

After Midnight

“He’s right here. I’ll give you two a minute.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

Stadler stood outside the cell, coat folded under his arm. He pursed his lips and cocked his head. Sighing to himself, he reached for the cigarette pack in his front shirt pocket and withdrew a Lucky Strike. Nasty, bitter things. But giving them up was impossible.

Taking a drag, he remembered the first one he ever had. Fifteen years old, he and Clancy lying in the bed of his father’s pickup. They were on their backs, chatting idly, when Clancy nonchalantly lit up in the middle of them talking about the future. He rolled his head towards Stadler and asked “Well?” as he flicked his mischievous green eyes towards the cigarette. Life was never the same.

But life had repeating patterns. Such as Stadler bailing Clancy out of prison. Again. And again. Tonight marked the sixth time. Just as he risked burning his fingertips, Stadler flicked the stub away from him and cleared his throat. Clancy didn’t stir. Drunk as a skunk, and no less smelly.

He had been out at the Dish with a pretty girl (“a dish at the Dish!” Marco the host would say lasciviously, wiggling his caterpillar eyebrows at every couple who walked in) when the waiter asked for Stadler to come to the phone. Stadler tried to wave him off, his date nestled in the crook of his shoulder, but the waiter had insisted. *Urgent. Please. They’ve called twice already.* Stadler felt that familiar sinking feeling. He excused himself, Camille pouting and looking away, and followed the waiter towards the front desk where they kept the telephone. The waiter’s jacket was white, crisp. He handed the phone to Stadler with a nod and stepped away to give him privacy.

He took a beat before putting the receiver to his ear. “Clancy.” It wasn’t a question.

A crackle as Clancy wheezed thickly into the transmitter. “How’d you guess, buttercup? Or were you just hopeful?”

“Where are you?”

“San Diego. Thought I’d find myself down Mexico way but got a little distracted.” Clancy chuckled to himself and Stadler heard him wince.

“You’re hurt.”

“Just a misunderstanding. You should see the other guys.”

Stadler rested the handset on his forehead and cursed. Every time.

Staring down at Clancy four hours later, curled up on the too-small bench in the gray-walled cell, Stadler asked himself why he was here. Twelve years of this. Drinking, fighting, passing out. Bribing bouncers, cops, even a lawyer, once. Clancy was a man with a noose around his neck walking off an increasingly short pier. The first time he received a call like this, Stadler had dropped everything, crying all the way down to the station and feeling nothing but soupy relief when the officer had unlocked the cell and Clancy had stumbled weeping into his arms, sobbing that he'd never do it again. But the sixth time? Stadler had a ball of ice in his stomach.

Clancy *snerk*-ed himself out of his slumber and bolted upright. His eyes landed on Stadler's and softened. He raised his shoulders with a sheepish grin. Despite himself, Stadler lit up another cigarette. *Bitter*. But he took a drag anyway.

Cameron Daxon