

Seventeen year old Slate Jake whistled softly as he shaved in front of the bathroom mirror. Slate was tall, blonde, with hazel eyes, and cool, so cool, but the last thing he wanted to do was wake up Antoine before Antoine was ready to be woken up. Been there done that, and it wasn't pretty. Slate couldn't be happier with the way things had been working out since the day Antoine de la Cruce dropped down in the middle of the dismal berg that was Indian Plains, Massachusetts, and found him in the process.

It was a drizzly cold night, six months ago now, just last April. Slate was standing in front of Friendly's at the Eastfield Center, smoking a cigarette and counting his change to see if he had enough for French fries and a coke (he didn't). Everybody else had gone home: Fat Boy, Sticks, Trigger. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. The usual in this boring nowhere town. But the last place Slate wanted to be was home. Home. That was rich. He'd never had a home. He had a house. Big beautiful house envy of everybody in Indian Plains. Right. You live there, then, with morose loopy Mom and Dr. Dad who was always everywhere else but there.

He'd been thinking of a way to get the cash for the French fries and coke. Man, he wanted those bad. Just a couple streets over were the Willamansett Projects. It was Saturday night, and there was always a couple three drunks idling curbside palms up. Quick move in, quick stash snatch...bingo...but before he could complete the mental picture, suddenly, like an apparition forming from a wisp of smoke, like some ghost suddenly embodied out of the mist and drizzle, he was there, standing right beside him.

Antoine de la Cruce. He was tall; he towered over Slate and Slate was 6'2". His skin was olive, his hair silver and slicked back from his forehead; his eyes in the dim light looked as black as his hair. He introduced himself, holding out his hand. The skin of his hand was soft as plush as a velvet glove. He said he'd just moved into town, was looking for a place to eat, would Slate care to join him for dinner?

Slate was thunderstruck. It was as if Antoine de la Cruce had read his mind.

And that wouldn't be the last time.

The blade knicked his face. Slate winced as bright red stains sprouted through the shaving cream. He drew his finger across the blood, and lifted the finger to his mouth. Then, he touched the finger to his lips.

Decked out in pin-striped perfectly tailored black suits complete with blazing white shirts, Slate and Antoine sped along the I-91 south to Hartford in Slate's vintage black 1965 classic Mustang. The suits belonged to Antoine; Slate was wearing a hand-me-down that Antoine had tailored for him. Slate glanced over at Antoine as he lounged easily in the passenger seat, his head tilted back, eyes closed, rocking out to Ozzy Osbourne, his ivory serpent-tipped cane bobbing rhythmically along. Man, the guy could wear a suit! He could wear anything, actually, and look like a million bucks. Even in sweats and a tee as he worked around the house, Antoine looked suave, sophisticated, elegant. This was just one of the many things Slate vowed he was going to learn from this mystifying presence that so randomly dropped into his life. Learn as quickly as he could, before he disappeared as haphazardly as he had appeared.

They pulled up in front of one of Antoine's favorite nightclubs, The Side Car. Slate had visited this club with Antoine often in the six months he'd known him. Here, Antoine was a VIP; he was greeted fawningly, shown the best table, and offered as many free drinks as the ones he paid for. And no one ever took a second glance at Slate or asked to see an ID. Antoine had that covered anyway if anyone ever did; he was a master at paperwork, even had some phony paper of his own, just in case...Slate never asked what the just in case part was; he figured if Antoine wanted him to know, he'd tell him.

The entertainment at the Side Car was wide-ranging and mind-blowing. They featured all kinds of bands from hip-hop to jazz. Slate had seen Big Bad Voodoo Daddy there and instantly fell in love

with their music. Antoine bought him all their CDs. They had dancers—male and female—that were really acrobats, like Cirque du Soleil performers, who could juggle, walk on stilts, breathe-fire, and even do high wire acts, all under the Side Car roof.

The problem was the drinking. Slate was no push-over when it came to liquor—beer, wine, or hard liquor. He learned young and he learned fast, living in that cold dismal house, and alcohol sure had a mellow way of soothing his pain and easing his loneliness. It also catapulted him to popularity. Dr. Daddy off to who knows where, Mommy Loopy locked in her despair and dead to the world on her Xanax low—Party Time!

But he'd never met anyone who could put it away like Antoine—and he wasn't just talking about kids. His relatives, including Dr. Daddy could pound the sauce like sailors on leave after six months on the high seas, but Antoine would've put any one of them under the table. That is what he did to Slate night after night every night they hit the clubs in Hartford. Slate always promised himself this night would be different, but it never was. The booze kept on flowing, and Antoine kept on grinning, and the dancers kept on breathing fire and swinging high above him and the music kept on playing louder and faster and the room kept on swirling until everything whirled into bright kaleidoscope colors, and time just collapsed and was swept away, until he woke up alone in his bedroom in Antoine's house, the window open, the fresh breeze blowing, and his head the size of Mt. Vesuvius and ready to blow.

And so the night was, once again, the same. Ending once again, the same.

Slate forced himself to sit up, pushing up against the backboard of the bed.

The movement made his head spin. He felt bile rise in his throat. With great effort, he forced it back down. He would not vomit in this pristine room. This room that was his. This room Antoine had made over just for him.

The night he had dinner with Antoine, he offered him a job. He told him he'd just moved to Indian Plains and bought a Victorian Mansion on the prestigious North side right across from Indian Plains State Park, and he needed help with the renovations. Of course he didn't tell him exactly *which* house he'd bought though that wouldn't have made a difference, Slate was sure. He needed work. He needed good old-fashioned dinero, and he probably would've done just about anything to get it. Well, outside of the obvious bad stuff. Antoine had come to start a business in the Pioneer Valley, and there were lots of opportunities. He told Slate he was going into Education Knowledge, and he wanted Slate to work with him on his business, too. But first, was to get the old Victorian in shape.

Slate jumped on the offer. No more counting change under a streetlight for French fries and a coke and coming up short. He'd been painting houses since he was fourteen. Piece of cake no matter what shape the place was in. He almost fell out of the booth when Antoine told him what he would pay. Antoine just grinned. "All you have to do is earn it."

The first time Slate pulled up in front of the house, 696 Huntington Lane, to report for work, truthfully, it did send a shiver down his spine. There'd been rumors floating around Indian Plains about 696 since Slate was a little kid: that there'd been a suicide; a suicide-homicide; the boogey-man lived there. That one came from his mom he was pretty sure just to keep him away from the place that'd been empty and dilapidated since he could remember.

But after he started working, Slate realized it was just a house, and he liked what was happening to it under his hands. Soon, he started working later and later, not wanting to stop, working sometimes fourteen and sixteen hour days. Then, he started crashing at Antoine's. It was only logical. He'd be dead on his feet; Antoine had six or seven bedrooms. He'd call the folks, never reaching anyone of course, leave a message about being at Fat Boys, at Sticks, even Trigger's. He knew they'd freak at the idea of their dearly beloved son crashing with the new dude in town—the new mysterious grown-up dude.

Antoine had hired a crew, of course, but once Slate came along, once he'd plucked him off the streets and into his home, and once Slate proved his mettle, Antoine appointed him the foreman of the job. This rankled many of the workers, men who were in the thirties, even forties; men who'd worked construction for decades. Just who was this snot-nosed punk the boss plucked out of nowhere to order everyone around? The few who dared put a voice to the rumblings found out real fast where that led: dismissal, rapid and final. No second chance.

With his crew in place organized and supervised, Antoine often wasn't around. At these times he'd whisper to Slate "You're my eyes and ears. That's why I'm paying you the salary I am. I want to know everything that goes on."

But there were also plenty of times when Antoine was there, working side by side with Slate, sometimes sixteen, eighteen hour days. His work was impeccable, and he guided his young apprentice not only through the reading of the blueprints, but through the planning, the buying, the meticulous steps of construction. He also taught him the methods of working with a crew, his crew. Antoine had a distinct style, carrot and sticks—if carrots failed the sticks were swift and as painful as painful as possible. Slate learned well at his master's knee.

Soon the nights he spent at Antoine's extended into several, and then several more, and then, on the day of his eighteenth birthday, right before school started again, September 2nd, all pretense vanished, and Slate simply moved in. Let his parents piss and moan all they wanted, there wasn't anything they could do about it now. He was eighteen and an adult.

Antoine entered with a mug of steaming coffee, as fresh, as dapper as if he'd spent three days at a spa rather than all night carousing at nightclubs. His cagey grin split his face. Slate looked up at him and groaned.

"How do you do it?" Slate asked.

"Do what?" Antoine replied innocently.

Slate groaned again. "Achhh! Don't mess with me! My head's gonna explode into a million pieces!"

Antoine laughed heartily, and sat on the edge of Slate's bed. He handed him the coffee. "Drink."

Slate took a long draught of the coffee. "Thanks. It's really good."

"It'll bring you 'round. Eventually."

Slate groaned again.

"You'll get used to it. It's necessary training."

"For what?"

Antoine smiled. "You'll see." He rose from the bed. "My work...our work takes great discipline. That's what you're learning now."

"Really? How to drink buckets and not puke or pass out."

"You've passed the not puking phase."

"Mission accomplished."

"Oh, no. Not nearly so."

Slate looked at him baffled. The guy was a jigsaw puzzle of a million million pieces.

"Drink your coffee. Shower. Get cleaned up. I need you downstairs."

"Yes, sir, Major General, sir!"

Antoine laughed, and left the room.

Slate wiped his hand across his sweaty face. When he drew it back, he noticed his fingernails were lined with something dark and rusty-colored.

Suddenly, images flashed: woods, a wide piece of stone, an altar, moonlight, candle light, a Side Car dancer, chanting, black robes...

Quickly, he lifted his finger to his mouth and licked the substance.

Ketchup? What the hell?

He searched his foggy brain. McDonald's? Burger King? Jack in the Box?

No use. Antoine held all the cards, and he was going to play them exactly when and as he wanted to.

The late September afternoon was bright and balmy as the St. Therese Lions faced the Clarkston Panthers in the first practice game of the season. Though just a scrimmage, really, the stands were jammed-packed. Clarkston and St. Therese were long-time rivals. Marching Bands were on hand as were the Cheerleading squads. Practice was just a word on a piece of paper.

On the sidelines during a break in play, Willowy Mary Rodriguez, the cheerleader's team captain, her long auburn hair pulled tightly back from her face in a high pony tail, her full lips glossed with rose pink, called her guys on loan from the High School Gymnastics Team over. Mary was small, compact, and acrobatic, and the fellas from gymnastics loved to throw her as high as she could fly. After a brief confab on the routines she wanted, the show began. The rest of the squad surrounded Mary's flying act in another prepared formation, this one led by Trigger Jenkins, real name Isabelle. Trigger had just joined the squad that summer, though Mary had been after her since freshman year. Coach Marsala always said no. It wasn't her rough home life, Marsala assured Mary, or a "wrong side of the tracks," thing. It was Trigger herself. She was short and compact and as athletic as Mary, but she was unpredictable, edgy, and tough. Mary thought those characteristics were actually assets for the dynamic squad she wanted to build. After two seasons of fruitless pleading, this season, Marsala agreed to give it a go, with one strict warning; Trigger steps out of line one time—she's out.

The double routine, Mary's performance of a series of gravity-defying stunts coupled with the complementing ground routines that enhanced Mary's tumbling sky show, brought the crowd to its feet.

Whistles blew and play resumed.

Coach Bill Moge, a man who could be more readily taken for an angry troll than a coach puffed on his everlasting cigar, and slapped each player on the back as they trotted onto the field, yelling indistinguishable remarks.

In the stands, Antoine de la Cruce, impeccable dressed in a polo shirt and light khaki pants observed the small town pageant playing out before his eyes. Seated next to him was a squat round man puffing furiously on a cigarette. When the player with Bator stitched across his back took the field, the man bounced up like a jack-in-the-box. "You go, Eric! Show 'im who's the boss!" He bellowed as he punched his fist into the air.

Antoine turned toward the gentleman and smiled, offering his hand. "You must be Mr. Bator."

Mr. Bator sat back down and grinned sheepishly. Taking his hand, he replied, "George. That's my boy out there. Eric."

"He looks like a fine young man."

"Oh, yeah, well, ya know....Kids."

"Ah. Of course. I'm Antoine de la Cruce."

"You have a son in the game?"

Antoine's eyes twinkled. "A friend. Helper. Very good helper. Slate Jake."

"Ah. Jake." George Bator's eyes did not twinkle.

"You know him?"

"Oh, yeah. A course. They all go to school together. They all know each other. Eric, Jake, Michael – he's the quarterback..." Suddenly, Bator's attention snapped back to the field. "Uh-oh...uh-oh..."

"What is it? What's happening?"

"Watch de Vries!"

Michael de Vries in a perfect circle of protection had cocked back his arm and hurled a bullet downfield to his wide receiver Eric Bator. Eric tall and lanky leapt like a gazelle, snagging the ball, and breaking for the end zone. George Bator was on his feet trumpeting like a basset hound. But rushing just behind him was a Clarkston D-Back, as big and square as Eric was gangly and long-limbed. And nobody was on the D-Back. Though built like a mountain, the boy could run, and the D-Back stomped after Eric, until he was close enough to pounce, knocking him to the ground with a flying tackle.

Valiantly, Eric tucked the ball to his chest, but the shock of the tackle was too much, and the ball squirted from his fingers. Another Defensive-back recovered the ball and raced ninety yards for a touchdown.

In the stands, a disgusted George Bator, threw his cigarette to the ground, grinding it beneath his workman's boot. "Freakin' Tommy LaFavre!"

Without another word, he turned and stomped toward the exit.

Down on the sidelines, the mood wasn't any better. Bill Moge wasn't about to throw away a good cigar, but he chomped it furiously, bellowing to Eric on the field, "What the hell's the matter with you, Bator! You couldn't hold onto a pass if your hands were soaked in tar!"

On the field, Michael de Vries made his way to Eric, offering a hand to help him up. Eric angrily shoved it away.

Across the field, Slate Jake slowly removed his helmet, his eyes never leaving Eric Bator.

Downfield, Mary Rodriguez walked toward the high school with Tommy LaFavre's arm draped loosely around her.

Inside the locker room, despite the loss, the St. Therese boys romped like young puppies, flicking their towels at each other, pushing shoving, slamming locker doors, and singing wildly off key.

Michael, freshly showered and dressed approached Eric who sat alone on the bench in front of his open locker, still in his stained and dirty uniform. Moge, spying Eric, wasn't ready to let it go. Reaching Eric, he slammed the locker door shut. It sounded like a gunshot ricocheting in the raucous room, which instantly went silent.

"What's up with you?" he asked in a terrifying whisper.

Slate Jake, impeccably dressed in a sport coat and chinos, quietly closed his locker door and walked softly to the mirrors. Whistling lightly, he combed his hair, but his attention was riveted on Moge and Eric.

"You had the ball in your hands! Right in your hands!"

Eric said nothing. He didn't even look up.

Moge sprang. He shoved Eric's shoulder hard against the locker. "Look at me when I'm talkin' to you! You ain't playin' Saturday. You got that? You hear me? Answer me!"

"Yes." Eric replied softly.

"Good. He can speak. You got one more chance. You blow it one more time, and you are off the team. Got it!"

"Yes."

Then Moge turned to the rest of the team. "Most of you probably know this already—heard it one way or the other. We got Tommy LaFavre comin' aboard startin' tomorrow. I'd say he put on a pretty good show today. He's earned a spot here—so I don't want no rivalry nonsense with any of you, got that?"

The team responded with a large chorus of: "Yes, Sir! Coach Moge, sir!"

Moge popped his cigar in his mouth and clomped away.

After Moge existed, the motion inside the locker room resumed, but the mood was somber and the boys spoke in hushed tones, dressing quickly and exiting without good-byes.

Michael, who stayed at Eric's side during his entire humiliation, sat down on the bench beside him.

"Did you know about LaFavre?" Eric asked staring straight ahead.

"I heard rumors. I never thought he'd make it because of his grades."

"You didn't think maybe it was something I should know?"

"Eric. It was common knowledge. I thought you did know. I didn't think it was worth discussion."

"Right."

"Come on. Get showered and changed. Your mom's waiting dinner."

Eric didn't respond.

"Forget LaFavre. He's nothing. Forget Moge. He's an idiot. Everybody knows that." Michael stood up. "Come on, now. I'll be waiting for you in the car." Michael patted Eric's shoulder, and left.

The locker room, now empty, grew eerily quiet. The echoes of the boys seemed to reverberate like ghost sounds, like hauntings of happy care-free kids, the kind of kid Eric knew he would never be.

Like a viper, he suddenly uncoiled. He rose from the bench and hurled his helmet full force against the bank of mirrors, shattering the glass.

A peal of raucous laughter rang out, trilling above the shattering of the glass and the lingering joyous cries of the ghostly locker room boys. Slate Jake stepped out from a bathroom stall.

"Way to go, Bator," he crowed. "Too bad those mirrors weren't Moge's face!"

He sauntered down to Eric. "de Vries is right, ya know. Moge is an idiot. Though, I might use choicer language."

"Get out of here, Jake. What're you doing? Eavesdropping now?"

"Ah, excuse me...using the facilities isn't allowed?" He propped his foot up on the bench. "There wasn't a damn thing wrong with the way you played. Come on! I saw it! We all saw it! Where was your cover? Moge say a freakin' thing about that? That D-back came outta nowhere—guy built like a brick shithouse and runs like an Appaloosa! Man! He hit you, I thought he killed you! The problem ain't with you, buddy. The problem's with LaFavre."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"I knew LaFavre at Clarkston. Before I came here. Before my folks did the "You'd be better off...blahblahblah...thing, ya know?"

Eric shrugged but said nothing.

"LaFavre's a brown-noser. A real suck-up. Did it over there. And he's gonna do it over here. You think these coaches don't talk to each other? Teacher's pet. Coach's boy. That's who LaFavre is."

"He's a pretty good ball player, too."

"He's an okay ball player. But he gets the breaks. It's those breaks...those opportunities that do the trick. You can't show anybody what you can do riding the pine."

"No shit."

"If LaFavre'd been hit like you were, de Vries, Moge would've been hustling tea and cookies out to the field, calling 911 for an ambulance..."

Eric pushed past Slate, pulling his jersey over his head.

"You wanna start Saturday?"

Eric looked back at Slate. "What'd you think, bright boy?"

Slate was leaning against the banks of lockers, flipping open a switchblade. "Bring me a piece of Tommy LaFavre's hair."

Eric turned away from him, stripping off his pants. "You're crazy, you know that, Jake? Freakin' nutz0."

“Maybe. Why don’t you try me.” He set the knife down beside Eric’s duffle bag. “What’d ya got to lose?”
