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Opening extract from

American Savage

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APERITIF

Titus Savage waited for his tenant to answer the door with one eye on the alligator.

He had spotted it as soon as he climbed out of his pickup truck. The creature was basking on the lawn that fronted the apartment complex. It hadn't moved when he approached the building and made his presence known. Even so, Titus knew that it was watching him closely.

'Does nobody read the signs?' he muttered to himself, wondering what was taking the guy so long.

It was the barbeque area around the back that attracted the reptiles. The smell of charring meat led them to crawl out of the waterway that bordered the property. Normally, they would watch from the undergrowth and wait for everyone to leave before seeing what they could scavenge. What made them a regular feature in the grounds lately was the fact that one or two idiots had decided it would be fun to toss them chicken bones. OK, so the gators around here were only a couple of feet long. They weren't as big or aggressive as the ones found upriver. Those beasts would strike at a splash. Still, they possessed a killer instinct, and that deserved respect.

Shaking his head at what he faced here, Titus made a mental note to call the wildlife removal company. It would be another cost at his expense, of course, and that only served to sour his mood when his tenant finally appeared behind the fly screen.

'You?' growled the guy in question, a bulky-looking man who sounded like he hadn't used his voice all day. 'You can't beat at the door making out you're a cop. I got rights!'

From inside the apartment, Titus could hear a television chat show coming through an impressive-sounding speaker system. His tenant was registered in the contract as Harvey Gulcher. He had come to the door in his vest and boxers, and was clearly irritated. This came as no surprise to Titus, who had attempted to reach him on his cell phone on several occasions. It was kind of rude, he thought, seeing as the man had been at home each time he called and was clearly just pretending not to be there. Titus knew this for sure as he had been discreetly watching him from his pickup throughout the past few days. Pretending to be a policeman on his porch had seemed like a sure-fire way to get Harvey's attention. No doubt it broke some law, but it was nothing compared to what Titus had in store.

'I've come about the rent,' he told Harvey, his voice calm and friendly. 'It's been two weeks now. I'm sad that you've gone quiet on me.'

Titus knew that in a certain light, with his bald dome and broad shoulders, he could appear somewhat formidable. His blue eyes had a hardened and penetrating quality, which is why he reminded himself to keep blinking and beaming.

'I've had cash-flow issues,' reasoned Harvey, which Titus knew to be true. Earlier in the week, he had been parked in

the street waiting for the man to return from the grocery store when the delivery truck pulled up with the home entertainment system. Titus had even used the master key to let them leave the box in the hallway, and what thanks had he received in return?

'I appreciate times are tough,' said Titus with a smile that tightened. 'But I have to feed my family.'

From behind the screen, Harvey casually bit at his thumbnail cuticle as if to indicate that his landlord would have to do much better than that. Titus judged the man's body mass index to be close to thirty. No doubt Harvey considered himself to be bearlike or chunky. According to the numbers, however, he had arrived in the realm of the obese. In his late twenties, Harvey was a contract computer hardware technician with no significant others in his life. Titus tended to favour individuals such as this when it came to renting out his single-occupancy apartments. In total, he owned seven in the same complex. It was his father who had once joked that what his son had here was a battery farm, but Titus failed to see the funny side. His tenants were free to come and go as they pleased, and could count on him as a responsible and courteous property management agent. As long as they kept to the terms of their agreement, and were polite if they called him out for maintenance and repair tasks, chances were they'd live long and fulfilling lives.

'I wouldn't stick around out there,' warned Harvey just then, who had briefly switched his attention to the gator on the lawn. Titus turned to see that the beast had crept towards him by a couple of feet. He looked back at the tenant, who grinned at him. 'You don't want to end up as lunch.'

'So, may I come in to discuss the situation?'

Harvey considered Titus through the screen for a moment longer, the TV still blaring, before scratching at his chest and opening the door.

'The last thing I want is bloodshed on my doorstep,' he grumbled. 'Let's make it quick.'

'Oh, I intend to.' Titus was already reaching for his back pocket as Harvey led him through to the living room.

Like most of the tenants so carefully vetted by Titus before he handed over the keys, Harvey wasn't the kind of person who liked to socialise. One glance at the unwashed socks on the hallway floor assured Titus that the guy hadn't entertained in quite a while. As for the speakers sitting astride the widescreen TV, in Titus's opinion it was all too big for the space. Still, he gave it only a brief glance before stepping up behind Harvey and looping the wire garrotte around his neck. Harvey gasped in surprise, but even as his hands snapped upwards it was too late to escape from the clutches of his landlord. Just as Titus had promised, pulling tight upon the handles, he didn't take up too much of the man's time. In fact, it would've been over for him much sooner had Titus's son picked another moment to call.

'*Am I too late?*' was the first thing Ivan asked, once Titus had managed to pinch the cell phone between his ear and his shoulder. It was a struggle to hold onto the garrotte with one hand as he did so, but he could never ignore the boy's ringtone. It was the same if any other member of his family called. Whenever they tried to reach him, it never went to answer machine.

'Ivan, you were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago,'

grunted Titus, as the man struggling in his clutches finally sank to the floor. 'This apprenticeship is never going to work if you can't keep good time.'

The silence down the line was in contrast to the sound of strangled gargling as saliva collected in the dying man's throat. It provided Titus with just enough time to assure his victim that his memory would be treated with respect in the same way as his body. Then it was all over for Harvey as a tenant, and just the beginning of his journey to the table.

'*Something came up, Dad*,' said Ivan eventually. '*But I promise I'll be home in time for supper*.'

FIRST COURSE

1

As a precaution, the Savage family ate with the blinds closed.

In the dining room, as the tea lights began to expire, the dessert stage was proving to be quite a trial. There was no problem with the way the food tasted. It was the sheer volume that challenged their stomach capacity.

'That's me done,' said Ivan, who pushed his plate away. The boy had been unusually quiet since returning home from high school, and so this declaration of defeat drew attention from around the table. 'I'm stuffed,' he added, sitting back with his hands pressed to his T-shirt.

Seated across from him, behind the carcass on the roasting tray and the remains from previous courses that surrounded it, a gamine young woman peered across at him.

'I'm not surprised,' she said under her breath, but just loud enough to be heard by everyone. 'All that finger food earlier.'

'So? I was hungry!' At fifteen, but with an intensity that exceeded his years, Ivan levelled his gaze over the leftovers. 'Anyway, who put you in charge? You're not even a *Savage*.'

'That's enough!' The man at one end of the table glared at his son. Titus had opted not to push Ivan for an explanation as

to why he'd failed to show at the apartment complex. The kid had a lot on at school. Everyone knew that. Even so, as head of the household, Titus Savage made no exceptions when it came to bad manners at the table. 'Amanda is one of us now,' he said, switching his gaze to their lodger, 'if not in name then in heart and soul.'

Amanda kept her hair cropped elegantly, which highlighted both her angular face and striking self-confidence. Titus was disappointed to find her smirking into her plate, but chose not to pursue it. In a way, Amanda simply filled the space vacated by their eldest daughter. With Sasha in her first year at university, wisely studying criminology and forensic science, Titus was pleased that every seat around the table was still taken. Inevitably, such a thought drew his attention to the centenarian sitting alongside him. At 103, it was a miracle that his father Oleg was still here at all. Titus observed the old man draw his dessert through a straw. He did so with a slurp, the thick fluid rising towards lips concealed by a long, white, whiskery beard, and then sighed with satisfaction. Through Titus's eyes, a meal like this was what invigorated them all. It was, he felt sure, the secret behind such a long and eventful life.

'If there are scraps left on Ivan's plate,' Oleg said, having run a tongue across his gums to clean them, 'just put it all through the blender and I'll finish up for him.'

Ivan and Amanda exchanged a look, each wrinkling their noses, which Titus didn't approve of one little bit. This was a feast, after all – a special occasion, with no place for bickering or disrespect. Everyone knew full well the lengths involved in laying on such a spread. As ever, sourcing the main ingredient

had fallen to Titus, as did the entrapment and slaughter. It was a shame that Ivan hadn't been there to assist him and learn on this occasion, but the real hard work – the magic, even – was down to one bewitching and very talented woman. Extending his gaze to the far end of the table, Titus observed his dear wife clearing her bowl. Even Angelica's apple pie tasted like no other. It was the shortcrust pastry that he savoured most, made with lard that she had rendered herself from the meat joints. Yes, you could buy a more conventional kind of thing in the stores, but it didn't come close in taste or satisfaction. For the Savage family, there was no substitute.

'Yet again, you've triumphed,' Titus told her, and prepared to find space for one more mouthful.

'It's all for you.'

She rarely smiled, his wife, and yet Titus could judge her mood just by gazing into her eyes. Right now, Angelica looked quietly satisfied that she had delivered another unforgettable spread. Titus lifted the spoon to his mouth. Sensing his shirt pull tight across his belly as he did so, the slightest hint of self-loathing soured the mouthful. There was no denying that he had put on a few pounds lately. Ever since the family had moved here, in fact, he found himself climbing onto the scales with a heavy heart, but what could he do about it? He had always taken pride in locally sourcing food for their feasts, and it was inevitable that the meat from these parts would carry a little extra fat. There also tended to be a lot more of it on the bone, and the Savages never left anything to waste.

Titus was as surprised as everyone else when his meal repeated on him. Just as he swallowed the last mouthful of

pie, the noise commanded everyone's attention.

'Pardon *me*!' he declared, much to the delight of the youngest family member. Little Katya giggled at her father, looking like a princess in her plastic tiara and dressing-up gown.

'You belched,' she said, in an accent that sounded more naturalised by the day. 'Daddy belched.'

'We say "burped", honey pie,' her mother stressed to correct her. 'Don't be vulgar.'

As everyone settled back to finishing their food, Titus observed his wife once more. Since their arrival, Angelica had embraced the gym, and how that showed in her figure! She was naturally slim, with a swan-like neck on poised shoulders, but had come to possess a lean and firm quality in her physique. Unlike Titus, she could enjoy a feast without piling on the pounds. Even the younger ones could get away with it, but not him. Still, Titus had more pressing concerns, and all of them were gathered at the table before him. This was his calling, and what a great source of pride it was to him. Looking around at his brood, he felt much better about the situation. If he could no longer look down naked and see his kneecaps then so be it.

Family came first, after all, no matter what got in the way.

2

As a culinary concept, cannibalism was not something Titus expected to break into the mainstream any time soon.

People didn't know what they were missing, in his opinion, but the practice was just too tied up in taboos to be something the general populace would embrace. For one thing, everyone still clung to an outdated concept of what it all involved. That kind of human meat eater, with a bone through his nose, a dance for the rain gods and an appetite for missionaries, well, it belonged to the history books. It was a damn shame, Titus believed. In a day and age when everyone fretted about the quality of the meat that went into their mouths, unknowingly gobbling up horse and Lord knows what else in their ready meals, here was a source of nourishment that wasn't just fresh but free-range and in bountiful supply. With a little groundwork, you knew exactly where it had come from and what condition it was in before it arrived in the kitchen. As for the moral considerations, it was perfectly possible to select someone for the table who basically deserved nothing less. Even when the purpose of their existence left a lot to be desired, Titus always set out to ensure the kill was humane. Harvey was

a classic example. Causing the man to fear for his life for a prolonged period wasn't kind. It would also result in a surge of adrenaline – a hormonal rush that only tainted the taste of the meat.

Tonight's dinner had taken some preparation. In transforming his tenant into a tasty treat, every step of the process had required care and attention from Titus and his family. As he had hoped to show his son, had football not kept Ivan from the kill, the flavour always improved through hanging the carcass for a short time. With the air conditioning in the apartment switched off, it allowed the bodily enzymes to break down quickly along with the evaporation of excess moisture. So, as Titus owned the place, he had permitted Harvey to remain there a while longer – strapped by his ankles from the roof joist. Then, as the gases that bloated the body worked their way free, and just before the smell threatened to upset the neighbours, Titus had enlisted Ivan to help move him out at dusk. It was a start for the boy, he believed, though there was still a long way to go. Later, in the family kitchen, and with great pride and expectation, he had watched his wife transform the corpse into a spread of culinary delights. There was something just so incomparably life-affirming about the consumption of your own kind. It was like a fuel injection into the bloodstream. A supercharging of the soul. Once you'd tasted such a thing, there could be no going back.

To eat a feast was a treat, but the Savage family could not afford to leave a trace behind. Fortunately, Titus had selected a food source where people often took off without a sign. In the rental sector, tenants were forever defaulting and then

disappearing with their belongings. So as long as he continued to take on the kind of recluse who wouldn't be much missed – which tended to boil down to bachelors from the IT sector – he always had a door to knock upon whenever the occasion for a feast arose. As a result of such diligence, all that remained of Harvey after they'd eaten was the paperwork, as well as the odd juice speck upon the table. So, once everyone had finished their meal, and before Titus retired to his study, the washing-up operation commenced. Everything needed to be scrubbed and sterilised, from the crockery and cutlery to the kitchen surfaces and the cooking equipment, including the oven and the extractor fan over the hob. It was a deep clean that took care of everything from drops of grease right down to the DNA. It demanded patience and commitment, which is why Angelica was quick to suggest that Ivan should be the one to escort Oleg back to his home.

'But why?' asked Ivan. 'His mobility scooter is outside.'

'Because you're his grandson,' she told him, mindful that the old man was in earshot – not that he heard a great deal nowadays – 'and it's the right thing to do.'

Angelica tightened her lips as Ivan shrugged and turned to fetch his baseball cap. There was no doubt that he'd become a little sullen lately. Then again, it came as little surprise from a boy of his age. Angelica supposed she should be grateful that she didn't have a teenage son smoking weed in the back seat of a stolen car. Instead, he spent a great deal of his time at home and never missed a meal. Nevertheless, she didn't take kindly to the attitude.

'Ivan,' said Titus, who had witnessed the exchange, 'what

do you say to your mother?'

The boy slotted his cap on, bill facing backwards, and seemed confused about his response for a moment.

'Oh, yeah,' he said finally. 'Thanks for cooking, Mum. It was a good one.'

'It was *spectacular*,' said Oleg, as Titus helped the old man to his feet. 'At my age I have to assume it might be my last, but I enjoyed every mouthful.'

'That's good to hear.' Angelica stepped back to let Amanda cross between them with the plates. 'You'll always have a place at our table.'

'And no doubt there'll be many more feasts to come,' said Titus, before escorting Oleg across the tiled floor. Prompted by a nod from his father, Ivan opened the front door. With all the blinds still closed, the intense sunshine that flooded inside was in marked contrast to the gloom in which they'd dined. Oleg followed his grandson outside, squinting as he peered up at the sky.

'It's a shame we can never dine *al fresco*,' he observed. 'A barbeque would be wonderful.'

'Think of the breeze,' Titus cautioned, and then gestured with his eyes at the neighbouring villas.

In his lifelong experience as a modern-day consumer of human beings, Titus Savage had made few mistakes. He was a conscientious hunter, always going to great lengths to cover his tracks. Only once had the family's appetite for people been uncovered, which is why they'd had to leave England in a hurry three years earlier.

Naturally, Titus had planned for this eventuality. To overcome the arrest warrants, he'd had fake passports prepared for everyone. As Amanda was not a suspect at that time, having only dined with them as a guest on that one fateful occasion, she was free to flee under her own identity, before joining the family at a later date. Wanted for the murder and consumption of a man, and possibly many others, Titus was well aware that only another planet could provide a safe haven. It was a notion that prompted him to think hard about where the family should relocate. In hindsight, Panama had been a mistake. The kids just complained about the humidity and erratic internet access, which is when he had set his sights on Jupiter. It would seem like light years away from their former lives in London, as he pitched it to them all, but not as alien as they first feared. When Titus had unfolded a map of America and explained that Jupiter was in fact a sleepy coastal town in the country's Sunshine State, he just knew that this was a golden opportunity for the Savages to start afresh and thrive.

'Four hundred years ago,' Titus had said, in a bid to seal the deal, 'the earliest English settlers arrived on the country's shores at Jamestown. Only the promised land was a little short on something central to their survival.'

'Videogames?' Ivan had suggested.

'Food,' his father pressed on, having pretended not to hear. 'So, as the cruellest of winters set in, those poor souls were forced to dig up the corpses of the fallen and eat them just to stay alive. We're talking about America's ancestral heritage here. They might not feast on human flesh any more, but it's in their genes! In my view, that makes it our spiritual home.

We can live among these people and instinctively nobody will suspect anything out of the ordinary.'

'As long as the climate is good where we're going,' Angelica had said. 'Warm, with good shopping.'

A northernmost suburb of Miami, divided by a broad water inlet and shot through with creeks, Jupiter was a world away from the skyscrapers way down in Florida's most famous metropolis. Unlike the outgoing spirit of the city, the people of Jupiter liked to keep themselves to themselves. With a waterside villa in a sought-after spur community, and false documentation that completely severed all links with their former existence, the Savage family were no exception. Every residence on the loop road was screened by careful landscaping, and featured private jetties out back to make the most of the tidal waters. It was a quiet, affluent but uneventful pocket of the county where palm trees sliced up the skyline everywhere you looked, pelicans roosted on porches and the rise and fall of the sun set the sky ablaze. Outsiders often said that the town's attractive, clean and tidy appearance was just a front that hid the more desperate aspects of life. You only had to venture behind the local parade of stores, where freshly watered flower baskets hung from the awnings, to find vagabonds and crack addicts in the shadows of the alley. In many ways, this tendency to pretend that bad things didn't happen suited the Savages just fine.

'People only see what they want to around here,' Titus once told his son on a drive across town. 'That's what helps us blend in.'

They had just passed a traffic accident of some description,

marked by hastily erected screens and all the cops who waved them on. From the passenger seat, Ivan had strained for a better glimpse.

'If only that was true,' he had muttered to himself on facing the front once more.

For a centenarian like Oleg Savage, Jupiter's pleasant climate and peaceful neighbourhood offered a new lease of life. The regular feasts helped, of course, but by and large the old man felt at home here. He had settled in nicely, drawing no attention to himself, just like his son and daughter-in-law. As for the grandkids, while little Katya had practically grown up native, it was Ivan who continued to stick out, despite his best efforts. Just then, as the boy accompanied his grandfather home, Oleg was forced to slow his mobility scooter to a crawl just to stay level with him.

'My dad,' asked Ivan, who walked with a pained-looking swagger as if he had some eggs in the seat of his pants and was trying not to break them, 'was he always this controlling?'

Oleg looked across at the boy, with his clip-on sunglasses flipped down and the scooter whining. He didn't think it helped that Ivan had belted his shorts so they hung around his thighs. Another inch lower and the boy risked falling flat on his face.

'Your father does the best he can under difficult circumstances,' he told him. 'You should only ever think of him as caring.'

A moment later, a car with tinted windows crawled along the road. Rap blared from the speakers. Ivan looked nervous. As it passed, he flinched behind his grandfather's scooter.

'Will you relax?' said Oleg, shaking his head. 'This is hardly a gangland.'

Ivan turned to check that the car had really gone.

'I wasn't scared,' he said, sounding thoroughly unconvincing. 'A Savage isn't scared of anything!'

As the boy resumed his swagger along the road, leaving his grandfather behind this time, Oleg reached for the accelerator dial on his scooter. With safety in mind, Titus had applied a strip of tape to indicate that the old man should never exceed half-speed. Just then, Oleg barely turned the dial by a notch before he found himself closing in on his grandson once more.

'It's quite a walk you have there,' he observed finally. 'I'm guessing it doesn't come naturally.'

Ivan glanced over his shoulder at the family elder humming along just behind him. Oleg was wearing a flannel shirt tucked into his slacks, while the old man's mirrored shades offered the boy a clear picture of himself.

'It's got to be done,' he told his grandfather. 'This is the U S of A.'

Oleg thought better of telling Ivan that his centre of gravity looked all wrong. It seemed to him like he had an invisible thread affixed between his shoulder blades, tugging on him as he moved. He also opted not to inform the boy that someone had penned the words 'kick me' across the back of his shirt. He'd find out for himself as soon as he took it off, which had to be marginally less humiliating than having it pointed out by his grandfather. Instead, as they approached the junction that led from the inlet community to the main road, the old man wondered what he could do to help him integrate better.

'How is school?' he asked.

'The same,' said Ivan.

What with the shirt, Oleg took this to mean that after all this time the boy had yet to make any friends.

'Your mum says you've joined the football team,' he pressed on, looking for a bright side. 'That's great news. What position do you play?'

'Bench,' said Ivan.

Oleg appeared baffled by the response, but chose not to pursue it. If anything, he had to admire him for taking up the national sport. For Ivan wasn't involved in the kind of football that used jumpers for goalposts, as it did in Oleg's day. This was American football – a completely different ball game with rules that flummoxed the old man. He just hoped the lad's young mind made it easy for him to embrace.

'Well, bench sounds promising,' he told his grandson regardless. 'It's certainly a start.'

As he trundled across the junction, with Ivan still strutting awkwardly alongside him, Oleg focused on the sign on the lawn for the whitewashed complex up ahead. When the Savages first moved to Jupiter, it had been his idea to move to the Fallen Pine Nursing Home. At Oleg's time of life, it was just easier all round. The home had lovely staff, with no stairs for him to negotiate, while the company of other people also in their winter years came as a comfort to him. With his son's family just around the corner and a place at the table whenever a feast was served, the home suited his needs in every way. In fact, when one occupant passed on in the room across the corridor, and another one moved in, Oleg had encountered a

renewed zest – one that he believed he had left behind in his teenage years. Negotiating the ramp towards the main doors, he looked across at the window to the communal room and saw her sitting there, as she always did when he was out, waiting in the sunny spot for his return.

'Priscilla looks pleased to see you,' noted Ivan.

Oleg Savage nudged the scooter into the park position on the porch. 'That's my girl,' he said, with a wink in the old lady's direction, and then began the slow, painful process of dismounting from his steed.

3

'Now, be good,' said Angelica, as she hung Katya's coat on her pre-school peg. 'No biting other children today, understood?'

'OK, Mommy.'

'Promise?'

The little girl looked up with an air of such innocence and purity that Angelica found it hard to accept that she had now been warned twice for leaving tooth marks in her classmates. On the last occasion, the indentation was close to going beyond play that had got out of hand. Angelica had been forced to put on quite a performance to appease the teacher, and really didn't relish the prospect of being called in again.

'I promise not to taste them any more, Mommy,' Katya replied.

'Good girl,' said Angelica. 'And it's pronounced "muh-mi",' she added. 'As I keep telling you.'

Katya nodded, and then puckered her lips with her eyes scrunched in readiness for her traditional kiss goodbye. She really was a sweetheart, as Titus kept repeating to anyone who would listen, with honey-coloured ringlets spilling over her shoulders, shining blue eyes and a little mouth in the shape

of a perfect bow. Angelica watched her skipping off into the busy playground, and quietly hoped she really did recognise that friends should not be considered food.

When the family had first arrived in Jupiter, baby Kat was still crawling and knew just a handful of words. She had since spent more than half her life here, and so it came as no surprise to her parents that she should sound so naturalised. Angelica was careful that she didn't go too far, though she herself had come to love life in Florida. If the family didn't already possess false documentation to support their citizenship, Angelica would've been first in the application queue. Yes, Ivan still nursed some issues settling in, but she felt sure that in time he would fall into the American way.

Driving out to the gym with the top down, this toned, tanned mother and housewife relished the warm breeze on her face and gave no thought whatsoever to her former life. Jupiter offered the family everything, and that included a plentiful supply of people that nobody missed whenever the time arose for a feast. Maybe it was the year-round sunshine that had brought out the best in her, for Angelica had come to complement her love of cooking with a passion for keeping fit. In particular, she liked to train in the open air, and so her mood got even better on pulling into the gym car park, where her personal trainer was busy stretching his hamstrings.

'Good morning, Joaquín,' she said, on killing the engine. 'I hope you're not going to push me too far today.'

The young man awaiting her arrival was dressed in a vest that exposed his broad shoulder blades and running shorts accentuating his tight waist. His wavy black hair was waxed

back to the nape of his neck, while Angelica often joked that she could strike a match on his stubble. Joaquín Mendez was a twenty-one-year-old Argentinian with strong beliefs. The cross around his neck symbolised his deep religious commitment, while the absence of trainers on his feet marked his passion for the soulful art of barefoot running.

'If I didn't push you, Mrs Savage,' he said, in his rich South American accent, 'I would not be doing my job to the best of my abilities.'

Angelica climbed out of the open-top and shut the driver's door while facing him. 'My husband hates to see people suffer,' she said. 'You're so different from him in lots of ways.'

Titus Savage had arrived early at the apartment in order to prepare the place for a new occupant. With a viewing lined up that morning, he needed it to be clean, tidy and smelling of fresh coffee rather than the corpse he had recently allowed to mature in the front room.

Sitting in the kitchenette, having flung open the windows, he found himself thinking ahead to lunch. No doubt Angelica would bring something nice back from the deli, as she always did after a workout. Some bagels, perhaps, or the sourdough bread that he liked so much – especially when it was still warm from the baker's oven. You couldn't live on human flesh alone. Like any diet, it was important to keep things healthy and balanced. He dwelled on this over the large latte he had picked up on the way over. With the plastic travel lid in place designed for sipping on the move but which never seemed to work, it was inevitable that he'd slop several drops onto his

tropical shirt. Peering down at the wet spots where his stomach sloped outwards, Titus was reminded that one aspect of his eating habits really needed to be addressed.

'This must be what they call a midriff crisis,' he half joked with himself. It wasn't that long ago when a spilled drink like this would've had a clear drop to the floor. Nowadays, Titus often found he had to brush crumbs from his belly. Setting the latte on the kitchen counter, he hopped off the stool and stretched. Then, out of curiosity, he attempted to touch his toes, but got no further than his upper thighs. Standing tall once more, he shook his head and sighed. 'You've let yourself go,' he declared, addressing his reflection in the oven door. 'What are you? A Savage or a slob?'

Titus felt a tinge of shame. As head of the family, especially one with such a noble tradition to uphold, was it not essential that he led them like a warrior? He took a long look at himself in the darkened glass and then let his shoulders sag. As a second-generation Russian, born in the UK but with the pride of the motherland in his heart, blood and bones, what had happened to him out here? Florida was a wonderful place to be in lots of ways, but the temptations had taken their toll. Titus only had to look at so many of the citizens to know what was responsible for his increasing weight. There was no denying that such fatty food had caught up with him. Despite what he faced in the glass, however, Titus couldn't allow himself to go to seed like this. Angelica had taken steps to look after herself, and Amanda seemed able to eat pretty much anything without putting on weight, but that wasn't the point. Take his son, Ivan. The boy looked up to him, and a father who broke a sweat while

carving wasn't setting much of an example. Titus resolved to do something about it. For one thing, he told himself, there was no need to drive to the apartment complex as he had just now. It was a short walk from the Savage residence, just three blocks beyond his father's nursing home. The next time he came out here, he decided, the keys to the pickup would stay in the villa.

It was the sound of the door buzzer that prompted Titus to stop gazing disapprovingly at his stomach. He glanced at his watch. The potential tenant was precisely on time, which was impressive. Turning to answer the call, he hoped this meant he would be renting to someone who wouldn't cross him for a while. For Titus resolved just then that he needed to get in trim before the family could enjoy another feast.

4

Amanda Dias had a particular taste in men. The slight but determined twenty-one-year-old could look back on a healthy number of dates since arriving in Florida. None of them had ended well, however. The guys who asked her out came from all walks of life. What they all lacked was the backbone to develop a relationship with a girl who had such strong views about food. Amanda didn't chew them up in the physical sense. That aspect of her diet wasn't something she'd ever share. Still, each one was quickly forced to recognise that they were dining with someone who possessed uncompromising convictions.

'Have you chosen?' she asked the young man sitting opposite her that lunchtime while consulting the menu in her hands. 'I like the sound of the corn and blueberry salad.'

Only recently, Amanda had been forced to cut short an evening out when the junior lifeguard on her arm had spotted a burger joint on their way back from the pictures and declared himself to be ravenous. On this occasion, Amanda had cautiously accepted an invitation to a beachside bistro overlooking the breakers because the chef was known to do fabulous things with seasonal fruit. Unlike the lifeguard, whose

idea of making an effort went no further than a red vest, surf shorts and flip-flops, the young fund manager who had invited her here had dressed carefully for their date. With a jumper arranged casually over his shoulders and a pastel polo shirt, Nate Dunlop looked both confident and relaxed as he folded his menu and beamed at his date.

'There's only one choice for me,' he said. 'The tuna with avocado and kiwi salsa.'

Amanda Dias flattened her lips, trying hard not to look crushingly disappointed. She'd had such high hopes, after all. Nate had first struck up a conversation with her under a hotel awning during an unexpected tropical storm, and then hailed her a cab home when the downpour worsened. This date had been something she'd been looking forward to, and now it was ruined.

'The salsa sounds good,' she said with a sigh, and considered her menu once more. 'The tuna not so much.'

'You don't eat fish?' Nate sipped at his mineral water.

'I play no part in the rape of the oceans.'

Coughing only slightly as he swallowed, Nate set down his glass.

'OK, so maybe I won't have the fish.'

'How about the meat?' Amanda looked over the top of the menu, her eyes narrowing.

Nate looked like he really could do with moistening his mouth with another slug from his glass.

'I sense I may be about to give you the wrong answer.' He offered a nervous smile. 'What can I say? I'm a sucker for a steak.'

The blinds behind Nate were set to counter the glare of the

sun. When Amanda sat back in her seat to fully assess her date, it caused harsh bars of light and shadow to cut across her face.

'There is *no* justification for eating defenceless animals in any shape or form,' she declared. 'The same goes for the fish.'

'I see,' said Nate, who had begun to look a little amused. 'A vegetarian, right?'

'Vegan,' she told him proudly. 'I don't do half measures.'

Nate responded by breaking into a broad smile. Amanda knew that would vanish if she revealed just how much further down the culinary road she had travelled with her surrogate family. A chance encounter with the Savages at the table had marked the beginning of her journey from a university undergraduate who rejected all animal-based products to the young woman she had become with an appetite for people. Instead of being horrified at the sight of a family consuming a human being, Amanda considered it a revelation. This was the ultimate in progressive eating, she had concluded. Nobody was preying on another species, but simply turning on their own kind in an overpopulated and resource-starved world. In her mind, dining on human flesh in no way contradicted her beliefs. In between feasts, she continued to pursue a way of life that spared all animal suffering. As for people, they perpetrated so many crimes against the creatures of the earth that this occasional, secret indulgence was her way of biting back.

'You know what?' Nate said next. 'You strike me as quite a man eater.'

Amanda cocked one eyebrow. A rare glimmer of amusement played across her face.

'That's very observant of you,' she replied. 'So, I'm

disappointed that you can't see beyond the prospect of a juicy T-bone and recognise the suffering behind it.'

'Don't you ever give up?' Nate addressed her with some exasperation, only to raise his hands as if to apologise. 'OK,' he said, now grasping for a conversation beyond the tense small talk they had shared so far. 'Convince me.'

'Really?' Amanda emerged from the shadows and leaned in on her elbows. It wasn't just the sun on her face that brightened her expression. 'Very well,' she began. 'Imagine if the meat eaters were presented with a choice.'

'I'd say medium,' said Nate. 'Rare can be risky and anything more is overcooked.'

'I'm talking about the choice between life and death,' she pressed on, quietly irritated by the interruption. 'One day the grazers will rise against your kind for the centuries of misery and bloodletting you have brought upon the animal kingdom. Time is running out, Nate. We are gathering in number, massing in ranks and becoming radicalised in the face of so much cruelty and suffering just so people like you can be served cheap cuts of meat. Well, enough is enough,' she added, and banged her fist on the table. 'A food revolution is in the air, and come that day you'll know how it feels to be hunted, scared and *butchered with your heart still beating!*'

Nate Dunlop had listened with growing alarm to what sounded like a murderous manifesto – one that had started calmly but ended with people at the neighbouring tables turning to see what had possessed this young lady now glaring balefully at him. He glanced around, drumming his fingers on the table as he did so.

'Well, it was nice meeting you,' he said finally, and rose prematurely to his feet.

Amanda sighed to herself. 'Not again,' she muttered, following him with her eyes.

Nate fished his wallet from his pocket. He dropped twenty bucks on the table for the drinks.

'It's not you,' he told her, 'it's me.'

'Really?'

'If I was half as crazy as you,' he said, with some irritation in his voice, 'then perhaps we'd be close to having a connection.'

It was only as Nate took his man bag by the strap from the back of his chair that she met his gaze for a moment.

'Paying for the drinks won't spare you,' she told him.

Nate glared back at her. Then a hint of pity came into his eyes.

'Listen, you're a nice girl,' he told her, before slinging his bag over his shoulder, 'but all this talk is nuts.'

With that, he left Amanda facing the chair. A moment later, she twisted around to see him easing through the throng towards the door.

'Hey!' she called out angrily, which caused yet more heads to turn. 'There's nothing wrong with nuts!'

Ivan Savage returned to his position on the bench and sat hunched over in his shoulder pads. With his cheeks flushed, and his hair in a tangle having just popped off his helmet, he willed himself to stay calm. After-school football practice had begun over an hour ago. So far, he'd been given three opportunities on the pitch. Each one had lasted no more than a minute before the coach opted to take him off again.

'It's for your own safety,' he told the boy. 'Even with protective gear, you're in danger of sustaining a head injury.'

'Give me a chance, boss. It's all I ask.'

'Ivan, you're playing with big boys here. Yes, it's a game, but it's not a *game*. There's a difference.'

Reflecting on the exchange, Ivan sat there with his helmet in his hands, as if it was a skull in need of crushing.

'Damn them all,' he muttered, with his own team in mind. 'Those guys should just learn to pass properly.'

Was it his fault that his teammates deliberately hurled the ball at him, knowing he lacked their handling skills? OK, so he was smaller and slighter than the other players out there, but nobody gave him a chance, and that included the coach. Ivan could barely break into a trot without being whistled off and placed on water-boy duties. Then there was the opposition. Just what was the point of slamming him to the ground like that? It was asking for payback. The boy sat there, stewing, and tried to take his mind off things by making another stab at understanding how the hell this game was supposed to be played.

If only Ivan could get his head around the rules. American football remained his perfect path to being accepted at high school. It was the country's national sport, after all. Embracing it as an outsider would earn him lasting friendships, or so he had believed at first. Nobody at school knew Ivan's true origins, of course. His father had ensured that their cover story was foolproof. Even so, he had expected his classmates to show a little more willingness to engage, rather than teasing him about his accent and calling him an oddball. Ivan had arrived at school eager to integrate as he knew best. Unfortunately,

unspeakably sick jokes and magic tricks involving pins and razor blades that tended to result in minor injuries for his volunteers failed to bring him respect, admiration or friendship. Instead, it had earned him several visits to the high-school principal's office. On calling in the boy's parents, and tabling the prospect of expulsion, he had been assured by Titus and Angelica that Ivan was simply a determined soul. Everything he had done, despite being misguided, was driven by his need for acceptance. That's when the principal had suggested that a team sport might be the way forward, with no concept whatsoever that as the school years progressed it would be his undoing.

'C'mon, coach,' Ivan grumbled, as the man in the Miami Dolphins jersey gravitated up and down the touchline. 'Give me a break here!'

'I can't do that,' the coach replied, with his back to the boy. 'It would be negligent on my part.'

'But how am I going to learn?' pleaded Ivan. 'All I do is sit here for session after session!'

The coach turned, looking pained.

'Ivan, I understand your frustration and appreciate your enthusiasm, but why don't you think about a non-contact sport? Something solo, perhaps, like . . . distance running.'

Ivan listened to his coach's advice, while quietly assessing the cords in the man's neck. He looked kind of chewy in the boy's opinion, which wasn't all bad with the right cooking technique. A stew, perhaps, or cooked with chopped onion, jalapeño peppers and spices for a tasty burrito filling.

'I'm good at football,' he said after a moment. 'You need me on side, coach. You just don't know it yet.'