

STATE OF
MIND

SAM THORNS

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CHAPTER ONE

STAGNATION

“Do you believe you are mentally sound, Ethan?”

“Yes. I know that things have happened, and that my dad was worried. It was all empty conjecture.”

Ethan, the patient, seems bored with my dialogue.

“So what you’re saying is, is that your father didn’t have your well-being in his best interest?”

“Hmm, you got it. Look, I don’t need someone to psychoanalyze me.”

“Would you like to hear my assessment so far?”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me regardless.”

“Ethan, not everyone is against or beneath you. You strike me as being self-absorbed and in need of affection that wasn’t given to you as a child.”

“This just sounds ridiculous, doctor. Do you really think you know me better than myself?”

“No, I don’t Mr. Riley. And I think you know that also. However, it is my job to ensure all of my patients

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receive medical care that best aids them.”

“Well I’m not in need of any ‘care.’ ”

“Mr. Riley, please sit d—Mr. Riley. Ethan. Do you believe you can change?”

Ethan Riley stops, and his attitude alters to a hint of empathy and compliance.

“Excuse me?”

“Do you believe you can change—that your own state of mind can alter for your own benefit?”

“I don’t know. I . . . don’t think I can answer that.”

The rain pours on the cement city of Chicago, Illinois. Bustling cars pile up in heavy traffic. Each vehicle is occupied with another drone going to his or her dead-end job. A stressed collage of zombies polluting a skyline of fading orange.

I head to my job in my mediocre car. The difference between me and most people, is I enjoy my occupation. It's not a drag or another way to make money, it's something I like to do. Few others like it, but that's why it pays well. In case *you* are wondering what it is, you'll find out shortly. Maybe you already know.

A sharp car horn disrupts my train of thought.

The clogged line of traffic is now moving, and I had been stupid enough to let my thoughts become distracted. I begrudgingly move along and continue my journey to the Chicago Police Department.

Watch what you're doing, you brainless fool, I, or something thinks.

When I arrive, I exit my car and make long strides with thin legs to the front of the building. My crappy black suit jacket and gray tie are soaked as I enter. The dark clothing I wear most regularly has become dripping wet.

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“How’s it going, Ethan?” Taylor asks with a smile as I enter.

“It’s going good, Taylor,” I say with a smile not even half as cheery as hers.

“That’s good to hear, have a great day!”

I smile again, nod, then walk past the desk. I stop walking and listen when I’m out of sight.

“Why do you talk to that freak, Tay?” Debra says.

“I dunno, he seems kind of lonely, and I say hi to everyone.”

“I think someone wants to bang the *weirdoooo*.”

“I don’t actually. Now be quiet. I’m gonna get some water.”

I stop listening.

I’m a freak? I think, disgusted. *I’m not the one who had to give sexual favors for a job.*

Maybe that’s not true. I was always taught not to believe speculation and rumors. She has her job, and I have mine. I should mind my own business.

I work as a homicide detective/part-time forensic photographer. I spent a few years on a photography course in college and few years doing a criminal justice course with intense police training after that. Worked my way up from desk jockey, to forensic photographer, to detective.

Nathan Hall (the lieutenant and technically my *superior*) pats me on the back with strong paws, making me flinch.

“Hey Ethan, we’ve got a call about a triple murder. Get your stuff ready, and I’ll take you in the cruiser.”

Nathan is the opposite of me: tall, big, and bold. His hairy face makes it difficult to read his expressions, but he constantly seems to be in meathead mode. His square jaw gives my hollow cheeks a run for their money. I get self-conscious looking into

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his bright eyes, knowing mine are lifeless. Lack of energy and optimism are a sour mixture. I'm at least self-aware enough to admit when I'm drained. Working out and dieting is always going to limit my energy levels.

Carrot on a stick, you fucking retard.

I'm sure Nathan's bright, as looks can be deceiving. But, other than that, he's a regular, boring moron. And I'm a regular, boring husk, compared to his friendly, but firm nature.

He's spewing information about this case and I'm taking in every small detail without giving full attention. I guess I'm gifted in the listening process. Come to think of it, I'm quite good at the talking part too. Sometimes.

"Okay . . . um, let me just head to my office and I'll see you in fifteen minutes, all right?" I say.

I gather my equipment and head to Nathan. The uneventful car journey takes no time at all. Upon arrival, I see the place. The house is old, obsolete, and undesirable. As if no one in the world would be comfortable owning it.

I open the backdoor of the police cruiser and step out. Nathan and his partner, James, are talking to the various investigators, so I head to the scene myself. I enter through the police tent. The plastic flimsy door opens; I show my badge to get in. Before entering into the point of no return, I find my coveralls and suit up. I hold a trusty plastic case of goodies in my hand. My camera's holstered around my neck. I'm a soldier off to war. A bombshell will have gone off inside, and the mess will be palpable.

How dare she call you a freak, what's her fucking problem?
I ignore the thought and continue.

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The crime scene's a mess. A true train-wreck of blood and carnage. I'd seen worse, but this is a disgusting sight. The report said it was a deal gone wrong, as one man shot both of his dealers.

We're not sure why the murder and suicide occurred yet, but my guess would be he got ripped off or stabbed in the back. But guesses aren't good enough in this line of work. Luckily, this isn't my case. I'm here as forensics, and nothing more.

The first thing I notice when I walk in is the smell. You always notice it around death and destruction. I'm not trying to be disgusting, but fecal matter and pennies are a dead giveaway.

The first body lies hunched forward against the wall, as if he'd sat upright, then fallen asleep. The red crater-sized shotgun wound marks the middle of his chest like a bullseye. It's the diameter of a bowling ball. The general appearance of the man is vagrant-like, and his facial expression shows shock.

I set my box of tools down to the right of the corpse and pull out my digital camera with an extended lens. I start snapping some pictures of the man from different angles. I photograph the weapon, notable tattoos, scars, bullet casings, wall and floor damage, blood splatters. I then repeat the process with my fold-out lightning equipment in better positions. I take individual shots of items, with a ruler next to them for comparison. As I work, police officers walk past with notepads in hand, jotting down any clues they find.

"Nasty scene, huh," a thick police officer says from behind.

I don't recognize this man, but he looks young and inexperienced.

I get up from my crouched position, peeved at the interruption.

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“I’m guessing you’re new, and you’ve never seen this before, correct?” I’m clear and understandable.

“Yeah, . . . I don’t usually deal with this stuff, but I guess you need to see all of it, huh,” the kid says with a nervous chuckle.

“Well I need to get back to work, don’t interrupt me again, please.”

His face twists into a frown as I turn and crouch down into the same position I was in a few moments again.

“Okay, sure,” he says in a confused tone. He walks away while still looking at me for a few seconds.

After around an hour of setting lights, taking pictures, and writing notes for myself, I pack up my toolbox and head to the next victim. I make careful steps around broken vases and police tape, then I make my way up the stairs.

The second corpse has two shotgun wounds this time: one in the chest and one in the right leg. I set up my equipment a second time and repeat what I did with the first body. And again, it takes around an hour. There’s not much difference in appearance, so there’s nothing striking to focus on. Instead, I get into the same groove I was in with the last body. Finally, I finish up and walk to the final scene.

The bastard is limp and motionless on the floor with his back to the ground. A self-inflicted shotgun blast to the head. His cranium is open like a watermelon, with the weapon to the side. Every wall has a splatter on it. His stretched-out arms are stiff, and I can tell the guy had some trouble reaching the long piece of iron’s trigger.

Amateur. You need to tie a string around the trigger, and then loop that around a table corner. Give a pull and WHAM—

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Dead.

I set up for the final time, and get to it. This one takes considerably longer; two and a half hours in total, as a lot of small details and clues appear. I'm not too repulsed by the scene—I rarely am anymore. All this will now amount to a heap of paperwork. Weeks and weeks of filing, categorizing, and reporting on the entire mess will take place.

It's after work, and it feels like my whole life is in a constant loop of stasis. Going back and forth to work, with minimal stimulation. Even though I enjoy most parts of my profession, I still need some kind of chore or activity to keep my brain active. I need something to make my monotonous life interesting again. After I spent a lot of time filing the evidence, Nathan spoke to me about his issues. It made me incredibly sick. He knows parts of my past, so he had some stupid fantasy I'd relate to him about his personal issues. He said sometimes he doesn't feel like himself, and that he has trouble with his emotions. It took everything for me not to throttle him. So now, I need to calm down in my home. I try this by opening up my laptop and sifting through my emails. I find one from an address I know too well. "takethedrag@hotmail.com" has sent me something.

It reads as follows:

hey ethan

check this shit out man its the bomb!!! if you need any tips n stuff then just drop me a line. sellin like hot cakes litreally my man. keep em comin!

yours sincseerly rob

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I delete the email and close my laptop. There will be no peace when using it.

The alarm rings through my ears. Machine-gun fire to the eardrums; each annoying musical tone of the obnoxious melody makes me regret setting the damned thing in the first place. After a few seconds of me fumbling for the stop button, I get up and look around with squinty eyes as light fills the room. I get a sense of nostalgia when I wake up. It's not the good kind of nostalgia, it's more like the "What? I just went through another day again, already?" kind. My boring cycle of the day is becoming aggravating.

But I get to it. I shower (oh how I adore a warm shower), I clean the house, I read for an hour and thirty minutes. Blah, blah, blah. You're bored as shit too, right? The shotgun massacre was a riot though, huh.

Something is coming. Something that will snap me into shape. Rejuvenate my core to satisfaction. I know it. I can sense it.

I've mentally skipped most of my daily tasks, or some recess of my brain has been playing in fast-forward.

I'm in the grocery store, with many people hurrying in and out—

My smartphone vibrates in my front pocket. I reach in and grab it, reading the caller ID in my head.

Dad? What the hell do you want from me now?

This is the excitement you're looking for, you leech!

I slide my finger across the phone's touchscreen and answer.

"Hello Dad."

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“Ethan! How are ya doing, how are ya doing. Me and Abbie are having a little get-together at our new place this Sunday, and we were wondering if you wanted to come!” he says in an exaggerated manner.

“I’m pretty busy with work Dad, and I don’t really want to see Abbie.”

Stupid fuck, he’s trying to mock you dumb-ass, are you going to sit there and take it?

“Busy with work? So you’re too busy to see your old man at his housewarming party?” he asks with disappointment.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“And you still don’t like Abbie? When are you gonna get that stick out of your ass and let me be happy for once?” His tone of voice changes completely. As if the shiny paintjob has washed away to reveal an ugly, rusted color underneath.

Let him be happy . . . ? For once!? Is my dad out of his mind?

“Well, number one, Abbie’s the same age as me. Number two, I’ll get that stick out when you decide to learn the art of *sharing*,” I say with a bit too much sarcasm. “You really are a pretentious little man, aren’t you?” My voice snares through my lips and into the phone.

“Ohhh and *you* always were a fan of using those *big words* to impress others, huh. Wouldn’t you say that is in fact, contradictory?”

He thinks you’re an idiot—you are an idiot! Look at you, buying a tub of low-fat ice cream like a girl with self-esteem issues on prom night!

I put down the ice cream as if my brain has told me to, and speak back to my father.

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“Maybe if you gave a passing thought to anyone other than yourself, I might have considered going. But since you’re so dead set on making everyone pay attention to you, I think I’ll pass. Bye.” I press the glowing red circle to hang up the call like it’s an escape button. I then continue with my shopping angrily. I notice people listening and staring.

Fucking invertebrates.

After picking up all the necessary items I need, I pay for my things and push my cart out of the store, hurrying as I do so. My car trunk opens like a space-age pod, and I start to load the bags of food and drink into the large empty space. Fillet steaks, bottles of sparkling water, unsalted peanuts, fruit and veg.

Aggressive whispering and obscenities are coming from a non-lit part of the parking lot. I close the trunk and listen for a moment. After, I walk gingerly to the commotion, as to not give away that I’m nearby.

My eyes adjust to the darkness. Two bulky men are harassing a young woman. I know I won’t be able to fight, and why would I want to anyway? To save some girl I don’t even know? Just as I’m about to start walking away, one of the goons spots me.

“Hey, who’s there? I see you, don’t you move asshole!” he calls out.

My heartbeat accelerates, but I’m ready for anything.

He pushes the girl to his friend and walks to me. He stops about a car’s length away. I can make him and his friend out well enough. The first one (that is closest to me) is big and heavy, with a cream jacket on. If this all goes south, he’ll pummel me into the ground—but I know it won’t come to that.

The second one (who’s by the woman) is a lot shorter, with

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a rat's face. He has a dark eye color, I think, I can't really tell. I'd most likely be able to take the small one if he began a fight with me. He doesn't look like a huge threat. I'm not an expert on fighting, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Trained in basic MMA, but nothing major. A chokehold here, an anklelock there. I find it pointless to fling your arms wildly at another person until someone gets their lights knocked out. It's good to be capable of defending yourself, however.

"Sir, this isn't any of your business, please walk away," he says in a calm, respective voice.

"Sir? That's a lot better than what you called me five seconds ago."

"Listen, this is just between me and her." His voice is overtly persuasive, I don't have anything to do with this, do I . . .

"I don't really want to deal with this today, but when I see something illegal, I need to investigate. It is my job after all."

I give a big, lipped smile. The man's eyes widen. In this situation, I have full control, so I need to exhaust all my options in talking someone out of an attack. You need to decide what path you're going down and stick with it. You can choose empathy, understanding, passiveness, logic, methodology. It's all power of suggestion and mind games, and for this game, I'll be choosing to threaten these two monkey-brains. Their tiny minds won't be able to call out my bluff, and even if they can, making them believe me will be too easy.

"That's shite!" the other man says, with a peculiar accent. Irish, it sounds like. "Ronnie, you know he's lying, just kick his arse!" He's desperate.

I have them both where I want them.

"Go ahead Ronnie, I know that you're the head of

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this . . . operation, and I know you're not stupid, so I want you to take thirty seconds to believe what I'm saying. I am a police officer for the Chicago State Police Department." I pull out my badge and phone from my dark brown coat that I'm wearing today. I slide up my touchscreen and press the flashlight button. I glide the light on the badge, making the silvery colors sparkle into the darkness. "There's my badge. Believe me, this isn't a toy. In my other hand is my phone, as you can already see. I have an emergency number ready to call that will send a dispatch team to this location in a very short amount of time. Special privileges." I'm lying somewhat, but there will be consequences for non-cooperation. I slide the small badge back into my pocket and hold my phone upright. "Now, you can either choose to believe me, and I can take that girl with me without calling this in. You know, no harm, no foul. Or you can try to attack me. And then this gets ugly. The choice is yours, my friend. Take your time to make your decision."

You think he's gonna fall for that? You probably will get your ass kicked! my mind concludes.

The man looks at me for a while, his Irish compadre—shocked and stunned—like a deer in the headlights. When he finally speaks, his words stumble out embarrassingly. "Finn . . . let her g-go . . . now!"

"But—Ronnie I—"

"Now!" Ronnie cuts his comrade off with a loud yell.

The woman struggles out of Finn's arms and spits in his face with a windy blow. Finn leaps back, disgusted, as she storms to me. He curses and stomps around like a leprechaun who's lost his pot of gold. I turn my head as me and the woman walk away.

"Good choice fellas, have a nice evening."

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They stare in disbelief. The gentleman named Ronnie seems more like he's seething, while Finn looks about ready to chase me.

I'm in the driver's seat with the young woman next to me. The light from inside the car lets me see her features and clothing.

Jet-black hair, big playful eyes, and cherry-red lips. The clothing she wears is inherently boyish, with her blue jeans and brown leather coat. These make her look masculine from chest to toe.

On the road it's quiet, so I start the conversation with, "You haven't said a word yet."

"Thank you. I know you didn't have to step into that, but it was brave of you to make those two look like ass-hats." She lets out a hysterical laugh. "I mean the look on their faces—I think they shit their pants!"

I turn my head to her and smile. "Eh, it was nothing . . . So, is there anywhere you'd like me to drop you off?"

"I don't really have anywhere to go, so a hotel will do fine."

"Why were you out there like that?"

"It was just business."

"Okay . . . What's your name?"

Wouldn't Dad be proud of us, ha! my brain yells out.

"My name's Jessica."

"And Finn and Ronnie, who were they exactly?"

"Clients," Jessica says while bowing her head down in shame. Her face tells a different story. One of reserved pride on the outside, with an inner, festering regret.

"As I expected," my mouth throws out carelessly. She looks at me with a pensive gaze.

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“Don’t judge me, you don’t know what I’ve been through, I didn’t choose to be like this . . .”

“Sure you did. And I hate that whole, ‘don’t judge me’ crap. You’ve been judging me since I stepped into your line of sight. If you saw me behind you in the street on a night like this, you’d have thought I was some pervy opportunist. Come on, don’t say you wouldn’t. Maybe not that severe. Let’s just say you wouldn’t be asking me for a ride in another circumstance. I know those kinds of looks. And also, you wouldn’t exactly stop for me to show you my badge. I’m going to take a wild guess and say you don’t even like cops, regardless. The way I see it, is I can judge whoever I want in this world, as long as I’m fine with others judging me. You’d say that’s fair, correct?”

Jessica’s face looks repulsed as the words leave my mouth. “How dare you! That isn’t fair at all, you don’t know anything about me!”

“I know you have sex with strangers in exchange for money.” My facial expression is the complete opposite of hers; mine is smug and unglamorous; hers is serious and frantic.

“Let me out right now. I don’t want to be in a car with someone who has opinions like that.”

“I was simply stating a fact, I didn’t say that what you do is wrong. I just said what you do is have sex with people for money. To be frank, I don’t care what you do; it’s your life to spend however you want. But I also have the choice to look at how you spend your life in any way that I please. I’ll ask again: you’d say that’s fair, correct?”

She turns her head to look out of the foggy window. “Whatever,” she mutters uncooperatively.

“Trust me, I don’t like putting people down, but what I just

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said is the truth. I'm sorry for pushing you a little too far, but you can take something from what I just said, and that will make you stronger," I say.

"You made sense; you just didn't have to be a dick about it. And don't patronize me either."

She looks at me one final time and moves her head back to gaze out of the window.

After about thirty minutes of driving, I pull the car over to the curb and turn off the ignition. A dainty hotel that looks humble and bright is to my right. Jessica looks at the place with surprise. "I can't afford this."

"How much do you have?"

"About seventy dollars."

I put my hand in my pocket, pull out my wallet and open it. I take out one hundred dollars and offer the money with my palm open. "Here, take this."

"Oh my God, really? Thank you. I-I'm sorry about what I said earlier, you were just being honest." She takes the cash hastily.

"I'd just like to help out somebody who's having a rough day. If you need my help, I don't mind reaching out to anyone in need, it's what I do, remember?" I give a comforting smile and put my wallet back into its home.

"Let me give you my number, you seem nice enough."

"Are you sure? I *would hate* to be bothersome."

Great result.

"Yes, I'm sure." She pulls out a scrap piece of paper from her tight jeans and rummages through her purse. She blows a frustrated breath and pulls a stick of lipstick out. She mimics the

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process with her lips as she writes out a clumsy blotching of her phone number. She then hands the small slip to me.

“I would kiss it, but I think I’d turn into a literal cliché,” she says.

I smirk a little. “Well, I’ll be sure to check up on you tomorrow. See how you’re holding up.”

She looks at me tenderly, and says, “You are sweet, but I can handle myself y’know.”

“Oh I know ma’am. Well, have a nice night, and it was a pleasure to meet you.”

She opens the door and walks off into the cold night breeze. She enters the main entrance; I start making my way back home. What I did there entitles me to something. You already know I’m up to something. A lot of people nowadays think when you help someone, it should be out of the kindness of your heart. This isn’t how the world works. You can’t just help someone and not get anything in return. That isn’t fair at all.

When I’m home, I throw my coat onto the coat rack, set my groceries in my blindingly white kitchen, and sit. The events of today swirl in my head like a whirlpool. It went fast. Like every day before it. When you get into a routine, you stagnate, and every step of the cycle becomes repetitive. Keeping yourself busy with hobbies and purpose is the key to a fulfilling life.

I continue to think as small moments replay like a montage; making me feel either ecstatic or vengeful.

Look at you, noble knight.

I switch my TV on and watch a cooking show. The man is overly confident and annoying, so I change the channel. A horror movie’s on, and it’s fairly entertaining, with its offering of a blood and gore spectacle. Ditsy teenagers are being axed off in a

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creative way. Two unlikely companions stare off into the haunted house at one point. Both of them are injured and broken in their own way. They sit there and talk.

The movie now has me invested, but it feels like time is going too fast again. I look at my phone which is carelessly placed on the edge of my coffee table.

It's 10:39!? my mind screams.

I'm an idiot for letting myself fall behind schedule. I pick up my TV remote, and before I know it, the plastic piece of technology has left my hand. It's flying across the room like a paper airplane. It cracks on the floor and scatters the batteries in opposite directions. I let my breath catch back up with my enraged mind, and I press the hard-to-find standby button on my flatscreen TV. I press the white switch to disconnect the power from it as well. After that, I hurry to get dressed in my nightly attire. While I lie in my bed, my thoughts are focused on my schedule. What tempers me the most, was that it was my fault this happened. My brain taunts and bullies me over what I had done.

The hours pass, it becomes clear that I won't be able to obtain any much-needed sleep. In turn, this will make me groggy and moody when morning does arrive.

By some miracle, I manage to fall into a state of slumber, but it's soon interrupted by that familiar alarm. Another day looping around with its infinite acceleration. Not stopping, not slowing; moving evermore.

I get up, feeling terrible. The sun pierces my eyes like needles, and the sound of chirping birds frustrates me. Even though this is meant to be *my* day of rest, I still need to keep myself busy. I'm not a religious man, so instead of being idle on a Sunday, I

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finish my morning routine.

The day's sunny for once, but it doesn't cheer up my mood. I log on to my computer and open up my emails. Five unread emails, four of which are junk mail, but one is titled "You're still welcome!"

I click it, starting to read the black text in my head as if it's my doctor delivering some more bad news.

Dear Ethan:

I know we haven't been on the best of terms lately, and I so dearly want that to change. Money has always been an issue between us, but I promise, I'll make it up to you. We're starting the party at 7:00 p.m., and we'd love for you to come by. If you don't have anything else to do during that time, stop by and enjoy the food! I know you have work in the morning, so you don't have to stay too long, only for as long as you see fit. You don't have to call me, just turn up and you'll be welcomed with open arms.

Love, Dad

The "Love, Dad" at the end makes it even worse. Like a knife being slowly twisted into my gut. It reeks to the high court of someone else's words.

I must admit, I am conflicted. I sit in my leather computer chair, deciding if I should go or not. Something in my head convinces me.

Maybe he wants to give you that money he's been yapping on about for years. Maybe he wants to say sorry and hope for an apology from you! Or maybe he wants to make an offer—an

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agreement. That must be why he's trying so hard—to make himself feel better, but it hasn't affected his ego so far, so why now?

I agree to myself with reluctance that I will go. There's one condition to my punctuality, however. I will bring along my own special guest. More of a hit to my dad's pride over anything else. And there's the plain simple fact I have nothing to lose.

I open my desk drawer under my home computer and pull out a USB stick and a notepad. The USB stick contains all the crime scene photographs I've taken on my digital camera. If you're worrying about security, everything is password protected and encrypted.

My splendid shotgun massacre shots are amazing to behold; I've outdone myself. Satisfied with my work, I divide my attention to detective business. I'm currently working on an already finished case; the busywork at the end of the line, pretty much. I note down anything that springs to mind. Although most people use digital methods, I prefer the old feeling of pen on paper.

I do this for an hour until I remember the events of last night. Jessica, Finn and Ronnie, the hotel. And unfortunately, the TV. It makes me grimace.

I walk over to my coat I was wearing last night and unzip one of the pockets. I pull out the small, tattered piece of paper, and stare at the smudged numbers. I decide to give Jessica a call. The phone rings for a few seconds before she picks up. "Hello?" she says in a groggy voice, yawning.

"Hey Jessica, it's Ethan."

"Ethan . . . ? You that guy from last night? The p—Cop."

"That's me. How are you feeling?"

"I could be better. Damn, you call early."

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“Sorry, I’m an early bird. Anyway Jessica, I was just wondering if you’d like to go out later?”

“I gotta ask, why are you being so nice to me? The hotel, the company, the ride, what’s the catch?”

I want to lie, but I can’t, so I decide to speak nothing but the truth. “I’m going to be brutally honest; I didn’t have any plans of helping you out with those two gentleman last night, but a lot of things happened. I saw potential in you, and I think we could be very good associates in the near future. I do something for you, you do something for me.”

“So you helping me was just so you could get something in return?” she asks in a confused voice. “I’m not going to give myself away, just so you know. I don’t deal with feds.”

“No, I didn’t mean it in that way. And it wasn’t like I saw some advantage at the time, that’s just how I see it now. I’m an oppor—A freethinker . . . and I think we could have a bright future,” I say to Jessica’s foul, but correct assumption.

“What do you want then?”

“Let’s start out with a party.”

I drive through the dark and misty atmosphere—my headlights shining on the rusty gate, reflecting little back into my retinas.

I stretch my arm out of my car window and press the faded call button for a few seconds until a man’s voice speaks up. (Probably one of his guards or something.)

“Are you a friend or colleague?”

“Errrr, relative?”

“Would that be Mr. Ethan Riley?” he asks.

“That’s me.”

Jessica is sitting here, wide-eyed at the mansion in the near

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distance.

The gate opens with a jolt. Like repairs haven't been made in years. I drive to a parking area where many other vehicles are ordered. Except, they're more expensive and outlandish. BMW, Rolls-Royce, Mercedes-Benz, Aston Martin. A collection of vanity. They'd be impressive if they weren't owned by rich elitists—exploiting somebody or other. I don't say I blame them. But why drive a nice car in a place like Chicago? It's like putting sprinkles on a dog's shit. It just doesn't make sense.

As I park my car between a Jaguar and Audi, Jessica starts asking me why I invited her again. Tiny pebbles separating under my wheels drowns out the racket. I stop, activate the handbrake, and kill the engine.

“Listen,” I say. She leans her head in close as I talk. “You're here because I wanted company in this boring, boring, boring . . .” I stop to think of a different word. “Soulless get-together, devoid of any fun . . .” She looks at me as if she's about to laugh.

“You sound fun at parties. Oh, what a coincidence,” she says while opening the door and flurrying toward the mansion.

When I exit the car, I now see what attire she has on: a black leather jacket, which is a different kind of coat to the one she was wearing yesterday. This time it's a lot shorter and is cut off to below the belly button. Under the jacket, she's wearing a plain gray T-shirt that covers the exposed waist the coat did not. My brain is giddy to see my dad's reaction as he sees what my “date” is wearing.

I can't get over how *slutty* she looks.

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Inside, it's a completely different landscape. Everything's white. *Everything*. It's so undeniably grand. The chandelier, the drinks, the food, the music, the guests, the waiters. People in sharp suits swagger around with facial expressions that scream, "I'm so fucking rich. So entitled. And, so much better than you."

I can't even bear to make eye contact with most of them. Seeing all this makes me so angry—I could have this, but instead, I must wallow in my gloomy neighborhood. With the trash, the filth, the smog. I'm being an entitled brat, I know. My circumstances are much better than most. Sometimes, it's nice to complain. We like to think we're always happy, but once in a while, you have to let your temper loose. We all do it.

Whatever.

Jessica straps herself to my arm; it's so unfitting. I've known her for hours, not even a day, and now I'm going to some rich high-end bash. If irony was a needle in a haystack, this situation would be a giant anvil in a box of packing peanuts.

A piano is being played with a pleasant tune. Nothing I've heard before, but something that sounds familiar—heard a hundred years ago. Similar to Beethoven, maybe. I can't identify it at all, which is strange for me. I take pride in being cultured in art and literature. The pianist is immersed in his performance, and I respect his diligence. The song now gets stuck in my head.

Jessica looks at me. "Nice tune, huh? A tune to die for, my extravagant fellow!"

I cringe and walk on.

My dad comes to greet me. He has that dumb sewer rat clinging to him like a pool float. They're both looking so *extraordinary* that it hurts.

Abbie Smith is wearing a glittery red dress that cuts off way

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above the knees and starts by her armpits. My dad is wearing a black suit jacket, stretched by the sheer gravity of his massive belly. Sports gloves, dress shoes, and a ridiculous black top hat. If there were *two* prostitutes in the room instead of one, I'd think Abbie was the second, and my dad the fucking pimp. A pimp or a magician, maybe. I'm not sure why he even tries to hide his bald head: he has not one single hair left on it. If he were a magician, he certainly wouldn't be able to magic it back.

He waltzes toward us, not realizing I'm his son. Instead, he's busy gulping down his champagne and giggling to his trophy. As soon as his gaze meets ours, he gags on his drink and his face goes from shock to fake happiness.

"Ethan! I was so worried you weren't going to make it," he says.

"That would have been such a tragedy," I say as I avert my attention to Abbie. Her face is round, her eyes are white and fresh. Her teeth are shiny and straight. Even her skin is overly white. Her brown hair falls around her ears charmingly. She can't escape her pointed features, however. I look down at what her dress is showing. Her tits are almost spilling out of her dress, and they're jiggling with every titter and tatter. As I gladly look away from her revealing outfit, I look at the happy couple. They're luckily not staring at me in disgust, but instead laughing away again at each other.

After a tiring cackle session, my dad now turns to look at Jessica, and the look on his face is fan-tas-tic. He looks like he smelled something unpleasant. "Erm . . . we'd hoped you looked at the dress code too." He's still looking at Jessica, but he's speaking to me.

"Well we didn't really have time to find something more

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appropriate. But this is Jessica.” Jessica herself is curiously looking at all the color and fantasy. So much so, that she’s not aware of my dad dissing her fashion tastes. If she did, she’d have probably punched him in the face, which would have been an entertaining spectacle. She does give off the whole free-spirit feminist vibe, so it makes sense.

My father now looks genuinely happy for once. “Jessica,” he says. She turns her head toward my dad, then smiles innocently. “well it’s great to meet you, my name is Jason, and this here is Abbie. I’m Ethan’s father.” He kisses both sides of her face, then leans back to his girlfriend’s (hate using that term) side.

Tedious minutes of being dragged around ensue. I chat with various snobby bastards (who are probably annoyed at the distance they’ve had to travel from somewhere nicer than Chicago). Now I’m sitting next to Jessica, producing some chit-chat to someone I don’t know. I mean, I don’t even recall this girl’s last name.

“What’s your last name?” I blurt out. I can see she’s tipsy, so she’ll find this curious. I’m just drinking water. The idea of sipping any alcohol makes me feel disgusted. It ruins your lungs, and it turns you into a buffoon. Anyone who drinks liquor to become more sociable is not intelligent. I would never drink that kind of crap.

“What?” She laughs with a scrunched face.

“I was just wondering, I don’t know. So . . . ?”

“It’s Janice,” she says with some laughter still in her throat.

At this moment, it dawns on me. Am I becoming friends with this person? I’ve never had many friends in my life. Everyone I’ve ever considered to be a friend has either abandoned me

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or drifted away. I don't need any new friends, what's the point? But I'm going through the motions of making a friend. Getting their name, going to an event with them, making small talk.

"Jessica Janice," I murmur.

Fast-forward a while and I'm now in the bathroom, washing my hands. White, soapy foam covers my hands as I run them under the clear water—exiling the bacteria-filled suds. I flick the water into the sink and look at myself in the mirror. I start to question what I'm doing, why I'm here, and what my life is about. A strange place to have this kind of thought. You usually have these epiphanies with a gun to your head, or in a mid-life crisis.

I remember what's happened in my life. My mother dying in a car crash years ago was morbid, but my dad seemed to get over it pretty quickly. I used to love my mother and father. I used to be different. The day that truck pummeled my mom's car at fifty miles per hour was a turning point. I'd say, "My mother is up in Heaven, with my Aunt Jean and Uncle Roger." but I don't believe in any of that shit. My mother's brain is now deactivated. Every memory she had of my face, my personality, my life, my ambitions, my future, my beliefs, my hobbies, my name. Everything is gone.

I punch the mirror hard and my fist cracks the other reality into pieces. The sound is quieter than I'd have thought. Like I've stepped on a shard of fake glass. Small lines and white, broken pieces appear by my knuckles. I pull my hand away with slight resistance. As I do, dusty fragments fall to the ceramic counter. I look at my hand; it's dripping with crimson and running all the way to my sleeved white shirt; melting into the material.

I grab a paper towel from the dispenser to the right of me

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and soak the blood into it. It's a painful procedure, but it's therapeutic. It reveals my hand to be pink and raw with tiny glass pieces still lodged in there. I unbutton my shirt at the wrist and pull it to my elbow and begin to use the same cloth to wipe up and down at the sections of red. It smears, but I dab the paper with some warm water to clean up. After a few minutes, it's all done. I roll my sleeves up to uncover my soaked right arm. I wash my hands again with soap.

I'm now talking to some rich guy who has a gray beard and is wearing the same suit as every other cretin here. My hand is throbbing from my "accident" and I've fashioned some kind of bandage with toilet paper and a miniature towel. He's talking about how he's a professor at one of the colleges in Miami. I pretend I'm interested in what he's saying. I chip in with some profound words that sound like fantastic gibberish. I've lost Jessica at this point. She's probably slamming back vodka with some banker for all I know.

"What do you think about that?" the man asks in an aging voice.

I look down at my hand, and I notice that a glass of wine has been placed in my bandaged hand somehow. I've been sipping on it too, and I suppose that's how the pain is beginning to numb.

It looks like you're quite the hypocrite, you moron. Why on earth would you do the complete opposite of what you just said?!

You know why.

"Well," I breathe in for speaking fuel. "The thing with art is; it's all subjective. If something provokes the viewer in a way; it's a piece of art. If I paint a red dot on a canvas; it's art. People

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can interpret it in many different ways. What does that red dot mean? Is it there for a reason? Is it to symbolize something or someone? As soon as the viewer asks any question at all about that piece; it is now *art*.”

The guy looks at me patronizingly.

“Great answer!” he shouts as he pats my shoulder.

Fucking die, fucking die, fucking die, I think as I watch his hand.

He lets go after that, finishing off his drink.

“Thanks. More wine?”

The night has now simmered down. It’s midnight. Most of the guests have left, or they’re sprawled across the floor like dead rodents.

I make my way through the chaos-filled hall of empty wine glasses and plates with stale canapés on top. I pass Jessica, who’s passed out. (She must have had a bit too much to drink.)

Well thanks for that one Sherlock.

I reach the end of the long hallway and walk into a warm, bright room—my father and Abbie are slouching. The single color slashed in the room is from the fireplace in front of them. They’re both facing away from me, looking romantically into the orange, hot glow. My dad hears me walk in, and turns around.

“Come in, come in, we were just about to head off to bed, Ethan,” he says.

I clomp forward with my hands in my pockets, and I sit in another chair next to their habitat. The drinks have definitely made me woozy and I know I’ll mentally scold myself for it later. And after that, I’ll be psychically scolding myself in the bathroom.

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My dad and Abbie are both laughing. Again.

Fucking hell.

My father can see I'm bothered.

He huffs and looks at me sympathetically before talking. "Ethan, I'm sorry things went like this, I'm sorry that Lily isn't here anymore. She left you to fend for yourself. I know you're always upset now, but-but I want you to be *happy*. I'm sorry about all of that . . . a-and about . . . other things. We only did that because we believed in you, son."

At this point, his words are beginning to be tinged with a level of phoniness that only my father can replicate. I pick up some random glass of chardonnay; pink lipstick smudged on the side. I take a big gulp, finishing it in one go. Jason is confused and disgusted. He's never had any trouble with bacteria or keeping clean, but the act bothers him. I would never usually do something like this without some gain to it. And that gain is watching my dad look with a disappointment that reminds him of his failures.

The ordeal with Finn and Ronnie and inviting an escort to a fucking house-warming party has made me feel reckless. A strange feeling indeed.

A dead mom is one thing, but this is something else. Something stranger. As I let the warm liquid travel down my throat, I ignore the millions of germs entering my immune system. I put the glass back down with a *chink*. At this point, my dad notices my terrible first aid attempt. The soft paper is dotted with dry, crusty blood, and it's falling apart.

"What have you done to your hand? You've been se—" He doesn't finish.

I don't speak up, I look at the fire instead. It symbolizes my

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emotions at this time. My gaze is fixated on the spectacle of light and color. It needs to take my mind away from other mental images.

“I hope everything has been going well with your new psychiatrist,” he continues. “You’ve been taking your pills, I assume?”

He fails to make conversation with me, and I carry on watching the fire crackle in front of me.

“Ethan!” he shouts. It jolts back Abbie and takes me by surprise. He’s uneasy, lost, like he doesn’t know where he is.

Abbie speaks for the first time tonight, and I wish she wasn’t here even more as the words leave her mouth. “Jason has cancer.”

I don’t even know what to think as her statement sinks in. Everything starts spinning as my warm face and body become cold. I can’t speak, I’m frozen. Paralyzed. And my eyes are becoming glazed over.

First Mom dying, and now Dad getting sick.

“What?” I manage to say with my voice quivering.

“Ethan, . . .” He looks like he’s about to cry too, but he’s managing to hold it in. “I’ve wanted to tell you for so long, but I just couldn’t. Your mother knew about it—that’s why she gave me all of the will. She was so damn worried; she didn’t want the money going to anyone else. We believe it to be genetic. This type of cancer anyway . . .”

“So it’s hereditary. Like . . . Henry’s?”

The name Henry hasn’t been uttered in our presence in a long time: it’s Jason’s brother. I can’t remember him well, but I know he died when I was a kid.

“Yes—Oh, of course.” He looks at the floor, seemingly

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ashamed. “I couldn’t do what I needed to. I’ve been such a bad father,” he now starts to go teary-eyed. “I’ve never been there for you; I’ve given you nothing. I’ve left you for all this. This!”

Abbie puts her hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Abbie says.

“It’s not . . .” he says. “It’s not . . .”

I can’t even process this—it’s like someone has hit me over the head with a sledgehammer. A haziness that comes on strong and sobers you up faster than you can imagine with a smack to the face.

Die fat bastard. Die. Fuck you, and fuck Henry too.

“You never told me,” I say after a time. “How long’s it been?”

“About two and a half years,” he says, looking down.

I don’t know whether to hug him or hit him. I can’t shake the feeling he could have given me some. All this extravagant scenery wasn’t put toward his medical bills, so why should I forgive him? Selfishness is something I could consider if I wasn’t in a pit of confusion myself. Keeping the serious news away from me also deprives me of needed quality time, doesn’t it? Don’t families need that before a loved one passes?

“So you’re . . . ?” I hint at the elephant in the room, as to if he’s getting better or if he’s going to be dead soon. As quickly as Henry, anyway.

“I’m coping. It’s at stage two. I’m going to get through this. I guess I just went crazy and bought all these things to make myself become bigger, and better. My chemotherapy is working, but I’ll be losing a lot of weight soon. The doctors over at Saint Phoenix Hospital are treating me well. If I don’t make it through this, everything I own, is yours.”

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I clench my teeth as Abbie looks away, closing her eyes, but I don't focus on her. How could she care? She's only known him for a couple of years. I'm fighting back the tears like my dad, but I can feel the warm water collect around my eyelashes.

"I'm sorry," he says in a hushed tone looking me dead in the eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

SANITY

“Why are you unable to answer if you can change or not? Do you feel as though it is not your place to say?”

“I just *don't know*. Not satisfied?”

“Mr. Riley, my profession requires attentiveness. You will talk to me, I will listen, and then I will provide you with medical attention that I deem necessary.”

“Pills,” Mr. Riley says while rolling his eyes.

“Yes, Mr. Riley, pills. Do you object to medication?”

“No. I’m not a science denier like a lot of the people out there.”

“Mr. Riley, remember what we discussed in our anger management session. We should treat everyone not only how we would like to be treated, but also with an innocence given to all. You are a police officer.”

“It’s more com—Yes, I’m police.”

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“I know how daunting it can be. But while working with others, we do need to show restraint. This ties into your anger management. I would prefer to stay away from that aspect of your life. Unless difficulties are caused in your professional work. Wh—”

“They’re not.”

“What I’m trying to get to, is an understanding between the both of us. Does that sound fair?”

“It does.”

My head is heavy. My arms are aching. My neck feels stretched. I haven't slept all too well, and I haven't told anyone about my dad's horrible news either.

My hand has healed somewhat, in lighter news. I must have nicked a delicate area punching that mirror. The cut is still raw and irritating under the skin.

After everything happened last night, I left Abbie and Jason alone after discussing the details. I left with Jessica, and she was just *gone*. She couldn't even keep her head from wobbling, so I took her to the same hotel she stayed in last time, and I gave her some more money.

Fucking freeloader.

This time, it was Dad's generosity. He slipped me about 750 dollars as if it were a bribe or something. I still think my dad is an asshole. My opinion won't change, but I do feel a hint of sympathy for him. I don't believe I'm entitled to the money because I'm a good person. It's because I was fairly owed a percentage of money from my mom. This was understood by both my father and I. My mother of course had no idea about the situation. I was too young to know anything about the whole advanced logistics.

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It might as well have been pocket money to me.

I look into the eyes of the victim. The body is incredibly old and is punctured like a dartboard. This elderly lady sits in a rocking chair, gray and stiff. She has to be in her eighties. I would feel bad, but you get numb to this sort of thing.

The crime appears to be a burglary. Jewelry, electronics, cash. Even the fucking family photos are taken, which would befuddle most. Why take the photos? They're not worth anything to any shop, and they only have sentimental value to whoever they belonged to. Instantly, you'd think it was someone who knew her, but, obviously, the thief is trying to throw us off. Domestic cases are all the rage.

Today, I'm not on forensic photography, I'm on detective duty. I can't help but instinctively angle myself for perfect viewpoints for a camera.

Men are talking behind me.

"It's a tragedy, right?" the first officer says.

"Yeah . . . tragedy . . ." the second one reiterates. "I hope we catch this bastard. Mrs. Freishaw was a nice lady—I had to visit here earlier in the year. She called about her cat being sick."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, cat was fine. Think it wasn't eating its lunch or something. Speaking of lunch, I'm starving. What do you say we go get something to eat at that diner across the street?"

Oh, the Bill-House Diner. Now that place is a shithole. But, it is quaint in its own little way. Like it had some history to it. The owner is Bill Francis Junior—Francis Senior passed away a few years ago and left his son in charge. Sometimes I'd go there for a coffee, but it'd have to be midday. Taking in caffeine at a

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late hour or an early hour can energize you to a point of exhaustion. So, at around 5:00 p.m., I'll leave work and take a little break. Shut off and not get bothered by my associates. As I plan my day, two men talk nearby. How these so-called "police officers" can dribble on about food while a decomposing (lightly nibbled) elderly lady sits close by is beyond me. Oh, yeah, the cats seemed to have gotten a bit hungry themselves.

Can't you two talk about it outside? Hearing you chat about the new succulent, special, spectacular steak, doesn't sound too appealing right about now.

In one moment, thoughts rush around me—my dad—my job—my dad—my job—my dad—my job—my dad—my job.

I need some fresh air. I finish up the first round of photos and tell everyone I'm going for a quick break.

"Quick breaks" are a common occurrence with this sort of work. Staring at a literal corpse can be quite upsetting to some. But, most people use it as an excuse to have a cigarette. I've never understood that nasty habit. If you want to kill yourself, throw yourself into a woodchipper. At least the rest of us will get a nice show of it. You pathetically sucking a cancer stick ten times a day doesn't look attractive. Or cool. Or interesting.

A guy named David walks outside without even glancing at me. We don't know each other much, but it's not like I want to know him anyway. He pulls out a cigarette and feels each of his pockets.

Don't, I think.

He feels again for a few seconds. Our eyes meet.

"Hi Ethan, you don't have a . . . ?" He gestures his cigarette at me like an empty bottle waiting to be topped up.

"I don't smoke."

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At this moment, I imagine myself crushing his stupid, gormless fucking face with a bolder. Then I become happy again.

“Oh right, sorry, I thought you might have smoked.”

You thought? Why, because I look ill? Do I look sick to you? I'm a freak?

A car comes. It pulls over and the door opens. It's Nathan Hall again, and he's looking focused. I'd admire him if he wasn't my technical superior. He sees me and starts his short journey toward the entrance. I'm standing there looking uninterested as David and I do nothing. David's gone for a smoke—he has no lighter for the activity, and I've come out for air I no longer need. Sometimes I don't even know if *I'm* telling myself the truth.

He walks past and through the door. I would explain the situation, but he doesn't stop to say hello. I take one gulp of the least putrid air I can find and head back inside.

Nathan is gathering everyone around—I wonder what for.

“All right boys, listen up. I know you've all been working so damn hard, but the chief is coming in for one of his little lectures. The case just got a whole lot trickier, and we've got to look busy. What's everyone got?” Nathan looks around as everyone falls silent. He spots me again through the crowd of about eight. “Ethan, you catch that?”

“Yes,” I say in a monotone voice.

Silence again for another few seconds as I get some looks from the group.

Why did he call me out? He's not the boss of me. Okay, maybe he is, but the chief is above him—so the point I'm trying to get to is fuck him.

I don't have authority over others. It's not like in the movies

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where the rogue detective comes onto the scene and takes no shit. That balls-out detective tells all the puny cops what to do and how to do it. This isn't how it works in the real world, and I can abide by that. But, sucking up to Nathan will not work for me.

“Good. Carry on.” Nathan strides past everyone as they all clamber back to their original positions. As he does, he whispers to me, “Can I have a moment?”

“Uh . . . okay,” I say.

He leads me outside again, starts talking. “Ethan, I’m just gonna say it. What’s happening? You’ve turned up late to work—”

“Wasn’t late.”

“With bags under your eyes, you’re as pale as a ghost, and it looks like you haven’t eaten in days. What’s going on?”

I didn’t want to give him my sob story, I never like to be the center of attention—I’m more of a background kind of person. Always have been.

“It’s not important. What is important, is that my work is sufficiently produced.”

“I know, but I’m concerned about you. I’ve worked with you for years, and I hate to see you like this. Tell me man, I want to get answers.” When Nathan speaks like this, he seems a lot older. I mean, he literally is older than me. Nearly in his fucking forties for Christ’s sake.

It’s different this time. Like he’s gone from being thirty-nine to just over the edge. It’s hard to explain.

“My dad has cancer,” I spurt out, wanting a quick explanation. I’m dumb to think this is going to be “quick.”

Nathan’s face turns to stupor. Like I’ve told HIM that HE has cancer. Pathetic. You don’t know me, you’re not my friend,

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cut the routine and shoot me the apology. You think that's right, don't you?

"Oh . . . I'm so sorry Ethan, I had no idea." He puts his hand on my shoulder, and my brain screams with every one of its synapses.

GET OFF YOU OVERPAID FUCK.

He takes his hand off after an embarrassing forced tear. "If you need any time off j—"

Shut the fuck up, you idiot. I don't need to get paid to sit on my ass and do nothing.

"No, no, no," I cut him off with. "I'm okay, I just need a few days, that's all."

A few days is too long, but I'll give a convincing lie. Most stains on humanity take weeks and weeks off when a loved one dies. People die; get over it. You're going to die. Your mother's going to die. Your father's going to die. Your siblings are going to die. Your children are going to die. Your children's *children* are going to die. Everybody dies. It is the thing we're best at. Dying and reproducing like a bunch of self-sufficient walking parasites; afraid to extinguish forever.

A sausage-linked pile of fingers jolts me back into real life. Whose hand is this behind me? It's the chief, and he's looking sentimental. He has a ring of fat around his neck, and his balding head is shiny. He looks like someone . . . Alfred Hitchcock; one of the most iconic directors ever. He looks just like him, except make him twice as big. That's the blob I'm currently looking at.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he says.

Were you listening too? I must have been caught in a trance of disdain for humanity again. Nathan and the chief are surrounding me. It's like they're going to push me to the floor and hack

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me to bits. All these condolences are angering me. I imagine their voices trapping me like a cage. Me pulling a handgun from my pocket, then shooting myself in the brain. Blood sprays onto the wall behind as words disappear. Words like “saddened,” “sorry,” “my regards,” “recover.” They slowly fade and my lifeless body topples to the floor. My anxiety clears. I’m back in reality.

“After you’re all done here, go home, get some rest, and come back refreshed, okay?” the chief says.

I nod, not knowing what I’m agreeing to 100 percent.

Weeks go by. My time off came and went in a femtosecond. I now sit in my office, trying to get work done. Nathan barges in and gets me to the main room with everyone else in the department. Since the Mrs. Freishaw incident took place, it looks like Nathan and the Hitchcockian Eddie Lains have some news. They’re having an intense discussion. It looks like another debriefing is coming our way. Nathan gets back to his usual soapbox, demanding attention for a speech.

“I’m glad to see everyone working their asses off, but we’ve just got some new information from forensics. It seems we have ourselves a suspect: a man named ‘Gustavo Ornes.’ ”

My heart skips a beat. I know this man.

“He’s clearly dangerous,” he says. “Has ties to the Mexican cartel. We’ve had similar cases in the past with this scumbag identified, as some of you may know. Fortunately for us, we now have a lead. He left a lot of prints—you know what that means—he’s been pretty sloppy with his operation. Now, personally, I’m not gonna rest until I see this monster behind bars. If everyone here works that extra bit harder, we’ll have him before the end

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of the month. I promise you. Am I right, boys?”

Everyone cheers. I hear a “Hell yeah!” and a “Damn right!”
Hell no. Damn wrong.

I take a shower. My muscles ease and give way to a shiver through my spine. The water dribbles down my curved face and joins the other droplets.

After cleaning myself, I turn the shower off and grab my crispy towel.

My house is tremendously warm; my main luxury in life.

A modern wardrobe stands open. My own personal Canon camera is here. An expensive one with a high-quality lens and an impressive maximum resolution. It’s not as fancy as my work one, but I use it for outdoor photography as a personal hobby.

A phone from the desk drawer to my right begins to vibrate violently. I open the drawer and answer the call. It’s a shitty flip phone, but the whole point of these is so you don’t have any threatening evidence on your main phone. Something disposable. A business/burner phone, if you will. I wouldn’t be caught carrying it around, so I keep it in a discreet location.

“Hello?”

“He wants to see you in two hours,” the other voice says.

“Okay.” I hang up and put the phone back into the drawer, tucked under a crevice.

I grab everything I’ll need, including my wallet, car keys, and watch. I place them near the door on a small table so I don’t forget them.

My day keeps getting more and more hectic, it seems.

The hour passes as I’m sitting in my computer chair.

The desktop isn’t on, but I’m passing the time as I’ve mostly

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done some extra filing into the murder case a few weeks ago. Although I'm not required nor paid to do this additional work at home, I suppose you may consider me a "workaholic." I find that word to be mainly used by single thirty-nine-year-old women who have twelve cats and fucked ovaries. All they have left are those cats and a job. With me, I take immense pride in my craft. I also don't have a completely hopeless life for a twenty-eight-year-old guy.

I look at the big clock at the back of my room and notice the time. The journey will take around forty-five minutes, but I want a head start. I sit up and yank the USB stick from my PC; I'll need it for later.

I grab all the items I had prepared earlier, including my cheap plastic watch with a fake silver watch head.

It's completely black outside as I close my front door behind me; it's eliminating the last of the light; enclosing me in darkness. I lock the door and continue.

Check, check, check, check.

Not much traffic on the road and I'm struggling to stay awake. It's about ten in the afternoon, and I can feel myself beginning to tire, but I can't sleep. Not yet. The previous week's events have knocked my sleep schedule into mayhem.

I pull up onto the drive. A dingy warehouse stands in the middle of a shady underpass, with a train passing close by. It charges my inner battery by a tiny amount. We're on a big plot of dirt and dying weeds. The address of this secretive warehouse is on Proxton Road. You'll remember that too, won't you?

Two cars are already parked: a giant SUV with a luxurious hood ornament on the front (a silver bull). The other is a red convertible that is magnificent in its own right. Too bad it belongs

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to a certain somebody I'd heard about once today.

I see Rodrigo standing by the door. Some immigrant, who's just a glorified bouncer for my other . . . work partners. He's chubby and Mexican. At least he has a job.

I head up to Rodrigo. He looks me over, chewing some minty gum.

Thank God, I think, I don't have to smell his awful breath.

"Arms out," he says. I put both my arms out and move my legs from each other. He pats me down for a few seconds. "Clear."

I nod and move on.

Asshole.

The metal door opens with a metallic *gong* echoing through the colorful corridor ahead. There's 90 percent black and 10 percent red.

Walking casually toward the light, it feels as if I'm crossing to the other side. A greeting from an old friend named "melancholia."

There's a poker game happening, with three men playing.

"The Boss" as some people call him, is sitting to the left of where I've entered. His real name is George Tanson. He's chomping on a comically large cigar, grinning. He's a big guy. I would say obese, but he also has a burliness to him that displays a grizzly demeanor. His sliver suit is turning rouge with the strange light above the men. His face is dull and expressionless. Shaven head and a deceivingly friendly goatee beard on his face. His pearly whites are showing through the cigar, but it doesn't look like a happy smile—more of a maniacal one. His eyes are completely white, except for the brown and black dot in the middles. Shit-faced on cocaine or some other drug.

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Straight in front of me is a black-haired scrawny kid. Can't be any older than twenty, probably still in his teens. I'm pretty sure his name's Mathew. He's not particularly important because of his features. What makes him interesting, is he's George's nephew.

Lucky kid.

Then we move on to Gustavo Ornes. The man of the hour. The one we're so desperately looking for. Gus is what your typical henchman would look like. Bomber jacket, gold chains, black sunglasses (indoors, mind you). He's Latino too like the other caveman outside.

George breaks his gaze from the poker game to look at me.

"Sit," he says.

Even though he's looking me in the eyes, I'm pretty sure no one's home; like he's being remote-controlled by some other being.

I sit down in a tacky garden chair. It creaks under my weight, and it feels like it's going to self-destruct, but I steady myself.

"Do you have it?" Hard New Jersey accent for George (that of course isn't regional to Chicago). Think Tony Soprano with (somehow) more swearing.

"Yes." I pull out the USB stick and place it onto the table, away from the poker cards.

"Good. Care for a game?"

"No, I've never been much of a fan," I say. Gus sniggers. "What?"

"Nothing." He smiles.

"Having fun with your game? I imagine you're the master of it now."

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He doesn't laugh. Instead, he manages a nod. "I am actually, man. You should play sometime, it'd be fun to see you get your ass handed to you." He pushes out another chuckle.

"I don't have a particularly good poker face. But hey, chess? I'm just wondering if the one cog turning in your head could handle it, Gustavo."

"Shut up dumb-ass." The insult is like a teenager talking.

"Oh, I'm the dumb-ass?"

"Yeah, you are. Now shut the fuck up, I'm going for a piss," Gus says as he leaves his seat and heads to the bathroom.

"George, a word?" I say.

"Ethan, you don't have to worry about Matty. He's a good kid."

I eye Mathew. He seems sheepish to dare cross me. George knows this too.

"Right. Well, someone we know is being put on a watch-list," I say.

"What are you talkin' 'bout?" George asks.

"Our *amigo* in the bathroom is being hunted for the murder of Mrs. Freishaw. We have the name 'Gustavo Ornes' up on the board, just above a nice little mugshot of his pretty face." This gives me great pleasure to say.

Gus returns from his bathroom break, and sees George shaking with rage.

"You fuckin' idiot." George slides his cards onto the table—his gold rings glistening in the light. "You absolute fuckin' idiot!"

George's face is pure contempt, while Gus's looks both worried and unbelieving as he returns to his seat. Mathew is observing in the background, keeping silent.

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The murderer in question speaks up. “Okay. I-I—It got outta hand! I didn’t *want* to kill her. She attacked me . . .”

“With what, her fuckin’ purse? Jesus Christ, I paid you to get me the valuables, not to fuckin’ kill the bitch. And then you lie to my fuckin’ face and say the job went off without a hitch. What he do?” George turns to me, asking his question.

“Stabbed her.” Even greater pleasure fills me up.

“You.” George turns his head from me and back to Gus, he points a finger with multiple rings toward him. “You . . .”

“Moron?” I say.

“Yeah, moron, I’m gonna have to keep you outta the game for a while, and you’ve gotta keep your fuckin’ head down. They know your fuckin’ name, and they know your dumb, fuckin’, face. Fuckin’ m-moron, dumb c-c-cunt . . . fuck,” he stutters out the swears of rage toward Gus.

“I-I-I I’m sorry.” He hangs his head in shame.

If you haven’t already guessed, Gus is a petty thief. Of course, he isn’t the best at it, but he has his moments, I won’t deny it.

“Game’s over guys,” George says.

We all exit our seats at delayed moments. George speaks to me and Mathew. “You two,” He points two fingers out. “Office. Now.” We both walk to his side of the table, but George steps over to Gus who’s standing completely still. He’s like a deer in the headlights. George grabs his arm tightly. “If I hear anything like this again, I’ll cut your fuckin’ head off and put it up on my wall.”

Gus nods.

I wink at him. He turns and walks out.

George’s office is organized, which is a blatant lie. Paper

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piles stacked on tables. Empty and full beer bottles lined up in random orders. A dartboard placed on a cement wall with its wallpaper peeling down—tattered edges to boot. A small refrigerator that looks like it's broken. He opens it. There's junk food and takeout with fizzy drinks shelved without care. It even looks as if the fridge acts as an air conditioner too. Cigar trays with week-old ash burned into the hardened, crumbly mountains.

George is now sitting—an icy-cold beer in his hand, almost frozen. He pops off the cap and takes a swig as it bubbles over.

“Ahh,” he says. “You guys . . . ?”

“No, thanks,” we say in unison.

He shrugs and places his drink on his dusty desk. “Matty, could you go pick up my jacket from the car? I left it in there. Completely forgot.” He throws his keys to Mathew, and before I know it, it's me and George in the room.

With a few seconds of silence, George reaches under his desk, pulls a laptop out, and switches it on. Pushing the USB stick into the port, he clicks the arrow keys down and squints.

“All right Ethan, I'm real impressed with what ya givin' me, and all I'm asking you to do, is to keep at it. These're good, the freaks will love this, I'm tellin' ya.” He moves the laptop clockwise, revealing the image. A man is hunched with a shotgun wound to the chest.

A true artist.

This is illegal; you know that already. But, I'm in a position where I can get extra cash on the side. I don't see myself as a criminal, but more of an entrepreneur. I take my kill shots and sell them to George, who then sells them to the disgusting nutcases who enjoy them. It's a win-win-win.

“Why thank you. I'm really enjoying working together, and

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I think we've got potential to generate even more business," I say.

"We sure do kid."

I haven't worked with George long, maybe a month or two, and I don't completely despise him. He asks what he wants from me, and when I deliver, I get paid. No bullshit. He doesn't want to know me personally, and he doesn't act like I'm his friend. The same goes both ways. I believe we're getting closer as partners. Sometimes, we have our moments.

I'm so sorry, Ethan.

He reaches around under his desk again and pulls out an envelope.

"Three hundred," he says while handing it to me and closing the laptop. I open the envelope. Glorious green cash is inside. Notes after notes after notes. I can get used to this.

I seal it back up, thank George, and slip it into my pocket.

"Also, here's my discreet contact information," he continues. "You've proven yourself to be a very useful asset—but don't call for anything unless it's important." He passes over a small sheet of paper with the massive numbers printed on them. I've earned two phone numbers recently. Look at me.

Mathew cracks the flimsy door open behind me.

"I couldn't find it, where did you say you—"

"I found it, I found it. It was on the back of my chair, I must have forgotten." The words come out as, "It was on tha back a my chaai."

"Oh . . . okay, well do you want anything else?"

"Yeah, get me another Buck Fire, would ya?" George takes another swig of his beer; downs most of it.

"Buck Fire . . . the red ones?"

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“Yeah, the red ones, the only ones I fuckin’ smoke.”

Sure, George is killing himself like all the other idiots, but he’s often joked about death. He isn’t afraid of it from what I can tell. I’m not making a special exception, but when you have a certain level of respect for someone, you become more acquainted with flaws and shortcomings.

“Do you have to get anywhere?” George asks me while fingering the empty glass bottle.

“Not really,” I say.

George pauses for a few seconds and looks at me. “Go home kid, you look like shit.” He smiles.

I nod and leave.

It’s still dark in the warehouse, but I’ve become more adjusted to it now. I bump into Mathew on my way out, and he stops to talk to me. I almost involuntarily grab him by the throat, but I stop myself.

I can’t see anything. I might as well be keeping my eyes closed, but I know it’s Mathew in front of me.

“Don’t trust Gustavo. And don’t trust Azaz either,” he whispers. A moment of silence falls, and he carries on walking.

I’m confused. If this kid has any brain cells, he’d know I don’t trust Gus already. We don’t see eye to eye, so why would he tell me that? And Azaz is a name I’ve never heard in my life. If it even is a person’s name at all.

“Why? And who’s Azaz?”

He stops. “You’ll find out soon.”

I’m not sure which question he directed that chilling statement to. I assume he’s referring to the first, however.

It’s turned cold outside now, and I can see my breath forming

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into white mist.

Rodrigo is sitting on a metal foldout chair close to the door. I'm not sure how he can fall asleep in temperatures like this. It must be the thick layer of fat surrounding his bones, heart, and lungs. I walk back to my car, noticing the SUV is still parked. As I ignite my car's engine, my dashboard lights up. The time is 9:45 p.m.

I drive for a while, making my way back home the same way I got here, before noticing a headlight tailing me from the rear. I need to stop—and soon.

And then an opportunity presents itself. A bright light is in front of me.

Bill-House Diner?

It is, and it's close.

I park my car in the parking lot and lock it up.

It's an old place, hasn't been renovated recently. A few tables and seat replacements, but it's still a shithole.

I enter through the swinging doors and examine the area. A family is sitting at a booth. The kids are jumping around like little hell spawns while the mother absentmindedly tries to control them. The father (I assume he is anyway) tries to lick his beloved's tonsils in the process. They look about eighteen or nineteen. Well done for ruining your life, you idiots. At least they've completed their life's purpose, but this isn't the right age for kids. It's social suicide.

Now the couple's little boy is trying to wrestle his sister to the floor. He manages to do it, but also smacks his head on the booth's wooden corner. I try to hold in my laughter as the lovers attempt to comfort their special snowflake.

An elderly man is standing by a dilapidated jukebox trying

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to get some song on there to work. He's wearing a leather coat, and his gray hair seems to be intact for now. I might just fill my pockets with rocks if I get to that age without kicking the bucket due to prostate cancer. Maybe that type is in the family too. Oh, that would be a joy.

Two cops are sitting by the counter in front. Both in uniform, also. They're not the same ones from earlier, but they're from my department. I hope they don't see me.

The waitress ahead is answering a call on her smartphone. Great.

As I get closer to the counter, I can read her name tag on her chest.

Peggy.

She's still chattering away to some dipshit over the other end of her call.

"Yah. Yes. I *knooooow!*" Her voice is so high-pitched, and her exaggerated "*knooooow*" hurts my eardrums. I'm starting to feel this is a bad idea for the plain reason of obtaining a headache.

"Ahem." I clear my throat. She doesn't notice.

"And then," she continues, "he was like, can you *gooooo*? And I was like *noooooo* way!" She laughs to herself and chews some bubblegum.

Is she trying to piss me off?

I'm beginning to get impatient. If this bitch doesn't serve me soon, then I'm grabbing the young couple's child (either one will do), and I'm going to throw the little shit into the jukebox. Then I'll get lit up like the fourth of July by the cops to my side.

Instead of all that, I start to count down from ten. "Ten, nine, eight, seven," I say.

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Her eyes dart to me.

“I’m gonna have to *goooo*, okay? Love you.”

“Five, four, three—”

“Can I help you?”

“Ahh, quality service.”

She rolls her eyes. “What would you like?” she asks in a fed-up tone.

“I’ll have a cheeseburger.”

The food gets cold shortly. I don’t touch it, I look around instead, imitating indifference.

As time slowly passes, I notice people are leaving, and new customers are entering. The young family is packing their meals up for leftovers. The two cops are waving goodbye to the ditsy waitress and an older-looking one. The only man left is the leather jacket-wearing guy. An American flag is embossed on his jacket and a biker gang logo is on the back. Useful.

A few more people enter. A man around my age passes. He places his brown coat on the chair where the police officers were sitting. A strange woman who enters and sits at the back of the diner speaks into a chunky phone. And finally, a few more people who stop by for a few minutes come and go.

I check my watch. It’s 10:30 p.m. My house isn’t far away from here—maybe ten minutes away. I think I’ll stick around for a bit and soak in the atmosphere of an atrocious location. Sometimes you’ve got to go through the bad to savor the good even more. But you know that’s not why I’m here.

I lean my head over to the left so I’m facing the window. Cars drive past, two or three every second. Then I see something that doesn’t surprise me at all. A red convertible. A smile cracks on my face.

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This is going to be interesting.

Gus enters the place with a swagger. He goes to the counter and orders something (I don't know what). He walks a few steps before noticing me. I know he's putting an act on.

"Well, well, well," he says with a sadistic tone.

I sigh as he slips himself into the opposite side of the booth I'm sitting at. He's not wearing his pair of sunglasses anymore, and he reeks of marijuana.

"Is there a reason you tailed me here?"

"Smart boy."

Gus is looking shifty, as if he's going to attack me. He wouldn't be THAT stupid to pounce on me, in front of an audience though, would he?

"I wanted to ask about that little . . ." Gus continues, "incident."

"What are you talking about? George is your boss, and if you're withholding information regarding your job, then he needs to know."

I can see his face getting angry as I talk.

"Bullshit!" He slams the table with the palm of his hand, rattling the cutlery and plate. It grabs some of the customers' attention too, but everyone continues as normal. I admit, it startles me. Men like this have one method of communication, and that's loud verbal insults or violence.

"Why'd you do it?" I say in a curious voice.

He squints at me as if this is some sort of trick. "Well, I don't know how you know about this shit. It on the news or something? The whore tried to hit me, and I wasn't in the mood to fight off some crazy bitch hag. You follow?"

Of course this idiot is too stupid to realize that I got the

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scoop in advance. He won't know my work.

"How old was she? Eighty? Ninety?"

"I don't give a shit!" Gus notices his volume is causing a disturbance, so he lowers his voice on the last word.

Another waitress comes to see the commotion.

"Is everything all right here, gentleman?"

"We're fine," Gus reassures her with a convincing lie.

"All right, keep it down though, hon. Your pancakes will be here soon," she says while walking back behind the counter. Hopefully to call the police.

"Come on, someone like you with your experience . . ." I break the silent tension. I think I'll pay him a small compliment. Retards like this think in good words and bad words. So, I play around with pleasantries like "talented," "gifted," and "master."

"You think this is fucking funny?" *Shit*. "You think I don't know you're trying to dodge the fucking bullet?"

Interesting phrase to use.

Gus reaches his hand inside his coat pocket. 9mm.

I'm beginning to sweat, but I need to calm down. I can't look weak. The first sign of it, and he'll strike. I can't believe he saw past my compliments. Maybe I have under-analyzed him and he might not be as dumb as I think. Still dumb, just not *as* dumb.

"So you're gonna shoot me? In a packed diner?" I ask.

"We're just having a chat." He places his gun back into his pocket and fills his hands with my paid-for food. He takes a bite of the cheeseburger and makes a so-so face. He throws it back and wipes his chin.

"Fine, let's 'chat' then," I say.

"So, you sure made a dumb-ass outta me, huh. That what

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you fucking do to your work partner?”

“I already told you that I had to do it. Also, I’m not your partner—we don’t work together. I provide goods, you provide valuables.”

“Same thing.”

“Well . . .” I look up to the ceiling, exaggerating my word. “I deliver different valuables.”

“What valuables?”

“That’s none of your concern, now—”

“Of course it’s my fucking concern. Don’t tell me what is and isn’t my concern.” He’s got the look of a madman.

I’m intrigued on whether he’ll gun me down right here and now. I’ve always taken him as an odd person, but not a maniac.

“Look, bring it up with George, I—”

He cuts me off again. “Do I need to remind you what I got?” He taps the left side of his pocket twice with the flat of his hand.

Right now, I need to divert the conversation, but it looks like he’s not giving in. I can’t mention the idea of going outside or leaving. This diner is my safe haven right now. Everything outside might as well be made out of lava. It occurs to me that this is the second time I’ve been placed in a precarious position. With Finn and Ronnie however long ago, what worked then? I told them I was a police officer, but would Gus buy it? If he did, would it save me or make things worse? Motion slows—the clock is ticking. I keep my composure, even though this is heading in a different direction to last time. I need something to get me out of this, but I can’t see any signs.

You’re better than this. Why are you getting worked up over some pothead, taco vendor? Moron. Imbecile. Parasite.

“You need to get rid of that gun. None of this will end well.

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Shooting me here is a drastic solution to a short-term problem,” I say. I don’t cower or lose my voice.

Gus looks befuddled, as if I’ve read the whole play to Macbeth in a Kermit the Frog voice.

“You think I don’t have the balls to do it? I’ll shoot you in the fucking head, bro.”

Think, think!

I scan the area, looking for my saving grace, and I think I collect enough material to go on.

“You see that woman behind you?” I nod my head back to the waitress from earlier—her hands still clutched to something. I’m betting it’s still the phone. “As soon as you make a move, she’s going to call the police. A station is five to ten minutes from here. Hell, some are probably on their way back now. Two officers were here about five minutes ago, and oh! It looks like one of them left their jacket. Interesting.”

“Bullshit.” Gus brushes off the statement.

I see a coat near one of the seats. I’m not sure if it did belong to one of the officers, but I need to convince him I’m telling the truth.

“No, no. Go ask the waitress, she said goodbye on their way out.”

He turns around and checks the environment for police officers.

Luckily, Gus doesn’t know I’m one too. Somebody like this is unpredictable. They can ruin your livelihood and send you behind bars before you can say “damn.”

George knows what I do, but that’s because we both have leverage over each other. We’re like two cards stacked against each other; one falls, so does the other one. He knows if he

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speaks to anyone about what I do, he'll get the shit-end of the stick too.

"I don't give a fuck about no cops." I can see he's bluffing. He doesn't want to get caught. I'm now back in control of the situation.

How the tables can turn.

"Spot that old man by the jukebox?"

He twists his head to the left and stares.

"What about him?" he asks.

"You think you're the only one who's packing?" I raise my thin eyebrows as he looks back at me.

I can see he's taking me at face value.

"Oh, and look at the woman at the back, she's already on the phone too. Chances aren't looking too great, huh. Put the gun away."

He pushes his pistol into his pocket once again and puts his arm back to his side.

"Why are you here?" I ask. "I can think of a lot of things, but none of them make too much sense. Ah!" It clicks into my head. "You *were* going to kill me, just not here. I bet you were hoping I'd go home, and as I was unlocking my door; you'd sneak in behind me and shoot me in the back. Maybe you planned to knock on my door and stab me up like that old woman. But, as you saw me go into the diner, you waited for a while until getting bored and stopping by as some kind of coincidence."

"Shut. Up," He clenches his fists and goes red in the face.

I've called his bluff and he's lost. I can see the defeat in his eyes, and I know he can do nothing to win his puny game. Something is still there though, a faint flicker of retribution in his head.

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He wants to make me look like a fool so bad, but he can't find a way to do it. It's becoming impossible.

"Look what you've done," he says with a hateful tone. "If you had to do half the shit I've done, you'd be gone, man."

I don't know what he means. I know he most likely had to fight off some rival gangs in his youth. It's his dog of a mother and rapist of a father's fault for conceiving this utter sack of failure and disappointment.

"You grew up on the street, probably had to earn some kind of respect off a cousin or something so he'd get you in his 'crew.' "

"What do you know?" he says. "You think you know what I'm like, but you don't. But I know you. Living in the big city must have been real hard. Mommy and Daddy divorce? But oh well, got your college education. You don't know shit about no one. What a fucking joke."

It's funny how he thinks he's a big deal. Like I have to earn his respect, but he doesn't have to earn mine.

Parasite, I think once again, not sure if the thought is directed toward me or him.

"Listen, listen, listen," I say, "I don't care about your life, I don't care about what you do. What I do care about, is if we're going to have a problem professionally. If that's the case, I need to step in. Like I said, we don't work together, but we work close enough that your problems can maybe get in the way of my work. So, here's what's going to happen . . ." I lean in closer. "You're going to go home, you're going to forget this happened, and you're going to never see me again. I will not associate with you, I will not work with you, and you will never follow me again—or in the words of George . . ." I pause for a moment to give more

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of a dramatic effect on my theatrical performance. “I’ll cut your head off and put it up on my wall.”

Gus looks pale. I thought he’d show more resistance, but he crumbles inside. He becomes speechless. Like a toddler watching keys jangle. Or a man who’s had a lobotomy; looking at the clouds after he’s shit himself.

I tap the table twice with the back of my knuckle, stand up, and make my way to the exit. The waitress watches on, placing the phone back down. Another waitress places syrup-soaked pancakes by the trembling Gus. The elderly man takes a sip of some hard booze and winces while watching me walk. The suspicious woman gives me a quizzical look too. I’m the man.

I wake up early. I managed to get home on time and get around eight hours of sleep. It was expected that I wouldn’t get disturbed by Gus, so I didn’t wake out of anxiety.

I perform my same-old morning routine. I get dressed, showered, eat breakfast, brush my teeth, and head to work.

It’s a grueling day of paperwork after paperwork. Filing my photographs for later inspection by other detectives and forensics. I note down every little clue I could pick up, and after a long day, it’s eventually closing time at the office. But, as many people know: work never stops.

At home, I need to see George. I dig around in my coat pocket from earlier and see the paper. I go upstairs and bust out the second phone in my drawer again. The phone rings, and after a few seconds, the call is answered. Complete silence, but it has connected.

“George?” I say.

“Ethan, what?” His voice has gone back to the gravelly tone

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I'm used to.

"I need to see you, it's about Gus."

"Meet me at the spot discussed last week." The call goes flat.

The spot discussed is a park close to my house. When I first met him, he gave strict rules to follow, and what would happen if I needed to see him. Before, it wasn't possible, due to the risk of me being a rat. I'd been open that I was an officer, and I made it clear I wasn't interested in arresting him. There are hundreds of cops in this city that perform illegal activities. What can I say, I wanted my share of the underworld. I'm not dedicated to anything more than myself. I work for *me* and *me* only.

I start to think of all the possibilities of what could happen to Gus. That putrid animal is going to pay, in one way or another.

The park is becoming less active now; most people are going home. This is the best time to meet—during the graveyard shift.

The park is open twenty-four hours a day. Security guards take their shifts patrolling the park. This means I'm completely safe from harm most of the time. No one would be stupid enough to attempt to attack someone in a guarded public area.

Maybe Gus would.

I wander the park, taking in the beautiful scenery. Birds chirp and flutter overhead. The air smells of freshly cut grass and perfume-scented flowers.

And wilted grass with burned tires.

I remember being a child and being taken to parks with my parents. I think we did anyway. Sometimes, I remember it differently. They still *were* the better days. Recently, everything's

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gone irregular, but not for the complete worst.

I was bullied in school a lot—relentlessly teased and ridiculed. Growing up in Los Angeles, I spent most of my days secluded from the outside world, just focusing on hobbies. I was never interested in the more social aspect of learning and school. I know, it's the typical repressed kid who eventually goes and shoots up a high school. It's not like that though. Sure, I was made fun of and had my fair share of assaults, but I would always keep my seething inside and let my imagination seek punishment.

I'd play with my camera, everywhere I'd go. I used to take pictures of everything. From abandoned warehouses to the woodland areas at night. Me testing out the aperture and exposure settings was like the popular kids trying out for the football team. I could find no greater joy than in photography. Other kids were frightened of the dark, but I learned to love it.

I particularly remember one night when I was lurking deep in the woods. I was about thirteen at the time, and I was a scrawny kid with a baseball cap. My bright orange pylon jacket was the only thing that kept me warm. Tall trees stood high above me like giants. I held my camera in my hand. It was one of those Polaroid cameras that wouldn't show the pictures until they were processed—but it was a good quality one.

My legs brushed the tall grass as the light behind me faded (like it is now in the park). I began to wonder whether I should head back.

No, I thought, I don't want to run scared.

This was the training process for not fearing the darkness. It helped me stop being afraid of *monsters*.

I wandered for so long, but I eventually found something of

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interest: a barn. This baffled me. I didn't understand why a barn would be placed in the middle of a random, wooded area with no open land. It just looked weird.

I sneaked, listening for any strange sounds. All I heard was the rustling of leaves and the chirping of grasshoppers. It was getting dark, to the point where I couldn't see far ahead anymore, but luckily, I came prepared. I slowly placed my hand into my pocket and pulled out a flashlight. The yellow beam pierced the darkness like a spike through fabric. I pointed the light at the old barn and saw a door. I remember being terrified. My heart was beating out of my chest and my breath was becoming quick and sporadic. I was a naive little fool who was no good for anyone, so I locked myself away like a *freak*. Little did I know what responsibilities I'd have to encounter and deal with. I tried the door, hoping it would be locked, but it wasn't. The door swung open and made a loud thud.

That damned door. Better keep it locked, or you know what will happen.

The area behind me was looking creepy, so I entered the barn instead of turning back.

When inside, I searched around. The wooden barn was empty. I expected to see haystacks or some abandoned animals. But it was just a big room with cracks in the walls—letting in whistling winds. A strange smell was in the room too, and not a pleasant one. As I walked around inside, I spotted something odd on the floor . . . : a shadowed object in front of me. I took careful steps toward it, making sure I didn't generate too much noise. As I got closer and closer, the wind picked up and whistled into my ear through the cracks and decay. I stepped near enough and saw the mess showcased before me. A man lay curled up, with a pale

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face and bloody shirt. He'd been hit by something. I wasn't sure if it was a bullet or a melee weapon, but it had done some damage. The pool of blood had formed around his frontal side—near his chest. I was shocked to see this, but the odd thing was, I wasn't scared, I wasn't disturbed, I wasn't disgusted; I was Intrigued. Questions popped into my head, “Who is this man? Why was he killed? When did he die? Is he dead? What should I do?”

Instincts took over and I looked around for something to use on him. Something to move him without touching his bacteria-filled corpse. I twisted my head left and right, and I noticed a hammer.

There.

I ran to the tool to pick it up. I could see the cream-colored handle. I was planning to use it to poke the body, but it was drenched all over with fluid. I wasn't going to pick that up. Besides, I'd found the murder weapon.

I turned back and shined my flashlight on the human fully. More blood, but it was dried, with it being ingrained into the wooden boards. This murder must not have happened recently. I started to think; I needed to tell the police of this incident. But I didn't have a phone or a quick way of getting their attention.

I walked back to the body and looked at it for a while. The man was thin and young. I knew what I had to do now, and the idea excited me. I was ashamed for thinking it at the time, but I wanted to be praised for my actions. I could have been on the news or could have been given a prize for finding this man. Maybe they'd find the murderer because of me and I'd be the hero. Or maybe, I told myself all that because it was too sick; too twisted to believe I may have been looking forward to what I was about to do.

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I placed my flashlight onto the floor, and let the light shoot out from its plastic and metal insides. I started taking picture after picture. Everything captured instantly and stored in my pockets. My thought process was that I was helping the police do their job, so they'd have to pay me for the work. I had invaluable evidence of not only a murder, but the murder weapon. This was an unheard-of event. A thirteen-year-old assisting in solving a murder case? This was only in the realms of fiction!

Time passed, and at this point in the story, the moon was creeping over the horizon. Light began to spill in through the splits in the side of the barn. White soft light.

I was happy with the pictures I had taken, so I grabbed my flashlight and began to go back to the entrance/exit. I was so giddy with my work that I was whistling with joy. Nothing bothered me at that time—as I pushed any bothersome thought of mental illness away. I helped the police, so what I did was normal.

I wasn't worried I might have gotten lost in the woods, or that I'd seen a corpse for the first time in my life. All that mattered was I had done something with an opportunity presented before me.

But I heard something that froze me. Something that made me stop whistling . . . : whispers. I switched my flashlight off and listened as the voices were getting closer.

“You saw it?” a high voice asked.

“Yeah, I'm not crazy,” another said.

“Would you two be quiet?” a third added.

Three people heading this way. I looked around to find an escape route. All the wall breakages were too tight to climb through.

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The only door was the one in front of me (and where the voices were coming from). I panicked and squinted my eyes to see in the dark. The moonlight helped me adequately. A ladder was hidden in the corner, and as I looked up, I saw it led onto a small platform. I snuck over to the ladder and made my way up—I needed to get out of sight.

Nothing was up there except cobwebs and dust. I laid down flat on the cold surface and peeked my head over. The door burst open and three figures walked in. One of them was holding a lantern; this lit up the three people enough to distinguish. The one holding the lantern was a nervous, twitchy guy with a denim jacket covering his torso and arms. The other was a female with a long black coat that looked like something a detective would wear. She didn't look like any detective I'd seen in the movies, just some kind of con artist. And the last was a big man with a big winter coat on. He looked like the leader of this hunt. The twitchy one looked around incessantly. The man and woman appeared to be in their mid-twenties or early thirties. The butch, older man looked a bit higher in age. Late thirties/early forties.

“I swear I saw a light,” the twitchy guy said.

“You said that last time,” the woman said.

“Just check anyway,” the older man ordered.

The group searched around for a while, not doing a great job. Finally, they decided on calling it quits. A sturdy pillar covered the ladder, making it unseeable. If someone were to poke their head around the wall jutting from the box shape of the barn, it would still be difficult to spot.

“See anything?” the leader said.

“No,” the nervous, younger-sounding one said. He seemed disappointed.

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“Nope,” the woman said, also. She sounded more disinterested than anything.

“Why didn’t you get rid of the body, you piece of shit?” the older man asked the twitchy one a rhetorical question. “Clean this shit up now, I’m going back to tell Frank. You got this.”

I crawled back as the leader left. The other two did as he commanded. I was concerned about this person named “Frank” at the time. Who was he, and was he coming too?

A lot of time passed, and after an even longer time of bickering from the two, they both left as well. Alone again, I breathed a sigh of relief.

This changed everything at the moment. The authorities might not have believed the story. I climbed back down the ladder, scanning my surroundings for any sign of another member of the group. No one. The body was gone and the blood was cleaned completely. It looked like they used bleach. The hammer was gone too. I was hoping they’d have maybe missed it, but that would have been stupid.

So after that, I left. I ran back to my house, and every day I put off seeing the police about it. Instead, I kept it to myself for years.

I don’t know why I didn’t tell anyone, but I thought it’d get me into some kind of trouble now instead of getting recognition. It’s like the adrenaline had worn off and reality had set in. I’d always debate in my head with such things like, “They’d think you’re faking it. No DNA could be found.” All these little statements put me off. I started to hate myself, thinking I was stupid to not tell anyone, and that I helped in the murder.

I’d like to think it’s why I became a detective or forensic photographer, but it isn’t. It wasn’t some act of nobility. I was

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interested in photography before I ever knew what I wanted to do, but I fell into a different side of it with my job. I wanted to be an artist. A man taking pictures of subject matter that made people feel introspective. But, it didn't happen.

So why am I telling you this now? I suppose I'm trying to pass the time. Or I'm opening a door that needs to be opened. Maybe I'm trying to get used to that, so others can open as well.

Now, the photographs lay undisturbed in my camera satchel—in my cupboard. They will stay there, as a reminder. A reminder of a time when I didn't run away. I might have hidden, but I did what I needed to do.

It feels like I've been walking forever, and the park never ends. I'm stuck on a train of thought and I have my ticket sewn onto my soul.

I get taken back to reality when a jogger passes me by and knocks me on the shoulder, nudging me back. I shake my head as if I'd been for a long sleep, I turn my head behind me to see the jogger hasn't even given a glance back or a "sorry." I give a short breath through my nose, and I imagine stabbing her in the back of the head. I feel better, so I divert myself back to the front. George is sitting on a bench nearby. He spots me too. I sit down next to him and place my hands on my legs.

"So, first day I give you my number and I get a call?" George says while taking a pack of Buck Fire from his pocket. It's the same pack, and he's on the last one. He pulls a lighter out and sparks up.

"You know I wouldn't contact you if it wasn't important."

"Yeah," he agrees. "So, Gus, . . . do we have a problem?"

"I'm not sure. He tried to kill me yesterday, so you be the

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judge.”

“Fuck . . .” His cuss turns into a sigh. “What happened?”

“He followed me home after I left, but luckily I stopped off at a diner, and I guess he got impatient. Came in and sat by me. Started yelling at me. Then he started threatening me with a gun.”

“He had a gun?”

“That’s right.”

George sighs again. “Carry on.” He crosses his arms while taking care not to burn himself with his cigarette.

“He tells me about how I don’t know anything, so I put him in his place. You need to hire more reliable people, George.”

“Listen kid, don’t tell me how to do my job. I’ve been in this game for a long time—I’ve lost people, and I’ve gained people. I know when someone’s a dead weight, and I don’t back away from pricks like this. When someone gets the boot, it’s never me. I’m the one who should be feared. You cross me, and you get fucked, it’s as simple as that.”

At this moment, I admire George a lot more. He doesn’t shy away from the ugly stuff, and he makes sure everybody knows it. This is somebody to be feared by.

“I like your ethic. No one should get in the way of you and what you want.”

“You get it, don’t ya? You could be in this for a long time if you follow orders and don’t fuck up. People like Gus are a liability.”

“You’re one hundred percent right,” I say to him, nodding. “Gustavo is someone who doesn’t get the full picture.”

“Exactly.”

“So what do we do about this . . . threat?”

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“Threat?” George says, unsure of my wording. “I’m not gonna have Gus jeopardize this way of life.”

“He’s putting your livelihood into danger. He’s created this situation now where he could break us all.”

“Gus has been here longer than you.”

“And he’s been more of a liability. Didn’t you say if anything similar happens to that incident with Mrs. Freishaw, you were going to ‘Cut his head off?’ ”

He looks down at the ground with his eyes fixated on the hardened cement. “I don’t make empty threats,” he whispers to himself with bared teeth. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

Do I need to spell it out for you?

“We kill him.”

CHAPTER THREE

DOWNFALL

“That’s great. I’m glad that you have a willingness to collaborate. Think of it as a trust-building exercise.”

“I understand. I’m not s—I understand what you’re trying to do.”

“Good. I think the way we’ll move forward, is we’ll go into depth about your personal life. Your relationship with your father, your relati—”

“No. No I don’t think I want to talk about that.”

I scroll through the webpage. I'm on a cancer-awareness website and I'm not even sure why. Research? Comfort? I can't label it. My dad called me a few days ago asking how I was getting on. I knew he didn't care, but I said I was doing fine and lied. Even though my father is dying, it doesn't feel true. I'm not happy or sad, I'm in the middle. From all the good he's done with me, an equal amount of it has been appalling. I can't even think back to a decent memory with him in years.

Someone knocks on the door, so I close the browser.

I open the door halfway to glance into the entrance. Mr. Freishaw is standing, looking nervous.

"Hello . . . it's Mr. Freishaw, correct?" I say, groggy from staring at the computer screen for a good fifteen minutes.

"Yes. Officer Hall told me to see you," he says in an elderly voice.

"Okay. Come in. Take a seat."

Mr. Freishaw drones on with tears in his eyes and a shake in his hands. Even though I do crime scene photography, that doesn't mean I don't have to get into the nitty-gritty every now

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and again. Budget cuts are a strain. I've worked as a run-of-the-mill officer. Then a detective for a short time—early in my career. So it made perfect sense for the chief to assign me standard forensic photography sometimes. Only a few, however. I'm a detective inside and out now.

This is no legitimate or official interview. This is a sympathy report. Nathan (the utter bastard) must have sent this blithering old fool to me for some peace of mind. I start to wonder about the legality of sending a victim to my address.

“Sir, calm down for me please. We have only the best working on this. I'm sure whoever was responsible for this will be punished to the full extent of the law,” I say.

I'm not wrong. Gus is going to pay for what he did, and I am going to witness his downfall.

“Thank you. I've given all my statements and they can't tell me more. I've tried to help. I-I-I-I don't know what's going on.”

This man is confused and he is aggravating me with his information. It doesn't help one bit. After a few more idiotic statements, he starts to cry. In my head, I'm laughing hysterically, but I console him all the same. “If you'd like a moment, I can get you some water. No one should have to deal with this.” I feel like being sick after spewing that garbage.

“Please, just find this person. I've been married to my wife for fifty-eight years.”

It should be “I was.”

“I promise you that the person in question will be brought to justice. You will be given information as it comes by my . . . colleague, Mr. Hall—who you've spoken to already.”

I've told George to call me between 6:00–11:00 p.m. when he's dealt with our problem.

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Convincing him that Gus needed to be eradicated was easy. Since he knew that the petty thief was losing his edge, he knew he was going to bring us all down. I lost a little respect when George tried to make excuses for Gus, but in the end, it worked out for the better.

“Thank you,” Mr. Freishaw says. His old body lumbers away like a turtle with a mollusk’s bottom. He exits.

I sit back at my desk. It looks windy outside, and the grass is moving back and forth with furious speed. The rain is drizzling down the glass—leaving distinct markings—like a Rorschach. The leaves on the trees are thrashing; they remind me of the thought-tangent I had a few days ago in the park. I’m reminiscent as I recount the thoughts back to myself.

Wind, barn, corpse, killers, hammer, dark.

A buzz in my pocket. The caller ID shows up as “Jessica.” We both have each other’s phone numbers now. After the party at Jason’s house, I gave her mine.

We haven’t seen or spoken to each other since then (unless you count incoherent drunk ramblings at 2:00 a.m.). She refused to take more money from me when I offered to pay for her hotel. I saw her stealing jewels from my father’s dressing room, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t care. As long as I knew this information, I’d have an advantage in some way. I answer the phone.

“Hello?” I say.

“Sup?” Jessica says. Her voice is muffled, and I can tell she’s eating food. What a slob.

“Is this a bad time?”

“Bad time? Why?” She swallows.

I mean, she is a natural after all, I think and stifle not to laugh.

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“Never mind. Why are you calling?” I put the phone between my neck and shoulder.

“Woah don’t get too excited. Just seeing what you were up to. I haven’t heard from you in a bit.”

“Been busy. I have a job.”

“Yeah, being a cop must take forever.”

“It does actually. But I have more than one job.”

“Ohh, another one? What job?” she asks, curiously. “Gigolo? Drug dealer? Pimp?”

“Very funny.”

“Well you’re just a bundle of joy today.”

“Thanks. Hey, do you remember when I said we could be good associates? That I see a bright future with us in it?”

“Yeah, I remember. I thought that was just a joke or something.”

“Not at all,” I ricochet back. “How would you like to meet me later to discuss it?”

“Sure, I guess,” she says. Even though she says sure, I know she isn’t.

“Good, I’ll swing by the hotel after work and—”

“I’m leaving. The hotel.”

“Okay, where are you going?”

“Just a couple of blocks from there. I’ll show you it today—it’s not far.”

“Sounds fair. So I’ll come by the new place in a few hours, all right?”

“All right. Room eighteen by the way. I’ll text you the address”

I wonder how Jessica is going to pay for an apartment. The jewels alone can’t fund a place in the middle of Chicago, right?

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It isn't particularly important, but I will be needing her soon enough. And she owes me anyway.

Hours pass in a montage of photocopies, pen on paper, and bathroom breaks. As my work period ends, I head over to Jessica.

The apartment looks depressing, with hardly any color to the dead, lonely building. I walk up the small steps outside that are leading to the front entrance. The door opens, I slip inside. Some middle-aged guy is sitting at the front desk with a newspaper in his hands. He pays one upward glance at me and sticks his nose back in his paper.

Room eighteen, I remember.

I read the signs displayed on the wall to navigate myself in the right direction.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, ah.

Room eighteen is nailed proudly onto the top of the red door in gold numbers. The silver, shiny doorknob glistens in the light from the sun stalking from the window. I knock on the door three times. It opens after twenty-one seconds.

"Hey," Jessica greets me with. She looks sleepy—like she's woken up from a nap.

She's wearing her sleeping attire: a white tank top and pink panties. Her hair's a frizzy mess too, unlike the straight hair I'd seen her sport before. I feel like I have to look away, but I remain respectable. If she wasn't a prostitute, she'd be more desirable to me.

"Hello."

"Well, come in." I enter the cozy room, examining the environment. "Got beer in the fridge. Oh right, you said you didn't

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drink that one time, right?”

“No, I don’t. But thanks.”

“You must be fun at parties.”

“You said that before.”

The room is unorganized but semi-tidy. At least she’s not a disgusting animal, but there’s room for improvement. I can see dishes in the sink. Cigarette butts are on an ashtray (looks like a takeout box?), and makeup is carelessly placed on a table. The air smells sickly-sweet of perfume and alcohol.

Jessica has gray, hung-over eyelids. There’s a weariness that shows signs of an evident hangover; from some other party she had perhaps partaken in. Or maybe she day drinks. I suppose I should expect this in the den of a whore’s house.

“So, how are you paying for all this now?” I ask while looking over the place.

Jessica takes a can of beer from her mini-fridge and chugs a refreshing load. “Work,” she says, wincing.

“Ahh, well hopefully soon you won’t need to do that anymore.”

“Why’s that, huh?”

“May I?” I gesture my hand toward her dining table. Two chairs stand together on opposite ends.

“Yeah, sure.” She takes her seat and so do I.

“Well, I’ve recently been in contact with an associate of mine, and it seems he has a position open.”

“So this is that job I was asking about?” she asks.

“That’s right.”

“Errrm, okay. What’s the job then?”

“Well, that’s what we’re deciding. I just wanted to let you know that an opportunity is opening soon. Today maybe, in

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fact.”

“Okay, but that still doesn’t answer my question.”

“Do you want the truth, or a fabrication of the truth?”

Now is the make-or-break time, and I’m giving her a chance to be inside my little world. Of course, if she doesn’t cooperate, I’ll have to leave. Then I’ll have another problem on my hands—but it’s up to her now. She stares at me for a few seconds, trying to read my face.

“The truth.”

I adjust myself in my seat and begin. “I take photographs of dead bodies. How I obtain these is not your concern, but I’m sure you can take a guess. I work for an organization that takes them and sells them to a third party. This is the only area I work in. I do not perform any labor in drug trafficking, weapon selling, or any other illegal endeavor. I pride myself on keeping efficient maintenance in this field. I am confident it can be beneficial for the both of us. Depending on the crime and death, it determines the pay. Like a photojournalist, if you will. More morbid.

“Now, I’m going to ask you a yes or no question, and I want you to be perfectly honest with me. Are you willing to work for me? Do everything I ask? If you say yes, then you will begin your process into becoming a full-time member of my workforce. I’d split the money earned with you fifty-fifty. If I decide to change this, then I want no arguments. I, of course, will be fair. If you say no, then I will walk out of this room, and you will never be contacted again. If you try to destroy me and my livelihood, I will just say this: it will not end well for you. So, what is your answer?”

Jessica stares at me for a few seconds before she bursts into jolts of hysteresis—laughing and slamming the table with her

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hand. She tries to speak but is caught off by even more laughter. I wait a moment for her to regain her composure.

“You’re serious?” she asks, breathing in.

“Dead serious.”

“Fuck yeah, I’m in!”

I must admit, I’m quite perplexed. I was not expecting a reaction quite like this. I expected a shocked look or a doubtful response. Instead, it’s full of lightheartedness and an enthusiastic confirmation. All of this within seconds of asking. No questions, no confusion. I must have misjudged her character.

“You’re sure? You can think about it. It could get . . . unethical or dangerous—depending on what you want to do.”

“How much does it pay first?” Her eyes go big.

“I’m not sure, as I said, it depends on the material. I got three hundred for my last one, so that’d be a hundred and fifty each. But that was just a simple murder case. It can go higher. Much higher.”

“Well damn, you’ve sold me.”

“Aren’t you put off at all? With seeing pictures of corpses and selling them for a profit?”

“Hell no, I don’t give a shit about that. Money doesn’t grow on trees, and some dead body won’t know the difference between ethics, so screw it,” she says in a weird kind of poetic way.

I begin to find this person underneath Jessica intriguingly appealing. Who is she? I know she can’t be totally trusted, due to her stealing habits, but I take her intentions to be true. I always have contingencies for events not wholly predicted.

I leave.

As I close the door behind me, a phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s my burner. I reach into my pocket as I stride away from room

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eighteen. I don't want to bring any unnecessary attention from the giddy Jessica.

"Is it ready?" I ask.

"It's ready," George says.

A massive smile livens up my face like a child on Christmas. Utter *bliss*.

The punch echoes through the room satisfyingly. Gus flails rearward and lands onto the rock-hard floor. He's lying on his back like a boxer being beaten to death.

He is being beaten to death. That's the whole point, isn't it?

The man providing the thrashing is Dante—someone I'd met a few times. He's very, very, very talkative, to a point where he won't shut up at times. I know we won't be the greatest of friends from that special feature alone. He looks loyal to George however, so I can tolerate him if I don't make contact. I could be forced to soon.

He has a pretty boy's face, one a man might want to punch if he gave you backtalk. Blonde messy hair at a medium length, blue eyes. It doesn't look like he's put in any effort to wearing something decent—just a scramble of random pieces and a red baseball cap he's worn from time to time.

"Sit him up again," George says.

"You're the boss." Dante shrugs.

He pulls him up with a slight struggle due to Gus being floppy and half-conscious. His face is bruised, red, and puffed out. One of his eyes is swollen and black. Blood is in his mouth and dripping down.

"Stahp . . . pleashe," Gus says.

George kneels into a crouched position in front of him with

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some effort. “Why’d you do this, huh?” he asks, sincerely. “Why’d you have to fuckin’ do this?”

“I cughn’t stahp. I’m sorhe.” He’s speaking like a handicapped freak.

He’s understandable. Barely. He’s also spitting saliva and blood everywhere. He’s a wreck. I’d be feeling sorry for Gus if I wasn’t enjoying this so damn much.

“You have a brain, all you had to do was use it. I told you not to do anythin’ stupid, and if you did it once more, I’d have your head on a fuckin’ wall. You fucked up.”

He did fuck up, so watching him suffer is extremely satisfying.

George nods to Dante again, and the blondie clenches his gloved fist. Amazingly, it’s stainless.

The *thwack* sends Gus back down to the floor again. This time, knocking him out.

“Oh boy, he’s messed up! Did I do that?” He giggles to himself.

“Dante, make sure he doesn’t take a walk, all right?” George says.

“Suuuuure.”

George walks me into his office, and I feel déjà vu wash over me as the familiar zone presents itself. This time, there’s an additional member added: Robert Allack—a stoner loser who’s as unreliable as Gus. Admittedly, he does sell various drugs well. I wouldn’t dare buy any of his disgusting product, however. For Rob, street credit can go a long way in ghetto areas and even high-end neighborhoods.

You may have guessed that he’s the one who idiotically sent me that email. He occasionally sends me silly messages relating

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to my work. I think he's trying to be my friend.

He's sitting on George's desk with his legs dangling toward the floor. A spliff is in his mouth, and he's blowing clouds everywhere. The greasy mop of hair curves around his chubby face. His attire includes cargo shorts, some hipster ironic T-shirt, and trainers for footwear. Every drug user/dealer universally wears this. He's a sad case, and I will only associate with him during meetings or other such occasions.

"Hey!" George shouts.

Robert takes a drag, but when George barks, he scrambles off the table and stands upright like a good pet.

"Smoking fuckin' dope again? Jesus . . ."

"I-I just thought you'd be a while y'kn—sorry, I apologize." He has the typical nerdy voice you'd imagine. Nasally and higher pitched than normal.

George sits in his chair, waving his hands to dissipate the smoke.

"Rob, wait outside would ya? You can keep Dante company, heh." George's lungs sound unhealthy and full to the brim with tar and chemicals today.

"Yup. Will do." Robert takes his spliff, snuffs out the lit end with two fingers, puts it back into his pocket, and leaves. Now George and I are once again alone in his office.

"Gus," he says as soon as the door is shut.

"Looks like you've been busy."

"He wasn't easy to find. I think he was trying to skip town. Was at a train station when we found him. Nearly shit himself when he saw us walkin' up to him. He ran, but not very far. Lucky it was night too, and lucky that he left his phone on. Never thought that son of a bitch was too bright."

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“So you tracked him?”

“Yeah, I had Alex on it. Found him in five minutes. I tell ya, that kid’s a computer whiz.”

Alex is the main IT guy of our whole operation and handles the tech side of things. From uploading illegal files to covering our network tracking vulnerabilities. I don’t understand fully, to be honest. Computers aren’t my forte, but I know the basics. He manages to cover my ass during my data heists. I have no idea how he does it, all I know is he *does it*. He’s good, but he looks weak and breakable when not behind a screen.

“Good. So when do we kill him?”

“Woah woah woah, slow down!” he moans, annoyingly. “We don’t just kill him right off the bat.”

I’m getting impatient and I’m finding George more and more soft. Like an egg about to crack. If he goes down this path of indecision or sympathy, we will all pay the price.

“Keeping him is more of a threat,” I say. “What do you think he’d do if he escaped?”

“He *won’t* escape.”

“What if he did—hypothetically? I’ll tell you what would happen: he’d march to the nearest station and give your identity to an investigator, and then you’d have an army of cruisers against you. Don’t forget me and the rest. I’m on his case, and Nathan seems dead set on catching him *this month*.”

“He’s not going anywhere! We’ve gotta think this through, okay? Plan this out, make sure his family sees it as an accident or a suicide. We can’t just put a bullet in his head and be done with it. Remember that you’re not a second-in-command here, Ethan. I took you in on faith—don’t test it.”

He’s right, I’ve been foolish to think in a “shoot first—ask

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questions later” mentality.

“Alex is already using his credit card to make it look like he’s leaving the country . . .” George says. “We think of a plan now, and we do it as soon as possible.”

I nod my head. “Okay. Who’s going to be killing him?”

“Me,” he says in a frightening voice with unblinking, saggy eyes.

The sense of leadership is strong. As long as George stays on track and keeps to his word, he could still be the capable man of action.

“I need to talk to you about something else,” I say.

“Go on.”

“I have someone who might be valuable to me and you—this girl named Jessica. I met her a week or so ago, and she wants to get involved. She’s keen too.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“I told her a lot. She can’t send me to prison for a crime she only has my word on, and she doesn’t have any evidence—not clever enough either. I’m not stupid. I met at her apartment, and she was very . . . interested.”

“Okay,” George says, “as long as she has no proof, but watch yourself.”

“So, could she fit?”

“I’ll need to see her first, but I’ll get back to you on that.”

That’s all I need. A firm consideration. I don’t need Jessica right about now, but there is safety in numbers. There are other activities I could involve her in if anything came to urgency.

I agree, stand up, but as I’m leaving, George shouts me again. “Ethan!”

I turn myself to face him.

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“One last thing,” he says while looking as though he’s contemplating the appropriate words to use. “You need to know about someone from another group. He’s dangerous, and I want you to steer clear of him. I can’t say much more, but just don’t get yourself involved. I apologize in advance for not bein’ able to discuss this further. Nothin’ personal.”

“What’s this person’s name?”

George looks at me a final time. “Azaz.”

I already know the name before he says it, and I remember back to when Mathew mentioned it in a whispered tone. They’ve both now said this name in a way that concerns me. Like this “Azaz” person is the Boogeyman. An old legend. What concerns me the most, however, is George has that same tone. Out of all people. Obviously it’s a nickname, but not in the usual sense. I can’t place the name with a face, a voice, a look, or even a gender. George didn’t say he or she (probably because it wasn’t important). I’m totally in the dark. The foreknowledge I can gather is the most obvious; being *The Book of Enoch*. Azazel is the fallen angel corrupted by sin (in brief descriptive terms). I’m not 100 percent on that, so at some point, I’ll need to dig further. If Azaz is evil, this is all a bit on the nose.

I don’t ask any further questions. Something tells me not to pry.

“One last thing, Ethan. I’m sorry about your dad.”

I’m silent for a while, but I consider the condolence, knowing I’ve never mentioned Dad’s cancer to George. I nod and leave.

It’s early morning, and I’m back in my office staring at my computer screen. I read the following:

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God cast Azazel and many other angels down to earth. The punishment didn't stop Azazel's rebellion. He became a leader of the Grigori, a group of angels who married mortal women and produced a line of monstrous children. Then, he began teaching evil to humans. He taught men the art of warfare and of weapon-making, and he taught women "the art of deception," which involved making and wearing cosmetics. Finally, he began teaching humans about witchcraft. His influence was so disastrous that, in the *Book of Enoch*, God says, "The whole Earth has been corrupted through the works that were taught by Azazel: To him ascribe all sin.

A chill runs down my spine, but I manage to scoff at the ludicrous fairytale. Some superstitious wacko-talk.

The door opens without a knock.

Fucking rude. What a freak.

Nathan juts himself halfway through the doorway.

"Ethan, can you come to my office in five minutes?"

"Sure," I say in a fed-up way. He nods and slips back out of the room.

What does he want? The worst-case scenario pops into my head. Could Jessica have said something? I try not to worry, but it's impossible not to. She could have mentioned it to the cops anonymously. This could be an awfully bad thing.

Nathan's office is much like mine; clean and organized. His mug with BEST DAD IN THE WORLD embossed onto it sits, handle toward him.

He places his hands interlocked in front of me. His perfect-knot tie lays along his chest. It mocks my rushed, put-together

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and crumpled suit.

“Sorry to take you away from your work, but there’s something important we need to discuss.”

“What is it?” I’m perplexed as to what else this could be about, other than Jessica.

“Well Ethan, I know you’ve been here awhile, how long was it? Seven years? As we said before, I know we haven’t worked with each other for a *huge* amount of time, and I know you’ve done a bit of everything around the office. Well anyway, I think it’s best if it comes from me.”

My heart’s racing and I’m beginning to sweat. I’m weak for becoming a mess of nerves. Fucking weak.

He carries on. “We’ve found a lot of photos on your computer that were from various cases. We noticed that they were in a public folder. Anyone could have accessed those if they were able to log on to your computer. And believe me, that’s a whole other kettle of fish. You can’t have your password as ‘password123’, Ethan. Come on, you’re better than that. Anyone could have gotten that, and then all of the private files could have been tampered with by God knows who.”

The words coming from Nathan’s mouth aren’t making sense, and I start to feel lightheaded.

“What are you talking about? Every one of my case files are put into a secure folder that requires a separate password. What you’re saying is false. Of course I didn’t have that kind of ridiculous password. That’s absurd.”

Nathan turns his computer screen to me, and it displays my account.

Image files are covering the screen from every one of the cases I’ve been a part of. A few files are also left with names

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like, “murder” and “case files.” I also notice my VPN is mysteriously missing. No antivirus either. These are not my mistakes, and an idiot like Nathan would be able to see that if he knew me at all. Turns out he doesn’t.

I usually have dozens of files, all with separate titles, and they have extra layers of security. I wasn’t sloppy, and I’m not an incompetent worker. I know that I have been sabotaged. I don’t know who’s done it, but I have a great guess. The thoughts make me enraged.

“You know I didn’t do this,” I growl.

“I know . . . I know you’re not like this, but the facts remain the same. At this stage, we don’t know what to do. I’m going to get to the bottom of this. I know you wouldn’t be this careless, but I’m looking at the proof. You need to see where I’m coming from.

“Right now, we’re just going to give you some time to get adjusted. I know you’ve been under a lot of stress, but there’s no excuse. Along with this, we’ve noticed that your USB drive has been used over the past week. I don’t know if you’ve tried to download a file on your work PC—whether that be a harmless file—which I know is most likely the case. Whatever it is that you’ve used a personal, unauthorized USB drive for, is irrelevant. You already know that our code of conduct states that this is not allowed.

“I think the main course of action here is simple; you need a break. This won’t result in a penalty for the time being. I’ve spoken to Eddie and I’ve managed to sweet talk him. I’ve told him you’re not incompetent, and even *he* knows, man. I’m just asking that you stay at home for a little while, while we sort this whole mess out.”

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Fuck you.

“I’m going to be speaking with the chief again soon,” he continues. “I’ll just say that he’s as concerned as I am. We both agree that you should be paid for your time off. Of course, it won’t be full pay, but it’ll be something. I’m sure you understand.”

This piece of shit is trying to calm me down; to try and keep me from yelling the room out. My head is bulging, ready to explode with rage. This fucking rat is pushing me away and feeding me some bullshit “paid time off.” Fucking pathetic.

“I didn’t do anything!” I say. “I *didn’t* do any of *that*. I’ve been giving it my all for the whole time I’ve been here. How dare you!”

“Ethan, just calm do—”

“No! You don’t get it! This is all a lie!”

“I know!” he shouts back. “We’ll find whoever did this, I promise you. You need to cooperate, now! Start by going home and taking some rest. You’re still not well—you’re not thinking straight. I know this wasn’t you, but I can’t just be giving you a free pass. Innocent until proven guilty. You know that better than anyone.” Breathless.

I exit my chair, crossing my head in disbelief. I start laughing wildly. This *has* to be a joke.

“Seven years . . .” I say to myself.

The room goes silent. I’m facing away from Nathan. I read the door.

“Nathan Hall” is spelled backward in the door window. All I see are shades of color and contempt for my fellow man.

I refuse to believe what is happening. Names process through my head, but a strong contender presents itself.

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It's Gus, but how?

I need to go through everyone and list the motivations and abilities. George would have good connections to frame me. If he was going to do so, he'd have gone all the way in incriminating me. Gus has an incentive, but he'd have to have done it before getting captured. That doesn't sound likely, and I don't think he's *that* stupid to defame me in such a non-hostile way. Jessica has no reason to do it, but I can't rule anyone out. She might be a criminal mastermind who knows exactly what she's doing. She wouldn't have had much time though. Alex doesn't have any motive, and I've been in the same room as him for maybe a few minutes. He does have the skills and knowledge to pull it off, just not the reason to do it. He seems like one of the strongest contenders. Rob doesn't have any motive either. He isn't at all familiar with computer hacking or undercover work, to my knowledge. Mathew might be trying to save his uncle from me in some delusional way. Dante has no reasons, and he treats life as a joke, so I'm not convinced. Nathan can be a possible suspect. But his personality shows the average wholesome father figure.

I feel like I'm solving another murder mystery. But the murder in question is my own. I'm looking into a mirror and seeing my own corpse, gray and blotchy.

"So, you're firing me?"

"No, we're not firing you—absolutely not. Did you listen to what I said? Paid leave, Ethan. We need to settle this right away. I understand your frustration, but don't think I'm giving you the boot," Nathan says.

It's all bullshit, he's done this to you, you idiot, fucking hit him.

I feel my hand moving, but I manage to stop myself. I'm

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not going to jeopardize my position more. Hitting Nathan wouldn't be the answer. I'm thinking on impulse, just like I have been with Gus. But the idea of cracking Nathan's face with my fist feels so right, even if I'm not half as strong as him. He couldn't fight back, though. It entices me.

I can't do this. I need to leave.

"I'm done here," I say.

I storm out, fighting back the urge to curse as loud as I can. So I repeat it in my head, over and over.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, I think, repugantly.

My car's speeding along. This shitty piece of junk is picking up impressive speed. I dodge in and out of traffic, throwing caution to the wind. I need to see George and find out what has happened. I trust him more than anyone right now. Other cars honk as I drive past. I'm not myself in this instance, but for a moment, I have a clear thought pattern. I no longer have shadows inside of my mind—instead; a realization of sanity. My speed slows, matching everybody else's fifty-mile-per-hour limit. I'm back to normal and I start to think everything over. If I'm going to take this situation seriously, I need to get to the warehouse in one piece. As I carry on, a strange scratching noise protrudes. My side mirror reveals a driver from the window. He's shrouded in misty rain, so I can't see his face. His front panel is against my rear bumper. This absolute waste of a person is destroying my car!

The noise gets louder and louder, so I begin to move. The angry driver is pushing me to the side of the road.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel and I try my best to

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straighten my vehicle, but to no avail. A skidding sound grinds underneath me, and I spin out of control. Gravity moves my head to the side—I grit my teeth. Three spins in the road take a toll on my headache-filled mind, and I feel extremely dizzy.

I am jolted forward and my head pounds painfully into an airbag. White, soft material fills my face, and I begin to fall into a deep sleep; eyes shutting and opening as sirens shriek. Vision ends.

White colors invade my retinas as my eyelids flutter. A nurse is watching me wake up.

“Oh, you’re awake Mr. Riley. Do you know where you are?” she says.

I look around. I’m attached to a drip and in different clothing.

Hospitals comfort me in strange ways. Not many people think the same, but I’m the opposite. Not this time; I feel trapped and agitated.

“Yes, yes. I need to get out of here,” I say.

“I’m sorry. Mr.-Mr. Riley! Please-Please, you need to rest Mr. Riley, you’ve been in an accident.”

“Accident? Somebody rear-ended me and took me off the road!”

I’m not going to take the blame for this. I was going over the speed limit, but the offense occurred after. It’s not my fault an angry driver took me out.

She speaks up again, and says, “Sir, you crashed into a sign on the freeway. No other witnesses came forward, and no one has been identified as the cause of the crash.”

Typical.

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Her voice is giving me a migraine and her presence is annoying me.

“Now, your insurance will cover the damages, and your father and emergency contact, Jason Riley, is on his way,” she says.

“*Oh.*”

“You have a concussion.”

No shit.

I don’t feel the need to answer back, so I nod and look away. The nurse wants to treat me like a child. I don’t have brain damage, so I don’t need this ridiculous treatment. My objective is to find George and for him to explain my predicament. None of this matters.

“I feel fine,” I say.

She’s having none of it.

“Please, once the results are in for your X-ray, we’ll see if you’ve suffered any damage. You’ve had a nasty accident, so we can’t be sure of anything just yet.” She screws up her mouth like she’s having a stroke or pretending to be in pain. I’m so confused.

I lean upright in my bed, still achy. I notice the badge on her bosom. A red phoenix.

“Is this . . . Saint Phoenix Hospital?” I ask.

“Why yes.”

“My father has his treatment here. Hopefully I’m in good hands,” I say, but I already know he *is*.

This hospital has been the best for years and continues to be upgraded and renovated. I’m reassured my dad is being taken care of in this place, and the nurse seems to think so too. “How’s he doing now?” I enquire. I’m surprised with myself and how

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I've taken an interest in his well-being. I suppose a near-death experience can put everyone and everything you know into perspective. Even if they are flawed to the moon and back.

For a moment, her eyes flicker a gesture of not registering as to what I've said. The more I think, the more I notice the twitch of her eyelids when I mentioned the word "Treatment," as if she didn't. . . .

Even more confusion strikes, but with a faint drop of relief. Maybe he's getting better and no longer needs treatment, and maybe he'll be back to his usual self.

"I'm guessing he's getting better; you don't look like you know what I'm talking about."

"I'm not at leisure to disclose any patient's personal information. It's confidential," she says. She isn't convincing at all. She may be a practice nurse or a volunteer. Her voice also breaks during the sentence.

"The chemotherapy," I say, testing her resolve. Her face fills me with dread. She does not know what I'm talking about. "My dad has cancer; you already know this—tell me you do."

"I'm not at leisure to disclose any patient's personal information," she says again, metallically. "I'm sorry, I-I'll be right be back." She jogs out of the room and leaves me to wallow in aggression.

I get a familiar sense of heart palpitations and a piercing headache. Like a drill to the soft membrane. Nothing makes sense and nothing matters. I've gone from anger, to acceptance, to confusion, and back to anger. The cycle repeats. A small part of brain matter at the back of my skull tells me I'm being paranoid, that I'm overreacting. I need to find out.

I exit my bed and pull tubes from my skin. I pick up my

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keys, phone, wallet, watch, and my police badge the nurse must have left near my bedside table. I slip my silver detective's badge into my wallet and fit the fake watch onto my wrist. Small pockets are fortunately at the sides of the gown, so I put most of my contents into there. My hospital gown does a shoddy job of covering me, but I don't care anymore. Fuck it.

My slow pace allows me to think. This fucking disgusting cockroach has fooled me again. I pitied him. I nearly cried for him. I feel ashamed of myself for getting manipulated, but it's my fault entirely. My body is on autopilot. Everything is background noise, and my new goal is unknown, but I'm sure I'll find it. The nurse comes back, trying to lead me back into bed.

"Please, get back in your room! Security!"

"What did it say?" I usher apocalypse into the room.

"You need to—"

"What did it say, you fucking bitch!?"

The nurse becomes wide-eyed and afraid. All she can utter is, "I'm so sorry."

Tears begin to form around her lashes, but she doesn't matter to me. I put my hand on her shoulder and squeeze. I jolt my arm to the side, forcing her thin frame to the floor. She falls back with a whimper as she cries uncontrollably, trying to shout "Security!" again, but to no use.

The halls are empty, apart from busy staff members who pay no attention to my silent footsteps. A staircase presents itself, so I begin to descend the huge building. The dark stairwell is long and seemingly unending. But, a door is visible ahead. It shows a glimmer of faint sunlight at the opening. The door opens with a metal *whine*. I'm out.

My blood is cold in my hands and feet, but hot in my chest

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and head. It's as if my body is delegating needed blood to keep me conscious. I'm being kept awake by sacrificing lesser-needed limbs. Processing this information is easier outside with rain pouring over my temple, and moist air filling my lungs.

I look around for an escape—my hospital gown dampening. Muddy grass is everywhere, but I follow a stony path to another door. This one is rusty and looks more like a gate. A parking lot dances in front of me, and I'm out again. My face is curled into a mix between contempt, exhaustion, and sadness. Some clean-ish black bags are hooked on the gate, with slips of paper inside. I unhook them and use them as DIY shoes. They will keep my feet from becoming too destroyed. They're far from being desirable. It will have to do for now. I feel like I need to take at least three showers to get rid of the bacteria crawling inside—swishing around my healthy blood cells and infecting them with various viruses. Man-made malware.

I stagger away from the citadel of health behind me. It seems more like a prison to me right now, and I don't feel like a patient. More like an escaped convict. My feet begin to ache as I walk for seconds, then minutes, then hours. I don't think, I move. A few cars honk as they go past, one even shouts out of the window.

"Fucking loser!" some teenage college dropout announces from his friend's ride. A few people are laughing in the back.

Cretins.

My hands are numb and I'm dripping wet to the *bone*. I turn my head left and right to search for some kind of clothing store. An answer presents itself. STEPS: a thrift store. Inside are racks and racks of T-shirts, hoodies, jeans, cargo shorts, baseball caps, beanies, and branded shirts for boring shits. I look them over and

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pick out some options.

I stumble from the dressing-room door dressed in a hoodie, some gray pants, and white sneakers. I check my pockets to make sure everything is safe and sound. I look sketchy and untrustworthy. Like a junkie. The person working the register is luckily stoned and in heavy slumber when I exit. Before I do, I leave enough money to pay for the clothing.

The black bag-shoes are in the dumpster to the right side of the store now. I'm refreshed, but still filthy to a distracting degree. I feel gross.

It's still raining, and dark clouds are moving in close. Black and gray mesh together like a War for the Declaration of Blandness. Bright cracks lighten up the sky, accompanied by a boom of thunder. I've calmed now, but the weight of the ongoing events has taken a toll on me. I'm no longer in some clear-headed mood—instead, I'm in a low and sickly state. How wretched and unclean my thoughts become. Images of killing my dad and twisting his neck until it breaks. His money is sitting in the bank, while I'm stumbling around in the dirt. The one hundred dollars in my wallet has now dropped to thirty.

Everything is his fault; every hardship is because of him.

Would you shut up? You're not poor, you just didn't know how to save money. Now you're overcompensating.

He is going to pay. I don't know how, and I don't know when, but he will pay for dishonesty and disregard. I am positive. Not for the money, of course, that is the least of the sins committed by the deceptive demon.

I head back to my house, deciding to deal with George in the morning. I won't be able to get any new information at such a late time. I can't imagine sleeping, but I can imagine venting

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my frustration on a punching bag.

I'm now walking down some shady area. It's still dark, and it's still raining and thundering. The road in front is dimly lit, and no one is around. A sense of unease creeps in me as I walk this street; I feel as if I'm going to be jumped by a couple of gangbangers and kicked to death. I'm an animal in their kingdom, waiting to be ripped apart.

Something catches my attention to my right and I snap my head in that direction. An echo of tumbling garbage cans comes from an alleyway. It's something you'd see from a horror film; not the gory slasher I watched before; more like a building-dread kind of movie. I don't care what happens to me anymore, however. I know I was already nothing in the eyes of my father. The real horror begins there. Pure evil. A family member faking cancer to get out of paying his failure of a son his dead mother's money? It's not in the possible conception of normality—not to mention I've most likely lost my job due to an unknown reason.

Deep down I knew he was lying, but I wanted to believe him. I trusted his word, and it blew up in my face. So now, all the events have led me to here—to this very spot. I peer into the alley and debate whether to explore or not. I can either go back to my home and live a life where I hate everything and everyone. Or, I can take a leap forward into unknown territory. This electrifies my dying perception, so with my newfound cognition, I divert paths.

Rain drips from a small, weathered tree branch down on top of me. The alley walls are covered in unintelligible graffiti and gang signs. There's a power line with a pair of shoes tied to it—hanging—swinging rapidly in the wind.

I have my hood covering my head, so the piece of clothing

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serves me well. I'm still getting damp as the water seeps through the fabric. A raincoat would be brilliant about now.

What the hell are you getting yourself into? my mind asks.

At the end of the alley, it splits off again to the left. It leads to an even darker area. The source of the noise is in front of me. A grimy, sliver garbage can is laying ahead with its lid off, and the trash inside is spewed out.

"Money, phone, jewelry. Now," a deep voice calls from behind me, sounding purposefully tough, as if put on.

I remember they're in my front pocket.

I turn myself to see a man with a beanie, a black coat, and a cloth covering most of his face. There's also a knife poked toward me in a fencer-type stance. A highly strange position for a tough guy.

"You can have my watch. Solid platinum, quite expensive," I say.

"Get your fuckin' wallet out then, too. And your phone."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind that. I gave you an order."

My mind sparks like an illuminating light in a sea of black. That same Irish voice I haven't forgotten.

"Finn. How are you?"

Everything aches. My back, my arms, even me bloody arse. Sleeping on the sofa bed for two nights in a row means being hit with various objects soon enough. Shelly is a beauty, at least to an Irishman like me. We're mostly too shit-faced to take much notice of who we choose to be our lass.

The she-devil walks in with a strut that makes me cower.

"Useless twat," she says. "Useless sack a shite. Should have

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got me a fella who can actually take care of the wee uns.”

“Darlin’, listen,” I say. “I got fucked up again, I know that. I don’t mean to say the things that I say. Sometimes me and the boys just get a bit rowdy, and we want to take the edge off a bit.”

“Finn O’Mally, you couldn’t be more stereotypical if you tried. You’re a drunk and a gambler, and a piss-poor one at that. You lose all our money, then you shoot up with your fuck-wit friends. I’ve had enough of it.”

“Don’t be like that Shelly, baby, you know I mean well. I know I’m like every other bloody Irish bloke, but I can’t change me blood. Me father was a fiend, but I ain’t him. You know I ain’t as bad as that, I just get carried away with all the fun of things. I wasn’t gambling last night, we were just having a little competition, that’s all. Me boss is angry at me for some slight dealings at work.”

“Every fucking excuse you come up with turns me stomach. Ever since we came to this shithole, we’ve been suffering. I don’t know why we ever left Dublin. Sure it was full of packies and niggers, but we at least had less of the fuckers there.”

Shelly has always been a hardcore racist—more so after a stiff drink. I don’t agree with it, but I’d be fucked if I ever spoke up about it.

“I know, I know. But listen, I only have to work a little more before we can move. Then we can go wherever you want. Where do you want to go, baby?”

“Stop fucking calling me that!”

I try to duck, but not in time. An ashtray full to the brim with fag ends hits me in the brow. It stings like a fucker. Me head jolts back, and half of me face gets covered with gray. Blood begins to rain.

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“Fuck me!” I shout.

“You daft fuck, you deserve worse. I look after those kids all day while you get pissed and do ‘work.’ Ha! If your work was sitting on your arse, turning beer into piss, I might call you a miracle worker.” She has such colorful insults when she’s in a true rage. This is one of those times.

“I make us a lot of money, darling.”

“That you piss up the wall straight away. Might as well put it on the fire and warm us up. Goes to waste on your short arse anyway. Pathetic fuckin’ weasel. Look at you, for Christ’s sake. You’re pissing yourself right now, ain’t ya?”

Now I’m terrified. I know this from past experience. This is one of the many times Shelly will become sexually satisfied with my submission. The few times it has happened, I’ve been utterly powerless to stop it from sheer frightfulness. She gets too close with almond eyes that burn like matchsticks. When that happens, I know she’s *enjoying* the show.

“Get ’ere, now,” she says with a hint of calmness.

“Shelly, c’mon love. I don’t wa—”

“NOW!” she screams at the top of her lungs.

I spot a few twitching curtains from other houses across the street. She’s that loud, the whole neighborhood can hear the noise.

I limp down from my temporary bed and grovel by her feet.

“Go on, do it. Little bitch.”

“Shelly . . .”

The look Shelly gives me is indescribable. I undress without another word and turn around.

At work, everyone is laughing. Two fellas are telling a crude joke

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about something I'd not like to hear. I pass them without a word and go into Ronnie's office.

"Hello Finn," he says.

He's sitting at his desk; feet kicked up, smoking. I've respected him for as long as I've been working with him. He's a genuine, standup guy. Doesn't take any bullshit either, but also lets me feel welcome in his presence.

He gets up and walks to me. He pats me on the shoulder and I shiver away from it.

"You okay?" he asks.

He's from London, I think. I've never asked. He sounds like an Englishman, but then again, he also sounds American at times. Like he's lost his accent. I like to think of him as an American, as the English don't sit too well with me at times.

"Great, thanks mate," I say.

"Good. Boss came in earlier, he wanted to talk to you but since you weren't in—he's left a message."

"Aye?"

"Yeah, it's to do with that guy. He knows him, it seems. Or George does, anyways."

"Right, well what's he said?"

"He wants him scared." Bad news for the guy.

"Oh, same-old job like last time?"

"Yes." Ronnie's forehead furrows as he stands over me. His tallness is a trait that makes him twenty times scarier.

"No problem. We can sort that whenever."

"His last whereabouts are the police station. Looks like he's a piggy after all. And you thought it was a bluff."

"It could have been fake, to be fair."

I am right, in a sense. Anyone clever enough could trick the

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gullible.

“Well it was real, and that’s where he is now. After he’s done there, we’re gonna follow him home and rob him. No killing though.”

“That’s fine with me. You drivin’?”

“Nah, I’ve got a bad wrist. I was out with Julie last night. She was very interesting on our date. Basically,” —

I zone out and think to myself, *I wonder what I’ll have to eat later.*

“C’mon, let’s do it now. Boss wants us to head there right this second, I just got the call. He’s on the move.”

The traffic is as you’d expect, quite dead for a rainy day in the afternoon.

“He’s going back to the warehouse. Follow him,” Ronnie says.

I follow the shitty-looking car at a reasonable speed. The car zooms ahead.

“Shit! What’s he doing? Chase him!” Ronnie says as he puts his big hand around the handle close to the door.

What were those for again? Y’know, the ones closer to the roof of the car? Who knows.

I match the man’s speed and feel the velocity of the car becoming dangerous.

“Don’t lose him.”

“I know!”

Swerving traffic goes past and beyond as I get closer to the target’s car. I glance inside, and for a split second, an insane face is looking at me. It sends a chill through my spine. The expression is one of pure turmoil.

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“Back off, back off!” Ronnie says, desperately.

Before I know it, my chassis is grinding along his car’s bumper. Sparks are shooting into the air and flicking backward through the rain and wind. The car swerves and swivels into a ditch with a sign poking up to eye level.

There’s a silence as both of our faces drop.

“What in the mother of fuck did you just do?”

I stare straight ahead and whimper.

The bollocking I receive leaves me feeling ashamed and sick. Ronnie is going ballistic at me, and I sit there and take it. My mistake is gigantic.

A phone rings: Ronnie’s. He looks scared shitless—same as I. His Adam’s apple dips into his throat before reemerging and trembling by his gullet like a loose screw in a mechanism. He opens the door, steps out into the pouring rain, and lifts the phone out of his pocket. He takes a huge breath before answering the call. He doesn’t talk for a while—just listens. I can’t read his lips, so I can’t hear any of the conversation. I don’t think I want to anyway. I’ve heard some horror stories of my boss, and all of them involve torture.

Minutes pass before he enters again, sopping wet.

Awkward silence.

“He’s at the hospital. Boss wants the job done still. I’ll drive.”

We swap, he drives, I shiver again.

Wrist doesn’t hurt now?

The place is lit up. Saint Phoenix Hospital.

We wait patiently for hours. Ronnie sits with a mean look

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on, and he's eyeballing me now and again.

"I'm sorry, all right? I don't know what happened. I just tailed him, and—next thing I knew—he was in the ditch. I must have hit a pothole or something."

He doesn't say anything. Just looks ahead.

"What did he say?" I ask.

"Things. I'd prefer not to repeat them, but let's just make sure we do this right this time." He lets out a frustrated sigh. "Apparently, he's not injured too badly. He might even come out tonight. If he doesn't, then we're to go in as visitors. Nightshift should be dead. We should be on a list or something too."

"Maybe we should take it in shifts sleeping? If we're here for a while."

"I'm good, let's just watch."

"You think we'll get paid a lot for this job?"

"How would I know? All I know is that this guy isn't too important, but he's close enough to George—or so I've heard."

"We could bury this guy. Why wouldn't we? What's the point in scaring him like this?"

"Territorial." Ronnie shrugs.

"Hmm. Let's hope he doesn't take too l—"

A crazed man in a hospital gown runs out of a side entrance and flails helplessly. He looks batshit crazy. As soon as Ronnie spots him, he gets excited.

"Fuck yes, he's o—" he pauses, looking at the man. "He's fucking escaped the place. Look! He's come out the back. How the hell did he get out here? Oh well, fuck it, as long as we get this done." Ronnie pulls a knife (switchblade of some kind) from his shirt pocket and goes to get out.

"Wait." I hold his shoulder. "He's probably drugged out his

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mind.

If we go up to him now, he's gonna be erratic, right? Probably won't even remember us being here if he's high. Or if he needs a beating, he won't feel a thing on painkillers. We should wait for him to get home, follow the plan that way."

"But I got told to get this guy scared no matter what, or where."

"It's risky, so we should just tail him—get him back to somewhere that's more secluded."

"How's he gonna get home though? His car is fucked!" Ronnie yells as the crazy guy rips some plastic bags from somewhere and ties them to his feet.

"We're in a great position. He doesn't have a car. We have the advantage here."

"Okay, fine. Let's just see what he's actually going to do. Let's just hope he doesn't spot us."

Ronnie and I have been on the road for a long time, going at a snail's pace. This Ethan fella doesn't turn around once. Just runs, jogs, then limps again. A few cars stop by and honk. He doesn't notice.

Eventually, after a stupid amount of time, he heads into some thrift shop. Ten minutes later, he heads out again with a brand-new outfit on.

"Okay, let's do this. I have a plan," Ronnie says, parking up.

"Let's hear it."

"Take these." He hands me the knife and a rag of some kind. I look up at him, befuddled. "What we're gonna do, is you'll follow him into that alley, while I sneak around the side. I'll take a

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path that'll lead me behind the fucker. Put the mask on to cover up. We can't let him know it's us. Specific orders. Only person that needs to know is George. When you've got his money—well, if he even has any—I'll sneak up behind him and put his fucking lights out. I'm sure that'll give us enough time to do a little extra stuff with that knife." A shit-eating grin creeps onto Ronnie's face as he makes a circling motion with his finger.

I'm not entirely sure what he means, but I nod all the same.

The rain is not unpleasant at all, even feels relaxing. As I walk down the alleyway (in which Ethan is passing through), I notice another path. I take it, making sure not to lose sight of him. The cracked fence makes a good vantage point to spy on him. That's when I trip on a bin and watch it roll toward his line of sight. The jig's up, so I sneak back around to corner him.

He's standing with his back turned from me. I tiptoe close and release the metal blade from the handle while pulling the tied cloth above my nose and mouth.

"Money, phone, jewelry. Now," I say in as threatening of a tone as I can muster.

I have now hit bedrock on how bad everything is going. With my newfound aggressor, there is an extra trick up my sleeve. I know this man. The main thing is I know his identity, at least, and that's all I'll need to succeed in evading his assault.

He looks scared when I gaze upon him, knowing his identity. He's still short and as rat-faced as when he stood next to Jessica.

I'm not willing to relinquish my possessions, so I begin to think of a battle plan. I've managed before, and I'll manage

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again. This crisis should be a lot easier than the one I was thrust into by Gus.

“Jesus Christ, you weren’t supposed to say that.” His impression fully fades back to the Irish accent.

“Why do you need my things, Finn?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you need my valuables? I’ve worked hard for my money, and I’m not going to hand it over to you, just like that. You already know I’m a police officer, so you can still walk away. I might be willing to give you a free pass.” I don’t lie; my money is surely earned; my college education is not, however, but he won’t know that.

In terms of arresting him. I’m sure as shit going to catch him somehow, but for now, I’m in no position to become threatening.

“Just give me your stuff. Otherwise, things aren’t going to end well,” he says.

Is this guy an idiot? He has no idea what can happen here. He sees me as another victim. He’s incorrect.

“Let me guess, you need money for a family you didn’t want, for food you loath—hate, even.” I adjust my word to be more understandable to this thief. “And you place yourself with thugs like that Ronnie guy. I bet the people you care about don’t have any idea about what you do.”

You can tell a lot about someone from their actions, but the other details are mostly guesswork. They won’t remember the small pockets of information.

“You need to do what I say, or you’ll get shanked. He waves the knife close by. “You remember my mate, don’t you? He’s behind you.”

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I turn around, but no one's there. I turn back and shrug.

He pulls his homemade balaclava down. "Just fuckin' hand me your stuff and we'll go! He'll be here any second, and he won't be as forgiving as me. He'll fuckin' break your neck.

"No."

"You crazy shit, I can't be arsed for this." He sniggers as if I'm crazy. He grabs me by the collar and reaches for my back pocket. I hold my composure. He will pay.

"You know I'm right, you'd disappoint anyone doing this. I think you know," I say.

"I'm just doing me job. I know you probably don't have anyone important in your life, so you don't know hardship at all."

Hooked!

"You're right," I admit, thinking over what he said.

It's his job? What is going on here?

"I've never had to provide for a family," I keep going, "and I feel sorry for you, I honestly do."

"Look, I don't want to do this, but I gotta put food on the table." He waves my wallet around like treasure.

"I know, and we all do as well. I've had the worse day of my life. My wife has been cheating on me for the past five years, and she's taking my kids away from me—I won't be able to see them. I've tried to hang myself a few times, but I can't bear to leave them." It's a good thing it's raining, because it gives the illusion of tears.

He lowers his guard, *tsks*, and crosses his head a few times.

"You know what I mean then, right? It's all fucked, isn't it? I don't wanna do this, I really fucking don't." The rain still pours overhead, but the various branches are sheltering us.

The man looks down at his knife, which he still has gripped.

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Now he lowers it. He looks down at the soaking wet concrete. It's the time to strike while his guard is lowered. To take the knife and hit him in the face with a solid punch.

He breaths out and kicks me hard in the ribs. It's a surprisingly forceful blow that knocks the wind out of me.

"I'm sorry," he says.

I fall forward and hold my chest as he goes in for another kick. Now he sees my face and cowers back. He looks at the lowered knife and raises it again. I lunge at the piece of scum as he attempts to swipe and run. He slips in the pool of rain beneath him, swinging his weapon down to the left—missing me completely. I grab his arm and grapple. I'm pained and frustrated. I didn't think far enough ahead, I failed to stop the attack, and I've failed everything. It's all my fault, and this stupid, idiot mind of mine can't fathom a simple plan. His actions weren't predictable. I still should have been able to analyze the guy well enough to know what was coming. I'm a cop for Christ's s—

I'm lucky, to say the least, but I've been given a second chance. He looks up in surprise.

"Shit . . ." he whimpers, struggling to move his arm from my lock. He slips and slides in the water, but it's no use. I now position myself to a defensive stance and push him hard against the brick wall behind him. He slams into it as I push my forearm to his neck, and the knife to a safe distance—pointing toward him and not me.

"I fucked up, I didn't want to hurt you, it's what me boss told me to do. I got a girl and kids back at home I gotta take care of—just like you. Lemme just go back to them, please." He now sounds stunned, but I wouldn't say scared.

It's odd how things can change so rapidly. At this moment,

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all I have is fierce disdain for this man, who's made me look like an utter fool.

"This boss of yours, who is he?" I ask.

"I can't . . . I . . . Azaz." He gives the name up (and pronounces it differently to George and Mathew). I can't hide my surprise.

"I see." My tightened force on the man's throat loosens as I remove my forearm.

I stare at him. He has his hands up and he's breathing with his mouth agape. The moonlight glides on me as the rain carries on with its march downward. A final boom of thunder crashes behind me. He wants to go back to his life, and he's struggling. I see a reflection in this person. Not one that resembles my personality or my looks. Instead, my current position in life. We both need to provide for ourselves, whether he has children is irrelevant to my life. A smile creeps on my face. I loosen my muscles.

I sink the fucking knife into his gut with both hands and push hard to the wall again. A *squishing* noise is generated, and a quiet spill of liquid hits the floor, joining red with crystal water.

He grunts—his eyes open up. He looks down and grabs my arms; digging his boney fingers into my clothing. He breathes rapidly with short, panting exhalations. I twist the knife clockwise and pull the blade out, making that familiar *squish* sound again. He, again, makes another breath of pain and terror. He relinquishes his hands from my arms and instead holds his chest, still not accustomed to his new wound. I don't even check out my work; I instead watch his line of sight creep down. My face is pure joy and ecstasy. No remorse, or regret: acceptance. I feel nothing for this creature, and it excites me. I gaze downward,

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where he's looking at his bloodied palms like a lost puppy. They're completely drenched. My wallet is laying close to him. I retrieve it as he slides down the wall—thudding to the floor and continuing to hold his bloody belly. I look down at the soaked knife. It's becoming cleaner as the rain washes it. I rub the bladed end on a leaf and slip it into my pocket, along with my other items. My shoes are also bloody, and that's when I know what the harder part of this arrangement is; not leaving any clues.

I need to depart from this area, and soon. I take a final look at my art. Then, I vanish.

Footprints are left behind. The police will check who bought the shoes if the red marks remain overnight. I stroll through the road—adrenalin still pumping through my veins. I remove my shoes and clean them with the sleeve of my hoodie. It's a sloppy job, but I have a state-of-the-art cleaning technique. I put them back on and continue with my walk back to the store. The lights are still on and the windows are covered with long streams of the storm rain. I'm inside, and the cashier is still stoned and now fully asleep. I'm leaving no bloody marks on the carpet (the rain must have washed them to a cleanish standard), so I carry on. No security cameras either; not in one corner of the room. The slumbering stoner is snoring; his head slipping off the side of his chair. I grab the same pair of sneakers I bought earlier, and examine the backroom. A safe and a switched-off camera in the corner. The light isn't on, and it's stuck in a position off toward the safe, and not the doorway. The blood has dried on my hoodie. It's not dripping, but the floor is wetter with me entering, exiting, and now entering and exiting again. I approach the sleeper; my money is still on the counter. I take it back and force it into my wallet.

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No one can know I was here.

Hypocrite.

Dribble falls from the guy's cheek and onto the floor below. Under his desk is a bottle of some off-brand pills, with a crudely drawn label, that has "EX-1" printed on it. Maybe it's some high-end tablets of ecstasy? I take the pills also and screw the cap off. Green-colored capsules, that look too big for swallowing are inside. I put the lid back on, then shove them in my pocket. If the police examine these, they could be sleeping pills, and my plan will fail. If they're drugs, a whole other can of worms could be opened. I want this man to seem as awake as possible. Toxicology reports won't be done in time if I play my cards right.

I prod the young man's face with my finger, and he doesn't even twitch. I'd have thought he'd be dead if it wasn't for the drool and snoring. His shoes slide off easily enough. They're weirdly patterned, and they look kind of similar to this store's brand. I replace them with the new sneakers I picked from the shelf. They're similar to the ones I'm wearing (roughly the same size too). I use a spare shirt from the rack behind me to touch the footwear, just in case. Whatever this guy has taken, it must be strong. He's still sound asleep, and I hope when he wakes up, he's none the wiser to the fact that his shoes have been swapped. Once the police investigate this place, they'll surely see some resemblance. This guy won't have an excuse to give. Either that, or this idiot gets away with it too.

I remove the knife from my pocket with the cloth of the shirt I snagged. I do this with care and delicacy. I clean the handle, doing the best job I can.

It's difficult to get the soft cloth into the indentations. The water over the handle is a good lubricant, however. Finding the

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prints will be *impossible* to do, let alone matching them with mine. I fit the handle in his palm and clench it as tight as I can without pain being inflicted—and trying not to wake him. He’s still completely unconscious. Where would a guy like this hide a criminally owned weapon? I remember the trash bags in the dumpster out back. I go explore.

I remove the two black bags, dirty and torn, tossing them away into the windy rain. They drift off, flapping and wriggling. The knife fits into a tattered bag. I tie it shut, still using the sleeves. I close the filthy box.

Next, I escape. I flee back home and dump the used T-shirt along the way. The next step will be creating a believable story of where I was this night. I left the hospital and returned to my house, where I got drunk and passed out.

Sounds like a plan, Stan.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFTERMATH OF CON

“Is there a particular reason you would not like to talk about your relationship with your father?”

“Would you like to talk about *your* dad, huh?”

The patient crosses his arms.

“Mr. Riley, I am here to help. As I said earlier, I’m not against you. I want to help, truly.”

“Just like everyone else, huh. Everyone wants to help, until the moment they see something for themselves. I’m done with that, okay? This isn’t me talking with a God complex, I’m just sick of people’s shit. Excuse my language, doctor.”

“Please—do not be concerned. I would prefer you to be relaxed in my office; to be at home.”

“This will never be normal to me. But doctor, you’re missing the point here. I don’t like people because . . . because they’re . . .” Mr. Riley does not have a valid reason.

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“Mr. Riley, I think you are trying to form a cover for yourself. From my observation, I think you are repressing something that has made you lose trust in others.”

“If you want to know what that is, you can take a look at a long list of everything that’s ever happened in my life.” The patient laughs.

“We have another fifteen minutes.”

“I didn’t mean it like—Look, I don’t want to talk about it, okay? Sometimes I’ve gotten forgetful anyway.”

“I left the hospital and returned to my house, where I got drunk and passed out,” I repeat into my mirror, looking at myself. I seem to have colorful skin again, and my face is upbeat. A thin smile emits from under my nose. I haven’t felt this good in years.

“I left the hospital and returned to my house, where I got drunk and passed out.”

It’s now the next morning, and I’m in the same mirror. I’m pale and cold—I’m not smiling anymore either. The drinking and vomiting made my throat burn, but it had to be done. I need to look awful today to make my story convincing, so I got a big whiskey bottle from across the street after I’d cleaned up a bit. My wet and blood-specked clothes are bundled in a towel, along with the shoes. I’ll have to dispose of them soon.

I’d taken a shower thrice to wash the sweat and grime from my body. None of the victim’s blood contacted my skin except for my hands. I look out of the window and see nobody there. I don’t know why I’m expecting the cops, but I need to be on guard—I can’t make one slip-up. I get myself some bottled water from the fridge and gulp it down. It’s refreshing and cool.

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There's a knock on the door; three times in quick succession. I put the drink down and creep over to the door. It's George in the peephole.

Phew, . . . it's only a matter of time before they find you though. And they will, you can count on it.

I unlock the door. There's a bear of a man in the openness.

"Jesus," he says. "What happened to you?"

"A little bit of drink, that's all. How do you know where I live again?"

"I keep tabs. And I didn't take you as a drinker, but whatever." He shrugs and gestures to come in.

I nod.

"I heard about your little accident, about your car."

"Yeah, some real bad stuff went down last night. I-I lost my job," I say in contempt. Even though I technically *haven't* been let go of by the department yet, I could tell Nathan was sugar-coating things. I'm as good as gone, so I tell George I was fired instead of suspended or something ridiculous like that.

"Oh shit . . . oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, that's some real bad news. I can't afford to lose another supplier now."

"You don't have to worry about that, I'll figure something out."

"If you say so. For now, don't get worryin' over it yourself." His mouth turns into a grimace. He feels sorry for me, I know it.

"Listen," I say, "what's important here is that Gus is the one who fucked everything up—I think. It's a long story, but I got let go because of a setup. I'm sure it was him."

George gives me a measuring look in return, but nods.

"I need to see our guest, now. Is he still alive?" I ask.

"Yeah, yeah, we still need to keep him alive for now. I've

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been lookin' out for his name online and his ma 'n' pop've put out a search for him. They think he's been kidnapped. We gotta just hold on to him for a while. In fact, we've got a discussion goin' on at the safe house. We can talk there."

"Fine," I say, not pushing any kind of luck. I can't think of why Gus needs to be kept alive now. He's more of a threat than he's ever been and becoming even more dangerous if he does indeed escape. "I just need to talk to him."

There he is, tied to a chair, but this time with no Dante. I pull up a chair myself and begin my questioning.

"You hear?"

"Hear . . . ? Hear what, man?" he asks while tilting his head to the side. He's no longer mumbling like an idiot. Looks like he's been patched up. He still has a slur to his dialogue, however.

"I lost my job."

"Too bad man, what was your job again?" he says.

"I think you know. Come on, just say it and I'll be more willing to let you walk out of here."

"Me? You think I got you fired from your shitty job? Probably stacking shelves or flipping burgers?"

"Ahh, trying to make me think you have no clue what I do for a living. In turn making you innocent of any crime. Probably. I didn't think you had a brain cell in there. Fascinating."

"Why don't you turn around and get out? If you're not gonna do that, then put a bullet in my head. Sick of hearing you talk."

"You hear?"

"What?"

"Did. You. Hear?"

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“I already answered your question. Fuck off.” He looks confused.

“Your parents are looking for you—sent out a police search. It’s lucky that I’m the only one who can keep them away from this place.”

He lunges for me but gets caught by a rope tied around his neck.

“I swear to God I’ll kill you,” he says.

“So you do know my job. Interesting.”

He stops and settles back, looking to the floor. He raises his head again with a smirk on his face, and says, “Actually, if you ain’t a cop no more, then you ain’t gonna do shit, huh.”

“Don’t count on it.”

I look around Gus’s cell. All that’s here is an empty bucket and a dishcloth. I pick up the cloth and wrap it around my hand. I walk out of the cell he’s kept in, then find the stationery cupboard. It’s a mess, with random items thrown around. I find what I’m looking for when I notice some scotch tape. I go back to Gus and crouch by him. I put the cloth into his mouth, avoiding placing my fingers too close to his teeth. He gags and shakes his head in protest. I carry on, putting one neat line of tape around his filled mouth. His shouts turn to muffled gargling as I walk away.

I enter George’s office again. Everyone seems to be present: George, Mathew, Dante, Robert. Even Alex and Ellie; the two IT workers who George is so fond of.

“Sit down Ethan, we’re just having that chat on what we’re gonna do with Gus out there. I wanna hear everyone give their verdict.”

I sit and listen. He’s sounding more like a mob boss every day.

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Alex is the first to speak up, saying, “I’d suggest we keep him alive. What’s the point in killing him if he can’t get the cops? I think we should just keep him locked up where he is and take turns guarding him to make sure he can’t escape.”

Red flags show up straight away. Alex is acting strange so I’m taking a mental note of it.

“So you want to wait for him to find his own way out?” Mathew asks.

“He’s not going to ‘find his way out’ if we watch him twenty-four seven.”

“Nah, he’s just gonna hit us over the head with a rock and run.”

“He’s tied up; we’re not dealing with a seven-foot behemoth. He’s some skinny, half-beaten, two-bit thief,” Alex says.

“Amen brother,” Dante says.

“Do you have anything to add at all, Dante?” George asks.

“Yes sir, I do,” he says while leaning back on his chair, balancing. “Instead of tying him to a chair, we tie him to the ceiling, and we beat the shit out of him with bats like a piñata. Maybe we make him eat some candy before that, so the winner gets a treat.” He laughs, but no one else does.

“Fantastic,” George says. “Ellie, you agree with Alex?”

Ellie turns to face the group. Her T-shirt exposes her many tattoos through delicately placed openings. A sleeve covers her arm, and she looks like a tattooist with a ponytail and big glasses.

“Alex does have a point,” she says. “We shouldn’t jump to a conclusion, guys. I don’t want to have to do more work on keeping up to date with a dead guy’s parents. They’re already searching, and they’re not going to give up until they have their son back. We should keep him for now, and then in a few months we

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should make sure that he doesn't squeal anything to the police if we let him go."

It worries me that Dante has the best plan out of everyone. Has Ellie become a suspect?

"Rob?" George says and looks at him.

"Ahh, up to you guys really. I don't mind either way," he says.

"Real fuckin' helpful, what an amazin' insight on what we should do." George nods his head and rolls his eyes. He's looking at me now. "Ethan, for God's sake, talk me into doin' somethin'. Please."

"I think killing him in due time would be the best option. The longer we wait, the more time we give the police to find us."

"Trust me, they're not gonna find him," Alex says. "We've locked this shit down. If anyone gives the word, I can make it look like he's been abducted by pirates on a trip to Hawaii."

"All right everyone, let's just take this step-by-step, and not rush things," George says. "For now, he stays put, and we do as Alex says. Since you want to go ahead with this, you can be on first watch." He snaps a finger at Alex, then turns to me. "Ethan, a word?" We walk away from the group. "I heard what you said, and he's not gonna get away with what you mentioned, I know."

We both exit the building. The air is cold, the sky is white, as always. My phone is vibrating gently for the seventh time. It's my dad, I understand, but I don't pick up. All I'll get is some half-baked speech on protecting me or a long-winded apology that brings me even more contempt. I slip my phone back into my pocket and look back toward George.

"I understand," I say. "He will pay, but in a few weeks or months. Don't leave it too long, though. He'll find a way out

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eventually, and when he does, he'll bring a meteorite on us. We're just carrying deadweight—is the way I see it.”

“Yeah, I get you.” No talking for a while, just the scuffing of our shoes on the floor until he speaks again. “So what happened with the police department?”

“Someone hacked my computer. Gus knew about my job, so it has to involve him, I know it.”

“Gus has been in that building for days now, with no way of getting into your place and planting a bug.”

“Outside help?” I question.

“I wouldn't think so. Unless he's got some cousin or sibling that we don't know about. IT hasn't found anybody making transactions with him online, and my boys haven't seen him going anywhere unusual. Alex and Ellie are rock-solid—they wouldn't fuck me over. I don't think Gus is the sharpest tool anyway, y'know? Wouldn't be the type of guy to have a backup. I'll get Alex and Ellie to find out some more on who could be working with him, but I doubt it, Ethan. Have any other suspects?”

“Not really. Don't-Don't underestimate Gustavo.”

“I know, I know. You okay?”

“I've been fired from my job, I crashed my car, and I found out my dad lied to me about something I'd rather he didn't.”

“I know,” he says. Of course he knows—he knows everything about everyone he works with. How did he find out so soon? I've tried my best to keep some things in the dark, and other things in the light. As long as I have control over what George does and doesn't know, then I'm fine. Especially when it comes to my other incidents. “If my old man did that to me, I would have broken his nose and put him in a retirement home—

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If the bastard weren't six feet under already."

"I just might," I joke.

But I don't feel like joking, I want to kill Jason Riley—a piece of shit dad. I want to kill him like Finn last night. Where I thrust the knife into his stomach and watched as his blood oozed down his shirt. Oh how his eyes pleaded with me. The warm sense of overpowering duality between a superior and an inferior being. The ecstatic—

"You listenin'?" George snaps his fingers to get my attention.

"No. Sorry. Carry on."

"I was just sayin' that you should get some rest. We'll figure out a new position to go from."

"I already said I'd handle it. I've still got images left and I can get more."

"Don't go doing anythin' stupid in the police station. I don't want to have to have an expendable member on my team."

"Okay."

"Now, I'll take ya back home. Let *us* worry about the whole mess," George finishes.

I'm back home in bed, still feeling awful and grieved. My stained and creased clothing has been washed and dried. Any evidence has been washed away with detergent, bleach, and rigorous toothbrushing.

The second knock of the day alerts my eardrums. I get up and glance at myself in the mirror. Still gloomy. I look through the peephole. It's the police. More importantly: Nathan. I feel uneasiness. If he questions me on the murder, I can't make a mistake. I open up.

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“Ethan, may we come in?”

“Why?”

“I heard about the incident that happened last night, with your car. Me and David have come to get a statement, and your dad’s coming to drop the car back to you. He’s got the insurance covered and he wants to press charges on the person who ran you off the road. Apparently. Not that they found the—Anyway, may we?” He gestures to enter, and I let him in.

“How are you feeling?” he asks like he cares.

“I feel like I’ve been hit over the head with a club. One of those days, I suppose.”

“I can tell. I have some good news about work. I’ve had some words with the chief, and he’s going to think about starting an investigation into what exactly happened with the computer hack. A few months and we sh—”

“Months?”

Does he think I’m a fool? He must be taunting me to think I’ll accept this. I’ve supplied more for the Chicago Police Department than any other member. Even if I’ve broken a law on the side, I couldn’t care less. I’m now even more inclined to persist in the selling of snuff photography. It might sound hypocritical, but I’m not a bastion of upholding the law. I enforce justice where I can. I’m good at my craft, and I expect recognition—and then some.

“Well that’s just an estimate, we have to assess the situation thoroughly. As you know, this is a serious matter,” Nathan reassures me un reassuringly.

“Uh-huh.”

I can see he knows he’s intruding. He’s paused and thinking of a way to escape my domain after giving me a bullshit excuse.

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“Well, I won’t take up any more of your time.” He begins to get up and stops abruptly. “Oh, one last thing that I’ve got to bring up. Police stuff, y’know.” He sits back down. “Last night at around 4:00 a.m., a deceased male was found in an alleyway with a laceration to his—He was stabbed.”

My heart sinks.

I keep my composure.

“Why are you telling me this? If I’m out of the—”

“No, no,” Nathan says. “This is strictly non-work related. I just wanted to know if you have any information on the incident, as I was told by the nurses that you left the hospital at 12:59. The police were called but you’d already gone before they arrived. I was just wondering if you saw anything last night.”

The number of times he said the word “Incident” is not only annoying, but also worrying. Am *I* a suspect?

He knows, he definitely knows. Now you’ve really fucked up.

“I didn’t, I’m sorry. I left the hospital and returned to my house. I had a bit to drink too,” I say.

“Oh, and when was it you had the alcohol?”

“When I got back. I bought some from the shop across the street. I’ve got the receipt somewhere.” I pretend to not know where it is. “Here,” I say after picking it out under the empty bottle of whiskey.

He reads it and gives it back. “So you purchased the bottle at around 3:00 in the morning. And what time did you get back home?” He gets out a pen and notepad.

I’m in almighty hot water now.

“I’m not sure, probably 2:15. I bought the drink later on since I wasn’t able to sleep. Plus, it took me a while to get back—

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car being broken down. I just wanted something to help . . . forget . . . with what happened.” I look down as if I’m depressed. “It’s been a rough week, but I understand that you did what you had to do. You were being professional, and I’m . . . s-s-sorry Nathan. For how I acted yesterday, and what my dad did was probably just to protect me from something. I don’t want to hate him. I’ve done enough of that already. He *faked* his cancer diagnosis.” Forcing these words out of my mouth is a real challenge.

Trying to act like I care about this disgusting creature and my equally disgusting father is hard. He looks at me with attentiveness and lowers his notepad.

“I’m . . . so sorry, Ethan. Don’t worry about it, there’s nothing for *you* to be sorry about. I understand your situation, and I don’t blame you for leaving the hospital.” He gets up and puts his notebook and pen away. “I can come at a more convenient time. We have a suspect, by the way, and he’s being processed for being under the influence of an illegal substance. We wish you were able to come into the office—could use your insight. I hope the man gets justice if he *has* committed this crime. Anyway, I’ll leave you to it.”

That fucking junkie couldn’t wait a day until he got caught. Typical.

Nathan stops and takes another look at the booze bottle.

“This . . . isn’t going to be like last time, is it?” he asks.

“What? Oh, no, no. This was just to help me sleep.”

“Right. I need to—

“It’s fine, honestly, sir.”

“Well anyway, you’re gonna have to go back to the hospital at some point, Ethan. Heard about the crash. Looks like a minor concussion, huh, but I’m sure they’ll want to run some tests and

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X-rays again just in case. So go there as soon as you can, okay?"

"Okay, I will. Thank you for the help."

"No problem, you take it easy."

We exit together. I wave him off and see a familiar car pass on the other side and park. I immediately close the door and exhale.

I rush to my wastebasket and take out the incriminating clothes. Before I get interrupted, I take the clothes into the kitchen and lift the plastic cover under the washing machine. I stuff the clothes into a crevice, covering it back up. Although the bloodstains are faint, you wouldn't believe the evidence that can be found.

I don't have time to think of my next move or interpret the ugly conversation with Nathan before more knocking sounds aloud. I wait and stare at the door, wondering if I should run and hide.

"It's me Ethan, open up." Jason's muffled voice is on the other end. He knocks again and asks to come in.

"Go. Away."

"Please, I'm sorry. I think I know what this is all about. I just want to talk."

I fling the door open, banging it to the wall. Jason steps back, startled.

"Leave, before I do something that will get me arrested, you piece of filth."

"You're not thinking straight, son. Let's go out for something to eat and I'll make it up to you."

"Go."

"I brought your car back," he says, ignoring my statement. "All fixed up. I took care of the repairs. Just a few scratches and

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dents. I swear to God I'm gonna sue whoever put my son in danger." He looks at the bottle and gives a similar look to me as Nathan did. "Is everything all right? Have you been taking your pills?"

"Shut up and answer me this" I keep silent for a moment, then speak. "why . . . ?"

"Come on Ethan, just le—"

"Why?!"

Tears start to well in Jason's eyes, and he clutches his chest. "I can't breathe, I'm sorry."

Anger sparks on my face for a moment, and I move forward. I push Jason to the ground. He rolls and tumbles to the rocky pavement of the walkway, defeated. I point my finger to his face, and say, "Get out of here, or I swear I'm going to kill you. Go!" I slam the door shut while storming away.

My father sobs and moans about his injured heart. He stays for about an hour, wallowing helplessly. That's the most joy I'm going to experience this day. Eventually, he leaves.

It's mid-afternoon now, and not working is feeling odd and unwelcome to me. I have a lust for something to do—something to work on. It makes me feel like a waste of oxygen like the other people walking around me. Even people who are pushing carts at the supermarket have more worth than me at the moment.

I go upstairs and rummage around my special cupboard. My old and new cameras are on the floor. My new one is in a camera satchel, while the Polaroid is off to the side in a plastic bag. I take my better gadget out.

I go out the front, get in my fixed car, and take a drive.

The woods are utterly peaceful and secluded. Rolling-green hills

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go on for miles with trees sprouted out beautifully. I walk for a while with my camera in hand, taking in the fresh air. I'm humming to myself, which I don't ever usually do. I see the scene all through the viewfinder. I capture every moment of greenery and bask in its splendor. It wears off when brainwaves grace my cognition.

I begin to mull over the most important action I've made in the past few years: killing a man. Anyone stupid enough to try and steal my possessions deserves to die.

He was scum. A wretched, putrid lump of dirt on your shoe. All you did was scrape it off on the curb. Bleach it down.

That's right. You took out the trash.

My thoughts are correct. I still can't help the feeling of an underlining double take. Like I'm not sure if what I did was 100 percent satisfactory. There is no guilt coiling my heart. Taking another person's life is something I will need to get used to over time. Maybe experiment with it again; enjoy it more. It's not an unpleasant feeling, but one that makes me feel self-righteous. If the victim was an innocent person, I would have to rethink things. I'm still not sure if I'd feel guilty. I'd perhaps feel the urge to do it again, and that's what worries me.

What had Finn said last night? He worked for Azaz. That name was coming up everywhere yesterday, and it's a point of concern from now on. He wanted me scared of this guy. He didn't want to take my things, and he didn't want to beat me, but he did anyway. Getting an order like that must have been serious. Where was Ronnie when I was attacked? The plan must have been different, but it went astray. I would have easily been subdued if they were both on me at once, I wouldn't have stood a chance. He wasn't there, but he will know, of course. If they

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were close, I could have another enemy. For some reason, that doesn't seem important. Azaz could be the main operator of a stronger organization. In what, I'm not sure. But to take a guess, it will be something similar to George. They must be connected. I'm fairly new to the whole organized-crime deal. Maybe all the other members have had their welcome message. It wouldn't surprise me at all, honestly. Jessica was with Ronnie and Finn the night we met. Could she be involved with them? I'd know if she were, but I can't rule it out.

"Hey-o, friend!" a voice calls from behind.

I jump back, startled. It's a hiker. And a professional one at that.

"Scared me," I say.

He looks at me and smiles. He can't have heard that, as he continues to walk toward me.

"Don't mind if I join you for a little walk, do ya?" he asks.

"I suppose not." His demeanor is friendly. I'm more so letting him into my social bubble to test something.

"Great! Y'know, the wilderness can be such a relaxing and calm place. I just love getting out the house every now and again to just . . . bask in all of its glory!" Now his cheeriness is beginning to get annoying, fast.

I don't mind a level of enthusiasm, but when they're almost screaming with joy, it gets tiring quickly. Everyone has something in their life they hate. No one is happy constantly, so it comes off as a faked attitude.

"Tell me, friend. Why is it that you came here?" he asks.

Call me friend again, and I'll rip your head off.

"Need to get away from the city—for a bit."

"Ahhh, I understand! The smoke and smog can get a little

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toxic, right? Y'know, I sometimes come down here, get a big ol' jar, and just collect some of the air. Let it out in my house the next day." I refrain from laughing at his statement. "God's grace is strong in the air. You can feel it sometimes. I don't mind if you're not a Christian, I hope you don't mind that I am, sir."

His southern twang is marred by the Jesus-freak-type tone. Real picket fence American Dad. He's obviously not the smartest guy, but his attitude projects genuine niceness. This is the perfect time to test my thoughts. How will it feel to murder an innocent (as far as it seems) man?

"I'm not a Christian, no."

"You don't mind me giving a speech on Jesus Christ then, do you?"

"I'd rather staple my testicles to a plank of wood."

His mouth opens in shock, as I realize I've said that out loud. He goes beet red and looks away. "I'm sorry friend," he says. "I didn't realize you weren't too happy about what I said. I hope the Lord find his way into your soul."

I can't stop myself now, I feel a hint of angry premonition go through me before I speak. "I don't need the Lord. What I need is to stop getting preached at! We're in the middle of nowhere. I told you I came here to get away from all the noise. You listen to what I said, but then you try to convert me all the same. I don't want to hear about Jesus Christ and his phony resurrection. I've read the Bible, and guess what? I'm not a fan. You have your right to believe in any bullshit you want to. I don't care if you believe or not, I really don't. Just stop trying to make me believe. You want to go on your mission in 'turning the fags straight?' Go ahead—I don't give a shit—but leave me alone. Probably so insecure about yourself, huh? Are you, in fact, a

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fag?” I ask, trying to stir up an exaggerated rise out of him or me.

He doesn't say anything; stares at me with rejection instead.

“Oh, son. You've got the devil in you.”

It's too much to hear. The word “son” added on rubs me the wrong way. I punch him in the face. Jason's in there as my fist flies toward the mustache-sporting man. He goes down and falls to the dirt. I stand over him with an evil glint in my eyes.

“Do you want to see God, huh? Would you like to go see him now?” I ask with a sinister agenda.

“Please Lord, make this soul see the error of his ways! I beg you, help this poor man. Make him love you, as I love you, and I will be eternally grateful!”

I put my hands around his neck to shut him up. My dangling camera rests on him, and I know what can happen here. Once I've choked him to death, I can take my camera and photograph the body. It's been so simple all along, and I didn't realize it. I tighten as I continue to see my dad. The image of him fades as Finn's face appears. I still hold tight as a choking voice coughs and wheezes. The oxygen is visibly limited, but I tighten my grip even more. Finn fades, and the facade wears off. A mustache appears again, rounded glasses, and neat, cropped hair. He's going a dark purple. My grip gets even more tight. It gets tighter and tighter until a thought pops into my head I would never expect.

This isn't fair. He's done nothing wrong, my imaginary mouth says, somehow being a voice of reason.

It makes me feel relieved. Like I've been waiting for a way to stop; for a way to not hold on so forcefully. The face in front of me is pained and helpless.

I loosen my grip and jump back. A deafening gasp is heard

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from the man as he lurches to his knees, sucking in air like a fish out of water.

“Th-Th-Thank you! Thank you God!” he says after heavy breathing.

The color in his face is so red now, it’d make the sun blush. I stand over him again, having a sense of slight remorse for my actions. I still don’t feel in control, however. Him thanking God instead of me fills me with contempt.

“Run. Now,” I say, looking at the trees.

Fortunately for him, he does. He runs like a man who’s been spared the death penalty. The test was a success in many ways and a failure in others. That feeling of regret stopped me from committing murder. It wasn’t the same with Finn. If he didn’t try to attack me and didn’t feel the need to take my valuables, he might still be alive today. The same goes for the Christian man. If he told me he was a sex offender or a child molester, I would have killed him there and then. Watched as the light faded from his eyes as his neck bulged a darker shade of red, indicating his brain would now be cut off from much-needed blood. He didn’t, however. He choked and groaned, looking at the sky, worshiping his God to the end. I mean, yes, the guy was an ass, but he wasn’t guilty of any kind of . . . sin? I suppose sin, yes.

There is still a small itch at the back; a tiny fingernail to my parietal lobe. It insists I made a mistake in not killing a helpless man. Maybe it’s right.

Could I kill Jason, though? Could I take his life with my bare hands? I look down and think about it. The answer is simple. I could. It wouldn’t be difficult, and I wouldn’t be guilty at all. It even excites me. Like with Finn. Digging out the problems in my life would be like pulling up the stubborn weeds from the

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concrete. Making sure I pour the weedkiller down sufficiently.

A thought comes to my head, where I'm pouring that same weedkiller down Jason's throat, watching him turn purple. Like the God-fearing gentleman. There's a big difference between those two faces I see. One makes me happy, and I now know which one.

The trek back is short. As I enter my car, I mull over the coincidence. Did I go to the woods to kill a person? Did I enter this place knowing I'd feel murder welling up inside me? It was as if God placed that man there and for me. I laugh at the ludicrous idea as I start the engine and drive home with a new sense of identity. I'm not an unemotional killer without motivation. I'm more of a God than the one made up in that stupid fuck's mind. I at least get to decide who deserves to die, and who doesn't. It's all in my head, and that's what's so great about it.

With the much-needed self-realization, a new plan for the week appears. Step one, I need to confront Jason. He won't die now, but we will see how soon it will happen. Step two, I need to find out who planted the bug on my PC. Then, I will decide if the person/people need to be killed also. Right now, the next few days will be an exercise of netting a wide area. Scoping out the situation; making sure I'm able to serve justice to those who need it.

Before all that, I need to rest again.

Jason's mansion is looking like it's being renovated again. Builders and decorators are swarming the place like flies on dog shit. I ring the buzzer, get greeted by a security guy, and make my entrance.

I see Abbie out the front playing tennis with a tennis coach.

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Hopefully she's fucking him on the side. I really do hope.

Inside the building, the place is being prettied up like a whore. The glimmer is enough to make me wince as I try and find Jason. He's probably upstairs looking sorry for himself. I climb the staircase and admire the admittedly thought-provoking artwork.

I enter and clear my throat.

"Ethan . . .," he says as he turns around. His eyes are as sad as a puppy's.

"This is where the cancer money is being spent then, huh."

He turns back around to stare at the roaring fire. I'm surmising that it's because he can't look at his own son, and how much he thinks of him as a failure.

"Can't even look at me," I say.

"I can. But I'm not fit to be your father, so it's hard."

"That's the most truth you've let spill from your mouth in a long time." I scoff a little.

"If you've come to mock me further, just go, son."

"I've come to see if you're *actually* sorry. I already know that you're not. You've got a new painting on every wall, it seems."

"Don't judge me like that. Judge how I hurt you, but forget about money for a minute."

"I don't give a shit about the money right now. I really don't care. You faking a terminal illness is something completely different. You're a psycho."

"We're both a bit *wrong*, Ethan."

I'm a freak?

"I wouldn't ever do the things you've done. Or . . ."

Jason looks at me, and a painful memory rears its ugly head.

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A memory so horrible, I've successfully locked it away in the basement, away from everything else. The painful tragedy is just that. A phrase, a description. The actual event in question is not known to me anymore. I know who it involved, and I could know exactly what happened again if I wanted to, but I won't let it. Every day it tries to become free of its shell. It pounds on the door, attempting to break it in by its hinges. I swallow. "The things you let happen," I muster, my voice quivering.

"Please don't. Don't bring that up now." Another crash on the door. It is on the verge of breaking.

"I won't. You have to live with what you've done. Spineless fucking coward."

"Leave me, Ethan! Leave me alone! Please just let me punish myself, but not you. Don't hurt me anymore. I know I'm a coward, but I can't take this."

I need to budge further—make him feel as low as I do. I know that will never happen. He will never pay for his *sins*. "What did you let happen to me? Remind me again. What have you done to me? Lied straight to my face with that bitch by your side. You never gave a shit about Mom."

Mommy, please. Don't leave me. Don't leave me with him.

"Your mother was no saint," he snarls. I've hit a nerve. "Abbie understands me more than she ever could. You remember what she used to do to you when she'd had a drink, don't you? *Control* you. Make you her little toy. You were small, and she didn't care about you."

That's a lie. She cared about me so much, you old fool. You fat piece of shit. You and that slut by your side, putting poison into my brain.

She didn't care about me. She used to put out cigarettes on

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my arm. Look, they're right here! You're right, you're right.

Like a light switch, it's been decided that Jason will die. The test has commenced and concluded. If I can't get along with this man, what use was he to everyone else? A true man wouldn't let their son be tormented like this. Will I become this sniveling man that is in front of me now? Every son is destined to be like their father. If that's the case, I might as well put a gun to my head and deal with the problem. Pulling out the weeds includes myself. Except, I'm not a weed, I'm the concrete the weeds are growing through. The next cause for action would be planting dynamite and letting the whole thing blow.

"If she were still here, I'd know she—"

"She would hit you with the iron—make you hurt, son."

"Stop fucking calling me that!" I push a chair over, looking embarrassingly weak as I do so, but still making Jason avert his eyes. "We're done," I say, "I don't want you near my house ever again. You can keep my car if you want it. Unlike you, I don't care about . . . this shit." I gesture around me toward all the possessions.

"It's your car, Ethan. And all this? It's all for show. I don't care about it either. Look." He gets up and grabs the fire poker from the fireplace. He javelins it into some strange painting of a woman taking her robe down below her shoulders. It goes straight through and hisses.

"You think that's it? Like, *boom*, all better?" I begin to think he's gone a bit loopy too. "You could destroy all this useless stuff, and I'd still see you as worthless as your fucking treasures."

"Oh yeah? Well fuck you then!" he says.

I'm mentally taken aback. He never usually lashes out to

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that degree, but it's a strange relief. Like I finally have some kind of recognition, that yes, he is emotionally invested. Still not enough, however.

"Get fucked. Have fun in your ivory tower. Choke to death. Hopefully you *will* get cancer, and when that skinny bitch outside has robbed you of Mom's wealth, and you're lying there crippled—screaming for help. I hope then, that she leaves you, and you have no one to put a bullet in your fucking head."

The speech makes Jason cry. I put on a bittersweet smirk and walk out, not giving a second look.

I'm down the stairs and out of sight, lightning-fast.

"Oh, Ethan!" Abbie says as she bumps into me.

I can't deal with this right now.

"Move. Please," I say as calmly as possible.

"Jason is sorry for what he . . . *we* said to you. I . . . *we* weren't sure if he actually had cancer, but we thought it might be. Rainy-day fund, y'know. We've been talking about giving some to you. You are my son-in—"

"Fuck off. Don't even say it," I say. Her face goes to anger, as if she's about to scream at me. I stop her with a wave of my hand and speak again. "You know what Abbie, he can't see you for what you are, but I can. He's stupid, you already know this. Just take every last bit of the money—take it. There's a particularly rickety spot in the floor up in the attic. Take him up there, I'm sure he'll fall right through and break his neck. Do it, I say. Get the insurance money, make him write a will and drain him like the leech that you are. I know I'll never see that fucking money again anyway. I'm not coming back here." I walk past her, glancing periodically at her unfathomable look.

I continue back to my car and get ready for departure. I take

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one final gander at the mansion. It won't be a long time until I come back here. It needs to be unexpected. Abbie needs to not realize what I'm there to do. When I do come back, it's going to be burned to the fucking ground. Mark my words. If Jason isn't in when it does go up in flames, I'm going to drag him, kicking and screaming, into the inferno. Whether I'm in there at the same time is irrelevant. I wouldn't be bothered in the slightest—melting away with my worst enemy.

What did he do again, Ethan? What did he do?

The door bulges as a heavy hit almost breaks it open once again.

I'm sitting in my car, watching my house from a distance. I reflect on what Jason said about my mother. He said she was just as abusive. She used to hurt me, but I couldn't see it. Am I that stupid to not even recollect my mom's dark side? I'm not so sure, so I need to dismiss it for now.

While I'm overthinking, I'm also paranoid and on edge. The nighttime is making me even jumpier, as I can see shadows dancing and taunting me. None seem to be real, so I ignore them.

You're being ridiculous. Just go inside. What's going to happen?

I exhale and go to take my key from the ignition when an unmarked car stops by my house. The engine keeps running for about ten seconds. It then carries on going. I have my suspicions on who it can be, but I watch. My hand continues on its journey. I start the car and give chase.

Tailing the car is easy enough. Following suspects is the same deal. You get too close; you look suspicious. You get too far away; they can give you the slip. It's all about balance. I

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weave through traffic, still not adjusted to driving. It feels as though everything is going too fast. As if I'm cruising through space.

The suspect's car eventually turns in to a gas station. It parks up and the user gets out.

Of course it's him. I knew this all along, but I didn't want to take the leap and say it. Alex is there, filling up his car. The most obvious answers are usually the right ones. Even though he isn't guilty of much more than checking out my house right now, it's still extremely suspicious. I don't have all the evidence I need, but it's a step in the right direction. If Alex is guilty in a small way, could I take his life, the same as Finn? Will I be sure I can take it? Like with Jason? Or will I be hesitant? Like with the hiker? It's a huge mess, but with George on my side, there will be no question of error. The state of affairs will be as clear as day.

The answer's simple. Like a nursery math test: $4 + 10?$ $1 \times 2?$ $8 - 6?$ You become unconscious to the answers, and that's what I need from George. I need proof of purchase. A death warrant that makes me live and every other scummy-fuck die.

He takes the nozzle from his car (even though I've never seen it. I didn't even know he drove).

He pays at the kiosk, mounts up, and continues on his way.

Back on the road, he's taking no particular care. He's cunning all right, but not enough. He hasn't seen me and won't. I know eventually, he's going to go somewhere important. His house, for instance. A loved one's house. But then what? Am I going to barge in, and put my boot on his scrawny neck and yell at him to confess? I can be intimidating at times, but not *that* intimidating.

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I come up with a plan, and it's a simple one; one as old as time: eavesdropping. All I need is to get close enough. Maybe he will make a phone call—give away some secrets even I'm not predicting. A prediction is already in my head, but I don't like to give it complete credence until I'm sure. Alex takes another turn. I'm at his house! If not his, someone important enough to go to. The address is twenty-seven Warlton Street. I make a mental note. Can you remember too, please?

He exits his car and strolls to the front door. He has a set of keys and goes in straight away. I park far enough away from him to not seem obvious. I sneak like a cat toward his choice of location. It's a nice place, in a respectable neighborhood. Nowhere near as dingy as where Finn lost his life. I make my way to the front of the house. A hacker like this must have some home security, so I keep my eye out for cameras. He'd be sure to hide them carefully, however, so I get nervous as I'm getting closer and closer. Eventually, I'm right up to the door. I check for any red, flashing lights, but I don't see any at all. Either I'm in luck or I can't see them well enough.

I like to look on the bright side in this case and be optimistic.

A light flashes above me, but not from a camera. A yellow brightness is illuminating from a window—positioned by a bedroom window.

I try to listen attentively, but I can't hear a word uttered. I'm not surprised, but I was hopeful . . .

I wait for a while, becoming bored, before he enters the leisure room, directly to the left of the front door. Another light comes on. I peek my head farther to see inside. A window comes leaning open; a centimeter away from hitting me in the face. Smoke puffs out in a huge stream. Stinks of cotton candy.

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“Yeah. Yeah. I know. Well I didn’t have much of a choice, did I?” he says while taking another drag from his vape.

Who is he talking to?

“He’s not there, no. No . . . Nope . . . He doesn’t seem to be up to much I guess, why do you even care so much?”

Gus?

“Well there’s not much I can do right now,” Alex says, “but I’ll be careful. If there’s a hint of any danger, I’ll abort operations. I’ll find a way, y’know?”

Again, not enough information to come up with a conclusion. The obvious choice *would* be Gus, but this time, I’m not so sure. It’s most likely him, but I could be jumping to an (as of yet) unsteady conclusion. Even if it is a safe one.

“I’ll call you tomorrow . . . I’ll be okay, you don’t have to worry.” He laughs to break the tension between him and the unknown individual.

I presume he hangs up as nothing else is said. I keep my body close to the front door, concealing myself within the darkness. Eventually, after a lot of sucking and puffing, sucking and puffing, Alex closes the window with a slam. The light shuts off and after a while, the bedroom light shuts off too.

It’s a minimal amount of information, but it’s still invaluable. There is, of course, another suspect.

I stroll back to my car while glaring behind me, making sure I’m covered. As I enter my vehicle, I start to try and piece the paper trail ahead of me.

Okay, let’s see. So, Alex is talking to one person. A person from our operation—it’s safe to assume. Is it Gus? Really? The tone of voice. The manner of words. Doesn’t sound like a hardened criminal. Are they more friendly than I thought? I doubt it.

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Hmm, Ellie? Now that sounds more likely. She's close enough in her position within the organization.

Freak, you're a freak har har.

How's about George? No, way, too friendly. Also, use of language. "Nope," you wouldn't talk to your employer like that. It has to be Ellie. She must be throwing him some "Do me!" looks behind the scenes. This could be big. Will I solve this though, huh? Will I? *Will you? Dumb fucker. Sounds like a dog.*

It's Ellie. It has to be. It can't be anyone else. Unless it's someone I have no knowledge of.

The jigsaw places are slowly but surely being put into place. Whether they're in the correct order, I won't know until I take a step back and look.

One, two, three, four, five . . .

I head home, going a bit faster than is usually comfortable for me. I need to take my mind off the events that have been occurring recently. Ever since that day with the mutilated corpses. The day I saw the carnage. Things have been getting hectic and sporadic. Did the bad luck start coming before then? Or when my mother died? Jason had to be lying through his teeth about her. In fact, I know he was.

Again, I'm getting worked up to a point of frenzy, so I stop ruminating. But of course, it happens again, and again. Before I get home, a plan occurs to me. Not a logical one to me now, but a plan all the same. I stop at a hardware store. I'm not in there for long, and when I come out, I head straight back home.

In the safety of my own home, I begin to panic—checking my windows every now and again. I'm claustrophobic. I don't know who to focus my attention on utterly. This "Azaz" person is on

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my tail, but I don't have enough information on that case either. Maybe Azaz is the one who planted the bug on my PC. It's possible. But it's like trying to put a face to a lineup of seven billion people. Azaz working with Alex? Has a ring to it. I'm being closed in on by forces I can't see. I needed to question Finn to get information out of him. And to put my mind at ease. I was so fixated on destroying him, I let my mind do all of the work. I was stupid when it came down to it. I was self-obsessed, but it felt so good to end a life that got in my way. A power trip, of course.

Maybe I should bring all of this up with George.

I walk up the stairs in my house—toward the cupboard. I put my camera satchel inside and move to my drawer. I open the small drawer and look down at the burner phone. It looks tempting, so I pick it up. I type in George's memorized phone number, hover my thumb over the green call button. Something stops me.

You're weak. Don't call him. I don't care if you need the help, you shouldn't rely on others. Be independent for once in your life, you cockroach.

I put the phone back, knowing that my inner thoughts are right again.

CHAPTER FIVE

THREATS

“We can come back to this, that’s no problem at all. Instead, let’s just go over how everything is going *now*. Since the accident involving your mother, how have you been coping?”

“I’ve been fine. It was a long time ago. I think it’ll be coming up to the anniv—”

“Ethan, remember that we shouldn’t create anniversaries for deaths. As much as we cannot forget those days, we should not hold them to a higher importance than any other. This will lead to a sense of loss that is reoccurring. Instead, hold on to your grief, and . . . I’m sorry, I should not be policing the way in which you process . . . I do apologize. You can grieve in your own way.”

“I’ve been *fine*.” Mr. Riley repeats his previous statement.

“Are you noticing any change in your social status, or do you mostly spend your time alone?”

“You already know.”

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“Right. I do believe you would benefit from having a close circle of friends, but I understand that it can be difficult when in full-time work.”

“No, you don’t understand. I don’t need them.”

One month later. One month later, and not much shit has changed. It's been a stressful amount of time. The planning has been a daunting task. Making sure I have a mind map of my next few steps was and still is imperative. The important point is that this is the week Alex is going to die. Once he is gone, Gus will follow in his grave. He is unfortunately still alive. It seems Alex is postponing the procedure even further by fumbling with the cover-up.

So, what have I been doing over the last month—apart from planning my attack against Gus and Alex? George has given me odd jobs around the warehouse. I've managed to bring any spare images over to him for my paycheck. It's sustaining me for now (along with my work pay) but soon I'll run low.

Should have killed the Christian. Took pictures of his carcass.

Gus remains caged up. Alex is loose, but I've been monitoring him. So far, he has been cautious around me. I don't think he has any inclination regarding my suspicions. And while they have stayed as a stationary threat, so have Azaz and Ronnie. I haven't been jumped yet, but I'm beginning to feel like I'm being

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watched. I will need to ask Jessica about her experience with Ronnie.

Speaking of Jessica, she and I have been getting somewhat “comfortable” together. We’ve been talking over drinks every now and again. She’s become a dependency on normality. With the stress caused before and during the incident, it’s been good to regularly see someone who doesn’t see me as a *freak*.

Today is the day. *Today* is the *day* I use Jessica to my advantage. But somehow, I’d prefer for her to be alive. I usually see everyone as expendable, but recently, two people in my life have become more than that.

Is it a worrying sign or something good for me? I can call Jessica a true friend in the literal sense of the word, so it must be.

Just shut the fuck up and use her like the human colostomy bag she is.

“So it looks like positions are opening up,” I say to Jessica, not entirely sure if she’s with or against me. The amount of time I’ve spent with her has proven otherwise, but with today being important, I need to make sure.

“Ah, great.” She sips her coffee.

I notice an ugly tattoo covering her thigh as she looks the shop over. Looks like a butterfly or something. I try to avoid looking at it while I sip on my coffee. She’s never worn a skirt before, and it’s below freezing outside.

“Say, remember those guys you did business with—those ones who gave you trouble that long time ago. You remember them? Finn and Ronnie?”

“Erm, maybe. The ones near the store? I guess I do. Why do you ask?”

“No reason in particular. I just want to know a bit more

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about what happened. I know that they looked pretty sketchy. I'm just wondering if you're in any danger, or anything."

"I'm not, you don't need to worry." The feelers I sent out have come back with zilch. She's stubborn for sure when she wants to be. It's like she knows how much to let slip.

A man passes outside the coffee shop; he walks and looks at me. For a moment, I believe he has a gun that he's pulling out of his pocket. I imagine him lifting it from his coat. He's raising it toward shoulder level—aiming straight down toward my face—his arm as stiff as a snooker cue. He knows a thing or two for sure. Does he work for Gus, or does he work for Azaz? Or does he work for the police? "Over here! I've caught the killer! I've caught that murderer who was involved with Azaz, but who might not be involved with Gus, and also might not have anything we're looking for!"

He shoots me in the face—the glass shatters in a hail of razors. Jessica even gets shredded a little. She screams, gawking at my hideously blown-out complexion. Passing pedestrians stand and laugh, pointing and hooting. What a nightmare.

"Earth to Ethan, hello?"

"Sorry, I was just thinking about something."

The guy is now across the road hailing a taxi. Looks like he wasn't working for anyone. Go figure. As more people walk past, I try not to think the same. I fail.

"So why do you care about them, huh?" Jessica asks.

"I don't," I say. "But you just have to understand that I'm on edge about them." I think for a moment, deciding that a risk needs to be taken with Jessica again. "Look, I'm just going to come out and say it. Don't freak out. Finn died a while back. I don't know if you heard about it, but yeah, he's dead."

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“Oh Jesus Christ. No, I didn’t know. I haven’t seen it on the news. I mean, it’s not like I watch the news, but still.” She laughs to herself.

It’s at this point I realize something: Jessica isn’t afraid of death. Okay, not *afraid*, but *bothered* might be a better word. She laughs in the face of mortality. She did it when we discussed our agreement, and she’s laughing now I’m telling her someone she spoke to is dead. I don’t know how close they were, but I’m guessing not much at all.

“It’s still under investigation. They take longer for criminals, of course. That, or the budget cuts. My superior told me actually, but I don’t want to go into all that. I’m not working currently, so the position might not be available yet, but it *will* be available.”

“I do need a good job, honestly. You wouldn’t believe the shit this one guy asked me to do, he was a—”

“Ehh,” I shake my coffee. “I’m drinking.”

“Right.”

I can’t imagine Jessica rolling on her back to let a stranger hump her for an insufferable amount of time. She doesn’t *look* like a hooker. Her personality might be playful, and her attitude carefree. But, she doesn’t give off the impression of someone with her occupation.

She’s too pretty, I suppose.

“You don’t strike me as someone who’s too in touch with his sexuality,” she says. “Not a virgin, right?”

This is the first time this type of conversation has come up.

“No.”

“Yeah, you don’t strike me as one. Just—You strike me as the guy not in touch with his sexuality,” she says in a fast cycle

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of words. The type when you repeat yourself as a matter of fact. “You haven’t said what I’m gonna be doing for this ‘position.’ ” She tries to change the subject after an awkward silence. “What is this seriously gonna be about, can you still not tell me?”

I don’t think for a few seconds, getting caught up in my head again.

“I mean, it’s not going to be anything that you’re doing now. Think of it as a partnership, where you’ll be assisting me in my work. You won’t have to get your hands dirty, actually, but you’re going to need to do some immoral things, as I’ve previously discussed. I know you’re a tough one though, so you’d fit right in.”

“Ahh, sweet talking me I see. I’m not as tough as I look.” She winks at me and taps her head. “But that’s for me to know and you to find out, if you get to know me well enough.” A big gulp of coffee goes down her throat.

Yeah, she swallows like a slut, you said it, ha!

Shut up, no one’s laughing.

I feel embarrassed as I blush. I’m such an idiot. Someone not in control of emotions. I hope she doesn’t notice. It’s not as if I’m falling or anything silly like that. It’s an unknown force making me feel uncomfortable.

“Actually, there might be a small job you can help me with. It’s unofficial. However, I am still willing to pay you for your time.”

“What kinda job we talking about here? Blow job? Hand job? *Foot job*? I mean those are a lotta jobs but I’m sure we can work something out.”

“What?”

“Ethan, I’m kidding. Jeez, lighten up a little. Y’know,

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frown, upside down.” I smile a little. “Hurrah!” she shouts, making customers in the coffee shop stare at us.

“Yeah, let’s keep it to room volume.”

“Oh c’mon, lighten up. I heard about money and I got excited, what can I say?”

She’s a real free spirit. Almost the opposite of me. Why would I even spend any amount of time or money around this weirdo? I should be thinking non-stop about how much I want to strangle this person.

*Dad would have sa—*I stop the thought dead in its tracks.

“It’ll be a lump sum, and it’s nothing major. We’ll say, three hundred at the end of today. All I need is for you to do a little digging. There’s someone I suspect of having ill-conceived motivations toward me—maybe to harm me. All you need to know, is his name is Alex, and he works for a man named Gus. He might be cooperating with a girl named Ellie. Got that?”

“Three hundred for a day. I gotta say, it’s not looking peachy.”

“Well, if you equal out the calculations—ten, twenty, thirty dollars per hour wouldn’t even come up to the amount I’m giving you. This should only take a few hours, and it’s not back-breaking stuff. So, an average of four hours at a push, coming up to a pay of fifty dollars. That’s me still being generous. An added one fifty for health and safety reasons. You don’t strike me as someone who cares about danger—not that there would be any. Another extra fifty for expenses toward discretion. You of course can’t tell anyone about this, so that money will go toward it.”

She looks at me with a winced pair of eyes. She says, “Three fifty.”

“Did you not hear what I just said?”

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“Oh I heard, but I want some more. I get hungry.”

The stubbornness has set in again. I do have to admit, I admire the frankness. No beating around the bush, no dancing about the subject. A simple answer. It’s simple enough for me, anyway.

“Fine, deal. You’re going to do a good job though, right?”

“Of course. *Duh.*”

We finish our drinks before heading outside.

It’s freezing cold when out of the warm indoors. Litter is strewn about while homeless people roam the street like tumors on a child’s brain. The child is in a hospice. Chicago might as well be in one too.

“Follow me,” I say.

“Is that Alex guy involved with that other guy—Finn, was it? Did he kill him?”

“No. I mean, I can’t know, obviously, but Alex isn’t involved with that, no. This is something else, something personal. I just thought I’d tell you about Finn because I didn’t know if you were close with him. And if you were, then I’d have to at least tell you since I’m an officer.”

Was.

“I get you, I get you.” We stop talking as a few people push past us.

No gun in sight again. We continue walking and talking. Jessica says, “I wasn’t *‘close, close,’* if that’s what you’re thinking. I never did anything with him.”

It was the other guy, wasn’t it?

“But was he working for some bad people? Or a bad *somebody*, maybe?”

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“What? I mean no, I don’t think so. I hardly know the dude. Or, *knew*, I guess. He just seemed like a fairly normal person. He didn’t want to touch me. Well, until you showed up, but it wasn’t like that. It was his friend with his hands all over me. Fucking creep.”

“Right, I see.”

She can’t be involved with this. The conversation has confirmed she’s a “tell it how it is” kind of person. She isn’t a mastermind. She has the mind of a chipmunk. She’s not the dumbest person, but she’s not exactly “academic.” That’s how I like them though, right? Not too dull, but not too sharp either. As long as they’re dumber than me, there’s no harm done.

“He got stabbed, or so I’m told. You don’t think anyone would have a reason to do it?”

“Are you interviewing me right now?” she asks, a bit peeved.

“No. I mean, I’m curious, but this is off the record.”

Jessica gives me a suspicious look before speaking up. “Errrrrrm, I know he had a shady job—him and the guy. I don’t know what they were doing, really. All I heard them talk about was about their boss, and then about getting paid. Then the one said about making a ‘grand entrance.’ I don’t know if he was talking about himself or his boss.”

“It all sounds really strange to me.”

I’m inquiring for my personal information at this point. Jessica doesn’t know a thing about Azaz herself and she won’t have any idea why he’d want me robbed, dead, or injured. Pick your poison. She had said something rather interesting. About someone making a “grand entrance.” She said it with a level of caution. Almost like I could imagine whoever saying it—saying it

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with a shiver going through their spine. It sounded ominous enough coming from Jessica.

“You’re telling me that it’s strange,” Jessica says. “I didn’t wanna be around them for too long. They *both* gave me the creeps now that I think about it. I guess that short guy isn’t a ‘normal’ person like I said. You can’t be normal and then get shanked. Doesn’t happen around here. Well, maybe, I suppose it does. Ya have fifty bucks in your pocket, and you’ll get eaten alive.”

I’m not listening to her. I’m trying to connect dots in my head while looking out for possible threats. The streets are empty, apart from the occasional person walking past. They always seem to give me a strange look. Is it what I’m wearing? Or Jessica? That’s what sets off alarm bells. When it’s none of the things you thought about. You’re walking down the street and someone laughs while looking in your direction. You look okay. There’s nothing outwardly wrong. But you think *Oh, maybe there’s a stray hair pointing to the sky or maybe there’s a ketchup stain on my collar. Maybe I have a loose piece of skin on my face that I can’t see. Don’t scratch now. You need to know if there’s anything there!*

When you’re back, there’s nothing there. Nothing abnormal. What was the person laughing at? You’ll never know, but you think for so long it makes your brain feel like it’s as bruised as a peach.

“Can’t stop daydreaming today, huh? We’re at your car.” We step in and buckle up. “Did you get your car cleaned? Looks brand new.”

“Got it fixed up a while ago. Nothing important,” I say, thinking back on the tailgating. In hindsight, that had to be Finn.

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I can't remember anything about the event, apart from the ditch I was in. I have a feeling I might have glanced over my shoulder as soon as I noticed a car, but I don't remember a face looking at me. I was in another place entirely throughout the whole ordeal. Even now, it feels like a dream. Like it happened in a movie I'd watched or a story I'd heard.

I drive with that same nauseous disconnect.

"There. That's the house right there," I say.

"Looks nice."

"Well, it's home to a scumbag. We're going to do some reconnaissance. I need you to just sit here. I've got a pair of binoculars, a walkie-talkie, and some food if you want some."

"Ooh, beef jerky!" Jessica dives into the bag, past the other items, and retrieves the fatty snack. I knew she'd want it. There weren't many options at the front desk to grab at the hardware store anyway. Beef jerky and peanuts. She might have a peanut allergy. I don't know.

She wouldn't have a nut allergy now, would she?

Really not funny.

Jessica has already ripped the bag open and is gnawing at the strips of dried meat like a dinosaur tearing at a human victim.

"Concentrate, okay?"

"I'm listening."

"Just . . . Just keep an eye out, yeah? Make sure you watch the house like a hawk. Anything that happens in there, you tell me. If he so much as coughs, you tell me, yeah?"

Christ man, stop saying "yeah." This fucking floozy is changing your vocabulary into shitty slang. Spend any more than a month with her and you'll be fucking men for money too.

"What if he goes out?" She asks a reasonable question.

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“Tell me. I’m trusting you with my car, but I’m not trusting you to drive it. If I see a scratch, you’re not getting your three hundred.”

“Three fifty.”

“Great.” I open the door and proceed to exit.

“Where are you going? I’m gonna be stuck here by myself?”

“I’m going for a walk, need to see someone.”

“Fine, but don’t take too long. Jeez.”

“Just do what I say and don’t get into trouble. Anyone asks, I wasn’t here.”

Jessica uses her body language. She points at her own two eyes and then points to mine. I grin and shake my head. I do have to admit, besides her flaws, she is charmingly characteristic. She’s not boring.

I walk a long distance to get to the warehouse. But, I enjoy the exercise, making the most of the clear space. My thoughts sometimes get in my way, as they have done since I became a murderer. The voices were either ridiculing me or congratulating me. I tune them out most of the time.

Rodrigo is on the door again, making sure rabble doesn’t turn up. He’s chewing gum again too, thankfully.

“Arms out,” he says.

I do it.

I don’t know much about the guy still. He’s the lesser part of the operation, but I can sense he’s no pushover either. He has prison tattoos on his face and neck. I must not have taken much care in searching before. I feel safer knowing he’s here, and it gives me more of an appreciation toward him. Mind you, he’s

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still a fucking idiot.

He grunts and lets me through.

I need to see Gus. Azaz is still an unknown threat. Right now, he/she is invisible. If I'm to focus my attention on that kind of attacker, I first need to get rid of the immediate danger. That danger is Gus and Alex. Possibly Ellie, also.

What makes Gus so dangerous to me right now, is that he is in a state of defenselessness. He's a trapped animal in a cage being prodded with a stick. At any moment, he could launch himself forward. It wouldn't be a death shot, but it would maim. The last time I visited Gus, he was beaten, but he understood his predicament. What I need from him now is an understanding between two opponents. Like when two fighters call it quits for five minutes. They'll take a breather and they'll be best buddies for those five minutes. As soon as that time's up, it's back to the ring. Back to the life-or-death fight. It's now my turn to go up against him and put my cards down (or so he thinks) and ask him for a peek.

Dante is on guard at the moment. Out of all the crew members, Dante has to be in the middle of insufferable to tolerable.

"Howdy-doodie, Ethan," he says while reading a magazine. He says, he says, he says. All he does is say. He would find a way to talk with his tongue cut out.

And what is he reading? A highbrow publication about the sophistication of modern architecture? A journalist piece of modern-day politics?

No, he's reading a pornographic magazine. I didn't even know they made those anymore. I thought they stopped making them as soon as the World Wide Web became a thing.

"Hello Dante. I'm assuming you're on watch."

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“Ding-ding,” he says, not averting his eyes from the spectacle before him.

“How is he?”

“I try to talk to him, but he prefers to sulk. Ain’t that right, Gussy-Boy?”

“Fuck you, *puta*,” Gus calls from inside his makeshift cell.

Dante lifts his head from the magazine and looks at me. “I think he’s starting to like me.”

I get inside the mutilated lion’s den. Inside the cell, the stench of old piss and shit hits my nose. There’s a bucket filled to the brim. Looking around doesn’t reveal anything important. Disappointing. I’m willing to bet there’s something behind the scenes.

Charming.

“You get used to the smell,” Gus says.

“I don’t think I want to.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be in here soon enough.”

“I doubt it.”

“Does Gussy need a diapie change?” Dante asks in a baby voice from outside the cell. “Or has he made a dookie in his potty?”

“I’ll kill you both. I’ll rip both your heads off and shit into them. Every time I use that bucket, I imagine I’m using your head, Ethan. Sometimes you, Dante!”

“I’m flattered!” Dante says.

I stare at him, weighing his words, dissecting them. All I’m getting so far is a waft of stink coming from the bucket and sentence analysis.

“Dante, mind taking a break for five?” I say.

“No can do. Boss says I’m not supposed to leave here at all.

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Also, I got a hard-on the size of Long Island right now, and as much as I'd love to get rid of it, I gotta stay."

"Thank you for that lovely image," I say. "Oh well, it's your loss then, Gus. Looks like everyone's going to hear your little secret. Do you want to know who I saw recently?"

"Oh, let me think, man! Was it a woman? No, no, of course not. It couldn't be a woman now, could it? Hmm, a man maybe? Did you see a man last night? Did you go for drinks, and then did he take you back to his apartment where he kissed you softly, and licked you in all the right places? 'Oh Johnathan! You can lick me there again! Oh do it again, baby! Please!'" He starts humping the air like a child. Dante's at his post, laughing.

Disgusting fucking prick. I'm not a fucking fag. Don't you dare say that about me. I'll rip your fucking head off and destroy your whole life you worthless fuck!

His words don't affect me in the slightest, I even laugh myself.

"Very funny. Your mom does look like a male sometimes. I confuse the two."

Dante gives an "Ohhhhhhh" in the background. As if I've given off a great comeback. I sometimes have comedic timing, but this is all a childish, idiotic joke.

"Go fuck yourself, you piece of shit. Come here to talk like that, you wouldn't if I wasn't tied to the goddamn wall, huh?"

It's true, but at least the joke worked in my favor, to a degree. It has him riled up and embarrassed.

"Say whatever you want to say. You've had your fun, and so have I. You know why I'm here and who I saw. You were right about it being a guy. I wasn't visiting anyone's apartment. It was someone visiting *me*. You know who."

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He spits into the shit and piss bucket. It makes me feel sick as it *patoings* into the multicolored mixture of bodily fluids.

“Look, I’m going to say a name very soon, and then all hell will break loose.” I look over my shoulder and see Dante in my peripheral vision. He’s looking intrigued. “You can say *yes* if you want me to stop. I saw someone last night. I know who it was, you know who it was. And I won’t say who, if you give me a little something back. You don’t want to have two strikes right now, so you have to really convince me to be friendly with you. I don’t want to say anything that I’d regret. If I say the name, I could get caught in the crossfire here. But I’m willing to put my neck on the line to make sure we have an equal understanding.”

I lied for the most part with what I said. I wasn’t risking a thing. I’d rather be completely sure before I spill a name that could cause an uproar. It would satisfy me to know that the most blabbermouth member knows Alex is a dirty snitch. For George to find out from Dante that Alex was the one to access my computer and wreck my reputation.

Gus looks down. He’s twitching with anger and he knows he’s cornered. “Yes,” he spits out like a broken tooth.

Once again, I have won the round.

The sparring match occurred during the spewing of threats. The lighthearted banter (that wasn’t banter at all) was the understanding. The part in which we took inventory and stood upon a common ground. By common ground, I mean me standing above him while he whimpers in his piss and shit.

“Good choice.”

Evil eyes from Gus.

I step out of the door and look at Dante.

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“Aww!” he says. “I wanted to hear the juicy gossip. Who is the rat within our mitts? I’m sure I could figure it out if I actually gave a shit. Hahah!”

“Who was on last patrol, Dante?”

“HmMMMM, Alex. Went home a while ago. Next I think is Matthew. Then, you? I keep forgetting honestly. I’m surprised George even lets me keep an eye on the beaner at all!”

Yeah, I’m surprised too.

“When does your shift end?”

“Next five minutes. It’s not your turn, right? I always get so mixed up.”

“No. You got the schedule right.”

“Ah.” He looks proud of himself. “I thought the boredom was getting to me.”

“Well, you have your . . . entertainment.” I glance at his wretched porno mag.

“Playboy print from eighty-two. Ahh, old faithful.” He kisses the front cover. “Oh, that didn’t taste good. Kind of salty. *Yuck.*”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s so childish, it is amusing to a degree. Like a wind-up monkey or dangling a set of keys in front of your own face.

“Have a fun shift, Dante.”

“Oh we will, ain’t that right, honey-pie?”

“Fuck yourself, faggot.”

George is nowhere to be seen in the building as I exit, which is usual for him. He’s a busy guy, so it makes sense for him to be out. He has deals to make and business to proceed with. When I’m passing his room, I spot the storage cupboard and a place I’ve kept secret from everyone. I have no idea if anyone else has

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noticed the side entrance to the warehouse, but I clocked it early on. When you use a base of operations, you need to know all the intricacies of it.

I walk outside, Mathew is coming onto the site.

Rodrigo is sitting down. He has shades on and is now as still as a statue. He's at a distance where it'll be difficult to hear a conversation.

"Hey, Mathew."

He's walking with earphones in. He takes one out and looks wide-eyed—surprised by a smile on my face.

Just need to keep this fucker here for a second.

"Hello Ethan," he says back, putting his earphones and phone into his backpack.

"How are you?"

"I'm good, thank you. And yourself?"

"Oh, I'm good." I let the words hang for a second. "What were you listening to there, Mathew?"

"Oh. A bit of *Joy Division*. Band."

Not a bad choice.

I'm running out of things to say already, so I go to an obvious choice for the moment. "Eh . . . you told me before to watch out for Gus and Azaz. You want to explain more about what you meant?"

"Erm, well. It's just a warning, you know. You seem like you have things that you know. I've seen things that you haven't. Heard things."

The conversation has now gone from a stalling device to an intriguing dialogue.

"And why would you want to tell me, Mathew?"

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“You just have to watch out. You’re new to this. I’m new to this. I just thought . . . maybe we could stick together, y’know? Like at a prison, where two new inmates get . . . Okay, forget that. I didn’t mean this place was like a *prison*. I just”—Dante bursts out of the entrance, making me and Alex jump, but not Rodrigo, who is like a part of the foundation now; unmoving and unfazed.

“Well hello, you two. Matty, he’s in there for ya. It’s 5:00 though, so I’m not sticking around.”

“Right. Thank you, Dante.”

“Ohhhh amigo, you are a very welcome Señor Mansa, and Señor Riley, you have a good day too, amigo!” Dante does his horrific Mexican impression and waddles away like a gunslinger.

I get a walkie-talkie transmission from Jessica, but I ignore it.

“Well, anyways, what were we discussing?” I say.

“About the thing I said a while back.” Mathew looks shiftily around us.

“Of course. Listen, you’re saying that Gus is dangerous? And Azaz also?”

“Forget Gus, he’s a small fry. Just some pretender. It’s Azaz you need to worry about from now on. I’m worried. I’m worried about all of us. Not that I care like that . . . I-I Just mean that I think something bad is coming. I can’t say anymore, I’ll get into trouble.”

Mathew suddenly seems younger than his (already young) nineteen years of age. Childish, glassy eyes look in terror. He’s agitated, looks as if he’s on the verge of a panic attack.

He’s just a child for Christ’s sake.

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“Okay, Mathew. You take it easy, y—Okay?” I’m surprised by my niceness as I walk away.

I am not in contempt of Mathew. I don’t know if it’s because of his age or because he’s helpful. Or maybe it’s because he’s George’s nephew. I’m not sure, but it doesn’t matter. I look behind me and see Mathew head through the door that Dante and I exited through previously.

I fiddle for my walkie-talkie and switch the mute off. Just as expected, Jessica is on the other line. It’s a good thing I kept it muted while having my little chat with Gus.

“Ethan. Ethan. Ethan. Ethan. Ethan. Ethan,” she’s saying repeatedly through the crackle.

“Yes, I’m here. When did he go?”

“What? How did y—Well, he left about five or ten minutes ago, I guess. He didn’t do much before that—mostly paced around the place, smoking his stupid fucking vape. Or I think that was a vape. Who actually enjoys those? Like if you’re gonna smoke, just damn smoke something. I don’t want the scent of unicorn ass wafting toward me in the street, y’know?” In this instance, Jessica reminds me of Dante. They could be long-lost siblings, I suppose. Vulgarity addicts, can’t stop talking, slightly dense.

“Okay. Just stay where you are. I’ll come by as soon as I can.”

I put the walkie-talkie back into my pocket and retrieve my smartphone. I open the maps application on my phone and type in the address of Alex: twenty-seven, Warlton Street.

A giant red pin pierces the map and I scroll to surrounding areas. I do all this as I walk. There are food places, clothing stores, bowling alleys; all within a ten-minute distance.

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Maybe he's going farther out. The longer this takes, the harder it will be to determine the information I need.

I lock my phone, continue walking. Ten minutes pass and Jessica radios in.

"He's back," she says.

"What does he have on him?"

"Erm, some kinda box? No, wait, he has a briefcase. A small one though. It's silver. What's in there, Ethan? He's back inside!"

"Don't worry about it." I'm not reassuring in the least. "Keep your head down, I'm nearly back."

"Why couldn't we have just used our damned phones? Would have been a whole lot e"—I mute her again.

I'm quite sure I know what's going on here, but I need confirmation. I open up my phone again and I type "Gun Stores" into the little white search box at the top. A few seconds of loading go by before options pop up. My suspicions are realized as a gun store is listed as being 7.2 kilometers away. Nineteen minutes by car. That has given just enough time to make sense. He must have been in a rush too. My phone shows low battery, so I lock it again and carry on.

He thinks a gun will save him, huh? Poor guy hahahahaha!

It's time to get back to the car and strategize.

The sun is dying from above: casting a gorgeous red and yellow light display over the horizon. My car is parked in the same place it was before. Jessica has her head positioned toward the house. She's looking through the binoculars. A sigh of relief hits my mouth for no particular reason. I didn't think anything bad would happen, but there's always the niggling nail hammering itself

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into my consciousness. Hammering and hammering, until it becomes more than a thought. It instead manifests into a—

“Don’t turn around. Just look ahead and walk to the left.”

With the order given behind me, I decide it’s best to follow it. I already know who it is though, who else could it be? It’s of course Azaz. It had to be Azaz. Had to show up at some time.

“We’re going for a little walk.”

Wait, no. That isn’t a newly heard voice. That sounds familiar.

You were wrong, you idiot. Azaz wouldn’t just show up like that—the grand entrance being a command from behind. It would be a baseball bat to the front of your head. A parade of insurmountable proportions. Instead of it being a collection of fun and celebration, it would be a collage of death and destruction. Your death and destruction.

“Is this Ronnie that I’m speaking to?”

“Well give the man a medal, he got it on his first try.”

Second.

Ronnie walks me away from my car and toward a secluded parking lot.

“Jess never could sit still, huh?” he says.

“What does that mean?”

“Means she went back to hers for her bag. Led me straight to you. I wasn’t even looking for ya. But when I followed her, I recognized that plate and that shitty car. I was gonna kill you that night. I should have. You killed my friend, and you really pissed off my boss too. I gotta admit though, you caught his attention. That’s more than most people do. Usually, it’s the people who catch attention of him. He’s really not as secretive as you might think. He doesn’t hide.”

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So it is a he.

“Ahh, good to know,” I say in an unfazed manner.

He’s walking behind me, purposefully far back so I can’t lunge backward and knock the gun away to make my escape. He’s a professional. Or, at least that’s how he’s operating. What are my options? If I beeped the speaker button on my walkie-talkie, Jessica would not understand Morse code. It’s useless. Reaching for my pockets in this situation would be a sure way to get myself killed. My arms aren’t up in the air yet, but I’m not sure why. My upper body was frozen in place as soon as Ronnie started talking.

“You’ve really shit the bed this time,” he says. “That night, all we were gonna do was rob you. That’s gone out the window now, though. I got special orders to bring you in alive. Then Azaz will have his fun with you. He wouldn’t want you to die without him laying eyes on you first.

“I’m thinking differently though. Know what I’m thinking? I’m thinking I’ll just say, ‘He tried to run—had to put a bullet in him, boss.’ ‘He swiped for the gun. I knocked his teeth out and put one between his eyes for good measure.’ ”

He’s not bluffing. I can tell by that tone—that sneer in his voice. He has a personal regard toward my life. He wants to *kill* me right now.

“Turn around,” he says.

I find myself in the empty parking lot. No people around, not even any cars in sight. No lights to speak of. The fading sun is making it harder and harder to see as it is. I turn around, tilting my hands upwards in a defensive position.

The next thing that I see fills me with real dread that can’t be explained in one word.

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He has a silencer attached to his gun. It's difficult to see, but it's there. It doesn't matter what type of gun it is, as there's a phrase that persists in life. It explains when a human being is within a dire situation. One that cannot be escaped from easily. This situation may even be impossible to escape from. It's a tremendously complicated ordeal to be put through. And that particular phrase is "I'm fucked."

Ronnie looks even uglier in the darkness. As if there's something hidden within his hardened features. Something lurking out of sight.

"You know what I'm going to do with this?" he says, not taking his eyes off me or moving the gun in any other direction than on my face.

My hope for an escape relies on words. This isn't looking peachy, but it's worth a try.

"You know what's going to happen when Azaz finds me dead, right? You said so yourself, he gave you an order. Really think he's going to believe you got overpowered by some slim five-foot-something guy? Or that I outran you? I don't work out as much as you, I'd be willing to bet; you can tell just by looking at me."

"Stop talking. I want to see your life end," he says, the darkness fully overtaking his face—apart from those damned shining eyes of his own. "You can try and run if you want. We can make it fair."

"I just said he won't believe you."

"You're not gonna talk your way out of this, little man. You're not gonna be alive by tomorrow."

"I'm not saying I should *be* alive by tomorrow. I'll be honest, I'm fucking shit-scared right now. I can admit that. But I'm

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not asking to live, I'm asking to see your boss. He wants to kill me himself. You . . . (*I almost say, 'And Finn.'*) sounded so freaked out by him. You don't want to see his bad side, I can tell; it's written all over you. This whole time, I keep thinking Azaz is going to make this *grand entrance* or something." I sneak in the phrase. Ronnie falters for the first time.

He loosens his grip on his pistol and readjusts. (I spot the minor detail like an expert.) Body language can give away the biggest secrets in someone's mind. A simple scratch of the neck, shift of the hair, or lick of the lips can say "I killed her." "I'm very nervous." "I don't like you." I drop my arms periodically after he falters, inch by inch.

Of course, I'm not a professional psychologist, but I've learned from the best in how to cheat, lie, and manipulate.

Every son is destined to be like their father.

"You're right about one thing. You should be shit-scared."

He's ignored my manipulation. Tactic comes back a failure.

I'm going to try another approach. "Just think! Think for one second! Do you want to go back with another failure? I'm guessing you had a job to do with Jessica, and I fucked that up. That was on me. But what the hell happened in the alleyway?" I contemplate bringing up Finn. *It's time, I need to.* "Finn told me you were there with him. Were you hiding or what? Where were you while your 'friend' was dying?"

"Shut the fuck up." He now tightens his grip with an audible *scrunch*. I've hit a nerve, but this needed to be said. I'm on thin ice. All I can do now is hope there's a shark in the water for me to grab onto. Then let it pull me to a nearby iceberg. "All you had to do was take your beating. You just had to *not be difficult*, but you couldn't do it. You resisted, you stupid fuck."

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I can't fumble this with Ronnie. He has a job to do, and maybe I can buy myself time to do . . . *something*.

"Look, I *defended* myself. He nearly beat me to death," I say. "I had to do something. He was talking about you and him." Where can I go with this? Can I turn this into some power struggle and make Finn not look like the good guy he's supposed to be? They're friends, he won't buy it in a million years. "Liar!" he'll shout at me. If they're friends, I need to relate. I need to be understanding. "He said you two were close, man. He was saying how rough he had it in Ireland. His upbringing, and how coming here changed his life. He didn't say if it was for the better or not." No glimmer in his eye confirms no eye movement or twitch, and no interruption either. Everything I'm saying seems to be coming off okay. "He didn't want to hurt me, but Ronnie, he wanted to impress you. He fucking looked up to you. But then he turned to me—he had tears in his eyes—and he says, 'I'm sorry about this, I really am. I don't want to do this.' No word of a lie.

"He then runs at me, man. He's got his knife high, and he puts me to the ground. Goddamn he was strong." The tone of voice and intonation I'm using is smooth. Like a movie star reminiscing about his role. It's one of the best performances I've ever given. "He's trying to stick that knife in me, and he does. Look." I unzip my jacket, lift my shirt while passing a reassuring hand to show I have no weapons. I even say, "I don't have a gun." He doesn't say anything.

I show the faint scar on my hand and a small scar on the right side of my shoulder. There are few others dotted around my body also—I avoid them.

You're saying that was all Dad, huh? Your mom was a bitch.

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“This one, right here.” I point to myself as I talk. “Luckily, it grazed me. I went to the doctors and it healed up pretty good after that. Healed quick too.” I can’t see the scar in the poor lighting, so I doubt he’ll clock onto the fact that the wound is twenty years old.

Who gave you that one?

As I put my shirt back down, I brush my hand past my pelvis. The door in my mind bangs again but stays shut.

Now is not the time. Stop it.

“You think I’m this sneaky guy,” I say after we both go quiet, “Like I’m planning to get you and your squad. I’m not. I should have taken a beating, you’re right. It wasn’t a beating. He wanted to *kill* me.”

Ronnie becomes even more silent. More silent than silent. And he says, “Finn would never do that. Finn wasn’t there to kill you. He was a father. You know that, right?” A small *twang* to my heartstrings alerts me. Nothing major, but a small amount of sympathy for information that I already knew. An amount of sympathy that keeps me glued to Ronnie’s words. I don’t have time to think enough. I need to double down right now. “We had our orders, and h—”

I try to cut him off immediately. “Ronnie, trust me. You don’t know me, but if Finn were here today, he might be ashamed, but he did. God knows he did. Every word I’ve said has been nothing but the truth. I know he was there to hurt me. It was in him that day. The *devil* was in him. And he wanted more Ronnie, he wanted more. I’ve seen it happen; people get *hungry* for it. They want to be something more.”

The next silence becomes worrying. But then, a scream of relief is heard mentally when Ronnie says, “Okay. I’m done.”

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He lowers his gun. “You want to see Azaz so bad, let’s go. I might have been your saving grace. I might have put a bullet in your head. Quick and painless. Now, we’ll do it your way. I’ll watch every second of it.” There’s no relief in his voice, only a deflation of character. Even I don’t feel the victory. It feels more like a cheated win. Like I had to stand on Finn’s grave to obtain it.

But, a win is a win and I’m not going to be letting it leave my sight.

“C’mon, let’s go. Hurry up!” Ronnie says.

I walk toward him. “I’m sorry, okay?” I walk a few feet ahead, getting as close to Ronnie as possible without seeming fishy. Of course, his guard is going to be down now. I have proven I have no weapon. I have proven I am sympathetic. I’ve checked all the boxes in my non-enjoyable succession of wits. “He didn’t suffer.”

“What?”

I take a step closer, I’m within touching distance. “I said, ‘He didn’t suffer.’ ”

“Whatever, you can say whatever you want. You’re not making it out of this.”

“But hold on . . . ” I take one last step forward. I can see Ronnie’s face in full detail. The watery eyes, the miserable face. I lean in to whisper something in his ear. “He screamed like a *bitch*.”

His face comes alive, changing in a second

“You fucking piece of s—” He cranks his arm back, swings his gun down to pistol-whip me—just as planned.

He isn’t within a shooting range, and he’s not thinking straight. He’s letting his emotions take over.

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The gun flies down with his hand gripped tight around it. I dodge to his side and turn my body away from his bent posterior. My right arm is now in a position as to where my elbow is adjacent with his head. I push my right arm forward to an uncomfortably stretched length and rack it backward as powerfully as I can. My elbow crashes into his face with a sickening *crunch*—pushing me forward. I think I just dislocated my shoulder.

I don't look at Ronnie, I take this as my chance to run. I know going for his pistol is an awful idea. It might as well be attached to his arm. (The sound of him tightening his hold on it permeates.)

I feel a wetness cling to my face as I run. I can't tell if it's sweat or blood, but it wasn't on the side of my face a second ago, so it must be his blood. Ronnie doesn't make much of a sound, just a soft moan. I can tell it hurt beyond a simple scream. It hasn't registered yet. It's registered in my arm, however, with my elbow being on fire.

The whole time I'm caught in my head, I'm already in the fire exit, making my way down into salvation. I bash through the doors with my good arm, popping my aching shoulder back into place. The adrenaline is filling my veins and making the pain bearably agonizing. I enter a different shade of darkness.

The outside streetlamps are a good indicator as to the direction I should be heading. Ronnie shouts so furiously that I waste no time even thinking about how he must feel right now. I reach into my pocket, unmute the walkie-talkie, and push the *talk* button in.

"Jessica, I'm coming, get ready!" I manage to say—winded already.

I rush so fast that everything becomes blurry. I stagger and

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graze the floor, but I don't fall. The chase is making me woozy and the car accident is still taking its toll on me. Random headaches have been a side effect for the whole of the month. As I reach the end of the road, the doors behind me swing open. Ronnie is outside and he doesn't look happy. Not one bit.

My car is still parked, but it's hidden well in the shade, away from the moonlight. Jessica is asleep; sprawled out with her hair covering her face. I grab my keys from my pocket and swing the car door open. Jessica is jolted awake unceremoniously.

"What in the fuck?!" she screams.

"We need to go. Now," I say.

"Wha-wha—Where . . . Where have you been? I've been sat here for hours, and you don't answer your walkie. Even tried calling you."

I don't respond. I put my phone on the dash. It's dead, but that's okay.

I ignite the engine and stick the gear into first. I punch it with a force so fierce, Jessica and I are both pulled back by an imaginary noose connecting us to our seats. My wheel spins out as I drive away from a cursing Ronnie. He says things I can't hear. I just know they're not *nice* things.

"Was that . . . Was that Ronnie?"

"Oh, yeah."

"What was he doing with you?"

"Talking."

"About?"

"Things." I keep my eyes on the road. I feel them bulging out. My adrenaline is sky-high. "Would it have killed you to stay in the fucking car, you stupid slut?" I say and regret.

Jessica looks abashed and her mouth is agape.

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“You-You needed to stay in the car.” I try salvaging. “I almost . . . Look, I didn’t mean that. I didn’t mean to call you that, but he followed you. He put a gun to my head and he almost killed me. You didn’t do what I said, and I nearly died because of it. You don’t take risks like that. *Ever.*”

I expect a snarky reply or some backtalk. But there’s nothing—just silence.

“Did you hear what I—”

“I heard, all right? You left for a while, I couldn’t sleep here all night, okay? I didn’t know when—”

“It wasn’t now, and you know it. It was before I got to the car. Before I got jumped by that maniac.”

“I wasn’t sure how long I was gonna be here!” she says. A quietness persists through the car, almost ripping my insides with a thick tension. “I’m sorry, okay?”

It’s not the kind of sorry you want. It’s the kind you get when someone’s trying to shut you up. For me, it’ll do for now.

“Fine.” That silence again. “I’m sorry too,” I mumble.

Is that the first time I’ve ever apologized to someone wholeheartedly? It might be. Or, at least the first time in a long time.

“Don’t call me that again. I don’t care what you think I am, just do NOT call me that.”

“I di—I say things in the heat of the moment. If I meant it, I would never apologize for inaction.”

She looks at me and then away again. She nods her head a few times, looking through the front windscreen. I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. I wish I knew what to say, as the thoughts in my mind are not only racing now. But colliding with one another. Crashing and careening over in a horrid extravaganza of forthright paranoia.

CHAPTER SIX

SANDBAGS

“Mr. Riley, you seem to regress into old habits that are not beneficial for you. We have discussed ho—”

“Yes, yes, I know. Look I’m okay being on my own. I don’t really *hate* people. Look, okay, the only reason I’m telling you this is because I know what we go over is confidential. But the truth is, I just want to be like most people.”

“And what is stopping you from that, Mr. Riley?”

“Like you said earlier, I have something repressed in me.”

“But you are unwilling to discuss it? ”

Ethan Riley almost removes himself from his chair again, but instead fidgets.

“I don’t know! These things aren’t easy to say. I feel so caged up all the time! Sometimes I just want to scream—sometimes I do scream! I don’t want to be so dramatic, but I am. I always will be. The voices in my head don’t stop sometimes. I’m not crazy—I know they’re just *my* voices, but I still hate it all. Write that

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down if you want. 'The reason I hate everyone is because the voices tell me to.' "

"I'm writing nothing down, Mr. Riley. What is important, however, is that you are self-aware of your flaws and shortcomings. You are also well aware of your anxieties. This is good."

"It doesn't feel good."

“You can sleep on the couch if you want to,” I say to Jessica. She shows no real enthusiasm, but also no resentment toward the idea either.

“I might need to. I don’t feel safe going back to my place.”

“He knows where you live, right?”

“No, none of my clients ever did. He just knows where my new place is now, I guess. He must have been following me, the creep. I shouldn’t have gone. I shouldn’t. I’d be super jumpy if I went back to my apartment, I said he was creepy! I didn’t know he was *this* creepy. Following me around and shit. I’ll kill him if I see him again.”

“Yes, you shouldn’t have left. But, I had no right to get angry.” *You sound so pathetic right now, Jesus fuck!* “But listen, . . .” I sit closer to Jessica. “I need to go check on my car. He might have placed a tracking device. You never know.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

“Just . . . make yourself at home.

“Sure, I can do that. It looks like you decorated.”

I get up and walk to my door. “Thanks, no one really gets to see it,” I say to myself.

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The night air is chilly. Again. I jog to where I've parked my car on the front-drive. I check my surroundings and begin my search. I feel under the rim of material—all around it. The process is grating and takes me a while to conduct my delicate determination. My shoulder is throbbing under my jacket and shirt. It's calming down painfully slow.

I don't feel any bumps or intrusions. I check again, groping with my scarred hand farther into the wheel arches. My hands are becoming dirty and I feel repulsion coursing through my body. This needs to be done. It cannot be left to wait. Despite my filthy feelers, I check once more, just to be positive.

Next, I'm on to the wheels themselves, fingering the insides of the rims and hub caps. I check and check and check, over and over again. There's nothing, it's completely spotless. Dread is seizing my body. No evidence of a tracking device does not fill me with ease at all. It's as if I've missed it. It's staring me right in the face and I can't see it. There's an unhealthy obsession taking over my mind, corrupting its core. That mixed with the fact I'm becoming a paranoid android. I'm robotically looking over my shoulders for a hidden attacker. Being snuck up on and threatened with a deadly weapon twice is enough to put anyone on edge. For me, it's like a grip holding me. A knot being tied around my throat, pulling closer to an endless ceiling.

I can never breathe. When I sleep, I don't rest.

I'm being ridiculous; of course there's no tracker on the car. Ronnie isn't smart enough for that.

He was smart enough to keep away from you. But dumb enough to let you get within a foot of him, too.

No matter what thoughts I have, I can't get rid of the feeling of being watched, even now. Whether it be Azaz, Ronnie, Alex,

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Gus. It doesn't matter. I know three out of four want me dead. Alex is more of a special exception.

I lift myself from the car after another expedition. Right underneath the car. There's still nothing!

It was unlocked. Do you really think Jessica remembered to lock it? You didn't have to unlock it, thinking about it! It just swung on open. I don't remember you pressing the unlock button on your wireless set of keys.

I sigh and walk back into my house. Jessica is somewhere—the bathroom, perhaps. I wash my hands in the kitchen sink using dish soap to get rid of the black, dusty grime from every part of my hands. It's caked under my fingernails. It looks disgusting. I wash so rough, my skin becomes dried up and flakey.

Should have worn gloves for this, genius.

Didn't have time.

I do need some gloves, so I look under my kitchen counter and get some yellow plastic cleaning gloves. I walk back outside and unlock my car. I start with the trunk. The same events play out as I search. I fail to see anything and become discontent with my efforts. I begin again until I am satisfied (but not satisfied). I continue, doing the entire car from top to bottom. Apart from literally taking it apart. I don't have the tools, nor do I have the full energy. The adrenaline has faded and I'm now on a downer. Eyes are constantly closing; my shoulder's as sore as I am. It's time for bed. I punch my window. My hand bounces off pathetically without even causing a scratch.

"Fffu. Fuck!" I say while holding my wrist. Nothing broken, luckily, but the silly frustration that took over is unacceptable. My emotions seem out of control at random times. I let out another sigh, this one massive. I head back indoors and to the

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kitchen sink. I take my (now) dirtied gloves off and throw them into my garbage. I walk back to the sink and wash my hands again.

Jessica isn't in the kitchen. She's not in the living room, nor my dining room. Instead, she's in my bedroom, rummaging around.

"Excuse me, what are you doing?" I ask, trying to measure my anger.

"Burner, huh? Who's George?"

"None of your fu—Please get out. You can stay on the couch downstairs."

Jessica bops her head up like a gofer.

"I was just being nosey. You did say make myself at *home*."

"That's a figure of—Look, just go to sleep, okay? I've had a rough night. I don't think I'll get any sleep, but I need to try. I need a shower—to brush my teeth. There are spare toiletries in the cupboard and a blanket if you need one. But please, just leave my shit alone."

"Ugh, fine. You're no fun. But who *is* George? Just tell me that."

"My boss, okay? You'll probably meet him soon enough for the job. Remember the money you want? Well he'll be the one giving it. Just put the phone back."

I need to hide that better next time and delete previous calls too.

"Fine, it's back in the box. I'm going," she says playfully. "But if you need some company, you know where I am." A wink and a nod and then she's out.

"Goodnight, Jessica."

The thought of laying with Jessica doesn't please me for

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whatever reason. No sexual attraction, even though she is attractive. What reason?

Knock knock.

When she's out, I perform my nightly routine, even though my timing is off.

When I finish with the bodily cleaning, I lust over my bed and let the sheets consume me. Sleeping never felt so good, considering the fact I thought I wouldn't get any. The exhaustion must be so great, that when my head hits the pillow, I instantly slumber. It enraptures me more than Jessica ever could.

My sleep is disturbed when Finn visits me. His speech is not totally coherent.

No, you're not supposed to be here. This is meant to be my time. MY luxury!

"You took that away from me. Everything," Finn says.

I'm not supposed to be feeling anything but contempt for Finn, but I'm no longer feeling that. I still don't regret my actions and the thought of the thief being a father doesn't change anything for me. But there's a hidden layer of anguish now boiling within me. Not yet overflowing, but coming up. I know where this path leads and I want to do everything to stop it. I will do anything, but in the end, I know it will happen.

"The reason no one cares about you is because, because, because . . ." he says. "You only care about you. You've known this for so long, long, long. Just like Daddy. Just like Mommy. Just like Henry. Just like Georgie."

Finn fades away into a spiritual mist, taking his dying words with him. I have no comment on his words.

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The sun shines on my eyes, making them water. I blink away the tears and sit up.

Time for work. Wait, no, you got fired, har har!

“I’m not fired yet. I’d better not be, anyway,” I say to myself. I stretch and get out of bed. Everything hurts.

Downstairs, Jessica is wrapped up in a blanket. Her torso is slightly exposed, showing more tattoos. Her right breast is falling and poking through her shirt. I walk up and pull the blanket over her to recover her modesty. The door knocks three times and I jump back as blood runs from inside my cheeks. I’m cold and twitchy again. Jessica stirs on the couch but doesn’t wake. Instead, she lifts a shaven, bare leg from the sheets and rests it on top of the armrest. Her foot curling around as her toes wriggle in comfort. It knocks some of the anxiety from me. I notice the butterfly on her thigh again. It looks more elegant this time. As if a near-death experience has given an appreciation to something I thought was ugly.

I shake my head, looking toward the door. I walk and press myself to it, inching my head closer to the peephole. I’m expecting to be greeted with the sight of a gun barrel pointing toward me. However, it’s Nathan paying me another visit.

I open the door.

“Come in. Hello,” I say without much effort.

“Good morning, Ethan. I—” He looks inside and notices Jessica passed out on my couch. “Oh, is now a bad time, Ethan?”

“Of course not, why would it be?”

“Nothing, nothing. Would you like to step outside for a moment? I have some news about your job.”

My heart rate elevates and I begin to sweat. “Yes, sure.” I hop out of my house, not even realizing I’m in my pajamas. I’d

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never usually want to be seen like this, but all self-image has gone and passed me by at this point. “So, the news?”

“Look, Ethan, I’m just going to be up front with you. This isn’t good news at all. The chief spoke to me earlier today, and it’s been decided we can’t accept you in the office anymore. Ethan, I’m so sorry, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go. The circumstances. . . .”

I switch off. My first impulse is to wrestle Nathan to the floor. To put my hands around his throat (much like the hiker), and choke the life out of him. Of course, I don’t actually do that. I just watch Nathan talk as my brain mentally mutes him. He’s now lip-syncing the words I want him to say: “You’re back, Ethan! I spoke to the chief and guess what? I bent over backward for him as I usually do. The good news is, you’re back baby!”

“Naturally, there’s a three-week period in which you will still receive pay. This will be the transitional period in which your employment is terminated. This will of course give you an opportunity to look for new employment. Ethan, man, are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” I say. Nathan puts his hand on my shoulder. It makes me shake with anger. “Get your fucking hand off me, right now.” The words come out on their own. Like they’re spoken from another mouth.

“Ethan!” Nathan rips his hand away and my shaking ceases. “I know this is not something you want to hear, but do not proceed to use profanities against me. That is something I will not tolerate when I am trying to help you.”

“I don’t care what you’re trying to do to me. Just stay away. We’re done, aren’t we? We’re not friends, we never were, so you can drop the whole ‘good guy’ routine. It’s stale. Leave, now.”

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Nathan looks at me with a quiet disgust, or so it seems to me. Now I see it in *his* eyes. He wants to hit me. I can't say I blame him, but it's a look I'm not used to seeing in him. He doesn't give me the benefit of a snide remark, but he does say something important. He says, "You know, I sometimes feel like I can't talk to anyone. I feel like an outsider too. I knew you before you started doing this to yourself. Sometimes you feel like doing *wrong* when you've done so much right. You don't want to just sit there and take it—I know the feeling. But right now, you need to not lash out in anger at me. I hope we stay in contact, and if we do, I swear I'll help you. I will . . . Be seeing you, Ethan." He turns away after giving me an unreadable smile. He leaves—not even giving me a double take.

I see his partner, David, in the car. I don't wave either of them off. Instead, I stagger back into my domain.

"Who was that? I heard shouting."

"No one important anymore. Got fired."

"Shit, just now? Oh damn, I'm sorry about that."

"I don't know why you're sorry, you had nothing to do with it."

"Just force of habit, I guess. Do you want something to drink? A coffee? A *special* coffee?"

Do I want to spoil myself . . . ?

I want to spoil myself. Try and take the ease off of my life falling apart. The slow decay of a rotting corpse. One that has a crater-sized shotgun blast in it.

"Please. There should be a pot in the kitchen. It's for guests, but I'll take some. I don't have a—"

Jessica stands up, reaching into her handbag. She pulls out a miniature bottle of cheap whiskey. She shows it to me with

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glee, and I nod. Jessica patters to the kitchen; her bare feet sticking to the floor.

“You’ve got quite a lot of shit in here!”

“I know.”

“How do you take it?”

“Black . . . but, do it however you do a special one. You choose.”

“Coming right up!”

After a short while, she returns with two freshly brewed coffees. I take a sip and it’s sickly sweet. She’s dumped an entire day’s worth of sugar into it. The whiskey helps any aches and pains and settles my mind.

You haven’t worked out in a while you lazy piece of shit, and now you’re drinking coffee again? The sugar content that’ll be in this! Remember that time Mom found out you ate all the candy in the cupboard that one time? You know the one. The one that had the Hershey’s and the Reese’s Pieces? Man, she sure did shout at you for that.

Did she shout, Ethan? Was that it?

“It’s good,” I say while thinking about more important things.

“You don’t have to be nice.”

“You’re right actually. It tastes like diabetes.”

“Oh *woooooow!* Look at the comedian. Looks like you’ve perked up a lot already.”

“I have—because I have a plan.”

“A plan? Plan about what?”

“Alex. I have a plan about Alex.”

I head upstairs and into the cupboard. My camera satchel is on the floor. Once I retrieve it, I move to my bedroom and take

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my burner phone. I won't be placing it somewhere else yet—somewhere it wouldn't be found by snoopers. I might as well keep this with me. I'll be needing it.

As you may have suspected, I'm going to be paying Alex a much-needed visit. I've held all prior arrangements back until this deed is done. With such a quintessential aspect of my life being taken away, repercussions must be administered to the guilty party. I have done enough waiting; so far all it has brought me is misery. It is now time for me to cause some of my own.

Jessica has returned home after much discussion. She protested about the safety of it. I said she'd be safer there than at mine. I don't know if I was telling the truth, but I am a phone call away. I wouldn't be running out of phone battery any time soon, either. She reluctantly agreed.

I still don't know if my car is safe to drive, but there's a high chance of me not giving a *shit* anymore. As previously stated, my life is crumbling in front of my eyes. Getting shot in the back of the head seems like a welcome thought for sore minds. And my mind would definitely be sore with a hollow point passing through it.

Would you shut up about dying? If you're serious about it, just off yourself already!

Twenty-seven, Warlton Street is where I'm currently stalking. My car is parked at a discreet location, hidden far away from searching eyes. I'm wearing a dark outfit as always; clandestine enough to blend in.

On my way, I picked up a few things from the hardware store. A different one, mind you. Frequent purchases at the same place will arouse suspicions. Especially with the assortment of

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items I had in my cart.

I'm equipped with a leather bag to hold all of my tools inside now. I sneak without looking too conspicuous. I hold a firm pace while holding my shoulder from time to time. It still aches like a bitch.

I look across the street and see the same parking area I was taken to yesterday. A mild shudder is directed through my body as I look back at how close to death I was. And now, here I am again. Not only am I kicking the hornet's nest, but I'm shaking it violently three inches from my face. I'm even checking in the entrance hole. I'm putting my eyeball close to it—grazing the stinger presenting itself to me.

Alex's car is parked up and doesn't look like it's moved at all.

I try to think of a smarter plan, but nothing comes to mind. I don't have any ideas that are jumping out at me. The only one that sounds semi-sensible is to knock on his door and let Alex gun me down like a dog.

"You will die like a dog for no good reason." Ernest Hemingway was a nihilist too, all right.

But there is a "good reason." The reason is I'm sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. Of course, it belongs where it currently is, but they don't see it that way. And who are "they" exactly? They're the omnipresent apparition. The faceless, unforeseeable future of carnage incarnate.

"I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." J. Robert Oppenheimer was a nihilist too, all right.

I'm full of quotes today. It's because I'm disturbed by my thoughts for the uncountable, consecutive number of days that have passed. I believe I am going reasonably insane with a great

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cause. I could call myself *crazy* if there were no reason to be crazy! But there is, there is a reason. It makes this all the worse. Just like the tracker, I am searching for an unseen third member to add to my hysteria. But instead of it being hidden away, it's right there, labeled all over me.

You realize you're not making sense, don't you?

Yes, I realize it. Just let me be like this—just for now.

The two houses next to Alex's place are vacant, it seems. No cars parked close and no movement within. I need to be sure. I move to the house closest and knock on the door. No answer. I move around to the other house while my surroundings are being observed. I don't see Alex peeking through his downstairs curtain in the window. I go to the left side of his house and knock on his other neighbor's door.

*What would you do if there was someone home, anyway?
Would you really have an idea for that?*

Jehovah's Witness here to murder your neighbor!

I guess not, but oh well.

I get closer to Alex's house and pull on some surgical gloves. (They're similar gloves to the ones I've used in my forensic photography career.)

He has all his curtains drawn. I suspect he's looking out of the windows right now, so I steer clear of presenting myself within view. I notice a side door leading to what looks like a back garden. Green grass lays past the door through the small gaps of wood. I pull at the handle, but it doesn't budge. Few cars are passing by, so I must look fishy by now. I wait for my time of empty roads and no streetwalkers before I get to work. There are no houses opposite Alex's. There's only a parking lot and a huge office building with no windows pointing in my direction.

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I take out a small power saw and carve a chunk out of the door. I trace around the hinge of the lock and reach a small gap. I continue along the top side of the lock until it pops out toward me. The whole time I'm performing this tricky task, I'm aware of the moderate noise I'm making. I shrug it off and continue, throwing caution to the grimy wind. Now that the piece is loose, I wriggle it around until it knocks out. It clatters to the floor. I push the door in. There's a resistance, and . . . it stays locked.

What did I do wrong exactly? The standard metal latch catches my eye on the far side. A frustrated noise leaves my nose as I pull my small saw out again. I make a curved line up to the handle of the latch and go back in on it. It becomes loose, the same as the lock. I take another piece of the wood out near the top of the latch and let it drop. It exits its domain.

I push. The door swings open with another *bang*. Then I rush to the back garden and open his unlocked screen door to the inside. It's time I say hello to Alex.

"Hello? Alex, it's me. Your old pal Ethan," I say as I remove my shoes from my feet and enter the residence.

Alex's house is a dingy place. Not unpleasant, but frightfully unkempt. A few busted microwaves are strewn about. Computer casings and workshop tools are also dotted randomly.

A shuffling sound is coming from inside the house, so I crouch down and make my way toward the open kitchen door. I get behind it with my back to the wall and my chest facing the door's inner side. When Alex dares to make his journey in, I shall jump him from surprise. I reach into my bag and pick out a crowbar with a lean weight to it. Equally balanced to suit my strength. It will be a less powerful blow as I'm using my left hand. My right is still painful to even move. I look like half of a T-Rex. My

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spastic hand even gives me the unflattering illusion of a less-crippled man whose mother took thalidomide.

She could have done for all you know. She probably drank when you were in the womb as well. Bleach and vodka cocktail.

I've always been ambidextrous. I know my strike will work, but I also know my swing won't be *as* punishing when I do it with my left. All is fine. Even though the first hit will be hard, what comes after will be the most important.

Tiny footsteps sound down the stairs and toward the kitchen. Alex shuffles in, scared out of his mind. His rapid breathing filling the air; his jittery movement rattling the hardwood flooring. I need this next step to count. I reach into my bag again and pull out some drill bits. He's jumpy, so this should keep him occupied. But he could shoot.

I pick a handful of the drill bits and throw them toward the open door leading to the garden. I peek past my cover. He gasps and lines up his shot in the wrong direction. I use this as my opportunity. I step soundlessly around the door, wind my good arm back (not too far), and I whirl the iron crowbar into Alex's knee-cap. I'm on his right side, so it gives me a tactical advantage. As the crowbar is about to strike him, I use my bad arm to push out with an open palm toward his gun. Pain will be shooting through his leg shortly. I don't want to waste any time knocking the pistol from his hand. It's a brand-new revolver. A snub-nosed one. It smashes off the wall as soon as it leaves Alex's hand, leaving a dent in the wallpaper.

With motion slowed, I watch my crowbar continuing its journey to a destination of agony. In that same slow motion, the curved metal unsurprisingly breaks Alex's leg from the middle. The leg folds in on itself as the path of the crowbar doesn't stop.

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It keeps going, hugging Alex's destroyed leg. He topples over with his disjointed leg going two ways. It looks like a pencil snapping in half, so the rubber and the lead tip touch like lost lovers. Except this isn't a match of the romantic proportion.

As he hits the floor, blood is already starting to fill his pants. Dark blood—almost black—spilling into the hardwood flooring's crevices. My crowbar finally stops after I spin in a full circle, staggering around to center myself. It dawns on me. The crowbar went all the way through. Instead of the momentum being slowed, it carried on without a care in the world. The only thing that stopped Alex from being a full amputee, is that the leg was *moved* out of the way.

*When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?
No, when an unstoppable force meets a very. Fucking. Movable.
Object. Oh, it moved, all right.*

The sound that comes from this man is noticeable to me after I look upon his pathetic state. It's horrifying. The sound of a wailing soul is accurate. Not just a scream of pain, but a sound that is similar to a grieving mother losing a child. It chills me to my core, which is an unusual thing for me. My emotions are in a state of limbo—not quite sure of what to make of my actions.

What if you're wrong?

This has crossed the line now.

Oh, you wait! There's more to come, you just wait.

You just can't stop. It's in your nature.

*Finish him off before he cries some more. Fucking pussy.
Go all the way.*

I look at Alex, searching for his eyes, but his eyelids are locked tight. Tears are forcing their way out. Too many tears to count. Too many tears to be normal for a human male.

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It had to be done. I'm sorry.

“Not used to a real-life threat, are we?” I say.

Alex continues his wailing moans. They peter out, only to be amplified with more screams and more tears.

“You-you-you-you broke my fucking leg! You—YOU’VE BROKEN IT!” His voice cracks as he shouts. Spittle flies everywhere with the tears shaking from his face.

“Get out your phone.” I feel my face going pale.

“What?”

“Get out your fucking phone.”

“You cra-crazy fuck! You fu—My leg! Look at my leg!” His screaming turns to sobbing. Then his sobbing turns to sniveling.

“Just be quiet for now,” I say as I move with agility to retrieve the revolver. I place it on the counter, along with the gory crowbar. I pick up all thirteen drill bits and place them back into my bag.

I return to Alex as he cradles himself. He’s looking over his shoulder, trying to not lose sight of his lower leg. It’s hanging by a thread. That thread could be a loose flap of skin or the fabric from his pants; It’s hard to tell with the blood overflowing. Seeing the danger of the blood, I take my belt off and tourniquet his leg. He shrills as I do it, but eventually he settles down again.

I reach over Alex and pull out his smartphone, dropping it in front of him. It bounces off the floor but doesn’t crack.

“Call Gus. Tell him to call off his people,” I say

“What?”

“You heard. Do it now.”

“I don’t want this . . .” The waterworks start up again. I get to one knee and slap him in the face, leaving a red implant. I look

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at him for one moment, then get back up and walk to the counter. I place the crowbar in my hand again. “Okay, okay! Wait!” he pleads. With a shaky grip, he taps his phone and puts it to his ear. I stand over him and stare. I stare into his now exposed eyes; the wide-open pupils. Pupils opened so wide he looks like a drug addict; a user, who is doped up on an injection of pure, black tar heroin. He glances at me and immediately drops his gaze, whimpering. “Gus . . .” His voice is uneven, but he clears his throat and talks again while gritting his teeth. “False alarm, man.” I snap my fingers, and when he’s looking at me, I signal to him with my free hand. I point at him, I point at me. I do the universal gesture of a handgun with my thumb racked back. I let my thumb go. My cheeks fill up with air and leave with an audible, whisper-quiet *boom*. He gulps. A droplet of sweat oozes down his forehead, then he nods. “He’s dead. I shot him, man. No, no, don’t send anyone. Yeah, yeah, I know how to take care of a dead body, dude. Call you soon? I guess I can. No worries, b-b-bye.”

“So you gave him a phone to use,” I say. “How’s he sneaking that around without anyone noticing? Probably wrapped in a condom and up his ass most of the time, right? When he’s calling you, he’s making sure the person on guard can’t hear too? At this point, I don’t care. All I know, is that I was right.” I pounce on Alex, ripping the phone from his hands and throwing it at the wall in the same spot as the gun made a dent. It shatters, leaving traces of glass. “We’d better get started. The whole block probably heard you screaming like a bitch.”

I can’t say I blame him for screaming his lungs out. What I did was monstrous. A wafting sense of shame permeates my body, but I ignore it. I am far past being an altruistic human being.

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There's no redemption for the wicked.

You still have time. Stop this.

Go all the way, Ethan.

That's what I like about you. You never fight back.

I place a tape recorder onto the table next to Alex's bed. He's strapped to a chair with heavy-duty duct tape. All the equipment comes out of my bag like clowns out of a clown car. He willingly went into his chair/prison, muttering to himself. A sense of shock has taken hold of his senses. He's currently naked, also. His genitalia is laying flat on the chair seat, with his ruined leg hanging limply to the floor. The blood seeping out is a slow drip.

With a drill in my hand, I push the button to make it twist. Alex's eyes stretch open. He pleads with his whole face. He's telling me subconsciously not to do what I'm about to do. To not push this spinning drill bit into him. Into an (as of yet) undetermined orifice or body part. I have my ideas, but none of them are clear yet.

"You only have one question to answer—only one. You only have to give one answer—only one—to each question." I say in monotone.

He nods.

I start easy. Not even asking a question, but more so testing he's listening.

"You work for Gustavo Ornes."

He nods.

"You hacked my work computer."

He nods.

"Speak up. Say it."

"Yes! Yes, I hacked you."

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“Good boy. You’ve maintained communication with Gustavo Ornes. Is that correct, Alexander Timans?”

“Yes.”

“Is Gustavo Ornes in communication with Azaz, also?”

He looks at me, perplexed, and says, “How did y—”

“Answer up, Alex.”

“Yes.”

“Is Eleanor Gounds associating between you and Gustavo Ornes?”

“What? No!” I give him a look that says, “You get one question to answer—just one.” He rethinks, speaks again. “She knew about what happened with me. I guess she . . . cared about me. Like that.”

Are you cheating on a girlfriend with Ellie? I almost ask out of curiosity.

“Did Gus have a hit placed on me?”

“No. Or . . . I don’t think so.

“No? Interesting. You and your little friend have misbehaved. Do you think you should be punished?”

“No!” he yells before I even finish the last syllable of my word.

“I think you should.”

“Please, I answered your questions. Just let me stay here. I did everything you asked! He’s making me do this.”

“Gus? How?”

“He’s connected. You know the story.” I don’t know, but it was an educated guess he’d have some cholos to come kill me.

Downstairs, after I swept up the broken phone pieces, I made a homemade detection device. They teach it to you in the Boy Scouts. Well, they taught me at least; it doesn’t seem above

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the board. You tie a jar to a door with some string. When the door is opened, the string from underneath is released. It smashes on the floor, alerting unbeknownst victims to an assault. Of course, you could rig it to other various things as well.

“He threatened your family?” I ask.

“He did, yeah. He’s crazy, I didn’t know what to do. I keep the whole thing secret, but he beat me. He got it out of me,” Alex says as he shakes. It’s as if he has the fever.

“Spare me,” I say—sympathizing with Alex, but not letting it show.

I feel a strong urge to untie him and let him go. It can’t happen.

“If we both hurt him back, we can stop all this. Azaz is a nobody.” That’s a pure lie. “We can all take Gus too, finally put that son of a bitch down for good.”

“You worked with the guy. You change sides quick. Do you really think that George would let someone like that back in? Do you think that, Alexander Timans?”

“I don’t know! I just want to see my family—I don’t give a shit about this work anymore! I want to go and see my parents and my fucking girlfriend.”

Why do they always bring their families into things? Oh yeah, because normal people show sympathy. You’re showing the smallest amount of sympathy humanly possible in your cold, black, dead heart.

I put the drill back on the table, not seeing a use in deploying it on Alex. He breathes a sigh of relief.

You’re not out of the woods yet, buddy. In fact, you’re not leaving.

“This is going to be your last chance, Alex. So far, you’ve

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been good. You've given me a lot of information. But now, it's your turn to pick the questions. I'll give you about a minute; you're going to tell me everything you know. I want to hear it all. You ready?"

"What? I don't know wha—"

"Go!"

"Erm-erm—Fuck! Errr—Gus made me hack you. Said he'd get his boys to cut up my family and have them fed to his dogs and he'd hurt me too—even more. He said—he said that Azaz is the big man and he's gonna fuck up George and make him pay."

As Alex rattles on, I slide the crowbar that's next to the drill from the table and into my left hand. He doesn't notice, as he's too busy listing everything to save his doomed life. My heart tugs in my chest as he talks.

He's guilty. Guilty of the sin of being scared—of being helpless. Look at him.

He's a low-life hacker who lost you your job and ruined your life. If you let him go—the same as that fucking annoying Jesus fucker—then you'll have officially lost your nerve. He's guilty, he's guilty of fucking your life up. Take the last leap—go all the way.

"And he wants me and him to join Azaz and be partners but I don't want to join, I don't want to, I want to go h-h-h-h-hooooome." He cries again. "I don't want to die." He looks over at the table and sees the crowbar is gone, removed without his awareness. He pulls his body from side to side, rocking the chair as he does it. His energy isn't powerful enough. His white skin is clammy with sweat and he's shaking now more than ever. Shivering so badly that his individual hairs are moving with a characteristic hop. "I don't want to die, I don't want tooooooo!"

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Please let me g—GO! LET ME GO!” Anger explodes from him.

Stop torturing him, get it over with if you have to.

Save him, he’s pissing himself. I see his dick getting rid of it like a leaking car!

Now! Do it now!

The crowbar comes down as the last words are uttered from him. “I’ll not let this”—A hearty crunch echoes in the tiny box room.

The trickle of piss continues sickeningly. A new trickle begins: the trickle of blood pouring from the head of formerly alive Alex. His neck doesn’t support the severe case of whiplash as his head bobbles forward. The impact of the metal has left an inward dent the size of a hand—a disgusting mortal wound that covers the cranium like a moldy fruit. Except, it doesn’t have a mushy complexion. This has a hard, visceral crack. Like an egg. A thump from a giant spoon (*crowbar*), onto the shell (*skull*); rupturing insides. Brain matter caved in from the outside. The inside protection has not passed the safety test on this occasion.

The curtains are drawn—as not to display the putrid sight.

I stare down, bewildered by my actions, but relieved with it being over. I drop the crowbar in my clenched hand. It goes to the floor with brain juice splattering from the action-end of the weapon. I know in my mind, I’ve done what had to be done. No matter how awful the action, it is done, and I am done with it.

But you’re not done, are you? There’s a reason you brought it with you. Why you put it in your bag with your other toys. We know the reason already. Go get it.

I walk with stiff legs to my bag in the corner of the room, pressing the stop button on the tape recorder as I pass by. As I go, I see something. There’s a shadow in the hallway. I assume

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it's not real; it's one of those fake ones I see sometimes. This shadow instead moves naturally, and it lengthens my paranoia.

Jessica walks in. As soon as she does, I think of her as being some kind of apparition. A mental illusion to scold me for my actions.

“What did you do?” Jessica says.

“I finished it. Went all the way.” I remove my surgical gloves that are splattered with crimson. I pull them inside out and put them in the bag.

Jessica walks closer to me, and when she sees Alex, she tenses up but keeps calm. It looks like she's biting her tongue. I stare at her with vacant signs in my eyes. I pull out my camera satchel, unzip it, and pick out my expensive piece of equipment. I undo the lens cap and twist the lens to a focus point. I put the strap over my neck, turn around.

“What are you going to do?” she says.

“This is my job. I did say.”

“You killed him.”

“Wait, you're real?”

“What are you talking about? Yes, I'm fucking real.”

I walk to Jessica and touch her face. When I feel real skin, I expect Jessica to dive back. She doesn't, she just looks at me with genuine sympathy. Not the fake kind Nathan and my dad have given me.

“How are you, Jess?”

“Jess . . . ?” she says, smiling. “Not as bad as you. I should have gotten here sooner.”

“Why?”

She gives me another look, but this one gives no clues. When she doesn't answer, it makes my assessment impossible to

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conclude. I can't know if she wanted to see me kill a man, or if she's ashamed she got here before she could stop me.

"What's done is done," she says, uncharacteristically mature. "We'd better do what you came here to do."

"You'll be paid for this too; you'll be glad to know."

"Then let's get to it."

As I gaze upon the front of Alex, he died in a sudden moment. It's obvious with all the other facts in place, but now it's even more so. His eyelids are pulled open with dilated pupils this time. His left eye (close to where the crowbar wound is), is red. Blood has seeped from the inside of his head into the canal connected to his eye sockets and inner workings. It has now filled his milky eye and turned it into an overly ripe cherry. His muscles are tensed up, as I can see the tendons in his neck nightmarishly twitching like piano strings.

I turn away—not because of the gruesomeness, but because of the sheer brutality caused by *my* actions. But also, by Gus and Alex's actions, which ultimately led to the events present. Whether he is directly involved with his fragility, I don't know. I force my head back into the direction of Alex. Jessica watches me. Alex's eyes are now closed—his head has stopped spilling, and his tendons are no longer dancing a freakish dance.

I look through the viewfinder of my camera and push the shooting button in to capture the image. The shutter snaps and dread leaves my body. Joy replaces it.

I gesture for Jessica to hand me some lighting equipment. The room is dark and dreary, as customers like, but I can't see a thing. Jessica looks at me and isn't sure how to operate my equipment. I show her in a grotesque bonding moment. She gets used to helping me. She places the spotlights and reflectors in places

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I would expect from a professional, not a novice.

I waltz around the corpse. I take picture after picture, adjusting the focus where I see fit. I make sure everything is perfect. It is art, and there's nothing else that can be said about it. My level of violence is unjustified, but the cause and effect are called for. I am an opportunist.

After taking many perfect images, I let the camera hang loose and pull out my burner phone from my bag of goodies.

I call George. It rings to a point of almost not being picked up. He answers at the last second.

"Ethan?" he asks.

"George, hey. Should get down here. Twenty-seven, Warloton Street. You got that? twenty-seven—"

"Yeah, I got it. Alex's address. Watcha doin' there?"

"You'll see. Don't worry, I'm all good—come down and we'll talk it through. Some stuff you're going to want to see. Some not so good stuff. I don't know. But I have my associate for you to meet."

"I'll be there soon. Don't move."

I lift my camera to my face again and take the photographs of Alex's macabre corpse while humming an unknown tune. I look at Jessica and it reminds me of the song on the piano. I heard it at a party one hundred years ago.

George enters the room. I'm still lost in an emotional exertion of serenity.

(In other words, I look pretty fucking high.)

"Ethan, . . . turn on around."

I do as George says. He keeps his composure as soon as he sees the scene. He looks at the mess and doesn't avert his gaze.

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You're strong. Stronger than anyone I've known, and it's the reason you're one of the only people who has personally gained my utter respect. You, George.

"Come on over here son, away from that," he says.

When George calls me son, it doesn't make me die inside. It helps me realize where I am. It pulls me back down to earth in a comforting blanket.

Again, I do as he says, scuttling toward him. My back arches down like a disabled man or a young, shy boy. He gets close and takes the camera from my hand. He untangles the strap from my neck as I look into nothing. A one hundred years/mile gaze into oblivion. He looks at me. Back at Jessica. Then at Alex again.

"Away from that." He doesn't refer to Alex as a person anymore, does he? How strange.

"You did that, huh?" George says. "Well, you gotta tell me why. Now. You gotta tell me why you killed my man, Ethan. Right now."

I point behind me without looking. George looks and passes by Jessica while giving her a suspicious glance. He sees the tape recorder, and moves to it, picking it up. He presses play and listens to the interrogation.

Spit flies from George's mouth, landing on Alex's ruptured head.

"Fuckin' cunt. Rat, fuckin' weasel," he says.

I'm still in a trance, staring at the same spot I've been looking at for minutes on end. I haven't looked back to see how Jessica is reacting, but a "Jesus" is uttered every now and again. As soon as George hit play, I presume he looked at me and thought

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better of his actions. He walked out of the room and continued the audio playback. I heard items being thrown. Glass shattering and stuff smashing. It's hard to tell between a wall. *And* when you're zoned out.

"Ethan, c'mon snap outta it. You're all right. You're good," George says as he paces the room. "All right, shit. Sorry, who are you again?"

"Jessica. Ethan didn't ask me to come, but . . . I . . ."

"Yeah . . . I remember. The one wantin' the job. I don't mean to be fuckin' rude but that's on hold for now." George turns to me. "We're gonna go back right now and do what you said we shoulda done a long time ago. We're gonna put a fuckin' bullet in that prick's head. That fuckin' border jumpin' fuckin' . . ." He has found no more offensive words to use. "Fuckin' SHIT!" He starts pacing again, leading me to believe he hasn't formed a plan yet. My line of sight becomes wider, as my body is once again occupied by *myself*. George and I lock eyes again. "You did good," he says. "You made a bit of a mess, but you did what I'd have done a thousand times over."

After eventually getting my bearings, I understand where I am. "I went a little overboard, didn't I?"

"Well . . . yeah. But I see why you did it, kid. You weren't getting any other pics any time soon. Now we've got something—for clients at least. Why put this piece of shit to waste, am I right?"

"Yeah. George, you have to stop Gus." I look at Jessica, and whisper to George, "He's calling that guy, Azaz. He's going to tell him where the warehouse is. He'll get us."

"Azaz? Oh, right. You don't have to worry about him. He's known about the warehouse for years; he wouldn't dare step in

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there with me. He knows I'll fuckin' kill him."

"I know."

"Listen, missy. You're gonna have to get outta here and go back home. This is no place for a young lady."

"Oh fuck off with that bullshit."

"Damn, the broad's got a mouth." George looks at me and notices that I don't even crack a smile. "Jessica, sweethe—Miss, you need to get back home. Look, I'll interview you tomorrow mornin'. Would that suit ya?"

"Maybe it would. If I got the job, sure. Ethan, are you going to be okay?"

"He's gonna be fine," George answers for me. Lucky that he does because I sense myself breaking down.

"Don't get yourself hurt, Ethan. We made a deal." She smirks beautifully.

"We did."

Jessica nods her head a few times before she exits the murder scene. Her heels patter down the stairs, and she's gone.

Gone.

I'm sorry for how I treated you, Jess. I'm really sorry. I should have never used you.

"Ethan, are you all right, really? You need to tell me what this is," George says. A minute and thirty seconds pass from Jessica's absence.

"I am. I . . ." I stop, searching for words to use.

The door in my mind bends unnaturally. The wood splinters like Alex's leg being wrecked with the crowbar. The door doesn't break open, but it's coming close. There's something on the frame I didn't notice before: a handle and keyhole. I don't have a key anywhere to unlock it with, and I don't want it opened

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anyway. But there's something more implicit here. The golden doorknob and protruding metal with the key-shaped hole is facing me. It shows me an important piece of information. The door is being broken down from the outside; into my world; into my reality. I put my head to the door, straining to see through the decorated keyhole. I see something that is undetermined and inexplicable. I cry out in terror, putting all my weight on the door as it gets pounded again.

This can't be happening.

This isn't happening.

I must know.

I stifle a cry of pure fear as my mind is covered in metaphorical gasoline. I remain stable and look to George again.

"George, listen. You go to Gus. You stay there, and you wait for me. I need to take care of something before I watch the fucker burn too."

"*Too?* What the fuck are you plannin'?"

"You don't need to worry." I go to push past him. He puts a hand on me. I wriggle out of it, almost bursting into tears as I speak. "Don't! Don't touch me! Please."

George relents, but steps in my way. "Talk to me, c'mon. You can talk to me. You're not on your own, whatever you're going through." The kind words seem so strange from this hardened bruiser. The Godfather of anger.

"I don't need to talk. Please." I can't stop the tears. I break down into a similar state as Alex. Except, this is more reserved with blocking, unnatural emotions. "I-I-I-I don't know what I'm doing. I'm scared, I'm really *scared.*"

Fucking baby. Stop crying. You're so high and mighty, but YOU cry like a bitch as well!

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“It’s all right, it’s okay, son.” He doesn’t know whether he can touch me again, so he doesn’t. I instead fall into his arms, unresisted by his comforting hug. He looks at me, stunned, but he does what my dad never did for me. He embraces me back. George isn’t someone I’ve known for a long time, but it feels like it—like I’ve gotten to know him every day, just a bit more. Respecting his principles and his way of life. “Son, look, whatever else has gone on, you’ve gotta say. We’ll go back to the warehouse and figure it out after that. I’ll send Dante down here with a shovel, and he’ll come bury this prick. More than I’d have given him. But first, you gotta speak up. If this problem is gonna affect our partnership, then I need to know. Ethan, look at me.

“We’re no good, all right? Your dad is a piece of shit for lying to you about his cancer. He’s a fuckin’ scumbag. But . . . we’re all like that. Including us. Us *especially*. Our crew of filthy cunts, huh.” He looks at Alex and grimaces. “Him too. He might have done some good, but he was chickenshit as well. If there’s one piece of advice I can give ya, it’s stand by your word, at the very least. Whether you’re moral or immoral, stand by your fuckin’ word and take it to the grave.

“If you want my words of humble fuckin’ wisdom, we’re no good. None of us are good, son. *None* of us. Anyone ya see on the street; they got demons. Ya can’t change the facts, but we carry on with the shit. You don’t lose it, all right? And now you gotta do that too; it starts here. You gotta tell me what’s happened. Tell me so I can help you.”

I can’t tell him, I can’t. If I say it, it becomes real.

No, none of it is real. The same with Mom too, it’s something you’ve made up. You need to find it all out for yourself, and then you can have your silly panic attack. You can cry like a bitch

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some more and go into the fetal position and cry. Cry, cry, cry and cry some more.

I can tell him, I have to.

“If I tell you, you need to let me go do this. You need to let me come back to you.” I sniff the watery substance in my nose back in as the tears stream down my face.

George nods.

Driving through moderate traffic is not a good idea. It’s not like I’m speeding or acting irrational, but I’m completely unaware of my surroundings.

Snap out of it!

I shake my head, breathe deep. I need to hear the words to come.

I park at my house and exit with my bag of tools and precious camera. I become suspicious, even though there aren’t any signs of insidious motives. Inside, however, is all the lunacy I’ve caused. The bloody crowbars and surgical gloves. The threatening drill. And, of course, the incriminating camera. I dump all of my stuff in the hallway for later. The old Ethan would never be so sloppy, but he’s not here right now. Probably for the better. He would have reveled in Alex’s agony. Maybe I did. Maybe I did and I’m trying to fool myself into thinking I care. A sheep in wolf’s clothing.

Upon ridding myself of the evidence of today, I head to my true destination. On the way, I stop at a gas station and fill up. I take an extra can too—for the road.

Upon arrival at Jason’s mansion, I don’t waste any time. I march to the gate and ring the buzzer.

“It’s me,” I say.

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“Who is it?” It’s Abbie speaking.

“It’s me. Ethan.”

“Oh, you. I thought *you* said you were never coming back.”

“Open the gate. Now.”

“You’re lucky he loves you.”

It’s the final nail in the coffin. The gate opens, letting me pass with no problem. The moving guys are gone. There doesn’t look to be much of a difference from the outside, but that’s not surprising. With the gas can in my hand, I stroll toward the towering structure. I feel sorry for the architects who built it, for what I’m about to do will be sacrilegious to thy craft. Abbie comes out with nothing but a dressing gown and some bunny slippers on.

“He’s out, okay? He went to pick some things up from the store. He’ll be back any min—” She spots the gas can. “What are you doing with that? Hey! Asshole, I’m talking to you! Give me the fucki—” Abbie makes a mistake. She gropes for the gas can, trying to tug it from my hand. She doesn’t relent, even after I pull it back hard. She won’t let go and she’s becoming a problem. I backhand her, sending her to the floor and loosening her claws from the can. I’ve wanted to commit that crime for so long, and it’s now been done. “You’ve gone nuts! You’ve gone crazy! I’m gonna call the police on you, and then we’ll see what they have to say about you FUCKING HITTING ME!”

I stop walking, bowing my head down in frustration. I turn around and look down upon her as she fumbles with the phone in hand.

“If you call the police, I’ll come back here and I’ll rip your head off and put it on my wall. I’ll mount it above the fireplace. Don’t make me do it. Don’t make me rip your pretty head off,

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Abbie.” I turn back and continue my pace toward the mansion. The last image of Abbie’s face I get is of unfiltered disbelief with a tinge of sickness.

I bust through the front door like an escaped lunatic at the mental hospital. I spew gasoline all over the place. I use it in small bursts, as the mansion is so roomy that one gas can won’t be able to fill each part of the house. I give it my best shot though. Abbie runs into the room I’m decorating with petrol. She screams incessantly—giving me empty words to do nothing with. She might as well be speaking another language. As the last few drops spill out onto an enameled table, the liquid pools on it and settles in the middle. I throw the empty can to the floor and walk back toward the entrance.

Abbie is still shrieking like crazy, but she is now talking to Jason in the hallway on her phone. “Jason! Jason! Your son! He’s gone crazy! He’s going to destroy it—your house!”

I ignore her and walk up the shiny stairs to the second floor.

A piano stands vacant on the laminated flooring. It’s been moved from the first floor to the second.

That man, playing that song, that lovely song.

I want it wrecked. This will be the final “fuck you” to Jason. A grand gesture of heinous hatred.

There’s a giant window with multicolored glass patterns on the wall behind. Something you’d see at a church. It’s so pretentious it makes me grit my teeth. I pick up a medium-sized plant pot by the piano. I heave it up, spilling dirt on the floor and onto myself. I scream internally but carry on. I cradle the plant pot in both hands, rocking it before letting go; smashing a massive hole into the window. Abbie screams from below as she continues her rant. I don’t listen, I just walk into Jason’s chamber (which is

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right next to the piano). It's the same place we had our last argument. The same place he told me he had cancer. I swagger across the room, drunk with pleasure or maybe whiskey. I pick up the stone-cold fire poker and bring it with me. The glass gets torn apart like tissue paper as I move the poker across the glass in random movements. I feel like a painter. But, instead of creating a beautifully planned artistic design, I'm ridding it from existence. The shards hail down to the pebbles below. Abbie shrills some more. There's a car driving at a snail's pace. Can you guess who it is? This isn't fucking *Blue's Clues*, but I'm sure you can do it.

I put the fire poker down and get behind the piano. I push it with minimal effort; the wheels do most of the work. As it gets wheeled to the edge, I don't think about Abbie. I give a big push and watch as it rolls to the gaping crack. It strolls off, seeming like the world is muted for a moment. After, a massive *crash* is sounded. Splinters fly into the air like feathers in one of those old cartoons. Abbie screams the loudest she has ever done so far. She must have got the hint of not standing close to that edge. Or the piano is laying on her spine.

I walk back downstairs and look down at Abbie. She has her hands clasped to her face; wide-eyed and inhaling. I reach inside my pockets and pull out a pack of matches.

How did they get there? I thought you were just getting some extra gas for a rainy day. You little rascal! A laugh track plays in my head.

I light one and throw it into the pool of gasoline. It sets alight; blazing orange. I get close to it and blow like I'm snuffing out a birthday candle. The flaming liquid spills forward and off the table. Tiny bits of cinder sprinkle to various objects.

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I walk outside.

Jason is here and he's now walking toward me. I turn my attention to the wrecked piano. Keys are strewn about—white and black—broken and useless. The open compartment of the piano is presented, a loose wire jolts outwards. I crouch down, pulling it free. It's my gift for the work I've done and have yet to do.

“Put that down, whatever you just picked up,” Jason says, sounding like he's talking to a dog.

“This is the last time you'll see me. The last time.”

“Abbie, call the police.”

Abbie is still fretting, but she comes back to her senses upon hearing Jason's voice.

“That's not a good idea, Abbie. Don't do something stupid like that,” I say with a coolness to my voice.

“How much misery must you cause? How much hatred do you need to be thrown your way before you get the hint?” Jason says.

“Look, I haven't come here to hate you. I've come to ask you something.”

“Is this about your mother? I've alr—”

“What did you do on that day. That day when *he* was staying over. You got into the room, and you saw something. What did you see, Jason?”

My dad looks ghastly. Like he's seen a ghost.

“No. Why—Can we—Look, I don't want us to be like this. I wanted to raise you well, but I'm a selfish man—a coward! I don't want us to be ene—”

“SAY IT!” I compose myself. “Just tell me what happened *that night*. Please.”

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Here come the sprinklers again. Bitch, bitch, bitch.

“Ethan . . .”

“SAY IT!” I jump at Abbie, grabbing the back of her head, pulling her hair tight. She groans in my grip. “Say it,” I repeat.

“Henry . . . *Mhpp.*” A whining sound comes from Jason as he chokes on the words he’s trying to say. “Henry, he . . . he . . . *ehhm . . . ahem . . .* he hurt you.”

I sense Abbie stir in my grip. She’s looking behind me. She rips herself from my squeezed hand, letting her hair tear from her scalp. She’s running away psychotically, waving her arms around screaming, “Fire!” “Fire!”

Jason and I don’t react. We just look at each other. His expression showing remorse. Mine showing hatred.

“Finish it—that’s not good enough.”

“My brother was not a good man. He hurt me too, when we were younger. I was scared of him, I still am, even though he’s been dead for . . . how many years? I forget . . .”

“Finish it.”

“Ethan . . .”

“Don’t make me ask again,” I say, wrapping the piano wire around my knuckles, turning them white.

“He molested you, son. He went into your room that night, and I saw. I saw that look that he gave me. Oh God that *look!* I couldn’t move, I was stuck. Forgive me! Please forgive me!”

The door breaks open—the hinges flying away into a void. My dark secret that even I didn’t know—didn’t *want* to know. Looking through that peephole gave me perspective on those past events. But they felt unreal. Unclear. Muddied water in a river of clarity. That one dark spot in the pool no one goes to. Because no one can tell what’s under there.

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My head's spinning. I stagger, then rectify my incorrect stature and blink myself back again.

"You're done. You've fulfilled your purpose," I say.

"Forgive me! I'm sorry for it all! I know I've said it too many times, I know I've caused you so much pain, but we can help each other now. There's no need to hurt anymore! Dad's here. Dad's here to make sure you're never hurt again."

Too little, too late.

"Come here. Come here so I can let you *die*."

"No! Leave me, I can't take this *anymooooore!*"

The backdrop behind me must look unreal. My goosebumps lap at the heat emanating from behind. I can't look back though, I can't view the masterpiece of elder architecture being melted to the core.

He did this, Ethan. He let it happen. You also let it happen; you're no saint in this. You asked for it. If you'd have just fought back against Uncle, he'd have stopped. But you didn't, and now you're going to kill the man you can't even bear to call your . . .

Jason struggles in my grip as I try to position his fat neck in a better direction for my garroting motion. He flounders like a gasping fish, trying so desperately to get away from the wire.

"Ethan—enough—I—can't—take this . . . PLEASE!" I put my knee to his back. I need to go all the way again. I've gotten so far, caused so much pain that I can't go back. I need to fight back from all attacks. Even when it wasn't an attack at all. Defense is the best offense for some. "Ethan! *Aghh! Noooooo!*" Jason gasps for air, even when the wire has still not been placed around his throat.

I look back at the mansion. It's so consumed in flames that it looks like the underworld itself. Big, bellowing mushrooms of

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murky smoke lift into the air—weightlessly freakish.

I'm a freak?

Jason is still gasping—no, not gasping, choking. I keep my knee pressed to his spine as he tries to lift himself back, failing miserably. The piano wire creeps toward Jason's neck. I brace for the hanging that will take place. I stop and lift the wire back into my full possession. Jason kicks out in frivolous salvation as I step back. A cause to action—with that cause being to save himself from certain death. His right hand is clutched to his chest. His fingers digging into his skin under his shirt and tie. He gasps some more, spasming in the gravel. He takes another few short inhalations of air. The mansion burns on behind me. Abbie's unhinged dance comes to an end. She sees Jason and runs to him.

"I'm—sorry—I'm—sorry—for . . ." Jason doesn't muster the last word through his panted sentence. His eyes flare in pain as his chest bumps up in a few more thrusts. He breathes in for a long, long time. I don't know how long, because I start running.

I slip the piano wire back into my pocket and break off into a sprint. Abbie is on Jason as I'm around fifty meters away.

"Jason! Don't die, please Jason! I don't want to feel alone; to not be with you!" she says.

Looks like she did care about him. You're not right about everything after all, are you?

I keep running, hearing sobs and screams. Then, I get to my car. I drive out the estate and back on the road. As I drive, fire-trucks rush past me to hell.

When I pass my house, I realize I won't ever be able to return. It's as good as done; the end of a chapter. I need to make one last

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stop, one last rummage around the place I've called home for so long.

With the trunk filled with essentials and mementos, I go to the warehouse. I have my cameras back and I've got everything I'll need to lie low. Somewhere. Anywhere.

I digress, what just transpired, exactly? I confirmed the suspicion in my mind that will now haunt me for as long as it stays in the room. (I'm already trying to push it back into the locked door.) I've let an uninvited guest in and it won't be leaving any time soon, but it might leave again at some point.

That memory stayed locked behind that door for a reason, you just had to open it. You couldn't just let it be. You couldn't just stay away. You had to climb up those stairs and watch as the body got dragged away. You put up a good fight, but you didn't have to stick your head where it didn't belong. All it's done is bring you pain. You're addicted to it, most likely. You've criticized everyone under the sun, but when it comes to you, it's okay. Because you're you, and you're the biggest pile of shit of them all.

Do I want that memory to go back out? I locked the door to make the pain stop. Sooner or later, that door will be broken again, no matter how many times I lock it.

People are on the street, people in vehicles. All drones; going to their dead-end jobs. I resent them and I resent their lives. "They're all bad people." George said. Their demons are punishable by death: *pedophilia*, *rape*, harassment, *molestation*, murder.

Now why is that up there? That one word, you know which one I mean. Yeah, that one, murder.

Why the fuck did you put that up there, you hypocrite?

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I ignore my rattling brain and drive on.

The warehouse is now covered in glowing dusk. Rodrigo stands unmovable at the front door, guarding it with his life.

“Rodrigo,” I say in an exhausted voice.

For the first time, he’s concerned. Only mildly, but concerned, nonetheless. Twitchy movements give it away.

“You look like shit,” he says. “They’re in there, waiting for you.”

A man of fewer words. I like it.

George is standing over a battered and bruised Gus who is now out of his cell and in the main meeting room. George is punching seven shades of shit out of him.

“Mothafucka. You wanna fuck with me some more?” he says. I notice the knuckle dusters he’s using. I smile.

“George . . . no . . .” Gus says.

“Shut the fuck up. Piece of shit.” Another blow damages (but not quite breaks), Gus’s previously broken jaw.

“Gahhhh, gah . . . ruahhh.”

This is the second time Gus has been unable to talk properly. The beating must have just started. With knuckle dusters, it’s scary to think of what can happen. I can get used to this.

“Hey, Mathew, c’mere. Clean the blood off the floor. I ain’t quite done with this fuck yet.” Like a servant, Mathew does as instructed, mopping up the concrete. “Ethan. You’re here.”

“I’m here.” This doesn’t come out with exhaustion now, but more of a meekness that hasn’t been here since I was young.

“Ahh. Well, Mathew’s here with us to make sure this all goes smooth, and Rob is here cos I’m guessin’ the landlady kicked him out the house for smokin’ too much dope again.”

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Rob shrugs. “I was last on watch actually, I don’t really know why I’m still here, man. Guess I’m here to watch the mayhem . . . ! And yes, Barbara did evict me.”

“This ain’t a joke. Brain’s turned to mush on that shit. Just stay there and don’t touch anythin’. You’re as bad as fuckin’ Dante with your immaturity.”

“Sure.” He shrugs again, beginning to roll a joint.

“In my office. We need to talk,” George says to me.

He’s right, we do need to talk.

George gulps down his whiskey like a kindergartener drinks apple juice at recess. He offers me some. I accept. Maybe it will dull the already dulled injury in my mind. I’m still buzzed off the first “special” coffee made by Jessica. I sip, still not used to the old alcoholic buzz, but enjoying the fuzzy feeling it brings to my cheeks. George pulls a pack of cigarettes from his desk. Buck Fire, as usual. He takes one out of the pack, lights it, and smokes it up. He also offers me one of those, but I decline. I draw the line there. I’ll save that for the real fucked-up types.

“You all right, son?”

“I’m all right.”

“What happened then? What did you do to him?”

“Burned him down. I’m done, George. After this is over, I need to get away for a while. I was hoping Jessica could join us, but I think I should see if she wants to run. Run somewhere . . . with . . . I’m not going to be around much longer. They’ll catch me soon, and I need to be gone before they do. But this . . . I need to see this through, this one last thing. As soon as Gus—When Gus is dead, I don’t think I’ll be coming back.”

“I see. Whatever you do, I’ll make sure you’re done right by me. But never say never, kid. But look, you were honest with

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me back there at Alex's. I like that. I wanna return you the favor. Ellie's been taken away with Dante. He's gonna keep her for a while. She's gone a bit loopy. She was . . . not so happy that her little love affair got the boot. It is what it *is*. She'll come back to her senses, but right now I'm treating her like a dirty rat too.

"Now, about all this. About what the fuck is goin' on. You already know about this guy—about Azaz. *Azaz*? Load a bullshit. His name's Frank. That's his real name, not fuckin' *Azaz*."

"*Frank*," *where have I heard that name before? It's ordinary, could be anyone.*

"We used to work together. My business was his, and his was mine. We made a killin'—no pun intended. But there was one night—one fucked up night where shit just went *wrong*. Know what I mean?"

I nod.

"This wasn't when we started workin' together, this was before. This was awhile back. So we're all together, my crew, and it's a dark night a—"

"And you're in the woods." The epiphany comes full circle and I realize my connection. I've technically known George for a long time. For *years*. Or known of his presence in the cosmos.

"Yeah in the *woods*, how'd you know that? I didn't tell this story before, did I?"

"No, but I-I was there. I know I was there. There were big trees and that barn—or stable—or whatever. And that body. The dead man."

"Holy shit, you're not bullshittin' then, huh? You really were there. Either that or you're a psychic. Huh. Well, Ethan, all this shit about Frank is to do with that night. At the time, he was a young man. He was a 'recruit,' I guess. A mule, maybe. Passin'

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all the shit we didn't wanna get caught with. Back then, we dealt with a lot more stuff than we do now. I think I'm still in this racket just cos I've done it for so long. Maybe. I dunno." He has another gulp of whiskey. "Back then, we had a team of four. Me, Gregory, Ashley, Azazel . . . Frank. Notice how I leave the last out of the group. Azazel was Frank's older brother, I'm sure you're making the correlation of the names now. And yeah, I know. Fuckin' weird name anyways, huh?

"But, I'm gettin' off topic. Shit went down with us, and ol' Azazel Dalacmont got caught doin' somethin' he shouldn't have. Puttin' it bluntly, he raped a girl. We did home robberies and such, but we had standards. Ya didn't kill, and ya didn't do *that*. Not on my watch anyway. If I caught ya, you'd be getting a fuckin' visit from me, all right." George takes a drag of a cigarette, puffs, then washes it down with the whiskey.

Punishable by death, I think.

"And so I confront him," he continues. "Now I wasn't gonna kill him, he *seemed* like a nice kid, but he rubbed me the wrong way that night. He was braggin' about the shit he did to this poor girl, and I fuckin' snapped. I took that bastard by the collar and I hit him—hard. Boy, I was strong back then. So fuckin' strong in my youth. I say *youth*, but I was still older than you. We fought, and I got out my gun, and well, you know how it goes.

"So, he's layin' there with a fucked-up wound; his little brother is back at camp—we used to stay in the woods a lot. We were always on the run. So what the fuck do I do? Really? I get my crew to take care of the body, but they just put it in that barn or stable you're talkin' about. Miracle it was there, really. It's like it was dropped there to cover our asses. We go up there, and

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there's a l—" George freezes. "You. That was you. All those years ago, huh?"

"It was."

"Huh. Small fuckin' world, I guess. Well, I should wrap this up. That quiverin' prick out there ain't gonna do himself in, huh? He *wishes*."

"Okay, so that scumbag gets what he deserves, but poor Frank has just lost his blood brother. He's lost the only family member that matters. I talk to the kid, and I tell him that his big brother's gone away for a bit. He'll be back sometime. I didn't know what else to tell him, honestly. Later in life, he finds out we lied. He snaps us into shape, all right. He's the only man I've ever met that holds a grudge so long. Even though it ends there, he still wants you dead. He doesn't scare me though, he doesn't."

"You did the right thing. We've both been given these chances to do something awful. We've taken those chances. For whatever reasons we've had," I say to George as I polish the whiskey glass off, grimacing as it burns down my gullet.

"You're right. As I said before, Ethan, 'We're all bad.' "

A chill runs through me as George finishes off his glass of straight whisky too.

I lean in my leather chair. It creaks in distress.

"So, what now?" I say.

"We kill Gus, and then I'll deal with Azaz. I always figure out a way to ruin my enemy. You know that."

"I know. It's time to ruin Gus."

George pushes his cigarette into the ashtray, extinguishing the flame.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEATH SENTENCE

“You need to tell me about this repression that is keeping you so far down, Mr. Riley.”

“I can’t. I’ve done a good job of forgetting it, for the most part. I forgot before; I don’t know if it really happened.”

“I cannot help you if you cannot discuss your relationship with your mother and father. Your extended family, also.”

“Just give it up.” Ethan Riley has become frustrated.

“If you do not wish to discuss these issues, then I am in no position to force you.”

“I’ll give you one bit of how fucked up my life is—pardon my language again—my dad was a selfish asshole who stole my money. Then bought that big house to mock me.”

“Do you usually exhibit jealous behavior?”

“It’s not—It’s not jealousy. It’s just—It’s not fair. I don’t say that in a childish way, even though it

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sounds like it. I mean it—”

“Mr. Riley, I’m going to ask a question—please do not take this personally or as an insult. Does the money really mean that much to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I am sensing an underlying issue that you are unwilling to discuss. Now, I am not asking you to relay this information. I would simply like to know if this is just about financial troubles.”

“Maybe.”

“I see . . . Has it ever occurred to you, that you may misremember information based on your parents?”

There's a commotion outside; a rough tumble of tables and chairs. A light flickers in the room Gus, Mathew, and Robert are in.

"The fuck is that?" George says.

He digs into his desk drawer and pulls a decorated firearm out. A Glock. It's embellished with diamond and gold plated. He checks the magazine, racks the slide.

We both walk through; me behind George. He's walking like a man with an agenda. He means business. A Slender, middle-aged man is holding Mathew hostage. A gun is pointed at his head. Both of them look anxious.

Rob is on the floor—a non-fatal wound on his head. He's unconscious but still breathing. Gus is still in the chair, semi-conscious himself.

"Put it down," the man holding Mathew says.

"It's you, you've finally come to take my shit, Gregory? I'm surprised Frank let a lowlife like you live. Especially with the shit you did for me."

Gregory doesn't speak, he just looks. Something to the right catches my eye. I try to call out, "George, lo"—A hammer *clunks* down onto the gun and fatty thigh of George. He moans a painful sigh, falling to one knee. The attacker reveals himself to me,

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holding the hammer up high, ready to strike it at me, but he stops.

It's Ronnie with a bandaged nose and two bluish bruises underneath his eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned. Not gonna run away this time," he says.

He backs me into a corner and revels in my startled form.

"Fuck . . ." George mutters as he holds his gun hand. Blood is running down his wrist.

Ronnie picks up the gun and points it at me while walking to George's back. He kicks him forward, pushing him into the center of the room. Gus begins to laugh to himself. It's inaudible at first, but he starts erupting into fits of hysterical chuckling. I stare at him, hating his last cheating flourish that comes to me as pure luck. A minute late and he would be dead. Errors have been made and they will stay and fester. For now, I need to hold on for dear life and stay strong, for the worst has not come. At least, I don't think it has. The next moment will be history in the making, I can feel it.

A door opens and a figure comes out.

The man walks through the dark doorway. As he gets closer, it even looks like the figure is *dancing*.

He's the second tallest guy in the room (Gregory is at number one. He towers over Mathew) but he is the meanest looking by far. Greased hair—a retro look. The face on this guy is of pure joy. I notice he has headphones on. He's shuffling closer to the center of the room, looking unflattering. My mind doesn't know what to make of Azaz, but he makes it up for me. I can't help but feel an anticlimax.

He gets closer and closer until I spot an object in his hand.

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Before I can identify it, it's already being *swooped* around.

The shining aluminum baseball bat hits George square in the head with an echoing *crunch*. A spray of fluid is released onto my face and eyes. Everyone else in the room flinches as it happens to them, also. The blood sprays in Azaz's face the worst; it even gets into his mouth, but there's still a look of joy planted on him. He is the only one not to flinch.

"*Come up and see me, make me smiiiiile,*" Azaz sings badly.

Upon the initial impact of the aluminum bat, George's neck snaps to the left. It looks broken. Pained exhaustion comes from his mouth. He falls flat onto his stomach, twitching. Mathew shouts something, looking as if he's about to faint. I make eye contact with him. We both must know this is it. I even glance at Gus, and he's as much of a deer in the headlights as Mathew. He looks stunned. A scorpion stinger to the senses.

Rob is unmoving, still unconscious on the floor. Down and out for the count.

Now George says something. It seems impossible with how damaged he looks, but he is in fact talking. I wish I can't, but I can hear the words. "Frankie. Stop . . . Please stop. Don't kill me, Azaz, please, Fra—"

"*Or do what you want, running willlllld.*"

That always was a nice song, I think as I recognize it.

The next hit comes down.

The bat is swung in a pickaxing motion. It lands directly to the back of George's head. The force moves his chin into the concrete floor, destroying his lower jaw. His teeth fling from his mouth in all directions like a blackjack dealer throwing cards.

Mathew proceeds to faint.

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I can see George's exposed skull and tissue. Somehow, not known in this universe, under some disgusting inside joke, George is still managing to talk. With the loss of his jaw and set of teeth, it's almost incomprehensible. I hear it, and again, I wish I could undo it.

"Azaz . . . pleath! Don't—wanna—die!" he says in a similar, sad state to Gus.

The once respectable and menacing boss of the dysfunctional crew is now groveling. I would do the same in his position, but I'm surprised on seeing this change of character. It's as if all me and George have built is now crumbling in front of me. All those pointless heart-to-hearts and trust-building exercises have led to this. The memories are now being sprayed all over my face. The information I confided in him is gone in terms of importance. I'm not afraid to admit I'm shaking and whimpering in the corner of the room. I'm not pissing myself or throwing my guts up yet, as I've eaten no food. The whiskey hasn't made its way into my bladder yet. Otherwise, if I did drink and eat earlier, I'd look like a toddler in a nursery wanting to go *home*.

The last hit comes down. It looks like Azaz's most powered-up strike. The bat comes down and spews George's gray matter to the non-existent wind. Everything becomes jelly as a mixture of skull, blood, and brain is thrown outward. I can't help but moan to myself and shut my eyes. The last image burned into my memory is of George's spasming fingers. They're dancing along with Azaz. That madman was still grooving to *Steve Harley & Cockney Rebel* while I was looking. It made him scarier.

"Oh God, that felt good!" that same madman yells. I still don't look, not wanting this to be real. "Open your eyes, kid," the voice says to me now. It almost sounds like George is talking

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to me. Maybe I dreamt up all of this waking nightmare. Maybe what happened was a figment of my imagination. Daddy did say to take my pills, didn't he? That's the issue, I haven't taken my pills.

My face is touched by something wet and cold. "Wakey wakey, baby." No, it's not George. This voice is deeper. I open my eyes and recoil as the aluminum bat is being rubbed on my face, smearing unidentified parts of George on me. I pat it away, wiping my face with my shirt. Azaz removes his headphones and passes them to Ronnie. "Don't be rude. Don't be so fuckin' rude. Hey, search him, Ronnie. Make sure he hasn't got any weapons."

He has a similar accent to George, except it's more subtle. He doesn't sound like a mob boss, but he has the same pronunciations for words.

Ronnie searches me, but not thoroughly enough.

"Phone. Keys. That's it, sir."

"Good."

"What do we do with *him*?" Ronnie asks Azaz.

"What, that sack of shit? Well strip him down first, take everythin' he's got on him and give it to me. Bury him outside after that. There's a scrapheap not so far from here. Leave a pinkie toe out for the birds or somethin'."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and if you can't get into the place—cut the body up into pieces and put him in a garbage can. It'll take a lotta work, but the gulls will eat him right up." Azaz winks. A scar on his face bends around his eye.

"Yes, sir."

I now see the new guy, Gregory, putting Mathew to the floor like a sleeping princess.

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“That was a good one b-boss,” Gregory says.

“Shut up, dog. C’mere, dog,” Azaz says. Gregory drops to his knees and crawls to George. I even think the creep is *panting*. “Now dog, you wanna treat?” Azaz points his weapon to the enormous pool of blood that has formed on the floor. George’s body is being dragged away. The wet blood is even showing rings of disturbance. Like when you skip stones in the lake.

Gregory whines in protest, but Azaz winds up his bat. Gregory bows his head in a scared gesture. He puts his face to the pool and laps it up like a good dog.

The whisky is now reversing destinations. Instead of entering my bladder, it’s coming back up to exit my body. It wants out, and this is the last straw in this massacre of mutilated emotions. I burp up the burning alcohol and I blow it from my filled cheeks.

Gregory laughs crazily while still lapping up his drink.

Gus begins to laugh again also. He was laughing before Azaz arrived, but he wasn’t laughing when he beat George to death. But he’s laughing now, rocking himself up and down, making the chair bounce. I believe he’s gone hysterical.

“Both of you, shut the fuck up before I get back to swingin’,” Azaz says. They both cease laughing at once, and the dog (formerly known as Gregory) sits up and away from the blood pool. He looks like Dracula with how much red is covering his mouth. His pale eyes and malnourished face give him the complexion of a vampire also. “So you’re the little shit who’s caused so much trouble, huh? Oh, don’t worry.” He bends down close to me and looks me in the eyes. “I’m not gonna bash ya brains in, not just yet. I’ll save that for Halloween.” He winks again and gets back up, giggling.

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I carry on cowering in the corner with acidic whiskey drop-lets still in my throat and mouth.

Who's the little bitch now? George just got his head blown out, and you're crying in the corner! We're fucked!

“Gregory, doggie. Why don’t you tell our friend here why he’s been a naughty boy? Probably won’t get anythin’ from Santa Claus anytime soon.”

“Yes sir, A-A-Azaz sir!” Gregory bows down to him. Then gets up—facing me. “You have k-k-killed one of Azaz’s ass-s-sociates. Finn O’Mally w-w-was a paid e-m-mployee and constitute of Mr. Azaz. Finn was not supposed to die when you m-m-murdered him. You also harmed another cons-s-stitute of Mr. Azaz—a Ronnie Filberd. He had suffered an injury at your hands. It came to light that you esc-c-c-caped from Ronnie upon your capture.”

Remember that. For Christ’s sake, remember that about Ronnie!

Azaz rolls his eyes. “G-g-got i-it o-out eventually. Hah!”

Gregory bows again, this time in shame.

I feel as though I’m trapped in a madhouse—a circus of psychopaths. It’s getting to be too much to handle. The past twenty-four hours have been an unimaginable rollercoaster. Finally, I have to perk up and take on a level of bravery. If I fail to do so, I will never live it down. Or die it down, depending on the outcome of the current matter.

“You have trained pets,” I say. “I can see that you got Gregory to join you. I suppose George didn’t willingly submit to you. Now that leaves . . . Ashley, is that her name?”

“Ahhhh, bravo, bravo! George told you the story. Well now that the cocksucker’s dead, I guess it don’t matter. Ya seem like

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a standup guy, Ethan, I'll be real with you. I want you to join me. You ain't done me any wrong . . . yet! And you, Gus. You've served me well. You will be rewarded."

"Th-Thank you," he says, avoiding eye contact.

"The fuck happened to him? Oh, your jaw ain't lookin' too good. Better than bein' fucked up though. Sooooo anyways, what do ya say, Ethan? Wanna join my crew? It seems like your last employer is a bit preoccupied in being dead."

"Yes," I say.

"Was that a yes to if he's dead, or if you're gonna be joinin' me? I mean, both should be pretty fuckin' obvious answers. Hah!"

"Yes," I repeat, looking down.

The only way I'll ever get out of this is if I submit. I can hold a shred of honor by disapproving, but I'm too "chickenshit" to do that. I'm not the kind of guy to face the music. I'll dodge that bullet for as long as I can. I'll duck, dip, and run until that bullet is against my skull. Like Alex, and like George. In the end, they both begged for mercy. They both cried out to be spared. I'll do that too when that bullet or blunt object comes down on me. But not yet. Not yet. That death shot is not at my head just yet, so I can make it a little longer.

But what then? How do I get out of this? Maybe I shouldn't get out of this, maybe I should become like Gregory. A simpering animal, obedient and brainwashed.

"I'll work for you, yes."

"Oh Ethan, I know, I know. No one turns me down. If they do, they end up like that fella. What's his name again? I keep forgettin'."

A muteness permeates the room as all four of us don't

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move. The extra fifth man is passed out and unmoved. Mathew got it lucky. He passed out on the second swing; a miracle. Rob hasn't seen anything at all, the lucky bastard. I'd rather he was in my position.

"G-George," Gregory says.

Azaz snaps his fingers. "George! That's the fucker! Yeah, he turned me down quite a while ago, Ethan. He called me all sorts of names. And, as you know, he killed my brother too. And I ain't angry that he killed him for what he did, but I'm angry that I didn't get a decidin' vote. I was a kid at the time, but still, he's my brother!"

"Yes." Static plays in my mind.

Another quietness.

"So!" Azaz shouts. Gregory jumps a mile. "Let's get to business, no time like the present. Dog, go fetch." He gestures toward Mathew.

"What are you doing with *him*?" I say to Azaz, as Gregory does his bidding, picking the small Mathew up like a clumsy fool.

"You don't need to worry about that. And dog, leave Gus until I'm back. Don't unbind him."

This fucker is going to torture Mathew, and you can't do anything about it. Then he'll untie Gus. Until he grabs a knife and slits your throat if you sleep tonight.

"Y-Yes sir."

Once Mathew is collected, Rob is also carried away into the unknown. I don't care about him as much, so knowing he's in the same predicament as I am is neither consoling nor disheartening.

Azaz walks me out of the room and into the dark void he

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entered from. Into the blackness that spawned the creature under my bed. The creature that was in my dreams. The monster I ignored so furtively. If only I stopped looking at the smaller picture, all of this could have been avoided. George would be alive; the person I've become attached to in some strange way. I'd say I'm friends with him.

The person I became attached to in some strange way. I'd say I was friends with him

We leave the torture room.

Out of the warehouse, the electricity in the air is daunting.

"Hey, Ethan. Check this out," Azaz says to me. Like a friend would talk to another.

Rodrigo is under a tarp near where he was standing. He's dead, of course. Dead as a doornail. His throat is slashed open in such a deep gash, with a skin flap showing a near decapitation. His shades are still on. I stare, used to death by now. Rodrigo's demise is less gory and tragic than George's, but bloodier than Jason's.

"What do ya think? Know who did that?" The face Azaz is pulling already gives me the answer.

"You."

"Mhmmmmmm. Was he a friend?"

"No."

"Good. I think seeing a friend get destroyed would be quite traumatizin'," he says, whispering the last few words.

"Yes."

That lighthearted face changes on a dime. It morphs into a sinister, darker face.

"Don't." One word. Only one word to make me rethink my

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whole persona toward this man.

“It . . . It is traumatizing.”

“I know. That’s what I just said.”

He gets close, imposing his massive height onto me; turning me into a filthy insect.

Like you deserve.

“Are you gonna be a problem, boy? Ya gonna cause me issues?” he says.

This is do or die—Sink or swim—Fight or flight.

“I won’t be a problem. Just give me time. I need to adjust. George wasn’t my friend; he was someone I worked for. No more, no less.”

“Ya sure? Ya got mighty close to the guy. Friends.”

“We weren’t friends. I might have gotten used to him being around, but it doesn’t matter anymore. The guy’s dead.” I shrug.

A point of tension shakes the earth’s equator until a breaking point erupts into relief. “Good answer!” He pats me down like a good buddy and I writhe under his touch. His scruffy denim jacket brushes by me too.

He’s your new demon in the room. He’s not behind that imaginary door either, so you’ve got two hellish ghouls kicking their feet up.

One of them is dead and the other is killable. Let me work this out.

There’s nothing to work out. Look around at the smoke and smell the ashes. It’s burned down to the ground. Every bit of hope you held on to has gone up in flames, just like Jason’s mansion. The similarity is that you’re the one who set it alight. You’re the arsonist of your own monument.

(Psyche.)

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A deep wave of depression flows over me. Sadness has come and gone. In comes the emptiness. The overwhelming presence of self-pity and unrelenting dissociation.

Where is my mind?

We walk farther into the area covering the warehouse. For the most part, it's wilting wildlife and scrapyards scattered around. The buildings in the near distance are a reminder of the inside world we're away from.

"So, you killed two of my men—and hurt another. You lost your job, you got hospitalized. Anythin' else I need to know about your shitty life? Only kiddin'."

"Nothing important, no."

"Mhm. So now that you're outta work, I guess I should find somethin' else for you to do. Another way you can work for me, huh?"

"My photographs did generate a lot of money for George. I don't know what else you'd want me to do," I say, trying to hide my rage.

"Ah, well we'll figure somethin' out. I heard about your job from that Alex guy. He said the same thing—that they got George a lot. Gus told us that you killed him. That true?"

"I did."

"Hmm, so you did," Azaz says, making me unsure if he knew or not. "Eh, I never liked the guy, personally. He seemed too up his own ass, but he's been workin' for me for some time. I think George probably knew that too."

"Yeah, maybe."

"How'd you do it?"

"Crowbar."

"Right. Nice."

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“I have pictures.”

“Oh yeah? Is that so?”

I nod, not looking in Azaz’s direction.

We’re now facing the sunset; it must be a full day since Ronnie held me at gunpoint in the parking lot. It seems so far away now. Like everything has been in fast-forward. I can’t imagine that life I had, the life of being blissfully unaware of this underground operation. Even further back is seeing Ronnie for the first time, not knowing him and Finn would be a problem. I begin to wonder if it was all planned out. Meeting them and Jessica seems too perfect. Like Azaz orchestrated the whole thing to get me closer to them. I cannot believe Jessica is in any kind of cahoots with any of these insane individuals.

I’m a part of this crew now. I can kiss the getaway escape goodbye for the time being.

“Show me,” he says after a pause. “I wanna see the pictures.”

“They’re in my car.”

“We’ll get ’em for you, don’t you worry. Gosh, wish we kept George now, coulda used that fat fuck for somethin’ useful. Oh well.”

“I’m going to prison soon.”

“And why’s that?”

“I burned someone’s house down.”

“Now why would you wanna do somethin’ like that?” He looks more amused than questioning.

“It’s personal.”

“Ahhhhhhh. It was ya pops, right? Didn’t he bullshit about cancer or somethin’? Man, was he tryin’ go for World’s Shittiest Dad?”

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“I suppose he was.”

“You don’t burn someone’s house down for that though, do ya?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t be like that, bud.”

You’re not my fucking friend. I’d kill you if I could.

Wait, you still have the piano wire. Yes, that’s what Ronnie didn’t find! But at the same time, does that change much?

“I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well I do.” That *face* stares at me again and I know I’m not getting out of talking about this.

I start to talk about it.

I can tell him, I have to.

“George, if I tell you, you need to let me go do this. You need to let me come back to you.” I sniff the watery substance in my nose back as the tears stream down my face. George nods. “I think my uncle hurt me. H-He hurt me bad. I don’t know what to do.” I look in the same spot I looked at while having my episode.

“Did he . . . do what I’m thinkin’?”

“I think so.”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say to ya, Ethan. Eh, we’ve worked together for a while, and you’ve shown courage. More than someone like that ever could.”

“I’m not like that. I say things so I seem better than people. I don’t know, I just want my life to be different.” The tears fall and my voice wavers.

“We ain’t perfect, you already know what I think about us all. All of us might be bad, but then there are the people who are even worse. There’s someone I knew, and he did somethin’

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shitty, same as your uncle. Maybe I'll tell you about what I did, if you promise to come back to the warehouse after you do whatever you need to do. I know it won't be good—what you're plannin' on doin'. But it needs to be done, don't it?"

"It does. It's needed to happen for a long time. But it's for me. It's my own selfish desire to make others hurt. Because he hurt me."

"Where is your uncle, huh? Maybe a few of us could pay him a little visit, y'know?"

"He's dead. Died of cancer."

"Right. Erm, speakin' of which. What has your father gotta do with all this? If the person who hurt you is dead?"

"Oh God . . . that night, that fucking night!" I freak out, not realizing how twitchy I am. "Oh God, what he fucking did to me. And what he let him do!"

"Ethan, calm down, calm down, it's okay."

"He saw what happened. H-H-Henry opened the door—my bedroom. H-h-he walked to me, and he p-p-put his arm on me. He *s-s-s-hushe-e-e-ed* me! Said I'd-I'd-I'd be okay t-t-t-tomorrow. George, I-I-I didn't want to do it, but h-h-he-he made me—I tried stopping him, but he didn't let me g-g-g-go, and th—" I'm back there in that room. Henry stinking of booze and smoke—musty on his breath.

The lights were off. I didn't move, I just told him to go away and to go back to sleep, but he didn't listen. The door creaked open and he stopped. Stopped dead in his tracks. The monster closest to me even turned around and he *shushed* him too. And Jason just looked at me, before closing the door. I couldn't scream or run, so I sat and waited for it all to be over. I was told not to scream. Not to scream like a *bitch*. . . .

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And he hurt me. . . .

And then in the next morning I thought it was a dream so I was okay but then every day I wondered what happened that night and it never happened again and somehow that made it worse like all of the pain that was caused was in my head and it never felt real but it still hurt all the same and don't make me go back please don't make me don't make me go there again . . .

It hurt me to a point of not feeling like living anymore. Until you become so convinced that you *deserved* to be hurt. That you *deserved* to cry. That you *deserved* to be changed.

After all the years, it never gets any better. You lose all will to do anything personal. Not because you don't want those amazing feelings, but because you don't *deserve* them.

"And . . . Jason stood and watched." My nervous, childlike voice turns to a deep venomous crackle in my throat. "He closed the door and he left me in there. I managed to forget, but it all came back. If I knew before then, Jason would already be dead. But now, I'm going to hurt him, the same way he hurt *me*."

"Give him hell," George says.

I nod back before leaving the room.

"So you just sat there, and took it? Bahahahahah!" Azaz says, gut rumbling with laughter. I don't hide my hatred well with my look. I feel my features tightening on my skin as Azaz laughs in my face. "Maybe you deserved some of it."

I can't stop myself from flying off the handle. I leap at him, attempting to . . . do something. It doesn't work.

Azaz grabs me by the throat and knocks me to the dry, dusty ground. He says, "Listen little man, you're not gonna try shit like that again. I was bustin' ya balls. If you go for me again though

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friend, I'll pull your fuckin' guts out through your asshole." His iron grip makes me lose consciousness for a moment; I feel helplessly fragile. I stare into the darkening sky, hoping that the asphyxiation will knock me out.

Azaz lets go and puts his hand out for a lift-up. I accept with hesitation. I need to be smarter than this, but I know I can't beat this monster. I lost one round, so it means I can never win. I feel lost; like I will never be able to make up for what happened. There's a small glimmer of hope in the emptiness, however. It's out of reach—so far away. It's there though, and if I don't try to hold it, then I will sink with the rest of my failures and shortcomings. Maybe I don't deserve to reach it for killing Alex . . . and Finn.

"Look, let's go back. I'm sorry for laughin'."

Once again, you're not my friend.

"It's okay."

"What your old man did, I ain't gonna tell you it was wrong. Everyone would say that. And that piece of shit uncle as well. God, what an asshole. Understatement, am I right? But that's in the past now, ya gotta look to the future." He slaps my chest hard, knocking me back a bit.

"Yeah."

"And about the fire. I'm sure we can work somethin' out with that too. Same thing with your job, ah. We can make this work."

"Burning his house down wasn't just it."

"You kill him?"

"Yes."

"Don't blame ya. Woulda done the same. In fact, did my uncle rape me? Or was that my other uncle? Ah, I forget. Point

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is, you've just gotta make life *your* bitch. Instead of the other way 'round." I nod. "What we'll do, is you can set up a place to live here. This will be our base of operations, commencin' as of now. You'll get to meet your new associates. Not many more to meet. And not many more that you *will* be meetin'. I mean, you already know Ronnie. Forgot to thank you about the black eyes ya gave him. We couldn't stop laughin' when he came in the next day."

"Gus," I say.

"What about him?"

"What happens to him now?"

"Errrm, he does the same as he's been doin'. He won't cause you any problems, I promise."

"He's known to disobey orders."

"Well, if he does, I'll mount his head on the fuckin' wall. And unlike your previous boss, I don't make promises I can't keep. Gus shoulda been dead a long time ago under that management. But now that he's under new leadership, I think I can whip him into it!" Azaz rocks his arm forward in a prospector-type "Get-er-done!" gesture.

I nod once more, not entirely believing what's happening now is actually happening.

"C'mon Ethan," he continues. "Let's get your new place set up. Then I'll get my boys to check on your place. You leave the feds to me, I'll deal with 'em."

"Where is he, huh? No one knows, really?"

Gregory, Ronnie, Gus, Mathew, and Azaz are sitting with me at the table. Mathew isn't bound and Gus is being untied, as per Azaz's request.

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“Thanks man. Think the circulation in my hands has been cut off for so long that if I jerked off, I wouldn’t need any porn at all,” Gus says and laughs alone. The atmosphere is too awkward to handle. Azaz peers into Gus’s soul, making him buckle under the scrutiny.

“Aha haaaa . . .” Azaz mocks. “Let me get one thing straight Gus, you’re not the funny one ’round here. You’re the pawn that goes in and does whatever the fuck I say. Yeah?” Even though Azaz speaks seriously, there’s a smidge of mocking comedy to it.

“Right. Sorry, sir.”

“That’s better. Now do me a favor. Go grab me a beer.”

“Su—Yes, sir.” Gus gets up, walking to the kitchen area.

Mathew sits, brought back in the room, unaware of his surroundings. He hasn’t said anything since he fainted and he’s still currently keeping mute. Azaz is throwing pebbles at him (must have gotten them from outside). It’s his own silly game. Mathew flinches when one hits him, but that’s all that happens. Azaz giddily continues like a child. It reminds me of a high schooler taking an insect and putting a magnifier under the boiling sun. A pointless but engaging act of cruelty. Amusing to those with low attention spans. A pure loathsome creature.

Punishable by death.

Gus returns with the beer, handing it to Azaz like royalty. Azaz eyes him up. As Gus walks back to his seat, Azaz begins to throw pebbles at Gus instead of his usual target. His new target laughs uncomfortably.

“Right!” Azaz says, clapping and thumping the table—now bored of his little game. “Let’s talk about somethin’ else. Since you two dumb fucks don’t know where Dante is, I guess we’ll

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have to wait for him to show. Shoulda fuckin' called Teddy and the Sunset Crew. Oh well. I've called Marcel, and he'll be arrivin' shortly."

"Dante's at Alex's. He's with Ellie," I say, hoping in a weird way Dante has sniffed the scent of trouble.

"Why didn't you say sooner? Fuck, see you two? Not much we can do about them now. If they had any sense, they'd not come back. But meh, if they come, Marcel will teach 'em a little lesson. Hah!" No one says anything. Azaz gets bored again. "Hey, limp dick! You get his camera?"

Ronnie looks at him. "Yes sir, would you like me to give it to you?"

"Erm, duhhhh! Fuckin' retard. I'm not gonna get up and get it now, am I?"

"Yes, sir." Ronnie picks up my tool bag from the floor, fishes around inside it. "Here you are. He had his regular phone, but he also had a burner phone in here too, along with some tools and weapons. Think they were used to kill Alex. Also, I searched George, all he had was his phone on him. Here."

Ronnie passes the camera satchel and I spot my old Polaroid camera there also. The two phones go over to Azaz.

"Won't be needing these anymore." Azaz throws both of my phones far across the room where they break, spitting out plastic across a wall. "Imagine if I accidentally threw the camera instead. That would have been a mistake, huh. Hah!"

He picks out my pride and joy, fiddling with all the different buttons. He gets frustrated straight away.

"Give it here," I say.

"Right. You're the camera guy after all." He shoots me with a finger gun and does that *cocking* sound that's universally

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known.

“You got a laptop or something?”

“Ron.”

Ronnie gets up and walks somewhere unknown. I don't care to find out. He comes back with a standard-looking laptop and sets it down.

I sigh, talking again. “There should be a black wire in the camera bag. Could I have it?”

“Ron.”

Ronnie looks at Azaz with bags under his colored eyes. He walks to him, where the camera satchel is sitting right in front of him. Azaz doesn't take his gaze away from me the whole time. The cable I asked for comes flying toward me. I can't help but flinch, but I catch and plug the camera into the USB port.

“Here, take a look,” I say as I open the file. I haven't had time to edit or erase the unattractive photos. The strange thing is though, they're all immaculate. Even with the poor lighting, I must have been sensible enough to turn the aperture up high. Either that or Jessica was better at her job than I would have thought.

“Not bad. That shit looks gnarly!”

“Thank you.”

“I never used to sell this kinda shit, but if there's a customer who wants to see it, then fuck if I'm not gonna give 'em what they want.” A black gentleman walks into the room. He looks as hardened as Rodrigo did. “Marcel! Hey man, take a look at this.”

Marcel walks to where Azaz is sitting. He doesn't look in my general direction.

“Fucked up,” he says.

“Eloquently put, my dear friend.”

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“Am I on door tonight then?”

“Yes. Go stand out there lookin’ scary. Everyone should turn up soon, so give ’em the usual reach around.”

“Sir.” Marcel walks back out, spending little time with greetings.

After a long waiting period, in comes the rest of the weirdos. Only two more. An extremely fat lady enters, holding a clipboard with a pen holstered on it. Dungarees and flower-patterned overalls. She looks pleasantly disgusting.

Could that be Ashley? No, too young.

Another hard man walks in. He looks like one scary individual. No tattoos, but lengthy healed-up burns are plastered all over him. There’s more torn flesh than unscathed. He comes across as a burn victim with reconstructed skin.

“Howdy folks. *Ooh*, two new members, I see,” the obese woman says in a bubbly fashion.

The scary-looking guy says nothing. Just sits on his own near the back.

“Ethan, Mathew, this is Molly and Lox. Your new business partners,” Azaz says.

“Hello.” I force myself to smile at them.

Mathew doesn’t speak, nor does he move in the slightest.

“Matheeeeeew. You’re being rude to our guests,” Azaz says as he throws more pebbles at him. Mathew continues to not speak, staring off into space. “Mathew!”

He stirs—broken from his trace. Not much, however.

“Hello,” Mathew says as soft as a child.

“Who’s a good boy?” Azaz riffs. The horror never ends here. The two new crazies join the party. “Ain’t we just one big happy family?”

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“Where’s Robert?” I ask. Not out of much caring, but more to change the harassment toward Mathew.

“Who?” Azaz asks me.

“Robert Allack. He was the deep web administrator.”

“Oh, he’s in the process of bein’ interrogated. He’s fine.”

I give up bothering.

With Mathew out of it still; being barely recognizable as a living human; everything falls to me. Robert is like a lost cause, so if it’s me without any support against the threat, then I feel totally overwhelmed.

Maybe you can work with them. Why stick your neck on the line? It’s not like there’s anyone to save anymore. Do you really give a fuck about Mathew? He’s a nobody. Dante is a nutcase as well—off to bury your mistake, along with Ellie—the woman whose boyfriend is that same mistake. You all got picked off in the end, and now you’ve got to take care of number one.

That’s you.

Jessica isn’t involved in this, so you can be rest assured that she’ll forget about you soon. Thankfully.

“So you’re sufficiently satisfied with the images?” I ask.

Molly looks at me and says, “What pictures would these be? I need filling in, hehe.”

“Ethan there has taken some pictures of a cracked-in skull,” Azaz says.

“Wonderful, wonderful.”

“And ya see, George had this side hustle of sellin’ ’em on the black market—to some group of sadists, I’d have thought. Probably get their rocks off to it as well.”

“George made a killin’ off it,” Gus adds with a matched giddy expression like Azaz and Molly.

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“Wonderful!” Molly repeats.

“Ethan, our main operation is a little different. I know George was into sellin’ some dark shit.” Azaz interlocks his fingers. “Y’know, drug trafficking, weapon distribution, hits. Etcetera, etcetera.

“Us however, we mainly focus on drug distribution. We have this new product hittin’ the market. It’s called EX-one. Oh, we also do some human trafficking.” Azaz takes a sip of his (now) warm beer. Probably forgetting he even ordered one. The sentence he uttered is so disturbing, but Azaz says it as if he’s describing a mundane job he worked.

“Human trafficking? As in you sell people?”

“Oh don’t worry, they have to be eighteen.” He waggles his finger at me like I’ve been a naughty boy.

“That wasn’t really my concern.” I notice that when I’m talking, everyone gives me anxious looks. It’s as if I’m saying the wrong things.

“Will that be a problem?”

“No.” I don’t think, I just say.

“Well that’s good. If you’d have said no, then Ronnie would be burying someone else up the scapyard. Hah!”

“Didn’t bury him. Wasn’t open. Had to cut him up like you said,” Ronnie says.

“Or cut you up, Ethan. Or cut you up.” Azaz shrugs. “Okay, let’s go over logistics. Molly handles the accounting side of things. Background checks and what-have-you. Ronnie is what we call the baiter. He gains a potential victim’s trust. Finn was a trainee, but mostly just drove us around. Y’know, up until you stabbed the fucker.”

I look at Ronnie. He’s ashamed of himself—he’s looking

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down twiddling his thumbs.

So that's why you took an interest in Jessica. You creepy fuck, you needed her so that you could sell her. Of course Jessica was never in on anything. To even have suspected her is an insult.

“By the way, I just wanna say good job coverin’ your tracks with his murder. You got the cops chasing their tails. I saw the reports that he got, they were hilarious. That poor cashier in the store close by got it pinned on him. Fuckin’ priceless!”

That new information makes me feel like shit. Somebody innocent got caught in the crossfire—just like I planned. Why do I care though, why now? Why not then?

Knowing Finn and Ronnie were even more unforgivable resets my thoughts. I had started to come to terms with what happened. I thought I was becoming remorseful for Finn. Azaz said Finn never contributed to the human trafficking, so it makes me feel as if I’ve killed the wrong one. Why couldn’t he have done the same as Ronnie? He had to be in on it too; of course he had to!

“Marcel is the new muscle. He’ll deal with any trouble that comes our way. That old door guy you had wasn’t too good. I mean all I do is come from behind with a knife, and he just fuckin’ bites it. Oh man.

“I’m thinking Gus is gonna take over with transport. Finn was the unofficial driver. But you can do some odd jobs for us.”

“Yes, sir!” Gus says. Azaz doesn’t look flattered.

“Doggie over there—or should I say Gregory—is my steward. My own right-hand man. He makes sure this operation doesn’t sink.”

“Yes, sir!” Gregory says louder than Gus.

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“Lastly, we got Lox in the corner. Don’t ask what he does and don’t ask about his name.” I look over at him, sitting in the corner. It’s like he’s wearing a cheap, tacky Halloween mask. His face looks plasticky and fake. I stop looking before I get the creeps. “Oh, almost forgot about you Matty. You’re gonna be our researcher. You’ll look for any targets you can find. People leave all sorts of personal info on their social media. I’ll give you a tutorial later, how’s that sound?”

“Oh.”

“I said, how’s that sound?”

“Good. Thank you, sir,” Mathew says without any tone left in his voice. It’s sad to hear again.

“Better. We got IT people too, Ethan, but they’re behind the scenes. You won’t need to know them. And anyways, you got a personal thing against ’em, don’t ya? Haha!”

I nod and smile. Like a mail-order bride being shipped and delivered to some rich asshole.

Just smile at his comments, laugh at his jokes. For now, until we figure out what we’re going to do, we need to seem like we’re all good.

“Now, I’m beat! Think it’s time we all hit the hay. Big day tomorrow. You two newbies!” Azaz points to me and Mathew. “You two will get a little trial run tomorrow. We’ll make sure you’re fit for your positions. But now, we’re gonna get you set up.”

“Are we free to leave?” I ask, stupidly.

“Free to—Of course you’re not free to leave. Not yet, anyway. You’ll be stayin’ here for a while.

“Oh,” Mathew says.

“So what, we’re going to be prisoners?” I eye up Gus and

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he gives me a snapshot of joy. A brief moment where his face lights up like a Christmas tree.

“One way of puttin’ it. It’ll be more mercy than you gave to poor ol’ Gus. He looked half-dead before we got here. You big bullies!”

“He was a threat.”

“Yeah, well not anymore,” Azaz says. End of discussion.

“It was nice meeting you two!” Molly says.

Lox says nothing at all.

“Dog, take ’em to bed. They’re tired.”

“Y-y-yes, sir.”

Gregory stands as though he has back pains. He’s not exactly crooked, but I’ve noticed he’s hunched forward sometimes. Like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

He lifts Mathew by the shoulders like a girl would pick up her dolly. Mathew doesn’t resist, just stiffens under the grab and allows himself to be moved.

“Ron.” Azaz gestures to me.

Ron steps up. I wave him off, knowing the routine already. This isn’t the first time I’ve been moved against my will, and it won’t be the last. I’m sure of that.

“Once again, you manage to wriggle out of it. I don’t know why anyone even tries messing with you. You’ve got a four-leaf clover planted on you,” Ronnie says.

“Jessica did say you were creep. I thought you were just a pervert, but there’s a little more to it, I see.”

“It’s not like that. She didn’t have anything to do with the job.”

“Oh yeah? And Finn was with you because . . . ?”

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“Just shut the fuck up. If you’re gonna give me a reason to kill you, it’s gonna be that mouth of yours. It got you out of trouble last time—I’ll admit that—but now’s different. I’m surprised he hasn’t killed you yet.”

“You lied too. You said that he wanted me dead. I think you didn’t want to inform me that he was looking to give me a job. I think you wanted me to believe that he wanted to kill me, himself. That way, you gave me a reason to run. How’d that work out for you, Ron?”

“You really know how to press my buttons, y’know that?”

“Good. You’re stuck with me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Ronnie finally leads me to a room. My head tilts down. I see which one it is and irony comes at me fast as I’m pushed into the same holding cell that Gus was. I’m just glad Gus isn’t here now to ridicule me.

“Enjoy your stay,” Ronnie says. Somehow, he has no sarcasm in his voice. It’s more of a by-the-numbers wording.

“You can’t be serious. This is a cell.”

“I don’t make the rules. If you have a problem, talk to the bossman. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to talk about such trivialities.”

Too many syllables in one sentence. It had to be too many for this caveman.

“At least empty the shit bucket, for Christ’s sake.”

“Where do you think you are? This isn’t a premium hotel.”

I can’t help but become loud in protest. Ronnie takes no notice and leaves me with a stained mattress and a bucket to excrete in. I notice now that the cell is opposite another room, but it’s not occupied yet. That room is George’s.

For the next two hours, I don’t sleep, I listen. There’re

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cheers and glass slams. The merriment has begun for the winning team. They're celebrating my incredible failure, along with Mathew's.

After a while of being left alone, my thoughts turn black. Where I could have had any single spark of hope, it has been snuffed out. Spending such a short amount of time in a confined space has done that to me already. To be so deprived of drive is disappointing. Planning was the way I could keep myself here in comfort. It was the way I could keep myself sane. Well, and the idea of Jessica and George being here. But now, George is dead and (cut apart into little pieces and shoved into a garbage can) buried. Jessica is away from me too. She'll be unable to find me. My phone's broken in two. Like my burner. There's no way of contacting her. Even if I were able to, what would I say? "Help, call the police! I burned down Jason's house and got captured by other criminals!" I don't see that working. So instead of planning, I fester in my thoughts, stewing like a rotten meal.

The laughing and talking continues. It quietens down after the majority of members leave.

Eventually, Azaz comes to say goodnight. "What are you still doin' up bud? You shoulda been asleep a while ago."

"Couldn't sleep."

Even though Azaz is a little hyped up, he isn't drunk. I imagine him as a careless man who would get destroyed on alcohol from time to time. But, for whatever reason, he isn't tonight.

"Bud, I'm sorry about these living conditions. These aren't suitable at all. In the mornin', we'll sort out sprucin' this place up a bit for you. Get you a real bathroom."

"Generous."

"Stop complainin', Ethan. Jesus."

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“Yes, sir,” I say with a hint of putrid mocking that isn’t noticeable.

“Look, we’re gonna be workin’ together pretty soon, I want no bad blood.”

“I’m not going to feed you bullshit like all the other yes-men here. I didn’t do that with George and that’s why we respected each other,” I say as I manage to find some stored-away courage.

And you’ve shown courage.

“Things are different. You’re the same as everyone else. If you do a good job, you’ll be in my good books. Do a bad job, and I’m sure you can imagine what book you’ll be in then. Hint, it’s the opposite of good.”

Courage knocked back down again. Great.

“Okay.”

“One last thing before I go. These are really cool. Retro y’know? And for some reason, they look familiar.” He takes out a Polaroid picture and shows me his dead brother. “Weird how you have these. I’m gonna take a shot in the dark and say that these belonged to George? But then, why would you have these, hmm? No bullshit, friend.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I don’t give a fuck about complicated,” Azaz barks as he lunges at the bars separating both of us. The photos scatter to the floor. “All I give a fuck about is this: did you take these pictures or not?”

“I did. It wasn’t George who took them.”

“Okay.” He gathers the pictures in one swoop, puts the picture back into a pocket, and looks at me. “Now, go to sleep.” Azaz walks away, taking that obnoxious swagger with him. He

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enters his room (not really *his* room) but leaves it open.

I go back to my disgusting bed and sit down. I'm repulsed by everything around me and it makes the space I'm in even more claustrophobic. I feel the need to scrub my hands down to the bone, then step into a boiling shower to wash away the bacteria.

You need to get used to this. This is your life from now on. You're not leaving here. Never, never, never.

The voice in my head is right, I determine. All is lost and this is my new normal. The new beginning of what is suffering.

A vibration catches my distracted mind. A phone is vibrating in Azaz's room. It doesn't make me feel any better, but it arouses my interest.

I stand up with my back pained from the hard wall I was leaning against. I get as close to the cell door as possible and examine. The phone is far, but it's ringing for sure. The number on it is hard to see, but I can read the phone from where I'm standing. George's phone is one of those big, sturdy things. He's had trouble reading in the past, so every bit of text is in large lettering. I don't recognize the number straight away, but it hits me. It hits me so hard I can almost see the lipstick that it is drawn in. My stony gaze hardens even more as my mood changes. It sours well, being just what I need. It's that boost of action I require; that motivation to do something other than wallow in loneliness. It's going to be a hard road ahead, but it's at least clear. It was full of thick mist when I walked into the warehouse today. In fact, my judgment was clouded as soon as I lost my job. That was the moment I changed my attitude toward everything. In a strange way, it made me free of responsibility. It made me see where the root of inaction was. The era of hopelessness needs to

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end if I am to stand a chance against these people. George's death was also the catalyst of a newfound purpose. Jason's death as well. In Jason's last act of having a heart attack as his mansion burned, at least did me the kindness of sending me on a mission. Everybody has—everybody who died at my hands. Directly or indirectly.

They've given me a task I need to perform.

I'm going to kill them all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PLAN OF ATTACK

"I suppose it's possible that I could remember information on my parents incorrectly."

"I don't have anything on record about your family, but since you have described your father as a wealthy man, would it maybe be possible that he had a profession that was heavily paid?"

"He worked in a big construction company a while ago, sure."

"And your mother?"

"She was a teacher."

"Maybe this miscommunication is more to do with your mother and father, rather than *you* and your father. Do you feel as though you were not given enough of a place in the family?"

"I don't know. It was a while ago, but I know they could have done more for me." Mr. Riley seems distressed when he speaks.

"Could you elaborate?"

"Ugh, we're going in circles! I don't remember

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how they treated me. I think they treated me fine. Like any other family.”

“Deep-rooted issues usually start at home. And people in my office usually have deep-rooted issues. I don’t mean to say this in a judicial way, of course.”

“Of course. Well, I think my mom would lash out from time to time. A spanking here and there. The usual.”

“I see. If it is not too intrusive, can you dig any further. Is there anything that stands out, Mr. Riley?”

“Up you get. Rise and shine,” Azaz says while banging my cell door.

I sit up, my head feeling woozy. The four-month-old beard on my face is unkempt and itchy. I’ve gotten used to it, but it’s not uncomfortable because of that. It’s uncomfortable because of how dry it feels to touch. And, how greasy my long hair is doesn’t help.

Once up, my frail figure creaks. I’ve gotten used to that too. There’s a mustiness surrounding me. Living on hardly any food isn’t difficult. Starving is the luxury of still being alive in Azaz’s little world.

A lot’s happened since you’ve last been updated. And when I say a lot, I don’t mean psychically. I’ve been let out of my prisoner’s domain twice, maybe three times. And when I did leave, it was to work. Sometimes, accidents happen. I had to account for accidents by making the corpse useful. Taking pictures of dead bodies for a maniac who’s tortured me mentally for months isn’t what I had in mind for my dream career. Working for the police was my life and I threw it away. If you’re wondering if I’ve lost my drive—I haven’t; I’m still as pissed off as I was

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before. The thought of Azaz getting his grubby hands over Jessica is what got me through some rough patches. It's the one thing I've been thinking about. You can call it an obsession if you'd like to. I catch myself daydreaming. I'm becoming too inclined to the idea of breaking out and throttling Azaz with the piano wire I still have. It's as if this wire is my shining silver sword I'll be wielding to fight off the invasion of beasts and ghouls.

If you're *also* wondering why I'm talking to you in this weird, mumbo-jumbo way, there is a reason. It's because the only entertainment I've been allowed is Azaz's stupid video games. When he's not out, he's slouched down wasting his abysmal life.

What does that make you then? He's currently got his feet kicked up enjoying a cold beer . . . What I'd do for a cold beer right now . . .

You don't even like beer. You liked the hard liquor like a cliché cop.

I know, but it's beer. Ice-cold, sweet and poppy beer. Is that what they say, poppy?

I've noticed I'm talking to myself a lot. And I'm talking to you a lot. Whoever "you" are. Why have I never thought that little thought before? I suppose I may have snapped a little. But that's part and parcel of being Azaz's pet.

Azaz beats a hard level of his game. I don't know what it's called, but it has some bearded gentlemen discussing dragons with him. I've memorized the silly dialogue of the goblins and gallant knights. Every time he slices an orc's chest open, I imagine myself doing it. Pulling a huge sword from my back, planting it into *Frank Dalacmont's* chest. Would you like to see me do

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that too? Well, it probably won't happen. Not yet anyway. I've tried to escape once in here. It didn't go as planned. I believe it's the reason I am under such harsh supervision now. Either that or the way in which Azaz showed me that damned picture of his dead brother. Since that moment, his mood toward me has soured.

Gus comes now and again to linger in my hatred. He laughs and eats in front of me. Sometimes he'll tell that fat bitch Molly to order a pizza, just to spite me.

Even though I insult Mollie, she treats me the most humanely. She'll occasionally bring me a book to read, but with nothing else to do, it'll be gone within a day or two. If I get caught reading it, it'll be snatched up and tossed into my toilet bucket.

Oh! The toilet bucket. Yes, that crazy and wild personification has made another appearance. I'm into his character development. He's gone from one lowlife to another.

Today is a special day because I'll be going out for some reason. I can already imagine what it will be. The last few times, it's been to take pictures of killed gang members. Some turf war has been going on, but it's nothing important. It's not a huge deal between two rival groups of ballers. It'll be an altercation between two members, which results in the fight going a bit too far. One case I saw showed a strangled African American. His intestines were pulled out like pastry filling. He had "NEGRO'S CANT JUMP!" written on his chest in bad punctuation. Azaz didn't like that one bit. Not because of the blatant act of racism. It's because of the mess it had caused and the wrong message it sent to another group. The work was credited to either Gus or Ronnie. If I had to put money on who did it, I'd have to put all

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of the money withdrawn from my account (by Azaz and all the other pricks) on Gus. He usually shows disturbing signs of hating Blacks and Asians.

Azaz unlocks my door and whistles at me. Now I feel like an animal. Even the guy named “dog” gets treated as an equal in some regard. He at least has a food bowl he can dunk his snout into.

I walk toward him in a good mood. The reason I’m cheery is because I’ll be getting a fresh set of clothes to go out in. A malnourished homeless man does tend to attract unwanted attention. I’m curious as to if I’ll be allowed to shave. My facial hair is becoming messy.

I’m getting blasted with water by a powerful hose Azaz is wielding. He’s taking pleasure in seeing my bare behind being power washed raw. Dish soap gets added to the mix by Gregory. He throws it on like a chef adding olive oil to the world’s biggest bolognese. I face the wall, feeling uncomfortable with my nakedness. On the other hand, I’m relieved that I’m finally getting a good clean.

“Get in there dog! You’re gonna need to scrub his ass with your own hands! Get in there!”

Gregory attempts to get closer while laughing. Azaz picks up a broom handle and pushes on the giant man. I sneer at Gregory and back away, covering myself.

“Someone’s embarrassed haha! Don’t worry Ethan, I’ll tell everyone it was cold day today,” Azaz says.

I close my eyes and hum to myself. I hum the same tune I heard at the party with Jessica—it calms me down.

After the power shower, I grab a towel and dry off.

“Can I shave?” I ask Azaz; stupid as ever.

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“You don’t like the beard?”

I really don’t. “It just might look more suspicious. It might be better if I wear something like you, and if I’m looking respectable.”

“I’ve got a beard—well stubble—but I deal with it. It looks good on you man, don’t worry about it!”

At least I tried.

I’m in a car; Ronnie’s driving. He’s been driving for a long time, but most of the ride is kept in silence. Azaz is in the passenger’s seat, so he’s of course the one who makes the most noise. Gregory is next to me, and I’m behind the passenger seat. I’m in the perfect range to choke out Azaz.

I stare out of the window like a kid going to Disney Land, except without the joy. The pretty colors of the traffic lights make me smile. Such a small thing to miss, but you do when you’re put away. I fantasize about my car, wondering where it could be now. It’s probably been scrapped for parts, but I’ve never asked about it. I miss driving and having conversations with normal people. When one of the only people you see regularly is Azaz, everything else becomes interesting. Not seeing Mathew or Rob since they were taken away has become unbearable. I haven’t heard anything from them since. Every time I ask, I get the typical “you don’t need to worry about it” response. The most Azaz offers in conversation is crude sexual talk (I think to taunt me) and business.

If you’re also wondering about that little dive I had with my family, well I’ve forgotten about that man named Jason too. He’s a distant memory in the back of my mind. And, I’ve decided my mother was incredibly sweet to me. She used to lay with me at

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night and read me bedtime stories. She had her occasional bouts of drinking where she'd go overboard. But she was a lovely mother. If she had no flaws, that would be *unrealistic*.

Why do you cry at night then?

And Henry? I'm over it. The conclusion Azaz had drawn gave me some perspective. That, and the fact I have other things to resent now. Henry is dead, Azaz is breathing. Henry may have caused me longer-lasting damage, but as of now, the true villain has done a lot more to ruin my life. I can come back from being hurt, but it will take me a lot more time to get out of this trapped box that is my life. I don't lose hope though. Never. Jessica can't be dead. If she is, I'll burn down the whole place (with me in it), just like Jason's mansion. I'll see it through to the end, with all of my enemies inside this time. I shouldn't be this angry and so full of hate, but right now, my hands are tied.

A bus goes past with a few people inside. My tongue lulls out without my knowledge. I put it back in before anyone sees.

The scene of the murder hasn't been described to me yet, but I already know it will be heinous. The sick thing is I'm excited. Some stimulation will be occupying my rotting brain in under an hour. I could cry with joy.

We run over a bump in the road, there's a rattle in the back. My back feels cold as the connotation of a body being in the trunk shows itself. That, or my camera satchel and tools.

I walk up the steel steps leading to a side door at a multi-complex apartment building. The smell of copper hits my nose as I walk in. I plug my nostrils. The smell is so thick, I can see the faint mist in the air.

A body is down on the floor with his stomach to the ground.

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There's a rim of blood circled around his shaven head. There's also a tattoo on the back of his head. It's a swastika. I can see one reason he might be dead now.

I called Jessica's butterfly tattoo ugly. I even had to turn away and try to avoid it. How much of an idiot I was back then. I'd do anything to just watch Jessica rest that tattoo by me. I didn't know what I was missing. Even if I wasn't sexually attracted to her, maybe I could be . . . Maybe I could be . . .

Would you shut the fuck up and carry on telling whoever you always talk to what the crime scene is? Jeez.

I crouch near the dead man's level. Something catches my attention; a shape moves in the corner. I look up and see Lox's terrifying gaze upon me. That rubbery mask of a face, unmoving and unemotional again.

"Oh, hah! Look, Ethan almost shit himself. Ay Ron, look." Azaz says as he holds his belly, chuckling. Gregory joins in like an alien not understanding human customs. "Fuck off, dog," Gregory gets in return.

"Fuck . . ." I say to myself.

"Yeah I forgot to tell you. This was Lox's handiwork."

"Christ, what happened?" I ask as I pull disposable see-through gloves onto my hands, lifting the victim's head to see the damage.

"Ask him if you want."

I glance at Lox and think better of it when his dead eyes twitch. I now believe Lox is a zombie of some kind. A half-dead thing that is neither human nor monster. He could be the reanimated corpse of Jack the Ripper. What makes him so scary is his lack of emoting. That's right, not emotion—*emoting*. Every movement he makes is janky and robotic. I can't imagine him

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getting angry and hurting another person, even with his scary features. I can't imagine him doing anything, other than breathing and sleeping. And even when he's sleeping, he has his eyelids strained closed, ready to snap open when he hears a faint noise in the night. My mind corrects itself, as I can now no longer imagine him sleeping. Slumber is a human thing, and he is not human. He is a creature not of this world. While Gregory is a broken-down human acting as an extraterrestrial, he will always be a person.

Lox will never be *that*.

I ignore him and continue turning the Nazi's head. The anticipation builds until I see the mutilation in all of its glory. I immediately drop the head and let out a whine that translates to, "I *really* didn't want to see that."

The face has been stabbed repeatedly. Too many times to count. Tiny slits cover the face like pimples. It triggers my trypopohobia, which is why the head has dropped. The face is battered and bruised with the amount of puncturing that occurred. And the—

You don't want me to continue, right? I know we don't usually speak this directly, but I get the feeling you don't want to hear more. I suppose I have the deciding vote. My vote is to stop. It's still making me squirm all over, so I need to focus again.

"Give him his camera, Ron," Azaz says.

Ronnie does as he's told while setting up some lighting. During my previous photoshoot, I mentioned getting that lighting kit. It was given to me the next time I worked. That was the only request that got taken seriously.

After helping with the scene, I ask for silence. Azaz is mocking me with an exaggerated shush behind me.

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I take no notice and begin the procedure. The feeling is like a runner having leg clamps undone. Or an artist having fingers surgically implanted onto his hands.

That's impossible. Impossible.

I'm rusty at first, making silly mistakes. Some photos come out blurry, so I delete them straight away. After a while, I get back into the swing of things. Photographing for George was different. How I would conduct my photoshoots for the police too. I had to be specific on details and scaling. Your goal as a forensic photographer is to assist others in their jobs. Either by convicting the perpetrator or proving innocence. I was also helping myself with a lot of the process, so it was personal to me. But with George, it had to be more focused on the gore.

For Azaz, it's even more different. Azaz wants these to look extra grimy. High saturation to differentiate the gory parts. If I had Photoshop, I could do some editing to give different results. But to think of that luxury would be laughable. I'd be lucky to even get a television, let alone a laptop.

The images come out great. Even when working for someone I want to kill, I make sure I do my absolute best, not accepting sloppy workmanship. I already know the dullard will be happy with whatever I produce. All he cares about is the violence.

I think the media coined the phrase "If it bleeds, it leads." I'm sure this applies.

After taking the first collection of photos, I turn the body over to expose my sick feeling into reality.

I'll spare you the details and fill you in soon. You've seen enough bloodshed.

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After finishing with the work and packing up my stuff, I get déjà vu of the shotgun massacre. The installation of brutality isn't similar because of the gore. It's because of the lead up to the job I had to do.

It occurs to me. Maybe the shotgun attack was Azaz's work.

Curiosity overcomes me and I ask, "Did you ever hear about the shotgun murders down south of Chicago?"

"Huh, me? We've done a few turf wars. Dep—" says Azaz, not seeing my point.

"Three dead. One committed suicide."

"Oh yeah. No, that wasn't us."

"Who was it?"

"George."

"Are you being serious?"

"I think so, hah!" he says. I look at him with strangeness. "Yes, it was him. There's a group he had trouble with for a while. Tried making it look like a suicide. I guess they're my problem now."

"Oh . . . I see." It figures. I can't seem to gather if this changes my opinion on George. I don't want to ask any further, it will lead to trouble, so I instead move on. "Are there any more in the house? I'm done here."

"Nope. Got your work cut out for you, huh?"

"I suppose."

"If you're done, let's get you back," Ronnie says.

Going back, already? It's something I can't handle. I can't be out for such a short amount of time. I need an excuse.

"Surely you guys have got another job to do? I haven't been out in weeks; I need some fresh air."

"You've had it, let's go." Azaz shows me the door.

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“If you want me to continue working, you need to give me an incentive.”

Azaz pushes Ronnie to the side and approaches. Gregory sits on the floor, waiting to go home.

“Did you just threaten me?” Azaz asks as Ronnie looks in adjusted disbelief.

“Look up the definition of ‘threaten’ and you tell me. Of course I didn’t threaten you. I’m locked in a room for months at a time, I’m of no ‘threat’ to you.” I say, bolder than usual.

“Sounded like you’d refuse to work for me if you didn’t get your way. That’s pressurin’ me, bud.”

“Not refusing to work. You can force me as much as you want. All I’m asking for is to be out for the whole day. I’ve been cooped up for a long time, and I’m getting cramps. If I have cramps, I’m not going to be able to produce the best quality of photographs.”

“Those pics looked fine to me.”

“How much longer did it take me? Being away from the job for a long time can make things arduous. Think about it.”

“You don’t tell me what to think or not think about, little man.” Azaz fronts on me again, throwing his pathetic masculinity parade. I cower back to show him he’s intimidated me. (He has in reality.) “Dammit Ethan, why you gotta make me angry? I wanna be nice to you, man. Look, I’ll do you a favor for today, all right?”

“All right.”

“And it might scare ya into shape too. Then you’ll think twice about stayin’ out.”

“You can’t be serious,” Ronnie interrupts. He’s braver than usual to try that little stunt.

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Azaz gives him a death glare and he falls back in line.

“What are we doing then?” I ask.

“You’ll see.”

“What have I missed out here?” I ask while looking at the homeless shamble around the city.

“Not much. There’s still a county-wide manhunt for you. Maybe keepin’ the beard’s a good idea, bud.”

“They won’t find me.”

“That’s cos of us.”

I know. That’s why I want to strangle you all with the piano wire stuffed into my left sock. It’s painful every time I keep it there, but I know I’ll be able to take it and wrap it around each of your windpipes. Just like I did with Jason! Just like I did with him, I’ll kill you all!

Ethan—you didn’t kill Jason. Remember?

“What else?”

“I think a new election is comin’ up. What are you, bud? Democrat? I’ve got you pinned as a Democrat.”

“I don’t have an opinion.”

“Democrat for sure.”

Gregory and Ronnie sit awkwardly in the car while Azaz and I talk. They don’t interject or give their two cents. They just mute themselves. I thank whatever divine energy that gives me the gracious gift of not having Lox in the car with us. He stayed behind for whatever reason (probably to rid the place of evidence) but we left him in the same corner. None of us said anything about him coming along and none of us wanted to ask him, I think.

I want to ask Azaz if he’s killed Jessica. If he’s tortured and

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murdered her. If she called—asking about me. Of course, he'd know she's involved in my life. He probably has her head in a freezer, waiting to present it to me. Or maybe he's waiting for me to try and make my escape again. When I do, he'll take me to her apartment and make me watch as she dies.

"You haven't told me where we're going," I say.

"The ghetto, my friend. You saw the guy with the abuse printed on him a while back? Well, we're dealin' with that mess."

"Is there a car tailing u—" Gregory tries to say.

"You said you wanted to come Ethan, so I'm doing you that favor. Y'know, it's not all kidnappin' 'n' killin' with us. Sometimes we gotta get into the filth."

As we continue to ride, I notice everyone is fiddling with their hands. Gregory is sitting next to me in the back still. His fingers are wriggling around like worms, touching each other. Ronnie is still in the driver's seat. He's tapping the steering wheel and shifting anxiously. I instinctively tap the car door handle in a numerous pattern. I fiddle with my green coat and play with all the little buttons and zippers.

"*Ohh*, Mathew had some taste for sure. I give this a listen when I'm feelin' down," Azaz says as he plugs a phone into the AUX. Music begins to play through the speakers. It's a song I haven't heard in years.

"Why can't we be friends? Why can't we be friends? Why can't we be friends? Why can't we be friends?"

We arrive at the destination as the sun sets overhead. Every time something bad happens, the sun is setting. I know that's a coincidence. Don't worry, I'm not going to start getting into star

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signs any time soon. But, it's a creepy fact that makes me sweat.

"Here we are kiddies. Ethan, you'll stay by the car with Gregory. You ain't sittin' inside. You haven't earned that kinda trust yet."

"Okay."

The place is under a bridge. It's a den for filthy fucks. All of the members of this disorganized crew are menacing and Fugly with a capital *F*.

Azaz walks in the dry earth. It's *so* dry, it looks like sand at this point. The vegetation growing is avoided by the bridge. Grass does seem to be sprouting where the clouded-over sun is shining.

The head honcho (who's acting tough to our group) is a mutant with inked teardrops covering his cheeks. They suit him.

"Louis! My man!" Azaz says in a (somehow) non-patronizing way.

Nice name for him.

If there's one thing I admire about Azaz, it's that he doesn't stoop to anyone. Not any one human I've met yet, anyway. Just like how I can't imagine Lox eating and sleeping—I can't imagine Azaz bending the knee to any schmuck at all. It seems unnatural in the order of the universe.

"Don't, man. Just don't," Louis says with crossed arms.

"Oh, c'mon buddy, we all knew somethin' like this was gonna happen. My guys have been gettin' eyeballed by your group since day one."

"He don't have no right man. That fuck needs to learn respect," he says grammatically nonsensically. "Why ain't that nigga down here? He fuckin' left his balls behind?" Louis continues to rape *The English Dictionary* with his metaphorical cock

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of abrasive language.

“Now hold on Louis, hold on. Lox stayed behind for his own reasons. If you wanna go talk to him, I suggest you learn sign language. The rumor is he lost his tongue in Afghanistan.”

“Whatever, man. Fuckin’ bullshit—is what all this shit is. Blood was spilled on our turf, Azaz. What the fuck you gonna do ’bout it?”

“What do you want? Would it make you feel better if I gave you a back rub? Auntie Norma visitin’ this month?”

“Nigga don’t fuckin’ test me!” Louis pulls out his piece that’s been sitting in his underwear. Azaz doesn’t even flinch.

“Woah, let’s not get angsty. We can come to an arrangement, I’m sure. How’s about you get one of our boys to come work for you. We knew this would happen. We’ve been goin’ through a little feud, so let’s settle this.”

The absurdity of this situation dawns on me. Some black guy who sounds like a stereotypical gangster. A meatball-chewing motherfucker. Two caricatures having an argument.

“Just cos you bunch of fuckin’ crackers deal with your weird-ass shit sellin’ folk, it don’t mean we want that. Bunch of fuckin’ freaks is what I say.” Louis kicks the dirt in a meek gesture of annoyance.

Oh, and that slight, teensy, little bit of information in Azaz’s sentence makes me nervous. Am I about to be sold to some whack jobs in exchange for murder?

“Don’t think of it like that,” Azaz says. “Think of it as a barter of goods. This guy’s a hard worker. He’s a tad weird, but he’ll get shit done.”

My heart beats faster as the familiar sweat forms on my brow.

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“Now watchu mean, huh? Who?”

Azaz turns around—slow as a snail. He’s grinning as he turns and I believe him to be looking at me.

“Gregory!” Azaz shouts, calling him by his real name. This must be serious. Gregory turns pale; a little whinny comes from his voice box. Even Ronnie looks shocked beside Azaz, and he wasn’t even spoken about. “Get our goods from the trunk.”

The color returns to Gregory’s face as he takes on that same grin. He travels to the back of the car and pops it open.

Out stumbles Mathew. He’s disturbingly skinny. Skinnier than I am by a mile. He shakes with his skull spinning like a bobblehead. I watch in disbelief as the boy I once knew has changed into a hideous sight for sore eyes. The ribcage is sticking out. It’s hanging over his abdomen. A large sutured-up scar is just about visible under his baggy sack pants.

He has a bushy beard like me. It’s gone ginger. I always used to hear George telling him to look smart and presentable when at work with colleagues. “If you don’t look respectable, you won’t be respected, Matty,” he used to say. He looks paler and older—much older. I call him a boy out of habit, but he looks nothing like one now. He looks older than any person standing around him. When he looks at me, he gives me a pained expression that tells me he’s done. He’s hit the end of his rope and he’s given up. I’d never blame him for it, and I still don’t.

“Dog, put him with his playmate for a moment.”

“Yes, s-sir!”

“Now c’mere dog. I want you to vouch for him. You’ve taken care of him for the longest, so you come and tell Louis what he has to be offered. Don’t worry, they won’t run. I’ll keep my eye on ’em.”

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Gregory leaves Mathew with me; I believe it's another one of his personal japes toward me. He wants me to have this opportunity. A chance to reminisce before the human interaction is taken away from me again.

"Ethan," Mathew says in a quiet voice.

"Mathew. They didn't look after you so well, did they?"

He makes a sound that seems like a laugh, but I can't tell. "I told you not to trust Azaz."

I laugh as well. "I never got a chance to. We all got caught by surprise. But . . ."

"I told you . . ." he says again, not taking what I said into account.

He did tell me. He warned me and I didn't take it seriously enough. I was the one who ruined everything. This young guy in front of me was my responsibility. I *need* to apologize.

"Ethan, you need to run. This is . . . We're not—"

"Mathew! C'mere, now!" Azaz says. "We're done decidin'. They're gonna take you to your forever home, hah!"

Gregory runs fast and grabs hold of the struggling Mathew.

"I—" is all I mutter before he is taken.

A look of urgency is passed between me and him as he is pulled away. As he gets dragged off, he stumbles down and is retrieved back up by Gregory, who tosses him over his giant shoulder. Mathew shouts as loud as he can, which amounts to a wheezing cry. There's nothing I can do for the poor guy, so I watch as he's whisked away to his fate.

The opposite gang gets their newly acquainted slave thrown to their feet. A few of them pat each other, bewildered, but amused by their future accomplice. Or whatever other nefarious plans they have in store.

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“Have fun. He’s all yours. Take this as a token of peace.”

“Yeah whatever,” Louis says.

As they drag Mathew away, I can tell something isn’t right. It comes to me when Azaz stares off into the distance. He makes a hand signal. It is confirmed there. He puts two fingers forward with a go-ahead maneuver while the gang is preoccupied.

Louis and his group begin to become confused when they look back at the wailing Mathew. The noise has become less frantic, more agonized now. Mathew is holding his belly; I know what is to come.

A shout is carried across under the bridge. It sounds something like, “Oh fuck!”

A train goes over the tracks above. As the ruckus of the train fills the air, the scrambling mass moves in unison. Now, I brace for the incoming insanity that I predict will come. The train passes and sound resumes.

The explosion doesn’t look real—it looks like some kind of special effect in a movie. I don’t even think Azaz or Gregory expected it to send such a huge shockwave. The shuddering ground beneath makes me topple over. I have to hold on to the car bonnet so I don’t eat the dust. The fumes coming from the explosion are awesome to behold. Big, billowing mounds of smoke disperses into the darkening sky. The last thing I recently saw of Mathew was a glowing cylinder splitting him in half. The flames engulfed him shortly after.

Louis’s group is on fire and scrambling to their feet. Some of them are in bits, strewn out across the scenery in pieces. Louis himself is a soldering semi-liquid lump of burning matter. One leg is pointing to the sky and an arm is laying placidly away from the rest of everything. He seemed tough, but no matter what,

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Azaz needs to always come out on top every time. I say this as if he's won against some of the best. The truth of it is, he gives off that winning vibe. He does it without overcoming a certain amount of challenges in my presence.

While Azaz and Gregory are knocked to the floor by the explosion, I don't even think about making an escape attempt. I'm more focused on letting myself not throw up from a new type of vertigo I've never felt before. A ringing in my ears persists. Bullets whiz above me, so I duck down low. I'm close to the floor. Both of my captors are getting weaponry out of their own; firing back on the enemy. It's an act of extreme aggression. A gunfight with no holds barred. With most of the African American gang wiped out, it doesn't look like there are more than six. Still overpowering odds with what I'm up against: a man in need of psychiatric help, an underpowered prisoner, and a half-man/half-dog.

I let out a shout. It's a shout of desperation. I need to know what is happening, as all I can see are sliding legs and yellow flashes. I spot an additional shooter from high up, toward the gang's side. This makes me even more reluctant to see Azaz coming out alive. But, my expectations are once again spurned. A bullet flies from that direction and hits one of the gangbangers in the head.

I know who the shooter is, as a thought introduces itself when I figure it out.

You guys are fucked.

Of course, it will be Lox. I caught onto Gregory's observation in the car, but I did it impassively, not thinking about it until now. Azaz wouldn't come here without a plan. It's a stupid, suicidal plan, but that's how the man is. And even then, he brings

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a plan B. That plan B is Lox (*Mr. No Surname*) and his mighty sniper rifle. There's no other gun in the world that could cause a braincase to project its contents from a good two hundred yards away. I'm just glad I know what side I'm pretending to be on.

More shots are passed between groups. The shots are getting shared more than two horny twenty-year-olds at a nightclub. I smile at my witticism in between the chaos.

A leg is shot out ahead. I know it's either Gregory or Azaz. It's going to be Gregory; I already know it.

Smoke and dust cover me. Now is the time to run, but I can't do it. I can't face the punishment again.

As I gather myself, I notice something that I never have before. There's a silver bull on the front of Azaz's car. I can't take my eyes from it. But, as I carry on staring, it gives me enough retributive passion to make a decision. I don't run because I need to escape; I run because I am afraid my life will be taken from me before I can kill.

I need a scrambled-together plan to anticipate the events to come forth. There's one thing I know for a certainty: I don't want to escape captivity yet. However, this momentary freedom will assist me in my future escape attempt/attempts.

I run and I don't look back. The gunfight continues and I'm surprised to hear no police or ambulance sirens. I remember where I am.

I hop a few fences, moving toward shadier areas (and by shadier, I don't mean it's away from sunlight).

I look like a hoodlum ready to cause trouble at the drop of a hat. Meanwhile, the neighborhood looks ready to kill a trespassing bum. People from all over watch me, looking for an incentive to gun me down. I ignore them and carry on. Up ahead,

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I can see an adjoining railroad that leads to some underground tunnels. I decide to head inside and seek shelter. The killing over at the underpass won't stop anytime soon. I'm sure there's backup to deal with and complications with law enforcement. I'm not running away (not yet anyway) but I'm plotting.

My worst nightmares are realized as a swarm of homeless individuals surround me. I've walked right into a nest of them.

*You're homeless too, you know? You shouldn't be so hasty.
Pile of shit. Lost your home, lost your life, lost your balls.
Soon I'll be back. I need to be.*

A few of the homeless try to speak to me, but I don't feel like chatting with them. The events preceding my new location haven't put me in the best frame of mind. So, I sit down for a moment and make sure no one tries to steal my last remaining object stored near my ankle.

I rest for a minute. That minute turns into fifteen minutes. Those fifteen minutes turn into an hour. I don't want to go back outside. I don't want to go back to the warehouse. I need to get myself ready in some way—ready to attack back after all this time of being deprived of my life.

The sound of pebbles shifting sounds in the darkness, closer to where I came in. I stand up, frightened Azaz has already found me. It's too quick, I can't go back—not yet! I need time to rest, then to think! It's not Azaz who approaches me.

“Hello there,” an elderly woman says to me. She looks slim and pretty for an older person. The type of woman you'd visualize when thinking of a foxy, mature thing who'd be raunchy due to a lack of insecurity. Her silver hair flows down her pale collarbone in straight threads. Her black, slender suit gives her an air of authority. FBI perhaps?

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“Who are you?”

“FBI. Agent Raynes, at your disposal.”

The homeless group around me lurks back. They recede into some unknown passage within the tunnel.

“Do you have food?” I ask, to give the appearance of being not who I appear to be. The FBI’s looking for me, there’s no doubt about that. Agent Raynes here is dubious at best.

“Ethan. Ethan Riley. You’re on the most wanted list.”

I’m screwed. I need to run—now.

Stay, let her take you into custody. You’ll at least be clean and showered. You won’t get to personally take down Azaz, but it’s a fair trade-off.

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Ethan, it’s okay. I’m . . . I’m not actually an agent anymore, I’ll admit. It makes me sound more official though, doesn’t it.” She laughs a weary laugh. “I know you. I’ve been watching you for a while.”

“Ashley?” I ask, understanding now.

“Yes. You know me as well?”

“You were there too. In the woods, with Gregory and George. You were the third that he mentioned.”

“I was. I’m assuming that he told you the whole thing, about how we worked together. That was a while ago now.”

“I was there that night. He didn’t just tell me; I was there. I know about the murder and what happened to George after. But not you, I don’t know what happened to you.”

“Come outside. We’ll talk.”

“No! He’s out there.”

“He’s not looking for you. Not yet.”

There’s nothing to lose. Not if Ashley is who she says she

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is. The clever thing to do would be to question what happened that night in the woods, but I'm not how I was. I don't have the tactical thinking left in me. I need help, but I can't admit it.

"Sure," I say.

It's now pure night. More time has passed than I would have imagined down in the tunnel. Ashley and I sit down at a bench. She has a cool composure, while I'm a twitchy nervous wreck. I'm most likely experiencing mild shell shock.

"You don't look great, Ethan, I'll admit. A big difference from when I saw you a month or two ago. But even then, go back four or five, and you were a different man."

"I've been busy dying," I say, thinking I sound introspective.

"Oh c'mon, don't talk in riddles. I've seen your files. I shouldn't really have looked, but I looked. I have many benefits within the bureau. Not many of those benefits have lasted, but I was liked around the office. But, again, that was a long time ago."

"And why are you here? I thought you'd be taking me in."

"No, no. I wouldn't be sat down with you now if that were the case. Police would be surrounding us.

"No, I'm here because I need to *help you*. I've been studying George's organization for a while. You've all been busy. But that's changed, and it's quite unsettling how everything's gone downhill. Just tell me something real quick. George is dead?" Even though Ashley asks the question, it sounds more like a fact. A fact she needs to be confirmed to move on.

"Yes."

"Right. I did have a hunch." A tear shines on Ashley's cheek. She wipes it away lightning-fast. There is some history

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here I am not privy to. “How’d he do it?”

You don’t want to know.

“I don’t want to say.”

“I . . . I need to know.”

“I understand.” My nerves calm with the soothing voice in my ear. “He was beaten to death. Hit in the head with a metal baseball bat. He was then dismembered and put into a garbage can around the warehouse at Proxton Road. The one on the Molten Estate,” I say, realizing how disgusting the sentence is.

“Figures.” Ashley turns away. It brings me no pleasure in telling her the details of George’s death.

“He needs to be stopped,” I say.

When I said, “He needs to be stopped.” I actually meant, “You need to stop him.” But I don’t say that. Both Ashley and I know who I’m mentioning, but we don’t say his name. It sounds wrong. Like a word you don’t use anymore. Not in Ashley’s presence, anyway.

“He does, and he will. I don’t really have jurisdiction now. I’m retired, but I can still call in a few favors.”

“You could call me in. You don’t need to be an agent to do that.”

“Why would I call you in?”

“Because . . .” They still don’t know I killed Finn. But the illegal distribution of classified evidence must be public knowledge.”

Oh yeah, you also framed that store clerk and probably made him suicidal. You feel like that whole shit was a work of art now?

Of course not. Finn and (mostly, by the sounds of things) Ronnie are scum, but I know my wrongdoings. Just leave it

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alone.

“Because I murdered someone,” I continue. “I murdered a man in cold blood, and I killed another man too.”

“I’ve read your case, as I said. But the Finn incident is a surprise then, actually. I didn’t know who killed him, but my first guess was one of George’s. You covered it well.”

“I need to go into a cell then, if that’s what it takes.” I don’t even know myself, or if the words I’m saying are sincere. They feel sincere, but it all comes out like an act.

“Finn worked in the human-trafficking racket, same as Azaz, same as Ronnie. I know all about those pieces of shit. I say they can rot in Hell. I’m not a God-fearing woman, but I know where they belong. Their personal lives might be clean, but their occupations drown them in grime. They’re dirty from head to toe,” Ashley says as she reaches in her suit pocket. She pulls out a pack of Buck Fire. I get nostalgic at the sight of the red-tipped sticks. That poorly rendered fireplace burning the packaging; making the whole thing look cheap. She knocks one out, lights up. She does it in an eerily similar way to George.

She makes smoking look *cool*.

“We’re all bad. We all have demons,” I say.

“George’s words of wisdom, are they? Sure sounds like it. If he means ‘we’re all bad’ in the sense of writing coherent poetry, then he may be right. I mean, he *is* right in some moronic way. I mean, if you look at me, I could come across as a sweet old lady. A sweet old lady who barely looks a day over forty, heh.

“But the point I’m trying to make is upon first glance, I might seem like a precious little button, but I have a past I’d prefer not many to know.

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“Listen, don’t take any of his advice. It might not be respectful to speak ill of the dead, but he always did bite off more than he could chew.”

“Oh well, doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

I enjoy the scenery, listening to the overbearing sirens of the late-coming public services. “I’m going to kill them,” I say.

Ashley looks at me as I watch the smoke rise in the distance evermore. “How so, Mr. Ethan Riley?”

“I don’t know. I just will. I’m *lucky*.” I don’t even believe the bullshit I’m spewing. But it’s the only thing I can think to say.

“Maybe. Luck runs out. It did for George anyway, and he was a proficient dodger of responsibility.” *And I’m the dodger of bullets*. “Ah, here they are. Finally.”

A white, unmarked van settles across the street. Out pops Dante. He looks exactly how he did before his disappearance: unkempt hair, handsome features, dark clothing with gloves on too.

He encloses on our position with a spring in his step. He says, “Well if it isn’t Ethan, fancy seeing you here, huh.”

“What a coincidence,” I say, tired.

“Dante is under my protection,” Ashley says, “and he will stay in it for just a bit longer. Unfortunately, I cannot do you that service, Ethan.”

“Service?” Dante puts a hand on his rear. “I thought you liked the look of my ass in these jeans. You were helping out the masterpiece in not being kicked.” Dante gives a pose by jutting out his behind farther while pursing his lips. I may have laughed a while ago, but I can’t find it in me now.

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“Shut the fuck up, Dante. Isn’t Eleanor coming out?”

“I don’t think she wants any R ’n’ R with Ethan. He did kinda kill her boyfriend.”

My heart is painfully *crunched* in an iron vice.

“Get her here,” I say.

“She probably won’t come, but I’ll try. Just like with most women.” Dante winks at Ashley.

She rolls her eyes, hiding a smirk. “Dumb-ass.”

“Sorry I can’t do more for you, Ethan, but I’m getting outta town when I can. Move state and try somewhere else. But, maybe in another life, yeah?”

“Wait, you’re not going to help?” I plead in desperation as he takes a few steps back toward the van. There’s a childlike pitch within my voice. It isn’t flattering.

“Me? Who do you take me for? George is most likely dead,” Dante says. Ashley gives him a look that confirms his suspicions. “Okay, he is dead. So I’m out. I wasn’t working for anyone else when I accepted the gig. I’m just some extra muscle, man. Ellie for sure won’t help you. And me, I’m just choosing not to. It’s nothing personal, but we’re not those types of people. You already knew that. Would you come running to me, if you were in my shoes? The answer would be *no* if you were smart. And you’re smarter than me. So use your brains, man. None of us were ever the heroic types, and we were never really friends either, let’s just be real.”

I want to argue, but I know it’ll be another pathetic plea against a brick wall.

“Yeah. Nice seeing you, Dante.”

“You too. Don’t get in any trouble, but if you do, take that fucker Azaz down with you. He sounds like an asshole.”

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And just like that, Dante is gone again. It looks like I'll get to see most of the gang on my day of freedom. The van doors close behind Dante, shakes a little, and out comes Ellie. Her stance shows the opposite spring Dante so firmly had. She's marching toward me with hatred in her stride.

"Ellie, don't shout. You don't have long to talk to Ethan. Say what you're going to say, but do it in a level manner," Ashley says.

"Fucking asshole," she says. "I would never help you out of anything."

"Stop. I'm not looking for help," I say.

"Then what do you want me for, huh?"

What *do* I want her for? The answer isn't simple, as I haven't planned at all in seeing her ever again. There was a time where I wanted to get in her face and call Alex and Ellie betrayers. That might come across as hypocritical with my previous involvement with the police.

Now, I can't think of much to say, other than an apology. Not for killing Alex (he still broke trust and plotted a mutiny against a strong leader) but for taking someone away from Ellie. It's not that I even respect Ellie either, she's just as bad, but a man needs to have standards if he's to judge others. I failed to see that before, but I see it now. I *was* wrong, and I have *been* wrong for a long time.

When I kill Azaz, Ronnie, Gregory, Gus, maybe even Lox, I will need to try and do it unemotionally. They're guilty of disgusting actions, and they will die. Alex and Ellie were a part of a conspiracy I was blinded by hate to see. I didn't want to listen, and for that, I killed one of them. The only thing left to do is to give the closure that is needed, even if it won't give *me* any.

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“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Is that all you have? He was being threatened to do the shit that he did and you knew it.”

“I did. I’ve been punished for it. There’s more to come.”

Ellie looks me over and notices for the first time how weak I look.

“Ethan has been in captivity for a few months now. George is dead and Azaz has taken over operations,” Ashley says.

“Mathew’s dead as well,” I add.

“Jesus. I was getting to him later . . .”

“I don’t give a shit about George!” Ellie says over us. “I don’t give a shit about Mathew either. I didn’t work with you, so I don’t care about all that bullshit. I didn’t expect it either, so when George told me that Alex was dead, I fucking *wished* that he died that day! Looks like I got it, but that won’t bring anyone back alive now, will it?”

“No,” I say.

“Well there we go then. Fuck off Ethan, you fucked-up psycho. I hope Azaz finishes you off next.” Ellie storms away and back into the van.

Not the kind of response I was hoping for, but it’s still some kind of finisher for both of us.

“I didn’t bring them here to help you, Ethan. Or to trash-talk you either. I brought them here so you could gain some perspective. That and because I can’t actually leave them until I can get their new identities.” She shrugs. “Those are some of the perks I was talking about.”

“It was good to see them. I feel like something has concluded here.”

“That’s good. Y’know, after all that shit happened in the

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woods, when Frank grew up, he was a good kid. We lied about his brother, but when he found out, it was like something changed in him. He was always a troubled child—part of the reason him and Azazel found us. But when he got nasty, it was like it was there in his DNA all along, and we triggered it. I could tell you his background. It might make you think twice, though.”

“Don’t tell me then.”

“I think that’s the smart thing to do. But here, let me help in some small way, for my peace of mind. I’ll know the outcome of this shit, but I really do pray it assists you against him.”

Ashley pulls out a syringe. It’s full of a yellowish liquid—inside a plastic box. I instantly know what it is. I’ve seen it enough times to know.

“Heroin. Enough to kill a fucking horse. Don’t ask me how I got it, and don’t ask why I have it. Let’s just say Frank hurt someone I knew in a similar way, and it’s what drove me away even more. You don’t have to give it to him, but I always kept it. Just in case, y’know?” Ashley says.

“I’ll use it in whatever way I can. I know what I’m going to do.”

“What *are* you going to do?”

“First, I’m going back to Azaz.”

“It doesn’t sound like a good plan already.”

“If there’s something I know about Azaz, it’s that he doesn’t like to be shown up. You know, dominated mentally. Cor—” I sigh, dropping my pathetic detective persona. “Does that sound like him?”

“You could say that. He’s always needed to be the biggest guy in the room. Dick measuring competitions and all that.”

“Well, I’ll use that against him. That’s the only way.”

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“Well I’d wish you good luck, but you already have it apparently. I’d give you Frank’s home address too, but I don’t know it. He’s staying in a fancy hotel, but I have no idea what room he stays in. Gregory would know; I’ve done surveillance; they meet there. It’s the big Tarrow Hotel, a few miles from here—can’t miss it. I’ll still be watching, but I can’t get involved. I’m too old to be fighting a damned war I lost decades ago. I have a family that I don’t want to leave. I’m just glad I finally got to meet you . . . and I’m sorry it wasn’t sooner. If everything goes wrong, then as Dante said, ‘Take that fucker Azaz down with you.’ ”

“I will. Thank you.”

I turn my back to Ashley as she heads back into the passenger’s seat of the van. The driver is unidentifiable to me, but I assume he’s an old partner or something.

My next steps will be calculated, no matter what happens. I must plan so far ahead that whatever curveballs are thrown my way are to be dodged. Dodged like those bullets I so skillfully avoid. There are a few things I need to do before returning to my worst enemy. A deranged man who lacks empathy and controls everyone.

Kind of like you, you sanctimonious asshole.

Yeah, like me. Once this is over, I’ll be better. I will—I’ll do better. But there still remains a purpose for my selfishness.

I get a strong urge to find Jessica, but I know that’s reckless. If Azaz was cunning, he’d keep her house on watch and wait for me to turn up if I ever went missing. Who knows, he might not know I’m even close to her at all.

The plan is what I need to follow. The plan is gospel. I repeat it in my head until it’s ingrained into my very nature.

CHAPTER NINE

WILD ANIMALS

"No, nothing stands out."

"I see."

"I'm sorry. I am, doctor."

"That is quite all right. Patients tend to find memorizing certain events difficult. I'm not saying that you were abused, Mr. Riley. What I am saying, is that gaps in memory can lead to troublesome results. However, this can also just be a completely normal instance."

"I understand," Mr. Riley says, as he stops fidgeting in his chair.

"We don't have much longer left. I would just like to refer back to my previous question I posed earlier on."

"Yes, doctor?"

"Do you think that your own state of mind can alter for your own benefit?"

I walk the streets, my body aching but replenished; a feeling of awareness I previously lacked. The perspective given to me by Ashley has helped. I think it's due to the plain fact I didn't have a plan before. Seeing Dante and Ellie's fate realized was revealing. Seeing Ashley and getting some answers as to who she is exactly put parts of missing information to rest. A few missing puzzle pieces lost down the back of a couch cushion. Every time you look at the jigsaw box caked in dust. The one resting where it has rested for years, you become complaisant in letting that puzzle go. For me, I've never been able to let something go so easily. Whether it be a mystery as old as I've been alive, or something new, I can never just *forget* a vital clue in a wider secret. Except for certain secrets that should remain hidden. But, with a good mystery—it's an uninvited block of unsolved emptiness. A void in my head that needs to be filled with that answer so it can shrink back to how it was.

Ashley, George, and Gregory were all hunted when they were complicit in the murder of Azazel Dalacmont. For that, Frank never forgave them and he instead turned to a rebellion against those who took him in.

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George resisted, but in the end, he paid for that. Ashley evaded. She remained somewhat whole in her wellness. There is still an unsolved mystery about the person Azaz hurt. That gap will have to remain unfilled for the time being, but it's safe to assume it was a family member of Ashley. I might be able to answer the questions still unfastened in my conscious, but not yet. Gregory submitted, left his old way of life to relent to the way of his new master. He must die out of sympathy. I don't know enough about him to gain that sympathy. For all I know, he may be the worst of the lot. But he is broken and needs to be put down like the wild dog he seems to have become. Killing everyone won't be easy, but I have killed before and I can do it again. I will not make the same mistakes as last time by making this a pleasure. Whether I feel enjoyment from the acts of murder is not up to me. I cannot control this, but I will make sure to act professionally in my crusade. There is no one else that can be given the choice of whether the group shall live or die. The closest I can get to a consenting approval is from Ashley. That's good enough for me.

When the end of the large street comes, the sun is rising with misty smoke still lingering in the air. I take a detour to my destination and slip into a side entrance to a closed-down gift shop. The doorway is blanketed in shade, so I blend in with the graying backdrop.

I take out my *own* gift given to me by Ashley. The plastic case is thin and rectangular. It's smaller than I expected, so I slip it into my sock, uncomfortable sitting next to my other weapon. It sticks out like a sore thumb, so I remove it and search for another place to store it. Unfortunately, there is nowhere that will

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work. I slam my fist on the boarded-up window and slip it back into my pocket. I continue my journey.

The underpass looks like another world in the day. The police tape blocks my entry (not that I would ever enter again). Police cruisers bar onlookers from getting a taste of death for today.

I watch from a distance, not wanting to blow my cover by snooping where I don't belong.

A large black ditch is present in the middle of the scene. It looks like an asteroid hit the ground hard, killing a few as it did. The bodies are already stored in body bags. They've been blissfully put away into the backs of ambulances. I wonder if Mathew is in one of those. It's doubtful, considering his slim figure was ripped in two and eviscerated by a mini nuclear blast.

"Everybody, back up! I won't tell you again," the crowd controller says, putting his hands in front to warn the mob.

I search for the body of Gregory. I don't bother looking for Azaz's body. I know the outcome. All the bodies are stored and there are no telltale signs of Gregory being killed.

The hill in which Lox sniped from a distance shows no factual evidence of a death either. I don't know what to expect, so there's not much I can determine from my analysis.

Now that an image has been created for me, the next steps are still fuzzy. The only thing I can do is go back to the warehouse. I have a start to my assignment lined up. It will likely get me killed, but I'm out of options—all options. Dante, Ellie, and Ashley are unwilling to help in a way that would excuse me from doing any work. But that's good, as I need to do all of this with my bare hands. I'm not getting myself arrested and I'm not calling for help here. I've had enough help. It's more than I deserve.

Deserve death.

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I walk and I walk. After I'm too tired to carry on, I walk some more. My directional skills have always been solid, so I manage my way around Chicago. Los Angeles was a different beast entirely, with everything looking similar. A plastic place with plastic people. The whole state of Illinois is nothing special either, with it lacking an identity to call its own. I'm sure any other place in the United States would also be the same if I traveled much. But traveling is something for a free man. I might have said trips and vacations are a pointless activity for people. Men and women who don't have enough fulfillment in their lives. But right now, the idea of a getaway to some faraway place sounds like something unattainably amazing. And we all know the unattainable drives our desire to *try*. It might be the reason Azaz seeks to control. He had an unattainable childhood and early adulthood, so he attempts to ruin other people's lives. A sick and devilish way of being an individual, that's for sure.

A lengthy route of passing various landmarks ensues. They remind me of the past few months.

I make it to the sacred warehouse. My prison—my home.

Marcel is on guard duty. Even though he's opposing, he doesn't reach the same type of nerve-racking imposition Azaz amounts. But both of them are killable. I always have to remind myself of that fact. The important question is known: Does Marcel deserve to die? It doesn't have an easy answer, but I need to prepare for everything. My main goal is to get into the warehouse and plant the weapon in my cell for later use. Marcel is not a target for me, but if he stands in my way, I will destroy him. I need Azaz to think he has the upper hand—that he is in control once again. Marcel being on the door indicates most of everyone is home. Gus's car is on the lot, which I recognize from previous

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encounters. Azaz's vehicle I was in not too long ago is also parked up, so this could get messy. Fortunately for me, I know the warehouse inside and out. There is one exit, but there is a way inside around the back. Only I know of it and only I will use it.

I get close to the ground and begin to crouch-walk. I hide behind barricades and trash cans. It's my way of shielding myself from the watchful eye of Marcel.

Once I sneak past, I shuffle toward the secret entrance. I keep my ear adjusted to noises and voices. I don't hear any, so I undo a panel from the wall and duck under the exposed opening. This leads to the underneath of the building. Flooring is suspended up by wooden beams. I feel the cleanliness I once felt this morning vacate. It makes me sick.

Voices sound down the corridor. Azaz and Gregory are discussing last night's mishap.

"S-s-sir, a-again, I'm s-s-s-so sor-r-ry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it, dog. Your ma get fucked in the pound and you came out of the litter? Fuckin' bitch," Azaz says.

So, Gregory is alive and Azaz is pissed. Nothing seems to be lost, so that doesn't make me happy.

"P-p-please, I didn't k-know he'd r-r-run."

"You fucked up on that and you fucked up on the bomb. Fuckin' dumb piece of sh"—Azaz doesn't get to finish his sentence before a loud *thwacking* sound echoes.

I stick my head around the corner and watch. Gregory is keeled over with his hands defending his precious ribs.

Didn't care about Mathew's fucking ribs though, did you? You turned them into charred barbecue.

"Please!" Gregory says, winded. "It w-w-was t-t-the s-

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sup . . . supplier. I . . . s-s-said, they gave us the wr-wr-wrong a-amount! Please, s-s-sir!”

Another punch sends him to the floor.

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay them a visit too. I’m enjoyin’ this.”

Gregory wobbles back up on his feet, bending his back down so he appears smaller. I notice his left leg is staggering much more than the right. There’s a bandage wrapped around a wound. It’s a bullet mark, just like I thought. It makes him look even more like a crippled beast kept in chains.

“Now tell me again—what you saw,” Azaz says, calmly.

“I s-saw him ru-run. We all got knocked down, and he got up and ran aw-away. We were f-f-f-fighting back and then it a-all went v-very quick. I didn’t know L-L-Lo-Lox was gonna be g-g-giving us b-backup.”

“You blamin’ me now, huh? You sayin’ I didn’t give you enough information? And now, because of that, I’ve lost some skinny prick who worked on the inside too. Is that what you’re sayin’?” Gregory looks baffled and cannot talk. “Just stop givin’ me that fuckin’ look, dog. Tell me which way he went. Sortin’ the fuckin’ mess out with Louis and the rest was bad enough—now I have to go play hide ’n’ seek.”

“I d-don’t k-know, s-s-sir. I’m s-s-sorry.”

“Fuckin’ pathetic. I’ll find him myself. You stay behind and look out.”

“L-l-look out for what, sir?”

“Him comin’ back. He’ll *fuckin’* come back. Already know it. He’s a weak, spineless fuck. Like you, right?”

I’ll tear out your spine and shove it down your throat.

Stop. Stop getting emotional.

“Yes, sir.”

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“Now, if you, a weak, spineless fuck got lost out there, what would you do, huh?”

“I’d c-c-come b-back, sir.”

“Well ding, ding, ding! There you are. Your fuckin’ answer is presented to you.” Azaz barges past Gregory, slamming him to the wall. His head even hits it as he is pushed back. He looks powerless, degraded, and emasculated.

As Gregory drags his feet away from the corridor, I make my move. My room is not far away, so I go; hearing Azaz start up his car and drive off.

My room is as it was before. The smell hits me, as I was used to the fresh air. Not anymore. My nostrils are filled with the putrid stench again. The door is locked, but my hands reach around a bar and I can feel the other side. I pull the container of heroin from my pocket, jamming it through the bars. Once through, I direct my hand to the left side of the door, keeping it tight up against the wall. I drop it and it makes a quiet *tap* on the floor. With my objective complete, I turn around and head back to the outside.

Molly turns the corner; she’s speaking with Gus.

“You’ll be okay, sweetie,” she says.

“Well, if he doesn’t find him, then I might not be. But Ronnie’s on watch if he does come back. I just don’t think Azaz trusts me, y’know? Not saying I wanna go keep watch over that cocksucker, but sometimes I feel useless, man.”

“We all have our jobs. Ethan’s been a good boy—no need to get your feathers ruffled. You take it too personally, sweetie.”

“Don’t fuckin say that t—Yeah, maybe I do fly off the handle. It’s just Ethan, man. He really gets under my skin, the fuckin faggot. Ever since I started working for Azaz, he’s been on

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my fucking case. Hope that bomb they keep talking about carved his fucking head open. That shit sounded pretty insane though, right? Never knew Mathew was in their car when they left.”

“Azaz is quite secretive, sweetie. He makes sure he doesn’t show his cards off. Always managed to have one up his sleeve.” Molly’s voice trails away as they both round the corner.

Molly’s fate is undecided, but I’ll treat her like Marcel.

I don’t take any longer to think. I escape while I can, climbing back through the way I came in.

“It’s me. I’m unarmed!” I say to Marcel.

The bodyguard leaps to my side and sweeps my legs from under me, knocking me to the floor. I grunt but don’t feel any pain left in me.

Marcel searches me, putting his hands in my pockets. He touches every crevice of me. He does it with a particular disgust. And *I also* bear it with an even higher disgust.

“Decided to show up, huh. As soon as he gets back, you’re fucked,” he says in my ear.

At least his breath doesn’t reek. He is annoying though; you should kill him when you get the chance.

He carries me away like a drunken uncle at a wedding. Well, it’s rougher than that, so I’d say the distant cousin’s rowdy friend who turned up to the party uninvited.

As I get dragged through the familiar corridors, Gus and Molly watch as I go. Molly looks pleased, Gus looks sulky. As I pass, I recognize a familiar hammer on the table. It’s the one George was hit with by Ronnie. It sparks a disdain—but usefulness. If I make it out of here, it will be helpful.

What are you looking at Gus? Yes, I didn’t die. You will

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though. You will die before I do. Like you were supposed to die on that day.

Marcel goes to open the door, but it's locked.

"Get the damn key!" he says to someone.

Gus returns with the key and hands it to him.

I'm thrown inside and locked in. This hellhole doesn't welcome its victims kindly.

"Stay put," Gus says, peeved at my existence. Marcel returns to his original post after returning the key.

I move as soon as the watchers have gone. I have to make sure everything goes as expected, so I grab the heroin container and stash it under my bedclothes. The likelihood of me getting searched is low, now that Marcel has looked me over. But now, I follow the order, sitting patiently. It'll be the last order I'll follow from that wretch. I wait for my escape ticket to arrive.

When Azaz gets back, he bursts through the entrance. I settle myself in for an abusive rant directed toward me and everyone involved with me.

He rushes in and tightens his grip on the iron bars.

"Where did you go, friend?" he asks, in a not-so-friendly voice.

"Nowhere . . . I came back as soon as I could. I got scared, okay?" I can sense Azaz is smelling trickery, so I tone down the performance so that I'm not weeded out. "I was getting shot at. What did you expect me to do?"

"It was your idea to come, remember?"

"I didn't know *that* was going to happen. You might think I'm weak or something, but that explosion . . . Holy shit, why would you even think of doing that?"

"You liked the little light show, huh?" Azaz loosens up

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now.

“No.”

“Didn’t think you’d be a fan. Hah!”

“I wasn’t. But I don’t run. Ask Marcel if you want, I handed myself over.”

“Yeah, you did. But I know you, Ethan. There’s something you’re not tellin’ me. Always is.”

“If you think I have any fight left in me, you’re wrong. I don’t have anything to gain, so why would I even care about getting out of here?”

“Well why don’t we have a chat about that then, hmm? Let’s discuss what you have left to lose instead.”

“What?”

Azaz picks out a stool from George’s office and sets it down in front of my room.

Before he gets back, I feel for the wire in my sock and the injector under my bed, just for comfort.

Azaz returns with his chair. He puts it down and sits. Then he says, “Let’s just cut straight to it. You already know who I’m talkin’ about. Jessica.”

“I know of her, sure.”

“You more than know her, bud.”

“Just get to the point, Azaz. I’m tired and I spent all of this morning trying to get here so you wouldn’t think I tried to escape. That didn’t do me much good, did it?”

“Because you’re lyin’ to me.”

“If you want to know the real story, go get Ronnie. Trust me.”

“Why?” Azaz asks with a smile, intrigued by my request.

“I’m here, in my cell, aren’t I?” I say. Silence from Azaz.

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“I’ve come here without any weapons and without anything to harm you. You’re going to want to hear what *he* did.”

“I almost feel like shuttin’ that down outta spite, my friend.”

“It’s no trick.”

“Ronnie! Get your ass over here.”

“Sir?” Ronnie says, getting to our meeting in record time.

“Ronnie,” I say, “I’ll ask you once to be honest—”

“The fuck you talking about, little man? Didn’t you just get back a second ago? Like, from escaping?” Ronnie tries to pal around with Azaz, but the madman before me is more fixated on my turn in the little game.

“Do you remember that day when you followed Jessica from her home?” I ask. “That time you were supposed to be looking for me? I won’t mention the nature in which you stalked Jessica; I’ll leave that there.” Azaz glances at Ronnie as I continue talking. “Well, you just happened to catch me, of course.”

“Damn right I did.”

“What happened after that?”

“You tried talking your way outta shit, and then you broke my nose. For a bony fuck, you knew how to throw your arm back. I don’t think you could even lift your arm to do that now, could ya?”

“I don’t care. What I do care about, is just before that. You’re not telling the full story here, Ronnie.”

“What are you doin’, Ethan?” Azaz asks me, watching in amusement.

I spare him a glance but divide most of my attention to Ronnie.

“Don’t try this bullshit. No one falls for this anymore, so don’t embarrass yourself,” Ronnie says.

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“The most obvious sign of a liar is avoiding a specific question. I think that question, Ronnie, is, ‘What happened after you caught me?’ ”

“I just told you. Can you not hear? I said, ‘You tried talking your way outta shit, and you broke my *nose* you skinny shit.’ ”

“And I stated that it was a lie. If you’re not going to tell the truth, then I will. Ronnie, when you held me at gunpoint, the only intention you had was to kill me. Do you remember?”

“I don’t tend to remember things that *didn’t happen*,” he says as he looks at Azaz. I can tell he’s not buying my side of things yet.

This’ll never work. He’d have to be an idiot to fall for this! Not an idiot, but someone who can’t bear to look like an idiot.

“It happened, and you know it. You wanted to ‘See the life leave my eyes.’ Those were your words, not mine.”

“Oh, c’mon boss. He’s trying to turn you against me.”

“Let the man speak,” Azaz says in a chilling tone.

“You planned to kill me and come back with a story. I ran and you had to shoot me. I think that’s what you were going for.”

“Hey, no offense there bud, but you don’t exactly look like you’d outrun me.” Ronnie lets out a forced chuckle. He’s practically taken the shovel from my hands and hired a digger to make his own grave.

“That’s what you said, isn’t it? That’s what made you change your mind.”

“Huh?”

“I told you I couldn’t outrun you, and that’s when you realized you wouldn’t have a convincing alibi.”

“What are you even talking about? I never said anything

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like that. Azaz, you're not buying any of th—"

Azaz shuts him up with a single raise of his hand, and says, "Tell me, Ethan . . . Is this really all you have?"

Shit, shit, shit, shit. One, two, three, four.

Ronnie looks relieved.

I do something clever—something that will be paramount. I shrug and sigh. I do it in a way that says to Azaz, "You're not as smart as I thought then, huh." I know that will drive him crazy with questions.

He has those same gaps of mystery I have. The ones that need to be solved to continue functioning. Along with that, he has the reckless ego of a self-indulgent megalomaniac.

"Don't stop now. Your little *story* was gettin' interestin'," Azaz says in a poorly hidden suppression of intrigue.

"Don't bother with him, sir. He does this shit all the time. Gets cranky if he doesn't get his way, hah!" The blatant way Ronnie is copying Azaz makes me cringe inside, but I remain in a mode. The mode is opposite to Azaz with how cool I'm acting.

It's like when someone mentions, "I need to tell you something about *insert name here*." It's not a question, it's a statement that oozes importance. Not something you want to know, but something you *need* to know.

You curiously ask, "Oh, what is it?" Your outward cadence of speech is calm and collected, but in your head, fireworks are going off. There's something within your mundane day that has become drenched in vagueness. A type of vagueness that begs to be specified.

Your world comes crashing down when they return your question with, "Never mind, I don't think I'm allowed to tell you."

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How dare this person take away your right to the most exciting point of your day.

You can't let go; you need the secret within your grasp. You can't rest until the knowledge trapped in the padlocked lips of the speaker is in your brain-vault.

Now think of that and times it by a hundred. That's what Azaz is and always will be.

"Just fuckin' talk, Ethan," Azaz says.

"I told you already. He tried to kill me. There's nothing special about it, all right? You don't seem to be understanding."

There is something special and it'll never be given to you.

"Is this your plan, really?" He bangs the cell door, trying to scare me. I watch him with cat's eyes when a mouse is about to be hunted.

"Azaz, chill. He's not all there—mentally, y'kn—"

"Shut the fuck up, Ron. Ethan, what is this, huh? I already know this guy's not a rat. George didn't run a tight operation like me. He thought he had Alex, he thought he had Gus, but they're mine. And you see Ronnie next to me? He's mine too, cos I run this shit."

"I never said Ronnie was a rat."

"Damn right I'm not a rat, fucker!"

I turn my attention back to an intriguing concrete wall and sigh again.

"Do you think I really give a shit if my men wanna kill some stupid prick like you?"

"Sir, he's really not worth your time."

"Look at me!" Azaz roars.

"He tried to kill me," I say. "That's all there is to it." I stand and look at him, ignoring Ronnie's absurd body language. "He

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had orders to bring me to you, alive. He said he's going to kill me. What more is there to this? He wasn't conspiring against you, he just wanted to do his own thing. Your orders are important, but he wanted me dead for killing Finn. I killed Finn because he couldn't follow orders either. He tried to murder me, isn't that right Ronnie?"

"What . . . I . . ." Ronnie says, getting Azaz's attention.

"That true? You and that bumblin' fuck couldn't even follow that plan, huh? Is that why he's dead?"

"Ran at me with a knife, so I stuck it in him," I say. "You probably already knew that."

"Sir, I don't know if it's true. I-I mean that's what he told me, but I-I-I don't know. It's just what he said!"

"I think I did you a favor, Azaz," I tease him with. "I'm assuming you wanted Jessica too. He couldn't even follow that order either. Seriously though Azaz, is that what happens to your employees? They walk over you exactly like *George*?" I'm treading on thin ice as I speak, I know it for a fact when I get a death-stare from the man himself.

He adjusts his attention back to the defendant. "Tell me, Ron. Did you disregard my orders?"

"Sir, I didn't—He's trying to—He's doing what he always does."

"The most obvious sign of a liar is avoiding a specific question," I say.

"You shut the fuck up! Goddamn weasel. He won't fall for yo—"

Azaz grabs the back of Ronnie's head and forces it into the concrete edge of the wall—cracking bone along with hard plaster. Teeth shoot out in a reminiscent dream to George's incident.

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His eyes bulge in disbelief—watering. His central and lateral incisors are gone. Blood replaces the gaps. My first instinct is to avert my eyes, but I keep watching. I'm enjoying the display of brutality and I could forever. I can't be fixed in that regard, so I need to embrace it in parts.

Ronnie screams in horror. His healed nose and black eyes are ensured to make a return appearance. After the confirmation sets in, Ronnie falls down. His cheek rests on the wall he recently kissed.

“Oh fuck. He can't answer the question now, can he? Haha!” Azaz speaks in an even cooler way than I.

“Mmyph goaddam mouf.” Ronnie doesn't speak much at all. Unlike Gus, and George (to a lesser extent), Ronnie's jaw is broken for real.

Azaz looks at him and walks off. I worry, thinking he is done here. I'm sorely mistaken. He returns with George's old, glamorous golden gun. He shoves it into Ronnie's gaping maw; the barrel scraping between the large gap of missing teeth.

“So, Ethan, you were sayin'? My employees walk all over me?”

“Azaz! What are you doing? You don't have to prove some point. Killing Ronnie won't solve a thing,” I lie through my intact teeth, making Azaz wonder if I'm genuine.

“Thing is, I know this fuck's been a naughty boy. Didn't know about the whole plan on killin' thing. Sorry about that, pal. You wanna tell the truth now, Ron? You wanna tell me you've been a naughty boy and that you tried to kill my good friend, Ethan?”

“Gegh fur, gegh fur!” The words get translated in my head to, “Yesh sur, yesh sur!” And finally translated again to, “Yes

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sir, yes sir!”

The gun barrel looks as if it disappears within Ronnie’s throat. Like some masochistic wet dream. He chokes on it. The feeling of enjoyment I had for the brutality dissipates. Not for Azaz though, as he’s filled with more joy the longer this offense continues.

“You’re going to kill the poor guy, stop!” I say, half out of pity, and half out of manipulation. The last order *he’ll* follow is from me.

I see Gus, Molly, and Gregory watching from the sidelines. They’re panicked and miserable, but they don’t step in to stop the mutilation. They just watch in an unhelpful, lingering position.

“Ethan, remind me again. So on two separate occasions, Ron went against my best interest? Now that is fuckin’ funny, hah!”

Ronnie is clinging to life with a rubber band at this point. He’s choking on the solid chunk of pistol. It splitting his jaw open has caused fatal, irreversible damage. But Azaz keeps going further and further. He’s not content with the growing terror in Ronnie’s tear-filled eyes.

With one last cough of blood and phlegm, those same terrorized eyes roll backward. I’m at a loss for words so I try and grab for the gun. The event is causing me emotional upset now. Strangely, this relieves me. I no longer feel like a freak who enjoys other people’s suffering. Here’s a man who I loathe being deepthroated with a handgun, and I’m trying to save his life. This can’t be an act anymore. I want to stop this.

I’m a freak? You think I’m a freak? Look at this guy and come back to me. He’s a real piece of work.

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“You want this, Ethan? Is this what you want?” Azaz asks me.

I look back at him, then at Ronnie’s zombie-like complexion. I can’t open my mouth to speak. When I look back at Azaz again, I already know it’s him having fun with me.

The flash from the Glock fills the bloodied cheeks of Ronnie. The red is ejected from the puffed-out mouth like a juice carton squirting blackcurrant. A flap of flesh behind Ronnie’s neck bursts open like kicked-in polyester. Not much blood gushes from the back, but chunks of meat hang as the man’s death rattle disturbs me. His once tear-filled eyes now overflow with bloodshot liquid.

I can’t look any longer, so I turn my head in loss/victory.

You got what you wanted. Are you happy now? Haven’t ruined enough lives as it is?

You already know Ronnie was never innocent. You just took out some worthless vermin. Well, you didn’t take him out personally, the dumb brute in front of you managed to do that. You gave him that nudge though. Congrats.

“Ahh, done.” Azaz says and sits back on his stool, using his white shirt to wipe off the spray of blood from his face. Ronnie lies down with that same terror still in his eyes. I avoid eye contact with the corpse while being reminded of Lox. “Clearing out the swamp. One fucker down, another to go. Ain’t that right, friend?”

“Jesus Christ . . .”

“Oh yeah, bud. Oh *yeah*. Let’s continue with our previous conversation, you arrogant *fuck*. Ethan, look at me.”

You’re staring at Lox again.

You’re staring at Ronnie again.

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I look back at Azaz with new resentment. Also, a slight bit of admiration for picking off my enemy.

You're next.

"So Ethan, about Jessica. It sounds to me like you and Ron both had your little crush on her. Y'know, that day she called me, she sounded so *worried* about you. She thought I was George, so I just pretended I was. The accent must've fooled her, hah! I said you'd be gone for a while—a little business trip. She ate that shit up, the fuckin' whore. It's not the only thing she ate up." He winks at me.

"You can lie all you want."

"No lie. I'm not sayin' she enjoyed it. What can I say, I'm more like my brother than I thought." The gaping grin he gives me is enough to make a man sick. The smugness and lack of remorse are horrid.

"If you touch a hair—"

"Oh, I did more than that. How's about I go and bring you some. You can keep it in a locket and carry it with you. A memento, bud." The gun swings in Azaz's hand. It's out of reach.

Get him closer. You can stop this monster from hurting anyone ever again. You can finally stop someone, you waste of oxygen.

"Don't," I whisper. "Please . . ."

"Can't quite hear ya, bud."

Yes! That's it, get him closer.

Use the injection, use the injection! Wait, no, just keep it simple. Kill the fucker by any means necessary.

"Just . . . Please don't . . ."

"Louder!"

"I . . ."

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Azaz pulls back and holsters George's pistol back into his pocket. I don't believe I miss my chance.

"You were hopin' to make a grab for this, huh? You can't stop this, friend."

"What are you going to do, Azaz? What?!"

"Just shut the fuck up and listen to me you egotistical cunt. Your sad games are annoyin' me. I enjoyed the last one, but now you're becomin' annoyin'. You're a disgrace, y'know that? I can see the cogs turnin' in ya head. You've probably got some grand plan, but it stops here. Ronnie's dead, and I don't really give a fuck about that. He was loyal when he wanted to be, but now he's soakin' in his own piss, shit, and blood. I might ring him out over your bucket as a prize for bein' the world's dumbest fuckin' cunt. Hah!" Azaz stands up and tuts at me. "Some plan you got here. I've lost interest in findin' out what it is. Just have a nice lie down and get some sleep. I'm gonna visit your girlfriend and give her a nice surprise." Azaz rubs his crotch with his hand. "I decided to keep her on standby 'till Christmas. But I'm feelin' generous, so I'm gonna do you a solid. I think I'll bring you that handful of hair you want *very soon*. I'll see you tomorrow, bud." One last wink from him before he walks away. "Someone clean up on aisle four! Gus, you're on watch. He gets out, I'll rip your balls off and put 'em in your sockets."

"You're going to die, Frank!" I scream to Azaz. "You're going to fucking gasp for breath as I watch you die!"

Stop it, you're emotional again. If you keep doing this, you're never going to win.

Gus comes to me, his expression similar to mine and everyone else's.

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“Where do you get off, huh? Why did you have to cause all this shit?”

“We’re never going to get along, so how’s about you just leave me alone?”

“I’m stuck with you, asshole, or did you not just hear?”

“Great. Start by getting rid of Ronnie then.”

“Real fucking nice, huh.” Gus picks up Ronnie by his shoulders and leaks a bit of unidentified matter from his companion’s neck. He gags, lifting his T-shirt above his mouth and nose.

I can’t see that Ronnie has indeed defecated, but I’ll take Azaz’s word for it.

“Molly, we’re gonna need some cleaning supplies! Do we have any in the storage cupboard or something?” Gus says.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart!” she says back.

“Well you’d better go to the store then! We’ll need a bag and something to mop the floor with!”

“Any way I can help?” Gregory chimes in.

“No, just wait for your owner to get back.” Gus chuckles to himself.

“I didn’t cause this,” I say after a while.

“Oh, just fuck off. Azaz is right—about you being an egotistical fuck. You think you’re so much better than everyone. Since we were with George, you always had to one-up me. Maybe that’s the reason I stopped working for the fat shit. You forced my hand, *amigo*.”

“Don’t even go there.”

“Oh, I will hmphh—just after I finish cleaning up your mess!” Gus struggles to lift the heavy man. “Okay, shit.” He drops Ronnie back to the floor and calls for Gregory’s help.

The next ten minutes pass with Gregory and Gus having

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immense trouble disposing of a corpse. They get rid of him the same way as George was gotten rid of. Ironic in a way that Ronnie is suffering the same fate. Chopped into unrecognizable pulp and fed to birds.

“That was a pain. I can’t even feel my arms,” Gregory says.

“Yeah, sure. Bye.” Gus has no intention of sticking to small talk. Instead, he comes back to harass me. “Done. Now time to clean all this shit up. Is it bothering you, asshole?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Too bad. Actually, I know this shit don’t bother you anyway. You got a couple screws loose.”

“Right.”

“When Azaz gets back, he’s gonna kill you. If he’ll kill Ronnie, then he’ll kill you for sure.”

Azaz’s weakness is having his authority challenged. Now I need to think of Gus’s. What worked the last time, in the diner? Riling him up made him irrational, but I don’t think that will solve anything. What do you think, hmm? Is there a way to take Gus down through the bars of a cell? He most likely has a gun
o—

Wait, no! For whatever reason, he doesn’t have a weapon of any kind on him. Azaz’s pistol has been taken, so that’s out the question. My only option is to use the lethal dosage of heroin—overdose. Getting him close will be easy, but having an escape plan afterward is something else. Where are his keys, where the hell are they?

He needs to get to you, to hurt you, doesn’t he? And he’s no monster—he’s just a drugged-up man child waiting to die. Get him in that cell with you.

So, I know the next steps. Gregory is somewhere in the

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main room and Molly is off on a shopping run. Now is the time to act, otherwise my chance will be squandered.

“Maybe he’ll kill you,” I say.

“Huh? What was that?”

“Maybe he’ll kill you. Maybe I’ll get into his head again, and maybe I’ll make him kill you. I just did it, so I can do it again.” My hand slips under my mattress. I feel for the container and find it. I open it with dexterous fingers and take out the syringe. I keep it under my sleeve.

“Here we go again with your little God complex thingy.”

That’s it, get under his skin. And when that happens, something else will go under his skin and into his vein.

“Maybe it is. I do get to decide who dies. You’ll die next; mark my words.”

“You’re so lucky these bars are in the way.” He shakes his head in amusement.

“I’ve just realized. We’ve never actually *fought*. Do you think you’d win?”

“Just stop, man. Stop trying to make me fuck up. It won’t happen. Whether I go in there or not, you ain’t getting outta there.”

“Gus, don’t go in there! You gotta make sure the door is locked at all times.”

“Shut the fuck up Gregory, no one cares what you’re sayin’.”

Okay, this isn’t good. Gregory can hear the conversation for one, so he’ll be able to hear more than that. As soon as Gus stops talking, Gregory will know something isn’t right. If Gus comes into the cell and is killed by me, he won’t hear it. But, at the same time, he could get spooked if he doesn’t hear the door get locked

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again. Also, having Gus right next to me inside the cell seems quite daunting. These iron bars on the door could be sturdy to pull him back into.

This is a minefield of outcomes.

Just shut up, you need to do something before Molly gets back! She'll most likely bring trouble with her.

What if Marcel comes in too, you dumb piece of shit? You'll out yourself, and that'll be that. You have to try something soon.

"How's about one for the road, huh Gus?"

"As much as I'd love to smash your shitty face in, I think I'll pass."

"Afraid I'll kick your ass instead?" I need to resort to teenage insults if I'm going to get to him.

"Ah, you are funny man."

"Come on, let's fight. There's nothing to be scared of. Bring a gun in with you, if you're really that worried."

"Nice try, ah."

"I'm just thinking that you don't want to even try. I'm behind a cell, you pussy."

"Fuck this." He rolls up sleeves that aren't there and walks into another room.

"Gus, don't!"

"I already said to shut the fuck up, dog."

When Gus comes back, he has the keys in his hand. He jingles them at me, wearing a smirk on his face. He puts them into his pocket after unlocking the door and cracks his neck in preparation.

"Scared? Pussy. Pussy," I taunt him with.

"Oh you're gonna fucking wish you stopped this shit."

I flinch back as the door opens. Gus approaches me. The

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first kick to my face makes me turned around and confused. Then, his fists come at me in a hailstorm of knuckles.

“Lock the door! A-Azaz w-will go crazy if he finds out you went in!” Gregory says.

Gus pays little attention, focusing his aggression on me. Gregory does not sound relaxed.

I get socked in my eye and I feel my vision go blurry. The thought that keeps me from screaming in pain is that I’m taking this beating for what I have done. For getting people’s lives taken from them. Most of those lives being evil—but alive, all the same.

“Gus! Lock it up!”

“Almost done . . .” Gus says to himself.

One last punch breaks my nose in two—blood gushes into my beard.

Gregory shuffles from where he is. It sounds like a wooden stool to me. “Gus!”

“I’m done you fucking spaz. Just shut up and go sit back down, I’m done.” Gus leaves me on the floor, coughing. He leaves the cell and locks the door behind him. Big mistake. His back is even turned to me.

“Thank you!” Gregory says.

Gus lets out a satisfied sigh. I’m up in a flash.

“Pussy,” I say to him.

He laughs, not believing I’m ready for round two. He begins to turn toward me, but I’m not going to allow him to do that. I’m more interested in ending this fight altogether. I reach out of my cell door and grope for his face. I find it and I cover his mouth, pulling him closer. The syringe is in my right hand and it’s getting close to his neck, getting ready to dive in; from one prick to

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another.

It goes into his neck and I push the plunger down to disperse the contents into his bloodstream. Muffled fear dominates as I pull him to the cell door. He wriggles in my hold; my arms strain for grip. I'm weak, so weak. If the heroin wasn't already working its magic, he'd already be away from me, calling for help. But instead, he tries to get the syringe from my hand. He ends up pushing the needle in his skin around—pulling the smaller hole to a large bleeding one. His desperation rewards him with a longer death.

I do not get emotional. I don't feel joy, but I do feel a personal triumph of ridding myself of a bad smell.

As Gus gets more lethargic, I let him rest on the floor, trying to make as little noise as possible.

And then, after a sufficient amount of time, I relinquish my hold over his mouth. I feel his face. His eyes are closed and his mouth is open wide. The noise sounding from his throat is a continuous high-pitched vibration. It's not loud at all, so I take a breather myself while wiping my hands across my shirt. Once I am certain Gus is dead, I move my hands to his back pocket. I take out the key to freedom and edge the door open. I try not to make a sound. It doesn't work.

"You serious, Gus? You're going in again?" Gregory asks. With my stealth lost, I slam the door open and make a move. "Just hurry up. If you keep doing this kind of stuff, then I'll have to tell Az-Aza—Ugh, Gus!"

I move in on Gregory. He's unaware of my presence. I take the stool from under him and he drops to the floor. I step on his shot-out leg and watch as he flounders.

"If you scream, you die," I say, applying a small amount of

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pressure to the area.

“O-o-oh God! P-p-please don’t!”

“Be quiet. Where is Azaz, Gregory?”

“H-h-how would I know?”

I step down and listen for a scream. There’s a small receded one.

“You know, Ashley told me you knew. So let’s cut to you telling me, okay?”

“He’ll kill me! He’ll kill me!”

“I already said I’ll kill him. Right now, you should believe me. I impose immediate danger to you now, Gregory.” When I threaten the poor man, I do it with little satisfaction. It comes off as being bored.

“What do—”

“Room number. Now.”

“Room two eighteen! Room two eighteen!” he says in defense.

I pick up the hammer I saw on the table upon my entry and I look down at Gregory. A flash of Ronnie’s destroyed, open mouth snaps into my view, then goes. I look away from the hammer, back to Gregory. His bent back and puppy dog eyes do not register in my empathy reader. It’s his tragedy that makes me *feel* something. Right now, I can’t afford to *feel*.

“George took me in,” he continues. “I was younger than him, Ethan. We were both troubled back then. I ain’t normal, you probably already know. A-A-Azaz knows. Always calling me retard and dog. It’s not right, but don’t blame A-Az . . . him. Please don’t.”

“Stop,” I say. I know what is happening right now and I feel a sense of fight or flight within me. Action needs to be taken.

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“I’m sorry for what he did, but he means well, he means well. Don’t be afraid of him. He’s my brother, as much as A-A-A-Azazel!”

“Stop,” I repeat with more adamance.

“George took me in when I needed him, and now . . . *he* has me. He’s good for me, and he treats me well. I’m not right in the head, but it doesn’t mean he takes it out on me. No matter what he calls me, it’s just him joking around with me!”

“I said, *Stop*.”

“Just please don’t hurt me. Let me go. I said what you wanted me to say and I want to stay here. I won’t follow you. Take all the phones if you want! I don’t have one, but I won’t do anything.” *We already know he will. It’s time.* “Just—I don’t wanna die.” He eyes the hammer in my hand with a whimper. The doglike behavior is reaching its peak. “I have a family. It might not be much, but they’ll be hurt if *I* hurt.”

There it is again, that plea for survival resting on the victim having a family. None of this relates to family. This is not personal, it’s strictly business. It’s too much. This has to end before I change my mind.

I plant the sharp end of the hammer into Gregory’s head and look away. There’s a similar vibration in his throat as I yank it back out again. I sigh, feeling an infection take my heart. A corruption consuming me, making me eviler. No matter how many times I deny it, I always feel a small thrill one way or another. It might not be there for long, but it comes and goes. Sometimes for a while, and sometimes for a fleeting moment. That’s when I notice I’m still riding off the pleasure of Gus’s death. I beg that his death could be less enjoyable, but I cannot deny the feeling. I need to ignore it, getting out.

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Molly will notice the bodies. You need to wait and kill her. We won't tell anyone you enjoyed it. It can be a secret. OUR secret.

The voice in my head is right for once. Or maybe it's been right all the time. Who knows. Molly will get back, and once she does, the first thing she'll do is call Azaz and get either me or Jessica killed. I'm jumping to conclusions, nonetheless. I need to remain calm and do what is necessary. Molly assists in Azaz's unjust business, but I did the same for George. Killing Molly will not make me any more of a monster, but I'd like to avoid it if I can.

I hold the keys to my cell.

Molly enters the building. She has a few plastic bags with items stored inside. She waddles in, placing the bags onto the table. She notices specks of blood and freezes in place.

"Don't scream," I say behind her.

With Gregory and Gus dragged into my cell, the site is all clear, apart from the evidence left behind. I'm lucky Molly got here when she did because I was just finished with the removal process. I had to sprint into the corner of the room and wait.

"They all dead, honey?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Will I be dead soon?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"On how much authority you have in this establishment."

"What do you mean, sweetie?"

"If I told you to go outside right now and to tell Marcel to go home for the night, would he?"

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“I don’t think he would.”

Molly and I aren’t facing each other, but I can tell she’s calm.

“If you told him to come inside for a moment, would he?”

“I think he would.”

“Where are my possessions?”

“They’re probably in the storage cupboard.”

“Go get them. Don’t turn around either.” The hammer in my hand wouldn’t be scary to see.

I follow her to the area mentioned and watch as she goes through various bags and coats. The hard end of the hammer is pressed against the back of her head. She pulls my wallet out. There’s no cash inside, but my ID remains. I’ll need it soon.

“Back we go,” I tell Molly, escorting her back to the main room. A faint moan comes from the back of the corridor. My ex-room is positioned in front of where the noise came from. With me standing closer to the noise, it’s almost unintelligible. It sounds like a person.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“It’s . . . nothing,” she says. Molly turns her head a few degrees, noticing my lack of response. She rethinks her answer. “It’s Robert. Robert Allack. He’s locked in. Like you we—”

I take my key from my pocket and shoo Molly into my cell.

“Ethan baby, what are you doing? Ethan!” I point the metal end of my hammer into Molly’s flab, pretending it’s a revolver of some kind.

She willingly enters the room and I lock her in.

“Don’t go in there, he’s not well! He’s been hurt by the others; you don’t want to see.”

“Shut up,” I say as I walk back, searching for the noise at

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the end of the hallway. The grim lights above illuminate particles of dust as I go—I feel gross in my skin. Eventually, I get to the ginormous door. The last time I saw this door was last year. I took no notice of it. It was locked and I never badgered my way into finding what laid behind it.

I go back to Molly. “Where’s the key?”

“Why do you want to go in there, sweetie? There’s nothing in there for you.”

“Just tell me where.”

“Don’t let him out. He won’t last long out here. You need to put him out of his misery, Ethan.” I stare into her soul. She relents. “It’s on your keychain already, doll. It’s already there.”

I look down at the keys and feel stupid for not thinking of that first. I go back to the large door and handle the bigger key into the even bigger lock. It opens with a creak so loud it could wake the neighborhood.

Rob is sitting on the floor, chained up and starved to near death. Flies cover his body as his feeble breaths make his chest rise endlessly. I walk to him and I notice why there are so many flies hanging around. He’s in his own fecal matter. It repulses me. I thought I had it bad, but I regret ever thinking that. I ignore the smell, the sight, and focus again on Robert’s general look. Everywhere I go there’s disgusting mess and waste!

He has scarring everywhere on his body and he’s been shaved. He’s also naked, apart from a miniature towel covering his genitalia. He looks up at me with the saddest expression I’ve ever seen. It’s a much sadder sight than Alex.

The images that are burned into my vision now verge on being torture porn, but I will them out of my head. Of course, it doesn’t do anything to remove them.

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“Fucking hell . . .” is all I can say.

Surprisingly, Rob’s voice is clear, but it sounds as sharp as gravel. “Help.” His vocal cords are fried. From the screams caused by the inflicted third-degree burns and knife wounds, I imagine.

The first person that comes into my mind is Lox the lunatic. Someone who has been responsible for other acts of cruelty. The disturbed individual who has no moral compass as far as I’m concerned.

“I’ll get you out of here,” I say.

My sympathy for Robert is at an all-time high. Seeing him in such a sad state is both shocking and depressing. The chains connected to the wall are suspended up with links. But, below that, leather straps are fastened tight to his wrists. I undo them and watch his arms drop to his sides like planks of wood. He doesn’t even seem to notice.

Right on cue, Marcel enters through the front door—the worst possible time to do so. I run back out, ignoring Rob for the time being. More important matters are at hand right now.

“Marcel! Marcel! Help me! Help me!” I hear Molly shout.

The look of malice I give her as I pass by stops her in her tracks. She knows she’s got me in a tricky situation now though, so I rush to the door.

Marcel stands there but doesn’t notice me straight away. “The *fuck* is—” He notices me. “Oh you motherfucker!”

I don’t waste time; I take my hammer and prepare for combat. I know this next challenge will be difficult, but I’m ready either way. I can’t take this as just a usual brawl. I’m not a typical fighter. Strange considering how many physical altercations I’ve been involved in recently. It’s some poetic justice of testing my

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limits. But no matter how much combat training I've had, there's no way I'm going to be able to fight off a man like Marcel. He could fold me in two if he pleased.

The first move I make is bluffing my swing down. I take the light hammer—wind up a hit. I soon pull back to a comfortable position. He predictably flinches back; one part due to lack of planning; two parts due to foolishness. This is when I take a legit swing.

It hits him, but not hard enough. The hammer's flat end bounces off his pectoral muscle like it's nothing. If there's a bad place to hit a man like this—it's there. I get punished for my insurrection against his person. He hits me with a meaty fist. The punch is harder than anything thrown at me by Gus. It knocks my already broken nose even more out of place, but I steady myself. It's no use, however. I fall with a *thump*, and I stay there.

Marcel is over me; he's reaching into his pocket.

I manage to stand up, as quick as a lightning bolt. I jump onto him with force and grapple. His superior physique overpowers me easily, but as I fall with him, I struggle to the back of the fall. We go down, with me in a better position. It's not long before he gets a better hold of me and digs his knee into my flat gut as I lie down on my back. I open my palm in a last, desperate attempt to save myself.

Dodge that bullet Ethan, dodge that bullet.

I push the gun from his hand, watching as it goes straight into the air and behind Marcel. He watches it go too; he doesn't care in the slightest. He begins to pummel me.

I try going for my sock. If I can get to the piano wire, I may have a chance to—

The fists continue coming as I fail to even glance my hand

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close to my knee.

After a beating that makes me see stars, the hammer in my hand is retrieved by Marcel. He lifts it at a 45° angle. The trajectory of the hammer will pierce my skull through the nasal bone. It will then enter my brain and I'll *shut off*. I've already lost.

Well, you gave it a good try. You got three out of seven. That's not bad. You at least killed Gus, so that's something. But now it's time to die, you piece of shit. You stupid fool. Azaz was right; you've been an egotistical fuck, and you're about to die as an egotistical fuck. Nothing has changed whatsoever.

I will change. If I live, I'll become better. Please just let Rob come here.

And—

Marcel's head erupts with gore. The blast is from the lower neck, leading up to the frontal lobe. It takes a split second for Marcel to keel over, but when he does, he drops the hammer on my chest. I wheeze while pushing the carcass of Marcel from me.

Both of you, Marcel and Rodrigo, died doing your job. And you both got destroyed. In fact, all of you are dead. Azaz's crew is no more (for the most part). And I took that choice away, didn't I?

You did. Live with it.

The only possible savior was Robert. And of course, he's there on the floor, a snail trail of grossness following him from his jail. I look at him with pity, but I try to help as best as I can. I lift him up by his arms as he moans in endured pain. His bones poke through his skin and his naked figure makes me avert my eyes. It reminds me of painful memories. This sorry state is no man any longer. I can relate in some, small way.

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Rob doesn't care about his nudity. He looks vacantly at a wall while I prop him on a chair. The gun in his hand is gripped with an unbreakable hold. I try taking it from him, but it's no use.

"Molly . . ." he says.

"Molly?"

"She's the one."

I understand the statement, but it's surreal. I take him at face value and confirm what he means.

"You're saying Molly did this to you?"

"Yes."

It's unreal that such a woman could hold such evil intentions.

"Get her," Rob says to me, pleading.

I feel as though it is my obligation to do so. I walk back to the corridor of misery. I go past the trail, past the blood, and then to Molly. Her nose is plugged and she's resisting the urge to vomit. I don't blame her.

"Up," I say.

Molly follows my orders. I let her out. She doesn't try to run, but she makes a light jog to the exit. I follow, feeling like the last survivor of a horror movie. I'm joining my unlikely companion (who's just as broken). Molly stops jogging and looks at Rob's disturbing figure. The monster doesn't even bat an eye. Rob doesn't waste time either. He fires a shot into her stomach.

If I never found Rob, I would have let her go. We're all bad. We're all bad.

Molly whoops and falls onto her large, round-shaped torso. She then says, "You fucking cocksuckers! I'll see you all in Hell you cunt fucking bastards!" She sounds like a woman possessed.

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I look at her in disrespect and see Rob. “End it,” I tell him. “No. You can go. I’ll finish here.”

I don’t see why I’d try to stop this. I can’t justify the loss of life that will occur.

“Good seeing you, Rob,” I say as Molly continues to screech obscenities.

“You too.”

I walk past Molly. When I pass, she tries to get up, spilling fast-food juice all over the floor. Rob puts another round in her; this time her leg. The sound doesn’t faze me any longer. It sounds usual at this point. The natural order of business.

I leave the warehouse, finding a weight being lifted from my shoulders as I do so. I get the intense urge to burn it all down, just like Jason’s mansion. Burn it all down to the ground so I’m not reminded of my torture.

Instead, I walk on. I look insane, so I keep an eye out for civilians. But, in a curious way, I don’t care how people see me. My whole life I’ve been concerned with the way I look, but the past few months have changed me. It seems that when you get all of your humanity ripped from you, you see yourself as less than a person. This is good, as it makes you appreciate the non-sensical order of life. Rob didn’t care about his appearance. He was hanging by a thread. I must be the same now.

With money and a credit card gone, it will be a troubled road ahead. All I know is that my next destination is either room 218 at the Tarrow Hotel or Jessica’s place.

Both could hold Azaz’s location, and finding him will be a throw of the dice.

I decide to take a chance and visit Jessica first—go to the hotel after. If I turn up at the hotel and no one’s home, I’ll curse

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myself for not looking in the most obvious place first. It could bite me, but there's something *wrong* about not going there. There's also the fact I don't know where the Tarrow Hotel is. I have a general idea, but I'm more familiar with the route to Jessica's place. I'll figure it out if I must, later. Azaz mentioned he'd be back tomorrow, so it doesn't give me a clue as to where he'll be. Whether he goes to the hotel before or after is not determinable. He may have already raped/killed Jessica. My only hope of stopping him from causing further (relatable) torment, is to catch him while he's unprepared. With everyone dead, there is nothing that will stand in my way. Azaz will die tonight and he will stop his reign of controlling domination.

CHAPTER TEN

TIGHTROPE

Ethan Riley does not respond for a long time.

“Would you like me to repeat the question, Mr. Riley?”

“Please.”

“Do you think that your own state of mind can alter for your own benefit?”

Ethan Riley does not respond again for an even longer time. Eventually, he speaks. “I believe I can. I believe that something will change. I’m not an optimist by any stretch of the imagination, doctor, but I think I can be different. Where I am at now is not making me happy. All I do is think and think and think and think *and think*. I might be able to break that cycle and do something with my life, but I still don’t know if I’m strong enough. Everything is there for me, but it’s hard. I know that’s the coward’s way of putting it, but it’s the truth.”

“I do not think you are a coward, Mr. Riley.”

“I think we all are, sometimes, doctor. There’s just

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something that I need to know.”

“And what is that?”

“I need to know that when the time comes, I’ll be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

Ethan Riley laughs. “I don’t know that yet, but I will when the time comes, doctor.” He seems giddy while speaking.

You're scared, aren't you? You're thinking too much, but you might be right. You might be right, Ethan. Try not to think about it, I think with mental exhaustion.

The roads are packed with taxicabs and honking cars. Pollution fills the already polluted air. Once, I might have said, "That's it, make the air toxic. Kill all these mindless invertebrates. Rot the grass and break the trees that give us life. Take everyone out one by one, until no one remains." Sometimes, those thoughts come back into my head. Before, these thoughts were invited and uninvited. Now, they're totally unwanted. Nasty, festering thoughts that aren't welcome. But they come and stay when they please because I'm coming to terms that I'm not in control of my thoughts. I can sugarcoat it however I want, but I can't outrun a bullet that is already ricocheting around in my skull.

The walk to Jessica's house is a struggle. My already feeble legs carry me there with difficulty. Taking a cab to her house would have been much easier, but my bank account has to have been drained of everything. I still haven't seen my car or have any knowledge of its whereabouts. I know it's not worth looking

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into any longer. My phone's broken; all other forms of billing won't be adequate. If worse comes to worst, I'll have to beg on the street like the worth—

Like the homeless people wandering past me.

That's all if Jessica isn't home. She needs to be home or else my plan will need to change.

When I arrive, there doesn't seem to be anyone home. I hope to whatever omnipotent deity that doesn't rule the world, to let Jessica be far away from the *ruiner*. Lovely, sweet, flawed Jessica I can't bear to be hurt like I was. It's not out of some deep love, but more of a protective urge. Jessica isn't a helpless person, but when a man like Azaz is around, there are no guaranteed results. I'd like to keep one person in my life from being wrecked. She'll be okay. I need to know this so I don't lose hope. Revenge isn't my main incentive anymore. It's the defense of another person who has shown me respect when I saw them as a tool. When I *used* them as a tool. When staking out Alex's house, there wasn't enough compassion within me. When I murdered Finn, I saw it as a work of art. There was selfishness and a lack of humanity in both instances.

I go to Jessica's door. Out of sheer desperation, I pound on it. I already know no one will answer, but I do it just to rest my mind. I walk away after a lengthy wait, still feeling a desire to go back and knock again.

Because you knocked wrong, idiot.

Of course, no one is home. Wasting essential time on a time-sensitive mission.

I begin my walk back to the warehouse. That way I can get my bearings and maybe find a way to get to the dreaded final destination.

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I go back in a rush. At this point, my legs are pumping along; I'm running on fumes. As I pass the warehouse, I notice a car that wasn't there before. Everything else looks the same, except this car. A hybrid is parked close to the sidewalk. The engine's running and tinted windows hide the identity of the driver.

They've come to get you again. Azaz will have backup. Backup, I'm telling you!

What are you doing? Run, for God's sake, run!

The window rolls down and Ashley's there. My heart beats back into rhythm. I go to her, hoping there's no trap. I imagine that golden gun being pointed at the back of her head, with Azaz smiling in the backseat. He ushers me in and dispatches me straight away.

What actually happens, is Ashley gets me in through the side door. I open it up, sit inside.

"What are you doing here, Ethan? You should be at the Tar-row like I told you."

"I thought Jessica might be here."

"Who's Jessica? I've not heard of a Jessica."

"Never mind. Just take me to the place, please."

When inside, Ashley drives forward and says, "It looks like you took a hell of a beating. Your nose's broken. I think you're missing a tooth as well."

"I didn't notice. I never was the prettiest." I smirk at my joke, still holding on to some semblance of humor.

"What happened in there?"

"I killed them. Well, *I* didn't kill all of them. And not *all* of them are dead. But they're gone. Ronnie, Gus, Gregory, Molly, Marcel. They're gone. I think Rob is too, from what I saw of

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him. You might want to go back and get him, but I don't know . . . I don't think he wants to be saved . . ." Ashley looks me over, averting her attention from driving for a time that's more than I feel comfortable with. "The broken nose was from Marcel. Or . . . it might have been from Gus. Doesn't matter really."

"How did Gregory go?"

"Hit him in the head with a hammer." Ashley gives me another look; I can tell she's diagnosing me with some affliction I don't have. "I'm all right."

"Okay Ethan."

"I actually got Azaz to kill Ronnie. I questioned his leadership and it worked like a charm. That really is his weakness. He couldn't handle it, so he *really* killed him." My eyes go wide as I talk. Ashley can read between the lines.

"You've been through a lot. I could get you out of here too. Dante and Ellie are out. They skipped cities, not so long ago, so I've just had to catch up with all this."

"No. Thank you."

"Was hoping you'd say that. I saw Azaz go into the hotel recently too, that's when I thought I'd track you down. It's lucky you went by the warehouse. I wouldn't have found you otherwise."

"I'm glad I found you. I would have gotten lost."

Maybe there is some cosmic force moving me along to the penultimate episode. A last word with a veteran before I go into the place that will kill me. How will I kill Azaz? Well, it's not how I'll do it (I'll wrap the piano wire around his neck and I'll pull as tight as I can) but how will I make him submit?

Catching him off guard won't be easy, and even then, I'll

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still have problems keeping him in a proper chokehold.

Marcel put you to the ground like you were nothing. Sure, Azaz might not be as built, but he'll snap you in two with pure aggressive intent.

"I might need your help," I say, feeling ashamed for mentioning it.

"To be honest, I should have helped you get out. I still feel guilty. But I don't know what I would have done, with that Marcel. I'm not sure how you killed him, but if he's gone, then I applaud you."

"Yeah . . ."

"So, tell me about the help you might need," Ashley says, reassuringly.

"I don't need much. Putting your life in jeopardy isn't something that I want to do. And if I'm being completely honest myself, I really *could* have used your help back there. I almost didn't make it out, but I was saved regardless. I'm not someone who's going to be able to take down Azaz, but I'll find a way."

"Oh, I know you will. You've made it this far, in case you forgot. There's a part of me that wants to just drive you to the airport and let you start a new life. But, another part of me wants this done. I want him to suffer and die. I know it might be wrong of me to think that, but you can't imagine the loss I've had."

"Are you going to tell me what happened to you, then? It seems you know a lot about me, but I don't know much about you, or how *he* got to you."

Ashley sighs—goes vacant for a moment, then says, "I guess I should tell you. A long while back, after we all split from the group. Well, Frank found out where I lived, and he found out that I was living with my sister while I was training to be an

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agent. She died. He killed her.”

I can tell by the look in her eyes that the memory is painful. She wants to dream about it for as little as possible. Staying in that place is dangerous to her health. Her anxiety-stricken state is showing me that. I recognize and relate to it. I would know. And, now I know Ashley Raynes has a locked door as well. But hers is open. The latch is in place, but the draft is coming through incrementally. I wish I did it like that, instead of letting it sour over time until it imploded in a frenzy of emotions. I believe that did the most damage in the long run; keeping it inside for so long and ignoring it. Even now I try to forget my tragedies. I write them off as distant nightmares instead of recent memories. And when that happens, you never get hurt in the first place. Thinking like that is the danger, though. At some point, when you bottle enough things up, it'll get to a stage where you can't do it anymore. There's too much to take in, so everything that was once bottled up gets out like a genie in a lantern.

Ashley's demons are right here in front of me. I appreciate being let into another dimension.

Everyone has their demons. Similar demons, when judging them based on hurtful effectiveness. Gregory tried telling me, but I had to not hear them, so I could do what was needed. Jessica probably has something that torments her. Molly too, perhaps, which led her to become the same as us. More of a monster.

All of these invisible hands clawing at a person for what they've done or haven't done, or failed to stop. They're always there to remind you. You can shut them away until a later date. Or, you can face them and let them cut you up until you've barely made it out alive.

Are you going to talk about your mother then, huh? You

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ready to have that discussion?

Not yet. I will, in time, but please not yet!

We're *all* bad. Every one of us. Me thinking of myself as a higher member of society for some arbitrary reason was a coping mechanism. A way to let myself believe I was above everyone else. Some extreme conclusion drawn so I seem normal. But not just normal; more than normal. I'm anything but. Not in a good way, not in a, "Oh, look at me, I'm so quirky and weird!" But in a way that makes me feel dead or that I need to be dead.

Because you're right. I'm that little cliché voice in your head that you make up for attention. Where you were an alcoholic cop working on the case. You couldn't handle your anger or liquor. When really, you're just acting for an audience and making a fool of yourself. Because that's what you do, you abysmal "human" being. Obviously, that whole "molestation" thing never happened. Or if it did, you deserved it. I mean really, an uncle? Seriously? That's some made-up shit or a desperate cry for attention. That doesn't happen to men. Oh wait, you're not a man!

That doesn't help either. All this time I've heard that voice and used it to look high and mighty. It annoys you, too, doesn't it? You've been sick of me complaining, but I must sound like a handful of daisies compared to those pricks... Now those voices will make me come back down to earth. Why should I let something like that turn me into what it says I am? If I use it to better myself, that will be how I win. And if I win, that'll show who's boss.

None of this can happen yet. There's still one roadblock in my way, and he's sitting in a comfy hotel room.

Does he have Jessica locked in the bathroom? She's taped

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into the tub and he's spraying boiling water onto her skin. After that, he's raping her and raping her again. And you're already too late!

Fuck that voice, it's just spurring me on. It knows the urgency, so it's helping me stay focused, that's all. I thank that voice.

"I'm sorry, I zoned out," Ashley says.

So did I.

"I . . . It's hard to talk about, y'know?" Ashley speaks again. "I dunno, there's not much to say. The reason I want you to use the heroin is because my sister was sick. Nothing serious, but she was in hospital for a while. And . . ." She cries out that same, restrained tear, but remains composed. "Azaz had been watching for a while. So, one time, he goes in there and he gets the drug that put her in the fucking place—God, that bastard doesn't lack irony. I'll give him that." Ashley wipes her tear and sniffs. "He made it look like it was her fault, but I've known all this time. I planned for so long to kill him. I was gonna make him feel that same pain—watch as he choked on his own vomit."

"I'm sorry," I say in an unhelpful, tired voice. "That heroin's gone. Don't suppose you've got another syringe somewhere?" I smile again, trying to lighten the mood, but failing horribly.

"I don't. As long as you stuck one of the fuckers with it, that's good enough for me. I just want Azaz to be dead, that's all that matters."

"I'll try to make him suffer," I lie. At this point, I just want Azaz dead, same as Ashley. Suffering isn't high on my prerogative. When you see enough death in one day, you lose all ambition for the empty threats you screamed. It feels more passionate

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to want him to suffer, but I feel as though I'm being manipulative again. "I mean . . . I'll kill him. Whatever it takes."

She nods and remains quiet. Then she says, "There's one person you didn't mention in the list."

"Yes."

The person comes back to me. I fear for my life once again.

"We're talking about Lox," Ashley says. "He's still alive. I'm not sure if you should even give him a second thought. We can formulate a plan, but Lox is not important. In fact, he's the *person* I know the least about. I don't know when he was hired to join Azaz, and I don't know where he's from, his real name, where he lives. And, if I'm being *completely* honest with you, I don't want to find out anything about him. He's like a ghost that just shows up from time to time. Like a hired, living scarecrow. Everyone knows that if you have that sick fuck on your team, no one will mess with you. Stay away from him if you can."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"Good. Are you ready for this? We're almost there."

"I'm not, but I'll manage."

"I'm sure you will."

Ashley parks up and I look at her.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'll keep watch. If a surprise comes my way, I'll be able to buzz you on this phone. If you press this button here three times, in rapid succession, I'll know something's wrong. I'll come up there to help. Right now, I think I'm more useful watching for suspicious activity. And trust me, I know when something looks wrong, I've been in the game awhile."

"Good to know. If he does kill me, just make sure the girl he's hurt gets out. She might already be dead, or she might have

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already found a way to escape—got out of there. I don't know, but just make sure he dies if I fail.”

“You set 'em up, and I'll knock 'em down.” She smirks, giving me a bit of hope. “See ya soon, Ethan.”

I step out of the car and look up at the tall building.

If the place has a room 218, then you already knew it was going to be a massive place.

Yeah, I did.

Ashley has booked me into the hotel already. She's done some FBI magic to get me a room now. All I need to do is show my ID at the front desk and head upstairs. Not only has Ashley booked me a room, but she's booked the next dozen rooms surrounding Azaz's. A smart move for sure. I can't help thinking I'll need more than the assurance of being able to make a lot of noise killing the man.

Ashley's also kindly given me a cap, so I can keep my head down. My appearance hasn't improved, so I don't need to show myself more than necessary. Ashley has cleaned me up a bit and given me a new shirt. I've been sprayed with deodorant, and she's managed to get all the blood off my face. The broken nose is not a good look. The bruising it's causing is unpleasant. Imagine a sad panda who'd been in the ring for five rounds. But now, I just look like a guy who's had a bad day with the added black eyes. The hospital can wait for now, as it seems as though my day will get much worse before it gets better. Frank Dalacmont is a big guy—I've already felt the power of his punch. Can a nose get any more broken?

Upon approaching the tower, police cars are scattered around. I pay them no mind but realize I'm a wanted fugitive.

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Even if they won't recognize me, it's still frightening to think I could be caught at any moment.

You should get caught. You killed your d—

You killed him and now they're going to catch you. Look at that one officer, he's looking right at you.

I compliment the thought for giving me a heads up and carry on.

The reception area is practically empty. A few professional members of the high elite scatter around. Azaz's fraudulent money has bought him this place and it's disgusting. Even though Ashley has paid for the room I'll be staying in, I don't usually like to take things that aren't mine. Under the current circumstances, I can let this go. Or maybe I'm being hypocritical in my egotistical mind. No, I'm not.

"Hello sir, are you staying with us today?" the receptionist asks me.

"Yes, ma'am. I made reservations earlier. Under the name Michael."

"Ah, of course! Mr. Michael, is that correct?"

"Oh, . . . yes, here's my ID." My mind races as I worry.

Ashley and I went over the plan. The receptionist would run a quick background check and everything would be fine. But if it isn't, everything is over, isn't it? Right? Can you help if something goes wrong?

"Everything checks out, sir. You'll be up in two one-seven B." She hands me my ID and a card with my room number on it. "Would you like some assistance with your ba—"

There are no bags in my hands.

"No, I can handle myself. Thank you for your help, ma'am."

I turn and leave.

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I take the stairs, not wanting to be caught in a confined space. Getting into an elevator isn't a huge worry of mine, but they're a space you can get trapped in easily. Right now is not the time to be taking silly risks like earlier.

My borrowed phone vibrates in my pocket.

"Hello?" I say when I pick it up.

"Ethan. I'm assuming you made it through. There's a tracker on that phone so I can see your exact location. And don't worry, we're on a secure line. The last thing I'd want is for any of this to get out there. I also see you're taking the stairs. I would have thought you'd be done with walking by now."

"Need time to think."

"Right. Just focus and everything will be okay. If it comes to it, I can always get the police's attention."

"No. No police. I can't get arrested yet. Even if I kill Azaz, I want to be locked away in my own time. I already know I deserve to be arrested. I still haven't been in captivity for long enough, or maybe I haven't suffered enough yet."

"Stop talking like that. If it's the choice between dying and getting arrested, you should do the obvious."

"I know. But let me do this first. Is there any way you can keep an eye on Azaz? How do I know he's even still in?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I have my ways of knowing when he's in."

"That's all I need to know then. Speak to you soon."

The numbers go up, one by one. Each floor becoming as similar as the last. Finally, I reach floor twenty. There's an A, B, and C area. I walk through the correct one and make my way to my room. Room 217B is in front, but I can't help looking at 218B. It's as if the door reads 666. I avoid a direct stance at the

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door, so if *he's* looking through the peephole, he won't be able to identify me. I swipe my keycard on the electronic lock and enter my room.

It's nice. It feels like a different world than the one I've been subjected to for far too long. There's chocolate on the pillows, freshly done sheets, a mini-fridge. It could bring a tear to a person's eye if they dealt with what I (justifiably) had to deal with.

As soon as I see the spotless bathroom, I fling myself toward the shower; ripping off my scruffy attire in the process. It warms me. I laugh to myself. The giggling is scarily happy. Too happy to be normal. I still manage to keep it to a reasonable level, despite the strangeness of it. The Dove soap fills every crevice, taking out all the muck that has been making my skin crawl. Shampoo and conditioner lather the tension out of the hair follicles. I start to feel like a person again.

I finish my first shower, then shower again. Overall, I spend about an hour and a half in the bathroom. The leftover time is spent grooming myself. The beard goes straight away. Unfortunately, an electronic shaver is not available to me. But, a pair of scissors are in the drawer to the side of the steamed-up mirror. I take the scissors out and begin to chop off the ugly facial hair with glee. I look to my hanging locks of head hair. The now-cleaned hair looks fine, but I can't have it for tomorrow. If for some reason, I get grabbed, I don't want to give Azaz a handle to do so. He won't grab me, I know this for a fact, but I need to avoid any mistakes here. I pick up the scissors again, cutting away. Massive strands go everywhere as I remove mounds of overgrown hair. I finish up and look at my pale, hollowed features. My face is black and blue, with my nose going to the right. It's pulverized, but still functional as I breathe a whistling breath.

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The overall job is not great, but beggars can't be choosers. It will have to do. Something that won't do, is the heap of clothing bundled up by the door. I throw the clothes into the cleaning basket, then open the blinds to the world. The outside sees my naked figure, in all of its glory. My reflection shows in the glass. I can see all the small scars and imperfections. Now, they don't repulse me as much. Everyone from outside can behold me—if they'd like. I'm completely impartial to the affairs of everyone else. I'm liberated, but there's the itch that must be scratched when I am ready. The scars that are too painful to look at. Not because they make me look ugly, but because they make me *feel* ugly. Maybe Mom wasn't the pinnacle of parental care.

She did beat you. Jason was right, and you ignored him. He wasn't perfect either, but he told you the truth for once, and you turned a blind eye to it. Because you turn a blind eye to all of your problems when they're too tough to deal with.

Yes, I can see. I don't need to reaffirm my knowledge of the events or even revisit them. It's the same with Henry. I will NEVER get over what was done to me. This was assured from day one. I can move on from the manifesting resentment for myself, nevertheless. I need to, if I am to become better.

I will become better.

My phone rings on the floor. I pick up and Ashley is waiting.

"You should get some sleep, Ethan. You're not going to get much done while exhausted. I can wake you when you need to be up."

"That should be fine. Thank you. I'll need a change of clothes. Think you could send up room service to handle that?"

"I don't run the h—Sure."

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“Great. I’ll be ready, Ashley.”

Am I becoming transfixed on altruism? Can you be too altruistic, anyway?

“That’s what I like to hear. But you’re not ready yet. I don’t suppose you’re planning on hitting him to death. There’s a few ways you can go about doing this. I know Azaz takes sleeping pills. You crush those up and put them in his drink, he won’t wake up. I would prefer a more painful approach, if I could be picky, but it’s an option. You could get a knife from the kitchen, stab him up. I’d love to see that in a report. But again, as long as that fucker dies.” The darkness in her voice is noticeable.

“I think I have something else in mind,” I say while thinking back to seeing Azaz last. I know a justified way.

“What would that be?”

“It’ll be in the report. All you need to know is he’ll be dead.”

“If you want to keep it as a surprise, that’s fine with me. Just get it done . . . please.”

Azaz pointed a gun at me the last time I saw him. George’s special Glock. If I find that, I’ll be able to use it against him. Or there’s something I somehow forgot about. The piano wire I’ve carried for so long. I can finally use it to squeeze every last drop of life from him. My bones may be brittle, and my muscles thinned, but tying a slender rope over his windpipe seems better. It might be stupid, but Azaz is dying regardless of what I do. I’d rather hear him choke out with my arms having most of the control. I decide I need to do it. If all else fails, I’ll make sure I have another weapon for more convenient killing, just in case.

I walk to the cleaning basket and pull a face as I search for my sock. I find it, pulling the thin wire out. Like I’m pulling fishing line from a trout’s mouth.

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“Stay safe, Ethan. I’ll call you when it’s almost time.”

I collapse into the warm bed with the wire still in my hand. I fall asleep before my head hits the pillow—the wire still clutched next to me like a child cradling a teddy bear.

It was the best night’s sleep I ever had. I went out like a light, only to be awoken by that vibrating.

Now that I’m partially awake, I answer the call, and for some reason, I ask who it is, but I realize my strange error.

“It’s me. You’re up. I’ve got no movement down here, and I haven’t had any alerts that he’s left the room. I can tell you this, I looked into his stay. It’s a complete breach of privacy laws, but if you don’t tell anyone, I won’t either. He has a guest staying with him.”

That’s all I need to hear. I wake myself and put my head to the wall, listening in for clues. Music is playing, but I can’t tell what kind. Azaz does like his tunes. It’s probably Mathew’s phone loaded with jams he stole.

The time is 9:30 p.m. and it’s unlikely anyone will be asleep. There’s not much way of knowing, but from being in close proximity with Azaz, he didn’t give any hints. He would leave the warehouse at random times when I was in my cell. He’d return in the mornings, then rinse and repeat.

“Okay Ashley, I’m going in. The door should be unlocked, right?”

“Yes. Last time Frank went in, I kept the door unlocked automatically. Again, another complete abuse of power. I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“It’s time I went. I’ll talk to you when this is all done. Bye.” My optimism has a dash of falseness sprinkled in as I talk.

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I have no idea if I'll be making it out of the Tarrow Hotel, but this will be where I get to decide how my life is spent. I won't cower anymore; I'll fight the monster at the door. I'll rescue someone, instead of letting the victim be harmed.

Lightning crackles out of the window, lighting up the room in a flash of white. The large bolt tears the dark sky apart. I see it as my true alarm bell. I'm not looking at a sunset, which is something to bear in mind. It comforts me.

I look at a care package placed out by the door.

I didn't even hear anyone come in.

Clothes, sleeping pills, a knife, and other various items are there. Special items for a special person. I don't mind being the patsy I so obviously am. Ashley and whoever else can use me however they want. Justified cause.

I push the sleeping pills aside, but pick up the knife and place it in my back pocket. Then, I get changed.

I creep out of my room and step out into the hallway.

Room 218. It looks daunting but inviting. An alluring attraction. A place of not yet revealed evil. Wickedness and debauchery are what I imagine to be beyond. Surprises are everywhere nowadays, so I brace for impact as I touch the door handle. It opens without a sound, so I enter with my fresh socks touching the carpet. I'm as quiet as a mouse.

Music *is* playing. It's "Happy Together" by The Turtles. A good song once again, but the taste is held by someone I can't stand, so the music does not fill me with any kind of emotion. I try to think of Mathew's choice instead and it raises my optimism by 0.1 percent.

There's a light on in the bathroom and the shower's running. I take my trusted wire and keep it in my left hand. The knife

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stays in the back pocket for emergency use only. I spot Azaz's stolen gun on a table in front of me and realize how lucky I am to be within a reasonable distance of it. There's a TV on, with some game show playing. The sound of the TV is either off or deafeningly low—the music predominates.

"If I should call you up, invest a dime," the lead singer sings on.

Lines of cocaine are on the same table along with a leather bag. There's someone on the couch. I might not have wanted to see her when I came in. I did notice her head pop up from the couch, even when I didn't want to.

But she is. Her pretty black hair is being brushed by her gorgeous hands. The towel she has on is loose fitting and her feet are propped up, resting on the table, right next to the weapon. I creep up to her and watch. The closer I get, the more I notice that butterfly tattoo I once stupidly hated. I'm a child looking at wind chimes on a hot summer's day.

"Sounds like a stupid idea to me," she says. I realize just how much I've missed that voice.

"And you say you belong to me,"

"Well, he might think again, the fucker . . ." Azaz says from inside the shower; the sound of the running water muffling him.

"and ease my mind."

"Ugh, fine. Come on and take it," she says with an irresistible giggle.

"Imagine how the world could be,"

"Maybe you should come here and I'll pull it out. You know how rough I am."

Jessica laughs again and continues brushing her hair.

"so very fine."

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I try not to yell in anguish. I instead remove all thought and go into sleeper mode. I take one step too far—Jessica’s head turns. We lock eyes. I put my hands out flat in a sign of mutual peace and silence. Two palms forward in a protest of violence.

“So happy together.”

Our lock breaks when Jessica darts her eyes to the table. I know what might happen, but I’m not killing her. I’ve killed enough people today, and out of all the people, Jessica does not deserve it. I’m going to grab her and talk with her, and I’m going to say:

Jessica—don’t!

Ethan! You’ve come, you’re finally here. He’s in there, he’s kept me locked up for weeks. Get me OUT of here!

Don’t worry, I’ll just take that gun and I’ll barge into that bathroom—I’ll gun him down! I’ll empty the whole clip into him. After that, we’ll leave. How’s that sound?

It soun—

Jessica jumps for the Glock, but the piano wire is (hesitantly) clenched between both of my fists. The wire even makes a *twanging* sound as Jessica makes her move.

“I can’t see me lovin’ nobody but you.

“For all my life.”

I pull her neck back with the force of a thousand men. Why would she reach for the pistol? There’s no reason to, and yet she has. She grapples my hands as the music plays in the background; the lyrics are no longer registering in my brain. She tries her hardest to get me to loosen my grip on the private hanging currently taking place. She digs her beautiful, painted nails into my knuckles. I don’t feel it. I feel nothing for anyone. My admiration has turned to nothingness—a deep unfeeling loss I never

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wanted to admit. This could be my fatal flaw, my Achilles heel. Azaz has his temper and I have my vicious cycle of overthinking and obstinance toward the truth of my life.

With that reality check in place, I now know how much of a threat Azaz is. I've always known, but the clarity has not been focused on him. Jessica made herself a threat by turning my trust into danger. There is still no anger in my killing, however, just a life that needs to go. A life I had grown close to being fond of. Two people who had let me down. Jessica could still have been kept as a hostage, but that's my wishful thinking in place. That same stubborn viewpoint. Always giving me relief when it's not needed—never giving me realism when necessary.

After a while, I begin to watch the game show. The silly man has fallen at the last hurdle. By hurdle, I mean the last question.

What is the capital of China?

“Korea? Is it Korea?” the man says.

Beijing. Too easy, next one.

Jessica is staring up at me with puppy-dog eyes. I stare back at the screen and whimper in a way I've never heard before. Maybe I've heard a whimper that's been *similar*, but not *this*. I carry on holding my grip as Jessica stops fighting me. It's as if she's forgiven me already. She even whispered to me that she's *sorry* and—

But the wire was wrapped around h—

—that she understands why I had to do it. She's nice to me, even as she's dying.

“Thank you. I'm sorry,” I say.

I see her letting go, so I release my grip. I cradle her in my arms as she dies, not being repulsed by her touch. Jessica can

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touch me if she wants, she's not like everyone else who *hurts* me.

The music peters to a close as the scene ends in tragedy.

Shakespearean in all of its disastrous calamity. Poetic injustice for a delicate flower being crushed under a boot.

"Everythin' okay, babe?" Azaz says as the shower stops running. "You're quiet."

I don't move in the crucial moment I should have. The plan will go off without a hitch if I just get my ass in gear and walk around the couch and take the gun. But I don't, I keep myself there, unbelieving of what has happened and what I've done. I can't stop myself from crying, so I gradually get louder with my sobs.

Blubbing like an idiot.

Please, just let me have this ONE MOMENT!

"Babe? Pass me my shirt, I think I left it out there."

Azaz walks into the room with just jeans on. He's drying his dark, cropped hair with a towel. He's also looking concerned. That concern drops when he sees me. It turns to anger as a flash of lightning destroys the darkness for a lingering moment.

Azaz pounces forward. I go into sleeper mode again, letting go of Jessica with remorse. I put my hand on the golden gun and flip the table in Azaz's direction. It hits him fully, spreading cocaine into his face and sending the bag in a sideways direction. He brushes the powder off and pushes the table aside with ease.

I back up to the end of the room, hoping I can explain why I killed Jessica. Not for any reason that would spare me from Azaz, but for my peace of mind. An explanation from either me or him, as to what is going on here. I already know what's going on, but I want to hear something a bit more pleasant.

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The man doesn't stop as I go against the glass. I fire a shot into his side as he approaches. He doesn't stop again, but makes a grunting sound. The next shot hits his thigh. He grunts again. This time he puts his hand over the wound and charges on. He's a foot away and within too close of a proximity for me to get off a successful hit. He rams me against the glass screen and I wrestle with his toned arms as I feel a shattering behind me. I pull the gun down low, aim it with a twist of my wrist. I pull the trigger four times in quick succession. Azaz doesn't seem to even notice he's being shot. Instead, he reaches up with his meaty hand and he pushes my head to the balcony.

I'm outside. He's pushed me through a glass screen and into the cool air.

We take our time resisting each other's motives. I do not relent in my need to kill, and Azaz does not give up on throwing me from this twenty-plus-story building.

The gun in my hand slips. My last intention is for me to give the madman a loaded gun. There have been six shots so far, so the battle hasn't been won for me yet. I notice Azaz tiring, so I know I have the upper hand. I hold the pistol out to my left, but he seizes my wrist. I twist my arm under his pinning hold, moving myself to a more comfortable position. When Azaz continues to block my movement, I reach with my other hand to the knife. As I pull near my rear, I feel warm blood. I think the knife penetrated my skin as I fell. I can't care right now. I throw George's pistol behind me, over the balcony. When Azaz realizes I could in fact kill him, he gets desperate. This is no longer a case of picking me up like some oversized plushie. It's a case of making me physically submit to his overpowering strength. He looks worried. This decision in his face has been made. He sees me as

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a threat for the first time. His hands move from my wrist and chest and go to my neck. A heavy clamp on my windpipe that makes me feel an ounce of blood leave my brain straight away. The force is unbearably great, so I loosen myself under it. The knife in my left hand slips from my grip from the sheer amount of blood covering it. It's just out of reach now! I can feel myself slipping away due to the strangulation.

Is this you finally accepting your fate? This isn't like with Marcel, y'know. Nobody is crawling on the floor behind Azaz to kill him. You're on your own. There's Ashley's phone that you can emergency alert, but will you stoop that low? Getting the police to raid in here and take your glory? No, you've already killed the guy, so let him kill you now.

I ignore the voice this time. It's not helping me and it never will.

I reach down and try to go for my pocket; feeling a similar incomprehension of the situation. It's out of reach. Like when Azaz had the gun in the cell. And Marcel, when I tried to grab the piano wire. AND, just like the fucking knife I had a second ago! I can't get anything; I just can't do it. Neither the piano wire, nor the phone, nor the knife.

My vision fades, but I try one last desperate attempt to dodge the bullet. I curl my legs up into a ball and put them under Azaz's CPR position. As I feel the weight being pushed on me by his arms, I notice the grip is getting softer by the second. He's leaking blood all over me. He won't be conscious for much longer.

I'll be dead much sooner.

I kick out my legs and get him to stagger back for three whole seconds before he plunges his fingers to my neck again.

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Before he does, I gasp sweet, refreshing night air into my collapsing lungs. My vision resumes as well, but it is getting edged in discoloration again.

My pocket vibrates as I feel Ashley's need to tell me something. She could have seen me in that room for too long and now she's worried. There will be a police raid taking place shortly, but I want Azaz to die before then. I need to ignore the call while I fight for my life. I crouch my legs again, ready to push underneath my villain—my monster. He's learned my tactic and he's changed his position by placing his backside over my waist. It gives me an intense, claustrophobic reaction. Anxiety swills. I become even more trapped.

With both of my hands free, I have a chance to use them in some way. I put three fingers from my right hand into his gut where the bullet wounds have torn out chunks. I dig in and feel around, trying to cause damage. He doesn't care, he just carries on with his strangulation that's losing me precious time. The adrenaline powering him up is too great to tamper with, so causing him physical pain won't do a thing.

With a final, choked breath that almost makes me lose enough stored-up air to pass out, I speak. "Ashley . . ." I say. Azaz's grip loosens the tiniest bit, and I manage to suck in a smidge of air. "Ashley's here . . . Down . . . there . . . You killed her sister . . . you stupid fuck . . ."

The clenching grasp on my neck loosens to a safer degree. The rock-hard tension in his thumbs turns to a placid jelly.

"What did you say?"

I don't respond. I plant both of my hands on his, digging my fingers and thumbs into the skin. I yank at whatever I can grab, and I feel Azaz's left thumb dislocate. His right doesn't, but I

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can see that he's bothered by the injury I've inflicted. He looks at his left hand and shoots his angry eyes on me. He punches me. I realize how tired I am of getting hit. This doesn't hurt as much as the others I've had today, so I shake it off. The mixture of blood loss and setting-in pain must have affected that. On a good day, that would have knocked me out until tomorrow morning.

After he delivers his blow, I deliver my own. I stretch out my right hand as far as it will go, pushing it into Azaz's throat with deathly momentum. Azaz snaps back and puts one hand to his wrecked Adam's apple.

I get up and immediately fall back down again. We're both writhing in pain, but it still seems as though I will die first.

Azaz groans a long, resistant war cry. I look at him from on the floor, watching as he gets to a standing position without ease. He staggers forward and drops to one knee in front of me.

"You . . . You fuckin' cunt . . ." he says.

"This is done. Lie down and die. I'll join you soon, . . . you unhinged, unbearable asshole." So much for my whole "unemotional approach."

"Oh, we're not done here." He tries to take a step from his kneeling position but falls back to it after a failed attempt to move. He sighs and plops himself back down.

My phone vibrates again, but I don't have the energy to answer it.

"You played it well, friend," Azaz says, taking a beer bottle off the floor. It's empty, so he tries shaking another with the same result.

"You too. Time to go, though. I *won*."

Azaz can't admit defeat, so he continues his search for a beer. He comes back victorious. The first and last victory to be

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had for him today. He looks at the bottle cap and shrugs. He breaks the top of the bottle on the floor—spilling heady, disgusting, revolting, delicious alcohol into the carpet. He puts the broken end into his pursed lips and takes a long sip. His spittle comes back bloody, but he still gives a refreshed “*Ahhhh*” when he’s done. He offers me some, but I reject.

“Y’know, no one likes a smug winner,” he says.

“I deserve it. After all this shit, I deserve it.”

“We both deserve to be put down. Fuckin’ thing’s a mess, pal. At least you’re here with me. My friend.”

“I’m not your fucking friend, Frank.”

Azaz goes mute, then laughs after a while. “Course not.” Takes another swig. “You know me, I guess. In some way. You always reminded me of someone.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh yeah. You remind me of my brother, man. My brother. Ya both had your ways of gettin’ out of all the shit. No one would blame you. No, not Azazel, he don’t mean no harm. Until he did, hah!”

I don’t know what to say, but I listen with an attentiveness I’ve never had to another person. I despise him, but there’s also a relation I can’t quite put my finger on.

“You were both always too clever for your own good,” he carries on. “Got you in more trouble in the end. So fuck off.” Azaz throws the bottle at me. It explodes against my back, adding to the knife-wound pain.

Azaz tries to get up once more from his sitting place, but he doesn’t even manage to move an inch.

“Why’d you have to do this? You’ve ruined it! You stupid son of a bitch!” he says.

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I see him reach for something in the darkness, but he throws it to the side after fiddling with it for a short time. There's blood pooling under him, to a degree where it looks like he'll be dragged under the ocean of life's liquid. His eyelids flutter and he begins to nod his head down. Then, his eyes close and he begins to snore.

I get up with creaking joints, then walk to the exit. I'm alive, but just about.

I look down and see a lit-up phone. Recent calls display; a phone number has been dialed.

The police.

I swear to myself and I swear to Azaz for being such a coward. To call the police on the brink of loss is a level I did not expect him to stoop to. But he did and I should not be surprised with the disappointments I have experienced with others.

I steady myself as I walk, trying not to fall in the low-visibility environment. I pass Jessica with remorse but do not let myself get lost again. I believe if I look at her face one more time, I might stay for good.

I carry on.

The door creaks.

It opens and in steps Lox.

I look into his piercing, blank eyes and I lose all hope of living. He comes to me, looks around by moving only his neck. His head is on a pivot, scanning the area for ways to murder me. After that, he looks back into my very mind.

If he was my monster, I would never be able to face him.

Lox bends his neck in a look of curiosity; a movement a beloved pet might give you when you make calling noises to them.

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I'm a second away from yelling in terror. Lox takes a freakish step toward me and I halt again—frozen in a deep, rising dread. He takes another step and another step and another step, and then he goes past me. He bends down with straightened back posture, picks up the leather bag from the floor. He's in my peripheral vision, examining the contents of the bag, before getting up. I do not get to see what's in the bag. I don't mind having that mystery unsolved. He takes one last look at Azaz's dying person, before returning to the hallway of the hotel's twentieth floor. He does not turn back, he just goes.

I leave it about thirty seconds before I also go, not wanting to see Lox's dead stare and shiny skin ever again. I don't get my request, as when I enter the hallway, Lox is looking in my direction as he steps into an elevator.

Paramedics tumble out of the opposite elevator door. There's a collection of CPD patches also. I could spot the insignia from ninety miles away.

How did they get here so quickly if these aren't Ashley's people?!

I don't think, I run. A pair of boots chase after me, but I don't get to see the officer who will be responsible for putting an end to my crimes. Probably a newbie who will get praised for his act of bravery as I get put away for life.

I dash down the stairs I came up in, clumsily falling down some steps. I manage to catch myself upright on the handrail most of the time, but other times, I don't get so lucky.

I feel the vibration in my pocket for a third time, so I decide to pick—

Buckshot showers from above, hitting the wall ahead. A

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tiny pellet rips into my scalp, making me leap in fright. I tumble down the stairs as I drop the phone. Me and the device land hard onto the landing that's leading to the next set of stairs. I get up and carry on running. The phone is not essential. As long as I get outside, all will be fine.

Another shotgun shot sends me sprinting. Another eighteen flights of being chased by an officer doesn't sound easy. I need to make evasive maneuvers. A, B, and C are labeled ahead. I throw my body into a random door that even I don't think about. I limp forward, knowing the chase is over, but still feeling an unreal eagerness to carry on going, to not give up. If it comes to it, I can walk back out into the staircase and throw myself down. I'd rather it didn't come to that, but getting arrested still feels unacceptable by my standards. At this rate, I won't be arrested by the trigger-happy cop.

I try my keycard on the fifth room ahead. It doesn't work, so I knock on the door in urgency. I shake my head, not understanding my game plan here. I'm running on pure instinct right now and that instinct is running on fumes, so my brain is frayed. I forget my current action and instead continue down the hall. Each door shows nothing new (apart from the number change), so I begin to panic. There's no clear path in sight, apart from the fire exit. The door caves in behind me. I make my choice. It's either I give up now and spare myself from getting shot or I try to leave this world with dignity.

Your dignity will be you laying there, your guts splayed out on the floor and you vomiting out blood!

I close the fire exit door behind me and pick out a fire extinguisher from a glass case to my side. I try to jam the equipment into the door, pulling the nozzle through the door handle

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and wedging it in place.

The fire extinguisher erupts in an explosion of white. It goes into my sockets and fills around my eyeballs. Unable to see, I stagger back. The canister must have been shot by the rookie cop. There's no way to justify use of a firearm in a public place without deadly force being determined. And right now, I wouldn't have thought an officer would know of my identity. Unless the receptionist's background check came back with a problem? Even then, it's been too long for there to be a random error to occur.

The door is being forced open and I know it's time to plead for a quick death or detainment. Running is out of the question. I taste pennies in my spit and fire in my lungs.

"Please—Unarmed," I say, winded.

I'm met with nothing. No order to show my hands (not like it would make much difference in the misty cloud). No order to get down on the ground. No order to stop running.

"I'm surrendering—I"—A crack of the shotgun rings in my ears as a blinding pain removes my vision. I keel forward, not knowing where I've been hit. I feel around for entry wounds, but I find nothing in my helpless search. I try to look around, for any kind of awareness to take over. To answer a question that will never be answered. Out of all the ways to die, this is a way I would have never expected. A misted hallway and an officer with an itchy trigger finger. I replay events in my head that have brought me to this time and place. I wonder if there was anything I missed, so I can find fulfillment in my final moments. Just like my scenery, it's all blank. There's no intervention to state the ambiguous. There are plodding boot stamps ahead, getting ever so close.

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Shit, you're really dying. You're feeling that coldness setting in. You're losing blood like Azaz. At this point, you won't be recovering. At least, it doesn't look like it.

Thanks for the update. I did all I set out to do, so I can die happy.

You can die happy? Here? Really? You must be experiencing the effects of blood poisoning then.

Or maybe this is all an entryway. A transition to whatever lies beyond. Hell never looked so *white*.

Two pairs of legs present themselves in a blurry vision and I'm picked up with care.

"You're shot," a recognized voice says.

And then fading light turns to gray as my body goes numb. I embrace the lack of living likelihood. I'm going somewhere else. Somewhere nice. Somewhere *familiar*.

EPILOGUE

PART ONE OF TWO

I wake up—darkness being replaced with brightness. Another day is on the horizon as my 7:00 a.m. alarm clock wakes me up with a gentle, gradual song. I look to my left and see the love of my life. My rock, my one and only. She stirs as her arched back makes way for rows of curly blonde hair.

I'm the luckiest man in the world, I think.

Her smooth skin looks delicious, so I take a playful bite.

“Ow! Nathan, you little . . .”

“Little what? Care to repeat yourself?”

I grab Autumn by her pelvis and pull her nudity toward mine.

“No sir,” she says provocatively.

We cuddle and hold each other until I figure out I may have responsibilities for the morning. I kiss Autumn’s neck some more; I realize that’s a mistake when she gets even more turned on.

“I’m sorry, love. I’ve got the-the thing,” I say.

“Yes I know, Nathan. Up you get. Up and at ’em.”

I’m up and picking out clothing from my wardrobe. I can see Autumn checking out my rear from the mirror. I tut at her and she makes a pleasing groan while laying her head back down for the rematch with sleep. Meanwhile, I get my ironed shirt and

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pants ready, put on my black suit and tie. Black leather shoes cover my feet, and a big coat for the winter encases my body.

It's late November. Everyone's preparing for Christmas. Halloween came and went in a few days in October. Christmas time arrives before the month it's celebrated on even comes. That's when you know it's a special holiday.

Before I go downstairs, I enter Daniel and Johnny's bedrooms. I inch the door open; they see me straight away. Sunday mornings are spent with laziness (rightly so), so they're usually in a deep sleep at this time. But this morning, they wake up due to the slightest creak of the door. Then all hell breaks loose.

"Daddy! Daddy!" my older child, Daniel, squeals in delight.

"*Cwismas tymmmm, Cwismas tymmmmm!*" Johnny screams.

"It's not Christmas Johnny." I chuckle. "C'mere Daniel."

I give the more excited child a hug, but return the affection to Johnny also. He carries on singing his rogue-covered version of the chart-topping Christmas song.

"Daddy, where are you going today?" Daniel says.

"Well *ohhhhh* Danny boy . . . I have work."

"What work?"

"*Hmm*, well, I'm going to that place we had a chat about on Monday. Remember? You see, what I didn't tell you was that the man who wasn't very well was someone I used to work with."

"Was he a policeman, same as you, Dad?"

"He was. He wasn't a very nice man though, so we had to make him leave. After that, he didn't get the help for him being sick, and he did some *bad* things."

"Wah he do?" Johnny demands.

"He was sick? Like he had the cold?" Daniel says.

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“No, no—I can’t tell you, boys. Very classified information. If I told you, I’d have to *gut ya!*” I stab Johnny with an imaginary knife. He giggles in my arms as I munch on his neck. The shrieks of baby laughter warm my heart. “You two should get back to bed. You’re never up this early usually. Did someone *pee the bed?*”

They both giggle and tell me to shut up. I walk away like a disgraced comedian as they jump back into their beds. As I’m about to close my door, they begin talking again.

“C’m on boys. It’s bedtime.”

“We had a dream,” Daniel says.

“Hmm?”

“Dat’s why we awake!” Johnny says.

“What dream? You had a nightmare?”

“You died, Daddy. You got shot in my dream. I woke up Johnny—I was scared.”

“Just a dream. Back to sleep now.” I shush them and close the door.

A strange dream for a young child, but kids have active imaginations. Premonitions of the future are usually not had in a racing car bed.

I walk back to the stairs and go down. I grab myself two slices of bread and pop them in the toaster. While that’s going on, I get a glass of orange juice and watch some news.

“Chaos in Chicago. Armed shooter at the Tarrow Hotel in Illinois takes the life of an unwitting resident. The scene of the attack is”—I turn the TV off and take a sip of my drink. Out pops my toast. I feel stupid for jumping.

How’d he die?

Attack from killer toast.

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I smile at my stupid joke as I butter the bread. Once the spreading is complete, I proceed to chomp on the food, already being late to my engagement for the day. I finish off my breakfast and drink my OJ in one fell swoop. I eye a big knife on the side. Some instinct tells me to borrow it, for safekeeping. Having a large knife on a kitchen surface with children around is never safe. I put the blade in my front coat pocket.

In the car, I avoid the radio and instead check my phone for texts. It's an awful habit, but it's one I can't seem to shake off. I limit myself today and check once. When there are no recent messages, I put my phone away and continue. I drive past the city and into a wilderness-infested area. Fog covers the rolling hills and large trees take over the scenery as I reach where I am headed. I'm headed somewhere special.

A few of the parked cars have already beaten me to the funeral burying.

Not an enormous amount of people are gathered around the plot of land. The deep hole leads six feet under. I stare into that chasm with strangeness. The priest of the funeral speaks with gentle words as Ethan Riley's gravestone reminds everyone of who's being buried. No one is weeping, no one is bothered. A young woman is looking at the gravestone with what looks like anger. A few other police officers are present. I greet them with firm handshakes.

David, who's worked with me for a long time is present. He also used to work with Ethan, sometimes.

"How's it going, Dave? Not a great way to be starting the day, huh."

"Yeah, you got that right."

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We both look on at the man headlining the ceremony.

“Ethan was a man with regrets,” the man says. “As we all may face hardship in our day; do not let darkness prevail. We *all* hold that darkness in our hearts, but it is our responsibility to let the light show us the way. For Ethan, this was not as easy as it may be for us. With a troubled childhood—trauma, in the tragic loss of his mother, and also having a rocky relationship with his father, we take our time now to understand that Ethan will find God’s grace, and be at peace, as his father found recently. May their souls be guided by the Lord’s wisdom.”

Ethan would have hated that.

His nihilistic blues were obvious. I try not to let myself get caught up in what Ethan was as a person, and more what he was like as an officer.

I will be sprinkling some niceties in my speech.

I get signaled to stand by Ethan’s grave. I plant my boots on the grassy earth and face the small gathering.

“I was there—as you all know. Ethan was a good guy. He had a no-nonsense approach to his work . . . and he got results. The tragedy of our healthcare system let Ethan slip through the cracks. He didn’t take his medication when it was prescribed. That’s not on him, that’s on those who swore to take care of him.

“Ethan’s father told me about what his son’s life was like. It wasn’t nice and it wasn’t pretty. We all can relate—I think. What I want everyone to know is that he wasn’t himself when he passed. He wasn’t aware of the terror he was causing on that day. He was scared, and he was confused. Now, I don’t tell this story because it makes me look like a hero. Quite frankly, I’m ashamed that I was the one to be on duty when the attack occurred. I was lucky to have been outside on that day. Many more could have

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been killed. Again, that's not Ethan's fault. So when he went, he went in peace. I tried getting him back to the paramedics that were trying their hardest to save the lives of the man and woman in question. Ethan ran too far and I couldn't get back to them in time. He died in my arms and I wish it wasn't so. The reason I wish that, is because I believe Ethan could have paid for his sins. I believe he could have been *rehabilitated*. All he needed was a helping hand. I'm sorry for everyone's loss." I nod and walk back.

"Thank you, Mr. Hall. Thank you for your kind words," the priest says while prepping for another speech himself.

I walk away. Someone follows me. I recognize her as Jason's trophy wife. A slim, pretty thing.

"Hello sir. I'm the widow of Jason Riley. Ethan's dad? My name's Abbie . . . I just wanna say, you gave him more than he deserved . . . What happened to him?"

"Are you referring to Ethan Riley? Well there's not much I can say on the matter that I just said."

"He really didn't suffer then?"

"I don't believe so, but that's not for me to say."

"Sure." Abbie fiddles with her hands. "I'm just so lost right now and I don't get the comfort I need. Everything has just been so *difficult*. You wouldn't mind getting some food with me, would you?"

I find it hard to tell if this woman is coming on to me. It looks like it, but I can't help keeping my mind pure. Reading between the lines is easy for me, but I still don't know how to react. I think about holding up my wedding ring, but I imagine myself getting a slap across the face if I did that.

"I'm sorry for your loss. For *both* of your losses. I am

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sorry,” I say and turn away, wanting to avoid the situation entirely.

As I return to my car after my brief appearance, I notice another woman watching from the distance. Silver hair and a black coat blend into the dank, smoggy morning. It’s hard to tell what she’s looking at, but she must be interested in the funeral. A friend of Ethan he kept secret? Having a prostitute as a companion was a surprise, so I don’t think anything is off the table at this point.

The woman looks at me, then turns away. I think nothing more of it and carry on.

While in the wilderness, I decide to take another trip. I weave my car through the roads like a surgeon stitching a patient. My headlights push through the fog. The turning I need to take is ahead. I go up the dirt road and past the deadfall. Broken trunks of godlike trees litter the ground. I avoid them and keep going. My tires take a beating, but I don’t let it perturb me. I know where I’m going, as I’ve memorized it.

Farther in, I start to notice the path thinning. I know I have gotten close enough to move on foot through the underbrush. So I do just that, by exiting the vehicle and walking into the foreboding forest. With a flashlight in hand, I walk over dead leaves and scattered twigs. They crunch under my weight and it feels like nature is playing me its horrible soundtrack.

I get to the barn in the middle of nowhere. It’s old but has no breakages or imperfections caused by weather or other events. I step in and breathe the sawdust-filled air. It chokes me—the dreadful taste of pine clogging me up. Birds chirp from outside as I walk to the newly installed trapdoor in the flooring panel. It blends in with the wood; isn’t noticeable at first glance. I unbolt

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it, flip the lid open, and climb down into the bunker.

And there he is. Ethan Riley, the dead man, is tied to a steel chair. He stares at me with bloodied tape covering his mouth.

“How’s your leg healing up? I’m no doctor, but I think I got all the ball bearings out. They were pretty stuck in there, weren’t they? At least we don’t have to take the leg off. The antibiotics should be doing a good deal to help as well. I’m going out soon and on the way back I’ll stock up on some more.”

He murmurs under his mouth block, so I remove the tape and let him speak. He says, “I’m ready to talk.”

“Ohh that’s great. That’s great to hear. I really think we can work through this, Ethan.” I pull up a chair next to his. I sit and grab some water on the side of the bench. I stretch to reach it.

“Please . . .” he says.

I touch his shoulder, he squirms. His large iron shackles connected to his legs and arms are unbreakable without tools. I’ve made sure to keep him secure and comfortable. I give him the water. He gulps it like a madman.

“We’re going to finally have that other talk then, Ethan. You’ve been out of it for days, but I think we should just go over what you’ve been up to. You caused a great deal of trouble for Azaz. I know that look you’re giving me. I know this isn’t what you were expecting of me. I don’t take pleasure in this. But come on, don’t be surprised. George’s hacker friend couldn’t get into our system without *some* help. I want to just mention that they got you for everything, by the way. Drill bits in his house, matching ones you purchased. Not sure how you got rid of the body, but somehow you did it. I’m not sure how you managed the disposal process. I wasn’t sure about that whole Finn fiasco until we raided your house. The sniffer dogs took their time, but they

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did their job. The chief said that we should have just given up on finding anything incriminating. But—Well, eventually we stumbled upon? Pretty big pieces of evidence. Bloodstains on your clothing. You still had the tags in them too. You knew you were going to be caught eventually. You're lucky I did.

“Now Gustavo Ornes was different. I saw how . . . you killed him, but I have to say that I'm surprised it wasn't sooner. Azaz didn't catch onto that, but he was just glad to get an extra soldier for his 'army.' Mrs. Freeshaw being killed was the straw that broke the camel's back, in my opinion. I knew Gus would either wind up dead or arrested. You made that choice for me.

“Your burner phone was brought in. We got some previous calls on there. I wish that . . . idiot didn't break it in half. That would have all been fine enough, but then you killed Azaz. I'm sure you didn't care about dying, did you? Or maybe you did—otherwise you wouldn't have ran.

“That's not important though. What *is* important, is that both Azaz and George are done. They've mostly been covered up until now. I knew you were working for one of them. Really think I wouldn't know? Truth is, you got rid of both of them.”

“Why-wo—Just *why*?” he asks.

“Why was I working with Azaz? Because that's the only way you take someone like that down. I think you know what I mean.”

“So all this time, Azaz has been corresponding with you . . . ? All this to stop his . . . operation?”

“That's right. I didn't want to, of course. If we're being honest again, I got interested when I got put on to his case. It was a small one, and it was quickly dropped due to 'unforeseen circumstances.' So yes, Ethan, I took bribes, and I let him run his

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little *operation*. Again, I did this for a reason.”

“And you were okay with human trafficking?”

“Oh come on. George wasn’t so innocent either. George managed to keep his nefarious activities secret to even his *own* crew. I’ll leave out his lesser-known criminal convictions. You don’t need to know things like that.” Ethan hangs his head. “I don’t care how Azaz did his business. I never partook. I just seized his laundered money from time to time. And with that, I tried gaining trust. Wasn’t undercover, but I think we’ve both done off-the-book activity from time to time, right? I found out you were working with George after that. So I got Azaz to do a little digging. He knew who you were, apparently. And I knew after some talking, you’d eventually get the monster arrested or killed. And then, his illegal operation could be taken away. You did well.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you did this for a good cause?”

“What? Of course I did. The ends did justify the means, but I didn’t just have some half-baked plan to topple Azaz down like that. I knew it would cause disruption, so I took advantage of it. I played both sides, just like you did. Look, I’m not trying to torture you, I want to be fair. Like we discussed. For the time being, you need to continue telling me everything. Your photographs—when did you start selling those? I wouldn’t say that was moral.”

“I’m not moral, I never said anything like that. I did it for money, that’s all it was.”

“Money, I see. I used to earn a lot, so I can understand what you mean.”

“That can’t just be the reason for what you did. It can’t be.”

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I ignore his statement, not wanting to go into things.

“I want to assist you in your troubles.”

“No,” Ethan says.

“This isn’t a deal where you have an option. I want a better life for my family, as much as anyone. And I want to help you, as well. I did say I’d help you. You’re not too far gone. But you . . . You killed your own father. How broken do you have to be?”

“You don’t know as much as you think you know about me. But I know! I regret it every day. Not because I feel sorry for the piece of shit, but because I hurt others to satisfy myself. I’ve hurt for my own personal joy.”

“Say it then,” I say, putting my hand near his leg.

“What?”

“Please, confess.”

“I already have. I’ve been doing it for so long. I’m finally done blaming others—*agh*—I confess!”

“I’m sorry,” I say, realizing I’ve gripped Ethan’s injured leg.

“I never looked at myself as the problem! I’m accepting who I am and what I’ve done—what I continue to do! I confess it, I killed my father and I regret my actions. Whether I killed him directly or not, it was in my heart to murder him, and for that I have sinned heavily. Like you’ve said to me repeatedly. I’ve sinned, but I confess, and I want to heal as a human being! I’ll go to prison! Whatever! I want to be better! Is that what you want?”

I pause and nod.

“You still have a long way to go,” I say. “It’ll be even longer before your leg heals fully, but I’ll be here. I don’t want you in

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pain from that limp. That won't be nice for anyone. But remember, you're dead, Ethan. No one can know you're here."

It looks like Ethan is about to plead with me again. He talks again after I walk back to the trapdoor.

"So you're taking down Azaz's business? You're going to get rid of it?"

"Not exactly. There's a problem that needs to be solved, but once that's dealt with, I'll fill you in." I put a hand on the ladder and almost climb.

Ethan says, "But *why*? Nathan, you're not like this. You're not someone who bends the law to their will. WHY would you even want to do this when all I want to do is confess and move on with my life?"

I think for a long time, flipping the question over and over again. Then I talk after careful consideration. "I've worked for a long time in the police, the same as you. Sometimes it was because I wanted to provide for my family, and really help the community. You know, do my job. Take down a criminal who did nothing but destroy. But there was something else in there too. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Finally, I understood why. You know when you're so *tired*? I'm not talking about tired as in, 'I'm so tired,' y'know. Like physically tired, I'm talking about mentally tired. Done. Sometimes, you need to do something. Sometimes, you want to *break* the rules when you've followed them for your entire life. Sometimes I just wanted to do something that felt so *wrong*. That sounds wrong, I know . . . Something we all do, is rationalize. We go over in our heads. We do something wrong and we rationalize it by saying, 'Well, if I do this, then this great thing will happen.' You justify it in your own way—that you're just doing it for a better purpose.

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But it's not that. Not exactly. You know what it's like to sit there and take it. I see it in your eyes. You can't control it either. A voice in the back of your head that will *never* be satisfied. Never be fucking satisfied! I'm sorry, please excuse that language, I'm sorry. What I'm trying to say, Ethan, is that I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy some of the awful things I've done. Things I will never tell anyone. I think you know what I mean, like you understand. I'll see you shortly."

He shouts again, desperate to talk more.

I drive to the hospital to finish my errands.

The look on Ethan's face was disheartening. I know he sees me as a crazy person. Maybe I am crazy. You never understand a person until they show themselves as they are. You can always be surprised by another man or woman's actions. I make sure no one knows my true feelings well. I've hidden them, much like Ethan. The difference is I've been able to do it much better. And now, I've been able to share them with another person, for the first time, just like I believe Ethan also did.

Stupid asshole.

There's a parking space close to the entrance, which I take. Into Saint Phoenix Hospital I go.

The staff are friendly with me and I return that with false happiness. I get my ordered supply of antibiotics and they turn a blind eye to the excessive amount I'm picking up. They know I'm the local hero, so me using these pills for anything strange is out of the question.

Before going back, I head upstairs for the real reason I've come. I follow the directions above to get to the intensive care unit. I swing open the door in front, just past the officer sitting

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guard, and I look at the patient lying in bed.

Frank (or better known as Azaz), is attached to an IV with tubes all around him. A science experiment gone wrong is what it looks like. I look down on him with disrespect, acknowledging his clinging life. Dying flowers sit on the bedside table, but I don't replace them. I sit next to him and look at his chiseled features. His nose is misshapen—same as Ethan's. But you can tell Azaz's broken bridge was done much longer ago. After corresponding with him for such a long time, he's now in a coma; a deep slumber he will most likely never wake from; a killer ready to be born again.

This destructive monster of a leader let all of his people die at the hands of the ex-detective. I've always known Ethan's evidential gathering was extensive while he was on forensic photography duty. That's beside the point.

Azaz breathes a staticky sigh. His chest heaves. He's living in too much luxury. Maybe he needs to be in less. Maybe he needs to die. I put my hand to the switch controlling his life. I feel guilty for the impulse, but it doesn't stop me. A heart rate monitor shows his steady pace and I get ready to pull the plug. I don't want to kill him, but if I must, I will. The staff will get in here after a short time, but Azaz will be dead and I'll still be alive. Is there another way he can die where I plead innocence, while still being reputable? I look around and see no CCTV in the room. There were cameras in the hallway, but not in the room with the VIP.

He could be useful, my mind tries to persuade me.

No, kill him. Kill the monster!

Keeping Azaz on a short leash could be difficult, but not impossible. Losing muscle mass after years and becoming a

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quadriplegic would be evil. Is it a point to consider? If I put the pillow over his face and let him die here and now, I could technically get away with this. It would seem suspicious, but who would ever defend him? I'd be an even bigger hero, to be there when he sucks in his last bit of air. I touch the wire leading to the socket. I pull it gently, toying with the idea of him dying. I can't help feeling excitement. Excitement that makes my gut swirl.

"You're going to die," I say like I want to ease him into another state.

Again, I stop myself and think for a long time.

I can do this.

I can't do this!

EPILOGUE

PART TWO OF TWO

I rest my head on the neck brace around the metal chair. It's cold and tough. I try to sleep. By some miracle, I manage it. But, it's a restless and uncomfortable sleep that wakes me up with a jolt of cramp down my back.

So here I am, back in a captured state. I need you more than ever. I have no company other than Nathan. I'd be lying if I said I suspected Nathan of working with Azaz, I already know that's stupid of me. The signs were there, but once again, I had a severe case of tunnel vision. Maybe I'm being hard on myself; there's no way I could have seen this coming. His goody-two-shoes persona was sickly sweet. I would have never thought of him as anything but a standard citizen outside of work. I suppose none of this *was* outside of work though; it was all business at the end of the day. He's gone self-righteous, it seems. His preaching about redemption and salvation is crazy. I don't see his point about anything. I don't see how he sees himself as virtuous. But, then again, there's a hint of upset in him too. Same as I.

He started lecturing me as soon as I came around from the attack in the hotel. When I have spoken, I've been drugged up and barely lucid. This has been the first time he's spoken in depth about the others. I don't know why he picked today, but I think I'm starting to see where he's coming from at last. I don't let

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violent thoughts take over my brain this time, but the voices are stronger than they've ever been.

Stupid, dumb fuck. How can someone get captured again after just getting off of their sentence? Sure you killed Azaz, but who cares? We didn't want you to go there and do your ridiculous stunt.

Is Nathan going out to visit someone? He's going to a hospital, it sounds like—You don't think . . . he's still alive, do you? No, can't be.

I need to stop thinking, for once. I already know that's impossible, but it's worth pretending.

Time passes. I look at my wounded leg again. Bandages cover the anticlimactic shotgun damage. When I did see it (as soon as Nathan used the pliers to get the pellets out), it looked bad, but nothing permanent. At least he was nice enough to use non-lethal slugs. It still hurt and I can't even bear the thought of walking on my left leg. The bruising shows how powerful the shot was. The placebo effect did a number on my psyche too. Nathan would dismiss it as a way for me to stop and be *helped*.

A noise comes from wherever the hatch leads. I lift my head to look. Nathan is back already. He's come to "heal" me. He'll keep it up until I'm all better. After that, what happens then? He'll *break* me, just like Azaz did to everyone. Nathan is not Azaz. He will never be evil, just misguided.

I can't help but dodge the uncountable amount of bullets that come my way. I have to keep doing it.

The hatch opens and Ashley jumps in. My mood does a flip of relief as she hurries to my side.

"That fucker was always shady. I knew it was him feeding Frank info on the side! Fucking snake," the elderly but nimble

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older woman says.

“You’re late.” I try and joke with my only friend.

She smiles, looking for a way to undo my heavy shackles. “We seem to keep meeting unexpectedly.”

“It wouldn’t be unexpected if you didn’t suspect Nathan. Looks like you’re right again, Agent Raynes.”

“As a woman, I’m always right,” she says as she picks up some bolt cutters. “Ahh! This’ll do.”

She doesn’t waste time. The intense stiffness in my elbows makes me ache. Seeing the bolt cutters take off the locking clamp fills me with a familiar longing for freedom.

With my shackles off, I rub my wrists to get blood flowing back into them.

“How’d you find me?”

“It took me a while to track Nathan’s tire marks. He drove here straight after they buried the coffin. Everyone thinks you’re *dead.*” *It’s very strange to be told that you’re dead.* “Had to come in on foot, but I’ve parked not too far away. There’s no way he’d even know I was here.” When Ashley is looking down at my scarred leg, she looks over at other areas. “He didn’t use this on you, did he?”

“No.”

“Well you’ll be out soon. Just hang tight.”

Azaz’s torture was effective. If Nathan got to the point of using physical abuse, I could handle it. But the mental deprivation of care during the Azaz era changed my headspace to a much darker version.

From what I’ve endured so far, it feels as though Nathan is going soft on me. He talks about assistance, but I can tell something is wrong. Luckily, it has been ended abruptly. I’m still not

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out of the mess yet. I need to escape with Ashley.

The ankle clamps break off and Ashley helps me stand. It's excruciating but necessary. I struggle along, trying not to weigh down my companion's slender frame. I feel her bony ribs dig into my side. It brings me comfort instead of disdain. I don't want to get attached again, however. I can't be hurt again like I was.

We go to the ladder; Ashley once again helps me. She supports my back as I climb up and out to freedom. She follows and we make for the door. This is when we both hear footsteps outside; the crunching of leaves.

Ashley unholsters her service pistol. She signals for me to get down. I hide behind a flimsy panel and wait. The space around me seems nostalgic.

Nathan takes a few steps forward and stops. I look toward Ashley; we don't know how to proceed. A few more steps before Nathan stops again. I look back and notice the hatch is open, emitting a small amount of light. Ashley notices too and mimics a curse. She stands up, pointing the gun. I follow her lead while heaving myself up. Nathan looks to me first. He doesn't even notice Ashley. She's bathed in shadow and silent, while the light from the bunker reveals me more so. The man I thought was nothing but a pushover grinds his teeth and throws down a bag of what I assume is the medicine.

"You shouldn't be out. We've still got work to do," he says. This is when I first start to think this isn't Nathan at all. The way he's talking is unlike himself. Maybe Lox has torn off Nathan's skin and put it on like a new mask. Some unknown Halloween sequel I've not been privy to. "I'm unarmed, but you know I need you to get back in there, no matter what. Your leg won't get you

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far, you know that.”

I see Ashley getting the drop on Nathan. The gun is leveled at his chest and she could take him out whenever. I believe she wants to hear more from Nathan, first.

“You’ll just never learn, will you?” he continues. “All that time with Azaz and you still don’t get it. You were a tool for people like him. Not me! I’m going to help you. You should have never talked to me the way you did. Treating me like someone like Azaz. You dig into everyone you know. Azaz said you were an obnoxious, self-indulgent narcissist, but I see you as scared. You needed to be stopped.”

“Give it a rest!” I shout, having had enough. “You actually are sounding like *him*. After all this time, you’re going so far over pettiness. I’m done being how I was, but you can’t accept it! Look at what *you*’ve become.”

“Get back in there, Ethan. It’s where you belong, please.” He takes a step.

“Listen to yourself. You’re obviously stuck in your head and you’re just going to wind up like me. Is that what you want, to be like . . . fucking this? Me!”

“I already have!” He puts passion in his words. “All my life, pleasing all you sc—I don’t care what you think of me. I already know. I don’t feel like myself, and I haven’t for a long time.”

“And I know what that’s like. You can find yourself—I already have. Those thoughts don’t stop, but you can overcome them. I don’t want you to die,” I say.

“To *die*? You’re going to kill me? What are you saying?”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“I know that. No one is going to die,” Nathan says.

I take limping strides backward as Nathan gets closer. He’s

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even resembling Azaz as he makes his menacing movements forward. He feels his pocket. I know he means to get me back into the bunker by any means necessary.

“Freeze asshole,” Ashley says from behind Nathan. “I could bullseye you from here. Think before you act.”

Nathan turns around.

“You’re the one. You could have talked to me,” he says.

“Thought I’d wait.”

“You’re not . . . Ashley Raynes, are you? FBI, is that right?”

“Retired. Now step outside.”

“Azaz is alive. I mean *really* alive. I was actually just visiting him, isn’t that right Ethan? Wasn’t I going to get you your medicine?”

“I know he’s alive, he’s in a c—” she says.

“He woke up.”

“Oh yeah? I already smell bullshit.” Ashley twitches.

“It’s the truth. Soon, he could be free.” Nathan takes a step forward; Ashley doesn’t see it.

I know what’s happening, but I want no more bloodshed. If it’s an option of saving Ashley or Nathan, it will always be Ashley. I listen, studying his words.

“I saw what he did. Your sister deserved better than that. He’s willing to forgive you for all this if you’ll accept his ap—”

“Oh just shut the fuck up!” she says.

I no longer see Azaz in Nathan. I now see myself walking toward Ashley. It’s me. Oh, it’s me going toward another kill. *Ethan* gets closer and closer, and I hate myself more than I ever have. The tricks and manipulation all lead to a life of misery. Now I can at least save someone who’s worth it. Someone who

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has experienced loss like I have. I couldn't save George or Alex or Rob, but I can save someone now, then have a normal life.

"Ashley, he's trying to trick you. Don't let him get close, there's something in his pocket!"

Nathan is on her; his knife flashes out with those paws gripped on. He angles the knife to her chest and makes a big leap. Ashley rolls out of the way with grace. Nathan tumbles forward, slashing at air. The former FBI agent fires a round but misses. Nathan is now back up and running toward her. I watch helplessly, trying to stand without wobbling.

Another shot is fired; it hits Nathan in his shoulder. He doesn't stop. The thrill or desperation keeps him going, just like Azaz. He gets close enough and straddles Ashley's flowing hair. She groans and throws the gun to the floor as the much-stronger Nathan overpowers her. She manages to fight off the knife barrage with her raised forearms. The knife swipes, cutting her left arm from elbow to wrist. Blood spurts out like a burst pipe.

"I'm sorry. I can't. You can't do this. Please," Nathan says.

I fall on the pistol like a quarterback on a football. I raise the pistol, aiming it at Nathan's head.

I can't shoot.

For whatever reason, some strong guilt holds me back. Some overwhelming force!

Ashley punches Nathan back and grabs both of his arms. The knife comes back down and is now perpendicular to her neck. It inches down, craning toward her exposed gullet.

"Don't . . . make me," I hear someone say. It could be me or it could be Nathan.

Enough is enough.

You're going to enjoy this because you can't help yourself.

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You're such a failure that you derive pleasure from other people's pain. You're going to plant a bullet in his head and watch a fountain erupt—fulfilling your titillating fantasies. You fucking disgusting animal trapped in your own min—

I shoot—I hit Nathan in his ring finger. The knife launches into the ceiling of the room and springs in its resting place. Nathan screams in suffering. He holds what's left of his hand as Ashley kicks him away.

“Are you insane? You don't shoot without the intention of taking out the target. This fuck could have killed me.”

“I'm sorry . . .” I say, ashamed of my actions while still believing in my own, small success.

Nathan was a threat, but now he is eliminated as a threat, and I want my life to be more than conflict. I want a world I don't hate; a personality that isn't detestable. The murder could have given me that same gratification as killing Azaz. Why does Nathan get to live and Jessica doesn't? Is there some atonement left to be had?

You still couldn't do it, after all this time. You want to have some self-imposed virtue by letting some piece of shit live? It's not as easy as t—

I will let a managed fate decide if Nathan lives or not. But listening to this will never help me.

But those voices will talk for as long as I live and I will listen for longer.

Jessica and Gregory shared the same excuse. I tricked myself into believing they were too far gone. I will pay for that for the rest of my life. Killing Finn—being one of my lowest moments—will haunt me. Whether Ronnie and Finn were bad people is not my decision. I do not get to choose who is worthy of

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obliteration. But I've chosen that path many a time. Now is a new era, but a trail must be taken to ensure I can transition safely.

I get up again, holding my knee as I go. It feels as though hundreds of pins are individually being poked into my muscles. Ashley helps me and I look at her gashed arm.

Your fault.

It's flowing with red, so I rip my sleeve off with one hand for her to use as a bandage. Nathan rolls around while muttering to himself. He looks right. I notice his shoulder leaking fluid as he starts to plug it up with his coat.

"It's all over," I say to him. He looks at me with a perturbed expression. "And I am through with this. You're on your own, Nathan. I hope you get the help you need, as much as I needed it."

I look at Ashley's gun in my hand and I look at Nathan. Now it's time to know if I want to move on or not. Do I want to change, or would I prefer to stay in the cycle of hatred?

"I have a family. You know I do. You can't do this to me . . ." he begs with one normal hand and one torn hand.

"Get it over with," Ashley says. "I'm gonna take your last shot as a miss. He's caused you a lot of shit. I wouldn't judge you for this."

"I said we're done. He has the tools to survive and if he does, I'll be far away from him. He can live."

I pick up the medical supplies on the floor. I take out a bottle of rubbing alcohol and antiseptic. I throw them to Nathan. I step to the door and out into the light. The mist around me parts to reveal the outside again. That familiar white I saw in the hotel shootout brings back that familiarity.

I turn back as Ashley walks by my side. I give her service

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pistol back and hand her the medical supplies. She handles the contents like a pro—fixing her wound up with the equipment present.

I look upon where I'd been kept and I remember a similar place that held a lot of significance.

“You can't leave me, I'm bleeding out!” Nathan says from inside the structure. “I-I-I can't get up! Ethan! Mrs. Raynes!”

I keep walking. Then I say, “Nathan, I hope you make it. When you endure the same pain as I have, you'll come out *alive*.”

I'm sorry Jessica. I'm sorry to everyone I tormented as much as I was. You never deserved to be stripped of your life for my sins. I confess, I confess. And I accept. Forgive me.

Mom and Dad, I don't want to hate you any longer. How you both hurt me was a sign of confusion. If I am to move on, I need to let go of this hatred. The same as with Henry. He is dead and he can never hurt me. No one can hurt me anymore. I vow to society that I will never hurt another human being for as long as I live.

I confess. I have paid for my sins!

“We need to get you to a hospital. I should have done more to stop that,” I say to Ashley.

“I'll survive this.” She winces, taking a pack of cigarettes from her pocket—Buck Fire. She pops a cig. Lights it clumsily and smokes. “It's Nathan who needs a miracle. He's bleeding bad, I don't know if he'll make it.”

“I'm not deciding anymore. I'm through with the murder and lies. He can live, he just needs to be strong enough. I hope he *does* live. No . . . he will live, I know it.”

“Well he's being reported, I know that. I have friends who

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could nail the fucker.”

“I understand.”

I put my hand on the carton of cigarettes and take one out. Ashley gives me a look but sees my desperation. My lips touch the red tip of the cigarette. It feels like a commemoration to George and every person out there. The deceased people I’ll live for now. Ashley lights it up for me. I drag in the smoke.

I cough, but let out a sigh of relief; the cleanest breath I’ve ever exhaled. I say, “If I can be afforded that same second chance as Dante and Ellie, then I want that. Is there still a chance for me?”

Ashley rests her good hand on my shoulder like a parent comforting their child.

“Of course.”

“Are you coming?”

“You heard the man. Frank might still be alive, so I need to settle this myself. I’m not going to ask you to do any more. You’re free to go.” She chuckles.

So we go. I take my thoughts with me, as always. I take this time to reflect and think of my future. I wonder if it will be as bright as right now. The sun is shining upon me; it’s so hard to tell if it’s setting or rising. It seems as though it is rising, to me at least.

For once, the intrusive thoughts do not prevail. They stay—resigned to a deep recess. The door does not shut, but it is removed entirely. I let myself become one with my true person. The resentment for myself melts away as I transition into a new chapter of living. No more hatred, no more doubts. I can start again. My psyche unites in a colorful splash of light. They mix and transpire.

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My *state of mind* alters. I smile the biggest smile of my life and weep openly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've been working on this book for about a year or two in total. At the age of eighteen, I wrote a quarter of my work in two months. It was disastrous writing, looking back now. It had dialogue tags in every sentence, adverbs galore, butchered apostrophes, punctuation patricide. Now, at the age of twenty-three, with around a year of learning and writing the rest, it is complete and readable. It's been such an enjoyable experience writing this. I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it—*whoever* it is who's reading this. I want to just say thank you to my friends and family for reading my work. Whether that's now or before I ended up publishing it. I want to thank my mom and dad (may they both be forever immortalized in this novel) for being supportive in my endeavor; not once did they question why in the hell I was writing a novel. Instead, they just told me to do it. That was great. Although I said writing this was fun, it was probably one of the most difficult startups I've had in terms of a hobby. Countless hours spent finetuning each word to make sure it's what you're viewing now.

I've had to learn most of the intricacies of novel writing myself, so that took a lot of getting used to. As this is my first

attempt at a full-fledged story, I ran into a lot of obstacles. In the end, I made one of the (many) stories up in my head. It took me bloody long enough. But with the help of said friends and family, I finally did it. And that makes me immensely proud.

Any issues with continuity, spelling, grammar, research, typos, were all me. So, if there are any glaring mistakes, that is on me, and me alone. I sincerely apologize for that if you've seen some mistakes. I've spent such a long time trying to make *State of Mind* the best that it can possibly be, but small things slip through the cracks. I've tried balancing writing with everyday life. It's been a huge learning process for me in reading about all the different nuances of writing, as this has mainly been a hobby. I didn't want to hire a proofreader for something that was meant to be made for fun. So, please excuse any errors, and know that I spent grueling hours trying to make my work perfect.

I want to make my last thanks out to *you*. You know who you are. Seriously, you know who you are; you're the guy or girl reading this right now. If you've actually taken the time to read this some-hundred-number-page novel, then I just want to say cheers. Really means a lot to me. Whether you thought this book was a piece of shit, or you thought it was the next coming of Jesus; I don't mind at all. And whether that be a hundred people or one person. This was never about popularity or income for me. If there's only one message you go

away with after reading this, it's don't be concerned with success or wealth. If doing something makes you happy, do it for the rest of your life. Do it because you love it. I love writing and I love reading. That's all there is to it. It might sound selfish, but I never wrote this for you. Yeah, that makes me sound like a dick. Oh well, it is kinda true. I never really had the aim of sending this off or even showing anyone at all. I only wrote it for one person. I'll sum it up with a quote from Walter White.

“I did it for me. I liked it.”

— Sam Thorns, 2021

Holy shit this had a lot of mistakes in it. Well, only a few hardcore mistakes with spelling and grammar, but also just things I should've caught the numerous times I read through before. I think I'm in a better headspace now, and I'm not in such a rush to get the book released.

Now, I'm on to bigger and better things. Thanks for all the support.

— Sam Thorns, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

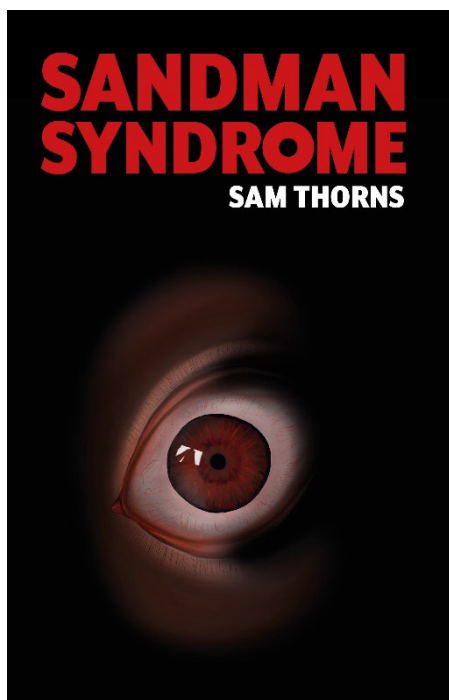


Samuel Henry Thorns - Dobson is an English writer born in 1997.

Writing at a young age, Sam Thorns honed his skills and developed his love for stories and storytelling in his free time, either reading or writing each and every day.

Writer of *State of Mind* (2021) and *Sandman Syndrome* (2023), Sam has used the time in between novels to learn everything there is to know about writing.

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