

CHAPTER 1

“Who’s that?” Jerry inquired, not caring. From the safety of the loading bay at Import Goods Incorporated, Kenny squinted toward the newest ship to enter the port, as if that would focus him in on a lone man dressed in a long black overcoat and expensive dark suit, standing in the unloading area.

That was all he could see from his vantage point. It was still dark, and the docks often became foggy in the early mornings, especially after or before a rain. This morning was unusually dense, almost spectral.

The thick mist crept lazily into the crevices as if to ensure the secrecy of a clandestine meeting. A massive barge behind the solitary figure stood guard from the ominous darkness of the open water. A single overhead light attempted to offer an identifying luminescence, but Lake Erie seemed intent on making the tall, mysterious figure appear nefarious. So, the fog ruled the early morning.

In their little corner of Cleveland, Ohio, on a brisk autumn morning, they might have been the only three people still in existence.

“That would be Michael Deshay,” Kenny answered as if revealing a deep, dark secret. Even as the name eased from his lips, the fog danced around the presence on the dock. Did he know they spoke of him, so he manipulated the vapor for effect in his introduction?

Jerry vexed to the point of frustration. “I could swear I’ve heard that name before.” A model for the standard dockworker, you wouldn’t catch him reading the Wall Street Journal anytime soon. You didn’t need to be an avid viewer of CNN, though, to have heard of Michael Deshay. And Kenny did enjoy showing off his knowledge of the business world. “He’s the hottest thirty-and-under entrepreneur in America.”

A generally difficult person, Jerry wasn’t tall, but he was thick in an it-used-to-be-muscle sort-of-way. Mostly bald, he cared for the remaining follicles as if they were very dear to him. He had his moments of tolerable humor, but even those tended to offend someone.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right. He’s that hot-shot kid who’s supposed to give the Gates character a run for his money.”

Kenny shook his head, half expecting the over-simplification. Jerry studied the figure that had waited patiently in the same spot for the last twenty minutes. He added, “I can’t believe they think some rich bitch’s spoiled brat can challenge that greedy bastard, Gates.”

Kenny’s disapproving glare received a look of pure innocence. “What?” Jerry asked.

“Things aren’t always the way they seem,” Kenny answered.

After graduating a year early from high school with a perfect 4.0 GPA, Kenny Johnson got a job at the docks and enrolled in business classes at the local junior college. By the time he received his associate’s degree in business management, he had saved enough money to transfer to UCLA. The thought of starting his own business right out of high school briefly crossed his mind, as Michael Deshay had, but his momma insisted he get an

education. Working full-time and going to school at night had been difficult, but now that he was less than a month away from earning a bachelor's degree, Kenny saw the value of Momma's words.

"Yeah, well, sometimes they're exactly the way they seem," Jerry said knowingly.

He responded, "For your information, Michael Deshay started his first business at sixteen years old, selling donuts wholesale to mini-marts while still going to high school. After graduating, he slowly built a fortune by starting other small businesses and making them more and more profitable, until all those small businesses became all those big businesses. He paid his dues, and now he's entering the ranks of the corporate giants."

"What, are you writing the guy's biography or somethin'?"

He decided to end the conversation with one simple statement, "No, Jerry, I read."

The twenty-four-year-old black man had a thin, athletic look, and took great pride in his choice to make it in this world through education rather than sports or rap music. He was determined to break the stereotype.

His dock mate declared, "Screw 'em all, that's what I say. Ain't none of 'em done nothin' for me."

And there was Jerry in a nutshell. In the end, it always came back to him.

"Excuse me?"

The voice took them both by surprise, causing the odd duo to whip around toward the opening of the large roll-up doorway of the warehouse as if he had ambushed them.

Now that Mr. Deshay was close, Kenny could fully appreciate the elegance of the slate-gray designer suit and silk scarlet tie underneath the open wool overcoat. It was a slick outfit. Even Jerry's eyebrows rose in appreciation.

He made his way past several large crates, entering a more open space where a large desk served as the office of the receiving bay. Kenny stepped forward to greet his idol.

"Mr. Deshay...uh, out for an early morning shopping spree?"

He smiled as he arrived at the table, "Hey Kenny, how're you doing?"

As they shook hands, Michael asked, "You still work here, huh?"

"A man has to make a living until his time comes. Then, he has to get rich."

"I had no idea you were a philosopher."

Kenny and Michael shared a friendly laugh. Jerry rolled his eyes.

"So, it's been what, five or six years you've been working here?" Michael inquired.

"Six. You bought that cherry-red Porsche 911 Carrera, with the out-set wheel wells. You remember that?"

"Of course, it was my first buy from the docks." He leaned in as if he were about to disclose a valuable secret. "You never forget your first," and they again enjoyed the silly humor.

Thinking back to that night, Michael said, "That's right. You were here then, weren't you?"

Michael knew he had been there. In fact, after the last couple of discussions with Kenny's boss, Frank, and some of his college professors, Michael was prepared to offer the young man a job. Jerry let out a breath of air, bored with the conversation. Kenny grinned at Michael's raised eyebrows.

"Mr. Deshay, this is Jerry. Jerry, Michael Deshay."

As they shook hands, Michael said, "Nice to meet you," and then asked, "You new here?"

"I ran the dock crew for the last twenty years, but now that the kid's graduating college, Frank doesn't expect

he'll be around much longer. Either that or he thinks I'm too old for the docks."

Michael countered, "Gotta be good to get inside when it's this cold, though." Turning to Kenny, he continued, "And you, young man..."

"You're only six years older than me, Mr. Deshay."

"Fair enough."

Kenny enjoyed it when Mr. Deshay came by the docks, usually once or twice a year, to buy a brand new exotic sports car before it was converted to the stricter American emission laws. He would face a fine, but it was worth it to experience the automobile "as God intended," which always made Kenny laugh and dream of the time when he would do the same.

"So, you're finally finishing college?"

Proud as a peacock, Kenny stood tall and answered, "I'll be finished before Christmas."

"You've carried quite a load between school and work. I'm impressed."

"Thank you. It'll all be worth it when I begin my assault on the business world."

"Yes, it will," Michael said, as he glanced at his watch. "So, where's Frank at, anyway? We were supposed to meet outside half-an-hour ago."

Knowing him to be the most punctual man he's ever met, Kenny looked a little worried when answering, "I don't know, but it must be important if Frank Schenelli is late for an appointment."

"I'm kind of in a hurry, but I want to take the car to an important dinner party tonight." Michael considered his options as he turned toward the dock and then back to Kenny.

"I'll tell you what," he began, reaching in his overcoat and into his suit jacket pocket. He pulled out a business card and continued, "Could you find Frank and tell him I'll be outside getting the car ready?" Then, handing the card to Kenny, he finished, "Call me tomorrow, and we'll see if we can put that education of yours to work." Kenny accepted the card, in a daze, as Michael walked out the door.

Outside, the first beams of sunrise reached over the horizon, ushering the fog to a rude exit, but the little that remained did all it could to make the man's departure feel as mysterious as his entrance.

Stunned to initial silence, Kenny offered a weak, "Thank you," but it was probably not heard. He became so excited at the prospects of his future that he almost didn't catch Jerry's comment, "Smug prick, it'nie?"

"Starting tomorrow, it's my black-ass that's gonna be the smug prick."

Jerry half-heartily offered, "Yeah, congrats, kid."

Although he didn't sound sincere, Kenny gave him a pat on the back. "Hang in there, old man." Then, he was out the side door and into the main warehouse, on his way to Frank's office. Jerry stood motionless, left to contemplate what just happened.

"I swear old people are becoming extinct."

"Yo, Frank, I qui...oh shit!"

Kenny had been looking forward to the day he could go into Frank's office and announce his resignation. Not because he didn't like Frank, he did, but Kenny believed he was meant for more. Knowing Frank, he would probably be proud of his employee's newest accomplishment.

Unfortunately, the two men standing over his beaten body interrupted Kenny's moment of triumph. Held by the front of his shirt, Frank hung limp in the assailant's grip.

After his initial oral reaction, Kenny found himself running faster than he ever had, back through the corridors of the warehouse. He had the advantage of knowing every nook and cranny of the building, but the disadvantage of being so scared he couldn't think straight.

Trying to organize his thoughts, while imagining running for his life, the realization occurred that they weren't even chasing him. Plus, he hadn't heard gunshots, and he was still alive – all good signs.

Maybe there was no reason to worry. If, for instance, they were leaning on Frank for unpaid gambling debts, it wouldn't matter that he saw them. Slowing to a stop, he thought, *Frank looked pretty bad*.

A glance down the hallway reassured him that no one immediately followed. A little surprised by his present location, Kenny stood by a side door that led outside to the docks. He must have been "flying" to have made it to the central warehouse already.

Outside on the receiving dock, Michael Deshay got into a brand-new Ferrari. He had an arrangement with Frank, so it wasn't like he was stealing the car. You can do that when you pay cash for the incredible driving machine of your choice.

"Someday," Kenny said aloud.

His sentiment echoed into the silence of the empty warehouse. By the end of the day, this bay would be full of expensive cars from foreign lands.

Just as his hand gripped the doorknob that would lead to freedom, a new commotion at the far end of the warehouse caught his attention. The workers were arriving. Within twenty minutes, the place would be full of unsuspecting laborers. Then he noticed Jerry in the office on the other side of the open space. The open doorway revealed him working at the desk.

At the moment, Kenny was the only one in harm's way. With a glance down the corridor, he wondered if it was safe to wait for the bus, and startled at the sight of the two towering figures that stalked him from around the corner.

The moment became surreal. The two men were walking, not running, walking confidently toward him as if they knew they would catch him, so there was no hurry.

Without thinking twice, he was out the side door and onto the main dock. Mr. Deshay revved the engine to his brand new Ferrari F355 Berlinetta sports car as Kenny ran to the driver's side door and knocked on the window. Mr. Deshay turned quickly, and then the electric window descended.

"What's taking...are you all right? You look like you saw a ghost."

Kenny felt a panic building inside him. He didn't want to get Mr. Deshay involved, but he obviously could no longer wait for the city bus to pick him up.

"Nothing's wrong, sir. I, uh, I was wondering if, uh..."

As Kenny stuttered his way through the garbled explanation, he glanced back and saw an undistinguishable face

looking out the window of the door he had just exited. Caught in a trance, he waited for it to open, having no idea what he would do if it did. The face vanished, but the door remained a barrier. He continued his vigil, willing it to stay closed.

“Kenny? Kenny!”

Startled back to reality, he blurted out, “Could you take me home, Mr. Deshay?”

“What?”

“The uh, bus won’t be back this way for a while. I hate to ask, but...”

“I take it you quit then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, hop in.”

“Thank you.”

Checking once again, the side door of the warehouse remained intact as he made his way around the expensive automobile. He opened the passenger side door when movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. The two men from Frank’s office walked next to Jerry through the open roll-down door of the loading dock. Jerry conversed with them as he waved at Kenny to stop.

Kenny played dumb, waving back at Jerry, and then got in the car.

“Does Frank know you’re gone? Even if you quit, you at least need to let him know.”

The question rattled Kenny. Should he tell Mr. Deshay? Self-preservation argued that he was a powerful man and could help get things straightened out, but guilt pointed out that it could endanger him.

“Yes, sir, I told him.”

“Is he coming down?”

“No, he said you could bring the money by later, he’s busy now,” Kenny lied.

“So be it,” he replied and drove off.

At Michael’s request, Kenny directed them to a few back stretches of roads to open the car up a little. It would have been more enjoyable if his time on earth wasn’t up for debate. Every time Michael glanced over, instead of enthusiasm on Kenny’s face, he only saw a troubled expression. Confused by the lack of appreciation for the elite speed and handling, he stopped showing off and took Kenny home.

Try as he might, Kenny couldn’t relax. The whole bizarre situation happened too fast. Before long, the high-performance tires hugged the final turn and smoothly brought the sleek cherry red sports car to a stop in front of a small gray house in the little neighborhood of Hough.

The freshly mowed green grass of the small front yard, surrounded by a chain-link fence, and cracked pavement of the walkway smoothed with caulking, framed the only home he’d ever known. It suddenly looked more like a prison than a sanctuary.

“From your reaction to those men, I would say they’re not buddies of yours.”

Kenny sat in silence.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Michael asked.

“I don’t want to get you involved, Mr. Deshay?”

"You asked me for a ride. I'm involved. Who are they?"

"I...I don't know."

"I can't have you working for me if you're in trouble with the law. I've worked too long and hard building Deshay Enterprises into what it is today."

"I'm not in trouble with the law. It's not even about me. Someone I know – I don't know how to help him."

"What did Frank have to say about this?"

"Frank?" Kenny asked nervously.

"Two detectives show up at the docks asking about you, or your friend? You leave, and you were very upset when you asked me for a ride. Did Frank find out and fire you?"

"No, he didn't fire me," Kenny answered, dejected. Frank had always been fair to him.

Michael had such high hopes for this kid, who reminded Michael of himself at that age. They had different reasons for being passionate about business, but the fire was the same.

"Alright. I know you're a good kid, so I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. I'm not going to lecture about the friends you keep since Frank probably already covered it. But you do need to get this settled. You have my card, call my work number if you need to talk. If I'm not in, my assistant can page me.

"I'll be at a function tonight, and I have a million things to do before then, but I'm going to have a cell phone installed in the Ferrari this morning. Maybe I can call back from the car."

"Yes, sir."

"If I don't hear from you, I expect an explanation telling me how it's been resolved, before you start tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"I assumed you accepted my job offer."

"Oh, yes, of course. It's a dream come true."

"Good. Be at my office at nine a.m. sharp, ready to work."

"I will, sir, I promise." Kenny was out the door of the expensive automobile. The excitement at the prospect of working for Michael Deshay had returned. So much so, he almost forgot his present predicament.

Kenny waved bye as he stood on the sidewalk, watching the sleek Berlinetta stroll away. He looked around, more conscientious of his "hood" than he had ever been. Was he embarrassed for Mr. Deshay to see where he lived? *Never*. It was a part of who he was, but how ridiculous did it look for him to be dropped off by a rich white man in a \$130,000 supercar, at his low-income house in an all-black neighborhood, a couple of miles east of downtown Cleveland?

Damn, no one saw.

Other than Old Lady Barnes across the street, who was peeking through her curtains, not a soul in sight. It would make for good gossip, but everyone thought the old bittie was crazy. A glance at his watch revealed it was still only eight o'clock in the morning. It would be a good three or four hours before the porches and front yards populated with the young adults of the hood, not going to college or work. The uncertainty of the moment made Kenny more determined than ever to be an example of what someone from their neighborhood could accomplish.

Entering the empty house signified Kenny's solitary plight, and he deflated from the brief respite. He was

alone, standing in the middle of the tiny living room, listening to the silence.

His family was well into the morning ritual of Momma dropping off his sixteen-year-old brother, Terrell, at school. Then, she would take his older sister, Lisa, to work at an office in Shaker Heights before circling back to her nursing job at Cleveland Clinic Hospital. It was a lot, which is why Kenny insisted on taking the bus to work at the Port of Cleveland.

His mom and dad worked hard to provide a house for their kids, but the goal was always to move into a safer neighborhood as soon as they could afford it. Pops ever had his eye on Cleveland Heights or South Euclid, but he was gone now. So, Kenny and Lisa joined the arduous task of helping Momma save for a better future.

Half-expecting the two brutes from the docks to burst into the house at any moment, Kenny glanced at the front door. He knew they couldn't have followed the Ferrari, and Jerry didn't know where he lived, so his stupidity couldn't give Kenny away. For the moment, at least, he was safe.

"I should have told Mr. Deshay."

Now, he was talking to himself. Strangely, hearing his voice was, almost, reassuring. It meant he was alive. Then, as would happen from time to time, especially during tough times, he missed his father. A drunk driver hit him head-on coming home from work, going on two years ago. *Pops would know what to do.*

The thought of Frank's bloody face resurfaced. Something bad happened, Kenny was sure of that. "I gotta do something." His eyes settled on the telephone, so he placed an anonymous call to the police, stating someone in the supervisor's office at Import Goods may be severely injured and then hung up. *At least Frank's taken care of.*

"Now, what about me?"

He no longer cared about talking to himself. It helped organize his thoughts, which insisted he needed a plan, but he had no idea where to start. Once again, Mr. Deshay came to mind. He retrieved the business card his new boss gave him earlier when everything was still right in his world.

He had just been offered the opportunity of a lifetime by one of the wealthiest people in America. That type of thing doesn't happen every day. A little nervous, Kenny made the call to Mr. Deshay's office and left a message with the secretary to please call back. He was on his way to getting the phone installed in the Ferrari now, so it could be a little while before he called back.

Kenny sat on the couch and then laid down, staring at the ceiling. Wanting it all to go away, he shut his eyes and imagined becoming an executive at Deshay Enterprises. Before long, he drifted off to sleep.

A police siren blared! Kenny shot forward into a sitting position and looked around in alarm. It screamed past the front of the house and then quieted into the distance. Silence reigned once again. He took a reassuring breath and noticed the clock read two-eighteen.

"That's not possible." He sneaked a glance out the window. Intermittent passersby from the neighborhood crossed his view, but nothing suspicious.

How did I sleep that long? The red light on the answering machine blinked. "Shit." Kenny hurried to listen to

the messages. “Hi, Kenny, this is Michael DeShay, I’m returning your call. My assistant said it sounded important, so I’ll try again soon.” The second message was even shorter. “I haven’t heard back, so I’ll assume you decided to wait till tomorrow. See you bright and early.”

He couldn’t believe he slept through the phone ringing twice. A quick inspection revealed the sound turned down. Momma refused to answer the phone during dinner and turned the answering machine down so they wouldn’t be tempted to pick up. It was nothing new for her to forget to turn it back up. *Should have never laid down.*

With his little brother’s return from school imminent, he considered his options. Six hours had passed, and he was still alive. Did he dare feel better about the situation?

Terrell came home and wanted to play catch with the football, but Kenny told him to do his homework first. They played catch later, and around dinner time, his momma and older sister arrived home. *They would have found me by now*, Kenny convinced himself.

Joining Momma in the kitchen while she cooked, he talked about his new job with animated excitement. It was unclear what his duties would be, yet, or how much it paid, but he knew this was the beginning of his ascent up the ladder of success.

Momma was skeptical. Her mother and father had been poor, so she didn’t have the advantages she provided for her kids. Working full time, she had put herself through college and earned a degree in nursing. There was no such thing as quick money. You had to pay your dues to make your way in this world. Kenny anticipated her concerns and was ready for the lecture, enduring it to the end.

“Someone does not go from dock laborer to a cushy business suit overnight. How could you quit your real job before knowing for sure about this so-called dream job? Haven’t I always told you never to burn a bridge?”

Her eldest son couldn’t help being a little offended. “I’ve worked hard for this opportunity, and Mr. Deshay respects my work ethic. Besides, it’s not like he offered me the presidency of his company. I’ll have to start at an entry-level position just like anybody else.”

Momma didn’t look convinced, but then he got an idea. “Wait a second.” He ran to his room and came back with a Fortune 500 magazine. “This man on the cover is Michael Deshay. They did a story on him, talking about how he got started, and now Deshay Enterprises is a Fortune 500 company. Talk about paying your dues?”

She gawked at the magazine, “Let me see that.” Momma read the caption, and then said, “How do you know this man? He is, obviously, very rich.”

“Momma, you’re not listening! He buys exotic sports cars from Import Goods, and my first day on the job six years ago was the day he bought his first car. I mean, what’s the odds on that?” She looked thoughtful, so he pressed his advantage.

“I told him I’m finished next month, so he said to show up tomorrow morning, and he would put my education to good use.” She studied the magazine again and said, “This man said that to you?”

“Yes, he did,” Kenny answered, more hurt than offended, this time.

With concern in her voice, momma said, “Baby, please be careful.”

Kenny got excited and gave her a big hug. “Thanks, Momma.”

"I'm serious. It may seem great now, but for all you know, you fill the quota of minorities in the workplace. Then, in six months, you're no longer needed. It's more difficult for a black man to make it in..."

"Momma, I know," he interrupted. "He's one of the good guys, I promise. 'If we want them to respect us, we must give them the same respect.'"

His momma joked, "Oh, now you remember what your father tells you?" Kenny laughed while she pondered Michael Deshay's picture further. "I pray this is everything you hope for, baby. If it's not, then you better be prepared to go back to Frank, begging on your hands and knees for your job back."

Kenny laughed, but now Frank haunted his attempt at happiness. Not knowing was driving him crazy.

Momma opened the refrigerator. "I forgot we're outta milk." She grabbed a twenty-dollar-bill from her purse and told her son, "I also need butter and..." she opened the cupboard and said, "Rice and bread." She handed Kenny the money and retrieved a frying pan from the lower cabinet. "Be quick now, I'm gonna get dinner started."

A sense of panic rose in the pit of his stomach. "Momma, I have to tell you something, can you send one of them?" he asked, nodding toward his sister and brother watching television.

His beautiful sister, Lisa, who had recently turned twenty-seven, turned her head and asked, "You got a problem, skinny butt?"

"Yeah, I need you to run to the store for me, fat ass."

"Don't call your sister that," Momma demanded.

"You got a broken leg or somethin'?" Lisa asked.

"You got a broken face?"

"That makes no sense," and she turned back to the television. Terrell just shook his head at Kenny.

"Momma..."

"Since when do I need to ask you twice? Now, get your skinny butt to the store," she commanded, smacking his backside. "You can tell me when you get back."

Talking back to Momma was out of the question. Kenny soon stood on the porch, gazing at the setting sun. Shadows crept across the cracked pavement of the street. There was nothing out of the ordinary as orange light turned to the gray of the evening.

He could make it to the store and back in fifteen minutes, tops. A man running in this neighborhood was usually incriminating evidence, but Kenny soon hit his stride. He reached the store in record time, but as soon as the items were purchased and his foot hit the sidewalk, a feeling of panic struck him like a ton of bricks. In full sprint back home, or as close as you can be with a bag of groceries in hand, he begged God, *Please let them be okay.*

Rounding the final turn, Kenny pulled up abruptly and froze at the sight of a black, four-door Mercedes Benz parked in front of the house. His eyes shot to the porch where his momma stood, mouth taped shut, and a large dark-haired white man standing beside her. The front door opened, and an even bigger man, with long blond hair in a pony-tail, came out of the house. He grabbed Momma forcefully by the arm.

The two thugs occupied space as if they owned it, surveying the land in search of other prey. Kenny's fear for his mother was debilitating. He couldn't think. He couldn't move.

His head turned left and right, desperately looking for help, but the streets seemed unusually deserted. Where

was everyone? Had someone seen his momma gagged and called the police? Kenny peered toward Old Lady Barnes's house. Was the curtain of her window partially open? How long would it take the police to answer to more ghetto violence?

A check on Momma revealed both men watching him. A chill rippled over his entire body. It was nearly dark, but he could feel the intensity of their scrutiny boring into his soul. He couldn't believe the audacity of these two white men standing in plain view on his porch. *This is the "hood," dammit.*

The dark-haired man reached inside his jacket, and then the blond did the same. It was now more dark than light, but Kenny knew what the action meant. He dropped the groceries and stepped into the street.

"If we go, we go together." Talking to himself was no longer comforting.

Kenny stopped about ten feet away from the porch.

"Did you tell your family what you saw?" It was the dark-haired man who spoke.

The long-haired blond gunman looked like a bodybuilder, even with a suit on, but it was the other one who was to be feared. He was clean-cut, business-like, and his voice demanded obedience. His eyes were cold but intelligent. This man was evil.

Then Kenny realized he'd just seen the two men clearly for the first time. Other than their size, he wouldn't have been able to give an accurate description of their faces for whatever happened to Frank. Would his family die for no reason? Momma stood still, but defiant. Kenny gathered strength from her courage.

"I didn't tell anyone. My family knows nothing."

Both men studied him. The blond turned his head to the other, wondering what to do next. The clean-cut gunman never looked away from Kenny's eyes, and even though it made his knees weak, he determinedly held the man's gaze.

There seemed to be no hurry or attempt at hiding their identity. *How do these assholes expect to get away with this?* Kenny was morbidly curious at the undeniable confidence. Then the devil spoke.

"I believe you."

In one fluid motion, the clean-cut gunman pulled out his gun. Pointing it at Kenny, he said, "I will spare your family," and then he pulled the trigger. The shot pierced the quiet night, commanding the attention of every living thing. Kenny died immediately, a single shot between the eyes, perhaps with an instant of peace.

The agonizing scream of his momma, muffled by the gag, trailed off to a whine as she buckled in the blond gunman's grip. The clean-cut gunman put his nine-millimeter back into the shoulder holster under his suit jacket and walked to the car. The blond man let Kenny's mom fall to the porch and quickly followed his leader, continuing to the driver's side of the vehicle. After a quick survey of the neighborhood, he got in and drove away.

Momma stumbled down the porch steps and crumbled next to her beloved son, struggling to lift him enough to cradle his limp body in her arms as she cried into the pitiless night. The wound in his forehead leaked tears of blood down his face.

Kenny would never see the new house, and he would never start his new job. He would never realize his dream of being a successful businessman.

“Why didn’t we kill them all?” The blond gunman asked.

“I was only paid to kill the boy.”

“But they saw us.”

“If I were concerned with being identified, they would all be dead.”

“I don’t understand,” the blond insisted.

“No one knows my true identity, and no one can find me unless I want them to.”

The blond man took a second look at the other. “Really?” After a moment, he asked, “What about me?”

“Our employer has plans for you.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t that he wanted to do anything else with his life, but he didn’t know how to feel about his boss, Angelino Carmen, deciding his future for him. Perhaps, he should be flattered that head of the Cleveland Crime Family believed him capable of...whatever he had planned.

“What about the rich dude in the Ferrari? We could have asked the kid who he was or where to find him.”

“I already know the answer to both questions. Mr. Carmen has something quite sinister planned for him.”

“Mr. Deshay, how are you this evening?” chimed the valet parking attendant as he opened the door for Michael’s date. He was known around town as a great tipper, so valets were always happy to see him. Not to mention, they wanted a chance to park one of his exotic cars.

“I’m fine, thank you,” he answered.

“Your date looks stunning tonight, sir.”

“I’m sure she would appreciate the compliment more than I would.”

“Oh, right, sir, of course, sir,” the valet stammered, embarrassed. He turned his attention to the woman.

“You look lovely tonight, miss.”

“Lovely?” she asked. “You told Michael I was stunning. Have I fallen so quickly?”

Even more embarrassed, the valet responded, “No, of course not. You do look stunning.”

She winked at Michael and smiled at the valet, “Thank you.”

Michael smirked at Rebecca. *Poor guy*, he thought. A woman as beautiful as Rebecca Trudeau was enough to intimidate any man, but with her high intellect and quick wit? She was downright dangerous. Michael walked up to the valet and handed him the keys, wrapped in a hundred dollar bill.

“Be gentle.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll take good care of her,” the attendant assured him, and soon pulled away – semi-smoothly.

“Awful serious,” Michael’s date replied.

“He gets nervous sometimes,” Michael responded, and then added, “A little adversity is good for the soul,” as he offered his arm to Rebecca.

Rebecca Trudeau was the daughter of Lawrence Trudeau, a highly successful businessman who made his fortune in international banking and the Forex money trade. A second-generation American, by way of France, he was all but retired now.

Most of the time, he played golf, gambled, or bought expensive gifts for his wife. He had high hopes for his daughter and Michael and was not shy about it.

Michael enjoyed these high-society affairs. They could drag on a little sometimes, especially if the people he talked to were boring. It was the occasions of brilliance that he appreciated. The opportunities to match wits with some of the most influential men in the world. He truly loved being part of the business world and the challenges it brought his way.

Tall, with an athletic build, chiseled face, and broad shoulders, the handsome businessman was a commanding figure whose presence alone spoke of confidence. It also helped to have a stunning woman like Rebecca on his arm. A classic beauty, with flowing brunette hair and a statuesque, sultry figure, she had the look and bearing of the aristocratic society she grew up and flourished in.

But her looks weren’t the most impressive part of this fascinating woman. The twenty-nine-year-old beauty was also a highly successful businesswoman, who had just become the president of her father’s financial empire. She had an aggressive business reputation. Some used the word snake, but Michael had yet to see it in their business endeavors, and whenever he spoke with her on a personal level, she always seemed personable and friendly. It was the mystery of Rebecca Trudeau that prompted his interest in a possible romantic relationship.

As the two made their grand entrance to the party, people whispered and smiled at how lovely a couple they made. Neither seemed to mind the attention. It appeared as if they were born for it.

The next few hours found the impressive pair making their rounds through the party. Michael had attended enough of these affairs to know most of the major players, so he didn’t make any new contacts this night. There were several interesting conversations, however, so he considered the evening a success.

All talked out, he wanted to spend some quality time alone with Rebecca. They were on a date, after all. He respected her as a businesswoman, but he wanted to learn more about the person. So, he hunted her down and asked if she would like to go for a late drink.

“Sure, but we better say goodnight to my father. He would be hurt if we didn’t.”

“I’m way ahead of you. He’s over there talking to the governor.” They walked over to the group, politely timing their arrival with a break in the conversation.

“Hi, daddy. Another wonderful party.” You could hear the love and respect for her father.

“Bekka! You look beautiful. I keep hearing how lovely my daughter is tonight, but I’ve only seen you from across the room.” Speaking to the governor, he asked, “Robert, doesn’t she look lovely?”

Lawrence Trudeau was known to speak his mind to whomever his audience, regardless of their station. A kind man with only the best of intentions made him well-loved by family and friends.

“She is beautiful as always, Lawrence.” Turning to Rebecca, the governor reached to shake her hand and said, “It’s always a pleasure to see you, Rebecca.”

“Thank you, governor. It’s good to see you, as well.”

Governor Wilson turned to Michael. “Mr. Deshay, I commend you on your work with the underprivileged. Your cleaning up of the east side of Cleveland has everyone talking.”

“Thank you, governor, but I’m afraid I can’t take much credit. The good people of that neighborhood did all of the real work. I just helped get them pointed in the right direction.”

The governor referred to a program Michael used to systematically tear down a poverty-stricken area and rebuild the businesses, schools, and housing without raising the rents or displacing residents. He limited national chains and required small businesses to be locally owned. Money going into the area needed to stay in the area. The community thrived and experienced record-low crime rates.

“I appreciate your modesty, Michael, but that was ingenious and changed the lives of so many people,” Lawrence commented.

“Thank you, Mr. Trudeau. It’s nice to see good people do well.”

“Indeed. Oh, hey, not to change the subject or anything, but I hear you bought yourself another toy,” Lawrence said enthusiastically.

Michael smiled, “Yes, sir. I couldn’t resist the new Ferrari F355 Berlinetta.”

“I hear it’s fast.”

“Zero to sixty in four-point-six-seconds.”

“Holy crap. You’ll have to take me for a ride sometime,” Lawrence remarked, and then he winked as he added, “I’ve been considering giving a sports car a try myself.”

Rebecca gave him a startled look. “You decide to get adventurous now?”

“Sure, why not? I never got to go through my mid-life crises. I was too busy working.” The group laughed. Michael added, “Anytime, sir. Let me know when you’re ready – we won’t tell your daughter.”

She turned to him, “You’re not helping.”

Lawrence laughed as he spoke to the governor, but made his statement loud enough for the entire group to hear. “He became a billionaire before his thirtieth birthday, yet he still calls me sir. You don’t see that kind of respect with the younger generation.”

“Daddy,” interceded Rebecca, “You’re very wise, but I’m sure your guests would enjoy more interesting conversation than the demise of today’s youth.”

“You’re right, sweetheart,” Lawrence concluded and then said, “See that? My daughter was able to tell me to shut up while being polite and respectful.”

Michael whispered into her ear, “That’s a lovely shade of red your face is wearing.”

With a pleading look, she asked, “Would you be a dear and rescue me?”

Enjoying his good-natured torturing, Michael appeared to contemplate her request.

Then, Lawrence smiled mischievously and said, “You know, you two make a wonderful couple.”

Michael glanced at Rebecca, who turned a droll glare on him. He responded with a self-deprecating grimace

and then replied to Lawrence with his finest smile and said, "Thank you, sir, that's very kind."

Then, with a glance at his watch, he added, "Look at that, it's getting late. Rebecca and I were thinking of going for a late drink on the lakefront. Would you mind if we took off?"

Anything that would promote the advancement of their relationship was acceptable to Lawrence.

"Of course, you two run along and have a good time."

"Thank you, sir."

They shook hands, and Rebecca hugged her father. "Thanks, daddy." She kissed him on the cheek and promised to see him tomorrow. They said their good-byes and made their exit.

"A basic get-a-way, but effective," she stated.

"Sometimes, simple is best."

Finally, clear of the party, they had the valet retrieve his car, and they left. Rebecca lived up to her direct reputation, telling him, "It's no secret my father likes you, but I want you to know there's no pressure."

"I appreciate that," he answered. "Let's just see what happens."

"I agree. Now, you better hurry me home to change, or we'll never get to that drink."

At her apartment, a simple kiss turned into an unbridled passion, culminating in passionate love-making.

"I have to go," Michael said, apologetically, as he stared at the ceiling.

"Okay," Rebecca replied. A little surprised, he looked over at her. She smiled. "Disappointed, I'm not begging you to stay and grace my bed with your presence."

Always appreciative of skilled sarcasm, he feigned hurt feelings. "A little."

They both giggled and relaxed. Michael kissed her and got out of bed. "I'll call you in a couple days."

Enjoying his nakedness, she responded, "That's what they all say."

He laughed as he put his pants on. Rebecca decided to take advantage of their momentum. "I have tickets to The Phantom of the Opera...a musical. Would you like to go?"

Pretending to be offended, he said, "I know what a musical is," and then added, "I've never been to one. But, I know what they are."

"Well, now you have a chance to actually go to one. It'll be fun."

"Yeah, okay," he agreed.

"Great. And this is my date, so everything's on me. I'll be by with a limo at six o'clock sharp on Sunday. All you have to do is dress up and look handsome."

Michael completed dressing, so he knelt on the bed and leaned over her. "I'll do my best." After a short but purposeful kiss, Rebecca asked, "Are you sure you don't want to stay?"

"I wish I could," he answered, reluctantly heading for the doorway. "I'm taking on a new assistant in the morning. I need to sleep a little."

"We could try to sleep in the same bed and, actually sleep."

He laughed, “Yeah, right. I’ll see you Sunday.”

On his way home, Michael considered how he would start Kenny out at the company. He expected an explanation for the strange incident that morning and couldn’t help wondering why Kenny never called back. He didn’t want to be that guy who lectures all the time, though. *People learn philosophies and tune out lectures.*

By the time he reached his bed, it was well after midnight, so sleep came quickly.

Michael slept.

Michael dreamed.