

MRS.
PLANSKY'S
REVENGE

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ONE

“Hello, it is I, your grandson, insert name here,” said Dinu.
“Correct,” said Professor Bogdan, language teacher at Liceu Teoretic. He leaned back in his chair and lit up a Chesterfield. “But too correct, you know?”

Too correct? Dinu did not know. In addition, he was asthmatic and the mere presence of a cigarette aroused a twitchy feeling in his lungs. No smoking in school, of course, but these private lessons, paid for by Uncle Dragomir, weren’t about school.

Professor Bogdan blew out a thin, dense stream of smoke, one little streamlet branching off and heading in Dinu’s direction. “There is English, Dinu, and then there is English as she is spoken.” He smiled an encouraging smile. His teeth were yellow, shading into brown at the gumline.

“English is she?” Dinu said.

“For God’s sake, it’s a joke,” said Professor Bogdan. “Is there gender in English?”

“I don’t think such.”

“So. You don’t think so. Come, Dinu. You’ve studied three years of English. Loosen up.”

“Loosen up?”

“That’s how the young in America talk. Loosen up, chill out, later.” He tapped a cylinder of ash into a paper cup on his desk. “Which is in fact what you need to know if I’m not mistaken, the argot of youth.” He glanced at Dinu. Their eyes met. Professor

Bogdan looked away. “My point,” he went on, “is that no American says ‘it is I.’ They say ‘it’s me.’ The grammar is wrong but that’s how they say it. You must learn the right wrong grammar. That’s the secret of sounding American.”

“How will I learn?”

“There are ways. For one you could go to YouTube and type in ‘Country Music.’ Now begin again.”

“Hello, it’s me, your grandson, insert name here,” Dinu said.

“Much better,” said Professor Bogdan. “You might even say, ‘Yo, it’s me.’”

“Yo?”

“On my last trip I heard a lot of yo. Even my brother says it.”

“Your brother in New Hampshire?”

“No *P* sound. And ‘sher,’ not ‘shire.’ But yes, my brother.”

“The brother who is owning a business?”

“Who owns a business. Bogdan Plumbing and Heating.” Professor Bogdan opened a drawer, took out a T-shirt, and tossed it to Dinu.

Dinu shook it out, held it up, took a look. On the front was a cartoon-type picture of a skier with tiny icicles in his bushy black mustache, brandishing a toilet plunger over his head. On the back it said: BOGDAN PLUMBING AND HEATING, NUMBER 1 IN THE GRANITE STATE.

Dinu made a motion to hand it back.

“Keep it,” said Professor Bogdan.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. New Hampshire is the Granite State. All the states have nicknames.”

“What is nicknames?”

“Like pet names. For example, what does your mother call you?”

“Dinu.”

Professor Bogdan blinked a couple of times. Like the skier, he had a bushy mustache, except his was mostly white. “Texas is the

Lone Star State, Florida is the Sunshine State, Georgia is the Peach State.”

“Georgia?”

“They have a Georgia of their own. They have everything, Dinu, although . . .” He leaned across the desk and pointed at Dinu with his nicotine-stained finger. “Although most of them don’t realize it and complain all the time just like us.”

“Does your brother complain?” Dinu said.

Professor Bogdan’s eyebrows, not quite as bushy as his mustache, rose in surprise. “No, Dinu. He does not complain. My brother grew up here. But his children—do you know what they drive? Teslas! Teslas almost fully paid off! But they complain.”

Those state nicknames sounded great to Dinu, even magical in the case of the lone star. He knew one thing for sure: if he ever got to America, Tesla or no Tesla, he would never complain. Just to get out of the flat where he lived with his mother, much better than the one-room walk-up they’d occupied before Uncle Dragomir started helping out, but still a flat too cold in winter, too hot in summer, with strange smells coming up from the sink drain and—

The door opened and Uncle Dragomir, not the knocking type, walked in. Professor Bogdan’s office got smaller right away. Bogdan half rose from his chair.

“How’s he doing?” Uncle Dragomir said in their native tongue, indicating Dinu with a little chin motion. He had a large, square chin, a nose that matched, large square hands, and a large square body, everything about him large and square, other than his eyes. His eyes were small, round, glinting.

“Oh, fine,” said Professor Bogdan. “Coming along nicely. Good. Very well.”

“In time,” said Uncle Dragomir.

“In time?”

“How much longer. Days? Weeks? Months?”

Professor Bogdan turned to Dinu and switched to English. “Weeks we can do, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” Dinu said.

Professor Bogdan turned to Uncle Dragomir, switched back to their language, and smiling as brightly as he could with teeth like his, said, “Weeks, Dragomir.”

Uncle Dragomir fastened his glinting gaze on Professor Bogdan. “In my career I’ve dealt with types who like to stretch out the job. I know you’re not like them.”

Professor Bogdan put his hand to his chest. “The furthest thing from it. Not many weeks, Dragomir, not many at all.”

“*Hmmf*,” said Uncle Dragomir. He took out his money roll, separated some bills without counting, leaned across the desk, and stuffed them in the chest pocket of Professor Bogdan’s shirt. Then he turned, possibly on his way out, but that was when he noticed the T-shirt, lying in Dinu’s lap. “What’s that?”

Professor Bogdan explained—his brother, the Granite State, plumbing and heating.

“Let’s see it on,” said Uncle Dragomir.

“It’s my size,” Dinu said.

“Let’s see.”

Dinu considered putting on the T-shirt over his satin-lined leather jacket. Not real satin or leather although very close. But the T-shirt would probably not fit over the jacket. It was a stupid idea. The problem was that he wore nothing under the jacket, all his shirts dirty, the washer broken and his mother once again dealing with the swollen hands issue. He took off the jacket.

Professor Bogdan’s gaze went right to the big bruise over his ribs on the right side, not a fresh bruise—purple and yellow now, kind of like summer sunsets if the wind was coming out of the mountains and blowing the pollution away—but impossible to miss. Uncle Dragomir didn’t give it the slightest glance. Instead he helped himself to a Chesterfield from Professor Bogdan’s pack, lying on the desk.

Dinu put on the T-shirt.

“The plunger is funny,” said Uncle Dragomir, lighting up.

Desfundator was their word for plunger. *Plunger* was better. The smoke from Uncle Dragomir's cigarette reached him. He began to cough. That made his chest hurt, under the bruise.

TWO



Something amazing happened on Court #2 of the New Sunshine Golf and Tennis Club just before lunchtime on the day after New Year's, although it was amazing to only one person, namely Loretta Plansky, a seventy-one-year-old widow of solid build and the only female player in the whole club with a one-handed backhand. She and her partner, a new member Mrs. Plansky had met just before stepping on the court that morning and whose name she had failed to retain even though she'd repeated it several times to herself as they shook hands, were playing in the weekly match between the New Sunshiners and the team from Old Sunshine Country Club, the hoity-toitier of the two, dating all the way back to 1989. Mrs. Plansky had been something of a tomboy as a kid, actually playing Little League baseball and Peewee hockey on boys' teams, but she hadn't taken up tennis until she'd married Norm, so although her strokes were effective they weren't much to look at. Now, up 5-6 in a third set tiebreak, Mrs. Plansky and her partner receiving, the better of the opponents, a tall, blond woman perhaps fifteen years younger than the others, lofted a pretty lob over Mrs. Plansky, a lob with a touch of topspin that was going to land inside the baseline for a clean winner. Mrs. Plansky wheeled around, chased after the ball, and with her back half-turned to the net flicked a backhand down the unguarded alley. Game, set, match. A nice shot, mostly luck, and not the amazing part. The amazing part was that Mrs. Plansky had wheeled around without giving it the slightest thought. She'd simply

made a quick thoughtless instinctive move—quick for her, at least—for the first time since her hip replacement, nine months before. Mrs. Plansky wanted badly to tell Norm all about it. He'd say something about how she'd found the fountain of youth, and she'd say let's call it a trickle, and he'd laugh and give her a quick kiss. She could just about feel it now, on her cheek.

"What a get!" said her partner, patting Mrs. Plansky's shoulder.

The partner's name came to her at last, literally late in the game. That bit of mental fun liberated a little burst of happiness inside her. Those little bursts, based on tiny private nothings, had been a feature of her life since childhood. Mrs. Plansky was well aware that she was one lucky woman. "Thanks, Melanie," she said.

They hustled up to the net, touched rackets, then collected their tennis bags and headed to the clubhouse patio for lunch. Mrs. Plansky's phone beeped just as she was pulling out her chair. She dug it out of her bag, checked the number, and stepped away from the table, off the patio, and onto the edge of the putting green.

"Nina?" she said.

"Hi, Mom," said Nina. "How're things? Wait, I'll answer—no complaints, right?"

Mrs. Plansky laughed. "Maybe I should be less predictable."

"Whoa! An out-there version of Loretta Plansky! You'd rule the world."

"Then forget it for sure," said Mrs. Plansky. "How are the kids?"

"Great," Nina said. "Emma's still on winter break—right now she's out in Scottsdale with Zach and Anya." Emma, a junior at UC Santa Barbara, being Nina's daughter from her first marriage, to Zach, and Anya being Zach's second wife, whom Mrs. Plansky had met just once, at Norm's funeral, and very briefly. But in that brief time, she'd said something quite touching. What was it?

"Mom?" said Nina. "You still there?"

"Yes."

"Thought I'd lost you for a second."

"Must . . . must be a bad connection. I'm at the club. The service is

iffy.” Mrs. Plansky moved to a different spot on the putting green, even though she knew there was nothing wrong with . . . well, never mind.

“The tennis club?” Nina said. “How are you hitting ’em?”

“No one would pay to watch,” said Mrs. Plansky. “And Will?”

“Will?”

“Yes. How is he?”

Will being Nina’s other child, fathered by Ted, Nina’s second husband. There’d been a third husband—called Teddy, kind of confusing—now also by the wayside, which was how Mrs. Plansky pictured all Nina’s husbands, Zach, Ted, Teddy, left behind by a fast and shiny car, the hair of the three men—none bald, all in fact with full heads of hair—blowing in Nina’s backdraft. Was that—a full head of hair—a criterion of hers when it came to husbands? Were there in fact any other criteria? Why had she never considered this question before? And now came one of those many moments when she wished that Norm was around. Yes, he’d say, it’s her only criterion. Or, no, there’s one other, and he’d name something that was funny, amazing, and true, something she’d never have imagined. And then: “Now can I go back to being dead?”

Whoa. Mrs. Plansky heard Norm’s voice, not in her head—although of course it was—but somehow outside, like he’d come down from heaven—in which Mrs. Plansky did not believe—and onto the putting green at the New Sunshine Golf and Tennis Club. She actually cast a furtive glance around. An errant ball came bouncing over from the ninth fairway.

“Fine as far as I know,” said Nina.

“Sorry, what?” Mrs. Plansky, moving away from the still-rolling ball, suddenly felt a little faint.

Nina raised her voice as though speaking to someone hard of hearing, which Mrs. Plansky was not. All systems go, said Dr. Ming at her annual physical. Just keep doing what you’re doing.

“Will,” Nina went on. “He’s fine, far as I know.”

Mrs. Plansky gave her head a tiny shake, putting everything right inside. “Is he back in school?”

Over at the table, Melanie caught her eye. The waiter was pouring wine and Melanie pointed to the empty glass at Mrs. Plansky's place, seeing if she wanted some. Mrs. Plansky didn't drink wine at lunch. She nodded yes.

"Not exactly," said Nina. "Will's missed so much time already and it's late in the year. He's planning on staying in Crested Butte."

"Teaching skiing."

"There's been a glitch with that. It looks like he'll be working the lifts."

Working the lifts? She and Norm had done some skiing in Vermont in the early days of Plansky and Company, the southernmost ski hills in the state close enough to their home in Rhode Island for Sunday visits, full weekends impossible because of work. The homeward drive at twilight with the kids, Nina and Jack in the back, Norm in the passenger seat, Mrs. Plansky at the wheel—they did it the other way around on the trip up, Norm's night vision never very good—and everyone exhilarated, exhausted, relaxed to the core: that was Plansky family life at its best. But working the lifts was all about getting through to your day off and hoping it would be powdery, in other words a spinning your wheels type of job, which ski instructor was not. When had she last spoken to him? Probably on his birthday, back in July, although she had sent him a check for Christmas. But to what address? She made a mental note to check on that, and a second mental note to call him soon. The fact that he hadn't thanked her yet for the check didn't mean he hadn't gotten it. For whatever reason, he'd missed out on a thing or two in his upbringing. Mrs. Plansky didn't get judgmental about that sort of thing. Will and a buddy had stayed for a night the week after her hip replacement, on their way to spring vacation at the buddy's parents' house in Lauderdale. She hadn't been able to find her bottle of OxyContin—always at the far right of the top medicine cabinet shelf—after they left. Mrs. Plansky was inclined to be more judgmental about things like that.

"But the reason I called, Mom, is I've got exciting news," Nina said.

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“Let’s hear it!” What a terrible person she was, making her voice so bright and cheery when she was steeling herself inside. But she knew Nina.

“I’ve met someone fabulous,” Nina said. “His name’s Matty but I call him Matthew. It’s more serious.” Mrs. Plansky felt the fast and shiny car speeding up. “You’re going to love him, Mom. Guess how tall he is?”

Mrs. Plansky glanced around, a feeble physical facsimile of getting her mental bearings. What she saw was the pretty side of Florida on a bright and sunny winter day. How lucky to be able to afford retirement in a place like this, and while she’d have preferred Arizona she’d kept that fact to herself, mostly on account of the look on Norm’s face when the real estate agent drove them up to the big but not too big house at 3 Pelican Way, the style New England as envisioned by someone who’d never been there, and the inland waterway right out the back door. Norm had been thrilled, and the fact that he totally missed the faux part—in fact was incapable of catching it even if prompted—only made her adore him all the more.

“Tallish, would be my guess,” said Mrs. Plansky. Norm had been five foot seven on their wedding day, losing an inch or two over the course of forty years. And his body had gone through many other changes as well. But somehow he’d been physical perfection the whole time. At least until those last months. She couldn’t fool herself about that.

“Six foot four, Mom!” Nina said. “And three-quarters.”

“Oh, my,” said Mrs. Plansky. “Tell me a little more about him.”

Nina laughed. Right from childhood she’d had this rippling musical laugh—like a song, as Norm had told her, perhaps too often in retrospect, but only due to the love in his heart. Was there something studied now about that musicality? Maybe she was imagining it. Over at the table the waiter seemed to have finished taking the orders and was looking her way.

“Salad,” mouthed Mrs. Plansky. The waiter gave her a thumbs-up.

"I don't even know where to start," Nina was saying. "But guess what? You can see for yourself tomorrow."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Plansky.

"We're flying down for a quick weekend with some friends in Boca and thought we'd stop by on the way tomorrow night and take you out to dinner."

"Wonderful," said Mrs. Plansky. "But I'll make dinner. You can see the new place."

"Are you all settled in?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then that'll be great. Bye, Mom. Love you."

"Love you," said Mrs. Plansky, but Nina had already hung up. She walked over to the patio, sat at the table, took a sip of her wine, and then another. Surprisingly soon her glass was empty. The waiter appeared with the bottle. "No, thank you," said Mrs. Plansky, covering the glass with her hand to make sure.

There were two routes home from the tennis club, home meaning Mrs. Plansky's new residence, a condo on Little Pine Lake. One, the shorter, cut straight through the woods to the lake. The longer route followed the inland waterway for two miles, therefore passing right by 3 Pelican Way. The last time Mrs. Plansky had taken that route was the day before she moved out. Now, after lunch on the club patio, her mind on other things, she found herself taking it again, although the realization didn't strike her until Norm's flamboyant tree came into view. He'd decided that if they were going to live out their days in Florida they were going to do it right, and doing it right meant a flamboyant tree in the front yard, and not just a flamboyant tree but the mother of all flamboyant trees, which he would plant from a cutting—definitely not a seedling!—and nurture like no flamboyant tree had ever been nurtured. No nursery in the entire state had been up to the task when it came to supplying a

cutting of the quality he'd demanded, the cutting eventually coming from Madagascar, ancestral home of flamboyant trees. The soil in the front yard had also proved less than first rate—not loamy enough and lacking in organic matter—so Norm had replaced most of it and added organic matter he'd come across at a woodlot deep in a Georgia forest, organic matter that had led to trouble with the HOA. But the result—Big Mama—oh, the result: a flamboyant that not only bloomed in May, like everyone else's flamboyant, but also at Christmas, most of the flowers the brightest red on earth, but also some bursts of the much rarer yellow flowers, both on the same tree! Norm invited a Rollins biology prof to take a look. "Unheard of," he'd said. "This is publishable."

They'd had sex twice that night, a double dip, as Mrs. Plansky had called it—she could be a bit bawdy when it was just the two of them—a feat, if it could be so called, that hadn't happened in at least twenty years. For some time after that she would say "Any new arboreal ideas?" at unexpected moments.

Retiring right also meant getting a metal detector and taking it for long beach walks, Norm wearing headphones and sweeping the detector back and forth with an intent look on his face and Mrs. Plansky taking a peek or two at that intent look. She could see little kid Norm at those moments and in an irrational way enjoy the false feeling of having known him all her life. They'd actually met for the first time on graduation day at college. The point about the metal detector was that after a big storm Norm had found an old Spanish silver coin with it, a four reales piece with a shield on one side and two strange pillars in the other. Mrs. Plansky bought a plaque for displaying the coin in the front hall.

"Which side out?" she asked.

"The pillars, of course."

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She slowed the car. Big Mama was in her glory—golden suns shining in a red fire. "When you sell the house," Norm said, pausing to

get more air inside him from the nasal tube, “you could always take a cutting.”

“Why would I sell the house?”

Pause. Pause. “You know.”

“I do not.”

Norm reached his hand across the bedcover. He lay on the special invalid bed they'd ended up renting. “Normally I always say buy,” Norm had said, “but maybe not in this case.” And the hand—so withered and also purplish from getting stuck with IV needles so often. She'd laid her own—so indecently healthy in contrast—on top.

Pause. Pause. “For moving on.”

An overwhelming urge to weep, to cry, to sob, rose up in her. Mrs. Plansky mastered it. “I'm not moving on.”

Norm gazed at her, his eyes now deep in his skull and getting deeper, but she could still see him way down in there, her Norm. He began to sing “My Funny Valentine.” Norm was a terrible singer—although he did a lot of singing during the course of an average day—scratchy, out of tune, unstable in pitch—but this one time, two days from death, as it turned out, and until he'd run out of oxygen, he'd sung like an angel, or, to be more specific, Tony Bennett.

Now, beyond Big Mama, a gardener was at work, planting something in the yard. At first she couldn't make out what it was, and then there seemed to be some mental refusal to accept the optical fact. But the something being planted was one of those plastic jockeys, outfitted in painted racing silks. Mrs. Plansky moved on.



THREE



Norm's smell lingered in corners here and there at 3 Pelican Way for a few months after he died. Not the smells of death and dying—those vanished almost at once—but the smell of healthy, living Norm, a smell she loved. Then one morning it, too, was gone. Three Pelican Way was on the market by lunchtime. Remaining there would have meant living life half dead. Pick one or the other, Norm would have said.

The condos at Little Pine Lake were very nice. For one thing they stood at the top of a rise, rises being hard to come by in the county. Then there was the lake itself, almost a perfect circle, and the water wonderfully refreshing, fed by a spring down below. There were only a dozen condos, all at ground level, backing onto the water and taking advantage of the slope. Mrs. Plansky had number twelve, one of the end units, with a private little patio where she liked to sit and watch the sunsets seeming to set the lake on fire. It wasn't cheap, but she'd paid cash and still had almost \$400,000 left over from the sale of 3 Pelican Way.

Mrs. Plansky didn't have to worry about money but she hadn't grown up rich so at least she knew what worrying about money was like. She and Norm had started with nothing—actually less than nothing if you factor in the \$10,000 loan from her dad at prime plus four and a half, paid back the very first day they could afford it. The ten thousand and all they could save from their paychecks—Norm working for a small engineering firm in Providence at the time, and

Mrs. Plansky a paralegal at a small law firm in Newport—was sunk into the effort to bring Norm's idea to life.

Actually Mrs. Plansky's idea, but it was such a random out of the blue sort of thought, more or less just passing through her, that she never could see taking credit for it, although Norm disagreed strongly and made sure that everyone knew. He himself had had several ideas before hers came along, none of them viable for one reason or another, from the realization that there wouldn't be sufficient demand to the deflating discovery that the invention he'd had in mind was already out there and doing killer business. Then, in the tent on what turned out to be a rainy weekend camping trip in the Berkshires, Mrs. Plansky—pregnant with Nina, and Jack standing but not quite walking—had been slicing a loaf of rye bread for sandwiches, when she'd suddenly said, "Wouldn't it be nice if the knife could toast the bread while you sliced?"

Norm, still dozing in the two-person sleeping bag, sat right up. "What did you say?"

Mrs. Plansky said it again.

Three years later, they sold their first Plansky Toaster Knife, actually fifty of them, to a start-up kitchen store in Oslo. The name of the product was also Mrs. Plansky's idea—Norm had pushed for Lasers by Loretta—as was the choice of the first client. Mrs. Plansky had met the owners at a trade show in Atlanta, a young, hip, sophisticated couple, very unlike her and Norm, except for the young part, and decided they were a good bet. Their next order, for five thousand knives, came from a chain based in Barcelona, after the CEO stopped by the Oslo kitchen store. And after that, the deluge.

"We're going to make billions!" Norm had said.

"That would be a headache," said Mrs. Plansky.

"How about hundreds of millions?"

"The feeling you get when you know a headache is on the way."

In the end—Norm running manufacturing and distribution, Mrs. Plansky sales and marketing—they'd made a nice amount of millions, some—but not too much to be harmful, they hoped—

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given to Jack and Nina along the way, and maybe half, almost five million, to various charities when they sold the company and moved down to Florida, envisioning a nice and long last act. Well. When it turned out to be so short, a line of Shakespeare's had kept popping up uninvited in her mind over and over: *As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport*. Mrs. Plansky hated that line and didn't buy it for one second. Finally it went silent, or went away, possibly to some other grieving mind. She didn't like that thought, either.

Mrs. Plansky, unlocking the door to her condo from an app on her phone—she'd refused to grow fossilized regarding things like that—at least not completely, an inventor's wife, after all—went inside. Yesterday had been the day Maria came to clean so everything was spotless, although it was always spotless, never more so than right before Maria's arrival. But now Mrs. Plansky didn't remember whether Nina had said she was spending the night with . . . with whoever it was, the new paramour. Just in case, she went upstairs to the guest bedroom in the loft and made the bed. Then she checked the guest bathroom, made a quick inspection, switched out the flamingo towels—bought on a post-Christmas sale at All Things Bathroom—for plain white. After that, she brewed herself tea in the kitchen and drank it at the island. There were shortbread cookies in the pantry and she wanted one, but hadn't she just had lunch? Loretta! Get a grip! She finished her tea, washed the cup, put it in the rack, gazed out the window at the lake.

Her phone pinged, meaning a text had come in. Mrs. Plansky found she was standing in the pantry for some reason. She went back to the island, checked her phone. A message from Jack: **You there?**

Mrs. Plansky's index finger hovered over the screen. Yes, Jack, I'm here. Good to hear from you. Too wordy? How about, Hi, Jack, present and accounted for. Good grief. Perhaps a simple Yes. Probably the right call, but wasn't it a bit uncivilized? Was there something uncivilized about machines which forced you yourself into being uncivilized if you wanted them to play nice? Oh, how she wished

she could be pouring Norm a small glass of that bourbon he liked—there was still some left—and hearing what he'd say about that, or any other—

The phone—such a busy little device and only half smart, the bad half of smartness—rang, snapping her out of her little reverie or whatever it was. On the screen scrolled the name of the caller: Arcadia Gardens.

“Hello,” she said. “Loretta Plansky speaking.”

“Hi, Loretta. It's Jeanine. Any way you can swing by here, maybe settle things down?”

“What's the problem?”

“Something about football.”

The plaque with the four reales piece now hung in the front hall of the condo. Back at 3 Pelican Way, headed out for Norm's first brain scan, Mrs. Plansky had glanced back and spotted him touching the coin for luck. She hadn't let on. Now, on her way out the condo door, Mrs. Plansky touched the old Spanish coin. Her hand pretty much did it on its own.

Arcadia Gardens, a forty-five minute drive south of Little Pine Lake, had beautiful landscaping—weedless flower beds lined with conch shells, big shady trees, mostly cabbage palm but also some ancient bald cypress—and looked like a well-preserved hotel from prewar Florida days, even though it was not yet ten years old. Jeanine, a trim woman of forty or so wearing a tan business suit, was waiting in the lobby.

“Thanks for coming,” she said.

“Of course.” They stepped into an elevator and rode to the top floor. “A football problem?” Mrs. Plansky said.

“There was an argument about a penalty call,” Jeanine said. “Offensive pass interference, maybe? Is that even a thing?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Plansky said. Jack had played in high school. She knew football.

They walked down the hall on the top floor, a sunny hall with nicely framed prints of clipper ships on the walls. The last door was closed.

“He’s got something wedged against the doorknob,” Jeanine said. “We can’t get in.”

Mrs. Plansky knocked lightly. “Dad?”

Silence from the other side of the door, and then: “Go away. And I’m not paying a goddamn cent. Don’t you, neither.” Then came more silence, followed by “Disloyal bitch,” spoken in the low, confidential tone some people reserve for talking to themselves.

Mrs. Plansky turned to Jeanine. “Paying for what?”

“The TV in the lounge,” Jeanine said, “but I don’t know where he got the idea there’d be a charge. No one would have told him that. It’s covered by our insurance.”

“He broke the TV?”

Jeanine nodded. “With a beer bottle.”

“He threw it that hard?”

Jeanine shook her head. “He wheeled right up to the screen and used the bottle like a club. Have you met Mr. Blucher?”

“I don’t think so.”

“He’s new. That’s who the argument was with. Naturally a staff member was on scene, serving refreshments and such, but it all happened very quick.”

“Dad’s ninety-eight. How could it have been quick?”

“I should have said surprisingly quick. Unfortunately Mr. Blucher was struck by a shard of glass and needed a stitch or two.”

“My God. Struck where?”

“The arm. We dodged one there.”

Mrs. Plansky turned to the door and knocked harder this time. “Dad. Open up.”

His voice came from closer, like he was right on the other side. “Why should I?”

“Dad! What kind of question is that?”

More silence. And finally: “A head-scratcher.”

Mrs. Plansky and Jeanine exchanged a look. Jeanine called through the door. "Your daughter drove all this way to see you, Mr. Banning. Please open the door."

"It's only thirty-two miles," her dad said. "And I'm not moving. This is my room and that's final. Finito. End of story. Full stop."

Mrs. Plansky plucked Jeanine's sleeve, drew her a step or two down the hall. "What's he talking about?"

"Well," said Jeanine, "it's not just this incident but there have been a few other things, too. We're recommending a move down to the third floor. The room will be just as nice but we can give him more assistance there."

"You think he needs more assistance?"

"Not just me, the whole team," Jeanine said. "Including Dr. Albert."

"If more assistance is necessary, why can't he stay here and have it?"

"Procedure. The third floor is where we provide the next level of assistance." Jeanine touched Mrs. Plansky's hand. "Our concern is self-harm."

"Self-harm?"

"Not intentional. But with the temperamental side of him maybe getting the upper hand a little more often these days . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Mrs. Plansky went back to the door, and this time didn't knock. "Why are you making this so hard?"

"This is all about the shekels, that's why."

"What are you talking about?"

"The so-called move. The third floor's another ten grand a month." Mrs. Plansky could feel a tiny breeze as Jeanine shook her head. "Any notion what this place costs?" he said.

Since she'd been footing the bill, Mrs. Plansky had a precise notion. What would happen if she voiced that thought aloud? Mrs. Plansky wasn't sure, but she'd shut down any such experiments on her father long ago. She took a deep breath and played her last card, the only one in the deck with any chance of working.

“Nina’s coming for dinner,” she said. “Do you want to join us?”

“At that condo of yours?”

“It’s where I live, Dad.”

“I like the old place better. With the tree. Why the hell did you move?”

“We’ve been through this.”

“Not your best decision. Also not your worst.”

That last part was code for marrying Norm. He knew and she knew but anyone else would have had trouble believing it for so many reasons, such as after all this time, and how long and happy the marriage was, and most of all the fact of the specialness of Norm. He’d never been good enough for her, but not in the ancient no one could be good enough for my daughter way. That, Mrs. Plansky understood—suddenly and parenthetically—was more like the way he thought about Nina. No, in her case there was another reason. *Shekels* was the clue. She came close to saying forget it. Damn it, yes. The words were on the way. But before they got out in the world, her father spoke again.

“All right, all right, the itty-bitty condo it is,” he said. “I better poop first.” Scraping and bumping went on behind the door and then it opened. There he was—slumped sideways, but somehow aggressively, in his wheelchair, her dad, once a good-looking man in a *Mad Men* sort of way, and now much reduced, even a bit orc-like. He raised his voice. “Julio! Julio!”

“Who’s Julio?” Mrs. Plansky said.

“The attendant who helps him with his sanitary needs,” said Jeanine.

“The other guy was better,” Mrs. Plansky’s dad said.

“Marcus is no longer here,” Jeanine said, and Mrs. Plansky knew at once how come.



FOUR

Julio wheeled Mrs. Plansky's dad across the Arcadia Gardens parking lot. Mrs. Plansky opened the passenger door. Julio helped her dad to his feet.

"I can get there myself," her dad said, batting Julio's hands away in a movement that was meant to be forceful. And it was true that on their last outing a month before—ostensibly for milkshakes although they'd detoured into a bar he liked the look of, where he'd been a big hit, downing two shots of bourbon and entertaining the barflies with his age, saving the puking part for the ride back—he'd managed to get into the car by himself. But not this time. He took one step, stopped, and teetered. Julio gathered him up smoothly and got him sitting comfortably on the front seat.

"Give him a tip, Loretta."

"You know there's no tipping, sir," Julio said.

"Yeah? How about at Christmas?"

"That's different," Julio told him.

"I win," said her dad.

Mrs. Plansky drove out of the parking lot to the main road and headed north.

"Some music, Dad?"

"Nosireebob."

A few miles passed in silence and then they hit the section with all the strip malls, auto body shops, and car washes, including the one where you could have your car washed by sudsy young and

not so young women in bikinis. Her dad turned his head to watch, then sat back, folded his gnarled and veiny hands, and said, “Seeing anybody?”

Mrs. Plansky glanced over at him. He was gazing straight ahead.

“Lots of people,” she said. She came close to itemizing them for him but in a *deus ex machina* way her phone, sitting in the cup holder, pinged the incoming text, saving her from a really bad move. Mrs. Plansky, whose vision after cataract surgery two years before—“I’ve found the best guy for this,” Norm had said. “No random bozo gets to mess with those eyes”—was very good, had no need to bring the phone closer. The text was from Jack and it was just this: ? She realized she hadn’t gotten back to him. Mrs. Plansky did not send texts while driving and even if she did she wouldn’t have now.

“Did I hear something?” her dad said. “Like one of those pings?”

“No,” said Mrs. Plansky.

“You know what I meant.”

“Excuse me?”

“Seeing anyone like a man. An XY to squeeze into your XX.”

“For God’s sake!”

“After all, you’re still reasonably attractive.”

“Thanks.”

“Matter of fact I have a candidate, if you don’t mind the type with lots of chins. I’m talking about Ernie Oberst’s kid brother. Bruno, I think it was. Came to visit a while back. His girlfriend walked out on him.”

Mrs. Plansky made no comment.

“Meaning he’s available,” her dad explained. “Based in Tampa. Lives in one of those developments with lots of swingers.”

She wanted to throw up, or at the very least turn around and deposit him back at Arcadia Gardens. But she did neither of those things, just drove on in silence. That side of her, the sexual side—but for certain not swinging, physically, mentally, or spiritually, and how could swinging be in any way spiritual? Surely it was the total absence of. But not the point, which was about the sexual side: now

gone. And if not gone, then in a coma of some sort. She knew comas up close. The last time she'd held Norm he'd been in one. Her eyes welled up and a tear or two got free and slid down her cheek. She glanced over to see if her dad was watching. He was asleep. She could let those tears flow to her heart's discontent. But she did not.

Six foot four and three-quarters could look like an NBA player but it didn't have to, and Matthew DeVore, Nina's new beau, was the proof. Narrow-shouldered, knock-kneed, splayfooted, chinless: Mrs. Plansky silenced that judgmental part of her mind and gave him a friendly smile as they shook hands. She'd left out wet-palmed, and also paunchy. But he did have a full head of hair, the rusty-colored kind you see on men too old not to be graying, and that was another issue, although in disguise: he was a lot older than Nina. She would soon turn forty-six and this gentleman had certainly crossed the sixty barrier, making him closer in age to the mom, meaning her. Mrs. Plansky re-silenced the judgmental part of her mind.

"Nina's told me so much about you," he said during the slightly damp handshake. "And call me Matty."

Ah. Didn't Nina prefer Matthew? More serious, wasn't it? Mrs. Plansky didn't quite remember, but she pushed past that little roadblock and said, "And I'm Loretta."

"Yeah?" said Matty. "I had a Loretta."

"Excuse me?" said Mrs. Plansky. She glanced at Nina, still smiling her introduction smile, seemingly unaware, although of exactly what Mrs. Plansky was not sure. Maybe the fault was hers, imagining nonexistent shortcomings. It hit her at that moment that some part of her mind might benefit from the brain equivalent of a hip replacement.

"My first high school girlfriend was Loretta," Matty explained.

"Perhaps a more common name back in the old days," said Mrs. Plansky. Maybe postreplacement she would have gone with something nicer.

Matty's own smile seemed to stiffen a bit. Nina took him by the hand and led him toward her grandfather, sitting in his wheelchair by the little bar in one corner of the living room, drumming his fingers on the armrest.

"Hi, Pops," she said, leaning down to kiss his forehead. He reached up, did his best to wrap his arms around her.

"Hello, beautiful." He clung to her. She patted his shoulder, kissed his forehead again, and straightened.

"Pops, I want you to meet Matthew. Matthew, this is Pops, a legend in the family."

They shook hands. Mrs. Plansky caught a change of expression on her dad's face, which had to have been when he grew aware of the dampness of the handshake.

"Nice to meet you, Pops," Matty said. "And call me Matty."

"Or Matthew," said Nina.

"Which is it?" said Mrs. Plansky's dad.

"You pick, Pops," said Matty.

"Am I your grandfather?"

"No, sir. What would you like me to—"

"What do you call your own grandfather?"

"Well, they're both passed."

"There you go."

"But what would you like me to call you?"

Mrs. Plansky's dad opened his mouth but no words came out. Instead he licked his dry lips with his dry tongue and closed his mouth. Nina and Matty gazed down at him, Nina worried, Matty confused and somewhat put off. Mrs. Plansky came over.

"How about calling him Chandler?" she said. "That's his given name."

Her dad nodded and returned from wherever he'd been. "Chandler Wills Banning," he said. "Princeton, '46."

"Chandler it is," said Matty.

"Where'd you go to school?" her dad said.

"You're lookin' at a Fightin' Blue Hen."

“Huh?”

“University of Delaware.”

“Who wants a drink?” said Mrs. Plansky.

Nina, Matty, and Mrs. Plansky's dad had drinks at the bar—white wine for Nina, JD on the rocks for Matty, the smallest scotch Mrs. Plansky thought she could get away with for her dad. She turned on the Golf Channel, her dad's favorite and which had his full attention at once. Nina and Matty sat on the barstools. She leaned against him. Mrs. Plansky went into the kitchen to make sure she caught the crab soufflé at the exact right moment.

She was a bit nervous about the crab soufflé. Mrs. Plansky liked to cook and the crab soufflé was one of her specialties, but she hadn't done any cooking in quite some time, her diet now consisting of toast and fruit for breakfast, a salad—often at the club—for lunch, and whatever happened to be in the pantry, tuna, for example, or even sardines, for dinner, unless she was going out with friends, of which they—she—didn't have many in Florida, and none of them close. She'd never felt the need for a lot of friends, at least not since her wedding day. When Norm was alive she'd cooked up a storm, a storm that had weakened with his loss of appetite and died with him.

So in the kitchen she kept squatting down and gazing through the oven window. Why wasn't the darn thing rising? She was checking her watch when Nina came in.

“Here's some wine, Mom.”

“Thanks.” Mrs. Plansky rose, one of her knees grinding in pain—in an uncomfortable manner—which she hoped was inaudible.

“Oh my God,” Nina said. “Are you going to need a knee replacement, too?”

“Of course not.” She took her glass. “And if I do it's not a big deal.”

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Nina thought about that. Mrs. Plansky read the thought, all about Norm and what a big deal actually was, medically. The inward look on Nina's face at that moment, deep and dark: it had never been in evidence when she'd had Nina under her roof, appearing for the first time around the time she'd left Zach, and showing up more often early in her marriage to Ted the first, a marriage that took her to L.A. for ten years or so, Mrs. Plansky losing track of Nina's inner journey during that time. But what a beauty she'd always been and still was, with fine features and shining hazel eyes, both coming from Norm. Her body was more like her mom's, shapely in a sturdy way, Mrs. Plansky's shapeliness no longer what it was, although she seemed to be hanging on to the sturdiness.

"I like the place, Mom. Is it expensive?"

"I'd call it affordable," said Mrs. Plansky.

Nina laughed her musical laugh. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here. I know my mom." She gave Mrs. Plansky a hug. Mrs. Plansky hugged her back. She hadn't hugged Nina—or Jack—in months, and didn't want to let go. At the same time, she felt tension inside her daughter, and plenty of it. They stepped away from each other, sipped their wine.

"I'll set the table," Nina said.

"Done," said Mrs. Plansky. "But you could make that vinaigrette of yours."

"Sure thing."

Nina got busy with oil, vinegar, Dijon mustard, a touch of maple syrup. Mrs. Plansky took another peek in the oven. Still no action.

"So what do you think of him?" Nina said. "Matthew, I mean."

"He seems very nice, but I've only just met him."

"And now you want a thumbnail."

Mrs. Plansky laughed. "Shoot."

Some people were capable of telling stories in an organized way, but not Nina.

"Wow, I don't even know where to start."

"Where he's from, for example."

“Originally? West Hartford. His father had a small law practice that Matthew joined and eventually took over. He retired early and we met on one of those sunset cruises. After, he came down to Hilton Head. For retirement, if you’re following this.”

Which Mrs. Plansky was. “You went on a sunset cruise?” she said. When Nina married Ted the second, she left L.A. and moved into his house on Hilton Head, a house she ended up with when that marriage fell apart, although that was all she got. The point was she was a Hilton Head resident and Mrs. Plansky had never heard of locals going on sunset cruises in their own harbors.

“I know,” Nina said. “Total impulse. I was out power walking, saw the boat, and hopped on board, if you can believe it.”

Mrs. Plansky could.

“And now,” said Nina, “we’re remodeling.”

“Your place or his?”

“Oh, mine. Matthew’s renting at the moment. Way too soon to be telling you this, but we’re contemplating marriage.”

“Ah.”

“I know, I know. Numero quatro. But—call me conservative if you like—I’ve come around to thinking these arrangements should be formalized.”

What arrangements exactly? Were they in love? Those were the questions Mrs. Plansky kept to herself. Instead she said, “Does he have any formalized arrangements in his past?”

“Ha-ha. The iron fist in the velvet glove!”

“Really?”

“No, of course not. Sorry, Mom. And yes, he was married once and had a relationship after that. What else? There’s a son in the Bay Area but they’re not close. And yes, he’s a little older, if that’s what’s coming next. But he’s super energetic and witty in a quiet way, and aren’t you as old as you feel?”

The answer to that was no, and so far Matthew’s quiet wit was pitched at a decibel level beneath her hearing range. She was about to say something about how nice it was that Matthew felt energetic

when the soufflé rose, rose quite abruptly, almost popping up like . . . well, you know. Would a bolder mom have now said, “And how is he in the sack?” Mrs. Plansky was not that mom. She donned oven mitts and pulled this tumescent wonder—certainly the best-looking soufflé she’d ever made—out of the oven.

“Wow!” said Nina. “You go, Mom!”

Mrs. Plansky set the soufflé on the counter. The scent of the shore spread through the kitchen.

“By the way,” Nina said, “I’m shutting down the gallery.”

“Oh?”

Nina had owned a few art galleries in her life, this latest one on Hilton Head specializing in landscape and seascape photography. She had a wonderful eye, in the opinion of Mrs. Plansky, who’d gone with Norm to opening night and bought a strange close-up of a moray eel caught in a moment that seemed to be contemplative, which had hung in Norm’s study back at 3 Pelican Way and had not yet been unpacked.

“Business has been slow with the economy and all,” Nina said, “but it’s not just that. Matthew and I have this fabulous idea. In fact, we’d like to talk to you about it.”

“I’m listening,” said Mrs. Plansky.

“How about at dinner?” Nina said. “When we’re all together.”

FIVE



The Americans had a Georgia of their own. Their Georgia was a state. There turned out to be fifty of them. So many, and they all had nicknames. Dinu—his back to the radiator in his seven square meters' bedroom, with part of that space taken by an old, jutting-out, unusable, coal fireplace, the radiator working sometimes although not today—had his laptop on his lap and was supposed to be solving ten trigonometry problems for class tomorrow at 9 a.m. Dinu gazed at the first problem. *If the shadow of a building increases by 10 meters when the angle of elevation of the sun rays decreases from 70 degrees to 60 degrees, what is the height of the building?* The first answer that came into his mind was this: the builder cheated and the building fell down, therefore zero height. There were ways of working this out, of course, probably beginning with a diagram. A notepad and pencil were visible under his bed, partly concealed by the socks he'd worn yesterday and maybe for a few days before, just about in reach if he leaned forward as far as he could. But Dinu decided to put that off for the moment, and instead check out those state nicknames.

Dinu found a list almost at once and opened a second window on the screen showing a map of the whole country. He had super-good Wi-Fi in his bedroom—far faster than at school—thanks to Romeo, a computer genius actually slightly younger than Dinu, who had piggybacked Dinu's Wi-Fi, as he'd put it, using one of those cool American expressions their own language lacked, off the Wi-Fi from the private clinic two blocks away. Alaska was a state? Way up

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there with this other country—so that was Canada!—in between? Did that make Alaska something like Transnistria? He checked out a few photos of Alaska and decided the answer had to be no. But if the whole continent was like some sort of animal, then Alaska was the head and Florida was the tail. He glanced at the nicknames of both. Alaska: the Last Frontier. Florida: the Sunshine State. Ah, yes, sunshine. Frontiers, as he had good reason to know, meant problems. Dinu spent some very pleasant time viewing photos and videos of the Sunshine State. He found a rather long account of its history and read it carefully from beginning to end. Dinu had a very good memory if he switched it on, which he did now. Seminoles! The Fountain of Youth! Key Largo! He had it all in his mind forever, and was researching luxury car dealerships in Miami Beach when Aunt Ilinca laughed her harsh, smoky, boozy laugh in the kitchen, just on the other side of the wall with the radiator. A thin, uninsulated wall—there was no insulation in the whole apartment block—and Aunt Ilinca's laugh seemed to be originating a few centimeters from his ear. Aunt Ilinca lived in the apartment block across the street and came visiting once a week or so, always with a bottle of Stalinskaya vodka, his mama contributing little squares of dark bread spread with the cottage cheese they called zamatise to these get-togethers.

“All men are useless,” Aunt Ilinca was saying, “but why do I end up always with the most useless?”

“Is he really so bad?” Mama said.

“I could tell you some of his habits but we're eating.”

“Habits?” said Mama.

Dinu did not want to know about the habits of Aunt Ilinca's new boyfriend, or maybe an old boyfriend recycled. And luckily at that moment a text came in from Romeo: **We need you.**

Dinu got his socks from under the bed—cheap thin socks patterned with little circles featuring the face of Megan Thee Stallion—pulled on a hoodie, stuffed his phone in his jeans pocket, grabbed Professor Bogdan's script, and went into the kitchen. They were sitting at the table, Mama in her old woolen housecoat, Aunt Ilinca

in an unzipped puffy coat with what might have been a nightie underneath, drinking from dainty little cups, hardly bigger than thimbles.

“There he is,” said Aunt Ilinca.

“Salut, Auntie.”

She gave him a look, quick but rather close, from head to feet and back again. “My, my, could this one still be growing?”

“You think so?” said Mama. There was brightness in her pale green eyes—the same color as Dinu’s—meaning she and Aunt Ilinca were just getting started with the dainty little cups.

“Oh, yes,” said Aunt Ilinca. “He will grow to be a strapping fellow like—”

She left it right there, although perhaps not soon enough, Mama’s eyes dimming a bit. Dinu went to the door, slid his feet into his sneakers, put on his almost-leather jacket.

“Going somewhere?” Mama said.

“Work.”

Mama opened her mouth to say something, closed it, then decided to go ahead with whatever it was. “Maybe this is a good time to discuss a raise?”

Dinu didn’t answer. He slid the bolt to the side and opened the door.

“Or how about a commission?” said Aunt Ilinca, blowing smoke through her nostrils like some sort of dragon. “In business there are commissions.”

Dinu went out and closed the door, maybe a little harder than necessary.

Dinu’s workplace was the Club Presto in the nicer part of the night-life section of the old town. He went inside.

“Hey, kid,” said Marius the bouncer, in English.

“Hey,” said Dinu. Marius was a huge guy who spoke a lot of English. Well, not quite true. He spoke a little bit of English often, for

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example, “Hey, kid.” Or “Even my muscles have muscles,” a phrase that came up whenever pretty girls were around, which was often. One of the pretty girls was Tassa, a classmate of Dinu’s who worked behind the bar a few nights a week. Too young for that, strictly speaking, but strictly speaking did not apply at Club Presto. They’d been in the same class for many years, which was how the system worked, but he was just noticing her lately.

“Yo,” he said as he went by.

“Yo?” said Tassa.

“That’s hello in Miami Beach,” Dinu told her.

Tassa spread her arms like she was an airplane and waggled them.

He stopped in front of her. Tassa had very beautiful ears. She must have had them all this time—not the ears, of course, but their beauty—the endless hours they’d sat at their desks in those cold, drab rooms. Why had he never noticed? In fact, all of her was beautiful. Not just the ears, but the face and surely the breasts, partly visible in her tank top, and . . . and . . . was this a good time for a fist bump? He made a fist and sort of poked it at her.

“What are you doing?”

“Fist bump. Also Miami Beach.”

Tassa nodded like . . . like that made sense! Then she raised her hand like she was about to give him a fist bump but just then a guy down the bar rapped his glass with the thick bejeweled ring he wore on his finger and she went off to serve him.

At the back of Club Presto, up and down some stairs and along a narrow corridor lit with a few red bulbs, stood a steel door with a sign saying CAMBIO, meaning foreign exchange, and below it a pasted-on cartoon of the Ceaușecus standing on a balcony addressing an unseen crowd. They were both wearing furry Russian ushankas and nothing else. Elena, in the word balloon above her head, was saying to Nicolae, “Talk to them.” It was a famous scene and true, except for the nudity part. They would soon be shot.

Dinu raised his hand to knock but the door was already opening. Thanks to Romeo, surveillance at Club Presto was world-class. Dinu entered the room that Romeo called mission control, after the place where the Americans had run their flights to the moon, although it was nothing like that, very small, smoky, and the keyboards stained by oily fingers, like in a mechanic's garage.

"Hey," Dinu said.

"Hey," said Romeo.

There were three people in the room: Romeo, who'd opened the door; Timbo, the other bouncer, cigarette in his mouth, headphones on, eyes closed, foot tapping; and Uncle Dragomir, sitting in front of one of the screens, a cigar in one hand and a glass of whiskey on the desk.

"Hello, Uncle," Dinu said.

"Ready to go?" said Uncle Dragomir, not turning from the screen.

"I hope so," said Dinu.

Now Uncle Dragomir looked at him. "Hope?"

Timbo took off his headphones and opened his eyes. He was a wiry little guy with a very full handlebar mustache and a quiet voice, not at all like Marius, although while the occasional drunk or group of drunks might try something with Marius—never with a good result—everyone behaved like a gentleman around Timbo.

"I meant yes," Dinu said. "I am ready."

"Do the briefing," Uncle Dragomir told Romeo.

Dinu and Romeo went to a table at the back of the room. Timbo put his headphones back on, Uncle Dragomir sipped his whiskey and returned to the screen. He was watching footage shot at a firing range. Sometimes, although not tonight, Uncle Dragomir monitored these events through a one-way mirror in a tiny room on the floor above. Both methods made Dinu uncomfortable, but in different ways.

Romeo opened a bottle of Miranda orange drink and filled two paper cups.

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“Salut.”

“Salut.”

Romeo was a chubby kid with acne and wild hair and certainly not good-looking in any way Dinu could see, and also he came from a poor family rumored to be part Jewish but some girls—and not just a few—were interested in him. He was already making lots of money—he wore a gold chain around his neck and had two real leather jackets, one black and one red—but it wasn’t just that. Romeo was a genius—the whole invisible structure behind computers, the internet, all that, was transparent to him, out in the open.

“Teach me, Romeo.” Dinu had heard more than one girl say that, even an older girl from the university. Girls liked geniuses. It made sense, but of course Dinu had known for a long time that he himself would have to find another way.

Romeo unfolded a printout of his research, but before he could get going, Dinu said, “Do you know about survival of the fittest?”

“Sure. That’s what we do.”

“What do you mean?”

He waved the printout. “They’re soft. We’re hard.”

“Who is they?”

“The Americans. Brits, French, all of them.”

“The Russians?”

“Very funny. They’re hard but clumsy. We are subtle.”

“Oh?”

“Romance languages make you subtle. But none of the others are hard, just us. There are huge forces at play. It’s a dynamic situation, Dinu.”

“I don’t get you.”

“A dynamic situation is a chance for the poor to get rich and the rich to get poor. But it doesn’t happen automatically. You have to work. So let’s work.” They bent over the printouts. “This is the grandpa, eighty-six, widower, lives alone in Texas.”

“The Lone Star State,” said Dinu.

Romeo looked puzzled for a moment and then continued. “And

this is the grandson—Tucker. Almost three thousand kilometers to the northeast of Texas—a university student at Penn State.”

“The Keystone State,” Dinu said.

“What are you talking about?”

“All the states have nicknames. Also flowers and songs.”

Romeo sat back. “The states have songs?”

“Like ‘You Are My Sunshine’ for Louisiana.”

“How does that one go?”

Dinu had looked up several of the state songs on YouTube, including “You Are My Sunshine.” He opened his mouth to sing the beginning, at the same time noticing that Timbo was watching. No singing happened. Dinu and Romeo got busy with Romeo’s research, Romeo pointing out details from time to time and Dinu filling in the blanks in his script.

~~“Hi, Grandpa, it’s me, Tucker.”~~

~~“Huh?”~~

~~Grandpa’s voice, whispery and wavery and all the way from Texas, came in very clear, but Dinu knew Grandpa was hearing what sounded like a bad connection, all due to a special box with lots of switches and dials that Romeo had made, a box Dinu’s headset was plugged into. Also plugged into the box were all their headphones, the kind for just listening—Romeo’s, Timbo’s, Uncle Dragomir’s. They all sat close together, listening with an intensity Dinu could feel. He could also smell them: Romeo smelled like he needed a shower; Timbo smelled of cologne; Uncle Dragomir smelled of garlic, whiskey, cigars.~~

~~“It is I, Grandpa. Me. Tucker. Yo.” Dinu, who’d already been a bit nervous, got more so. His hands were so sweaty they were dampening the script. “I am in—I’m in a bad situation, Grandpa. I need your help.”~~

~~“My grandson Tommy?”~~

~~“No, Grandpa. Tucker. Your grandson Tucker. I am in—I’m in a bad situation.”~~

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