

Prologue

The highway was nearly clear of any traffic, giving the sleek black car ample room to maneuver, accelerating through turns and weaving in-and-out of the few cars on the road as though the nature of physics was of no concern; however its cargo was most precious. Outside the autumn air was crisp, typical for Central New York in October; but inside the car, comfort was in great supply. The few leaves that clung to the road were vaulted into the air as the Toyota Celica ripped their grip from the asphalt, no matter how hard Vinnie tried to keep his foot from pressing the pedal to the floor mat, his sheer excitement overpowered any will control. It was to be a weekend like no other, he could feel it in his bones. Giddy with eagerness, it was all he could do to keep from smiling. Though, like comfort, there was no shortage of smiles for him. His wife's tender hand caressed his, assuring him that all was well. Her blonde hair hanging just above her shoulders now, her slim body and voluptuous curves nestled safely in the passenger seat to his right. It was all he could do to keep his eyes from leaving the road, just the sight of the seat belt enveloped between her breasts, pulling the fabric close to her skin while the contents behind firmly pointed their direction. Oh yes, this was to be a weekend to be remembered.

While he loved her with his heart and soul, trusted her with his life, nothing could compare to the feeling of pride he felt whenever he glanced in the rear view mirror. A small child of three, feet dangling in the car seat, head resting gently to the side; sleeping so peacefully, so soundly. Not a word was to be said for fear of waking him. He was their

greatest gift, their greatest treasure, and now they finally had their chance to introduce him to the world of the Saltines.

The Ritz Strike Back

By Matt Caffrey

Dedicated to Mike, Steve and Clayton:

Friends for life, Saltines forever

(except Mike because he's a douche bag)

Chapter 1

“Holy shit the water is cold!” Antonio yelled as he pulled himself onto the boat deck. “I think my dick almost disappeared from shrinkage!”

“I’m sure there is still enough there to keep me satisfied,” Alexis yelled from the cabin. Her voice was typically melodious, but with the full moon filling the sky, there was such a vivaciousness in her tone that Antonio wondered if he was going to get any sleep tonight.

Drying himself off with a shiver, he peered into the night sky. It was their last night in the islands. After months of debate, it was clear that the dive shop wasn’t the success he hoped it would be and after Alexis received her degree it was time to give her dreams a shot. *Can I really just give up?* He thought to himself. He heard the answer in his head, a rough voice damaged by years of smoking, a voice not his own. Staring at the North Star, that was Jere’s star, after all he had done everything within his means to help guide Antonio, including giving him the money to open a scuba shop in the keys, he felt an emptiness unlike any other. Something was pulling him, telling him, it was time; time to head north.

Walking into the small room that doubled as their apartment, the silent sound of the waves caressing the side of the boat, he saw her. Moonlight dappling across the bed giving just enough light to reveal her head peeking out of the blankets. It was cold enough in the cabin, but that was not why Antonio’s skin pebbled with goose bumps.

“Are you cold?” he asked, careless of the answer, not that much was given. Just a

sly smile that made her eyes nearly disappear behind their lids. Oh how Antonio loved Asian girls. He knew the answer, words not needing to be said.

With his hair still dripping, he removed his towel and shorts and slid under the covers with her. If it was going to be their last night together, he might as well make it memorable.

The sun was barely up by the time Antonio woke, or rather, by the time Alexis woke him. It was not the first time she tried, he was not what you would call a morning person. Giving a mumbled response, he reached to the nightstand to grab his cigarettes and his glasses. Still naked, he walked past the boxes that piled to the ceiling in the little room. It was a wonder how much shit they could cram into that little cabin. Glancing past the mirror fixed firmly to the wall, he noticed some scratches on his back that certainly were not there before going to bed. Vivacious? She was like a cat in heat, and despite her confidence in his being able to satisfy, he thought a jackhammer wouldn't have gotten the job done.

Walking out to the deck, Alexis was standing at the rail with her back to him. Fully dressed, she stared off over the crystal blue water. Her body was beautiful, her dark hair cut short, like a pixie. Her perfectly shaped ears poking out of spiky clusters of hair. Just looking at her made him initiate launch sequence. The sound of his lighter caused her to turn around.

"I didn't think you would ever wake up." Her voice was cool, though he could sense the anticipation in it. Certainly, not like the anticipation it held last night. "We still

have a lot of things to do before we catch our flight.” Anticipation, seasoned with a dash of bitchiness.

Exhaling, Antonio scratched his balls and stared at her, not sure if he wanted to begin the argument one more time. “Did I ever tell you about the time I thought I had crabs?” he laughed.

“The soap story, again?” she said while rolling her eyes, “You’ve told that story a million times, and honestly, it’s not that funny.” Bitchiness indeed.

Suddenly, it occurred to Antonio exactly what he must do. Frankly, the thought of starting over didn’t seem that bad.

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The customers were ensconced in their chairs, a steaming brew of coffee sitting by their side, a good book in their hands, and their minds being taken far, far away. Rocky couldn’t help but feel quite content as he collected the books that had been long since forgotten by the “overnighters”; the customers that came in after the bars had closed for a last ditch effort at sobriety before driving home. In actuality, the Two In the Evening was in some ways a public service, providing a safe and comfortable atmosphere for people to unwind and relax, and hopefully, learn something in the process. Over the course of the two years since the doors first opened, Rocky had seen many young lovers come strolling through the doors, and many strolling out meeting for the very first time in his establishment. While his own love life may be less fulfilling, there was much to be said about helping others find their soul mate.

The stack of books grew considerably larger as he strolled from table to table, but his massive arms were in no way encumbered by the weight. If anything, he could have handled much more, but last night's crowd was not in as great of numbers as it could have been. It was typically his favorite shift, working from 11:00pm to 8:00am, not just because everyone cheered at 2:00am, but because it was quiet and collected. It was a peaceful respite from the bustle of the workday, and the overnights; despite what state of drunkenness they were in, were always easier to handle than the pretentious snobs who came in during the day. In fact, for some strange reason, Rocky would rather clean up after a drunkard who couldn't hold his alcohol than any rich woman who *expected* him to discard her refuse. But, truth be told, Rocky was grateful for all of his customers, and in some strange way, he could not help but think that they were grateful for him as well.

Glancing at his watch, he sighed. Carla was late, again. She typically ran 15 minutes late no matter what, of course in Rocky's estimation, all women had a distinctly different perception of time; but it was very strange that she could be running *this* late. Two hours had passed since she was supposed to take over for him, but naturally, he couldn't say anything. Truth be told, he was in love with her. It wasn't just her full lips or her beautiful eyes, nor was it her amazingly trim body with large breasts that made Rocky want to hire her. It was her passion for reading and her caring personality that first drew him to her, but he was her boss and it couldn't be. *Not that she would want anything to do with me.* Rocky thought to himself, *she would probably rather have some really attractive guy who treated her like crap instead.* It was a bitter thought, and not the first time it crossed his mind.

Despite the weariness of going on his eleventh hour of work, Rocky was too excited to be tired. He had waited four years for this day, finally a chance to reunite with his long lost friend, not to mention the wife and child that he would bring along. Yes, it was going to be an incredible weekend. *If only Mario and Antonio could be here, too*, he pined, but nothing was going to spoil this weekend.

The cold blast of wind from the doors opening forced Rocky to jerk his head around, and despite the chill his heart grew warm. Carla entered, her jacket pulled tight around her as she hurried in, her hair blown in every direction; yet for some reason she could not have looked more beautiful. Rocky nearly dropped his stack of books just at the sight of her.

“I’m soooooo sorry I’m late,” she said as she quickly unzipped her jacket revealing her large, round breasts that seemed somewhat at odds with her perfectly flat stomach, “I wish I had a good excuse, in fact, I spent the whole drive over here trying to think of one.”

He knew he should be angry. He knew that he should not let anyone, especially a woman, get away with being two hours late. But with her, he melted. Putting on his best employer attitude, he stared at her; not a difficult task of course, as any man would do.

“What excuse did you come up with?” He asked, trying to sound stern, though he realized he probably sound more like a fool. Vinnie would have come up with some clever line to make her laugh, Mario would have flashed his winning smile to melt her heart, and Antonio? Antonio just had to stand there and let his package do the talking. Rocky had his hands full just trying to keep his tongue from flapping like a mongoloid idiot.

“My dog ate my homework?” She said with a smile, while her looks may be plentiful, her humor did leave much to be desired.

“Well, ordinarily I would fire someone who was two hours late,” Rocky lied, and he tried his best to hide his bluff, “but today, I am feeling generous.” *Just give me a blow job and we’ll call it even.... No, I can’t say that, I’ll get sued, not to mention that she’ll probably laugh at me, or send her really big boyfriend after me!* What was this girl doing to him?

Her full lips curled in a frown, but her eyes showed a strong sense of relief. Perhaps she really was sorry for being late.

“I know, that was really lame,” she said, quickly casting her eyes to the floor, “the truth is, I broke up with my boyfriend last night, and I felt so bad I barely slept last night.”

Deep inside, Rocky wanted to dance a jig, but he kept his face stern, although he tried to put sympathy in his voice. *Not too much sympathy*, he said to himself, *you don’t want her to think you are a pussy. No, don’t think of pussy right now!* It was too late, suddenly the bulge in his pants began to expand. “Well, if you want to talk about it,” his voice trailed off as she looked up at him, her eyes gazing at him admirably, hopefully she hadn’t noticed his emerging erection, “but only during your break. For the mean time, I need someone to put on fresh coffee and then run register.” *I am such a dick! I should have been nicer, I should have given her a shoulder or something!* He was hopeless at best.

Carla simply nodded and scurried to the backroom to place her jacket and don an apron. As she hurried away, Rocky couldn’t help but stare at her luscious ass, that was

certainly not going to help calm things downstairs. It was a perfect ass, after all. In many ways, it was Carla that helped keep the store full of people, but then, can you blame them?

She quickly emerged and proceeded to make coffee and Rocky returned to his work. Soon his friend would arrive and he could go have some much needed, and much deserved fun. But, in the meantime, he had books to shelve. Shifting the bulk of books in his arms he proceeded to find their appropriate places on the shelves. *Not too much longer*, he thought to himself, *not too much longer*.

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Mario tried to stay busy for the last few minutes of the work day, but the desire to talk to everyone was far too great. It was a Friday, and he found it difficult for his boss to be upset if he pissed away the last fifteen minutes of his day talking to his coworkers. Fortunately, the extra hours he had put in during the week allowed to make significant headway on the projects he was working on; and despite having to check, correct and in most cases re-do the work his colleagues screwed up, he was still ahead of the game.

Stretching his arms and rolling his neck in a circle, trying to loosen up the muscles that had grown so tight from staring at the computer screen all day, it was all he could do to even stay in his seat. He watched the clock tick by, it was almost 5:00pm, and soon he could leave.

“Are you going to happy hour?” the text message quickly appeared on his screen. Another Friday night at the bar was the last thing that he had planned on, but things suddenly became quite interesting. The message was from Danielle, the goddess of all

women whom the company recently hired. While she wasn't much for brains, she compensated by wearing tight shirts and even tighter pants. He couldn't decide which he preferred staring at, her amazing rack or the outline of her thong running along her perfectly shaped ass, or perhaps it was the clearance between her thighs that you could parallel park a Buick in and still have room to spare. She was gorgeous, and she knew it. She barely said more than three words to him, although he did catch her staring at him once-in-awhile. Perhaps it was nothing, perhaps it was all in his head, but maybe....

Mario's jaw damn near hit the keyboard, he had never thought that he would have a chance to talk to her, let alone have *her* begin a conversation! Staring at the blank screen, he knew he had to say something, and knew it had to be charming, funny, cool and yet not too interested all at the same time.

"I wasn't planning on it," he wrote back to her, trying to sound as cool as possible, "y'know, I'm a very busy man... in high demand."

After pressing the return button, he suddenly wished he hadn't sent the response, but it was too late. Surely the damage was done, but it wouldn't be the first time pure arrogance with women worked.

He sat there, waiting impatiently for her reply; *if* she was going to reply at all. *What a stupid thing to say*, he thought as he began packing up his briefcase, *only Vinnie would say something that stupid*. No, that wasn't fair. Vinnie may not have been born with much tact around women, but even he wouldn't have said something *that* stupid.

After ten minutes, Mario realized she wasn't going to respond. Dejectedly, he turned his computer off, said goodnight to his coworkers and headed for the door. It was a large office building, which is natural when working for the nation's largest home

builder, but he walked through it as quickly as possible, hoping to avoid Danielle at all costs. *Why did I have to say something so stupid?* He berated himself, and was soon ready to spend a quiet evening at home; at least he would be able to pleasure himself while thinking of her.

The air was cool, and the fading sun cast rays over the horizon. Fall was here, and in Rochester, New York it was the most beautiful time of the year. The trees were in full force, painting the hillside in a myriad of oranges, yellows and reds. It was like a painter's canvas. With a shake, he forgot about the foliage and quickly moved across the parking lot to his car. When it comes to the beauty of fall color, nothing is better; but when it comes to the cold, it can be down right unbearable.

His car was parked near the edge of the parking lot, away from any other car and the possibility of receiving a ding from a misguided door. His car was his baby, and while at times he regretted spending so much money on a used; or rather *certified pre-owned*, car, looking at his Audi sparkle in the sunset made him forget all about his poorly planned response to Danielle.

Retrieving his keys, he heard the sound of a man's footsteps closing in quickly from behind him; suddenly he felt a fear like he hadn't felt in years. *Could he have found me?* He thought, but no matter how illogical that seemed, since they had defeated him after all, his heart was still racing. Spinning on his heels, he was ready to attack or dodge a blow. Raising a clenched fist, it was all he could do from turning a crimson red.

Chapter 2

Mario felt quite the fool staring down at the short, stocky woman. He imagined that there was a time when she was thin, and quite attractive, but that was certainly not the case now. Barely standing over five feet tall, she was built like a barrel. Her breasts were large and round, but not nearly as large or round as her waist. Whatever happened, she had definitely let herself go. Sheila stared at him with a strange sense of curiosity and bewilderment. Truthfully, he probably could have punched her in the face and the stupid bitch would have just laughed.

“Are you going to happy hour?” she asked, barely pausing to give him a chance to answer, “because I was planning on going, and I was thinking that you might want to come along, too, you know, unless it was cramping your style.” Mario tried not to roll his eyes at her. It was bad enough that he had to work with this annoying girl, but it only became worse since he hooked up with her one drunken night; definitely not his finest moment. She hounded him constantly, and had he not been so conscientious of avoiding Danielle, he would have done a better job at avoiding Sheila.

“No, I wasn’t planning on it,” he said, trying not to make eye contact with her; her face managed to become more and more round every time he saw her; did she not realize how fat she was? That was rude, and he knew it. Even Vinnie would have more tact than that.

“Oh, well you should come out then, it’ll be fun!” she said, “then afterwards a few of the other girls from accounting are going to go dancing.” Making two fists and placing

her elbows on her breasts, she began punching into the air while shaking her girth to both sides. Mario assumed she was trying to dance, but it was hands down the worst attempt he had ever seen. Suddenly, the vision of her and the other moo-cows from accounting out on a dance floor popped into his head; if he ever needed a way to rid himself of an unwanted erection, he may just have found it.

Not exactly certain what to say, Mario glanced over her head and saw Danielle looking over her car at him. Was she staring? Chances are she was probably trying to figure out what Sheila was doing. *Shit!* Mario thought to himself, *She probably thinks I turned her down for this wildebeest! She's going to think I am some kind of freaky pervert who only likes fat girls!* He couldn't help but stare as her little car sped off, never looking back.

"Well, what do you say?" Sheila asked, Mario had forgotten she was there.

"Huh? What?" Mario said, trying to regain himself, "Uh, yeah, fat would be great, I mean, *that* would be great. I will see you there." And quickly, he got into his car and sped off, he had to catch up to Danielle somehow.

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Standing alone in the now empty cabin, save a few suitcases full of his possessions, Antonio hurriedly danced from one foot to the next, not exactly certain what he was supposed to be doing. He was surprised how easy it was to rid himself of Alexis, not that they put any finality to it, simply that he was going to go to New York instead and he would call her later in the week and relay when he would meet up with her in

Phoenix. Not that he ever intended to. There were still so many things to do, and so little time to do them. He had to vacate the boat by noon, which only left him a few hours to get everything in order.

Picking up his cell phone, he dialed the airline to switch his flight; which was surprisingly easy to do. Expecting to be on hold for a long time, and then having to argue and plea his case, the lady was quite amenable and before he knew it everything was in order. A two o'clock flight to Hancock Airport, *hehehe, cock*, Antonio laughed to himself, a rental car waiting, and a taxi to pick him up an hour before his flight. It must have been his lucky day! First, he ditched Alexis without a fight, and now he just managed to put everything in order for his trip to Syracuse. Suddenly, noon was a long way off, and despite his sexual marathon the previous night, Antonio still felt an urge to rub one off.

Rummaging through one of the smaller suitcases, he found his laptop and turned it on. Closing the few curtains that were open, he made sure the door was locked and laid down on the bed, laptop splayed out in front of him. Lying on his side, he entered in the password that would allow only him access to his secret cache of the best pictures and movies downloaded from the Internet. It was quite a collection, nearly two gigabytes of pictures, and another four gigabytes of movies. He had always felt a pang of guilt for keeping such an extensive stash from Alexis, not that she would care whether or not he rolled the dice on occasion, but mostly because he knew she would feel insulted that he found these other girls so attractive. Searching through the files, he selected one of his favorite movies, and was soon arm wrestling with his one-eyed opponent.

The girl, naturally Asian, was using a pair of chopsticks on her clit, while she moaned incessantly. A man, dressed as a Chinese food delivery guy, was casually pouring duck sauce on her tits, while another girl was stuffing an egg roll up his ass. It was definitely one of the most perverted videos he had, but it never failed to get the job done.

Shooting his kung pow all over the bed, Antonio laid back on the pillows to reflect in the momentary sense of satisfaction that comes after a successful round of feeding the geese. Grabbing his cigarettes, he casually lit one and began puffing away; at least Alexis wasn't here to bitch at him for smoking inside.

Laying there, with his pants around his ankles, Antonio nearly knocked the laptop off the bed following a sudden knock at the door. Leaping to his feet, closing his laptop, and trying to zip himself up while trying to not burn his dick with the cigarette, he scrambled to the door.

"I'm coming!" he yelled as he strode the two or three paces to the door. Panting, he looked around, there was no visible sign of what he was doing. Cautiously, he opened the door a crack to peek out, he seldom had visitors on the boat.

The girl standing outside was beautiful, even if she did seem as though she was pouting all of the time. She was very quiet, never saying more than the appropriate pleasantries when she was in his scuba class, and coming to visit him was the last thing he would ever expect from her.

"Hey, Clarisse, what's up?" Antonio said through the crack between the door and its jamb, he may not have caught any evidence of his jerking off, but women always managed to see the unseen. "What brings you out to the dock?"

She was very attractive, of middle height with deceptively large breasts, not that he had any first hand knowledge, but his imagination was seldom off. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a pony-tail, a rather bulky looking piece of fabric fastened by a safety pin holding it up. Her shirt was tight at her firm waist, and looser at the top, revealing a small blue star tattooed above her right breast. She looked at him quizzingly, as if not exactly sure what to say or where to begin.

“I heard that you were leaving,” she said, avoiding eye contact with him, “and I just wanted to say goodbye, and that I am going to miss you.”

Antonio opened the door wide enough to step out and give her a hug. It was quite possibly the nicest thing he had heard in years. It made him wish that he had spent more time with her outside of class, maybe taking the time to actually getting to know her. He wished that he knew what to say, he was never very good at talking to girls.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” he told her, trying to sound soothing, “I may be back after all.” Antonio breathed in deeply, letting her intoxicating perfume fill his veins, had she always smelled this good? He gently let her go, but her big brown eyes looked at him, as if more puzzled than before, but with a hint of relief.

“You’re not going to close down the store?” She said as she glided a step back, still within arms reach, and still staring up at him adoringly.

“We’ll see about the store,” Antonio lied, he admitted to himself at least that he knew nothing about running a dive shop, “but at least I’m not going to be following anyone” He said, jerking his head slightly toward the cabin.

Clarisse suddenly became startled, and tried to peer behind his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, is *she* here? I shouldn’t have come down, I didn’t want to-“

Antonio interrupted her, “Don’t worry, she’s been gone for a while now, long enough for me to, uh, well, she’s gone. Let’s leave it at that.” Her smile was enough for him.

“Well, I’m sorry to intrude, but if you do come back down, please give me a call, maybe we can grab something to eat.” Her smile belied any apology she gave, there was a definite sense of satisfaction in her tone.

“Actually, I have some time before my taxi comes,” Antonio said, “would you like to grab something to eat? At least, we could get some take out or something.”

“Sounds great!” Clarisse squeaked as she began jumping on her toes, “I could go for some Chinese food right now.”

Antonio stared at her, trying not blush, and wondering if all of the curtains *had* been closed.

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Mario frantically drove out of the parking lot, his premium alloy wheels; which cost him a pretty penny to upgrade, leaving a significant streak of rubber behind. In his rear view mirror he could see Sheila standing, staring confusedly behind him. *Christ, how am I going to deal with that?* He wondered, although his main focus was dealing with the beautiful woman who had somehow eluded him. Screeching to a stop at the first light, he peered down the road, but saw no signs of her car. He had lost her, but worst of all, he wouldn’t see her again until Monday morning. Will the damage have been too great? Can he somehow find the balls to talk to her and try to smooth everything over? Most

importantly, will she think him some kind of freaky pervert? Too much was hanging on this to let it ride to fate; somehow he had to resolve it tonight, at all costs.

His Audi careened down the road, swerving maniacally through the traffic, the layout of the road did not give her many chances to turn, he *would* catch up to her, one way or another. The trees on the side of the road were blurring together, the other cars giving rude gestures as he slid past them, on the left and the right; even if it meant going on the shoulder of the road. While his car was his baby, Danielle topped any loyalty he may have had.

The red lights flashing in his rear view should have given better warning, but Mario was oblivious. He continued his dangerous path down the road, and by the time he realized what was going down, it was too late to try and be responsible. The police car was following him, but wasn't close enough to tail him completely. Making his first right into a small neighborhood, he proceeded to make his next right, followed by two lefts, three rights, a left a right and a left again until suddenly he realized he had no fucking clue where he was. Throwing himself onto the floor, he hid; waiting. It would only be a matter of time before the cop finally caught up to him. So he lay there, frantically waiting. This was not the typical quiet night he had envisioned, and definitely nothing like what he expected to have happened. If anything, he wished that he had been chasing after Sheila than having a cop chase after him. All he could do was lay there and wait.

The floor of his car left much to be desired in terms of comfort, but he sat there; waiting. Minutes passed and soon the remaining daylight was completely gone. Glancing at his watch it was well past six o'clock; no cop would continue pursuit for his reckless

driving. It must be safe. Somehow, by the stroke of luck or God, he had evaded the cop. A smile quickly shot across his face; he had out run the law. This may just be his night after all.

Slowly regaining control of the driver's seat, Mario started moving the car forward, anxiously looking all directions. It was clear, and so was his destination.

The parking lot at the bar was quite full yet Mario had no difficulty finding a parking space; luck was definitely on his side tonight. It was near a tradition for the employees at his company to come to this bar every Friday night, and he certainly partook when he could; but not too much. *It's better to make it a once-in-a-while thing*, he told himself, although at this moment, he wanted nothing more than to drink and celebrate his victory over the local police.

Walking toward the bar, there was a large group of people standing near the doorway; one of the many unfortunate effects of living in New York and being unable to smoke inside of a bar. Stopping and pulling out a pack of Camel Lights, Mario joined the group, commiserating over the fact that they were forced to smoke outside. His nerves were still running rampant, hopefully a cigarette will calm him down.

He was caught in a meaningless conversation with some barfly about whether or not the winter was going to bring as much snow as last year when he felt a light punch on his shoulder. Turning, a fist ready to be planted, he was less than relieved to find it was only Sheila.

"I'm so glad to see you!" She shrieked, trying to throw her arms around him, which he casually dodged, leaving her arms hanging limp in the air. "I thought for sure that when you left you were just going to 'whatever' me and leave me all alone."

Mario didn't know how to respond, so he chose not to; and rejoined his conversation; surely they would have as much snow this year, and resumed smoking his cigarette. If only he could have avoided her better; and if only he could have caught up to Danielle, not that he knew what he would say, or how he would say, but surely it would have been better than the way things were going right now.

He felt another punch on his shoulder, turning quickly he yelled, "What the fuck!"

The look on Danielle's face would have been priceless, had she not been so beautiful. Frightened and ready to apologize up-and-down, Mario felt very bad. "I'm sorry," he quickly stammered, "I thought you were someone else."

His reply did little to smooth things over, but it was a start. Were those tears forming in the corner of her eyes?

"Seriously, I'm sorry," he continued, "I am such a dick." At least she began a smile at that.

"I shouldn't have startled you," she said, oh so coolly; man alive she was hot, "I am completely in the wrong." For a woman who appeared to be less than smart, her choice of words made Mario realize he may have underestimated her intelligence.

"No, it was my fault, completely." They stood staring at each other, not saying a word. Her crystal blue eyes reflecting the pale night's light, the curves of her body seemingly dancing between moonbeams, it was all he could do to refrain from embracing her. "Can I buy you a drink?" He said, desperately hoping to smooth things over.

She eyed him casually before consenting, and he followed her to the bar.

Chapter 3

Rocky resumed his work, despite a longing to stare at Carla's body more, but it was only a matter of time before his expected arrivals would appear; and little better to pass the time than re-shelve the books. Actually, he could take little credit for the term "Two In the Evening". It was Vinnie who first coined that phrase, as he did with many phrases. After all, there was a two in the afternoon, and a two at night; why shouldn't there be a two in the evening? And what better name for a 24 hour book store/coffee shop? Vinnie certainly had a way with wordsmithing; not to mention a way with women.

Regaining the books in his arms, he began placing them in their appropriate places. Rocky may not have been much for wordsmithing, but when it came to making his store unique, no one was better. Instead of organizing books by their title or by authors, he preferred to organize them by the color and the shape of the books. One-by-one he placed them in the appropriate place.

Setting his pile of books beside him he studied each one carefully before selecting one with a hardcover bound in blue. Scanning the shelf, he found a small opening between two books that he was fairly confident would provide enough room and also match the aesthetic of the book's cover. He was always careful with his books, and he gingerly pushed the copy into the opening, despite how much resistance the surrounding books gave him. Grabbing another, slightly larger book, he found another shelf with room and continued to place the books back where they belong.

It was not a fast process, but that was in part why Rocky enjoyed his job so much. Any fool could work in one of the larger book chains, where author's names were

butchered by the ignorant workers and where the books were treated as just a product. If he could leave his mark on the world, he hoped that it would be the importance of reading.

His mind wandered as he continued his task, book by book he lovingly shelved each until only one remained. A very large book, with a deep crimson red cover. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the door open followed by two-and-a-half people. A smile split his face, and he hastily crammed the last book in its place. The opening was not as large as he estimated, and his brute force made the books obey; although the sound of bindings being torn from their pages was like the sound of a million shrill screams in his ears. Remaining on his knees, his peripheral saw a young child come bounding toward him, arms wide and virtually leaping against Rocky.

Feigning a fall onto his back he lifted the boy up in the air, had he not seen the boy's parents walk in he would not have taken such liberties with the child. "Unka Wocky!" the boy beamed, staring down at his captor. "It's me, William!"

The boy's parents, walked over eagerly and the surprise on their faces must have matched Rocky's. Setting the boy down, Rocky began to get back up, only to be tackled once again, this time there was no feigning a fall, despite Vinnie's short stature, his body had some velocity.

"What, you're not going to lift me, too?" Vinnie asked, hugging Rocky, and slowly getting to his feet. "It's great to see you, buddy!"

"It's been too long!" Rocky said also getting to his feet. With one giant swoop of his arms, he enveloped both Jasmine and Vinnie and pulled them tightly to his chest, "It's been way too long." The muffled sounds from his arms, reminded Rocky how much

larger he was than the pair, and loosened his grip on them. “I take it that’s your son?” He said, pointing to the boy examining the books displayed on the shelf.

“That’s our William,” Jasmine said fondly, “It’s amazing that he knew who you were, since he’s never seen you before.” Her startled expression was mirrored on her husband’s.

“He’s definitely a smart kid,” Rocky said, a sly smile creeping across his lips, “must take after his father; which rules out Antonio!” His booming laugh filled the small enclave where they stood and was matched by Vinnie’s higher pitched laugh.

“Speaking of Antonio, have you heard from him at all? Or Mario for that matter?” Vinnie asked, bringing his voice low where only they could hear.

Rocky’s angular face swung from side to side on his broad neck and shoulders. “Not a word from either. I’m sure they’re alright, though.” Quickly, he shot his head up and wrapped the two of him in his arms again, pulling them tightly. “It’s so great that you two could come up, though. I’ve missed you both so much!”

The muffled sounds reminded him that he was going to have to be gentler around his smaller friends.

.....

Chinese food always hits the spot, Antonio thought as he eyed the several containers scattered on the small countertop. Debating whether or not he wanted some more sweet and sour chicken, he realized that Clarisse had barely eaten anything. She

was sitting across from him on a stool pushing the food around with a spork, staring intently at her paper plate. She had been very quiet since coming inside, and Antonio had no idea what to say to her.

“Have you gone diving lately?” He asked, casually taking another scoop of fried rice.

“No, not really. I’ve been really busy.” She said, without looking up. “Antonio, I want to talk to you. I mean *really* talk to you, but I don’t know where to begin.”

Giving a short pause, he nodded as he reached for some soy sauce. He had always been weary of women who began any conversation with words like “We need to talk”, it was never good news.

“Ok, go ahead.” He said, leaning back on his stool, “Do you mind if I smoke?” He asked, grabbing his cigarettes, he had the feeling this was definitely not going to be good.

“No, that’s fine,” she said, eyes staring intently at the plate in front of her. “The thing is, well, for the longest time, I’ve had this feeling...” her voice trailed off as she looked up to read his expression, unfortunately, he gave little indication what his thoughts were. Although, beneath the countertop his pants were giving far too much away. “It’s just that, well, I always chase after the *wrong* guys, but I think that I finally found the right one, and unfortunately, I don’t have many people that I can talk to about it.”

Fuck! He thought to himself, the tension in his lap was certainly beginning to relax. *She thinks I’m just her friend.* Trying to compose himself, he inhaled his cigarette lazily, “Have you told this to the guy?”

She stared at him, more confused than ever, tilting her head slightly. “I think I just did.”

While it could never be said that Antonio was the smartest man in the world, even he realized where this was going. The pressure against his fly was stronger than ever.

Taking another drag, he matched her confused expression, trying to find the right words. He wished Rocky was here, Rocky always knew how to handle women. “Well, this is a surprise,” he said quietly, “a good surprise, don’t get me wrong.” Man he was going to blow this, he knew it. “Kind of bad timing, though.”

“I’m sorry, I know you just broke up with your girlfriend, and here I am acting like some horny college co-ed.”

The pressure against his fly was growing unbearable, what the hell was up with his libido lately?

“No, it’s not her, believe me, it’s definitely not her.” Antonio said with a laugh, “Christ, I don’t know why I even stayed with her so long, I guess it was just the fact that it was too complex to end. I did love her, though, don’t get me wrong. It was comfortable, we worked well together, helping each other out whenever we could.” He was rambling and he knew it. “But, the point is, that I’m leaving and while I will probably come back, I’m honestly not sure when and that is not fair to you---”

Placing both hands on top of the counter, she shut him up with a kiss. *Horny college co-ed? This chick was down-right hot for his cock!*

Laying under the blankets, again, he was certainly putting some mileage on the bed lately. His arm under Clarisse’s head as her breasts, deceptively large indeed, rose

and fell with the currents against the boat. Antonio realized this was probably not the smartest thing he had ever done, and was wondering how the hell he always managed to get himself in these situations?

.....

The bar was packed to the gills, some of the faces he recognized as coworkers, others were completely new to him; but everyone he saw shared the same expression. Danielle had casually slipped her arm around Mario's and walked confidently by his side. In unison, everyone stared pop-eyed, stepping back, clearing a path in the throng as Mario strutted up to the bar. He felt like a noble, no a king; Christ, he felt like a fucking Emperor and the bar his empire. He led every conversation, cracking every joke, stealing every punch line, and always to his side was Danielle. She stared up at him, a sparkle in her eyes, laughing at all of his jokes and encouraging him, supporting him to tell more. Even at his best, Vinnie could not have been as funny. Every topic that was brought up was an opportunity for him to explain his ideas, his opinions, and requiring little debate for people to see his point of view; taking it as gospel. It was his show, alright. And all the while, Danielle was his biggest fan.

The crowd around him swelled until everyone at the bar was standing near him, a small empty space in front of him and Danielle. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Connor, the self-proclaimed company stud; a typical Guido who believed that he was God's gift to women. Lifting his glass to salute Mario with a drink, he smiled and nodded his head toward him. There was something in his eyes, though, something not to be

trusted, Mario couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he knew that he would have to tread lightly around him.

Drinks were poured with liberty, money exchanged with the bartender as though it was of the least importance, tonight, he was King.

A slight tug on his arm and he casually leaned his ear to Danielle, never stopping his conversation with the people in front of him; his people. A hushed whisper from Danielle was all it took. Slowly, sinuously sliding off the bar stool, she caressed his hand as she led him toward the door. Collective shouts of disappointment filling the crowd, asking, pleading, begging Mario not to leave, to stay for the love of all! The drink was certainly rushing through his veins, but at least one part of him was still sober.

Walking through the cloud of smoke that welcomed every patron of the bar, whether they wanted it to or not, Mario felt Danielle's hand tense on his and pulled him quickly to the rear of the parking lot.

"Hurry," she said, nearly dragging him off his feet, for someone so petite, she had a strong grip, "I don't think he saw us..."

Mario's heart raced and with his other arm reached down to touch the steel that waited in his pocket, it had been years since need revealed it; and it was not a feeling he was comfortable with. If there was any way to avoid it being exposed tonight, he would take it.

Pausing briefly in the shadows behind her, Mario demanded an explanation, to which she was not forthcoming giving. Staring at her, trying to coerce a reason for their quick departure.

“It’s my boyfriend,” she said hurriedly, “Well, ex-boyfriend really. But, he cannot seem to accept it as that. Unfortunately, he is incredibly jealous and will stop at nothing to keep my interests from any man other than himself.” Where did she learn to be so articulate? Mario wondered in his head, it was as if he was seeing her for the first time, in an incredibly new light, it was a pleasant surprise.

With a slight shake, Mario composed himself trying to focus on the task at hand. The night air was much colder than it had been when he first entered the bar, the last thing he wanted was to fight, but if that’s the way things were to go down.... She began shivering and Mario threw his arms around her, pulling her near. “It’ll be alright,” he told her, “Everything will be alright. I’ll protect you.”

Jerking away, she stared at him defiantly. “Protect me?!” She said haughtily, “It’s you that I am worried about! Who will protect you!?”

The flash of silver against the moonlight was so quick that Danielle nearly shrieked at the sight of it, but the cold fury in his eyes, dead set and serious, somehow eased her. “This is all the protection I need.” He lied, with any luck his strategy would not require any blood shed. *It worked once*, he thought to himself, *it has to work again*.

“My car is parked out front, stay by my side, one step at a time we’re going to get to it, carelessly, as if nothing else matters, and we’ll leave. Should there be any, interruptions, I’ll take care of everything.”

His voice was stern, and he could sense her spine become rigid, more confident. He had never considered himself to be much of a leader, but tonight anything was possible.

His beautiful car sat there at the edge of the parking lot under a streetlight, glowing like a beacon of refuge and safety; yet it still lay at least fifty feet away. Placing his arm around Danielle he lead her to it, if there was any way to avoid a confrontation he would take it, but for now he was going to be her rock. The pace he set was steady, but in no way rushed, he could not show any of the fear that was growing inside of him. Had the other Saltines been there... *where had that thought come from?* He asked himself, it had been so long since they had crossed his mind. *No, that life is behind me; I can't go back, too much has changed....*

Twenty feet to go, safety was almost within his reach.... Ten feet, they were going to make it, he could feel it in his bones, they were going to be safe, five feet, and finally he was at the passenger door. Unlocking it, he casually opened it for Danielle as she stepped in majestically. In the pale light she was more beautiful than he could have dreamed. *Is this a dream?* He thought to himself as he closed the door behind her and walked to the driver's side. *Will I suddenly wake up and find myself in bed?*

A man shouted from behind him, if this was a dream, it might not have a pleasant ending. Long strides eating the parking lot in each step, a mountain of a man was running toward Mario. While he never considered himself a large man, Mario knew that he was above average, in height as well as build. But moving quickly was one of the largest men Mario had ever seen, and the look in his eyes was death.

Bracing himself, trying not to let his legs give way, Mario prepared himself. *What you resist, you empower.* He repeated over and over in his mind, this was not a time for fear, he must stay focused. The blast against his face sent his body reeling backward, landing forcefully against his car, his beautiful car! Stunned, and blinking behind tears,

he saw the man staring down at him, literally blocking the full moon behind him. Mario slowly felt for his knife, but stopped short. *What you resist, you empower.* A fist planting into his stomach sent Mario to his knees. *What you resist, you empower!* A foot caught him in the chest that lifted him off the ground, only to come crashing down on his knees again. *What you resist, you empower!!!* He thought, trying to remain lucid was becoming futile as a fist drove down between his shoulder blades. He could taste blood on his lips, and felt pain all over his body, pain unlike any he had felt before. His body felt as though it would shatter.

The man was laughing! The hulking fellow stood there, head back laughing at Mario. His ears were ringing, and he could only make out bits and pieces... “pussy” and “loser” and a number of other demeaning words directed at him. Struggling to get to his knees, he was sent down to the pavement again with a thud that made his head spin. The laughter continued as he lay there. *What you resist, you empower!* Why hadn’t it worked? Another foot in the ribs, pain drifting all along his body.

The man began walking around to the passenger’s side, Mario had to protect Danielle! Using all of the strength he could summon, he reached out to grab his attacker’s leg and spinning on the asphalt he ripped the man’s feet out from underneath. The sound of the man hitting the pavement was thunderous in his ears.

They both staggered to their feet, every inch of Mario’s body was on fire, but the time for resistance was here! Defiantly, Mario seized the man by the shoulders and placed a knee in his groin, sometimes you have to fight dirty. The man didn’t even flinch; and Mario realized he was going to die.

Suddenly a figure came streaking through the parking lot, a small, blocky body was sprinting toward him, another attacker? *Christ! I can't even handle one!* For such a large person, Sheila moved with the grace of gazelle, leaping and flying through the air. Her girth landing squarely on the man in front of him, driving him to the ground. Mario stumbled and stammered as she pounded away at the giant, the man was sobbing, feebly trying to deflect her blows!

“Get out of here, you fool!” She yelled to Mario, nodding toward the car. “I’ll finish him off!”

Stunned, Mario didn’t even realize he was opening the door, let alone putting it in drive, and leaving the parking lot. It was not until he was on the open road that Mario remembered he was not alone in the car. Danielle stared up at him, an expression of pain on her face to match the pain that soared throughout him.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, clearly holding back tears, “I didn’t know what to do, I wanted to help you... you must hate me, and honestly, I cannot blame you.” Her voice was near a squeak now. “Please, tell me that you are not mad at me.”

One of his eyes was swelling shut, his mouth was ripe with the bitter tang of blood, each breath brought pain in his tender sides, but as he sat there looking at her, he had honestly never felt better.

Chapter 4

Laying there, Antonio wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. Just when things seemed to be going his way, Clarisse had to come and ruin everything. No, that wasn't fair, he should have been stronger; firmer. A sly smile creased his lips, well perhaps he had been strong and firm enough... but he was still in quite the predicament. He was trying to free himself from women, at least for a little while, at least enough so he could get his life back on track. But now, Clarisse threw a turnip in the stew. Whatever the hell that meant.

Sitting up, stretching, Clarisse looked devilishly happy. "So, let me guess," she said as she quickly turned to him, "right now you are trying to find a way to ditch me without feeling guilty. Right?"

Antonio was shocked. He opened his mouth to lie but she interrupted him.

"I know, it probably seems weird since I was so forward, and believe me I don't want to stand in the way of your plans." Sliding off of the bed, she showed no shame as she slowly gathered her clothes from the floor, from the stool, the bra hanging off the ceiling fan. "Trust me, this was fun and everything; and I feel better that now you know how I feel. But, what will be will be and I don't want to force anything."

Antonio didn't know what to say, not that he was getting much of a chance. It was amazing how cool she was about this. She turned on him quickly, though. "But don't think for one minute that I am just going to be some easy lay who you can call over whenever you want a piece of ass."

Now how in the world did she know he was thinking about doing just that?! This chick was getting freakier by minute. Christ, he hadn't felt this awkward since he was 20, and sleeping with a girl who didn't tell him that she was only 16 for several weeks. What was her name again? Clarisse picked up again.

"The truth is, I like you a lot. I have for a long time; but most importantly, I respect you." Girls never respected Antonio, something was definitely weird. "So, I don't want you to feel all weird about leaving and then feeling obligated to come back to me." While she was talking, she managed to put her clothes back on and stand there as if she had never undressed in the first place. Antonio on the other hand, just lay there as helpless as a kitten. What the hell was going on?

Wrapping the blanket around himself, he got up and walked over to her. She just stood there with her arms under her breasts. He didn't know what came over him, something finally just clicked. Letting the blanket go he threw both arms around her and pulled her tight. Pulling back slightly he placed a hand under her chin and tilted her head up to look into her eyes.

"Ever been to Syracuse?" He asked, as he smiled down on her.

It was crazy, he knew it was crazy, but life was crazy sometimes. And frankly, Antonio loved it. From the moment they left the boat, they began talking. The entire cab ride to the airport they were lost in conversation. Waiting in line to pick up their tickets, they talked about everything, pausing only briefly to order an extra ticket and to pull some strings to get two that were seated next to each other. From the lobby to the gate, to the airplane until touching down in Syracuse, never once did the dialogue cease, nor did

it cease to fascinate Antonio how much the two of them had in common. Every little like and dislike was the same; from bands to cars to what brand of underwear was better. Antonio told stories, and she listened intently, laughing at all of the right parts. She was a little dismayed about the soap story, but after he revealed that it was just an allergic reaction; she laughed so hard she nearly peed her pants. It was as if someone cloned him and gave her the appropriate plumbing. She was perfect; it was crazy and he loved it.

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The three stood in the bookstore a long time chatting away, trying to cram everything that had happened over the course of the past four years into one conversation. Rocky's abs were sore from laughing, Vinnie was hands down the funniest guy he had ever met, and Vinnie's shoulder was sore from Rocky's hand slapping down every time he made the larger man laugh.

Jasmine just stood there, politely, beaming a strange hybrid of affection for her husband, pride that he was reuniting with his old friend, and jealousy that she was not as involved in the conversation. Oh well, this weekend was more about her husband anyway, she thought to herself. Deep down she wished that she had friends that were as close as these two were, but she made her decision a long time ago; well before she had ever even heard of Vinnie Saltine, and it was her cross to bear. She kept a keen eye on William the whole time, watching him as he never strayed too far from her. He was a very curious child, observing everything around him; especially the people. Suddenly, he strode over to a young girl of 5 or 6 sitting on the floor reading a book full of colorful illustrations. Jasmine could not hear his words, but she watched him intently. He sat

down next to the young girl and she immediately started listening to whatever he had to say as though it was the most important thing in the world. With William, it likely was the most important thing in the world, only the girl wouldn't realize for years and years to come, long after she had forgotten meeting the confident young boy half her age.

A beautiful girl a few years younger than her husband sashayed up between the two men. Jasmine's eyes grew wide as she noticed Vinnie's eyes wander luxuriously up and down the woman's body; it was as if she wasn't even there! Jasmine immediately realized from Rocky's countenance that this young trollop held his affection; and judging by the young woman's face and body language, she felt the same about him. Naturally, neither one realized it about the other. What a shame, suddenly a clever thought popped into her head.

Rocky took great pleasure in introducing Carla to his friends, although in no time the two were reminiscing again and the newcomer was sidelined. Leaning next to her husband, she planted a light kiss on his cheek; asking him to keep an eye on William while she visited the ladies' room, and grabbing Carla by the hand whisked her away as well. Yes, it was a clever thought indeed.

"So, let me get this straight," Rocky asked, holding his sides from laughter, "the whole time you had no idea that the cleaning woman was at the doorway?" He burst out laughing again, slapping his small friend on the shoulder.

"The best part is," Vinnie said in between laughing fits, "she doesn't speak a word of English, right? So, by the time I realize she's watching us, I ask her to shut the door and leave, but she misunderstands and thinks that I am giving her orders or something. So

doesn't she come in and start cleaning the room! Around us!" Rocky burst out laughing again, and Vinnie casually sidestepped another blast on the shoulder; which made the two start laughing even harder.

With a sigh, the two regained themselves. "Where did the girls go?" Rocky asked as he looked around.

"Ladies room," Vinnie said breathily, a quick glance around his friend showed William was more than fine, and apparently had made a friend. "You know how women are." With a groan, Rocky agreed. If there was anyone who understood women, it was Rocky, Vinnie thought.

Soon, the two women emerged; both looking as though they had just spent the day in the spa. Vinnie thought that Jasmine looked even more beautiful than when she left, if that was possible. With long, confident strides she and Carla quickly rejoined the group. Vinnie wanted to wrap his arms around right then and there and let decency be damned.

"I was thinking," Jasmine said as she slipped an arm around Vinnie's, "maybe Carla here would like to join us for lunch?"

Rocky looked a mix of excited beyond belief and terrified. Carla merely looked up at him and smiled. With a deep breath, he consented. Soon, arrangements were being made. Carla went to the page the customers that for the first time since its opening, the Two in the Evening would be closing, but that it would return to normal business hours on Monday; which prompted a unanimous sigh and groan from the patrons. The three also walked over to gather William.

With a sparkle in his eye, the young boy leaned in and gave the girl a kiss on the cheek. “Now, you remember what I told you, ok?” He said to her as he held his mother’s hand. The young girl blushed and nodded.

“What was that about?” Jasmine asked as she led him away.

“Oh, nothing.” William said, although his smile said exactly the opposite.

Rocky gave Vinnie a slight nudge in the back. “Looks like he takes after his father in more ways than one!”

Jasmine’s smile was cool, “Are you saying that my husband has success with women?” Her arched eyebrow boring a hole at Rocky.

“I’m not saying he had success with them,” Rocky laughed, Vinnie winced fearing the slap on the shoulder that was soon to follow, “he was just never shy talking to them. In fact, I bet that for every ten girls he talked to, he would only get one, maybe two real phone numbers!” Rocky burst again, and suddenly was doubled over trying to talk through the laughter, “Remember that one time you met that girl, and she gave you her email address... and even though everyone told you to wait, you emailed her that very same night!”

“And what happened?” Jasmine asked, smiling at her husband.

“What happened?” Rocky boomed, “he totally scared her off, that’s what happened!” His laughter filled the entire store.

“Ok, fine, so maybe I was a little... eager, in my youth.”

That set both Jasmine and Rocky into hysterics.

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Driving was much more difficult than Mario thought it would be, and despite the fact that Danielle was probably an excellent driver, there was no way he would relinquish control of his car to her. His head was dizzy and throbbing, and each turn sent a new wave of pain up his side; it only made sense that they should go to whomever had the closer apartment.

Danielle lived in a very small apartment, there was barely enough room for the both of them, but it was well furnished and completely clean. It was a good thing they hadn't gone to Mario's, if only because it was such a mess. Although, she would definitely get wet by the immense size of his television. He wouldn't have blamed her, though, 60" of hi-def was enough to get his juices flowing every time. He had barely taken two steps into the apartment before he nearly collapsed against a chair; without doubt, that was the worst beating he had ever received, it was a wonder he wasn't laying in a hospital bed right now.

Danielle rushed over to his side, and gingerly led him to the bedroom. The left side of his face was swollen, his lip puffy and purple; yet despite the pain required, he managed a smile. Maybe it was his night after all. A sharp pain in his ribs reminded him that no matter how willing she might be, his body was not going to allow anything to happen.

Quickly pushing the mound of pillows off the bed, *what is it with girls and pillows?* Mario thought to himself, she pulled back the covers and helped him lay down. With a deft hand, she removed his shirt revealing a series of bruises and cuts from the parking lot. With a blush, she averted her eyes, but continued undressing him. Clearly, she was not the type of girl who was used to having a stranger naked in her bed; well, not

that he was either. Clots of dried blood clung to his skin and his hair as well. But quickly Danielle returned with a tray carrying an ice pack, a warm, damp cloth, some Tylenol, and a glass of water. Helping him with the glass of water, he quickly downed two small pills while she placed the icepack on his face. Not just his eye, or his lip, on his entire face. Behind the cold fabric, Mario was blushing. Slowly and carefully she began cleaning his wounds, small murmurs of apology and sympathy every time he winced from the pain. It took some time, but she finally bandaged all of his cuts before lifting the ice pack off of his face. His eyes were heavy, and he was growing lethargic; a glance from his good eye revealed that the Tylenol had a sleeping agent in it. Yes, sleep was sounding good.

“You certainly look like shit.” She said with a smile, although Mario tried not to laugh because of the pain. “But, I have the utmost confidence that you will be well tomorrow.” She leaned in carefully and placed a very gentle kiss on his swollen lips, “Although, I admit I am disappointed since you are of no use to me now.”

Mario tried to pull her closer, but the pain was too great. His head was fuzzy and soon his good eyelid was closing. His one shot at being with Danielle and he was too banged up to bang her. Even Vinnie would have laughed at that line... slowly, everything became dark, foggy, his breathing grew heavy and labored, his head fell deeper into the soft pillows behind his neck, and sleep came.

The woods were dense and the pale moonlight that broke through the canopy of trees revealed the little space between trunks that served as a path. A light fog was floating above the ground, making it difficult to see the terrain. A misplaced step could

reveal a rock or root that would certainly mean a broken ankle or worse. Mario could hear the three men behind him, stepping warily as well, although each time he turned around they seemed further and further behind. He wanted to wait for them, but somehow he knew that there was little time to spare. The forest seemed oddly familiar to him, although he was certain he had never been here before.

Soon he came to a clearing and crouched down behind a massive rock. A large gathering of women was sitting around a monstrous bonfire, flames dancing and flickering toward the stars above. Behind them, a towering cabin loomed ominously, its windows dark save a small lamp from one room. He was in there, he could feel him. Who was in there? He asked himself, but the answer didn't come. Somehow, he had to save him.

The light rustling of leaves behind him caused him to turn, he recognized the two faces although their names were impossible to remember. He felt a small feeling of comfort, knowing he was not alone.

"He just disappeared," one of the unnamed faces said, "one minute he was there, the next he was gone."

Mario shivered, although not from the cold. There was something dangerous in the air, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't figure out what it was.

From the edge of the woods, a light grew brighter and brighter, heading toward them, growing closer and closer, suddenly the fire erupted, sending flaming logs and sparks in all directions. The women scattered to the edges of the trees, those that weren't lying motionless on the ground. The flash from the explosion in the middle of the clearing blinded him, and he struggled helplessly against the ground. Pain shot through his head

and his arms. He looked to his companions and saw them, fortunately they were still alive although clearly struggling as much as he was.

The light in the cabin was still on, then slowly it winked out.

Mario shot up in the bed, the pain in his side was still there, although not as much. The light in the windows hurt his eyes, and a raised hand helped to shield them. *Where am I?* He thought to himself, and suddenly the room had a strange recognition to it. Memories of the night before flooded his brain, and quickly pushing the dream away. Holding his head in his hands, he tried to remember, he knew it was something important but any chance at recollection had melted away.

There was a rustling sound in the kitchen, and Mario tried to get to his feet. His head was still spinning and it made sitting up difficult. Hanging off of the side of the bed, elbows on his knees, supporting his head in his palms, he heard the door open. Danielle, he remembered her, oh God how he remembered her, ran to his aid; and gently laid him back down on the pillow.

“The swelling has gone down considerably,” she said quietly, she smelled wonderful; he felt drunk in her presence. “It’s remarkable how well you’ve recovered” She said as she smoothed his blankets. Resting back on her heels, she stared into his eyes.

She was beautiful. Her long blonde hair pulled back, her blue eyes shining up at him. She wore only a shirt, *his shirt*, the top three buttons were undone and the collar was splayed out to each side. Her shapely legs were uncovered, smooth as silk. He had a vague memory of those legs around his last night. His shirt was much too large for her, and as she leaned in to tend him, he could clearly see down the collar. Between her firm,

round breasts, yes he remembered those being pressed against him too, he could see her flat stomach, and clear to the floor.

Straightening, she arched her eyebrow coolly, if she was offended, she gave no outward sign. “Can I get you anything?” She asked, as she placed her hand on his.

Surprisingly, it didn’t hurt to shake his head. And with a shrug, she leaned in to kiss his forehead. The thought of lying in bed all day and letting her act as his nurse was sounding more and more pleasant, but there was an urgent voice in his head. Something was not right, something dire, he had to warn them. *But who?* He thought. Closing his eyes, he was surprised that his left eye could open and close without any difficulty. He *must* have recovered quickly. Suddenly, he realized what he had to do.

Leaping out of the bed, he searched frantically for his pants. The commotion sent Danielle running in to see what was going on. Despite her urgings, he convinced her that he remembered something very important to take care of. She looked so hurt, just staring at him as though she had done something wrong.

He put his arms around her and pulled her close to him. *Maybe there was no need to rush off just yet*, he thought to himself.

Both hands behind his head, Mario stared up at the ceiling. This had never happened to him before. Danielle waited an appropriate amount of time, trying everything she could, but no dice. Eventually, she got to her feet and put on her *own* shirt, hmmm, was that supposed to mean something? Mario wondered. No, overanalyzing the situation was something that Vinnie would do. So, there he was, naked under the blanket, and no matter what he tried nothing seemed to work; while Danielle was cleaning!

Neither said a word, although the embarrassment was clear on Mario's face. He wondered if he needed to ask her to keep this little mishap a secret? Christ, come Monday everyone at work will know that this one time, for the very first time in his whole life, his love machine wouldn't function. He could just picture the look on Connor's face at work; first he was going to show up with a shiner, he had to have a girl save him in a fight, he spent the night with quite arguably the hottest girl in the world only to fall asleep next to her, and then, when he finally gets a chance to seal the deal, nothing. What the fuck!? He wanted to curl up in a ball and die.

His mind was racing, beyond how he was going to deal with this. The previous night's events were telling him something, if only he could figure it out. Not to mention the dream he had! What could it all mean? At least he had a long drive to ponder it some more, no matter what he had to reach at least one of the Saltines, and fortunately he knew where to find one.

"Ever been to Syracuse?" He asked Danielle when she returned with a vacuum, a vacuum! How could the lady think about cleaning at a time like this!

"Is that a joke or something?" she said, staring at him.

As Mario swung out of bed, he reached for his pants and told her that he had to see a friend, and was wondering if she wanted to come along for the ride.

She looked at him, trying not to smile. He could see the wheels turning in her head, and he suspected that a quip about "at least getting to ride something" was forming on her tongue, but instead she just nodded.

It wasn't long before the two of them were leaving the apartment, and were on their way to where it all began for Mario, where it all began for the Saltines.

Chapter 5

It had been so long since Antonio had last sat in this parking lot, he pointed out the dumpster he used to smoke behind, and told Clarisse every story he could think of; even the time that a crack head chased Vinnie inside the store, it was all he could do to put off going inside. He had a million reasons why he should just turn the car around and drive, anywhere was better than here. Delicately flicking her cigarette out the window; she had remarkable aim as the filter landed in sewer grate, Clarisse turned to him.

“I doubt that we just flew up from Florida to see the parking lot.” She said to him casually. It was a slight nudge, not prodding or forceful, and certainly not nagging. She was definitely one-in-a-million.

Antonio nodded, she was right. With a final drag he opened the door and flicked his cigarette toward the dumpster. It was time to face the music; whatever tune was playing. Locking the doors, it was never smart to tempt the crack heads in the area, he strode to the front door. Clarisse quickly catching up and seizing his hand in hers. With a deep breath he opened the door and walked in.

The buzz from inside the store, notifying the employees that someone had walked in, was the most refreshing sound in the world. For the first time in years he felt as though he was home. Strangely, there were no customers and the only person in the store was someone Antonio had never met before. The young man perked up at the sight of a customer, and while he was barely old enough to buy cigarettes, he stared up and down at Clarisse as if she had walked in alone and naked.

“Is Jere here?” Antonio asked, his voice squeaking a little. Not out of fear, it just did that sometimes. It was as if puberty never really gave up on him.

The kid looked confused and protective at the same time as he stared at Antonio, he clearly had no idea how far back Antonio went with the store's owner. "Why do you want to know?" The young punk said, his voice had a strange accent, and he nearly butchered every word he said. "Who are you?" He asked quickly as he stood up straighter. This was not the homecoming Antonio expected at all.

"I'm an old friend." Antonio said, quietly.

"An old friend indeed," a rough voice said from the office to Antonio's right, "although, old friends usually call once in awhile, they may even mail a letter or two." The man took a few steps closer, his belly round and his face rounder. Large glasses sat atop his nose while a fringe of white hair surrounded his bald head. "No, the only time 'old friends' stop by is when they need something."

Antonio was speechless, Jere was like a father to him; he had helped Antonio become the man that he was today, and yet every word he said was true. Shamed, he wanted to turn around and run away, never to return. This was a bad idea, he should have stayed in Florida, he should have done a lot of things differently.

"But then again," he said in that gravelly voice that was all too familiar, "any 'old friend' who comes into my store with such a beautiful girl can't be that bad." Jere beamed a smile so warming, so affectionate, Antonio could not help but run up and the give the old man a hug.

Even when Jere gave him a light squeeze on his ass, it didn't bother Antonio. Especially not now, he just held on to his dear old friend. "Unfortunately," he said, "Antonio was never much for manners. My name is Jere, and you are?"

"Sorry, this is Clarisse." Antonio sputtered.

“What happened to the Asian fetish?” Jere said with a laugh that made his belly shake, “Antonio always had a thing for Asian girls. He told me once that he liked them so much because their pussies were on a slight slant.” Clarisse blushed slightly though Jere showed no shame at all. It was good to be home.

“There’s beer in the fridge, or wine if you prefer,” Jere continued, “help yourself to either, then come into my office, we have a lot of catching up to do.”

The walls of his office were lined with old photographs of the now old man when he was in his prime. The broad shouldered Adonis with washboard abs, rippling biceps and a head of hair like a golden mane was nothing like the withered old man sitting behind the desk. Artifacts and treasures retrieved from the sea’s floor were placed precisely in the glass cabinets against the wall, yet if asked about them, Jere would regard them as if trinkets he bought at a flea market. Material goods mattered little to Jere, it was jokes, memories and stories that he cherished.

They sat in his office, having a few drinks, while Jere told them stories of Thailand; and their prostitutes, Finland; and how the teenagers there are told to go off and have sex with a man and a woman then come back and tell their parents which they prefer; he told perverted jokes and lectured them both about the “bell curve”. It was just like old times, Antonio was lounging back smoking a cigarette while Clarisse sipped her beer and laughed alongside him.

“What ever happened to the other guys you used to hang out with?” Jere asked sipping his wine, “You know, that tall weird kid, the blonde guy and the short cute kid. Do you ever talk to them?”

There was a time when Mario could have driven this stretch of the thruway with his eyes closed, in fact there was many a night he practically did. Yet for some reason it was as if he was seeing it for the first time. The pain that still lingered in his side was the furthest thing from his mind as he was telling the beautiful young woman all about the friend they were going to see.

“So what happened when the boyfriend came home?” Danielle asked.

“It was the damndest thing, so, Rocky scrambles out of bed, scooping his clothes up off of the floor,” Mario couldn’t believe it, two days ago the closest he came to this girl was when he would think about her while doing a little fireman time, and here she was hanging on his every word. “Now mind you, he’s completely naked and still totally drunk off his ass.”

His story was interrupted by Danielle’s cell phone, to which Mario could not help but look at the caller ID, the number that was displayed had an area code he had never seen before and decided it was best to give her privacy. Well, as much privacy as could be afforded in his car. If there is one thing that can be forgiven of all people, is that it is impossible to talk on a cell phone in a car *without* other people eavesdropping. If anything, people have a tendency to talk even louder when having a conversation in this fashion. It was a pet peeve of Mario’s and something that he at least would try not to do to other people.

In truth, he really did his best to drive without listening to her conversation, not that much was said on her end. It was just a series of yes’s and no’s that totaled no more

than 30 seconds. But it was obvious that despite his efforts to be oblivious to her conversation, she was hell bent on not letting him hear anything.

Mario was ready to continue his story when they came upon the exit to Syracuse, and the car remained silent instead. Leaving the thruway, they were quickly racing from one highway to the next, his Audi speeding around traffic; this time Mario was much more cognizant of police officers, all the while without saying a word. Despite a grumbling in his stomach, perhaps he shouldn't have refused anything to eat from Danielle. Well, he *did* he try to eat; not that it did any good, he hoped this wasn't going to be a recurring problem with girls and fortunately she hadn't mentioned it once. Yet, no matter how much hunger gripped him, he was on a mission and food would have to wait. Suddenly, in spite of his best efforts to concentrate, a thought occurred to him. What if that phone call was from one of her friends checking up on her? What if the friend knew he went home with her? What if the string of yes's and no's were embarrassing answers to questions? Yes, he went home with her. No, they didn't have sex. Yes, they tried. No, he couldn't get it up. Yes, she was disappointed. No, she was never going to have sex with him again. Yes, it was alright if all of her friends knew. Christ! Even Vinnie wouldn't be this paranoid. Vinnie, that name triggered his thoughts again, he must find Rocky, he must warn him. Times were growing dire and only *he* knew!

Mario had never been to the book store/coffee shop, but deep in the recesses of his mind he remembered Rocky talking about it; somehow he even remembered the name. It was a clever name, he could never have come up with something so unique. Long ago he had received a postcard inviting him to the grand opening, but he had just graduated from college and was too busying trying to find a job; poor excuses at best, but

they were all he had. For all he knew the store hadn't stayed open this long, but it was his only shot. Somehow, he knew it was still open.

"Closed!?" Mario yelled at the top of his lungs as he banged on the door. "How the hell can a 24 hour book store be fucking closed!?" It was so illogical, and it was tearing him apart. He drove all that fucking way for nothing! "What the fuck!"

Banging on the glass one more time, as if that would have some magical effect on the situation; which was about as effective as yelling "open sesame". Mario spun around and slid down the door, sitting at the entry. Resting his head in his hands, he wanted to cry. What if I was too late? It was a terrible thought, and he quickly tried to force it out of his mind. The dream told him that the four were back together, that had to mean *something* good, although, one *did* vanish? What did it all mean? Mario promptly began banging his head on the door, if for nothing better to do.

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It wouldn't have been Jasmine or Carla's first choice to have lunch, but as soon as Rocky mentioned Denny's, Vinnie perked up like an excited boy on Christmas. How anyone could have wasted as many hours there as the two had, actually as the *four* of them had, was well beyond her. But, that was one of the side effects of being married, you had to put up with the other person, no matter how weird or strange they were. Instead of traditional wedding vows, Jasmine began wishing they had taken different oaths; instead of loving to honor and obey, let's face it that *is* a bold faced lie. The day that a woman obeys her husband will be the day that cats clean their own litter boxes.

But, instead of saying “honor and obey”, they should make the man and woman confess to their friends and families that they will “put up with the other person’s shit” until death or divorce do they part.

But, despite the fact that the table was sticky, and the vinyl booths even stickier, she did her best to put up with her husband’s shit. Fortunately, the waitress was prompt and polite; even procuring a set of crayons for William; which he immediately began using on the back of the placemat. And while he was so adorable intently coloring, they could have at least given a more original drawing for him to render; the outlines of silverware, a plate, glass and bowl hardly gave much room for imagination.

Putting on her best smile, Jasmine once again listened to the two men go on and on about the times gone. The sad part was, now they weren’t even catching up on the last four years, they were reliving old memories of when they were young. Vinnie was notorious for telling, and retelling stories; but even Jasmine could not help but laugh most of the time. There was just something about him, his humor was infectious.

“So, there we were, right,” Vinnie began while Jasmine looked at him expectantly. He always started stories out with either that line, ‘seriously’ or, ‘oh my God’, at least he was predictable. “drunk off our asses,” he continued; another all too common expression of his, at least he had gained control over his drinking problem, “and Antonio just gets up on the coffee table, strips down to his boxers, and starts giving this speech.”

“What was the speech about?” Carla interrupted.

“A man gets half-naked and stands up on a coffee table and you want to know what he talked about?” Vinnie gave a very confused look to Rocky, and drew the outline

of a triangle on his sleeve, to which Rocky animatedly shook his head no, with a shrug Vinnie continued, “the point is that this became a sort of tradition with us. Ever since then every time we’ve gone drinking together, at some point in the night Antonio starts going off on some topic, and its all we can do to make sure he keeps his clothes on.”

“Hey Vinnie, tell the story about the time you ran across the room with a sock on your cock!”

“Seriously, check this story out,” Vinnie began, Jasmine had the feeling this was going to be a long lunch.

Rocky didn’t know which was better, the fact he was reunited with his long lost friend, or the sheer amazement that he was finally out on a date with Carla. *Can a lunch with friends really constitute a date?* He thought to himself, *well, not that she would consider it a date, certainly. She probably sees this as just a business lunch or something.* Vinnie continued to tell his story, and Rocky did his best to laugh along. He knew all of the punch lines by rote, it was amazing how the timing of each story never changed. It was as if the man had recorded every funny story he had ever told and just had to push the play button. It really was too bad he was stuck on reruns, but, it was great to have his friend back, even if it was only going to be for a weekend.

“Wow,” Carla said when Vinnie finally quieted down, leaning in closely so only he could hear, “your friend *really* talks a lot.”

Rocky didn’t know if he should defend Vinnie or not, but it was true. He carefully studied her eyes, and it was clear she wasn’t being antagonistic; just an observation.

“Yeah, but he’s the funniest guy I know. So, it’s worth it.” Rocky said, there was some truth to it at least.

“Do you like me, Rocky?” Carla asked, *how could she just ask a question like that point blank?*

He wanted to tell her everything; how he dreamed about only her, that he wanted nothing more than to hold her in his arms forever, how he wanted to provide for her, take care of her, be there for her whenever she needed him.

“Yeah, you’re cool.” Rocky said. *What the fuck!?*

Carla looked at him stunned, he didn’t know what answer she was expecting to hear, but it was clearly not that. Suddenly, she started laughing. *Damnit! Why did I have to say something so stupid!?* While she leaned against him in the booth, he could feel her hand on his thigh, her laughter faded but her smile remained. Above the booth, she seemed perfectly composed, just a woman sitting with some friends; under the table he could feel her slowly caressing his leg, moving precariously further north, slowly, dancing with her fingers, yes, definitely north; but stopped abruptly right before reaching the north pole. Her hand lingered, teasingly, as though wanting to move the final centimeters needed to take hold of his flesh rocket, but staying put. *Fucking women!* Rocky thought, *Damnit!* The thought of fucking women made little Rocky reach up to the table.

Carla removed her hand, *bitch*, Rocky thought; *no, that’s not nice*. And both hands were quickly folded in her lap again as if nothing happened. Rocky had never been more confused in his life.

Vinnie went up to the settle the bill and the girls, again, went to the ladies' room, Vinnie was definitely going to have to explain why girls did that, leaving Rocky alone at the table with William. *What the hell to say to a 3 year old?* Rocky thought to himself, Christ, he clearly proved he couldn't talk to a woman his age, talking to a three year old should be easy!

"So, do you like Barney?" Rocky said.

William looked up slowly at him, the look on his face a hybrid of confusion and anger. *Did I say something wrong?* Rocky thought. *Man, I suck at talking to everybody!* As Rocky was about to smooth the situation over, William suddenly spoke.

"It must be hard," he said in a quiet little voice, "trying to decide all the time."

What the hell did that mean?

"What does that mean?" Rocky said, making sure to keep his language clean around the kid.

Shaking his head, William looked around, searching. Finally, his eyes rested on the placemat. Looking up, he pointed to the spoon. "You want to be this," then sliding his hand to the knife, "but you are really this." Shaking his head again, "It must be hard."

Rocky's face was white as a ghost, how could this *child* know so much?

"Oh my God," Vinnie said when he came back to the table, but the rest was just a jumble of words to Rocky's ears. He figured it was a story of some kind, and probably one he had heard dozens of times before, but all he could think about was the poorly colored picture of a knife and spoon.

Chapter 6

All in all, it was a good meal with good times had by all. If this was all of the time he was going to have with his friend, Rocky would have been completely content; but fortunately he knew that this was only the beginning.

The walk back to their respective cars was a little rushed due to the cold that was suddenly coming on. While the sun was still in the sky and had a way to travel until nightfall, the wind that whipped across the parking lot was quite fierce. Rocky, Carla and Vinnie stood by the black Celica while Jasmine secured William in his seat. It was all Rocky could do to not stare at the peculiar child, *how did he know?* Perhaps some things in life were best left unsaid.

As Jasmine closed the door, she turned to the small group discussing plans for the evening. Rocky was giving directions to his new house, just in case Vinnie couldn't keep up. It certainly seemed as though Rocky was challenging him to a race on the highway, and Vinnie loved a good challenge.

In the middle of his instructions, Rocky's belt began to vibrate and quickly pulled out his pager. *Who uses pagers anymore?* Vinnie thought to himself.

"That's weird," Rocky said as he looked at the display, "I've never seen this number before." Then turned to go back inside.

"Where are you going?" Vinnie asked.

"To use the pay phone." Rocky replied, only to have three cell phones produced in front of him, maybe it *was* time to get a cell phone like everyone else in the world.

Rocky dialed the number, although he was certain it was probably just a drug deal or something that he had mistakenly received. That was one of the problems of being the only non-drug dealer in the country who still had a beeper.

Rocky's countenance had regained color since leaving the diner, but soon it was drained of all blood.

"That was the police!" he said quickly, as he ran to his car, "someone tried to break into my store!"

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Naturally, it was quite impossible to see all that Syracuse had to offer without a full pack of cigarettes. Checking his supply as he drove down the boulevard, Antonio realized that he had smoked way too much in Jere's office and had to re-stock. Completing a U-turn, Antonio pulled into the Sunoco station that was directly across from the dive shop; a place he had frequented quite often. While he certainly purchased more than his fair share of cigarettes there, they assumed he was old enough to buy beer well before he became of legal age. Yes, it is safe to say that Antonio shopped at that convenience store *a lot* during his youth.

It's not that the area was bad, per se, but for some reason there was a significant number of homeless crack heads that panhandled around the corners; and none more famous in the area than Poppy. Unsure whether Clarisse would feel safer going with him inside, or remaining in the car; he locked the doors behind him, leaving her there. It was a gamble, but he did not want to insult her by asking. Truth be told, if she was scared, she

could have followed him. Oddly, she sat in the car as though nothing in the world could worry her.

The face behind the counter was a pleasant surprise to Antonio, after four years Kumar was still working at the Sunoco. Virtually everyday, Antonio had walked across the four lane highway, divided by a large planted median, to be greeted by Kumar.

“Mr. Antonio!” Kumar yelled, or at least gave as much of a yell as he could without disturbing the few customers milling about the small aisles, “It has been too long, yes, yes, much too long. You are good?”

Antonio definitely felt as though he was home.

“Yeah, I’m alright,” Antonio said modestly, “Back in the ‘cuse for a little while, so I thought I’d see some old friends.”

“Oh, so good you stopped in, Mr. Antonio,” Kumar said with a sly smile, “Just this day only, we have buy one get one free Camel Lights; you still smoke Camel Lights, yes?”

Antonio nodded.

“Very well indeed, Camel Lights for Mr. Antonio.” Kumar rushed to the back room, Antonio questioned whether or not there was a premium for the cigarettes, but when Kumar returned he proved it indeed.

“Yes, yes, buy one get one for Mr. Antonio,” Kumar went on, “and how are things with Ms. Alexis? She is very well I hope.”

Antonio blushed, in all honesty, Alexis had been long since forgotten. Truth be told, his heart was standing room only, and much to his own surprise, was occupied by

Clarisse. In fact, just the thought of Clarisse replaced any thought of Alexis and all the things she said.

“Alexis is well, Kumar,” Antonio lied, he had the feeling that deep inside he had really hurt her, but that was a problem for a different day. “Hey, I thought you were heading off to California, what happened?”

“Ahh, yes, California,” the man behind the counter began, “well, let us just say that my heart is here in Syracuse, despite the cold and the terrible football team, it was impossible for me to ever call another place home.”

For the first time in Antonio’s life, he completely understood what someone was saying.

After saying his farewells to Kumar, Antonio exited the store; his purpose for coming home more clear than ever. While he hated the taste of humble pie, he still had one more slice to take.

Walking briskly to the car, it was getting dark after all, he heard an all too familiar voice off in the distance.

“Sir?” Poppy said, “Can I have a cigarette?”

Ordinarily, hearing Poppy’s voice, let alone *seeing* him was enough to send children screaming; and even Antonio felt shamed every time he ignored the poor crack head’s plea for help. But something overtook Antonio.

Poppy limped toward Antonio, the result of a beat down suffered years ago, a beating that Antonio watched happen while doing nothing about. “Sir,” Poppy began again, “can you spare a dollar? It’s cold and I would like some coffee, if you please.”

His toothless grin belied any feeling of cold, in actuality, Poppy needed cash for

another hit. Instead of offering a dollar, Antonio wrapped his arms around the beggar whose clothes reeked of urine and garbage, but Antonio could care less.

“Poppy,” Antonio nearly cried, “I’ve missed you!”

“What’s wrong wit’ chew man?” Poppy asked, despite his undeniable craving for some rock, he suddenly seemed as sober as a priest. “You a’ight, man?”

“I’m fine, Poppy,” Antonio said as he let the man go, pushing a dollar into his hand, “My friend, I am more than fine.”

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In the grand scheme of things, Mario had done many seemingly stupid things that yielded positive results. The weeks following hooking up with Sheila had been less than ideal but she definitely turned out to be a giant asset when he was getting his own ass handed to him on a plate in the parking lot the night before. There was that time when he sat around for months while the lease expired on his apartment, resulting in him being homeless for 10 days; but it turned out for the best when he found a great apartment that was quite affordable. And of course, there was his classic poor response to Danielle via instant message; which certainly turned out to be a wish come true. But, as he hurled the piece of concrete at the glass doors of the Two In the Evening, he knew that it would either go down as an act of genius, or as an act of complete idiocy.

Fortunately for him, as well as the two Saltines; seeing Vinnie in tow was a most definite surprise, it was the former.

It took a significant amount of explanation to the cops to release Mario and the beautiful girl with him, the cops wanted to frisk her over and over again, from the

handcuffs that held them. Both Mario and Rocky were elated that Vinnie was there, if there was anyone who could talk their way out of a situation, it was certainly him. In no time the police officers, despite the fact that Rocky refused to press charges, saw the light as Vinnie's silver tongue smoothed everything over. He even had the cops laughing! But it wasn't until the police cars were long gone from the parking lot, and the gaping hole in the front doors patched with duct tape and cardboard, until the three Saltines allowed their muscles to relax; and quickly were embracing each other left and right.

"This is a fucking Kodak fucking moment!" Vinnie yelled as he squeezed his friends tightly, or rather, as they squeezed the breath out of him. "Who the fuck would have fucking believed this shit!" Despite his silver tongue, it could be quite rusty at times.

"This is f'ing unbelievable!" Rocky said, his head above his two friends, barely fighting the urge to lift them both off of the ground. "I mean, don't get me wrong, Mario, you're paying for my new f'ing doors, but this is the most unbelievable work of fate I have ever seen!"

"We'll talk about the doors later," Mario said, he was very tight with money at times. In fact, there was one incident in college, while trying to settle a bill at a diner late in the morning, despite how many times they added it up, they were consistently short the exact amount of his meal. "But for now, we have more important matters to discuss." His sober tone was in stark contrast to the levity of the mood.

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Chapter 7

It was a race indeed on the highway, Rocky's vintage '69 mustang; purchased after his store became successful, Mario's Audi A-4 and Vinnie's Toyota Celica were screaming down the interstate, passing, weaving, doing anything possible to stay ahead of the pack. However no matter how much Mario or Vinnie pushed their cars to the limit, it was damn near impossible to out run Rocky's classic car. Jasmine tried her best not to look at the road in front of her, and wondered if her husband could talk his way out of a speeding ticket at the rate he was going; all the while, William was in his car seat, dangling his feet and laughing!

Danielle encouraged Mario, trying to give directions as best she could, suggesting staying in one lane over the other, passing on the right when necessary despite the discomfort of rumble strips that made her bulbous breasts bounce. A hand gently placed on his leg helped Mario accelerate his car as much as it did his massive erection beneath the steering wheel. *Where were you this morning?* Mario wanted to ask his suddenly perky prick, but he knew he would get no response. Danielle certainly showed no signs of dismay after his failure to perform this morning, *tonight will definitely be different!* Mario thought as he laced his way between other cars.

Rocky, with the top down, let the wind run through his hair as he careened down the street. His mustang was literally kicking the shit out of the other two cars who were doing their damndest just to keep up! Carla's hair was blown in all directions with the wind, yet she smiled contently. Trying to keep his eyes on the road while not staring ubiquitously at her body was a serious effort, it was as if her breasts were made solely for

a man's enjoyment! His thoughts were racing about the things he wanted to do to her, just as much as his mustang was racing the foreign-made cars trailing him. Yes, it was a good day for anything made in the USA.

Despite his best efforts to enjoy his certain victory, Rocky could not help but feel a pang of guilt as he sat in the garage waiting for his friends to *finally* pull into the driveway. Had it not been for Carla's head in his lap, he may have gone back to find them. With his fingers interlocked behind his head, he thought it rude to rub a girl's head while she was going down on him. He casually looked into his rearview mirror while Carla serviced his now well-oiled machine, worrying about Vinnie and Mario finding his new house kept him from cutting his personal victory lap short. It was quite amazing how forward Carla had become, every car that separated him from his pursuers drew her a little closer, and quite frankly, made her much more horny. In some perverse way, he wished his friends could have seen him now, with Carla going to town on him, her head bobbing frantically up and down, her tongue slashing wildly, while she simonized his hot rod.

With perfect timing, just as Rocky filled Carla's mouth with his premium unleaded, a pair of head lights came up his long, winding driveway. Despite wanting to savor the moment, Rocky quickly zipped up his pants and stumbled out of the car on wobbly legs. Opening the door, he allowed Carla to enter first; whether because she was a lady or because she needed a chaser, he couldn't tell. She just gave him a blow job in

Vinnie could not help but stare at his beautiful wife as she walked in front of him, despite her real age, a number never revealed, *and* having given birth a few years earlier, she was as trim and sultry as any 22 year old. Surely he was the luckiest man alive.

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Rocky held the door open for his friends as they entered his custom-built home, even though he could still feel the sensation of Carla's full lips wrapped around his piston with vacuum-like pressure, he knew there was more to life than the occasional tune up in the garage.

He even felt a little abashed, having so much home for just himself. Prior to giving the grand tour to his friends did he ever consider himself ostentatious. But as he led them from room to room, many of which weren't furnished yet because he ran out of uses for all the rooms, it was impossible to shake the feeling that he was missing out.

Jasmine and Vinnie deposited their luggage in the largest spare bedroom, which Rocky had built specifically for people with children. There was a doorway that led into a smaller bedroom, each sharing a private bathroom. The smaller room even came furnished with a racecar shaped bed, naturally a mustang- Rocky's favorite, that he had made for this weekend. Yes, the Two In the Evening was quite successful indeed.

Mario and Danielle, not having the foresight to plan for an overnight trip, had no luggage; but in no time Rocky provided them with the amenities needed for a weekend getaway for two. Toiletries, towels, fresh sheets for the queen sized bed, even silk pajamas for each!, were carefully laid out on the bed while they toured the house independently.

It was easy to be modest about his home, Rocky merely felt fortunate enough to have a roof over his head, let alone a beautiful house located deep on 50 acres of the wooded hills surrounding Syracuse. All-in-all, Rocky would give up everything just to have a taste of the lives his friends had. Money was a luxury, but it in no ways heals the soul.

After making themselves at home, the group gathered onto the large balcony on the back side of the house, where Rocky had pulled several choice-cut steaks out of the freezer to defrost. Everyone, save William, had a glass of the finest Merlot, while Rocky fired up the grill. The sun was still a long way from the horizon, yet twilight felt near.

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The Two in the Evening was dark, a large piece of cardboard was duct taped to the door; apparently the store wasn't as successful as Jere made it out to be. In fact, standing in the now waning sunlight, the place looked run down and derelict. At least Antonio's dive shop wasn't as big of a dive as this store looked.

"Must have gone out of business," Antonio said to himself as he went back to the car. *Now what to do?* Antonio thought. It seemed so perfectly clear that this was a weekend to make things right, starting with Jere, next was Rocky and eventually Vinnie and Mario; all the while he now had Clarisse to help him. He felt so fortunate to have found her, it was crazy all right, but it was great.

Starting the engine, Antonio was about to drive away when a massive Hummer pulled up to the store, a young man stepped out and walked up to the doors, looking

completely confused as he tried to pull the door open. It was locked, but he tried again and again, each time scratching his head trying to figure out why the door wouldn't budge. He tried pushing on it, hoping that would work, but yielding the same results. Antonio and Clarisse couldn't help but start laughing at the poor guy trying his damndest to get past these seemingly tricky doors. Pausing, the guy scratched his head and tried pulling on the doors again, followed by pushing. It continued this way for several minutes, until Antonio had the heart to tell the man that it was locked.

Rolling down the window, he politely shouted, "I think it's locked."

The young man jumped three feet in the air and quickly turned around, he had been so preoccupied by the door that he was oblivious to other people in the parking lot.

"That's impossible," the man said, "Rocky wouldn't close the store; the store always stays open." The guy was clearly not running on all cylinders, he looked vaguely familiar to Antonio. "Always open, 24 hours a day, no matter what." He said matter of factly, although obviously he was wrong.

The sun was fading over the horizon, but the pale light was enough to reveal the man's face. "Joel?" Antonio nearly shrieked, his voice squeaking again, *why does it do that?* He thought to himself, "Joel? Is that you?"

"Yeah," the man said slowly, although if because he was cautious of strangers or because he was dimwitted it was hard to tell; Antonio figured it was the latter. "Who are you?"

"It's me! Antonio!" he yelled, "We went to high school together!" Well, the truth is Antonio went to high school, just not very often. Not that he didn't try to go, it was just that more often-than-not, he stopped at Vinnie's house on the way and the two of them

decided to skip. The best days were when Rocky would skip, too. It was well before the Saltines were even a thought in any of their minds, well before their adventure in Canadia, it was a time of pure innocence, before any of their hands had ever dealt death.

Joel stared at Antonio for a long time, a very long time. His mouth working, as though he was trying to figure something out. Then he turned to try opening the door again, of course, it was still locked. Turning to Antonio he said, "There must be something wrong with the door," yes, he was close to puzzling it all together, "it must be jammed." Pausing again, he thought for awhile, "Do you have a phone, we need to get Rocky to un-jam it." *Well done, Joel.* Antonio thought to himself, not because he figured out the door problem, no, he was far from that, but because he would help him find Rocky.

Needless to say, after putting his cell phone back in his pocket, Joel was no help. Unfortunately, he did not know Rocky's phone number. After all, seven digits *is* a lot to remember. But, surprisingly, he *did* know where Rocky lived and before long Antonio was on the highway again, following his strange guide. Clarisse was quiet, although considering the turn of events, Antonio could not blame her. Just that morning he was a normal guy, well as normal as anyone could be, but now she must think he was the most complex, fucked up person in the world. Honestly, she might not be far from the truth.

Rocky's house was well hidden behind the clumps of trees separating him from the road, at the end of a long, winding driveway. Antonio's jaw dropped as he saw the sprawling house, the three car garage that was connected to the house via an enclosed breezeway was large enough to fit most families, yet it paled in comparison to the enormous structure adjacent to it. How Rocky could have made enough money to

purchase this mansion was beyond Antonio, especially since his store seemed to be so ramshackle. *I knew that reading paid off*, Antonio thought, *but I didn't know that selling books could be so lucrative*. Maybe with Rocky's business insights, he might be able to turn his failing store around.

The lights in the house were dark, but there were several cars parked in the driveway. An Audi-A4 and a Toyota Celica; *and these are the cars he doesn't park in the garage!* Antonio thought, man, he was definitely in the wrong business. For not the first time today, Antonio considered turning his little compact rental car around and heading anywhere else in the world, but with a deep breath he parked between Joel's Hummer and the A-4.

Retrieving their carry-on bags from the back seat of the car, Antonio and Clarisse continued to follow their dimwitted guide into the house.

"Hello?" Joel yelled into the cavernous foyer, "Rocky? Are you here? The door is jammed at the store, I can't get in!"

The sound of laughter and music were coming from the back of the house, and with a shrug Joel led the two; who were busy trying not to step over their tongues as they walked through the massive house. Antonio's boat, let alone his living quarters, could have fit within that foyer, books were definitely more profitable than he had thought.

Through the hallways, the smell of barbecued food wafted in the air, reminding both Clarisse and Antonio that they hadn't eaten since the Chinese food that morning. Even though Antonio no longer ate red meat, the smell of steaks made him start salivating.

“Rocky?” Joel began again as they walked through the corridors, “Rocky, are you here? I can’t work at the store if the door is jammed!” He was beginning to sound pissed. “Who is going to take care of the boxes in the back room if I can’t get to work? Someone has to move the boxes, and you said that I am the best at it!”

“What the heck are you talking about?” Rocky said as he came through the kitchen, “the door isn’t jammed, it’s---“ his words trailed off and he nearly fainted at the sight of Antonio and the beautiful young woman standing next to him. Rocky couldn’t help but stare at her breasts, they seemed deceptively large on her small little body.

Rocky was never one to swear, in fact the past four years he had successfully refrained from using words like “fuck” or “shit” or even “damn”, but the next sentence out of his mouth ruined his streak. “No fucking way!” He yelled, his smile splitting his face, “Vinnie! Mario! Come here quickly! You’re not going to believe this shit!”

Chapter 8

Jere was slow getting up the stairs to the second floor of his house, the lights were off but he could hear his cat scratching at the screen door; *Addis must have forgotten to let kitty in after he took the trash out*, he thought. *It's impossible to keep track of that pussy*. Gripping the railing helped him climb up the stairs, pausing a minute to catch his breath, before ascending the last few feet.

Flicking the switch to his dining room, he immediately removed his pants and walked to the fridge, pouring a healthy glass of white wine, he walked over to the table, opening the door to let Pussy come running in. The air outside was very cold, and the room was as chilled as his beverage. Sitting in his big leather chair at the end of the table, he sat down to watch TV. Picking his nose, he half-heartedly flipped through the channels, while peeking at his brain scratchings before popping them in his mouth. Kitty rubbed up against his legs luxuriously, then playfully scratched at the white, flabby flesh.

It was quite lonely, and Jere was lost in memory, thinking about the days when Antonio and his friends used to come by and spend time with him. Even Addis' company, which was frequent, was not nearly as much fun. He hoped that he had done right with them, he definitely tried his hardest. Someone had to teach those four that there was a world out there, away from the boondocks and the rednecks that inhabited them.

Off in the distance, he could hear music playing; another field party was just getting under way. Another group of lazy kids who would never realize their potential, if only they could break the shackles of the town they lived in. *If only....* He thought lazily.

The doorbell chimed, although Jere wasn't expecting anyone. *Probably Addis*, Jere thought to himself, *sweet kid, even though he's welcome any time, he always rings the doorbell first*. A moment passed, but Addis didn't enter. The doorbell chimed again.

"It's unlocked," Jere yelled from his table, and a few seconds later the door creaked as it was being opened. From his vantage point at the table, Jere could see anyone coming in; of course he also kept a katana blade within arms reach. It had been many, many years since he had last trained with it, but he was confident that he could still be deadly with it.

It had been years since a beautiful woman walked into his house by herself. Sure, the boys used to bring their girlfriends over and he would enjoy staring at them, before they went downstairs to the guest bedroom. But a long time had passed since one came to see him. Forgetting about the sword hidden behind him, he stared at the young woman who glided up the stairs. Her hair was as black as the night, her body both slim and bulbous in all of the right places. It was enough to make his old heart completely stop, he watched her come toward him. He had never seen her before, but his dirty old mind started coming up with images of the two of them together.

"Jere?" She asked quietly, though confidently, as she pulled a chair out from the table. "You probably don't remember me, do you."

Jere's memory was not what it used to be, but he would definitely have remembered seeing this girl before. "Hmmm," he said in that gravelly voice, "I used to

have a boy who cut my lawn, every time I saw him he had some knew piercing or different colored hair.” He said with a smile, “Did you finally decide to go all out, Keith?”

The woman just looked at him, clearly missing his joke. Her black dress seemed to be painted onto her body, she sat down gracefully to his right, and crossed her long, muscular legs; revealing that she was wearing nothing underneath.

“You don’t look familiar to me,” Jere said as he turned the tv off, “did you used to come around her with a boyfriend or something?” She was gorgeous, her perky breasts acted as two thermometers, and judging by their current state of erection, she must have been freezing.

She laughed melodiously, placing her hand on his knee. “No, honestly I have never been into your home. It is quite nice.” Her voice trailed off as she observed the room, noticing the shiny polished cabinets that held more treasures and artifacts. “Actually, it has been many years since we last met, I was just a little girl then,” her hand continued to run up his thigh, “as you can see, I am all woman now.” Her smile revealing that she was indeed a dirty bird, and perhaps she would need a little time over his knee to make her behave.

“My name is Katrina,” she said, “I believe you knew my father,” her voice trailed off again as she came within inches of his member, he definitely didn’t need Viagra, he needed Katrina. “do you remember my father?” She said, licking her lips seducingly, “do you remember Pierre au Saint?”

Jere certainly remembered.

The now black TV screen revealed a quick flash of silver at the sliding door behind Jere, instinctively sending him crashing to his side, kicking the girl's chair away from him as she also fell to the floor. Reaching out he seized his own blade from against the wall. With three carefully placed and gracefully executed swings, he was on his feet. An arm, still holding a long sword, had cut through the screen door and was now bleeding on the hardwood floors. Katrina's head was nowhere to be seen while her body lay motionless in front of him, with part of Pussy's tail laying next to it. Apparently, he wasn't as accurate as he used to be, but he was still deadly.

"So, this is what it has come to?" He said, as he pulled the woman's body to the bathroom. "Did you think killing me would avenge your father?" He shook his head, it was not the first time he had to kill someone who was consumed by evil, and somehow he knew it would not be the last.

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The street was dark and lonely, the wind fierce as it whipped across the empty lanes. Poppy pulled his jacket close to him, trying to keep all of the warmth he could. He had made enough money today to go get another hit, and fortunately, no one attacked him. It was always a good day when no one attacked him. Walking up the hill, his legs were shaky; whether it was withdrawal or from the cold, it was hard to tell. His addiction was a part of him, and had been for a long time, it was difficult to discern what were actually his feelings and what came from his need for crack.

He scurried from street lamp to streetlamp, pausing under each puddle of light, peering in all directions. His sudden paranoia could have been easily attributed to his

craving, but even Poppy knew it was something more than that. For the first time in God knows how long, someone actually took the time to treat him as more than a beggar, more than just an urchin living under the street. In fact, Poppy could not remember the last time someone actually talked to him, let alone give him a hug. He spent the rest of that evening walking around, not asking for money; but hoping that someone would give him some real affection. Sure, there were the numerous ho's who would do anything, even to him, for some extra green; after all, they needed a fix, too. But even Poppy felt dirty after having his way with some crackwhore who needed cash. So, he continued to wander up the street, to the place he called home; when he could afford it.

The usual toughs were chillin' on the corner, acting as tough as possible. Despite the blade that he carried, even Poppy avoided them. A knife was useless against a gun, and self-preservation was key. Ironically, however, they did their best to ignore Poppy as well. People like him always drew the attention of the local police, and while these guys were frontin' as bad ass mo' fo's, there was no need to draw attention.

Poppy couldn't help but feel dejected as he continued up the hill, there was no love. He came to the house he typically stayed at, near the dumpster he frequented when all else failed, far from the police station he went to on occasion, petty crimes were usually enough to get a meal and warm place to stay. He was a degenerate, he knew it, but it hadn't always been like that.

Climbing the rotting stairs to the house, he stepped over a body splayed out on the steps. He couldn't tell if the man was breathing, and didn't even check to make sure he was good; it was not an unusual sight. The house was dark inside, the windows boarded up, the heat hadn't been on in years. There was a small room on the third floor, a closet

with a bucket for a toilet, but it was cheap and everyone knew it was his. It wasn't much, but to him, it was home.

A man dressed in a three piece suit sat idly in the shadows, watching the door. Everyone knew that he was a junkie like the patrons, but he was the supplier. He was armed to the teeth, and underneath his small stool was a trap door that could lead to safety quickly should there ever be a raid. Poppy remembered him when he was a little boy, playing in the streets, shooting ball at the park. It was different then, the kid had a future; but he threw it all away. Now, everything he had was attributed to drugs; the rings, the gold watch, the nice clothes, the Lexus parked out back, it was all dirty money. If only Poppy hadn't gotten caught up in the scene, he too, could have been somebody.

Paying the man his nightly rent, plus extra for his hit, he took the small envelope and climbed up the stairs. Moans were coming down the hallway, whether from some crackwhore or someone O.D'ing, he had no clue, it was all the same to him.

His "room", a 6'x6' square hole in the wall, was dark. Getting an extension cord run was extra, and way too expensive; but he saw alright in the dark. Grabbing the small bundle tied up in the corner, Poppy began rifling through his belongings; pulling out his pipe and lighter. He crouched down on the floor, setting the paraphernalia next to him while he rummaged to the bottom of his bag.

The light in the room wasn't much, but he could make out the people on the picture clearly. He was so young then, had a whole future ahead of him. Now, he was nothing, a washed up junkie with nothin' better to do than get high and bum for cash. Maybe it *was* time for a change.

Putting his personal effects back, including the pipe, lighter and envelope; Poppy removed his belt and curled up in the corner. There were times when the belt was only good for finding a vein, there were a lot of other times when he considered putting it around his neck, but tonight it had a better purpose. Stuffing his mouth with the cheap leather, he bit down hard fighting the urge to light up. It was the first step to recovery, and no matter how many nights he was going to have to be like this, he was going to free himself from his vice.

Shuddering, with tears filling his eyes, Poppy lay awake all night in the fashion. When the sun finally came up, he took the still sealed envelope, his few belongings and was heading to the bus stop. A few touches and he'd get the cash he needed to go downtown, he could sell his little stash for a profit there; then grab a one-way ticket out of this place. For the first time in years, Poppy felt free.

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Chapter 9

Music was played loudly in the great room, the guests were sitting around the large mahogany coffee table, laughing and reminiscing all the while. Jasmine relaxed in the soft leather couch she shared with Mario and Danielle, who was perched on his lap with her arms wrapped around him tightly. Despite her head being so close to his, and her perky breasts blocking the otherwise unobstructed route, he still managed to put a beer bottle to his lips without disturbing her.

Antonio sat luxuriously in a padded chair large enough for him and Clarisse, but she was completely content sitting on the floor between his legs. After all, it was easier than having to get up from his lap every 15 minutes so he could go outside to have a cigarette. Her eyes were red from the constant bursts of laughter, and her sides were sore to boot, yet she continuously looked up at him, smiling fondly.

Completing the circle, Rocky lounged on a sofa with Carla's head nestled in his lap, not for the first time tonight, however this time she was not giving him the lube job he received earlier; but it was still so nice to her body cuddled up near his.

Vinnie returned to the room with another beer to sit on the arm of the couch, with his own arm wrapped behind his wife. Since the Saltines had been reunited completely, he was a ball of energy, getting up and making elaborate gestures for each story and joke

he told; as well as accompanying Antonio outside to the deck every 15 minutes, not to mention his need to take a piss every half hour, and his frequent trips to get another beer. Now, he barely left his wife's side, save to get another beer.

Despite his best intentions, he had been practically ignoring his wife all night; he tried his damndest to include everyone in the circle, to make sure everyone was having a great time. But he realized a long time ago that it was impossible to spread your attentions to everyone without ignoring your wife a little.

He was certainly more careful of that now, than he had been earlier. As a result of his assumed role of Master of Ceremonies, Jasmine had focused her own attentions more and more to Mario. While he tried not to dwell on it, his mind was racing with jealousy, accusation and overanalyzation. She hadn't done anything wrong, per se, but from the little bits that he overheard, he could not help but feel in some way threatened. The way she took sudden interest in everything he talked about, the way she complimented him, the way she scowled at the girl on his knee. *Was this just her way of getting me to pay attention to her?* He thought, while still throwing quips and punch lines into the conversation around him. *It's just like a woman to get all pissy just because she's not the center of attention.*

Overcompensating, as all men do, Vinnie leaned in to give his wife a kiss on the cheek. With an ostentatious yawn, she stood up and stretched her arms out wide; leaving Vinnie hanging in mid-air with his lips all puckered up. *Fucking cunt*, Vinnie thought.

"Well, it's getting late," Jasmine said behind her hand, stifling another dramatic yawn. "I will see you guys in the morning." With a smile, she regarded each of the Saltines, although Vinnie couldn't help but notice that smile linger a little bit longer with

Mario. *What the fuck?!* Turning around she gave Vinnie a self-satisfied look and headed off to bed. Soon after, Danielle, Carla and Clarisse each followed suit, giving their respective partners long, sultry kisses, before leaving the four Saltines alone in the living room.

“Wow, Vinnie,” Mario said with a smug look on his face, “I guess she told you.”

“Oh, she’s definitely getting it in the ass tonight.” Vinnie said, despite the laughter that erupted, for once he wasn’t joking.

“Anyone else need a beer?” Antonio said as he got up from the chair, casually adjusting himself to try and hide his massive cock-rocket.

“I’ll come with you,” Mario said as he got up off the couch to follow Antonio into the kitchen.

“What a fucking douchebag!” Vinnie hissed after Mario was out of earshot.

“What are you talking about?” Rocky asked, opening his eyes. He was lost in thought, wondering what it would feel like to try and get it in Carla’s ass; although he wasn’t sure if he could ever stick his dick up a woman’s ass.

“Mario; he’s being a total fucking prick tonight.”

Rocky carefully studied his friend before finally shrugging. He wanted to tell his friend to stop being such a retard, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t in his nature to ram a chick’s ass, and he definitely wasn’t going to get in between two friends.

“Oh my, God!” Mario said quietly in the kitchen. He was leaning against a large marble topped island, while Antonio stood just outside the screen door. “Dude, is Danielle not like *the hottest* chick you’ve ever seen!”

“Yeah, man,” Antonio said taking a drag, “Although you’ve gotta admit, that Carla is hot, too.” He tried to keep the exhaled smoke from coming back into the room, but to no avail. Hopefully Rocky won’t get pissed. “This whole fucking weekend is pretty fucked up; a good fucked up though.”

“Yeah, speaking of fucked up, dude,” Mario paused, unsure how much he wanted to reveal to his friend, “Have you ever been with a chick, but nothing happens?”

“Yeah dude, all the time.” Antonio replied.

“Seriously?” Mario felt a huge surge of relief, “I thought I was the only one; like there was something wrong with me.”

“No, there were a lot of times with Alexis that she would be too tired so we would just cuddle or something. Of course, after she fell asleep I jerked off like a mad man. Why? Is Danielle a prude or something?”

Any relief that Mario had was blown out the screen door.

“No, she’s not a prude at all. It’s nothing like that.”

“I bet she’s great in bed, right?” Antonio asked, flicking his cigarette over the railing.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Don’t want to talk about what?” Rocky said from the kitchen doorway, he was eyeing the trace amount of smoke that hung in the air concernedly.

“Nothing,” Mario said turning beat red.

“No, no there is definitely something,” Vinnie said following Rocky into the room.

“Look, it’s not a big deal or anything,” Mario wanted nothing more than to just let it go, but he knew his friends, and they could be relentless. Especially Vinnie. If anything, Vinnie would put on the full court press and pry it out of him. “This morning, Danielle and I were trying to get it on, but there was no response from downstairs.”

The lack of laughter and mockery was quite a surprise to Mario, maybe the Saltines had finally grown up, maybe the years of sophomoric behavior was behind them.

“How did she handle it?” Rocky asked, wanting to fully comprehend the situation before making any assessments.

“*Did* she handle it?” Vinnie asked.

“Of course she handled it,” Mario argued, “And sucked it and prodded it and everything! Christ, I would have let her rub peanut butter on it if I thought it was going to make a difference.”

“Crunchy or creamy?” Antonio asked.

“Creamy of course,” Rocky said matter-of-factly,

“Although crunchy might be better for you Mario, maybe subconsciously you really want some nuts on your nuts.” Vinnie quipped.

Mario just shook his head, thankfully the years of sophomoric behavior were not that far behind.

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It was almost 3:00am by the time that Rocky finally staggered to the bed and slipped between the covers with Carla. He was dunker than he had ever been, he could feel the room spin every time he closed his eyes. Strangely, despite having more to drink

and being much smaller, it was Vinnie who had to help Rocky walk back to the room. *How long had it been since the Saltines were all back under one roof?* Rocky thought to himself as he tried desperately not to vomit. It was amazing indeed, and he berated himself for his lack of temperance tonight. Ordinarily, he seldom indulged more than a few drinks. Of course, ordinarily he had few opportunities to drink with people other than Joel. And truth be told, Joel preferred to spend more time alone in the small apartment that Rocky had built in the basement for him than he did hanging out with him.

A soft moan reminded him that he was not alone in the bed, Rocky had forgotten just how wonderful it felt to have someone sleeping next to him. Reaching his massive arms out, he gently pulled himself closer to Carla. His head was cloudy, but he could feel her body rise and fall with each breath she took. Her skin was softer than the silk sheets they slept on, and it was all he could do to keep his fingers from running up and down the contours of her naked body.

Slowly, she turned to him; eyes half open. Surprisingly, she was not mad about being woken up; nor was she angry about his level of intoxication. Instead, she looked at him strangely, perhaps even lovingly? She closed her eyes and kissed him, pushing his head back into the down pillows. Her firm breasts were pressed up against his chest as she clung to his body. In no time Rocky was naked as well, and was hastily stuffing a pillow between the headboard and the wall, hoping that they wouldn't disturb his guests. But, the soft moans from Carla soon grew louder and louder until she was literally screaming with pleasure. With her hands on his broad chest, she was riding him for all he was worth. Had it not been for the alcohol, not to mention the oral exam in the garage, he

would have definitely blown his wad within the first few minutes. But, he knew he was going to be a long night.

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Vinnie didn't know what to expect as he opened the door to the bedroom, part of him wanted her to be asleep; a part of him wanted her to be awake, but no part of him wanted her to be angry with him. If he had only been able to pay more attention to her, if only he had tried harder.

Quietly, or rather as quietly as Vinnie could manage, he undressed himself and lay down next to his wife. He carefully wrapped one arm around her, and slipped one under the pillow trying to find a position that was mutually comfortable. No sooner had he laid his own head down then the covers were thrown open opposite him and Jasmine stalked over to turn the lamp in the corner.

The light hurt his eyes, but he quickly adjusted. Her face was silhouetted from the backlighting, but her body language spoke volumes. Arms crossed under her breasts, her luscious breasts, her feet planted. She was clearly waiting for something, and Vinnie could only imagine that it was an apology; and as far as he was concerned, she could stand there all night. As much as he loved his wife, he refused to apologize for things he didn't realize he was doing or had done. If anything, she should apologize to *him* for her behavior. Propping himself up on his elbow, he matched her stare. Not saying a word, just waiting. He realized it was going to be a very long night.

The soft wailing moans from down the hall grew louder and louder, *at least someone is getting some action tonight*, Vinnie thought to himself as he was still staring

at his wife; neither saying a word. Suddenly the moans grew louder and louder to full-fledge, all out screams of passion, causing Vinnie to burst out laughing. Throwing her hands in the air, and casting a look of disgust and disapproval to her husband, Jasmine briskly walked to the bed, stuffed a pillow under one arm, ripped the covers off of him and stalked out the door. He didn't know where she was going, and frankly he didn't care. He was just relieved that *he* wouldn't have to sleep on the couch tonight. In fact, at that moment the only thing that he cared about was finding another blanket.

Fortunately, one was waiting for him in a small closet, as well as two more pillows. Carefully walking to the door connecting his room to William's, he peeked in and found the little guy curled up fast asleep.

Closing the door, Vinnie returned to the bed and squeezed the pillows around his ears, until he too was fast asleep.

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Mario and Antonio had retreated to the balcony to escape the lusty sounds drifting down the hallway. While both wanted nothing more than to be in bed with their own women, they continued their conversation. *Women can wait*, Antonio thought to himself as he handed his pack of cigarettes to Mario, *friends are more important*.

"All I want to know," Antonio said exhaling, "is how the *fuck* did Rocky make so much money from a bookstore? You know, I love him and everything and wish only the best for him, but seriously! It's *just* a bookstore! He must be selling drugs or something, he *does* have a pager."

Mario shrugged. He, highly doubted that his friend would ever do something illegal. Although he too, had been jealous over Rocky's sudden wealth; but more than that, he was jealous that Rocky was *actually* fulfilling his dreams! Mario knew that he could have tried harder in college, perhaps going on to grad school like he had always talked about. But, cliché or not, it certainly was easier *said* than *done*. Hell, even Antonio was following his dreams, he had the balls to actually get out of Syracuse and try *something*, and even if his only success was finding Clarisse, it was more than he could say for himself. *Although, Danielle is amazing*, he thought lazily as he puffed away, *but maybe I could have done more with my life, too*. Then, of course, he thought of Vinnie's success. While he never would admit it, he had secretly wanted Jasmine when she first came walking up to them in the smoky Canadian restaurant some years ago. But, true to form, Vinnie was the one who went after her, and as always, everything worked out for the best with him. William was the most remarkable kid he had ever met; that smug look of pride and accomplishment on Vinnie's face as Mario and Danielle played with little William was forever burned into his mind. Being around a small child seemed so natural to Danielle, *maybe she would want to have kids with me?* Mario thought, where had *that* thought come from? Christ, he wasn't even able to sleep with her when he had the chance! No, Vinnie was just possibly the luckiest man in the world, and it grated Mario to no end.

"Dude, are you alright?" Antonio said, "you look like you're going to puke."

Mario had forgotten that Antonio was there, watching him intently as his head was slowly drifting toward the floor. His side burning, he threw his arms out to catch

himself from hitting the deck just in time, and soon was emptying every last drop of alcohol from his system.

Mario's heaves continued for what seemed like hours, his eyes were watery, his throat burning. Two sets of hands were now rubbing his back and giving words of comfort. When the final shudders of nausea passed by, started to get up. Though his nostrils could only smell the putrid acids from his stomach, he caught a faint whiff of a wonderful perfume; *I hope that Danielle did see me puking!* Mario thought, trying to spit out the awful taste in his mouth; yet much to his surprise, and relief, it was Jasmine who was helping him to his feet. She looked at him so lovingly, so sympathetically; Mario had never seen this from her before.

"Thank you," he said, as both Antonio and Jasmine turned their heads away quickly, it wasn't his fault his breath was so bad at the moment, placing a hand over his mouth he spoke through his fingers, "I suppose I should be going to bed now."

Slipping an arm around his back, and one arm around his shoulders, Jasmine and Antonio helped carry Mario to his rooms; with a brief stop at the bathroom so he could freshen up. Antonio stood beside his friend while he was brushing his teeth, trying desperately to get him to drink some water. Reluctantly, he accepted and downed the whole glass.

"Are you cool, man?" Antonio asked handing him a towel, "did you get it all up?"

"Yeah, I think I just rejected every drink I've had all weekend." Mario said, his throat was rough, and talking was not easy.

“This weekend!?” Antonio said, “Christ, man, I think you just rejected every drink you’ve *ever* had! The only time I’ve seen someone puke *more* was the night that Vinnie threw up all over the roof!”

Perhaps not all of the alcohol was out of his system, in fact, just mentioning Vinnie’s name made Mario turned and embrace the toilet one last time. *Always compared to Vinnie*, he thought in between dry heaves, *always one step behind, and never quite as much*. It was going to be a very long night indeed.

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Antonio was completely exhausted by the time *he* finally made it to bed.

Although, seeing Danielle’s naked breasts as he walked into the room carrying Mario was quite a nice surprise; and definitely unexpected. Perhaps he *should* have knocked first, but then again, how was Antonio supposed to know that instead of being asleep she was lying on the bed half-naked? After all, how many girls wait for their boyfriends naked, except for a tiny pillow between her legs?

He did feel a little guilty though as he pulled the covers around him and Clarisse, the sun was just peeking up over the horizon. It seemed like days had gone by since he last saw her, and now he pulled her tightly as she curled up beside him. *How long had it been?* Antonio wondered, his eyelids were very heavy now; Antonio wasn’t sure which was worse, Mario’s endless dry heaves over the toilet or Carla’s, it must have been Carla, Carla’s loud screams of insatiable passion. She had quieted down considerably, but she was still going strong; Christ, even a banshee would give up at sunrise! Whatever Rocky was doing to her, she either loved it or hated it.

With his arms around Clarisse, she lay her head on his chest. He held her as close

burst out of Rocky's even larger arms. "You had to sleep on the fucking couch, didn't you!"

"How is this *my* fault?" Jasmine protested, sitting across the living room from Vinnie, it was hard to tell if Mario was on guard to keep her from Vinnie or Vinnie from her. "You were the one who was asleep while someone walked through the room to take him!"

"Well, if Carla hadn't been screaming so God damn loud, I wouldn't have had to bury my head under a mound of pillows! Christ what the hell *were* you doing to her?"

"Don't try to blame Rocky for *your* bad parenting!" Jasmine snarled, Vinnie matched her snarl with a look of death.

"Enough!" Rocky boomed from behind the chair, large darks circles surrounded his eyes, clearly he had gotten little sleep the previous night. "Enough, both of you. Let's just try to keep our heads and we can figure this out."

"Exactly," Mario said crossing his arms, "There has to be a logical explanation for all of this."

"The only logical explanation that *I* can see," Vinnie began, "is that fucking whore you brought over must have had something to do with it. In fact, it was probably all three of those conspiring cunts!"

Rocky squeezed his friend tighter, more to restrain himself than Vinnie. Antonio had had enough though, and with Rocky's efforts to keep Vinnie controlled, he could not defend Antonio as well.

The sound of his knuckles against Vinnie's face rang through the hall, as stars danced in front of his watery eyes, the taste of blood on his lips. Surprisingly, it had made

Vinnie calm down, a little; if more recalcitrant as well.

“I’m sorry, Vinnie, I love you, but you crossed the line.” Antonio said, shaking the pain out of his knuckles. “And I’m sorry guys, but once again he’s probably right. I’m sorry I brought Clarisse here, I’m sorry that I didn’t hear her slip out of the bed; and believe me, I am sorry that I couldn’t have protected William.”

“You’re right, Antonio,” Mario said sitting down on the couch, “you’re right. It’s my fault, too. I can’t believe that I was so blinded by her, I thought she may have been the one.” Jasmine’s hand on his back was quite consoling. “If only I had known.”

“Well, I don’t care what you guys think,” Rocky said, relaxing his grip on Vinnie slightly, “I don’t believe for one second that Carla had anything to do with this. I’ve known her a lot longer than you guys, and trust me she is not the type of person who would harm *anyone*” He wanted to believe his own words, he *had* to.

“Where could she have gone, then?” Jasmine said from the couch, “There are three girls and two cars missing, and *my* baby is in one!”

“Maybe she followed them,” Rocky said disbelievingly, “or maybe she decided to go to work or something.”

“She would *steal* someone else’s car to go to *work*?” Vinnie said acerbically, “Face it, man, she is guilty, too.” His eyes had grown cold, distant of all emotion, but the sight of Jasmine with her hand on someone else’s back made every muscle in his body tense, if he could only break free; someone was going to pay for this, even if the price meant a dead Saltine, someone was *definitely* going to pay.

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After much debate, far too much in Vinnie’s opinion, a feeble plan was set.

Despite the fact that it pained him to no end, Rocky could not hold his friend at bay forever and was soon tying off the final knots securing Vinnie to the chair. His hands were bound behind his back, with a length of cord for each ankle to the chair.

Mario's Audi was no longer parked in the driveway, a piece of evidence that clearly indicated at least one of the culprits; so he and Jasmine took the Celica to notify the police. Oddly, after Vinnie was literally imprisoned in the chair, she *insisted* that Mario come with her, claiming that *he* was in no state to be left alone.

Rocky still believed that Carla was innocent, she *had* to be! Despite how irrational it was, he still adamantly argued that she *must* have gone to work, that Joel probably drove her. It was a futile argument at best, but at least he would be covering ground. Had it not been for the gag they stuffed in Vinnie's mouth, he would have pointed out exactly how stupid that idea was.

Antonio didn't have much to offer, but the least he could do was to drive around to all of the gas stations, asking the attendants if anyone recognized at least two of the women. He also wanted nothing more than to believe that Clarisse played no role in this; but he consented that finding William was more important than anything. Somehow, they could still make everything right.

Vinnie sat there as motionless as can be, watching the final car leave the long, winding driveway, until he started to struggle against his bonds. The coarse rope dug deep into his wrists, burning and bloodying the skin. His determination was fueled by a hatred like he had never felt before, abandoning his body's pain. He had to break free, somehow. He preferred using his wits to his muscles, but somehow he *had* to break free.

Suddenly, everything fell into place; and in spite of the long cloth tied around his mouth, he began to laugh.

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“I’ve never seen him act like this before,” Jasmine said quietly, “it’s like I don’t even recognize him anymore.” She sat motionless in the passenger’s seat, the Celica was nothing like his Audi, but it still handled very nicely. Mario stared at her, wanting to find the right words to bring her comfort, his heart was literally breaking for her. In one morning, she lost her son, and most likely her husband; it was more than anything he could bear.

“If,” he began, unsure of his words, “If there is anything I can do,” he wanted to be strong for her, someone had to, “please, don’t hesitate.”

Her cool eyes took him in, staring at him in a very peculiar fashion. Nodding, she returned to her stare out the window. Long moments passed, neither speaking. Mario was quite certain that Danielle had somehow been involved, dare he say that she had *conspired* this whole event, what a terrible thought! That would imply that everything, all of it, was just a way to use him. Had she somehow *known* that he would take her Syracuse, and eventually to William? Was it all just coincidence? He wanted to be rational, but truth-be-told, in such a short time she had really broken his heart. Every thought in his head told him that he should be *furious* with Danielle, that he should have been as enraged as Vinnie was, but he couldn’t bring himself to it. His heart wouldn’t allow it. He wanted to cry, he wanted to break down like a small child and weep his eyes out, not for what he had lost; but for what he could have had.

“I know how you felt about her,” Jasmine said, resting her hand on Mario’s, “I

could see it in your eyes, the way you smiled when you looked at her. You *do* have every right to be mad at her.”

Mario nearly swerved off the road when she spoke, *had she read his mind?* After all, she did have a very, unique, past. Could he even trust her? He eyed her suspiciously. No. No woman would intentionally plot their own child’s abduction. Clearly, from Vinnie’s reaction to her, no good can come of that.

Mario sighed, “I am not going to be mad with her. I should be, but I won’t.” Jasmine eyed him wearily, weighing him, considering. “Who knows, maybe she *is* innocent after all, maybe right now she is returning with William. I could never forgive myself for being untrustworthy of her.”

“You have a heart of gold,” Jasmine sighed, “a rare trait in men, so it seems.” She was lost in thought for a moment, “Y’know, Vinnie used to be so sweet, so loving. I thought he was the perfect man. But, it appears as though I was wrong.” Her hand began caressing his, softly, and she began to cry.

There must have been a million gas stations in Syracuse, and Antonio knew that he couldn’t search them all. They had each agreed to be gone only a few hours, to return at dusk to report their findings, or lack of their findings as he feared. He began with the usual places, the gas stations closest to the highways; chances are they would stop there first before traveling. His little rental car raced from station to station, inquiring behind each counter, describing the girls and William. No one had seen them, he was quite certain that any *one* of them would have caught the eye of any guy behind the counter, let alone three beautiful girls together! It was becoming more and more futile.

Stop-after-stop, he covered a significant amount of ground; and he too was in need of gas, not too mention cigarettes. His free pack was almost as empty as his gas tank.

It hardly seemed that it had just been yesterday he was pulling into the Sunoco station, he felt as though he had gone weeks without sleep; yet as the sun hung high in the sky he found himself back in the parking lot where this whole weekend seemingly began.

After fueling, he pulled over to the side. Locking the doors behind him, Antonio looked around, he expected to see Poppy come stumbling up to him at any moment. Strangely, he was not to be bothered by the homeless man today. At least seeing Kumar standing behind the counter was a semblance of continuity, at least *something* seemed normal. A rare feeling of late.

“Mr. Antonio!” Kumar began, “So good to see, Mr. Antonio, again! Two times in as many days, the good fortune must be with me.”

“I’m glad *someone* has some good fortune,” Antonio said with a smile, “mine seems to be no where to be found.”

“I am guessing that you are out of cigarettes, yes Mr. Antonio? Well, I have very good news, yes very good news indeed. You will certainly be most happy with the news I am about to give you, in fact, I am almost too happy to even tell you the blessed news you are about to hear.”

Antonio cringed, this had better be some *great* fucking news for the build up he was getting.

“It certainly appears,” Kumar continued, in truth, he never stopped, “that for a second day in a row, we have Camel Lights in a box for buy-one-get-one. Yes, I know

Mr. Antonio, this is incredible news indeed. Mr. Antonio? Where are you going, Mr. Antonio?”

From the corner of his eye Antonio had found his fortune, and it had just left the parking lot.

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The Two-in-the-Evening was locked tight, the only sign of entry had been from Mario’s concrete through the window, although the cardboard and duct tape was still intact. He walked through the empty aisles cautiously, it was clear now that Carla was implicated as well. How he wanted to believe that she was innocent, the evidence had been in his face all morning, but he could not pass judgment on her. It was a sign of how weak she had made him, strange since he had been so bold the night, and morning, before. *Women*, Rocky thought to himself as he went to the backroom, *apparently, none of the Saltines knew much about them after all*. It was a sobering thought.

The back room was very small, a counter lined one wall ending with a refrigerator, a round table with three chairs in the middle. At first he thought that a big spacious break room was ideal for his employees, a place they could “recharge their batteries” and go back to work with a fresh new spirit. How quickly he learned what a mistake that was. The plush chairs and couch that now adorned his living room, not to mention the oversized mahogany table, were quickly removed from the enormous break room as soon as he found his employees were spending more time in back than they were helping customers. It was also soon after that Rocky built the concrete wall he now found himself in front of.

The door was locked, of course, it had to be considering its contents; even with the most expensive security system he could get and the reinforced steel door, he still didn't feel as though the room was safe enough. The combination was one that only he, and by default, Joel knew. Rocky told him everything, mostly because he was the only person he had that he could call a friend. Fortunately, the man was too stupid to remember most of it. But, he had to know the combination in order to take care of the boxes back there.

Turning the dial, he matched the small engraved triangle to the third number and twisting the iron handle he pulled the door open just a crack to peer in. He hadn't expected to find anything back there, not even his precious cargo; after all Joel *had* left this morning as well, for all he knew he may have lead Carla right to it. At the same time, he wanted to open it and find the girls, with Joel by default, and William. Finding the boxes present did not overcome his disappointment of not finding William.

With a flick of the light switch, the fluorescent bulbs over head began to flutter, revealing the metal shelves and wooden crates extending deep down the long room. Once it was part of a large warehouse, and after a brief stint as being the break room, it again was used for storage.

Taking a crow bar from one of the crates, he began to pry the lid off reveal his precious quarry. With three of the boxes open, Rocky could finally breath a long sigh of relief. His latest shipment had arrived, and all was well. While his bookstore did offer a certain level of financial security, it was smuggling stolen goods that attributed to Rocky's wealth. It was not a career path he otherwise would have taken, one he merely stumbled upon. He never knew what the shipments would contain; sometimes jewels,

Chapter 11

The wooden chair constraining Vinnie was very well made, the knots securing his wrists were as tight as possible; but while Rocky did his best to ensure that Vinnie could not escape his efforts were flawed. It did not take Vinnie long to lean the chair back and slide his feet, plus the cord around them, free of the chair's legs. The next step was simply to stand up; and following some unique contortionism, his hands, while still bound, were pulling the gag from his mouth. He was loose.

Rubbing his wrists surreptitiously, he folded his long knife, putting it pack in his pocket and began pacing, plotting his next move very carefully. While there were still gaps, for the most part Vinnie had been able to figure out much more than the others had. The biggest question was what to do next. It was obvious he would have to wait for the rest of the Saltines to return, especially Rocky; but in the meantime there were some other answers he needed and only one place to start.

The garage and the driveway were both empty of cars, and Vinnie needed a

vehicle desperately. The sun was at its apex, but did little to warm him; although in truth he was a full of molten fury. Searching the back of the house, he found one of the clues he was looking for, before walking to a small builders shed. A large rock handily removed the padlock, but all he found was a riding lawnmower. He needed a vehicle, badly, and strongly considered the lawnmower, but as he was sitting on it, a strange lump under a bed sheet caught the corner of his eye.

Vinnie had never ridden a motorcycle before, but as he stared at the machine with the white covering in his hands, he knew that now was as good a time as ever to learn. Pushing the chopper out to the lawn, he couldn't help but admire the shiny chrome and the plush leather. Putting all of his weight onto the lever, the engine fired up like a guttural roar from hell itself. Tearing up the lawn behind him, he eventually weaved his way down the long driveway and out onto the open road, he was uncertain whether he would find the man he sought, but it was his only hope.

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Jasmine tried to hold it together while she was talking to the police, giving very detailed descriptions and showing what seemed like every picture she had ever taken of William. Mario was relieved that the police officers from the night before were no where to be seen; he couldn't imagine how he was going to explain that. Being picked up one night for breaking and entering, even though he *technically* didn't enter the store, then the next day reporting a kidnapping. The strangest part was Jasmine's request of a restraining order against her husband; this was not good in Mario's eyes. He wanted to attribute their behavior to stress and trauma, but it was becoming clear that any type of reconciliation was going to be hard. *Maybe I can help them*, he thought while Jasmine signed the

necessary paperwork, *maybe I can find William and bring the whole family back together!* He knew it was his chance at being a hero.

The request for the restraining order took much longer than Mario had hoped, and included a brief visit to the courthouse; Mario added up the hours, it was precious time being lost. Every minute *could* have brought them closer to finding William, every second was one that they could not afford to lose. He desperately wanted to help, to do something so much more, but for the time being he was relegated to being Jasmine's chauffeur, or so it felt, at the very least he was going to try and be stable for *her*.

If anything at all, being with Jasmine helped keep his mind off of Danielle. It seemed so surreal, one minute he was holding her in his arms, the next she was gone and all hell was breaking loose. *Could she have been the one?* He thought, he tried his best to believe, he wanted to believe, he *had* to believe. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and the look on her face as she peered up at him so lovingly, so adoringly was forever burned in his retina. An image he would cherish always, regardless of the outcome of the weekend's events. If anything, he knew that the bar was raised; higher than he could have ever imagined. Any girl that came into his life now was going to have to compete with Danielle. The way she tended his wounds, the way she laughed at all of his jokes, the way she placed all of her attention on him. Yes, the bar had been raised quite high.

The autumnal landscape seemed alien to him, instead of seeing the beautiful colors that fall brings; it was bleak and gray. He was empty inside, his heart aching more than anything he had ever felt. He wanted to scream, to cry, to beat the life out of something; but he had to maintain calm. Rational thinking was the only answer, it was a

puzzle that he was going to have to figure out. As he drove down the country lane, heading back to Rocky's house, he knew there was something odd; something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Something just didn't make sense; it was like an itch on his back that he just couldn't quite reach, and he was wracking his brain trying to figure it out.

"I really appreciate your help," Jasmine said coolly, surprisingly Mario hadn't realized she was stroking his knee, "this has been hard for all of us, and I don't think I could get through this without you."

Mario glanced at her while trying to drive, there was something very familiar in her countenance. As crazy as it seemed, it was very much the way that Danielle had looked at him. That one night in the Niagara, so many years ago, had she looked at him *that* way, he probably would have fainted; but his loyalty was to his friends though. No woman would *ever* get in the way of that.

"Jasmine," Mario said, trying to be firm, "I think you are making a huge mistake." There it was out, he had to set her straight somehow. "Vinnie loves you, and you *know* that you love him too."

Jasmine started laughing, an odd response.

"Vinnie doesn't love me," she said, her soft lips curling into a pout, "he used to, at least. But I saw the way that Antonio looked at Clarisse, I saw the way that Rocky looked at Carla, and I *definitely* saw the way that you looked at Danielle. *That*, is love." Her arms were suddenly crossed beneath her breasts, they were very large; and Mario couldn't help but notice the way the seatbelt across her chest managed to making the outline of her bra clearly discernable. "All night long, all I wanted was a look like *that*

from him.”

“Then why didn’t you say something to him? Why did you get so angry?” Mario wished he understood women better, Christ, Quantum physics was easier to understand than women. Organic chemistry was easier to understand. At least there were constants in science and math, the only thing constant about women was that they were *constantly* changing.

“Why should I have to tell my *husband*,” spitting out the last word, “that I *want* affection from him? Shouldn’t he offer it up freely, openly, without any question?” She did have a point, maybe women weren’t so hard to understand after all, “One night, we were making love, at least that’s what *he* calls it, more often than not I feel like a warm blow-up doll to him; and I had to *ask* him to kiss me!”

Mario wasn’t sure how comfortable he was hearing about what goes on in his friend’s bedroom, but she continued. “Do you know what he said to me?” Jasmine said haughtily, Mario could only imagine what Vinnie would say at a time like that, “My arms are tired!” She threw her arms up in disgust. “Does *that* sound like love to you? Does *that* sound like someone who actually cares?”

Mario only shrugged. Vinnie was predictable most of the time, but some things he did were beyond explanation. At times, Vinnie was like that itch on your back that you just can’t reach. Suddenly, Jasmine started crying again.

“Mario,” she said in between sobs, “promise me that when we find William you will help us, protect us. I’ve never seen Vinnie like this, and it scares the hell out of me.” Tears were welling up in her blue eyes as she stared at him, Mario knew he had to be a rock.. Although, the thought of filling those shoes, taking Vinnie’s place... no, his loyalty

was to his friend, it *had* to be; but there was something tempting about that offer. He wanted to say yes, but he couldn't take over for someone else's family. Could he? He could imagine how wonderful it would be to have a family of his own, to have a loving wife sitting next to him, while their child, *his* child, sat in child seat, dangling little legs to and fro.

"No one is going to hurt you, Jasmine. I promise." Mario slammed his foot down on the gas pedal, a piece of the puzzle had fallen into place, the unreachable itch had just been scratched.

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The house was nothing like Vinnie remembered, years of neglect had reduced the once manicured landscape into nothing more than unruly shrubs wrought with overgrown weeds and vines. The place had a feeling of cold, the paint peeling, the siding warped, the windows were dark; it was certainly uninviting. Vinnie pushed the motorcycle down the street, he was banking on the element of surprise. Just standing in the driveway was dangerous enough, and he was going to need every advantage possible for what he was planning. It was desperate, and there was no indication in his mind that this could even work; but his son was too important to not take risks. He was rolling the dice with fate; and he may not even live long enough to toss them.

A quick scan of the perimeter of the house looked safe, the back of the house was more neglected than the front; but there was nothing threatening, outside at least. Cautiously going to the front door, Vinnie took a deep breath; his stomach was dancing and he wanted to hurl; *it's the only way*, he thought as he placed his hand on the knob, *it's the only way....*

Surprisingly, it was unlocked and Vinnie entered as quietly as he could. His steps light, careful not to make any sound. The hallway was cold, colder than anything Vinnie had ever known, it felt like death. The faint sounds of a fire crackling drew him deeper within the house, the dust unsettling with every step causing small motes to linger into the air. Vinnie stifled a sneeze and continued, his heart was racing, he was definitely going to throw up. *If only the other Saltines were here*, he thought, but knew that was never going to happen. *They* had made their choice, it was clear as crystal, and so had he.

“I wasn’t expecting you so soon,” a low, booming voice announced. The man was taller than most, his long black hair hanging to his shoulders as he faced the fire, one arm resting casually on the mantle. Vinnie could have thrown his steel straight into the man’s back, killing him quickly, but he wanted answers first. “It has been too long, Vinnie.”

The man turned around, his long black coat hanging to the floor. There was something unusual about him though, something Vinnie hadn’t recalled from their previous meetings. His eyes, black as night, were heavy; deep furrows had creased the edges. His nose was sharp, he looked much like a raven; a raven who was ready to gorge on carrion.

“I didn’t come to fight you, Farloh,” Vinnie said, “I’ve come here for answers.”

The man’s laughter filled the room, but his eyes never changed. “Answers? You think that *I* have answers for *you*?” The man’s laughter subsided, “If anything, I should be seeking the answers.”

Vinnie’s hands tensed, suddenly the six inches of steel in his pocket didn’t offer as much protection as he had hoped. This was dangerous, deadly; the man was like a viper ready to spring at any moment.

“Where is he?” Vinnie demanded, “Where is my son?”

Farloh’s eyebrow arched questioningly, “What son?” Picking his glass of wine from the mantle he stepped toward Vinnie, “I’m afraid I have no knowledge of your son,” he moved slowly, “yes, it has been some time since my eyes have given information about you, a pity. You could have been quite powerful, had *she* not poisoned your mind with thoughts of *love*.” His mouth was snarling, the look in his eyes showed no love lost for the woman he spoke of. “Yes, it appears as though all of my plans had failed that night. For the past four years I have been waiting, hoping for a chance at retribution. Oh, I could have taken out Rocky years ago, and no one would have known; let alone cared. Pity, indeed. And Mario? Why, he would have been fool enough to not even fight back. As for Antonio,” Farloh paused, his expression unreadable, “Well, I fear that his time will come soon enough.” He suddenly stopped, a mere few feet separating him from Vinnie. Vinnie wanted to lunge himself at the man, to rip his throat out, to remove his appendages limb by limb, but fear kept his feet planted. “And as for you, Vinnie, it is such a pity to have to kill you. From the moment I met you, I knew that you could have been very powerful, very dangerous. Had you succeeded on my little mission, I would have placed you to my right, so that all would tremble before both of us. You would have been my successor of course, with power and glory unknown to any man!” He smiled, a fatal smile, “But, now I know there is a son....” His voice trailed off, “A son to be molded and trained, to be more powerful indeed!”

Vinnie’s body trembled with fear, his hands shaking violently, trying his best to maintain any composure he could. “Tell me where to find them, and I will obey.” His voice was shaking, “I will hunt them down, I will kill them all if I have to; just leave my

son alone.”

“A perilous bargain,” Farloh hissed, “A treacherous path to be tread lightly.” His eyes were weighing Vinnie, “But, I’m afraid that there will be no bargain, Vinnie. For you, it will only be death!”

A quick flash of silver was all Vinnie saw, as he dodged the blade coming toward his ribs; the dance of two men with knives drawn; flowing with a beautiful grace. Stabbing, slashing, the ring of blade meeting blade; the room swirling in Vinnie’s eyes; images, objects all blurring together in one fluid motion. Suddenly, time seemed to stop.

For Vinnie, every contest and every challenge had a distinct winner; a clear loser. But, for the first time, he found himself in a draw. His arm outstretched, with his wrist caught by Farloh’s hand, was all that kept him from cutting the other man’s throat. Farloh’s blade, equally hovering near Vinnie’s jugular, was suspended by his other hand. Each man statically pressing their blade closer and closer, yet not making any sudden movements; it was a test of time. Waiting for the right opportunity, waiting for the opponent to make a mistake; sweat was beading on Vinnie’s forehead, his muscles began to feel like water as he held on desperately, it was like hanging on a sheer cliff by his fingernails. He could sense the cold blade, he could imagine the feel of it ripping through his skin; his veins bulging. Suddenly, the man laughed again.

“If you kill me,” he said quietly, “you will become me.” Vinnie’s eyes grew wider and wider, “I cannot be destroyed, I *will* live on!” His heart was racing, hands growing weaker; “your son will be mine!” Farloh howled, it was a mad man’s cry.

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Antonio's tires squealed as he tore out of the parking lot, leaving a long trail of black rubber on the asphalt, it was all he could do to keep his quarry in sight. How fortuitous that two of the girls he was looking for would be filling up for gas at the same station he was in. It was a stroke of luck he had not expected, and was not about to lose. Racing down the boulevard, he managed to catch as many green lights as reds, and pressed the gas down harder on every yellow; although he knew that he had to keep a little distance between himself and the Audi. With any luck, he would follow them directly to William. His pulse was racing, and his hands were sweaty on the wheel; it was all falling into place.

He was very relieved to see only Danielle and Carla in the car ahead of him; there was still a chance that Clarisse was innocent after all! He tried not to get his hopes up, but his expectations were high. He had thought that she was a gift sent down from above; but after the morning's events he had felt the burden of guilt, knowing that had she not come with him to Syracuse, things may not have occurred the way they did. If she was involved, however, and he ever *did* get his hands on her...*I can't hurt a woman? Can I?* Antonio thought to himself, as he weaved in and out of traffic as circumspectly as possible. It was bad enough that he had hurt girls emotionally in the past, their names bored into his head never to be forgotten; he felt pain like no other thinking about those girls.

The Audi pulled into an all-too-familiar parking lot; the entire weekend seemed to be repeating itself. First a chance encounter at the gas station, now a return to the Two In The Evening. Antonio intentionally went around the block, putting a little more distance

between himself and the girls, it was a risky move. On one hand, he had the chance of surprising them; on the other he ran the risk of losing them. Luck had been on his side once already, hopefully it hadn't run out.

Impatiently sitting at each red light he hit, wishing he had more cigarettes, Antonio drummed on the steering wheel with anxiety. Time was of the essence, he could not lose them. As soon as the final green light was given, Antonio pulled into the parking lot. Fortunately, the Audi was still there; parked next to Rocky's Mustang. Both cars were empty. He still had a chance.

In the day time, the store did not look as run down as it had; in fact, it was quite nice. Antonio suddenly felt abashed for feeling jealousy over Rocky's good fortune, he wished the best for all of his friends. Although he still wondered how much money *could* be made from a bookstore. Focusing on the task at hand, Antonio set a plan. Rocky must have been inside the store, too. With the two of them, they could easily take care of two girls; and hopefully not have to come to blows with them. At the very least, he and his large friend could overpower them, and hopefully drag some answers out in the process.

A part of Antonio was actually a little disappointed as he jogged to the store, he would have liked to see Clarisse again, even if it was under the worst of circumstances. But, that would have to wait for another day.

The store was quiet, with no signs of anyone to be seen. Antonio quickly crouched behind a small bookcase, and scurried through the aisles on his hands and knees. He was going to ambush them if given a chance. *Reinforcements are on the way!* He thought to himself, as he dragged himself throughout the store; if he did see those bitches he was gonna bring the hammer down!

Suddenly, he heard the two girls laughing as they strolled casually out of a back room. Antonio sat quietly, listening intently.

“That was easier than I thought it was going to be!” Carla said as she picked a book up off one of the shelves. “It’ll take anyone hours to figure out he’s in there, thank God he doesn’t have a cell phone!”

“I was terrified that he would see us,” Danielle said, sitting down in one of the oversized chairs, “He is so much larger than either one of us, he certainly could have overpowered us despite our combined efforts.” Carla nodded with agreement.

“Would you like some coffee?” Carla said as she began to brew a pot, “We still have a long time before our rendezvous with Clarisse and the others,” Antonio wanted to scream knowing that Clarisse was involved; and the *others*?

“Please,” said Danielle, “I would love some. But, you must tell me more about last night! I admit, it is a shame that we had to deceive the boys; they are quite attractive. Especially, Mario.”

“You’re right, it is a shame. But, we had orders.” A sly smile crept across Carla’s face as she poured the water into the coffee maker, “Although, what I wouldn’t give for one more time with Rocky. My pussy is *still* sore from last night!”

“Well, I am glad that *someone* got some action last night,” Danielle said, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. “The things that I would have done to Mario if given a chance, I was ready to give up being a Ritz just to be with him.” Danielle paused, “I cannot help but think that somehow he knew not to trust me, as though the man has such incredible will power he could not even get aroused. It is mind boggling to say the least.”

“Did you two do anything?” Carla asked, sitting across from Danielle in another chair, crossing her legs casually.

“We tried,” Danielle said softly, “How I wish we could have. I have been so horny since bringing him back to my apartment. In fact,” Danielle said blushing, “I even masturbated with a pillow while waiting for him last night.” Her arms were no longer crossed beneath her large breasts, as she slowly moved a hand between her thighs.

“Perhaps, I could be of assistance?” Carla said, striding over to the other girl, “we do have some time to kill.” Her smile was as mischievous as any Antonio had ever seen.

“Please do,” Danielle said eagerly, “my pussy has been wet all weekend, perhaps you can help.” She quickly unzipped her black pants, leaning back while Carla began licking the inside of her creamy white legs. Even from behind the bookcase, Antonio could smell the lingering scent of her warm pussy. He tried to think about something else, anything at all; baseball, concerts he had been to, even the old woman he had walked in on accidentally while she was changing out of her wetsuit at the shop. But nothing worked. The launch sequence had been activated. Danielle’s soft moans were echoing through the empty store; which did little to keep Antonio’s erection at bay. Peeking around the corner, he could see Danielle was completely naked now, laying on the floor while Carla, also naked, was slowly working her fingers inside of Danielle. Their bodies were pulsating together in the most sexual rhythm Antonio had ever seen. He wanted to take notes, if *he* could make a woman’s body do that he could satisfy every girl he ever encountered.

It was very uncomfortable crawling on the floor quietly with one of the biggest hard-ons Antonio had ever had; but he slowly made his way closer to them. He wasn’t

sure that he could grab both of them at once; in fact he was quite sure that if he even touched *one* of their naked bodies he was going to splooge down his pant leg. He was going to have to wait it out.

Suddenly, the muffled sound of an engine being started came from the back room. Carla quickly got off of Danielle and began putting her clothes on. Danielle immediately followed suit. Antonio used the opportunity to get into a crouching position, ready to spring at any moment. As soon as one was decently dressed....

The sound of steel grinding against steel could be heard from the back room; a terrible sound of metal being ground against metal. Danielle whipped her head around as a giant crash echoed through the store. Antonio leaped at her half-naked body, at least she had put her bra on, and tackled her to the ground. While she was busy trying to wiggle away he, Carla threw her body on him, using her fingernails to claw her way through him to rescue Danielle. Someone was biting him, his hair being pulled in two different directions. *Christ!* Antonio thought, *Can't women fucking fight fair?* Suddenly, Carla's weight was no longer on top of him, and he was able to subdue Danielle enough to pull her arms behind her back. It was a relief like no other to see Rocky standing behind him, Carla bound by Rocky's massive arms. They were going to get some answers indeed.

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Chapter 12

The room was dark and still, neither man moved an inch; a sudden flinch or unexpected move could easily bring death. It was all Vinnie could do to maintain the grip on his blade, let alone the grip on the other man's wrist. Time seemed to stand still, as each man pressed their blade slowly toward the other man's throat. Vinnie truly began to wonder how he was going to survive this battle, thoughts of his own demise flashed through his head. *Would anyone even care?* It was a morbid thought, *I have been abandoned by the ones that I love*, his eyes began to strain as he clung desperately; his thoughts becoming more and more opaque, he needed to find an advantage soon or it would all be over.

Vinnie's strength was waning, he was growing far too tired; he realized he could not keep the stalemate up forever. The wounds on his wrists from being tied to the chair had reopened, blood running down his wrist held by Farloh. It took all of the extra

strength he could afford to pump the handle of his knife, causing more blood to slowly trickle out. He could feel Farloh's fingers slipping, as he clung desperately to Vinnie's bloody wrist; until finally the grip was loosened enough and his hand was released. The blade sliced cleanly into Farloh's neck, his eyes glazing over dropping the blade he held to clutch his throat. All color had been flushed from his face, the dark red blood flowing through his fingers and down his chest.

Staggering back, Farloh tried to gasp for air but to no avail; the once towering man dropped to his knees as life rushed out of him. Vinnie had killed before, but he had never felt satisfaction from it, and even now as he watched his assailant slowly die, he was overcome with remorse.

Vinnie watched as the man's features began to change; his hair, black as pitch, turning a silvery gray. His face becoming withered and furrowed from age. His hands, caked with blood, became wrinkled and frail. Strangely, Farloh smiled. "I am free," he said through gasps of air, "you've released me." Tears welled in the old man's eyes, "Tell Katrina that I love her, and that I have always been proud of her."

Vinnie cautiously slid to his knees and approached the old man, helping him lay on his back. "Who is Katrina?" Vinnie asked quietly.

"My daughter," Farloh wheezed, his blood collecting in a puddle beneath him, "tell her Pierre loved her." A final breath of air escaped through the man's body, his lifeless eyes staring back at Vinnie, the man died smiling.

Vinnie immediately began convulsing, he felt something foul surging through his body. He felt cold and numb, his head began throbbing as he clutched his temples. Images danced in his mind, places he had never seen, people he had never met. Pieces of

information surging through his brain, millions of flashes exploding inside of his head, each one revealing something important, yet Vinnie could not discern one from the next. His eyes stung, his ears were ringing, he flailed violently on the ground trying futilely to regain himself, to gain some type of control. He did not even recognize his own blood stained hands, he felt as though he was in someone else's body; or rather someone else was in his. It was all one giant blur, everything seeming so foreign; an image danced in his head, something he could see in his mind as though looking through a window into the backyard, he saw a face he recognized and howled into the empty room.

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"What do we do with them?" Rocky asked, as he finished tying Carla's hands together, he was getting far too much experience with this lately.

Antonio pressed a cold compress to the back of his neck, he *still* couldn't believe that bitch had bit him! "You can fucking kill them for all I care," Antonio said coldly, "but first we have to find out where William is."

The two girls looked at each, their eyes wide open, panic read clearly across their faces. Antonio knew that he did not have the constitution to kill them, and he was quite certain that Rocky could not either; but the girls did not need to know that. Walking over to Danielle, Antonio crouched down beside her to check her restraints. It was painful to see a woman bound like that, and Antonio prayed that he would never have to do it again. But had she not tried to kick him in the balls, he would have left her sitting on the couch next to Carla.

"I'll take this one," Antonio said referring to Danielle, "you can take the other one. Question her, find out all that you can, and we'll see how their stories match." He turned his attention back to the girls in front of him, "and the one who lies, dies."

“How do we know which one is lying and which one is telling the truth?” Rocky asked, there was no way in hell he was going to kill anyone ever again.

Antonio looked at his friend, he hadn’t thought about that part before. The fact that “lies” rhymed with “dies” just made it a really cool thing to say, like something the hero would say in the movies.

“I don’t think they will risk lying, do you?” He said to the girls tied up on the floor, they shook their heads emphatically from side-to-side. Hopefully, there would be no need for bloodshed.

Rocky led Carla to the back room, the large steel door was ruined and laying off to the side where the forklift left it. Placing her on a crate, he began loosening her gag enough so that she could talk. She immediately started to plead her case when Rocky raised up a hand telling her to stop; her mouth snapping shut. He stared down at her, and began pacing. He had so many questions, and he didn’t know where to begin. Finally he stopped and rounded on her, cold fury staring deep into her eyes.

“Did it mean anything?” He asked sternly, “Last night, in the garage, at Denny’s, did it mean anything at all?”

Carla stared up at him, tears forming in her eyes, she quickly cast them to the floor, anything to avoid having to look at him. A minute ago, he was a man to be feared, now he was just a man who she had hurt far worse than anyone else in her life. Tears streaked down her face as she slowly nodded. “I love you, Rocky.” She said, her voice shaking, “I love you more than I have ever loved anyone else in my entire life.” Her body started to tremble, and shook even more as Rocky placed a giant hand under her chin; lifting her face slowly to stare at her.

“Then why did you do it?” he said quietly, “How could you do it?”

Carla stared back him. She wanted to scream, she wanted to throw her arms around him and apologize, never stopping until he was finally convinced. “She made me betray you,” she said in between sobs, “I wanted to be with you, everything I felt last night was real, but I had no choice but to obey her.”

“Who made you do it?” Rocky asked, “Danielle?”

Carla shook her head violently, “No, not Danielle.”

“Then who?” Rocky asked, he was growing impatient, he hated feeling impatient.

“Jasmine.” Carla said as she broke into hysterics, “I’m sorry, Rocky. I’m so sorry, I’ll never hurt you again. I promise.”

Rocky was a large man, more muscular than most he had ever encountered; yet at that moment it took every ounce of strength he could muster, ever last bit of power he had, to turn around and walk away.

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Antonio sipped casually from a glass of water, practically ignoring Danielle, although he carefully memorized her facial expressions. Everyone made fun of him for being stupid, not that he was of course. He just made very little effort in school, well the days that he actually went. Sitting in a class was boring, and he was too busy dreaming of all of the really cool things he wanted to do; like starting a band or making movies or something, and in truth you didn’t need an education to make those dreams come true. He really was much more astute than people gave him credit for, even if he never did go to college like the others had. Had anyone been watching him now, they would have thought he was an experienced trial lawyer.

“So, let me get this straight,” he finally said, setting the glass down, he had a feeling that Danielle was telling the truth, but he wanted to turn the screws to her. He thought that perhaps a little misdirection was in order. “A woman three times the size of Mario came streaking across the parking lot and rescued him from the large man kicking his ass?”

Danielle nodded.

“But *you* didn’t do anything to help?”

“I didn’t know what to do!” She protested, “I wanted to help him, but I was so scared.”

“Yet you weren’t too scared to betray the man you claim that you love?”

Danielle averted her eyes, he knew he had her cornered. “And,” he said emphatically, “You claim that you had never met Carla or Clarisse before, is that correct?”

Danielle nodded again, and Antonio stared at her. He had extracted all of the information he needed from her, enough to confer with Rocky at least and certainly enough to locate William but there were a few more things he wanted to know.

“So, you love a man, yet you won’t help him when he’s getting his ass kicked.” Antonio continued, “You betray the man that you love by conspiring to kidnap his friend’s son,” he had her now, he was finally getting to the best part, the part he wanted to know the most about, “But worst of all!” He said pounding his fist down on the table for emphasis, “You engage in a *sexual* act with *another woman* whom you’ve never met before, in a *public* bookstore, the *same day* you betray that man you *love*?!”

Danielle burst into tears, “I know, I know I’m a terrible person. I understand if

Mario never wants to speak to me again,” she sobbed, “What can I do? What can I ever possibly do to make it up to him!?”

Antonio paused, he hadn’t expected this, but it was good. “Well, for starters,” he said as he knelt down beside her, trying to be consoling, “you can tell me exactly what Carla was doing to you, and how it felt, and how I can do that to a girl.”

Danielle looked at *him* questioningly, this was certainly not the turn of events she was expecting either. She tilted her head, weighing how much Mario meant to her, she was about to answer when Rocky entered the room and saved her.

“What’d you find out?” Rocky said, his fists were tightly clenched, by the look on his face he wanted to kill someone, Danielle squeaked when she saw him; she was clearly afraid that he had hurt Carla.

“*Almost* everything,” Antonio said, standing up, “but the important stuff at least.”

“Me too,” Rocky said quietly. “So, where’s William?”

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Mario parked the Celica in the empty driveway, they were the first ones back. As he walked toward the house, he suddenly remembered Vinnie being tied up. *How could we have done that to him?* He thought, he suddenly was afraid of going inside, to face that. At the time, it seemed like the natural thing to do, but now that a few hours had passed, he was ashamed of his actions. More importantly, he was afraid of the lashing Vinnie would give if they *ever* untied him. He would never in a million years let *that* go, he would hang it above their heads forever. All-in-all, it was probably the shittiest thing they had ever done, and Mario could not bring himself to face it.

Jasmine caught up, and quickly took his hand in hers. “Are you alright?” She asked.

With a shake he regained himself, “Uh, yeah,” he said, “I was just thinking about what we did to Vinnie, he’s probably going to be pretty pissed off.”

“Are you serious?” She asked, putting her hands on her hips, “the man is a complete psycho! *You* had to do something! *You* saw how he was acting!” She softened her tone, and took his hand again, “Mario, you saved me this morning. You are a hero to me.”

Mario couldn’t help but puff his chest out a little, maybe he was a hero. Strangely, he thought it would feel differently, more grandiose. Something in his head still said that it was wrong, but as he stared down Jasmine, looking up at him so admiringly, he felt a little more reassured that they had done the right thing. He loved Vinnie, but it was true that he was out of control and someone had to take care of the situation.

With a deep breath, Mario took Jasmine by the hand and led her toward the house. He could only imagine the wrath that Vinnie would give him, but he was going to be strong. If not for Jasmine, then for the Saltines. Sometimes, the ends justify the means; and as long as the end brought William back, then anything else that transpired would be forgiven.

Mario was not sure what to expect when he walked into the living room. He assumed that it was going to require a lot of time talking to Vinnie to calm him down, to help him see that they were right and he was in the wrong. But as he stared at the empty chair, and the bundle of the cords on the floor, he began to shiver. Vinnie was loose, he could have been anywhere in the house; he could be watching Mario at that very moment

waiting for a chance to attack.

“How did he get loose?” Mario asked, although he did not expect an answer. “Unless, *someone* freed him?” He was growing considerable cold. Jasmine was pressed to his side, her head buried into his chest. She was shaking uncontrollably, he assumed she was crying out of fear. Unthinkingly, he wrapped his arms around and pulled her close to him. She really had such a trying day, it was a wonder she could even continue on. “Could the police have arrested him?” He asked, but she shook his head into his chest. Her breath was warm through his shirt; her body warmer.

He continued to hold her in the great room, slowly spinning around to peer in all directions. Searching the house could have revealed Vinnie, but Mario wanted to wait until the other two Saltines were there. It was a very unexpected twist of fate.

“Are you alright?” Mario said, looking down at Jasmine; although he was more concerned with his surroundings. His muscles grew tense as he prepared himself for an attack at any moment.

Jasmine looked up at him, placing her hands around his neck and kissed him. Mario wanted to resist, he knew that he should resist; but he couldn’t help himself. Forgetting about everything, he found himself lost in the moment; kissing his friend’s wife. Mario knew that this would probably go down as a moment of idiocy.

Pulling away quickly, Jasmine suddenly screamed, squeezing her eyes shut and pulling her hands over her ears. She was rolling on the ground uncontrollably. Mario had never made a girl do *that* just by kissing her; and he certainly never seen a women show such regret for cheating on her husband. Quickly crouching down beside her, he tried to comfort her. “Are you ok?” he asked.

“Something has changed, something is very different,” she said faintly, “He can see, He can see and hear everything!”

Mario had no idea what she was talking about, but she was definitely freaking him out.

Chapter 13

Mario helped Jasmine to the couch, despite the fact that her forehead was burning she was shivering as though in sub-zero temperatures. He slowly rubbed her hair as she slept soundly with her head in his lap, he had no idea what she had been talking about, and assumed that the ordeal of the day had finally just gotten to her; she must have been suffering from post-traumatic stress. He had a promise to keep, and he was not going to let her down. He hoped that Antonio and Rocky would come back soon, but in the mean time, he kept his steel close at hand.

A low booming rumble came up the driveway, but when Mario turned to look out the window there was no one there. Slowly lifting Jasmine’s head off his lap, he advanced toward the doorway to peek around the corner. Her teeth chattering loudly enough for him to hear from across the room, she questioned what he was doing. Placing a finger to his lips, to signal her to remain quiet. Hiding behind a large hutch, he listened cautiously, hearing the front door open, followed by a single set of feet echoing down the hallway . The pace was steady, confident, and coming directly toward the room they were

in. The waning sunlight revealed the shadow of a man across the wall, Mario's heart was in his throat. Slowly turning the knife in his hand, he waited; he would not strike first, but he would be ready to attack if necessary. The steps coming closer and closer, then suddenly stopping.

"Antonio? Rocky? Mario?" Vinnie called down the hallway, "Are you guys here?"

Jasmine threw her head under the blankets, but it was obvious she was shaking nervously under the covers.

"Come out, come out where ever you are," Vinnie called again, his voice seemed cold and distant, clearly he had not forgiven them. Mario tensed as the footsteps began anew, coming closer again.

As soon as Vinnie stepped into the room, Mario seized his arm and tried to wrestle him to the ground but was immediately overpowered, and the smaller man flipped Mario onto his back, his knife sliding across the room.

Scrambling to his feet, Mario dove after his knife, and quickly turned around with the blade exposed. He quickly put himself between Vinnie and Jasmine.

"What the fuck has gotten into you?" Vinnie said, "Dude, are you alright?"

"Stay away from her," Mario said firmly, "Look, I hate to do this, but just don't hurt her."

"Step aside, Mario. This is between me and her"

"I can't do that, Vinnie."

"What's gotten into you, man. You're acting all weird?"

"Me? I'm not acting weird! You're the one who wants to hurt an innocent

women. I'm fine, dude, there is definitely something wrong with you."

Vinnie started to take a step forward, Mario's back stood a little straighter. Jasmine continued to shake under the covers. The tension in the room was thick to say the least.

"Open your eyes, Mario. Can't you see what is happening here?" Vinnie said, as he took another step closer, "She's trying to wedge herself in between us, she's Ritz, man."

"Stay where you are, Vinnie, I'm fucking serious. I'll fucking kill you if I have to." Mario quickly tossed knife between his hands.

"I'm afraid that will not be happening, my friend." Vinnie said as he stepped closer again, "She has to die, Mario, she has to."

As Vinnie's foot touched the ground, Mario lunged at him again; the blade whizzing by Vinnie's ear as he deflected the larger man, sending him flying to the ground again. Vinnie pulled out his knife and sprang for the lump under the covers, only to be sent to the wall by Mario.

Vinnie slowly turned around, staring at his friend defiantly. "Mario, I don't want to kill you, please don't make me. Just step aside, and let me finish this."

"Kill him, Mario!" Jasmine yelled from under the covers, "For the love of everyone, just kill him!"

Mario lunged again, Vinnie grabbed his arm in mid-air, twisting it and wrenching it tightly to his back.. "I'm telling you, man, she's Ritz. This whole thing was her idea."

"You're wrong, Vinnie. Once again, you're fucking wrong!" Mario said, he was afraid his arm would pop out of the socket, but he had to protect Jasmine at all cost. "You

always think you know everything, you always think that you are so much smarter and better than everyone! I'm sick of it! I'm sick of you! Why don't you just fucking leave and we can all be happy again!"

"Mario, I'm dead – fucking - serious. She's Ritz."

"He's right, Mario." Antonio said running through the doorway with Rocky on his heels. "Once again, he's right."

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It took some time to get everyone back under control. Vinnie relented that killing Jasmine was not an option, but tying her up with Danielle and Carla seemed to be a safe solution. Mario tried to apologize, but Vinnie insisted that it was nothing; that he was just doing what he thought was best. Antonio and Rocky weren't sure exactly what had happened, but the four Saltines were back together again, and together they could finally piece all of the information together to find and rescue William.

"After you guys left," Vinnie began while leaning against the mantle, "I realized that the two cars missing were the Audi and the Hummer. The Celica has the car seat, which meant that the girls either went on foot, which would not get them very far, or they are somewhere in the woods, traveling by Joel's Hummer."

"Yeah, I figured out the car seat thing, too," Mario added.

"Joel and I were building a cabin in the woods," Rocky said, "he's the only other person who knows where it is. It's a long hike on foot, so we better get moving."

"What about the girls?" Antonio asked, "Should we take them with us?"

Vinnie shook his, "No, separate them into different rooms, though. They'll be fine until we get back." The look in his eyes toward Jasmine did not seem very convincing.

“And Rocky, make sure to tie their legs together, not just to the chair. We don’t want to give them any chance of escape.” A slight smile crossed his lips, the others were amazed that Vinnie had freed himself of the bonds.

“Well, what are we waiting for, then?” Mario said, standing triumphantly, “Let’s get a move on. Viva la Saltines!”

“Viva la Saltines!” The others echoed, and soon they were heading out the door into the night. The Saltines would ride to victory once more.

Rocky and Mario led the group as Vinnie and Antonio trailed behind. The group was very sober, no one speaking. It had been a very trying weekend, and with any luck it would end on a high note.

The edge of the lawn broke into a thicket of tall shrubs and field grasses before revealing a dense woods of tall hardwood trees, their leaves a myriad of oranges, yellows and reds. As the sun cast a hue of reds and pinks over the horizon, it would have been a beautiful sight had the mood not been so severe.

There was a cart path with deep furrows from the all-terrain vehicle Rocky and Joel had used to bring materials back into the woods, but the cover of the woods kept the Saltines safely disguised. They walked for what felt like hours in complete silence, save the rustling of leaves underfoot; yet they had been able to cover a vast amount of ground.

“Hold up, guys,” Vinnie said quietly, finally breaking the silence. “There is something I need to ask.”

“OK,” Antonio said, trying to weave his way between the trees. “What’s up?” he whispered.

“Listen, should anything happen to me, I need the three of you to take William far

away. He's not safe, he'll probably never be safe. Protect him, take care of him, love him as if he were your own."

The other Saltines just stared at him. "What the hell are you talking about, Vinnie?" Rocky said as he looked at his friend with great concern, "Hey, I know that this has been a tough weekend, but believe me, man, we're going to get through this. And we'll never let the Saltines disband again."

Vinnie smiled, and touched his friend's shoulder. "That means a lot to me," his face had suddenly grown forlorn, perhaps it was the moonlight but there was something different about him. "But, just in case. Please do it."

The three agreed, although they thought he was just being paranoid.

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The woods were dense and the pale moonlight that broke through the canopy of trees revealed the little space between trunks that served as a path. A light fog was floating above the ground, making it difficult to see the terrain. A misplaced step could reveal a rock or root that would certainly mean a broken ankle or worse. Mario could hear the three men behind him, stepping warily as well. The forest seemed oddly familiar to him, although he was certain he had never been here before.

Soon they came to a clearing and he crouched down behind a massive rock. A large gathering of women, at least twenty or thirty of them, were sitting around a monstrous bonfire, flames dancing and flickering toward the stars above. Behind them, a towering cabin loomed ominously, its windows dark save a small lamp from one room. With a look to his friends, Mario was certain that William was in the cabin.

The light rustling of leaves behind him caused him to turn. He felt a small feeling of comfort, knowing he was not alone.

“He just disappeared,” Antonio said, “one minute he was there, the next he was gone.”

Mario shivered, although not from the cold. There was something dangerous in the air, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t figure out what it was.

From the edge of the woods, a light grew brighter and brighter, heading toward them, growing closer and closer. The deep roar of an engine rumbling through the trees, and a pair of headlights that was moving directly toward the bonfire.

“Viva la Saltines!” Vinnie shouted from the driver’s seat as it plowed into the fire, sending flaming logs and sparks in all directions. The oversized vehicle burst into flames as a giant fireball erupted. The women scattered to the edges of the trees, those that weren’t lying motionless on the ground. The flash from the explosion in the middle of the clearing was blinding, and Mario struggled helplessly against the ground. Pain shot through his head and his arms. He looked to his companions and saw them, fortunately they were still alive although clearly struggling as much as he was.

Thick billows of smoke were filling the night air from the Hummer as it was engulfed with flames, a streak of fire was burning into the forest floor; a trail of flaming gasoline from a punctured tank. Mario wanted to scream out to his friend, it was too late. He couldn’t have saved him.

The light was still on in the cabin and the remaining three Saltines ran toward it, throwing the door open wide. William sat on the floor with a deck of cards splayed out messily in front of him. “Go fish, Unca Joel.” He said, as Rocky raced over to scoop the

little boy up in his massive arms.

“What was that noise?” Joel said from underneath the bed, “It scared the shit out of me!”

Rocky held the boy close to his chest, as Antonio and Mario encircled him. The group swayed, not saying a word. Vinnie was gone, but his legacy would continue.

Epilogue

Jasmine struggled against her bonds, trying desperately to free herself. Her muffled screams resulted only in a sore throat. Years of planning, all gone to waste! She had come so close to finally freeing herself of Vinnie, to finally being with the man she loved and not the one who was destined to give her the chosen child. Her only hope now was that the army of Ritz she had built could defeat them, and bring William back to her safely. It would only be a matter of time before they would come back and rescue her. Hopefully, the only one they killed would be Vinnie. If she ever saw him again....

The door slowly opened, a thin sliver of the sudden light burning her eyes. A figure approached her, a man. She tried to crawl back against the wall as the knife came closer to her, it was all she could do to scream through the gag as she was stabbed again and again. Her abnormally long life had finally come to an end.

The End

The Ritz Strike Back