

Half a Brother excerpt

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Valdur – with his impossible wingspan – reached into the taxi, all the way across the passenger seat, and put his hand on the Russian cabbie’s shoulder.

“Don’t!” I said, glancing at the traffic light, which had just turned green. “If he drives away, you’ll break your arm.” Behind my brother, I bent down and waved, hoping to defuse the situation with my vaguely Russian looks. I was boyish and gangly, not yet shaving daily like Valdur. But the cabbie only directed wide angry eyes at me, his jaw muscles tensing like he had marbles under his skin. The cars behind the taxi honked.

“Come on, man, give us a ride,” Valdur said, in his even, sunny tone. He always sounded the same, whether he was talking to our former social worker, Allison, or he was celebrating yet another of his personal bests for the Druid Park High School Terrapins basketball team. He had a voice like a man with a yacht, a man with no worries except for deciding how many hours to nap in the sun. “We have money,” Valdur told the cabbie, revealing the wad of bills in his other hand, money our mother had given us from the cash register of Karu International Food Mart, which she owned.

The cabbie responded the way all cabbies, store clerks, and restaurateurs responded to us, regardless of shoulder manhandling or Russian-ness – he pretended to be busy. He flipped on the “occupied” light and punched the gas, the engine roaring in a startling burst. And then he became a tiny toy cab on the horizon, or at least on the horizon of 22nd Street and the Baltimore sky, the shrinking sound of his music, the only evidence he’d been here.

Valdur, who had withdrawn his hand at the last second, lost his balance and now sat in the road, smiling. He shrugged. “I tried,” he said. I reached down to help him up, all seven feet of him. He was the only person I’d ever known who was taller than my own six feet and nine inches. And we were both still growing. I figured I might catch him because, even though our mother had started us in school the same year, he was ten and a half months older. Every night, I sneaked into the kitchen and polished off whatever milk was in the carton, and I ate my mother’s verivorst, her blood sausage. I thought tall thoughts.

Valdur bent over and brushed the road dust off of the dress slacks we had special ordered from Niedermeyer Big & Tall; they’d arrived yesterday, just in time, and they had cost a whole month of wages. Our mother had pinched and juggled the books so that she could pay us in advance for our usual job stocking shelves in the food mart in the evenings, after practice. Normally, we wore shorts or the Druid Park High track pants that Coach had gotten us after he realized we didn’t own pants. Now, Valdur licked his finger and rubbed at a dusty smear on his thigh. “Stupid as a table leg,” I told him. “We can’t get picked up by the police before we even make it to the interview.”

“Well what’s your idea, Malev?” he said, gesturing in an exasperated way toward the broken down number eighty-three MTA bus that still sat down the block.

“This town isn’t that big.”

“Yeah, but we are,” said Valdur. “And nobody’s going to stop for us.”

“You go and hide behind that dumpster. Maybe they’ll stop if there’s only one of us.”

“Why me? Why not you?”

A knot blossomed in my throat. “Well, it’s just...” I gestured to my own face and then I gestured to his.

Valdur's jaw went slack as if I'd punched him in the gut. It was the closest I'd ever come to saying that I was the one who could pass for white, while Valdur looked vaguely like a giant Dominican, with coffee-colored skin and soft curly hair that drifted away from his head as if he were in zero gravity. The truth was that we didn't know what we were. Our Estonian mother, blond and blue-eyed and six feet tall herself, wouldn't tell us. Whenever we asked who our father was, she only laughed and shrugged and said, "Old Nick," which was Estonian for "Santa Claus." Then she would push her reading glasses down and study us over the top of them, her pen hovering in the air over an inventory list. "It doesn't matter." Then she would do her imitation of *The Godfather*: "Capiche?"