

Arthur Arellano

A STORY

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OF THE MANY unexpected things that had happened to Arthur Arellano, the transformation of his modest garage into a warehouse, stacked with boxes upon cardboard boxes of counterfeit goods, was far from the most surprising. Written on the boxes were names like Chanel, Versace, and Givenchy, designers of luxuries far beyond the reach of Arthur and his wife, Norma. Their presence made Arthur uneasy, and so it was that in the week after Louis Vu delivered this unforeseen wealth to the Arellanos, Arthur often found himself slipping out of his rented house at odd hours, stealing down the pebbly driveway past his Chevy Nova, and opening the creaky garage door to ponder the goods with which he was now living so intimately.

Even under the cover of night, Arthur resisted the urge to filch a Prada wallet or a pair of Yves Saint Laurent cuff links, even though Louis ended nearly every phone call by saying, “Help yourself.” But Arthur could not help himself, for he was troubled by a lingering sense of guilt and a fear of the law, trepidations that Louis addressed during their weekly lunch at Brodard’s, where, under Louis’s tutelage, Arthur had cultivated a taste for Vietnamese fare. According to Louis, Brodard’s

was the finest example of such cuisine in the Little Saigon of Orange County, meaning that it was the best Vietnamese restaurant in the world, outside the homeland itself. As Arthur ate the first course, a succulent salad of rare beef sliced paper-thin and marinated in lemon and ginger grass, a cousin to the seviche he loved, he wondered how the same dish tasted in Viet Nam. Usually Louis compared their dishes to another version he had feasted on in Saigon or Hanoi, but today, as the waiter cleared away the plate, Louis instead explained the reasons why his business did much more good than harm.

"It's like beautiful people and ugly people," Louis said. "Beautiful people can't let on that they need ugly people. But without the ugly, the beautiful wouldn't look half so good. Am I right? Tell me I'm right."

Arthur eyed the next course the waiter was slipping onto their table, six roasted squab fetchingly arrayed on a bed of romaine lettuce. "I suppose you're right," said Arthur, whose grasp of capitalism was tenuous at best. "Those look delicious."

"The moral of the story is this," Louis said, choosing a bird for himself. "The more fakes there are, the more that people who can't buy the real things want them. And the more people buy the fakes, the more the real things are worth. Everybody wins."

"That's the way you see things," said Arthur, lifting a squab by its slender little leg. "You don't think you're just telling yourself what you want to hear?"

"Of course I'm telling myself what I want to hear!" Louis shook his head in mock exasperation, his eyes wide behind his sculptural Dolce & Gabbana eyeglasses. "We all tell ourselves what we want to hear. The point, Arthur, is this: Do you want to hear what I'm telling myself?"

Arthur had indeed wanted to hear the many rhetorical questions posed by Louis over the past few months. For example, Louis had asked, consider his eyeglasses, manufactured in the same factory that produced the real D&G frames and lenses, but after hours, with ghost workers whose shadow labor resulted in a product that cost two hundred dollars less. For those on limited incomes, did not the gift of Italian style outweigh any hypothetical losses to Dolce & Gabbana? Or, Louis had said, think about Montblanc. Would the pen company suffer more than the craftsmen of Wengang, China, if those workers could not make their replicas of the Meisterstück? Although Arthur could not picture the town of Wengang, he could conjure up a blurry image of the faraway Chinese, dark haired, tight eyed, and nimble, somewhat like Louis himself.

"I'm hearing what you're telling me," Arthur said, watching Louis eat his squab with the bird perched between thumbs and index fingers, his pinkies pointed upward and outward. "Otherwise your things wouldn't be in our garage."

"Hopefully you've been learning and not just hearing," said Louis. "Money's to be made, Arthur. Good money."

But for all Louis's talk of profits, Arthur and Norma had refused the 10 percent commission Louis had offered. Loaning Louis their garage was an act of sympathy stirred by the sight of his apartment, a one-bedroom cave doubling as a warehouse. The loan was also a way of paying back Louis's father, who had saved Arthur's life last year, however inadvertently. Arthur recognized the legacy of Men Vu in the most prominent features of his only son, the bull's-eye nose, pegged over a mouth perpetually slightly agape, and the broad expanse of brow ruled by wrinkles whose horizontal lines ran deep and straight. As Louis nibbled on the squab, Arthur was moved once more by the memory of Men Vu, a man he had never met.

"Keep those boxes in our garage," Arthur said. "Like I told you, it's our gift."

Before Louis could respond, Arthur's cell phone buzzed. The text message was from Norma: *get dry cleaning*. After Louis leaned over to read the message, he poked Arthur in the shoulder and said, "You should pick up some flowers for Norma as well." To Arthur's credit, he meant to ask what kind of flowers he should get for his wife along with her clothing, but the arrival of the bananas flambé, Arthur's favorite dessert, prevented him from doing so. The waiter placed the plate of bananas on the table, each one in a crisp jacket of golden brown, deep-fried coconut batter. Then the waiter touched a match to the thimble-size pitcher of Caribbean rum he was carrying, and as the liquor burst into flames, he poured it over the bananas. The spectacle delighted Arthur, driving Norma's request from his mind so completely that even though he had the nagging sense throughout the afternoon of something he needed to do, what that was he could not recall.

THE MOST UNEXPECTED thing to happen to Arthur Arellano, and the fateful event that brought him together with Louis Vu, was the failure of his liver, something to which Arthur had given much less thought than his nose, or his big toe, or even his right hand, all of which he could have lived without, however uncomfortably. Thus, when his liver began dying a premature death some eighteen months ago, Arthur was unprepared in every way except for having health insurance, courtesy of his younger brother and employer, Martín, which paid for his visit to Dr. P. K. Viswanathan, who explained that Arthur's liver was the unwitting victim of a disease Arthur understood only in its parts: auto, immune, hepatitis. Swiveling in his seat as he talked, the doctor said, "Autoimmune hepatitis means that your body no longer recognizes your liver as a part of itself. When this happens, your body rejects your liver."

“My body can do that?”

“Your body is a complex organism, Mr. Arellano.” The doctor stopped swiveling and leaned forward, his elbows on the leather writing pad of his desk. “It can do pretty much whatever it wants.”

Arthur left Dr. Viswanathan’s office convinced of his imminent death. Far more people needed organs than were available, and never had Arthur won anything worthwhile in his life. He was a chronic loser of bets big and small, from the thoroughbreds at Santa Anita to Pai Gow at the Commerce Casino’s pay-to-play tables, his undistinguished career as a gambler culminating in the loss of the pink bungalow on a noisy stretch of Magnolia Street in Huntington Beach, miles from the shore, for which he and Norma had spent seventeen years paying. After their bank repossessed the bungalow in the twenty-ninth year of their marriage, Norma left Arthur to live with one of their daughters, and Arthur moved into Martín’s house in Irvine, where, soon after, he learned of his diagnosis at the university hospital, which explained how the pain in Arthur’s joints—the fatigue, the itches and skin rashes, the nausea and vomiting, the loss of appetite, everything that Arthur blamed on the stress of his gambling debts over the past several years—were merely symptoms of a rot far deeper. But of all these signs, the one that drew Norma’s attention when she came to him at Martín’s after the diagnosis was the jaundice, the creeping yellowness of his skin that compelled her to exclaim, “Why haven’t you been taking care of yourself, Art?”

During the next hour in Martín’s sun-saturated living room, Arthur humiliated himself twice, first by seizing Norma’s hand and, without warning, bursting into tears, and second by confessing to having cashed out his life insurance policy. Norma did not ask how he had spent the money, and Arthur did not have the heart to tell her about the Indian casino in Pechanga where he had lost seven days of his life, as well as all his money. For a long time Norma said nothing, but when she sat down at last, he knew she had resigned herself to seeing him through his illness. When she put one hand on his knee and the other to his cheek, he also understood that the autoimmune hepatitis was God’s sly way of keeping them together.

In the months of waiting for news of a liver, they debated whether they should ask after the donor’s identity if Arthur was so fortunate as to receive an organ. Eventually they decided in favor of letting modern medicine maintain its air of mystery and the miraculous. Thus it was not by choice but by accident that they discovered the liver’s origins, a year after the operation, when Arthur was back working for Martín at Arellano and Sons, the landscaping service founded by Arthur’s father,

Arturo, known by one and all as Big Art. The revelation arrived in a manila envelope from the hospital, left in the mailbox of the Spanish-style cottage that Arthur and Norma were renting from Martín at a substantial discount. Inside the envelope was a quality of life survey with the donor's name printed next to Arthur's own, courtesy of a bug in a hospital computer, as they and several dozen others eventually discovered when the scandal reached the headlines. On seeing the name, he felt a tremor run through his liver. He blamed it at first for what he thought was a delusion, but when he passed the survey to Norma, she saw the name as well.

"Could it be Korean? Like the Parks?" she asked, referring to their dry cleaners, Mr. and Mrs. Park, migrants from Incheon via Buenos Aires who spoke better Spanish than the Arellanos did. "If it's not Korean, maybe it's Japanese."

For his part, Arthur had no idea. He had trouble distinguishing one nationality of Asian names from another. He was also afflicted with a related, and very common, astigmatism wherein all Asians appeared the same. On first meeting the Parks, he had not thought that they were Korean, or even Japanese. Instead, he had fallen back on his default choice when confronted with a perplexing problem of identification regarding an Asian. "There are a lot of Chinese around here," Arthur said. "I'd bet this guy is Chinese."

In fact, Men Vu was from Viet Nam, a widower and grandfather who had been killed in a hit-and-run, a story Norma discovered by sleuthing online at the lawyer's office where she worked as a paralegal. Faced at last with a real person and a real name, Arthur reluctantly concluded that it was only right and proper to find someone, anyone, to whom he could give thanks, a complicated task since there was no Men Vu in the phone book, leaving Arthur to call every Vu listed in Orange County, of whom there were hundreds. After going through those who spoke no English, those who hung up on him, and those who uttered something rude in a foreign language, Arthur found, at last, Louis, who listened without interruption and then said, with only the slightest accent, "I'm the one you're looking for, Mr. Arellano."

Louis pronounced his first name "Louie," or, as he put it, "the French way," and for their meeting provided an address ten minutes distant, in Fountain Valley, a pleasant suburb of tract homes, condominiums, and sprawling apartment complexes always admired by Arthur for its forthright and modest motto, which embodied all that Arthur had wanted for himself, Norma, and their brood. Those unassuming words were printed on a stone block situated on a meridian at the city's border, greeting Arthur, Norma, and all who entered Fountain Valley with this promise: "A Nice Place to Live."

ONLY WHEN HE was in his own living room that evening after a long afternoon of balancing the books at Arellano and Sons did Arthur remember what he had forgotten, just as Norma unlocked the front door. He turned off the television broadcast of the World Series of Poker, and as he explained that he had overlooked running down to Park Avenue Dry Cleaning, he discerned her unhappiness by the way she uttered “hmmm” without making eye contact, the noise vibrating somewhere down deep in her throat. She said “hmmm” when he asked her what she was cooking for dinner, and then said it again when he asked her what was for dinner the next day while she washed the dishes. Only when he stroked her back in bed, with the lights out, did she finally say something else.

“Let me make something very clear to you, Arthur.” The pillow into which her face was turned muffled her voice. “Do not touch me, and do not come close to me.”

“But—”

“Would it kill you to think about me for one moment in your life? Would it kill you to do something for me, just to see what it feels like?”

“It’s the liver,” he said, an excuse that had served him well over the past year. “I’m still getting used to it.”

“No, you are not. You are completely recovered and good as new. That’s the problem.” Her back was still turned to him, and her breathing was labored, the way it was when she walked up more than two flights of stairs. “Art, you’re fifty years old, and you act fifteen. Now go to sleep and leave me alone.”

Arthur leaned his chin on Norma’s shoulder and whispered, “Didn’t you say we should talk more to each other?”

“Arthur Arellano.” Norma shrugged off his chin. “Either you sleep in the living room, or I will.”

Middle-aged bodies like Arthur’s were not made for couches, and after a miserable night, Arthur gave in to a moment of weakness the next morning, calling his brother to ask for refuge. The phone was answered by Elvira Catalina Franco, his brother’s Guatemalan housekeeper of dubious legal status, who greeted him the way she’d been taught by Martín’s wife, Carla: “Arellano residence. May I help you?” But when his brother said hello, Arthur discovered that he could no longer supplicate himself, for already he could see Martín’s disapproving look, the eyes, cheeks, and lips puckering around the nose, pulled tighter together by the drawstring of Martín’s facial muscles.

“I just called to say good morning,” said Arthur, avoiding Norma’s gaze as she entered the kitchen. “Good morning.”

Martín sighed. “This isn’t high school anymore, Artie,” he said. “You’re too old to make prank calls.”

Even after Martín hung up, Arthur pretended to carry on a conversation, for Norma was behaving as if there was nobody in her kitchen while she toasted two slices of wheat bread, poured herself a cup of Yuban, read the headlines in the *Register*, and chuckled along with the KDAY disc jockeys. Arthur, hovering in the corner, sensed that he was merely a specter, already dead, acknowledged by Norma only as she brushed by him on her way out the door, saying over her shoulder, “Don’t forget your pills.”

He found his translucent orange prescription bottles and a glass of filtered water in their usual place, arrayed on the bedroom dresser. First he swallowed the diuretic, sipping from the glass and sighing. He hated taking most of the medications, even though the second pill for lowering his blood pressure was absolutely necessary, as was the third one, the immunosuppressive that ensured his aging body would get along with his even more vintage liver. Dr. Viswanathan had said that the risk of rejection would always be there, and the resulting sense of unease weighed on Arthur, the daily reminder of the alien within him that was delivered in quadruplicate form via these pills, even the fourth and final one that he somewhat enjoyed, the antidepressant. Although it was good for filing down his emotional rough edges, it was not as satisfying as the painkillers he had taken in the immediate months after the transplant, dots of magic that made his skin feel like cotton under his own fingers. The antidepressant only restored in him a feeling of normalcy, and why, Arthur wondered as he took it, should he need a pill for that?

MARTÍN’S BEHAVIOR THAT morning in the office confirmed for Arthur how correct he had been in not asking for help. The office was in Martín’s guesthouse, a clapboard cottage separated from the main house by a swimming pool cleaned by a robotic, stingraylike device that kept the water sapphire blue. Arthur had barely turned on the computer and begun contemplating his morning game of blackjack when Martín entered, sat on the edge of Arthur’s desk with its stacks of unfiled receipts and invoices, and began going into minute detail about his family’s vacation at Lake Arrowhead that past weekend. “Jet skis,” Martín said. “Champagne brunch. Filet mignon. Pink sunsets.” This, at least, was what Arthur heard, the office itself affecting his hearing, with everything from the paper clips to the art deco sconces reminding him of what his brother possessed that he did not, Arellano and Sons, bequeathed by Big Art only to Martín when Arthur’s bad habits became obvious to their father.

"So, how was your weekend?" Martín said. "How are you and Norma doing?"

"We're fine." Arthur studied the computer screen, where he was being offered the chance to double down on a pair of tens. "We're doing great."

"Just thought I'd ask." When Martín rotated the platinum watch on his wrist, Arthur saw black threads of earth under his brother's fingernails. Arthur suspected Martín deliberately left the dirt there as proof of how he ventured out with the landscaping crews to trim a few hedges once every week, another sign of the saintliness that led Martín to trust, or perhaps to torment, Arthur with the accounting. "You know Norma talks to her pedicurist, who talks to Elaine, who talks to her mother, who talks to me. I don't even go looking for this, Artie. I just hear it because it's out there."

"I appreciate your concern." Arthur doubled down and drew a king and an ace, the kind of good luck that never happened in real life. "But maybe the pedicurist said something different to Elaine, who said something a little different to Carla, who said something a little different to you, until you heard something a lot different than the way things are."

Martín sighed, coughed, and glanced at his watch. "We're brothers, Artie," he said, raising himself from the desk, which creaked in relief. At the door, Martín paused, as if to say something else, and then left, the absence of his considerable heft palpable, an imaginary cutout into which Arthur's own body could fit. According to Dr. Viswanathan, the donor would have been a man of roughly the same size and weight as Arthur himself and from there, Arthur had conjectured that the donor might be in other ways like him too, middle-aged and graying, of a Mexican ancestry only vaguely remembered by word of mouth from ancient grandparents with faces like those of Easter Island statues, vulnerable to the seductions of all-you-can-eat Chinese buffets for seven dollars and sugar-glazed doughnuts pregnant with raspberry preserves, a profile also befitting Martín. Would Martín have given Arthur a spare part of himself? A kidney, say, or bone marrow? Would Arthur have done the same? The questions bothered Arthur all day, and later that evening in Louis's apartment, he gave the most honest answer he could to his friend.

"I think so," Arthur said. "I would, I think I really would."

The bones and scraps and wilted garnish of their dinner lay on the coffee table in Styrofoam containers, whisked to Louis's door every evening by the teenage son of a widow who cooked for two dozen bachelors. She used the four-burner stove in her own kitchen to conjure dishes that were, Louis said, minor masterpieces, aromatic catfish caramelized in a clay pot, tender chicken sautéed in lemongrass and chili, a

deep-dish omelet of mushrooms and green onions, wok-fried morning glory studed with slivers of garlic, everything meant to be dipped in a pungent sauce that was the very lifeblood of Vietnamese cooking, a distilled essence of fish imbued with the color of dawn and flecked by red chili pepper. Satiated, Louis sighed in appreciation and said, “It’s like getting shot at. No one really knows what they’ll do until bullets are flying.”

“Really, I would,” Arthur said. “Even though I can’t stand him, he’s still my brother.”

“It’s easy to say when you won’t ever have to do it.”

And Arthur never would. After Arthur had bravely announced to Dr. Viswanathan that he too wished to donate his organs, the doctor had explained how the cyclosporine and corticosteroids Arthur ingested to keep his body from rejecting the liver had ruined his body for donation. Secretly Arthur was pleased, feeling that his decision to donate, before he was told he could not, gave him a toehold on moral high ground, the kind of real estate that Louis said could not be bought. Louis knew the value of real estate, for he owned two houses and a condo in Perris, the affordable suburb in the far-eastern reaches of the Inland Empire that he liked to call the *other* Paris. Even now Louis was doing his homework, watching a television show about increasing the resale value of houses with simple and inexpensive renovation ideas that involved thrift-store shopping, Dumpster diving, and attic treasure hunts.

“I love that stick-on floor tile they’re using in the kitchen,” Louis said. “From here, you can’t even tell it’s not really marble.”

“Why don’t you just live in one of those houses you bought?” Arthur said. Louis’s apartment was even bleaker than before. With the inventory gone, the mismatched furniture was fully exposed, as were the walls, once white but now gray. “You should enjoy your quality of life. That’s one thing I’ve learned this year.”

“But I am enjoying my quality of life.” Louis stretched out on the couch, from whose depths would later emerge a double-size bed for Arthur. “I’m thinking about how my renters pay my mortgage and how I’ll profit from those houses in a few years.”

This, Arthur realized, was the difference between them. Arthur thought of what he had done, what he was doing, or what he should have done, but Louis existed in the speculative tense, thinking only of what he could do. “It’s not all about money, Louis,” he said. “What about a wife? A family?”

“You mean love?” Louis pointed to the gold ring on Arthur’s finger. “Can you say that’s made you happy, Arthur?”

"It's not love's fault if things haven't worked out between me and Norma."

"I've tried love," Louis said, as if it were a kind of soft, malodorous French cheese. "It's okay, but the problem with it is the other person involved. She has a mind of her own. You can't say the same thing about things."

Arthur watched Louis for any sign of irony, but the small frown on Louis's face indicated he was serious. "Tell me about her," Arthur said. "Or was there more than one?"

"It's all in the past, Arthur." Louis gestured over his shoulder dismissively. "And I never think about the past. Every morning that I wake up I'm a new man."

Arthur had tried to get Louis to talk about himself before, never with any success, and so he changed the subject. "Thanks for letting me sleep over," Arthur said. "I appreciate it."

"You're my friend," Louis replied.

Arthur interpreted the statement to mean that he was the only friend, for Louis never mentioned anyone else. "You're my friend too," Arthur said, putting as much feeling as he could into his words. For a moment, the two of them maintained eye contact and smiled at each other. Then, before the situation became more emotionally complicated, Arthur excused himself to go take a shower.

THE FIRST INKLING Arthur had the next morning of a less than auspicious day was the office computer crashing, taking with it into oblivion the last week's worth of record keeping. Despite Arthur's tinkering, the computer was still frozen at the end of the day, and it was a frustrated Arthur who climbed into his Chevy Nova, turned the ignition, and heard nothing but a mechanical screech, leaving him to ask for a jump start from Rubén, the Arellano and Sons landscaper who worked on Martín's house and who had once confessed to Arthur that he was *indocumentado*, which Arthur knew was true for more than one of Martín's gardeners. By the time Arthur stopped off at home to pick up fresh underwear and his razor before he went to Louis's, he was wondering what more could happen. Norma was in the kitchen, microwaving a TV dinner, and when she saw him, she gestured at the notepad by the phone, saying, "Someone called for you."

Arthur was relieved at having something to do besides scurrying furtively around his own home. The caller's name was Minh Vu, and as Arthur dialed the number, he wondered if this person was one of the many he had called months ago. While Arthur had not recognized the accents he had heard then as being of Vietnamese origin, he could now hear that accent quite clearly when Minh Vu

answered the phone, even if his English was perfectly understandable as he said, “I think you know my father.”

“I do?”

“His name is Men Vu.”

“Louis didn’t tell me he had a brother named Minh.”

During the brief pause on the phone, Arthur could hear a woman cooing to a crying child. Then Minh Vu said, “Who’s Louis?”

The remaining conversation took six minutes. After Arthur hung up the phone with a shaking hand, he informed Norma that Men Vu had eight children, not four, none of whom were named Louis. One of them—Minh—had received the hospital letter linking their father to the seven strangers who had inherited not just his liver but also his skin, his corneas, his ligaments, his pancreas, his lungs, and his heart. For the past few months, the Vu clan had been arguing about whether or not to contact these seven strangers, and only now had they agreed to do so. At first, Arthur hadn’t known whether to believe Louis or Minh Vu, who was outraged when Arthur said, “How do I know you are who you say you are?” But Arthur began to be convinced when, without hesitation, Minh Vu had provided him with a phone number, an address, and an invitation to visit his father’s house in Stanton, where, he said, Arthur would find photographs, hospital records, X-rays, and ashes. Having kept himself calm for the time required to tell Norma the story, Arthur suddenly discovered himself in need of a drink. He found the last bottle of Wild Turkey he had ever bought stashed beneath the kitchen sink, half-full and untouched since the diagnosis.

“Oh, my God.” The first sip brought tears to his eyes. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“We’ve got to go over there, Art,” Norma said, her dinner forgotten in the microwave. “Louis’s got to tell us what’s going on.”

“No, this is up to me and him.” The whiskey had burned off the fringes of his panic, and Arthur swallowed some more straight from the bottle. “Just the two of us.”

“You’re an idiot.” Norma enunciated each word, as fierce as she was during the year of waiting. “What if he gets violent? We don’t even know what he’s capable of if he’s been lying to us all this time. We don’t know what he wants from us. We don’t even know who he is.”

But Arthur was not listening, the third shot of whiskey having run an electric wire from his throat to his gut and down to his toes, bringing him to his feet and out the door to the Chevy Nova, despite Norma’s entreaties. He was about to turn on the engine when the liver throbbed inside him, the size of a first-trimester fetus, forever

expectant but never to be born, demanding his acknowledgment, his gratitude, and his love the way it constantly had in the weeks after the operation, rendering him so breathless with its need that he had to roll down the window and gasp for air. Overhead the moon was shining through a tear in a curtain of clouds, a perfect round bulb of white light reminding Arthur of the first thing he had seen upon awakening from his operation, a luminous orb floating in the darkness that he dimly understood to be heaven's beacon, telling him that he had crossed over to God's side. The orb grew steadily, its edges becoming hazy until it was a whiteness that filled his vision, a screen from behind which something metallic rattled and indistinct words were murmured. Someone was saying his name, someone not, as he had first thought, God, for Arthur was alive, a fact he knew both from the spear of pain thrust through his side, pinning his body to the bed, and from the voice he recognized as Norma's, calling him back to where he belonged.

ON HEARING OF the conversation with Minh Vu from a breathless Arthur, Louis did not open the doors to any number of alternative futures and parallel universes where he was the son of the man who had saved Arthur's life. Instead, Louis merely sighed and shrugged. He was on his knees, sorting through a new shipment of goods, the boxes shoved up against the walls of the living room and labeled Donna Karan, Calvin Klein, and Vera Wang. While Arthur sank into the couch, Louis got up and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I suppose it had to come out eventually, didn't it?" he said. "I'm sorry, Arthur. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Arthur closed his eyes and massaged his temples. In addition to the corkscrew of pain in his guts, a headache was chiseling out a groove in his skull. It made sense now why there were no pictures of Men Vu in the apartment, and why Louis had always been evasive about visiting Men Vu's grave. While Louis had attributed both those things to the bad blood that had run between him and his father, the real reason was that there was no blood at all.

"If you're not Louis Vu," said Arthur, "then who are you?"

"Who says I'm not Louis Vu?"

"You just made it up when I called you," Arthur said. "Louis Vuitton is your idol. And Vu is a very common Vietnamese name."

"Actually," Louis said, "I'm Chinese."

"Oh!" Arthur gasped. "I knew it! I knew you were Chinese!"

"But I was born in Viet Nam, and I've never been to China." Louis sat down beside Arthur on the couch. "I can barely speak Chinese. So what does that make me? Chinese or Vietnamese? Both? Neither?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." Arthur groaned and rubbed his temples. "Why? Why did you do it?"

"Put yourself in my shoes, Arthur." Louis leaned back and crossed his legs, the feet capped in fake Fendi wing tips. "I don't get your kind of phone call every day. And when I get it, I have to see where it takes me. So I played along. It's how I've gotten ahead."

"I want you to get your things out of my garage." The pressure in Arthur's head and the spike in his gut were excruciating. "Tonight."

Louis shook his head mournfully. "I'm afraid not, Arthur."

"What do you mean, you're afraid not?"

"Don't get me wrong, Arthur. This is business, not personal, okay? Otherwise, I like you a lot. We've had fun, haven't we? We're friends, aren't we?"

"We are not friends," Arthur said.

"We're not friends?" Louis appeared genuinely hurt, his lower lip quivering. "Over something like this? Come on, Arthur!"

"Just get your things out of my garage tonight."

"But where would I put them?" Louis's lip stopped quivering, and an expression of gloom slowly descended on his face, dragging down the corners of his lips and eyebrows. "No, I'm afraid those things will have to stay. And please don't think of calling the cops. It might be hard to explain why you have a garage full of Miu Miu and Burberry."

"Then I'm going to take your things out of the garage myself," Arthur cried. "I'll take them out to the desert and leave them there."

"If I were you, Arthur, I'd think very carefully about touching my things."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"You've got something on me." Louis inspected his fingertips. "But I've got something on your brother, don't I?"

"What?"

"Come on, Arthur!" Louis's shout startled Arthur, who had never heard Louis raise his voice or seen him lean forward, as he did now, and snap his fingers an inch from Arthur's face. "Wake up! Who's your brother underpaying to clip his lawns and trim his hedges?"

The weight of Arthur's naïveté pressed him deeper into the couch as he recalled Rubén, Gustavo, Vicente, Alberto, and all those other employees of Arellano and Sons of whom his brother asked no questions, so long as they produced Social Security cards and driver's licenses, either real or fake enough to be mistaken for real. Those phantom identities were easy to obtain, as Louis had shown Arthur one

day, fanning out five driver's licenses on the coffee table, each one with Louis's picture but a different name. Arthur buried his face in his hands as he imagined a raid on Arellano and Sons, leading to arrests and deportations, with disgrace for Martín and defamation of Big Art's good name.

"I think it's time for you to go home, Arthur," Louis said, leaning back into his corner of the couch. His voice was tired, and his face was pale. "Why don't you just go home?"

THE LIGHT IN the bedroom was on when Arthur pulled into the driveway, although the rest of the house was dark. He was afraid of what Norma would say, so he bought some time by opening the garage door, just to make sure that the miracle he had prayed for on the drive home had not happened. It hadn't. The boxes were still there, flaxen in the moonlight and stacked to the ceiling and the walls, right up to the edge of the driveway. Louis had needed every square foot of storage for his fountain pens with their plastic barrels, his sunglasses without ultraviolet protection, his watches that kept perfect time for a day, his designer jackets without linings, his pants with hems that unraveled easily, his discs of pirated movies filmed surreptitiously in theaters, his pseudopills that might or might not work, his reproductions of Microsoft software so perfect as to come with the bugs infesting the genuine item—a garage crammed with things fashioned by people he would never know but to whom Arthur felt bound in some way, especially when he imagined the unknown places from where they might hail.

Greeting Arthur at eye level were the names of Gucci, Jimmy Choo, and Hedi Slimane, beautiful and exotic appellations written on the boxes with a blue marker. Arthur and Norma had yearned for such names upon encountering them in Bloomingdale's and window-shopping at the boutiques on Rodeo Drive, but when the clerks had ignored them, they understood that they themselves were unwanted.

"Arthur Arellano!"

Arthur turned. Norma stood at the back door in a frayed bathrobe, her feet bare. "I can explain," Arthur said, extending his arms hopefully. But when Norma folded her own arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow, he saw himself as she saw him then, offering nothing but empty hands. ■