

OVERNIGHT SENSATION

CHAPTER ONE

They may have been called “the beautiful people” but, for my money, most of them were butt ugly.

Overweight matrons balanced fruit baskets they called hats on their blue-haired heads. Pear-shaped gentlemen wore dark suits and shiny blue ties that they thought made them look “distinguished” but instead made them look pompous, feeble and ridiculous.

And these were the purported *crème de la crème* of modern society. What had the galaxy come to?

A small army of diminutive servers, each decked out in a gleaming black tuxedo, sped around the room with trays balanced on one extended arm, offering colorful but powerless libations and unidentifiable *hors d’oeuvres*. They looked like Keystone Kops, only smaller and slightly more efficient.

Clinging to my arm was my wife, Candy, the one glaring exception to the room’s apparent “ugly only” rule. She wore a skintight dress made of some type of shimmering pink material that clung as though someone had thrown it on her in a liquid state and it had dried there. Her rich, brown-red hair had been cut and shaped

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to give her a coolly professional edge but still warmly accentuated the sunshine of her face. Her deep blue-green eyes scanned the room as she pretended to look for friends and co-workers. She was really searching for someone who looked better than she did.

She was wasting her time.

I didn't look half-bad myself. I was wearing a brand new leather tux underneath a full-length black canvas duster. My hair was combed straight back from my forehead like a Latin lover's. The nearly neon polish on my black dress shoes reflected light like a mirror. I knew I wasn't one of the beautiful people but, all spiffed up in my brand new penguin suit with the only truly beautiful thing in the entire room on my arm, I felt pretty damned good.

Another of the little guys walked by and lifted his tray in our direction. I stared at the collection of psychedelic liquid thereon, curled my lip in disgust and waved him away.

"It wouldn't hurt you to try one," Candy said teasingly.

"Maybe," I told her. "But it'd hurt like hell if someone saw me drinking one."

"Ruin that tough guy image?"

"Yep. And I've been cultivating it for years. Be a shame to have it destroyed because of some frou-frou

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party.”

“Want a tequila?” Candy asked.

“Does a starwhale shit in the sky?”

Candy grimaced. “Where’d you learn to talk like that?”

“Bruno,” we said together, invoking the name of my old drill sergeant. We shared a laugh and then Candy headed off in search of liquid tolerance.

I watched her go, enjoying the view, and then turned in the opposite direction. Suddenly, a squat man stepped into my path. A half-dozen identically-dressed others froze behind him, their heads bobbing like those little plastic dogs you see in the rear windows of cars. These weren’t the little guys with the hors d’oeuvres. These were the big boys with the precision shatterguns.

The man in front of me beamed the crescent-shaped floodlight that was the smile that got him elected and held out a beefy hand. I smiled a warm greeting and shook it.

“Mr. President,” I said. “It’s good to see you.” I was lying, of course, but he would never know the difference. Then again, maybe he would. Lying was what he did for a living.

“Good to see you, Fist, good to see you,” he told me. I believed him about as much as I believed me. He pumped my hand with the kind of overwrought energy that only a politician can muster. “You’re looking well

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tonight. What is this? Leather?”

“Gen-u-ine,” I told him, pronouncing the ‘i’ like ‘eye.’ I straightened my back with civic pride. If the President said I looked good then I obviously did. The man was a fashion plate, if he was nothing else. Where the hell were the paparazzi when you needed them?

Pinching my lapel between his thumb and forefinger, the President stroked the material of my tux. “Very nice, Fist,” he cooed. His crooked, stubby fingers wriggled almost sensuously along the leather, like tomato worms thrown into a hot frying pan. “Very, very nice.”

“Yeah, but you can’t wear it in the rain,” I told him, gently taking his hand by the wrist and removing it from my tux. “Stinks like a bitch if it gets wet.”

I saw the heads of the Secret Service men behind him stop bobbing, as though somebody had pushed their “pause” button. They had seen me gently but forcibly remove the President’s hand and they had heard me utter the “bitch” word in his presence. Any minute now they would open fire, spilling my ungrateful brains onto the richly carpeted Presidential floor thus saving the President from a verbal terrorist attack.

Only that’s not the way it would go down, of course. By the time their neatly groomed fingers touched the butts of their well-hidden weapons, I would have

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rendered them all helpless with the flapjacker, transforming them from healthy, red-blooded secret service agents into two-dimensional images of their former selves. Then, just for fun, I might fold them up and fly them through the windows and into the Rose Garden like flesh-colored paper airplanes.

Fortunately, the President intervened. He eyed me with a strange, cockeyed stare — almost as though he was trying to determine whether or not I was serious — and then burst out laughing, belting out the guffaws in great, roaring blasts. “Fist, you are some kind of card, I’ll tell you what,” he bellowed. The Secret Service guys relaxed, unwittingly saving their lives. Then, as if reading my mind, the President smiled a naughty, little-boy smile and asked, “The flapjacker. May I see it?”

I nodded resignedly and reached under my lapel into the holster hidden beneath. It was always like this, every time I met up with the Prez. He’d make some half-assed greeting and then ask to see the flapjacker. I think the thing gave him wood.

As I pulled the weapon from its holster, I couldn’t help but admire its sleek, sweeping design. At first glance, it was just another pistol, cold and lifeless and ready to spit death. Another glance, however, and you realized it was more than that. There was an artistic style to it that

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other mere guns couldn't match. And the fluidity of its design gave it an even more menacing aura, like a rattlesnake hiding behind a rock. Its cool black surface glinted with beauty and malice and it almost seemed more than metal — it seemed like a malignant extension of the gunman who held it.

Hell, I was getting wood myself.

I passed the flapjacker to the President and watched as his overzealous Secret Service team tried to look like they didn't give a damn what the President held in his hands. Truth was they were envious of me, every mother-lovin' one of them. Any of them would have given his left nut to have what the President now held. But, like me, they'd have to earn it. And it wasn't easy.

The President's mouth formed a sensuous "o" as he stared down at the weapon in his palm. He held the flapjacker in his right hand and fingered its embossed design with his left. "What I wouldn't give ..." he said softly, "... to be able to fire this just once."

Of course, he knew he couldn't. The weapon was coded to my DNA and would respond only to my touch. If he or any of the other people in this room—hell, anyone else in this galaxy for that matter— tried to pull the trigger, they'd receive a blast of electricity that would knock them flat on their ass. I smiled, imagining the

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president looking up at me from the floor, wide-eyed, his perfect hair all spiky from a sudden dose of high voltage.

Alas, it wasn't to be. Wiping a sliver of drool from his egg-shaped chin, the President reluctantly passed the flapjack back to me. As I slid it into its holster, I noticed the heads of the Secret Service men ease back into their collars, like turtles into shells.

“And where is that delicious wife of yours, Fist?” the President continued, staring over my shoulder as though Candy were hiding behind me. She wasn't. I could see her across the cavernous room where she was saying hello to the Vice President and his wife. I watched her enviously, not only because she wasn't stuck having to make small talk with the President, but because she had a glass of tequila in each hand. On the rocks.

I considered objecting to the President's casual use of the term “delicious” when referring to my wife, but then realized, in all fairness, it was an accurate description. At least he had good taste in women.

Candy arrived not a moment too soon with the tequilas—a slender, tapered shot glass for her and a roomy tumbler for me. My eyes told her that I loved her as I snatched the tumbler from her and took a healthy gulp.

“Here she is!” the President eagerly spat, dismissing

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me with instant finality. “Candy Fist herself!”

“Mr. President,” Candy said. She smiled with real warmth, dipping her delectable chin respectfully and passing her tequila to me, out of harm’s way (or so she thought). Her voice was silky and smart. Her eyes nearly glowed from within. My chest swelled with husbandly pride.

The President opened his arms and embraced her. I barely stifled the urge to scream in abject horror as his thick, sausage-like body seemed to swallow Candy whole, allowing only her lovely little head to peek out over his padded shoulder. She caught me watching and gave me a playful wink. I made an ugly face at her (it wasn’t difficult while watching the human clam envelop her) and took another sip of my tequila. It was really good. Smooth, yet almost heavy with the taste of agave. Reyes Cartel, I guessed, Envejecido Finalmente. Very expensive stuff.

Reluctantly, the President released Candy from his meaty grip. She gave him a quick smile and immediately seized her tequila from me, draining it in a deep, healthy swallow. Probably to alleviate the crushing shock of that meat-clam hug. That or to prevent me from drinking it first. Smart girl.

“Well, Madame Treasurer,” the President bellowed, “Anything new on the updated cashunit technology?”

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Candy wagged her finger gently in the President's direction. "Now, now, Mr. President," she said. "You know as well as I do that this is a diplomatic event. Protocol prevents us from discussing business here."

The President looked over at me and shrugged. I decided that meant he wanted me to take another sip of my tequila. So I did.

"You're right, of course," he said to Candy. Then, louder: "We're here to honor the Reyes Cartel and all the good work they've done for the Alliance." He held an open palm to his lips and whispered, "Not to mention for my administration."

He turned toward the crowd, raised his glass and, beaming like the politician he was (which is to say like a Great White shark preparing to make a meal out of an unsuspecting sea lion), cried out, "To the Reyes Cartel!" Dozens of glasses were raised and dozens of voices replied, "Here, here!"

"I'll drink to that," I said. And did. "Damn, this is good tequila."

"Yes, yes," the President hurriedly agreed. "It's the very best of the Reyes Cartel. Top of the line. One-hundred-and-twenty-five percent Blue Agave. Not available in any store."

"No?" I frowned. "That's too bad. I guess I'll have to

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hide some in Candy's purse and smuggle it home."

Everyone thought I was kidding.

I wasn't.

The President smiled and leaned in closely, as though offering me some top secret tidbit from a clandestine operation. "I can get you some, if you like," he said. "You being a War Hero and all."

"I'd appreciate that," I whispered back, playing up the cloak-and-dagger stuff. "I'm sick of that synthetic shit."

Candy gave me a stern look. I ignored her. I may have cursed, but I was still being polite. Had I decked the leader of the Galactic Alliance for feeling up my wife?

No.

Not yet.

Anyway, I hoped he would keep his word. That way, the White House staff wouldn't bust me for trying to sneak out a bottle or two beneath my tux.

"I know what you mean about synth tequila," the President continued, ignoring my potty mouth. "Ever try and make a margarita with it? It foams like a rabid dog when you blend the ice."

I looked at Candy and mouthed the word, "Blended?" She shrugged and her eyes said, "No accounting for taste." Me, I could never trust a man who drank blended margaritas. And I was about to tell the President just that

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when the portacom in my pocket suddenly buzzed.

“Excuse me,” I said. The Secret Service men got all tense as I reached for it. I smiled to let them know that I knew what they were thinking and then laughed to show them how ridiculous it was.

“Fist,” I said into the portacom.

“Fist, it’s Sonny Beach.”

Sonny Beach. I hadn’t heard from him in what seemed like years. Beach was the Sheriff of the global village called Earth. His job was to maintain peace and order on a planet that had survived a series of increasingly bloody and pointless wars, twisted corporations that put money ahead of humankind and an invasion of the living dead. After all Earth had been through, her people deserved a calm, peaceful lifestyle. But there was always some asshole who wanted to fuck it up. And that’s where Beach came in. It was his job to stop them.

And sometimes, when he needed help, he called me.

“Sonny, how the hell are ya?” I said, genuinely pleased to hear from him. We’d had some good times after the war, before going our separate ways career-wise. “It’s been too long.”

“Sure has,” Beach replied. “Wish I was calling under better circumstances.” I caught the seriousness in his tone. This was no auld lang syne call. Something was up.

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“Go on,” I told him. I drained my tequila and set the empty glass on the piano beside me, earning a glare from the pink-suited pianist. I glared back. He looked quickly away. “What’s up?”

“Wondering if you might come pay us a visit. We could use some help.”

“With?”

“Jamie Goodgarden,” Beach told me. “You heard of him?”

I assumed that was a rhetorical question. Everybody had heard of Jamie Goodgarden. He was by far the galaxy’s most popular entertainer. His music albums had all gone multi-tritanium; his MindFlicks had broken box-office records; his books were all best-sellers. Jamie was a genuine jack-of-all-trades, entertainment-wise. It’s been said that he’d sold more books than the Bible and been seen by more people than the Pope. He was galaxy-renowned for his acts of charity and kindness and those who knew him personally all had the same thing to say about him: There was no one more genuine than Jamie Goodgarden.

I had seen him perform myself on a couple occasions. I couldn’t call myself a fan—I mean, the guy was no Lemmy Kilmister—but I liked his music all right. And his MindFlicks were usually entertaining enough. His books,

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however (mostly romance) were dull as hell.

“What about him?” I prompted.

“He’s dead,” Beach reported. “Someone just gunned him down in San Diego.”

I felt an ice-cold hand grab a fistful of my intestines and give them a firm squeeze. I fell back against the piano, hard, earning another slit-eyed scowl from the pianist. I ignored him. Fucking musicians. Probably didn’t even know where Middle C was.

Jamie Goodgarden was dead. Shot dead. The shock I was feeling wasn’t because I was overwhelmed about the loss but because I was thinking about the effect his death was going to have on the planet; hell, throughout the galaxy. I couldn’t even conceive what the next few days were going to bring as far as the media was concerned. Newspapers, magazines, television, NeuWorld. Tribute concerts, private gatherings, mass masses. The eventual biographical MindFlick. On and on and on and on. Ad nauseam.

“I’m on my way,” I told Sonny and dropped the portacom back into my pocket.

Candy knew from the ashen look on my face that the call hadn’t been good news. “H.B., what is it?”

“That was Sonny Beach,” I told her. “Jamie Goodgarden is dead.”

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A collective gasp went up from the people near enough to overhear. The President nearly choked on a cashew. “What?!” he exclaimed.

“Jamie Goodgarden is dead,” I repeated. “Somebody shot him.”

The gasps around me became exclamations of horror, expressions of sadness and bleated demands for more information. A few women started crying immediately. Sobbing, really.

I leaned forward and placed a quick peck on Candy’s cheek. “I’m sorry,” I said simply, ignoring the sudden chaos around me. “I gotta go.”

“I know,” Candy told me.

I shook the hand of the stunned President (at least the news had shut him up for a moment), said a few quick goodbyes and exited the White House at a jog.

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