

## 1

Leo Radigan and I couldn't have been more different, and I'm not just talking about the color of our skins. I lived in the city. He was out in the 'burbs. I was a lawyer with a corner office. Leo was blue collar with dirt under his fingernails. No kids for me, two for Leo and his wife Trudy.

But when a guy saves your life, none of that stuff matters.

"Gimme two more, Leo," I said. "Come on, tough it out."

Leo grunted under the strain of the weight on the bar, and wheezed out another rep.

"One more to match me."

He pushed up the last rep and dropped the weight back onto the chrome uprights.

"You're strong tonight," I said. "You been juicing?"

Although Leo and I were about the same height, I packed an extra twenty pounds, mostly around the mid-section. So usually, after he finished a set, I'd add another ten or twenty pounds to whatever exercise we were doing. But not tonight. He matched my load, rep for rep.

He smirked. "Naw, man. Just straightened out a little problem that's been weighing on me, and all's right with the world."

"What little problem?"

"Some shit I was dealing with at work." He stretched his arms, then cock-walked around to the head of the bench to spot me.

“It’s good you took care of whatever it was, because you’ve been pretty much a dick the last couple weeks. You must’ve been a real bundle of joy at home.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you.”

“Oh, how?”

“You and me ... we’re hangin’ out tonight.”

“Can’t. Gotta go straight home. Diana’s got a honey-do list for me.”

I toweled off the bench, lay down and lifted the bar.

“I don’t mean hangin’ out, like we’re together, numb-nuts. I need you to cover for me. You know, just in case *somebody* asks.”

I completed the set and said, “You mean Trudy, right?”

“Exactly. Trying to stay off her radar.”

I threw the towel at him and he blocked it aside. “So, where did we hang out—just in case, you know, somebody asks?” I said.

“We went to that little bar over on Main Street and got shitfaced.”

“I quit drinking, remember,” I said, then squeezed a stream of orange Gatorade into my mouth.

To save my marriage, I’d stopped boozing about a year ago.

“Shit, I don’t know. Make something up.”

Leo paused to give it some thought, then tugged at his nose, morphed his face into a smirk and said, “You drank club soda and played grab-ass with the bar maids. Anyway, doesn’t matter, it’ll cover up any inconsistencies in our stories if Trudy asks.”

“I don’t have a story. I’m going home to my wife.”

“Ah, yes, the lovely Diana.”

“Eat your heart out, brother.”

He tapped me on the shoulder, then pranced around like he’d just bagged some Hollywood starlet. “I’m screwing this dancer.”

“Let me guess. She’s with the City Ballet, right?”

He took me seriously and answered, "Naw, man. A Russian babe from the strip club."

"Oh, you mean Irena."

"How'd you know?"

"Isn't every Russian babe working a strip club named Irena?"

He added a couple, five-pound plates onto the bar, and started doing another set.

"I can't believe you're screwing around," I said. "Trudy's smarter than you, makes more money than you, and looks a hell lot better than you deserve."

He pushed out the last rep, sat up, then said, "Here's a little fact of life for ya', bro. No matter how good-looking a broad is, there's always some guy out there who's tired of putting up with her shit. Bank on it."

"Enlightening. So partying with strippers, that's your answer?"

"For now," Leo said.

"Wrong answer, man."

"I know you've got a perfect little life, but come down off your high horse for a minute. You don't have to deal with the shit I'm dealing with."

One of the several city cops who were club members ambled over and said, "You pussies done yapping, or what?" He was wearing a faded, blue NYPD T-shirt and sweatpants, I guess so we didn't forget he had a badge and a gun.

Without acknowledging the prick, Leo and I moved away from the bench.

"Thanks, girls," the cop said.

"Fuck him," Leo mumbled.

"We all have to live with the choices we make, Leo."

"I knew you'd understand."

"Come on, lighten up. You're getting laid tonight."

"Don't worry. All my faculties will be up and running just fine."

## 2

I'd met Leo ten years ago at the Bay View Health and Athletic Club. In the club parking lot, to be exact. Because of a rash of car break-ins, club members had been warned not to leave valuables in their cars. But that night a gang of bored rich kids from a nearby subdivision decided to step up their game, ambushing me on the way to my car. It wasn't enough for them to just take my credit cards and the paltry ten bucks I carried in my wallet. They decided to add to their evening's entertainment by using my dome to play whack-a-mole. Somewhere on my way to unconsciousness, Leo, my white knight, came running to the rescue, swinging a baseball bat like he was hitting cleanup for the Yankees. I can still hear the sound of the heavy maple crashing against bone, and the accompanying screams from the punks. When my head cleared, I saw half of the gang writhing on the pavement, limbs broken, blood everywhere.

"You always carry a Louisville Slugger around with you?" I said after the action was over.

"Just when I need it," Leo said.

"You saved my life, man. I owe you, big time."

"In spades."

Now, being a black man, it took a second to divine his meaning. But what the hell, he'd just saved my ass.

After I recovered, Leo and I worked out together twice a week—upper body on Mondays, lower body on Thurs-

days. He filled in the rest of the week with boxing and aerobics. You'd never believe the guy had a wife and two kids, because I didn't know any married men who spent that much time out of the house.



**FROM THE JOGGING** track at the top of the club, you looked out on the luxury yachts and sailboats tied up to the piers in Port Washington Bay. But in spite of the panoramic view, members called the place Horror View. Every week it seemed like something else would break down. Air conditioning one week, sauna the next. The place smelled of decaying vegetation, but sometimes during the spring, a breath of fresh salt air off the bay would deodorize the place. No one seemed to mind, though. It just gave the members something else to bitch about besides their spouses.

Like most clubs, Horror View had its own little social strata. Hardcore muscle-heads, biceps and quads straining against the fabric of their tight-fitting gear, were usually grouped under the jogging track, preening and lifting big weights, putting on a show for the females. The young hip crowd, dressed in their color-coordinated designer outfits, was at the other end of the floor, occasionally lifting a dumbbell, but mostly just standing around bullshitting about how great they looked. Leo and I were marooned between the two groups, all faded T-s and baggy sweat-pants, usually with a handful of other misfits.

We'd finished showering and were sitting on the bench in front of our lockers, getting dressed. It was late, so only a few other members were still around. Naturally, the locker room was as drab and messy as the rest of the place.

"I ever tell you 'bout my boss?" Leo said.

He'd slipped on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. An oversized baseball cap was turned backwards, and pulled

down over his ears.

“Not really.”

“I think he’s connected.”

I laughed, and slapped him on the shoulder.

Leo shrugged. “Laugh if you want, but I’m telling you, he’s one really scary dude.”

“Why’re you telling me? So, don’t work for him? By the way, how was your date?”

His thousand-watt smile said it all.



**LEAVING THE CLUB**, we ran into Eddie Hambrick, a muscle-head we both knew.

“Frick and Frack,” Eddie said. “We starting to wonder about you two guys.”

“Ha, ha,” Leo said, brushed him off, and continued on to his car.

“Hey, what’s the rush?” I said, catching up to him. “Irena’ll be there when you get there.”

It was foggy and our breaths vaporized in the cold, damp air.

Up ahead, I heard a car window breaking, the car alarm wailing a beat later.

A man in dark clothes was rummaging through a car.

“Isn’t that your old Chevy, Leo?”

“What the fuck?” he yelled.

The thief looked up, then jogged off towards a large sedan idling at the back of the parking lot, Leo in hot pursuit.

“Watch out, Leo. He might have a gun.”

The car’s headlights flashed on, stopping Leo dead in his tracks. I shielded my eyes from the glare. The vandal stopped next to the car, turned and faced us. He was brandishing a crowbar.

I came up alongside Leo. “Can you see the license

plate?”

“Can’t see shit.”

“How about the big-ass crowbar the guy’s holding?”

It was a standoff. We weren’t going after them and they weren’t coming back at us. Thick chords of heavy metal guitar riffs screeched from inside the vehicle, its wall of distortion pushing us back a step. The guy dropped the crowbar, hopped into the car, and the driver sped out of the lot.

Eddie said, “What the fuck was that about?”

“Don’t know, but goodnight, Irena,” I said.

Leo turned away, muttering, “It’s starting.”