

The Pigman reached his left hand out to me. "What's the matter?" I yelled. He started to double over—his eyes fastened on me—gaping like a fish out of water. Then he pressed his right hand to his chest and fell to the bottom of the stairs.

CHAPTER 11

I knew it was a heart attack right away. Lorraine almost passed out, but I knew enough to call the police. They got there about ten minutes later with an ambulance from St. Ambrose Hospital, and we almost didn't have enough time to get the skates off.

Two attendants came in with an old lady doctor, and we told them how he had been shoveling snow and had been out all day, and they just whisked him away on a stretcher like an old sack of potatoes. He was breathing just fine. Maybe a little fast, but it certainly didn't look like he was going to die or anything like that.

"Who are you?" this one snotty cop asked.

"His children," I said, and I thought Lorraine was going to collapse with fear. We both knew what her mother would do if she found out.

I answered all the questions he asked, and when I didn't know the answers, I made them up.

"Your father's age?"

"Fifty-eight," I said.

"Wife?"

"Deceased."

"Place of birth?"

"Sorrento."

"You two kids don't look Italian."

"Our mother was Yugoslavian."

I mean those particular cops were so dumb it was pathetic. I felt like I was talking to two grown-up Dennises who had arrested mental growth. It was a big deal over nothing. They wanted to know if we could take care of ourselves, and we assured them we were very mature.

"Your name?"

"John Pignati."

"You?" The cop pointed at Lorraine.

"Lorraine . . . Pignati."

They finally left after they had a good look around the place. I mean, the furnishings were enough to make anybody think a pack of wild gypsies lived there, but they were probably anxious to get along on the rounds of the local bars and collect their graft for the week. Lorraine got furious when I told her that and said she hoped I needed help some day and there were no policemen to call. Then she called me stupid and left me

standing in the hall. I walked to the edge of the living room and just waited for the lecture I knew was coming.

"You shouldn't have gone upstairs with the roller skates on," she finally said as though in a trance.

"I didn't think he would follow me up."

"You just never know when to stop."

"Oh, shut up!" I snapped at her. "You're beginning to sound like my Old Lady."

She turned her head away, and I was sorry I had yelled at her. "He's not going to die. It was just a little stroke, that's all. He was breathing fine when they carried him out."

I needed two beers after that, but Lorraine was nervous about staying there. So we found the keys to the house in the kitchen, locked up, and took a walk in the cemetery. We didn't last long there because it was too cold, and she felt terrible when we walked by a freshly dug grave. There's nothing worse than a freshly dug grave with snow falling on it.

The next day we cut school and took the Number 107 bus to St. Ambrose Hospital. We got there a half hour before visiting time, but that gave us time to check on Mr. Pignati and find out that he wasn't dead. In fact he was so alive he looked better

than ever, but I've heard that's the way a lot of people are when they have heart attacks. I mean, that's supposed to be the real danger period because they feel energetic, but if they exert themselves, they can have another attack and croak. This Transylvanian-looking nun-nurse made us sign our names in a book and gave us a couple of passes so everyone at the hospital would know we had permission to be there and were not a couple of ghouls raiding the morgue. I hate to go to hospitals because you never know when you get in one of the elevators if the guy next to you has the galloping bubonic plague.

You should have seen Lorraine carrying eleven gladiolas. She looked like a Mongolian peasant hawking flowers in a flea market. We took them from three different graves in the cemetery and couldn't find a twelfth gladiola anywhere. But who counts a dozen gladiolas when you get them? We still pretended we were John and Lorraine Pignati because only members of the immediate family were allowed to visit.

"Your son and daughter are here," this fat, huge nurse said, opening the door to Room 304. And there was the Pigman, propped up on his high pillow with the bed raised. It was a semiprivate room, and I'd better not tell you about the other

patient in there that made it semiprivate because he looked like he wasn't long for this world. They had a guy with some kind of oxygen-tent thing nearby that looked like a malaria net.

"Hi!" Mr. Pignati said, with a great big grin on his face. You'd have thought he was a guest in a hotel the way he looked, with this breakfast tray right in front of him on a weird-looking bed table.

"Look at the lovely flowers they brought," the fat, huge nurse said. "I'll put them in some water." She flashed a gigantic smile herself and then beat it.

"We had to make believe we were your kids," I explained, and you should have seen him smile.

"Are you all right?" Lorraine asked.

"Of course I'm all right." He laughed. "I'm getting out of here in a few days. There's nothing wrong with me. The doctor even said so."

There was a lot of small talk after that, and Lorraine never took her eyes off the guy in the other bed, who looked like he was 193 years old. Then the fat, huge nurse came back in with the gladiolas in this crummy glass vase that looked like they had just dug it up in the backyard. "Aren't they pretty?" she said and then beat it again.

"Is the house all right?" Mr. Pignati asked.

"We locked it up last night after the cops left," I said.

Lorraine fumbled in her pocketbook. "We brought you the keys," she said, holding them out to him.

"You keep them," he said. "Maybe you'll want to watch some television or have some more chocolate ants." He laughed as usual.

"I don't think so—"

"Maybe we will," I said, taking the keys right out of her hand. "We can leave them in the mailbox, in case we don't cut school tomorrow."

"I don't think we—"

I flashed Lorraine a dirty look, and she never finished her sentence.

"You're looking good," I commented.

"I'm sorry if I was any trouble yesterday."

"Are you kidding? Lorraine and I thrive on excitement." And then the three of us giggled.

"What did you have for breakfast?" Lorraine inquired, which was a little uncalled-for since all you had to do was look at the tray, and you could tell it was the usual rubbery eggs you always get in a hospital.

"You didn't eat your toast," she further observed.

"Do you think you could stop by and see Bobo for me?"

"Sure," I said.

"Tell him I miss him."

Just then the guy in the other bed took a choking fit, and the three of us just looked very uncomfortable until that was over. The fat nurse came running in and did something to him to make him stop. It looked like she strangled him actually.

"Get him the peanuts in the yellow package—not the red package. He likes the dry-roasted ones better."

"Sure."

"And half a hot dog. Don't give him the whole hot dog because he never eats all of it."

"How are you all doing?" the nurse said, bounding in and exhibiting her ivories again. "Your father's a very funny man," she squealed. "He knows an awful lot of jokes."

"We know."

Then she started cranking the bed.

"A very funny man. . . ."

It was scary the way Mr. Pignati's head seemed to stick out of that mountain of white sheets and just sink slowly downward.

"I think you'd better be going now."

"We're going to miss you, Mr. Pignati," Lorraine said, as though she was giving last rites.

"Please take care of Bobo until I get out." He smiled. "And the house. Make yourselves comfortable and use anything that's there."

"Good-bye, Mr. Pignati."

By the time we left, I was so glad to see the outside world I thought I had been in prison for seventy-three years. The smell of hospitals always makes me think of death. In fact I think hospitals are exactly what graveyards are supposed to be like. They ought to bury people in hospitals and let sick people get well in the cemeteries.

The sun was shining, and the ice was beginning to melt on the street. A big plow came down Forest Avenue, scooping snow right into the front of it and throwing it out the top through this pipe contraption. It looked like a black dragon devouring everything it touched. Pretty soon our bus came along, and then we hiked back up to the house.

Everything that happened from then on Lorraine blames me for, and maybe she's right. Things were just fine at first. Lorraine was in her glory because she had a brainstorm about making spaghetti. That would have been a superb idea if I had overlooked the fact that I loathe spaghetti. Mr. Pignati had some sauce left in the refrigerator, and there were three packages of number nine vermicelli, so I decided to let the little homemaker go ahead with it.

"I miss him." Lorraine sighed, sprinkling salt into the boiling water.

"Who?"

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"You know very well *who*."

It was sort of strange without him around. I stayed in the living room and watched television, and when my mentality couldn't stand that any longer, I went upstairs.

"John, what are you doing up there?"

"None of your business."

I went into the bedroom and opened the closet with all of Mr. Pignati's clothes. He didn't have that much, but I knew even if he were next to me, he wouldn't mind if I tried on a jacket or two. My own father won't let me touch his stuff.

I tried on a shiny blue suit that looked so worn I think Columbus must have sported it over to the New World. The lapels were so big I felt as though I was wearing reverse water wings. There was a full-length mirror on the door, and when I saw myself, I realized I wasn't plain old John Conlan anymore. I was a famous actor getting ready to go before the cameras to play the role of a distinguished European businessman and lover.

"The spaghetti's almost ready!"

I took one of his ties that looked like a red-and-blue flowered kite and hung it around my neck, and when I found a makeup pencil on the top of the bureau drawer, my transformation was complete—a moustache.

"Good Lord," Lorraine gulped. I thought she

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was going to drop the pot of spaghetti. She had set the dining-room table and pulled down the shades so it was pretty shadowy, and that made me look perfect. In the middle of the table were two religious-looking candles burning away.

"You look fantastic!" she blurted.

"You think so?"

"Watch the sauce on the stove. I want to wash my hands upstairs," she said, and I caught a bit of a wicked smile on her face.

The sauce had come to a boil four times, and I had to keep shutting off the heat because the goo was spilling over the edge of the pan.

"Will you hurry up?"

"I'm coming." Lorraine's voice came from the bedroom—as if I didn't know what she was doing.

I finally shut the stove off and went into the living room. I was planning to put the TV on, and I was mad as @#\$\$ because I knew the spaghetti was congealing in the pot. I don't like spaghetti when it's normal, let alone congealed.

"Good evening," came this sexy voice from the stairs.

She stood there for a moment, and I couldn't believe my eyes. I knew she had been digging out some old rags of Conchetta's, but I hadn't expected this. She was wearing a white dress with two mil-

lion ruffles and a neckline that was the lowest she'd ever worn . . . and makeup and high heels and an ostrich feather in her hair. She looked just like one of those unknown actresses you see on the TV summer-replacement programs.

"You look beautiful!"

"Do you mean it?"

I let out a growl and started toward her, imitating Bobo. She squealed with laughter and ran back up the stairs with me right after her.

"Stop it, John!"

"I am a handsome European businessman, and you are in love with me!"

She tried to hold the bedroom door shut, but I forced it, and she ran to the far side so there was only the bed between us.

"Come to me, my darling!"

We were both laughing so hard we could hardly speak.

"One kiss is all I ask!"

I caught her and threw her on the bed. I could hear the sound of the cameras clicking away on the set.

"One kiss!"

"John, stop it now. I'm not kidding." She started laughing again right in my arms, but I stopped it by putting my lips on hers. It was the first time we

had ever kissed. When I moved my lips away from hers, we just looked at each other, and somehow we were not acting anymore.

"I think we'd better go downstairs," Lorraine said.

"All right."

"Dinner is served," she announced, carrying this big plate of congealed spaghetti. We each sat at opposite ends of the table with the candles burning away. I poured us some wine in these long-stemmed glasses, and for a few moments we just sat looking at each other—her with the feather in her hair and me with my moustache.

"To the Pigmans," I said softly.

"To the Pigmans."

She lifted her glass, and she was lovely.

CHAPTER 12

"I wish this one would hurry up and croak because her husband has been getting a little too friendly lately."

"Yes, Mother."

"Any man who can even think of flirting with another woman while his wife is on her deathbed deserves to be shot."

"Can I have seventy-five cents to get my blue dress out of the cleaners?" I asked, though I could tell by the way she was fidgeting with her hairbrush that she was not finished with her own topic.

"Get it out of my pocketbook, and hand me my compact while you're at it." She loosened the knot on her bathrobe and sat down at the kitchen table.

"He calls me out into the hall and asks how his wife is doing, and all the time he's got his hands in his pockets and is giving me this wink. I don't know what he heard about nurses, but I think I set him straight."