

CHAPTER 1

A Hundred Friends

The sun is rising in the cloudless pale blue sky when I stop for a moment in front of my house and think about climbing through the bathroom window over the back porch; but I really don't want Mom seeing me like this, and I definitely do not want to explain how I escaped a mob hit squad, or why. Instead, I decide to keep going and hang out at the Raven until I have a good story to tell her. Besides, the way my sides throb I don't think I can climb onto the back porch. I probe my left side gently; it hurts like hell but I don't think the ribs are broken. I run my tongue around my teeth and find the hole at the back on the right where my tooth used to be. Those guys tossed me a pretty good beat-down.

The Raven Social Club is locked up tight. Even the back door on the first floor hallway of the three-family house is padlocked. I slide down the cement wall of the Old Lady's house on the corner across the street from the Raven. It's our usual hangout opposite the deli, when we are not in The Raven shooting pool and drinking.

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Sitting on the sidewalk with my back against the wall feels good. I slowly begin picking morsels from the French roll I took from the bread bag as I walked past the deli. I hadn't realized until I pop that first piece of bread into my mouth how hungry I am; haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon. I get like this in the summer, especially when it's hot. And even though it is only the first week of June, the temperature is already in the nineties and that is unusually hot for New York. I close my eyes and let the sunshine melt the pain away and clear my head of any thoughts. There is nothing but the red glow of the inside of my eyelids.

Blackness interrupts the crimson haze in my head momentarily. My eyes dart open, I instinctively spring to my feet, and reach around my back for the 007 switchblade.

"You're one jumpy jungle bunny," says Nicky Rocci. "But I guess you would be from the looks of you. Black eye, swollen jaw, some nasty black and blues... Well, blues on your sides," he continues while holding my leather jacket open.

"You look like you had a rough night too, you whop cocksucker," I reply, sliding back down to the sidewalk. "Who worked over your face, Nails?" I call him Nails partly because his family is in the construction business and he likes to tell everyone that he can chew nails and spit bullets. He is sporting a black eye, busted lip, and his nose looks like it was moved around his face a bit.

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"My Dad wasn't too happy about the job we pulled on the Deli Man. Let me get a piece of that bread."

"Get your own," I say. "And while you're over there, grab a couple of quarts. I know the Deli Man won't mind."

Nicky Nails disappears into the alley that leads to the back of the deli and comes out with two quarts of Budweiser then reaches into the big brown bread bag and pulls out an Italian loaf. As he crosses the street I notice a slight limp, probably got stomped on too.

"So, why did you tell him about the Deli Man? I thought we all agreed to keep our mouths shut. No matter what!" I ask as I shade my eyes and gaze up at him.

"I didn't tell him anything. It seems the Deli Man is more connected than we thought."

"Not, we thought," I correct, "You thought. You said he was a small time numbers guy. Easy pickings."

"Well, MoJo," Nicky sits down beside me.

He calls me MoJo, which is short for Morris Johnson, and after the lyrics in the Doors song, 'L. A. Woman'. I love that song, play it all the time.

"Not only is he more mobbed up than I thought; he was paying my family to keep his bank here. Naturally, when we hit him, he complained to my father about not protecting his money. My dad asked me what I knew."

"And you bitched up!"

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"Does it look like I talked?"

I take a long deep swig of cold beer.

Nicky continues, "We saw Deli Man's guys grab you. I guess you kept quiet too."

"Of course I did; we wouldn't be here if I didn't. He was going to keep on beating me until I gave him the answer he wanted. That's when he found out about Elizabeth and me, and went fucking ape shit."

Nicky shakes his head, "I told you fucking his daughter was a bad, bad idea. She talked, didn't she?"

"No." I pause for a moment, as my mind jumps back to Deli Man's kitchen, "Elizabeth was in the hall crying. Deli Man looked at her, and said something in Italian, which I didn't understand. Her mother dragged her off down the hall. I thought he told her to get Elizabeth out of there. But a few minutes later her mother yelled 'mignotta', which I did understand, 'whore'. She must have given her the old Virgin Finger Test. Deli Man forgot all about his money, and told his men to kill me."

"Yeah, well, I told you, if you fucked his daughter he would kill you."

"But at least he stopped beating on me."

"Wait a second," Nicky has a surprised look on his face. "If he told his guys to kill you, how are you here?"

I am about to answer when a black Ford Fury jumps the curb and screeched to a stop, its bumper inches from our faces.

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Detects. We know who they are, Fitzpatrick and Mancotti, or Batman and Robin as we call them. They grab us by the shirt, well, me by my leather jacket since I'm not wearing a shirt, and shove us into the back of the car. No one says a word, not the two cops, not Nicky, and definitely not me. They drive a couple of blocks up to East Tremont and then down a little side street that dead-ends at the train tracks. It's a secluded place where junkies come to shoot up or do other deeds that one won't do in public. They get out of the car and walk back up the street a bit, leaving Nicky and me locked in the back.

Nicky and I look at each other; knowing we are both thinking the same thing. Either this is an open mike trick, or we are being setup for a hit. I am leaning more towards the former. It's an old cop ploy. Leave a couple of suspects in a room with a hidden microphone or tape recorder and wait for them to turn on each other. It works just as well in the back of a police car, but Nicky and I are not about to fall for that. We sit in absolute silence. And if they are going to turn us over to the mob it will be just as easy to do, as it is really early in the morning and no one saw us get picked up. But then they would have been here waiting for us already. In my mind, there is no doubt this is the open mike bullshit, so all we have to do is sit here and be quiet. They will eventually get bored and cut us loose.

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Fifteen or twenty minutes pass and the two detectives get back in the car. We smile at them. We are not some scared little school boys afraid they are going to tell our mommies on us.

Nicky says, "If you are finished playing games, you can drop us off back on the corner, our beers are going flat."

"Shut the fuck up!" yells Mancotti. "You boys will be lucky if you see the light of day again."

The car rips up the street in reverse and spins around at the intersection. They flip on the siren and speed down East Tremont Avenue again, catching the attention of the few people waiting at the bus stop. Thankfully, there are some people on their way to work this early Saturday morning already. We race through the street until we get to the police station, where we are summarily marched upstairs, not in handcuffs mind you, and into individual cells. They push us in and slam the doors shut behind us. It's dark and stinks of urine and shit but there is also a long and narrow metal bench opposite the door. I sit on it then lie on my back; I am finally going to get some sleep.

Almost complete darkness greets me when I open my eyes again and I lie there staring at the ceiling. 'This has been one long fucked up day,' I think. Hell, it's been one long fucked up month, as it has been just about that long since Nicky told us of his plan for robbing the Deli Man. May, second, to be exact.

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It is the first really nice day in spring; so naturally, we all ditched school and are going to hang out at my house.

Maria, Bonnie, and Betty walk in and come straight up to my room.

"Your mom's gone to work, right?" asks Maria.

I grab her by the waist and pull her down on me, "Of course. And she thinks I left for school already." I kiss her as her long black hair drapes over my face. "Get in," I command.

"Oh no," objects Bonnie, "you get up and come downstairs. We want to have some fun. And we have to call everybody's school and report them absent for the day." She grabs Maria's arm and hauls her from the bed.

Maria pulls away and gives me another kiss, her blue eyes darting wildly over my body.

"No, no, no, there will be none of that." Bonnie drags her from my bedroom.

I come down to the living room about five minutes later, as Maria is ending her call with Fr. Robinson, my Dean of Discipline, "OK Father, you have a good day. Yes, I will. I have to go now or I'll be late for work. Good Bye." She smiles at me standing in nothing but cut off shorts. "Nice legs."

"Your man is a track star, baby." I strike a running pose.

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"Fr. Robinson sounded a bit annoyed. I don't think he believes you're sick," she says, scolding me. "How many days have you missed young man?"

"I don't miss any of them," I laugh. "Give me the phone, and I'll call Aquinas for you."

"Betty will call Aquinas for her and St. Catharine's for me, thank you very much. You can go finish getting dressed. You need to cover up that stick figure you call a body."

"I'm agile, lean, and a real power pumping sex machine. Go ahead, you can tell them, baby."

"I don't know anything about that," Maria wraps her arms around my waist and I try to slide one knee between hers.

"Quiet fools," Betty orders, "it's ringing!"

"Ah, yes, is this Sister Thomas... This is Maria Marino's mother. She is having a bad day this morning. No, it's nothing serious, just the start of her time."

"That's a croc," I blurt out loudly then dash to the kitchen and grab the other phone. "That's what's wrong with you women today. You cry about God's natural ways, with your pills and feminist products..."

"Shut the hell up, you, old fool," Betty yells into the phone. "I'm so sorry Sister, that's her senile drunkard idiot grandfather on the other phone."

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The girls get the message and rush to the kitchen. I'm not only fighting off laughter, but also Bonnie, and Maria, with the phone held above my head.

"Who's gonna make me breakfast? Forget that, get my vino!" I yell just before Bonnie slaps down the receiver and cuts off the line.

"So sorry Sister, but I got to go." Betty hangs up abruptly and joins the other two girls in the kitchen punching and slapping me. "You are such an idiot! Maria, take him upstairs and keep him out of trouble. Bonnie, you go with them and keep her out of trouble. I'll get you when it's your turn to call."

Dino, the Greek, Sweet Jesus—pronounced just as when you're excited—and Frank, walk in to see the girls piled on top of Morris. From the way the girls cover him they think he's naked.

"All right, it's going to be one of those parties," Sweet Jesus shouts as he quickly pulls his shirt above his head.

Betty turns to see Jesus with his shirt half off, "Great, the other morons are here. Can we just get through making the calls first?"

Nicky busts into the kitchen, "good youse guys are here. I got a plan that you got to hear, let's go downstairs. Sorry girls, it's boys only."

"Good, get out of here," Betty tells him, "We also got real business here."

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Nicky likes to talk business in my basement because of the foot-thick stone walls and shuttered windows. No way for the cops to ever eavesdrop on us.

I think he's overly paranoid, as he says the cops are always listening.

"OK guys. I was hanging out on the corner the other day and for two hours I saw a couple of guys go into the deli and leave after a minute or two. I recognized two of them; numbers guys for the Bananas." The Bananas is what Nicky calls the Banoas, a mob family, whose territory is north of Tremont Avenue. "Deli Man is running a drop in my neighborhood! Can you believe that?" He's watching us across the pool table, expecting us to be as outraged as he is. We aren't. After a couple of seconds, he continues, "I watched the comings and goings for the next couple of days..."

"You haven't been to school at all this week?" I ask and immediately know that it was a stupid question.

"Yeah, it's been really nice this week. Besides, what do I need school for? I'm going to work at my father's construction business."

"It might be good if you know how to add and subtract, or the difference between area and perimeter, or anything useful for the business." I point out.

"That's for youse guys. My job will be making sure I get my cut or I bust somebody's head. Now, let's get back to the

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business at hand. Deli Man leaves around three, when Elizabeth gets there. The bagmen make their drops and then Deli Man returns about five. For about a half-hour or so Elizabeth is there all by herself with the money. Guys, we are going to rob the deli before the Deli Man gets back."

Sweet Jesus is the first to object, "You want us to rob Elizabeth? You do realize that she knows all of us."

"I'm not talking about pulling a gun on her or anything like that. That's for amateurs, I'm a professional. First of all, the five bagmen go straight to the back stockroom, so she probably doesn't even know what they are doing there. We are going to sneak in, find the hiding place, and take it without her even knowing we are there."

"And how do you plan to do that?" asks Frank, who is six-one and redheaded, not quite the sneaky type.

"Well, I'm guessing Deli Man leaves his daughter there because he figures the cops won't bust it when she's there. His first mistake, Elizabeth has the hots for our friend here, MoJo. And she has it bad."

"Jungle fever is easy to catch, and incurable," I say.

"That's why I excluded the girls, we need you to work your black magic on that dizzy little blonde and keep her busy while Sweet Jesus steals the cash."

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"That's HEY-ZEUS, you blasphemous bastard. And what are you gonna be doing while me and Morris are taking chances stealing mob money?"

Nicky lays out the rest of the plan. "I'll be covering you, so you can get into the back room without being seen. Dino and Frank will be lookouts and warn us if Deli Man comes back."

I think about a saying we have, 'You have a hundred friends who can get you into prison, but not one who has a plan to get you out.' Then, there is Nicky; his plans could get you killed, and I'll bet this is one of those plans.

As Nicky sees it, Elizabeth is the insurance that no one will suspect us of the robbery. She will be able to swear that I was nowhere near the back room, and Nicky, while boosting beers, will also be cleared. It is risky, but it seems like an easy in and out job. Just like when we go shoplifting, all the store detects follow Betty and me around the aisles, while the others clean up. And if we really want a big score, we go to the jewelry counter. While Betty tries on cheap items, Maria and Bonnie try on expensive things and pocket them. The more upscale the stores, the easier it is to work them. While Betty is black, well, more like a cinnamon chocolate, with beautiful long lustrous obsidian hair down her back from her Indian heritage, she is still black.

We agree that it is a good plan, but also point out that stealing from the mob is asking for a bullet in the head.

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According to Nicky, Deli Man is small potatoes, probably not even connected to the Banana family. Nicky is also almost sure it's a rogue operation; that they are possibly skimming money from the Bananas. If that's the case, the job is most likely good for a couple of thousand and they won't be able to tell anyone about the loss. We plan to make a go of it next Friday, because that is the heaviest gambling day.

We join the girls in the living room again. Frank had brought along five quarts of Budweiser, so now we crack the caps.

I take mine to the window and pour a bit out, "To the brothers down below."

"Why do you always do that?" asks Frank.

"Respect," I walk back to the couch and Sweet Jesus pulls out a baggie full of weed. I go to work rolling joints and tossing them to the guys. In about two minutes, I rolled five fatties, and Maria, who has been sitting on my right leg the whole time, sticks the last one in my mouth and lights it up. I take a big deep toke and hold it in.

"Let it out," Maria tells me. When I finally exhale a thick cloud of smoke straight up, she says, "Give me a shotgun." I oblige, flipping the joint backwards in my mouth so only the tip is visible. I inhale deeply through my nose and blow a steady long stream of thick white smoke up her nose. As she starts to exhale, I pinch her nose shut and cup her mouth. After a couple more seconds, she shakes her head and I release her.

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She lets out a huge cloud and a little cough. "Stupid, you're choking me."

"Now that's how you smoke reefer... like a man." I take a swig and another toke, but before I can exhale, she locks her lips to mine. After a few seconds, I manage to break away coughing out smoke. We break out in laughter, hugging and kissing, our eyes red and tearing. It's such a rush.

'Brown Sugar' blares out of the speakers, as one of the girls puts on my new Sticky Fingers album. The party is just getting under way.

Nicky walks around the room holding up a little red capsule for either an open mouth or a beer bottle. I offer the beer bottle and he drops in the barbiturate. Maria and I sip on the downer-laced beer as we stretch out on the couch, entwined in each other's arms and legs. By the time 'Can't You Hear Me Knocking' pumps through the air, time is slowing down and I can feel Maria's heartbeat through her breast as I fondle her nipple under the blouse.

Her breath is wet and hot in my ear, "People can see us."

My body completely covers her petite five-two frame, "Nobody can see a thing." I say as I turn my head to scan the room. Only Betty and Dino are left, but they are too involved with each other on the other sofa to know what else is going on. "We're alone," I whisper softly as I unbutton the blouse. I feel her hand slip into my pants and wrap around my dick. Either the

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combination of marijuana, barbies, and beer, or her wanton emotions have completely erased any concerns. I study her plump white breasts and flush pink nipples rising to my mouth and dropping away from my flickering tongue as her hand works my hard-on in time to the music. I run a hand over her pussy, petting her kitty, as she likes to say, my fingers gently spreading her lips and my index finger probing her vagina. I hear her moan with resistance then sigh in acceptance as I slide just the tip of my finger into her.

"It's OK," I comfort her, running my free hand through her silky black hair. "I'm not going to finger you all the way." I slide my finger, wet from her juices, up her slit until I reach her tiny clit and work it around in little circles as she grinds and grips my dick tighter. I can feel how wet I am as her hand glides up and down; not as hard as I could be, thanks to the drugs, but Maria doesn't mind, or notices, her body heating up as she writhes rhythmically to my stroking.

We are oblivious to everything, no other sounds other than our moaning and groaning intrude, and the only sight is the shimmer of our sweating half-nude bodies. Suddenly, her grip seizes up like a chokehold on my dick. Her other fingers dig into my back and rip down, setting me ablaze. Her legs clamp on my hand and I fight to slide my fingers down and into her tightening hole. I force my index and middle fingers in seeking her heat and hear her gasp and squeal as she continues to come. I'm so intent

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on pumping her throbbing pussy I don't realize I am cumming in her hand too. Finally, our bodies come to a halt, our hands wet and sticky inside each other's pants.

Maria let's out an, "Ooh yuck."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I tell her, pull my hand out of her pants, and slide it under her buttocks. Then in a single movement, I roll over, sit up, and pick her up into my arms. "I'll take you upstairs to the bathroom. Hang on."

Maria pulls her hand from my pants and makes a motion towards my face.

"Don't you dare!"

"What. What's the matter?" She's laughing and rocking in my arms.

"Do it and I'll drop you on your head," I warn. We are so stoned she doesn't realize I almost dropped her while standing up.

I steady myself and carry her up to the bathroom. Our clothes loosely draped over our bodies, we peel them off and drop them to the floor, stand for a few seconds admiring each other's body, then hug for even longer. This is the first time we have been completely naked, and even in my hazy state I am taken with her beauty. Her black wavy hair frames her tanned face and those blue eyes sparkle like crystal opal. Two marble white breasts dotted with dirty pink nipples are just big enough to fill my hands and perfectly proportion her body. Bikini tan

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lines accentuate them as well as her black-haired kitten reaching down towards her shapely legs. At just eighteen, she already possesses a well-developed woman's body. I reach over and turn on the shower, we climb in and I pull her close.

"Don't you even think of it," Maria sternly warns me, as my dick is hard again.

"What?"

"Let's just get washed up," she says with a little trepidation.

"Don't worry, I'll never hurt you. You know that." I begin to gently rub the warm water on her belly and she does the same to me. Within seconds, the warmth of the water combined with the effect of the downers gets us woozy. I wash her off quickly then myself then wrap a towel around her and another about my waist.

We cross the hall to my bedroom. Maria reaches for the doorknob but I take her hand, "Let's check first." I knock and Frank answers. We wait while Frank and Bonnie get dressed then open the door.

Bonnie gives Maria a look and she shakes her head "No."

Frank also gives me an enquiring gaze and I confirm Maria's denial.

As the door closes on us, she spreads the towel open behind her and begins shaking and gyrating to the music in her head.

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"You are really pushing your luck, young Lady," I tell her, feeling myself get turned on again.

She takes one arm and pulls the towel across her body to her shoulder. "What's the matter? Don't like what you see?" She flashes me a quick glimpse then covers up again.

"You little cock teaser," I call her with mock anger.

She drops onto my bed, towel wide open, and her legs spread apart, showing her pink pussy, "don't be mad, baby. You want this, don't you? You want it bad." She snaps her legs shut as I take a step toward her. "No. No. No."

I can't tell if she is just playing or if she is really that stoned.

She springs up as I reach the bed and sticks her face against my throbbing dick beneath the towel wrapped around my waist. "Ooh that feels so good." Maria looks up at me, pulls the towel down, and rolls her face in my crotch. Without another word, she opens her mouth and placing both hands on my ass, pulls my dick all the way in. Slowly, she draws my dick in and out, sucking as hard as she can. With each motion, my dick gets harder and when it's rock hard I run my hands down her back. She stops moving but continues sucking harder still and I feel as if I am sobering up; Jesus, she is sucking the high right out of me. She goes on and on for what seems like an hour then unexpectedly pulls back. My dick is big, red, and pulsing painfully. "That's enough," she announces and slips past me with cat-like agility.

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I stand there, unable to move, struggling to even bring one coherent thought to mind. I finally turn around, as I hear her shutting my dresser's drawer. She's standing in my Sly Stone tee shirt, which on her drops all the way down to her thighs like a mini dress. She bounces back onto the bed and pulls me down to sit beside her.

Maria falls over on her side and curls up into a ball, "stay with me. Forever."

I brush the hair away from her face tenderly. Her eyes closed already, she is long gone. I pull the covers from behind her and fold them over her. This has been a fantastic day and it's only 11:30. I look down at my lap, "God damn it, she left me with a raging hard-on."

We spend the weekend as usual, hanging out at the Raven drinking beer, doing shots of vodka, and shooting pool during the day, then, at the stash house at night getting high. We could do jelly beans in the Raven without a hassle, but they frown on us lighting up in the place.

Thankfully, we don't need to stand on the corner smoking joints like the other yokels in the neighborhood, not when we have a house of our own. We don't actually own the stash house, it belonged to an old lady who Bonnie and Maria befriended. They used to help her out, taking her to the store, to go cash her social security check, anything the old lady needed, they did for her. They even used to call her Momma.

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Bonnie and Maria spent many nights there, especially when their mothers picked up new boyfriends they didn't particularly care for. They had grown up together; Bonnie was like Maria's big sister, and both had seen some bad times, so Momma and the stash house saved them for some real ugly situations. I never met her; regrettably, she had died before I moved to the neighborhood.

Maria never spoke of Momma but became deeply melancholic when the others started talking about her with great fondness. Bonnie told me one night after everyone had passed out that Momma had collapsed in the street while they were at school and because she had no ID, no one knew who she was. It was days before Bonnie and Maria found out what had happened to her, and then only by chance. Bonnie overheard a woman at the Laundromat talking about an old lady she thought lived around the corner with her two granddaughters, who had died of a heart attack. She wasn't clear on the older girl, but described Maria to a tee.

The girls had figured out long ago that Momma had outlived everyone in her own family. Her husband died in an accident and both sons during the Korean War. Momma was all alone, except for Bonnie and Maria.

It was also at the stash house that they met Nicky, Frank, and Dino. Dino lived next door to Momma and struck up a friendship with the girls. It wasn't long before the five of them

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were hanging out at the house regularly, and Nicky started stashing his pharms in her basement.

That is also when they began calling it the stash house. After Momma died, the girls continued cashing her checks and paying the gas and electricity. The house was paid for and they felt that Momma wouldn't mind them keeping the place for her.

I get an eerie feeling every time I am in the place, like being in somebody's crypt. They have retained everything the old lady possessed, pictures of people nobody knows, furniture that is decades out of date, and we keep the drapes closed at all times so no one realizes the old lady is gone. In fact, we enter the house from Dino's backyard through the cellar door so nobody can see us come and go. Only Bonnie and Maria ever use the front door, as it is natural to them. The whole thing creeps me out, but it is no different from the hideouts I stayed in back in Fort Apache.

Back in my gang days with the Original Sinners, I never let anyone see me coming or going from those spots either. If someone accidentally did, I never went back there again anyway. It was a matter of survival and so is this. While the old lady was alive, the girls had been strict and only let Nicky stash a few bottles of pills, but now we stash everything there; pills by the case, a brick or two of marijuana, guns and knives for the arms business, and fake IDs. It is a safe haven because none of us is tied directly to the house, so the cops will have to bust us

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carrying stuff in or out of the house to make an actual case. A fact we were forced to drive home to the girls one day.

It happened a couple of months ago when I returned from making a pick up from a solid weed connection in Harlem. I had my book-bag loaded with a high potent weed called blonde, and some even better Thai Stick for our personal pleasure. Nicky arrived at the house at the same time with a shipment of uppers and downers.

We walked into the basement and Betty, Bonnie, and Maria were in there playing Cops and Robbers with the .22's and .38's. I thought Nicky would lose his mind.

"What the fuck are you bitches doing?"

"Hey," Betty yelled back, "You better watch who you are calling a bitch."

"Are you bitches out of your fucking minds?" he yelled even louder.

"What's your fucking problem?" asked Bonnie.

"Yeah," Maria jumped in, "The guns aren't loaded, you, stupid prick!"

"Morris! Morris, talk to them," Nicky told me as he threw down his book bag of pills, and grabbed his slick black hair.

"First of all," I said as calmly and politely as possible, "Put the fucking guns down. I don't give a shit if they are loaded or not. If you are stupid enough to shoot yourselves that is your problem." I paused for a moment, waiting for them to put the

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damn things down. Finally, they complied, placing the guns on the table. I shook my head in disgust, "I guess you're not worried about getting pinched for murder?"

"What murder?" Maria asked. "I told you the guns aren't loaded."

"They are not loaded now, but one day they will be, and someone will probably kill somebody with them. And when the police get them and dust for prints... wouldn't it be a bitch if yours are the fingerprints they come up with!"

All three girls let out a simultaneous, "Oh."

"Oh," Nicky returned with three hand towels, "Oh well, you'd better start cleaning. Unless you want to do a twenty-five to life bid for something you know nothing about. And girls, please clean all the guns, I can't sell any of them thinking they may be traced back to me. These ain't fucking toys! This isn't a fucking game! Jesus Christ. Stunod!"

But what we mostly do at the stash house is get high and chill out.

The rest of the week goes by in the usual manner; we go to school, hang out at the Raven, move merchandise, and now are casing the deli for the job. Frank is logging the Deli Man and his bagmen's comings and goings, as we need a precise timetable to work with on Friday. I go into the deli with Nicky and start rapping to Elizabeth. Nicky boosts a couple of beers, a practice run for Friday.

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"You look sexy sweet, Liz," I half whisper to her, leaning forward on the counter.

"Oh come on now," she says, "I'm just wearing my school uniform. It's nothing special."

It's a white short-sleeved blouse, blue skirt, and vest.

"It's not what you're *wearing*," I emphasise; "It's what's inside what you're wearing." I reach out and with my index finger playfully flip her button loose.

She quickly grabs my hand and holds it down on the counter, "Stop it," she says sternly, "don't think I don't know about you, Mr. Morris Johnson."

"What do you mean? What do you think you know about me?"

"Some of the girls in school know you from your old neighborhood," she continues, a blush growing on her face. "They said you had a lot of girlfriends and that you, umm, took advantage of them... for lack of a better word. And I know you have a girlfriend now."

I notice she hasn't buttoned her blouse and her cleavage and top of her lace bra are still showing. I make believe I am distracted by her breasts. "Huh... What girlfriend? And who are these girls spreading these lies and slandering my good name? Are any of them a supposedly ex-girlfriend?"

"Oh, come on. Everyone knows you are going out with that little Italian girl, Mary. And I have heard her talking about you to

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her friends at school." Elizabeth studies my face, looking for me to lie about Maria.

Instead, I slyly change the subject, "You girls spend way too much time talking about boys, don't you? And that's why your math homework is wrong." I point to the third answer on the open page in her book on the counter. "That should be x square plus xy minus y square. The next one is x over y plus ten."

Nicky taps me on the shoulder, "Let's go, genius. Nice tits, babe."

Elizabeth clutches her blouse and buttons it all the way to the top. "Hey, are you going to pay for those beers?"

"No," Nicky yells back as he walks out of the store.

"Just put it on his dad's tab," I tell her and start to walk out.

Elizabeth grabs my arm. "What about your girlfriend, Mary?"

"I'm not looking for a girlfriend," I tell her, then, turning back, I take her by the hand. "I need a woman. Are you a woman, Liz? Are you ready to be my woman?"

"No," she blurts out. "I mean; I'm not going to be your girlfriend. You are so full of it."

"Woman," I correct her and leave.

I catch up with Nicky, grab one of the beers, crack the cap, and pour a splash out, "to the brothers down below. We've got a problem; Liz goes to Aquinas."

"I know. What's the problem?"

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"She goes to school with Maria," I take a drink, "Girls talk. They talk a lot, and mostly, about their boyfriends."

"So, you shoot her the breeze another day or two, and come Friday, we pull the job," he slaps me on the back. "Then you are done. No problems."

By Friday, we have our window of opportunity pinpointed from 4:30 to 5 o'clock. That is ten minutes after the last drop is made and fifteen before Deli Man returns. I go in first and draw Elizabeth away from the door. The door has a bell, so Nicky needs to come in and hold it ajar for a second to let Sweet Jesus sneak in behind him. They will go up the aisle and across the back of where they will wait until I give a signal. After I have Elizabeth's undivided attention, Sweet Jesus will disappear into the stockroom and locate the cash. Nicky in turn will cover his exit by unlocking the back door. Elizabeth will never know Sweet Jesus was in the store.

At 4:30 I enter the deli, "Hey, Sweet Thing, how are they shaking?"

"Uh... Ok. No, wait, what did you say?"

I walk over to the end of the counter, "Never mind. How's the algebra coming along?"

"Not too good," Elizabeth immediately bends down to pull out her textbook.

Nicky opens the door, Sweet Jesus slips in, and makes his way to the back of the third aisle. "You kids do what you do I'm

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just going to pick up a couple of beers." He crosses the front of the store and down the last aisle to the cooler.

"Come on, Nicky, you are going to get me in trouble," Elizabeth objects.

"Don't sweat it, Liz," I comfort her, "Just put it on his dad's tab. He already knows what a drunk he is. Let me see what you got."

Elizabeth flips the pages of the textbook, "I have these word problems to do."

"Yeah, but that's not what I was talking about." I run one finger along the opening of her blouse.

"Come on, Morris, stop it. Help me with this one," she pleads. "Train A leaves the station at 7 a.m. travelling 45 mph. Train B leaves 2 hours later travelling 60 mph. At what time will train B catch up with train A?"

"Pittsburgh," I tell her confidently. "Now let's see those sugar cones."

"No. And that's not the right answer," Elizabeth replies in disgust. "Come on now, be serious."

I look back at Nails and flash him a 'what's up' expression. Nicky shrugs.

"I am serious. I want to have a peek at your little sugar cones."

"No, I'm not doing that," Elizabeth defies me. "And you know the answer can't be Pittsburgh."

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"Well, they have to be travelling west. Because if they were heading east they would be in the ocean in an hour."

I hear the tin bell ring.

"Let's go genius, these beers ain't gonna drink themselves."

"Ok," I tell Nicky, knowing Sweet Jesus has scored. "3 p.m." I turn to leave.

"3 p.m. Is that really the answer?" asks Elizabeth.

"Yep. 3 p.m. Pittsburgh," I look at the clock on the wall near the refrigerators, it's 4:45.

"Wait. How did you come up with the answer?" Elizabeth demands desperately. "I have to show the equation."

"You need the equation," I smile at her, as I walk back to the counter. "And I need a peek. I may be a genius, but I'm a horny genius."

Elizabeth glances up at the clock, knowing her father will be back soon then looks around and notices Nicky has left the store already. "OK," she quickly pulls up her blouse and bra, showing me her breasts. Her nipples stiffen instantly with subconscious excitement.

A smile spreads across my face as she re-adjusts her bra and tucks her blouse into her skirt. "Lucky guess," I say, having more fun with her but see the look of frustration on her. "OK, it's 45 times X equals 60 times X minus 2. X is the number of hours the trains travel. Only when X is eight is the equation equal, 360 miles is about the distance from New York to

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Pittsburgh. You add 8 hours to 7 a.m. and you get 3 p.m. for train A; you add 6 hours to 9 a.m. and you get 3 p.m. for train B."

She writes down the equation, $45X = 60X - 2$. I take her pen and put parenthesis around the $X - 2$. "Thank you," she slips a kiss on my cheek.

"Au contraire," I tell her, "My pleasure, truly."

I cross the street to the guys and notice they all have disappointed looks on their faces. "What's the matter, didn't you find it?" I ask Sweet Jesus.

"The Deli Man has a safe," he informs me.

"Not here," Nicky warns us, "Let's go to the stash house. Fuck!"

As we head down the block, I look back and see Elizabeth watching me. A smile creeps back onto my face.

Nicky asks, "What are you so happy about?"

"Elizabeth has nice tits."

"She showed you her tits?" Sweet Jesus asks in disbelief.

"Next time, I work on the girl and you can do the sneaky work."

"It won't work. You don't have the magic."

"Oh yeah? Spanish men got machismo," he shoots back, "We're born with that shit. I can go all night."

"Remember who you're talking to," I tell him as we cut through Dino's backyard, "I got you your first lay and you couldn't go five minutes."

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Everyone bursts into laughter.

"Hey, no mention of Elizabeth's tits," I caution as we make our way to the living room of the stash house.

"Meow... Whittist... Meow... Whittist..." They mock and make whipping motions.

I flop down into a chair that is hard from years of wear and pull a beer from one of the six packs Nicky took from the deli. Music playing upstairs informs us that the girls are already here.

"Let's get down to it;" Nicky turns to Sweet Jesus, "What kind of safe does the Deli Man have?"

"A safe safe. It's about this high and this wide," Sweet Jesus holds his hand to his waist, then apart about three feet. "It has a combination dial and everything."

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck Me," shouts Nicky.

"Oh yeah, it also has a slit cut into the top," Sweet Jesus continues. "About a foot long and two or three inches wide. I guess it's for dropping the money in."

"Did you look in? Could you tell how much was in there?" asks Nicky, still pissed.

The girls walk in, grab a beer, and take their seats in our laps. Betty looks us over, knowing something is up, "Tough day at the office, boys?"

"You could say that," Dino clues her in. "Our little robbery at the deli hit a snag."

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"The corner deli?" she questions. "That's just stupid. You don't shit where you eat. Everyone knows that."

"Thank you for that ageless insight," Nicky snaps. "Maybe you can embroider it on a couple of throw pillows. Let's get back to business; did you see any money in the safe?"

"No, it was too dark. But it has to have some because it is hidden behind cases of toilet paper. I had to move them out of the way to get a good look at the safe."

"Did you put them back the way they were?" I ask.

"Of course," Sweet Jesus assures me, "Exactly as they were. This is not my first time."

"Why are you robbing a rinky dink place like the corner deli?" Maria asks.

"Because that rinky dink little deli is a numbers money drop," answers Nicky. Frustration rising, he begins pacing around the room.

"Oh," Maria jumps up and looks down at me accusingly, "That is the stupidest plan you guys have come up with yet. Nicky, I know this had to be your idea, and you are going to get yourselves killed. Everyone knows you don't rob the mob and live."

The girls stand up and in unison shake their heads.

Dino takes hold of Betty's hand, "You don't have to worry about that. The money is locked up in a safe, so that's that."

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"Not so fast guys," Nicky grabs another beer, "MoJo, you're the fucking genius, always making explosives in your backyard. How about you make a little boom-boom juice and we blow the safe?"

I got a chemistry set for Christmas when I was eight. Two years ago, I did an experiment that produced sulphur dioxide, a pretty nasty smelling gas. My mother demanded I get the set out of the house immediately, and I moved it to the tool shed behind the garage. Of course, this was my plan anyway, so I could have fun making nitroglycerin, boom-boom juice. It was a dangerous process and I didn't want to blow up my mom by mistake, or the house.

The gang knows about the lab and won't go near it, but Nails, naturally, wants to know if my mom can smell weed if he lights up in there. I forbid any smoking around the lab as carelessness will most likely blow the place up.

He was in the lab one day when I was making bombs for some Puerto Rican radical group, who wanted to blow up banks. They wanted the United States out of Puerto Rico, or to stop bombing Puerto Rico, or who knows what. All I know is that they paid \$5000 for five ready-to-blow pipe bombs and promised that nobody would be killed.

Nails couldn't understand not robbing the banks, just destroying some office furniture. I told him I didn't care about the banks or those guys' politics; I just didn't need the F.B.I.

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coming after me for murder. And also told him that I had warned them, "If anyone dies, I don't care if it's the bank's president or the cleaning lady, I'm making a sixth bomb for you." Over the next two weeks, there were five midnight bank bombings in Manhattan.

The F.B.I. is investigating.

"Two things wrong with that idea, Nails. First, I don't know how much nitro it will take to blow open a safe, but I'm pretty sure it would blow up the entire building too. You know, because it is old and wooden. Second, how am I supposed to keep Elizabeth busy while you are blowing up a safe in the backroom? Not to mention that the rest of the neighborhood is going to hear it and see it. What happened to this being a secret affair?"

"Excuse me," interjects Maria, now very upset. "What do you mean, 'Keep Elizabeth busy'?"

"Yeah, it seems Elizabeth has a bit of a crush on our boy here," Sweet Jesus offers the explanation gladly.

"Don't worry," I say as calmly as I can, "I'm just shooting her some BS while he sneaks into the stockroom."

"I'll keep that little mignotta busy. I'll scratch her fucking eyes out so she won't be able to see a God Damn thing when I get through with her!"

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"This is supposed to be a clandestine affair, so the Deli Man won't know we robbed him. You fucking up his daughter is as bad as Nails blowing up his shop." Dino offers.

"How about we steal the whole fucking safe?" Nicky quickly proposes. "Then again, it is the size of a washing machine and probably weighs several hundred pounds. How do we sneak it past Elizabeth and the rest of the neighborhood?"

"I can scratch her eyes out and rip her ears off," Maria vents, "that fucking little whore."

"Why don't you guys crack the safe?" Betty suggests. "You must have someone in your family who specializes in that sort of thing."

"Not really," Nicky replies, "most safes have electronic locks nowadays, timers, and what have you. Safe cracking is a dying art. Besides, if I did know someone, they would want a hefty cut."

"Wait a second," I wrap my arms around Maria. Mainly to make sure she doesn't try to hit me with a beer bottle or something. "It probably is a pretty old safe, so we get a stethoscope and crack it ourselves. The tumblers should sound like bowling pins when they fall." I'm really careful not to mention Elizabeth's name again.

"Yes! Hell yes," Nicky gets amped up, "That'll work. We can go to that old folk's home on the other side of Parkchester and steal a stethoscope."

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"Give me forty dollars," Bonnie demands with her hand in Nicky's face, "I know this goes against your religion and all, but there is a medical supplies store in Parkchester too, we will just go buy one." She snatches the money from his hand and the girls head out the front door.

Bonnie looks back at us in the living room, "try not to commit any felonies until we get back."

"Good thing no one mentioned Elizabeth's tits," Sweet Jesus jokes after we hear the door close.



For the next week and a half, the guys take turns trying to crack the safe. I keep helping Elizabeth with her algebra and helping myself to a peek-a-boo feast. Each time, I push the limits a little farther. It's also coming up to finals so she is desperate for my help, and she really wants me, whether I have a girlfriend or not. She hasn't asked me about Maria since she showed me her tits the first time and although she keeps telling me that I'm a nasty boy, she does whatever I tell her to do.

"What color is your hair?" I ask her.

"What's the matter, you blind? It's blonde."

"I'm not talking about that hair. It's very pretty by the way, like waves of wheat in those commercials about America," I smile at her.

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"Thank you," Elizabeth responds. "But I'm not going to do that."

"Do what, Liz?" I play innocent.

"Come on," she says with mock anger. "You want me to show you my downstairs. It's the same as the hair on my head, so there."

"Now, we both know that's not true," I tell her. "The hair on your head has been bleached by the sun for eighteen years."

"Seventeen," she corrects me, "I'll be eighteen next month. June 4."

"Really? You seem much older, and mature. Anyway, the hair on your pussy has only been there for what, three, four years now?"

"Four years. Go on."

"You are more mature. But... your pussy has never seen the sun, so the hair must be darker. I say a light brown," I try to sound professional, "It's science, you know."

"Ha, you're wrong, mister smarty pants," like lightening, she pulls up her skirt with her left hand and pushes down her panties with her right, exposing a full and very light blonde bush. A second later, she realizes what she has done and her face reddens with embarrassment.

I double over laughing and she slaps me hard on the back of the head.

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"You are the devil, Mr. Morris Johnson, but think you are so smart. If I told my father about what you've done, he'd cut your balls off."

"Why do you girls always want to blame us guys?" I say accusingly. "You know you wanted to show what you've got. By the way, very nice, I'm impressed. And I'm going to have to re-think my whole sunlight theory. Unless," I stop for a moment, pretending to think. "You have been taking her out for a sunning on a regular basis."

"That's disgusting and you better get out of here before my father gets back. But thanks for helping me with my homework," she leans across the counter and gives me a kiss on the lips.

"Thanks for giving me something to dream about," I say, running one hand across her ass.

"Get out of here, you pig, before my father catches you and does cut your balls off."

I meet up with the guys at the stash house. Today, it was Nicky's and Dino's turn at the safe. Dino was the listener, so every time he thought he heard a click he nodded and Nicky wrote down the number. When they got a group of three numbers, they tried them in various combinations, but always without luck. When time ran out, they left by the back door in the stockroom, which leads to the alley. It was easier for them since they only had to sneak into the store.

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Wednesday afternoon went the same as all the days before.

"I'd just like to say, for the record, that you four guys suck. I don't know how much longer I can do this." I tell them.

"Mi Dios me ayuda," exclaims Sweet Jesus, "We're in the cramped, dark, dirty stockroom risking our lives if we get caught, while you're playing show and tell with— what was that you called her today, you're lovely, Lizzie."

"First of all, it was vivacious Lizzie, and second, you can never get caught back there. If you hear the deli door open, you get out, fast. If y'all don't crack that safe soon, I'm going to have to fuck that girl and let Nails blow the safe, before her father finds me there with her."

"Don't you fuck that girl," warns Nicky, "because if Deli Man catches you with his daughter, he will cut your balls off. If you fuck her, he will kill you."

At that moment, the girls storm into the smoke-filled room and all hell breaks loose. Maria is on me like a flash, slapping me in the face as hard as she can; the sound hangs in the air only to be replaced by the guys', "Oh Shit."

She starts punching me in the gut and I try uselessly to catch her failing hands. I finally get a bear hug on her, not a good move, as she knees me in the groin.

"You no good fucking Nigger," she yells.

I'm in shock, from the pain and her calling me nigger. It's the first time I've ever heard her said the word. "I'm BS-ing her, just

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shooting the breeze, helping with her homework to keep her from noticing the guys."

"What part of helping with her homework is this?" Maria pulls her top over her head, exposing herself to the whole room. The guys start to cheer and she flashes them a look Medusa would be proud of. She pulls her tee shirt back down, "oh, I know, it's the part where she shows her gratitude. Or is that your normal fee for helping girls with their homework? You no good bastard!" Maria runs out of the room and storms upstairs crying.

"You're in trouble now."

"Shut the fuck up, Nicky! In fact, you guys get the fuck out of my house," commands Bonnie.

"You guys leave," I say quietly, "Catch up with y'all at the Raven."

"Oh no, you're getting the fuck out too! Now!" Bonnie points to the front door.

"I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving her like this."

"Go," Betty says. "We'll take care of her."

"The girls are right," Frank takes hold of my arm, "If you stay, you'll only make matters worse."

"Get your hands off me or I'll cut your mother-fucking throat."

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"Whoa... Whoa... Whoa..." Nicky steps in, "MoJo, you got to give her time to cool down. But from that look on her face, it may be a day or two."

"Maybe never," Bonnie rips into me, "You fucking asshole."

"Just go," Betty says in a kinder, gentler voice.

I hope you enjoyed chapter 1 of Killer With A Heart.

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