

CRUNCH TIME

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Ben Kingsland

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SYNOPSIS: Far underground, the nation's peanut butter pipeline is burbling along, a great network of tunnels transporting the gooey spread from state to state. But this precious natural resource comes under attack when Slovenian terrorists kidnap the beautiful scion of the Smucker's corporation and threaten to detonate a leaky nuclear warhead into the peanut butter supply unless their demands are met. Can Stacy Smucker outfox the terrorists, or are they just too nuts?

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 MEN, 1 WOMAN)

GREGORI (m)..... 20s-40s. European white-collar criminal. Smooth, dangerous. Thick Eastern European accent.

ANASTASIA "STACY"

SMUCKER (f)..... 20s-30s. Stylish, professional, photogenic face of the family.

JEROME MONROE

SMUCKER IV (m)..... 60s. Aging agribusiness executive.

HURL (m)..... 20s-40s. Criminal sidekick.

SETTING

Underground; a maintenance junction of the Peanut Butter Pipeline near Savannah, GA.

TIME: The present.

AT RISE:

The Peanut Butter Pipeline, miles below the surface of Georgia. It is dark and industrial. Just offstage, we hear the low burbling of thousands of gallons of peanut butter flowing to markets out west. That exit is a mouth to the pipeline. GREGORI, alone with a jar of creamy Jif peanut butter. He sniffs it like a sommelier, inspecting the bouquet. He dips one finger in and puts a dab on his tongue. He judges the flavor. He scowls, seething with anger.

GREGORI: Smucker's...you dare to call this peanut butter. This is a leguminous pudding. This is an emasculated paste. This is a big "Smuck you" to the discerning customer. This ends tonight.

HURL leads STACY onstage, not too roughly. He exits. STACY is bound and gagged. GREGORI seals the peanut butter and sets it down.

GREGORI: The lady of the hour herself! Enchanté. Please—allow me.

He removes her gag.

STACY: You beast—I!

GREGORI: Temper, temper, Stacy Smucker... You're on holiday. I expected you to be in better spirits.

STACY: I expected you to be in jail.

GREGORI: You know what they say: "When a man and a woman are expecting different things, they will still get the same child."

STACY: No one says that.

GREGORI: (*Furious.*) It is a very popular saying! Do not denigrate Slovenian folk wisdom! Do you know where we are?

STACY: You won't get any information out of me!

GREGORI: I brought you here.

STACY: (*Considering.*) Right. We're at the pipeline.

GREGORI: Ninety miles southwest of Savannah, two hundred feet underground. The gentle churning of your father's pipeline in the air. Just smell all that delicious, roasted—

STACY: What do you want, Gregori?

He pulls out his phone.

GREGORI: I'll tell you both.

JEROME MONROE SMUCKER IV appears. He is on his phone.

SMUCKER: Jerome Monroe Smucker IV. Hello?

GREGORI: J.M.! I have a business matter to discuss.

SMUCKER: Who is this? How did you get this number?

GREGORI: Why, from your daughter, Mr. Smucker.

SMUCKER: Stacy?

STACY: Don't listen to him, Dad! He's European!

GREGORI: Silence! *(He slaps her twice in comically stagey fashion. She staggers.)*

SMUCKER: Stop! Don't hurt her!

GREGORI: And stop I will, dear J.M., once we've talked a little business.

SMUCKER: Smucker's doesn't negotiate with terrorists.

GREGORI: I'm at junction T59 of the Savannah Peanut Butter Pipeline. Your daughter, Stacy Smucker, is in my custody. I am also in possession of a leaky nuclear warhead, which I am prepared to push into the pipeline with your daughter perched atop it, like a deleted scene from *Dr. Strangelove*. Do you understand me?

STACY: He's bluffing, Dad!

SMUCKER: You wouldn't dare.

GREGORI: Try me, J.M. What have you got to lose?

SMUCKER: Everything.

GREGORI: *(Delighted.)* I know! Within forty-eight hours, you will hold a press conference announcing that Smucker's is preparing for a high-profile merger. You will take no questions. When you have done this, my associates will send you documentation that you will sign—

SMUCKER: I know this voice.

GREGORI: Then you know to take me seriously, J.M.

SMUCKER: You should never have quit, Gregori.

GREGORI: Sign the documents and wait for further—

SMUCKER: You're in over your head.

GREGORI: You don't know where my head is!

SMUCKER: A thug! A hustler! A small-time crook—

GREGORI: Small-time no more, J.M— I'm through playing for peanuts! Forty-eight hours!

SMUCKER: Put Stacy on!

GREGORI holds the phone out to STACY.

STACY: I've—

GREGORI pulls the phone away.

GREGORI: Touching family moment is over! Forty-eight hours!
(*GREGORI hangs up. SMUCKER exits.*)

STACY: You brute—!

GREGORI: Oh, save it.

STACY: He'll never give that press conference. The police will rescue me and have you deported back to Slovenia within the hour. Dad's right—you're in over your head. I don't believe you even have a leaky warhead.

GREGORI: (*Calling offstage.*) Hurl! The package! Not only do I have a warhead, I've put this junction on lockdown. I have weapons and food for a week. And I have the will to bring this country's peanut industry to its knees.

HURL enters, carrying the warhead. It looks suspiciously like a traffic cone.

GREGORI: Hurl! Report.

HURL: Got the guns loaded up, got coolers spread out, got some soup going on the hotplate, in case anybody's, uh...and got this little boy cleaned up.

The warhead has leaked. HURL wipes it up with a rag and then blows his nose.

GREGORI: Hurl, you are a prince among lackeys. I'm going to have some soup. This is Anastasia. Feel free to strike her.

GREGORI exits. Beat.

HURL: So—

STACY: You can strike me if you want, I won't ever tell you a thing.

HURL: (*Timidly.*) ...what's your sign?

Beat.

STACY: Aries.

HURL: (*Aside; STACY, of course, can still hear everything.*) Aries! A horny Aries, right here in the pipeline! Play your cards right, Hurl, and you just might hit yourself a slam dunk. Just stay cool. (*He turns back to her, suavely.*) I'm a Pisces myself.

STACY: Pisces have interesting hands.

HURL: What do you mean?

STACY: (*Coy.*) I read palms.

HURL: No kidding? How about that!

She motions him over. He comes over, hands outstretched. She takes one hand.

HURL: How's my love line?

STACY: Oh—! Sorry, it's just—I've never seen one so *big* before.

HURL: (*Pleased.*) Well, you know... What else is big?

STACY: Your brain line is through the roof. What's an intellectual like you doing working with Gregori?

HURL: Hey, Gregori's a good boss. He paid for the food, and he lets me make my own trail mix...

STACY: Did he tell you who is going to merge with Smucker's?

HURL: Oh yeah. He didn't tell you yet? It's gonna be—

GREGORI is back, holding a spoon.

GREGORI: Enough, Hurl.

HURL rips his hand away, stepping back.

HURL: Oh, I'm sorry, Gregori! She was all over me! She's an Aries!

GREGORI: Women can't restrain themselves around you, Hurl, that's your curse. Did you have a question, Anastasia?

STACY: What do you want with the company?

GREGORI: Hah! I want to save it! *(He goes to the jar on the ground, picks it up.)* Look at this—your family's flagship product. Millions of jars sold each day of this syrupy, synthetic cream. Not a speck of nut in the sludge to remind you of the honorable legume it pretends to call ancestor.

STACY: Creamy isn't our only variety.

GREGORI: Oh ho! Defensive? Certainly, you offer a number of textured alternatives. But they are as sandpaper compared to what is possible. We both know what real peanut butter can be. You remember my presentation to the board?

STACY: Yes. Before you went rogue.

GREGORI: I brought a single jar—crafted by Slovenian peanut masters.

STACY: "Crunch Time," you called it.

GREGORI: There was no true translation. But it needed no translation, did it, Stacy Smucker? Remember! Remember the taste!

STACY: *(Remembering, despite herself.)* A jar of peanuts barely coated in their own oil...an avalanche of salty roasted boulders, an eruption of taste...

GREGORI: Remember the richness; the passion in the nuts.

STACY: The finest nuts in the world.

GREGORI: But J.M. Smucker turned me down...for this. *(Shows her the jar.)*

STACY: I have to eat it in every commercial.

GREGORI: Yes.

STACY: In every photo op...

GREGORI: Yes.

STACY: (*Overcome with desire.*) When all I want is to feel those boulders crashing down again.

GREGORI: Feel the boulders!

STACY: A stampede of jagged flavor, roasted like a forest fire, salty as the Dead Sea. I want each mouthful to tear my cheeks. I want my bread ruined and helpless before each spread of the knife. I want each bite full of the meat and the stem and the root and the earth and the shell. *I want to taste the husk! (She is helpless now. GREGORI puts his hands on her shoulders.)*

GREGORI: Shhh...I know...

STACY: I want to taste the husk...

GREGORI: Don't we all?

HURL: (*Uncomfortable.*) Was there more soup?

GREGORI: (*Ignoring him.*) Join me, Stacy. A new Smucker's will lead the charge to a world of uncompromising taste. Leave butter behind and let peanuts—Slovenian heirloom peanuts—be given the place on honor on the ingredients list. Give all those choosy moms the right choice.

STACY: I—

HURL: 'Cause some soup would really hit the spot.

GREGORI: (*Irritated.*) There's no more soup.

HURL: Oh. Okay, sure. I'll just get some trail mix then.

GREGORI: I ate the trail mix. Will you shut up?

HURL is stunned. He begins a slow burn.

HURL: I worked hard on that trail mix.

STACY: My father?

GREGORI: He'll have an advisory role. But you, dear Anastasia, will be the queen.

HURL: I didn't even get any!

GREGORI: For the last time, you sputtering hayseed—

HURL: You don't care about me, just like you don't care about Smucker's! All you care about is your paycheck!

STACY: What?

HURL: You'll run Smucker's into the ground, promoting some terrible, chunky-ass artisan peanut butter that tears baguettes in half! Just like AgroEuro wants you to!

STACY: AgroEuro?!

GREGORI: Quiet, lackey!

HURL: Once Jif is dead and Smucker's is bankrupt, AgroEuro snaps up American market share in PB and J! And you get your revenge, and walk away with how many millions? You mercenary, GORP-stealing—

GREGORI slaps HURL twice, as before. He staggers. GREGORI brandishes his spoon.

GREGORI: Let me teach you something about loyalty...

With a kung fu yell, STACY picks up the warhead and hits GREGORI in the back of the head with it. He crumples. STACY gestures to HURL.

STACY: Help me, quick! It's the only way!

They drag GREGORI to the pipeline and toss him in. He screams and screams. STACY closes her eyes, shaking. HURL goes over to her.

STACY: *(Singing, à la "Mary Had a Little Lamb.")*

MOTHERS KNOW THE GOLDEN RULE
SENDING CHILDREN OFF TO SCHOOL
DON'T YOU BOTHER WITH THE REST
JUST PACK THEM THE VERY BEST

STACY & HURL: *(Singing.)*

TAKE A TASTE, TAKE A WHIFF
CHOOSY MOMS CHOOSE JIF

No more screams. Beat.

STACY: Thank you.

HURL: Sure. Good riddance to bad bosses.

She stands and holds out her hands so HURL can untie her.

HURL: Say, it's a little late, but next time do you think you could not knock the nuclear warhead around too much?

STACY: It's a dud.

HURL: Sorry?

STACY: It's leaking all that condensation. It wouldn't do that if it were live. Discovery Channel.

HURL: (*Inspecting his rag.*) Huh! So all that gunk I've been wiping up... So I'm not sterile!

STACY: Maybe not.

HURL: In that case, Aries, what else can you tell me about my love line?

STACY: I'm a Virgo.

STACY exits.

HURL: Nuts.

BLACKOUT.

THE END