



“Thanks for calling The Settlement. Radine here. What’s up?”

“And a pleasant evening to you, Nadine. Is your manager on the premises?”

“It’s Radine, with an R. Who’s calling?”

“Name is Dean Autry. I apologize for calling so late.”

“No problem. We’re open till four but only serve soda after two. No exceptions and yes, you need ID,” she recited.

“Truth be told, I’m requesting a work reference on CJ Singleton.”

“Yep, CJ’s one of ours, but the manager is tied up right now. I can take your number.”

“Perhaps you can assist me if you have a moment.”

“CJ better not be looking for a job. I’ll kill him. And if you’re trying to take him away, I’ll say horrible and nasty things about him.”

“Even if they’re not true?”

“That’s right. Don’t even think about taking CJ away from us.”

Dean chuckled. “I’ll only request him for a short amount of time. I assure you. So tell me, what’s your general opinion of CJ? I have to say I’m already sold on the lad but, tell me; how does he get on with others in the crew?”

“He runs the shows, but he works alone a lot, too. In here all night sometimes. That’s so creepy. I know he’s had gangsters try to slice him with stemware, and he’s had run-ins with knives. He’s a tough one, that CJ. He always walks away unharmed.”

“Well, that’s good to know I suppose, however, I’m not too interested in his—”

“Oh ... and one night, someone pulled a gun on him. We thought he was being robbed, but it was a jealous boyfriend.”

“Are there often conflicts between his work and the birds?”

“Birds?”

“Is he a ladies’ man?”

“Oh, *birds* ... that’s so funny. Actually it’s kinda the opposite. He’s kinda shy. From what I can tell, he doesn’t get too close to anyone. It took me a few years to get to know him. Personally, I think he’d rather fix old stereos than get to know people, but I guess I understand. He’s lost a lot of friends. Close friends. Then his girlfriend, Simone, died. He really clammed up after that.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but again, I’m trying to gather a feel for who he is,

professionally ... at his trade.”

“Let’s see. He’s tough but cool. Funny but dependable. Everyone trusts him. The ladies love him but he’s a mess—like, a clean mess, ’cause he always smells good—like, showered ... but still a mess. I wish he’d buy a mirror, or just use one once in a while. But then I’m into fashion, and *personally*, I love his scruffy brown hair. I straighten him up when he gets here. I can only imagine CJ in an Armani suit. That would be so hot.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Has he ever missed an appearance?”

“Appearance? He’s the soundman. He doesn’t do appearances. At least not here anyway.”

“I see. Let’s try this. Has he ever *not* arrived for a scheduled function?”

“Oh, no. Not CJ. Nope. Sometimes we can’t find him, but that’s usually when he’s crawling in between walls and floors. Says he’s running wires. I think he likes getting dirty.”

“Thank you, now. You’ve been most helpful.”

“Okay but you’ve been warned. Don’t take—”

“Good night, Nadine.”

“It’s *Radine*, with an R!”