

About the author

C. R. Preston is an only child. As such, he does not like to share food, be wrong, or lose at Monopoly. At the tender age of four he learned how to write and immediately began practicing his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Before becoming a successful writer, C.R. spent two years sleeve-polishing the multiple degrees he earned from University of Toronto. Presently, he is living in sin with his life partner and their 13 plants. Due to his recent rise to fame, the writer would like to maintain his whereabouts secret, in order to keep his stalkers at bay.

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**THE
SPANISH
GURU**

C.R. PRESTON

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are products of author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To my parents

SUPPLY AND DEMAND



Sometime in the early part of the twenty-first century, in the capital city of a certain ex-communist country, a pack of stray dogs crossed the main boulevard, making their way between car bumpers, huge huffing buses bursting at the seams with passengers, and impudent scooter wheels. The light turned green for a moment, shining like a small beacon of hope in a sea of feverish engines and dust. But nothing moved. From one end of the boulevard to the other, as far as the eye could see, traffic had been brought to a halt. Seen from above, the conglomerate of vehicles appeared to be a single creature—frustrated, unwashed, and colourful—struggling to break loose from the confining fences made of gray apartment buildings that contoured the length of the boulevard. Probing the sidewalks with wheels heating in the midday sun, the creature huffed and puffed, unable to swing its formidable tail. Small circles of exhaust smoke disappeared into the greyish skyline, and for an instant, the creature breathed in. Suddenly, a deafening symphony of honks broke out, shaking the balcony windows of the apartment buildings.

The dogs squinted at the noise and carried on brushing indiscriminately against the motionless cars. One dog stopped to scratch in front of a shiny black Mercedes, rubbing its matted fur against the license plate.

“If I had the room to move, I’d run him over,” said the driver, making a spitball with his tongue and projecting it across to the dog.

The animal turned quickly, giving in to a fit of howls and barks. He looked the driver in the eye and made for the wheels, biting at the rubber with a foamy mouth. For a while, the dog wrestled hopelessly with the rubber and growled a few times before joining his pack again.

“Close the window, will you?” asked the man sitting at the back of the black Mercedes.

The driver looked in the rear-view mirror and nodded. He took one last drag of his cigarette and flicked it to the curb, pressing a button to close his window. The man in the backseat watched the cigarette butt die out in the mound of filters that formed an outline at the base of the sidewalk and shook his head disapprovingly.

“These streets will never get cleaned,” he noted to the driver.

“And why should anyone clean them?” shrugged the driver. “They’ll just get dirty again.”

“How much longer, do you think?” asked the other man, pulling up the sleeve to his suit to check the time on a gold wristwatch.

“Dunno, Mr. Pector.” The driver shrugged again. “Traffic jams don’t make exceptions for no one.”

“Yes,” nodded the man, looking down his nose at the rusty station wagon wedged between the curb and the black Mercedes. “They are utterly democratic. And they say there’s no democracy in this country,” he added, trying to catch a glimpse of the traffic light.

The light turned green again, this time allowing a dozen cars to move forward. The black Mercedes squeezed itself in front of the station wagon, coming to a halt in the shade of a white bus.

“Sucker!” hissed the driver with a grin, and then excused himself, mumbling, “Sorry, Mr. Pector.”

The man in the backseat said nothing. Through his window, he could see the cluster of passengers clinging on to each other, pressed flat against the bus door. The door opened with a pneumatic huff, letting five people come out. From the sidewalk, ten more rushed to the open doors, pushing each other out of the way. Defying the laws of physics and passenger safety, they squeezed through, allowing the doors to close them in.

“Let’s make a call, shall we?” the man said to his driver, catching his eye in the rear-view mirror.

“Yes, Mr. Pector,” the driver nodded and hit a button on his speed dial.

Placido Pector looked away from the street to the giant apartment building blocks flanking the main artery of the city. Heavy and gray, each one of these utilitarian buildings had been erected at a rigorous distance from the others. Over the years, the thin layer of travertine peeled off the facades, showing the brickwork. But the apartment blocks were there to stay, remnants of another age, immutable and demoralizing, rupturing the asphalt along the boulevard like rotten teeth.

The man’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of sirens.

“Here we go,” said the driver, turning the key to start the car again.

A blue police cruiser made its way from the sidewalk onto the street, forcing the other cars off the road. It pulled in front of the black Mercedes, waited for it to get closer, and started its siren again, pushing through the traffic jam. Placido Pector checked his watch again.

“In the future, remind me never to leave the house at this hour,” he said to his driver. “We’ll have to give this guy a nice bonus,” he added, nodding at the cruiser.

Behind him, the low-timbered horn of the bus screamed in out-

rage, as if to say, "That's not fair."

"Yeah, yeah," waved the driver of the black Mercedes. "If you want fairness, better move to another place. He-he-he," he chuckled. "So much for traffic jams being democratic, huh, Mr. Pector?"

* * *

Hotel Lido had been a landmark of the city through multiple political systems. It had been built as an elegant baroque establishment under the Habsburg monarchy, kept as a place to isolate foreign visitors from the realities of communism during the socialist republic decades, and turned into a place of leisure for the wealthy after the revolution. Now, only months away from having to function up to the standards of the European Union, the hotel was given a quick makeover in the form of a spa, complete with an entertainment team reminiscent of those they had at tropical resorts. Where to find good-looking men who could teach fitness classes and get the old gals hanging by the poolside excited enough to move? The hotel manager turned to the man in charge of placing beautiful people at the right spots and making a profit out of it.

Placido Pector stepped out of the black Mercedes. He looked at the facade of the building, noticing the high cornice carved with running leaf patterns. Massive gold letters spelled out the name of the hotel. The only visible signs of change were the dozen flags from around the world flanking the centerpiece above the front entrance, which was an indigo-coloured flag as big as a queen-sized bedsheet, with a golden wreath made of stars embroidered as its emblem.

"Nothing like a change of flags to authenticate new circumstances," he greeted the manager, who was waiting by the door.

"Yes," nodded the other man, shaking Placido's hand vigorously. "Do you like it?"

"That depends on the circumstances," he said, staring at the giant European Union flag.

“Well, this is what I wanted to show you,” started the manager, holding the door open for Placido. “You know my business takes me around the world to see how other hotels operate. After all my travels, I have to say the Lido is as close as we’ll ever get to a five-star establishment in this city. Especially now that I’ve opened up the spa,” he added proudly.

Placido nodded absentmindedly as they crossed the lobby, heading for the outdoor pool at the back of the hotel.

“There’s only one thing missing,” the manager continued. “Customer loyalty.”

“Come on,” Placido gestured dismissively. “Where else do you expect a respectable foreigner to lodge? I bet they all come back to the Lido for lack of better options.”

“True,” agreed the manager. “Yet not many people travel to these parts of Europe. They used to when it was forbidden,” he added, giving Placido a look that made him think of another time they both lived through. “Now that we’re no longer a communist prison, they’ve lost interest. We are the newest member of the Union, the poor relative waiting for hand-me-downs. “

“That’ll all change once we’re no longer the newest member,” remarked Placido.

The manager shook his head slowly and grabbing a hold of the metallic handle to the glass door, he rested his arm there for a moment. “But our habits will take much longer to change,” he said. “We’ll have to learn to respect, before others can respect us. Look at how we’re treating our own. We hate our gypsies and we throw stones at our pride parade. Even our women,” here he paused, and added, “we need them to be weak.”

Prompted by this last observation, Placido raised a disproving eyebrow. Before he could say anything, the manager concluded, “The world no longer wants to know us, my friend. We get the odd investor

and the rare businessman, but if I don't do something, I'm afraid our expenses will far exceed our earnings."

Placido returned the man's grave stare, as the manager showed him to the pool deck. A very high fence surrounded the deck, making the yellowish-gray sky the only possible scenery. Across the deck, a few palm trees grounded in large flowerpots marked the pool area with a precarious shade. Behind every tree, there was an incense can stuffed with burning cones meant to overpower the pungent smell of diesel coming from the boulevard. Slowly, the fragrant smoke curled up into the air, doing very little to cover the heavy odour of pollution.

The manager brought him to the bar, and after waving the bartender away, poured Placido a glass of his finest scotch whiskey. From four sets of speakers, the sharp sound of a trombone mixed with the playful rhythm of bongo drums. Over the salsa music, the men could still hear horns honking from the cars on the other side of the fence.

"So what did you have in mind?" asked Placido, knowing the manager was hoping he could help.

"Well," started the other man, pouring a glass for himself, "I figured if I can no longer rely on tourism, I must open up to the local clientele. The Lido must offer them something steady and attractive to come back to. As it happens, the demographics in this part of town are of a specific kind," he said, casting a glance across the pool deck, where a number of middle-aged women were lying back on beach chairs. "I have a market for a male . . . entertainer," he confided with a wink. Then, looking back to the women, he added, "Someone who can get them and their friends to spend their time and money at the Lido."

"Doesn't sound like much of a business plan," noted Placido, checking his wristwatch. "I mean I can get you a stud or two, if that's what you need, but I don't see how it'll help the Lido in the grand scheme of things."

The manager shook his head, "I'm afraid you're missing the big

picture here,” he said, spreading his arms widely. Placido looked away from the salt stains that had crystallized around the man’s armpits.

“Land Retribution Act 143B,” articulated the manager. “The land that once belonged to the nobility was stolen fifty years ago by the proletariat. But do you know what happened this week?” he asked. He was certain Placido, like most alert citizens of his country, knew. He said, “This stolen land was given back to the original owners. Well, to their legal heirs at any rate— most of the original owners died off years ago. Yet overnight, if you will, people from all walks of life inherited land. A villa in the country, a condominium downtown, even a cottage somewhere in . . . Africa,” he ended with aplomb.

Placido scratched his head. “Africa?” he repeated in disbelief.

“Yes,” waved the manager. “Some people inherited land as far as Africa.”

“Why Africa?”

The manager took another sip from his glass and lowered his voice as he leaned closer to Placido. “The socialist party tried to convert African countries to communism, and so large quantities of land were purchased in places like Libya, Gabon, and Angola. Courtesy of Land Retribution Act 143B, this land belongs to our people now.”

Placido raised an incredulous eyebrow. “So what? Who needs land in Africa?”

“Why, the African people, of course,” said the manager, clinking his glass against Placido’s. “Land, irrespective of its geographical location, means money, my friend. And there is lots of money to be made from this particular land retribution act.”

Placido took another swallow of fine import whiskey, this time swirling it in his mouth. The manager crossed his arms, hiding the sweat stains on his dark suit, and lowered his voice again. “So you see, my old friend, a *stud* or two is not what I need. *We* need a clever, athletic-looking chap who can bring in this new money. Someone who

can provide us with the leverage we need so that I can get investors, and you can keep doing what it is that you're doing," he added with a meaningful stare. "These women are the wives of new money and old money together. They are the wives of ministers, judges, and executives. What do you think they would do to prevent their husbands from finding out about their . . . indiscretions?"

"Almost anything," replied Placido, holding his hand over his chin pensively.

Placido Pector thought about it for a few days. He could have sent dozens of beautiful women if asked to: redheads that made any man go wild with passion, brunettes with eyes of Caribbean blue, blonds with legs up to their necks who could recite Shakespearean sonnets while beating any man in tennis. But it was not men he was asked to cater to. It was the wealthiest wives of the city that needed to be pleased. This unforeseen demand made way for a supplier of beauty to set a new precedent. Placido needed a new type of product, an untapped resource in a post-communist country: the beautiful and useless male.

This male had to be easy on the eyes, not keen on feeling useful, and comfortable with taking what life offered him in exchange for not much other than looking pretty. He thought of the men he knew, most of them eager to cheat and steal as long as it followed a reasonably masculine code of conduct. They were the product of a society where the value of a man rested in his ability to provide for his family, for his woman. What self-respecting man would be willing to make a living off the good will of wealthy women? Thieves would not. Nor would other members of the underground world. It had to be a sort of man without clear qualifications, without consistent revenue, and with a love of self so great that he might consider letting others in on it. It also had to be a fellow who knew how to dress and undress, according to the occasion. Suddenly, while brainstorming these unlikely qualities, he heard himself describe his favourite betting horse.

Placido remembered that Leborio Borzelini, who until that day had been the undisputed arm-wrestling champion of every pub east of the Rhine River by virtue of his speed, was only good for two things: surprising big guys with a quick offense and stealing their women. If he wasn't so damn good at finding excuses for himself, Placido would have thrown him to the dogs a long time ago. But he thought the kid had something special. He could talk a nun into becoming a burlesque dancer and then convince her to cut him in on the profits.

Placido had plenty of beautiful women who specialized in getting powerful men to do his bidding. And until now, he did not think of finding a man to do the same for powerful women. As any bold inventor, Placido could not help but wonder which of his creations would be more effective. Would a beautiful female be the master of manipulation, or would a young Adonis surpass her charms? Hard to tell, he decided. Manipulation was difficult to measure. Leborio would certainly shed some light on this issue, as soon as he would undertake his new task teaching some sort of fitness class at the Lido Spa and Pool. At any rate, it would make for a most interesting social experiment, the old man thought.

“Get up, my champion.” The gangster gently kicked Leborio out of his afternoon meditation. “You’re getting a promotion.”

* * *

If there was a man Leborio Borzelini feared and, implicitly, respected, that man was Placido Pector. Without being very tall, Placido commanded anxiety of anyone he came across. He made local warlords, politicians, and celebrities nervous. He was one of those local characters who never made the news because they chose to stay out of the spotlight but were rumoured to be behind all respectable heists and illicit operations. No longer a spring chicken, Placido had only one son, legitimate or otherwise, who could not have fallen farther from the tree that was his father. In fact, if the father had been an apple

tree, as far as Leborio was concerned, the son had come out a tomato.

Thinking about it, Leborio found it pathetic that Armin Pector was still in junior high at the age of eighteen—what made it laughable were the junior's motives for choosing to stay there. Besides the advantage of being the only ninth-grade student who could vote, Leborio suspected that Armin's primary reason for repeating ninth grade so many times had to do with picking up girls. Sharing a learning space with considerably younger female colleagues improved his odds at getting to know them better. Girls seemed to like older guys. Even if a fellow was not particularly good-looking, a girl forced to see his face every day for a year might eventually change her mind about him. Of course, this theory only worked on rookies, and this was why Armin chose to stay in ninth grade, to his father's embarrassment and exasperation.

As far as Leborio could tell, Placido was a good father and would never have said anything unsupportive to his son. The only sign of disappointment he had ever witnessed was the day he heard Placido ask what he took to be a rhetorical question.

“Who am I going to leave my business to?”

Leborio did not answer and counted on the universe to point out the obvious. He could almost picture himself riding in Placido's inconspicuous black Mercedes. He saw no reason to upgrade to a more noticeable car and attract unwanted attention from the authorities. He also saw himself commanding Placido's people, living in Placido's house, sleeping with Placido's wife—or even better, with his mistress. There was only one thing standing between him and Placido's lifestyle: Armin Pector. Leborio knew too well that despite Placido's no-nonsense personality, he was reluctant to recognize his son's shortcomings. The father held on to the hope that one day his son would rise up to the Pector name and make him proud.

“He's still young,” he told Leborio with a sigh. “One of these days,

he'll snap out of it.”

Out of what, stupidity or high school? thought the younger man. The way Leborio saw things, he owed it to his boss to sever the useless rudiment of familial ties, should the opportunity ever arise.

The opportunity presented itself with the “promotion,” as Placido liked to refer to it. Leborio had been dozing off all morning on a black leather couch at the back of Neon Lounge, Placido Pector’s trendiest nightclub. Luckily, he slept with one eye open and most people assumed he was in fact meditating. When Placido kicked him gently, Leborio pushed his shiny dark waves behind his ears and straightened the crisp white collar on his knock-off Dolce shirt. He had been waiting for this moment. At last, the head of local organized crime had seen the signs the universe was sending him and had decided to retire, leaving him, Leborio Borzelini, in charge of operations. His good-for-nothing son would stay out of the picture.

“You’re going to work the ladies over at the Lido,” announced Placido. “They’re looking for a good-looking chap with athletic inclinations, who can, shall we say, *entertain* the old gals.”

Seeing that Leborio stiffened at the edge of the couch into a figure shaped like a four, he pressed on, “Don’t pout, dear boy. You haven’t got the lips for it,” he said, gently kicking his foot. “These gals are not that old you know. Some of them don’t look half bad, either. You’ll like it; you’ll see. It’s just your cup of tea: no work and lots of women to roam about you. You can teach them how to—what do you call that mumbo jumbo?”

Leborio’s eyes widened in disbelief. The old man was serious. He was going to send him to strut his stuff at the Lido like one of his cheap dolls—granted, though, they really weren’t that cheap. That was how Placido saw him, just another pawn in the corrupt booby trap he had spread about the changing city.

“What mumbo jumbo?” he brought himself to ask.

“The one where you look like you’re sleeping.”

“Meditating?”

“Yes, you can teach them how to meditate. While they’re doing it, you can either find out something juicy about their husbands or unburden them of their jewels. But the jewels would have to be top-notch. None of that cubic zirconium or Swarovski crap. They’d have to be real diamonds, big diamonds, like the ones they use to make for queens and lock up in museums. We don’t jeopardize our name for any old rock, you understand.”

Before accepting this new assignment, the younger man could only bring himself to utter one thing. “Why me?”

Placido looked rather surprised. He took a few steps back to open his desk drawer, reached into a carved wooden box, and pulled out a thick cigar and a gold-plated lighter.

“Everyone has a talent,” he said after a while, puffing on the cigar to light it up. “Yours, my dear boy, is to get yourself out of impossible situations.”

Leborio suppressed a cough and turned his face away from the cloud of smoke. Paying no mind to his discomfort, Placido went on, “I’m sending you into a minefield because I am certain that you will map it out for others less intuitive than you, and help me turn this into a successful expansion of the business. Think of it as an internship. If you succeed, well, there might just be a place for you in upper management, ruling some part of the city.” He puffed on his cigar with great gusto. “Think about it! It’s an untapped industry. And you’ll be the head of research, if you will.”

“What if I refuse?”

Placido frowned. “That would be a shame. As I said, you are good at some things. What you are not good at is working for your money in the conventional sense of the word. And I wish you to never have to do so. You know what they say, if you do what you like and are good

at, you'll never have to work a day in your life."

"And this is the best you think I can do for myself?" Leborio stood up from the couch.

"By no means. But this is as good a start as any, and it's better than most," he said, blowing a yellow cloud of smoke in the young man's face. "It's an unexploited market, and you could be its pioneer. The laws of supply and demand, my boy, the laws of supply and demand! This is a golden opportunity. Think about it."

Leborio thought about it during the next few meditations. Not long after, he became part of the Hotel Lido Spa and Swimming Pool entertainment team. Apparently settled in his new routine, Leborio Borzelini began planning to take charge of his destiny, against all odds—even against Placido. But Placido was a dangerous man, and Leborio knew to tread cautiously for now. Because he was a person who believed that when life gave one lemons one absolutely had to turn them into lemonade, he decided there were opportunities in becoming a yoga teacher at the Lido. This would give him ample time to figure out a way of eliminating the competition. Young Armin Pector's weakness had always been women. And women had always been Leborio's strong point.

DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND



In the shade of a colourful umbrella, Leborio Borzelini stretched out his magnificent arms and whispered, “*Inhalamos*. Inhale.”

Half a dozen well-aged women sporting Versace sunglasses eagerly followed his lead. Holding their breath for a moment, the women awaited instructions. With a deliberate and hypnotic movement, his muscles rippling beneath his olive skin, he brought his arms down, letting them hang just a little lower than the leg line of his turquoise swimming trunks. He closed his eyes for a moment, like a conductor before his orchestra. Almost immediately, he heard them sigh and knew that behind the designer shades, the women’s eyes rested on his body.

“*Exhalamos*. Exhale,” he commanded, as all arms descended slowly to the ground.

A few more *inhalamos/exhalamos* stretches and he would move on to the lunges, which announced the beginning of the end for his afternoon yoga class. Leborio emptied his lungs and thought about the first yoga book he’d ever read. It was written by an illustrious

Tibetan monk whose name sounded like a French delicacy, and it professed the benefits of compassionate love for all God's creatures. According to this wise monk, the highest state of consciousness one could attain in this fleeting life was to become a guru, a channel between God and humanity. The guru's mere presence enlightened those around him. This was why his job was really fairly simple. All one had to do was be. Leborio thought it sounded like the sort of job he was cut out for. Soon after reading the monk's book, he began practicing yoga by meditating to the sounds of his favourite music. This process was rather challenging during his teenage years, as his musical inclinations were partial to the heavy metal movement. But by his early twenties, with practice and perseverance, Leborio found it increasingly less difficult to focus. Of course, his musical taste had changed by then to electronica. Without the distraction of lyrics, one could empty the mind and float on the wings of imagination to the sounds of an oscillating number of beats per minute.

One day, while meditating to the new release of a British music producer turned deejay, Leborio fell asleep and dreamed he was flying over his house, down to the main boulevard of the city, and into the Costa Rican embassy, where he sat down at the conference table and had tea with the ambassador. This had been a most pleasant vision, and when he awoke, he proceeded to download British music from Henry Purcell to Fat Boy Slim and Juno Reactor. Having figured out the secret to attaining a trance-like state of mind, Leborio felt confident he could help others toward a path of blissfulness.

"Inhalamos. Exhalamos. Good. Now let's go to lunges, ladies."

Perla Galanis nudged her friend, Rita, whose plump pout opened up like a purposeful fish mouth before a healthy wiggly worm.

"Oh, I do hope he turns his back for the lunges," she said, just as Leborio commanded the women to exhale.

"Keep your mind out of the gutter," Rita hissed back. "This one

is mine!”

Perla shot her a look but said nothing. She was too much of a lady to dignify Rita with a response. Not that she couldn't think of one. After all, Rita deserved to be placed in front of an old-fashioned mirror, not like these new department store slimming lenses that made any old whale look as thin as a model so she would buy whatever she tried on. No. Rita ought to have been placed in front of a mirror that reflected her paunch and the ripples on the back of her thighs that either fierce hail or untreated cellulite had bestowed on her. To think the woman didn't even have the decency to cover up in public.

There she was, showing her pear-shaped booty in a two-piece Brazilian bikini on the deck of the Lido Hotel pool and obstructing the view of perfect, golden-skinned Leborio. A woman of her age! Why, the shamelessness of it all left Perla red-faced. Of course, her red face could have been from spending too much time in the sun earlier that morning. Her skin could only take so much tanning by the poolside with the aluminum collar around her neck. They called it a *tan optimizer*, and for the price she paid for one of those gizmos, she also received a transparent bottle of clear lotion that smelled like baby oil and was called *tan enhancer*. Armed with a complete tanning kit, Perla was napping by the poolside that morning until Leborio's soothing voice woke her up to join the yoga class.

“Will you be joining us this afternoon, Mrs. Galanis?”

“Oh, but of course, Leborio. I wouldn't miss your class for the world.” And then blushing at her own eagerness, she added, “I find yoga is very good for the joints.” But only old people complained about joint aches, and she was not that old. She felt the need to explain, just in case he might place her in the same age bracket as those other housewives. “A young woman can never be too careful about her joints if she plans to have an active old age—which I'm still quite far from reaching,” she smiled. “Better to be safe than sorry.”

“You look quite well, Mrs. Galanis,” he said, smiling back. “Regular exercise and eating healthy will keep you in good shape well into your forties,” he added with a wink.

“Perla,” mumbled the flustered sexagenarian. “Just call me Perla.”

She thought he smiled at her during yoga, and worked on her stretches with that much more dedication. Once the class was over, Perla sighed as she watched Leborio walk away. Dear Leborio had the keen eye of a trained professional, she thought. He was able to recognize the hard work she had put into her tight little body. Surely, there were thirty-year-olds who envied the firmness of her shoulders. Her skin had never looked as good as it did with the sunny glow she had acquired during the past few months. She wondered if the tanning kit had anything to do with it. Perhaps. Or perhaps it was the flutter in her stomach that made her light up the way she did before she’d married George. It was as if a beam of light from the sky pierced the clouds and spread over her platinum blond French twist, covering her with a warm and fuzzy halo.

I am in love with a real man, she thought.

There was no telling if this real man returned the passionate love she felt for him. But one could argue that there was passion in his occasional winks. Younger men felt intimidated by women of maturity and hardly ever acted on their passions. She would have to find a way to let her beloved know that the coast was clear despite the formality of titles married people adopted. She might have been Mrs. Galanis in name. In her heart, helped largely by George’s obsessive love for reading politics in bed, Perla was a free woman—free to find her way to true love.

She waited until after she had showered to knock on the door to the spa. A pretty brunette dressed in a white lab coat opened the door with a toothy smile spread all across her flawless face. The girl looked young enough to be in high school, remarked Perla.

“Can I help you ma’am?”

Raising an eyebrow, Perla walked past the girl right up to the service counter. Ma’am! The nerve of this girl! You don’t call someone ma’am unless they look like a ma’am. And Perla certainly did not. She put her elbows on top of the counter and interlocked her fingers.

“I’m interested in a massage.”

“I can take you right now,” offered the girl.

“No,” protested Perla. “I mean, no, thank you. I am a loyal client of Mr. Borzelini.”

“Umm, Leborio is booked for the rest of the day I’m afraid,” said the girl, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “I can take you if you’d like, or we can make an appointment for tomorrow.”

Perla had not anticipated this. Faced with an obstacle as prosaic as an appointment, Perla Galanis turned away and started to leave, feeling as if a dark cloud had descended upon her. She grabbed a hold of the shiny knob on the tinted glass door. Reflected in the glass, a gentle light shone from behind her, contouring a male-shaped halo. The clouds parted once again as Leborio’s unmistakable form appeared in the doorway.

“Snejana, hand me a bottle of eucalyptus oil, will you?” she heard him ask the girl. His eyes rested on her beaming face for a second. Then, taking notice of the older woman, he said, “Perla, how is your afternoon so far?”

Her face lit up as she turned to look at him.

“Wonderful, thank you. Of course, it would be even better if I could get a massage. But I understand you’re busy for the rest of the day.”

“Today, I’m afraid I am busy. But come back tomorrow, and I will be all yours.”

Mine, she thought. He should be *mine*. He *will* be mine.

“All right. I will come back tomorrow,” she nodded, inspired by a

newfound confidence. “Don’t work too hard, Leborio.”

“I won’t,” he winked again, adjusting his turquoise Speedos with the hand that wasn’t holding the eucalyptus oil. “Oh, Perla, before you go, I meant to compliment you on your earrings. They look most becoming on you.”

She touched her ears instinctively, rubbing the heart-shaped diamonds with the tips of her fingers. George had bought them for her last summer at an auction in Monte Carlo.

“Thank you. They once belonged to Maria Callas. A gift from Aristotle Onassis, I would think.”

Leborio took a closer look and marvelled at the workmanship. She heard him utter the word *exquisite*, and for a moment allowed herself to believe he meant her. Not entirely impossible, after all. Perla had once been the Queen of the Ball at the spring Danube River Festival, before the festival morphed into the spring socialist republic workers’ parade. George’s oldest friend swore he heard him call Perla exquisite as he watched her wave from her shell-shaped chariot. And if she had been exquisite once, she could be exquisite again.

“Will you close the door from the inside, dear boy? I’m getting cold in here.”

Behind Leborio, the door to the massage room opened wide enough to allow Rita to stand in it. Leborio excused himself and followed her into the room, leaving Perla livid with rage in the middle of the spa antechamber. Why, that collagen-injected, old fish! How dare she make such a fool of herself at her age, going after a man who could be her son, a man she could never aspire to understand! And the way she spoke to him. This was not how one should speak to . . . an artist! Perla had some trouble finding the exact word to define Leborio’s title and settled on artist. He wasn’t really an artist in as much as he did not produce palpable art. There was no great Borzellini masterpiece out there to be sold post-mortem for an outrageous price; no moonlight

sonata to listen to and think of gentle Leborio conducting the national orchestra with the kind of passion that makes the hair of a man jump out of its coil and into his face. No. There will be no great masterpiece bearing his name for posterity. But there was now, and he was special enough without producing anything of value. This was not how one should speak to a Leborio Borzelini.

Oblivious to Perla's noble inner conflict about defining the essence of Leborio Borzelini, the toothy girl wondered if the old lady was having a heart attack. At first, she stood still in the middle of the room, and then she trembled, turned red, and broke into a sweat that caused her mascara to melt. Snejana watched her quietly, afraid she might have to call the ambulance and spoil her afternoon. If the ambulance was called, the manager would have to step in, and that would be it for the rest of the day. She would have to pretend to do something useful, like clean the glass shelves, restock products, and make calls to confirm appointments. It had happened a few times before when an old gal passed out. What could be expected of them at their age? Of course, there was no telling how old they really were, with all the face-lifts and tummy tucks they invested in. A waste of money, really. Just because one couldn't tell their age didn't mean they didn't look old. Snejana examined the woman from the corner of her eye, wondering about her age. Her skin had the tangerine finish of animal hides, rigid and stretched like the face of a cat nailed to a tree.

"Should I put you down for tomorrow?" she asked gingerly, afraid to test Perla's regenerative capacity just yet.

The old lady stared her down in contempt and nodded.

Perla knew her type all too well. One look at the girl told her she was the impervious and callous sort, who looked fresh for the picking in her youth only to wilt into a big old mare like Rita. From a few feet away, the girl's most striking features were her unusually long neck and legs, somehow unbalanced against the rest of her willowy

body and her thin but widely set hips. Poor girl, she told herself. She's made only for breeding. She wondered what Leborio thought of her and pictured laughing about it with him over an alcohol-free cocktail.

"How well put!" he would observe. "She does remind one of some sort of a large creature. An ostrich perhaps?"

"Doesn't she?" Perla would throw her head back, laughing. "I thought you'd see it too."

"Oh, Perla, few women have your wit and sense of style. Lucky is the man who has your heart," he would say, pressing his bow-shaped lips against her well-manicured hand. "You truly are exquisite. Just like those diamond earrings of yours."

One day, she thought, putting an end to her daydream. Until then, she would continue to surprise him with her wit and sense of style. Her wit she would have to work on. Not that she didn't have a sharp wit. But every time she saw Leborio, she was tongue-tied. Luckily, there was her unmatched sense of style, manifested mostly through her jewellery collection. Diamonds were a girl's best friend, Perla thought, idly playing with the earrings. And there were plenty more where they came from.

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