

CORPSE AND ROBBERS by Stephen Kaminski

EXCERPT

Samir Orucov and his wife, Mitzy, operated Paul Bearer & Sons Funeral Home. Not that Mitzy did much other than drink champagne cocktails and lord over the aging home and its staff like a blitzed baroness. Christened “Leyla,” Mitzy was the daughter of a peasant farm worker and housewife in Azerbaijan. She was swept off her feet at the age of eighteen by the dashing young Samir, who whisked her to America with a devilish smile and the promise of opportunities abound. After short stints in Cape May—a beach town in New Jersey—and Wichita, the couple landed in Rusted Bonnet. Samir started out sweeping floors at Paul Bearer’s, worked his way up to the top spot—funeral director—and by the time old man Bearer retired, had saved enough money to slap down a down payment and take ownership of the non-denominational home. There were, in fact, no “sons” to assume the business.

Samir, a fifty-three-year-old Azerbaijani from Baku had grown up in a world very different from Mitzy’s bucolic childhood. From the age of eight, he slept on city streets with his older brother, Jalil, surviving off of poached farmer’s market fare. By twelve, Samir realized that Jalil—then sixteen and with more brawn than wits—didn’t have the chops to get them out of their cardboard box quarters behind a printer’s shop. So, Samir assumed the role of the brains behind the pair of brothers, and devised a set of confidence schemes. Within a year, he had them living in a rented room at the back of a brothel, and by the time he turned twenty, Samir and Jalil shared a penthouse on the coast overlooking the azure blue waters of the Caspian Sea.

But Samir fancied himself as a businessman rather than a con artist, and had an itch to see America. His plans to travel overseas were slowed when he spotted Leyla—then a fetching teen selling produce and fending off lecherous men behind her father’s stall in a downtown market. He took the time to court her properly, wooing her with rich silk dresses and expensive dinners. Within a year, they married and—over her father’s protests—hopped on a plane to the United States. Samir left Jalil

behind, armed with stacks of cash and a working knowledge of enough simple ruses to get by on his own.

Samir quickly learned that life as an immigrant was no picnic in the States. Nor was making a living aboveboard. After failing ventures in the wholesale carpet and kitchen cabinetry trades, he reverted to the deception profession. But New Jersey law enforcement didn't accept dollars the way Baku policemen greedily shoved banknotes into their pockets. So, the couple fled Cape May for Kansas, where Leyla tried her hand at hawking costume jewelry and Samir at peddling bags of livestock feed laden with healthy doses of sawdust. Neither was successful and after Samir spent twelve months in Leavenworth, the pair tucked their tails between their legs and moved to Rusted Bonnet, where Leyla had a second cousin working as an electrician at the local Ford engine plant.

Suppressing his dreams of a corner office in a skyscraper, but not giving up on America, Samir accepted a minimum wage position with Paul Bearer & Sons. At the same time, Leyla took a fancy to Bellinis and to Bacardi chased with pineapple juice, dubbed herself Mitzy and, a year later, bore a son.