

PART II

“Dancing with the Bears”

CHAPTER III.

High in his dark Upper East Side apartment, Andy Clifford stared down on a lively Thursday night; people buzzing to the bars below, taxicabs flying up and down the avenues, even the warm, late April weather was festive. But Andy was unmoved by it all. His employer, Telecommando Incorporated, had announced massive job cuts after the market's closing bell that evening. Andy feared that his promising marketing career at the firm was coming to an abrupt end. He was alone at his apartment, but he had company: a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of chilled vodka.

Andy raised the bottle to his mouth. "The bastards, they always get rid of people on Fridays." He lit a cigarette. "Why fucking me?"

Just yesterday, Telecommando was going places. The once sleepy manufacturer of employee time cards, of all things, had spectacularly transformed itself into a worldwide telecom colossus. The Newark-based outfit's phones were sleek, and they ran on a sexy technology – the mobile internet – that aroused investors' desires. Telecommando's stock was the darling on the Street, and the firm was the leading mobile internet player, but there was just one problem: the mobile internet didn't really work. The profits disappeared and the shares tanked. Now came the layoffs, and the thought of them made Andy hang his head.

New York City felt like the loneliest place in the world. Andy's girlfriend was out of town for a pharmaceutical conference, and Kelly had no idea of his misfortune. For the third time in the past hour Andy considered calling Kelly, but when he envisioned the ensuing conversation he became sick to his stomach. Kelly would profess sympathy and understanding, but regardless of what was said Andy would still be without a job, and Kelly wouldn't be able to help him. He wanted to hear her supportive words, but decided to keep it to himself.

Andy stared at the ground, twenty-two floors beneath, reached for the bottle of vodka, then dropped his cigarette out the open window and watched it fall. Red sparks flew as it hit a tree below. Andy exhaled heavily. He lifted the bottle to his mouth again and grimaced. The bottle was placed on the ledge and his body was slumped at the open window. Andy closed his eyes. He lost track of time when he felt a rush of blood to his head, then panicked when he heard the faint sound of keys rattling. He turned towards the front door and froze.

The door was opened and light from the hallway illuminated the dark apartment. The shadow of a tall and relatively thin man revealed itself. A cloud of cigarette smoke engulfed his silhouette. The man had long hair and in his right hand clutched a peculiar object, which had the appearance of a small suitcase. He turned on the lights inside the apartment, and Andy, still standing by the open window, covered his eyes.

“Nico?” said Andy, squinting. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, well, well,” grinned Nico Gressens, his smile revealing a set of fake teeth from the night in Georgia a year and a half ago. The Dutchman had let his hair grow out, he wore jeans and an orange shirt; a cigarette rested between his lips. Nico scratched his fingers on his chin, where several large scars were visible. Large headphones were wrapped around his neck, and the wire from the headphones was connected to the strange object that he was carrying. He quickly glanced at the open window, the bottle of vodka, the full ashtray.

“I see my roommate’s got the blues ‘cause he might get fired tomorrow,” he said.

“Laid-off,” Andy snapped back. “There’s a big difference!”

“Are you alone?” Nico said as he threw his keys onto the coffee table. He peeped through his roommate’s bedroom door. “Where’s that naked Kelly hiding? Is she back from California? Are you sure you want me sticking around tonight?”

“I didn’t expect you to get back this early.” Andy turned his back on Nico and lit another cigarette in front of the open window. “Back before 6AM without a girl under your arm is not part of your crazy DJ routine. What happened?”

“The cinnamon girl I was raving about called it quits tonight,” Nico shrugged. He blew smoke rings and watched them dance their way to the ceiling. “Didn’t feel like deejaying at the joint, so I packed-up my turntable, wished the party people goodnight, and came here to see how my old friend is holding up.” He extinguished his cigarette. “I read your company’s earnings release on the web.”

“Your old friend ought to stop drinking and update his résumé. Twenty-five thousand people will be out of work tomorrow. There’s a rumor that my entire division will be terminated. I’ll probably be one of the cuts. It all just makes me feel . . . I don’t know, like a fucking loser.”

“The loser today is the winner tomorrow,” said Nico as he mixed vodka and orange juice in two tall glasses full of ice cubes. “My friend Andreas, the American Dream is alive and well. Look at me – be prepared to switch many careers in your lifetime. Yesterday I was a banker, today a DJ, tomorrow a dishwasher, then a cook, perhaps a pimp, always a salesman, and for all I know I could end up as a garbage man, but I won’t live an ordinary quiet life.” Nico passed one of the drinks to his roommate and raised his glass. “If you’re not being appreciated at the office, just walk out of there. I left Bankers Price for a dream and a turntable and I’m a happier man for it, never mind that a fine woman broke my heart tonight. Now, here’s to all the ladies – love is on its way.”

“Cheers to globalization. In this recession, only companies in India and China are hiring. There’s a pink-slip with my name on it and I don’t have another job to go to. I’ll return the corporate credit card, the laptop, the cellphone. So much for MBA today, CEO tomorrow. The

corporate guillotine is ready for my head. You were there with me, we learned lots of things at Harvard,” Andy said as he emptied his glass in one try, “but surviving a layoff was not one of them.” He pointed to the bottle. “Pour me another drink, man.”

“Andy, your life can change in an instant, and when the well is dry you’ll know the worth of the water. Enjoy your life; there’s much more to it than jobs and careers.”

“Easy for you to say. You cashed-in your fat stock portfolio as soon as you walked out of the hospital a year and a half ago and had the money to do whatever you please. Now you’re a white European with a turntable playing chaos music.”

“It’s called house music.”

“Same shit. I have debts, zero savings, student loans and I pay a Manhattan rent. I’m a black man from Alabama in corporate America, working hard, trying to get ahead, and tomorrow it’ll be all over. It’s a bear market, damn it, what am I supposed to do?”

“You should be dancing with the bears.” Nico approached the strange suitcase with the headphones. “You can just sit there, be drunk and miserable, or you can get down and set yourself free. I’ve got your back, I’ll spin a little something for you, my dear friend.” Nico unlocked the suitcase and a high-tech turntable, with the side marking *Made in Japan*, revealed itself inside. He connected the turntable to a pair of speakers and donned his headphones.

“What happened to the bright Andy that I know? Fuck these layoffs! As long as you’re alive you can make things happen. Here’s a tight Louis Armstrong remix for your ears. It’s called West End Blues – the Upper East Side mix. Thank goodness for Louis. He’ll make us feel all right. You know, when I was in the hospital in Atlanta, when I thought I would die, I was hoping that—when I did—Louis Armstrong would play for me. I’d only ask for four things in heaven: extra virgin olive oil, the *Wall Street Journal*, Louis Armstrong and me.”

“What about the ladies?” asked Andy.

“Trust me,” replied Nico, “where there’s music, food, and money to be made, the ladies will be.” Nico swiftly armed the turntable with a disc and pushed play. Instantly, a horn began a swinging jazz rhythm and the Dutchman clapped his hands along. Then he began twisting and turning knobs on the turntable until the jazz meshed with a soulful electronic beat. Louis Armstrong began another solo, this time with his voice, in a scat singing improvisation that blended nicely with the heavy hitting rhythm. Nico’s eyes lit up as he threw a deep and pulsating bassline into the loop. He accelerated the beats and the smoky apartment began to buzz.

“Now who’s in the house tonight?” shouted Nico. “My friend Andreas, are we ready to party? Put your drink down, put your smoke down and get down on this dance floor. *Ya* hear me? Relax your mind, let the positive vibrations get inside you. Move your feet and don’t give a damn. Do your *thang*. Show you got soul, brother, let the music heal and be your friend.”

Nico leveled the vibes on the turntable, put his headphones down and closed his eyes. He snapped his fingers to the beat and improvised along with Louis Armstrong’s voice. A smile crossed his face as he let the funky music move him. He let all the devils out of the cage as he began to shake. Nico created his own dance floor in the tiny living room and the dazed Andy realized he had a lot of catching up to do. Nico waved his hands in the air and urged his roommate to join him. A swig of the bottle later, Andy did just that. It was a strange sight. The end of civilization.

“Can you feel it?” yelled Nico. “You got it, my man!” The Dutch DJ was oblivious to anything around him. Andy tapped his feet and clapped his hands, but played babysitter. He worried that Nico would slip and fall, perhaps even through the open window, and was relieved

when the remix finally came to an end. Nico, however, effortlessly eased into another song and encouraged Andy to keep on dancing, which became easier with every drop of alcohol. The two roommates moved to the beat and the bottle was passed frequently between them. Eventually Andy became so intoxicated that he danced more wildly than Nico. He took a drag off his cigarette and even sang along with Nico to some of the vocal tracks. Thoughts of layoffs were the farthest from his mind.

“Sweet, sweet music,” smiled Andy. “Keep it playin’, my deejay.”

Nico high-fived his roommate on the improvised dance floor. Both men were gripped by the sounds that kept streaming from the turntable. A pack of cigarettes later the vodka was finished. Andy collapsed on the couch, longing for his bed. Nico, who had a hard time sleeping at night ever since he had started working as a nightshift DJ, tried to convince Andy that he should call in sick and keep on partying.

“You might be fired tomorrow anyway,” joked Nico. “As for me, it’s too late to be looking for another love, so, why don’t we switch to wine?”

“I have a big day ahead,” nodded Andy. “Just swear you’ll wake me up in the morning.”