


A
LORETTA KOVACS
NOVEL



HOT
FUDGE

ANTHONY
BRUNO

Hot Fudge

A Loretto Kovacs Novel

Anthony Bruno

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Chapter 1

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Loretta Kovacs said.

“I do,” Frank Marvelli said, and he kissed her again.

She didn’t object. In fact, she might have been holding him a little tighter than he was holding her, but it was hard to tell. They were sitting on the lone hard bench inside one of the holding cells at the rear of the offices of the Parole Violators Search Unit—better known as the Jump Squad—where they both worked as parole officers. The Jump Squad picked up parolees who had violated the conditions of their parole and stopped reporting to their assigned POs. The walls of the cell were Pepto-Bismol pink, and the bars weren’t bars at all. It was cyclone fencing. But the decor didn’t matter to either of them. The walls were what mattered.

“Marvelli,” Loretta mumbled, her lips mashed against his, “it’s getting late. People will be getting here soon.”

Marvelli brought his wristwatch to his face without disengaging from Loretta’s lips. “It’s ten to eight,” he said. “We’ve got time.”

“Julius usually gets here early,” she said. Julius was their boss, Julius Monroe.

“Not this early,” he said.

“Okay. You’re right.”

Loretta felt like a shaken-up can of Coke. She couldn’t believe they were doing this. She couldn’t believe she was here with Marvelli, necking. But she was, and it was pretty freakin’ wonderful.

Despite some of her best fantasies, she’d never in a million years thought they would get this far. The cards were stacked against them: First of all, they worked in the same office. Second, Marvelli was not her type because he was a greaser—not the trendy retro kind but the real item, like a *T. rex* that had somehow survived the Ice Age on some uncharted tropical island. And last of all, Loretta had been absolutely convinced that Marvelli would never get over his late wife, Rene, who had lost her battle with breast cancer a little over a year ago. But finally Marvelli made his peace with it and decided it was time to move on. And Loretta had been there waiting for him at the side of life highway, her thumb out, praying that he’d give her a lift.

Not that she was desperate. Not at all. She'd gotten used to celibacy ... so used to it, was scary. But she could've managed just fine without a man. Not happily, but she could have done it. Fortunately she was now out of the running for a Guinness Book of World Records citation.

Marvelli squeezed her closer to him, and she held the back of his neck, feeling the goop he put in his hair between her fingers. That didn't bother her anymore. But as the tongues wrestled, she had to admit that the constant taste of chocolate was beginning to bother her. It had been nice at first, but here it was—eight o'clock in the morning—and he was already eating ice cream. He seemed to be eating ice cream all the time. This couldn't be good for his health, she thought. And if he dropped dead and left her all alone, that would be disastrous for *her* health, too.

She glanced down at the empty pint of Arnie and Barry's Elmer Fudge Whirl sitting on the floor next to Marvelli's pointy, black, imitation-alligator shoe, and she just couldn't contain herself.

"Marvelli," she said, pulling away from his lips, "we have to talk."

He looked startled. "About what?"

"Your eating."

He shrugged, puzzled, "What about it?"

"Ice cream in the morning? What is it? Are you pregnant or PMSing?"

"Loretta," he said. "You know I have a problem with low blood sugar."

"But you eat constantly." *And you don't gain an ounce*, she thought jealously.

"This isn't news, Loretta. I've always eaten like this."

"I realize that, but this ice-cream obsession is something new. I don't want you keeling over with a heart attack before you're forty."

Marvelli looked a little embarrassed. "C'mon, I wouldn't call it an obsession."

"No? What *would* you call it?"

"I just love the taste. I mean, this Elmer Fudge Whirl stuff is out of this world. Arnie and Barry's has Ben and Jerry's beat by a mile, at least with this flavor. Their other flavors aren't nearly as good, but this stuff..." Marvelli kissed the tips of his fingers like a French gourmet.

Loretta just gave him a look. "Shut up and kiss me," she said.

"Isn't that a song?"

She grabbed his lapels and pulled him closer, grinding her lips into his. Their tongues said hi, and it was like live wires touching. *Bam!* She was back in heaven.

Marvelli moved Loretta's hair away from her cheek as he tilted his head the other way, rubbing noses with her as he continued to kiss her. He just couldn't get enough of her these days, and he'd be perfectly happy to stay right here, locked up in this cell, the two of them making out like teenagers for a long, long time. Just the two of them...

And maybe a freezer full of Elmer Fudge Whirl, in case they got hungry.

He strained an eyeball to catch a glimpse of the empty pint container on the floor, and suddenly he felt guilty for thinking about ice cream when he was kissing Loretta. Maybe she was right. Maybe he was getting a little obsessed with this stuff.

He glanced down at the carton again, remembering the fudgy taste. *Nah, he thought. I'm not obsessed. It's just good stuff, that's all. She's just a little upset because of her weight maybe.*

Of course, Loretta hadn't been as crazy about her weight lately, not since they started going out. It used to be her number-one hot button, but she'd calmed down about it ... a little. She didn't exactly welcome the topic if it came up, but she didn't get ballistic either. He'd noticed that the little markers on her bathroom scale hadn't moved in quite a while. When he'd first started staying at her place, the sliding plastic markers were always set back to zero, even after he'd set one for himself. Then one day while he was brushing his teeth, he looked down and saw that one of the markers was on 23 pounds. She had to have put it there because that wasn't his weight, but she hadn't bothered to set it back. He didn't say anything, of course—he wasn't that stupid—but he kept checking it whenever he was in the bathroom, and it stayed there. He figured she'd forgotten about it because she wasn't weighing herself anymore. The old Loretta would never have left evidence like that behind.

He was glad that she'd come to terms with her looks. She still had a bit of a self-image problem, but for the life of him he couldn't understand why. He thought she looked great. Thick, wavy, naturally dirty-blond hair that hung just below her shoulders. Peachy skin. Green eyes that sparkled like jewels. And a body that made him feel like Columbus sailing the seven seas, discovering new worlds all the time. In fact, at this very moment he had an incredible urge to unbutton her jade silk blouse and go exploring. Maybe he'd discover America.

His hands slowly slid up the satiny material along her sides as they continued to kiss. He was heading for land, his main mast at full sail.

Suddenly he thought back to their first time, which wasn't all that long ago. Five and a half weeks, to be exact. She'd been wearing this same blouse that night. They were on stakeout, sitting in an unmarked Department of Parole Chevy Cavalier, watching a two-family brownstone on a quiet street in Hoboken. They'd gotten a tip that a seventy

three-year-old minor-league wiseguy named Carlo Carlucci was visiting his longtime goomah who lived in that house. Carlucci hadn't reported to his PO in over eight months and Loretta and Marvelli had been assigned to his case. Even though Carlucci was relatively harmless, he was still a made man, which made him a priority. But Marvelli so of knew the old guy, and he didn't want to embarrass him in front of his lady friend. Instead of banging on the door to make the arrest, Marvelli had convinced Loretta to wait until Carlucci came out of the house and went to his burgundy red Lincoln Continental so they could take him quietly out on the street. It was after one A.M., and they had already been waiting in the Cavalier for three and a half hours.

Marvelli had been going crazy, trying to keep his eyes on the building when the only thing his little pupils wanted to do was look at Loretta. He'd been thinking about nothing but her for months. He was going *wacky* thinking about her. But he hadn't dared do anything about it. He didn't know exactly what was stopping him, but he was afraid it wouldn't work out—afraid that it hadn't been long enough since Rene had died, afraid of what his mother-in-law would say, afraid that he wouldn't know what to do with a woman who wasn't Rene, afraid that he'd blow it with Loretta and just end up humiliating himself. But sitting in that car with Loretta right next to him—their shoulders practically touching—he was going out of his mind. The sexual tension in the car was so thick, he could have made sandwiches.

Finally at 1:21 A.M.—he knew because he'd been checking his watch all night for want of something better to do—he turned to her and said, “Loretta—?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. It wasn't a “Yes, what is it, Marvelli?” kind of yes. It was more like a “Yes, of course, definitely” yes.

“Yes, what?” he said, playing dumb. “You don't know what I'm gonna ask.”

“You're right. That's why I'm answering in case you don't ask the question I want you to ask.” Her eyes glimmered in the moonlight. She was leaning toward him. He could smell her shampoo, they were so close.

“Oh...” he said, wondering if he should keep going. “And what is it you want me to ask?”

“I want you to ask me what I've been dying to ask you.”

“And what's that?” He leaned closer to her.

“Don't play dumb, Marvelli.” She took his hand.

He felt as if he were going to burst. His heart was thumping like mad, and he felt light-headed. Somehow his other hand had found its way to her thigh, and when he realized it was there, his palm started to tingle. “Loretta”—he cleared his throat—“Loretta? Can I—?”

“Yes!”

But his hand was already on the back of her neck before he'd even started to ask if he

could kiss her. He pulled her closer and put his lips to hers, and pretty soon their hands were everywhere, and their tongues were doing a slow tango, and one thing led to another and then another and then something else, and it was almost four o'clock before he realized that they were in the backseat and his pants were down around his knees and Carlo Carlucci's burgundy Lincoln was gone. Carlucci had gotten away. But neither of them cared.

Oh, Loretta, Loretta, Marvelli thought in a dizzy haze. Physically he was in the Pepto-Bismol cell, but in his head he was in the backseat of that Cavalier. His hands were sliding under Loretta's blouse, heading north along her ribs. *I want you so bad*, he thought. *Right here, right now—*

Suddenly her elbows clamped down on his hands like twin rattraps.

"What?" he said, breathing hard, blinking his eyes, not entirely sure where he was.

"Not here," she whispered urgently. "What if Julius catches us? He—"

"And what if I do catch you?"

"Jesus!" Marvelli flinched, snatching his hands back. He looked through the cyclor fence and saw his boss staring in at them, clucking his tongue and shaking his head. Julius Monroe was short and stout with a pointed goatee and penetrating eyes. His dark skin reflected the dim light of the naked forty-watt light-bulb inside the cell. He was wearing black slacks, a gray dress shirt, a black-and-white silk tie with piano keys running down the length of it, and his ever-present skullcap.

"Must be mating season at the zoo," Julius said, stepping into the open doorway.

Loretta was blushing through her scalp. Marvelli felt plain stupid for getting caught like this. Loretta was right. A cell wasn't the place for this.

"Julius," she said, as she quickly checked the buttons of her blouse, "this isn't what you think."

"Oh, yes, it is!" His belly laugh bounced off the cinder-block walls as he looked from one parole officer to the other, "Mizz Kovacs! Marvelli the marvelous! You two are fooling no one."

Marvelli caught Loretta's eye, looking for some help. Should he fess up or deny, deny, deny?

"Let me explain," Loretta said.

"No need, my dear," Julius said, cutting her off. "It's plain as day and as dark as night. You two have been skulking around here for weeks, thinking no one knows. But love is blind, and you two need radar if you think people haven't figured it out yet."

"What do you mean?" Marvelli said, trying to sound indignant.

"Please, Marvelli, spare the DeNiro routine. It's not your trip."

Marvelli looked at Loretta. There was no explaining their way out of it now, and the both knew it. "So now what?" he said to Julius. "You want one of us to quit?"

Loretta sighed. "No one has to quit. I'll put in for a transfer if that's what you want Julius."

But Julius just scowled at them both. "Are you out of your minds? It's hard enough getting people to work in the Jump Squad. I don't want either of you going anywhere."

"But you don't mind that we're—?" Marvelli didn't exactly know how to phrase it.

Julius cocked an eyebrow, and lines appeared on his forehead like venetian blinds. "Yes, I very much do mind, Marvelli. Take the slap-and-tickle act somewhere else. You can be in love on your own time, not the state's."

"I'm sorry," Loretta said, frowning. "We'll try to control ourselves in the future."

"How about controlling yourselves right now?" Julius said. "Look, people, I don't want to be the love cop, but this goo-goo eyes stuff is bad for morale. The other POs have been talking. It looks like I'm running a sloppy operation around here. That ain't good, people. Not for *vous* or *moi*."

"I hear what you're saying," Marvelli said. A sinkhole was opening up in the pit of his stomach. This was just what he didn't want to happen.

"I hope you hear what I'm saying," Julius said, "because I'm not so sure your ears are tuned in to my melody. We haven't been playing in the same key lately."

Marvelli got defensive. "What do you mean? I've been getting my work done."

Julius pointed at the empty Arnie and Barry's container on the floor. "It's things like this that make me go atonal, Marvelli. What's a jumper supposed to think when he gets locked up with your designer ice-cream trash? Our clients already have an acute sense of the have/have-not scene. They don't need us rubbing their noses in it."

"I wasn't going to leave it in here," Marvelli said.

"Doesn't matter," Julius shot back. "This stuff's all over the office. In the refrigerator, the wastepaper baskets, on the windowsills, on top of your desk. If you're gonna OD on ice cream, can't you do it just as well with the store brand?"

Marvelli's face started to get hot. He hadn't been eating *that* much Arnie and Barry's.

"Look, you know I don't like being the finger-wagger," Julius said. "I'm a man of peace and beauty. This authority stuff goes against my grain. All I'm saying is shape up and do your jobs the way you used to so that we don't have to have this little chat again. You picking up on what I'm putting down?"

Marvelli and Loretta nodded glumly.

"Now don't go acting like Adam and Eve getting the big eviction notice. I'm not mad at either of you. I'm just giving you a heads up before I *have* to get mad."

“Got’cha,” Marvelli said.

“We’ll behave,” Loretta said.

“Amen then,” Julius said. “No more needs to be said.”

A woman’s voice gradually drifted into the holding cells from the next room. She was singing, but there were no words, just *do-dos* and *dah-dahs*. Still, Marvelli recognized the song right away—“Viva Las Vegas.” But when he suddenly realized who the husky mezzo was, his face sagged.

“Julius!” the woman called out. “You back there, my man?”

“I’m here.”

“I got a jumper for you, J. A good one. And that ain’t all I got.”

“Who’s *that*?” Loretta mouthed to Marvelli.

“You don’t want to know,” he muttered.

“Where are you, Julius? I got a lot to tell you.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “I’m coming, Vissa, my sweet.”

“Thankyouverymuch,” the woman said, drawling it out to make it sound like one word. It was actually a pretty good Elvis imitation.

Too good, Marvelli thought.

Chapter 2

Marvelli, Loretta, and Julius filed out of the holding pens and into the bright fluorescent lights of the main office like moles coming out of the ground. This was where the PC desks were lined up in two straight rows surrounded by dozens of file cabinets pushed up against the walls, each one bulging with case files. No one else had arrived for work yet. The only people in the office were this woman, who had just called out for Julius, and a tall skinny guy with his wrists cuffed in front of him. Loretta didn't recognize either of them, though it was clear that the woman had apprehended the man. But the woman didn't look like she was in law enforcement. She looked more like a lounge act.

Loretta tried not to stare at her, but it was hard not to. The woman's hair was jet black and voluminous—gravity-defying mounds of it encased her head and shoulders like whipped cream. Her lipstick was a shimmery pale pink, and it looked like she'd used a felt-tip pen for eyeliner. Her fingernails matched her lipstick, and the extensive collection of bracelets on both wrists jingled whenever she made the slightest movement. She was wearing black patent leather boots, skintight bell-bottom jeans, a hip-length black leather jacket, and a red velveteen scoop-neck top that showed off some considerable cleavage. But the odd thing about her was that the sum was greater than the garish parts. Somehow it all fell together and produced a very attractive person—even if she was a bit on the slutty side.

"How do, Jul'?" she said to Monroe. "And Marvelli! Goodness gracious, it's been a long time." Marvelli extended his hand, but she ignored it and threw her arms around him, giving him a big hug.

"How's it going, Vissa?" he said.

"Not bad, not bad at all," she said. "Say, how's that little girl of yours? Nina, right?"

Marvelli nodded. "Nina's not so little anymore. She'll be fourteen in a couple of months."

"Good golly, Miss Molly! I remember her when she was just a little bitty thing."

Loretta couldn't quite place the woman's accent. She had the distinctive delivery of a Jersey girl, but her phrasing was down-home Southern.

"And who might this be?" the woman said, peering at Loretta with her chin c

Marvelli's shoulder.

"This is Loretta Kovacs," Julius said. "She joined us about a year ago. Loretta, meet Vissa Mylowe."

"Nice to meet you," Vissa said, reaching past Marvelli to shake Loretta's hand. "Vissa is short for Elvissa. See, I was named after my daddy, sort of. His name was actually Dexter but he worked most of his life as an Elvis impersonator. He was born and raised in Tupelo, Mississippi, just like the King, so he sounded just like him, singing *and* talking. My mom's name was Doris—she was a do-do girl in a girl-group sound-alike band called the Shalalas. They met in Atlantic City, fell in love at first sight, and never left. The two of them melded together like a great big hunk-a-hunk-a burning love."

"Really," Loretta said. Vissa was still pumping her hand.

"You may think I'm forward, Loretta, but I always tell people my whole story up front because I know they're just dying to know how I got my unusual name."

"Of course." Loretta nodded, her hand still getting pumped. She really wasn't that curious about Vissa's name.

"Vissa's a PO, too," Marvelli explained. "She works down the shore, out of the Tom River office."

"Yeah, it's teeny compared to this one," Vissa said. She had a cute way of wrinkling her nose. It was hard to tell what she really looked like under all the mascara and eyeliner, but her style kind of reminded Loretta of Rene Marvelli.

"So what brings you back to the mother ship?" Julius asked, as he eyed the tall, skinnier jumper who was just standing there, showing attitude. The handcuffed man was in his early thirties, but he looked like hell. His complexion was sallow, and what hair he had left was dirty, greasy, and unkempt. He had too many teeth for his small mouth, and the pencil-thin mustache just highlighted that fact. He was wearing a stylish three-button black suit with an open-collar white shirt, but it looked like he'd slept in that outfit several nights running. Julius tried to look him in the eye, but the man had his head tilted straight back. He was staring at the ceiling, showing a very pointy Adam's apple.

"This is Freddy Maxwell," Vissa said to Julius, "but he's no big deal."

"Oh, really?" Freddy muttered under his breath, still looking at the ceiling.

"Hasn't reported to his regular PO in a year," Vissa said. "I spotted him coming out of some no-tell motel in Seaside Heights. He got in his car before I could get to him, so I had to follow him all the way up here to East Orange. The guy's a pimp."

"I beg your pardon," Freddy mumbled. His voice was so nasal it sounded like he had cotton jammed up both nostrils.

"I decided to bring him here 'cause it was closer," Vissa said.

“Could’ve killed me in that friggin’ thing you call a car,” Freddy droned. He didn’t try to hide his contempt for her.

Vissa stopped smiling and got in his face. “Your attitude leaves something to be desired, sonny boy. And unless you want me to hand you that pitiful little thing you got between your legs in a doggie bag, you’d better shut your mouth.”

Loretta couldn’t hold back her grin. Vissa had as much attitude as Loretta had.

Freddy mumbled something, but no one could understand what he was saying.

Marvelli jerked his thumb at the pimp. “So if this isn’t the catch of the day, what’s your big news, Vissa?”

“Brace yourselves.” Vissa extended all ten fingers, looking from Marvelli to Julius. “I think I’ve found him.” She waited for their explosive reaction, but when it didn’t come she frowned, looking like an unhappy raccoon.

Marvelli looked at Loretta as he stuck out his lower lip and shrugged.

Julius was still waiting for the punch line. “Who, dear Vissa? Who did you find?”

Vissa shook her fists. “Who the hell have I been looking for the past eight years, for God’s sake? *Ira Krupnick!* Who else?”

Marvelli’s eyes rolled toward his boss, who simultaneously rolled his eyes back at Marvelli. They wanted to be impressed, but it was clear that they were both skeptical.

“Are you two deaf or what?” Vissa said, raising her voice. “Didn’t you hear me? I think I found *Ira Krupnick. Ira Krupnick!*”

When the two men didn’t say anything, Loretta jumped in. “Excuse my ignorance, Vissa, but who’s *Ira Krupnick!*”

Vissa threw up her hands, totally annoyed. “You mean these guys never told you about him? *Ira Krupnick* is only the worst case this office has ever seen. He is the most recidivist criminal this state has ever incarcerated. And the most low-down. And the most dangerous. And the slipperiest. When it comes to bad characters, *Krupnick* is the king.” After a moment Vissa blinked, surprised by her own unwitting reference to *the King*. It was obvious from the sour look on her face that the misguided allusion had left a bad taste in her mouth.

Julius rubbed his chin. “Well, yes, *Krupnick* is a bad cat, but I don’t know if I’d exactly put it that strongly.”

“I would.” Vissa turned to Marvelli. “Don’t you think so?”

Marvelli pressed his lips together as if he were thinking about it. “Well, yeah, he is bad, but, you know, it’s not like he’s the only one like that in the world.”

Loretta noticed Marvelli’s gaze wandering back toward the old refrigerator in the hallway. He was thinking about food. He was *always* thinking about food. Especial

fudge-whirl ice cream. It was amazing he wasn't a blimp.

Freddy the pimp mumbled something.

"What?" Vissa snapped at him impatiently. "Speak up. No one can understand you."

"I said, what'd this Krupnick guy do? Why's he so bad?"

"It's none of your g.d. business," she said.

"Well, actually I'm kind of curious myself," Loretta said. "What *did* he do?"

Vissa sighed loudly and tossed her head. Her big hair didn't move. She was clearly exasperated with the men, so she addressed her remarks to Loretta. "My friends here seem to have forgotten. Ira Krupnick was convicted of selling guns and silencers in large quantity. He was also connected with the kidnapping of an executive in Philadelphia, but he was never charged with anything in that case. He's what the shrinks call a criminal opportunist, which means he'll get into anything he thinks he can get away with—you name it—theft, drugs, burglary, extortion, anything. But what makes Krupnick different is that he's also very smart. Except for the guns, he's never gotten caught on any of the other things he's been involved with. He always seems to slip away, leaving someone else holding the bag."

"Tell me to shut up if I'm out of line," Loretta said, "but it sounds like there's something personal here."

Marvelli, Julius, and Freddy all nodded simultaneously.

Vissa glowered through her mascara at the three of them. "Yes, of course, it's personal," she said. "Eight years ago, back when Krupnick had first violated his parole, I was the one who caught him. All by myself. He was sleeping off a bender at one of his girlfriends' houses. He had quite a few girlfriends at the time. This was down in Cape May. I cuffed him, got him in leg shackles, and paid a couple of truck drivers to help me get him into my car. I filled up the tank and brought him straight to this office. I didn't want to be a fool around handing him over to the hicks downstate. I figured Krupnick was too important." As she said this, she was staring accusingly at Marvelli.

"Now wait a minute," Marvelli said. "That was not my fault."

"I'm not saying it was. Krupnick is a superior intellect. I'm not surprised he tricked you."

Loretta glared at Vissa. What the hell did she mean by that? Loretta thought. That Marvelli was an *inferior* intellect?

Marvelli raised one finger. "No, no, no, no, Vissa. It was *your* fault. Superior intellect had nothing to do with it."

"For cryin' out loud, Marvelli, I had been driving for three hours straight. I had to pee and I asked you to watch him for *one* minute."

“No, you said *stay* with him for one minute. You had taken his leg irons off—”

“I had to. It was a long walk from where I’d parked.”

Marvelli continued, “He wasn’t wearing leg irons or handcuffs—”

“He must’ve picked the lock on the cuffs in the car when I wasn’t looking. He must’ve pretended that they were locked, then took them off when I handed him to you.”

“You did not *hand* him to me. You said *stay* with him. The guy was dressed pretty nice. He sounded intelligent. He didn’t look like the kind of mutts we haul in here every day—”

“Hey, I resent that.” Freddy said, raising his voice.

“You shut up,” Vissa snarled.

Marvelli ignored the pimp. “From the way Ira Krupnick looked that day, I thought he was a friend of yours, maybe another PO. How was I supposed to know he was a jumper? You never actually told me.”

Vissa pointed down at the floor by the entrance to the holding cells. “He was standing right there—*right there!*—and you just let him walk out the door. Poof! He was gone!” She looked at Loretta, eyes wide. “And I only went out to pee. Can you believe it? Men!”

Loretta didn’t say anything, but she didn’t appreciate Vissa running down Marvelli like this. Maybe there was a reason she worked out of the field office down the shore. Maybe nobody here could stand to work with her.

“Calm down, Vissa,” Julius said. “You’re messing up the energy in here. Now tell me where’s Krupnick, and why didn’t you apprehend him?”

“It was a fluke,” she said. “I was down in Atlantic City in one of the casinos, looking for another jumper, when I spotted this guy playing blackjack. He looked familiar, but I wasn’t sure because he has a full beard and he’s a lot heavier than Krupnick was eight years ago. He was with a bunch of other guys, a few of them bruisers, so I kept my distance. But the more I watched him, the more I was convinced it was him. Luckily he has an account at that casino, so I was able to get an address. He’s living in Southport, Connecticut, using the name Arnie Farber. I think Marvelli and I should go up there and check him out.”

Marvelli stuck out his hands, palm up. “What do you need me for?”

Vissa gave him a withering look. “For a second opinion, Marvelli. You’re the only other PO we’ve got who’s ever seen Krupnick up close.”

“Gimme a break, will ya, Vissa? I’ve got my own cases to take care of.”

Vissa looked pleadingly at Loretta. “You can stand to be without him for a day, can you?”

Loretta’s face turned red. “What do you mean?” she said defensively. *How the hell does this woman know about us?* she thought.

“Well, you two work as a team, don’t you? I mean, that’s what I heard?”

Loretta was embarrassed for having jumped to conclusions. Sneaking around with Marvelli was making her paranoid. "It's up to him," she said quickly, trying to cover her tracks.

"C'mon, Marvelli," Vissa pleaded. "Southport's not that far. We can do it today. Soon as I get Freddy here squared away."

Freddy gave her a drop-dead look.

"I've got a lot to do today," Marvelli protested. "I can't just take off."

Vissa let loose like a steam whistle. "This is Ira Krupnick we're talking about, for chrissake! He was on the state's most wanted list at one time. What do you have to do that's more important than this?"

Vissa looked to Loretta with pleading eyes. Loretta stiffened. *I'm not his keeper*, she thought. *He can do what he wants.*

"I told you," Marvelli said. "I'm too busy."

"Don't be a jerk, Marvelli," Vissa said. "This is important. Tell him, Julius. He *has* to help me with this."

But Marvelli's back was up now. "I don't have to do *anything*, Vissa."

She raised her index finger and stuck a frosty pink fingernail in his face. "Don't talk that tone with me, pal."

"Oh, yeah? And what're you gonna do about it?"

She smirked at him. "Don't make me embarrass you, Marvelli. You know I can."

Loretta furrowed her brows. What the hell did *that* mean? she wanted to know.

Julius stepped between Marvelli and Vissa. "Cease and desist, you two. You're destroying my good-morning aura. Let's take this into my office. Now."

"Fine," Vissa said.

Marvelli just scowled.

"Loretta," Julius said, "will you process Mr. Freddy here while I play Solomon and crush these two brats in half?"

"Sure, no problem," Loretta said.

Vissa pulled the handcuff keys out of her pocket and started to toss them to Loretta. The two women exchanged wary glances just before the keys flew through the air between them.

As Vissa followed Julius to his office, Marvelli dashed back down the hallway to the refrigerator out back. "I'll be right with you," he said.

Julius rolled his eyes and glanced at Loretta. "Again?" he said.

A few minutes later Marvelli returned with a Styrofoam coffee cup filled with iced cream and a white plastic spoon.

Vissa started to laugh. “Ice cream for breakfast? I always knew you were a garbage truck, Marvelli, but now you’ve reached a new low.”

“Have you tried this Elmer Fudge Whirl stuff?” he asked her. “Man, it’s out of this world.” He dug into his cup.

Vissa reached for his midsection and pinched his stomach through his shirt. “You better lay off the sweets, Marvelli,” she said in a breathy whisper. “I don’t want you getting fat on me now.” Her lips went from a shimmery pout to a flirty grin, her eyes holding his.

Loretta couldn’t believe this. Just a minute ago they’d been fighting like cats and dogs and now Vissa was flirting with him. What was with this woman?

“Come, come, children,” Julius said, as he corralled Vissa and Marvelli.

Loretta watched them file into Julius’s office, not sure what to make of all this.

Freddy the pimp was staring at her, his eyes mopey, his lower lip hanging open. “So can I go now?”

She just looked at him. “Sit down.” She pointed to the wooden straight-back chair next to her desk. “We’re gonna be here for a while.”

“Then I can go home?”

“Eventually,” she said, clearing paper off her desk.

Maybe in a few years, she thought.

Chapter 3

Loretta pulled out a Violator Reentry form from the bottom drawer of her desk and slammed it shut with a loud boom. She found a pen in the middle drawer and wrote down the date at the top of the sheet: April 16.

“Did you file your taxes?” Freddy the pimp asked, an unlit cigarette bobbing between his lips. He was sitting next to Loretta’s desk, his long gangly legs crossed as he tried to get to the lighter in his side pocket despite the handcuffs.

Loretta cocked an eyebrow at him. “Did you file *your* taxes?” she asked.

“Just trying to make conversation,” he said. He flicked the lighter a few times until he got a flame and held it to his cigarette. She glared at him before he exhaled any smoke and he picked up on the hint, blowing it out the side of his mouth and away from her.

“Got an ashtray?” he asked.

She looked around and spotted an empty Arnie and Barry’s pint on Marvelli’s desk. She reached over and grabbed it, plunking it down next to Freddy’s elbow. “Use this.”

Freddy tapped his ash into the empty container. “Your friend ought to lay off the stuff,” he said. “It’s really addictive.”

Loretta ignored him and continued filling out the form.

“For real,” he said. “I had one girl I had to let go because of this stuff. She couldn’t stop eating it. I mean, fat girls aren’t really a problem in my business. A lot of guys go for that. But there’s fat and then there’s *fat*.”

She gave him a dead-eyed stare. “Are you *trying* to piss me off?” she asked.

“Oh, no. Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m just saying there’s something about that particular ice cream that’s hazardous to your health.” He sucked on his cigarette, tipped his head back, and sent a geyser of smoke toward the ceiling.

Neither of them said anything. The only sound in the room was the soft scratch of her pen as she filled out the form.

“I’ll bet he only eats this flavor,” Freddy suddenly said. “The fudge whirl. That was the one that got my girl Linda into trouble. She always said the other flavors weren’t nearly as good.” He shook his head with regret. “She used to be so pretty. It’s a shame.”

Such a pretty face, Loretta thought bitterly. She must’ve heard that about a billicion

times.

“A damn shame,” Freddy mumbled to himself.

Loretta kept her eyes on her work. “You’re getting on my nerves, Freddy.”

“Sorry.” He drew on his cigarette and made his lips pop.

Loretta continued to work on the form, checking off boxes and filling in lines. She was stumped, though, when the form asked for the arresting officer’s name. She couldn’t remember Vissa’s last name.

“Mylowe,” Freddy said, reading over her shoulder. He spelled it for her.

“Thank you,” she said. This guy was really beginning to bug her.

The early-morning quiet was gradually invaded by a rising din coming from Julius’s office. Loretta stopped to listen. Vissa and Marvelli were going at it again.

“C’mon, Julius,” Marvelli was saying. “This is ridiculous. She doesn’t need me for this. Anybody in the office can go with her.”

Vissa started whining. “You’re the only other PO who knows what he looks like. Marvelli. How many times do I have to say it?”

“Case closed,” Julius overrode them both. “Vissa, you can have Marvelli for the day. But that’s it. I want to see you back here tomorrow morning as usual, O Marvelous One. Arrive at your desk—not out back in the holding cells with ... you know.”

“But—”

“No buts. Just go.”

Vissa’s loud hooting laughter drowned out whatever argument Marvelli was making.

“Go,” Julius ordered. “I have made my decision, and there are no appeals. Get out of here. *Andale, andele, pronto.*”

Freddy was shaking his head. “Poor bastard,” he said. “I feel sorry for him.”

Loretta looked up from the form. “Why?”

“I only had to spend three hours with Vissa. Your buddy’s stuck with her for the whole day.”

“So? What’s wrong with that?”

Freddy didn’t answer right away. He studied the ash on his cigarette. “Let’s just say Vissa Mylowe is a lot of woman.”

“Meaning what?”

He took another drag as he considered his answer. “Lemme put it this way. If Vissa worked for me, she’s be my biggest earner *and* my biggest headache.”

Loretta put the pen down. “The headache part I can understand, but what do you mean she’d be your biggest earner?”

Freddy laughed with the cigarette wedged in the corner of his mouth. “It always

amazes me how dense broads can be about other broads. Let me clue you in. Visa Mylowe is one sexy babe. And not bombshell sexy—I mean genuine sexy. The kind of broad guys get cuckoo over.”

“I’m not following you.” Loretta wasn’t sure she wanted to.

“There’s just something about her that’s unbelievably sexy. The way she says things, the way she looks at you, the way she can change gears in the middle of a conversation and then change right back again. I mean, look what she did with your friend. She was bitching at him like crazy, ready to scratch his eyes out, then just like that she turned around and gets all playful with him, melts him right down to nothing.”

“She did not melt him down to nothing,” Loretta objected.

“You don’t think so because you’re a woman,” Freddy said. “You didn’t see it the way a guy would.”

Loretta picked up her pen. This mutt was full of crap, she thought. Right up to his brown eyeballs.

“I’m telling you, though,” he said. “If I had her working for me, it would be like money in the bank. Johns pay big for girls like her. She’d be the kind guys fall in love with and pass through the nose to be with. She’d be a freakin’ gold mine.”

“Right...” Loretta shifted her attention back to the form. Freddy was a jerk, she decided. She shouldn’t even bother listening to him.

But as the pimp fished another cigarette out of his pocket and lit it with the end of his last one, Loretta glanced back toward Julius’s office. Sure, the woman was sexy and flirtatious, but Marvelli’s not that shallow, she thought.

Besides, he doesn’t seem to like her at all. And they’re only going to be together for a day. What could possibly happen in one day? Nothing, she told herself. Absolutely nothing.

Freddy was blowing smoke rings, tracking them with his eyes. “You think she’s good for the sack?”

“How the hell would I know?”

“I’ll bet she’s something else,” he said admiringly.

“If I ever sleep with her, I’ll let you know,” Loretta said sarcastically.

Freddy stopped blowing rings and stared at her. “You go that way?”

“What way?”

“With other women.”

Loretta scowled at him. “No.”

“You go both ways? Boys *and* girls?”

“Keep it up, Freddy. You’re doing a great job getting on my good side.”

Freddy shrugged, pulling an innocent face. “I’m just asking. That’s all. Personally I don’t

think there's anything wrong with that kind of stuff."

"Did I say there was?" Loretta heard herself getting loud. "Did I?" she said, toning down.

"Hey, you know what I say? I say, whatever gets you through the night. Long as you don't hurt nobody else. What people do behind closed doors is their business. That's my motto."

"Just as long as you get your cut," Loretta pointed out.

"Only if they're doing it with one of my employees. It's a free country. Amateurs can get laid, too. I don't mind."

"That's big of you, Freddy."

"Don't mention it."

Loretta scrunched her lips to one side of her face as she stared at the form. "I don't have your file here, Freddy. Where did you last serve time?"

"Leesburg."

"Where were you arrested?"

"Wildwood."

"Do you remember the name of the presiding judge at your trial?"

Freddy exhaled his disgust. "Do I remember? How could I ever forget that big motherfucker Stanislaw Z. Kopinsky. Gave me the maximum and said he would've given me more if he could've. They call that guy the Time Machine."

Loretta couldn't help but laugh. "Freddy, every court in the country's got a judge they call the Time Machine, and every con I've ever met says he's been screwed by the Time Machine."

"Hey, I don't know nothing about the rest of the country, but in my case it's true. That old bastard Stanislaw is the *original* Time Machine."

"Sure, Freddy, whatever you say."

Freddy took a long drag off his cigarette, the smoke slowly filtering out through his nose. "You mind if I ask you something?"

"What?"

"How much do you people make?"

"Parole officers?"

"Yeah."

"None of your business."

"Can't be much," Freddy said, scratching the underside of his chin. "It's a state job, right?"

Loretta looked at him. "You thinking of applying?"

He laughed, hissing through his nose. "Not me, man. I'm just thinking about Vissa. I bet she don't make more than thirty-five, forty grand a year. I could triple her salary easy if she came to work for me."

Loretta just shook her head in disbelief. "You are incredible, Freddy. You just got caught violating the terms of your parole, and here you are discussing future illegal activities with an officer of the court. Are you brain-dead or what?"

Freddy's mouth formed a deep frown as he shook his head. "No way, no how," he said. "I never said *what* I wanted her to do for me. How do you know I'm not looking for a cleaning lady?"

"Yeah, right," Loretta said. She went back to the form. "You'll have to find out if she does windows, though. I have a feeling she doesn't."

"She can do my windows anytime," he said with a lascivious grin. "You, too."

Loretta dropped the pen and reared back to slap him silly when she suddenly realized that he was still handcuffed. POs are not supposed to use excessive force, and they are definitely not supposed to strike a parolee when he or she is in restraints.

Freddy puckered his lips and closed his eyes. "Ooooh, baby," he moaned. "Hurt me. Hurt me good."

"That can be arranged, Freddy. And you won't like it."

He grinned. "You never know."

Just then Marvelli and Vissa emerged from Julius's office. They were both laughing about something.

"This mutt giving you a hard time, Loretta?" Vissa asked.

"No more than any other mutt I've ever had to deal with."

Freddy rotated his shoulders like a stripper. "Ooooh, ladies," he growled in his throat. "I love it when you talk about me."

"Ignore him," Vissa said. "He's been doing this crap ever since I picked him up. I think he turns himself on."

"Not like you do," Freddy said under his breath.

Vissa struck like a cobra, grabbing him by the throat and digging her nails into his flesh. She tipped his chair so far back he was on the verge of toppling over. "Behave," she growled. Her thumb was on his trachea, cutting off his air supply. When she finally let him go, he wheezed and coughed, sucking in as much air as he could get.

Loretta raised an eyebrow. "He's still in cuffs," she reminded Vissa.

"I know," she said, keeping her gaze on Freddy. She didn't seem to care.

Loretta looked to Marvelli. He didn't seem to approve either, but he held his tongue.

"Here," Vissa said, picking up the Violator Reentry form, "let me finish this up. Mind if I

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