

## FRIDAY

Vance Courage could not understand how his sister, Kathy, found any solace, or *positivity*, as she liked to call it, posting their news on Facebook. Even harder to get was the fifty-nine people who *Liked* their dad's death. Some had clicked on the crying emoji. But *Likes*?

*How can you Like death if you haven't tried it?*

That's what Vance wanted to write. But it would upset Kathy, and he'd vowed to keep his trigger finger off the keyboard. Too bad more people didn't exercise the same discipline. He plopped on the grungy floral sofa inside his tiny apartment, put his feet up on a plastic orange crate, and watched the *Likes* pile up. He hated every one of them. The comments were worse than the *Likes*:

*OMG! So sorry for your loss!*

*What happened?*

*Lost mine last year, know how u feel*

*Preying for you and ur famly*

*Thoughts and prayers GF*

*So sorry for you Kat*

*Thots and prayers sweety*

*Time heals all wombs*

*We're here for you*

Someone posted, *Some good will come of this some day you'll see it!* ☺

He shook his head at the screen. The same words and phrases in slight variations popped up over and over and over like the continuous video loop he'd seen at the gun show where he'd bought his 9-millimeter Glock. The

salesman said the video was about three minutes long because that's the attention span of the average male. The guy was right. One hundred five *Likes* piled up before he snapped his tablet shut.

Everywhere he went, people were glued to their mobile devices like chewing gum for the brain: walking their dogs, sitting across from friends in restaurants, watching a movie at their local theater. How trivia could be so riveting was a mystery. The posts were just a bunch of stuff written by people with nothing better to do than brag or complain, and God knows he had his own stuff to bitch about.

Kathy had given him the tablet for his birthday, and his oldest nephew pre-downloaded the Facebook app and created his profile. He started out with five friends over a year ago: his sister and her four boys. His loser brother-in-law, Larry, sent him a Friend request, but he'd ignored it. More than a year later he still had the same five.

"You isolate too much," Kathy said when he looked less than enthused after unwrapping it. "This way you can keep up with our family." It was a quasi-delicate way of reminding him that he didn't have one of his own.

The tablet grew on him after he installed the MatchMeUp dating app. Kathy and the boys took scads of pictures and posted them immediately to their accounts. He wondered how she'd feel if she knew the only reason he checked her posts was to see if there were any good pictures of him he could recycle as dating chum. He'd learned to copy, crop, and paste pictures from her Facebook timeline to his dating profile.

He glossed over their blurbs about school plays, softball games, vacations, and birthday parties. He scoured their newsfeeds looking for flattering pictures of himself. He'd

read an email blast by an online dating blogger saying if he wasn't getting a lot of new hits from the kind of women he'd like to date, he should freshen up the pics. Otherwise, the blogger wrote, his online profile would get stale.

Online dating was intriguing in the beginning, especially when he got his first email from an attractive brunette. She turned out to be a fake email from a Russian porn site. His enthusiasm waned further after a series of disappointing dates.

Then the slimy marketers, experts at exploiting the most basic of human wants, started spamming him several times a day. They sent enticing emails about a "special someone" who was trying to connect with him. He knew he was being suckered, but the 50%-off deal was too tempting. Getting back out there might be a welcome distraction. While reactivating his account, a Facebook *Friend* request lit up on his tablet. That was odd. He didn't get requests, other than the one from Larry he'd never accepted. He clicked on it.

A thumbnail appeared above the new invite. Daniel Ruiz. He accepted it.

*Now there's a blast from the past.*

He hadn't heard from Sergeant Daniel Ruiz for at least twenty years. He clicked on Sarge's social media profile and started reading. He was a grandfather. Had three kids. All girls. Had recently gone on a cruise to Nassau, Bahamas. Was retired from the Fort Lauderdale PD. Was active in the local Fraternal Order of Police. And he was divorced. That was a surprise.

His profile picture wasn't of him or his girls. It was an old black-and-white photo of a young woman, scanned with crinkles and scratches across her beautiful face. Something ticked in the limbic part of Vance's brain when he looked at

it. He couldn't quite place the feeling or the photo.

An instant message popped up on his tablet. How RU doing man?

Great and u

*Blip.* Sarge was quick. Retired and bored. You married yet?

He was looking for "n" for "never" when another question blew up.

What are you doing these days?

He was irritated and closed one eye to focus. Rather talk

Give me ur # I'll call now

As soon as he pecked it out, his cell lit up. "Hey. Long time. What's the occasion?"

"¿*Qué bolá contigo?*" Sarge asked.

"I'm pressing *one* for English. You know I hate that."

"Yeah, you don't hate it. You just don't understand it. Nice to know you haven't changed. You should try embracing your culture. Voluptuous women and good cigars."

"I don't like the smell of cigars. Plus, I wouldn't know the difference between one from Havana and one from Idaho. I like to think of myself as the last American living in Miami."

"Don't get too used to the idea. Soon we'll be taking over the free world. In case you haven't heard, a pair of Cubans ran for president. So what if they didn't make it to the *Casa Blanca?* Still got two in the Senate. And you're as Cuban as the one from Texas."

"Don't take this personally, but don't remind me. I'm burned out on politics."

"I called to say sorry about your dad."

“Oh,” he said. “Thanks. How did you know?”

“Saw it on your Facebook page.”

“How did you find me there?”

“Are you serious? Um. I typed your name in the place where you search for people and a *muuy* handsome guy came up, one that looks just like you.”

“My sister puts everything out there. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

Sarge hesitated. “Is she your younger sister?”

“Yeah. She has a bunch of kids. All boys.”

“You’d be surprised. Read an article that said posting stuff releases dopamine or serotonin or something. Makes people feel good; it does something to brain chemistry, like sex and online dating. Addictive.”

The online dating comment hit a nerve. “I prefer beer and wine.”

“You always did. Meet me for a drink later?”

He looked at his watch. “I’ve got to be at the funeral in an hour. I promised to go to Mom’s house after the service. I’m definitely going to need a sports drink after. What about Tavern in the Grove?”

“My favorite dive. What time?”

“Five thirty.”

“I got a better idea. I’ll pick you up. We can sit in the parking lot at the bar and drink single malt out of brown paper sacks if you want.”

“How chivalrous.”

“I’m a Latin man. What’s your address?”

He chewed on his bottom lip. He didn’t want to tell him because he had a pretty good idea how Sarge was going to react.

“Geez, Glenvar Heights, nice,” Sarge said. “Glad to see

your career as a lawyer is panning out. I better bring my weapon.”

“There’re worse neighborhoods.”

“Not above the poverty level.”

Before he had the chance to agree, Sarge ended the call.

He saved his contact information. When he picked up his tablet and opened the cover, his brain went into overdrive. Sarge’s profile picture was of the girl who was murdered at the Hotel Mutiny. It was hard for detectives to give up on a cold case, even ex-detectives. This one had been bothering him, too, ever since he’d left Miami PD to go to law school a couple of decades ago.

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He felt the dagger eyes piercing him as he skulked down the church aisle to the front pew reserved for immediate family and sat down a few feet from the casket. None of his relatives were subtle about his tardiness or unkempt appearance. They twisted in their seats and glowered at him. He hid behind a pair of cheap wraparound sunglasses. His father had passed suddenly from a heart attack, and he hadn’t had time to process it.

“Ju could have pressed jur slacks,” his mother, Isabel, whispered in his ear, the y-words always spoken as j-words.

His pants were rumped and his white shirt wasn’t very white. He should have polished his shoes, too. And worn a jacket, maybe even a tie. Not a shining example for his nephews.

Kathy was already there with the boys; she’d separated them with two seated on either side of her. She squinted and wrinkled her nose, irritated. She needed them to behave, and he loved being a bad influence.

“Hey, Uncle Vance,” Cory whispered, leaning over his

grandmother.

“Shh,” Kathy hissed.

“Sorry,” Vance mouthed to his mother and sister as the service began.

The priest had delayed it waiting for him. “Death is nothing at all,” the priest with threads of gray hair and a bulbous nose began, sounding theatrical, as if he were auditioning for something. “I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I, and you are you. Whatever we were to each other is what we still are.”

Cory mouthed “WTF?” to his younger brothers. The kids covered their faces with their hands to keep from laughing. His sister and mother didn’t see it.

But Vance did, and it took a lot to keep from laughing along with them. He *was* a bad influence. He winked and grinned at the kids. Then he stared straight at the altar.

The priest continued. “Play, smile, think of me, and pray for me. Call me by my old, familiar name.”

Why was Sarge suddenly back in the picture? Not so much as a Christmas card in over a dozen years and now a same-day invitation to an old haunt.

His mother reached over and grabbed his hand. She squeezed it, then let go, dabbing at her welling tears. If the service wasn’t so weird he might have cried, too.

He looked around. There was no one present from his father’s side of the family. Dr. Jim Courage’s lineage could be traced to the *Mayflower* on his grandmother’s side. No one remotely descended from the Pilgrims was in attendance, only his mother’s very extended Cuban family.

He lied about it at school, his ethnicity. He looked just like his dad, fair-skinned with the sort of medium-brown hair that streaked gold in the summertime.

“Oye, there’s your *madre*, Vance.” That’s how the kids at school who knew he was half-Cuban teased him.

“She’s not my mother. She’s the housekeeper.” He denied it to gain acceptance, to avoid being bullied like the other Cuban boys. All these years later he still felt guilty for saying she wasn’t his *madre*. The housekeeper. The memory filled him with self-loathing.

“Let us pray for him. And let us pray for his family.”

A relative on his mother’s side who owned a floral shop in the colorful Calle Ocho business district had made the funeral flowers. There was an enormous spray of roses covering the casket flanked by wreaths on rickety metal easels. When the priest raised his arms, his robe caught the edge of one of the gigantic arrangements. It toppled forward. The congregation fell silent, then erupted into a choir of gasps. A woman raced to the altar with the urgency of an EMT. He had so many relatives on his mother’s side he wasn’t sure how the one fixing the flower crisis was related to him. His dad told him he’d be happy to have his ashes scattered in Biscayne Bay. But funerals were for the living. And the living consisted of his mother and her relatives, and they all fully expected a costly extravaganza.

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Six male relatives, including Vance, began lowering the coffin into the ground using handheld slings. A powerful gust of wind came from nowhere. It blew so hard it unbalanced one of the pallbearers. Like dominoes, the men holding the slings wavered, and the casket swung above the grave. One man tottered perilously close to the edge before regaining his footing. His mother slapped the lavish coffin with her open palm, uttering something unfamiliar, primal.

Afterward some in the reception line picked roses from a



large wicker basket atop a folding table and dropped them into the open plot. Others genuflected and crossed themselves forehead to navel, left shoulder to right. Others just walked past silently. Hankies and tissues weren't just for tears. Men mopped their brows and women dabbed their upper lips. Mid-May in south Florida could introduce summer with the subtlety of a sledgehammer, and today was one of those days.

After the casket was lowered into the earth, he stood graveside with Isabel, giving her time to settle down, to compose herself. The sound she'd let out earlier was one he'd never heard before, and it was replaying again and again in his head. His father's coffin had just about pulled a half a dozen men, including him, down into the hole. His mother's strange shriek had alerted the dogs in the neighborhood. They'd been barking and howling until the roar of a front-end loader drowned them out.

The tractor driver sped toward the open grave, taking a wide berth around a white Cadillac SUV idling in the *No Parking* zone across the street. The operator popped out of the tractor seat as it flew up and over the curb. The sound of metal gnashing the concrete startled his mother back into the present. She covered her ears.

It was too loud to talk with the tractor growling a few feet away, the impatient gravedigger goosing the gas, his way of hurrying them so he could finish the job.

Vance reached for his mother's hand and gently coaxed her away. "Kathy and the kids are waiting in the parking lot to drive you home."

Walking slowly so as not to rush her, he looked back once. The scene morphed into a construction site. The operator dumped a bucket of dirt into the open earth. The

scent of burning diesel filled the air. The white Escalade disappeared.

“Ju’re coming to the house.” Her look said she was not taking no for an answer. “Some friends and family are coming, too. Plus, I have something I want to give ju.”

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He arrived at his mother’s, not surprised the entire residential block was jam-packed with cars. His dad used to joke about it. *If you marry into a Latin family, you’ll never have a place to park. And neither will your neighbors.* It might have been funny if it weren’t so true. Even a small soiree meant both sides of the street were packed for as far as the eye could see.

His parents’ modest Mediterranean Revival home backed up to a canal leading to the Intracoastal Waterway. Isabel loved the red clay tile roof and white stucco exterior because she said it reminded her of home. Cuba. When his folks bought the house going on fifty years ago, Coral Gables was respectable, but hardly ostentatious.

When the neighbors got wind that the Cuban family with the WASP surname planned a get-together, one of them preemptively called the police. It was one of the ways Coral Gables had changed. It was now snobby. And it was also a lot more expensive. Teardowns were selling for more than five hundred dollars a square foot. The new generation of homeowners waited anxiously for the old crop to die or move to assisted living so new people with more money could bulldoze the bungalows and erect lot-filling McMonstrosities.

When he reached the house, Kathy was in a spirited debate with a moon-faced Coral Gables female police officer named Gonzales with spiky auburn hair atop a tiny head. She looked like a tick about to pop, and the buttons on her

shirt looked like they were about to let go too.

“Google Miami Parking Authority on your phone.” Kathy held hers up menacingly.

He intervened. “Sorry, Officer. The ladies are touchy about parking.”

“So I’ve heard. We’ve had several calls. Been here before.” She sighed.

“They always call,” Kathy complained. “It’s a public street. There’s no law against it.”

Officer Gonzalez rested her right wrist on the butt of the gun strapped to the shiny utility belt digging into her flesh. She appeared to be in no mood for a showdown. “Looks like everyone is legally parked.”

He looked around sheepishly. Several neighbors had gathered outside their homes. He’d listened to their complaints before. They didn’t appreciate paying over a million dollars for a house overlooking a pop-up parking lot. His sister was usually mild-mannered, but not today.

“What are you all looking at?” she shouted. She turned toward the cop. “I’d like to report them as stalkers.”

“They live here.” Gonzales furrowed her brow. “Legally you can park on the street, and by law they can stare at you.”

He was embarrassed. He felt sorry for Officer Gonzalez, who headed across the street to talk to the woman with the surgical duck lips, standing akimbo, her manicured claws gripping her bony hips. He saw both sides of the dispute and privately sided with the neighbors. His first generation Cuban-American relatives weren’t into carpooling or economy cars.

He’d parked the dusty Nissan Cube titled to him—in lieu of fees a client couldn’t pay—two blocks away. He’d intended

to sell it, but the air conditioning went out on his car last summer right after the warranty expired, so he'd sold the Range Rover for twenty grand to pay bills. The Cube was part of a bug extermination fleet, and the four-foot-long cockroach mounted to the roof couldn't be completely removed without tearing a hole in the top. One giant leg cut at the knee remained. Kathy's kids dubbed it Edgar. Parking Edgar that far away had an upside. He'd been glared at enough at church and wasn't up for being the focus of a neighborhood watch group. The car was humiliating, but with a little luck, the new online ad campaign he was running would jumpstart his law business and he could buy something normal to drive.

"*Vance, Vance, Vance,*" all the aunts, uncles, nieces, and cousins—mostly women—chimed when they saw him come through the door. Unlike him, his Cuban relatives were demonstrative and fussed over him. The house was full, standing room only. The reassuring scents of cumin and coriander, grilled onions and bell peppers flooded his head with happy thoughts. His mouth watered.

"We're so happy to see ju but so sad about jur *popi*. Jur mother is so lucky to have ju here." Aunt Sophia leaned on her cane and reached up with one gnarled hand. He loosened at the knees, lowering himself, making it easier for her to reach his face. She clamped a thumb and forefinger softly on his cheek and smiled warmly at him. His heart sang. The heck with the neighbors and the minor inconveniences his tight-knit family caused. He supported her shoulder as she rebalanced herself, needing both hands on her walking stick.

Marrying his dad-the-doctor had elevated his mother, Isabel, into instant upper-middle-class living. If there was

any resentment between the two sisters, he'd never seen it. Sophia, six years older than his mother, had taken on the role of mama to Isabel and their much younger brother, Antonio. Their own mother, Marta, had died of cancer during the Cuban Revolution. Their father had preceded her in death by only a couple of years, details of which were never discussed. Sophia was just nineteen years old when she'd fled Cuba in 1962 to live with relatives, escorting her younger siblings to Miami. His Uncle Antonio was too young to remember his mother. His father died before he was born.

Sophia and Antonio—"Tony"—were regular fixtures around the Courage household when he was growing up. He'd heard his father treated Tony when he suffered a medical emergency when he was nine years old. Uncle Tony was the big brother he'd never had. His dad tolerated the arrangement. Other than the story of the surgery to remove Tony's appendix, Dr. Jim Courage showed no obligation to play father to Tony. By middle school, the sisters were worried. Tony was getting into trouble, running with a new crowd—the kids from the barrios where he lived with his big sister.

Sophia's cloudy eyes met his and she studied him. He had to look away because when she looked at him, she saw Tony too. She used to talk about it. It had been a long time since he'd disappeared, and she didn't want to talk about a ghost anymore. That's how she put it: ghost. Twenty years, that's how long his uncle had been missing and how long he'd been an FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitive.

"Ju need to eat something, Harry!" Salvador, an exuberant second cousin, corralled him. "*Oye, flaco*, ju look pale." *Flaco*. Thin man. Sal was a personal space invader, and Vance had learned long ago how to sidestep him. It

didn't work this time when Sal used an unexpected blocking move.

Harry was a famous jazz singer from New Orleans. Vance looked a lot like him—deep blue eyes, easy smile, good crop of medium-brown hair, sharp cheekbones, symmetrical features, a prominent nose that enhanced things—Sal was convinced he could pass for Harry Connick Jr.'s brother. He wasn't as sure about the resemblance as Sal was.

“Harry, ju look out for *your* mama, no? Ju the family lawyer—ju take care of business for jur mama.”

“Of course.” He looked for an opening and, when he saw one, darted past Sal to check on her. She was busy in the kitchen, a faded floral apron hanging from her delicate neck. He'd failed her for not marrying and having six kids. She used to bring it up all the time, and he was relieved the day she stopped.

Neither of his parents were enthralled with Kathy's husband—Larry the tire salesman at the local dealership—who'd made it to district manager. But Larry fathered four boys, and that was more than enough to cancel out their son-in-law's shortcomings.

Isabel spoke in barely a whisper. “Are ju hungry?”

He pulled a plate from the counter and loaded it with food. “Where are Kathy and the boys?”

“She wasn't feeling well, so she just left.”

Kathy seemed perfectly fine confronting Officer Gonzales. No sense bringing it up. He put his plate down and got a beer from the refrigerator.

Sophia shuffled into the kitchen. The two sisters huddled near the sink, speaking Spanish in hushed tones.

“I have something for ju. Jur dad wanted me to give it to ju. What ju say?” His mother put two fingers on her lips,

thinking. “Personal things.”

Sophia carried a wooden cigar box, balancing it on her cane. She handed it to him. He lifted the lid a little and peeked inside as though a pair of white doves might slip out. No birds, just old papers and photos. He put it on the small table near the kitchen window next to his beer and food.

“Ju take it with ju when ju leave, no? I’ll remind ju,” Sophia said. “When ju leave, I make sure ju take the box with ju.”

“OK.” He was in heaven, gorging on red beans and rice, caramelized plantains, and his favorite, *ropa vieja*, shredded beef on rice.

When he was leaving, Sophia hobbled to the door, carrying the box he would have forgotten. “He wanted ju to have it. And here, take this, too. It’s jur *popi*’s . . . last will. Ju know what to do, right?”

Isabel stood next to her as if in solidarity, letting her older sister Sophia take the lead while she dried her hands on the old apron.

“I know. I was listening before.” He took the box from Sophia and tucked it under his arm. He kissed her softly on the cheek. He hugged his mother with one arm. Her eyes welled again. He put the box down and used his thumbs to catch her tears. His throat tightened. “I’ll call you,” he said, picking up the cigar box and sliding the blue-covered document beneath it. He didn’t have to look back to know they were watching him from the doorway. When he saw a neighbor scowling at him from a big picture window, he jogged the rest of the way to the car.

His phone buzzed. He fumbled for it in his pants pocket. Sarge came up on caller ID.

“Hello.”

“¿Dónde demonios estás?”

“I’m pressing one for English now. Beeeep.”

“Let me translate nicely. Where are you?”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

“Hurry up, man, before I get robbed or killed.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“You’re right, *señor*. It’s worse than that. Maybe you should relocate to Homestead. You’d get more bang for the buck.”

“That depends on how you define bang.”

“Very funny. Get your skinny pink ass over here. There’s nothing good about this place. You live in 3B, right? Whoever lives next door sure is nosy—what my ex likes to call a curtain-twitcher.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He shifted in his seat. “I try to ignore my neighbors.”

“Me? I want to know who lives near me. Hurry up, *gallego*.”

He was still laughing when Sarge ended the call. *Gallego* was vintage Sarge, Cuban street slang for a guy who can’t get laid.

He pondered an old regret on the drive to his place. Maybe he should have stayed with Metro instead of going back to the University of Miami to get his law degree and with it, a big pile of debt. If he had, he’d be on a cushy police pension. When he’d first opened his small solo practice, he thought it would be rewarding helping the less fortunate. Working pro-bono cases. Bettering the world.

It wasn’t. Far from it.

He pulled into his apartment complex and parked Edgar between two older trucks with landscape trailers chained to rear hitches. He stowed the cigar box and legal document



under the driver's seat.

Sarge zipped in behind the Nissan, perpendicular, blocking him in, and rolled down the passenger window. He looked incredulous. "Don't tell me that thing's yours. *Ay, yi yi!* Is that a cockroach leg?"

He couldn't deny it. There was nothing he could say to defend it. Sarge would never understand taking a car with a plastic roach leg on the roof in lieu of cash.

Sarge reverted to his old self. "You're one hot date. *Un hombre caliente.*"

"Should I punch you in the nose for English?" He climbed into the Jeep Renegade. "I need a drink."

"You'd think I'd get a little nicer greeting after all these years." Sarge stared at the underwear swaying from a makeshift clothesline strung from a tree roped off to second- and third-story handrails. "I gotta say I'm a little surprised you live here."

Last time he saw Sarge, he'd bumped into him at the grocery store. He'd just graduated law school and was being romanced by the big firms in Miami.

"Well, I guess things just don't work out the way we think they will. I figured by now you'd have a fancy place in Coco Plum." Sarge paused. "There's an upside, I guess. You don't have to worry about anyone ripping off your car." He sniffed the air. "Smells like someone needs another beer."

"Well, at least my rent's cheap." Vance looked out the Jeep window, up at the apartment next door and didn't see any curtains twitching. "You're right. Someone needs another beer."

## FRIDAY NIGHT

The seatbelt cut a diagonal swath across Sarge's belly, making its shape changeable, like a shallow canal cutting into a very big bowl of Jell-O. The driver's seat was as far back as it would go, otherwise Sarge might not have had enough elbow room to turn the wheel.

"I'd rather smell like beer than cheap cologne." Vance cracked open the passenger window, letting some heavy air in.

"Hey, now. It's not cologne. It's Axe body spray. Drives the ladies wild."

"Right. I'm flattered you freshened up for our date."

"At least I make an effort." Sarge craned his neck back and forth, looking for a break in traffic to make a left out of the shabby apartment complex.

Like lots of Vance's friends and family, Sarge was a first generation Cuban-American. Vance noted that Sarge still had the unruly eyebrows the prosecutor pressured him into styling before he testified at an important trial back when he was still a cop. Sarge had told him the attorney said his eyebrows made him look sinister. The hair on top of his silky brown head was long gone now, and he wore a tidy salt-and-pepper fringe cut, trimmed neatly above his ears. He was either growing a goatee or had missed a patch shaving. And it looked like he'd whitened his teeth.

Sarge wore thick-framed black glasses in all his Facebook posts. He wore them in person, too, and from a profile view, Vance could see a crevice in the fleshy folds between his eyes, deep enough to clamp a dime. Earlier, when he'd enlarged one of Sarge's selfies, he'd noticed a pierced ear. He still wore the same hollow gold rope around

his neck. It hung just below the second button of his apricot *guayabera* shirt. The attached 14-karat gold crucifix was too small for a gangbanger, but it was still tacky.

“I’d ask about the funeral, but I bet you’d rather talk about work,” Sarge said, navigating the Jeep toward Coconut Grove. “So how is biz?”

“It’s all right if you like prostitutes, petty thieves, and pedophiles.” A sad but accurate state of affairs.

“I kind of like prostitutes. Affordable ones wearing body condoms.”

Vance shook his head and chuckled. In truth, trash talk was a turn off. Sarge looked like he regretted saying it.

“Ever miss the action?” Sarge looked at him and grinned. “Police action.”

“Sometimes, I guess.” He shrugged. “I think maybe I just missed my calling.”

“Scariest job these days, being a cop. So what is your calling?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know.” That was the God’s honest truth.

“Ah, a mid-life crisis. I had one, too. Split up with my wife.”

That surprised him. “The idea of you and Maria breaking up, I never thought that would happen.” He’d envied Sarge’s marriage, just never out loud.

“Yeah, well, I guess I wanted someone who acted slightly interested during lovemaking.”

“You over-share, like a chick.” Vance leaned away from him, resting his right shoulder against the passenger window frame.

Sarge parked behind a bicycle rental shop across from the bar. The tavern’s once glossy red front door was

splintered and weathered gray at the seams. The four small glass panes lining the top were grimy: outside from time and inside from exhaled carbon dioxide. It was dimly lit and smelled like a potpourri of mustard and second-hand smoke. Vance dragged a barstool over the concrete floor and sat. Sarge did the same. He ordered two beers from the bartender.

“She’s hot.” Sarge’s eyes were glued to the tattooed bartender. “*Muy caliente.*”

Sarge was in a trance, watching her every move. Vance snapped his thumb and forefinger in his ear. The longer he stared at the barkeep, the longer it would take to find out why the impromptu meeting. *Twenty years.* He wanted to know what couldn’t wait.

She scurried around the bar and returned with two cold beers, popping the caps one-handed, like a magician. “You gentlemen wanna run a tab?”

Sarge was more than happy to pay. He pulled his wallet out and handed her his credit card. She scuttled off to wait on some young men. “I can’t help myself. The chance to impress pretty girls, well, it’s just too much for me.”

An emaciated college student folded up on the barstool next to Vance and drew hard on an E-cigarette, tilted his head back, and emitted a contrail of bluish smoke. The vapor annoyed Vance. He wanted to get down to business. He gulped his beer, trying to think of a way to jumpstart the conversation. The alcohol went straight to his brain, easing the nagging feelings of despair that had followed him from his mother’s house to the bar. Being with Sarge was better than being home by himself. *Lighten up. Let Sarge have a little fun.* But Sarge was dragging it out.

“So, why are we here?” Vance asked him. “What’s up

that couldn't wait?"

"I wanted to pick your brain about something."

"Go ahead. Pick away."

"I wanted to get some advice about online dating."

Vance laughed so hard he grabbed his stomach with both arms. It felt good to belly laugh. "Oh, gosh." He laughed again, harder this time. *Yeah, right.*

Sarge put both hands on either side of his face, palms facing out, a thumb in each ear. "Got me." He cupped his hands and yelled, "Two more beers, gorgeous!" He turned to face him again. "I got a little update from the high security prison in Florence."

Florence. The Alcatraz of the Rockies. Supermax. There was only one reason Sarge would bring up ADX. Sarge was fishing. "Oh, yeah? What sort of update?"

"There's a rumor there's an impending hit on Chago Marino."

Chago Marino, his Uncle Tony's former partner-in-crime serving a 205-year prison sentence. "How do you know that?"

"I know people. I got connections, *gallego.*"

"So what did your people say?"

"Chago's had 'round-the-clock protection since he was moved from ADX to the high security block." Sarge picked up the bottle of beer and suckled it like a baby. "Someone on the outside's been keeping his payments to the Aryan Brotherhood current. Rumor has it the payments stopped."

Chago Marino had been in the Colorado prison for fifteen years, and dozens of high-priced lawyers had been working on a variety of strategies trying to appeal his conviction. They'd performed a miracle getting him moved from the maximum-security prison to the high-security block. They'd

been hoping for another magic trick for a decade.

The bartender stopped by and asked if they wanted another round.

Sarge asked, “¿Cuánto cuesta?”

“Twelve bucks.” She plucked Sarge’s credit card and ticket from inside a highball glass next to the register.

“Thanks, sweetheart.” He added a fat tip to the check and watched her expression. She glanced at it and stuck it in the cash drawer. Sarge looked dejected. But he snapped out of it when he stood to leave. The Friday night crowd had grown three deep at the bar. Students clamoring for somewhere to sit moved in on them like hyenas. Sarge pushed his chair to make space to stand.

“OK, babe,” Ruiz yelled at him. “I hope you had fun on our date.”

Vance was having the same problem, so he rammed his chair stool back into the crowd when the drunks behind him didn’t respond to normal cues. “Thanks for the beers, honey. It’s fun to get together every twenty years.”

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It was nightfall on the ride back. Sarge asked if he knew that over eighty percent of online daters posted lies about something *muy grande* on their dating profiles.

He shrugged in the passenger seat. “I’m not surprised.”

Sarge took his eyes off the road and looked at him. “Are you on any dating sites?”

Sarge was so nosy. He shook his head and rolled his eyes, but didn’t answer.

“Aha! Guilty! That is a great big *si!*” Sarge howled. “There goes the online dating world. So what tall tales did you tell?”

This was another conversation he did not care to have tonight. “I checked the divorced box.”

“Why? Are you married or attached or something?”

“No.” The reason seemed silly now.

“Then why?” Sarge looked at him with great confusion, the fissure between his eyes deepening.

“Research says women prefer losers to non-starters ten times out of ten. I read they’ll pass over the older bachelors.” This was sure to fire Ruiz up.

“Ya think? They might find a forty-five-year-old guy who’s never been married a risky investment? The ladies are usually looking for a little experience. They figure if you did it once, you’ll jump off the plank again. Divorce is better than no experience. So what sites are you on?”

“I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Oh, come on. Which one?”

Sarge was in beginning-stage badgering and had a reputation for tenacity, getting confessions from the most adamant criminals. Tonight he didn’t have the energy to fight him. He grimaced. “Um. MatchMeUp.”

“Uh-huh. No one’s on just one. What others are you fishing?” Sarge looked over again. “Come on.”

He was exhausted. Sarge was going to give him a raft of shit either way. Might as well bargain. “If I tell you, will you promise to answer my question?”

“Sure.”

“Fish-a-Plenty.”

“You mean Pussy-a-Plenty. Jeez. There’s a box on that site that asks whether or not you have a car. A car! That’s a pretty low standard, don’t you think?”

He sat quietly. Sarge was queuing up for one of his pontifications. Here it came.

“Here’s the thing, *gallego*: We look at the pictures. The cha-cha’s, they look for the money. That’s how it works.

Unless you have a Warren Buffet-sized Fidelity account and post it, you better look like Brad Pitt. You got an edge on me in the looks department, I gotta admit it. But lying about being divorced? That gets you off on the wrong foot from the get-go. How long you think it takes before they figure it out?”

He listened until Sarge was done. “OK, now it’s my turn.” He’d moved in closer to the center console to watch Sarge’s reaction. “Why do you have the picture of the murdered Mutiny girl as your Facebook profile picture?”

Sarge hardly looked ambushed. He showed no element of surprise. “So, you remember her.” He fixed his eyes on the windshield. The only sound was coming from the Renegade’s tires crunching the road. After a long pause, he said, “Ever have one of those cold cases you couldn’t let go of?”

Vance had. “Sure. Lots of them.” The Mutiny girl was one they shared. The unsolved ones, especially the ones you knew you could solve, those ate cops alive. This one was low-hanging fruit, but they’d never arrested anyone.

Sarge glanced at him, stopping at a four-way. “It should have been an easy case if there wasn’t such a big conspiracy to cover it up. There was enough evidence for my dead grandmother to put it together. But the folks running the hotel were so corrupt we couldn’t do a decent investigation. Add to that, that jurisdiction-wise, it was a mess since they found her body in Monroe County and she was killed in Dade County, in the hotel. Anyway, you already know that’s how I think it went down. Unless you forgot.”

“No. I haven’t forgotten. But Dan, that was a long time ago. And not only that, you were outside your jurisdiction.”

Sergeant Daniel Ruiz had been a Fort Lauderdale homicide detective. Broward County. It’s how they first met.



After the murder, Ruiz was snooping around the Hotel Mutiny in Miami where he had no official business. Vance was socializing with his Uncle Tony at the hotel. It seemed odd now for a cop to hang out drinking hundred-dollar champagne with his uncle, a drug lord. But the Hotel Mutiny lacked all boundaries, moral, ethical, legal, or otherwise, with kingpins at one table, FBI agents at another. It was the one stain on his police record, partying at the club with his uncle and his sociopathic partner, Chago Marino. Vance had never claimed to be a saint but this crossed the line.

They rode in silence until Sarge turned the conversation to a lighter topic. "So what's your username?"

"What?"

"No. Seriously, what's your username? Took me an entire day to come up with mine. *AngelBatista*. What do you think of that?"

He shrugged. "Should I think something?"

"Well, yeah. Angel Batista, the detective on *Dexter*. The one who wore the fedora and had the hot thing with the black lieutenant? Don't you think I look a lot like him?" Sarge pursed his lips. He couldn't hold the expression for long. He cracked up, showing his very white teeth.

His laugh was contagious. "I've never seen it."

Sarge took umbrage. "Whoa! You're kidding. The best show since *Miami Vice*, set right here in our own backyard. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't get the premium channels."

Sarge shook his head. "What's your username? Come on, I told you mine." He went in for the kill. "Why do I always get the impression you think you're better than everyone else? Like you're too good to be fishing for the ladies online

with the rest of us.”

He'd used this same tactic before, badgering him when he said he was quitting the department to go to law school, accusing him of being too much of a snob to stick with law enforcement. The Mutiny girl murder was a hot case at the time. But it hadn't been assigned to Vance. Ruiz wanted him to stay on, be his mole. They both suspected she was killed at the hotel, then dumped in the Upper Keys. Sarge guilt-tripped him, said Vance was duty-bound to stay on and work the case. Manipulation 101. But he'd already made his mind up and given notice. The coroner was renting refrigerated trucks to store dead bodies. Miami was a war zone, and every night there were a dozen street murders, and half the cops were dirty. “Gallego69,” he finally said.

“Even you're not that cynical,” Sarge said. “But you are a snob. Come on. Give it to me.”

“MileMarker45. Happy now?”

“Hmm. *Muy bueno*, catchy. I like it. Nice little play on your age. And the Florida Keys, right?” Sarge nodded slowly, looking pleased with himself.

“Well, I have to trawl with decent bait, right?”

“I agree. Since you can't use *Bazillionaire*, it's good. That, and your pictures, handsome *hombre* like you.”

Sarge turned the Jeep into Vance's place. The flat-topped, three-story, green stucco apartment complex looked eerie in the thick air under the flickering streetlights, like an algae-covered shipwreck. Ruiz put the Renegade in park. “*Grassy-ass* for the enchanting evening.”

Vance opened the passenger door to get out. “Don't break the speed limit checking your MatchMeUp or whatever accounts on the way home.”

“No worries about that.” Sarge held up his phone. “Got the apps. Don’t want to keep the ladies waiting.”

Vance shook his head.

Sarge pushed his phone closer to Vance’s face. He tapped the screen. It lit up in the dark. “Check it out. Have you seen this? Uses GPS. Shows you where the ladies are right now. If you want to get laid, you swipe this way, and if you want to work on getting your virginity back, you swipe the other way, like this.”

He pushed Sarge’s hand away. He wanted to get out of the car. Instead, he closed the passenger door and stayed in the air conditioning. The humidity wasn’t the reason. Sarge hadn’t answered his question yet. They’d made a deal.

Sarge found what he’d been looking for. He held up the phone and showed him a picture of a cute senior. “I did the wild thing with her on the first date, after she chugged a bottle of Chardonnay. She’s kinda hot, don’t you think?”

He grimaced and looked away, changing the subject. “So who’s been taking care of Chago’s payments to the Aryan Brotherhood?”

“His kid, I think, the one with the club foot. Can’t remember his name.” Sarge was preoccupied, trying to enlarge the picture.

“His name is Gregorio. And it’s not a clubfoot. The kid was born with elephantiasis. His mom kept a shoe on it to keep it . . . contained. She bought him a new pair of Thom McAn leather lace-ups every year and made him sleep with one on. His foot is shaped like a size ten shoe. I saw it once. It has a few folds where his toes should be and there’re some things growing out of it, like toenails. I still can’t understand how he learned to walk on it normally.”

Sarge squinted. “How do you know all that? About the

kid's foot?"

"My uncle's best friend was married to his mother. There was a lot of family gossip about it, the foot."

"Wow. Nice job, way to go, playing it down. 'My uncle's childhood friend.'" Sarge rolled his eyes. "You mean your fugitive uncle's business partner who's serving a triple life sentence in a high-security prison. Who also happens to be in arrears to the Aryan Brotherhood." Sarge raised his eyebrows. "It's not like they were stealing loaves of bread to feed the poor. Los Guapos is a sin on the heart of all Miami."

Vance stepped out of the Jeep and closed the door. The passenger window whirred down. He poked his head inside with his arms folded on the frame. "Thanks again for the beers."

"*De nada.*" Sarge chuckled. "Let's stay in touch, MileMarker45."

Vance gave Sarge a middle finger.

"What's that for?"

"Your IQ." He'd dropped to Sarge's level.

"I'd say it's for your number of Cuban parents."

"You really need to grow up, *Detective Batista.*"

Sarge returned a one-finger salute and drove out of the apartment parking lot.

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Vance stopped at the Cube, grabbed the cigar box and documents he'd stashed under the driver's seat, and jogged three flights of concrete stairs to his apartment. It didn't make sense for the Aryan Brotherhood to take Chago out; Chago Marino was the biggest cash cow the Brotherhood had ever seen.

If Sarge's sources were right, Chago's son, Greg, with the deformed foot, was the conduit to the money protecting his

father on the inside at the high-security prison at Florence. All organizations, even the most despicable ones, function with a code. He understood the drill. Cash was used to bribe guards, maintenance, and medical personnel, enabling the Brotherhood to move goods and services inside. The hierarchy within the cellblock was a delicate environment best left to the inmates. His Uncle Tony should have been on the same block as Chago.

The miles of cocaine snorted up nostrils during the '80s and '90s from Studio 54 in New York to the Rainbow Bar and Grill in Hollywood had a ninety percent chance of having been imported and distributed by the Los Guapos Syndicate.

But their crime stories had different endings, Tony and Chago.

The lump in his throat returned. The funeral. Watching his mother trying her best to manage the grief. The cigar box she'd given him, filled with memories. The document he'd put on the kitchen counter in his apartment: his father's Last Will. It would predict her future. He'd have to detach emotionally while he processed it, then boil it down. He'd have to explain it to her later.