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1. all
2. these
3. things
4. i've
5. done

chocolate is contraband

caffeine is illegal

the city is riddled with crime

Anya is torn between accepting her birthright
and following her heart

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I. i defend my own honor

THE NIGHT BEFORE JUNIOR YEAR—I was sixteen, *barely*—Gable Arsley said he wanted to sleep with me. Not in the distant or semidistant future either. Right then.

Admittedly, my taste in boys wasn't so great. I was attracted to the sort who weren't in the habit of asking permission to do anything. Boys like my father, I guess.

We'd just gotten back from the coffee speakeasy that used to be off University Place, in the basement of a church. This was back when caffeine, along with about a million other things, was against the law. So much was illegal (paper without a permit, phones with cameras, chocolate, etc.) and the laws changed so quickly, you could be committing a crime and not even know it. Not that it mattered. The boys in blue were totally overwhelmed. The city was bankrupt, and I'd say maybe 75 percent of the force had been fired. The police that were left didn't have time to worry about teens getting high on coffee.

I should have known something was up when Gable offered to escort me back to the apartment. At night at least, it was a pretty dangerous trek from the speakeasy to where I lived on East Ninetieth, and Gable usually left me to fend for myself. He lived downtown, and I guess he figured that I hadn't been killed making the trip yet.

We went into my apartment, which had been in the family practically forever—since 1995, the year my grandma Galina was born. Galina, who we called Nana and who I loved like nobody's business, was busy dying in her bedroom. She had the distinction of being both the oldest and the sickest person I had ever known. As soon as I opened the door, I could hear the machines that were keeping her heart and everything else pumping. The only reason they hadn't turned the machines off, like they would have for anyone else, was because she was responsible for my older brother, my little sister, and me. Her mind was still sharp, by the way. Even confined to the bed, not much got past her.

Gable had had, maybe, six espressos that night, two of them with shots of Prozac (also illegal)—and he was mad up. I'm not making excuses for him, only trying to explain a few things.

"Annie," he said, loosening his necktie and sitting down on the couch, "you gots to have some chocolate in here. I know you do. I'm gagging for it. Come on, baby, hook Daddy up." It was the caffeine talking. Gable sounded like a different person when he was on the stuff. I especially hated when he referred to himself as Daddy. I think he'd heard it in an old movie. I wanted to say, *You aren't my daddy. You're seventeen years old, for God's sake.*

Sometimes I did say this but mostly I let it go. My actual daddy used to say that if you didn't let some things go, you'd spend your whole life fighting. Chocolate was why Gable'd said he wanted to come up to the apartment in the first place. I told him he could have one piece and then he had to leave. The first day of school was tomorrow (my junior year as I mentioned; his senior), and I needed to get some sleep.

We kept our chocolate in Nana's room in a secret safe in the back of her closet. I tried to be real quiet as I walked past her bed. Not that there was much of a need for that. Her machines were as loud as the subway.

Nana's room smelled like death, a combination of day-old egg salad (poultry was rationed) and overripe honeydew melons (fruit was pretty scarce) and old shoes and cleaning products (purchase permitted with voucher). I went into her walk-in closet, pushed her coats out of the way, and entered the combination. Behind the guns was the chocolate, which was superdark, with hazelnuts, and came from Russia. I put a bar in my pocket and closed the safe. On my way out, I stopped to kiss my grandmother on the cheek, and she woke up.

"Anya," she croaked, "what time did you get home?"

I told her that I'd been home for a while. She'd never know the difference anyway and she'd only worry if she knew where I'd been. Then I told her to go back to sleep, that I hadn't meant to wake her. "You need your rest, Nana."

"What for? I'll be resting forever soon enough."

"Don't talk like that. You'll be alive a really long time," I lied.

"There's a difference between being alive and living," she

muttered before changing the subject. “First day of school tomorrow.”

I was surprised she remembered.

“Go get yourself a nice chocolate bar from the closet, okay, Anyaschka?”

I did what she said. I put the bar from my pocket back in the safe and replaced it with a different, identical one.

“Don’t show anybody,” she said. “And don’t share it unless it’s with someone you really love.”

Easier said than done, I thought, but I promised I wouldn’t. I kissed my grandmother’s papery cheek again. I closed the door softly behind me. I loved Nana, but I couldn’t stand to be in that awful room.

When I went back out to the living room, Gable wasn’t there. I knew where he’d be.

Gable was lying in the middle of my bed, passed out. As I saw it, that was the problem with caffeine. A little of it, and you had a nice buzz. Too much, and you were a goner. At least, that’s how it was for Gable. I kicked him, not too hard, on the leg. He didn’t wake up. I kicked him again, harder. He grunted a little and rolled onto his back. I figured I’d let him sleep it off. If worst came to worst, I’d sleep on the couch. Anyway, Gable was cute when he slept. Harmless, like a puppy or a little boy. I suppose I liked him best that way.

I took my school uniform from my closet and laid it out on my desk chair for the next day. I organized my bag and charged up my slate. I broke off a single piece of dark chocolate. The flavor was strong and woody. I rewrapped the rest in its silver foil

and put it in my top drawer for safekeeping. I was glad I hadn't had to share it with Gable.

You're probably asking why Gable was my boyfriend when I barely wanted to share chocolate with him. The thing is, he wasn't boring. He was a little dangerous and, stupid girl that I was, I guess I found that sort of thing attractive. And—God rest your soul, Daddy—it could be said that I lacked positive male role models. Besides, sharing chocolate wasn't some casual thing: it really was hard to come by.

I decided to take a shower so I wouldn't have to do it in the morning. When I got out ninety seconds later (everyone's showers ran on timers because of how expensive water was getting), Gable was sitting cross-legged on my bed while stuffing the last of my chocolate bar down his throat.

"Hey," I said, my towel wrapped around me, "you went into my drawer!"

Chocolate was smudged on his thumb, index finger, and the inside corners of his mouth. "I wasn't snooping. I sniffed it out," he said in the middle of a bite. He paused chomping long enough to look up at me. "You look pretty, Annie. Clean."

I wrapped my towel tighter around myself. "Well, now that you're awake and you've had your chocolate, you should leave," I said.

He didn't move.

"Come on, then! Out!" I said this strongly, if not loudly. I didn't want to wake my siblings or Nana.

That's when he told me that he thought we should have sex.

"No," I said, wishing very much that I hadn't been so foolish

as to take a shower while a dangerous, overcaffeinated boy lay in wait on my bed. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” he asked. And then he said that he was in love with me. It was the first time a boy had ever told me that. Even as inexperienced as I was, I could tell he didn’t mean it.

“I want you to go,” I said. “We’ve got school tomorrow, and we both should get some sleep.”

“I can’t go now. It’s past midnight.”

Not that there were enough cops to enforce it, but midnight was the citywide, under-eighteen curfew. It was only 11:45, so I lied and told him he could still make it if he ran.

“I’ll never make it, Annie. Besides, my parents aren’t home, and your grandma will never know if I stay. Come on, be sweet to me.”

I shook my head and tried to look tough, which was somewhat hard to do while wearing a yellow, flowered towel.

“Doesn’t it count for anything that I just told you I love you?” Gable asked.

I considered this briefly before deciding that it didn’t. “Not really. Not when I know you don’t mean it.”

He looked at me with big, dumb eyes like I had hurt his feelings or something. Then he cleared his throat and tried a different technique. “Come on, Annie. We’ve been together almost nine months. That’s the longest I’ve ever been with anyone. So . . . Like . . . Why not?”

I gave him my list. One, I said, we were too young. Two, I didn’t love him. And three, the most important of all, I didn’t believe in sex before marriage. I was a mostly good Catholic girl, and I knew exactly where the type of behavior he was suggesting

would get me: straight to Hell. For the record, I very much believed (and believe) in Heaven and Hell, and not in an abstract way either. More about this later.

His eyes were a little crazy—maybe it was the contraband he'd consumed—and he got up from the bed and walked closer to me. He started tickling my bare arms.

“Stop that,” I said. “Seriously, Gable, this isn't funny. I know you're trying to get me to drop my towel.”

“Why'd you take that shower if you didn't want—”

I told him I'd scream.

“And then what?” he asked. “Your grandma can't get out of bed. Your brother's a retard. And your sister's just a kid. All you'll do is make them upset.”

Part of me couldn't believe this was actually happening in my own house. That I'd allowed myself to be so witless and vulnerable. I hooked my towel under my armpits, and I pushed Gable away as hard as I could. “*Leo is not a retard!*” I yelled.

I heard a door open at the end of the hallway and then, footsteps. Leo, who was tall like Daddy had been (six feet five inches), appeared in my doorway wearing pajamas with a pattern of dogs and bones on them. Even though I had been handling things, I had never been so happy to see my big brother. “Hey, Annie!” Leo wrapped me in a quick hug before turning to my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. “Hello, Gable,” Leo said. “I heard noise. I think you should leave now. You woke me which is okay. But if you wake Natty that won't be good because she has to go to school tomorrow.”

Leo led Gable to our front door. I didn't relax until I heard it shut and Leo had latched the chain.

“I don’t think your boyfriend is very nice,” Leo told me when he got back.

“You know what? I don’t think so either,” I said. I picked up Gable’s discarded chocolate wrappers and crushed them into a ball. By Nana’s standards, the only chocolate-worthy boy in my life was my brother.

The first day of school stunk more than most first days of school, and they tend to stink as a rule. Everyone had already heard that Gable Arsley and Anya Balanchine were over. This was annoying. Not because I had had any intention of staying with him after the foul he’d committed the night before, but because I’d wanted to be the one to break up with him. I’d wanted him to cry or yell or apologize. I’d wanted to walk away and not look back as he called my name. That sort of thing, right?

I have to admit: it was amazing how fast the rumors spread. Minors weren’t allowed to have their own phones, and no one of any age could publish, virtually or otherwise, without a license or even send an e-mail without paying postage and yet gossip always finds a way. And a good lie travels a heck of a lot faster than the sad, boring truth. By third period, the story of my breakup had been carved in stone, and I hadn’t been the one doing the carving.

I skipped fourth period to go to confession.

When I entered the confessional, I could see the distinctly female silhouette of Mother Piousina through the screen. Believe it or not, she was the first female priest Holy Trinity School had ever had. Even though these were supposedly modern times and everyone was supposedly enlightened, more than a few parents

had complained when the Board of Overseers had announced her as their selection the prior year. There were some people who just weren't comfortable with the idea of a lady priest. In addition to being a Catholic school, HT was also one of the better schools in Manhattan. Parents who paid its exorbitant tuition did so with the understanding that the school wasn't allowed to change no matter how bad things got everywhere else.

I kneeled down and crossed myself. "Bless me, Mother, for I have sinned. It has been three months since my last confession . . ."

"What's troubling you, daughter?"

I told her how I'd been having impure thoughts about Gable Arsley all morning. I didn't use his name but Mother Piousina probably knew who I was talking about anyway. Everyone else at school did.

"Are you considering having intercourse with him?" she asked. "Because action would be an even greater sin than the thoughts themselves."

"I know that, Mother," I said. "Nothing like that. The thing is, this boy's been spreading rumors about me, and I've just been thinking how I hate him and I want to kill him or at least hurt him a little."

Mother Piousina laughed in a way that only somewhat offended me. "Is that everything?" she asked.

I told her that I'd used the Lord's name in vain several times over the summer. Most of the instances had occurred during the mayor's Great Air-Conditioning Ration. One of our "off days" had coincided with the hottest day in August. Between the 110-degree temperature and the heat generated by Nana's

many machines, the apartment had been a pretty close approximation of Hell.

“Anything else?”

“One more thing. My grandmother is very sick and even though I love her”—this was really hard for me to say—“sometimes I wish she would just die already.”

“You don’t want to see her suffer. God understands that you don’t mean it, my child.”

“Sometimes I have bad thoughts about the dead,” I added.

“Anyone specific?”

“My father mainly. But my mother sometimes, too. And sometimes—”

Mother Piousina interrupted. “Perhaps three months is too long for you to go between confessions, daughter.” She laughed again which annoyed me, but I continued anyway. The next one was the hardest to say.

“Sometimes I am ashamed of my older brother, Leo, because he’s . . . It’s not his fault. He’s the kindest, most loving brother but . . . You probably know that he’s a little slow. Today, he wanted to walk me and Natty to school but I told him that my grandmother needed him at home and that he’d be late for his job. Both lies.”

“Is this your entire confession?”

“Yes,” I said, bowing my head. “I’m sorry for these and all the sins of my past life.” Then I prayed the Act of Contrition.

“I absolve you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” Mother Piousina said. She told me to say a Hail Mary and the Lord’s Prayer as penance, which seemed a ridicu-

lously minor punishment. Her predecessor, Father Xavier, really knew how to give a good penance.

I stood. I was about to open the burgundy curtain when she called to me, “Anya, light a candle for your mother and father in Heaven.” She slid open the screen and handed me two candle vouchers.

“We’re supposed to ration candles now,” I grumbled. With the endless stupid coupons and stamps (weren’t we supposed to be rationing paper?), the arbitrary point system, and the constantly changing rules, ration laws were incredibly annoying and impossible to keep up with. It was no wonder so many people bought goods on the black market.

“Look on the bright side. You can still have as much of the host as you want,” Mother Piousina replied.

I took the slips and thanked Mother Piousina. For all the good lighting candles would do, I thought bitterly. I was pretty sure my father was in Hell.

After giving my vouchers to a nun with a wicker ticket basket and a box of votives, I went into the chapel and lit a candle for my mother.

I prayed that, despite having married the head of the Balanchine crime family, Mom somehow wasn’t in Hell.

I lit a candle for my father.

I prayed that Hell wasn’t so bad, even for a murderer.

I missed them both so much.

My best friend, Scarlet, was waiting for me in the hallway outside the chapel. “Nice work skipping Fencing on the first day, Miss Balanchine,” she said, linking her arm through mine.

“Don’t worry. I covered for you. I said you were having scheduling issues.”

“Thanks, Scarlet.”

“No problem. I can already see exactly what sort of year this is going to be. Shall we go to the caf?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Yes, you could spend the rest of the school year hiding in the church,” she said.

“Maybe I’ll even become a nun and swear off boys forever.”

Scarlet turned to study me. “No. Your face wouldn’t be good in a habit.”

On the walk to the dining hall, Scarlet filled me in on what Gable had been telling people, but I had overheard most of it already. The most important points were that he had broken up with me because he thought I might be a caffeine addict, because I was “kind of a slut,” and because the start of a school year was a good opportunity for “taking out the trash.” I comforted myself with the thought that if Dad had been alive, he probably could have had Gable Arsley killed. “So you know,” Scarlet said, “I did defend your honor.”

I was sure Scarlet probably had but no one ever listened to her. People thought of her as the crazy drama girl. Pretty and ridiculous.

“Anyway,” she said, “everyone knows that Gable Arsley is a horse’s backside. The whole thing’ll blow over by tomorrow. Everyone’s only talking about it because they’re losers with no lives of their own. And also, it’s the first day of school so nothing else has happened yet.”

“He called Leo a retard. Did I tell you that part?”

“No!” Scarlet said. “That’s pure evil!”

We were standing in front of the double doors that led into the dining hall. “I hate him,” I said. “I really and truly hate him.”

“I know,” Scarlet agreed, pushing the doors open. “I never knew what you saw in him in the first place.” She was a good friend.

The dining hall had wood-paneled walls and black-and-white linoleum tiles like a chessboard, which made me feel like a piece in a chess game. I saw Gable seated at the head of one of the long tables by the window. He had his back to the doors, so he didn’t see me, though.

Lunch that day was lasagna, which I have always detested. The red sauce reminded me of blood and guts, and the ricotta cheese, of brain matter. I’d seen guts and brain matter for real so I knew what I was talking about. In any case, I wasn’t hungry anymore.

Once we sat down, I pushed my tray toward Scarlet. “You want?”

“One’s more than enough, thanks.”

“All right, let’s talk about something else,” I said.

“Other than—”

“Don’t you say that name, Scarlet Barber!”

“Other than the horse’s backside,” Scarlet said, and we both laughed. “Well, there’s a most promising new boy in my French class. Actually, he kind of looks like a new man. He’s all, I don’t know, manly. His name’s Goodwin but he goes by Win. Isn’t that OMG?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Um, it stands for something. Dad said it used to mean,

maybe, ‘amazing’? Or something like that? He wasn’t sure. Ask your nana, okay?”

I nodded. Scarlet’s dad was an archaeologist and he always smelled like garbage because he passed his days digging up landfills. Scarlet went on about the new boy for a while but I wasn’t really paying attention. I couldn’t have cared less. I just nodded occasionally and pushed my repulsive lasagna around my plate.

I looked across the cafeteria. Gable caught my eye. What happened next is somewhat blurry to me. He would later claim that he hadn’t, but I thought he sneered at me, then whispered something to the girl sitting to the left of him—she was a sophomore, maybe even a freshman, so I didn’t know who she was—and they both laughed, and in response, I lifted my plate with the uneaten, though still scalding-hot lasagna (all food was required by law to be heated to 176°F to avoid the bacterial epidemics that were so pervasive), and then I was running diagonally across the black-and-white linoleum floor like a bishop gone mad and just like that Gable’s head was covered with ricotta and tomato sauce.

Gable stood, and his chair toppled over. We were face-to-face, and it was like everyone else in the dining hall had disappeared. Gable started to yell, calling me a string of names that I won’t bother to repeat here. I’d rather not type a whole long list of curse words.

“I accept your condemnation,” I said.

He moved to punch me but then he stopped himself. “You’re not worth it, Balanchine. You’re scum like your dead parents,” he said. “I’d rather just get you suspended.” As he left the dining

hall, he tried to wipe off some of the sauce with his hand, but it didn't do any good. The sauce was everywhere. I smiled.

At the end of eighth period, I was delivered a summons to appear in Headmaster's office after school.

Most everyone managed to avoid getting into trouble on the first day of school so there weren't that many people waiting. The door was closed which meant someone was already in the office, and a long-legged guy I didn't know waited on the love seat in the foyer. The secretary told me I should have a seat.

The boy was wearing a gray wool hat that he took off as I passed. He nodded, and I nodded back. He looked at me side-long. "Food fight, right?"

"Yeah, you could call it that." I wasn't in the mood for making new friends. He crossed his hands on his lap. He had calluses on his fingers and despite myself, I found this interesting.

He must have seen me staring because he asked me what I was looking at.

"Your hands," I replied. "They're kind of rough for a city boy."

He laughed and said, "I'm from upstate. We used to grow our own food. Most of the calluses are from that. A couple are from my guitar. I'm no good; I just like to play. The rest I can't explain."

"Interesting," I said.

"Interesting," he repeated. "I'm Win, by the way," he said.

I turned to look at him. So, this was Scarlet's new boy? She was right. He certainly wasn't hard to look at. Tall and thin. Tanned skin and toned arms which must have come from the

farming he'd mentioned. Soft blue eyes and a mouth that seemed more inclined to smile than to frown. Not my usual type at all.

He offered me his hand to shake, and I accepted it. "An—" I started to say.

"Anya Balanchine, I know. Everyone can't seem to stop talking about you today."

"Hmmp," I said. I could feel my face getting flushed. "Then you probably think that I'm crazy and a slut and an addict and a mafiya princess so I don't even know why you're bothering to talk to me!"

"I don't know about here, but where I'm from, we come to our own conclusions about people."

"Why are you here?" I asked him.

"That's an awfully big question, Anya."

"No, I meant here outside this office. What did you do wrong?"

"Multiple choice," he said. "A. A few pointed comments I made in Theology. B. Headmaster wants to have a chat with the new kid about wearing hats in school. C. My schedule. I'm just too darn smart for my classes. D. My eyewitness account of the girl who poured lasagna over her boyfriend's head. E. Headmaster's leaving her husband and wants to run away with me. F. None of the above. G. All of the above."

"Ex-boyfriend," I mumbled.

"Good to know," he said.

At that moment, Headmaster's door opened, and out came Gable. His face was pink and splotchy from where the sauce had hit him. His white dress shirt was covered in sauce, which I knew was probably bothering the heck out of him.

Gable scowled at me and whispered, “Not worth it.”

Headmaster poked her head out the door. “Mr. Delacroix,” she said to Win, “would it prove a terrible inconvenience to you if I saw Ms. Balanchine first?”

He consented, and I went into the office. Headmaster shut the door behind us.

I already knew what would happen. I was put on probation and assigned lunch duty for the rest of the week. All things considered, pouring the lasagna on Gable’s head had still been completely worth it.

“You must learn to resolve these little relationship problems outside of Holy Trinity, Ms. Balanchine,” Headmaster said.

“Yes, Headmaster.”

It somehow seemed beside the point to mention that Gable had tried to date-rape me the night before.

“I considered calling your grandmother Galina, but I know she’s been in poor health. No need to worry her.”

“Thank you, Headmaster. I appreciate it.”

“Honestly, Anya, I worry for you. This kind of behavior, if it becomes a pattern, could be damaging to your reputation.”

As if she didn’t know that I’d been born with a bad reputation.

When I left the office, my twelve-year-old sister, Natty, was sitting next to Win. Scarlet must have told her where to find me. Or maybe Natty had guessed—I was no stranger to the headmaster’s office. Natty was wearing Win’s hat. They’d obviously been introduced. What a little flirt she was! Natty was cute, too. She had long, shiny black hair. Like mine, except hers was stick-straight while I was stuck with untamable waves.

“Sorry about stealing your place in line,” I said to Win.

He shrugged.

“Give Win back his hat,” I told Natty.

“It looks good on me,” she said, batting her eyelashes.

I took it off her head and handed it to Win. “Thanks for babysitting,” I said.

“Stop infantilizing me,” Natty protested.

“That’s a very good word,” Win commented.

“Thank you,” Natty replied. “I happen to know lots of them.”

Just to annoy Natty, I took her by the hand. We were almost to the hallway when I turned around and said, “My bet’s on C. You’re probably too smart for your schedule.”

He winked—who *winked*? “I’ll never tell.”

Natty actually sighed. “Oh,” she said. “I *like* that.”

I rolled my eyes as we went out the door. “Don’t even think about it. He’s way too old for you.”

“Only four years,” Natty said. “I asked.”

“Well, that’s a lot when you’re twelve.”

We had missed our regular crosstown bus and, due to MTA budget cuts, the next one wasn’t for another hour. I liked to try to be home when Leo got back from work and I decided that it would take less time for us to walk across the park back to our apartment. Daddy once told me how the park used to be when he was a kid: trees and flowers and squirrels, and lakes where people could canoe, and vendors selling every kind of food imaginable, and a zoo and hot-air balloon rides and in the summer, concerts and plays, and in the winter, ice skating and sledding. It wasn’t like that anymore.

The lakes had dried up or been drained, and most of the surrounding vegetation had died. There were still a few

graffiti-covered statues, broken park benches, and abandoned buildings, but I couldn't imagine anyone willingly spending time there. For Natty and me, the park was a half mile to be gotten across as quickly as possible, preferably before nightfall when it became a gathering place for just about every undesirable in the city. Incidentally, I'm not entirely sure how it got so bad, but I imagine it was like everything else in the city—lack of money, lack of water, lack of leadership.

Natty was pissed at me for making the crack about babysitting in front of Win, so she refused to walk with me. We were just across the Great Lawn (which, I suppose, must have had grass at some point) when she ran ahead about twenty-five feet.

Then fifty.

Then one hundred.

“Come on, Natty,” I yelled. “It’s not safe! You’ve got to stay with me!”

“Stop calling me Natty. My name is Nataliya, and for your information, Anya Pavlova Balanchine, I can take care of myself!”

I ran to catch up with her but by then she'd put even more distance between us. I could barely see her anymore; she was a tiny dot in a schoolgirl uniform. I ran even faster.

Natty was behind the glass section of the enormous building that used to be an art museum (now a nightclub) and she wasn't alone.

An incredibly skinny child, dressed in rags and, coincidentally, a decades-old Balanchine Chocolate Factory T-shirt, was holding a gun to my sister's head. “Now your shoes,” he said in a squeak of a voice.

Natty sniffled as she bent down to unlace her shoes.

I looked at the child. The boy, despite being emaciated, seemed sturdy, but I was pretty sure I could take him. I scanned the area to see if he had any accomplices. No. We were alone. The real problem was the gun and so I considered the gun.

Now, what I did next might sound reckless to you.

I stepped between my sister and the boy.

“Anyya! No!” my baby sister screamed.

My dad, you see, had taught me a thing or two about guns, and this kid’s handgun didn’t have a clip. In other words, no bullets unless there was one in the chamber, and I was betting that there wasn’t.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” I asked the boy. In point of fact, the boy was three inches shorter than Natty. Up close, I could see he was younger than I had thought—maybe eight or nine years old.

“I’ll shoot you,” the boy said. “I’ll do it.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “I’d like to see you try.”

I grabbed his gun by the barrel. I thought about tossing it into the bushes, but I decided I didn’t want him terrorizing any more people. I put it in my bag. It was a nice weapon. Would have done a heck of a job killing my sister and me. Had it been functional, that is.

“Come on, Natty. Get your stuff back from the kid.”

“He hadn’t taken anything yet,” Natty said. She was still a bit teary.

I nodded. I handed Natty my pocket handkerchief and told her to blow her nose.

At this point, the would-be mugger had started to cry, too.

“Gimme back my gun!” He lunged at me, but the kid was weak with hunger, I’d guess, and I barely felt him.

“Look, I’m sorry, but you’re gonna get yourself killed waving that broken gun around.” This was true. I wouldn’t be the only person who would notice he didn’t have a clip and, likely as not, the type of person who noticed such a thing would shoot the kid between the eyes without a second thought. I felt a bit bad about taking his gun, so I gave him what money I had on me. Not much, but it’d keep the kid in pizza for a night.

Without even a moment’s reflection, he took my offerings. Then he yelled an obscene name at me and disappeared into the park.

Natty gave me her hand, and we walked in silence until we were in the relative safety of Fifth Avenue.

“Why’d you do that, Annie?” she whispered as we were waiting for a walk signal. I could barely hear her above the city noise. “Why’d you give him all that stuff after he tried to rob me?”

“Because he was less fortunate than us, Natty. And Daddy always said that we have to be mindful of those who are less fortunate.”

“But Daddy killed people, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Daddy was complex.”

“Sometimes, I can’t even remember what he looked like,” Natty said.

“He looked like Leo,” I said. “Same height. Same black hair. Same blue eyes. But Daddy’s eyes were hard and Leo’s are soft.”

Back at the apartment, Natty went into her bedroom, and I scrounged around for something for dinner. I was an uninspired

chef but if I didn't cook, we'd all starve. Except for Nana. Her meals were delivered to her via tube by a home-health-care worker named Imogen.

I boiled exactly six cups of water per the package's instructions and then threw in the macaroni. At least Leo would be happy. Macaroni and cheese was his favorite.

I went to knock on his door to tell him the good news. There was no answer, so I opened it. He should have been home from his part-time job at the veterinary clinic for at least two hours, but his room was empty aside from his collection of stuffed lions. The lions looked at me questioningly with their dull plastic eyes.

I went into Nana's room. She was asleep, but I woke her up anyway.

"Nana, did Leo say if he was going anywhere?"

Nana reached for the rifle she kept under her bed, and then she saw that it was me. "Oh, Anya, it's only you. You scared me, *devochka*."

"Sorry, Nana." I kissed her on the cheek. "It's just Leo's not in his room. I was wondering if he said he was going anywhere."

Nana thought about this. "No," she said finally.

"Did he come home from work?" I asked, trying not to sound impatient. Clearly, Nana was having one of her less cogent days.

Nana considered this for about a million years. "Yes." She paused. "No." She paused again. "I'm not sure." Another pause. "What day of the week is this, *devochka*? I lose track of time."

"Monday," I told her. "The first day of school, remember?"

"Monday still?"

“It’s almost over, Nana.”

“Good. Good.” Nana smiled. “If it’s still Monday, that bastard Jakov came to see me today.” She meant bastard literally. Jakov (pronounced Ya-koff) Pirozhki was my father’s half brother’s illegitimate son. Jakov, who called himself Jacks, was four years older than Leo, and I had never much liked him since the time he’d had too much Smirnoff at a family wedding and tried to touch my breast. I’d been thirteen; he’d been almost twenty. Disgusting. Despite this, I’d always felt a little sorry for Jacks because of the way everyone in my family looked down on him.

“What did Pirozhki want?”

“To see if I was dead yet,” Nana said. She laughed and pointed to the cheap pink carnations that were sitting in a shallowly filled vase on the windowsill. I hadn’t noticed them. “Ugly, aren’t they? Flowers are so hard to come by these days, and that’s what he brings? I suppose it’s the thought that counts. Maybe Leo’s with the bastard?”

“That’s not nice, Nana,” I said.

“Oh, Anyaschka, I would never say it in front of him!” she protested.

“What would Jacks want with Leo?” I had only ever known Jacks to ignore or show outright contempt for my brother.

Nana shrugged, which was difficult for her to do considering how little mobility she had. I could see that her eyelids had begun to flutter shut. I squeezed her hand.

Without opening her eyes, she said, “Let me know when you find Leonyd.”

I went back into the kitchen to tend to the macaroni. I called Leo’s job to see if he was still there. They said he’d left at

four as usual. I didn't like not knowing where my brother was. He might be nineteen, three years my senior, but he was and would always be my responsibility.

Not long before my father was killed, Daddy made me promise that if anything ever happened to him, I would take care of Leo. I'd only been nine years old at the time, roughly the same age as that little mugger, and too young to really know what I was agreeing to. "Leo is a gentle soul," Daddy had said. "He isn't fit for our world, *devochka*. We must do everything we can to protect him." I'd nodded, not quite understanding that Daddy had sworn me to a lifelong commitment.

Leo hadn't been born "special." He had been like any kid, if not, from my father's point of view, better. Smart, the spitting image of Daddy, and best of all, the firstborn son. Daddy had even given him his name. Leo was actually Leonyd Balanchine, Jr.

The year Leo was nine, he and my mother had been driving out to Long Island to visit my maternal grandmother. My sister and I (ages two and six) had strep throat and had to stay behind. Daddy had agreed to stay with us, though I doubt it was much of a sacrifice as he'd never been able to tolerate Grandma Phoebe.

The hit had been meant for Daddy, of course.

My mother was killed instantly. Two shots through the windshield and straight through her lovely forehead and honey-scented chestnut curls.

The car my mother had been driving slammed into a tree as did Leo's head.

He lived, but he couldn't talk anymore. Or read. Or walk. My father had him sent to the best rehabilitation center followed

by the best school for learning disabilities. And Leo certainly got a lot better, but he would never be the same. They said my brother would always have the intellect of an eight-year-old. They said my brother was lucky. And he was. Though I knew his limitations frustrated him, Leo managed a lot with the intellect he had. He had a job where everyone thought he was a hard worker, and he was a good brother to Natty and me. When Nana died, Leo would become our guardian—just until I turned eighteen.

I had added the cheese sauce and was considering calling the cops (for all the good that would do) when I heard the front door open.

Leo bounded into the kitchen. “You’re making macaroni, Annie!” He threw his arms around me. “I have the best sister!”

I pushed Leo gently away. “Where were you? I was crazy worried. If you’re going out, you’re supposed to either tell Nana or write me a note.”

Leo’s face fell. “Don’t be mad, Annie. I was with our family. You said it was okay as long as I was with family.”

I shook my head. “I only meant Nana, Natty, or me. Immediate family. That means—”

Leo interrupted me. “I know what that means. You didn’t say *immediate*.”

I was pretty sure I had, but whatever.

“Jacks told me you wouldn’t mind,” Leo continued. “He said he was family, and you wouldn’t mind.”

“I bet he did. Is that the only person you were with?”

“Fats was there, too. We went to his place.”

Sergei “Fats” Medovukha was my father’s cousin and the owner of the speakeasy Gable and I had been at the night before. Fats was fat, which was less common in those days. I liked Fats as much as I liked anyone in my extended family, but I’d told him that I didn’t want Leo hanging out at his bar.

“What did they want with you, Leo?”

“We got ice cream. Fats closed his place, and we went out for it. Jacks had . . . What do you call it, Annie?”

“Vouchers.”

“Yeah, that’s it!”

And if I knew my cousin, he’d probably made those vouchers himself.

“I had strawberry,” Leo continued.

“Hmmpf.”

“Don’t be mad, Annie.”

Leo looked like he might cry. I took a deep breath and tried to control myself. It was one thing to lose my temper with Gable Arsley but behaving that way around Leo was completely unacceptable. “Was the ice cream good?”

Leo nodded. “Then we went . . . Promise you won’t be mad.”

I nodded.

“Then we went to the Pool.”

The Pool was in the nineties on West End Avenue. It used to be a women’s swimming club back before the first water crisis, when all the pools and fountains had been drained. Now, the Family (by which I mean the *semya*, or the Balanchine Family crime syndicate) used it as their primary meeting place. I guess they got the space on the cheap.

“Leo!” I yelled.

“You said you wouldn’t be mad!”

“But you know you’re not supposed to go to the west side without telling someone.”

“I know, I know. But Jacks said that a lot of people wanted to meet me there. And he said they were family so you wouldn’t mind.”

I was so angry I couldn’t speak. The macaroni had cooled enough to be eaten so I began to serve it into bowls. “Wash your hands, and tell Natty that dinner is ready.”

“Please don’t be mad, Annie.”

“I’m not mad at *you*,” I said.

I was about to make Leo promise that he would never go back there when he said, “Jacks said maybe I could get a job working at the Pool. You know, in the family business.”

It was all I could manage not to throw the macaroni against the wall. Still, I knew it was no good getting mad at my brother. Not to mention, it seemed excessive to commit two violent acts with pasta in the same day. “Why would you want to do that? You love working at the clinic.”

“Yeah, but Jacks thought it might be good if I worked with the Family”—he paused—“like Daddy.”

I nodded tightly. “I don’t know about that, Leo. They don’t have animals to pet at the Pool. Now, go get Natty, okay?”

I watched my brother as he left the kitchen. To look at him, you wouldn’t know anything was wrong with him. And maybe we made too much of his handicaps. It couldn’t be denied that Leo was handsome, strong, and, for all intents and purposes,

a grownup. The last part terrified me, of course. Grownups could get themselves in trouble. They could get taken advantage of. They could get sent to Rikers Island, or worse: they could end up dead.

As I filled glasses with water, I wondered what my *padonki* half cousin was up to and how much of a problem this was going to be for me.