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JAKUB “PIES” Jakubowski had to see the mother of the woman he killed. He would locate Milena Chlebek, and face-to-face he would apologize to her.

As he stood alone and listened to the loud arguments and agonizing screams reverberating off the concrete walls outside the cell’s steel door, it was all that mattered to Pies—to apologize.

The wrinkled white shirt and dark gray suit combo he squeezed himself into was stretched to its limit across his upper back and biceps due to the chiseled muscle he had developed over the past five years. The pants now fit a bit more snugly around his trim waist and made his upper physique appear like a wide V. He’d worn the exact same suit into the prison, virtually swimming in the cloth, but he’d walk to freedom with the material bulging to its tensile-strength breaking point.

His close-cropped, self-buzzed hair completed his overall intimidating appearance.

The penitentiary was the first place Pies had ever attempted to exercise. He’d grown prolific with his regimen, to the point where some of the others surreptitiously mocked his obsession—which was in itself remarkable given so many men on the inside worked out incessantly. The calisthenics Pies used were simple, but they lasted for hours on end. Push-ups, pull-ups, deep knee bends, as well as

constant pacing within his cell and the yard, that's how he achieved his current build.

When he paced, especially while in the yard and common areas, no one got in his way. During those supercharged tense moments, Pies appeared more like a frantic zoo animal patrolling its tiny territory than a man doing his time, and the others would walk wide berths so as to not cross paths with him.

He'd done so many callisthenic repetitions over the course of his incarceration that his nickname among the other prisoners was "PP," shortened from "Push-Pull." The nicknames were rarely mentioned to his face, though.

Pies entered the penal system with an incredible amount of aggression, anger, and hostility over what his life had become. Tacit violence oftentimes seemed to ooze from him. No one wanted to be the first to challenge him for fear that the newcomer, Pies, would cause not only physical harm but also irreparable damage to their own precarious standing among the other prisoners.

Soon, Pies became somewhat of a junior statesman among the ceaseless arrivals of new prisoners, and his cycle of never being tested continued to go on and on.

Conversely, Pies did not receive psychiatric treatment for what were—obviously—severe manic episodes. Thankfully, the manic times inside the prison had diminished over the past eighteen months. It was almost as if he had paced and exercised himself to better mental health, if that were even remotely possible.

Pies twitchily paced back and forth within the holding cell and thought briefly about Milena's husband Blaze, who had died of a heart attack three years ago. He had read the obituary on the *Chicago Tribune's* website on one of the prison computers a week after Blaze's passing. Blaze was such a good, solid man, a master baker who had absolutely trusted Pies with his daughter, Vicki. Pies could only assume that Blaze's early demise was due, in part, to Vicki's shocking death.

Vicki's mother Milena was now the lone survivor of the Chlebek family.

Ever since Pies squeezed the revolver's trigger in a desperate attempt to kill his crime boss Bast Zielinski, the source of lifelong torment, he was constantly working up to this apologetic moment.

Practicing.

Every day as he exercised, he would silently rehearse the act of contrition—thinking up various verbiage, inflections, and body language to make sure that Milena Chlebek understood how truly sincere he was.

Previous to the shocking developments earlier this particular day, though, when he was advised he'd be leaving prison, Pies's plan had revolved around inviting Milena to the penitentiary complex and making his case to her in the visitors' room. He would have to adjust his strategy—that was painfully obvious. The apology would now materialize sans the cynical, hooded-eyed gaze of the prison guards.

It would be only Pies and Milena.

Alone.

Time and time again, as he'd find himself training for what he would say to the woman, he'd stop himself. How could he rehearse something as crucial as a sincere apology? And he realized, even prior to his receiving the startling news of his early release, Milena would never consider coming to the prison to visit him in the first place.

What in the hell was he thinking?

Deep confusion and anger clung to Pies like painful, itchy burrs as he continued to pace within the cold concrete and steel structure of the Stateville Correctional Center north of Joliet, Illinois. He must have walked back and forth past the well-worn, overstuffed backpack that lay on the floor some two hundred times by now.

He paced and paced.

Utterly rattled that he was being set free barely past the halfway mark of an eight-year sentence for manslaughter, Pies was furious that he'd not seen the parole coming sooner. He kicked himself for

missing something important in his last parole hearing. But he also knew some paroled prisoners were not given their exact early release dates as a safety concern, so that any enemies they may have created in prison wouldn't be operating under deadlines to hurt the exiting inmates—and vice versa.

The stark cell he currently occupied was the last stop for a paroled prisoner before being picked up by friends or loved ones—or given a bus or train ticket if friends and loved ones had forsaken the detainee. The departing inmate would also receive whatever cash he still retained in his facility bank account and then be sent on his way. If he were completely broke, the penal system officials would dispense a few twenties for the parolee's return-trip expenses.

Before they allowed Pies to depart, the prison authorities would run his name through various national criminal-justice data systems, checking to make sure he wasn't wanted in any other state. If an arrest warrant existed elsewhere, the jurisdiction in question would be contacted and awarded just enough time to head south of Chicago to pick up Pies before he was set free.

There would be no such legal obstruction this particular day because Pies was otherwise clean—in the judicial system's eyes, anyway.

Up to this point, it was a judicial system that had let him down at every turn. Pies was guilty of so much more than accidentally killing Vicki Chlebek. He would have been in prison for the rest of his life if all of his crimes had been properly tallied and the prosecutor and judge handling his case hadn't dropped the ball.

But life in prison was just not to be for Pies and that angered him. As this newly formed irritation began to creep into the deep recesses of his mind, he quickened his pacing speed, and he was able to successfully push back the rage where it would cause no further distress.

He rolled his head back and forth and attempted to loosen the tight dress-shirt fabric from of his neck, and he forced himself to conjure up what would happen to him in the future.

He reckoned he could throw a beating at the next corrections of-

ficer he made direct contact with. As soon as that thought fired in his mind, he knew it wasn't going to happen though, and for good reason.

Right after breakfast, a stout and humorless corrections officer named Chandler nosed right up on Pies, slapped an approved release form against his chest, and said, "Today's your day, killer. Time to go out and into the world. Parole board came through for you."

Pies snatched the paper away and quickly read.

Before he could even verbally respond, Chandler handed him a black smartphone with a paused video displayed. Pies was reeling from the CO's notification of parole, and he didn't understand the offering of the smartphone at first—until the humorless guard pressed the play button.

Exhibited on the smartphone was a shaky and muted surveillance video of an unsmiling Milena Chlebek. She was dressed in a windbreaker and blue jeans and was working in the front yard of her Edison Park home, sweeping the walkway. It was obvious by the way she mindlessly worked away, never once looking into the camera's direction, that Milena didn't know she was being surveilled. The video seemed so benign—a sturdy woman in her late sixties sweeping a sidewalk—and yet, Pies knew instantly what it meant.

Milena's life was being threatened.

Visually speaking, it was not a very exciting video to watch, but the point was clear.

The Chicago Outfit, who Pies had worked indirectly with before his incarceration and who certainly were responsible for the video, were correct in their assumption that Milena meant a great deal to him. He could never allow her to be harmed by the mobsters. She was an innocent. As loose as Pies's moral code had become over the years, it still always called for innocents to be protected whenever possible. He couldn't allow for another one of his mistakes to cost an undeserving someone his or her life.

The humorless CO Chandler said, "Your friend from Oak Park

will be in touch.” He then slipped the phone into Pies’s front pants pocket, and before he backed away, he tossed a phone charger on top of the cell’s bunk.

Pies understood that he was leaving prison for certain. He couldn’t cause trouble and delay his release. If he didn’t cooperate, Milena would be killed. The Chicago Outfit would see to that.

So now, an hour after the CO gave him the phone, dressed in the too-tight gray suit, Pies continued to pace within the holding cell.

He paced—and anxiously awaited his future.

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THERE WAS a bunk in the Stateville holding cell where he had spent his last eighteen hours in prison, but Pies couldn’t make himself lie down. He didn’t want to risk allowing the restorative benefits of sleep to permit him to reevaluate his duty. It was a must that his primary task be completed. It had to be done today. He’d find Milena Chlebek at her bakery on Northwest Highway, and he would apologize to her for killing her daughter and tearing her family apart.

His goal was set.

With quickly depleting adrenaline levels, the groggy Pies barely managed to appear unaffected by exhaustion as he stumbled and dodged other downtown Chicago pedestrians on Canal Street. He quick stepped, as best he could, away from the Amtrak station and in the direction of the Ogilvie Transportation Center, where he’d catch a Northwest Metra commuter train to Edison Park.

Soon, he’d be face-to-face with Milena.

Earlier, as he was riding the Amtrak train from Joliet to Chicago, he contemplated his other major concern outside of making his apology—how to keep Milena safe and free of the Outfit’s sway.

First, he would have to carefully ferret out the new mob underboss and see what he wanted. A higher-up may have called for Pies to be sprung from prison, but in Pies’s experiences with the Outfit, it would be an underboss running whatever show they wanted him for.

And as fatigued and as surly as Pies felt, he had enough of his wits left to consider taking a major risk once the Outfit made their plans known to him. Deep down he knew the mobsters would never truly be “done” with him. If he agreed to one job, he’d be obligated to do them all from here on out—until his usefulness was depleted. At that point he’d become expendable, and most likely he would end up dead.

The coming few days would be a precarious high-wire act for the newly paroled Pies. And, these would be nearly sleepless nights, for certain.

He wondered if he should work it so that the new Outfit underboss would go the way of the last one. Pies could make it so the victim wouldn’t even see his demise coming. He’d done it before with the use of some simple items—household repair parts and shotgun shells—all of which could easily be picked up at nearly any hardware and sporting good stores. It wouldn’t be difficult to set up.

Some of the criminal cohorts who Pies had operated with in the past made the fatal error of repeatedly underestimating him. Nearly all of those men were moldering now.

Perhaps, after he apologized to Milena, he could quickly get her to a safe place. Maybe they’d go to Wisconsin? He recalled a trip the Chlebeks took him and Vicki on to lift his spirits after his mother died all those years ago. The excursion lasted for only two nights, but the outing allowed the young Pies to see some natural beauty for a change, after experiencing the brutal end days of his mother’s life. The location was in Delavan, a place not too far from Chicago. Maybe an hour or so drive. Pies and Milena could stay out of sight long enough to work on a better plan to get farther away from the Outfit. Permanently.

Another thought immediately fired in Pies’s mind. He could always circle back from dropping Milena off in Wisconsin, find where the Outfit underboss lived, and kill him before he did any work at all for the man. If Pies died in the commission of setting Milena free, so be it. She would be okay. His debt would be paid.

An hour later, seated on the Metra commuter train to Edison Park, Pies read through the release packet he was handed as he left the Stateville Correctional Center. He was assigned to a halfway house located on Bryn Mawr Avenue near Oleander Avenue, in the Norwood Park neighborhood on the Far Northwest Side. He would have to report to the halfway house by 6 P.M. that day, and he would also have to meet a parole officer on Belmont Avenue soon.

Naturally, he was placed under some strict parole guidelines. The documents that he scoured were riddled with boilerplate material: can’t associate with known current parolees, can’t possess a firearm or a dangerous weapon, can’t drink alcohol or partake in any illegal stimulants, and can’t be peripherally involved in such activities. He must adhere to the rules set forth by the halfway house where he’d be residing, and he was required to treat the supervisor and residents there with respect. He would have to immediately obtain a legal paying job and keep on a strict non-felonious trajectory. The document went on and on. If he didn’t obey the rules for the next few years or if he was arrested for any reason, he’d find himself back in Stateville doing the remainder of his time.

Of course, that’s exactly what Pies wanted, but since Milena’s life was being threatened, he was on a new mission to stay free—for now, anyway.

As the outbound Metra train slowly rolled away from its fifth stop, Pies reclined in his seat and slipped the smartphone from the side pocket of his backpack and brought it to life. He located the contacts file on the phone’s display and opened it. There was only one name and phone number on the programmed list. Pies figured that this singular contact name and number most likely connected to another burner phone like the one he held in his hand. Pies smirked sadly as he noticed the name the Outfit chose for the phone contact.

One word: Mother.

“We are now approaching Edison Park. Edison Park is the next stop,” said the barely audible, automated voice over the train’s scratchy-sounding PA system.

Pies slid the phone back into its hiding place, slung the backpack over his shoulder, got to his feet, and shuffled down the center aisle. He pulled the sliding interior double doors open and went into the train car's vestibule. This was an outbound train operating in the early afternoon off-hours, and he was the only one exiting that particular car. He peered out the grime-smattered door window as the train slowed and saw the familiar low-slung commercial and residential buildings of Edison Park slip past, right to left. It was years since he'd seen his old neighborhood, and he was pleasantly surprised that nothing had really changed.

The train came to a smooth stop, the doors hissed opened, and Pies stepped from the car. He kept his head down and awaited the train's departure. Once the train rolled on, he would cross the tracks and go directly to Chlebeks' Bakery on Northwest Highway. It was only a block and a half away.

But then a thought came to him. He spun on his heel, walked around the fence that surrounded the train station's platform area, and crossed through the tiny park that bordered the tracks.

The Chlebeks' family home was less than two hundred feet away, and Pies wanted to see it up close before he went to the bakeshop where he knew Milena would be. Throughout his lifetime, Pies never knew of a regular workday when Milena Chlebek would be anywhere but her bakery. She would have, most likely, hired a trained baking professional to keep the quality of their goods intact, but she'd be at the bakery running the place, Pies was sure of it. Back before he was sent away, he remembered that master baker Blaze Chlebek would always arrive at the shop at 3 A.M., and Milena would show up by 5 A.M. to get the front of the house ready for their customers to arrive at six.

Pies could see the Chlebeks' humble brick house the moment his shoes hit the patchy grass of the park. He slowed his pace and tried his best to enjoy the view of the pretty little neighborhood, the shade trees, and the well-maintained homes bordering the park.

He approached a park bench, where a couple who looked to be in

their forties sat enjoying the day. Pies smiled and nodded. "Hi, how are you today?" he said to them.

Both the man and woman nearly smiled back, but then the man recognized Pies and nudged the woman. The woman gave the man an odd look, but then she, too, recognized Pies. Fearful, the couple stood and walked in the opposite direction.

Pies cleared his throat and kept walking.

He got to the sidewalk in front of the Chlebeks' home, and he silently observed the structure. He had no intention of getting any closer.

The house appeared slightly different from the last time he viewed it. It wasn't dramatic, but Pies noticed immediately that the paint on the soffit was peeling, and the gutter on the left side hung lower than the right due to a series of fastener failures. The shrubs in front were dead—brown and withered. Pies began to wonder why Milena hadn't maintained her home, especially since he had secretly given her and her husband Blaze a backpack containing \$300,000 before he turned himself in to the police. What became of the money? Maybe she tossed it away once she figured out that the neat bundles of \$100s were from him.

He backed away from the home and headed toward Northwest Highway, as he originally had intended.

Within minutes he'd be face-to-face with Milena. Perhaps he would ask her what she had done with the \$300,000 he'd given her. As soon as that thought passed through his mind, he wiped it away. It was none of his business.

Pies walked across the Metra tracks, and he paused for a moment at the alley opening that led to the exterior, backside door for the apartment where Vicki used to reside above the bakery—and where Pies violently ended her life. Anxiety-induced perspiration sprouted along his hairline, but he forced himself to push forward.

He was seconds away from Milena.

It would be all done with soon.

Vicki's mother would either accept or reject his sincere apology.