

Chapter 10

Miraculously, they arrived without incident at The Sign of the Whale, a bohemian watering-hole on M Street NW just off Dupont Circle. The ride was over in what seemed the blink of an eye. Esposito drove like a Formula 1 competitor, or at least he thought he did. The open air of the warm night drag race had tousled their hair with comic effect.

“Mmm... this is good coffee,” Marnie said. She was sipping a pint of Whale Ale, a micro-brewed beer with a resplendent, hoppy bouquet. It was the house specialty.

“Indeed, though I find balmy weather like this often calls for a Märzen. Would you like a try?” He slid his glass across the table.

“Ohh, that’s good. You do know your beer, John.” She was calling him John now. The beers had some effect, but Esposito had an uncanny ability to put her at ease. She felt comfortable, sitting there talking on a pleasant variety of topics from their

backgrounds to the definition and interpretation of *jihad*. It was the most interesting “date” she’d had in ages.

She picked at the chicken Caesar salad they’d decided to share.

“I find you fascinating, Marnie. I hope I don’t put at unease by saying this, but I’ve yet to meet someone like you before. You’re vastly intelligent, curious, and independent. You attended a Roman Catholic University, and you are interested in Islam. A great majority of people these days tend to hide their head in the sand when faced with Islam, mostly in reaction to their natural fear of terror. They equate Islam with terror, while you on the other hand seek to understand it.”

“Well, I think saying that all Muslims are terrorists is like saying the Klu Klux Klan represents the whole of Christianity. We’ve all had our moments of fear, though I don’t think many people—at least in the States. You know, those who haven’t travelled much—have experienced the reality behind the fear as have those who’ve actually been through something terrifying. Sure, there’s the news that brings fear to us daily, but it’s hardly instructional. I’d rather face my fear by at least minimizing my ignorance on the subject of the cause.”

“I’m becoming infatuated now. This is simply marvelous!” Esposito folded his hands in a temple and rested his chin on them. He beamed ardently.

“You’re involved in a highly secretive project, which—as you’ve said—you’d have to kill me if you told me anything about it. You work for one of the smartest men that I know, and he raves about you. However, you’re not—how do you say—an item anymore.”

“Let’s talk about you, shall we?” She deftly changed the subject.

“Well, I’m what some would call a helpless bachelor.”

“I think helpless is hardly apropos.”

“I tend to bore those that I’m attracted to, and I overcomplicate relationships rather than relying on simple emotion to carry my heart. Some have said that man’s attraction to large-breasted blondes is a survival instinct stemming from man’s hunter-gatherer days. The sad fact is that smart girls generally don’t want anything to do with me, and I often find myself seeking solace in the arms of a mindless twit. This is something I intend to rectify one day.”

Marnie studied Esposito over her pint glass and wondered just how much of what just came out of his mouth was orchestrated to seduce her. “*Who cares?*” She thought to herself. She found herself becoming increasingly attracted to this man.

“They say acknowledgement is the first step toward recovery.” She said.

“I’ll drink to that.”

They clinked glasses.

Marnie and Esposito carried their romantic, intellectual *tête-à-tête* into the wee hours of the night. Several beers later, last-call was announced, and they looked at each other and saw the tinge of disappointment in the other’s eyes.

“I believe they are giving us the boot, Miss McCloud.”

“Infidels.” She snarled with mock contempt at which Esposito obviously revelled.

“Two espressos please.” He called to the waiter, who nodded at him as he passed, hefting a tray of empty beer glasses.

“This will put some fuel in your jets. It’s a bit of a drive for you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, an unconscionable three miles.”

“Dear me! That seems terribly far. Will you make it in one piece?”

The espressos arrived with perfectly little flourish along with a remarkably long beer tab, which Esposito promptly snatched up.

“Allow me,” he said. “It’s the least I can do to compensate you for putting up with my droll monologue.”

“Be my guest, though we’ve both been drolling a little upon the corporal.” Marnie swiped a lemon rind around the rim of her cup and sipped the intense, aromatic brew.

“You enchant me!” Said Esposito, recognizing and appreciating the pun.

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On the barely sub-sonic drive back to the Georgetown campus, Marnie proclaimed that she was unfit to drive home, citing inebriation. This had less to do with her inability to drive than the potential displeasure of being dropped off in a University parking lot by an acclaimed don where she would trade her carriage for a pumpkin.

Esposito performed a sliding stop at the south entrance of the Georgetown quadrangle at her announcement. The campus was deserted at this late hour.

“I have just the solution.” He seemed sober as a priest; his golden eyes sparkled under the sodium lights of the nearby parking lot. “I’ve a two-bedroom flat only a stone’s throw away. Trust me, I am the consummate gentleman; plus it looks like you can defend yourself pretty well even if I turned masher on you. Please don’t hurt me, or at least spare my nose. It’s a family heirloom.”

“Invitation accepted. Just don’t kill us before we get there.”

At this Esposito, thrust the car into first gear and fishtailed the *Beemer* back onto Prospect Street. He then dropped down to the Canal Road and sped them across the Key Bridge. He was a mad pilot with the wind in his hair. All that was required to round off the image would be a pair of bomber goggles and a white, silk scarf flapping around his neck.

“Are you always a gentleman, John?” Marnie asked.

“That would depend entirely on you, m’lady.”

“Do you always drive this fast?”

“I went to the doctor, and the prognosis was a lead foot.”

“I’d watch out for cops if I were you,” she said as reached over the gear shift for his belt buckle.