

# A MANGO FOR THE VICEROY

BY JOE HILAND



The rec room buzzed with sated snores and the drone of daytime television. Mia paused in the doorway and let her eyes adjust to the darkness of the room. Nine men lounged in reclining chairs, slippered feet pointed up at the ceiling. The elastic waistbands of their pajama pants expanded and contracted with each mammoth breath.

The Viceroy alone was awake. He sat at a small table near the window with several decks of cards fanned out in front of him in a scheme of solitaire Mia had never seen before. The Viceroy appeared uninterested in his game. He watched rain slap against the windowpane, his expression calm but not quite serene; his lips were set too firmly together for a man at peace with his surroundings.

The Viceroy was the only resident of the Nottingham Home for Recovering Autocrats whom Mia regarded as handsome. He was taller than the rest—lithe and elegant in his movements—with the rich complexion of burnished cherry wood. Most of the residents were round and soft from years of banquets and booze. They were old bulls content to graze away their twilight years. But the Viceroy was still solidly within his virile middle age. His hair was dark and frosted with perfect shades of gray at the temples, and he eschewed the mustaches and goatees favored by the other autocrats.

Every resident was issued a standard wardrobe of casual attire—khaki pants and polo shirts and such—but the Viceroy was the only autocrat who bothered to change each morning. Today he wore a blue-checked Oxford shirt and navy blue pants with a brown leather belt that matched his loafers.

“Did you have a good breakfast, Hank?”

“You stared at me before you came over here.” The Viceroy didn’t turn from the rain when he spoke.

“Did I?”

“You did. I saw your reflection in the window.”

“I didn’t mean to stare,” said Mia. She sat down across from him. “I’m worried about you, Hank.”



"My name isn't Hank."

His real name was an elegant heirloom passed down from his paternal grandfather, lilting and strong like the tides of his island home. But each resident was given a new name when he entered Nottingham. And the thin man's new name was Hank.

"That's the name Dr. N wants us to call you," said Mia.

He turned to face her for the first time. His eyes were glassy from the sedatives, and his voice was rocky. "That man put cream in my coffee."

"I know he did."

"I hate cream in my coffee."

"I know you do," said Mia. She pulled a small jar from her pocket and set it on the table. "I brought you Spanish olives."

"Olives don't interest me anymore."

The Viceroy moved two cards then stared at his game.

"Dr. N told me you had saltines and carrot sticks for breakfast," she said.

"Very observant, the doctor."

A burst of phlegmy coughs tore through the television's white noise, followed by a hoarse Slavic curse. The Balkan Chancellor lurched out of his recliner, smacked his chest with the palm of his hand, and hacked until tears ran down his red cheeks. Several residents stirred in their slumbers, but none seemed to notice their comrade's distress.

The soldier standing guard outside stuck his head through the doorway but made no move to save the choking man. He clamped down on his blue helmet with both hands, as if he feared the Chancellor's coughs might blow it from his head.

Mia raced across the rec room and positioned herself behind the Chancellor. She tried to perform the Heimlich, but her arms—long though they were—couldn't encompass the autocrat's girth. He wheezed a pathetic curse, and Mia felt panic sinking in.

"Allow me," said a calm voice beside her.

She stepped aside and watched the Viceroy deftly embrace the Balkan Chancellor from behind and give him one emphatic squeeze, which sent a butterscotch candy skipping across the rec room rug.

The Chancellor coughed a few more times, then wiped the tears from his face. He gave the Viceroy a stately handshake, then turned to Mia.

"My throat is hurting," he said. "I would like some pudding. Chocolate."

"Sven," Mia said over her shoulder, and she heard the soldier's boots click together as he stood at attention. "Please escort Kevin to the cafeteria so he can have some chocolate pudding."

"I'm Jan," said the soldier. "Sven has the day off."

"Sorry, Jan. Kevin needs pudding."

"I should call for backup," said the soldier. "I can't leave you alone with the rest of them, Ms. Foster."

"So you don't need backup when a resident is choking? But if he wants chocolate pudding it's time to call in the cavalry?"

"The United Nations did not supply us with horses."

"Christopher Columbus!"

Profanity was forbidden around the residents, and Mia had adopted the explorer's name as her favorite expletive after hearing the Man Who Ruled a Desert shout it angrily at Alex Trebek.

"Look at them," Mia said and pointed to the residents in their recliners. Those who hadn't slept through the Chancellor's choking were watching Mia and the soldier with the same glazed looks they aimed at soap operas. "I'm perfectly safe. Take Kevin to the cafeteria, get him his pudding, and come right back."

The soldier hesitated, surveyed the catatonic men in their pajamas, then led the Balkan Chancellor out of the rec room.

The Viceroy took his seat at the solitaire table. Mia followed but didn't sit down. The rain outside was slower and less violent, though still steady.

"No more olives?"



"No more olives," said the Viceroy. He swept the cards up and shuffled, his long fingers dancing with an easy grace

"You need to eat," said Mia. "How can I help you eat?"

The Viceroy began dealing to himself and sighed. "You could give me something worth eating."

"The cooks will make you anything you want. Just ask. You can have whatever you want."

"Untrue."

"What wouldn't they make for you?"

"The cooks never refuse me anything," said the Viceroy. "They practically throw food at me."

That was Mia's fault. She had instructed the cafeteria staff to drop cinnamon rolls and scoops of macaroni on the Viceroy's tray, whether he asked for the food or not.

"Then what's the problem, Hank?" The Viceroy's eyelids drooped at the name, but Mia continued. "What do you want to eat that we're not giving you?"

"A mango." He said the word with a breathless longing that left Mia cold and suddenly sad. "A mango," he said again.

"That's it? I'll order you a whole crate of mangoes. You can have mango three meals a day. Mango smoothies, mango ice cream, mango pie. Do people make mango pie? Doesn't matter. You eat the mangoes however you like. In fact, I'll send someone to the store right now to get you mangoes. You'll be eating mango for lunch."

"That all sounds lovely," said the Viceroy. "Even the mango pie, which I've never had but would happily try. Yes, all quite lovely. And all quite impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Mangoes are forbidden."

"Says who?"

"Says Dr. N. I asked for a mango my first day here, before you arrived. He refused. The doctor was quite adamant. He called mangoes my Arbitrary Prohibition."

"Shit." The word escaped her mouth like air from a burst balloon.

The Viceroy raised an eyebrow and smiled, clearly pleased with her unfettered profanity.

"Christopher Columbus!"

Mia was hired as Resident Dietician two months after the Nottingham Home for Recovering Autocrats opened. Most of the staff had been working with Dr. N for years—lobbying foreign governments, securing grants, identifying and extraditing potential residents. Even the U.N. guards had been vetted a full year ahead of time.

Mia hadn't applied for her job. She was freelancing in Chicago, making enough to get by, when Dr. N sent her an unexpected email. She hadn't heard from him in more than a decade and assumed he was still teaching. He wasn't. He told her he had an unusual problem that she was, perhaps, uniquely qualified to solve. He offered a six-figure salary, and she found someone to sublet her apartment.

The final exam for Professor Nottingham's Philosophy of Imprisonment was unlike any Mia had ever taken. She prepared in her usual manner, waiting until the night before to flip through her class notes and skim over articles she should have read months before. She slept two hours and arrived early with a bluebook and a large, sugary coffee.

The professor was a neat man with impeccably parted gray hair and a penchant for boisterous bowties. On the day of the final he wore a peach-polka-dotted number that clashed with his green corduroy jacket in the most endearing way. He was friendly, if a bit stiff. He had a reputation as a hard grader, and Mia wasn't alone in wondering if she would pass his class.

"You won't need your bluebooks," said Professor Nottingham. "Today's final will be a collective oral exam." He let a wave of confused murmurs pass through the lecture hall before he continued. "You



have two hours to debate, discuss, and answer a question that has troubled me for several weeks now. To be honest, it's kept me up at night. I don't expect you to offer a perfect solution, but I do expect a lively debate. If you can reach a consensus response before the exam period is over, you all get an A."

A student behind Mia raised his hand and asked why they had to answer the question together. Couldn't they fill out their bluebooks and let the professor decide which answers were best?

"A valid question," Professor Nottingham said and picked up a piece of chalk. "You must form a consensus because my particular inquiry is one which, I hope you'll agree, necessitates a democratic answer."

He wrote out his question in tall, clean print across the central chalkboard.

*What would a compassionate prison for Hitler look like?*

Then he took a seat on a wooden chair near the exit, crossed his legs, and told his students to proceed.

The class debated the virtues of solitary confinement and forced labor for half an hour, until Professor Nottingham stood, underlined compassionate, and returned to his seat. The lecture hall fell silent. A minute passed, punctuated only by a few muffled coughs.

Anxiety crept from Mia's stomach to her limbs, and her legs began to twitch. The prospect of failing Philosophy of Imprisonment was disconcerting enough; she didn't want to be part of an entire class of failures.

Mia didn't realize she'd been frantically clicking her pen until she looked around and saw everyone in the lecture hall staring at her. She silenced her pen, swallowed down the lump in her throat, and began speaking before she could stop herself.

"My grandma is in a retirement home, and I was just thinking how it's kind of like a prison." She hadn't been thinking this at all, but the truth of her

statement gave her a sudden jolt of confidence. "They make it so the old people in the home are comfortable, and it seems really great at first. My grandma plays pinochle and watches TV all day. They have sundae bars and Taco Tuesdays and stuff. But she can't do anything unless the nurses approve it first. She can't go out to the movies. She isn't even allowed to walk in the garden without a nurse nearby because they're afraid she'll break a hip, or something. And they feed her fifty pills a day. And last week she called me all upset because they wouldn't let her have this type of potpourri she likes in her room. And it's like, who cares what kind of potpourri she has in her own room, right? She'll be dead soon. Let her have whatever freaking potpourri she wants..."

Mia trailed off, saw the looks of confusion and unveiled irritation coming from her classmates, and started clicking her pen again. She stopped when the boy behind her reached over her shoulder to take the pen away. She folded her hands in front of her and looked up at Professor Nottingham.

To her surprise, the professor wasn't angry or exasperated. In fact, he looked almost serene as he stood and again took up the chalk. He began scribbling notes below his question. His handwriting was tighter, more frantic than before.

*Retirement Home*

*Comforts—Television, Food, etc.*

*Restricted Movements*

*Arbitrary Prohibitions*

"You should have told me about the mangoes."

Mia swept into Dr. N's office so quickly she didn't notice the other people in the room until she was halfway to the doctor's desk. She stopped short, an accusatory finger pointed in Dr. N's direction.

Colin, the Leisure Coordinator, stood next to the desk holding out a clipboard for Dr. N and Assistant Director Grünwald to view.

"I thought we had guards in this place," said Grünwald. She looked over Mia's shoulder and



yelled. "We cannot have unauthorized people bursting into offices!"

"Sorry," said a voice behind Mia. She turned to see a sheepish boy in a blue helmet hovering in the doorway. "I assumed she was part of the meeting."

"Assume nothing!"

"Relax, Rita," said Dr. N, though he hardly looked relaxed himself. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, and his drab gray tie hung in a fat, clumsy knot around his neck. The bare bulb on the ceiling reflected harshly off his sweaty head. "Why would he stop Mia? She's part of the staff." Grünwald scoffed, and the doctor continued. "In the future, however, she could knock before rushing into my office."

"Very rude to interrupt a meeting in progress," said Grünwald. She was a twitchy bird of a woman with an immaculate bun of white hair and pearl-studded spectacles. Her voice was incongruously deep and menacing.

"Sorry," said Mia.

"Well?" said Grünwald. "What is so important about mangoes that you must come crashing in here like a drunken donkey? Hmm? Speak up. The meeting has been interrupted, and it appears we cannot resume until you tell us this very important information about fruit. So?"

Mia felt foolish and exposed. The conviction that had spurred her march from the rec room to Dr. N's office disappeared.

"The Viceroy would like to eat mango," she said. She tried to control her voice, tried to sound calm and professional. "If we served mangoes he would..."

"Who is this Viceroy?" Grünwald interrupted. She held her palms up and looked from Mia to Dr. N. "I do not know any Viceroy."

"She means Hank," said Colin. "You know who she means." He was a former British Marine with a steel hip from the Falklands. He was also one of the few staff members who didn't resent Mia's late appearance at Nottingham. The others all seemed to think she hadn't earned her position.

"Of course I know who she means," said Grünwald. "But she should know protocol by now. We change the men's names for a reason. It's part of the rehabilitation process."

"I must agree with Rita on this point," said Dr. N. He pulled a platinum pen from his shirt pocket and held it poised in his fingers like a cigarette. "I don't understand why you can't simply call Hank, Hank."

"I guess he doesn't seem like a Hank to me." Mia had this problem with every resident's new name. She knew perfectly pleasant Hanks and Marvins and didn't want to spoil the names by tying them in her mind to tyrants.

Dr. N sighed. "I take it you're here to discuss Hank's Arbitrary Prohibition."

"Yes," said Mia. "Why didn't you tell me he couldn't have mangoes? I'm the Resident Dietician. That's important information to me."

"It's in his file," said Grünwald. "Didn't you read his file?"

Mia hesitated. She had skimmed over each resident's lengthy file her first day on the job and noted only the most important biographical details. Countries of origin, former titles. A few Arbitrary Prohibitions had stuck out to her. The Balkan Chancellor couldn't listen to Wagner. The People's Commissioner of Enlightenment wasn't allowed to wear red. She hadn't noticed Hank's.

"This is what I'm talking about," Grünwald said. "She hasn't even read the files."

"She's still catching up," said Colin. "Give her a break."

"There is no time for breaks," Grünwald replied. "The Committee will be here in two weeks."

"We all know when the Committee is coming, Rita," said Dr. N. "Let's focus on the issue at hand." He pointed his platinum pen at Mia. "You have a question about Hank's Arbitrary Prohibition?"

"Why mangoes?" asked Mia.

"It's arbitrary," said Dr. N. "There is no 'why.' He asked for them, and we denied him. Just like your grandmother and her potpourri."



"I think we should reconsider the Vice...Hank's... Arbitrary Prohibition."

"Out of the question," said Dr. N. "Arbitrary Prohibitions must be absolute. If we retract his, we'll have to retract everyone's. Then the whole system breaks down."

"I agree," said Grünwald. "Most emphatically, I agree. We cannot allow this girl to break the system."

"I'm not breaking the system," Mia said. "I'm part of the system. Hank needs to put on pounds before the Committee arrives." She felt a surge of the conviction that had carried her into the office. "And I'm thirty-three years old. I'm hardly a girl."

"You're hardly a dietician," said Grünwald. "But that doesn't stop everyone around here from calling you one."

"Rita!" Dr. N pointed his pen at the Assistant Director.

"She's not qualified to be here," Grünwald said. "Someone has to say it. We should have hired a dietician with experience in prisons. But no. You had to be sentimental. You had to hunt down a former student."

Dr. N slammed his platinum pen down on the desk, and it broke apart. The spring flew over his head and hit the window behind him. The ink cartridge slid across the desk and fell to the floor. Grünwald jumped in her seat, and Colin took a step toward Mia.

"I would like to speak with Assistant Director Grünwald. Alone," said Dr. N. His voice was steely, cold. "Colin, we can discuss the bumper pool table later. Mia, Arbitrary Prohibitions are absolute. End of discussion."

That night, after extended consultation with a bottle of chianti, Mia distilled her many professional hassles—Hank's fasting, Grünwald's contempt, the Committee's looming arrival—into

one manageable phrase: the Mango Problem. The beauty of the Mango Problem, she decided, was the simplicity of its solution.

She drove to work the next morning with the windows down, and her confidence grew as she approached the Nottingham Home for Recovering Autocrats. The grounds were mostly old-growth Indiana forest, and the home itself was a long, squat building of unassuming brick trimmed with short round shrubs and modest flowerbeds. Wrought-iron benches and humming bird feeders lined the courtyard. It was a warm, welcoming place, once you got past the barbed wire.

Mia parked and walked through the outer security gate, bidding a cheery *Good morning* to the young men standing guard in their blue helmets. She felt the satisfying crunch of the gravel walkway beneath her feet, and she swung her fat purse with gusto. It was heavier than usual, and the added weight lent an enjoyable pendular effect to her swinging.

"Good morning, Jan," she said as one of the glass front doors swung open before her.

"I'm Sven," said Sven. "Jan is guarding the kitchen."

"Sorry, Sven."

Mia hugged her purse against her side and started to step past him. The guard didn't budge. He spread his legs apart and puffed out his chest, filling the doorway with his Scandinavian bulk.

"Apologies, Ms. Foster," he said. "I must check your bag before I let you in."

"You've never checked my bag before. No one has."


"Those are my orders."

"Orders from whom?" asked Mia.

"From me, of course."

Grünwald's voice came from behind the soldier, but he was too wide and the lobby too dark for Mia to see her nemesis through the glass doors.



A wooden spoon stands vertically on a dark, textured surface. To its left, a dark bowl contains a red tomato and a yellow fruit, possibly a mango. The scene is dimly lit, with the spoon and fruit catching some light.

*“A mango.”*  
*He said the word with a*  
*breathless longing that*  
*left Mia cold and*  
*suddenly sad.*



Mia took a step back. "This is ridiculous," she said. "I need to get to the cafeteria. I need to be there for breakfast."

"I will tell you what you need," said Grünwald. "You need to open up that bag and show us what you have inside." She poked her head around Sven's torso and glared at Mia. "Or is there something in there you would rather we not see?"

Mia stiffened, and a smile crept over Grünwald's lips. They stared each another down for several moments before Mia decided the best way to defy Grünwald was by showing no fear.

"Have a look." Mia opened her purse and held it high in front of her, right under Sven's nose. Grünwald strained to look inside the purse, but she was too short.

"Well, soldier? Does she have a mango in there?"

"No, Assistant Director Grünwald," said Sven. "She has two mangoes in here."

Dr. N gave Mia probation. Actually, it was more of an ultimatum.

"The Committee will be here in thirteen days. If Hank is not five pounds heavier when they arrive, I'll expect your resignation."

"Forget resignations," said Grünwald. "Forget thirteen days. I say we fire her now."

"That's not your decision, Rita."

Grünwald snorted but said nothing. After marching Mia to Dr. N's office and dropping the contraband mangoes on his desk, she had taken a position behind the doctor's right shoulder. Sun streamed through the window and gave her a deceptively angelic aura. Mia had to squint to look her in the eye.

"I could quit right now," said Mia. "I could walk away whenever I want. I'm not a prisoner. I could leave you with a malnourished Viceroy." Dr. N and Grünwald both grimaced. "Explain that to the Committee."

"One of out ten is not bad," said Grünwald.

"Ninety percent success rate."

"I mean it," said Mia. "I'll quit."

"Go ahead. We don't need you."

"Please, ladies," said Dr. N. He tapped the broken halves of his platinum pen together to make a meek, tinny sound. "The Committee will be here in thirteen days."

"Precisely," said Grünwald. "We cannot waste any more time with this...dietician. If she quits, I say let her. If she doesn't quit, I say fire her. Either way, problem solved."

"I'm not quitting."

Even with the sun in her eyes, Mia could see Grünwald's irritation, and she felt the giddy rush of defiance that had made her drive to work so cheerful.

"Five pounds in thirteen days," said Dr. N.

"Let's make it seven," she said.

The Viceroy took four carrot sticks and two cups of coffee from the serving line at lunch. He sat alone at a sunny window table and watched the others attack heaping trays of sloppy joes and mashed potatoes, fried mozzarella sticks and marshmallow-infused gelatin bricks.

Mia got a club sandwich, pretzels, and a diet cola. She exchanged a few pleasant words about the weather with the Supreme Oligarch, then crossed the cafeteria and sat down across from the Viceroy.

"If you're trying to entice me with that food you made a poor choice," he said. "I'm a pescetarian."

"That mean you don't eat bacon, Hank?" Mia took a hearty bite of her sandwich and chewed with relish.

"Among other things. Did you happen to speak with Dr. N about my Arbitrary Prohibition?"

Mia nodded, chewed.

"I take it mangoes are still verboten, then?"

Mia shrugged, sipped her soda, swallowed.

"You can have a mango in two weeks."

"Two weeks?" The Viceroy took a large gulp of



coffee. "I can have a mango when the Committee is here?"

"How do you know about the Committee?"

"Everyone knows about the Committee's visit," said the Viceroy. "You sedate us, you don't deafen us." He drank more coffee. "So Dr. N will give me a mango when the Committee arrives?"

"No, Dr. N won't give you a mango. Ever. And if he sees you with one, he'll certainly take it away."

The Viceroy glanced around the cafeteria, first at the other autocrats, then at the cooks in the serving line, and finally at the soldiers posted beside the door. He leaned across his tray and dropped his voice.

"Are we talking about rebellion, Ms. Foster? A coup d'état?"

"I'll bring you a mango," she said, leaning across her own tray and jabbing half her club sandwich at the Viceroy to emphasize her point. "I'll bring you a mango every single day until...well, whenever. But you have to gain nine pounds before the Committee arrives. You have to eat more than carrot sticks."

"Rebellion *and* extortion," said the Viceroy. "You're finally becoming interesting, Ms. Foster."

"Just doing my job," Mia said. She pulled a slice of bacon from her sandwich and bit it in half.

The Viceroy lifted his mug to his lips, hesitated, then let a deep, exhausted sigh escape from his chest. It was a gesture of hard-earned surrender. He reached across the table and grabbed a handful of pretzels from her tray.

The Viceroy put on five pounds in less than a week. He still wouldn't touch the sugary cereals and processed cheeses adored by the other autocrats, but he showed a fondness for organic peanut butter and vegan muffins. Mia asked him what foods he missed most from his island home, then had the cooks order three whole swordfish and a case of pineapples.

Dr. N grew more relaxed with each passing day.

He sported an old orange bowtie and took to carrying a simple Bic in his pocket. One morning he stopped Mia on her way to the cafeteria and reminisced about Philosophy of Imprisonment.

"You kids sure earned that A," he said.

Grünwald, on the other hand, grew more venomous as the Viceroy grew more voluminous. During staff meetings she refused to address Mia directly, referring to her always in the third person, using only her title, never her name. "Despite the Dietician's unsolicited advice," she would say, "we will maintain Hank's sedatives at their current levels." Or, "Although the Dietician apparently works by a different set of rules, the rest of us need to show up for our shifts on time."

The Assistant Director's ire was, Mia found, more satisfying than Dr. N's frequent praise. Each malicious encounter with Grünwald left her fortified with a sweet, spiteful pride. This was a revelation for Mia, who had never before thought of herself as a vindictive person.

As the Committee's arrival drew nearer, however, Mia found herself less inclined to gloat. The Viceroy's progress was heartening, for sure, but each pound he packed on brought the central weakness of her solution to the Mango Problem into sharper relief. Namely, she had no idea how to sneak a mango past Grünwald and her guards every single day until...well, whenever.

The more she pondered this obstacle, the more appealing reneging on the deal became. After all, what could the Viceroy do if she didn't make good on her end of the bargain? To whom could he appeal? These questions left her feeling guilty, but oddly giddy. She felt like a different person when she thought about betraying his trust, and this new Mia was strong and alluring.

The Viceroy continued gaining weight, and Mia's resolve hardened. She would double-cross the Viceroy, plain and simple. She was, after all, only doing her job.



Three days before the Committee's arrival, Dr. N decided the residents needed some sun. He wanted them looking chipper and healthy when the Committee came, and a good jolt of vitamin D was just what the doctor ordered.

So Colin drove into town and returned with a carful of kites. He solicited Mia's help, and they led the autocrats outside after lunch instead of into the rec room. Four guards followed them onto the lawn and formed a loose, wide perimeter around the group. Mia and Colin unwound strings and launched kites into the air.

The Balkan Chancellor proved to be an adept pilot. He sent his kite dipping and soaring in a series of impressive aerial acrobatics. The other autocrats laughed when his kite took an inadvertent turn into the limbs of a beech tree and one of the U.N. soldiers had to climb up after it. The day was breezy and bright, and their bathrobes blew gaily in the wind.

Mia stood apart from the group and watched the Viceroy. He was fitter, happier, more sociable. He mingled with the other residents, though he stood out from them with his neat clothes and polished demeanor. The sinking weight of guilt tugged at Mia's chest.

"How are you going to pull it off?"

She jumped and spun around to find Colin standing at her shoulder.

He held up his hands. "Didn't mean to frighten you," he said. "I'm just curious is all."

"Curious about what?"

"Your plan."

"My plan?"

Colin eyed the guards scattered across the lawn, then cupped his hands and yelled toward the autocrats. "Keep your string taut, Jeremy. Otherwise you're bound to crash that bugger." He stepped ever so slightly closer to Mia. "I'm wondering how you're planning on smuggling mangoes into this place indefinitely. I could see

you pulling a fast one over the guards once or twice, but to do it every single day, well, you'd need a real plan for that."

Mia looked at her feet, then back across the lawn at the Viceroy. "I'm not smuggling any mangoes."

"Relax," said Colin. "I know all about the deal you made with him. Grünwald had me slip a nano mic under his shirt collar. He's wearing it now, doesn't have a clue."

"Christopher Columbus!"

"Don't worry. Grünwald only hears what I want her to hear."

"And why wouldn't you want her to hear about our deal?"

"Truth be told," said Colin. "I feel sorry for old Hank."

"Why? The Vice...Hank is here for a reason, just like the rest of them."

"Do you know what a viceroy is?"

"It's another title men give themselves to feel important," Mia said. "Like sheikh or shah or president." She squinted up at the squadron of kites.

"That's not quite right," said Colin. "You really haven't read Hank's file, have you?"

"I've been busy."

"A viceroy," Colin continued, "is someone who rules in another person's stead. Hank there ruled his archipelago while his uncle was receiving leukemia treatments in the States. He was in charge for a month or two, when suddenly an American company found a deposit of this rare ore on one of his islands. Can't remember what the mineral is called, but they use it to make smartphone batteries."

"And what?" asked Mia. "The Viceroy let the company dig up the island to make their smartphone batteries, and the people got pissed and threw Hank out of office?"

"On the contrary," said Colin. "Hank refused to sign over mining rights to the company. A week



later, the streets were filled with well-armed men in uniforms nobody recognized. Hank sent out his army to meet the strangers, people got killed. Soon after that, Hank's uncle returned, thanked him for keeping the seat warm, and tossed him in jail."

"You're saying he doesn't belong here?"

"I'm saying he deserves a little compassion, is all."

"Is this a trap?" asked Mia. "If you're working for Grünwald and trying to trick me into smuggling mangoes, you have to tell me. Otherwise, it's entrapment."

"You're thinking of the police," Colin said. "I'm under no such obligation."

"Then how do I know I can trust you?"

"Because," said Colin. "I'll be the one doing the smuggling."

Finally, the day arrived. The Committee would be there at noon, and Dr. N couldn't have been more pleased. The Viceroy had gained almost eleven pounds. He still ate his meals alone and shunned the rec room television, but the Committee would find no fault with his physique. His face was fuller, more regal. The faint outline of a paunch could be seen beneath his ironed Oxford shirt.

Mia greeted the Viceroy at breakfast and gave the scrambled eggs and wheat toast on his tray an approving nod.

"You're looking healthy, Hank."

"I feel like a Christmas goose," said the Viceroy. He stabbed a hunk of egg with his fork and frowned. "But I'm sure I'll feel better once I get some vitamin C in my system. Which reminds me..."

He gave Mia a hungry, expectant look, and she felt suddenly like a drug dealer.

"I don't have it on me," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper. "You'll get it later."

"How much later?"

"After the Committee leaves, everything should calm down," she said. "The guards will be relaxed. Then I can give you your mango."

The truth was, she didn't have a mango at all. She hadn't yet seen Colin that morning. The previous day he had assured her his plan was foolproof, though he refused to share any details. It was best, he had said, if she didn't know how Hank's mango arrived in the home.

The Viceroy set his fork down on his plate and crossed his hands on the table. "You're lying to me."

"I'm not," said Mia, unconvinced by the tone of her own voice. "You'll have to trust me."

"I've trusted you for two weeks," the Viceroy said. "Now I want my mango."

"If you just wait until..."

The Viceroy stood and picked up his tray. "I'll be in the rec room. I hope my vitamin C deficiency doesn't take a turn for the worse. Who knows what shape I might be in when the Committee arrives?"

Mia cut through the lobby on her way to Colin's office and found her path blocked by a cadre of soldiers with brooms and sponges. They bustled to and fro around the booming epicenter of Grünwald, who ordered them to sweep harder, scrub faster. The Assistant Director caught sight of Mia and let out a frightening bellow. The sweeping and scrubbing stopped, and the lobby fell silent.

"You stay out of sight when the Committee arrives, Dietician," Grünwald said, spittle flying from her lips with the last word.

"I have a job to do," said Mia.

"Your job today is to stay out of the way. The Committee does not need to know your name. They do not need to hear you speak. They do not need to know you exist at all."

"I fixed Hank," Mia said. "They need to hear about that."

"Dr. N and I will decide what the Committee needs to hear."

"Where is Dr. N? I need to talk..."

"Dr. N is preparing to receive the Committee. He does not have time for Dietician problems."



Mia badly wanted to spar. It would almost be worth trading barbs for an hour, she thought, just to know how painful the wasted time would be for Grünwald, each malicious remark bringing them closer to the Committee's arrival. Unfortunately, Mia had the same deadline as Grünwald.

She ducked her head and barreled down the hallway to Colin's office, leaving the Assistant Director to curse the assembled soldiers for leaving fingerprints on the glass front doors.

Colin's office was across the hall from the rec room. Most of the men were settling into their recliners, releasing elephantine belches, and adjusting their elastic waistbands. The Viceroy was seated at his solitaire table watching a late morning drizzle drift down on the grounds.

Mia turned to knock on Colin's door, but it opened before she could bring down her fist.

Dr. N looked as surprised to see her as she was to see him, and it took him a moment to remember to stand on his tiptoes before he spoke to her.

"I have discovered the true nature of Colin's soccer ball," he said and furrowed his brow.

Mia couldn't tell if he was angered or perplexed by this discovery.

"I like your new bowtie," she said and pointed at Dr. N's neck. The tie was black velvet, and so was his suit. He looked better equipped to drive a pack of teens to prom than to receive the Committee. "Very, um, authoritative," she said.

Dr. N stepped aside to clear the doorway. "Please come in," he said.

Colin's office was much nicer than Mia's. Hers was a converted storage room across from the head cook's office. His was a wood-paneled den with built-in bookshelves and tall windows looking out onto the rose garden.

Colin sat behind his desk with his arms crossed and an unreadable expression on his face. In front of him were two halves of a red and white soccer ball, and a single green mango the size of a large

man's fist.

"Why a soccer ball?" she asked.

"Seemed inconspicuous," Colin said. "And it's a football."

"We call it soccer here."

"I know what you call it," he said. "Doesn't mean I have to repeat your mistake."

"This is not the time for a semantic debate," said Dr. N. He motioned for Mia to take the seat opposite Colin but remained standing himself. "Ms. Foster, you have now twice sought to circumvent an Arbitrary Prohibition. Furthermore, it appears you have bribed a resident. Does that accurately sum up our situation here?"

"I was doing my job," said Mia. "You hired me to fatten up the Viceroy, and that's what I did."

Dr. N massaged his temples. "Please, Mia. Don't call him that when the Committee is here."

"Grünwald told me not to talk to the Committee."

"First good idea Rita has had in weeks," said Dr. N.

"Mia did get results, sir," said Colin. "There's no denying old Hank has filled out nicely."

"True," said Dr. N. He took in a long, slow breath and studied the mango on the desk. "He really ate all that food just for one mango?"

"Not exactly," said Mia. "He thinks he's getting a mango a day until..."

"Until when?"

"Whenever."

Dr. N picked up the mango, weighed it in his palm, and walked behind Colin to admire the rose garden. He tossed the mango gently from hand to hand.

"Is it safe to assume," said Dr. N, "that Hank will make a scene while the Committee is here if you don't give him this mango?"

"Probably," said Mia. "Hank seems awfully fond of that fruit." An impish impulse passed through her. What *would* the Viceroy do if she didn't produce the mango? What kind of a scene would he make?

"I never saw this mango," said Dr. N. He turned



from the window and dropped the mango into Colin's lap. He pointed to the desk. "And I never saw this unusual soccer ball."

"Football," said Colin, but Dr. N didn't seem to hear.

"Tomorrow Hank's Arbitrary Prohibition will be strictly enforced. As we all know, Arbitrary Prohibitions are absolute." Dr. N frowned at his watch, strode past Mia, and opened the office door. "If you'll excuse me, I must prepare to receive the Committee."

Mia entered the rec room with Colin's soccer ball tucked under her arm. It really was a clever bit of smuggling—an outer layer of red and white leather wrapped around a plastic shell that snapped together like an Easter egg.

"Hello, Jan," Mia said to the kid standing guard.

He smiled, pleased she had remembered his name. "You are a football fan, Ms. Foster?" he said.

"Just starting to get into the sport."

"Then I must show you some moves," said Jan. He readjusted his holstered taser gun, hitched up his cargo pants, and bounced on the balls of his feet. "Let me see the ball."

Mia stiffened and assumed her most commanding tone. "I hardly think this is the appropriate time for games, soldier. The Committee will be here soon."

Jan stood instantly at attention. "Of course," he said. "The Committee. Forgive me."

"Why don't you wait in the hallway and let me know as soon as you see the Committee headed this way?"

"My orders..."

"It wouldn't look very good if our residents were passed out drooling all over themselves when the Committee arrives, would it?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then please be my lookout," she said. "I'm going to liven the men up a bit."

As soon as Jan left, the Viceroy began clapping.

His applause was casual and steady, barely audible above the television and the snores of his fellow autocrats.

Mia took a slight bow, and the Viceroy gave her a stately nod of approval. He smiled broadly and stretched out his hands as she approached.

"You are a woman of your word," he said.

"I will be soon," said Mia. She took the seat across from the Viceroy and held the soccer ball on her lap.

The Viceroy's smile fell. "I explained the danger of my vitamin C deficiency."

"Relax," Mia said. "You'll get your mango before the Committee gets here."

"Why not now? The guard is gone. What better time than right now?"

"I don't want you eating the mango right now. I don't want you to be all sticky when the Committee arrives."

"Am I a child?"

Mia shrugged. "You know what you are."

"How do I know you actually have a mango inside that football?"

"You'll have to trust me."

"That phrase again."

Mia shrugged. She turned her gaze to the meager rain falling outside. The day was overcast but strangely bright. The lawn was lush and green, the forest thick and inviting beyond the barbed wire fence.

The Viceroy resumed his solitaire, snapping down cards with exaggerated precision. Minutes passed.

Mia felt strong and decisive. She had solved her Mango Problem. All that was left was to savor the look on Grünwald's face when she walked in and saw the Viceroy holding the one thing in the world he had been absolutely forbidden.

"The Committee approaches!" said Jan. He stood in the doorway and looked expectantly at Mia. Clearly, the kid needed an order.

"Turn around so you can greet the Committee



when they get here.”

This the soldier did at once, turning his back on her without question.

Mia placed the soccer ball on the table, gave it a half twist just as Colin had shown her, and opened it to reveal the mango inside.

“I’m a woman of my word,” said Mia.

The Viceroy used both hands to cup the mango and lift it from the halved soccer ball as if the fruit were some rare antiquity. He brought the mango to his face, inhaled its scent, and whispered, “I’ve done it.”

Mia screwed the soccer ball back together and was about to stand to meet the Committee, when the Viceroy sprang from his seat.

“I’ve done it!” he yelled.

He leapt across the room, scattering playing cards in his wake. He jabbed at the side of the television, and the screen went dead. He kicked the Balkan Chancellor’s feet.

“Awake, all of you. See what I’ve done!”

The slumbering autocrats stirred. They sat up in their recliners and rubbed sleep from their eyes. The Viceroy held the mango high above his head for all to see.

Mia was frozen in her seat. She saw understanding and admiration dawn on the autocrats’ faces, saw the Viceroy shake with sheer triumph. She saw Jan turn and reenter the room. She knew she should warn him. Now was the time to call for backup, the time to draw his taser. But Mia couldn’t push breath past her lips. Everything was beyond her control.

“Hank,” said Jan. The kid held out his hands in a gesture of peaceful appeasement. “Please calm down. The Committee...”

The mango hit poor Jan squarely on the nose, and he dropped to his knees. He looked over at Mia, his eyes wide with confusion, his face a mess of blood and mango juice.

The Man Who Ruled a Desert began the applause, echoed shortly by the Supreme Oligarch. Within moments, every recovering autocrat was clapping wildly. They rose to their feet, and the Viceroy took several courtly bows.

“My friends,” he said. “I know you never doubted me.”

“Gentlemen!” Grünwald roared from out in the hall. “What is the meaning of this racket? The Committee demands quiet as it conducts its inspection.”

The applause died as soon as the Assistant Director appeared in the doorway. The autocrats all turned and watched Grünwald as she surveyed the scene. She stiffened when she saw the bruised mango on the floor.

“Dietician!”

The autocrats erupted into a frenzied ovation. They saluted the Viceroy and shouted rallying cries in their native tongues. A few residents made obscene gestures at Grünwald, whose fury seemed to have paralyzed her. She could do nothing more than stare at the discarded mango and shake with rage.

Behind her, Dr. N stood dumbfounded.

Behind him, the many faces of the Committee swarmed to peer inside the rec room.

What would they make of this scene? The smashed fruit and bleeding soldier on the rug. The cheering tyrants in their bathrobes. The silent woman in the corner with a game of solitaire in disarray. ▣



