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## Chapter 10

The night in the hotel had been heavenly. Harvy staggered home in the morning drunk on lust. He felt like he was on drugs, the incident in the abattoir was now at the back of his mind, and everything seemed only half as bad as it had before. The memory of Jennifer's fragrant skin, the orange glow of the dawn, the buzz and the hum of the city all played a melody within him, the first beats of a new song rose up inside him and he glowed with bliss.

Once at the practice room, he lunged at the cheap keyboard to see if the intro worked, he improvised and refined it, picked up the cello and developed the song even further. A few lines of lyrics came to him effortlessly, he tried a simplified opening and tried to accentuate the sound with the bass, then began tinkering with it and rehearsing it over and over again.

That evening he showed the song to the band. They caught the bug too, and eagerly played what he'd written. In the days that followed they worked together with so much focus that the song finally took shape. Marvin brought in his slide-guitar, and Spike, the drummer, laid down his beats. After three days of intensive practice, 'Touch' already sounded surprisingly laid back and lively. Harvy's eyes lit up; it was as if he'd conjured a hit out of a hat.

The next day this wonderful light and easy feeling had vanished. Tony Tangeroli was back. This meant that he would have to share Jennifer with the underworld boss, which felt like a stab in the heart. But it wasn't just that: from then on it would be dangerous to even look at her. Sweat ran down his forehead with anxiety when he thought about it, and if she touched him in public he flinched.

But it was even worse than that: Tony Tangeroli wanted to see him. That couldn't mean anything good. Jennifer, who had brought him the message, insisted: 'Harvy, you haven't got a choice – you have to go, otherwise you'll be dead, sooner or later.'

Harvy was agitated. He couldn't turn down an invitation from the Big Boss, he knew that. Tony Tangeroli only asked once – turn him down, and you'd made an enemy of him. But under the circumstances he had absolutely no desire to meet with him.

Jennifer placated him: 'Tony doesn't know anything about me and you. He's got nothing against you. Believe me, I know him. I don't know what it's about, but Tony's in a great mood. You don't need to worry.'

It took a few talks with her to convince him that the best thing to do would indeed be to meet with Tony. She reassured him that nothing would happen. The meeting would take place on the roof terrace of Tony's penthouse in Hell's Kitchen – without her. Just him and Tony. She guaranteed for Harvy's safety, she was well connected with Tony's bodyguard Butch, who owed her a favour and would keep a watchful eye on the conversation.

After her persuasion Harvy finally agreed to see Tony Tangeroli, even though he felt uneasy about it. On the way to the meeting – the tireless 'Button Man' Paulie had brought back his bike from the abattoir with new locks – he was so worked up that he almost crashed. It was a miracle that he hadn't collided with a car while making a jump over a pile of rubble. Harvy felt as unsteady as a beginner, and the bulletproof vest Jennifer had given him unnerved him. As he dismounted the bike in front of the skyscraper where Tony's luxurious penthouse was located, he took a deep breath.

In the lobby of the tower he had to go through a series of checks and turnstiles. He had to tap in the key code he'd been given, his finger prints were taken and compared to the ones on his pass. When Butch escorted him in the elevator to the roof terrace, it felt like being in a high security wing of a prison.

He recognised Tony on a sun lounger by the pool in conversation with a gaunt man. Tony's bodyguard Butch told Harvy to wait. He watched the Boss hidden from view behind a palm tree. Tony was black and a head taller than him. His arms were as large as Tony's thighs. His shaved head shone in the sun competing with his golden wristwatch. He was wired up on his left-hand side and had an earpiece: a few words in the microphone and a pack of wild attack dogs would probably appear. The musclemans hands seemed incredibly soft and fine – of course: he

never got his own hands dirty. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. All in all he gave off an aura of clenched power and gave the impression of a man who knew what he wanted.

The other man had the figure of a child – a pitifully emaciated creature with protruding bones and a serious face. His white linen trousers trembled around his thin legs, and his tiny shirt flapped wretchedly around his weedy torso.

‘Listen Freddie, I know it’s hard because you’re the best. But I believe in you. In our world, it’s not always the best who win, you understand, right?’

‘Yes, Mr. Tangeroli.’

‘You’re going to be riding Mister Ed, everyone’s going to bet on him. You’ll take the lead and dominate the race, like you have the whole season. On the last lap you’ll fall back, Topkapi and Silver Groove will overtake you. Is that clear?’

‘Very clear, Mr. Tangeroli.’

‘There’s a damn lot of money at stake Freddie, and this could mean stacks of money for you and your family. If everything goes to plan you could be taken care of for the rest of your life.’

The Boss took off his sunglasses and looked at the jockey sharply.

‘Are you my nigger?’

‘Always at your service, Mr. Tangeroli.’

The Boss smiled at him kindly. They stood up, and Tony put his hand on the jockey’s stiff back almost affectionately.

‘Believe me, in a couple of years when you’re at your villa in Long Island lying by the pool sipping at a mojito you’ll think of me and you’ll say: that goddamn Tony Tangeroli was right. Repeat back what I told you!’

‘On Sunday I’ll come third behind Topkapi and Silver Groove.’

‘I knew you were a friend, a true friend’

‘Thank you, Comandante!’

Tony shook the jockey’s hand, they hugged, then he gave Butch the sign for him to take the man to the elevator. Harvy recognised the jockey, but he wasn’t sure where he’d seen the guy before.

As the jockey went down in the elevator, Butch called Harvy. His heart hammered in his chest. If his pulse had already been high when he had arrived, it now quickened even faster. Butch led him to the pool, where Tony Tangeroli received him with a nod.

'Harvy?'

'Yes.'

'Pleased to meet you. Tony Tangeroli. Call me Tony. Please, take a seat.'

They sat in smooth wicker chairs at the side of the pool. A barely covered Latina brought ice-cold drinks and nibbles.

They drank from their banana daiquiris and looked at one another.

'You want to ask me why I've brought you here.'

'Mm.'

'Jennifer has told me all about you'

Harvy winced.

Tony smiled at him. Harvy felt beads of sweat forming on his brow. He felt the weight of the bulletproof vest under his shirt.

'Hot stuff.'

Harvy's heart almost jumped out of his chest. The Brooklyn Bridge was in his mind's eye.

'You're really going for it. How long have you been together?'

'Er...'

'You *are* the singer of The Raccoons aren't you?'

'Yes...er...right.'

'Ever since Jennifer went to your concert your music plays at our place day and night. When we're working out, working, chilling, 24/7. And because I'm into your groove, I'd like to make you an offer.'

'An offer?'

'Don't get me wrong. To be honest I don't know anything about music, that's not my thing.'

The ice tinkled in his glass as he casually sucked on his daiquiri.

'But if Jennifer really digs your songs so much, there's got to be something to it. She's got taste. And because I love Jennifer more than anything, I want to do you guys a favour.'

He stroked his hand down his grey trousers.

'What label are you on?'

'Raspberry Records.'

'Raspberry what?'

‘A small, independent label. Kind of for insiders. It’s not really known outside of the scene.’

‘Who do they put out, this...’ Tony cleared his throat disdainfully, ‘Raspberry Records?’

‘Barry and the Elephants. Masters of Mud. Lady Rip-Rip.’

‘Hm.’ Tony said, shaking his head. ‘Never heard of them. How many people work there?’

‘Four or five?’

Tony rumbled his brow thoughtfully.

‘Do they pay well?’

‘They pay – if there’s money there.’

‘It all sounds a bit amateur. Listen, Harvy. I want to put you guys out on a grand scale. I’ve got a friend at Sony Music. He’s not the boss, he’s a producer two or three steps down. My guy will get you a meeting with the boss. I’ll make Sony an offer they can’t refuse. Then The Racoons will really take off.’

Harvy swallowed. Sony Music was the biggest label in the world. Just being under contract with them would catapult them into a different league in one strike. Their success would reach whole new spheres. All the pitiful haggling for fees, all the demoralising bread-and-butter and temp jobs would come to an end. Just making music. Their music! But if what was going on with him and Jennifer ever came out he’d end up, with or without a bulletproof vest, sleeping with the fishes in the East River.

‘Believe me, Harvy, I’m somebody that keeps their word. A promise means a lot to me. I’ll make sure you’re Sony’s newest popstars.’

He lit a cigarette and blew elegant smoke rings up towards the sky.

‘Friendship and respect are sacred to me. I’d do anything for a friend. Anything, you understand?’

Tony took his sunglasses off and looked at him intensely.

‘Are you my nigger?’

Harvy took a deep breath in and out. The wind blowing over from the Hudson cooled his hot forehead. He felt his sweat running underneath the bulletproof vest. He ran through all his options in a fragment of a second. He basically only had one. ‘I’m your nigger, Tony. But I have to ask my guys. I can’t make a decision over their heads. We’re a band, we don’t have a boss.’

Tony Tangeroli nodded. 'Ok. You have forty-eight hours. Let me know. I'm counting on you, my friend.'

Harvy was relieved. Tony put his hand tenderly on his forearm. 'I want to tell you a story. Listen up. My mother is from Kenya. When I was a boy, she warned me: "never grab a leopard's tail! But if you do, don't let him go." I've kept that with me my whole life. I've never let go of the leopard's tail. And I've done well. I've always had luck.'

Tony looked across the Hudson towards New Jersey lost in thought. Harvy didn't understand any of it – what was that supposed to mean?

'My father – rest in peace – always used to laugh at my mother's wisdom. He was Italian and came from a completely different world. If she talked about leopards he would roar with laughter and shoot chestnuts from the trees in the garden. But my mother was right. She was the best Consigliere you could ever have. If Dad had listened to her, he'd still be here.'

Tony looked him steadfastly in the eyes.

'What happened?' Harvy asked.

'My father let go of the leopard's tail for a moment. He was careless for a short second and the predators attacked. He allowed them too many freedoms, he wanted to keep them on a long leash. That was his mistake. His generosity cost him his life.'

'I'm sorry.'

Tony made a dismissive wave of his hand. 'What I want you to take away, Harvy, is this: you only get one chance in this life. If you don't grab it or you let it go, you lose. You get me?'

'Yes' said Harvy, but thought. 'No.' Was Sony Music the leopard? Or Tony? What were they actually talking about? Who cares, the main thing was he'd got his head out of the noose.

'You know the Old Testament, right?'

'Not very well.'

Tony started to preach: 'It came to pass that the singer and his sons and brothers came with cymbals and harps and lyres; and the trumpeters and the singer and the musicians joined in unison to thank and praise the Lord, because his greatness lasts for eternity; then the house was filled with a cloud. And the priests

were unable to give their service because the glory of the Lord filled the whole temple of God. Now go in peace, my son.'

They stood. Tony said goodbye to Harvy with a warm hug and placed his hand paternally on his shoulder. The nightmare was over, and Butch escorted him to the elevator. Harvy was breathing audibly.

'Thank you.' He said in the elevator.

'For what?'

'For being there.'

'I'm always there.'

Out in the street he wondered if it had all been a dream. If it had all been nothing more than a mirage. But Tony's words from the Old Testament rang in his ears. And he could feel the soaked through bulletproof vest under his shirt. He had to round up his guys as quickly as possible, they had to talk over Tony's proposition. To be signed to Sony Music was a dream. Or the beginning of a nightmare?

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