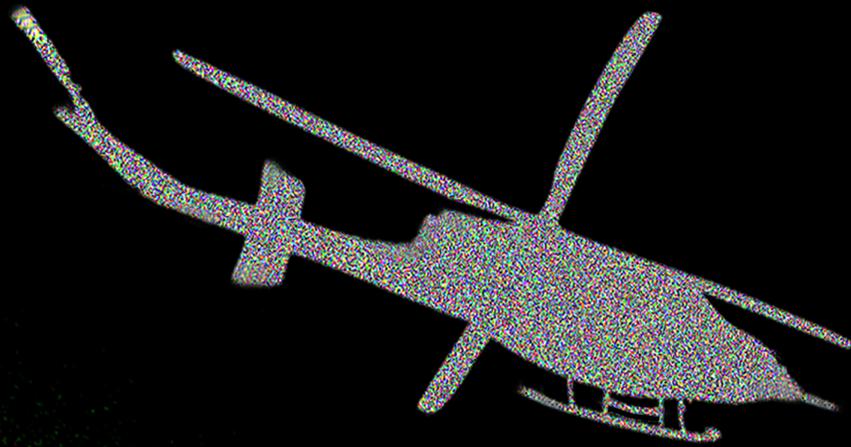


# URBAN WARFARE



A NOVEL



BY  
**ERIC VINCENT**

From the PYRAMIDER Trilogy



# URBAN WARFARE

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A novel by ERIC VINC3NT  
From the PYRAMIDER Trilogy  
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## PART ONE

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### PREPARING THE BATTLE SPACE

*“Sometimes decades pass and nothing happens,  
and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen.”*

*-Vladimir Lenin*

# 01

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*Thursday June 3rd 2010*

Julian Breton stepped out onto sleek and pulsing Seventeenth Street unplugged and immune to geolocation, his pocket litter absent a mobile communications device. The twilight sun's low trajectory latticed between the glass towers of the financial district, lighting the street level in elegant secondary glows. A trim six-foot, Breton moved in graceful strides through the midtown throng. Clad in snug Adidas running gear, his caramel skin glistened where the sun touched it. He's clean-shaven, his afro buzzed military-short. With his green eyes and angular bronze face, it's impossible to guess his exact ethnicity. Breton could be from anywhere.

A block and a half northward, he arrived at the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Six lanes wide, replete with grand cultural institutions, the parkway diagonally bisects downtown Philadelphia's northwest quadrant, a river-like opening through the surrounding urban density. Breton gazed the length of it. About a quarter-mile up, the circular Swann Fountain at the center of Logan Square shot brilliant white arcs and pillars of foamy water into the air in concentric arrays. A half-mile beyond it, the colonnaded porticos of the Philadelphia Museum of Art loomed in a majestic haze at the paramount of the broad avenue. Breton launched into a brisk run in the direction of the museum campus.

Crossing the automobile roundabout inside Logan Square, sunlight drenched Breton in the open spaces of the parkway. His slicing stride propelled him across the flat asphalt like a gazelle on a savanna. The downtown skyline soared up behind him with intersecting geometries and textures and hues. Muscular pillars in triangle-topped porticos stood noble sentry over the vast rotary intersection.

As Breton raced across Twentieth Street, the Parkway expanded to five traffic lanes in each direction, a tree-lined Le Mans raceway stretch. National flags from around the world hung from tall lampposts lining the inner motorway, the

canvases undulating in sparse breezes, their exotic graphics punctuating the boulevard's international flavor.

Pumping his long arms, Breton propelled himself in sharp, disciplined strides across the grass lawns of Eakins Oval. Arriving at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, he charged across its street-level pavilion and dashed up its wide flight of stone steps, taking them two at a time, traversing the entire seventy-two-step flight in about ten seconds. He slowed to a rest at the museum's portico-level pavilion, ostensibly to stretch his legs.

A museum guard lingered by the circular fountain at the center of the pavilion, a pudgy, middle-aged black man clad in the generic rent-a-cop uniform of blue blazer, white shirt, black slacks and tie. He sauntered in Breton's direction. Breton feigned indifference. They brushed past each other, exchanging neither word nor glance. The guard circled wide in his walkabout, and shuffled toward the museum's grand entrance.

The sun edged behind the museum as Breton lingered in the shadow of its colonnaded portico, pondering the epic sight of the sylvan mile-long parkway, and how it sliced diagonally into a huddled grid of skyscrapers in a phallic sort of way.

The iPhone the museum guard handed Breton in their brush-pass began vibrating. He put the slim gadget to his ear, and murmured, "Hello."

A whiskey and nicotine-soaked voice came over, "What's a senate intelligence committee?"

"An oxymoron."

"Good evening, Commander Breton."

"Good evening, Senator."

"He's waiting for you at Belgian Cafe, Twenty-first and Green. Address him by the alias *Pyramider*."

"Copy Pyramider, Twenty-first and Green. E.T.A. fifteen minutes."

"I'll let him know." Breton terminated the call and tucked the phone away.

A hulking white tour bus roared up to the curb in front of the museum steps and lurched to a halt. "Here they come," Breton murmured to himself. The front door of the bus popped open, and they poured out like ants from a hole, a tribe of

school-age kids and their parents from some place other than Philadelphia, dozens of them, fists raised, scrambling up the Art Museum steps, giddily yelling and screaming, many of them bellowing the melody of the *Rocky* theme song.

Breton glanced left. To the northeast, a narrow turquoise and rust-colored spire capped with a gleaming gold cross knifed above the treetops, Saint Francis Xavier Church, at the corner of Twenty-fourth and Green. Breton decided to indulge himself in old-school landmark navigation, and use the church spire to geo-navigate his way to Belgian Cafe.

He began jogging down the “Rocky Steps,” while dodging the onslaught of manic Rocky tourists. One kid ran directly into Breton and bounced off him, stumbling on the stairs. *They never look where they’re going*, Breton laughed to himself.

At the street-level pavilion, he turned and jogged in the direction of the old gothic church spire.

## 02

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Manny Pultrone surfaced from the underground darkness of the Kennel nightclub like a pale lizard from a cave, intending to spy on the undercover police surveillance van parked across the street and down a ways. But his view of it became obstructed by the NBC10 News van pulling up in front of the club, its polished white shell emblazoned with the network's iconic rainbow-feathered cartoon peacock. The exclamation *Da fuck?* leapt from Manny's mouth like a startled mouse.

The look on his face became screwier when celebrity news anchor Kathleen Price emerged from the van as if arriving for another day at the office. Then Manny's legs became rubbery at how drop-dead beautiful she still looked. Her lean, petite body was shrink-wrapped in a micro-blazer and miniskirt, the outfit's white fabric offsetting her biracial cocoa skin in a way that threatened to cause a traffic accident. Her chocolate-brown hair cascaded to her shoulders in artistic curls and waves, framing a honey-hued Botticelli face. Manny reached his skinny arms out, the unbuttoned cuffs of his black silk shirt dangling from his wrists, and crooned, "Hey, bella ragazza! Where you been?"

Kathleen called back in her famously gossamer voice, "*There* he is! How've *you* been, Manny?"

"Lonely! How come you don't come 'round here no more?"

Kathleen ignored that question, as her camera crew emerged from the van with gear in tow. She said to Manny, "Hope this isn't too sudden for Ricky."

"He'll get over it," Manny replied, motioning back to the club. "We could use the publicity."

Kathleen glanced over with a crossed brow, "What's up with that, Manny?"

"Business has been *way* off."

"No, Manny, I mean, what's up with that awful sign?" Kathleen pointed at a large discus over the doorway, featuring a cartoon mug-shot of a pit bull's face, its teeth menacingly bared. KENNEL was lettered underneath the dog in a font

common on football jerseys. She continued, “I don’t get why you changed the name of the club. *Dante’s Inferno* was a perfectly cool name.”

Manny turned and gazed at the KENNEL sign like it was a bad omen, then carved his fingers through his wavy black hair and said, “I dunno, seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Kathleen glanced around, surveying the area. “You say business has been off?” An unattended parking lot for a long-shuttered movie theater offered squatter parking for club clientele. Glass pebbles littered its broken cement surface, detritus of break-ins. Street parking was plentiful, because nothing else was around. There too, in the gutters, the blue glass pebbles, like little rivers. “This used to be the hottest club in town, Manny. What happened?”

“Ricky getting locked up, for one.” Manny glanced north up Seventeenth Street, fluttering his hand in that direction, “And we got competition now.”

“You mean Jupiter?”

“You heard about that.”

“I covered it. It was the event of the season. What’s wrong, Manny? You seem bothered.”

Manny shook his head, “Everything’s different since Ricky got sent away. I don’t think he’s gonna like it.” Manny pushed his fingers through his hair and glanced around, as if seeing the place for the first time and trying to make sense of it. “The Kennel’s gonna be the only thing he’s got now. And what’s left of his crew.” As if on cue, a diminutive young man with kinky hair gelled back from his forehead emerged from the club, leering at Kathleen. Manny snapped at him, “What do you want, Raffy?” But Raffy remained speechless at the sight of Kathleen. Her miniskirt was hemmed to a point shy of impropriety, and Raffy’s eyes became locked on that point. He winced and shuddered when Manny finally yelled, “*Raffy!* What the fuck are you doing out here!” Raffy shot Manny an indignant look and began stuttering a non-reply. Manny cut him off, “Go ice down the bars and clean the tap wells!” Raffy rolled his eyes. Manny pointed at the threshold of the subterranean club and shouted, “Go do it!” Raffy gave Kathleen a final eyeball assault, and retreated back inside.

A camera crewman held a mirror in front of Kathleen. She tossed her chocolate brown hair, and the curled ends swept the shoulders of her white blazer. “So what are we looking at here, Manny?”

Manny showed his palms, “Ah, I dunno...”

“We’re talking off the record, Manny.” A crew guy handed Kathleen a clip-on microphone. “I’m not a crime reporter. I’m doing a fluff piece out here, courtesy of my idiot producer. Must be a slow news day.”

Manny glanced around, and made a conspiratorial lean towards her, “The family should all be here, welcoming Ricky back with a party here at the club. The South Philly family, that is. We was hoping some people from the New York families were gonna show. But ya see that unmarked police van over there?”

Without looking, she said, “I spotted it when we were driving up.”

“Right? So five-oh’s taping everyone coming and going, and you *know* the New York gumbahs are gonna get scared off by that.”

Kathleen began affixing the tiny microphone to the lapel of her white blazer. “When’s Ricky getting here?”

“Soon. Fat Frank’s picking him up at Graterford.” Manny glanced at a bulky chrome watch on his wrist. “Uncle Marty and his crew should’ve been here by now.”

“It’s early, Manny. Stop looking at your watch. What about Don Giorgio?”

“Not comin,’ still in Florida recovering from his heart attack.”

“Is he still in charge?”

“Yeah, Don Giorgio’s still the big boss, but Uncle Marty’s running things while he’s away.”

“How’s that going over with everybody?”

“It’s been weird, and it’s gonna get weirder.”

“Why, because Ricky’s coming back?”

Manny nodded, “Marty’s been phasing out all of Ricky’s projects since he’s been away. The alliance with the Junior Black Mafia, *gone*. The meth crews, *gone*. A lot of really easy money, *gone*. It’s gonna be like Ricky’s coming out of a time-warp. I don’t think he’s gonna like the new normal, and we’re talking about a guy who’s used to having his way.”

Kathleen dimmed her eyes at Manny, “You think there’s gonna be a turf war.”

Manny nodded. He pointed at his chest with his thumb, “And I manage Ricky’s club, so I’m gonna get caught in the middle of it.” Manny crossed himself, “It’s gonna be a long, hot summer, Kathleen. Pray I’m still alive by the end of it.”

## 03

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The elevator doors slid open, and Chief Detective Ernie “Sully” Sullivan stepped out onto the twentieth floor landing with his phone at his ear. Stocky with tousled silver hair, dressed in a gunmetal-gray business suit, Sully marched down the corridor like a bull with manners. A floor-to-ceiling window at the end of the corridor was bright with daylight. When his partner Craig Gamble’s greeting came over the phone, Sully grunted, “I just got called in for some chicken-shit meeting with the captain on zero notice.”

“Now?” Craig replied, “Shit dog, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I don’t either. Are you cool?”

“Yeah, I got this covered, Sul.”

Sully checked his wristwatch, “Okay, but ping me when it’s about to go down. I wanna see it.”

“You got it boss.”

Sully pocketed the phone, and stopped at the end of the hallway, taking a moment to scan the scenery beyond the plate glass. In the near distance, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge spanned the Delaware river, its twin steel towers soaring into the clear sky and likewise painted ocean-blue, paired by thick curving cables hung with mathematical rows of vertical suspenders. Its blacktop roadway pulsed with veins of automobile traffic, arching in a shallow slope over the half-mile-wide waterway.

Sully opened the last door at the end of the hall, stepped into the windowless conference room, and murmured an epithet under his breath. Captain Dougherty hadn’t arrived yet, leaving Sully with no idea how late he’d be. He reached back for the doorknob, pondering retreat. Then the door at the opposite end of the room swung open, and Captain Bradley Dougherty entered in full dress uniform, minus the hat. Of slight build, with a pink complexion and straight white hair parted on one side, he shut the door behind him and called out, “Thanks for coming, Sully, have a seat,” gesturing to the oval conference table. The two men

sat across from each other. Dougherty rested his forearms on the table, folding his hands together, and said, “How you doin’ Sully?”

“I’m alright, Captain.”

“Brad, Sul, c’mon. You look like a zombie.” Sully shrugged his thick shoulders. Dougherty continued, “Heard you been spending nights on Sergeant McIntyre’s living room couch.”

Sully winced in embarrassment, “Mac was kind enough to put me up for a little while.”

“Things not going well with Caroline?”

“We’re going through a rough patch.”

“Caroline’s a fine lady, Sully. Try to patch things up with her. I like that you’re bullheaded with your work, but turn it off with the spouse once in a while.”

Sully chuckled, and said, “Is that why you called me in, Brad, to offer me marriage counseling?”

“Maybe!” Dougherty flashed an affectionate grin, “Everything’s connected, Sully. A happy home life makes for a focused cop. Which brings me to the point. As you know, we’ve been on track to phase out the Organized Crime Task Force. I called you in here, because I wanted you to hear it from me, before the grapevine hits you with it. A date’s been set. The end of this year. As of midnight December thirty-first, your section’s officially getting folded into the Bureau of Criminal Investigation.” Sully nodded his head in assent. Dougherty continued, “Times have changed. We gotta change with it. The mafia’s not some stand-alone entity anymore. Anyone with an internet connection can form a criminal organization now. We all gotta be on the same page, sharing the same intel.”

Sully put a hand out and nodded his head, “I understand all that, Brad. I’m all for it! Hell, I don’t know why we gotta wait until the end of the year!”

“Because we’re a big ship, and we don’t maneuver that fast.”

“I hear ya. But you said *your section* like I got a section. I got Craig Gamble, and me. That’s been my section for the past year. A rookie, a desk, and a couple of unmarked cars.”

“And you’ve been doing fine work with what little you’ve had to work with. But don’t forget, your rookie’s a war veteran, and so you should thank me for making sure you got a rookie who’s capable.”

“Thank you. So I guess if we got a deadline set, then we know what my transfer’s gonna look like.” Dougherty didn’t respond at first. Sully said, “Right?”

“We don’t.”

Sully stared at Dougherty a moment, then said, “Aw, shit, Brad. I don’t like the looks of this.”

“Not for anything, Sul, but I’m gonna let you in on something. I’m supposed to tell you, *Don’t worry, this happens all the time*. It’s bullshit. I’ll tell you what’s goin’ on here. The brass wants to incentivize you.”

“*Incentivize* me? To do what?”

“Not to do what, just to be aware. You didn’t hear this from me, okay? But the new commissioner got wind of rumors of you bein’ a little friendly with Don Marty Dante.”

“Whoa, Brad! It was *me* who brought in his son Ricky! You *know* that! If I was that cozy with his pop?” Sully shrugged and shook his head, “That don’t make no sense!”

“But Sully, you wanted that kept quiet, remember? You stayed in the shadows, and let the D.A. take credit for the Ricky Dante bust, so you could maintain your cover with the goodfellas downtown. And it worked. La Cosa Nostra bought the myth. Problem is, people on *our* side started believing the myth, too.” Sully stared unblinking at Dougherty, who continued, “It was good strategy, up to a point. But now, it’s got you boxed in a little. You gotta box yourself back out of it.”

“I get it, Brad. Ricky Dante’s getting released from prison today, so I’m being incentivized...”

“Whoa!” Dougherty cut the air with his hand, and shook his head, “I’m not suggesting you do anything but your job, Sully. Nobody’s suggesting you manufacture anything against Ricky Dante. Just understand, the brass is gonna have an eye on you from here on out. And what they see, is gonna determine what your transfer looks like. Just so you know.” Dougherty flipped his index finger back and forth between them, “That’s what this is. It’s a heads-up. Patch things

up with Caroline, go back to spending nights in your own bed, and get some sleep, cuz you're gonna need it.”

• • •

Sully went back downstairs. The operations floor of the Philadelphia Police Command Center at Seventh and Race streets resembled a war zone absent the firefight. The spiraling din of barely-controlled chaos inside the windowless, football field-sized cavern could induce vertigo in a civilian visitor. Sully had ages ago learned to tune out all the swirling ambient noise, the chirping radios, squawking intercoms, grunting and babbling phone operators, and order-shouting brass. While making his way to his desk, a chiming electronic simulacrum of *Come Fly With Me* poured out of a pocket of his suit jacket. He extracted his Blackberry from the pocket and checked the caller ID. It read STREETWISE. He put the gadget to his ear. “Yeah, Craig, is it happening?”

“Any second now.”

“Roger, I’ll call you when it’s over.” Sully pocketed the gadget, and switched the channel of a flatscreen TV on the wall over his desk. The enchanting cocoa face of NBC10 News star anchor Kathleen Price appeared on the screen, standing outside a nightclub called Kennel on south Seventeenth street. Standing next to her was the likewise famous face of a man who could have been separated at birth from Hollywood actor Andy Garcia. Kathleen Price began interviewing Ricky Dante live on camera, “What are your plans now, Ricky?”

“In a word, Kathleen, normalcy.” Dante pushed his hand through his jet-black hair, revealing a distinctive widow’s peak at the center of his forehead. “Looking forward to getting back to a normal life, and running my club here, the Kennel.”

“It must have been hard, Ricky, being in prison when your father passed away?”

Dante glanced at Kathleen sideways in hesitation, his legendary confidence faltering for a split second.

*She got ya*, Sully thought to himself.

Dante said, “Yeah, Kathleen, that was rough. I mean, they didn’t let me out to attend his funeral. But I’m over it. Like I said, I’m just looking forward to getting back to business, running my club.”

“It must be great to have your freedom back, Ricky. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Kathleen.”

Dante turned away from her, and she was halfway through the boilerplate newscaster sign-off when Sully muted the sound. He extracted his ringing Blackberry from his pocket and pressed it to his ear. Craig Gamble’s voice came over in a low murmur, “Catch that?”

“Yeah. How’s that surveillance van holding up?”

Craig chuckled and said, “Shit, dog, it’s fooling exactly nobody. They’re sticking out like a turkey in a chicken coop over there. Not that it matters, ‘cause all the usual Vinnies and Tonys are a no-show for Ricky’s little shindig. So far, anyway. Listen, I’m sportin’ a civilian getup, so I’m gonna go sneak inside the club, have a little drink, do a little dance, and collect a little intel.” Craig lowered his voice further, “I got a little electronic Mickey to drop on their asses.”

“Good man.”

“Yo, Sul, you notice something about the way Dante and Kathleen Price were rappin’ with each other?”

“Now that you mention it, they did seem a little familiar with each other. And the South Philly mob ain’t exactly her beat. Why, what were you picking up on?” Silence on Craig’s end. Sully continued, “You think they’re an item?”

“Maybe. Like you said, it ain’t exactly her beat. Shit, dog, I didn’t know she *had* a beat. Long as I can remember, Kathleen Price did nothing but sit in front of a camera and read from a teleprompter, so I was kinda wondering what the fuck she was doing down here in the first place.”

“Slow news day, maybe.”

“Maybe. Signing off for now. Gonna go venture across enemy lines. Damn, how I love life during wartime.”

“Want me to come down there and work the perimeter?”

“Nah, Sul, they know you too well around here. You’d blow my cover. I got this.”

“Keep your powder dry, kid.”

“Word.”

## 04

---

As Julian Breton approached Belgian Cafe, he didn't spot Pyramider right away. On the leafy intersection of Twenty-first and Green streets, a black canopy emblazoned with a yellow prancing lion sheltered the restaurant's alfresco dining area. Under the canopy, red and yellow chairs and wood tables wrapped the exterior corner of the restaurant, populated by an ethnically diverse college-age and up crowd. Breton began to wonder if the eccentric young spook he'd been hearing about decided to bale on their meeting. Then a blond haired man sitting at a table against the restaurant's black-lacquered exterior wall made a discreet hand-wave, and stood to greet Breton. He wore a black shirt and trim black slacks, and so Breton realized why he hadn't spotted him at first: Pyramider was wearing all black, and sitting against a black wall. *Like a good spy, hiding in plain sight*, Breton thought to himself. He walked to the table and said, "Pyramider?"

The young man nodded. They shook hands. Pyramider said in a deep and textured voice incongruous with his youth, "Tristan Boumann, pleasure meeting you." Tristan had a great tan, and his aquamarine eyes glinted in contrast to it. He had a rower's V-shaped physique, and a firm but friendly handshake. He and Breton settled across from each other at the rectangular wooden table.

A tattooed and pierced waitress walked over dressed in punky attire, hair dyed black as tar, introducing herself as Marlana. In a manner as cordial and sweet as her appearance was edgy and fierce, she recited the list of beers on tap, and the dinner specials. Breton ordered the steak frites salad and a pint of Stoudts pilsner, and Tristan ordered the same.

Breton leaned back in his chair, glancing around. Locals walked their dogs, jogged with white earbuds dangling, bicycled by in singles and pairs. A cool, calming breeze blew off the nearby Schuylkill river. The setting sun branded a bronze glow on an ensemble of brownstone rowhouses across the street from the restaurant. "So, Tristan, tell me what you're up to, and how I might be of assistance."

Behind furtive glances as if vigilant for eavesdroppers, Tristan began, “The Senator said you’re someone I should be networking with. To what end, you’ll have to school me. But I gotta say, I’m intrigued with your experience in the military with...”

Breton made a subtle hand gesture, and Tristan quieted. “Let’s not discuss that here,” Breton said. Marlena arrived with two pints of beer, and set them on the table. After she walked off, Breton said, “Tell me about your connection with the Senator.”

“He’s got my new consulting firm on retainer, and recommended putting your contact info in my rolodex, but said I had to ask you first, in person.”

“So ask.”

“What is it exactly, Hypermedia Strategies?”

Breton leaned across the table a tad, and murmured, “Culture hacking.”

“Culture hacking?”

“Don’t say it too loud.”

“My bad.”

Breton leaned back in his chair. “I invented the term *hypermedia strategy*, because it sounds less insidious. Hypermedia strategies are akin to public relations blitzes, advertising campaigns, and publicity stunts, except the lines between those distinctions are intentionally blurred. I create a cultural event, or cultivate a rumor, and it goes viral, covertly advertising a product or a service, or a message or image that someone might want conveyed.”

“How is that different from astroturfing?”

“It’s not astroturfing, because the existence of an ulterior motive, or a commercial motive, is never entirely concealed.” A hint of a sardonic grin emerged on Breton’s face as he continued, “My logo is always branded on it, somewhere, however small, but it’s there. Ideally, a hypermedia strategy should seem to emerge from nowhere, because the audience won’t care what’s behind it. What makes it *hypermedia*, is that it transcends the media used to convey the nested message.”

“The nested message.”

Breton nodded, “The nesting of a message within a broader concept, is a key ingredient in a hypermedia strategy. Nesting is what makes it *strategic*.” Breton pointed an index finger up for emphasis, “Bear in mind, all this has to be implemented with extreme care, and meticulous planning and execution. It’s like when your martial arts teacher cautions you to never use your skills for evil purposes. Culture hacking is like that. If negative motives are behind it, or if it gets out of your control, it can do extreme damage.”

“In what way?”

“In lots of ways. Ruin a person’s reputation. Destroy a company’s stock value. Cause a run on a bank. Incite violent protests. Spark a popular revolt. Overthrow a democratically elected government. Things that can’t be undone.” Breton made a discreet glance around, vigilant for eavesdropping, and continued, “We’re talking about manipulating mass media, and we live in an information-based society. I have to exercise a strict code of ethics, which basically boils down to this: you can promote your own cause, but you cannot attack someone else’s. The client’s motive has to be positive.”

“Can you give me a recent example of one of these gigs?”

Breton thought about that a moment, then began, “People think they’re being treated to a free live music series, when the true purpose is to promote the lobby lounge and restaurant of the newly opened hotel it’s taking place in.”

“Huh. That sounds familiar. Let me guess, the *Sessions at the Westin* thing?”

Breton nodded with a hint of an approving smile, “That was one of my hypermedia strategies.”

“Wow. The music biz? That’s a little unusual for a James Bond type like yourself.”

Breton shrugged, “I’m not James Bond anymore. I’m retired from all that. I get to pursue my own interests now. And I love music. Like you.”

“*Sessions* was pretty huge. But I thought that guy Eric...?”

“You assumed that was *his* thing.”

“*Everybody* thought that was his thing, *especially* him.”

Breton smiled, “Yeah, I knew he was going to be a little cocky about it, and that’s why I hired him. Eric’s a man of many talents, and modesty isn’t one of

them.” Tristan cackled at that, and Breton continued, “But that’s why it worked, because nobody knew I recruited him to host it, call himself the producer, do all the media interviews and so forth, be the public face of it.” Breton sipped his beer, and continued, “Him being a well-known composer and musician gave it street-cred. That’s what *Sessions at the Westin* needed. That’s what made it newsworthy. It couldn’t feel like a corporate product, although it obviously was.”

“Sounds like astroturfing.”

Breton shrugged, “That one pushed the envelope a little. It *felt* real to the audience, so they didn’t care enough to ask, to go look behind the curtain. That’s where emotional branding comes into play.”

“Emotional branding.”

Breton nodded, “I research the culture of the target audience, figure out what they’ll respond to on an emotional level, and create a cultural event that’ll appeal to that emotion. Then I’ll nest the core message, or the product or service, within that cultural event. That’s what I did with *Sessions at the Westin*, created an atmosphere akin to a family gathering in a big living room, which is what that lobby lounge resembles.”

“You know, I went to a few of those performances, and I remember getting this warm feeling, like I was with family and friends on Christmas Eve or something.”

Breton flashed a proud smile, and said, “That was precisely the effect it was meant to have on you. So many of us have those memories from childhood, of being at a holiday gathering, and somebody playing music, and that feeling of warmth. When I was little, my older brother used to peel out blues licks on an acoustic guitar, putting on a little concert in the middle of our living room on holidays.”

“Cool. Does he still play?”

“No. Sorry to be a bum, but he passed away, a long time ago.”

“Oh, wow, I’m sorry, bro. Can I ask what happened?”

“He was shot to death.”

Tristan winced, and hissed, “*Sheisse*. I hope they fried the bastard who did it.”

Breton shook his head no, “They never caught the guy.”

Marlena arrived with their steak frites salads.

## 05

---

Manny Pultrone glanced around the inside of the Kennel nightclub with a manic look in his eyes and a pallor of fear on his face, and yelped into the cellphone he had pressed to his cheek, “Yo, you gotta get people out here *now!* Ricky’s *here* and the place is fucking *deserted!* What? *WHAT?!*”

The voice on the other end got obliterated by the nightclub’s booming sound system. Menacing darkness bathed the cavernous underground space, save for swirling globs of color thrown around by ceiling-mounted disco lights, and the white glow from digital cash registers behind the bar. Tommy Santoro, the club’s bar manager and sole full-time bartender, stood idle behind the bar, his arms folded across his chest. Little Raffy, the club’s diminutive young bar-back, hustled around trying to look busy.

On the opposite end of the club, Ricky Dante sauntered along the perimeter of the dance floor, his lean physique clad in a trim black designer suit, jet-black hair slicked back over his skull. He bumped fists with the guys and kissed the girls in attendance, about a dozen people in all. A gorilla with a human head walked behind Dante like a bodyguard, the tall, hulking Francis “Fat Frank” Larditelli. Fat Frank’s light brown eyes smoldered with the cunning of a man who knows his size is its own tool of intimidation. Dante and Fat Frank walked up behind Manny, still yelping into his cellphone when Dante slapped him on his shoulders. Manny spun with a frightened start and stammered, “H-hey, Ricky!”

Dante snapped, “Get the fuck off the phone, Manny. Where’s Uncle Marty and his crew?”

Manny brandished his cellphone, “I’ll call them again.”

Dante slapped at Manny’s cellphone, knocking it clattering to the floor, “Fuck that. They know I’m here. Everybody knows I’m here. It was on the fucking *news*, beotch...”

They got interrupted by a holler, “*YO RICKY!*” A black man with a thick build approached them in a waddling swagger, drink in hand, yelling, “Welcome back,

my *nigga!*” Cheeks roughly stubbled, he sported an oversized red Phillies jersey and matching cap, its visor cocked down over one side of his face. A large wooden toothpick protruded from his yellowed teeth.

Dante stepped to the thug and gave him a bear hug, saying, “Thanks, player, it’s good to be back.” Dante turned to Frank and Manny, “See? *Some* peeps know I’m back!” Dante turned to the black man and said, “My bad, homes, what’s your name again?”

The black man bellowed, “What’s my *name*? I’m C-Money, muthafukka! I been hangin’ at this jawn since the *get-go*! Yo, Ricky, how come they ain’t hardly no peeps up in here, homes?”

Dante replied, “Why don’t you get on your cell and get some fucking peeps up in here, yo?”

Fat Frank stepped at C-Money, shouting, “Yeah, muthafukka! You want peeps up in here? Get some peeps up in here!”

Dante grabbed Frank, “Yo, chill.”

C-Money yelled back at Frank, “Yo! I ain’t tryin’ to start no shit, homes! Jus’ sayin’ this place is dead, y’all. What’s up wit’ dat?”

“Yeah,” Dante called out to Fat Frank, “Why is that?”

Frank looked at Dante, and said, “Somebody fucked with the club while you were in the joint. Manny can tell you more about that. He’s the one who hired the cocksucker.”

Dante turned to Manny, “Who’s he talking about?”

Manny pointed his thumb sideways, “It was that new club, Jupiter, up the street. They pulled this big stunt. It made us look like jerk-offs.”

Frank stepped to Manny and jabbed his fat finger in his face, “Don’t bullshit the boss, Manny! It was the same guy, the one you hired!”

Dante cut in, “What guy?”

Manny pleaded, “You approved it, Ricky! Remember? I told you everything!”

Dante glanced around the noisy club, then looked at Manny and Fat Frank, and snapped, “The pool room.”

The three of them marched to a back corner of the club, and through an open door. Inside a darkened lounge, a clutch of kids lingered around a red-felted pool

table, chatting and shooting balls around on the table. Towering over them, Frank bellowed in a rude baritone, “EVERYONE OUT! NOW!” The club kids scurried out of the room like cockroaches when the lights are turned on. Frank slammed the door shut after the last one exited. Thumping music could be heard from behind the closed door, but now the lounge was quiet amid dim lighting. Dante pointed at a black leather couch against the wall. Manny settled into it. Frank stood by the door, maintaining an unblinking gaze on Manny.

Dante leaned back against the edge of the pool table, facing Manny, letting silence settle into the room. He folded his arms across his chest, and said, “Who’s this guy who pulled a stunt on the club, Manny?”

“His name’s Julian. Julian Breton.”

“Never heard of him.” Dante glanced at Frank, and said, “You said he fucked with us, and that’s why there’s no business here now.” Frank nodded. Dante snapped, “Don’t just rock your fucking head at me, Frank! How the fuck did he do that?”

“Remember two years ago, when we changed the name of the club? And put the cages with live pit bulls around the dance floor?”

“Yeah, I thought that was a cool idea. What about it.”

Frank pointed at Manny, “*He* picked the guy who came up with all that.”

Manny cried, “But you approved all that, Ricky!”

Dante glanced at Manny, “Yeah, but it was your idea to rebrand the club after I got locked up, to take the heat off the place.”

Manny shook his head, “It wasn’t my idea, Ricky, it was Julian’s. I thought you guys knew each other.”

Dante snapped, “Manny, what the fuck did I just tell you! I don’t know *anybody* named Julian!” Dante wrinkled his brow and shook his head, “Will you fucking stoonads just tell me what the fuck happened?”

Frank said, “When this new club, Jupiter, opened last year, they held this big grand opening, promoted all over town, all over the news. And it basically ridiculed our new theme. They had an adopt-a-puppy arrangement with the local dog shelter, and puppies in the club people could adopt. Some of them were pit pulls. The event was called, *Out With The Doghouse, In With The Dog*. Yeah,

pretty fucking retarded name, right? Problem is, it was the biggest event of the year.”

“So what? What the fuck does that have to do with us?”

“Rumors got spread that we weren’t taking care of the dogs. Ricky, understand, this was right after Victor Michael got locked up and kicked off the Eagles for that dogfighting racket he was running. You were in Graterford when that shit went down, so I don’t know if you realize what a federal case that got turned into. People get really emotional over that shit. We got raided, and shut down, and the pit bulls got taken away. We got ‘em back, but L&I said we couldn’t keep ‘em in the club anymore.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Your pop had just passed away, Ricky. We didn’t wanna burden you any further. There was nothing you could’a done. We thought we could deal with it ourselves.”

Dante glanced at Manny, then back at Frank, “Then what happened?”

“The city hit us with a bunch of bullshit code violations. We got clusterfucked in the press. People were trash-talking us like we were into animal cruelty. Which was all bullshit, ‘cause we took good care of those dogs, every one of ‘em. But it was like, we was guilty by association. It was a month before we re-opened, which almost wiped out our books. Then, when we re-opened, hardly anybody came.” Frank pointed his big index finger down at the floor, “Business at this place has been *dead* since then.”

Unblinking, Dante said, “Let me get this straight. The guy you hired to create this new image for our club, was the same guy that this new club called Jupiter...?”

Frank nodded, “The very same guy Jupiter hired for their big grand opening that trashed our reputation.”

“You think it was intentional?”

“It felt that way. The way everything dropped all at once. And the timing...”

“Right after my pop passed away.”

“Yeah, and right after Don Giorgio and Uncle Marty severed our alliance with the Junior Black Mafia.”

Dante wrinkled his brow, “What would that have to do with anything?”

“This Julian guy’s black.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. It was all a little too much of a coincidence. It felt orchestrated. Like somebody was trying to get to us.”

Dante stared into space, and muttered, “Get to me.” He thought about that a moment, and continued, “Yeah, I get it. The Junior Black Mafia blamed me for the embargo. But they didn’t have the balls to confront me inside Graterford about it. So they sent someone to stab me in the back out here, where I couldn’t defend myself. Makes sense.” He looked at Frank and continued, “That’s why Uncle Marty’s not here. He knew I was gonna make him hand over the key to the kingdom, but now he thinks he doesn’t have to, because I’m somehow weakened.” Dante glared at Manny and snapped, “What’s the guy’s last name again?”

“Breton.”

“Breh-*tahn*,” Dante repeated the name in a sarcastic snarl. He glared at Frank, “Tell me you found the cocksucker and sorted him out.”

Frank shook his head no, “Can’t find him. It’s probably not his real name. Jupiter can’t find him either, yeah, I asked. Remember a kid named Tino Minelli?”

”Tino Minelli...”

“Short, bald, big mouth, dresses like an art-fag...”

Dante nodded, “Yeah, I remember Tino.”

“Tino’s the general manager at Jupiter. I caught up with him when he was leaving the place one night, and put a gun to his head over this. But he acted dumb, said he didn’t know what was going on.”

Dante exploded, “Bullshit! You’re telling me, Tino’s the manager of the joint, but he didn’t know what was going on! And you *bought* that! What kind of a big, fat fucking pussy have you turned into in your old age, Frank?”

Frank winced, and said, “Ricky, we can go over there, and you can ask Tino yourself.”

“You’re fucking right, Frank. You and I are gonna go have a talk with Tino, right now.” Dante turned on Manny, “You, go dig up some information on the fucking guy, before I dunk you in a vat of acid.” Frank reached back and opened the door. Manny climbed off the couch and ran out, disappearing into the club.

Frank kicked the door shut behind him.

Dante remained leaning against the pool table, arms crossed over his chest, staring at the black leather couch as if Manny was still sitting in it. Then he said, “You kept this hidden from me, Frank.”

“I did, Ricky. I made that call. I did it for your peace of mind.”

Dante glanced down at the floor, and nodded his head a little, “I appreciate that, Frank.” He glanced up at Frank with a trace of a smile. “So let’s go have a chat with Tino Minelli.”

“Ricky, you can’t pack heat in Jupiter. They use metal detection.”

Dante waved him off, “I don’t give a fuck. With what I learned at Graterford, I won’t need a gun to kill Tino. Go get my Ferrari and bring it around front.”

“You can’t whack Tino inside the club, Ricky. They got lots of security.”

Dante’s eyes measured Frank’s considerable size, and said with a sneer, “So do I.”

Frank glanced down at the floor.

Dante snarled, “You didn’t get soft on me while I was in the joint, did ya Frank?”

Frank looked him in his eyes, and shook his head no.

Dante continued in a calmer tone, “Don’t get soft on me Frank. Cuz if ya do, I can’t use you no more. And I need ya right now. How long you been my right-hand man, Frank?”

“Since kindergarten.”

“That’s right. That’s how long you been waiting for me to take the throne, so you can be underboss, and then *you’ll* be in line for the crown. But we gotta sort this out first. We gotta send a message to Uncle Marty, because he obviously don’t take us seriously. We find this black dude, and send him back to the Junior Black Mafia with his head missing. Then Marty gets the message, that he’s gotta hand over the crown. I want this to be a smooth transition of power. I don’t wanna have to use force on Marty. He might be an asshole, but he’s still my uncle.”

Frank glanced at the lounge’s closed door. An asymmetric hip-hop beat thumped on the other side of it. He looked back at Dante, “Yo Ricky, you think this is a good idea? I mean, you just got out of prison an hour ago. Now you

wanna start a war with the Junior Black Mafia.”

“That’s why it’s a good idea, Frank. They fucked with my business when I wasn’t around to defend it. What would you do?”

Frank nodded, “I see your point.”

“What they did was deliberate, and it was public. So now, I’m out of the joint, and I’m Ricky Dante. I’ll let you call it, Frank. If I let two days go by without responding to this, what does that say to people?”

Frank scrunched his lips and shook his head, “It wouldn’t look good, I know. I just thought you might wanna have some blow, and get some strippers in here and get laid first, and enjoy your freedom a little bit, before you go swimming back into the mob shit.”

Dante pushed himself off the pool table, walked up to Frank, and cupped the side of Frank’s skull with his palm. “I *am* enjoying my freedom, pisan. I’ve been sitting inside a dirty shit hole for five years, waiting to swim back into the mob shit. That’s what sharks do. We keep goin’ forward, or we drown. Don’t worry, pisan. We’ll get some blow and some naked bitches in here, and we’ll have a fucking Roman holiday the likes of which this town has never seen. But that can wait. We got business to take care of first. Now be a good underboss, and go get my Ferrari.”

## 06

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The sky over Philadelphia had grown dark by the time Julian Breton and Tristan Boumann departed Belgian Café and strolled south on Twenty-first Street towards center-city. In the distance ahead, peaks of skyscrapers, speckled with rectangular white lights, glimmered through the trees lining the sidewalks of the elevated Fairmount district. Tristan said, “I could look into it.”

Breton shot him a quizzical look.

“Your brother’s death.”

“It was almost *twenty* years ago.”

“I’m good at finding things. What was his name?”

“Daniel. Don’t bother, I’ve looked into it. I’m still looking into it. We wouldn’t want to be stepping on each other’s toes.” Breton glanced ahead. The openness of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway began stealing up on them. The downtown skyline emerged over the roofs of row houses they passed. Breton said, “The Senator told me you were good, said you got mad talent, mad potential.” Tristan glanced ahead in a blank stare, nodding his head. Breton continued, “Your father got a bad rap.”

Tristan’s stare grew more distant, “I agree, but I’m biased.”

Breton changed the subject, “Pyramiding. How does it work, if you don’t mind me asking.”

They approached the rear façade of the Auguste Rodin Museum, its wood-paneled galleries visible through the windows of the Paul Cret-designed mansion housing the immense sculpture collection. Tristan began, “Pyramiding is something I stumbled on while studying the nuances of mixing audio completely inside the digital realm. The concept of applying triangular noise to smooth out sampling distortion was something I found weirdly fascinating. Then while researching a case for the Senator, I found myself doing something analogous to it with the intel I was collating. That led to an epiphany.”

“Of what sort?”

“Of information theory. Take noise. Noise is random. It doesn’t correlate to anything. But it can cancel out distortion, which is non-random. Distortion, unlike noise, correlates to its information source. That asymmetry is very rare, like a form of quantum weirdness. What I discovered, is that if I implement a Fourier transform...” Tristan placed both his hands out palms-down, then crossed one over the other, “...where I apply that cancellation effect to intel collating, a process of elimination and prioritizing emerges in a pyramiding pattern, and the point of the matter emerges.”

Breton stared unblinking at Tristan a moment, then said, “I’ll take your word for it. I’m surprised you haven’t heard from the CIA yet.”

“I’m expecting a call from Langley any day now. That is, unless I’m blackballed from national security clearance over what my father put them through.”

Breton smiled, and said, “I’ll put in a good word.”

“Thanks.” Evening picnickers dotted the grassy gardens of the Rodin Museum’s front lawn. Tristan said, “Culture hacking. You learned that stuff in the military?”

Breton nodded yes. “It’s called *psy-ops*, and it’s always been an important aspect of warfare.”

“School me.”

“The most prismatic example was Operation Desert Sabre. Nineteen ninety-one. Saddam’s forces were convinced we were imminently attacking them from across the Saudi-Kuwait border. That was not an accident, or they, the Iraqis, just being dumb.”

“The *Hail-Mary*. Was that one of your hypermedia strategies?”

“Well, I wasn’t calling it that yet. And I can’t take all the credit for that operation. But I was on the team, so to speak, a joint special operations task force responsible for designing *psy-ops* and disinformation warfare aimed at Iraqi forces. The one I referred to was the centerpiece, designed to set up the *Hail-Mary*, which was General Schwarzkopf’s idea.”

“I remember General Schwarzkopf on TV, explaining the *Hail-Mary*. You guys swung left, out into the open desert to the west of Kuwait, and crossed into

Iraq from Saudi Arabia, virtually unopposed.”

Breton nodded with pride, “That was *my* epiphany, what we did with that operation. How many coalition lives it saved. How fast and decisive our victory came.” They turned off Twenty-first Street and walked along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, through a tunnel of overhanging tree leaves illuminated by tall lampposts adorned with flags shifting in subtle breezes. “What we did was straight out of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, just applied in a technologically advanced battle space. Later, in the Balkans conflict, we applied that stuff to Milošević in a way that would really bake your brain.”

Tristan nodded with interest, “School me.”

Approaching Logan Square, the immediate area became dense with passersby, tourists and locals, many within earshot. Breton said, “Sprachensie Deutche?”

Tristan replied, “Ja, ich sprachensie ein bisschen Deutche.”

In German, Breton continued, “The Balkans war was a European war. It was not the Arab Middle East, although it was actually Muslims we were protecting in the Balkans conflict. Regarding human intelligence, we enjoyed a rather limited depth of penetration in the Arab Middle East. But the Balkans was a theater of operations we’d half a century to familiarize ourselves with. We’d been embedded there over the whole course of the Cold War. That area, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, was a perpetual hotbed of Cold War intrigue. So our human intelligence penetration there was quite deep.” Breton looked at Tristan and added, “Du verstandlicht?”

Tristan nodded, “Ja, ich verstandlicht. Das ist sinnvoll.”

They crossed Twentieth Street, and entered the Swann Fountain park, inside Logan Square’s rotary motorway. It appeared their privacy returned. Breton resumed in English, “So we had the upper hand on Milošević when it came to, say, planting stories in the Eastern European media, or finding out how loyal his allies were, and what could be done, covertly, to compromise them, through media manipulation and viral marketing. We had to work the streets of Belgrade, mind you, helping the Otpor movement, but without leaving our fingerprints on it. It was tricky, a whole different kind of urban warfare. Speaking of which...” Breton

motioned to a park bench, one of many ringing the circular fountain, and they sat. Little kids splashed around in the fountain, while their parents idled spectating on its perimeter. Under the amber light of a tall lamppost, Breton extracted the brush-passed iPhone from his running jersey, and held it out, glass panel-up. “Do you know how to hack one of these?”

Tristan glanced down at it, and said, “Yeah, I do.”

“I figured you would.”

Tristan took the gadget, turned it over, brandished it back-panel up, and said, “Here’s what you do...”

## 07

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With Fat Frank squeezed into the passenger seat, Ricky Dante angled his fire engine-red Ferrari 360 convertible to the curb in front of Jupiter nightclub. In contrast to Dante's club, this one was in a smart part of town, its entrance inside the elegant lobby of a venerable old office tower noted on the city skyline for its distinctive rooftop of orange Enfield tiles. Red velvet ropes hung from an array of brass stanchions along the sidewalk, manned by a platoon of bouncer-doormen dressed in business suits, white plastic techno-polyps in their ears attached to coils of intercom wire. A long line of restless patrons crowded the sidewalk aspiring for admission. The line barely moved, and the cool, corporate door staff batted neither hair nor muscle at any display of impatience.

Typical of swanky clubs and restaurants in Philly, parking curbside anywhere near the club's entrance was verboten - that is until an exotic automobile or a celebrity motored up, in which case the prohibition got waived, and Dante held the upper hand on both grounds. The irresistible glamour of the sleek Italian sports car, Fat Frank being so physically imposing yet well-dressed, and the legendary visage of Dante with his signature jet-black hair and matching black designer suit, and just today released from prison in a newsworthy fashion, all combined to predestine a welcome fit for a mafia prince. Jupiter's bouncer-doormen nearly slobbered as they pulled open the Ferrari's doors, then waved Dante and Frank past the velvet-roped crowd of overly-made up girls and fake-tanned guys lined up a block long awaiting admission to the exclusive nightclub. One of the doormen murmured into a wrist-com, signaling inside the club Dante's arrival. The Ferrari remained at the curb in front of the club's entrance, a beacon signaling *This Place Is Hot*.

While Dante and Frank strolled across the lobby and descended a wide marble staircase into the club, Dante murmured, "Did ya see how crowded they keep the sidewalk? I met this club owner inside Graterford who told me they do that on purpose. It creates an image for the club."

Frank grunted, “I know.”

“What’ya mean, *you know?* Listen, we gotta start doing that at Kennel.”

At the downstairs landing, they arrived at a mahogany lectern commanded by a tall blonde woman clad in a white dress tailored to within a millimeter of her swimsuit calendar physique. In a smart Russian accent, she announced, “Good evening, Mister Dante. We have a table for you in our VIP lounge, if you would like to follow me.”

A tall black man clad in a dark suit and tie and wearing a wired earplug led the woman into the club. Dante and Frank followed her, trailed by a beefy, tanned Italian, also in a dark suit and wearing an ear-com. The five of them strutted in procession along a white runway extending the length of the sprawling subterranean space. Rows of spotlights imbedded in the runway created the effect of an airport landing strip. Club patrons parted for them, lavishing celebrity-worthy attention on Dante. *When I Grow Up* by The Pussycat Dolls blared from the house sound system at a bone-rattling volume.

The black security agent came to a halt at a small staircase into a raised, cordoned-off section of the club. The Russian hostess ascended the staircase into the VIP lounge and showed Dante and Frank to a black lacquered table. An enormous video wall covering the back of the lounge pulsated shifting forms of color to the rhythms of the music. The Italian security agent stopped at the entrance of the VIP area, where he and the black man lingered, resembling a pair of Secret Service agents guarding a head of state. As Dante and Frank settled into their seats, the Russian woman bent over at her waist, threatening to spill her bountiful décolletage onto the table, and shouted above the considerable din, “What would you like from the bar?”

Dante glared up at her and shouted, “Bring us two Courvoisiers, and Tino Minelli.”

The blonde twitched her head askew, “Pardon?”

“Tino Minelli! Is he here?”

She straightened up and glanced around, “Yes, Tino is here somewhere.”

Dante beckoned her. She bent down. He called out, “Find Tino, and tell him I wanna have a word with him.” The hostess nodded and strutted off.

*I Kissed A Girl* by Katy Perry now thundered over the sound system. Fat Frank nodded his large head to the plodding electronic beat. Dante gazed around at the swarming eye-candy of skin-baring women and trendy men, all glowing and glistening under high-tech lighting that seemed to emit from everywhere and nowhere at once.

A lithe young Asian woman sashayed between the two Secret Service agents and up into the VIP area, clutching a pair of brandy snifters the size of grapefruit melons, each half-filled with amber liquid. Black pants and a tiny black tank-top appeared to be spray-painted onto her body, and she arched her back provocatively as she set the snifters on the table in front of Dante and Frank. A short, wiry man with a shaved head followed her up into the VIP area, dressed in slim pink slacks and a floral-patterned shirt. He extended his arms at Dante, and yelled out with a toothy grin, “*There he is!*”

Dante waved him over, and Tino Minelli eagerly hustled over and sat across from him. Dante chopped a hand out at the gyrating bodies on the dance floor and shouted, “You got a real fly little thing going here, Tino!”

“*I know!* But forget about that, Ricky. You’re out! And you look *great!* It’s great to have you *back*, pisan!”

Feigning affection, Dante grabbed Tino’s arm and squeezed it against the table. “Thanks, Tino. Really, coming from you, that really warms my heart.”

“I trust we’re treating you okay, Ricky?”

“Oh, yeah, Tino. I’m having a blast already.”

Tino looked down at his arm. Dante hadn’t released it. Tino tried pulling it away, but it didn’t move an inch. Dante’s hand, muscled from years of doing fingertip pushups in prison, had Tino’s arm spot-welded to the tabletop at five points. Tino patted at Dante’s hand, the one gripping his arm in a death-trap, and shouted over the music, “I want you to feel comfortable here. Seriously, Ricky.”

Dante glared back at him, “Seriously, Tino?” Dante slipped his free hand behind the lapel of his black suit jacket, and brought it back out, now brandishing a slim metallic ink pen. Its silver plating flared in the club’s electric lighting like the blade of a miniature stiletto.

Frank glanced at the security men still lingering by the entrance to the VIP

area, who were thus far oblivious to the carnage threatening to unfold, and called out, “Not here, Ricky!”

Dante called back, “Shut up, Frank!” Dante manipulated the pen so its sharp point protruded about two inches from inside his clenched fist.

Beads of sweat sprouted on the dome of Tino’s head. Panic in his voice, he called out, “Why are you doing this, Ricky?”

A diabolical grin sliced across Dante’s face as he snapped, “Why am I doing this! Good fucking question! You know the answer to that!” Positioning the pen low on the table so Tino’s upper-torso obscured it from view of the security men, Dante aimed its point up at Tino’s left eye socket. “*Out with the Doghouse*, Tino? Did you think that was funny?”

“No! I told Frank, I didn’t...”

“Tino, in two seconds, I’m gonna gouge your brain outta your fucking head. Now, you *know* me. So if there’s one thing you know you should *never* do...”

“Ricky! I’m just a peon here! There’s a big group of investors who own this place! *They* hired that guy! I was out of the loop on that whole thing! Please, Ricky, believe me! We go way back! I would *never*...”

Dante nodded his head up a notch. Tino quieted, now sweating profusely. He glanced down at the shimmering point of the silver pen protruding from Dante’s fist. The machine-gunning beat of *Got Money* by Lil Wayne exploded from the house sound system. Dante called out over it, “*Never* insult my intelligence, Tino.”

Tino shook his head no, “I wouldn’t. I’ll do whatever you want, Ricky, I swear.”

Dante glared at Tino a moment, then let go of his arm. He slipped the pen back inside his black suit-jacket, and patted the side of Tino’s skull. “Okay, Tino, I believe you.” Dante took a sip from the snifter and placed it back on the table. Frank picked his snifter up and took a long pull from it, looking relieved. Dante called out to Tino, “So, where do I find this guy?”

“I got his email address on my computer.”

“His *what* address?”

“Email.”

“Don’t gimme that geeky computer shit, Tino! I can’t beat a guy’s brains out

with his email address! Where the fuck does he live? Where's his office?"

"I can try to find out, Ricky."

Dante slammed his hand on the table, "You don't *try*, Tino. You *find* this motherfucker. I'm coming back here tomorrow night, and you're gonna tell me where I can find him. Understand?"

"Yeah, Ricky! I'll get right on it!"

"What the fuck's his name?"

"Julian. Julian Breton."

Dante repeated the name, "Breh-*tahn*. Sounds like a faggy French name. Is the guy a foreigner?"

Tino shook his head no, "Jules? He's from around here. Southwest Philly, I'm pretty sure."

Dante blinked a few times, then twitched his head askew and barked, "Tino, did you say *Jules*?"

"Yeah, Jules. People call him that."

Dante stopped blinking. "What does he look like?"

"Light-skinned black dude. About six-foot. Real lean and cut, like an athlete. And he's got these bright green eyes. Never seen eyes like that on a black guy before."

Frank's face jolted, like he'd accidentally vacated his bowels. He glanced at Dante, who had that same look on him. Frank leaned his huge upper-torso across the table and shouted, "Tino! Describe the guy, in detail!"

"I just did!"

Dante slouched back in his chair, looking up, as if gazing at an imaginary sky, the look of a man who's gazing into a distant past and seeing an ominous future, and muttered to himself, "I don't fucking believe it."

## 08

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At the intersection of Seventeenth and Market streets, Julian Breton emerged from the night-blanketed metropolis and strolled across the Westin Philadelphia's carport. At the elevator bank on the hotel's third-floor landing, a mahogany credenza displayed various newspapers laid out in orderly stacks: the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, London *Financial Times*, Philadelphia *Inquirer*, and the evening edition of the Philadelphia *Daily News*. the latter featuring Ricky Dante's face on the front page with the headline, *HE'S BACK*. Breton grabbed one of those, and folded it under his arm.

• • •

Inserting his key-card into the door's slot, the green LED flashed. He entered the suite, easing the door closed behind him. As it clicked shut, he crooned, "Hey, Boo."

"Hey, handsome," replied a lilting female voice from another room. Breton dropped the key-card on a small table by the door, extracted pocket litter from the back pouch of his running top, and dropped them on the table. He kicked off his running shoes, and walked across the living room to the bedroom.

His lady lay reclined on a sofa by a window overlooking the glistening west-end of the city, fifteen floors up. A small black robe wrapped her petite body, and she cradled a novel in her slender hands. Breton paused at the threshold of the room, and said, "Comfy in our new digs?"

"Very. And my iPhone is on the kitchen table, as you requested."

"Cool, give me a minute."

"Hurry, lover. My lips await thee."

Breton blew her a kiss, and spun around.

He switched on the lights in the kitchen area of the sprawling suite. Her

iPhone lay in the middle of the small table. He grabbed his MacBook case, and placed it on the table. He sat and opened the case. From an inside pouch, he removed a Phillips-head eyeglass screwdriver. Cradling her iPhone in his palm, he used the screwdriver to remove the two tiny screws in the back of the phone. Then he wedged a tiny flathead screwdriver into the seam of the device's chassis, snapped off its back plate, and laid the exposed gadget on the table.

From the MacBook case, he pulled an eyeglass headset, and donned it. Gazing through the magnifying glass into the guts of the iPhone, he identified its baseband processor, the tiny black sliver of silicone which locked-in the phone's network carrier - the hack target which Tristan Boumann tipped him off about.

He set his MacBook out on the table and powered it up. He opened iTunes, and hit play. From the case, he pulled a set of ear-buds, and ripped the buds off their wires. He twisted the exposed wires together, and pressed the combined pair against the iPhone's baseband processor. He plugged the earbuds jack into the MacBook's audio port. Tristan assured him static charge from the audio port would scramble the code on the baseband processor, absent any danger of damaging its surrounding components.

He removed the wires from the guts of the iPhone, and reassembled the gadget, then removed the eyeglass headset. Typing into his MacBook, he emailed a custom-written program to the hacked iPhone's SIM card, then powered up the iPhone. From his MacBook, he simulated a phone call to his girlfriend's now-hacked iPhone. The phone rang. He terminated the call, and repeated the entire ritual on the iPhone the Philadelphia Museum of Art security guard brush-passed him. Then he closed up shop, and turned off the lights. On the way out, he grabbed the newspaper he'd acquired in the hotel lobby, and folded it under his arm.

Returning to the bedroom, Breton walked barefoot to the couch and sat on its edge, by her waist. Bending down to her, he placed a tender kiss on her lips. They lingered on the kiss for a quiet moment. He sat up. She said, "We're all secure now?"

"Well, you can never assume that. But your phone can't be tapped, and you can't be geo-located, so long as the hack sticks."

“That’s nice to know.”

He glanced down at her opened book. “What are you reading?”

“*I Get On The Bus*, by Reginald McKnight.”

“How is it?”

“Creepy, in a deliciously fascinating way.” She nodded up at the newspaper folded under his arm, “What are *you* reading?”

“Ah.” He unfolded the newspaper and set it out on the coffee table.

She glanced at the cover of the paper. “Keeping up on current events.”

“Yeah. Creepy, but I wouldn’t add deliciously fascinating.”

“I don’t know, baby. You’re a lot closer than you think.” She placed a bookmark in her novel, closed it, reached it over to the coffee table and placed it next to the newspaper. She pulled off her reading glasses, and set them on top of the novel. “It’s going to get hot now, Jules, isn’t it. That is, if you still plan to go through with this.”

He glanced away and sighed. “Yeah, Boo. It could get hot. Tell me. If you were in my shoes, would you go through with this?”

“I can’t answer that for you, Jules. You have to follow your heart, and your instincts. Things always work out for you when you follow your instincts. You know that.”

He frowned a little and shook his head. “This is different. There’s a personal element to this, which has me feeling out of my depth. It’s hard to explain. It’s complicated.”

“*You’re* complicated, Jules. That’s what I love about you.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t always figure you out. It’s funny, you know, my mother always told me to keep my man guessing. But I’ve fallen in love with you, because you always keep *me* guessing.”

“I don’t try to.”

“I know you don’t. It’s just your nature.”

“Guessing aside, tell me, Boo, honestly. Am I being selfish, risking everything with this?” She touched his shoulder. He reached out to her. They cradled each other, and he dropped his voice to a whisper, “Because you don’t have to hang

around for this. You could disappear for a few weeks, go on vacation, and come back when the smoke clears. I would understand, trust me.”

She placed her hand on his cheek, the tip of her index finger extending across his lips, “No, Jules. We ride *together*, baby.”

## 09

---

An angry Ricky Dante pushed and shoved his way through the crowded Jupiter nightclub and up the steps toward the street. Fat Frank hustled behind him, trying to keep up. When they got out onto the sidewalk by the Ferrari, Dante tossed the keys to Frank and shouted, “You drive!”

After five minutes of navigating the congested grid of center city streets, battling taxi and bus and pedestrian traffic, Frank called out to Dante, “You don’t know it’s him!”

Dante had his elbow perched on the door of the Ferrari, his face buried in his hand, eyes closed, shaking his head. Frank pulled up to a red light and braked. Dante moaned into his palm, “It’s him, Frank.”

“How the fuck do you know?”

Dante turned and glared at Frank, “Think about it, you fucking ape!”

Frank threw his hands in the air and shook his head, “Okay, Ricky, I’m not getting something here. Enlighten me.”

“This thing was elaborate. It was deliberate. And it was targeted at *us*, by a light-skinned black guy with green eyes, from Southwest Philly, named Julian. He lived on 45th, between Larchwood and Baltimore. She called him *Jules*. Remember now?”

Frank shook his head with a blank stare.

Dante yelled, “*Jules* is a fucking *nickname* for *Julian*!”

A cacophony of car horns blared from behind them. The light had turned green. Frank twisted around and hollered at the top of his enormous lungs, “SHUT THE *FUCK* UP!”

Dante buried his face back into his palm and moaned, “Just drive, Frank!”

## 10

---

“I’m C-Money, muthafukka!” Detective Craig Gamble stood in the middle of the police command center on Race Street, still clad in his undercover disguise of the oversized red Philadelphia Phillies jersey and matching red cap, and a large toothpick still protruding from his artificially yellowed teeth. Re-enacting the cover routine he’d performed at Kennel nightclub earlier that evening, a diabolical grin alighted his face as he repeated: “I’m *C-Money*, muthafukka!”

Chief Detective Ernie “Sully” Sullivan, slumped in a black leather office chair, stared up at Craig, pointing at him and repeating, “You’re C-Money.”

“Mutha-*fukkah!*”

“Lemme get this straight. You called Ricky Dante a motherfucker, to his face, in his club, and he didn’t shoot you on the spot.”

Craig thumped his chest with his palm, “Yo, I *got* it like that. Just like I can call him *my nigga*. Coming from a black dude, and him being so desperate for attention, and me being his most devoted anonymous sycophant in his club today...”

“Okay, I got it now.” Sully sat up, becoming more lucid. “So I guess it went over.”

“Shit, dog, like a pussy joke in a barber shop. I slipped Dante the electro-Mickey, and made like a fly on the wall, while they proceeded to shoot their mouths off about all the shit that’s going down with them. You want me to give you the briefing now, or do you wanna get some sleep, and we can do this tomorrow?”

“No, let’s do it now.”

Craig pulled off the Phillies cap, and tugged off the artificial facial hair glued to his cheeks, “Sure you okay, partner?”

“Fine.”

“Still in the doghouse with the old lady?”

“Still in the doghouse. I should’a went to the Kennel club with you. Could’a

gotten crocked on Ricky Dante's dime."

"Why'd the old lady kick you out, Sul?"

"We had a fight. Do we have to talk about that?"

"Married couples don't break up over one fight, Sul."

"We had more than one fight. We've been fighting for a while. Do we really have to talk about that?"

"Well, I don't like my partner in crime bein' all sleep-deprived. Where you staying at anyway?"

"Sergeant McIntyre's living room couch. Caroline said, *Find somewhere else to sleep*. So I did."

"Shit, dog. You know how to call a lady's bluff."

"Yeah, I'm a real Casanova."

"C'mon, Sul, let's do this tomorrow. Go get some sleep."

"Nah, I'm fine."

"You sure, partner?"

"Yeah, partner. Life during wartime. Briefings are always more accurate when they're fresh. Besides, we're on notice from the brass. We gotta be good little soldiers, or they're gonna send us to the Russian front. So have a seat, and let's hear it, C-Money Muthafukka."

# 11

---

The gloom of nightfall drenched the decrepit block of south Seventeenth Street when Fat Frank motored Ricky Dante's Ferrari in front of Kennel nightclub's bleak industrial facade. Frank pointed out a flashy racing motorcycle parked on the sidewalk near the club's entrance, and said, "Yo, Ricky, check it out. Cholly DePaolo's here. That's his bike."

Eyeing the bike, Dante said, "How's Cholly been?"

"Cholly's been good. Sticking with the straight life. Still no mob stuff for Cholly. He's gotten into filmmaking lately."

"Filmmaking?"

"Yeah, right? Cholly grew up to be quite the auteur."

"*Auteur*? That's a pretty fancy word for you, Frank."

"I learned it from Cholly."

Dante glanced around. "Stay here a minute. I wanna have a word before we go in." Frank powered down the Ferrari. Dante continued, "Cholly used to bug me about his sister a lot."

"I know."

"He thought I could find out what happened to her. I told him I'd see what I could do, look into it, ask around, figuring he'd drop it eventually. Wasn't 'til I got sent up, he finally stopped bringing it up. You know, Frank, in all those years I was in prison, Cholly visited me more often than anybody."

"That don't surprise me. Cholly always looked up to you, Ricky, because of the way you always looked out for him, after Anastasia..." Frank didn't finish.

Dante turned to Frank, "Did he ever ask you anything about that Jules guy?"

Frank wrinkled his brow and shook his head, "No, never. Cholly was just a little kid when that happened. Why? You think he could've remembered him?" Dante maintained an unblinking gaze on Frank, who stared back at Dante. Frank cocked his head sideways and said, "Ricky?" Frank pointed his index finger up, "You gotta watch it."

“Watch *what?*”

“Watch you don’t let that guy get up inside your head and fuck with it. I can see it already. You’re thinking all kinds of crazy shit.”

Dante shook his head, “Don’t try to analyze me, Frank.”

“Nobody knows you like I do, Ricky.”

“I said don’t do it.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“Sorry is right, Frank. That fucking nigger infiltrated our club and sabotaged it, right under your fucking nose. Just how the fuck could you let that happen?”

“Manny dealt with all that. I swear, Ricky, I never saw the guy in the club. I would have followed him out and clipped him if I did. You know that.”

Dante took a moment to cool down, and said, “When we go in there, we’re not gonna say a word about any of this in front of Cholly. Understand?” Dante glanced around. “After he leaves, Manny’s gonna tell us where we can find that fucking green-eyed mulatto.” He looked at Frank, “We gotta get him this time.”

Frank nodded, “We’ll get him this time.”

“Don’t just rock your fucking head at me, Frank. Look at me.” Frank looked at him. Dante murmured, “We’re gonna kill him, dead. And we’re gonna bury him deep and wide, in six pieces, where nobody’s ever gonna find him. Because understand this, Frank. It’s not just about the club anymore, or appearances, or my reputation.”

“I know.”

Dante lowered his voice to almost a whisper, “Because if Don Giorgio finds out about that thing, he’s gonna butcher you, too, Frank. Not just me.”

Frank wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his blazer, “I know.”

“You know?”

“Yeah, Ricky! I know.”

“You don’t just *know*, Frank. You *do*. You’re gonna *act* on what you know.”

“Ricky, I swear on my mother’s eyes, if I gotta get up to my neck in blood in order to bury that motherfucker, that’s what I’m gonna fucking do.”

“You fucking better.” Dante nodded toward the club and opened the car door,

“Let’s go.”

• • •

Inside the otherwise empty Kennel nightclub, a small crowd of people huddled at one end of the bar in conversation. No music blaring, no colored lights swirling. The white house lights are on, set to dim. The scene resembles a glorified downstairs pub, with a small bunch of locals in attendance. The center of attention is a wiry, dark-haired man of average height, dressed and groomed more or less like Dante, the flashy wiseguy look, perched on a barstool, regaling his audience with effortless charisma.

The bartender, Tommy Santoro, looked up at Dante and Frank approaching, and they all turned.

“Cholly!” Dante called out.

Charles “Cholly” DePaolo turned his head, then swiveled around and jumped off his barstool, calling out, “Fuckin’-aye, Ricky!” The two men walked to each other and embraced, kissing each other’s cheeks old-country style. Dante stepped back, looking Cholly up and down. Cholly said, “It’s great to have you back, pisan.” Cholly not only looked like Dante’s younger brother, his speaking cadences emulated Dante’s as well. “You look like Graterford didn’t put so much as a dent on you.”

“Fuck Graterford. Look at you, Cholly! You’re a big man now!” Dante snapped his fingers at Tommy Santoro. Tommy produced a bottle of Courvoisier and poured two snifters full, pushing them out onto the bar for Dante and Frank. Dante continued, “Where were you earlier, Cholly? We had a party...”

Charlie cut him off, “Yeah, Rick, I heard. I was working with Uncle Marty. You know how that is. I got away as soon as I could.”

Dante and Frank grabbed their drinks and took long pulls. Dante wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his black suit jacket and snarled, “Uncle Marty. He should take a fucking break. All work and no play. I gotta talk to him.”

“What about?”

“Nothing, Cholly. How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been good, Ricky, staying busy.”

“I hear you’re a filmmaker now?”

“Yeah, my new hobby, saved up and bought a camera and some lighting equipment, and started messing around with the stuff.”

“How’s Don Giorgio?”

“He’s fine.”

“Yeah? Really?”

“Yeah, Ricky, really, pop’s fine. The heart attack was mild. Nothing, really. Nothing that would take *him* out. But he’s staying in Florida a little while longer. The weather’s good to him. He loves the sun and the heat. You know, Ricky, sometimes I wonder if my pop even *had* a heart attack. I think he just needed an excuse to go on a long vacation. But you’ve known him longer than I have, so maybe you’d know better.”

Dante polished off his drink, slammed the empty glass on the bar, and stuck his index finger in Cholly ‘schest, “*You* should know better than to talk about your pop like that.”

“Too late, Rick, I did already.” Cholly polished off his drink and announced, “Goodnight, everybody, gotta get up early for work tomorrow.”

Dante grabbed Cholly in an embrace, and they kissed each other’s cheeks again. As Cholly pulled away, Dante called out, “Whatever you need, Cholly, day or night, just call me, got it?” As Cholly walked to the exit, Dante called out, “The rest of you, out! We’re closed for the night. Except you, Manny. You stay.”

• • •

A short while later, Dante, Fat Frank, and Manny Pultrone sat alone together in the silent and dark club. Dante leaned on the bar and said, “Let’s hear it, Manny. What do you got for me on this guy Julian Breton?”

“I got his email address. That’s it.”

Dante picked an empty highball glass off the bar, squeezing it with his fingers.

He rasped, “Email.”

“The guy does everything by email. That’s all we got on him, Ricky. I searched the place up and down, and...”

Dante hammered the highball glass into Manny’s face. Manny slumped against the bar, then to the floor, his face spouting blood.

## 12

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In darkness, Julian Breton lifted himself up and off the bed in a slow curl, so as not to wake his girlfriend. He walked naked to the living room of the hotel suite, and took a seat at the desk. A large picture window next to it overlooked the glimmering western half of the night-drenched city. He opened his MacBook. In the darkened room, the screen's illumination made his face look like a mask floating over the desk, reflecting in the window glass, creating a dual image.

The email icon indicated awaiting inbox messages. He clicked open the application. One of the incoming messages was from sender:

[tminelli@clubjupiter.com](mailto:tminelli@clubjupiter.com)

The subject line read:

Urgent

Breton clicked open the message. It read:

Jules, pls contact me asap. work u did 4 jupiter nightclub put our business & me personally at risk. involves a mr ricky dante. ricky visited our club & expressed his displeasement with how u characterized your pr campaign 4 us. u have a professional obligashon to address this. i contacted the sr ownership partner of jupiter and you will b hearing from him 2. our contract stipulates you b accountable 4 damages ur work incurs on 3rd parties. -tm  
Tino Minelli, General Manager

## Jupiter Social Club

Breton murmured to himself, “Opening guns.” He closed the MacBook, went to the suite’s walk-in closet, retrieved a pair of faded denim jeans and a white cotton polo shirt, and pulled them over his bare body. He picked his iPhone and the room’s key-card off the table by the door. Exiting the suite in stealth, he strolled barefoot through the hallway to the elevator bank, and rode one of the elevators down to the lobby level.

The plush lobby lounge was sparsely populated. Breton settled into a brown leather couch in a secluded corner. He brought up the iPhone’s numeric keypad, tapped Tino Minelli’s phone number on the touch-screen, and put the phone to his ear. Several rings. Connection. Oppressively loud background noise, then a distorted “Hell-hello?” came over.

“Tino, Julian Breton.”

“Who?”

“Jules. You just sent me an email.”

“Oh, *Jules!* Hold on, let me get somewhere quiet.” Breton listened as the noise gradually subsided, then Tino’s voice returned, “Jules?”

A cocktail waitress approached Breton. He cupped the phone and murmured to her, “Grey Goose martini, up, very dry, no fruit, thanks.” He handed his room key-card to her, and she glided off. He said into the phone, “Yeah, Tino, I’m here.”

“Did you read my email?”

“Of course I read it, Tino. That’s why I called you.”

“Jules, Ricky Dante is fucking homicidal over this.”

“Tino, bear with me here. I’m trying to figure out what the problem is.”

“The *problem?* Do you know who Ricky Dante is?”

“Of course I do, Tino. Everyone in Philly knows who Ricky is.”

“No, Jules, listen, I *know* Ricky, going way back. I could tell you stories about Ricky Dante that would uncurl the hairs on your afro. The man is an evil genius when it comes to killing people who even slightly annoy him, and what you did annoyed him way more than slightly.”

Breton lifted his feet up onto the couch and kicked back in a full recline, resting his head on its cushioned arm. “Okay, so Ricky’s a bad-ass. So what’s he pissed off about?”

“Your campaign for Jupiter trashed his club!”

“How so?”

“The whole thing with the dogs! His club is called Kennel! He thinks we were mocking him!”

“Oh please. You sure he wasn’t playing with you?”

“He. Was. Not. Playing!”

“I was simply continuing along a theme that I love. I love animals, especially dogs.”

“Well, Jules, apparently that theme backfired on Ricky’s club in a seriously fucked up way. He wants to speak with you about it, here, tomorrow.”

“Can’t make it tomorrow. Maybe next week.”

“Fuck, Jules! He’s coming back here, tomorrow! And he wants some fucking answers!”

“What are you worried about, Tino? I’m the guy he’s pissed off at, not you, right?”

“You don’t get it, Jules! If Ricky Dante can’t kill the guy he’s pissed off at, he kills the guy standing between them instead! *I’m* that guy right now!”

Breton didn’t reply to that. He listened, and waited.

Tino’s voice went from paranoid to desperate: “Hello? Julian? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, Tino. I’m still there.”

“Well? What the fuck are you going to do about this?”

“Chill, Tino. Give me a second. I’m kind of in the middle of something.” The cocktail waitress returned with Breton’s martini. He mouthed *Thank you* to her, pulled his feet off the couch, and sat up. “I dunno, Tino.” He craned his neck down and sipped at the martini’s brim as it sat on the table, then picked it up with his free hand. “This all sounds kinda melodramatic, and I’m kinda busy right now. I mean, honestly, from the way you explain it, it sounds to me like a lot of dumb shit that I just don’t have time for.”

“Jules! He’s going to fucking kill me!”

“Wait, Tino, don’t interrupt me. What I was gonna say was, if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll call Ricky, and put things straight with him.”

“You’ll do that?”

“Yeah, Tino. For you, I’ll do that.” Breton sipped his martini.

“You gotta call him *now*, Jules! Because he’s coming here tomorrow, and...”

“Tino, listen to me. If for some reason, I don’t get through to Ricky before you see him tomorrow, tell him exactly what I just said. Tell him I told you that I’m going to put things straight with him. Got it?”

“Okay. Thanks, Jules. You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

“Not a problem. Stay in touch. By the way, Tino, since I’ve caused you so much agita, is there anything I can do for Jupiter that might go some way to make up for it?”

“Now that you mention it, you know that holographic jawn you rigged up in Club Parachute?”

“Yeah, I own the patent on that. You want one of those in Jupiter?”

“I’ve been meaning to email you about that. It’s really dope.”

“Word, Tino. Consider it done. As soon as a hole opens up in my schedule, I’ll call you, and go in there and install it. But listen, it might be on short notice, so answer your cell when I call.”

“But Julian, when you called me just now, my caller ID said *Restricted*. So how will I know when you’re calling me?”

“Simple, Tino. When your caller ID says *Restricted*, you’ll know it’s me.”

## 13

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Pre-dawn sunlight threatened to illuminate the corner of Thirteenth and Dickinson streets deep in South Philadelphia, where Ricky Dante stood catty-corner from a block of two-story red-brick row houses, still wearing the same black designer suit he'd been arrested in five years prior. The neighborhood's thick density of two- and three-story row houses created a folksy if eerie fusion of openness and claustrophobia, the repetitive patterns of urban vernacular.

Dante walked up three cement steps to a canopied front porch, and peeked in the window. Through the curtains, he spotted a middle-aged woman in a frumpy robe milling around inside. Dante rapped his knuckles on the door frame. The woman came to the door and pulled it open. Dante said, "Hey, Aunt Gloria."

"Ricky, come in, sweetheart." Gloria hugged him. They kissed each other's cheeks, and she said, "Welcome back, honey."

"Is Uncle Marty awake yet?"

"Are you kidding? He was up an hour ago. He's out back. Can I get you a coffee?"

Dante started walking through the low-ceilinged living room toward the back of the house, "Yeah, thanks, Aunt Gloria."

At the rear of the cement and cinderblock back porch of the house, a dusty black Chevy pickup sat parked in the narrow back alleyway. Slabs of sheet rock partially filled the truck's bed, and its tailgate lay open. A short, wiry, silver-haired man, dressed for heavy contracting work, rummaged through a toolbox set out on the tailgate. Dante called out, "Hey, Mart."

Maurizio "Uncle Marty" Cremonese stopped what he was doing, and turned to Dante, cradling a battery-powered drill in his hands. Uncle Marty had a square jaw, thin lips, thick black eyebrows, and intense brown eyes with dark circles beneath them. His lean arms were tan, and cabled with bulging veins. He barked in a raspy tenor, "Ricky! What happened to Manny Pultrone last night?"

Dante feigned a deflated posture, and held his hands out at his sides,

exclaiming, “Whoa!”

“Whoa, *what?* I asked you a fucking question!”

“Whoa, like what happened to, *Welcome back, Ricky! Glad you’re out, Ricky! Let’s have a drink and catch up on things. Whoa, that.*”

Uncle Marty reached the power drill around behind him, and slammed it down into the toolbox. He folded his sinewy arms across his chest, glaring unblinking at Dante. “I asked you a fucking question. What happened to Manny.”

Dante glared unblinking back at Marty, then finally said, “Manny had an accident, a’ight? He fell, at the club, and we took him to the hospital. He’s gonna be fine. They’re stitching his face. I’m gonna go pick him up in a little bit. And I don’t like your fucking attitude.”

Uncle Marty dropped his arms down at his sides and cocked his head at Dante, “Excuse me?”

Dante held his thumb and forefinger up, “It would have been a *little* bit respectful if you took a few minutes from your busy schedule to bring your crew to my club and welcome me home last night!”

“Yeah, right, with the feds sitting in a van outside, filming everyone coming and going. I don’t think so. Besides, I’m not a party-boy, Ricky, not on weeknights. Hold a nice Sunday afternoon get-together, and me and your Aunt Gloria will come around and pay our respects.”

Dante dimmed his eyes at Marty, “Fine.”

Gloria brought a mug of coffee out and handed it to Dante. She patted him on his lightly stubbled cheek and said, “Fight nice, guys,” then ambled back inside the house. Dante sipped the coffee.

Marty turned back to his toolbox, and called out, “You look like you’ve been up all night.”

“I have. How are the numbers?”

“Numbers are fine. Sports bets are up. Loans about the same.”

“I heard coke and meth are way down. What’s up with that?”

Marty spun around, glowering at Dante. “Way *down?*” He glanced away for a second, then glared at Dante, “If my guys are dealing coke or meth at *all*, it’s because they’re keeping it *way* outta my sight!”

“We made a lot of money with that shit, Mart.”

“Yeah, and we got a lot of our guys killed and locked up and strung out on that shit, too, Rick. Betting and loans are still the lifeblood, just like they’ve always been. You know that.”

“Don Giorgio’s orders?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t disagree with it.”

“So how do we make up the difference?”

“Honest jobs. Businesses. Staying outta jail. Staying off the Feds’ radar. Downsizing. Not trying to live like movie stars.”

Dante glanced around, “Living in little houses like this.”

“I like this little house, Ricky. It’s cozy. The Feds ain’t gonna confiscate it. My wife’s not gonna sell it out from under me, like yours did with that fancy high-rise condo. I’m close to my people here. I like being among my people. The salt of the earth tastes good to me.”

Dante shook his head as if shaking those words out of his hair, and snapped, “Ya know, Marty, when I got sent up, my pop was in charge. Now he’s gone, and Don Giorgio’s in charge. But he’s in Florida, so now you’re in charge. Everything’s totally different now, and it didn’t occur to nobody to consult me about any of this.”

Marty shot his index finger up, “First off, I’m not in charge. I’m just supervising things, while Don Giorgio recuperates from his heart attack.”

Dante scoffed, “His heart attack...”

“What was that?”

Dante shook his head, “Nothing.”

“Listen, Rick. For five years, there’s been peace. No wars, no hits, no big prosecutions, nobody flipping and turning on the rest of us. No headlines. No drama. Okay? Now, let me tell you why.”

“Because you and Don Giorgio turned into a couple of goodie-two-shoes.”

Marty froze for a second, then stepped at Dante, so they were inches apart. “No, Ricky. Things are that way now, because that was your father’s dying wish.”

“He didn’t tell *me* that.”

“You weren’t there.”

Hurt flashing in his eyes, Dante shook his head, “They didn’t let me out to see him.”

Marty turned and pushed his toolbox into the truck bed, lifted the tailgate, and slammed it shut. “Well, you’re out now, and now you know what the deal is, so deal with it.” He walked around to the driver-side.

“Where you going, Mart?”

“Girard Estates, to finish a banquet extension on the Loft. Wanna come? Do some *real* work?”

“I can’t, I gotta go pick up Manny from the hospital. But listen, Mart. I got a problem I could use some help with.”

“What kinda problem?”

“This guy, he fucked with my club when I was away. I need to borrow some muscle, to sort him out. It’s just some punk-ass black dude. He singled out my club, and it hurt business.”

“If he’s just some punk-ass black dude, then how the fuck did he do that? You got a crew, Rick. What was Fat Frank and the rest of the knuckleheads doing when you were away?”

“It’s a long story, Mart. But we’re a family. We can’t let shit like that slide, right?”

“No, you can’t. So you gotta go do what you gotta do, Ricky. That’s your job. That’s why you’re underboss. Just keep it out of the papers. And Ricky,” Marty pointed his index finger up, “Do not get any of our Italians hurt, or locked up. Understand?” He glanced up the alleyway and shouted, “Mike! Let’s go!” Marty opened the driver-side door of the truck and climbed in.

Dante could hear Marty’s right-hand man, Michaelangelo “Big Mike” Mara, approaching from up the narrow alley, talking on his cellphone. Then Mike appeared, Dean Martin-handsome even in work clothes, reaching for the truck’s passenger-side door handle. In his mid-thirties, he stood about six-five, and weighed about two hundred seventy pounds, most of it muscle. He caught a glimpse of Dante sipping coffee in the middle of the back porch, and did a double-take, then called out in his usual easy-going way, “Ricky Dante! When did they let *you* loose on society?” With that, Mike folded himself into the cab of the

pickup, pulled the door shut, and the truck roared off.

## 14

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George Braetin flipped a burger on the grill, and a grease flame shot several feet in the air. He and his son Julian stepped back, turning their faces away. Julian murmured, “Easy, pop.”

Grinning, George called out, “Fire in the hold!” One-by-one he flipped the other half-dozen burgers, each sending up a dramatic splash of flame and sizzle.

George’s wife Billie called out, “Careful, baby! Don’t go burnin’ the pretty face on that fine-looking son of yours!” Billie pulled open the screen door of the back porch, while calling out, “I’m gonna go get the buns and the condiments all in order, honey.” She turned and winked at Julian as she stepped inside, leaving he and his father alone in the backyard of the Queen Anne row house on Forty-fifth Street, just north of Baltimore Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia.

Shaded from the midday summer sun by an old oak tree, Julian slapped his hand on his father’s shoulder as they watched over the grill. “You got your hands full with her, pop.”

“Oh, yeah,” George smiled.

“Seems like she’s been looking after you pretty good.”

George grew serious, “Oh, yeah. That woman saved my life.” He nudged the burgers with the steel spatula. “You know, Jules, when your mother passed away, I thought that was the hardest test the Lord could possibly put me through. I just prayed to Him to please look after her. Because I knew she deserved to be in Heaven, after leaving her homeland and her family, putting up with me, and having Daniel and you. But then, when He took your brother, I almost lost faith. I was sitting next to Billie in Bible study one night, just after your brother was killed, and...” he turned to Julian, “Did I ever tell you this story?”

“No, pop. I dunno. Maybe. Tell me again.”

“I slammed my Bible shut, threw it on this table, and walked out of the church, all ornery and whatnot.” George looked up at the sky, “Please forgive me for that, Lord.” He looked down at the grill and went back to nudging the burgers.

“Billie followed me out onto the street and grabbed me, and literally dragged me back inside the church. She pushed the Bible in front of me, and held my hand through the rest of the meeting.”

Julian nodded, “I was in sniper school at the time. You called me to say you proposed to a woman in your congregation at the end of Bible study one night.”

“It was that night.”

Julian took a deep breath, looking around at the backyards of the other modest houses surrounding theirs. “You know, pop, about Daniel.”

“What about Daniel?”

“For him to get shot and killed like that, for no reason, and the city didn’t seem interested in finding his killer...”

“The city,” George grumbled. “I wasn’t a got-darned bit surprised about that. Got-darned Philly cops couldn’t find sand at a beach. I told you what they did to me when I got back from Germany. I’m serving my country over there, fighting the cold war. I get back here to my home town, and they lock me up for some stuff I didn’t have nothing to do with and wasn’t nowhere near when it happened. I was across the Atlantic Ocean, for got-darned sakes. Then, when your mother showed up to post bail, and they see I’m married to this beautiful blue-eyed, blonde-haired woman...”

“They doubled the bail amount, I know. *That* story, you’ve told me.”

“Got-darned racist pigs.” George looked around, “I shouldn’t say that now.” He glanced up at the sky, “Forgive me, Lord.”

“Things have changed since then, pop.”

“Yeah, you want to believe that sometimes. Seems like half the cops on the force now are black, and the white cops are a whole lot more courteous now.” He turned to Julian, “But things haven’t really changed, son. Mark your father’s word. Evil still has to show its face in the world, and it does, and it will, just as much now, if not more than ever.” He placed an aluminum tray on the grill’s side-car, and began scooping the burgers off the grill and into the tray.

“I’ve been looking into Daniel’s case lately, pop. Seeing if I can turn up anything on his killers.”

“Now, why would you want to go doing that?”

“I had a feeling you were going to say something like that.”

George chuckled, and said, “You had a feeling. Listen, son. You had that feeling for a reason. There’s a *name* for that feeling.” He looked at Julian, “It’s called your *common sense*.”

“I just...”

“Listen to your father, Jules. You go out looking for evil, and you will *become* it. I never gave a damn about Philly cops catching Daniel’s killers, because that’s not true justice. The Lord will catch them, and He will exact His judgment on them. That’s good enough for me.” George now had all the burgers in the tray in an orderly array. “But I have a feeling that’s not going to be good enough for you, will it, son.”

“I didn’t say that, pop.”

“You didn’t have to.”

## 15

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“Okay, Ricky. I’ve got your email account all set up.” Manny Pultrone’s voice sounded more nasal than usual, due to the tent of white gauze bandages covering his nose and upper lip. He and Dante sat in front of the desktop computer perched on the desk in the windowless back office of Kennel, buried deep inside the basement of the nightclub’s industrial building. Manny continued, “I’m going to look away, so you can type in a secret password. It can be any word you want, as long as it’s something you’re not going to forget easily.” Manny turned away, “Okay, Ricky, go ahead.”

Dante leaned forward, studied the keypad, and tapped his forefinger on it, then sat back. Manny turned back around. Dante announced, “I used my name, D-A-N-T-E.”

“You weren’t supposed to tell me that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s supposed to be your secret password.”

“Well, Manny, we share a secret now. And if I need somebody to get my messages when I’m not around, you can do that. I can trust you, right?”

“Yeah, Ricky, that makes sense.”

“Okay, so now, I want to send this motherfucker a message. Set it up for me.”

“Okay. The application is open to your account, so he’s going to see this message coming from your signature on your account, and he’ll know it’s from you. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, that’s okay, Manny. That’s the fucking point, innit?”

“Yeah, Ricky. It’s all set up. His email address is in the ‘To’ window, as you can see:

[jbretton@hypermediastrat.com](mailto:jbretton@hypermediastrat.com)

“Now, you want to give the message a title, and type it into the Subject line.”

“From Ricardo Dante.”

”Okay,” Manny typed it in, and continued, “So, now, you can go ahead and type your message in the big space down here.”

“Type it for me, Manny. Tell him, *What the fuck do you think you’re doing, and how the fuck do you think you’re getting away with it.* Type it.”

Manny did so. He looked at the message, and said, “Is that all you want to say?”

“What more do I wanna say? Am I writing a fucking book?”

“The thing with email, though, is, you get to look at what you wrote, and think about it before you send it.”

“Just fucking send it, Manny.”

“Okay. To do that, you click the mouse on this Send button right here. You sure you’re ready to send this message to this guy, Ricky?” Dante glared unblinking at Manny. “Okay, Ricky, I’ll click Send.” After a few seconds, a chime sounded from the computer. “That sound tells you the message is sent.”

The two of them sat in silence, staring at the computer screen. Dante glanced at his watch, then at Manny, “So now what? How long before he... what?”

“Replies?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the thing about email, Ricky. He could reply right away, or a week from now, or never. Just like you get to look at your message and consider it before you send it, he gets to look at what you sent him, and take as much time considering a reply as he wants.”

Dante motioned to the computer, “And all business is done this way now, with email.”

“Not all business, but big business, the corporate world, finance... yeah, they do it all through the internet now. You can send pictures and documents, video, music, all that. And you can do all that shit through your cellphone now, too.”

Dante gestured to the computer, “That’s how this guy Breton got to us.”

“Yeah. I got an email from him, saying he owed you a favor.”

“Why did you take his word for it?”

Manny shrugged, “He had amazing credentials. Adidas, for one. The guy spearheaded the whole Adidas revival in the US. I mean, you don’t get much bigger than that. He’s a Philly boy, so we all assumed you did him a favor along the way, and now he’s big-time, so he’s come back to repay you, out of respect.”

“Was he ever here, in the club?”

“He stopped by once at the end, to look everything over.”

“I haven’t seen him in twenty years. What does he look like now?”

Manny thought for a moment, and said “He kinda looks like Lenny Kravitz. But there was this thing with Breton’s voice. He didn’t talk like a brother from the hood, or with a Philly accent. What’s this guy got on us, Ricky?”

“A long time ago, he got his hands where they didn’t belong, and me and Frank had to give him a good slap.” Dante shook his head, adding, “We should’a fucking killed him.”

The computer emitted a bell-like chime. Manny leaned into the screen, “He replied. Wow, that was fast.”

“Let’s see it.”

Manny grabbed the mouse and clicked open the message:

Wrong answer.

Dante leaned his face into the computer screen, “That’s it? *Wrong answer?* What the fuck does that mean?”

Manny nodded, “That’s a weird reply.”

Dante sat back and folded his arms, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger, staring at the screen. “No it’s not, Manny. It’s not weird at all. What’s he doing with that reply?”

“Trying to fuck with our heads?”

Dante nodded yes. “He’s saying, *Yeah, this was all intentional.* He’s coming clean. It’s a declaration of war.” A satisfied grin spread across Dante’s face.

## 16

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Julian Breton and José Toro got about a quarter of the way out to the apex of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, jogging along its elevated pedestrian walkway, when a PATCO High Speed Line train roared underneath them. José called out, “Whoa, brother! Feels like an earthquake!”

Breton called back over the swirling noise of the train below, and seven lanes of automobile and truck traffic to the left of them, “When two trains cross the bridge at the same time, their weight and velocity generate torsion, creating an oscillation effect. It twists the bridge’s deck, making the whole bridge sway. Makes it feel like a mild earthquake.”

José’s bushy brown eyebrows ascended halfway up his forehead as he exclaimed, “No *shit!* That shit is *crazy*, man!” About five-eight, José had a boxer’s build, wavy dark brown hair, and a thick brown mustache. He and Breton jogged in tank tops and running shorts, perspiring under the muggy afternoon sun. José called out, “Sounds like you did your homework on this bridge, bro. What else can you tell me about this thing?”

Breton shouted over the noise, “It was built by the same engineer who oversaw the Manhattan Bridge, and utilizes the same deflection-theory suspension design. When it was finished, in 1926, it was the longest bridge in the world.” As they approached the 175 foot-tall granite land anchorage towering up over both sides of the deck, Breton pointed down and to the left, at the automobile traffic. “Here’s something you need to know, José. You see that concrete zipper barrier that separates lanes three and four? Notice how traffic from New Jersey is traveling in lanes one, two and three. And traffic from Philly to Jersey is in lanes four through seven.”

“Roger,” José called out.

“By twenty-three-hundred, our execute nexus, the first three lanes will be closed for construction. So all traffic will be going both ways in just those four lanes on this side of the zipper barrier.”

“I’m tempted as *heck* to ask how you pulled *that* off.”

“I didn’t personally arrange for that.”

“Ah. But as usual, you did your intel.”

Breton nodded, “It’s convenient, given our purposes. Otherwise, I would’ve had to round up at least two more retired Delta operators. This way, it’s just you and me on this gig, José.” They proceeded out over the Delaware River, approaching the Philadelphia-side steel tower, one of two that propped up the suspension cables supporting the bridge’s road deck. Like the rest of the bridge, the tower was painted ocean-blue, with flat steel beams crossing inside three flat squares stacked 385 feet over the river, three colossal bolt-riveted X’s soaring into the sky. Below and to their right, a long row of rectangular piers jutted from the east edge of the Philadelphia land mass into the water.

The two men continued jogging toward the apex of the bridge, taking in the expansive views of the river. The Walt Whitman suspension bridge loomed south in the distance. Brightly painted shipping cranes towering over the New Jersey dockyards, their derricks hanging idle, lined the Camden waterfront. A tugboat guided a mammoth tanker through the waterway, the tanker’s rusted hull carving a V-shaped wake that spanned to the river’s edges. Every few minutes, a jumbo jet descended low and slow from the east, gliding in for a landing at Philadelphia International Airport several miles to the south.

When they arrived at the apex of the two mile-long bridge, Breton signaled a rest. They turned left and leaned their forearms on the railing overlooking the seven lanes of roaring automobile traffic. Breton pointed east, “You’re going to be coming from the New Jersey side, in the middle lane, lane five. When you get to that granite anchorage, you’ll start to slow down, and edge out across both lanes. When you pass under that steel tower, that’s your marker that tells you it’s time to come to a full stop.”

José called out, “Roger, copy steel tower.”

Breton pointed west, “I’ll be doing the same, coming from the Philly side. After I’ve got eastbound traffic tied-up, I’ll be pulling out to the middle of the bridge, here.” Breton pointed directly below where they stood. “Then, I’ll blink my headlights, giving you the signal to make your next move.”

“I’m gonna make a U-turn, and drive back to Jersey, then call that number you gave me.”

“Correct. That’s all you have to do. I’ll take everything from there.”

“Easy enough. This was smart, coming up here. With this walkway raised up over the road bed, we got a bird’s-eye view of everything from here.”

“When we get back to your car, we’ll do a drive-through. But, yeah, I thought it would be a good idea to come up here, so you can get an over-view of how it will all go down.”

“This definitely helps. You’re still very thorough, Jules, as usual. I remember that about you.” José turned around and leaned on the south rail, gazing down on the river. “What’s the drop distance to the surface?”

Breton turned and looked down, “About 140 feet.”

“That’s a bit of a drop.”

“Yeah. It’s a bit of a drop.”

José glanced at Breton. “I’m not gonna ask. But whatever it is you got planned, you’re gonna be making quite a footprint with this, bro. I hope you got a creative exit strategy.”

Staring out over the river, Breton didn’t reply.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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