

## Something Strong Cuts Through

A Rottweiler stands in the fenced training enclosure behind Homeward Pet Adoption. His hackles are up and he weighs about a hundred and thirty. He growls and snarls as Neil casually moves along outside the fence, tossing pieces of raw hot dog into the enclosure without looking at him. The dog shadows Neil as he devours the food. Neil circles the perimeter, tosses in treats, seemingly pays no attention to the dog, who soon stops growling. He makes another trip around, then stops at the gate, opens it, steps into the enclosure. The Rottweiler glares at him, instantly alert. Neil crouches, turns sideways and looks away. He tosses hot dog bits and gradually shortens the distance between them. The dog is only a few feet away now. Neil drops a few chunks between them and the Rottweiler chomps them down. He looks up, sees Neil's open palm extended toward him, half a hot dog displayed in it. Neil still doesn't look at him. The dog sniffs it, hesitates, then takes it from his hand. Another half appears; this time, Neil lets his hand graze the dog's neck as he takes it. After three more hot dogs, he is stroking his face as the dog licks him. He slips a nylon leash over his head and leads him out of the enclosure, tail wagging. As they head to the back door of the shelter, one of the staff members, Molly, intercepts them. She has a teenage girl with her.

“Very nice work,” Molly says. “Neil, this is Luz. I've just been giving her the tour. She's going to be volunteering with us.”

Luz offers her hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Neil. That was very impressive.”

Neil gives her hand a perfunctory shake. “Thanks. I got to get this boy settled in.” He hurries off.

“He doesn't seem too comfortable around women,” Luz says.

“Neil’s not too comfortable around anyone. But he’s like a canine genius. We’re lucky to have him.”

In the parking lot, Luz sits in her car and reads. She glances up to see Neil exit the shelter’s front door. Whipping on a pair of wraparound sunglasses and a baseball cap, she crouches down in the seat and starts her car. As he walks up the street, she watches and waits. The 261 bus stops a half block away and Neil trots to catch it. As it pulls away, Luz pulls out of the parking lot and follows.

The bus deposits Neil in an older part of town. The houses have been repainted and reshingled countless times but the tiny yards are neat and well-tended. Children, mostly Latino, play in front of their homes while their fathers work on their cars in the driveway or water their lawns. Neil nods to a couple of them as he passes and enters a little house set back from the sidewalk. Luz rolls up across the street, stops. She writes down Neil’s house number, sits there a minute, then drives off.

Inside the house, Neil gets a beer and takes it into the living room. The furniture is sparse and used but the room is immaculate. An overstuffed chair with a lamp, cheap bookcases filled with paperbacks, carefully arranged by author, a small TV with an inexpensive DVD player. Nothing on the walls. As Neil crouches down to look through his novels, there is a knock at the door. He opens it to find seven year old Dia standing there.

“Mama and Papi say come over for dinner. But hurry up, Neil, I’m hungry.” With that, she turns and scurries back to her house next door.

“Damn, man, why you gotta eat like there’s no tomorrow?” Flaco asks, as Neil chows down on some homemade enchiladas.

“Cause there might *be* no tomorrow, ever consider that?”

“Flaco, let the man eat,” Angela says, smiling. A private duty nurse, she is dressed in her uniform.

“I’m just saying, it’s scary, man,” Flaco says. He makes a face and Dia laughs.

Angela gives him a kiss. “I have to go.” She gives Dia a hug. “You go to bed when Papi tells you, okay? I’ll see you in the morning. Later, Neil.” She trails a friendly hand across his shoulder as she leaves.

“Thanks, Angela. Delicious, as usual.” She closes the door behind her and he shakes his head. “Man, I could never do her job. Taking care of those people? Uh-uh.”

“Me, either,” Flaco says. “Some doctor told me I was gonna be paralyzed all over the rest of my life? Shit, I’d just shoot myself.”

“How you gonna do that if your arms are paralyzed?”

“Maybe I’d make you hold the gun and I could pull the trigger with my tongue.” He grins, taps his forehead. “Always thinking.”

Later, they sit on the front stoop and drink a beer. It’s a soft summer evening and music wafts through the air all around them. “How’s things at the shelter?” Flaco asks.

“Okay. Some good people on staff, good volunteers. Everybody sure does like to talk, though. TV shows, clothes, famous people they call by their first names, shit like that. And they always seem to be doing something with their phones.”

Flaco laughs. “Yeah, them phones do everything but suck your dick, don’t they?”

“How’s work for you?”

“How do you think? It’s a *pinche* slaughterhouse. But I go every day, I don’t miss no days and I work extra hours if they got it. I’m just glad Angela stuck by me while I was down.”

“I bet she’d whip your narrow beaner ass if you fucked up, wouldn’t she?”

Flaco shakes his head ruefully. “The woman made me buy life insurance last year. I figure I do anything wrong, she’ll straight up murder me and make it look like an accident so she can collect.”

They are both quiet for a bit as they sip their beer and enjoy the darkness. “You been out, what, almost two years now?” Neil finally asks. Flaco nods. “Those first few months, it ever seem kind of, I don’t know...dull? I mean, I had this whole thing in my head about what it’d be like after all those years, how great it’d be to be out. Don’t get me wrong, I do not ever want to do another day behind bars but sometimes it doesn’t really seem to measure up, you know? You think that means I’m all fucked up?”

“Happened to me, too, and I got a wife and a daughter I love. Imagine how crazy I thought *I* was. But I think I figured that shit out. See, when you’re locked down, you spend years wondering every day if you’re gonna have to kill somebody or somebody’s gonna kill you over some bullshit. That’s a lot of fucking tension. It works on a motherfucker. Keeps you sharp, makes you feel alive, but it can make you lose your mind, too. We both seen it happen. So, everything considered, dull is pretty good.”

Luz waits at the bus stop near Neil’s house, a manila envelope on her lap. The bus arrives and Neil gets off, starts up the sidewalk. She hurries after him.

“Neil?” He stops, turns to face her, puzzled. “I’m Luz. We met at the shelter?”

He looks her over a moment, then it clicks. “Oh, yeah, you’re gonna volunteer, right?”

“Right. Could I talk to you about something? It’s really important.”

“All due respect, but I only met you once, so we can’t really have anything important to talk about.”

He turns to leave and she puts a hand on his arm. His face darkens; she lets her hand drop. “I’m sorry, I know this probably seems a little bizarre but I’ve come all the way from LA to talk to you. See this envelope?”

“Is there something wrong with you? ‘Cause you’re kind of creeping me out now.”

“Actually,” Luz says, “I’m very well grounded.”

“You’re not acting like it.”

“Sure I am. I approached you in a reasonable way, mentioned I came a long way to see you and showed you my envelope. That’s not creepy.”

“It isn’t?”

“I just want a few minutes of your time. Would that kill you?”

He stares hard at her until she looks away, then he sits down on the bus bench. “Five minutes.”

Luz takes out some old photos of a lovely young woman, hands them to him. They range in age from her teens to her thirties. “Recognize her?” Neil barely glances at a couple of them, shakes his head. “Please, take a good look.”

“Persistent, aren’t you?” He looks more closely; surprised, his face softens. “Oh my God,” he says. “Paloma.”

“That’s right,” Luz says, “Paloma Castillo.”

“Where did you get these?”

“From her. She was my mother.” She takes a breath. “And you’re my father.”

Angela and Flaco watch as Neil paces their living room. “She had all these pictures of the two of them, so I know Paloma was her mother.”

“Was?” Angela asks.

“She died of cancer about six months ago. The girl’s been staying with a friend and her family.”

“Tell me if I have this right. You met Paloma at a party. You were both seventeen and something clicked and you just sort of went crazy for each other.”

“Right.”

“And you had sex.”

“Right.”

“And she was a virgin.”

“I didn’t know that but that’s what the girl says.”

“What about you?” Flaco asks. “You a virgin, too?”

“Fuck you, Flaco.”

Flaco laughs. “I knew it! A one hit wonder!”

Angela waves him off. “Okay, so she went back home, you went back home, you were making plans to see each other again...”

“And I got busted a couple days later. Then she found out she was pregnant and I went to prison. I never saw her again.”

“So she never told her family who the father was?”

“A seventeen year old convicted murderer doing fifteen to life? Would you? Paloma told the girl just before she died. I guess she finally decided she had a right to know.”

“Does the girl have a name?”

“Luz.”

“And where’s Luz staying?”

“Some place called the Regal Motel.”

“I know that place,” Flaco says. “It’s on Madera, out there by the tracks.”

“What’s it like?” Neil asks.

“It’s great if you’re a fucking cockroach.”

“Flaco, that’s not really helpful, is it? So, Neil, what did you do when she told you all this?”

Suddenly weary, Neil drops down onto the couch. “I was kind of stunned, you know? She was talking fast, something about getting to know me the next few weeks before she has to go back for her senior year or something, but I couldn’t really focus because my fucking head felt like it was gonna explode.”

Angela and Flaco wait for the rest of it, but Neil is silent. A few moments of stillness is all Flaco can tolerate. “Okay, so your fucking head felt like it was gonna explode. Solid. Then what happened?”

Neil looks pained. “Well, basically, I ran off like a little punk bitch.”

Luz sits at the cheap desk in her motel room, working on her laptop, when there is a knock at the door. She opens it to find Angela standing there.

“Hi, Luz. My name’s Angela Medina. My husband and I are Neil’s only real friends in town and he told us what’s going on. Mind if I come in?”

Luz manages a nod as Angela strides past her, looks around at the cheap furnishings and water-stained ceiling. “It’s the only place in my price range,” Luz says.

Angela puts a hand on her arm, smiles. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I’m real familiar with price ranges, which is one of the reasons I’m here.”

“I’m not following. Did Neil send you over?”

She laughs, shakes her head. An open suitcase, overflowing with clothes, is stuck in a corner. “That all your stuff?”

“There are a few things in the drawers and the bathroom. Why?”

“Because, *mieja*,” Angela says, grinning, “I’m inviting you to come stay next door to your Dad.”

Flaco and Angela watch Luz demolish a plate of cheese enchiladas. “I love this!” Flaco says.

“It’s like it could be one of them reality shows: ‘Badass Ex-Convict’s Undercover Daughter’ or some shit!”

Angela smiles. “I have to say, I’d have liked to have seen you wearing shades and a ball cap, running surveillance on Neil. Like he’s not paranoid enough.”

“Angela, these are delicious. And Flaco... you’re a funny guy.”

“Thank you, little one.”

“So, you must know Neil from prison, right?”

“I was in the dog program with him the last year I was down. It was kind of like a reward for not getting no shots for a couple years.”

“You got rewarded for not getting shot in prison?”



Flaco laughs. “A shot’s when the cops write you up for doing something wrong and you lose some good time. There’s so many rules in there, it’s almost impossible not to get one now and then. But you want to get out bad enough, you can do it.”

“What were you in for?”

“A drug thing.”

“For how long?”

“Almost four years.” He looks at Angela, smiles, shakes his head. “This girl ain’t shy, is she?” He looks back to Luz. “Any other questions? Social security number? Shoe size?”

“I know Neil went to prison for murder.” She folds her napkin carefully into a small square. “Who did he kill?”

Flaco looks to Angela, who shrugs her shoulders. “She should know.”

“Maybe Neil should tell her.”

“She asked us, Flaco.”

He pauses a moment. “He got drunk and stole a car. He was driving like a madman down some of them canyon roads north of LA when he blew through a stop sign and t-boned this girl. He got banged up some and she died.”

‘How can that be murder?’ Luz asks.

“Stealing the car was a felony and she was killed as a direct result of that felony. Second degree murder, fifteen to life. She was a nineteen year old pre-med student and her father was a retired cop who knew a lot of people. Neil’s mother was an asshole drunk with no money and no friends. They didn’t even offer him a chance to cop a plea. He had a public defender and the trial lasted three days.”

“That’s awful. Did any of that prison stuff happen to him when he first went in, like on “Oz?”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know. You want to know, you’ll have to ask him.”

Late that night, Angela and Flaco are in bed. Flaco, trying not to laugh, has his hand over the phone. “He was asleep,” he whispers to her. Then, into the phone: “Sorry to wake you up, *ese*, but I got some big news.”

At Neil’s house, he sits straight up in bed as he clutches the phone. “*What!?*”

At the shelter the next day, Neil unleashes a dog in his kennel. As he latches the door, Luz appears behind him. “I want you to know it wasn’t my idea to stay with them and I didn’t know Flaco called...”

“Look, this is between you and me. I don’t like you getting my friends involved in our business.”

“Then you should speak to Angela about it. She just showed up at the motel and practically kidnapped me.”

“Since she didn’t *actually* kidnap you, you didn’t have to go, did you?”

“No, I could have stayed in my luxurious suite at the fabulous Regal and ordered gourmet vegetarian meals from room service but I prefer to mingle with the locals when I travel. Don’t you?”

Neil’s eyes flash as his jaw tightens. “Don’t get shitty with me, girl,” he says, his voice rising. “Who the fuck do you...” He stops abruptly as he spots a couple of volunteers watching furtively from the other side of the kennels. Busted, they immediately hustle out the back. Neil

watches the door swing shut, then closes his eyes and takes a breath. “This is my place of work. We can’t talk here.”

“You mean you can’t yell at me here.”

“Yeah, that, too. All right, supper tonight, you and me. But don’t expect to have a good time.”

Dia sits on Flaco’s lap as they watch TV. When Angela and Luz walk into the room, Dia hops down and wraps her arms around Luz’s legs. Luz’s anxious expression dissolves and she strokes Dia’s hair. “That is so sweet, Dia. You’re a delightful little muffin.”

Dia giggles, runs to Flaco, jumps back in his lap. ‘Papi, Luz said I’m a muffin!’”

“I was just telling your mama just the other day, I think Dia might have some muffin in her.” He tickles her and she shrieks with joy.

“Wish Luz luck, you two,” Angela says.

“She don’t need luck,” Flaco says. “Look how pretty she looks.”

Angela walks her to the front door, opens it. “Don’t worry about what you say or how you say it. It’s all good, hear?”

“Thanks, Angela.” She takes a step onto the stoop, freezes. Neil stands there. He wears his one good shirt and his hair is slicked back. “You ready?”

“You don’t mind I’m driving?” asks Luz.

“Well, we can’t walk, can we? And last time I looked, I don’t have a license.”

The ride is silent and strained. Luz parks the car and Neil is two steps ahead of her all the way into the restaurant. The hostess seats them and leaves menus. Neil studies his fiercely while Luz tries not to show how jumpy she feels.

“This is nice,” she says.

A twenty year old server bops over, all fake smiles and energy. “Hi and welcome to Appleby’s!” he says. “I’m Bobby and I’ll be your...” Neil ices him with a glare and his face collapses. “I’ll just give you guys a few more minutes,” he says, skulking off.

Neil puts down his menu, clasps his hands over it. “So, how’d you find me?”

“Once I had your name and age and I knew you were in the corrections system, it was pretty easy. There’s all kinds of information floating around the web. You just have to know how to grab it. I know what prisons you were in, your disciplinary records, stuff like that.”

“And that’s legal?”

“Most of it. I had some help from some hacker friends here and there.” She forces a weak smile. “Don’t tell anybody. I wouldn’t want to end up in prison.” She immediately feels like ripping her own face off. “Oh, God, I can’t believe I said that, I’m sorry, I don’t know what...”

“You have to go home and forget all about this shit.”

She freezes; he may as well have slapped her. “This *shit*?”

“Even if you’re really my daughter, none of this is gonna work.” She starts to reply but he holds up a finger, shakes his head. “I grew up in the penitentiary and I can’t begin to tell you how fucked up that was. Maybe you think you got an idea who I am but, believe me, you don’t. I got my hands full trying to do my job and figuring out how to live in the free world; I can do that, maybe I can learn some other new things, have some kind of a real life. But that’s full time work and it sure doesn’t include being someone’s father. So, you go back to LA where your

friends are, finish high school, maybe go to college, have a good life. You like to get into other people's business but you seem like a good kid and I hope it works out for you. But you and me are done. You understand?"

Luz's eyes moisten and she drops her gaze. Neil shifts awkwardly in his seat, stares at his watch like he has never seen it before. An excruciating minute passes. Luz finally looks back up at him but there are no tears. Her eyes bore into his face, her expression flinty, her voice sure. "When I was little, us kids used to have an expression: 'You're not the boss of me.' Well, guess what? You are not the boss of me. I might be seventeen but I'm an emancipated minor, which means I'm responsible only to myself. No guardian, no Department of Social Services, just me. And I'm not going anywhere. As a matter of fact, I'm enrolling in the high school here for my senior year and I'm volunteering at the shelter. Angela said I'm welcome to stay with them as long as I want so, between those two places, we'll probably be bumping into each other quite a bit." She leans toward him. "I'm your daughter, all right, but more important than that? You are my father. And I intend on having a father from this point on. So, all I can tell you is, you'd better man the fuck up."

Neil's face flares crimson and the veins in his forearms thicken and leap as he clenches the table. Swallowing hard, he opens his mouth to speak but Luz quickly raises a finger and shakes her head, her glittering eyes never leaving his.

Their server passes and she stops him with a hand on his arm. He jumps at her touch. "Bobby, I think we're ready now," she says. Then she turns back to Neil and engulfs him in a heartfelt, heartbreaking smile. "We're ready, aren't we?" she asks.

Neil's scowl and outrage retreat at a speed far beyond his control. He releases his grip on the table and slides back in the booth, aggravated and impressed and perplexed. Then, something strong cuts through his confusion, something deep and clear, and his choice becomes obvious.

"All right," he says. "You go first."