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Chapter One

In front of me stood a giant stack of quivering comforters, aqua, still in their original packaging, still with the tags that said "remove by the customer only," heaped on top of each other, with red labels announcing they would soon be available at great discount. I pointed my snubnosed revolver at the stack.

"You don't need to be hiding," I said to the pile of reasonably priced bedding, which had every reason to hide.

"I'm doing inventory," said the small, terrified voice of the daytime manager of the Bed Bath & Beyond, Store #1991, Arkham Village.

Jablonsky, my enforcer, sat with his feet up on the desk behind me and looked through the week's receipts on the store laptop. "Who buys see-through shower curtains?" he asked. "Boss doesn't that strike you as perverted?" He was big and blond, like a linebacker for the Aryan Animals, who hit the gym twice a day and wore a crewcut, military style, that he did himself.

I told him to reconsider. You had see-through plastic shower curtains and the store upsold you into a nice outer curtain made of fabric. It was pretty high class.

"You're scaring me," said the stack of comforters.

"Relax," I said.

"The boss says relax," said Jablonsky.

"Tell him why he should relax," I said.

"You should relax," said Jablonsky, while rubbing out some ear funk with his finger, "because Bugsy isn't wearing his murder suit." Jablonsky wiped his hands on a set of cloth napkins.

"Why don't you show our friend what happens when you opt to conduct inventory instead of talking to Buggy Maddox."

Jablonsky hopped off the desk, looked back, and dropped the laptop to the ground, then stomped on it with his alligator loafers. "I hope they have a warranty," he said.

My enforcer pulled out his hunting knife, which had a wicked guthook blade, then approached the pile of comforters. He whistled a very low tone, a kind of a moribund whistle, unlike the whistle he used to harass cute girls who walked by. My enforcer boasted at least fifteen different whistles.

"These comforters. Forty percent off?" he said. "Are they down or synthetic?"

"Synthetic," said the manager from behind the stack.

"Even at ten percent off they're a really good value," I said.

"Not anymore," said Jablonsky. He pulled off the comforter from the top of the stack and we could see the tip of the manager's brown spiked hair.

Jablonsky paused, then unzipped the comforter from its plastic case. The only other sound in the office was the shuffle of zombie stock boys pricing bath soaps.

"What are you doing?" the manager asked.

"A little something you could prevent," I said. Because of RICO laws you had to be careful with what you said out loud. Any place could be bugged, even my own mall, though I found that unlikely.

"What was your name again?"

"Caputo," he mumbled.

I knew his name, he'd been running this location for nine months. He'd transferred from one of their stores in Sacramento, and stubbornly refused to understand how we did things here on Long Island.

"Our friend over here is cutting the tags off of your comforters," I answered.

"Which tag?"

"The one that says do not remove unless you're the customer."

"You can't do that," he said.

Another whistle from Jablonsky. This one was that whistle you make that's high pitched, when you do it by opening your mouth wide and putting your tongue up near your palate. It was the "you're talking crazy whistle."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because you aren't the customer."

This conversation was not progressing. Screw RICO. "Cut them all off," I said. "Then take off one of his hands, your choice, at an additional discount."

"No!" said Caputo, in a half-assed shout.

"Then come out from the stack of comforters and talk man to man."

Caputo appeared in front of us. He had the small inventory scanner gun in his left hand, outstretched with the trigger dangling off his finger. He was a plump Mexican kid who wore a mustache with a goatee that suggested to the customers that he might be a badass.

"Put the gun on the ground," I said, and he did. "Put the knife away," I told Jablonsky. The enforcer picked up the cracked laptop and gently placed it back on the desk. He sighed heavily as he sheathed his blade.

I walked up so close my nose was almost bumping Caputo's. His name was on a metal tag, attached to his blue Oxford shirt with a magnet. It was too bad: you worked your way up to management at the Bed Bath & Beyond, the kid probably took some classes even, and they still made you wear a name tag like a stock boy.

"I'd like to hear one more time why our protection payment is late," I asked.

He mumbled something about an audit from Corporate, that the Labor Day Blowout didn't generate as much revenue as they'd expected, that people had been paying with gift cards instead of

cash, which was much harder to skim. Understandable but not my problem.

"We're going to review how this works," I said. It occurred to me that I was still pointing the snubie at his gut, at point blank range, which was impractical because the powder burns would never come out of my Members Only jacket and I'd have to buy a new one. They aren't easy to find. I holstered it to put the manager at ease.

The speech was worn. I'd said it too many times. I needed some new material.

"From Macy's to the north and Sears to the south, the food court in the west and your thing in the east," I said, "me and the Strong Island Boys are here to create a unique retail experience at the Arkhaven Mall. In exchange for a taste of sales, we serve as ambassadors to the clientèle who comes into the mall and would prefer that they don't get their asses shot off while perusing the penis-shaped pasta at Spencer's, or witness your store reduced to rubble like the Foot Locker a few years back."

"I know."

"Our cut is in cash that you put in unmarked manila envelopes. No funny business, no excuses, no trying to bribe my boys with down pillows," I said with disgust in Jablonsky's direction. He hung his head.

"Corporate has been asking questions," Caputo said. "They said they were going to send someone to investigate."

Bullshit. I might be just a self-employed criminal entrepreneur. What I did know was that the corporate headquarters had better things to do than investigate one store.

That was why I didn't squeeze too hard. A couple of points on sales, not so much that Corporate would deem this particular location to be "underperforming," which was the kiss of death to a big box retailer.

"The rest of the shops in this mall don't have a problem making their payments."

Caputo was visibly sweating. I backed off, partly so he'd relax, partly so I didn't have to smell

the chain store bialy he bought at the food court and in all likelihood eaten in the past five minutes.

"This doesn't need to be an adversarial relationship," I said. The guys at the Orange Julius treated me like family.

"Tell Corporate what they want to hear," I said. "Call it shrinkage, spoiled inventory, do whatever you need to do: you make your payments like every other store in the Arkhaven Mall, and the Strong Island Boys will do whatever we can to help you navigate the often treacherous waters that are suburban consumer sales. Also, I'd like to talk to you about setting up an off the record casino night here. For some friends of ours."

He nodded. Caputo tiptoed over the remnants of his laptop to the desk, and handed me a second envelope. I took a look. Collections were now officially done for the week and I could focus my attention on next week's college football bets.

The office door opened. It was Mikey, one of my soldiers who'd been guarding the exit.

"Boss," said Mikey, "we got a dead hooker problem."

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