandered across the grassy plateau of the backyard. It was big enough to have three ladders and a place where the bottom leveled out like the shoreline at the beach. There was playground sand and a pair of teak chaise lounges on the 'beach.' Towards the rear of the yard, just on the edge before it dropped off into the dark ravine below, there was a rock formation built over the pool. It would provide nice shade to anyone swimming in the dead of summer and it would provide cover for any shady nighttime activities any time of the year. For the party, blue and yellow lights provided the ambiance for the people sitting on the sectional sofa under the overhang. A bright white light flashed briefly next to the couch. A minute or two later it happened again and I realized that someone was opening and closing a refrigerator.

"Yo, dude, check that out." I nudged Tichy and pointed in the direction of the concrete outcropping that would have made the set director on a movie proud for its realism.

"You mean the grotto?"

"Grotto?" *A grotto? Like the Playboy Mansion. Where the hell am I?*

“They don’t have it on but there’s a sixty-inch flat screen under there, too. My parents came over once for a Super Bowl party. Dad spent the whole time in the grotto. Mom wasn’t too happy about it.”

“What the hell?” It was rhetorical. I should have asked, “Who the hell?”

Tichy nodded and moved out of the way to let a large man pass. The man reminded me of the twins from The Cellar. His musky cologne lingered after he had passed. My sinuses screamed in complaint. Tichy moved to occupy the man’s spot at the portable bar. A pair of bartenders was busy making drinks. Two hurricane glasses were stuffed with more bills than a Tiffani could expect on a Saturday night at the strip club by the airport.

“I’ll just have a beer. Whatever they’ve got.”

“Beer? How plain,” said an unfortunately familiar voice from behind me. Andropov.

I turned, trying on Sabrina’s practiced smile for size. “Hey, man.”

“Vincent! You are popping up in all kinds of places.” Sergei pulled me into a giant bear hug.

“Sergei, let him go. Vince needs to get his beer.”

Sergei pushed me away with more force than I expected. I stumbled backwards. Tichy sidestepped to avoid spilling the two glasses of red wine he was trying to pass to me.

“Ah, of course. This explains why Vincent is here. The esteemed Professor.”

Andropov did nothing to hide his contempt.

I took the wine, one glass in each hand, and then held the beer bottle by the neck between two fingers.

“Sergei, help Vincent. We don’t want him to spill wine on his best suit.”

Sergei dutifully took the glasses of wine. I shrugged a ‘thanks’ in his direction and took a long drag on the beer. It was my best suit, but I was annoyed that Andropov would know it.

Tichy now had his own hands full with two more cocktails for him and his father. He still hadn’t spoken a word to Andropov. He started back through the pulsating crowd. Andropov disappeared behind him. There was music now and I smelled food but had yet to see any. Sergei could easily see over the tops of most everyone’s heads. He followed Andropov. I drafted in the big man’s wake.

The Tichys and Sabrina were exactly where we had left them, but, to my disappointment, Anna was nowhere to be seen. Alex handed his father his drink. Radek took a sip before acknowledging Andropov. When he did make eye contact, it was only a moment. He then looked back to his son like a stray cat had followed Alex home.

Sergei looked to Alex for direction on what to do with the red wine, and then delivered the drinks to Sabrina and Mrs. Tichy. He fell in line behind Andropov but not before giving me another friendly shove. I guessed Sergei didn’t have many friends. I kept my mouth shut and drank my beer. It was Mrs. Tichy who broke the silence.

“Vladimir, I am surprised to see you here. After the trouble you caused for Lukin.” She sipped her wine and smiled without any warmth.

“Oh, that. Yes, Mrs. Tichy, I did cause some trouble. But I have made amends. My father has donated generously to Lukin’s campaign.”

Andropov actually sounded humble.

“Your father has made lots of donations on your behalf.”

I was shocked. I thought everyone was afraid of Andropov. Milana Tichy was clearly not everyone.

“That’s old history,” Sabrina said. Her accent became very pronounced. Sabrina was a different type of excited than the rest of us. My money said she was happy to see Andropov, just like she had been that night at The Cellar.

“Yeah, Mom, let it go. It’s over. He’s out now,” Alex said. He and Andropov exchanged glances.

I watched Andropov bristle at the phrase ‘he’s out now’ but he quickly regrouped. A hundred Sergeis couldn’t protect Andropov from that type of injury. Mr. Tichy took another drink of whiskey. “So, is your father here?”

“He is. He is. And I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you, Radek. Sadly, my mother didn’t feel up to it.”

“How is she doing, Vladimir?” Mrs. Tichy softened when she spoke.

“She’s okay. The treatment has been tough for her.” Andropov’s eyes fell to his expensive Italian lace-ups. Sabrina moved to touch his arm, but caught herself. The silence grew faster than anyone could think of anything to say.

My stomach growled loud enough for everyone to hear. Sergei actually laughed out loud.

“I’m gonna go and see if I can find some food. And look for Anna.” I was anxious to leave and I did want to find Anna. Someone needed to explain to me what the hell was going on.

#

“Vince! Vincent!”

I stopped so suddenly a dude with a tray of chicken ka-bobs almost speared me in the back with a grilled teriyaki skewer. The food, I had discovered, was on the opposite side of the French doors from the bar. There were buffet stations of appetizer, finger-type food. The fact that it was a buffet and not being offered on sterling trays by the model clones circulating with the champagne seemed strange to me. But I also got the impression that alcohol was more important to most of the guests than a tiny quiche.

“Vince!” I still couldn’t make out where the voice was coming from. I noticed Anna’s hand waving from behind a group of expensively coiffed older ladies, not unlike Alex’s mom, spooning caviar onto thin slices of blue potato. I maneuvered around balancing my own plate of ka-bobs, quiche, and spring rolls. Everything about this shindig had an international flair. The United Nations right here in New Jersey.

Anna still had a glass of champagne in her hand, but from the rosy glow in her cheeks I knew it wasn’t her first.

“Where have you been? I have been looking all over for you,” she said with a scolding tone.

“I went with Tichy to get drinks. We came back and you were gone.”

“That’s because you didn’t come back alone. You picked up some trash along the way.”

“Andropov?”

“I didn’t want to talk to him or his trained monkey.” She finished the glass of champagne and set it in a giant flowerpot. Her look suggested that maybe my new pal Sergei came with a warning label.

“What’s the deal there?”

“Works for him. Works for his father really. Errand boy.” Just like Sabrina, when Anna drank she sounded more Russian and a word or two here and there would fall through the cracks.

“No, not him. You and Andropov.”

“Oh, that.” She sat on the edge of the flowerbed. She opened her small clutch purse and applied a layer of lip-gloss. I waited.

I sat down next to her. I waited some more.

“We, as you say, went out. Then we didn’t.”

“See, I just don’t get that. He’s so…” It was her turn to wait. “Stupid.” I said.

“Ha! He is, isn’t he? I thought you were going to say scary.”

“Well, he’s that, too.”

“We are from the same neighborhood. He can be fun.”

We sat in silence. I was thinking about what she had said. It looked like she was doing the same. She was right, of course, he did seem like he could be fun. If there hadn’t been the thing with the car and the judge’s son and the prison, he probably would have

reminded me of one of my screw-up cousins like Joey D, who broke his middle finger skateboarding and had to wear a splint for six weeks so it looked like he was giving everyone the finger.

“I can be fun.” I scooted closer to her. This was it. I decided this was my moment. The same way Pop had taught me how to hit a curve ball. Keep your eye on the ball and lean into it.

So, I leaned into it.

I kissed her.

Fifteen

“Where have you been? I have been looking. Everywhere.” Sabrina stood with her hands on her hips. The unfriendly look on her face testified to the truth in her sentiment, despite the fact that she and Tichy were in almost exactly the same spot where I had left them minus Andropov and Sergei

“We were getting food.”

Sabrina rolled her eyes. Food was never a priority for this group. Food is always a priority for us Costas.

“I need to find a bathroom. Come with me.” Sabrina grabbed Anna’s arm and the two tottered off into the pulsating crowd.

“She didn’t want to go alone,” Tichy said.

We both took a step back to let a bar back through with a cart of ice and silently surveyed the scene. I watched an old guy ogle a waitress behind his wife’s back. I saw a woman pour her drink out into one of the decorative planters. Two punks who barely looked old enough to drink were leaned over the deejay booth, shouting a request. The common denominators here were too much booze and too much money.

“Whose party is this?” I knew he had already told me. But that was before. Before the doorknockers and the champagne and the lion fountain.

Tichy pointed to a group of men smoking cigars just south of the pool house. I recognized Tichy’s father. The other three were unfamiliar.

“See the man over there with my dad? The tall one. In the yellow shirt.”

I squinted remembering that I needed to get my eyes checked. I hadn’t seen the garbage can I flattened in our driveway and I couldn’t make out the face of the man in the yellow shirt. I could tell our host was talking from the way he was waving the cigar around for emphasis.

“His name is Joe Norstrom. He owns a lot of different businesses. Calls himself an entrepreneur.”

“Sounds like an entrepreneur to me.”

Tichy rolled his eyes. “The other two—standing next to my dad—one is my dad’s friend, Uri Grant. Uri’s the one running for mayor. The other is Antonin Andropov, Vlad’s father.”

“Uri Grant?” I was getting so accustomed to the European names that this one stuck out. “What kind of name is Grant?”

“American.” Tichy let me chew on that for a second. A kid named Abraham Garcia sat next to me in elementary school. His mom was Jewish. His dad was not. Maybe Uri Grant was like Abe Garcia.

Tichy patted me on the back suggesting I should do a dismount from my mental gymnastics routine.

“He’s from the same part of the Czech Republic as my family. He changed it to Grant to sound more American. He’s a big American Civil War buff. He collects bayonets. His actual last name is Slovensky. Now he just uses the initial.”

I thought about that one for a second. “Wait. Did you say he uses the initial?”

“Yep.” Tichy’s sipped his whiskey.

“That makes him U.S. Grant.”

Tichy raised his glass and tipped it in my direction. “He’d be so proud that you figured it out.”

I wished I could see U.S. Grant and Joe Norstrom better. But the person I really wished I could make out was Andropov The First. Politicians and Swedish entrepreneurs were fascinating and all, but I had a vested interest in the Andropov family. “What’d you have to do to get rid of Vlad and Sergei?”

“I didn’t have to do anything. My parents left to find Uri. Vlad and Sergei left to find you and Anna.”

“Why?”

“*Where did my friend Vincent go? I must find him,*” Tichy said in a frighteningly good imitation of Andropov’s accent.

“It has more to do with Anna than with me.”

“If you say so, I don’t know—Sergei seemed to like having a new friend.”

#

“I’m bored. I want to dance,” Sabrina said to Tichy, tugging on his sleeve.

I'm bored. I want to go home, I said to no one. That wasn't entirely true. Boring was not a good word for this party. But I still wanted to go home. Or at least get the hell out of there. The party was turning the corner from buzzed to drunk and lively debates were changing gears to heated arguments. If this were anything like the parties on my side of the Garden State Parkway, that gearshift meant the difference between hurt feelings and broken noses.

They stumbled towards the dance floor that had opened up by the pool. Watching Tichy apologize to someone he bumped into along the way, it occurred to me that he had had a lot to drink. Rookie move on my part not paying closer attention to that. Party foul on his part for having that much to drink when he was the one that drove our asses out here.

"How much has he had to drink?"

"Who knows? I don't count." Anna's accent again. *Damn it, that's sexy*. She put her hand on my chest and cocked her head to one side. "Want to dance?"

Not here. Not now. "I'm thinking we should start towards home. But I don't think he can get us there." I took her hand and led her up the few steps to the second tier of the stone patio.

She started to say something but didn't get the chance before the sound of breaking glass captured our attention. We turned to look down towards the dance floor. A guest had upended a waiter balancing a tray of empty glasses. A small circle of dancers opened up to avoid the general mess, not to mention the broken glass. It was not one of

those moments where a needle screeched across a turntable and the party slammed to a halt. People got out of the way but never stopped dancing.

Two hulking men, same general shape as my new friend Sergei, pushed through the crowd to the edge of the circle. They both had short, cropped hair, mercenary-style if the movies are to be believed, one blonde and one a dark brown. Both were wearing expensive suits, not tuxedos like the cater-waiters. My guess was they were in the talking out the trash business not the slinging the hash business. Norstrom looked like exactly the type of guy who travelled with a pair of Vikings in his back pocket.

Anna and I watched the mystery guest scramble to his feet. He yelled something at the security team. The toppled waiter scurried away with his tray and the bits and pieces of the glassware that he had picked up before the Nordic A-Team had appeared.

“What the...? What’d he say?”

Anna shrugged. She, like just about everyone else it seemed, wasn’t all that interested in the scene that was unfolding. She started moving towards the house.

“Wait. What’s he got?”

She turned, leaning on me, but inspecting her manicure. The disruptive guest yelled something else I couldn’t hear, but I could tell that the security team kept their mouths shut, just closing the distance between him and them. I caught a flash of something in one of the blue spotlights that reflected prisms from the pool.

Like a mosh pit at a Metallica concert the open circle moved and shifted. The three of them were alone on the edge of the crowd closer to the pool. I leaned in to get a better look.

“I just want to talk to him. Norstrom. I need to talk to him.” I heard him this time because the DJ was transitioning from one track to another. Anyone paying attention could have heard him.

Another flash from what was in his hand. I leaned in closer and squinted hard, trying to get a better look. He moved under one of the standing patio lamps that illuminated the outer edge of the outdoor kitchen. I managed to make out the shard of broken glass he was wielding. I could also see the trail of blood he was leaving because of a gash in the same hand. He was bleeding. A lot.

“He’s bleeding. See. Look. Right there by the pool.”

Anna obliged my direction by looking where I said look, but didn’t express what I would have thought would have been the appropriate level of shock. “It’s a party,” she said. “There’s always someone who gets out of line.”

I turned to her, dumbfounded, and missed tracking a third Viking coming in quietly from behind. I did manage to catch him wrap the guest up from behind. Number Three squeezed like a python and his prey, with his arms pinned at his side, dropped the broken glass. One of the original pair pulled a handkerchief from his pocket—*seriously, dudes actually still carry handkerchiefs?*—wrapped it around the glass and slipped it in the inside pocket of his jacket. The three security guys escorted the guest around the edge of the partygoers. The mystery guest kept protesting but he was no longer yelling and the slump of his shoulders and the way he was clutching his injured hand signaled resignation.

Anna and I had to step aside to make room for the foursome on the stairs. The proximity had piqued her interest, so I wasn't alone in trying to listen in and get a better look as they passed.

"I just want to talk to him. Just talk. I need to talk to him," the guest said. His refrain was on constant repeat.

"I know, Dr. Evans. I know. But this is a party. This is not a place for business," we overheard the blonde one say in a voice more calm and soothing than I had expected. We watched them disappear into the house.

"Did he say doctor? That dude is a doctor?" I kept up my pattern of asking questions that no one had been answering. Until now.

"He did. But he was right. This is a party. No need to get messy." She leaned in and kissed my cheek. She took my hand and squeezed it. "I thought we were getting out of here."

I liked the attention from Anna, but I wanted someone to explain what had just happened. Why would a doctor pick a fight with Norstrom's security team? And why would Norstrom's security team keep the doctor away from tonight's host?

"But..."

"No buts." She sealed this proclamation with a kiss, a real kiss, not just a soft peck on the cheek. My hand went around her waist. She smelled and tasted like vodka and the chocolate mousse tart she had nabbed just before we left the dance floor. I still wanted answers but my questions could wait. I could ask Tichy when he was sober and

we had some time and distance from Josef Norstrom's own Islands of Adventure Waterpark and Dance Party.

Sixteen

Mo's Trucking was buzzing along by the time I pulled into the parking lot on Monday morning. I locked the Chrysler and headed towards the office. I rewound my weekend and thought about Saturday night. The smell of hot motor oil and diesel fumes leaked from the open loading bays. It was supposed to be 96 degrees today and that smell would only get worse as the day wore on. Even so, it wasn't the toxic sludge that made my stomach turn.

I had sobered up enough to drive by the time I had wrangled Tichy and Sabrina towards the door. Tichy didn't even notice when I took the keys from the valet.

I dropped Anna off at her apartment first. Getting driving directions from three drunk non-native English speakers wasn't easy, but somehow I managed to get us there. She weaved up the sidewalk to her building, waving good-bye. Sabrina had rolled down the window and yelled something in Russian. I was worried it had something to do with me, until Anna stopped and yelled back: "I love you, too. You are beautiful, too." I think Sabrina had tears in her eyes. Drunk girls all speak the same language, just with different accents.

I had waited by the Camry in Tichy's driveway until a cab had come to take me home. Tichy offered to wait with me but I sent him inside with Sabrina. I needed air. I needed quiet. I did not need Sabrina's tears or the stench of her cigarettes.

I sat on the curb and picked at the house number painted on the concrete. A light came on in the big house behind me. I could see Tichy and Sabrina passing back and forth in front of the long windows that framed the double front doors. The light went out and I assumed they had gone upstairs. The timer expired on the outside floor lights. With a click and a hum, the yard went dark. I was alone in the dark in the leafy suburbs of Bergen County.

The dispatcher had told me it would take about half an hour for the cab to get here. It was actually closer to forty-five. Lucky for me, the cab driver spent the ride to my house fired up on his cell phone. The cab smelled like cooked onions, which made perfect sense after we stopped at a light and he leaned into the passenger's seat and took a big bite of Jamaican beef patty. He dug around into the paper bag, extracted a handful of napkins and wiped the grease from his beard. I watched as he used another stack to mop his brow. Our eyes met for a split second in the reflection in the rearview mirror. He was tensed and ready for me to complain or puke like a pansy-ass frat boy in the back of his cab. I just nodded, the kind of nod that guys do.

That Monday morning I gave the same nod to one of the new drivers. I couldn't remember his name. The nod was good for that, too. He was eating an egg sandwich and smoking a cigarette outside the loading dock. My stomach churned again.

The cool air of the office smelled stale, but was a welcome relief. Gina wasn't at her desk and I could hear Mo on the phone from his office when I passed by on the way to the dispatch office. I dropped my bag on the floor next to the desk and headed to fridge for some o.j. I checked the messages on the voicemail to make sure all of the deliveries had left that morning. I took a big swig of the orange juice regretting the decision when the acidic sweetness hit my empty stomach.

The door swung open. Mo hadn't bothered to knock. "It's my damn company. Why the fuck would I knock?" I could hear him say in my head.

"Costa. You have those reports for that dickhead Donnie?"

"See, the thing is, Mo..."

"There is no 'thing,' Costa. Where are the reports? You told me you'd get them done before you left on Friday."

I took another drink of the o.j., buying for time.

"I think the direct quote was, "No problem, Mo. They'll be on your desk Monday morning." That sound familiar? Then I come in early and what do I find?"

I assumed that was a rhetorical question. Turned out it wasn't.

"And what do I find, Costa? Or what the fuck don't I find?"

"I know. I'm sorry, Mo. I just need a half hour."

Mo twisted his wrist. His gold Rolex oyster wasn't as new as Donnie's, but it was still a Rolex.

"Twenty minutes. Or don't bother." The way he pointed his finger at me before leaving left me with no mistaken impressions.

I crushed the rest of the orange juice and immediately got to work. I had gotten cocky when it came to these reports for Donnie's Discount Furniture. I had been doing them every Friday since that trip to Donnie's. I knew I was doing a good job, even if no one bothered to say anything nice to me. Bobby K had given me space of my own in the mini-fridge. Gina didn't roll her eyes at everything I said anymore, just some of the things I said. Mo only half looked at the reports.

I had been close to finishing the reports on Friday, but I was looking forward to having the whole weekend off. Then Mo left early for his shore house and Gina didn't stick around much later. I was the only one left in the office. I had figured I could get in early on Monday and finish them before Mo even got in. Problem was I totally forgot about them until I pulled into the parking lot and saw one of Donnie's trucks ready to go out for a delivery.

I wasted five of my twenty minutes waiting for the dispatch computer to boot up. Modern technology was not a priority for Mo. All of the driver logs were still done on carbon paper. Bobby K had his magnet system. Gina kept one of those pink message pad by the phone on her desk and a black plastic slotted tray sat on the counter where she could file any phone messages. Donnie had voicemail; it was impossible for him to have phone service anymore without it, despite his best efforts. But he never checked it and would rip a new one for anyone who transferred one of his calls to voicemail. So Gina took messages. For Donnie. For the rest of us, she only sometimes took down the messages. Most of the time she transferred those calls to the dispatch voicemail and let us sort it out. But not always, so you had to check the pink slips by the front door just in

case. I think she did it that way so that Bobby K would spend more time in the front office.

I watched as the printer slowly belched out the last pages of the reports. I yanked the pages, sending the tray skittering to the floor with an awkward crash.

“Hey, what’s all that racket? We’re not buying you another printer if you beat the shit out of that one, Vincent.” Gina’s voice pissed me off more than usual today, especially the Vincent part. She had one of those fax/printer/copier color machines. She wouldn’t let anyone in dispatch use it, “because of your greasy paws.” I had noticed that the stop sign clip art on Bobby K’s new safety posters hanging in the shop was in color.

I ignored her on my way to Mo’s office. My heart was racing, not just from rushing, but from knowing that I had fucked up. Big time.

Mo didn’t look at me or the stack of papers that I put on his desk. Instead, he looked at the Rolex. “Hmmm, a minute to spare.”

I exhaled. I started to speak but stopped short when Mo held up a hand. He still hadn’t looked at me. He reached for the reports and paged through them. I relaxed a little, knowing they might be late but they were right.

“I want you to take these to Donnie yourself. I want you to explain why they weren’t faxed to him on Friday.”

“Sure thing, Mo.” This felt too much like getting off easy.

“And then when you get back, Bobby K needs help with the repair invoices.”

“Not a problem.” I waited. I knew there was another shoe here. Another one of Mo’s white leather Italian loafers was going to drop. He looked at me.

“And I’m going to need you to help Gina with her filing. I’ve been having her pick up a lot of the slack since Joe’s heart attack and she just hasn’t had the time. So, maybe you stay late and get her caught up.”

I wanted to protest. I wanted to tell him Gina left almost as soon as he was out of the parking lot on Friday afternoons. I wanted him to know about the voicemail bullshit that she pulled with us. I wanted to tell him about the bottle of Vodka she kept in the bottom drawer of her desk and how many manicures and massages at Massage Envy she had charged back to Mo.

I didn’t. For all I knew Mo already knew about all of that and didn’t give a shit. Gina had worked here longer than any of us in the office. I had heard the stories that some of the drivers told about how Gina got ahead by giving head. I had seen the cartoon etched above the third urinal from the right in the men’s room down in the shop.

I kept my mouth shut.

“You got a problem with that?” Mo said, sounding like he almost wished I did. Behind me I heard the spinning sound of Gina’s chair rolling closer to the office so she wouldn’t miss anything.

“Sure thing, Mo. Whatever you say. I’m happy to help.”

Gina snorted in the hallway and said, “Yeah, right.”

Mo rolled his eyes in her direction. He was losing steam for his big power play. “Good.” He tossed the reports back to me. “Get these to Donnie. And if the prick has a problem with that, you tell him he can kiss my ass.” Mo picked up the receiver on his phone. “Gina! Get my wife on the phone.”

I picked up the papers I had come in with and left quietly, feeling pretty proud of myself. Gina saluted my passing her desk with her middle finger. I tossed her a shit-eating grin in return.

I was fuming but would be damned if I'd give Mo or Gina the satisfaction. I walked back to the dispatch office, got my bag, slid the papers inside, and didn't stop until I got to the Chrysler. I had been at work for only an hour and managed to piss off everyone in the office, nearly puke on a bottle of orange juice, and possibly break the broke-ass printer. Even for me, that was an accomplishment. If I could find a way to disappoint my parents on the way over to Donnie's Discount Furniture, then I would have really pulled something off. Unfortunately, I had already gotten a mildly disappointed vibe from Ma and Pop every day since I quit school to work full-time for Mo, so this probably wasn't going to be the day I set the land-speed record for screw-ups.

The warehouse for Donnie's Discount Furniture takes up two full blocks behind the original Donnie's Discount Furniture. I knew from the deliveries and pick-ups we ran through Mo's that he had bigger, newer suburban warehouse space in Central Jersey that serviced mostly Trenton, most of the Shore points, all of South Jersey, and some of the Philadelphia suburbs. Donnie's wasn't in New York at all, but there were rumors he wanted to expand. Delivering into the city is an expensive proposition. Mo charged a premium for any time one of our guys had to cross into Manhattan. Even Donnie would have to sell a lot of sectionals to make those numbers work.

No one bothered trying to make the warehouse smell like anything other than a warehouse. The exhaust from the forklifts and the trucks from suppliers that idled outside

replaced the chocolate chip cookie gas. Gone were the salesgirls and the stand-up cutouts of Donnie in a baseball jersey, “going to bat for grand slam savings.” Instead of being thoughtfully and purposefully arranged, the furniture was wrapped in thick plastic and stacked high. Amputated limbs from coffee and side tables awaited reattachment. A guy about my age stopped when he saw me standing in the bay door.

“Can I help you, pal?”

“I’m here to see Donnie. In the store they said he was out here.”

He didn’t immediately reply, probably wondering who the hell I was, and, more importantly, if he would catch hell for sending me to Donnie. At least, that’s what I would be thinking if he had just shown up on our loading dock at Mo’s. He was wearing the blue coveralls that every guy who ever worked a warehouse in a movie wore. The name sewn on the chest was Joe. At our shop we had lots of coveralls that Mo rented from the same place that did the mats on the floors. Half of those said “Joe,” too. Mo said you could get them cheap “if you didn’t give a shit was anybody’s name was.” All I had to show for my blue-collar credibility were my steel-toed safety shoes. Donnie’s Joe didn’t look at the shoes. He did a cost-benefit analysis and I came up harmless.

“The office is over there. See those stairs?” He cocked his thumb towards the sidewall. Metal stairs rose to a door with a window that opened into a metal box attached to the wall of the warehouse one story up. Except for the fact that it wasn’t, it could have been a stray shipping container that someone welded into place, cut a door, and built some stairs.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said. I didn’t know if he meant that figuratively or literally as in ‘Don’t tell anybody I would let a stranger wander through the warehouse.’ Didn’t matter either way and he was gone before I could ask.

I headed towards the stairs. More bits and pieces that would eventually end up in houses all over New Jersey for low, low prices lined the aisles of the warehouse. I ignored the sway from the stairs that came with every step of the climb and tried to avoid looking at the spaces between the treads. Heights aren’t my thing, particularly those ascended by way of erector set.

I assumed the door led to an office with a couple of desks where foremen could survey the furniture kingdom below, so I opened it without knocking.

I was wrong.

There was only one desk in this office: Donnie’s. And Donnie was sitting at his desk counting his money. Literally. Donnie was counting stacks and stacks of money.

“What the fuck?” he said. “Who the fuck are you?” He didn’t make a move other than he stopped counting.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. It’s me, Vince. Vince Costa. From Mo’s. Mo sent me with the reports.”

“What the fuck are you doing out here? Can’t you see I’m busy? Did you even knock?”

“I’m sorry. They told me in the store you were out here. Mo said I was only supposed to give the reports to you. They were supposed to be faxed on Friday night, but, instead, I thought I’d just drop them off.”

When I thought about it later, the thing that stuck out to me was that even though Donnie was pissed at me and surprised, he didn't jump or flinch or make any kind of move to hide the money. He calmly gathered the stacks of bills and rubber banded them. He swiveled to place them in an open safe at his knees. He swung the door shut and turned the locking mechanism. I heard the thud as the safe locked and the tumblers fell into place.

“Hand them over.”

I did. I asked if he had any questions or if there had been any problems.

“I haven't even looked at them yet. How the fuck could I have any questions?”

I waited, standing still and straight. Stacks of cash had a way of snapping me to attention. Donnie flipped through the pages, but it didn't look like he was focused on the comings and goings of dinette sets. Instead, he looked up and focused his attention on me. The Donnie from the over-the-top commercials was a clown: the kind of clown that makes balloon animals for five-year olds. If the Donnie that sat in front of me now was a clown at all, he was the clown that creeps into your nightmares and murders the neighbor's cat.

“Do you have any questions, Vince?” His voice was cold and calm.

Was he talking about the reports or the cash? Either way, I knew the answer.

“No.”

“Right.”

The analog clock on the wall ticked. Sounds of the warehouse floated up to us. A forklift honked its horn.

“Get lost, kid.”

Seventeen

Gina greeted me when I walked back into the office. “Where have you been? You get lost?” I was surprised she wasn’t on the phone. I was not surprised by her attitude. Mo’s door was closed.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on the phone? With Marie? Isn’t that your full-time job?” I didn’t slow down long enough to hear her reply. I went straight to the dispatch office and shut the door. Even with the trip to Donnie’s I had a good hour before Bobby K showed up. Right about now he would be knee-deep in super squats at the gym.

The red light wasn’t blinking on the phone, so that meant no voicemails. A couple of driver’s logs were on the desk that hadn’t been there that morning, but they could wait. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket before I sat in Bobby’s chair. I scrolled through the numbers, found what I was looking for, and pressed the call button.

I was feeling confident and determined. I was. Until I heard the ringing on the other end of the phone. I said a little prayer to the patron saint of voicemail and wrong numbers asking for either or both.

Neither of my prayers were answered.

“Hello?”

“Anna?”

“Vince, is that you?”

“It’s me.” *Okay, her caller ID worked. What now?* “What’s going on?”

“Huh? What’s going on?” She sounded confused.

“Yeah, you know, how are you?”

“Oh. Ooooh...” She seemed to get it now. “I’m good. You didn’t sound like yourself. Is everything okay with you?”

“I’m fine. Do you want to have dinner tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes. Or tomorrow. Or Friday. Or, you know, whenever.” *That’s it, Vince. Kill her with your confidence.*

“No.”

“No?” I had known ‘no’ was a possibility, but I had hoped it would come disguised as a maybe.

“No, I mean, yes. I’m sorry. Sometimes I say it backwards. No, not today. Yes, dinner on Friday.”

We made plans. Anna and I made plans for an actual date. I told her I’d pick her up. She suggested we go out for pizza. I was surprised, but I rarely turned down pizza and I wasn’t going to start now. Pizza gave me home turf advantage. For the first time since

we had met, I could spend time with Anna and not have to worry about ordering the right wine or how to toast in Czech.

“Vince?” she said right before we hung up. “I’m really glad you called.”

“I’m really glad, too.”

#

I wasn’t done. I had another call to make. This time the voicemail gods did hear my prayer, evidenced by the fact that all I got was a tinny recording of Andropov saying something in Russian, then a familiar beep.

“It’s Vincent Costa. Thanks for the offer. Just want to be perfectly clear. Not selling the car.”

I stared at Andropov’s card lying on the desk. I thought I’d feel better about that second call. I had been putting him off. Avoiding it. Avoiding him. I stood up and stretched. Grabbed another o.j. from the fridge. I put Andropov out of my mind.

I grabbed the DOT files for the new drivers and got to work.

#

Pizza is serious business in New Jersey. It is the food equivalent of Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi. A whole pie is a meal. A slice makes a good snack. Husbands and sons build wood-burning brick ovens in the backyard for their wives and mothers. Builder spec houses in fancy neighborhoods like the one where Tichy’s parents live come with ovens built into the gourmet kitchen next to the professional stove and the double-wide refrigerator.

We all have our favorites. There's your local joint, where you grab a slice after the gym or pick up a pie to watch the game. Then there's your sit-down place where you go after graduation or a successful court date. The sit down pizza places are mostly what they show in the movies: red and white tablecloths, fake grape vines on the ceiling, and an empty basket bottle of Chianti on the table, complete with red wax candle.

For the Costa's our sit-down place was Antonella's Cucina. It is the same building it has been in since the day it opened, some time in the Fifties. Antonella's shares a parking lot with a nursery. In the back, behind the shrubs and the bags of dirt there's a small house where the original Antonella lives with her son Joe. Joe runs the restaurant now. I went to school with his daughter, whose name is also Antonella, but she goes by Toni. We went on one date. At her father's restaurant. It didn't go well.

The yeasty smell of the pizza dough wasn't the only thing that greeted us when I opened the door to Antonella's. Toni was the first person I saw when Anna and I walked in.

“Vince Costa? Is that you?”

“Toni?”

Toni gave Anna the once over. One date or not she was still a Jersey girl and her competitive streak emerged. She smiled at Anna. I noticed a set of shiny, white veneers that sparkled against the orange tint of Toni's self-tanner.

“Hi, I'm Toni. Welcome to Antonella's.”

“Toni, this is Anna. Toni and I went to school together.”

Anna said ‘hi’ and smiled politely. Toni led us to a booth that wasn’t directly by the door for the ladies’ room, but close enough to make her point.

“Enjoy your dinner,” she said in a way that suggested she would prefer otherwise.

“Ex-girlfriend?”

I checked to make sure Toni was out of earshot. The phone had rung and she was busy with a takeout order.

“No.”

Anna cocked an eyebrow in a sexy way that was obviously a question mark.

“Okay, we went out. But just once.”

Anna waited. I hoped she was jealous. At least as jealous as Toni appeared to be. I was hoping Toni’s was just evil-eye jealousy and not spit-in-your-food dislike.

“We came here. Her dad watched us from the kitchen the whole time.”

Anna laughed. “Is that him?”

I followed her nod towards the kitchen. He had aged but that was definitely Toni’s dad Joe looking back at us through the pass through from the kitchen. It was one date, years ago. Pop paid for the damage. *Man, these people knew how to hold a grudge.*

This was technically our first date, but Anna and I were past all of that preliminary getting to know you bullshit. The memory of kissing her at that *Twilight Zone* party was still fresh. While we waited for our food talking about our jobs, she asked me about Mo’s.

“He’s kind of an asshole, but it’s a good job. The guys in the shop are good guys.”

An image of Bobby K and his protein shakes popped into my head. Better that than one of Gina filing her nails.

Tichy had told me that Anna worked for a pharmaceutical company, but I had just assumed with legs like hers and that sexy voice she worked in sales. She called me on it when I asked her what it was like always trying to get people to buy something.

“What?”

“You know, playing nice with the doctors in the hospitals. Giving them free notepads and pens and samples.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tichy—I mean Alex—told me you worked for Genoven.” I thought that would explain everything.

“I do.”

“I know there’s good money in sales—I sold cell phones for a while and even that was okay money—but I just don’t have the stomach for it.”

“Neither do I.”

A waiter dropped off two salads and a basket of homemade garlic knots. The smell of the fresh baked bread alerted my stomach, which briefly diverted my attention from Anna. I grabbed one and tore it in half. Steam escaped from inside giving me a soft, hazy Italian food buzz. I inhaled, took a bite, and looked at Anna.

“But you must do okay. I mean...because...you know...” I said between bites. The bread melted in my mouth. I couldn’t help but smile. I was hoping she’d fill in the blanks here.

“I don’t think I do.”

I assumed she was fishing for a compliment and I didn’t mind being on the hook.

“You’re just so beautiful; they must have a hard time saying ‘no’ to you.”

She stabbed a cherry tomato. She popped it in her mouth. I took another bite of the garlic knot.

“Vince, I don’t work in sales. I’m a chemist.”

“Huh?”

“I work in a lab. I’m not one of those—what you call?—pharma girls?” Her blue eyes met mine. I honestly don’t know if it was pity or pissed off that looked back at me. Turned out it was puzzled. “You think that I do that job because I am pretty?”

“Pretty? Babe, your train left the pretty girls standing on the platform.” I had heard my cousin use that line one night when he was chatting up one of the Eagles cheerleaders down the Shore. I remembered a second too late that he and I had both gone home alone that night. I apologized before she had the chance to say anything. I also apologized for making a sexist assumption. “The principal at my middle school always said that if you assume you make an ass out of you and me.”

Anna looked more puzzled than before. She crunched on another bite of salad and I returned to my own.

“Ass out of you and me?” The way she repeated the cliché I could tell we had bumped up against our language differences.

“See, it’s like this.” I waved down our waiter and borrowed a pen. Then I pulled one of the paper napkins from the black, metal dispenser tucked behind the fat, glass jars of red pepper and Parmesan cheese. I wrote the word ‘assume’ in block letters on the napkin. Then, just as the principal had done on the blackboard in seventh grade, I drew a line between ‘ass’ and ‘u’ and then another one between ‘u’ and ‘me.’ I repeated the saying pointing to each phrase as I said it. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Toni and her dad giving us skeptical looks from the kitchen.

A small smile slid across Anna’s face. I could tell she got it. She didn’t say anything she just leaned across the table and put her lips on mine. The kiss was soft and fast. She was back in her chair before my brain had even fully processed the contact.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“You’re right. It was sexist to assume and you did make an ass out of you,” she said, emphasizing the ‘ass’ and ‘you.’ “But, it was because you think I’m pretty. And that makes me happy.”

It was my turn to smile.

“And my mother taught me that if someone gives you a compliment you say thank you.”

Eighteen

The parking lot at the Routeway Plaza was half full. Literally. The half by Friendship Spa was full, no spot available within fifty feet of the door. The other end was nearly deserted. Only one other car, a blue Volkswagen with a Starfleet Academy window decal that belonged to the guy working at Fro-Yoz, was parked right in front of the wooden bench. I had temporarily suspended my strict parking lot rule for my date with Anna. Friendship Spa and Fro Yoz were the only things open late. I had no idea what time the Russians shut down their soak and steam operation, but I knew I could get frozen yogurt until 11:00.

I also temporarily suspended my self-imposed rule of no frozen yogurt in the car. Only a hundred dollar detail can get sprinkles out of the carpet strip between the seat and the center console, but, for Anna, that was a risk I was willing to take. I grabbed a lot of napkins on the way out and hoped for the best as she climbed back into the passenger seat.

#

Hearing about your date's ex-boyfriend, even if it is smoothed out with a frozen dairy treat, is a necessary evil. It's like the waiver they make you sign before you participate in sports at school. "The school is not liable for any damages or injuries incurred as a result of Vincent's participation. Contact sports are inherently dangerous and may result in serious injury such as loss of limb, loss of sight, loss of hearing, loss of motor skills, paralysis or death." You sign it (well, your parents do) without putting much thought into it.

About as much thought as I put into asking Anna about her relationship with Andropov. The time had seemed right to rip off that band-aid. Hopefully, it would only sting for a second.

"My father worked for Vlad's father when we first moved here from Russia," she said. "I was young, twelve. I didn't speak any English. Vlad was my first friend. We watched Oprah together after school.

An image popped into my head of the two pre-teens propped in front of the television and Anna learning to say things like 'My Favorite Things' in English.

"By the time we got to high school I realized Vlad was my boyfriend."

"High school sweethearts?"

"Yes. It was nice in school. He was popular and I was shy. So, he helped me. He was always there."

Another image, this one of a slightly younger than now Anna popped into my head and I had no trouble believing that Vlad had always been there. Any guy worth his rocks would want to get that shit locked down. This was worse than I had imagined. I

thought he was someone Anna viewed as a foolish mistake that was over the minute it began. One of those drunken hook-ups that lasts longer than it should. Anna, drunk on Andropov's expensive brand of vodka, making a bad decision she immediately regretted. It hadn't even occurred to me that there was this kind of history between her and Andropov. It had never occurred to me that it ever have been nice.

“Then, it was just like movies. I went to Rutgers and he worked for his father. Things changed.”

“You changed.”

She didn't say anything.

“What did he do for his father?”

“I don't know. Nothing really. Errands. Mostly just act like a tough guy and throw a lot of money around.”

She closed the gap between us, twisting so that her face was inches from mine. Anna kissed me, ending that conversation. Not the sweet thank-you kiss of Antonella's, but a full-on, grown-up lip lock. Her open mouth met mine and any thoughts of Andropov evaporated in the steamy fog that clouded my brain.

The interior of the Chrysler, for all its pimp-daddy bad-assness, was not designed for contact sports. While Anna kissed me, hot and sweet, I tried to maneuver my arm around her to get the two of us closer together. I managed to get my right hand around her waist, finding the smooth skin of her back, under her shirt. I pulled her towards me and was so lost in the moment, here with her, her lips on mine, her skin on mine, that I ignored the yelp of pain that came from her. I had moved to kissing her neck, breathing in

deeply trying to save the sense memory of her smell, her warmth. She was squirming against me, twisting and turning. My first thought was that she was getting really turned on and couldn't help herself. Then I realized she was actually trying to get away.

“Owww...” she said, finally managing to pull herself away from me. “Vincent, that hurts.”

My brain was foggy. I felt like I was watching a movie on fast forward, a scramble of images and pixels barely recognizable and Anna was trying to hit the pause button.

“That,” she said, pointing to the gearshift.

I slowed the movie down enough to realize that when I pulled her across the car, the gearshift had been grinding into her hip. I was too far gone to have noticed. I felt like shit. I said so.

“I'm sorry. I guess I got carried away.”

“It's okay. Here...” She raised herself over the center console and wiggled between me and the steering wheel into my lap.

“Hang on...” I reached between the seat the door and said a silent thank you to the designers of electric power seats. My seat moved backwards smoothly. Anna relaxed into me and wrapped her arms around me.

“Better?”

“Better.”

I could have counted on one hand the number of times I had been parked, making out with a girl. Not having your own wheels or your driver's license until you're nineteen

tends to keep a limit on that number, particularly when your father is a firm believer in sensible sedans. I do remember that the time I got to second base with Maryellen Rostenkowski behind the Shop Rite in Pop's old Buick, there had been a lot more real estate. The Chrysler was like a pair of tight jeans on a guy. Sure, they make you look like a rock star, but the boys don't have much room to breathe.

I had no idea where this thing with Anna was going, not just tonight but after tonight when the sun came up and I was back at Mo's. But, honestly, I couldn't think straight and couldn't have cared less about tomorrow with Anna shifting her weight from one hip to the other, grinding, whether on purpose or not, on my crotch. Somewhere deep in my brain, I knew I had to come up for air soon or the gearshift incident was going to lose its place on the top spot of the awkward list. Anna's hand was resting on my belt buckle, seemingly as if she was trying to decide how far she wanted to take this.

Neither of us had to decide if we were going to christen the Chrysler that night.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Pause.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A fist pounded on the driver's side window. Anna screamed and jumped out of my lap. I turned and found myself face to face with Vladimir Andropov.

Nineteen

I managed to force myself into an upright standing position.

“What the hell?” I said, relieved that my voice didn’t sound like a soprano from the Philadelphia Boys Choir. I shut the car door behind me silencing the door ajar chirping. That was something I could control.

“Sergei, look. It’s our new friend Vincent.”

Sergei was managing the Anna situation. She was momentarily quiet, maybe trying to catch her breath or maybe just curious to hear what Andropov and I had to say. Sergei didn’t say anything, just glanced over her shoulder and tossed a head nod in my direction. He wasn’t touching Anna, but he was facing her and close enough to grab her if she made any sudden moves. If he wasn’t a bouncer, he should have been.

Andropov stepped closer to me, closing the distance between us to an uncomfortable level. Unconsciously, I leaned back, bracing myself on the car for support. I tried to make it look like a cool guy lean. *Don’t mind me, just chilling here with my ride.*

“I was so disappointed to hear your message about selling my car back to me.”

“Look, it’s mine. I bought it fair and square. And it’s my decision if I want to sell it.”

“But it really is my car. I worked hard for it. I was proud of it.”

“Then you should have made the payments. Or, well, you know...”

I heard a snort of laughter come from Anna. Andropov and I both turned. She shrugged and smirked in dead sexy way. The woman might have just kneed me in the nuts, but luckily that part of my world has a short memory.

“Vincent, Vincent, Vincent...” Vlad put his arm around my shoulders and leaned next to me on the Chrysler. Any one of the men passing in and out of Friendship Spa would have mistaken us for old friends chatting after a nice, relaxing schvitz. His hand gripped my shoulder, finding that same nerve that Ma used to clench when I was talking during mass. The pain radiated down my arm and I flinched. “We are friends. I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

Anna snorted again and said something in Russian. Sergei replied to her in a soothing, almost whispering, tone. Andropov muttered something that sounded like ‘bleck’ in reply. I assumed it wasn’t a compliment.

“If you don’t want any trouble, then why the hell did you start banging on the window?” I was starting to lose the feeling in my hand.

He squeezed tighter. “Because I wanted to know why you wouldn’t sell me my car, but you would have the balls to show up here.”

“It’s not your car. And we’re just here for the yogurt.”

Andropov eyed me closely then let go. I clenched and unclenched a fist, trying to get the blood moving down my arm again.

“You see, Vincent...” Andropov stepped away and turned his back to me. The way he kept repeating my name was freaking me out. He was waving his arms like he was having a silent but very animated conversation with a ghost. He spun around on his heel and was facing me again. “It’s all about respect.”

“Respect? That’s bullshit,” Anna said, the last word sounding like she spit it on the ground. It came out as bull-sheet. Which would have been funny under different circumstances.

Andropov pointed a finger at her.

“Hey!” I said, standing up straight, looking for the courage to defend Anna, but really knowing that she didn’t need me to defend her. I did see that a group of men had stopped near the Friendship Spa entrance. A couple of them were craning their necks to get a better view.

Andropov dropped the finger and opened his arms, palms facing me. I had the sneaking suspicion that he was mocking me.

“Okay. Okay. I put my cards on the table. I told Sergei about your message and I said to Sergei, “Sergei, can you believe Vincent is being so difficult and disrespecting me like this?” and Sergei said...what was it you said, Sergei?”

We all turned to Sergei. Sergei turned away from Anna, but slowly in this stilted, awkward way that kept her in his peripheral vision. It didn’t look like he appreciated his boss including him in the conversation. He had the distinct air of someone who thought this particular task was outside the scope of his regular employment. “I said, “Vincent is good guy. He hates Philadelphia Eagles.” That is what I said.”

I appreciated Sergei sticking up for me, as it were. I also appreciated the sheepish look on his face that I took as a muted apology. I was surprised he had remembered that thing about the Eagles.

“You did. You did say that. But, yet, here we are.”

I still couldn't solve Andropov's problem here. I knew he was pissed about the car, but I didn't see how that fit together with respect. Or lack thereof.

“Vincent, in my business, respect is very important. People are always watching me.” He didn't have to look any further than the other end of the parking lot for that one.

I wanted to ask what exactly was his business. What exactly the 'expediting' in AVA Expediting meant. I could also clue him in that people were always watching him because he's a fucking felon out on parole. “So, when someone shows up here, in my car with my girlfriend, that is a problem. People might get the wrong idea.”

Sergei nodded in agreement, in spite of himself. Another muted apology for what he probably thought should have been obvious to me.

“I am not your girlfriend and this isn't your car,” Anna said. “No one is disrespecting you. You're just being a paranoid asshole. Like always.” Andropov brushed away her comments with a wave of his hand.

“So, what? What now? Are you going to beat the shit out of me because I won't give you my car? Or have Sergei do it?”

Andropov feigned shock and surprise. “Violence is the last resort.”

I was disappointed that that particular resort was still on the list of vacation spots.