

Chapter 1

The River Stynx

After the world got rewritten, the Manhattan Free Zone became the most happening place on the planet. It was also the deadliest. On this particular sunny day, Clyf Davis was about to get a heapin' helpin' from both sides of the MFZ experience. But of course, he had no idea at all what was about to take place.

"And where are you going my brilliant Mozart-level pal on this seriously cold winter's morning?"

"Tom! Man, you are up early." Clyf answered with a big dose of friendly incredulity. "I figured you never got out of your coffin before late afternoon. Should I be worried?"

"C'mon man! Cut me some slack. This is my second week as manager of the Vanguard. I need to take care of BIZ!" Answered the thin man decked out in an incredibly out-of-place retro outfit.

Sporting a crisp white dress shirt with a skinny black tie, gold cuff links that were just visible at the opening of the sleeves of his vintage Navy peacoat, joined by tight dark gray slacks topped off by a pair of super-shiny black Beatle boots and gazing through square-rim Buddy Holly glasses, the new manager of The Village Vanguard was quite a sight at this time of day. The neat nostalgia effect was a bit hampered however by the man-bun knot on the top of his tightly pulled-back jet-black hair and the large aqua marine gemstone earrings that caught the early morning sunlight like cheap Christmas tree lights. The overall effect seemed to be saying: "Behold! I'm a little old school, a little serious business, and a pinch of cray-cray."

"Yeah. I imagine being the new boss at one of the world's last jazz clubs comes with a fair amount of pressure." Clyf offered as he reached in to give Tom Barrynger a full throttled soul handshake. "I'm off to catch an early morning ice breaker gondola to grab some breakfast at one of those cheap places in Little Venice. Since you seem to now be impervious to the vampire-killing effects of sunlight, you wanna join me?"

"I *wish* bruh," answered Tom with an emerald-ear twinkle. "I really need to get to the club to get things ready for tonight."

"Dude! It's 9:30 in the A of M!" Countered Clyf.

"Dig. But...nah man...I just can't! Hey, would you pick up a couple of those toasted vennis for me?"

"But of course, my brothah. One big ol' order of mini sausages wrapped in fried dough and slathered in mustard for the impresario formerly known as *Nosferatu*! Coming right up!" Said Clyf as he bent low to the ground with a flourish only to rise quickly up to his full height backing away while making the sign of The Cross. The *film noir* effect was highlighted by the clouds of cold winter voice-vapor coming out of their mouths as they spoke.

“Man. You are TOO much!” Tom laughed. “Hey, you bringing that new chart tonight?”

“Oh. Right!” Said Clyf in a slightly worried voice. “Absolutely!”

“I’m counting on you Clyf! We gotta big shot from The Denver Post coming out tonight to check us out.”

“A Looney from Sagan?”

“That’s right.”

“Dayum!”

“I know right?!”

“A’ight then,” said Clyf as he turned to go.

“See you tonight...”

...with that new chart!” Added Tom in closing.

Giving his pal an exaggerated salute while turning to walk over to the gondola dock, Clyf thought; *Guess I’d better finish that chart this afternoon.*

Most of the mom and pop shops and cheap restaurants that sprung up in Little Venice have big smartwalls that flash the latest news as well as ads. Not being able to rely solely on the good graces of hungry customers being leisurely poled around by gondolas, these industrious small business owners make their true living by selling ad time on their state-of-the-art real estate turned into 3D ad-space.

A few of the walls were tuned to the morning news provided by the People’s News Network (PNN) which was all the rage these days:

“Another murderous rampage in the MFZ this morning by the infamous street thug gang “The Night Crawlers. “Let’s go live to Greenwich Beach and our newsie on the scene Tif Wagner. ‘Sup Tif?”