Ch. 7 On the House

The hotel was pristine. And large. A night’s stay was as much as most people’s paychecks. The floors glistened with bright lighting from the large crystal chandelier hanging in the lobby. Employees glided about like worker ants in rubescent blazers and with perfect posture. Subtle jazz played in the background. It all made Lapdog want to throw up; maybe directly in the middle of the fancy rug he stood on, paused, immovable.

It wasn’t the nerves digging through his muscles that made Lapdog nauseous, although he was extremely nervous. Gaudiness that made everything seem too expensive to touch, step on, or even look at bothered him to his stomach. If he could only get his knees to bend and feet to move forward, he’d be able to get this over with and leave the ostentatious Grand Accord Hotel to get back to the alleys, decently priced houses, underpasses, and parking garages where he was comfortable handling these types of things.

After his meeting with Angel Belkin, Lapdog felt hopeful for the first time in a long time. That hope was short-lived. Plans changed no more than a few hours after leaving Angel’s house. Silent K was the proverbial king of the city. So, when he told Angel he’d arrange the meets for Jesse Hammer and Mr. David, those words could be taken as golden. Turned out, those exact words were golden, in interpretation. Lapdog later found out, when Angel called him with a saddled tone, that Silent K had set up a meeting at the Grand Accord Hotel with Mr. David, Jesse Hammer, *and* the mysterious bagman proctoring the entire exchange. Yes, exactly as Silent K promised: he’d *set up a meeting*.

Lapdog had hoped to dodge the bullet of meeting any of the dons. He white-knuckled his cell phone as his stagnated bones pinned him in the middle of the hotel lobby, much like he did when he stood frozen in his apartment as Angel relayed the news to him. Technically, Silent K held up his end of the bargain. The meeting was happening because of him. Never mind the fact, as Lapdog was told while being profusely apologized to, that Angel had made it clear to Silent K that he was hoping that *he*, Silent K himself, would arrange and proxy the agreement for the exchange.

Lapdog wasn’t surprised things had already taken a turn. The highway of life he traveled on was a cycle of U-turns—dead ends were his major concern. Mobsters changing things up, molding context and semantics like silly puddy whenever it suited them, was something he was used to. Hince his surprise when Angel had first mentioned that Mr. David’s and Jesse Hammer’s sign-on had already been “handled” on Silent K’s end—expecting to have to do the sit down himself per usual bagman protocols. He hadn’t hinted at his reluctance to Angel, or aloud at all, because he didn’t want to jinx it into existence.

However, it came to fruition anyway, which fit the mold of his experiences as a bagman.

There he was, being stared at by the clerk with glossy bronze hair that was so curly it looked like the hair rollers were still lodged in there. Passerby and hotel employees alike glared at him with puzzled or distasteful expressions. A server that looked way too ex-punk rock star to be there shot a head nod and what seemed to be an under-the-influence smile at Lapdog. He could practically hear the stretched-out enunciation *duuuude* twined into the server’s very being. Lapdog nodded back, aiming a peace sign at the server dude then managed to trot toward the front desk.

“Hello, and welcome to the Grand Accord. May I help you?” The curly-haired clerk spoke with perfect tone and vibrance while wearing a smile that suggested she was already annoyed. She looked at him, her eyebrows raised with curiosity, then shook her head as though she caught herself grimacing, then straightened her face and continued smiling.

Lapdog swallowed his nerves and said, “Yeah. I have a five o’clock lunch reservation for three at Le Dîner Fourchu.”

She looked down at her computer and typed away like a stenographer. “Name,” she said.

“Under, uh, Sams.”

Luckily for Lapdog, restaurant reservations, even in glitzy places like the Grand Accord Hotel, didn’t ask for proof of ID. He had a few fake IDs, sure. But none that matched the name Gregory Sams—the name Silent K told Angel to have his bagman use for the reservation.

“Yes, Mr. Sams. We have your reservation and thank you for your early check-in. Her tone was more pleasant after finding his name in the system. “But, um…”

“Is there a problem?” Another problem already? Lapdog thought.

She looked at him with the same puzzled countenance that all the other employees and passersby kept glaring at him with.

“Well,” her voice became cautious as she rubbed the back of her neck. “I just want to ensure the safety and…and comfort of every customer. Are you sick or…no, I’m sorry. Wait.” She became flustered, blinking her eyes as if she had just looked directly at the sun. “I shouldn’t have said that. I meant to say…”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I know what you’re getting at.” Lapdog’s eyes beamed tenderly, and with a hand placed over her chest, the clerk exhaled with a relieved bow. “You’re referring to this, right?”

He pointed to the sky-blue surgical mask that covered his face from the bridge of his nose down to his chin. His hair’s natural black sheen had adopted a convincing chestnut brown (it was his first time using hair dye since high school). A pair of shades rested in his coat pocket, deciding that wearing them with the mask would feel too much like he had on a Groucho glasses disguise.

“I don’t mean to pry, sir. Again, I just want to ensure every guest is accommodated.”

“No worries.” Lapdog waved his hand. “I’m a stickler about germs is all. Ya know, in Japan it’s not such a rare sight. Helps with allergy sufferers big time.”

She smiled. “I’d imagine so.”

“But yes, I’m not sick or spreading germs or anything like that. But I am somewhat susceptible to ‘em. I’m just cautious is all. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s perfectly fine.”

“Grand.” Lapdog frowned, alarmed at himself for using such a pompous-sounding word. He thought maybe it was the atmosphere and urged himself to fight the temptations of saying “salutations” or “exquisite” at any point while he was there. This was a cover ID he was not comfortable portraying.

“Perfect.” She seemed pleasant now, with no hint of annoyance in her tone. “Please wait by the Dining and Events corridor behind you to the left of the hotel entrance. I’ll have a server come and direct you in a moment’s time.”

“Thank you.”

“Not a problem at all. Enjoy your time and thank you for your business.”

Lapdog nodded and stood near the entrance as instructed. He glanced down the spacious corridor and wondered what the price for this level of gaudiness was. He laughed a hearty laugh. It was just a hallway—a pricey one—and bigger than his apartment. He took a moment to imagine being rich. Would his mansion resemble the stylings of this corridor? He thought about strippers. Expensive, classy, strippers with names like Angel Molasses or Tigress or Salacious Sandy—considering that the only strippers he had ever been able to afford wouldn’t even know the word salacious much less name themselves with it.

A proper, southern gentleman accent came from behind him. “Hello, Mr. Sams?”

“Yes?” Lapdog turned around and saw a skinny man in a beige vest with black slacks and a black shirt. His hair was fancy, a flattering umber shade, styled and gelled in a way that Lapdog figured to be fashioned from a magazine.

He greeted the man with friendly eyes and a head nod.

“Good early afternoon. My name is Godfrey. I can guide you inside now. Please, sir. This way.”

Something seemed unnatural about him. They weren’t in the South, and no one in the city sounded like that. He imagined the scrawny host practicing and perfecting that stupid accent in the mirror just for this job. It was another reminder of being somewhere he hated to be, full of pretentious pricks.

“Oh, sir, may I kindly ask you to remove your mask?”

“No, you may not.”

The waiter blinked his eyes. He seemed surprised at the response.

“But sir.”

“I am not contagious, but I have a condition that makes me a bit more susceptible to germs than the average person. So, I would like to remain with my mask on for the time being. Thank you.”

“We are a Michelin star restaurant, sir. I must insist.”

“And I must decline, thank you.”

Lapdog felt like an asshole. He kept telling himself that maintaining the secrecy of his identity was more important than the feelings of some uppity-ass host. He couldn’t, and wouldn’t, waver on this.

Just move on already, guy. Lapdog thought.

The waiter pushed out a smile, talking through his teeth. “Our establishment is…above par...sir.”

“Well,” Lapdog said with a chuckle, “seeing how being below par is actually what golfers aim for, I think I’ll stick with the mask on, thanks.”

“I meant…above board.”

“I’m ‘*bored*’ of this conversation. I’m keeping it on.”

The waiter rubbed his hands together, a vein protruding from his neck, and stepped closer to Lapdog. In a lower, but much different sounding voice he said, “Guy, give me a break here, will ya?”

Southern gentleman changed to eastern shore boy.

“Well, ain’t this a nice surprise, ‘Godfrey’?”

“Believe it or not, that is my real name.” His voice was closer to a whisper now.

“Or not,” Lapdog said.

“You do plan to eat n’ drink, right? Because if so…then what the—I mean, you’ll hafta take it off at some point.”

“Well, if so, then at that time I guess we’ll both be happy, won’t we?”

Godfrey cleared his throat; the southern gentleman came back to the forefront. “Indeed, right this way sir,” he said theatrically.

“Thank you, G-dawg.”

Godfrey grunted.

Just a few feet down the corridor was a large arching doorway with cream-colored marble columns. They walked in. It was quiet compared to the bustling of the hotel just feet away. Soft classical music played in the background with the clinking of dishes coming from afar.

Godfrey ambled behind the host stand and glided his index finger down the check-in book. He tapped his finger against the page twice.

“Mr. Sams, here you are. Quite early. But that is of no consequence. We can seat you now and we can bring you a beverage while you await your party.”

“Thank you again, Godfrey.” Lapdog enjoyed saying his name, mostly because he could tell that Godfrey didn’t enjoy it.

“However, sir, I must confirm a slight discrepancy.”

“And that is?”

“The frontline clerk advised us you were expecting a party of three, correct?”

Party of three: me, myself, and I, Lapdog thought. Shit, that’s what I’d prefer, somewhat safer unless I decide to off myself, which, hell, before all this shit is done, I just may consider. Then he did the quick math in his head: me—one, Jesse Hammer—two, Mr. David—three, yeah. Three.

“Are you seeing something different?” Lapdog asked.

“Different, indeed. Our records reflect a reservation for seven.”

“Seven,” Lapdog said, not so questioningly and not so matter of fact. A soft gasp slipped out of Lapdog after hearing that number. Godfrey noticed. He appeared to enjoy the sudden discrepancy.

Sounding much more confident and entertained, Godfrey said, “Yessir. Party o’ seven. Is…that a…problem, Mr. Sams? An unexpected turn perhaps, sir? Do we need to find a smaller table? Perhaps there was an unbeknownst cancellation of sorts?”

Fuck. Fucking triple A fuck. Lapdog thought. Seven people? What the fuck is this, a birthday party? His head felt heavy, panicked. Who else was showing up? He coughed, cleared his throat, swallowed his nerves, and repaired his suddenly slouched stance. “Seven, yes, of course. Originally it was three. I’m glad I remembered to reserve for seven when it was called in. No changes necessary. I’d just like to be shown to my table, please.”

“Very well, Mr. Sams.”

A young woman walked up in a black skirt with shoulder-length, straight black hair, and marvelously chocolate skin. “Hello, Mr. Sams. I’ll be your server today. My name is Leela. I can escort you to your table. Please follow me to our VIP section.”

Godfrey gasped. Lapdog laughed.

“V…IP?” Godfrey said, addressing the server.

“Absolutely.”

Godfrey displayed an absent stare.

She walked closer to Godfrey and pointed at the reservation book. Her voice was kind, subtle, but not quite a whisper. “See, here? The asterisk means VIP, and here, the two P’s mean prepaid, aaaand…here…shows the service package that was reserved.” She looked up and smiled at Lapdog. Her teeth shined as bright as her glossy lips. Her eyes all but twinkled. “I’m sorry, sir. We’ve recently adopted a friendly new booking system for us and for our customers.” She turned back and pointed her smile at Godfrey that carried a weight of discipline with it. “We had a meeting about it this morning.”

VIP and prepaid. Thank you, Silent K, Lapdog thought.

“Yes, yes. Of course,” Godfrey said.

“Of course,” Lapdog mimicked. “I’m ready to be shown to my table now. Thank you, Leela. Oh, and Leela?”

“Yes, Mr. Sams.”

“I mean no disrespect by this mask I have on. During the winter, for medical reasons, I just have to be a little more cautious. I hope that’s okay.”

“That’s not a problem at all, sir. To be honest, I do the same during the spring—killer allergies.”

He stared at Godfrey while responding to Leela and said, “You don’t say? That’s great. Leela, You’re the best.”

Godfrey’s face looked as if it couldn’t decide which emotion to convey.

Lapdog resisted an impulse to pull down his mask and show Godfrey the shit-eating grin that was glued to his face. He followed Leela as she led him to the table. He sat down and asked for a glass of water. Leela left, and with her went Lapdog’s sense of calm. He looked at the six empty chairs at the table and shivered. A clean-shaven male server with pale skin and gold-rimmed glasses placed a tray of a fluffy bread loaf on the table with whipped butter on the side and a glass of ice-cold water. Lapdog lowered his mask just enough. Taking a sip was a bad idea. Chilled water spread through him in a frigid attack against his nerves. He shivered even more. He tried taking deep breaths and rubbing his hands together. It worked for a spell. Then Lapdog noticed three new guests arrive, standing next to Godfrey brandishing mafioso luster.

One man was bald and had on a dingy blue suit, standing quietly next to the other two. Another wore grey slacks with a vest to match, and a white long-sleeved dress shirt, sporting a smile of the wicked—deviously crooked—with slicked back dirty blonde hair. He looked fit, and cool, standing with his hands in his pockets, chewing a toothpick while he talked to Godfrey. The other man looked like a stack of boulders in formal wear, a stocky nightmare donning a charcoal pinstriped suit with a yellow tie and a matching pocket square in his blazer. He was large both horizontally and vertically; Lapdog measured him from afar as possibly matching his proud 6’4” stature.

Lapdog froze. It was as though his heart had grown feet and ran a one-hundred-yard dash. He watched it all unfold in what felt like slow, intense, motion: Godfrey pointed at Lapdog’s table; Leela approached the two new guests and began to escort them; They reached the table; Leela left, and both men stood there with their eyes barreling down on Lapdog.

He didn’t move.

Although fear was tap dancing on his insides, this sudden freeze was tactical. Lapdog knew what they were waiting for, naturally. But, no, he couldn’t do it: he couldn’t stand up to greet them. Standing up to formally greet them would be too telling of his identity (or at the least too risky), mask and hair dye or not. His goddamn height was a problem. It was too often a problem, and it was why he had concluded years ago was the reason why he’d always size up people he was in the same room with, guessing heights like an NBA scout.

So, he stayed seated.

Lapdog held out his left hand, palm up, pointing to the seats in front of him.

“Please, gentlemen. Have a seat,” he said.

He had learned plenty of things as a bagman through the years. Mob Etiquette 101 would be a class he’d ace if there was such a class. He knew refusing to stand would be considered disrespectful. He also knew that simply saying “Hey, I can’t stand up so I don’t give away anything about my identity” would, in fact, be giving away things about his identity.

Now that they were standing right in front of him, all three men looked like they couldn’t be anything but gangsters. The man in the grey vest had a scruffy face. He looked mean even though he was smiling, nibbling on the toothpick relentlessly. The man in the blue suit had creepily wide eyes that looked as if they hadn’t blinked in years. And the large man in the charcoal suit was still very large. Being this close now, Lapdog noticed a clear difference in expense between the other two men and the ritzy charcoal-suited man.

“Hmph,” grunted the large man in the charcoal suit, disdain trickling off him as he hovered over Lapdog.

The man in the grey vest took the toothpick out of his mouth, still flashing that violent smile, and said, “I’m Donnie.” His Irish accent was thick, and something about him suggested that he was extremely proud of it. “Is this really how yer gonna start this bit?” He pointed at himself, and the large man then said, “We are used to better hospitality.”

The man in the charcoal suit had the most apathetic expression on his face. His hands were square, meaty, chunks of flesh and knuckles. His face had a scar just above his left eye. The blackness of his beardstache had an intimidating edge to it. His hair was cut short and neat yet added a rugged element to his look. Lapdog wondered how a man this huge was only the third largest don in the city. At this very moment, he couldn’t imagine a situation where the man couldn’t punch or slam his way out of anything that presented hurdles for him. Ollie David, aka “Mr. David”, did not fall short of his legend. Up close, he was probably several inches shorter than Lapdog had originally measured (around six feet tall edging on 6’1”).

Mr. David just stood there, as quiet as a mountain blocking the sun from the horizon. He looked at him without saying a word, clasping his hands together just below his chest as he waited for Lapdog’s response. The silence lasted long enough for Lapdog to visualize at least five ways Mr. David could kill him without any weapons.

All four men stared intently at each other.

A woman’s voice intervened, upbeat and powerful, and said, “What the fuck? Are you all too scared to wrinkle your skirts, or did you just forget how to use a chair? Sit your asses down so we can get started.” Her Russian accent was thin, but her rambunctiousness was thick.

Saved by the bell. Jesse “the Hammer” Volkov stood there with two other women. She threw her backside into the seat, then tore off a piece of bread and dipped it in the gourmet butter. The other two women sat on either side of Jesse Hammer.

Smacking and chewing, she said, “How do they do it? How do they make this butter taste so good?”

Lapdog hadn’t even noticed them approach the table. He looked behind him and Leela was walking away after escorting them. Mr. David grunted again, shook his head, unbuttoned his blazer, then sat down. Then Donnie sat, and the man in the blue suit did the same.

Lapdog felt like his eyes had just come into focus after a deep sleep. He was just now able to focus on the reality in front of him: the blue-suit thug, Donnie, the goonish stranger, the ever-terrifying Mr. David, Jesse Hammer, the boisterous don, and her two companions—two of the most gorgeous women Lapdog had ever seen (and he was still reeling over Leela’s beauty).

“Glad everyone could make it,” Lapdog said with a commanding tone, desperately trying to divert his attention from the two stunning ladies next to Jesse Hammer.

“Nice spot,” Jesse Hammer said. “I think I’ve fucked some wall street dweeb in this hotel before.”

Mr. David glared at her; the thug in the blue suit looked as though he was trying to hold back a laugh. Lapdog coughed out a single chuckle.

“Well, glad you’re familiar with—” Lapdog started as Jesse Hammer jumped back in.

“Or killed,” she said as she finished off the last bite of bread. “Fucked or killed, can’t quite remember.”

Her two beautiful companions smiled and giggled, provoking another deep grunt and frown from Mr. David.

They both looked like models, yet only one had the height of a model. The taller one had straight blonde hair and sharp cheekbones, softened by a gentle amount of blush. She wore a chic indigo jumpsuit with wide pant legs and her right shoulder bare. The other woman wasn’t as tall, Lapdog guessed around five-seven. Her swarthy skin was magnified by her brunette hair and golden earrings that dangled brilliantly. Lapdog cleverly told himself she looked like sexual gumbo with the perfect combination of lips, breasts, ass, legs, and a stunning face. Then he looked at her again, the gleam in her hazel eyes was so titillating that Lapdog corrected himself—gumbo was too messy and too lazy of an analogy to use on her. He continued to dig through his head to find a suitable description, and he could not.

Lapdog noticed that he had allowed himself to become scattered. He shook it off, literally shimmying in his chair. While trying not to stare, glancing around the table and the room, Lapdog witnessed the blue-suited man staring at the two beauties as well, but more obviously so. He also noticed a displeased scowl on Mr. David’s face. He could practically see the frustration crawl up his arms. His right eye twitched.

“Let’s get this straight,” Mr. David said. “This is not going to be the Jesse Hammer show.”

She looked at him, cracking an obtuse smirk. “Are you sure about that big guy?”

Jesse Hammer wasn’t what some men would call attractive, but she wasn’t unattractive either. She had broad, masculine shoulders. Her auburn hair made her skin look doughy. She had a pixie bob hairstyle that suited her well.

“Again, I’m glad we are all here,” said Lapdog. “This won’t be that complicated of a thing.”

“How reassuring,” Jesse Hammer said.

The beautiful blonde laughed.

“I’m sure you all have been given the particulars. I’m here to answer what I can, and hopefully, we all leave happy.”

“That’s the only way I chose to leave,” Jesse Hammer said, winking toward Mr. David.

“You just can’t help yourself can ye?” Mr. David said, followed by a heavy sigh.

“You know you love it when I flirt with you—gets your man juices flowing.”

Lapdog’s mouth leaned crookedly, heedful of Jesse Hammer’s brazenness contrasting to Mr. David’s renowned sophistication. She lacked class. She was vulgar. She knew it and didn’t give a damn.

“I told ye, this is not going to be one of your boorish displays. Show some decency.”

“This is a friendly meeting here, Mr. David. It’s okay if we keep it light. Right…Ms. Volkov? Or Ms. Hammer? Or…I’m sorry. Not trying to sound too formal or anything but how should I refer to you?”

“You refer to her as Jesse Hammer or Jesse *the* Hammer, and you do so respectfully.”

The beautiful blonde finally spoke. Her tone, though, held no beauty. Lapdog’s eyes widened, feeling the gravity of her scorn. Her Russian accent was more obvious than Jesse Volkov’s although didn’t carry the same electricity.

“It’s okay, Treva. Our little friend here is just getting to know everyone. Isn’t that right?” said Jesse Hammer.

“That’s right, Treva.” Lapdog leaned in then spoke with cushy inflection, “And that’s…Trigger Treva, right?”

“Look at that, Treva, you’re a superstar, too.” Jesse Hammer beamed proudly.

Wow, this is all feeling too real now. Lapdog thought. As if Jesse Hammer and Mr. David weren’t enough, I gotta deal with Jesse Hammer’s underboss.

Lapdog had almost wished he wasn’t as familiar with the who’s who of this town’s underworld. He would conceivably be free of the terror poking against his spine if he were more oblivious to who was in front of him.

The brunette muttered a yawn, smiling while doing so.

Trigger Treva, Lapdog thought, rubbing his index finger and thumb across the button of his chin. Then the other one must be Easy D. Easy D. Christ. And she’s somehow sexier than the rumors about her. I’ve heard some things, but right now she’s quiet as hell and it’s creeping me out.

“I’m at a table full of superstars. That’s why my partner and I strictly wanted to do this deal with you. So, if that is Trigger Treva there, then you must be the one and only…D, Easy D.”

She looked at Lapdog with a strong eye-to-eye gaze and wore a playful smile, that smile that hadn’t left her face since she sat down. She looked at him and still said nothing.

“Okay then. Let’s get this deal written in stone why don’t we?”

Jesse Hammer threw her hand up in a frustrated motion, gesturing for Lapdog to be quiet.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“We’re talking about an offer that’s on the table before there are any drinks on the table. That doesn’t seem right now does it?” Jesse Hammer said.

“Agreed,” said Trigger Treva. Easy D nodded.

“You talk a lot,” Mr. David said. “Hammer, you know how I feel about this.”

“What are you yapping about now? How you feel about what?”

Mr. David glared at Trigger Treva and yanked his head toward her. “Your friend there, speaking out of turn,” said Mr. David. “Do you see Donnie, or…this one,” he paused and started snapping his fingers at the man in the blue suit as if he were trying to flick an old lighter.

“Franklin,” Donnie hinted.

“Right, Franklin here doesn’t speak unless called upon.”

“Careful, David. Don’t let your mouth run further than you can catch it.”

“It’s okay guys,” Lapdog chimed in. “We’re all friends here, or at least partners for now.”

“Shut up,” Jesse Hammer snapped. She pointed her finger with a defiant wave at Franklin and Donnie. “You and your little…boy band, lead singer cockfuck of an organization ain’t how I run things. You may want to be the only star of the show, referring to people that will die for you as lackeys, not even remembering their fucking names, but see my people, especially these two wonderful ladies, they mean something. So they can speak all they want.” She turned to Donnie with her eyebrows showing puzzlement. “Why does he remember your name? And why are you the only one who works for Mr. David here that I’ve heard about? ‘*Mr. Donnie*,’ eh? What makes you so special?”

Lapdog was playing the wait-it-out game, heeding control without the know-how to snatch it back from dons on a tirade.

Donnie looked at Mr. David, his crooked grin even more pronounced. Mr. David flashed what seemed to be a smile, but was something else entirely, and nodded his head at Donnie.

Then Donnie took his toothpick out of his mouth, licked his lips, and said, “Because I’m goddamn Donnie. I handle things that no one else can, yah? And in a way so no one knows it was Donnie who’d done it. See, Mr. David trusts me with shit.”

He sounded sinister. Even the lackey in the blue suit looked to be holding in his piss. Then there was roaring laughter, which caught Lapdog off guard. Jesse Hammer’s booming laugh was kind of cute. Lapdog caught himself trailing off again but shook it off before he started having wild thoughts of a certain mob don bent over in a bed. He told himself that at some point he desperately needed to get laid.

Gathering herself from her animated chuckle, Jesse Hammer said, “Handle things no one else can like what—tickling his pickle?”

Mr. David slammed his fist on the table. His giant hand looked like a boxing glove with brass knuckles. He said nothing. He looked at no one, his gaze aimed at the floor. Lapdog could practically see Mr. David walloping everyone at the table into a mash.

This time Trigger Treva stopped laughing. Jesse Hammer stopped laughing, too, but she didn’t seem scared, just curious, like a lion watching a gazelle tread into its din. Everyone was focused on Mr. David. Lapdog panned the table and caught Easy D’s steely smile grow.

Lapdog didn’t know what to make of it, and he didn’t have time to think about it. He took a sip of his water and then said, “If everyone wants to kill each other,” he started, speaking with a steady tone, “then do so *after* this deal…if you don’t mind.”

Franklin looked out of place, peering out the corner of his eyes at Mr. David with a boyish expression. Lapdog felt a kinship with the lackey. He tried not to admit that to himself or accept it. He didn’t want to be just another expendable function of this deal.

“Interesting,” said Donnie with an undecipherable look.

Lapdog exhaled. “Hey, look. We’re sitting at Le Dîner Fourchu. Drinks and appetizers are paid for—a business reservation. Let’s order something to take the edge off and make use of the reservation by taking care of some business. Whadayasay?”

A brief silence of contemplation spread across the table.

“Fine,” Hammer said. “Order up.”

“Great, I’ll call over the waiter.”

Mr. David belted a laugh. It caught Lapdog off guard. It was an ugly rasp of a thing.

“Is that how ye conduct business, yeah? The bar is just there. You’re not meanin’ to tell me ye won’t walk a few feet to round up a drink order is ye?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. Well—”

Mr. David turned his head in disgust with a large smile that looked more like a frown on his face. “First, this fella doesn’t even greet us properly. Now he’s priming the waiter to be his fetching puppy. ‘Mr. Sams’, you’re first impression isn’t very impressive.”

Seeing Mr. David use air quotes with his bulky fingers made Lapdog feel even more struck by the sarcasm. He gulped, hoping the rest of the table didn’t notice.

“I agree,” Jesse Hammer said.

Dammit, Lapdog thought. Now is when you two decide to be on the same side? The fuck?

Jesse smirked and looked directly at Franklin. “Why have a waiter fetch when we have a fully capable errand boy right here.”

Okay, now that makes more sense, Lapdog thought.

Easy D and Trigger Treva giggled. Donnie juggled his toothpick in his mouth. Mr. David literally growled.

“I have to stay to mediate.” Lapdog showed an amiable expression. “Wouldn’t wanna leave and come back to see a full-blown cage match now, would we?”

“Do you mind, hon?” Easy D said, leaning her beautiful face in Franklin’s direction.

She had a soft accent that Lapdog couldn’t place, but it definitely wasn’t Russian. Franklin looked at Mr. David questioningly. Mr. David stared at Jesse Hammer and her crew; their flashy stylings and perfect bodies and faces painted with defiant smiles seemingly mocking him. At least that’s how Lapdog interpreted Mr. David’s flat expression. Mr. David looked firmly at Franklin and responded with an aggressive head jerk.

“What would everyone like?” Franklin asked.

“You already know what we want,” Donnie said, followed by a grunt from Mr. David.

“A rum and coke for me, thanks,” Lapdog said.

“Brew, brew and more brew,” Jesse Hammer said. “Bring me a fuckin’ barrel and I’ll do a keg stand for ya.”

“What brand o’beer would ye want?”

“Surprise us,” she said.

Easy D winked at Franklin and he ducked his head with a subtle smile like a teenage boy that just got a kiss on the cheek from his high school crush.

“Fetch quickly,” Treva said.

Mr. David shook his head as Franklin headed toward the bar.

“Now, down to business, perhaps?” Lapdog said.

“No.” Jesse Hammer pointed her finger, manicured with glossy purple nail polish, at their bare table. “I don’t see any drinks yet. Business starts when the drinkin’ starts.”

“O…kay.” Lapdog gritted his teeth then caught a glimpse of Easy D. She flashed an even kinder smile at him than she did at Franklin. Suddenly, Lapdog noticed, he wasn’t gritting his teeth anymore.

“While the Irish Hulk over here is so obviously offended by you sitting your cute keister in your chair, I’m less worried about why you won’t stand and more interested in why you’re at a goddamn business meeting looking like you’re about to do surgery.”

Lapdog had almost forgotten about his mask. He had intentionally been projecting his voice so he didn’t sound like a muffled idiot. Good thing he practiced that at home for a whole hour; they didn’t seem to complain about not hearing him so far.

“Oh, this thing? I’m susceptible to illness. Wintertime. Precautions. That’s all.”

“Suspect is a better word, yah?” said Donnie.

“And here I was thinking we were going to play doctor,” Easy D said. Each time she chimed in her voice was gentle. She was the epitome of a non sequitur.

“Don’t you dare respond to that.” Mr. David pointed at Lapdog with a chastising tone.

Lapdog placed his elbows on the table, his hands tucked under his chin. “I do actually get sick easily in the winter. Perennial allergies—it sucks. Since we’re not talking business until the drinks are served it seems you’ll just have to wait to hear the rest.”

Jesse Hammer shot a frown at Lapdog, but spoke with an agreeable tone and said, “Smart ass.”

“This is so much fun,” Easy D said.

The lackey finally returned. With a serving tray in hand and a cautious walk—lacking the poise of a real server—he placed the drinks in front of each party, with an extra three beers for Jesse’s crew. Hammer picked up a beer, examined the label, scowled, then gulped the entire bottle. She let out a deep belch.

“Oh, cop on, Hammer! Are ye serious?”

“I just downed a whole brewski in like four gulps, give me a break.”

“A woman of your station should show more decorum. People should talk about ye with respect and dignity. Displaying this behavior is unbeco—” Mr. David stopped himself. Lapdog quietly chuckled, and could quickly tell Mr. David didn’t want to say “unbecoming” because Hammer would have jumped at the chance to make a vulgar comment about cum. He continued, “…It’s simply not how someone of your position should be acting.”

She paused. Then said, “Eat my dick.”

Mr. David shook his head and threw his hands up. He took a calm sip of his drink which Lapdog assumed was probably Redbreast, neat. Donnie carefully waved his glass of whiskey in his hand as he stared intently at Lapdog. His smile was as dominant as the bronze hue of his whiskey, whooshing about in his glass.

“So, now are you going to finish your lovely story behind this weird doctor…ninja…007 look you got going on here?” Hammer asked as she grabbed a second bottle of beer.

“Apart from not wanting winter cooties, you mean?”

“A smart ass and a comedian I see. I wonder if you’d play the role of dead douche just as well.”

“I don’t think I would.” Lapdog felt a pinch in his thigh and a tickle in his testicles. He pushed down all the sensations from his jittery insides and continued to feign confidence. “The catching an illness bit is true. But let’s be honest. Look around the table.” They did, all taking a quick cocky glare at one another. “This is a practical who’s-who of the city’s baddest of badasses. I probably should have come in a full ninja outfit, covered up head to toe. But then you’d miss out at the chance to look into my piercing eyes.” Lapdog flashed a smooth smile. “Seriously, guys. Would a smart bagman give any more than he absolutely needed to about his identity if they were worth half a fuck?”

“Well done, lad.” Donnie said, then downed his drink.

Even Mr. David smiled. “And ye are the bagman seeing this whole thing through then, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“You still look ridiculous in that thing.” Hammer took a long gulp but didn’t finish the entire bottle this time. “So, Bag Boy, tell us…who is your partner? The one with the rocks.”

“Nope.” Lapdog sniffed his rum and coke, smiled, then took a sip. “Nice try though.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“Indeed.”

Mr. David leaned back in his chair. Finally, an unaggressive gesture from the big brute. “Okay, so give us the bits by bits then.”

Lapdog proceeded to tell them about the diamonds and other jewels. He even detailed how concise the process was in equally dividing the goods. The mention of biometrics and other security for the jewels seemed to impress Trigger Treva. Lapdog wasn’t sure but it seemed the mention of Silent K’s name brought a brief shudder to the table. He went on to tell them about checkpoints and need-to-know exchange locations.

“No one will know where the meet will happen until it’s time. No one except me of course.”

“Aww, does the Bag Boy not trust us? Do I get the Bag Boy’s man bags all in a tangle?” Jesse joked.

“Security, security,” Lapdog implored. “Also, let’s remember, this also ensures access to your own share. Each case of goods is remote-locked. They will not be able to be accessed until all three parties have their share and I’m safe at home with my feet up in my La-Z Boy.”

“And where mayhap is ‘home’, Mr. Sams?”

Lapdog pointed and wiggled a friendly finger toward Jesse Hammer. “Nope. But again, nice try.”

She sarcastically snapped her finger. “Well darn.”

“Enough,” Mr. David interjected. “We meet up, get our shit then go home with a case that we can’t even access until these other untrustworthy bastards get their share?”

“It’s only fair. And you will of course get a chance to verify the goods at the meet. Well, not you perse. Your stand-in.”

“Our stand-in?”

“Yes. No bosses at the meets.”

Both Mr. David and Jesse Hammer groaned.

“Again, it’s only fair. And safer honestly.”

“Safer, how?” Trigger Treva said with a devious tone.

Lapdog shrugged his shoulders. He knew Treva was setting a mouse trap on that one.

“If I may, boss.” Donnie looked at Mr. David, his brow full of curiosity. Mr. David nodded. “Okay then Monsieur Sams. I must admit I am sensing a bit of a conundrum.”

“Oh?” What is it now, Lapdog thought.

Donnie’s voice became mockingly high-pitched. “Well, me lil’ whee-skers are’a tinglin’ mate.”

“What are you sayin’ Irishman?” Hammer said.

“A few mil from chippin in three-quarters of one is a ripe lil’ return and all, yeah? But then what? You’ve made clear how the baddest of the badasses are in on this.” He pointed with a cool-looking gesture around the table. “We got the Boss here, Hammer, Silent K. Hell, they didn’t get to where they are by lackin’ in the way of makin’ money, yeah? A one-and-done deal doesn’t sound very prosperous.”

“Good point, lad.” Mr. David said. Franklin nodded.

“That’s the best part and another reason why it’s in everyone’s best interest to see this through—aka not moving in on someone else’s share and messing up the whole deal. At the end of it all you’ll each be provided with Joey Smokes’s diamond connect.”

Hammer crossed her arms and lifted her chin in the air as she glared at Lapdog. “Really? I hear he only works with the Carbones.”

“That’s what a lot of people think. Understandably so since Joey worked for the Carbones, may he rest in peace. But no, his connect was loyal to Joey but more loyal to greenbacks. Now that Joey is gone, he’s eager to get his business back in order. The Carbones will always be the out-of-state celebs that could never make it to our city. The flow of diamonds and gems moves here. Everyone knows that. That’s why Joey did his thing here. Joey was the closest the Carbones got to a foot in this city. His connect doesn’t feel confident they can do it now that he’s gone. But when I mentioned the likes of Jesse Hammer, Mr. David, and Silent K…he was all in.”

“Impressive Bag Boy, impressive.”

“Not bad,” Mr. David agreed.

Trigger Treva leaned forward, her perfume adding a soft touch to the air, and said, “Just one question: why not just kill you?”

That soft touch was followed by a hard punch to Lapdog’s gut. He gulped and stuttered.

“Wh—what?” he said.

“Well.” Treva pulled a piece of bread off the serving tray then tore a tinier piece, ate it, and continued. “What’s stopping us from nixing this thing and just taking you on a little trip to my playhouse? I have all sorts of fun toys to play with; ones that’ll get ya very vocal on that connect.”

“I’m sure you do, Treva. Since my partner’s connect isn’t the playful type, that would only make him hightail his lucrative business elsewhere. See…he only wants to do business with those he can trust. So, if he doesn’t hear from me *and* my partner the way we have planned, he’ll know someone is playing against the rules and that’ll be that.

Treva slumped her back against her chair. Jesse Hammer smiled.

Hammer asked, “What’s next then? When is the first meet? What’s the prep?”

“That’s all for now. The rest will only be shared with the exchangee the day of.”

“Hmmm?” Hammer’s hum was very disapproving.

“I’m playing this one close to the chest guys. Trust me, it’ll all go smoothly. We have this planned down to the finest detail.”

“A bit on the skeptical side are we, Hammer?” Mr. David said.

“Oh please. I’m supposed to just outright trust Silent K and you—the one sober paddy in town.”

“Hammer, Mr. David, all will go smoothly. Scout’s honor. No one is getting fucked here.”

“Well, I didn’t say I didn’t wanna get fucked.” Hammer said, winking at Mr. David.

“I really don’t like you,” he said.

Easy D grabbed her beer and handed it to Jesse Hammer. “Boss, these guys are great. I wanna do it.”

Hammer finished her half bottle then took the other one Easy D handed her and glugged loudly followed by a satisfying exhale. “Thanks, my deer. Okay, then, D. I think you’re right. Mr. David, Mr. Bag Boy, Easy D here just brokered a deal for you. Be thankful.”

Donnie snatched the whiskey from Franklin’s hand just as he was about to take a sip and killed the drink. Then he chewed feverishly on his toothpick as he stared at Easy D. Lapdog noticed Hammer’s pupils shooting arrows toward Donnie.

“Watch your gaze Irishman.”

“My gaze? I’m just admiring the view.”

“You lil’ prick. Watch yourself.” Hammer shook her head. “You’re just…creepy, ya know that? You really put the leper in leprechaun.” Donnie smiled like he had just received the grandest of compliments.

“Fucking muppets,” Mr. David said.

Easy D stood up, showing off her tanned, tawny skin and smooth legs. Much to Franklin’s (and Lapdog’s) pleasure, he noticed her skirt was just as short standing up as it was when she was sitting down. Her four-inch stilettos philandered across the tile floor as she walked toward him. Her walk was like a stripper’s dance. Mr. David shook his head while Jesse Hammer pinched her lips together, smiling, watching Easy D walk; maybe not quite as subtle as poetry in motion, but there was a lot of motion.

Easy D leaned forward in front of the lackey and got close to his face. Her cleavage rested right under his neck. Almost nose to nose she poised her gorgeous face in front of his. Her long hair resembled a sinuating wheat field at dusk, vibrant with a shine of golden brown. She slid her finger underneath Franklin’s chin, her shimmering ruby necklace clinking as she wiggled her head.

As soft as a whisper she said, “Thanks for the beer.”

“Any time,” he replied.

“Well, my ladies have made their minds up. Dollars upon dollars it is then.”

“Great.” Lapdog tugged at his collar and held his hand out which both Mr. David and Jesse Hammer rejected with a scoff.

Mr. David stood and straightened the cuffs of his sleeves.

“These beers weren’t half bad. Decent choice lil’ lackey.” Jesse and her crew stood up and turned to walk off.

Franklin looked proud. “It was an easy choice, I’d expect. I heard Viktor Belkov used to order beers a lot—that brand specifically.”

Hammer turned around slowly.

“What the fuck did you say?” Hammer said.

Trigger Treva for the first time wore a face that lacked stillness. Even Easy D looked uneasy. Then came the shit storm; no preceding calm, just storm.

“I…I.” Franklin whooped a confused stutter. Mr. David and Donnie watched on plastered with unconcerned expressions.

“Repeat what the fuck you just said about my father. You fuck.” Hammer walked over to him, buffing the efforts of Trigger Treva tugging at Hammer’s arm to stop her.

“I…I…I heard Vi-Viktor used to like this beer. That’s all.”

“Used to? What the fuck do you mean used to? My father didn’t *used to* do shit. If he likes that brand, he still likes that brand. I’m here on his behalf because I’ve earned the right to be where I am. That’s why I’m here. You know what Viktor King Lion Volkov *used* to do? He used to shoot people right in the fucking head.” She pushed the lackey in his forehead with her index finger, smearing the sweat cascading down. “But now that I’m here, I do that.”

Aside from looking piss-in-the-pants afraid, the lackey seemed to be shocked and confused. Lapdog, however, was not. He was in the know of all things that needed to be known; like how Jesse Hammer was very sensitive about the depleting health of Viktor the Lion Volkov, Jesse Hammer’s father and the predecessor of their syndicate. Everyone knew she was running things now, with Viktor being on the worst side of eighty years old. But most people also knew to choose their words carefully when talking about him around Hammer. Speaking in the past tense would not fit that mold. Lapdog’s thighs tightened even more, he felt beads of sweat run down his spine passed his ass crack.

“Hammer, we’re okay. He was only saying—”

“Shut up Bag Bitch! Did you have your hand up his ass like his fucking puppet master? Because if not then you have no idea what the fuck he was *trying* to say. So sit there like the good little Bag Bitch you are and shut the fuck up.”

There goes my nuts jumping into my stomach and my cock shriveling into a slinky, Lapdog thought. She’s on one now. There’s going to be no reeling her in. And what the fuck is up with Mr. David?

Lapdog glanced at Donnie, rubbing his chin, chewing that goddamn toothpick, silent. Mr. David was also silent but with a loud aura of sinister intent, yet somehow, he looked pleased, wearing an off-putting ear-to-ear grin. But Jesse Hammer was in a sinister mood of her own.

“Boss, let’s go,” Trigger Treva said as she walked up to Hammer and gently grabbed her by the bicep. She was careful not to tug.

Jesse turned to walk away, still muttering, appalled. “Viktor used to. Viktor. What the fuck? Like he’s on a first-name basis with one of the most powerful men in the city. This fucker.”

Knives. Lapdog had heard about Jesse Hammer’s affinity for them. She found knives to be personal and intimate. She also found them quiet, effective, and easy to hide; like in a shoulder harness underneath a blouse. With no regard for her surroundings, blind with rage, Jesse Hammer pulled her sentry clip blade from her harness, turned around at a bullet’s speed, placed her right hand on the lackey’s shoulder and with her other hand stuck the blade in his side.

Lapdog shot up from his seat like he had just been bitten on the ass. “Jesus fuck!”

“Now he stands,” Donnie said.

“Don’t you fucking scream or I’ll twist,” she said, whispering to the lackey as he squirmed in pain, grunting and panting. She looked at Mr. David and squinted. His lack of surprise or response made her pause. Two short-tempered bosses were staring each other down, a sudden and fleeting propensity for violence teetering on either side. She grabbed Franklin’s hand and placed it firmly on the blade. Hold that there, don’t pull out just yet, baby.” She suddenly seemed calm. “It’ll gush like your big boss does after a romp with one of his thousand-dollar hookers. Don’t bleed all over the fucking floor. This place is too nice for douchebag blood. Get that taken care of.” Jesse Hammer pointed at the lackey while looking at Mr. David.

Like clockwork for the sporadic, Easy D handed a cloth to Trigger Treva and she relay tossed it to Jesse as she walked by.

“Oh, don’t worry, Hammer…I do intend to take care of *that*.” Mr. David said firmly.

Lapdog was breathing heavily. Fortunately, no one at the restaurant had taken notice yet. Mr. David instructed Donnie to take the lackey to the car. Donnie put his arm around Franklin, who was whimpering like an injured dog, and left the restaurant, walking with a very nonchalant strut.

“Uhh…Uhh…” Lapdog searched for words then landed on: “I’ll be in touch.”

“Noted,” Mr. David said, still flashing that horror movie smile. He yelled politely toward Jesse Hammer as they exited the restaurant. “Thanks for coming ladies.”

She yelled back: “Whatever. Goddamn mudaks.”

Lapdog didn’t blink for the next hour. He barely remembered the taxi ride home. He was on autopilot as he replayed the scene repeatedly in his head. He got home and sat perfectly erect on his living room couch, his eyes as wide as half dollars. He sat there quietly for several minutes. He leaped out of his seat and rushed to the bathroom with his hand desperately covering his mouth then prayed to the porcelain goddess. He threw up for several minutes.

Ch. 8 Channel Surfing

It had been over a week since the Joey Smokes hit. Billy-Billy had gotten used to the time between jobs. The lull was a great barometer for seeing just how well they covered their tracks. Some jobs required them to be loud, some required ninja-like tactics. Loud to quiet, the Joey Smokes hit could be described best in the words of Goldilocks: “just right.” Billy-Billy tickled himself when he thought of that one about a week ago. He often wondered if they were just really good hitmen or if the police were just really shitty detectives; either answer kept them employed. As employed as they were in such a corrupt city, it wasn’t like they had pensions or biweekly paychecks. A hit can only be done so often even in this town. So they made the money last and made the paydays big. Between the two of them, they made well over six figures their last two hits. They weren’t hurting for the money. They hadn’t been hurting for the money for a long time.

The Joey Smokes job had left a sour taste for both Billy-Billy and his partner, Tony Two Fists, but for different reasons. Tony was upset that he didn’t get to duke it out with the guy. A high-ranking mobster with the rep of kicking ass like Joey Trambini was like a final boss fight; an accolade Tony Two Fists wanted under his belt. Billy-Billy’s sour taste gnawed at him because he still couldn’t figure out what was causing that feeling, and intuition seemed too easy of a reason.

Billy sat on the sofa thinking about it quietly. It had been his M.O. for the past few weeks—mentally scratching at that unnerving itch that just wouldn’t go away. He wouldn’t tell Tony Two Fists that though. He could carry on with his suspicions in silence without causing a stir. Billy flipped channel to channel, holding the TV remote with a lazy hand. His mind was preoccupied, and afternoon TV sucked; there were only so many Judge Judy tirades he could watch. Instead, he’d stop on a sports channel then venture off thinking about the hit again, then change to the news channel and venture off thinking about the hit again, then change to the home shopping network and Tony would snap Billy out of his channel flipping daze by calling him a queer to which Billy would flip to yet another random channel only to venture off and think about the hit again. It was a maddening cycle.

He loved their plush twill couch, so stewing in thought in their luxury condo sitting on his favorite Diane Sofa wasn’t exactly stressful living. He’d tell himself that whenever he caught himself in one of those fugue states of second sight about that job—even if it took flipping through fifty channels until he realized it.

Gunshots echoed from the TV. Billy-Billy landed blindly on an old country western.

“No. Turn that shit. If it ain’t in color I ain’t watchin’ it.”

Tony Two Fists yelled from the kitchen as horses neighed loudly from the TV set. Billy-Billy didn’t like country westerns either. But he also didn’t like Tony’s barking at every channel he landed on. Tony stood in the kitchen dressing his pizza with enough pepper flakes and parmesan that Billy could smell it from the living room.

“Give it a chance,” Billy-Billy said. “At least it’s during an action scene. Maybe it’s a good flick.”

“No. Change it.”

He heard a cowboy holler “yeehaw” and that was enough for him to acquiesce and hurriedly change the channel. He landed on a music video channel that he didn’t even know they had. Pop videos appealed both to his inner teenager, and his manhood. Slow motion did wonders on a woman’s glutes and breasts, especially on a 4K screen. He didn’t know the song. But it didn’t matter.

“A woman that moves like that on the dance floor,” Billy-Billy said, aiming his voice to the kitchen so Tony Two Fists could hear, “bro, you can only imagine what she’s like in the bedroom.”

“You’re a perverted old man,” Tony Two Fists said, yelling back.

Billy grunted and muted the TV and turned to face Tony.

“I’m far from old. Watch yourself.” He un-muted the TV and went back to nodding his head. “Besides, you should be all into this stuff. These songs aren’t that bad.”

“No, you’re right. They ain’t that bad. They’re that bad and then some. You nut. Plus, you’re past just likin’ it. Do you even hear the words? Ya fuckin’ perv. We’re in our forties bro. You’re nodding your head to what…teenager shit? And it’s all crap. It’s not even music. If you’re gonna listen to pop music at least listen to the good bit.”

Billy turned his head and looked at his partner with a pause, his face curled in a bitter frown.

“Uh huh,” Billy-Billy murmured.

“What? Don’t look at me that way. You know I’m right. Stop lookin’ at me like that. Turn that shit down at least.”

Tony took his plate with three large slices of pizza on it and walked into the sunken living room. Billy stared him down the whole way. Tony laughed then took a gigantic bite of his pizza. Billy faced the TV and smiled as the chorus kicked in on the music video.

“Do we really have to watch this shit?” Tony Two Fists asked, catching bits and pieces of pizza before they tumbled from his mouth.

“Yes, we really do.”

Tony started smacking his food, loud and intentional.

“Keep smacking your food and I’m gonna smack you.”

“Now that’s’a trick I’d like to see.”

Billy stood up, his lean frame towering over his partner as he devoured his food. He looked at his right hand and rubbed his palm with the fingertips of his left hand. He took one step closer to Tony. Tony’s eyes frowned with curiosity. It was like monkey see monkey do. Tony stared up at Billy then Billy looked down at Tony’s pizza. Tony’s gaze followed and looked down at his plate of pizza also. As soon as Tony’s head tilted down toward his pizza, Billy reached both hands out and clapped them together right next to Tony’s left ear.

“Yo,” Tony belted. His scream was pitched high with surprise as he fumbled his plate. “You nearly made me drop a good slice you goddamn psycho.”

“There was a gnat.” Billy’s palms were beet red. “I got it.” He giggled a little.

“There wasn’t no damn gnat you lyin’ scumbag. Show me your hands. Where is it?”

“It’s sitting on the couch slobbering over a pizza.”

“Dick.”

Billy went back to his seat as Tony shook his head at him. It didn’t take long for the sexy vixens on TV to bring out Billy’s smile again.

“You get on me about cussing…some sort of gentlemanly man bullshit. Whateva. And look at ‘cha. Where’s the sense in this? I can’t cuss but you can get your old man rocks off by drooling over chicks half your age?”

“They don’t call it the boob tube for nothing.” Billy leaned back with a prideful look on his face and stared right at Tony, remote in hand, then turned the TV up even louder.

“Nice guy, real fuckin’ nice.”

The home had a lot of natural light. They liked it that way. Working in the dark so often—sometimes even in the most literal sense—they wanted their home to be vibrant, lively, and open. The interior design was limited to mirrors and what Tony liked to call “funny looking wall hangin’ shit” which was just geometric-shaped wall decals. Tony loved the mirrors because he loved looking at himself at every turn. It wasn’t because he thought himself a self-proclaimed model. Far from it. He and Billy both found that being able to see behind you in every corner of the house was just as good as expensive video surveillance. Mostly he loved looking at his clean and unscathed face, lacking any semblance of the fact that he had spent years in underground fighting rings. His reflection was his badge of honor.

He was also proud of his hair. There wasn’t as much of it compared to his fighting days. He went from a full, sleek shiny product-filled head of hair to a thinning widow’s peak. Tony would say his new look made him appear more distinguished. Billy, however, often reminded his partner that the new look he’d refer to wasn’t new at all; it was signs of getting old. But with a tilted frown and a nodding head, Billy had also conceded to something: even with the receding hair, his partner was aging well. He wouldn’t (and didn’t) struggle with the ladies.

And Billy often found himself in awe of his partner’s unblemished face. All those violent underground fights—it was impressive. As he watched Tony attack his second slice of pizza like a raptor on a helpless mammal, he remembered the night Tony’s face should have gotten a scar. Billy could still picture the vibrant splash of blood slanting down Tony’s face that night at the underground fighting ring. The dull loser with a sharp blade could be thanked for that. Tony reciprocated his thanks by paralyzing the guy with a body slam on the concrete floor. *You’re welcome*.

But, even after getting sliced by that blade, Tony didn’t get scarred. Billy couldn’t help but stare, somewhere in between being grossed out and entertained, imagining where the scar would be as Tony jawed away.

“What?” Tony Two Fists paused, catching Billy staring at him.

Billy shook his head. “Nothing. Trying to decide if I want another slice or not. You’re loud smacking is making me hungry again.”

“You should. It’s fuckin’ amazin’.”

“I will in a bit.”

Billy continued to flip through the channels.

“So,” Tony Two Fists started, looking away from Billy as he spoke, “what do you think about that crime boss minaj a tua diamond deal going down?”

Billy exhaled and in a very militant tone said: “Keep your nose clean.”

Keep your nose clean; one of Billy’s go-to mottos. As quiet as it may have been handled, a deal of this magnitude still seemed to find its way into The Two’s information pool. One way or another they stayed abreast with things; especially big things. The ears they had on the streets were keener than most. Their eyes were always open. Their noses were indeed *clean*. And they preferred to keep their mouths shut.

Billy shook his head as he flipped through the channels. “Look at this. Can you believe these chumps got famous for this?” Billy stopped flipping through channels after seeing reruns of *Jersey Shore* on the screen. They both shook their heads.

“Now, I wish someone would pay us for that job,” Tony Two Fists joked.

“Truer words have never been spoken, my friend. Pro-bono?”

Tony laughed.

“Yeah, maybe even pro-bono.”

Billy took a deep breath and indulged Tony in his prior statement. “It is intriguing though, partner. There’s a lot of money and a lot of jewels floating around this whole thing.”

“Even with our network…even *we* don’t know much about it. Which says a lot.”

“Yeah. It does.”

“Do you think anyone else knows?”

“Nah. We only know because it’s us. And we don’t know a hell of a lot besides the fact that a big diamond deal is going down. Information isn’t cheap.”

Tony took a large bite from his pizza. Chewing and laughing he said, “We aren’t cheap either.”

“Darn right. But I think we agree this isn’t one of our things. Those names involved are crucial. We can agree…keep our noses clean on that one, yeah?”

Tony took several swigs of his iced tea and held a thumbs up at Billy.

He’d tell Tony to keep his nose clean because the only thing in the city they should be concerned with was killing. If they were to be involved, there would be dead bodies afoot. If they were to kill someone with so many important names involved in a big deal like this—that would be a big deal indeed.

Tony slurped his drink, practically sucking the ice cubes in his glass, then placed the cup down. He let out a satisfying exhale and said, “Can you imagine though? A call to do Hammer, David, or Silent K? The payday would be astronomical.”

“Yeah, and so would the aftermath. I know you aren’t told old to remember the last boss we dealt with.”

Tony rubbed his forehead. “Jesus, never. That was…some wild shit. Not a fun day at the office.”

“Exactly. And these three are several notches above that. So…”

“Level up time!” Billy frowned at Tony and Tony waved him off in return. “Kidding, chill out. I just want a front-row seat to see how this all plays out. But don’t worry, my nose will remain spotless.”

“Don’t make my motto sound so gross.”

“You’re gross. You perverted fuck you.”

Billy flipped the bird at Tony. Tony laughed and told Billy that’s just as good as cussing someone out. They debated for the next thirty minutes or so on whether Billy-Billy gesturing “fuck you” was the same as saying it, chomped away at their deluxe pizza, and flipped through channels.

Before the night ended, Billy hadn’t noticed he was no longer thinking about his odd feeling from the Joey Smokes job but had adopted intrigue over this deal with the diamonds and unknown bagman instead.

Ch. 9 Checks and Unbalances

Freddy hadn’t spoken to his fuddy-duddy of a cousin in a few days. Keeping his distance, as far as he was concerned, was a brilliant stealth move. But it was time to get another serving of info from Angel. He had called Napoleon and Lincolns to give him a ride to Angel’s jewelry store. He craved the image of stepping out from the backseat of a sleek vehicle flourishing a pricey blazer and mercurial smile. Napoleon’s BMW would have to be sleek enough for today.

On the way there he noticed that Napoleon and Lincolns had finally adopted his nick, Sources. They hadn’t started calling him boss yet, but he figured that would come. Why harp on the little things when ordering them around made him feel like a don anyway?

He sat in the backseat with a large smile and so much pride oozing from him that he could use it to mold his already overly-styled hairdo. Napoleon and Linclons rambled in the front seat about God knows what. Some obscure hip-hop song was playing with lyrics fraught with talk of snitches and “big money moves” which Freddy gladly embraced as the soundtrack for this moment. Nodding his head and rubbing his chin with his index finger and thumb, he envisioned official mobster meetings with high-end scotch and shellfish. Suddenly he leapt forward shooting both hands out, pinning against the passenger seat in front of him, bracing himself as the car jolted. Napoleon apologized but told him he wasn’t gonna get seven years of bad luck for running over a cat.

“God fucking damnit,” Freddy said, watching the mangy calico plod across the street. It looked right at him, with an unbothered temperament, and meowed in a way that made Freddy picture it saying: “Watch it bucko.”

“Do you mind fixing the baby seat?” Napoleon said, turning his head toward Freddy. “It fell when I slammed the brakes.”

Freddy felt his cool mob don movie scene come to a literal halt. He shook his head; just then he noticed how often he does that when he’s around Napoleons and Lincolns.

“Why do you have a fucking baby seat in the car?” Freddy said. “You dating some chick with kids now?”

“Never that,” Napoleon replied. The car started moving again. “You know Lincolns is the only creep that does the baby mama and preggo bitches thing.”

Lincolns readjusted his seatbelt. “Well, yeah. It’s ‘cause those bitches are ripe. They stay ready for some new D.”

“Gross,” Freddy said. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“The baby seat, I know—it was a lil’ side job. Shorty wanted me to snatch her kid from her punk ass ex. Needed the baby seat.”

“So why do you still have it?”

“Those things are worth some real bread. Gonna sale it. You know anyone lookin’ for one?”

“No man.”

Lincolns pulled out a black glock .45, checked the clip and rubbed the grip.

Freddy wasn’t too familiar with guns even though he had a similar one, but he did like how cool Lincolns looked with his. That mobster don feeling started to rush back to him.

“What’s going on at your cousin’s shop that’s so important anyway?”

“Just some family stuff,” he said. “gotta pick up something while I’m there.”

What Freddy hoped to pick up was fresh information on Angel’s clandestine diamond deal with Louie Constantine. The minute details were starting to feel too minute each day. For all he knew the venue had changed, or the deal had already gone down. No way. That couldn’t have happened, Freddy thought. He would have heard something by now if it had.

The worrisome thoughts gained pace as did his heartbeat. The car stopped; reverse parked in front of Angel’s Galleria. Freddy stepped out, adjusting his blazer, with his chin pointed to the sky. Then he grimaced, his nose wiggling.

“The fuck is that smell?” Lincolns exclaimed as he stepped out of the car.

Napoleon got out, closed the door then leaned against it as he lit a cigarette.

“It’s obviously shit.”

Freddy scowled and coughed and said, “What in the holy fuck! Why is it so strong?”

“Gotta be close,” Napoleon said waving his cigarette around like an incense stick.

“Why are you so damn calm about smelling shit?”

“Fuck else am I gonna do?”

“You two stay here.” Freddy coughed again, covering his nose. “Give me five or ten.”

“Yup.” Napoleon nodded at him, and Lincolns walked around the car then leaned against the passenger door next to him.

Aside from Bern, Angel’s front desk employee that Freddy despised, the store was all but empty, which didn’t mean Angel wasn’t getting business. Freddy had found that out a long time ago. The big business happened in the VIP room. On cue, the VIP door toward the back of the store swung open. Angel and two other men walked out. One was a shortish white guy who was mostly unnoticeable aside from his salt-and-pepper beard and globe-like figure. The other was a tall, well-dressed black man who was very noticeable. His presence had an immediate pull. The trio were talking, but Freddy couldn’t make out the words, partly still shaking off the stun from the tall back man’s presence. He was fit but not bulky. He wore a cream sweater, upscale and expensive, the sleeves casually pulled up just enough for the sunlight to bounce off the silver TAG Heur glinting on his wrist. Freddy recognized the watch from afar by the strap alone—alligator leather with stylish stitching that ran up a $10,750 price tag that he had to walk away from just months prior. The tall black man looked like money incarnate but also carried an air of edginess. He reminded Freddy of Idris Elba—a perception that Freddy didn’t know he happened to paint on most black men who were at least six feet tall and dressed well.

After recognizing the brand of his watch, he recognized the man. Just then, he gulped and was about to whisper aloud “Silent K” with a soft exclamation if not for the heavy hand that thwapped against his chest.

“What the hell?” Freddy said. He blinked his eyes as though just waking up from rem sleep.

“Excuse you.” A deep and commanding voice followed the heavy hand.

Without aggression or effort, the hand pressed against Freddy’s chest slowly moved him back several feet until his back was against the wall. Freddy saw Angel shake Silent K’s hand then looked down at the hand on his chest, then looked up at who was behind it.

A darker-skinned black man, not as tall but dressed exquisitely, conducting more of a “don’t fuck with me” than a “how do you like my watch” poise stood next to Freddy against the wall. He removed his hand and said, “Need some space.” He wasn’t even looking Freddy’s way, his gaze locked on Silent K, Angel, and the fatty with the beard.

Freddy felt his normal bark itching at him but couldn’t muster a whimper. And he was content with that. He wasn’t okay with the ninja-like slyness this man had. Where the hell did he even come from?

He must be one of Silent K’s guys, Freddy thought. The VIP of VIPs. No wonder the store was empty. He looked at the three of them and they looked to be finishing their salutations.

“Pleasure as always,” the chubby man said.

“Everything is up to par?” Angel said, looking at Silent K. He smiled.

“Up to par and then some,” the chubby man said.

They shook hands once again and they began to walk out. Freddy’s knees felt weaker than a nervous groom at the altar. They buckled. He stumbled forward as Silent K crossed paths with him, slightly bumping into his thigh. Freddy thought he could hear the Darth Vader theme music in his head as his heart started doing jumping jacks.

The dark-skinned man moved swiftly forward. Even more swiftly, Silent K threw up his left hand. The chubby guy just stood there. Silent K bent forward, looking Freddy in the eye then grabbed him by the shoulders and stood him upright. He dusted off Freddy’s shoulders and stared at him but said nothing. The prolonged silence caused a thick drop of sweat to cascade from Freddy’s forward onto his upper lip.

The dark-skinned man grunted.

Silent K tapped heavily on Freddy’s left shoulder and said, “Careful.”

Freddy could barely make out what Silent K said. His voice was scratchy, an eerie hiss that struggled to project.

The chubby man then said, “Yeah, careful, friend. Wouldn’t want to hurt yourself.” Then he turned to Angel and gestured goodbye. “Take it easy, Angel.”

The dark-skinned guy nodded as they walked out of the store.

Another prolonged silence deafened the store until interrupted by a loud exhale and a laugh. “Freggin’ A, dude,” Bren said. “That was close. I mean, what ya got, noddle legs?”

“Shut the fuck up you seed of a diseased whore. Fuckin’ cornbread eating piece of cum.” Freddy’s bark suddenly came back. It felt good to let out.

“Hey, Hey! Not in here. Stop that,” Angel yelled. “My God. What are those words you just said? Who talks like that?”

“Your jerk cousin, that’s who,” Bren said. Her big eyelashes fluttered as she flipped her bangs. Freddy hated her blonde bob hairstyle—if you had blonde hair, he’d often say, it should be a rule that it has to be at least passed the shoulders.

“That’s enough. I’m sorry he spoke to you that way, Bren.” Angel pointed a disapproving gaze at Freddy. “Bren, can you head to the back and book those invoices on my desk, please? And call Mr. Rodder and let him know his order will be finished tomorrow.”

She thanked him for his apology and walked toward the office, her heels clapping loudly against the tile floor.

“What do you want?” Angel walked toward the register, writing this, moving that—looking like the owner of a store.

“Can’t a guy come visit his cousin? Can’t I? Cousin.”

“A guy can. *You* cannot.”

“Ouch. First, I get manhandled by your fancy clientele there and now I get slapped down by my own flesh and blood. And all I was doing was coming to make sure you were doing okay. You know, because of the…” Freddy leaned forward and started to whisper, “stolen goods, quid pro quo ya got going on.”

“Shut up would ya.” Angel looked around the shop with a nervous pan. “Look, I’m sorry. Okay?” Angel took out some cleaning solution and started to wipe down the counter. “Plus, you already turned me down which, by the way, I haven’t thanked you enough for. So, thank you. But I’m…we’re…doing just fine. Moving on. Smooth sailing.”

Freddy tried to hide his disappointment, turning his head and walking around the store as he spoke. “That’s good. Really, cousin. Excellent. But…” he meandered back toward the front register toward Angel, “everything is smooth sailing…until it ain’t.”

Napoleon finished his cigarette and ignored Lincolns as he kept pestering to have one. They both practically bowed as they noticed a sharply dressed man and his crew leave the store, taking quick notice it was Silent K. They exchanged Silent K stories for a bit then exchanged stories about women for another bit until the odor of feces started to take a heavier toll. Napoleon had already sprayed lavender-scented air freshener he took from his glove compartment to try and kill the fecal stench in the air. It didn’t work. Lincolns told him all the lavender scent did was make the doodoo more tranquil and at peace with smelling so horrible. Napoleon couldn’t bring himself to laugh because he was floored by the fact that Lincolns used a word like “tranquil.”

“It’s too nice over here for this bullshit,” Napoleon said, waving his hand over his nose.

“I told you we just need to locate the—”

“No,” Napoleon interrupted Lincolns with a brutish grunt. “I’m not gonna look around for shit. The fuck is wrong with you?”

“Whatever.”

“Seriously, bruh. We have to start acting and being the part. We ain’t just some stickup kids, or baby mama vigilantes or worse…shit hunters.”

“I hear ya, I hear ya.” Lincolns propped himself off the car door and stretched. “Sources gonna have us on to bigger and better things.”

Napoleon nodded and smiled a fortuitous smile. “Exactly. Let’s do this one right.”

“Right,” Lincolns said as he swatted his palm at the flies that lingered in the area.

“We’ll make this look easy, Links. Gotta remember, that’s why Freddy came to us. We’re like the enforcers.”

“No doubt.” Lincolns tilted his head, his brow full of curiosity. “Yo, somethin’ been bothering me about Freddy…I mean Sources: His last name is Belkin, yeah?”

“Yeah, so?”

“He’s Jewish, right? Belkin ain’t a Jewish name.”

“What? How you figure that? What do you know about Jewish surnames?”

“C’mon, son. You know they normally have names ending with –*witz* or –*stein*. You know, like ‘Horowitz’ or ‘Frankenstein’ or some shit.”

Napoleon’s face turned into a wrinkled mess, a combination of a wince from the foul smell and confusion.

“Nigga, what? *This* is what’s been ‘bothering’ you?”

“I’m serious. What Jewish person you ever heard with the name Belkin?”

“But stein is good then, right? So what, now Frankenstein was Jewish?”

“I don’t know. Shit, the proof is in the name. I guess that nigga was a Jew.”

Napoleon stared at Lincolns, straight-faced, and said: “You’re a dumbass.”

Lincolns hurled profanities at Napoleon as he noticed someone in a black jacket with a hood over his head and a brown paper bag in his hand. He tapped Lincolns on the shoulder and they both watched him walk up to Angel’s door near the steps. The afternoon sun beamed its conspicuous light upon him. Lincolns walked behind him then tapped the hooded stranger with his index finger.

He shot up, his hood falling off his head as he jerked. A teenager—the scrawny build of no more than sixteen years old stared back at him. His eyes were ovals and his teeth were jittering.

“What ya doin’ kid?” Lincolns said.

“I—I umm.” the kid stuttered and shuttered.

Napoleon approached the kid and kneeled. “Don’t be afraid, friend. Just tell us why you’re walking around with fresh shit in a bag and placing it under this man’s welcome mat.”

More stutters fumbled from the kid’s mouth as his body shivered.

A voice closed in on them from behind and said, “That’s ‘bout as good as ye gonna do on this one it seems, kid. Take the bag and get on. N’ don’t fret, you’ll still get yer coin fer it.”

An Irish accent always put Napoleon on guard. You didn’t exactly bump into Irish folk at the local supermarket in this city. Underground fight clubs, poker tournaments, strip clubs (or at hotels with cheap prostitutes)—sure, Irish abound. But Napoleon knew most of the scroungy-looking ones with a toothpick dangling from the corner of their mouths were definitely made guys.

“Yes, yessuh,” the kid said, his Irish accent audibly clear now that he got past his stutters. He ran off.

Napoleon stood up, wiping the gravel off his palms from bending down. “This is your doing?” he said.

“The shite? You’d need a much bigger bag. I ain’t too kind to toilets ye see.”

“The fuck does that even mean,” Lincolns said, unimpressed.

Two other men in suits came around the corner and joined the Irishman with the toothpick.

“Name’s Donnie,” he said holding his hand out.

“I know who you are,” Napoleon said, crossing his arms.

Donnie looked at his empty hand, smiled and placed both hands in his pocket then leaned against Napoleon’s BMW.

“Well, see then I’m at a disadvantage—ya knowin me n’ all.”

“Because you don’t know us right? Smart ass,” Lincolns said.

The three Irishmen laughed. Donnie said, “I don’t give a fuck who’ya are. Obviously, this city doesn’t give a fuck otherwise I would know who’ya are.”

Lincolns shot evil daggers at the Irishmen. The two lackeys postured up. Donnie didn’t move an inch.

Napoleon laughed. It wasn’t a sarcastic laugh; it was a hearty bawl—a real laughing *at* you not *with* you exhibition. Donnie’s face showed offense.

“Yeah, we’re the nobodies,” Napoleon scoffed. “Meanwhile three overdressed lames…” Napoleon stopped then took an appraising gaze at them and continued, “…one overdressed lame and two pawnshop goons are paying kids to drop shit bombs at local businesses.” He laughed some more. “You guys are reeeeally high on the totem pole of the city’s elite. Yeah, okay nigga.”

Donnie wanted to tell Mr. David this task was beneath him. But Donnie didn’t tell Mr. David anything. Now he had to deal with these bastards attacking his rep. And doing a convincing job at it.

“Nothing to say back there?” Lincolns said, addressing the two lackeys. “Oh yeah, that’s right.” He snapped his fingers. “Y’all are Mr. David’s guys. He doesn’t let you all out the house much, right? And when he does you don’t exactly get to show off your social skills.”

“You black motha—” one of the lackeys started before Donnie turned and shot a look at him.

“Just tell us why you guys are wasting your time with something like this,” Napoleon said.

Donnie’s tone became serious. “One of Mr. David’s lady friends bought a diamond necklace here. Got a shite deal. We’re just returning the…shit. Why do ye two maggots care?”

“Let’s just say it’s a friend of a friend situation here. Nonetheless, there ain’t no point in keeping up with this thing.” Like a well-oiled machine, as Napoleon spoke Lincolns pulled out his glock and cocked it. “We’re gonna need y'all to bounce.”

“Ye want us to ‘get ghost’ yeah? I think I heard one of you little hoods sayin’ that before somewhere.”

“Yeah, something like that,” Lincolns said. Holding his glock to his side.

Donnie leaned his head down, staring at the piece. “Shiny,” he said. “Careful with that. I’d suggest keepin’ it rights there next to yer leg. Once ye starts aimin’ at people, things get kinda hairy, yeah?”

While it wasn’t exactly a Mexican standoff, but the pressure of one filled the air. No one budged, flinched, or spoke for what felt like minutes, but had only been seconds.

“This was the last bag our lil’ buddy was to drop off anyway. But yah see, he didn’t exactly drop it off now did’e?”

Napoleon’s stance became firm, posture at the ready. “And he’s not gonna.”

One of the lackeys darted toward Napoleon and fell against the store’s front door when Lincolns glock smacked against the side of his head. He was out cold. As Lincolns tried to regain his balance Napoleon threw a left hook at the other lackey, a wild but powerfully landed punch. He fell against the car and rushed Lincolns, wrapping his arms around him. Lincolns feet started lifting from the ground. Donnie stepped away and watched, his hands still in his pockets. Lincolns caught a glimpse of him amidst the scuffle and saw an eerie smile plastered on Donnie’s face. Napoleon punched the lackey that was grabbing at Lincolns in the ribs, he winced and let go of his grip.

Lincolns turned and saw Donnie. He relived each insult and cocky look Donnie had thrown their way and wanted to pounce. Just as he leaned forward to swing, Donnie’s arm flew from his pocket, swift as a cobra, and Lincolns found himself in a rear naked choke. Donnie’s right arm was pressed snug under his chin, tightly pressed against his windpipe, and somehow holding a switchblade in his left hand as his left arm locked in the other.

Donnie let out a single laugh as he looked across. “Stalemate,” he said, locking eyes with Napoleon wearing a faint smile and aiming a jet-black HK45 at his head.

Napoleon was breathing heavily but seemed perfectly calm. He’d never tell Lincolns, or anyone, but Donnie’s smile was a thing of horrors.

Freddy paced around the store, fishing for info but not getting Angel to bite. Bren would come out of the office, yapping away with her high-pitched, speedy voice, and Angel would send her back to do another task. Something had to give, Freddy thought.

“I mean I know you’re all in on Louie Constan-fuck, but you never know what could happen. Yeah, I’m being nosey.”

“Yes, you are,” Angel agreed. “You missed your chance at this. And stop cussing so much.”

“I’m not being nosey because I still want in, cousin.” Freddy’s tone became empathetic, his face wore a convincing level of concern that would have made his high school drama teacher proud. “I’m being nosey because I care. Yeah, I’ve been worried about ya a bit ever since you told me about this. It’s a dangerous place out there. You know that.”

Angel hesitated and let out an agreeable sigh. “I know,” he said. “I know, but it’s fine. I promise.”

“I’m losing sleep out here. You know how much I love my beauty sleep,” Freddy jested. “I guess I won’t be sleeping well until you’re done with this little rah-rah venture of yours.” Freddy was dropping hints hoping to pick up a semblance of information.

Angel smiled and reached his arm out to tap his cousin on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, you won’t be restless long. All the exchanges will be over next week. Thank God. I’ll be glad when they’re over too.”

Freddy turned his back, trying to hide the smile he couldn’t hold back. He was better at extracting details than he thought he’d be.

“By the way,” Freddy started, “the strip joint you told me about, Flavors, just letting you know don’t have your guy do the exchange on a Thursday or a weekend, including Fridays. Weekends are just too crazy, and Thursdays one of the gangs from 18th Street typically go there.”

“Re—Really?”

“Yeah,” Freddy said proudly. “That’s a freebie by the way.”

“Thanks, Fred. I mean that. I’ll run it by my guy. But I don’t wanna keep talking about this here.”

“Okay, okay. I won’t keep bothering you about it.” Freddy relented, knowing the deal was still going down at Flavors and now narrowing it down to a few days was plenty. “Don’t be too soft out here. You’ll get eaten. Tighten up the security and all that bit.”

“I don’t think I—”

Both Angel and Freddy hopped in panic when a heavy thud came from the front door. A man lay strewn against it, his back leaning against the glass door. He appeared to be unconscious. Freddy’s eyes widened as he saw Napoleon, Lincolns and two other men fighting. Angel leaned over the counter then stopped and rushed around the front and stood next to Freddy. By the time he got there he saw a short, muscly black man aiming a gun at a menacing white man in a suit that seemed to have another black man in a headlock of sorts. Angel had no idea who any of these people were. Before long the white fellow let the black guy out of the stranglehold and the other black guy lowered his gun. He grabbed the two other men in suits, they stood wobblily beside him and followed him to a gray Oldsmobile and drove off.

The short black man dusted off his clothes and walked into the store. Freddy looked at Angel, he looked entirely frightened.

“Your place of business won’t be smelling like shit outside no more,” the short black man said.

Napoleon caught a quick glimpse at Freddy who was gesturing “shhh” to him with his index finger above his lips.

“Uh, th—thank you,” Angel Belkin said.

“No problem,” Napoleon said. And walked out.

Freddy had no idea what the hell had just happened but couldn’t have been more pleased. The timing was too perfect. Angel was clearly shaken which would mean he’d likely be open to sharing more information about this deal, or at the very least, easier to pry it from without him knowing it was being pried from him. But Freddy wouldn’t press his luck anymore today. It would be too obvious and might upset the apple cart so much that Angel might call off the whole thing.

“Like I said, cousin,” Freddy held a stern countenance as he headed toward the door to leave, feeling like a don all over again, again straightening his blazer collar as he spoke, “…it’s dangerous out there. Be careful.”