

"Or an AR-15. You'd like it, Evelyn: it's the most expensive of guns, but worth every penny." I wink at her. But she's still talking; she doesn't hear a word, nothing registers. She does not fully grasp a word I'm saying. My essence is eluding her. She stops her onslaught and breathes in and looks at me in a way that can only be described as dewy-eyed. Touching my hand, my Rolex, she breathes in once more, this time expectantly and says, "We should do it."

I'm trying to catch a glimpse of our hardbody waitress; she's bending over to pick up a dropped napkin. Without looking back at Evelyn, I ask, "Do . . . what?"

"Get married," she says, blinking. "Have a wedding."

"Evelyn?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Is your kir . . . spiked?" I ask.

"We should do it," she says softly. "Patrick."

"Are you proposing to me?" I laugh, trying to fathom this reasoning. I take the champagne glass away from her and sniff its rim.

"Patrick?" she asks, waiting for my answer.

"Jeez, Evelyn," I say, stuck. "I don't know."

"Why not?" she asks petulantly. "Give me one good reason we shouldn't."

"Because trying to fuck you is like trying to French-kiss a very small and . . . lively gerbil?" I tell her. "I don't know."

"Yes?" she says. "And?"

"With braces?" I finish, shrugging.

"What are you going to do?" she asks. "Wait three years until you're thirty?"

"Four years," I say, glaring. "It's *four* years until I'm thirty."

"Four years. Three years. Three months. Oh god, what's the difference? You'll still be an old man." She takes her hand away from mine. "You know, you wouldn't be saying this if you'd been to Jayne Simpson's wedding. You'd take one look at it and want to marry me immediately."

"But I was at Jayne Simpson's wedding. Evelyn, love of my life," I say. "I was seated next to Sukhreet Gabel. Believe me, I was *there*."

"You're impossible," she whines. "You're a party pooper."

"Or maybe I didn't," I wonder aloud. "Maybe I . . . was it covered by MTV?"

"And their honeymoon was so romantic. Two hours later they were on the Concorde. To London. Oh, Claridge's." Evelyn sighs, her hand clasped under her chin, eyes tearing.

Ignoring her, I reach into my pocket for a cigar, pull it out and tap it against the table. Evelyn orders three flavors of sorbet: peanut, licorice and doughnut. I order a decaffeinated espresso. Evelyn sulks. I light a match.

"Patrick," she warns, staring at the flame.

"What?" I ask, my hand frozen in midair, about to light the tip of the cigar.

"You didn't ask permission," she says, unsmiling.

"Did I tell you I'm wearing sixty-dollar boxer shorts?" I ask, trying to appease her.

TUESDAY

There's a black-tie party at the Puck Building tonight for a new brand of computerized professional rowing machine, and after playing squash with Frederick Dibble I have drinks at Harry's with Jamie Conway, Kevin Wynn and Jason Gladwin, and we hop into the limousine Kevin rented for the night and take it uptown. I'm wearing a wing-collar jacquard waistcoat by Kilgour, French & Stanbury from Barney's, a silk bow tie from Saks, patent-leather slip-ons by Baker-Benjes, antique diamond studs from Kentshire Galleries and a gray wool silk-lined coat with drop sleeves and a button-down collar by Luciano Soprani. An ostrich wallet from Bosca carries four hundred dollars cash in the back pocket of my black wool trousers. Instead of my Rolex I'm wearing a fourteen-karat gold watch from H. Stern.

I wander aimlessly around the Puck Building's first-floor ballroom, bored, sipping bad champagne (could it be nonvintage Bollinger?) from plastic flutes, chewing on kiwi slices, each topped with a

dollop of chèvre, vaguely looking around to score some cocaine. Instead of finding anyone who knows a dealer I bump into Courtney by the stairs. Wearing a silk and cotton stretch-tulle bodywrap with jeweled lace pants, she seems tense and warns me to stay away from Luis. She mentions that he suspects something. A cover band plays lame versions of old Motown hits from the sixties.

"Like what?" I ask, scanning the room. "That two plus two equals four? That you're secretly Nancy Reagan?"

"Don't have lunch with him next week at the Yale Club," she says, smiling for a photographer, the flash blinding us momentarily.

"You look . . . voluptuous tonight," I say, touching her neck, running a finger up over her chin until it reaches the bottom lip.

"I'm not joking, Patrick." Smiling, she waves to Luis, who is dancing clumsily with Jennifer Morgan. He's wearing a cream-colored wool dinner jacket, wool trousers, a cotton shirt, and a silk glen-plaid cummerbund, all from Hugo Boss, a bow tie from Saks and a pocket square from Paul Stuart. He waves back. I give him thumbs-up.

"What a dork," Courtney whispers sadly to herself.

"Listen, I'm leaving," I say, finishing the champagne. "Why don't you go dance with the . . . receptacle tip?"

"Where are you going?" she asks, gripping my arm.

"Courtney, I don't want to experience another one of your . . . emotional outbursts," I tell her. "Besides, the canapés are shitty."

"Where are you going?" she asks again. "Details, Mr. Bateman."

"Why are you so concerned?"

"Because I'd like to know," she says. "You're not going to Evelyn's, are you?"

"Maybe," I lie.

"Patrick," she says. "Don't leave me here. I don't want you to go."

"I have to return some videos," I lie again, handing her my empty champagne glass, just as another camera flashes somewhere. I walk away.

The band segues into a rousing version of "Life in the Fast Lane" and I start looking around for hardbodies. Charles Simpson—or someone who looks remarkably like him, slicked-back hair, suspenders, Oliver Peoples glasses—shakes my hand, shouts "Hey, Williams" and tells me to meet a group of people with Alexandra

Craig at Nell's around midnight. I give him a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder and tell him I'll be there.

Outside, smoking a cigar, contemplating the sky, I spot Reed Thompson, who emerges from the Puck Building with his entourage—Jamie Conway, Kevin Wynn, Marcus Halberstam, no babes—and invites me along to dinner; and though I suspect they have drugs, I have misgivings about spending the evening with them and decide not to trek up to that Salvadorian bistro, especially since they don't have reservations and aren't guaranteed a table. I wave them off, then cross Houston, dodging other limos leaving the party, and start moving uptown. Walking along Broadway I stop at an automated teller where just for the hell of it I take out another hundred dollars, feeling better having an even five hundred in my wallet.

I find myself walking through the antique district below Fourteenth Street. My watch has stopped so I'm not sure what time it is, but probably ten-thirty or so. Black guys pass by offering crack or hustling tickets to a party at the Palladium. I walk by a newsstand, a dry cleaners, a church, a diner. The streets are empty; the only noise breaking up the silence is an occasional taxi cruising toward Union Square. A couple of skinny faggots walk by while I'm at a phone booth checking my messages, staring at my reflection in an antique store's window. One of them whistles at me, the other laughs: a high, fey, horrible sound. A torn playbill from *Les Misérables* tumbles down the cracked, urine-stained sidewalk. A streetlamp burns out. Someone in a Jean-Paul Gaultier topcoat takes a piss in an alleyway. Steam rises from below the streets, billowing up in tendrils, evaporating. Bags of frozen garbage line the curbs. The moon, pale and low, hangs just above the tip of the Chrysler Building. Somewhere from over in the West Village the siren from an ambulance screams, the wind picks it up, it echoes then fades.

The bum, a black man, lies in the doorway of an abandoned antique store on Twelfth Street on top of an open grate, surrounded by bags of garbage and a shopping cart from Grinstead's loaded with what I suppose are personal belongings: newspapers, bottles, aluminum cans. A handpainted cardboard sign attached to the front of the cart reads I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME. A dog, a small mutt, short-haired and rail thin, lies next to him, its makeshift leash tied to the handle of the grocery cart. I don't notice the dog the first time I pass by. It's only after I circle the block and

come back that I see it lying on a pile of newspapers, guarding the bum, a collar around its neck with an oversize nameplate that reads GIZMO. The dog looks up at me wagging its skinny, pathetic excuse for a tail and when I hold out a gloved hand it licks at it hungrily. The stench of some kind of cheap alcohol mixed with excrement hangs here like a heavy, invisible cloud, and I have to hold my breath, before adjusting to the stink. The bum wakes up, opens his eyes, yawning, exposing remarkably stained teeth between cracked purple lips.

He's fortyish, heavyset, and when he attempts to sit up I can make out his features more clearly in the glare of the streetlamp: a few days' growth of beard, triple chin, a ruddy nose lined with thick brown veins. He's dressed in some kind of tacky-looking lime green polyester pantsuit with washed-out Sergio Valente jeans worn *over* it (this season's homeless person's fashion statement) along with a ripped orange and brown V-neck sweater stained with what looks like burgundy wine. It seems he's very drunk—either that or he's crazy or stupid. His eyes can't even focus when I stand over him, blocking out the light from a streetlamp, covering him in shadow. I kneel down.

"Hello," I say, offering my hand, the one the dog licked. "Pat Bateman."

The bum stares at me, panting with the exertion it takes to sit up. He doesn't shake my hand.

"You want some money?" I ask gently. "Some . . . food?"

The bum nods and starts to cry, thankfully.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a ten-dollar bill, then change my mind and hold out a five instead. "Is this what you need?"

The bum nods again and looks away, shamefully, his nose running, and after clearing his throat says quietly, "I'm so hungry."

"It's cold out, too," I say. "Isn't it?"

"I'm so hungry." He convulses once, twice, a third time, then looks away, embarrassed.

"Why don't you get a job?" I ask, the bill still held in my hand but not within the bum's reach. "If you're so hungry, why don't you get a job?"

He breathes in, shivering, and between sobs admits, "I lost my job . . ."

"Why?" I ask, genuinely interested. "Were you drinking? Is that why you lost it? Insider trading? Just joking. No, really—were you drinking on the job?"

He hugs himself, between sobs, chokes, "I was fired. I was laid off."

I take this in, nodding. "Gee, uh, that's too bad."

"I'm so hungry," he says, then starts crying hard, still holding himself. His dog, the thing called Gizmo, starts whimpering.

"Why don't you get another one?" I ask. "Why don't you get another job?"

"I'm not . . ." He coughs, holding himself, shaking miserably, violently, unable to finish the sentence.

"You're not what?" I ask softly. "Qualified for anything else?"

"I'm hungry," he whispers.

"I know that, I know that," I say. "Jeez, you're like a broken record. I'm trying to help you . . ." My impatience rises.

"I'm hungry," he repeats.

"Listen. Do you think it's fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who *do* work?"

His face crumples and he gasps, his voice raspy, "What am I gonna do?"

"Listen," I say. "What's your name?"

"Al," he says.

"Speak up," I tell him. "Come on."

"Al," he says, a little louder.

"Get a goddamn job, Al," I say earnestly. "You've got a negative attitude. That's what's stopping you. You've got to get your act together. I'll help you."

"You're so kind, mister. You're kind. You're a kind man," he blubbers. "I can tell."

"Shhh," I whisper. "It's okay." I start petting the dog.

"Please," he says, grabbing for my wrist. "I don't know what to do. I'm so cold."

"Do you know how bad you smell?" I whisper this soothingly, stroking his face. "The *stench*, my god . . ."

"I can't . . ." He chokes, then swallows. "I can't find a shelter."

"You *reek*," I tell him. "You *reek* of . . . *shit*." I'm still petting the dog, its eyes wide and wet and grateful. "Do you know that? Goddamnit, Al—look at me and stop crying like some kind of

faggot," I shout. My rage builds, subsides, and I close my eyes, bringing my hand up to squeeze the bridge of my nose, then I sigh. "Al . . . I'm sorry. It's just that . . . I don't know. I don't have anything in common with you."

The bum's not listening. He's crying so hard he's incapable of a coherent answer. I put the bill slowly back into the pocket of my Luciano Soprani jacket and with the other hand stop petting the dog and reach into the other pocket. The bum stops sobbing abruptly and sits up, looking for the fiver or, I presume, his bottle of Thunderbird. I reach out and touch his face gently once more with compassion and whisper, "Do you know what a fucking loser you are?" He starts nodding helplessly and I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina.

The bum is too surprised to say anything. He only opens his mouth in shock and moves a grubby, mittened hand slowly up to his face. I yank his pants down and in the passing headlights of a taxi can make out his flabby black thighs, rushed because of his constantly urinating in the pantsuit. The stench of slit rises quickly into my face and breathing through my mouth, down on my haunches, I start stabbing him in the stomach, lightly, above the dense matted patch of pubic hair. This sobers him up somewhat and instinctively he tries to cover himself with his hands and the dog starts yipping, really furiously, but it doesn't attack, and I keep stabbing at the bum now between his fingers, stabbing the backs of his hands. His eye, burst open, hangs out of its socket and runs down his face and he keeps blinking which causes what's left of it inside the wound to pour out like red, veiny egg yolk. I grab his head with one hand and push it back and then with my thumb and forefinger hold the other eye open and bring the knife up and push the tip of it into the socket, first breaking its protective film so the socket fills with blood, then slitting the eyeball open sideways, and he finally starts screaming once I slit his nose in two, lightly spraying me and the dog with blood, Gizmo blinking to get the blood out of his eyes. I quickly wipe the blade clean across the bum's face, breaking open the muscle above his cheek. Still kneeling, I throw a quarter in his face, which is slick and shiny with blood, both sockets hollowed out and filled with gore, what's left of his eyes literally

oozing over his screaming lips in thick, webby strands. Calmly, I whisper, "There's a quarter. Go buy some *gum*, you crazy fucking nigger." Then I turn to the barking dog and when I get up, stomp on its front legs while it's crouched down ready to jump at me, its fangs bared, immediately shattering the bones in both its legs, and it falls on its side squealing in pain, front paws sticking up in the air at an obscene, satisfying angle. I can't help but start laughing and I linger at the scene, amused by this tableau. When I spot an approaching taxi, I slowly walk away.

Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up, as if I'd just worked out and endorphins are flooding my nervous system, or just embraced that first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal. I'm starving and need something to eat, but I don't want to stop by Nell's, though I'm within walking distance and Indochine seems an unlikely place for a celebratory drink. So I decide to go somewhere Al would go, the McDonald's in Union Square. Standing in the line, I order a vanilla milk shake ("Extra-thick," I warn the guy, who just shakes his head and flips on a machine) and take it to a table up front, where Al would probably sit, my jacket, and its sleeves, lightly spattered with flecks of his blood. Two waitresses from the Cat Club walk in after me and sit in the booth across from mine, both smiling flirtatiously. I play it cool and ignore them. An old, crazy woman, wrinkled, chain-smoking, sits near us, nodding at no one. A police car passes by, and after two more milk shakes my high slowly dissolves, its intensity diminishing. I grow bored, tired; the evening seems horribly anticlimactic and I start cursing myself for not going to that Salvadorian bistro with Reed Thompson and the guys. The two girls linger, still interested. I check my watch. One of the Mexicans working behind the counter stares at me while smoking a cigarette and he studies the stains on the Soprani jacket in a way that suggests he's going to say something about it, but a customer comes in, one of the black guys who tried to sell me crack earlier, and he has to take the black guy's order. So the Mexican puts out his cigarette and that's what he does.