



## CHAPTER ONE

### SAN DIEGO

San Diego mornings looked like a real estate brochure somebody left in the sun. The sky was the particular shade of blue used in dental office murals, and the smell of carne asada drifting from taco trucks made even busted Hondas seem glamorous.

Jimmy Viceno leaned against his busted Honda. A 2008 Civic, though “Civic” implied civilization, and this thing was one pothole away from declaring itself a sovereign state. Its hood gaped open, revealing an engine bay that looked like a junk drawer set on fire. The mechanic, a stout man with a goatee like a bird’s nest, peered in with a flashlight. “Looks like the hybrid inverter coil is bad.”

Jimmy blinked. “The what?”

“Hybrid inverter coil. It’s what makes these cars go.” The mechanic straightened, wiping his hands on a rag that was stiff enough to hold its own shape. “Full rebuild... easily six hundred bucks.”

Jimmy had eighty-seven dollars to his name, most of which were already earmarked for tacos and art supplies. His voice cracked. “Six hundred? What’s it run on, diamonds?”

The mechanic shrugged. “My brother-in-law runs a scrap yard. He’ll give you two fifty for it.”

Jimmy stared at the Civic. Midnight drives to Ocean Beach. Parking outside Comic-Con because he couldn’t afford tickets. Bad dates that ended with *you’re sweet, but I don’t date guys whose windows don’t roll up all the way*. Even the pine tree air freshener, now smelling faintly of gym socks and burnt coffee, felt like family.

His phone buzzed. It was from his brother Mark: *Rent's due Friday. You got your half?*

Jimmy looked at the Civic one more time, then at the mechanic. "Two fifty?"

"Cash. Today."

Jimmy signed the paperwork and patted the hood. It felt like saying goodbye to a dog he couldn't afford to feed. He took the cash and stepped into the relentless San Diego sunshine.

Two hundred fifty dollars in his pocket, but he had no car and rent was due Friday, but his biggest problem now was that he was going to be late for his shift at Golden Lotus if he didn't catch the next bus.

He walked half a block before catching his reflection in the window of a parked pickup truck, and in it, tipping a fedora at a cocky angle, stood a figure that shouldn't have been there.

Rat Boy.

He only existed in Jimmy's head and notebook. A comic book hero that Jimmy had been drawing for years, a normal dishwasher who was bitten by a radioactive rat and then evolved into something more useful. He gradually became a survival consultant who showed up when Jimmy needed advice.

"*Rule #14,*" Rat Boy said, adjusting his fedora with one clawed finger. "*If you believe there's such a thing as a hybrid inverter coil, you deserve to take the bus.*"

Jimmy stopped walking. "Wait. That's not a thing?"

"*That mechanic saw you coming from three blocks away.*"

"But he seemed so knowledgeable..."

Rat Boy's tail curled in the reflection, punctuating his disgust. "*Two hundred fifty dollars for a car worth four hundred. Congratulations. You just got hustled by a guy whose business card probably says 'Trust Me.'*"

"He didn't have a business card."

"*That's even worse.*"

Jimmy resumed walking toward the bus stop, Rat Boy's voice still echoing in his head even though the reflection had disappeared. The thing about Rat Boy was that he was always right. He could also be annoying.

The bus stop was two blocks away. The digital display said the next bus would arrive in four minutes. Jimmy sat on the bench and pulled out his composition notebook: “THE ADVENTURES OF RAT BOY: DRAFT 47” written on the cover in thick black marker.

He had completed forty-six drafts and there had been zero publishers interested... yet. It only takes one.

He flipped to the page he'd been working on last night. The problem was the origin sequence. Right after the dishwasher was bit, he looked in the mirror and sees that his teeth had changed. The art had to show a mix of fear and curiosity. The transformation had to hurt. It has to feel earned, and not just convenient.

The bus arrived and Jimmy boarded, still sketching. He found a seat near the back. As the bus lurched forward, Jimmy braced his notebook against his knee and kept working.

He drew the reflection: sharper features, wider eyes, the suggestion of something animal creeping into something human. The fedora would come after the dishwasher accepts what he's become and decides to use it. The trench coat would be practical. You couldn't fight crime in a restaurant uniform.

The bus stopped and Jimmy looked up and saw that the Golden Lotus was across the street. He checked his phone and saw that he was three minutes late. Mr. Wong probably wouldn't notice. The lunch rush hadn't started yet.

Jimmy shoved his notebook into his backpack and got off the bus.

San Diego maintained its perfect seventy-two degrees. The sky was clear and the weather was, as always, absolutely perfect.

Somewhere in Chicago, it was raining.



## CHAPTER TWO

### CHICAGO

The weather in Chicago was terrible, but inside Pompeii's Italian Restaurant, nobody cared. The place was dark enough that lunch could have been midnight, and the heavy velvet curtains were drawn tight because whatever happened here wasn't anybody's business.

Outside, November rain fell in sheets, turning the streets into rivers of gray slush. The sky hung low and threatening. Car horns blared. Someone shouted in Italian. A police car with a screaming siren wailed past.

Salvatore "Sal" Stefano sat in the back booth eating linguine in clam sauce. He ate slowly, deliberately, the way he did everything. His Rolex caught the dim light when he moved his fork. It was the only thing about him that wasn't subtle.

Stanley Schiffman stood near the table holding a leather folder, sweating despite the air conditioning. He always sweated when he had to deliver numbers to Sal, but today was worse because the numbers were bad. Stanley was thin, nervous, the kind of accountant who looked like he apologized to furniture when he bumped into it. His glasses kept sliding down his nose. He pushed them up with one finger, leaving a smudge.

Benny Palachio leaned against the wall, arms crossed. Benny was the size of two normal people stacked on top of each other and then compressed into one very angry unit. His face had the particular look of a man who'd been hit so many times he'd stopped noticing.

"Well?" Sal said, not looking up from his pasta.

Stanley opened the folder with trembling hands. “Kansas City: fifty-two thousand. St. Louis: forty-eight thousand. Las Vegas: sixty-six thousand. Miami: fifty-six thousand. Detroit: thirty-three thousand.”

He paused.

“San Diego?” Sal asked, fork pausing midway to his mouth.

Stanley’s folder shook slightly. “Eight thousand.”

“Eight thousand.” Sal set down his fork carefully, like it might explode if he wasn’t gentle.

“Yes, Mr. Stefano.”

“Eight thousand dollars.”

“Yes.”

“Total.”

“Yes.”

The fork rested on the edge of the plate. Sal picked up his wine glass, swirled it once, set it back down without drinking.

Benny shifted his weight against the wall. “Il sole rende la gente debole,” he muttered.

““The sun makes people weak?”” Sal repeated in English. “What are you talking about? Miami has sun and beaches and girls in bikinis on every corner. Miami does fifty-six thousand.”

“Miami ha i cubani. Loro hanno sempre fame,” Benny said.

“And San Diego?”

“San Diego ha Tony e le sue scuse.”

“You got that right. San Diego has Tony and excuses.” Sal finally looked up from his plate. His eyes were gray and cold, the color of winter sky. “Get Tony on the phone.”

Stanley fumbled with his phone, nearly dropped it, caught it, dialed. The phone rang four times before someone picked up. Stanley put it on speaker.

“Machiavelli’s, this is Tony.” The voice sounded nervous even through the phone.

“It’s me,” Sal said.

The pause on the other end was long enough to be meaningful.

“Sal. Hey. How are you? How’s Chicago? We’re doing good, really good, the restaurant’s full every night and the kitchen’s running smooth...”

“Eight,” Sal said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Eight thousand. That’s what you sent this month.”

Another pause. This one felt like drowning.

“I know it looks bad,” Tony started.

“It looks bad because it is bad.”

“The market’s different here, Sal. Everyone wants organic, sustainable, locally sourced everything. I had a guy ask if our product was gluten-free. Gluten-free! Like we’re selling bread instead of running a business. It’s a different culture. People here, they don’t understand the old ways. Everything’s sunshine and yoga and green juice. Nobody’s hungry. Nobody needs what we’re offering.”

Benny snorted.

“Eight,” Sal said again.

“We’re building relationships. It takes time. Rome wasn’t built in a day, right? We’re establishing trust, creating networks, developing long-term partnerships that will pay off in the future. You can’t rush these things. San Diego’s not like Chicago. You can’t just walk in and start operating. You have to be subtle. Patient. Strategic.”

“Miami doesn’t need time. Vegas doesn’t need time. You need excuses.”

“Sal, if you could just see the operation, you’d understand. We’re positioned for growth. The clientele here is different. More discerning. We can’t just do things the Chicago way. We have to adapt and evolve. Think outside the box.”

“I don’t want you thinking outside the box. I want you filling the box with money.”

“We’re working on it. I promise. Next month will be better. We’ve got new opportunities developing. New connections. Things are about to turn around. I can feel it.”

“You’ve been feeling it for two years.”

Sal closed his eyes briefly. “Tony,” he said, his voice dangerously quiet. “I don’t want strategy. I don’t want positioning. I want results.”

“And you’ll get them. I promise. Just give me a little more time.”

“I’ve given you two years.”

“One more month. Let me show you what we can do. Next month’s numbers will be better. Way better. I guarantee it.”

“You guaranteed it last month.”

“This time it’s different.”

“It’s never different.”

Tony’s voice went up an octave. “Sal, please. I’m doing my best here. It’s not easy. You don’t understand what it’s like in San Diego. The competition. The regulations. The attitudes. Everyone here thinks they’re living in paradise. Nobody takes anything seriously. It’s all surfboards and sunshine and good vibes. Try running a serious operation in a place where the biggest worry most people have is whether their avocado toast is organic.”

Benny made a sound that might have been laughter or disgust.

“You have one more month,” Sal said.

“Thank you, Mr. Stefano. I promise I won’t let you down.” Tony’s relief was audible. “I’ll give you less excuses and more results, I swear...”

“Fewer.”

Silence.

“What?” Tony asked.

“Fewer excuses, Tony. Not less. Fewer.” Sal’s voice was patient, almost gentle. “You have fewer excuses. Less money. Fewer results. Less time. It’s not complicated.”

Stanley and Benny exchanged glances. When Sal started correcting grammar, someone was about to have a very bad day.

“Right,” Tony said weakly. “Fewer. Got it.”

“One month,” Sal repeated. “And I’m sending someone to watch.”

Tony’s breath hitched. “Mr. Stefano, please, I told you, the crew...”

Sal hung up without saying goodbye. He set the phone down on the table and picked up his fork, looking at the cold linguine with distaste.

“Manderai qualcuno là fuori?” Benny asked.

“No,” Sal said, pushing the plate away. “I’m not sending anybody, at least not yet. I just want him to sweat.”

Outside, the rain hammered harder against the windows. A flash of lightning lit the curtains from behind. Thunder followed, close enough to feel in your chest. Sal walked toward the door. Benny followed at a respectful distance. They stepped out into the rain. Sal didn’t hurry. He let the cold water hit his face, his expensive suit, his Italian shoes.

A black sedan pulled up. Sal got in the back. Benny got in the front.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“Office,” Sal said. “I have calls to make.”

The car pulled away from the curb, the windshield wipers were losing their fight with the rain. Sal watched Chicago slide past his window, buildings and streets and sky, all the same washed-out gray.