

BREAKAGE

FROM PEN INTERNATIONAL PRIZE WINNER
DAVID-MICHAEL HARDING



Black Rose Writing | Texas

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For Kate

BREAKAGE

1

“I want you to remember four words. Apple. Coin. New. Gray. Okay, Mr. Chariot?”

The doctor’s voice was pleasant and gentle. The examination room was spic-and-span clean, comfortable, and the staff courteous, but none of it eased the sickness Donnie Chariot was feeling. “Got it,” he answered nonetheless.

“All right. Why have you come in today?”

“Something’s wrong with me.”

“How so?”

“I’m forgetting things.”

“Such as?”

“Things I should know. Little things. Big things. But it’s more than that. Way more.”

“Give me an example.”

“I do....” There was a pause that instantly felt too elaborate and Donnie tried to shed it. “I do a lot of accounting work. I’ve gotten so I can’t do my job. I can’t seem to get the numbers to cooperate like they did. I’m making mistakes. Those are the big things. They’re expensive mistakes.”

“Have you talked to your boss about it? He knows what’s happening?”

“Oh, he knows all right.”

“That’s good. It’s important to be honest about such things.”

Donnie grimaced. “He’s not happy.”

“Perhaps it’s time to give yourself a break from work. Step away for a while.”

“That’s unlikely. We’re in...um...this is our busy season. Can’t you just give me something? Maybe Adderall. I heard that’s the rage on campuses. Does that really help with concentration? That’s what I need, doc.”

“We can talk about it. What other symptoms can you tell me about? Any headaches? Balance concerns?”

“No. None. It’s just the numbers. They don’t fit like before.”

“What do you mean, fit like before?”

Donnie squirmed on the edge of the examining table. “There was a time when I could do some pretty advanced math in my head. I can’t do that now.”

“That’s not abnormal. You’re only doing what most of us can do. It doesn’t mean you’re ill.”

“It does for me. It goes beyond math.”

“Try this. Count backwards from one hundred by seven.”

Donnie didn’t flinch and rattled off numbers like a machine-gun. “Ninety-three. Eighty-six. Seventy-nine. Seventy-two. Sixty-five. Fifty-eight. Fifty-one. Forty-four. Thirty-seven. Thirty.”

“That’s enough. You’re remarkable. Not one of my patients can do that as easily as you just did.”

“Thanks, but it’s not addition and subtraction I’m talking about. It’s probability. Coherent odds...I mean ratios. Coherent ratios. Operational subjectives. It’s looking at a map of equations and seeing a clear route through all of them. That’s what I used to do. And I can’t anymore. Not anymore.” Donnie’s voice trailed off and his eyes fell to the floor. “I’m sick, doc. I need help.”

“I know you do.”

Donnie’s gaze broke with the floor. “You do?”

“What were those words I asked you to remember when you came in?”

They were lost to him, but Donnie searched the doctor's face, his own mind, and the ceiling before his eyes fell to the floor again. "I don't have a clue. Green? A color maybe? Cat? I think one was cat."

The doctor turned a card on the examining table face up. On it were the words, *Apple, Coin, New, Gray*.

"Didn't do very well, did I?"

"The same."

"The same as what?"

"The same as you did three weeks ago."

"Three weeks?"

"When you came in last time."

Donnie stood up and rubbed his face hard with both hands. "Is that true? I was in here three weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"God damn it!"

"Did you fill the prescription I wrote you?"

"I don't know."

"Donnie, this has been going on too long. It's early onset Alzheimer's. I'm as certain of it as I can be, short of an autopsy."

"Don't waste all your bedside manner on me, doc."

"This is serious, Donnie. I can't sort it all out. Every case is different, and how you present isn't in any textbook. You can do things most people would need a calculator for, but then there's these classic signs. I don't know all the answers, but I do know it's getting worse."

"You're telling me."

"You're still a relatively young man. You can enjoy a very successful retirement. Back off on working all hours. Keep up with your medicines, watch your diet, exercise. You need some help. The sooner the better. I need you to come in and see me next week."

"What will that change?"

"Probably nothing, but I want you to bring your daughter. You need help with this. You can't do it alone any longer."

"I'll bring my maid into the fold."

"Not this time. It's too important. You need to tell your family."

“That probably isn’t going to work very well.”

“When’s the last time you spoke to Donna?”

“Li’l Donnie? A couple years anyway. Maybe longer.”

“You’re not sure, are you?”

“A long time.”

“You can’t remember.”

“I remember. I remember an ungrateful girl, that’s what I remember.”

“You’re no bed of roses either. You know that?”

Donnie locked eyes with the doctor for a long count.

“What do you remember, Book?”

The name startled him. It was a handle hung on him decades ago for his skill and predilection with illegal gambling and bookmaking.

“I know you, Donnie. I’ve been your doctor for thirty years. I knew your wife. I know your daughter, Donna. I know your granddaughter. And I know you. Thirty years you’ve been coming in here and you don’t remember coming to see me a few weeks ago. What’s that tell you?”

“Tells me I’ve been coming here too damn much.”

“Get in touch with Donna. If you don’t, I will. You need her.”

Donnie considered the suggestion for just a moment. Whatever afflicted him, it didn’t stop him from thinking ahead to the racehorses and odds already swirling around the upcoming “Run for the Roses” at Churchill Downs.

“You might be right,” Chariot said as he explored the doctor’s face and his own uneasy mind. He compared what he found with what he knew he needed to produce for the gamblers of Las Vegas. “I believe I do need her.”

2

“The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports” had not yet ended. Sleek horses, bleeding sweat down coats of chiseled black, chestnut, and dappled gray, were still pounding down the stretch where the crowd’s roar was rising to meet them. Behind the entries lay the touted turn for home; ahead waited the wire. The eventual winner of The Kentucky Derby had a furlong yet to cover, but Donnie Chariot had seen enough races to know the horse’s lead was insurmountable. He also knew the place and show horses had settled into locks. The next horse’s connections would have to settle for fourth.

Though Donnie had already put the finish up on the tally board in his mind, on the track, the jockeys’ whips bit into their laboring horses’ flanks in what Donnie knew would be a failed attempt at a better finish. Unless one of the horses broke down, the “Run for the Roses” was as good as over. Before it ended for real, Donnie calculated the payouts would cost him north of seventeen million dollars, his reputation, and perhaps even his life.

Chariot didn’t see a broken foreleg coming in the next twenty seconds. It wasn’t in the genes of these four particular thoroughbreds. Though anything was possible, it was not probable. A breakdown among this quartet was against the odds. Odds and probability—by the numbers, Chariot’s numbers—was what Donnie knew better than anyone else.

Genetics was only one piece of a living, breathing dimensional puzzle that was a horse race. Forelegs genetically prone to snapping were more difficult to see than unicorns. Finding winners was easier. Professional handicappers, weekend warriors, bookies, and dreamers each had their method. Donnie Chariot's gift—a blazing quick-strike mainframe of a mind that crunched statistics as easily as other people breathed—dissected the puzzle with a scalpel made of numbers. Past performances, weight, weather, track, trainer, time, distance, and competition calculations were dumped into his head. He reviewed all the horses' bloodlines in the time it had taken to turn the pages.

The process was repeated with trainers, tracks, and jockeys. The sets of numbers were then overlaid in his mind. Ten million synapses fired in a nanosecond and winners, losers, and “also-rans” trickled out his fingers as checks next to horses’ names on Daily Racing Forms. Other handicappers used their own processes, even if it was only a dart board. The difference is that Chariot’s worked. It had made him rich, but what he did when he didn’t handicap a race is what made him powerful.

When the numbers on a tote board winked at Donnie in a singular fashion only he could discern, the supercomputer between his ears whirled. The tallying odds gave him a peek behind the certainty curtain of numbers that ebbed and flowed as bets. Courtesy of his unusual genius, Donnie pegged results that were immune to the outcome of the race. He called these races “Specials.” They were rare to his eyes and invisible to others’.

What brought Specials to light was a peculiar algorithm that tilted the amount wagered per horse and subsequent odds, versus the total pool, or dollars, bet on the race. A Special exposed a circumstance where monies placed delicately on the scale of a horse race, in certain places on certain horses in certain amounts, forced a yield that was like compounded interest to a banker. If there was such a thing as a sure bet in gambling, Donnie’s Specials were it. In the maelstrom of numbers that continually raged in his brain, this perfect storm of unbalanced odds presented the surprisingly quiet eye of a hurricane where his thoughts could settle and find a respite.

This is what made Donnie Chariot powerful and also what gave him that nickname, “The Book.” He fed the furnace reputation of The Book on his usual flare for handicapping and odds setting, but in the orgy that came with a Special, Donnie Chariot became an icon. He was an oracle of betting that scooped the pool of smaller tracks and lighter races, emptying the coffers previously stuffed with cash, two-dollar wagers at a time.

Donnie had the power other people wanted. Money came and went and could be recovered, lost, and gained again in a day. Power endured and Donnie Chariot had power in spades. It was money that bought the mansion in New York near his home track at Belmont Park. Money also paid for the jet that brought him to Churchill Downs, but it was power that had gotten him his usual private box and it was power that brought disciples to that box to symbolically genuflect and kiss the ring.

But right now, lost beneath the climaxing wail of 160,000 spectators, Donnie Chariot was alone with his torrent of thoughts. Today had been unusual for a myriad of reasons. A Special had presented itself, but it was vastly more extraordinary than any other. Today the numbers had tickled Donnie’s mind from the tote board for the running of The Kentucky Derby.

“It’s never happened before,” Donnie heard his voice in his ears, perhaps talking about the simultaneous arrival of both the Derby and the Special. Or perhaps it was something else whispering as numbers reset, stopped, and started again in his head.

From the time the top horses entered the stretch, Donnie knew the outcome, but that result was the most peculiar thing of all peculiar things to happen. As horses streaked below the wire of Churchill Downs and glided into easy canters, the winners didn’t match Donnie Chariot’s picks. The Book was wrong.

3

The roar of the Derby throng was far from settled. Flamboyant hats and empty mint juleps in their commemorative cups were still being jostled about. The jubilant sea around Donnie seemed oblivious to the fact that most were holding losing tickets. For them, it had merely been enough to be there.

The Book held no tickets—winners or losers—and to “be there” had lost its fascination twenty years ago. There was normally little appeal for Donnie in the race itself, apart from the historical significance and the impact he would see materialize in the breeding sheds. That changed when the Special in the esteemed race had revealed itself. Until then, he was here to fulfill an expectation, a step shy of an obligation.

With the presentation of the Special at Churchill Downs, handwritten notes, texts, and whispers flowed out from the guarded box seat he had occupied beneath the Twin Spires now for his thirty-fourth Kentucky Derby in a row. The stream of information had peaked at the bell when the last of his “beards”—secretive betters and punters for Vegas—approached betting windows the world over and discreetly placed the last bets based on what Donnie had seen in the numbers. Even with the closing of the windows, none of Donnie’s money was in the till. His business had evolved to the point where he handled the money of others for the vigorish.

Donnie's cut kept him flush, but more importantly, kept his mind engaged. Without the daily odds making, the energy in his head conspired to prevent sleep at best and cohesive conversation at worst. His mind was an under-loaded circuit that, try as he might, endless games of fiendishly difficult sudoku couldn't abate.

As winning owners ran the gauntlet of glad-handers and backslappers toward the Winner's Circle to be captured forever by a hundred photographers, the losers eked toward the paddock where pundits would pine in hopes of discovering what went wrong. For his part, Donnie tried to see the numbers again in his mind, but they were gone.

He held a racing program for Derby Day and absently noted he was leafing through it with an uncommon regularity. Years before, the box on millionaire's row would have been witness to him holding the decorative souvenir program outlining the day's races simply as a prerequisite prop. Today, rather disturbingly he discovered, he returned to the assorted undercard races to remind himself of trainers, barns, owners, and who would be in the irons.

His eyes lowered and he gently scratched an itch on his cheek. While the crowd waged pandemonium and stood on their feet with phones pressed into service as cameras, Donnie Chariot turned the page to the next race of the day and touched the sleeve of the bodyguard standing next to him.

“Do you have my racing form?”

His voice and action were swallowed in the chaos of crowning a new champion. Unintentionally rebuffed, Donnie took note of the empty seat next to him and this time swatted at the burly attendant.

“Hey! Jimmy? Where's Li'l Donnie?”

The big man was startled and looked down, but through eyes that were uncommonly confused. “Frank, Mr. Chariot. I'm Frank. Jimmy's...you know...Jimmy's away.”

“With Li'l Donnie?”

“Your daughter, sir?”

"Yes, my daughter! Donna. Where'd she go? She must have my Daily Racing Form. I need the DRF."

"LD didn't make the trip, Mr. Chariot." There was a pause that drowned the cheering crowd from Frank's ears. The drowning was spurred on by a vacant and desperate look coming from Donnie's eyes that unnerved the big man. "She hasn't come to the track in a long time, Book."

Frank reached into the inside pocket of his sport coat and inadvertently revealed the resting place of a Glock .45 pistol. The pocket yielded a folded Daily Racing Form. He handed the booklet, crowded with tracks, races, horses, and past performances to his boss. "Here you are, Book. Use mine."

Donnie Chariot uncharacteristically snatched the booklet. "Damn it! She doesn't have the picks for the twelfth race yet."

Frank followed the DRF to Chariot and cautiously dropped into the empty seat beside him. He shot a pleading look to his own underling standing in the aisle at the edge of the luxury box, then returned to his boss. "Mr. Chariot? LD, I mean Donna. She isn't here." He shot another glance to the aisle and then around as if someone might be listening. "She didn't make the trip. She's probably still in New York."

Donnie was leafing through the souvenir Derby program again while the Daily Racing Form had taken up a lesser position beneath it. "What'd you say?" There was more than a little menace in Donnie Chariot's voice as he came away from the programs and stared tight in Frank's face.

"Li'l Donnie isn't here, Book. She's in New York."

"Did she call in the picks?"

Frank was more confused and becoming anxious. It didn't fit a man whose thick arms tested the seams of his light-colored sport coat. "She doesn't call...I mean, Donna don't pick anymore. Not for years. Not since she was a little girl."

Focus came back into Donnie Chariot's eyes as plainly as if a cloud had passed from his face. There was a moment's hesitation as he

physically felt the shroud being lifted. He searched a moment for something in his mind, then smiled and patted Frank's heavy thigh.

"I know she doesn't, Frank. I was testing you. What's the matter? You look tense. You want a mint julep or something?"

Frank relaxed, but not completely. He got up from the seat and took his place at the aisle. "Naw. I'm good. Must be the sun."

"Maybe we could get you one of those Derby hats that block my view now and again." Donnie leaned around his protector to Nicky, Frank's second in the aisle. "Hey, Nicky? Frank needs a hat. He's getting too much sun. Find him one with steeples on the top and maybe a pony running around the brim. A couple flowers too."

"I'm good, boss."

"You'd look good in a hat like that," Nicky grinned. "It'd show off your eyes."

"You'd like that. Probably ask me out."

"You wish."

Donnie broke the coarse banter. "Nicky, go bring the car up."

"Sure thing."

Nicky was bounding down the steps, leaving Frank looking at his back then to his boss. "We leaving, Book?"

"Yes." Donnie was stuffing his program and Frank's DRF in his pocket.

"The card's not up, Mr. Chariot. There's a couple more races. Then the party. You gonna bail on the party?"

"I need to get home."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. Tonight. What's the matter with you?"

"Well, nothing, I guess. I got a few bucks on the twelfth race, but—"

"You know I'd rather you didn't gamble."

"I'm just playing around. Makes the races worth watching. A little skin in the game to keep me awake, is all."

"I'd hate to see you fall on your face at a betting window. You'll have some skin in the game then and it'll keep you awake, too. Let's go."

Frank was moving slowly. “I heard Mr. DeSeti mention that Baron was coming in from Vegas for the big race. You want to see him before we go back to New York?”

“Baron’s here?”

“I thought you knew.”

“I must’ve forgot. Are you certain?”

“That’s what I heard from DeSeti.”

Donnie motioned to the steps. “I’ll talk to him later. He’ll be calling.”

Vehicle traffic was already picking up outside the grandstands. The VIP walking lanes, behind their velvet ropes, were filling as well, and apart from the oblivious celebrities, seasoned big-time gamblers occasionally caught Donnie’s eye and nodded their respect. Frank saw each one, as well as any quick movements. He was always happy when they settled in the car. He was happier still when the jet lifted off as he reclined in the furthest back seat—weight to help balance the plane. With no one onboard but The Book, Nicky, and the pilots, Frank would sleep away the quick trip back to New York. He wouldn’t wake up until the wheels touched down at JFK.

Across the aisle, Nicky surfed the net and dozed. Toward the front, Donnie Chariot couldn’t close his eyes. He stayed hunched over a leather-bound binder of sudoku games working a vintage fountain pen until the jet landed.

“We’re home, kiddo,” Donnie said as he set his booklet beside him in the plush seats, got up, and pulled an overnight bag from a narrow closet.

Frank was slowly coming to life. “Leave that bag, Mr. Chariot. I’ll bring it.”

“You mean, you’ll tell me to,” Nicky said, collecting his own carry-on.

“I mean, I’ll have Nicky bring it. She’s strong.”

Donnie glanced down the aisle at his two-person entourage, nodded, and went forward. The plane stopped rolling and the copilot was already opening the door.

“How was the race, Mr. Chariot?”

“Fine. They’re all fine. No one got hurt.”

“I see all the jocks wear flak jackets now and the rails have catchers built in if they fall off. Sounds like it’s working.”

“I was talking about the horses.”

“Oh. Of course,” the copilot said as he lowered the steps.

Donnie smiled. “The riders all got off on their own accord. That’s good too.”

Relieved and relaxed, the copilot went too far. “Did one of those jockeys bring home a winner for you?”

“I don’t gamble,” Donnie said as he descended the steps and walked away toward the terminal.

Behind the bemused copilot, Frank and Nicky were gathering The Book’s luggage. Frank pointed into the plush seat and the forgotten sudoku binder. “Grab the boss’s book.”

As Nicky picked up the leather-wrapped volume, he flipped it open. The book was a thick collection of inked-in, finished sudoku games.

Nicky touched Frank’s arm with the open book. “Hey. Check it out. The boss plays crossword puzzles.”

“I said, pick it up, not search the man’s things, you nosey shit.”

“It’s a book.”

“It’s *his* book. Mind your business if you want to keep working and stay above ground.”

“What’s that mean?”

Frank stopped his unloading. “Are you stupid? If you don’t know who you’re working for, you better run while your knees still bend in the right direction. You turnip-truck-riding—”

“I know who I work for. I was just saying—”

“No, you don’t know, ‘cause if you did, you wouldn’t be going through the man’s stuff. You might see something that you’re not supposed to see. You do that, it’s like taking poison. Might as well put a gun in your mouth.”

“Relax, Frank. You’re paranoid.”

“No. I’m smart. And those aren’t crossword puzzles, Turnip. It’s sudoku. Tough ones. I’d go blind just looking at them. The Book fills them in with a pen by the fistful. No mistakes. The guy’s like a computer with numbers. He gets new inserts now and again for that book from an old trainer he knows in Japan. We used to go over to a big track—Fuchu, or some Japanese shit like that—once a year or so. Not so much anymore. Something’s changed. He’s slowing down maybe.”

“Probably thinking about retiring.”

“I dunno. I don’t think you can retire from his kind of life.”

“How come?”

Frank stopped again and stared. “See that? You’re showing your ignorance again, Turnip.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, Turnip.”

“Aww, move your ass, will you?”

4

Frank bounced up the wide stone steps of the mansion—light on his feet for a big man—and opened the door for his boss. Nicky was pulling the Bentley away toward the back of the estate and the garages.

“Always good to be home, hey Book?”

“Right you are.” Donnie stopped just inside the doorway, froze, and looked around at his bags and across the floor, patting his pockets. “Where’s Mr. Nakamura’s book? I just had it.”

“I slipped it in your bag. You left it on the plane.”

“Did I?”

“Yes, sir. Right here.” Frank pulled the finely tooled leather-covered booklet from a bag and handed it to his boss.

“Oh, good. I need another set of inserts. I knocked these out coming back from Baltimore.” The phone in Donnie’s jacket pocket rang. “I think I have a few yet. Maybe in the office.” He glanced at the phone and put it away without answering. “Probably in my desk.”

“You mean Churchill?”

“Churchill?”

“We just got back from Louisville, not Baltimore.”

“Yes, I meant Kentucky. Pimlico needs a facelift. You can only put so many coats of paint on an old rail and it starts looking like an old rail with lots of coats of paint on it.”

“Yes, sir. Are we headed there?”

“Where?”

“Pimlico.”

“For what?”

“The Preakness.”

“Hell, that’s a lifetime from now.”

“They run two weeks after the Derby.”

“Two weeks. Like I said, a lifetime.”

The house phone rang in a distant room.

“You want me to grab that?” Frank asked as he poised for a quick dash.

“Let it go. They’ll call back.”

Frank glanced at his watch. “Pretty late to be calling anyway.”

“It is late. I’m headed up. Leave the bags until morning.”

• • •

Donnie had just closed the door to his bedroom when his cell rang again. This time he didn’t bother to see who was calling and left it unanswered. Less than a minute after the cell stopped ringing, the house phone by his bed rang. He knew who it’d be. There was little to be gained in avoiding the inevitable. He’d been in ticklish spots like this before. Maybe not as deep a hole as this one, but he’d work it out. He figured that honesty, in any enterprise—even one that was criminal—was still the best policy.

“Hello?” Donnie said softly into the receiver.

“Good evening, Book. Have you retired for the night?”

“Getting ready. How are you, Baron?”

“Broke.”

“I rather doubt that.”

“I might have a few nickels to rub together, but it’s not for your lack of trying.”

Chariot balked.

“You still there, Donnie?”

“Still here.”

“I was planning on seeing you at the track. Someone said you left about the same time I took a bath on the Derby. You were calling in a lot of action at post time. Sold me short, Chariot. Real short.”

“Just south of seventeen million.”

“Like I said, real short. You want to tell me what happened with that?”

“It was a horse race, Baron. That’s why they race. You can’t tell who wins if they don’t race. You know that.”

“What I know is that I dropped \$17 million in two minutes. That’s not good business. Not for me and certainly not for you.”

“Agreed.”

“But the true rub is that it was my money—”

“And my reputation,” Donnie cut in. “You can make money any day—”

“Except today.”

“It’s harder for me to recover what I lost.”

“You spend much reputation lately, Book?”

“I live on it.”

Both phones fell quiet.

“You left the track early. How come?”

“I was done.”

“Seen enough, huh?”

“Yes.”

Quiet.

“You know that when you make a call like that, Donnie, we load up pretty heavy.”

“I’ve told you not to do that. You can impact the odds with big money.”

“Yes, well, it happens. Everybody wants to get a piece of the action when you say jump, especially on a high-profile event.”

“I’ve always advised against it.”

“And when things don’t turn out, a lot of people get caught in the wringer. That doesn’t make people happy—”

“I’ve always advised against—”

“—and pissed off people are dangerous people.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Baron.”

“I know. I know. I’m just talking here.”

“And I’m just listening. Is there something further?”

“I’ve asked twice already, but haven’t got an answer. Are you going to tell me what happened today?”

It was the third silence.

“So that’s how it is, Donnie?”

“It’s a horse race. These things hap—”

“Not when you drop the hammer they don’t! Not once. Not ever!

Have you taken to betting against the house, Chariot?”

“Don’t be—”

“If a little bird whispers in my ear that you were laying off my seventeen mill so you could—”

“I wasn’t. *I wasn’t!* I wouldn’t do that.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Not back in the day. People change, Book. Things change. Maybe somebody’s giving you a better deal. A bigger cut. That it? You want more of the pie?”

“No. Nothing.”

“And that’s my answer as to what happened, too? Nothing. Just a race.”

“Yes.”

“All right, Donnie, but I’ll be looking for you to help recoup my bad day. Any more bad days like today and I’m apt to take it rather personal. I’d eat my grandchildren before I’d part with another seventeen million on one race, and I love my grandchildren.”

“I love mine, too.”

“That’s good, Book. All right. Sorry to keep you up. I’m on Vegas time. The party’s still going strong here at the track. You should have stayed. Might have enjoyed it.”

“It’s not my thing.”

“I know. One last piece bears mentioning. Find me a good race to pull the trigger on before the Belmont. Get back in my good graces. Fair enough?”

“I’ll see what comes up.”

“Do that. Maybe help it along a little. For all our grandchildren’s sake. Goodnight, Chariot.”

5

Donnie was in his cavernous office ahead of the first light. On the oversized desk, four wide computer screens provided a glowing early breakfast of data. It streamed through The Book's eyes and applied a salve over the restless mind that was forever seeking something to numerically digest. He touched one screen and it jumped to another bank of data. A mouse click away he was scanning racing results from the weekend and cards that would be run over the days to come. He saw horses' names, followed them to bloodstock agents, noted pedigrees and racing histories of sires and dams, siblings and offspring. It was a colossal, uncontrollable morass of information and numbers. But it settled him and occupied his mind. The data poured through his eyes in a drowning rush—a firehose into a mason jar—but nothing spilled. It was taken, distilled, digested, and stored in nanoseconds.

An hour later the sun was breaking through the late spring clouds over New York and Donnie was in his gourmet kitchen pouring a second cup of coffee. Decaf. Frank came in for his first—caffeinated from a second pot.

“Morning, boss.”

“Frank,” was all Donnie said by way of a greeting as he weaved his way through the first floor of his mansion back to his office.

In a few moments, Frank followed him in with three morning newspapers. He set the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* on

the corner of Donnie's desk and took the *NY Post* with him to a big chair. The chair had been strategically placed years earlier so he could see the door to Chariot's office and out the floor-to-ceiling wall of windows to the entrance of the estate.

Frank settled without a sound. For almost two hours he sipped his coffee and turned the pages of his paper in total silence. When Mrs. Glass, the housekeeper and cook, brought in a small plate with toast, peanut butter, and fresh coffee at precisely nine o'clock for *The Book*, it was not an interruption. Instead, it was a continuation of the mandated morning. As he always did, Frank followed Mrs. Glass back to the kitchen. He would get his own coffee and as ever, find Nicky bent over breakfast.

"Morning, Frank," Nicky said. "You want an omelet? I just made a doozy."

"That's right. You're a cook now instead of a driver."

"In my day job, I'm a bodyguard. Like the secret service. A trained assassin."

"Here we go," Frank said as he filled his cup.

"But at night, I'm a *commis*."

"A what?"

"Like a chef-in-training."

"You can practice here any time," Mrs. Glass said. "Save me the bother."

"I keep forgetting that night school gig," Frank said. "How's that working out?"

"Excellent. Last night we made—"

"I don't give a shit," Frank said between blowing over hot coffee. "Don't let it interfere with this house. That's all I want to know."

"Ease off," Mrs. Glass said. "It's a fine thing he wants to do something besides what goes on here."

"Nothing wrong with this job," Frank said as he continued cooling his coffee. "If the boss taps your shoulder, you better have your mind right—be ready to step up. That's what's important."

“You’re a dinosaur,” Mrs. Glass snapped. “He don’t want to be a bone breaker his whole life. Good for you, Nicky. Stay in that school.”

“Thanks,” he said before turning his attention on his mentor. “Is the boss going out today?”

“I doubt it. They’re racing next door at Belmont this afternoon. He’ll be into that board, no question, but I doubt he goes over.”

Mrs. Glass pried. “How’d he do at the Derby?”

“I dunno. He’s always been a tough read. Keeps the cards close to his vest, but the phone was ringing last night. Somebody—”

“Probably Vegas,” Nicky volunteered.

“Probably so. If they’re calling that quick, I don’t think it’s a good sign. These guys don’t call to congratulate each other. They call to collect.”

“Ouch.”

“You never know,” Frank continued. “Could be a little, could be a lot.”

“I don’t think The Book handles a little.”

“Nope. He don’t. Either way, you both better look busy. Do some dishes or mop a floor somewhere. Nicky? Go wash the car or something. Walk around like you’re a secret service agent. Put on your shades and talk into your sleeve.”

Frank smiled at himself as he refreshed his coffee and headed back to his station and his paper.

Nicky didn’t smile a bit.

“Don’t mind that one,” Mrs. Glass said. “He misses the old days. The rough and tumble. I don’t.”

“The rough and tumble?”

“Back when. It was different. Now, everybody uses the internet to gamble. Back in the day, it was all cash. Piles of it. There’d be tables in the basement. Men counting all day long.”

“I’d like to see that. Piles of cash.”

“Well, there’s other things you wouldn’t have wanted to see in that basement.”

“Like what?”

“Never you mind.” Mrs. Glass stopped, but enjoyed having an audience too much to close the show just yet. She took up where she left off, scarcely missing a beat. “Frank would drag in some schmuck who didn’t pay. Back then, Mr. Chariot wasn’t the calm, quiet gentleman he is now. If you had his money, you’d count it out on the table to him, or the fingers you counted with would be on that table, but not connected to your hand. I scrubbed blood out of that man’s shirts more times than I care to remember.”

“Mr. Chariot?”

“The same.”

“You’d never figure him that way.”

“It was twenty-five years ago. Maybe thirty. It got real bad after his wife was gone.”

“You been here a long time?”

“A very long time. I seen it all. The parties. The big crowds. People all over the lawn. Too much work. Way too much for the pay. It’s better now. Quieter. Not so much work.”

“The boss liked to party?”

“Like a rock star, as they say. That’s why his wife left him. That, the bloody shirts, and the craziness in his head. The numbers. The edginess. He always had to be busy. Busy, busy.” Mrs. Glass pointed to her head. “Up here. He’d be pacing at night. Walking all over the house. Outside on the grounds. The guards almost shot him more than once, I can tell you that.

“Then that damn game of his. I used to find books all over the house. All filled out. Hundreds of them. That Chinese puzzle, number thing. You know it?”

“Sudoku,” Nicky said as though he’d known it forever.

“That’s it. There—”

“I think it’s Japanese.”

“Whatever. There isn’t as many as there once was, but I’m still picking them up. I don’t even look any longer. Zip! Right in the trash. Silliness.”

"He played with one of those books all the way back from Kentucky."

"You like as not don't know how he made out at the Derby, do you?"

"No."

"That's the way of him. You'd think in all these years, he'd offer up a tip now and again. Nary a word. And after all I've done for him and his family. I near raised his daughter—especially after his wife went round the bend. She topped herself, you know."

"I hadn't—"

"They said it was a car accident, but everybody knows better. Might not have even been suicide. One gambler or another gets in deep and needs a way out. Cap the ex- and The Book saves a fortune in alimony. Can't prove it by me, but I've always had my doubts. No matter.

"His little girl—cute as a button, that one—Donna, or Li'l Bonnie, LD she was called then—came back here to live after her mother passed. And who do you suppose takes on the task of raising her? For no extra pay? And still, like I say, never a tip for reliable, steady Mrs. Glass. I work for the biggest bookie in New York and I'm tearing up tickets and tossing them in the air at Belmont just like ten thousand other idiots. We're all flunkies. You included. It's not right."

"I wouldn't mind a tip or two myself."

"Fat chance. Frank doesn't even get any. Nor Li'l Bonnie for that matter, though I doubt she'd play. Her and her father don't get on."

"No?"

"Not since she came back the second time."

"A second time?"

"She followed in her father's footsteps when it comes to matrimony. Divorced. She moved back here. Her ex? Nowhere to be found. You're a smart kid. Figure it out."

"Really?"

Mrs. Glass crossed a finger over her heart. "God's honest truth. This can be a dangerous place. If you mess with this house, you better have all your T's crossed and your bags packed for someplace warm."

“And it was the same as when Mrs. Chariot died, except this time I got to take care of LD’s baby—the grandbaby. She’s another cutie pie just like her mom. People around here—the help—we called the baby, ‘D Three,’ but not around LD. She hated that name. She hated being called Li’l Donnie, too. I guess that tells you all you need to know about how good her and her father make out.”

Nicky pushed up from the counter. “That’s too bad. The old man must want to see his grandkid, don’t you think? She’s never been here as long as I have.”

“Oh, he dotes on that one. At least he used to. Apple of his eye. He weaned her at Belmont Park, same as her mom. Sharp as a tack too. Just like her mom. Chariot had her reading by the time she was three, I think. Course, it was a Daily Racing Form and not no nursery rhymes. She must be eight or ten now. Probably reads a DRF faster than you.

“But she don’t come around much. It’s Li’l Donnie who’s the wedge.” Mrs. Glass held her arms out to the house. “He’ll leave her and her baby girl all this and Donna won’t even come to see him. Not even Christmas. Heartbreaking. All this to gain, but me? I can’t get one tip on a race. Isn’t that awful?”

Nicky was growing bored with the gossip. “I better get moving. Pretend I’m doing something.”

“Yep. Like I said, you’re a smart young fella.”

6

At the entrance to the estate, the gate began to move and announced an arrival with its clamor. Big German shepherds strained against their chains on either side of the vintage iron behemoth and barked an echo to the gate's clanking. Nicky was headed out the front door and recognized the driver as his boss's daughter, Donna Chariot. Alexis, Donna's seven-year-old daughter, craned her neck to look around the manor. Nicky had seen Donna a couple times, but the two hadn't met. He thought she was pretty but wondered how she'd look if she smiled. Always in a rush to drop off some papers or get her father's signature then get away, she often never went in the house. Today looked like more of the same.

The car rolled near the stone steps and stopped as the passenger window went down. Donna leaned across the seat holding a large envelope up to Nicky.

"Would you see he gets this?"

"Sure," Nicky said as he begrudgingly moved down the steps.
"Good morning to you, too."

Behind the car, a small truck pulled in the still open gate and likely averted a sharp exchange. The dogs didn't bark at the truck but pointed their sharp ears toward Donna's car when Alexis piled out of the back seat.

"There's Mr. Abreu! I bet he has flowers!"

“Stay away from those dogs!” Donna yelled as she pivoted in her seat and jumped from the car herself in the draft of her daughter’s spirited rush.

Nicky tapped the envelope on his palm and watched until the door of the mansion opened behind him. Frank came out and walked by.

“This ain’t gonna be good.”

“What’s wrong?” Nicky asked as he caught up and walked alongside.

“The Book wants to see LD. A C-note says she won’t even go in the house.”

“No thanks.”

Ahead of the pair, Mr. Abreu had already tossed Alexis up into the back of the truck where she found it full of flowers for spring planting. When Donna got to the truck, she gave the old gangster-cum-gardener a warm hug. It caught Nicky’s eye.

“She’s pretty cozy with the help, don’t you think?”

“You’re ‘the help.’ You should live so long to be cozy with a woman as sharp as her.”

“Hi, Mr. Frank,” Alexis hollered and waved. “Me and Mr. Abreu are going to plant all these flowers. Want to help?”

“Not today, you’re not,” Donna chided as Frank and Nicky walked up. “Hop down. We’ve got to go into the city.”

“I’d rather plant flowers,” Alexis said. “I’d like to be a part-time gardener when I grow up.”

“I know that, kiddo,” Mr. Abreu said. “And I know what you want to be full-time.”

“You do?”

“A jockey would be my bet.”

“You should go right to the pay window,” Alexis smiled. “We have a winner.”

“Excuse me while I cash,” Abreu grinned as he reached for her.

Alexis backed up further into the truck bed. “I’m staying.”

“Not likely,” Frank said as he reached into the flowers and held a thick arm out in front of the little girl. “Grab on before your mother hauls you off to the woodshed.”

“Nope. I’m staying here.”

“Lexy, get out of that truck,” Donna said. “Now.”

Frank turned toward the directive. “Hey, LD. How you doing?”

“Real well except for an obstinate seven-year-old whose convinced she’s smarter than the rest of the world.”

“Probably is,” Abreu said as he took down a flat of flowers.

“Your father wants to see you,” Frank said. “I’ll get smarty britches here while you—”

“Another time. Tell him I had to go. C’mon, Lexy. No fooling around. We’re late for—”

“Grandpa!” Lexy was over the side of the truck into Frank’s arms and down him as if she were dropping from the limbs of a tree.

Donnie didn’t break stride as he scooped up his granddaughter. “How’s it going, kiddo?” he said as he carried her back to the truck and sat her on the tailgate. “That might be the last time I can do that. You getting too big. Are you going to be able to make weight? This isn’t a handicap race, you know? I need you at weight or I’ll have to get another rider.”

“I can make it, Book.”

“Don’t call him that, Lexy,” Donna snapped. “I’ve told you before.”

Without looking at her mother, Alexis continued the game with her grandfather. “Who’s my mount? Don’t set me on a dog. I need to pad my poke going into Belmont. We gotta run in the money.”

Donnie thought a second and looked around before his eyes settled on Frank. “You’re aboard Frank’s-a-Faker. Real strong horse. Don’t let him push you around. Keep a tight rein on him and don’t let him unseat you.” Donnie was staring at his granddaughter, but the look on his face was suddenly vacant. He kept talking as his thoughts waged a battle to catch up to him. “Hold on tight and finish strong. No matter what, you always have to finish the job. Don’t fail and always finish. Stay high and

tight in the irons. Never welch on a bet. Keep your word over everything. Finish and keep your word.”

Frank stepped into the fragmented diatribe. “Riders up!” He sat down hard on the tailgate, bouncing like a temperamental stallion in its starting gate. It was all to buy his boss time to recover.

Lexy had hold of Frank’s jacket on his broad shoulders. Abreu silently cupped his hand for Lexy’s ankle as she knelt into it and then was raised up and straddled Frank’s back.

“Where am I running?” Alexis half whispered to her grandfather.

“C’mom, we have to go,” Donna tried.

“One of my favorite tracks,” her father continued, as his focus began to return.

“Then it’s either Belmont, because it’s our home track, Churchill for the history, or Tampa Downs in February for the weather. Since it’s not February, can’t be Tampa. You just came back from Kentucky, so I’ll bet Belmont Park.”

“We’ve got a winner,” Donnie said. “Pay the girl, Nicky.”

Nicky smiled at the game but didn’t move. Everyone, including Donna, looked at him, but he still didn’t make the right connection. Behind the pretend jockey on the back of the thoroughbred, Frank’s-a-Faker, Abreu made a spectacle of pretending to count out money. Only then did Nicky stuff Donna’s envelope under his arm and dive into his pocket for cash. He held out a five for Alexis.

She looked at the five, then to Nicky. “I went off at four to one. Tell him, Mr. Frank. We went off at four to one.”

“We went off at four to one.”

Nicky fumbled for a ten and Alexis took it with a smile.

“Okay, you ran your scam,” Donna said as she firmly unsaddled her daughter from Frank’s back. “Perfect teachable moment, Dad. Why am I not surprised?”

“Come in the house,” Donnie said, his mind clear again. “I need to talk to you.”

“We have to go.”

“It’s very important.”

Donna was disgusted and it showed, but her father persisted. “Lexy can breeze Frank around the driveway then help Mr. Abreu. Five minutes.”

“Five minutes, Mom,” Lexy begged.

“Fine. Five minutes. Against my better judgement,” Donna said as she pulled her phone from her back pocket. “I have some calls to make. You help Mr. Abreu. Don’t get in the way and don’t get dirty.”

“I won’t.”

Donna punched up a number and shot her father that same disgusted look. “I’ll meet you in the office,” she said as she drifted away on a circuitous route to the house with the phone to her ear.

“I shoulda bet,” Nicky said to no one in particular.

“I better put tea on,” Donnie said, unable to hide his genuine surprise at having won a small battle. He gave Lexy a hug and kissed her on the top of her head. “You work on the posies. Li’l Donnie’s in charge, men.”

“I’m Alexis.”

“I know that,” Donnie smiled. “I’ll try to get your mother to stay for lunch.”

“No peppers, Grandpa. Remember, I don’t like them. You neither.”

“That’s right. Let’s you and me swear off peppers for life. Whaddaya say?”

“Deal!”

“I’m all in. Now, get your chores done.”

Abreu pulled a tray of flowers from the truck as Donnie headed for the mansion. “You want to lay them out?” Abreu asked Alexis as he pointed. “All around this tree here. Hold the plastic. You won’t get dirty. Space ‘em out a little.”

Alexis started to carry the flowers, dropping them sporadically, but also looked across the yard at the big dogs.

Mr. Abreu motioned at Frank and Nicky then whispered, “Give this a listen.” When Alexis came back for another tray, Mr. Abreu was ready. “Hey, kiddo. I’d like to lay them flowers out nice for your grandpa. All around that tree. How many flowers do we need?”

Lexy abandoned the black plastic tray and stared at the big circular flower bed. “Do you know how big the flower bed is?”

“Just what you see there. That big.”

“I mean in feet and inches, silly. Or use metrics. I can convert that.”

“How big around would you say that flower bed is, Frank?”

“I don’t know shi—nothing. I don’t know nothing about flower beds.”

“I’d say about sixty feet around,” Abreu toyed. “Let’s call it fifty-eight feet. Fifty-eight feet, three inches exactly.”

“Okay. And what concentration do you want the flowers?”

“Concentration?”

“Density. How close do you want them?”

“I dunno. A foot or so. They’ll fill in.”

Alexis drew a circle in the air and began silently jotting down an equation in the air.

“Hey, kiddo? Can you do the ciphering out loud? Maybe Mr. Frank can pick up a couple a pointers.”

“Sure. We change the circumference to decimals—that’s 58.25. Pretty simple. Divide that by pi. We’ll use 3.14159, to make it easy.”

“To make it easy,” Abreu smiled and winked at Frank.

“You get 18.5415 plus a little bit. That’s called the diameter, Mr. Frank. Divide that answer by two. What do you get?”

Frank was caught but came close. “Umm...nine and change?”

“Good. 9.2707. That’s the radius. The rest is easy.”

Abreu winked again at Frank and Nicky. “The rest is easy.”

“You multiply ‘pi’ times the radius and multiply the answer by the radius a second time. It’s two hundred and seventy. We need two hundred seventy flowers. Do you have two hundred seventy flowers?”

Mr. Abreu looked at the wealth of plastic containers in the bed of the truck. “Well, I got about twenty-eight flats of eighteen plants each left.”

“Oh, you have lots.”

“How many is lots?”

“Five hundred and four,” Alexis said as though everyone should know.

Abreu looked at Frank and Nicky. “Thanks, kiddo. Five hundred and four. Ain’t that something?”

Frank shook his head. “Amazing.” Next to him, Nicky’s jaw was slack.

“Before the starting gate opens,” Lexy asked them all. “Can I go pet the dogs?”

“Yep, but move slow,” Frank said.

Before she’d gone far, Frank motioned for Nicky to go with her. “Keep her away from the house. It’s apt to get loud. Usually does.”

Nicky jogged to catch up to Lexi and got acquainted in the short walk.

“Make sure they get a good whiff of you so they know who you are,” Frank yelled. “If you get bit, your mother will skin me alive.”

Abreu chuckled. “That’s a damn poor choice of words around a Chariot.”

Frank looked at Mr. Abreu hard. “I wouldn’t play them games with her. Li’l Donnie don’t like it. She’s got a temper.”

“She’s cut from the same cloth as her old man.”

Across the driveway, Donna ended her phone call and headed toward the house.

“She won’t be here ten minutes,” Frank said as he started walking away. “I better get in there in case they start swinging.”

He caught up with Donna on the stone steps and jogged past her to hold the door. “Always good to see you, Donna. Lexy’s getting tall. You making out?”

“All right. You?”

They were walking through the mansion to Donnie’s office.

“Good. Your father treats me well.”

“You’d be the first.”

“Awww, c’mom, LD. Cut him some slack. Things are way different. He’s like a new guy. You should see him.”

“I’d have to be here for that to happen.”

They were in the office. Through the windows Donna could see Nicky and Alexis at the gate petting the big dogs.

"Who's the new guy?" Donna asked as she gave herself permission to notice Nicky was both handsome and athletic before dismissing him as another hired thug.

"Nick Colletta. Local. Real good guy."

"Good guy? Then why's he working for my father?"

Frank ignored her. "He just drives. He don't do anything else in the business."

"My dad will corrupt him before long. Or get him killed. Not killed. Sorry, Frank. He'll 'move away' or just go 'missing' out of the blue."

"Not this one. He goes to school at night."

"Trying to get his GED, no doubt."

"No, he's studying to be a chef. He makes things in the kitchen here that are damn tasty. Nice fella. You two would make a cute couple."

Donna ignored the suggestion but looked at Nicky again through different eyes before turning away from the windows. "Speaking of the kitchen, where's Broom Hilda?"

"If she ain't in the kitchen, grocery shopping, I think. At least that what she says, but I know she goes to the track when the weather's decent. Your father knows it, too."

"I'm surprised he hasn't chopped her thumbs off for stealing from him—even if it's only time."

Frank was at the collection of decanters and glasses along a far wall. "Make you a drink?"

"Yes, please. I'll need it to talk to him. Would you mind going to find him? Let's get this over with."

• • •

When The Book stepped in, he went to the windows. There wasn't the slightest glimmer of a salutation. A hug or peck on the cheek was beyond the pale. Donnie watched Alexis talking with Nicky and laying out plants for Mr. Abreu. The sunlight back lit him to his daughter, but

Donna negated that gunfighter's advantage by moving to the far side of the room, drink in hand.

"What's this all about?" she said as she tapped her tumbler with a manicured nail, looking more through her father than at him. "You said it was important. It better be. I don't enjoy coming to this old hovel."

Donnie glanced up into the deeply coffered ceiling. "She's hardly a hovel, Donna. Do you dislike your own home that much?"

"This isn't my home."

"It was. Could be again—"

"No thank you."

"—if you weren't so stubborn."

"I'm stubborn? Is that what this— Oh, forget it. I should have known this was some ploy." Donna set her drink on the desk and headed for the door. "Tell Frank to call me when it's time to read your will."

"That won't be necessary. You're not mentioned."

She was almost to the door. "That's a good approach. You almost won me over."

"Alexis inherits everything I don't give away. She'll have enough to do anything she puts her hands to, but not so much as to do nothing. Much like what I've given you."

Donna stopped. "Oh, please. Is this where I'm supposed to break down and thank you for everything you've done for me?"

"That's not my intent."

"I could start with...what? Thanking you for driving my mother mad and out of the house? Thank you for her supposed *accident*? Lexy's father—he's still missing. Do you want me to thank you for that too? Or do you want to stand Lexy up in your pillory until you hear it from her own mouth?"

"Where does that vitriol come from?"

"I presume all those things I'm supposed to thank you for. Let me know where Lexy can pick up her check."

"How is she?"

"Fine. She's fine, Dad. I'm leaving now."

“I’d like to see her more often.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? I’m her grandfather.”

“What are you going to say to a seven-year-old? The same stuff you said to me? ‘Primrose Dancer looks like a lock in the third at Saratoga.’ ‘Hey kiddo, what’s the difference between a claiming race and an allowance?’”

Donnie looked away from his daughter. “It wasn’t all like that,” he said.

“It wasn’t? I remember thinking going to Florida for vacation meant Disney World, not Gulfstream and Hialeah. Every other kid went to a *real* park—like Central Park. Dad, we went to *Belmont* Park.”

“They have swings.”

“And booze and cigars and betting slips—”

“You sound like your mother.”

“You ever think she might have been right? Christ, I took a racing program for show and tell.”

“What’s wrong with that? How many other kids had one?”

“You never got it, did you? You used to drag mom around until you drove her crazy and she bolted; then you had me to take.”

“I only wanted you with me. That’s all. The tracks were my job.”

“It’s not a job. It’s a sickness and I don’t want my daughter exposed to it.”

“It’s not like the flu. It’s not something you can catch. Besides, I used to take her. She loves horses and she has a mind for them.”

There was a sudden quiet that sucked the air out of the room. They looked at each other, wondering who would say it and if either one dared.

Donnie walked from behind his desk with his daughter’s half-empty glass. He went to his makeshift bar and poured two fingers of Scotch for himself and held the bottle up as a question for his daughter.

“No,” she said.

His tumbler went with him back to the windows where he continued to watch his granddaughter. He sipped and Donna waited, hoping he'd go in another direction. He didn't.

"How is she at math?"

"You sonofabitch...."

Donna was headed for the door again. This time she wouldn't balk.

"Donna, wait. I'm sick!"

"I'll say."

Donna slammed the door behind her, but Donnie was on it almost as fast. He yanked the door open and caught a glimpse of his daughter flying down the main hall to the big doors.

"Donna, wait! We need to talk."

"No chance."

"Hold up! You're the only one who can help me."

Donna stopped just inside the doors. "No, Dad, I can't. No one can help you. I've seen your act. Remember? I know I sure do. Almost every night I remember."

"I'm sorry, Donnie. You know I am," her father pleaded. "I've apologized a thousand times. I can't take it back. I'd give anything if it didn't happen like that. Anything if you hadn't been there."

"Do you remember it though? Like I do?"

"That's the thing. I don't remember—"

"Let me help you. It paints an unforgettable picture."

"Don't do that, kiddo."

"Why? Why not?"

"Don't do that to yourself."

"I remember it! You should remember it, too! There's a little girl—screaming her brains out. Running. Crying. She runs to her father to protect her. He reaches for her, but his hands are all bloody. Then the blood's on her! That bring it back for you?"

Donna went out the doors. "*Lexy! Get in the car.*"

The youngest Chariot came running and was stuffed in the back seat. The car door slammed as Donna yelled to her father. "Don't call me again. And stay away from Lexy."

• • •

“You okay, boss?”

The query came from Frank and was uncharacteristically tender. The Book was seated at his desk but hadn’t even heard the big man come in the office. Donnie’s head was wound in a tangled knot he couldn’t find the end to. With no end, no beginning, he couldn’t even begin the unraveling process.

“Yes. Fine, Frank. What is it?” came The Book’s socially acceptable, automatic reply.

“Nothing, boss. Just. You know...you could hear LD all over the house.”

“She can be loud.”

“You’re not kidding. Though...I kind of miss her being around, you know? I seen her grow up. Then you don’t see her anymore. Well, you know....”

“I do at that.”

“Yep. You need anything, boss?”

“Thank you, no.”

Frank was in the frame of the heavy office door. “She’s a good kid, Book. She’s been through a lot.”

Donnie didn’t answer, but Frank read in his eyes that he didn’t need reminding. Donna had done a fine job of that in the hallway.

“Okay, boss. You sure you don’t need something?”

“I’m sure. Why do you keep asking me?”

“Because I guess you must have needed something pretty bad to ask Li’l Donnie to chat, and, if you don’t mind my saying so, it’s pretty easy to tell her coming over didn’t work out too well. So, I’m thinking whatever it is you needed, you probably still need. Am I right?”

“Yes. Thank you. You’re a good man. I appreciate your concern. I truly do.”

“I’m more than that. You’re my boss and I’ve tried to never cross over the line, but I’m your friend, too. We seen too much together for

way too long to not be. So, you need some help, I suspect you should ask your friend. Know what I mean?”

“I do. I do and I will. But there’s nothing you can help me with at the moment.”

“Okay. I’ll leave it alone.”

Donnie smiled. “Leave what alone?”

“Nothing, Book. We’re good.”

“Okay. Let’s do that,” Donnie said, but thought otherwise. If something was amiss with the business, Frank would have already told him. The smile faded. Maybe he had already told him and it was gone from his mind. What else had he forgotten? This was bad. Very bad. But what he hadn’t forgotten was Baron’s threat. He also remembered that the Belmont Stakes would go off in a month or so. Donnie had to have a special kind of help and the only one who could give him that was his daughter, but it was clear she hated him and would never budge. He thought for a moment that maybe it was the way she’d been raised.

7

The shadows were stretching long and low as Nicky finished waxing the Bentley. Nearby, Mr. Abreu was picking up empty black plastic flower packs and stacking them in the back of the truck. He'd had a good day despite losing his helper early on. The estate showed his efforts. With the new plants lining the driveway, spring had officially come. The flowers always went in following Derby weekend. The threat of frost was past and the bright colors either joined in the celebration of a successful day at the races or provided a poultice to ease the sting.

Nicky's soap and water melting away on the warm blacktop was another sure sign that spring had reached New York. Sprucing up a car that didn't need it made the pretend scrubbing and buffing easy and served a valuable purpose. He had parked the big car out front in hopes that Mr. Chariot would see him working from his office windows. Nicky couldn't see through the heavily tinted, thick Lexan, but he knew the boss was there. He was always there.

"Nicky's going to wash the paint off that car," Donnie said as he held his hands behind his back and looked out the windows as Nicky predicted.

Frank set his iPad to the side. "Maybe it was dirty. It's good he's staying busy."

"He might scrub the chrome off the bumper," Donnie offered as he stood staring.

Frank joined him. "Does that car even have bumpers?"

"Plastic ones, I suppose."

They watched Nicky picking up the tools of his impromptu trade and Abreu blowing any remnants of dirt off the driveway.

"Things are pretty quiet," Frank said, his pace revealing a measure of disappointment. "You want me to let Nicky go?"

"Probably should. Go ahead."

"Is there anything I can have him do for you first?"

A sleek Corvette announced its arrival at the gate with a deep throated roar that set off the guard dogs. Nicky walked over, touched a button near the thick columns, and the gate, clanking an argument, gave way to the visitor. The 'Vette revved again, jumped through the still moving gate, and wheeled toward the house.

"Who's that?" Donnie asked the world outside his windows as much as Frank, who was still watching with his boss.

"DeSeti's kid. Junior. That's his new toy. He had it here last week. You saw it."

"What's Julian doing here?"

"It's his boy. He's dropping off the pickups for the week. Same as always."

The Corvette rolled its fat Michelin's off the driveway over Abreu's new plantings as it came to a stop.

"You see that, Frank?"

"I'll take care of it."

Frank was out of the office like a shot. He came out the front door to meet Junior DeSeti on the steps.

"Get that car off them flowers, DeSeti. Mr. Chariot don't like people disrespecting his property."

Junior tossed a laundry bag at Frank's feet. "There's three hundred large in there. He can buy new ones."

"That's not how he works."

Nicky had wandered over and was looking at the flashy car. Mr. Abreu appeared to be ignoring the building fracas.

"You tell him that's how I work," DeSeti cracked as he headed back to his car.

"You can tell me yourself, Mr. DeSeti," Donnie said as he came through his doorway onto the portico. "It seems you've ventured off the driveway onto my flowers. That's not a pleasant thing to do."

DeSeti snatched a wad of cash from his pocket and ripped a pair of twenties off up into the air. "Here. For the flowers."

"That's not necessary," Donnie said as he descended the stone steps and picked up a twenty. Nicky left the car and grabbed the second bill for his boss. "Thank you, Nicky. An apology would suffice. I'm sure it was a simple lapse in judgement."

Junior DeSeti came back for his money, snatched it from Donnie's hand, but stayed by his host. "That's right. I didn't see them."

"See that, Frank. Just a—"

"But maybe you should keep this money," Junior said. "I hear you had a bad day at Churchill Downs. Real bad. What's in that bag won't touch it." Junior held the twenties out between his fingers. "You need this worse than me."

"You're outa line, kid," Frank threatened as he came down the steps. "Shove off."

Donnie stopped Frank with a touch on his sleeve. "How about you, Mr. DeSeti? Did you do well in Lexington?"

"Better than you," DeSeti laughed.

"Better than me.... Blind courage. So you like to gamble. I'm not much for it myself, but I'd play along with you if you'd like." The Book had walked back up the stairs and turned, the laundry bag at his feet. He pointed across the courtyard to a pair of barn swallows sitting quietly courting on a wire. "See those two birds, Mr. DeSeti? Your car against the money in this bag. Which one leaves first? All you have to do is pick which one leaves first. Do you have the courage for that action, Mr. DeSeti?"

Everyone searched for the birds. Junior found them and looked at Donnie while everyone else stared at him. "Yeah, right."

“Which one leaves first? This bag. Your car. I calculate that’s four, five to one in your favor.”

“You sure about that?” Junior laughed. “Remember, you’re not used to betting your own money. I hear you only lose other people’s money. Or do you plan on not paying anyway? This or the Vegas money either?”

“Are you saying I wouldn’t pay?”

Nicky answered for DeSeti. “Mr. Chariot’s never welched. Everybody knows that. You want his action? Yes or no? If you’re in, toss your keys to Frank. If you’re a stone-cold wasted bitch, get your punk ass out of here before I turn the dogs on you.”

“You know who you’re talking to?”

“Do you know who *you’re* talking to? Mr. Chariot was making his bones before—”

“Thank you, Nicky,” Donnie said as he kicked the bag down the steps to Frank. “There’s my ante. I’m in. Better hurry, little girl. Two hundred fifty-six thousand, four hundred eighty dollars might take flight any moment.”

All eyes were back on Junior. Even Mr. Abreu was drawn across the drive, but he was watching the birds.

“So?” Frank asked. “Play or go home.”

Junior pulled a keyless fob from his pocket and tossed it at Frank, but looked at Donnie. “I’ll take your money, Book. One on the right leaves first. If you don’t pay, they’ll know in Vegas before I’m through the gate.”

Every eye was on the birds.

Other birds chirped and sang around the manor, but the swallows were quiet and still. Soon they’d dart off to a mud nest they’d built somewhere. Perhaps they’d make the short trip to Belmont Park and snatch the flies that were pestering thoroughbreds as they cantered for exercise riders.

Junior DeSeti was anxious. He looked from the birds to Donnie and back again.

Donnie Chariot watched Junior, taking no apparent notice of the birds that held so much money in the balance.

Junior DeSeti tried to joke. “Are they even alive?”

“Hope you like walking,” Nicky said, trying to encourage and convince himself.

The bird on the right flapped its wings as though it had lost its balance but didn’t let go of the wire.

“Ah! Ah! There he goes! Get ready, Chariot,” Junior began.

Then the swallow on the left launched itself. It was a dark feathered blot streaking head high across the driveway in a dive-bombing attack on some unseen bug. Then the bird disappeared around the big stone house and left its partner alone.

Donnie Chariot smiled. “Thank you, Mr. DeSeti.”

Any thoughts of easy money vanished from Junior’s face. “Hold up, Book. That was stupid. It’s a couple of birds. That’s not a bet.”

“Was that a bet, gentlemen?”

“It was a bet,” Frank answered as he walked up the steps and handed the key fob to his boss.

Nicky grinned. “Try Uber.”

“This is bullshit! I wouldn’t have taken your money over a bird!”

“Mr. Abreu?” Chariot asked with a gentleness in his voice as he looked over the fob. “Would you like a new car? This one seems to have run over your flowers.”

“No. Thank you, Book. I like the truck you got me.”

“I’ll take it, boss,” Nicky volunteered.

“You touch this car,” Junior spit, “and you’ll never touch another.”

Nicky was in his face. “Bring it.”

“Everyone relax. Nicky? That means you,” Donnie more than suggested. “Frank? Would you give young Mr. DeSeti a ride home?”

“Glad to.”

Donnie whispered to Frank as he handed the fob back. “Nicky stays on. Find something for him to do.”

In the driveway, Junior DeSeti was fuming. “Are you kidding me?”

"Not at all. Frank would be happy to accommodate." Donnie pointed to the bag at the base of the steps. "Nicky, bring the bag please. Thank you for dropping that off, Mr. DeSeti. Oh, and sign the title over if you would. You can drop it in the mail if that's easier for you. Please extend my best to your father."

The Book had turned his back and was headed in the mansion. Nicky bounced up the steps, snatching the bag of cash as he did. He went up the last step backward and flipped Junior DeSeti the finger.

"That'll do, Nicky," Donnie called from beyond the heavy wooden doors.

Nicky smiled at Junior, grabbed his crotch, mouthed, "Fuck you," and disappeared inside with the bag.

"You ready, Junior?" Frank asked as he smiled at Mr. Abreu and stepped around the car. "I never drove one of these things. I hope I don't wreck Mr. Chariot's new car."

Junior opened the passenger door and caught a smile on Mr. Abreu's face. "You think this is funny, old man?" DeSeti stomped and kicked several flowers underfoot and flipped the gardener off before becoming the passenger in what had been his own car.

Mr. Abreu's smile vanished as he looked at the disheveled flowers, then watched as the fancy car—in lurches, fits, and starts—inched out the gate.

It was after dark when Donnie heard the big gate open. He glanced out an upstairs window to see the truck Mr. Abreu had been using earlier pull in. Frank and Nicky got out and drifted away into the shadows of the estate.