



## Midnight Taxi Tango: A Bone Street Rumba Novel

By Daniel José Older

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**The author of *Half-Resurrection Blues* returns in a new Bone Street Rumba Novel—a knife-edge, noir-shaded urban fantasy of crime after death.**

*The streets of New York are hungry tonight...*

Carlos Delacruz straddles the line between the living and the not-so alive. As an agent for the Council of the Dead, he eliminates New York's ghostlier problems. This time it's a string of gruesome paranormal accidents in Brooklyn's Von King Park that has already taken the lives of several locals—and is bound to take more.

The incidents in the park have put Kia on edge. When she first met Carlos, he was the weird guy who came to Baba Eddie's botánica, where she worked. But the closer they've gotten, the more she's seeing the world from Carlos's point of view. In fact, she's starting to see ghosts. And the situation is far more sinister than that—because whatever is bringing out the dead, it's only just getting started.

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### Editorial Review

Review

#### Praise for *Midnight Taxi Tango*

“With a cleverly written, imaginative plot and a cast of otherworldly, colorful characters set in the streets of New York, *Midnight Taxi Tango* takes urban fantasy to a thrilling new level.”—*RT Book Reviews* (top pick)

#### Praise for *Half-Resurrection Blues*

“Daniel José Older is here to save your soul. But he might just terrorize it first...a fabulous talent.”—Victor LaValle, author of *The Devil in Silver*

“All the best dark urban fantasies are about matters of life and death. *Half-Resurrection Blues* takes that to the limit. A hard-core, hard-driving fantasy.”—Simon R. Green, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Tales from the Nightside*

“As real as fresh blood and as hard as its New York streets. A Lou Reed song sung with a knife to your throat.”—Richard Kadrey, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Getaway God*

“A fantastic beginning to what will surely be a fantastic series.”—Jesmyn Ward, National Book winning author of *Men We Reaped*

About the Author

**Daniel José Older** is a Brooklyn-based writer, editor, composer, and author of the Bone Street Rumba novels, including *Half-Resurrection Blues*. He facilitates workshops on storytelling, music, and anti-oppression organizing at public schools, religious houses, and universities. He co-edited the anthology *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History*, and his short stories and essays have appeared in *Tor.com*, *Salon*, *BuzzFeed*, *Gawker*, *New Haven Review*, *PANK*, and *Strange Horizons*.

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Chapter One

*Carlos*

"What song is that, man?"

I don't move. The rumble of this ambulance's diesel engine fills the air again; the park comes into focus around us, streetlamps fighting off the gloom. If I hold still, if Victor shuts the fuck up, if nothing happens for another few seconds, then maybe I can sink back in, grasp hold of that fragile thread of a melody, the line of her face fading into the darkness.

"Carlos?"

I rub my eyes and reach for the coffee cup on the dashboard. The thread is gone; Sasha is gone. Gone for good. “It’s nothing, man. Just some song I heard.” The coffee is lukewarm but strong as hell. Reality settles in fully around me. “Can’t seem to shake it, is all. You get a job?”

Victor shakes his head, “Nah, man, go back to sleep.” The ambulance radio crackles to life, a routine announcement that seat belts save lives, and then all we hear is the diesel putt-putt-putt and occasional snores from the passenger compartment, where Victor’s partner, Del, is laid out.

“Look,” I say, “if some shit don’t go down by four, I’m out.”

Victor nods. “I’m telling you, it’s been every night, C. Without fail.”

“Maybe accidents do take vacations after all.”

“Carlos, I’ve been doing this job for twelve years and I ain’t never seen a pattern like this. You know I don’t even go in for all that woo-woo shit either. I don’t get involved in your whatever spirit-hunting weirdo life. No offense.”

“Thanks, man.”

“And I ain’t never come to you ’bout some shit in all the time I known you.” He pulls out a cigarette and starts smoking it out the window.

Around us, Von King Park glowers with late-night shadows and a few scattered lights. The metal bars of a playground swing glint out of the gloom, a silhouetted pyramid against the cloudy sky. Darkened brownstones peer from behind the trees on either side.

Maybe there is something lurking out there. I get the faintest tinge of it—a rude kind of itch—but my cluttered-up memories make it hard to think clearly.

Anyway, if I say anything right now, Victor will interpret it as encouragement to speak more, so I light a Malagueña and glower along with the park.

Victor lets out a menthol-laced cloud and shakes his head. “Last night, a hipster on a bike got completely destroyed by a passing garbage truck. I mean, we were picking up pieces of him blocks away. The night before it was a prisoner that broke out the precinct over there, made it halfway across the street before the desk officer popped him and then he got sideswiped by a motorcycle. The dude got dragged like four blocks, and when we got to him, his back was hamburger, Carlos. Hamburger.”

I just grunt.

“Wednesday it was the suicide. That was on the far corner of the park over there. Jumped from the roof of that brownstone and lived, man. We had to decompress him though, full-on tension pneumo, tubed that ass and hauled him to Bellevue. Died in surgery.”

“Damn.” I have no idea what Victor’s going on about, but all medical jargon aside, he’s right. Three apparently unrelated gory deaths in a four-block radius is the kinda thing that puts me to work. He rattles off a few more while I smoke and ponder patterns and, inevitably, the past . . .

“Carlos?”

“Yeah, man?”

“You’re humming again.”

“Huh?”

“Like, while I’m talking.” Victor narrows his eyes at me as I sit up and rub my face.

“Shit, man. Sorry.”

“It’s cool. I know you’re not used to the nightlife. Anyway, they started calling the place Red Square on the strength of all this. And I’m just saying, seems like the kinda thing . . . you might know something about.”

Vic’s never known how to talk about me being half dead. It’s not his fault—I’ve never come out and said it to him. But a gray pallor covers me like a layer of dust, and my skin is cold to the touch; my heart rate never surpasses a melancholy stroll. Plus I deal with ghosts. In fact, I’m employed by them: the New York Council of the Dead, a sprawling, incomprehensible bureaucracy, sends me to clean up any messy irregularity in the rigid, porous borderlines between life and death. I mean, since I’m a walking messy irregularity myself, I guess it makes sense the Council’d use me as their cleanup man, but truth is, it gets lonely.

Especially recently.

A whiny bachata song explodes out of Victor’s belt. He curses, his belly shoved against the steering wheel as he squirms into what must be some kind of yoga pose to dig out his phone.

“Ay, shut the fuck up with that yadda yadda horseshit,” Del hollers from the back. Del is like eight feet tall with locks down to his ass. He’s from Grenada, but he got hit by a school bus in the nineties and has been speaking with a thick Russian accent ever since. When he gets really worked up, his brain clicks fully over into Russian—some shit the neuroscientists of the world are still going nuts trying to figure out.

Mostly people try to be really nice to him.

“Sorry, man!” Victor yells, cradling the flip phone against his face. “Hello? . . . Uh, yeah, hang on.” He hands me the phone. “It’s for you, man. Some chick.”

Sasha.

The thought wreaks havoc on my slow-ass heart for a half second, and then I mentally clobber it into submission. Of course it’s not Sasha. There’s eighty million reasons for it not to be Sasha, least of which being how the fuck would she have Victor’s number and know I was with him? And why would she care? She walked out on me with no forwarding address, barely recovered from a nasty demon possession and pregnant with my child. And now all I have is a Sasha-shaped hole in my chest and a song I can’t stop humming.

I mean, I did kill her brother. I was in no place to try to get her to stay. And still . . .

“Carlos?”

I have to stop disappearing from the world like this. I ignore Vic’s raised eyebrow, take the phone, and say hello into it.

“Tell your buddy if he refers to me as ‘some chick’ ever again, he’ll be driving his own ass to the ER so they can extract his nutsack from his mouth.”

“Hi, Kia.” Kia is sixteen and will probably rule the world one day. For now, though, she runs my friend Baba Eddie’s botánica. Started on the register, selling amor sin fin and espanta demonio herbal mixtures, statues of saints, and beaded necklaces. Then she took over the books, which were a disaster, and, without bothering to ask Baba Eddie, she set up an online store and proceeded to build what appears to be a small spiritual-goods empire—one she rules with an iron fist—and all as an after-school job.

“You called?”

“Isn’t it a school night? What are you doing up at four a.m.?”

“Returning your phone call.”

“That was like eight hours ago!”

“All right, man. I’ll talk to you later then.”

“Wait—you know anything about the park over on Marcy?”

“Know anything about it? I know a buncha motherfuckas been gettin’ got there recently. Usedta be my stomping grounds for a while, then I moved on. Is that where you are right now, C? You might wanna not be there.”

“I’m all right. Anything else?”

“My girl Karina babysits a whole boatload of little white kids at that park. You want me to ask her about it?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“I’ll see her at capoeira tomorrow. Maybe I’ll swing through with her after.”

The radio crackles, and Victor picks up the mic. “Five-seven X-ray, send it over.”

“Be careful out there,” Kia says.

Victor puts on his seat belt and cranes his head toward the back. “Del, we got a job.”

“Morgala vikalyu, padla!”

“It’s been like three weeks now,” a little Humpty-Dumpty-looking middle-aged man in a bathrobe tells us. “I been coughing and hacking, but this is different.”

Del towers over the guy, arms akimbo, perpetual frown deeper than usual. “You’ve been coughing for three weeks, yes?” He says it like he’s about to launch into an eighty-thousand-page dissertation about peasants and vodka. “And now you decide for to call nine-one-one, why?”

“Well, tonight I coughed up something different. You want to see?”

“I really do not want to see this thing,” Del says, but the little oval-shaped dude is already rummaging around a pile of used tissues and medicine vials on his coffee table.

Victor copies down the guy's basic information at the kitchen table. I'm sitting across from him trying not to gape. "Is this normal?" I whisper. "People call you for this shit?"

He peers over his dollar-store reading glasses at me for a hard second, then gets back to writing.

"Here it is!" the guy exclaims cheerfully. Then he erupts into a hacking fit. He passes a plastic Tupperware container to Del, who gingerly takes it in a gloved hand and peers in. He scowls and tips it toward us just enough for me to see a tennis-ball-sized clump of tangly brown hair.

"The fuck?" I say before I can stop myself.

The patient shrugs. "I know, right?"

Victor shrugs too, and then both radios in the room burst into excited, static-laced growls.

"Unit with a message, please repeat your assigned number and location. Unit with a message, please re—" Another desperate scramble of static and yelling cuts off the dispatcher. Victor and Del both furrow their brows and turn up their radios at the same time.

I hear the words "forthwith" and "imminent arrest" and then more static comes in. The dispatcher releases an angry tone over the airwaves and yells at the units to stop stepping over each other.

I stand up. "What is it?"

Victor shakes his head. "Sounds like they're calling for backup."

*"Marcy and Green! Marcy and Greene!"* the radio screams. *"Forthwith! We have an imminent cardiac arrest. I need medics. I need backup. We about to roll."*

Victor and I lock eyes. "The park," I say.

He nods. "Go. We gotta wrap this up."

At full speed, I move with ease. You don't realize my left leg drags; this cane compensates just so: the full complex machinery of me lunging forward like a wave. It took practice, believe me. But I've had time. It's been more than four years since I died in some unspeakably violent way at the foot of the ornate archway at Grand Army Plaza and then woke up days later in a phantom safe house on Franklin Ave, body broken and every memory shredded. I find new life in each moment like this: the midnight brownstones breezing past me, the siren song of something foul dragging me forward. This is life, and really, anything is better than the sheer emptiness of so many lost memories.

"The streets is hungry," a little old lady mutters when I roll up, sweat-soaked and out of breath, at the southwest corner of Von King Park. She has a rusted old cart in front of her and a head scarf tied around her wrinkled brown face. "Streets be feedin' when they hungry."

A bloodstain the size of a trench coat shines up from the dark concrete at me. It catches the sickly orange glare of streetlamps and the pulsing blue emergency lights. They've already decorated the spot with police tape. The ambulance must've screeched off just before I got there; I hear its wail recede into the night. A few feet away from the bloodstain, a motor scooter lies in a heap, like someone just crinkled it up and tossed it there.

The cop nearest me has icy blue eyes and looks young and entirely unimpressed. I ask him what happened

and he just shrugs and looks away. I turn to the old lady, still standing beside me and chewing her mouth up and down like she has the mushiest piece of steak in there she don't wanna let go of.

"One'a them Chinese delivery boys," she responds to my unasked question.

"What hit him?"

She nods up the block some, where a Daily News truck idles with its hazard lights on. A guy with a baseball cap and a goatee stands outside, talking on his cell phone, eyes barely holding back tears. An ugly, human-sized dent marks the side of the truck.

I shake my head. "Damn."

"Streets is hungry," the old lady says again.

"You see anything right before? Anything weird?"

She turns her attention from the street; those ancient cataract-fogged eyes squint up at me. "Was just a small one, eh."

"A small . . . what?"

She flinches, eyes back on the street, far away. "Don't play stupid now."

"A small ghost."

"Ay."

"You see it clear?"

She shakes her head. "Just fleeting-like. Came and went, came and went." She chuckles softly. "He'll be back though, eh. He'll be back, yes."

## Chapter Two

Kia

I don't know why I can't stop thinking of Giovanni today. This is probably all Carlos's fault, with his damn incessant searching for an invisible past. Whatever it is, I can't shake it: it's like there's a tiny Gio hiding behind all the little potion vials and sacred pots on the shelves around me. I opened the botánica early even though it's Saturday, because I couldn't go back to sleep and lying in bed with the sunshine creeping over me just wasn't cutting it. Yes, I have trig homework. No, I don't care. And Baba Eddie doesn't have any readings till two, which means he'll waddle in at 1:58, sipping his coffee.

But here I am.



The sunlight finds its way through the saint statues in the window display, lands on me and warms my skin. I feel old even though I'm not.

And then a breath of spring comes through the open door. It's tinged with frost but still carries that freshness, that new-soil, sunlit-fields goodness, and it should make me happy but it doesn't.

Giovanni.

This always happens, this second week of March, and I always forget and turn myself in circles wondering why I can't find my way out of this hole, why every thought hurls me back to a dim, cramped place that doesn't know sunlight. But anniversaries will do that, creep up on you and settle in your bones.

Still, he's never been on me like this. Usually it's just the emptiness.

Giovanni.

It's been seven years, almost to the day.

I should probably give up and admit he's dead. Everyone else has. A boy like that, that bright a fire, seems like it'd be too much to ask to have him around for more than a decade or two. Instead I make up stories: Giovanni in Amsterdam, whoring around gleefully with poets and painters, smoking hash and making fun of American tourists. Giovanni in India, writing plays while riding elephants. Giovanni in Tunisia, fermenting a lusty new remix of the Arab Spring.

When I was ten, almost eleven, and he was what? Sixteen? I was still plotting how to get him to marry me. I'd done all the math, checked and rechecked it: he would be twenty-three when I hit seventeen, the legal age to marry in New York. That seemed doable: seventeen and twenty-three. Shit, Uncle Freddie got married when he was fifteen and Aunt Bea was twenty-eight and they're still going strong. Then again, Uncle Freddie's been known to swallow his own teeth on purpose. Anyway, I scratched the equations out on my little Powerpuff Girls notepad and arrived triumphantly at the conclusion that it was doable, mathematically at least. The other concerns, that he obviously had no interest whatsoever in girls and that we're first cousins—that all seemed like secondary problems. Sex was gross anyway, right? Who wanted all that?

I'm gonna be seventeen next week and Giovanni is . . . nowhere.

A woman comes in, ignoring the closed sign on the door. I can't tell if she's white or Puerto Rican or white and Puerto Rican. She's got loud purple lipstick on and she's almost perfectly round. Maybe she's been here before—Gina? Louisa? Then she opens her mouth and she's definitely Puerto Rican. "Hola, mi niña. Lissen, you have those collares for Babalu I asked about before? It was maybe two weeks ago, yes?"

Oh yeah, she was here before, but it wasn't no two weeks ago. Two months maybe. "We already sold 'em out, Iya." I use the respectful term for an elder santera even though I don't know if she's initiated or not. Whatever. One way or the other, she's older than me.

"Ay, mi madre, but I put in the order and everything." A singsongy whine enters her voice. I want nothing to do with it, so I end the conversation quick and she finds her way to the door. And then: Giovanni. Giovanni dressed in a hundred shades of violet, fro unruly. We were on our way home from school. That same chilly freshness teased the arrival of spring, and Giovanni was rolling his eyes because he got cast as the swan again in the ballet school's version of Swan Lake. "Gayest role ever," he said, sipping a cup of milk and sugar with a splash of coffee in it. "So stupid. Why can't we do a ballet based on Ishigu?"

I jumped up and down and did little pirouettes around him. “Ishigu! Ishigu!” That’s the manga we both loved. Well, I loved it because he loved it and everything he loved was a holy relic to me. Plus, Ishigu was half boy-demon, half android and surrounded by the hottest anime chicks in Robot City. Gio could be Ishigu and I could be Maiya, who carried a staff with a talking ram’s head on top that she used to disembowel all the tentacle-bots that came at them from the Red Death Chambers.

“I’m coming in late,” Baba Eddie says when I pick up the landline. I hear him pull on his cigarette. “Something came up.”

“I’m so sure.” For no reason at all, I’m annoyed.

“Hold things down for me, okay? Why are you there so early anyway?”

“I dunno.” I shrug as if he can see it over the phone, but really: it’s Baba Eddie; he probably can.

“What’s wrong, Kia?” That touch of charismatic condescension he always gets away with because he knows I love him like a father. Uncle. Fatherly uncle. Whatever. I let it slide. Again.

“Nothing.”

“Good.” He ignores my blatant lie. “See you at three . . . ish.”

“You have a two-o’clock reading, and anyway, I have capoeira at three and I really hate being late.”

“Who’s the reading for?”

“Eliades.”

“Oh fuck. He’s always coming with some bullshit. Keep him entertained till I get there.”

“I’m not entertaining.”

“Just tell him I’ll be a little late.”

“But . . .”

The line goes dead.

Ishigu was a third-degree master of Shumanjo Levitating Robot fighting style, but PS 861 in Sunnyside didn’t have that as an after-school option, so Giovanni took kenpo instead. Gio also was a lead alto in glee club, treasurer of the debate team, assistant editor at the school newspaper, and president/founding member of the Amiri Baraka Drama Club. Each met on a different day of the week, which I always took to be a special scheduling miracle devised solely to please my overachieving cousin—but it was really just a coincidence.

“Why you still wearing your tutu?” Gio narrowed his eyes at me.

“Because I’m a ballerina,” I informed him.

“Ballet is so girly.”

I matched his sneer with one of my own. “You do ballet and you’re a boy.”

“I’m not just a boy.” Gio’s hands extended to either side, palms out, like Ishigu does when he’s getting ready to levitate. “I’m the baddest boy in town, bitches.”

I was laughing, but then I stopped. “Don’t call me a bitch.” Both my fists found my hips, and I frowned, creasing my brow to show I wasn’t kidding.

“I didn’t mean you.” The apology was sincere. “I meant it universally. All the bitches in the universe! Anyway, it’s not a bad word if you say it right.”

“It’s not?” We started walking again, all through the quiet suburbs of eastern Queens. When Gio was with me, I could ignore the creeping sensation that I don’t belong, I don’t belong; no matter where I am, I don’t belong.

“Shh . . . We on a mission.”

“Where we going?” I’d never been to this neighborhood before. Maybe driven past once or twice with my dad, but it was all white folks, and the feeling of don’t belong, don’t belong hung heavy in the air, like all the molecules wanted me to leave too. But I knew I was safe. Gio’d been studying kenpo since he was my age and he was a brown belt and not to be trifled with.

“It’s a secret mission.”

“But where we going?”

“If I tell you, it won’t be a . . .” I made the face that I knew gets him, the one that I used to make right before I cried. He caved. “Fine. But don’t tell anybody.” He lowered his voice to such a shrill whisper on the word “anybody” that a little spittle escaped and he had to wipe his mouth. “We’re going to see if Jeremy’s okay.”

I rolled my eyes. For three weeks, all I’d heard about was Jeremy Fern. Would Jeremy like this red leather jacket? Does he read Ishigu too? What kind of cigarettes would Jeremy smoke? If Jeremy were a crayon, what color would he be? (Yes, no, Virginia Slims and plain ol’ white, respectively, but who was listening?) The angle of Jeremy’s chin: divine architecture; the perfection of his frown when he was thinking about a math problem; the timbre of his voice: angelic. Jeremy the Brave, bringing in articles about oil drilling in Antarctica for social studies. Jeremy the Agile, bounding effortlessly across the gym in tights for his Swan Lake solo. Jeremy the Cryptic, explaining his theory of how all six Star Wars movies were really one eight-million-hour rewrite of the Book of Job.

Or whatever.

If the boy had the slightest hint of self-awareness and looked out from the curtains of his thin blond hair once in a while, I’d actually feel like he was a threat to my impending marriage. But as it was, he displayed zero interest in anything more than a platonic friendship with Gio. Which baffled and relieved me at the same time.

So now we were off to see Jeremy the Clueless for some dumb “mission.” Great.

Eliades shows up right on time, of course. I’m sipping some bodega tea, no milk, no sugar, staring off into nothing like some asshole in a nursing home, when the guy busts in with a loud jingle-jangle from the door chimes. He’s always well dressed, but today his green striped tie lies half undone around his neck like a noose, and the top of his shirt is open, revealing pallid, moist flesh and a hint of chest hair. It’s a chilly March day, but he’s sweating like he ran all the way here from his Manhattan office.

“Hey, Eliades.” I’m grateful for the company; all these memories crowding my head can’t be healthy.

Eliades wipes a hand over his thinning hairline. “It’s back.” No Hi, Kia, no How’s school? Just It’s back. Okay. I hate small talk anyway. I don’t even wanna know what’s back.

“Baba Eddie’s running a little late.”

“But . . .”

“You can have a seat and wait for him.”

Eliades may be self-absorbed, but he knows me well enough not to argue when I use my have-a-seat voice. He makes his way through the aisles, pouting softly, and settles in one of the big easy chairs we got at half price from the vintage spot on Myrtle.

A textbook lies open on the counter in front of me; I don’t even remember taking it out. It’s trig, some shit I already know how to do, and can’t be bothered answering a bunch of mindless questions about. I know this is a terrible reason to be getting Cs, but the truth is, I’m bored out my mind almost every day in school. I mean, most of us are, and believe me when I tell you it’s not us, it’s them. Half the kids in there could be teaching advanced computer coding to a roomful of the aging millennials that are supposed to be educating us. It’s all teach to the test, teach to the test, meanwhile, we got important, real-life shit to deal with that doesn’t involve proving to a messy bureaucracy that their limp-dick machine functions properly.

Every time my report card comes back mediocre, my dad makes a speech about options being open and how I’m smarter than this and he’s disappointed, and I get it, but that doesn’t change the fact that doing mind-numbing work is mind-numbing, and my mind is numb right now. I’m over this shit. I’ve learned more running this botánica and trash-talking with my girl Karina than I ever did in a classroom.

Eliades lets out a massive snore.

I slam the textbook shut and roll my eyes.

“You wouldn’t make much of a spy,” Giovanni informed me as we sat in some bushes on a little hill behind Jeremy’s house. It’s just like all the other ones on this block: three stories, faded off-white shingles, all the decaying decadence of a middle-aged dad in a rumpled suit. “Too much chatter.”

It hurt, but with some effort I kept the whine out of my voice. “Well, how am I sposta spy when I don’t even know what we’re doing here?”

Gio sighed and adjusted his position a little. “Because Jeremy said some strange men had been showing up around his house.”

“How do you know he didn’t mean you?”

“Kia!”

“Keep your voice down. You’re gonna give us away.”

“What I’m gonna do is take you right home and then come back all by myself.”

The idea was so offensive to me I actually squealed a little when I said, “No!” This time when I made the pre-cry face, it wasn’t a ruse.

Gio knew it too, and he softened. “Then shut the fuck up, Kia.”

“Fine. But don’t swear at me.”

After a few moments, Giovanni sighed. “He said there were strange men that would whisper through his window late at night, all kinds of things about how he was destined for greatness and he was the chosen one. All kindsa shit. But it was like a whisper he could hear inside his head, not them speaking. They just made weird clicky sounds. They wanted him to come with them but would never say where, and when he’d ask, they’d just vanish into the night.”

I didn’t know what to say. My eyes were open so wide they felt like they were gonna pop out. “And you gonna stop them?”

“I just want to make sure he’s all right, is all.”

Something is clogging up the air in the botánica. My eyes are watering, and I can’t tell if it’s because I’m getting all emo from thinking about Giovanni or if it’s from whatever thickness has settled over the room. No, it’s definitely not me. I peek through the aisles but Eliades is hidden behind a bookshelf. I can’t inhale fully, my breath stops at the top of my chest and makes me cough.

“Eliades?” I say, and the silence that follows chills me.

It’s back. His words echo through my head over and over again. It’s back. I didn’t even bother asking what—it’s not my business and what could I do about it anyway? It’s back. He’d elongated the “it” in that way people do when they’re talking about something they don’t want to speak out loud. He looked like just saying it was a punch in the gut.

It’s back.

The room is so quiet now. I don’t even hear the traffic outside or the shoppers around the corner on Graham or the bachata that usually streams out the music store across the street. “Eliades?” I sound like such a little girl: pathetic. The thickness hangs over everything, an ever-expanding balloon forcing all the air out of the place. I could call Baba Eddie, but I don’t want to move from right here. Somehow I’m positive if I move, it’s all over. So I don’t. I wait.

It was getting dark; the foliage we were in was already swamped in shadows and the sky turned turquoise through the trees above us. Gio fumbled in his pockets and then produced a black cigarette. I gasped. He rolled his eyes, fumbled again, took out a lighter. The sugary scent of cloves filled the air; it was sweet and perfect, Giovanni’s magic pixie powder.

“How you gonna be all mad that I’m loud,” I hissed, “and then light a great big beacon of flame and send all that smoke out? You know he gonna see it.”

“He’s not even home yet. Look, the lights are out. Anyway, you can’t really stake out a house and not smoke. It’s, like, the rules.”

“I guess. If by stakeout you mean stalk.”

“Shhh!”

I was about to remind him he’d just said no one was home when a light went on. Jeremy appeared, pulling curtains out of the way and then lifting the window. He stuck his head out, smelled the summer breeze (the

cloves too probably), and then disappeared back into his room. I elbowed Gio, for no real reason except to somehow indicate that I'd told him so, and he nudged me back but kept smoking.

"You're an asshole," I whispered. It felt good to swear, mature.

"Shh!"

Music swirled out of Jeremy's room. It was trancelike: a gush of strings and then a heavy beat. Jeremy sailed past his window, arms over his head, a perfectly executed grand jeté. He emerged, pirouetting, in the next window just as a pleading, luscious voice came in over the beat.

I tugged on Gio's sleeve. "What's this music?"

"It's Björk."

"What's a Björk?"

"Shh!" That was the moment I understood he would never marry me. The boy was entranced. I could see Jeremy dancing in his eyes, the glare from the bedroom lighting up his face, his mouth hanging slightly open. I might not've had the words for it at the time, but inside I knew: it was love. Not that bullshit TV love, not the corny love-song love either. True love. The kind that people got themselves killed for. The kind that made you do really, really stupid things.

"Gio?"

"Girl, if I have to tell you to shush one more . . ."

"What are we really doing here?"

The music churned on. Gio kept his gaze fixed on the window.

A stick of sage sits on the counter, its charred end resting in an ashtray beside Baba Eddie's cigarette butts. The lighter is . . . Where is the lighter? Usually in Baba Eddie's pocket, dammit.

The air still throbs with the heaviness of something about to happen, and I'm sure it's whatever spiritual crap Eliades dragged in with him. Which is some bullshit, but I guess it's what we're here for. Can't blame a sick person for coming to the hospital.

Baba usually squirrels away matchbooks in random nooks and crannies for when he misplaces his lighters. I turn my head slowly to the shelf behind the counter, scan past iron pots, little wooden axes, grinning stone heads, and there, tucked in between a bag of birdseed and a porcelain vase, sits a black matchbook from some Italian restaurant around the corner.

I don't really know why sage does what it does, but Baba Eddie swears by it, and listen: that shit works. I light it on the second try and wave it up and down the aisle like a cheerleader, leaving a floating river of fragrant smoke in my wake.

The place already feels more relaxed, but when I'm done I squirt some Florida Water around just to close the deal. Eliades manages to snore through the whole thing. I won't lie: those shits are comfortable as hell. Best nap ever.

It's twelve past two.

Fuck everything.

I call Baba Eddie, but he doesn't pick up. I've done no homework, no restock, no online sales. I just sat here, sulking, surrounded by Gio and memories and saint statues for two hours.

I throw my bag over my shoulder and shake my head. One way or the other, this'll have to sort itself out without me. I put some quiet Enya-type shit on the stereo, lock Eliades in, and head off to the rec center.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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