

FROM THE TWISTED MIND OF
KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



— THE —


HUMANIST

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THE HUMANIST

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To you

“The man who lies to the world, is the world’s slave from then on.”
Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

• • • •

“Nothing is like it seems, but everything is exactly like it is.”
Yogi Berra

• • • •

“Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next.”
Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

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“Before the truth will set you free,
It’ll piss you off,
Before you find a place to be,
You’re gonna lose the plot.”
Bring Me the Horizon, *Mantra*

Prologue

SHE'S BEEN WITH ME ever since I met her, as if she imprinted herself into my brain.

I still remember two things she told me—her words continue to ring in my ear like an ever-present whisper.

One: People like myself don't go to jail.

That is true. Oh, so true.

And two: The law isn't about common sense.

She's right. She's right about a lot of things. She's right about just about everything.

The law is about what you can prove, about what you can make people believe.

And when you have deep pockets and influence, you can make people believe anything. It's not about what makes sense. Sometimes fantasy is way more believable than reality. If enough pieces fall together, people will fill in gaps and make sense of the picture. Sure, some of those pieces might be the wrong way around, upside down, or even from a different puzzle. But most of the time, people believe what they're told.

I think about these words often, especially when we're together—as we are now.

Trying to brush my thoughts aside, I hug her tightly, our heads on each other's shoulders.

“Do you think this is what the people want to hear?” I ask.]

“Yes,” she replies, her voice like sunshine. “They'll buy it. Hook, line, and sinker.”

We release each other. She holds my face while my hands move down her body, coming to rest on her hips. Her eyes are mesmerizing, deep, and soothing.

“Just don't tell them the thing,” she says.

The thing.

“Of course not,” I assure her. “You know what’d happen if I did?”

“It would hurt a lot of people.”

“I know.”

We kiss—long, deep.

I know.

I never want to let her go.

But sometimes, what we want and what we get are two different things.

Chapter 1

2003

Grant Taylor Interview

DETECTIVE MIKE KOLTON: You understand why you're here?

GRANT TAYLOR: [inaudible]

KOLTON: Sorry, you have to speak up for the recording.

TAYLOR: I think so. It's been a rough few days.

KOLTON: You're here to help us with our investigation into the deaths of your wife and children.

TAYLOR: Murder.

KOLTON: Sorry?

TAYLOR: Murder of my family.

KOLTON: Yes, that's what we're looking into. We need your help.

TAYLOR: [sob] Yes.

KOLTON: You said you don't want a lawyer. Is that correct?

TAYLOR: I don't see why I need one—if I'm not under arrest, and I'm here to help.

KOLTON: Okay. You want anything before we start? Coffee? Something to eat?

TAYLOR: No.

KOLTON: You just let me know at any time and I can get you something, okay?

TAYLOR: Fine. I'd rather just get into this.

KOLTON: Well, let me step through this at a higher level, and then we'll get into more detailed questions. First off, I want you to know I'm on your side with this, okay? You need to tell me the truth, okay? I can help you, but you need to tell me. I just want to know what happened. Is there anything you want to say before we begin?

TAYLOR: [inaudible]

KOLTON: Again, Mr. Taylor, you need to speak up.

TAYLOR: I can only answer questions about what I remember.

KOLTON: I understand, Mr. Taylor. Let's just concentrate on the questions.

TAYLOR: [inaudible]

KOLTON: Where were you on the evening of the sixteenth?

TAYLOR: I, I'm not sure.

KOLTON: Were you at home?

TAYLOR: Yes. At home.

KOLTON: What were you doing?

TAYLOR: I, I don't remember.

KOLTON: Were you celebrating something?

TAYLOR: I'm not sure. I don't remember.]

KOLTON: Are you okay, Grant? Would you like some water?

TAYLOR: No.

KOLTON: Something to eat?

TAYLOR: No.

KOLTON: I'm just trying to make this easy for you.

TAYLOR: I know what you're trying to do.

KOLTON: And what's that?

TAYLOR: You're trying to be my friend. Trying to get me to confess to something I haven't done.

KOLTON: Do you feel the need to confess?

TAYLOR: I haven't done anything.

KOLTON: Let's get back to the questions. Let me help you. What was your relationship like with your family?

TAYLOR: [silence] It was good, just like everyone else.

KOLTON: You didn't fight? You were away a lot with your work.

TAYLOR: Yeah, we fought. Like I said, just like everyone else.

KOLTON: Was your wife unhappy you spent so much time away?

TAYLOR: I don't know. Maybe. It was never really a thing.

KOLTON: Were you having an affair?

TAYLOR: What? No! Why would you say that?

KOLTON: Did she find out? Is that why you did it?

TAYLOR: I told you, I didn't do anything. What are you trying to do here?

KOLTON: We need to ask a lot of different questions, Mr. Taylor, to get a picture of the events leading up to the murder.

TAYLOR: That wasn't a question. That was an accusation.

KOLTON: I'm just trying to understand your relationship with your wife. We know how it can get sometimes. You get successful, other things catch your eye, you go down a different path.

TAYLOR: I've never cheated on my wife. Never.

KOLTON: We'll come back to that. What about around two o'clock in the morning of the seventeenth?

TAYLOR: On the seventeenth?

KOLTON: Yes, on the seventeenth. Do you remember?

TAYLOR: Asleep, I guess, since it was two in the morning."

KOLTON: What time did you go to bed?

TAYLOR: I don't remember.

KOLTON: You know, this would go a lot easier if you helped me.

TAYLOR: [shouting] I'm trying to help you! I just don't remember. It's like my memory's been wiped.

KOLTON: I understand that, Mr. Taylor. Sometimes trauma impacts our ability to remember events. I've seen it with people who've been kidnapped, innocent bystanders who were part of bank robberies—people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

TAYLOR: No, this is different. I can't remember *anything*.

KOLTON: If it helps, your tox screen came back clean.

TAYLOR: Well, something happened.

KOLTON: Like I said, that's what we're trying to figure out. Now, you said you were in bed. Where was the rest of the family?

TAYLOR: I don't know. In bed, too, I guess.

KOLTON: And you weren't moving around the house? Do you have any history of sleepwalking?

TAYLOR: What? No! What are you suggesting? Do you think I did this? I didn't do this!

KOLTON: I'm just asking questions, Mr. Taylor. Trying to understand what happened.

TAYLOR: I didn't do this.

KOLTON: Here, I want to show you something.

TAYLOR: Okay.

KOLTON: [reveals crime scene photo] This is a picture of the knife we recovered at the scene. Grant, have you seen this knife before?

TAYLOR: No. Never.

KOLTON: Are you sure? Take another look. Think hard.

TAYLOR: [silence]

KOLTON: For the record, Mr. Taylor.

TAYLOR: No. I've never seen it before. What is it? Did the killer use it?

KOLTON: Maybe you bought it a long time ago, maybe a gift for someone? Maybe for your son?

TAYLOR: I bought my son a car for his birthday. I certainly would never buy something like that for Kane.

KOLTON: You didn't pay cash for this knife from a pawn shop at Lincoln Square?

TAYLOR: No. Of course not. I've never been to a pawn shop in my life. Never.

KOLTON: Okay. Mr. Taylor, the crime lab performed a blood stain analysis on the knife and found evidence of your wife and son's blood.

TAYLOR: [sobs] Why are you telling me this? Why are you showing me this?

KOLTON: I'm sorry, Mr. Taylor. I'm just doing my job here.

TAYLOR: I've never seen it before.

KOLTON: Mr. Taylor...Grant...your fingerprints are also on the knife.

TAYLOR: [sobs] What? Impossible.

KOLTON: The only set of prints on the knife.

TAYLOR: There must be some mistake. I've never seen the knife before. Someone fucked up, somebody's gotten that wrong. It can't be. I don't remember.

KOLTON: I'm afraid not, Grant. Listen, this can go a lot easier if you tell the truth. Tell me what happened that night. I can help you. Tell me what happened. In your own words.

TAYLOR: Nothing happened. I don't know what happened.

KOLTON: You don't know what happened? Why do you say that?

TAYLOR: [silence]

KOLTON: Is it because you did something and maybe you can't remember it?

TAYLOR: [silence]

KOLTON: I can't help you if you don't talk. Is there anything you can tell me?

TAYLOR: I want my lawyer. Terry Barr. Now.

KOLTON: This is it, Grant. Your last chance. As soon as your lawyer gets here, we won't be holding back.

TAYLOR: I'm not saying anything more without my lawyer.

KOLTON: Interview suspended.

2011

This story isn't about death row, but about who's on it.

It's been eight years since that police interview between Detective Kolton and Grant Taylor, and I'm at the United States Penitentiary in Terre Haute—a high-security prison near the Indiana-Illinois border. It has the dubious honor of housing inmates awaiting their execution and fielding countless security threats. Thanks to its clientele, it was once touted as “Guantanamo North.” Inmates are held in the Special Confinement Unit, where they live in small cells until their appeals are put to rest and everyone is content with the decision to execute them.

The facility affords restricted communications, minimal medical attention, and scant mental health services. The inmates spend a few days a week outside their cells, in slightly smaller cages, to enjoy whatever meager natural light they can find. What else would you expect for people who've been unanimously convicted of capital offenses and sentenced to death by a jury of twelve?

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev—the Boston Bomber, and Timothy McVeigh—convicted of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, both put in time at this penitentiary. But they're of course gone now—their fatal punishment delivered at the hands of a U.S. marshal, an executioner, and a cocktail of drugs designed to stop the heart in the most humane way possible. *9[Each of their deaths was witnessed by their families, spiritual advisors, and attorneys.

I arrive at USP Terre Haute in my Dodge Challenger—the only rental sports car I could get my hands on.] I'm wearing a midnight blue, Italian designer suit, along with accessories that together are worth five figures.

The person I'm here to see didn't arrive under his own volition. He arrived wearing an orange jumpsuit, his wrists and ankles bound in chains. He arrived with a death sentence.

And he was innocent.

Now, I should point out—I'm not an attorney. I'm not some rich bastard on a social crusade. Nor am I a reporter looking to unravel a wrongful conviction. I've come to confront Grant Taylor, to tell him things, to let him know how he arrived on death row. To talk to a condemned man. To clear my conscience.

It's Sunday morning. The sun just appeared on the horizon. As I march across the parking lot, I gaze up at the deep blue sky and pop a couple tablets into my mouth. My head is killing me. I attribute it to stress.

The clouds are full and fluffy. All in all, it's a bitch of a day to be dead. Probably not a great joke, considering Grant Taylor is scheduled to be executed within the next three hours.

Hundreds of people are gathered in front of the facility. Half of them are protesting the execution; the other half are celebrating.

The first group—the protestors—sees this as an opportunity to drag capital punishment into the public light, to condemn the process as unjust and inhumane. Some claim God himself is the only one who should take a human life.

But the other side—the celebrators—hopes Taylor dies slowly. He was convicted of an inhumane act, they argue. They're praying for a botched execution, so he has to undergo the ordeal twice, or some fuck up that makes it infinitely more painful than it needs to be.

Television reporters line the perfectly manicured grass near the prison's entrance. Gazing into the nearby cameras, they outline key elements of the Taylor story: his start in politics, where it all went wrong, what happened to his family, the expedited trial, his swift sentencing, the annulment of his appeals...blah, blah, blah. They in-

terview several protestors to gain a real “people perspective.” It’s a human-interest story.

But I’m not one of them. I avoid the circus for good reason.

I enter through the side entrance, avoiding the prying eyes, the do-gooders, the supporters, the haters, and the watchers. I know the side entrance is reserved for facility employees under the direct guidance and express permission of the warden.

I’m here outside normal visiting hours because I’m not a normal kind of person. My reputation and wealth go a hell of a long way in getting anything done with government or private enterprise. They’re puppets, and I pull the strings. Money, power, influence. That’s what I bring, and that’s why I’m here.

I’m reciting my monologue as I go through the security protocols. Yes, even someone like me must undertake the rigorous checkpoint routine. I hand over my phone and car keys to a guard who, to my understanding, will keep them safe until I return. I step through the metal detectors. They don’t go off.

A second guard—“Carl,” according to his nametag—greet me on the other side of the detectors. He’s over six feet tall and built like he grew up on a farm, with forearms thicker than my biceps. He stands there, his arms crossed, and looks me up and down—disapproving, sizing me up, wanting to ask me questions. But he’s been instructed not to talk to me, not to inquire about my background or my motivations for wanting to see Grant. The warden gave him strict instructions to take me to a meeting room, and, by the look on his face, I can tell he’s enthusiastic about it.

That’s sarcasm. I’m sure you know that.

We walk in silence down hallways, our footfalls echoing around us, the guard’s cheap rubber soles squeaking as we turn around corners. We pass doors, both solid and barred. Some of the solid doors have stenciled words on them, such as “Store” or “Office.” Beyond

the barred doors and long hallways are more barred doors. I don't think about it too much.

I know I wouldn't survive long in this place. Here, muscle is king, and strength—both mental and physical—is what you need to survive. My strengths would be useless.

But all that's still general population territory. Where we're heading is not what you'd call "general population." Our destination is a place where solitary confinement reigns supreme, and I think I could do that. In fact, on some level I think it would be almost enjoyable; to be away from people, away from the world. But I'm naïve and talking as someone who's never seen the inside of a jail. Hell, I never even got detention as a kid.

Regardless, I'm sure my money and status would keep me out of any hard time, no matter what crime I got pinged for. People like me—white, wealthy folk—well, we just don't go to jail. I'd pay my way out, maybe get a slap on the wrist. I guess I'll just have to take my solitary confinement in the south of Italy.

As we march down the corridor, the police transcripts flash through my mind. I've heard the tapes, memorized them—every word, every utterance. I even have copies at home. The undeniable evidence. Grant's unwavering commitment to his story. Even with everything stacked against him, he still went down swinging. The prosecution's case was solid and straightforward—about as straightforward as you could ever hope to have. No deals were offered; they didn't need to consider anything like that. After all, they had the murder weapon. And a motive. And the means.

The defense had nothing but a conspiracy and an insanity plea. It was laughable, really. The jury heard everything: the evidence, the motive, the gruesome details of how it all went down. Took them half an hour to come up with a guilty verdict and recommend the death penalty.

It happened that way because that's how I orchestrated it.

After a maze of somewhat soothing, cream-colored corridors, we reach a door that has “Meeting Room 3” stenciled on it. Carl looks at me then to a small keypad on the wall next to the door.

“You want to enter this one in?”

I stare at him.

“Pardon?”

“The code,” he says. “You can enter it in here.”

I shrug. “What are you talking about? What code? I don’t know any code.”

Carl sighs, heavily. He reaches out and punches in random numbers—ten total, no pattern. There’s a short period of white noise before the door lock responds, then an irritating electric buzzing sound. Carl yanks the door open, then runs his eyes over me.

“I can’t believe he’s letting you do this. Damn waste of time if you ask me,” he says, his voice deep, hardened.

“The warden and I are very good friends,” I say with a wink.

It’s mostly true. The warden owes me. More than he cares to admit.

Carl sighs and then launches into a spiel, talking in a disinterested tone as if he’s reading through the terms and conditions of a warranty. “The inmate will be secured to the table. No touching the inmate, no passing anything to the inmate. If you feel threatened by the inmate, hit the panic button by the door. When you want to leave, knock on the door and wait for me to come get you. Do you understand these rules as I’ve explained them to you?”

I nod and take a step inside. Then I turn back toward him. “I trust you’ve deactivated the recording equipment for this meeting?”

Carl cocks his head to one side. “I don’t know, Mac.” With a blank look, he reaches for the handle.

“You know,” I shout at the closing door. “I’m sure we’re going to be great friends one day!” My sentence concludes with the door’s metal locks sliding into place.

I turn and take in the windowless room. The walls are plain, the interior the same cream color as the walkways. There's a door at the other side of the room where I'm assuming Grant will enter. In the middle of the room, bolted to the floor, is a table. Three metal chairs are positioned around it. I don't know who the spare one is for. A set of handcuffs, secured to the surface, will be attached to Grant when he arrives. I take a seat and wait, taking the opportunity to rub my hand against the side of my head. It's tender, and the more I push the more it hurts, so I push against my forehead instead to try to relieve some pressure.

I'm not used to waiting, and the chair is as uncomfortable as waking up in a gay brothel with your pants around your ankles. Ah, Mexico. Sweet memories of Dave's bachelor party. But I digress.

Just then, a buzzing noise, and the door in front of me opens. I stand and watch as an almost six-foot tall, orange-garbed prisoner shuffles in. A chain connects his wrists and ankles to his waist. Just in case he tries to make a break for it. Two guards escort him in. I can't read their names, but I don't care what their names are. They're inconsequential to the story, although I will say one's Hispanic and the other is African American. But then again, maybe they aren't, and I'm a racist asshole. Anyway, they're both barrel-chested and keep their gazes on their subject. For the sake of the story, let's call them Santiago and Darnell.

The prisoner takes a seat. I'm guessing it's Grant, even though it sure as hell doesn't look like him. I guess that's what eight years of solitary confinement does to you. Limited exercise, non-existent natural light. Grant used to have *GQ* looks and a lifestyle to match. How the tables have turned. His perfect blond hair has withered away, his California-tanned skin lightened, now akin to egg whites. A week's growth has overtaken his once smooth jawline. His once powerful and composed stature now hunched over. Face devoid of emotion. He looks like someone who's come to terms with death row. Accept-

ed his fate. He looks over me with dead eyes but neither says nor shows anything. He'd be one hell of a poker player.

Santiago stands back, his hand on the butt of his taser, while Darnell speaks to Grant.

"I trust we aren't going to have any troubles here today, are we Grant?" It's more of a direction than a question.

Grant shakes his head. Compliance. Beaten into him physically, mentally, emotionally. He holds up his cuffed hands and gazes at me as he waits for Darnell to attach the table restraints. They lock into place with a menacing clack. Grant is a seasoned professional. Not that he grew up with a life of crime or visited family members in prison. He may have started with nothing, but this guy used to be the owner of a global tech company, had an IQ that was off the charts, was married, had a pigeon pair, even planned to run for mayor. He had his path all figured out, all the networks and connections—all the way to the White House. That's an important piece of information; that's why he stood out. Let me come back to that.

Satisfied by Grant's security, the guards walk to the back wall and flank the door they had entered through. They fold their arms like a pair of nightclub bouncers.

"Excuse me," I say. "I believe the warden assured me we could talk alone."

The two guards look at each other and then down to the prisoner.

"Come on guys, don't make me call the warden."

With a sigh, they shrug and depart the room. "We'll be right out here if you need us," Darnell says.

Grant and I look at each other in silence for a long time, each of us waiting for the other to make the first move. He looks me up and down, but I'm not sure how much of that information is going to his brain. His eyes glaze over. It looks like he hasn't smiled in years. But

why would you when death is so imminent, the reaper just around the corner sharpening his sickle?

“Mr. Taylor,” I venture, “you don’t know me—”

“You a lawyer?”

“No.”

“A journalist?”

“No.”

“From the mayor’s office?”

“No.”

“From the marshal’s office?”

“No.”

“Detective?”

“No.”

He leans forward on the table. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here because the state is going to execute you.”

“You don’t have to remind me of that.” He looks away. “I’d rather they just get on and do it already.”

“I want to tell you a story.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Sorry, very rude of me. My name is Atlas Jones.” I hold out my hand. We both stare at it for a moment before I awkwardly retract it. “I want to—”

“Guard!” Grant yells, and then turns to me. “I’d rather spend the last few hours of my life thinking about my family, not listening to your sorry ass. Guard!”

The door opens.

“Grant, please. I have information for you. I know what happened to you.”

Santiago puts a key into Grant’s chains.

“Stop!” Grant yells.

The guard looks at him. Grant looks at me, a spark in his eyes—as if the rain clouds had parted to reveal a glowing sun.

“Sorry, guys,” Grant softly apologizes. “I might’ve been a bit hasty. Give me a few more moments with this Mr. Jones here.”

“Grant, don’t piss me off. Not today,” Santiago says. “You’re either coming or staying. None of this flip flop shit.”

“I’m sure you can appreciate my mental state on a day like today.” He shakes his head. “I just need to get my head right. This man here will help me.”

Darnell eyeballs me, his eyebrows raised.

I nod. I don’t know exactly what I’m agreeing to, but it had the desired effect.

Santiago sighs and heads for the door, slapping his partner’s shoulder on the way out.

When the door clicks shut, Grant talks. “Listen here. You better not be jerking my chain, or God help me, I will rip this bar off the table and beat you to death with it. I’ve got nothing to lose today. You said you had information. I can tell you I was set up. I didn’t do it. I never killed my family.”

The way he’s talking strikes me. It’s not emotional; he’s not breaking into tears. It’s factual, hard. He isn’t rushed—he’s measured. I had often wondered what his first days here were like. Did he cry himself to sleep? If so, was it because his family was dead, or because he knew he was destined to receive a shot of lethal chemicals? Those are the thoughts I had mulled over when I couldn’t sleep, when I sat in my penthouse apartment and looked out over the New York City skyline.

“Please, Grant,” I tell him. “Let me explain everything, and this will all become clear.”

“Are you a private investigator? What’ve you found out?” Again, no urgency in his voice.

“No, I’m not a private investigator.”

“Well, if you aren’t a lawyer, journalist, or anyone, how the hell did you get in here?”

“It’s amazing what someone will do for a few bucks. You should know that. You know, back in the day.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yes. Yes, it was. A lifetime ago.”

“So, who are you?”

“Let’s go back sixteen years.” I clear my throat. “Back then, I had finished top of my class at Harvard, blitzed my internship, aced my licensing exams. I became the youngest, hottest investment banker at Wakefield & Gold. I don’t want to brag, but I had this knack to read the markets, and everybody wanted a piece. Money, cars, girls. More than I could handle.”

“Sounds great, kid. Impressive. But I don’t see why any of that matters. Not here. Not now.”

I hold up my hand. “Stay with me, Grant. I want you to understand everything. Usually, I can’t remember what the hell happened yesterday, but I sure as hell remember this. It’s all so clear in my head.”

I tap my temple. It hurts.

I look him in the eye. “I want you to appreciate that nothing is ever as it seems.”

Chapter 3

2003

Eight years ago, I was sitting at a desk, staring at a computer screen, in a boxy office with no natural light. The fact I had an office at all was because my employers saw a future in my talents and my ability to see the market's peaks and falls coming from a mile away. I was an expert in saving companies making millions for our clients—even as millions drowned in the flood of bad debt. But let's face it. My business partners were mainly interested in my ability to make them money. They didn't really have any desire to nurture my abilities. But I didn't mind. My world was a far cry away from the chaotic mess that was "the field": an open space filled with tiny cubicles and people running between desks, phones ringing nonstop, monitors displaying real time information.

Management's policy allowed me to keep a solitary family photo on my desk, but I didn't have any family to show. As a three-year-old, I had been orphaned for reasons that were never explained to me. After that, I did the usual rounds, since my caretakers were assholes who just took in kids for the government checks that come once a month. They saw me as a way to receive some extra drug and booze money. I saw them as stepping stones, people who were helping me move to the next stage in my life. I had no connection to them, and they felt little connection to me.

I worked my ass off through school, college, and beyond. My guardians, if you could call them that, gave me nothing more than the hand-me-down clothes on my back and some meager food rations. At times, I even had to fight for that. I worked for everything else. And from the ashes, the phoenix rose. While other kids were fucking around, I would be devouring books, making sure I knew more than the next person. Hell, the next hundred people.

I had the opportunity to build networks in junior school and high school, meeting people who knew people. They were mainly hefty benefactors looking to donate cash in the shadow of my sob-story to help them sleep better at night. Instead of bowing down and thanking them for their thoughtful gesture, I repelled them. I didn't need anyone else to help me through, nor did I want some significant other dotting over me or even a pet dog to keep me company. I got by just fine. So, there was no picture frame on my desk, or anything else for that matter, aside from trays filled with paper, reports, and anything else the company thought I should have to fulfil my position.

Management equipped my desk with my three monitors, which gave me all the data I could want. In a small window at the top of one screen was the view of a press conference. I could see the back of a few reporters' heads as they whispered to each other. It was a small room—the news they were discussing would be a shock to everyone, and only the lucky few were invited. I had rolled my sleeves up past my elbows and loosened my black tie. My charcoal-gray suit jacket was slung over the back of my chair. I played with my cufflinks, spinning the toggle clasp as I perused the information flooding across my screens, all the while ignoring Elton, who was sitting across from me.

Elton was a senior partner, as well as a prescribed mentor, principal ass kicker, and perpetual ass licker. He had made a name for himself in the early days of the company. Took a few risks, came out on top. Flew up the ladder, probably skipping a few rungs on the way. I remember when I had first met him, he was leaning back in his large leather chair, his shoes propped up on his desk. He looked over me and my cheap suit and said, "You know something kid, you remind me of me when I was your age." What a dick. Now he was old and boring and lacked vision.

The reason he had invited himself to my office was to berate me and watch me fail, and he wore a scowl as he did it. My announcement had yet to begin, and I wondered if it ever would. When I

first shared my proposal to pull out of the renewables market with him, he responded by saying it was, and I quote, “lacking in foresight and inherently stupid.” Given that market had flourished for the past decade and generated close to fifteen percent of all power needs, the world considered it a safe bet. A steady growth field.

Regardless, I did it anyway. I shorted the stock. It was risky, but everything is risky, and my risks aren’t as dicey as people perceive them to be. The thing was, Elton didn’t know what I knew, and he couldn’t see what I saw. The way I connected the dots was beyond his comprehension. It was 3:00 p.m. on a Friday, and he was keen to wash his hands of everything before the weekend.

“I told ya, kid, those ideas of yours are horseshit. I already told the directors I’m distancing myself from you, that you’re a loose cannon, that your ideas are bullshit, and you can’t be trusted.”

“Uh huh,” I managed, watching the market fluctuate on one of my screens.

“When this is all over, security will come in here and escort you out. If I were you, I’d be packing a box now. And this bullshit about some two-bit tech company in Japan? Man, you’ll fry for this.”

“South Korea, not Japan.”

“I don’t give a fuck where it is. South Korea, North Korea...it’s a goddamned pipe dream. You’ve cost this company millions, and trust me, the partners will look for blood after all this. And it ain’t going to be mine, I can damn well tell you that! I’ve built up too much stock in this company to go down in flames with some nutcase.”

“Fuck, Elton. You’re really killing my buzz here.”

He brushed his pants leg and stretched his neck. He was smiling—not in happiness, not because he “saw himself in me,” but because he could taste sweet victory, and I was going down swinging. Defiant.

“Now listen here, you little shit...”

Elton continued talking, but my focus was on the press conference, and his words evaporated into background noise. He might've even said something about not working in this field ever again, and perhaps even something about my mother, but neither of those bothered me in the slightest.

"Elton, will you just shut up for a second?"

He stood at my desk, ready to pounce, as I spun the monitor around and turned up the volume. The announcement I had been waiting for played out through the speakers. A glitch in over forty-two patents was coming to life in the Californian solar farm. The defect would not only decrease performance over the short term, but the long-term effects would also be chaotic. The electronics would basically eat themselves into oblivion. The flow on effects would be widespread. The fallout, indescribable. Fingers were already being pointed, talk of lawsuits raised. All the while, I was sure that CEOs sitting in the top ten technology companies were sweating through their Alexander Amosu designer suits.

Stocks fell as if they were in free fall. With every screen refresh, the indexes sunk lower and lower. People were pulling out as the news spread like a virus across the internet. The damage had already been done. There was no coming back from it.

Elton mumbled something. I held up a finger. There was something else I was waiting for. And then it happened. A global memorandum distributed through various news outlets by an unknown South Korean company: EGTech. No one knew who they were. They were even anonymous in their own country. But I did. I saw what they were capable of, the one bit of tech they were refining for release.

The thing was, the market was saturated with panels out of India and China and Germany. With no plant or means to produce their tech, EGTech would have to sell to the highest bidder and wait for everyone else to catch up. Sure, they would have made some mon-

ey on the patent, but that was years in the making. I gave them an opportunity. I made them multibillionaires in the blink of an eye. They announced to the listening world that their bacteria-based nanotechnology was the answer to the problem.

Anyone looking for information about EGTech wouldn't have much luck. The company was comprised of two people. Two incredibly smart people, smart enough to accept a million-dollar investment from my discretionary funds, which, in turn, was offset by the short sell. Simple, really.

I had just made the directors at Wakefield & Gold a major part of the single point of every piece of global solar technology for the next century. They would make more money in the next few years than they had seen in their entire history. As if they needed more.

Meanwhile, Elton stared at my monitor, mouth agape. When the renewables sector hit rock bottom, I bought everything I could get my hands on. It was a win-win. Couldn't have possibly worked out any better.

Elton stepped back, wringing his hands to the point of oblivion. His phone rang. Fumbling it out of his jacket pocket, he glanced at the screen, then slowly raised it to his ear. The stunted conversation, mainly one way, finished with a, "Yes, sir. Right away, sir." He tapped the device on the side of his head and stood, then pulled out his white pocket chief so he could pat away the sweat on his forehead. He looked at it questioningly before shoving it back into his top pocket.

His words were squeaky, disorganized. He cleared his throat and started again. "Tealson wants to see us. Now."

I smirked, tapped a few keys on the keyboard, and stood. I straightened out my sleeves and pressed in the cufflinks. Elton waited at my door, looking to both ends of the hallway. The sounds from the field echoed down the hall. No one had seen this coming. No one except me. I pulled on my coat.

“Come on, Atlas. Don’t want to keep Tealson waiting.”

I tightened my tie. “Considering what I just did, I’ll take my damn time.”

It was a remark I would never make in front of Tealson, or the rest of the W&G hit squad, as we called them. They were depressing old bastards who had destroyed many a career, and life, during their tenure. They made the rules that everyone had to abide by. And when I say everyone, I don’t just mean at Wakefield & Gold. They made the rules for *everybody*.

The elevator ride to the top floor was quiet, aside from the occasional cough from Elton. He stared at the floor, his hands in his pockets, monologues surely rushing through his mind.

“You know,” he said, leaning over toward me, “you play your cards right here and let me do the talking, and I think I can save you. You were already on the ledge before this, and everybody knows that. And this little stunt, well, I’m just not sure. But you let me handle this, and I can spin it for you. We can both get out of there smelling like roses. If you like your ass intact, you’ll leave everything to me.”

I smiled even bigger.

Tealson’s office, which was bigger than my apartment, was full of dark wood and gold trimmings. Bookshelves and nooks adorned the walls, showing off several first edition novels and awards. In front of the shelves, facing the middle of the room, were large, leather couches where one could sit and read a first edition. Not that anyone ever would. Everything in the office was ornamental, designed to assert dominance and foster a sense of inadequacy among its visitors. At the far end of the room, in front of the floor-to-ceiling window, was a desk. The edging and legs held intricate engravings in some Mediterranean, oriental style. I had no idea where it was from, what it was made from, or what period it was meant to represent.

But the desk wasn’t important. What was important was the person sitting behind it. Director Tealson, one of seven directors, a fifth-

generation director of the company. He had a salt-and-pepper military buzz cut. One of the old guards who played it rough when he had to and played it even rougher every other time. He wouldn't win any beauty contests, and he knew that, but he didn't care. His wife was thirty years younger than him. His mistresses were younger still. They knew about each other and didn't care, provided Tealson kept bringing in the millions. Tealson himself didn't care, either; he was well past caring about what people thought of him. They say this game is all about relationships, on how well you connect with someone to achieve a result. Well, he short-circuited all that and just achieved the results.

He tightened his blood-red bowtie and motioned for us to enter. I held my breath as I stepped into the room. It was like passing through a threshold, an archway into greatness. I could feel success entering my pores as I walked. It excited me. Elton and I walked in together, like two defendants walking into a courtroom to see the judge. Let's face it, this was Tealson's courtroom. Whatever he said, it went. And he judged as freely as swinging an axe.

The more I moved through the room, the closer I got to Tealson, the more I could see the disappointed look on his face. But I had no way of knowing if that was his regular face or if it was something specifically for us.

When we got close, Tealson pointed to the two armchairs opposite his desk. Elton and I sat, sinking into the leather. It was like receiving a hug from a cow. Tealson, his demeanor unchanging, sprung out from behind his desk, in a manner of someone much, much younger. He must've popped a few pills before we arrived.

He leaned against his desk and folded his arms, looking over us like a Roman emperor deciding if we should live or die. He probably gave the same look to a menu, deciding to eat the lobster or the duck.

Eventually, he spoke. "Would you mind, gentlemen, telling me what the *fuck* that was all about?" He emphasized the swear word,

making sure we knew we had pissed him off. Like, really pissed. He said it so emphatically, I almost pissed myself.

Elton leaned forward. “Well, sir, Atlas here came to me with a proposition. I was initially against it. However, upon further investigation, I found promise in the suggestion and instructed him to continue. Under my direct guidance, he undertook the necessary—”

“Shut up, Elton. Fucking ass-kisser. I wasn’t talking to you.”

Elton sat back awkwardly, and Tealson turned his damn scary glare to me.

“You,” he said. “What do *you* have to say for yourself?”

I took a breath. “I’m not too sure I need to say anything for myself. My results say more than enough.” I exhaled.

“Oh, really?” Tealson said. “That’s a ballsy response from a snot-nose punk like yourself. Do you see any reason I shouldn’t call security right now to escort *you* from the building?”

“Mr. Tealson, I could explain the inconsequential minutiae to you, the intricacies within the complexity, but I don’t really see the point. There are only two people in this room who would get it, and I know you had the same inclinations as I did.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that a fact?”

“Of course! That’s why you signed off on the deals.”

His face dropped. “I beg your pardon? I did what?”

“Mr. Tealson, on your watch, you’ve been able to secure the biggest windfall Wakefield & Gold has ever seen. You’ve been at the forefront of the future of sustainable technology and acquired a long pipeline of capital revenue that will exist deep into the next century.”

“I, I—,” he stuttered.

“You’re a genius, sir. Really! I’m sure the other partners are right now planning an event to honor your ingenuity.”

He sat in stunned silence. I was tip-toeing a fine line with my mock praise.

“I mean, there’s a couple hundred million on the periphery I could have got my hands on, but what’re millions when we’re talking billions?”

Tealson played with his bowtie while looking over us, his face unreadable. I considered myself a half-decent poker player, able to read people as well as I could read markets. But right then, I had no idea what was going through the old man’s head. His look was like Talon, his jaw clenching. It was a risky move to lay it out as I did, but I trusted he would see it as confidence and not arrogance. I mean, I was arrogant, make no mistake. I just knew the right time and place to be a complete asshole.

Without saying a word, he returned to his desk and picked up the phone. He maintained eye contact with me as he spoke. “Security” was all he said, and then he placed the receiver back in the cradle.

“Get your asses up out of my chairs.”

We shot up and buttoned our jackets. My heart was beating hard, my mouth dry. My eyesight became hazy, every sound elongated. If Tealson asked me a question now, I wouldn’t be able to answer it.

Elton leaned over to me. “I told you, wise-ass, to let me do the talking. Now we’re fucked.”

We turned as the office door opened and a security guard appeared in his white shirt, black tie, and black pants. His name was Lenny, or Levi, or Leroy, or something like that...shit. Anyway, he marched in, a hand on the butt of his service pistol and a look of “no bullshit” on his face. He must’ve been twice my age, with naturally permed brown hair and deeply-tanned skin.

“I can’t help you now,” Elton said. “You’re fucked, my friend.”

The guard stood behind us, awaiting further instructions.

“Get him the fuck out of my office and out of this building.”

My heart sank. I tried to align my thoughts, but nothing would fit together. I looked at the guard, and he stared back at us. Confusion reigned on his face.

Elton pointed a thumb in my direction, and I dropped my head. The guard moved in and grabbed my arm.

“Mr. Tealson,” Elton began, “It would be absolute pleasure to escort this piece of shit out of the building. Maybe stick a few into him on the way.”

“Not him,” Tealson yelled from his desk. “Elton here. Take him.”

Suddenly, it all came together. My thoughts fell into place. I knew what was happening.

Elton turned. “What? But, sir!”

Tealson straightened. “There’s no room in this company for someone like you.”

“I’ve given twenty-two years, Tealson! Don’t you dare do this! Please. Please reconsider!”

“We’ve compensated you well during that time. We thank you for your tenure.”

The guard grabbed his arm, and he pulled away sharply.

“Get your hands off me.”

Tealson remained resolute.

Elton turned and pointed a finger at me. “I’ll get you for this!”

“What the hell did I do? Just because you didn’t have the intelligence to see what I saw? Or the balls to do it? That’s not my problem.”

The guard escorted Elton out of the office as he hurled a barrage of obscenities toward me, with a few aimed at Tealson. Not the smartest thing. I could never understand why people acted on emotion. For me, everything happened in the rational aspects of my brain. I thought everything through—every decision, every move.

When the door closed and the room returned to quiet, I turned to see Tealson pouring brown liquid into two glasses. I didn’t get a look at the bottle, nor did I care to ask. If it was coming from Tealson, it would be better than top shelf.

He placed a glass on my side of his desk. I picked it up. We stared at each other for a moment before sipping. The liquid slid down my throat smoothly, burning slightly, then quickly giving way to a warmth that took over my mouth.

“Finer than pussy,” Tealson remarked.

I tipped my glass in his direction. “As you say, sir.”

Tealson pointed his glass back at me. “You’re lucky I don’t fire your ass as well. Next time you want to sniff something out, you come to me. Only to me.”

“Well, I hope I can come to you.”

Tealson placed his glass down and rested his hands on his stomach. “Is that a threat?”

“Oh,” I said. “Not at all.” I waved my phone at him. “News travels fast. People want to know. People want me to come and work for them.”

“Well,” Tealson retorted. “I guess we’re just going to have to find you a bigger office.”

Chapter 4

I cracked open an eye and squinted at the sunrise filling my bedroom, the sharp light falling upon a woman's long blonde hair, which was draped over her shoulder and naked ass. I had filled the night with beers, whiskey, tequila, and I'm sure other things that had been alcoholically wiped from my memory. Unfortunately, this also included her name. Rose or Ruby or Robyn. Something like that. It definitely started with "R."

My head banged. The night before was a blur—and for good reason. There was a lot to celebrate. My promotion for one, sticking it to Elton another. I'm sure there was a speech at some point, with the kind of delivery one would expect after ten or so shots of something or other.

Anyway, Rose, or Ruby, or whoever, was at the bar. It was like in the movies. Amongst the roar of the patrons, there was a moment where our eyes locked. Some might have called it *the moment*. You know, the story that gets told to kids and grandkids about how we got together. Well, let me make this very clear. This wasn't one of those moments. Not for me, anyhow. Whether her intentions were to enjoy an evening out with her friends or end up in my bed, it didn't matter to me one iota. The reality was I bought her and her friends a round of cocktails, boasted about my latest win, and grabbed her ass on the dance floor. I wasn't a dancer, never have been, so the only way I could survive among a mass of writhing bodies was to stay close to her and hang on for dear life. And one thing led to another. A private booth, indiscrete hands, and the overwhelming need to take a piss.

The lavatory. An important part here. Because if I had held it for a little longer, or went a little earlier, things might have turned out different. For both of us. There are a million little decisions, a million forks in the road, that I could have chosen. A different route that could have changed everything. It doesn't seem right to reflect on

such things. I mean, I can't change them, so what's the point? Things are the way they are and the way they'll be.

Anyway, the next bit is hazy, so I'll recollect it from my sense of what happened. Maybe the other guys would have a different perspective or told a different story, but this is mine. I was standing at the urinal, trying desperately to keep my aim true while swaying, when the gent's door burst open, followed by a shuffling of feet and loud, confused shouting. At first, this commotion was rolled up into one big ball of noise, the oozy mash of drunken recall.

Now, let's make this clear. I'm not one to get into other people's problems, regardless of who they are or what they did. I've never given to charity or thrown two bucks to a beggar. As far as I'm concerned, if I could pull myself through hard work and sacrifice from the bullshit that was my childhood, then everyone else could do it as well. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. And second, I'm not much of a fighter. Sure, I had to fight through school. I mean, didn't we all? It's just that I always talked my way out of the shit. I had never learned that tactic didn't always work.

I zipped up and turned to what I thought was the basins. Wrong. In my drunken navigation, I was now facing the back wall. In the middle of that wall was a big guy, easily over six foot, wearing a leather jacket and dark jeans, his back turned toward me. I could see over his shoulder another man's face. He didn't look happy. Judging by the conversation, the pinned guy had fucked something up. I watched to see how the situation would pan out. It was like I had a courtside seat. And things weren't looking so great for the guy against the wall.

"You're past your due date, Aston."

"I, I know. But I got it. I was gonna see him tomorrow. Just blowin' off some steam."

"I don't think you heard me. *Past* your due date. You didn't pay by the agreed time."

“I know, I know!” he said in a flurry, as if the words couldn’t wait to get out of his mouth.

“Well, you should also know I need to collect.”

“Of course. Here, I’ll give you the money.” He reached into his jacket pocket, his fingers shaking. “You can give it to Talon.” He produced a stack of bills.

“I think you’ve misunderstood what I’m here to collect, Aston. I’m not your fucking courier. You can pay Talon direct tomorrow, and you can do it with one fewer digits on your hand.”

“No! Shit! There’s got to be a way out of this. Come on, I got the money.”

“Does it look like I give a shit what you have? I don’t like repeating myself, Aston. I just want you to prepare yourself to feel as much pain as possible. But don’t worry, I’m not taking your thumb. You’ll still be able to hold a hand of cards. I’m not a complete animal. Just that you might find it difficult to shuffle. And think yourself lucky the man himself ain’t here to collect his shit.”

While the guy begged for his attacker to reconsider, I weighed my options. At that moment, neither of them knew who I was. The guy had money, and I like money. I could’ve walked away and let the big guy have his way. I could have done a lot of things. This was one of those decision points I spoke about earlier. A million different things. But I didn’t do a million other things—I did one thing.

I stepped up and drove a punch into the big guy’s kidneys. Christ, did he buckle! He yelped and just about bent in half. By then, I was past the point of no return. There was no coming back from that. There was no way I could apologize and walk out with my face—and limbs—intact. So, I continued. While he was groaning in agony, I shoved his head into a porcelain bowl so hard that a piece of the urinal broke off from the impact. Just like that, the guy was out cold.

I didn't know what to do then. A victory dance? A witty remark? I swayed a little and looked up at the guy, whose face was a mixture of relief, confusion, and maybe relief. Shit, did I say that already? What I meant was, he had pissed himself.

"Fuck, man. What the fuck did you do?" he accused.

I shrugged. To be honest, it all happened so fast, and, in my state, I wasn't entirely sure what had just taken place.

"Do you have any idea who that was?" he asked.

I looked at him and blinked slowly, looking at him. He had a dark blue shirt and a cheap tan suit. I should know, I have enough of them myself. He had slicked back his black hair, giving him the look of a wannabe gangster. Couldn't tell you anything else about him, because who gives a shit if I could? Oh, the dark patch in his groin region was growing. He brushed at it to no avail.

"No," I said. "Who is he?"

"Doesn't matter, but I'm getting the fuck out of here. And you should do the same. If he wakes up and you're standing there with that slack grin on your face, he'll smash it in half."

He opened his jacket, reached into his pocket, and pulled out the stack of notes.

"Here," he said. "Take this." He threw it to me, and, after a few attempts, I had it in my grasp. "Do me a favor," he said, handing me a card. "Call that number and pass that along. Tell them I'm done, that I'm out. Let them know we're even. Don't come looking for me because I'm not around anymore. That card is a fucking curse."

And the rest of that encounter is kind of a blur, like a bigger blur than before, like the alcohol had hit me all at once—or maybe it was the adrenaline dying down. Anyway, I felt incredibly fucking tired. I remember returning to the booth quickly. I remember a cab ride. Rain on the window. I remember a blow job. Laying my head on the pillow. Someone on top. The world going black.

Funny, isn't it? Some things remain in our memories so clearly, yet others become a washed-out pixilation, a stained-glass window of a photograph.

I squeezed my head and took a moment to feel sorry for myself. My apartment spun. The open-curtained window, the makeshift bookshelves against the wall, the cheap lamp next to my bed I had found in a dumpster. I rolled over and placed my feet on the floor, trying to balance my view.

I pulled myself up with a groan and left for the bathroom, taking one last look at the fabulous body that lay outstretched on my bed. If I found some energy (and a little testosterone), I might delve in for another helping. You know, if she was up for it. I mean, she stayed, so my first efforts must have been all right...right?

After a short stint at the toilet, I shuffled into the kitchen, only running into two walls on the way. My lounge was sparse. The couch was there when I moved in. I hated it. Never used it anyhow. The television was the cheapest I could get in a discount store, but it worked. I had shut and locked the windows because it was cold outside, and I live in a shitty neighborhood. But the blinds were open, and natural light that streamed in hurt my brain.

I flicked on the coffee machine and it grunted and groaned to life. I knew how it felt. When my promotion came through, I would spend my newfound revenue on a better coffee machine, a more comfortable couch, a bigger television. Comfort. Eventually, I would invest in a better property in a more prominent location. Perhaps something a sober girl would like to come back to. Until then, I would have to rely on alcohol and low inhibitions to get them up three flights of stairs, down the stained hallway, and through the door.

I made two espressos and went about the business of frothing the milk. So deafening was the sound, I wished I drank it black. Just after I sloshed the warm milk into the two cups, I heard my front door

shut. I grabbed the two coffees and shuffled back into the bedroom. The bed was empty. To be honest, thank fuck. Because I wasn't up for any of the talking bullshit, or sex bullshit either, as much as I tried to convince myself I was.

I sat the cups down on the bedside table and rolled into bed, propping myself up to a reasonable position to drink hot liquid. I grabbed a cup and took a sip. God's nectar. Beside me on the other pillow was a piece of paper with curly writing on it.

Thanks for a great night. Call me. Olivia.

Her cell number followed. I guessed it was her number. I mean, what sick individual writes a thank you letter and then puts a fake number on the bottom? Wait, Olivia? How the fuck did I get Roxy? I wonder if I called her Roxy or Ruby. Did I groan it out at climax?

And did you hear that? A *great* night. Damn right, Roxy...I mean, Olivia. Shit. I better get that right before the next encounter, if I had a second encounter. As long as it involved alcohol, I guess.

The rest of my a.m. involved sipping coffee and reminiscing about the look on Elton's face when he realized I had done what I said I would do. Oh, and when the old man fired him. Shit! Glorious! I tried not to think about where he would end up. He wouldn't find another job in New York, nor anywhere on the East Coast. Of course, he could just retire. I had no doubt he had put a whole bunch of dollars away to prepare for some impending event.

After a recovery sleep, I rolled out of bed. I drank the cold remnants of the cups and spent a whole thirty minutes on the can and in the shower. I'll spare you the details. The bigger surprise was in my room.

Strewn about the meager space in a fit of drunken passion were my clothes from the previous night. I picked up my pants and inspected them, looking for any reason to dry clean the damn thing. The smell dictated that answer. I threw my shirt into the corner. I must've spilled something on it at one point because there was a large

stain on the front. Maybe I fumbled a drink somewhere in the night. After smelling it, I realized how wrong I was. I didn't recall vomiting during the night, nor cleaning off said vomit. Maybe it wasn't mine? I didn't know which was worse.

I cleaned off the jacket, removing everything to prepare to move it to the "dry clean" pile. No point dry cleaning individual suits. The local cleaner down the street had a deal—three for the price of two—so it made more sense to stockpile the dirty ones.

As I patted down the jacket pockets, I felt something large in an inner compartment. I pulled out a roll of tightly bound notes. Some of the night's events came back to me—not all, but some. The big guy doubling over, passed out on the ground. The victim thrusting the bills into my hand. He said something, someone to call. Terry? Or Tim? And then him holding something else. A business card?

In another pocket I found it. It was the size of a business card, but it was matte black and made of metal. It didn't bend or break. Engraved on one side was a phone number, on the other a ten-character sequence. I flipped it over in my hand. It was a thing of beauty. I considered taking it to Tealson and asking if my new business cards could look like it.

*18[I picked up my cell and dialed the number.

"George's Dry Cleaning," came the reply, curt and courteous at the same time.

"Yeah, hi. I found—"

The line went dead.

I redialed.

"George's Dry Cleaning." Same voice, the same tone.

"Yeah, I need to give—"

The line went dead again.

I flipped the card over and redialed.

"George's Dry Cleaning."

I read out the combination.

She paused. Then she read out a date, an address, and a time. It was for that night, some road in a neighborhood even less desirable than the one I lived in.

I stared at the money on my bed. It could be a short-term win. I could blow it on new furniture and appliances. Get a head start on revamping my life. But then I calculated the downsides. From what I could recall from my drunken memories, the guy I had hit didn't seem like the kind of guy I should've hit, and he likely worked for someone I probably shouldn't piss off. Besides, it wouldn't be long before my bank account worked its way upward, anyway.

This alluring revelation settled my night's plans: make the delivery, get out. I wondered if I would get a tip for my trouble.

It turned out I got more than I bargained for.

Chapter 5

THE MEETING LOCATION was more foreboding and more gangster-like than I could ever describe, but I'll give it a go. The block-long alley ran between two rows of buildings—residential on one side, businesses on the other. Boarded up windows lined the ground floor tenants on both sides. On the commercial side, faded and illegible signs were attached to the bare brickwork between doors.

The cab driver dropped me off and didn't hang around long, apparently keen to distance himself from this sketchy situation. The streets seemed deserted, but of course that didn't mean they were empty. I pulled my knee-length coat tighter around me. Beneath it, I was wearing my best cheap suit. I guess if you were going to see someone important, it was worth looking important. I tapped my chest pocket where the card and money were securely held. As long as no one stuck a gun in my ribs and searched me, I would be fine.

How wrong I was.

I warily made my way down the alleyway, looking for the right door, but also keeping an eye on everything else. Every shadow, every bum sleeping next to a dumpster. In the distance, there was a sound of breaking glass and a cat screeching. At least, I think it was glass that was breaking, and I think it was the sound of a cat. Given my environment and the fact I was shit scared, I might have been making up the source of the noises.

Every so often, there would be an offshoot to another road. It was a city within a city. A miniature grid of streets lined with rubbish, with coarse smells attacking me. And it was damn cold. I wondered if the cops came here. If they did, would they bother to stop and help me if I was in need?

Then I stopped. Under a rusty external stairwell, there was faded red door. I checked my watch. Only twenty minutes late. I walked

up to the door and knocked. Nothing. So, I banged on it. Then I noticed a spyhole near the top of the door. It looked like one you would find on a hotel room door, only much higher.

Just then, a voice boomed through the door. “Card.”

As I reached into my jacket, I heard the distinct sound of a shotgun being raked. Now, I know I was already in an alarmed state, and I was probably imagining noises I had heard on episodes of cop shows. But I can tell you, you don’t mistake that noise. I paused, my eyes wide, my breathing shallow.

“Card,” the voice said again.

I dragged it out and held it up to the door peephole.

“Wait,” the voice said.

I returned the card and shoved my cold hands back inside my jacket. I can’t tell you why I didn’t wear gloves that night. Because I had a pair. A really nice pair. I guess I was so excited about what I was embarking on I just completely forgot.

After I had spent a minute taking long glances up and down the alley, I heard from behind the door the sounds of locks being opened, metal sliding on metal. The door opened a few feet. Behind it, I could see the room looked like the backroom of a strip club—dark, with just as much character.

I took a deep breath and stepped inside. As soon as the door shut behind me, a weak bulb turned on above me, lighting up the area. I could see I was in a hallway, with various doors along the right wall at regular intervals, and a large poster of Marilyn Monroe at the end of the hallway. You know, the one where she’s on the hot air grate and her dress is blowing up and everything. Anyway, it seemed extraordinarily out of place.

Then a large hand came down on my shoulder, and I could feel a body right behind me. I didn’t have to turn around and look at him—his presence alone was enough for me to conjure many horri-

fying images. His strong fingers bit into me, causing pain to run up to my neck.

“Walk,” he said. “Talon wants to see you.”

Talon?

And so, I walked, without knowing where or who we were walking to. Well, more like staggered, given the pulsing vibrations up and down the right side of my body.

When we reached the first door, the man behind me stopped, and I had no choice but to stop as well. He knocked once, turned the handle, and pushed me inside with about as much decorum as you would get if you were thrown out of a strip club for poking a fork in the bare rump of a stripper.

Inside the room was a desk with a lamp on it. It was the only source of light in the room and strategically positioned to cloud the features of the person sitting near it. Periodically, a round glow would ignite and then disappear. A wisp of smoke rose from the cigarette-laden ashtray in the middle of the desk.

“Please, take a seat,” he said, and then took a huge draw on his cigarette before butting out the remains in the tray. As I sat, I sensed movement from the corner of the room, and before my arse could find the seat, someone slammed my head down on the desk with such force I momentarily forgot what my name was. Then that person held my head down against the desk and pressed what I assumed was a gun against my temple.

The man at the desk cocked his head to the side so we faced each other, and then he leaned forward into the light. His small, dark eyes were inset into his skull. His long, greasy hair followed no particular direction. He had stubble over his uneven face. Old acne scars? I made out a white singlet. His dark shirt looked like it was open all the way.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Talon.” He flashed his grin.

Oh, *Talon*. Rows of gold teeth filled my vision.

His grin dropped. “Now, how about you tell me who the fuck *you* are and how you came to be in possession of that card in your pocket.”

“I’m no one,” I said meekly but also defiantly.

The gun cocked. Once again, unmistakable.

“That isn’t an answer.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, clearing my throat. “My name is Atlas Jones. I was out celebrating last night. I ran into a guy in the alley behind Louie’s Gin Bar. He was frazzled, couldn’t understand the fuck he was talking about. I thought he was high or something. He throws a stack of money and a card at me and runs off.”

He chewed over my reply, then came in closer. “Do you know why they call me Talon?”

“Because of that winning smile?”

For a moment, the person behind me lifted my head off the desk. But just for a moment. Then slammed it down onto the surface. Very hard. My ears rang.

I heard a drawer open, then close. Talon held a blade in front of my face, uncomfortably close to my eyes.

“You’re a funny guy,” he said, rotating the blade. Light reflected off it. “No, not because of my winning smile, as you put it. It’s because I have a knack for removing body parts very carefully. Do you know the sound it makes when you pop an eyeball out of its socket? Something you’ll never forget. The last guy I did that to, he was a funny guy also. Did you want to give it a go?”

I tried to shake my head. I had no idea if I was successful or not, but surely the look in my eyes would suffice.

“No?” He leaned back in his chair. “I also have this thing.” He pulled open the drawer and held another object in front of my face. A pair of pliers. Now, I didn’t know for sure, but it looked like there was dried blood on the jaws and handle. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you I was positively shitting myself.

“You see,” he continued, “someone fucks with me? I got a habit of taking some back. I start at the back teeth, then come forward. Then work on the lowers. It’s really not a pretty sight, but there’s something about that feeling when they pop. They just come clean out, a squirt of blood and all.”

“I’ve got the money,” I exploded, panicked. “It’s in my jacket pocket. I haven’t taken a bill.”

The guy behind me kept the gun against my head as he reached into my pocket and pulled out the stack. He sat it on the desk in front of Talon, who sat back in his chair and stared at it.

“My boy Stone here was at that gin bar last night. Had that piece of shit, good-for-nothing Aston up against the wall and someone suckered him from behind.” He came in close again. I could smell him. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Fuck! Look at me! Do I look like someone who could punch someone? I’ve never been in a fight.”

Talon sat back and smiled. It was impossible to know what it meant. Was he giving himself some distance, so my blown-out brains didn’t end up on him?

A quick look of the eyes, a flicker, and I was on my feet. The only problem was my head was still on the desk, being held in place with Stone’s gun. My ass was in the air, and I didn’t like where it was going. Not one damned bit. And then I heard it. Out of all the sounds I had heard that night, out of everything that sent a shiver up my spine, the next one petrified me. The jingling sound of a belt, then a zipper being undone.

“Fuck. What do you want from me? I’ve got nothing else.”

“Oh,” said Talon. “I wouldn’t say you have *nothing* to give.”

“I told you everything. Why would I come here if I fucked you over?”

I felt a hand reach around and start undoing my pants.

“I returned your money! That’s all I wanted to do!” Tears formed in my eyes, a rarity to be sure, but the occasion called for it. I would trade, barter, and negotiate for my life. You might also add the safety and security of my orifices to that equation as well.

I could feel my legs buckle.

“No, no, no,” Talon said. “You must stay strong for Stone. You don’t want to make him work any harder than he has to, but believe me, he will.”

Stone pulled my pants down.

“Oh, God, please. I don’t want to do this. I just wanted to return the money.”

“Now, I’m going to ask you one last time, and if I don’t like the answer, Stone will stretch that tight little hole of yours, and I know you’re clenching very fucking tightly right now. Where did you get the money and the card?”

“I fucking told you. In the alley behind Louie’s Gin Bar. Some guy throws this shit at me. I take it on myself to get it back to you. I’m trying to make things right.”

Suddenly, I was upright, spun around, and staring into a pair of very menacing eyes. He had grabbed me by the collar, but I felt faint. All the blood had rushed from me, and pins and needles attacked every inch of my skin.

Stone reared a fist back, and I closed my eyes and waited. The impact was destructive. He might have hit me in the eye, or maybe the nose, I wasn’t sure. I just remember falling. At the time it felt like forever, like the ground would never come. But eventually, it did.

I wasn’t sure how long I was out for. It might have been seconds or minutes, or it might have been an hour. However long it was, when I woke, it was sudden. The first thing was the metallic taste in my mouth. At first, I thought it was blood, but then I realized there was something in my mouth. My eyes sprang open, and I looked past

the gun at Stone. He was crouching over me, his tackle hanging below his shirt, his pants still down.

Talon was standing next to him. He placed a hand on Stone's shoulder. Stone ripped the gun from my mouth and stood with a grunt. He shuffled off to put himself back together as Talon stood over me.

"Get up," he said.

I worked my way to my feet and quickly secured my pants, trying to slow my breathing. When I looked up, Talon had his arms folded, with one hand working either side of his forehead.

"Atlas, Atlas, Atlas. What the fuck am I going to do with you?" He looked at me. "You were very convincing, even when your ass was on the line, literally. But you held firm. And, in all honesty, I wouldn't have known the truth unless I had the bar's security footage."

Fuck.

"You realize my conundrum, Atlas. You fucked one of my guys. But you returned the money." He put a hand on my shoulder. "And you can bluff like a son of a bitch. You got balls, kid, I'll give you that. Seen men twice your size whimper like little bitches when put in a similar situation."

We stared at each other. I could tell he was mulling something over. I hoped it had nothing to do with Stone, who had taken up residence at the table and lit a cigarette. Talon's eyes widened, and I could tell he had decided.

"What do you do?"

"Investment banker," I replied.

"Oh," Talon said. "Any good?"

I shrugged. "I guess. I mean, I did just land a four hundred-billion-dollar revenue pipeline for the company I work for."

I could see Talon's eyes open wider, his pupils dilating. The numbers I threw around clearly aroused him. He nodded slowly.

“Well, well, well. Perhaps you should come and work for me, then.”

“Maybe as a scapegoat,” Stone boomed from the other side of the room.

Talon laughed, a chortle turning into a rumbustious growl. Stone followed in succession. It was so infectious I had no option but to follow.

The laughter eventually died down, and Talon wiped a tear from his eye.

“Goddamn,” he said. “And to think I was going to let Stone here blow your fucking brains out.”

I caught my breath.

In the blink of an eye, Talon’s demeanor had changed.

“Do you like poker?”

I took a second to respond, trying to keep up with everything that was happening. I shrugged. “Sure.”

“What do you know about it?”

“Just the basics. Each player has two cards and combines them the community cards to make their best hand in order to beat everyone else.”

He gently rocked his head back, eyed me, stroked his moustache.

“Well. It’s a start. Let me give you the tour.”

He placed an arm around my shoulders and gently escorted me to the door. When we got there, he said, “Don’t forget to say goodbye to Stone.”

“Goodbye, Stone,” I said.

Stone grunted.

Talon turned the handle of the next door down the hall and led me into his world. A large room, impeccably decorated with wood and steel. A bar ran the length of the left-hand wall, and a team of people tended to those requesting attention or took drinks to the

punters sitting at the eight tables. Each table was busy with some card game that kind of resembled poker.

We went to the bar and Talon clicked his fingers. An attendant appeared before him and he ordered two of something. To tell you the truth, I wasn't listening—I was too busy watching the action unfold at the tables. The dealer dealt cards, some up, some down. The players moved chips around the table, sipping their drinks in small measures.

Talon must have caught me staring because he said, "A little variant I created called *Thief*."

"Looks interesting," I said, transfixed.

"Well, this can be a little challenging, especially for the new guy."

"I'm a quick learner."

"Well, everything you thought you knew about poker you can flush down the toilet. There are approximately twelve hundred variations of the game, but what we play here is something different again, our own variant."

I turned to see him holding two tumblers with three fingers of clear liquid in it. I took the glass, and he clinked his against mine.

"To being alive," he said, and then downed his in one gulp.

I lifted the glass. It smelt like petrol. I looked at Talon, who was eyeing me expectantly. After what I had gone through that evening, I was glad to have anything alcoholic to calm me. I slowly lifted the glass and poured the contents into my mouth, swallowing quickly, trying not to let the burn linger in my mouth. Not that it mattered, because it burned all the way down and boiled away in my stomach.

He smiled as I slammed the glass down on the bar and exhaled what felt like flammable gas.

"All right then," he said, clapping his hands. "Let me give you the overview. Then you can figure it out as you go."

He spun me around and placed an arm around my shoulder as he explained the rules of his game.

“Like every variant of poker game, the goal is to get the best hand and win the pot. Like you said before, to win you need to make a more superior hand than the other players by combing your cards with the community cards. The starter moves around the table clockwise for each hand. Seems pretty straightforward, right?”

I nodded

“Players start with one card and there are two more visible cards in the community. For round two, an additional card is dealt along with two more invisible cards in the community. Follow me?”

I nodded again and he continued.

“Here’s the catch. For the first round, players must force any other player to exchange their card. For the second round, you can change out a community card of your choosing, visible or invisible.”

“So, the world just keeps on changing?”

“Exactly!”

“How the hell does anyone win?”

“The person who’s the most resilient, the one who can most effectively remain agile in a shifting, changing, dynamic world. They are the ones who win. Just like life. Those who can make the best use of the misfortune around them and come out on top.”

I stared at a game in progress. A player displayed some fingers and another player had their card exchanged.

Talon pulled me around so we were face to face and placed both his hands on my shoulders.

“Now, Atlas, listen to me. This is my private parlor. Entry is by invitation. I invite you to be a member. But there are some rules you need to abide by.”

“Go ahead,” I said, taking it all in. The lure of it all was far too much, let alone the exclusivity of it all. For not one moment did the thought cross my mind someone with the name *Talon* was inviting me into his den, with fuck knows who else, to potentially lose a hell of a lot of money.

“The rules are simple. Membership is non-transferable, which means you don’t give your card away to anyone, like that dickhead Aston did. Membership is private, which means you don’t tell anyone about this.”

“The first rule of fight club?”

He gave me a sideways glance, a toothy smile. “Exactly. There’s hope for you yet. My parlor is open every Friday night, at a different location each time. You can find out where by calling the number on your membership card. You know, the same way you found out about this location. We have eight tables, each holding six players. Turn up on time. You know, *not* like tonight. There’s no cap on how much you can win or lose at each sitting, and the house takes a cut of each winning pot. If everyone folds, the house keeps the pot. You can play in debt to recover your losses, but know if you do, and walk out of here in the hole, your obligation trebles. We only accept cash. No credit, no goods, no Walmart gift cards. You buy in and cash out with Tessa next door.”

Against the far wall, someone swore out loud, stood up, and swept a stack of chips against the wall. A large man erupted from the corner. And by large, I mean huge. He was wearing a white shirt with jeans and donned a black vest (that was a size too small) that fought to stay connected in front. His hair was slicked back, but his beard was wild and disheveled, hiding most of his face, and his black eyes were wide and livid. He grabbed the offender—a middle-aged, black suit-wearing banker type—by the shoulder, swinging him around and punching him square in the face. He then snatched the man by the scruff of the neck and pushed him to the door as the man held his hands to his face, blood streaming through his fingers and onto his dinner jacket.

“Oh, and you misbehave, you’ll be out, courtesy of Hugo here,” Talon added. “I can revoke membership at any time, which means your debts are payable in twenty-four hours, by money...or some oth-

er means.” He looked at me. “I’ll leave that up to your imagination, you sick little freak!”

He squared me up. The friendly features had dropped from his face, and his eyes had become cold. I can’t say I’ve ever gazed upon such a pair of eyes in my life. Nothing came close. Not even my numerous shitty foster parents when they were hailing down a barrage of punches and cigarette burns.

“You break any of my rules, and you and me will have a major problem. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Do you want a problem with me?”

I shook my head.

“That’s the right fucking answer.” A smile returned to his face. “Any questions?” Beneath that jovial externalism rested a man that considered business to be serious.

“Just one,” I said. “What’s through that door?” I pointed to a blue door inset at the far end of the room.

“That,” Talon said, turning and placing a hand around my shoulder, “is the invitation within the invitation. Once a month, the top players have the blessing of spending the evening with me. High stakes, no limit. Fifty thousand buy-in. Winner takes all. Half a million. You want to make some serious money, that’s where you’re going to do it. And you get to do that in the company of champagne, pussy, cock, coke, whatever your proclivity. I once had a patron request a donkey and a sauce bottle.” He leaned in close. “And who am I to decline a man what he desires?”

I grinned. Not about the goat. Half a mill sounded like an unbelievable payday. But then I remembered the situation I was in—all the hoops I’d have to jump through to get there, and also the fact I’d need to win at my table in a game I had never played before.

“I’ve seen dreams get made and also get shattered in that room,” he told me. “Take our friend Aston, for example.”

"I see," I said. "Well, I can't wait to get started."

"Well, tonight, you can stay at the bar. If I put you in one of those games right now, you'll be dead before the night's through. You help deliver drinks or some shit as payment for lying to me."

"I'm a fast learner, like I said."

"You're no good to me dead, kid."

Talon made his way to the door. "Consider yourself lucky, kid. You're getting an opportunity most don't. Now, I've got some...work to do next door with our friend, Aston." He put his hand on the handle. "Should I say hello for you?"

"To be honest, I'd rather you didn't."

"Suit yourself."

I spent the next few hours taking orders and running drinks. I even picked up a few bucks as tips from the players. Bless. Whenever I dropped off drinks, I would spend a few moments watching the game unfold. Watching the bets, the cards, the dealers, the players. There was one in particular who caught my eye.

A lady, mid-fifties. She had fiery red hair and perfect makeup. She wore a black pantsuit, smoked fat cigars, and drank small glasses of brown spirit. There was something about how she played that got to me. How could I tell that about a player playing a game I didn't even know? Well, I don't know what to say, other than I just did. It wasn't until I turned my attention to the dealer, I finally figured it out.

I would be good at the game, I just knew it. It's cards. There's a science to it, there are calculations and formulas to predict the best outcome.

When the clock hit one, people collected their chips and cleared out. Dealers tidied the tables and stacked the house chips. Bar staff cleared glasses and wiped down the bar.

Talon came back in to see me, shaking hands with a queue of several people as he did so. Some wore gangly grins, and, with a wink,

Talon slapped them on the back as they left. Others stared at the ground, avoiding eye contact with the world. Talon took those people under his wing and whispered in their ear.

I thought maybe Talon was misunderstood, that deep down he cared about the people playing cards in his parlor. But then I remembered what type of person he was and figured he was most likely telling the losers their debt repayment timelines and what would happen to them if they didn't pay up. There was only one person Talon really cared about, and that was Talon. His show of support was nothing more than a show to keep the winners coming back and the losers on the edge.

After everyone had left, Talon sidled up next to me at the bar. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm going to have a little bit of fun," I said, cracking a smile.

He pressed a metallic card down on the bar and looked at me as he slid it over.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Chapter 6

KOLTON: OKAY, PRESENT in the room is Grant Taylor and his lawyer, Terry Barr. Grant, are you ready to continue?

TAYLOR: [silence]

KOLTON: For the record, Grant.

TERRY BARR: You shall address my client as Mr. Taylor.

KOLTON: [sigh] For the record, Mr. Taylor.

TAYLOR: Yes.

KOLTON: Thank you. Now, earlier I showed you a photo of the knife we believe was used in the murders of your wife and children. We have eyewitness testimony that you purchased the knife from a pawn shop. We have your fingerprints on the weapon. Did you want to make any comments about that?

TAYLOR: [silence]

BARR: I hope you've got something more than that, detective. It is circumstantial at best. You bring that knife and witness to a courtroom, and I'll destroy it.

KOLTON: Well, I guess we'll tell our story, and you'll tell your story. But why tell stories when we can talk about the truth right here, right now? Grant—sorry, Mr. Taylor—I'm still here to help you.

BARR: If there's nothing else, I'd like some more time with my client.

KOLTON: We'll get to that. But it's not just one thing I want to talk about. It's a big picture thing I want to get to. Now, Mr. Taylor, you mentioned you don't remember the night of the murders. What about before then?

BARR: Be specific, detective.

KOLTON: Where were you that afternoon of the sixteenth?

TAYLOR: Given what day it was, I think I was at home preparing.

KOLTON: Are you sure about that?

BARR: My client answered the question.

KOLTON: Is there anyone to corroborate your whereabouts on the afternoon of the sixteenth?

TAYLOR: My wife. My family.

KOLTON: That's mighty convenient, don't you think?

TAYLOR: [sobs] No.

KOLTON: I'll ask you again, Mr. Taylor. Were you having an affair?

TAYLOR: I told you before. No.

KOLTON: This is your last chance.

BARR: Detective, please. Is there a question for my client in there somewhere?

KOLTON: Yes, there is. Mr. Taylor, what is your connection to Isabelle Chalmers?

BARR: Don't answer that.

KOLTON: What, is there a problem?

TAYLOR: Who's Isabelle Chalmers?

KOLTON: Mr. Taylor, I—

BARR: I would like a moment with my client.

[silence]

KOLTON: Interview suspended.

Chapter 7

GRANT SPREADS HIS LARGE hands on the table. Or at least as far as he can, being chained to the table.

“What was the sequence?” Taylor’s question is colder than I expected.

“What sequence?”

“The characters on the card you received from Aston.”

“I—I don’t remember. That was a while ago.”

“What about her phone number?”

“Whose phone number?”

“Olivia, the girl you met at the bar. What was her phone number?”

“I don’t know!” I stand up. “Why are you asking me these questions?”

“Forget it. What the hell am I listening to? Why are you wasting my time? This last bit of time I have?”

“I told you, I want you to know.”

“Well, you aren’t really telling me shit. There’s nothing you’ve told me that could possibly help me.”

I sit back down and compose myself. I lean forward. “We’re getting there, Grant. We really are. I just want you to know the origins of it all. You know, every superhero and villain have their origin story. Whether it’s Bruce Wayne trapped in a cave, or Hal Jordan dying of cancer. Origin stories help people connect to the hero, help to build empathy, maybe even some sympathy.”

“You want me to feel sorry for you?”

“You? No. I really don’t give a shit. I just want you to understand. There are lots of steps in the journey.”

“Well, right now you’re pissing me off.”

“I’m getting there, Grant.” I pause and look at him intently. “What about you, Grant? What’s your origin story?”

He begins to fold his arms, but the restraints stop his movement. He blinks slowly and takes a deep breath. It's fascinating to watch someone who's been on death row for years to become institutionalized and have all hopes dashed. Then to see them forget all that, to think they are just like everyone else—free. Free to do whatever he wants. But by far the most interesting moment, the one I'm waiting for, is when he remembers where he is and why he's here.

"I don't have an origin story, Atlas."

"Sure you do," I reply. "You were born in New Hampshire to Tom and Betty, right? Two of the most middle-class people I've ever researched. *You* did all right, though. School captain, top of the class. You broke the mold. Went to college, graduated with honors. Started your own business. Happily married Melanie, had kids. Business was doing well, really well. So well, in fact, that you moved up a few pegs on the social pecking order. Then you decided you wanted to make a difference. So, you run for mayor. Everything's great. You're a star on the rise. Does that sound about right? Public office. Senator. How am I doing?"

"Yeah, it sounds about right," he says, nodding slightly. "So what?"

"Well, it's important. Your success is important—*was* important. Doesn't really matter now, I guess."

He shrugs.

"See, we all have origin stories. All those things we've done, all those experiences that make us who we are. I mean, I skipped a lot of the mushy emotion bullshit stuff because, let's face it, who really cares, right? The fact you started a charity to help disadvantaged children? Or that you used to volunteer at your kids' schools talking to the students about resilience? Blah! Who cares? The jury certainly didn't care about that stuff when they handed down the death sentence."

Grant stares at me, or maybe through me. He says nothing, so I keep going.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it? All those good things. Everything to ensure your success and progress through life. To increase your personal value. And yet, when you were put on the stand and pummeled by the prosecution, your stocks fell quicker than a virgin’s panties on prom night. Man, you should’ve seen the look on your face. I bet you were hanging out for reasonable doubt. Am I right? Of course, I’m right—of course you were. But there was this nagging thing in the back of your mind. You thought no jury of twelve would believe all the evidence laid out before them. That all you needed was one person. One person who didn’t believe the prosecution.”

He clenches his jaw. I keep talking.

“And yet, a murderer who does their time with no trouble gets an early release. Finds themselves on a program. Improves themselves, or at least makes others believe they have. Gives their time to charity. Helps others avoid the same mistakes so they can have a brighter future. Helping disadvantaged youth find another outlet instead of gangs and drugs. This person, well, they are bloody saints. People look at them and go, ‘Poor soul, trapped in his upbringing. Did the wrong thing, but at least now he’s trying? Give him a gold star.’ And then? Boom. Personal value through the roof. Hardly seems fair, does it?”

“Please, stop talking,” he says, closing his eyes.

So, I keep talking.

“I mean, which is better? Which is worse? The one who’s good but does wrong? Or the one who’s bad but does good? In reality, for me, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is being able to predict it. Actually, what really matters is knowing when something—a stock, for instance—is at its best and about to plummet, or vice versa. That’s where real money is made, when real value is delivered. Take that sustainability stock, for example. Sometimes you just need to look be-

yond the numbers. And sometimes you just need to help those numbers along a bit.”

“You’re giving me a headache.”

“I’d give you some drugs I have in my pocket, but the guard made it pretty clear I wasn’t allowed to pass anything to you.”

“Is there anything else? Anything important for you to tell me?”

“Grant, it’s all important. Let me continue.”

Chapter 8

LOOK, I'M NOT GOING to lie—I spent a lot of time researching poker. I'd stay up from sunrise to sunset studying it. You know, strategies. Even tried finding out about Talon's version of the game, but not even Google had anything on it. So, I resorted to basic, generic tactics. Seeing as I'd be playing with seasoned veterans, I figured I'd take it easy the first few games until I got the hang of it. Let's face it. There's no skill in poker in the short term; it's predominantly luck. However, the long term is a different question. This is where skill comes into its own right, where the better players make mathematically superior decisions than the people next to them.

Between fantasies of rolling around in a bed of money, my week consisted almost entirely of work. Oh, but I did get a date with that Olivia gal. Nice enough of her to show up on my doorstep unannounced. I came home one evening to find her camping out at my door. Which made sense, I guess. She did ask me to call her, and I never did. And yet, she returned. Insert something about setting them free here, if you're into that kind of thing.

Apparently, she was in the area and enjoyed last time, so she wanted to see me again. To be completely honest, it took me a couple of minutes to remember who the hell she was. How she got into the building in the first place, I have no idea. Maybe that's why I was attracted to her—the fact she could use some smarts to get around obstacles that got in her way.

Ha ha ha! Sorry, I couldn't help myself. It was her boobs! That's what attracted me. Now, don't get me wrong. Pretty face, very pretty face. And damn smart to boot. I'm not a shallow guy, but damn, am I right? Anyway, we went on a date, like a real one. Shitty coffee at a shittier joint around the corner. We spoke about everything: her family, the studies she loved, the job she hated, all that shit. I listened to some of it, pretended to listen to the rest. I got the gist of the con-

versation. We both drank coffee and shared a glazed doughnut. Not romantic or nutritious, but, hey, we laughed. We shared stories (mine were made up, of course). I was witty, and she smiled at me in a way no one ever had. But please, believe me, this isn't one of *those* stories. I'm not going to tell you she changed me, I became reformed, or she set me on some path to greatness. The reality couldn't be further from that.

You see, I don't have many friends. Come to think of it, I don't have *any* friends. But the reason for that is simple—I don't need friends. I don't need the complication that comes from them. I don't want to rely on anyone, and I don't want anyone relying on me.

I do have acquaintances, people I frequent certain establishments with. Some from the office, high-strung fuckers looking for a line of coke to snort and a hooker to suck on a pacifier.

Now, I'm sure some Harvard study is going to tell you friends are good for physical and mental health, that they help you deal with stress and make better life choices, but I think that's a load of shit. I believe friends are good for three things.

One: to stay connected to reality. But who the fuck wants that? Reality is either boring or painful. There's little good in the here and now. There are only the present and the future, and our views on that dictate what is real, so why should I place that in someone else's hands?

Two: to get help when you need something. Think love, money, or support. I need none of those things. I've been able to get by just fine on my own. When I needed money, I worked my ass off to get a job and get through. I've rolled up the sleeves and worked through it. Christ, it really isn't hard. All these pansy kids today with their expectations and entitlements. I tell you, life's going to kick them in the balls the first chance it gets, and then they'll go running to Mommy, or Daddy, or the government, asking for a handout, an explanation, revenge, or money.

And three: to be there when *they* need something. Let me just refer you back to point two.

The best part of the date was when she lingered at my stoop for just a second too long, and we kissed. Of course, we had done more than that other night—way more—and she had come back, so maybe that was expected. Anyway, I took her upstairs, and we ended up in bed.

So, in summary, I don't need anyone, but I do need them to do things for me. And I will put in as many coffees and doughnuts as I need to, if it ends up in sexual promiscuity. I know what you're thinking. *Asshole*, right? But we all do things to get things. That's just how the world works. I'm just making my intentions extremely clear. Wouldn't you rather know someone's intentions, however blunt they are, rather than making assumptions based on your perception of the truth? Christ, I'm the last damned boy scout.

After I saw her into a taxi at two the next morning, I couldn't sleep. So damn wired. How had things picked up so rapidly? From junior associate to a corner office, an invitation to a club I couldn't tell anyone about, and a girl who made my sexual fantasies come true. It felt like a black swan event, one that would have been a surprise to anyone, let alone myself. It reminded me of when Porsche declared they owned Volkswagen in '08, and VW shares went up over ninety percent in a single day's trading.

But the real breakthrough, and the bit that should interest you, came two days later. I was making myself at home in my new office. It was Elton's old office, which has some kind of symmetry or poeticism about it or something. I had a corner office bigger than my whole apartment, room enough for a couch and a bookcase—which was empty, by the way. I mean, what the hell was I going to put in there? It came with views of Central Park, so, go me.

Anyway, on that particular day, old man Tealson came in and took a seat in my office. Now, let me tell you how interesting this is,

because Tealson never goes to *anyone's* office. People go to see him, not the other way around. Which means he had something very important to tell me, something that just couldn't wait.

Regardless, there he was, sitting in my steel and fabric chairs on the other side of my desk. A far cry from the luxurious, handcrafted, calf leather armchairs that occupied his own world several stories above us. I felt honored he bothered to drag his scrawny ass down to my neck of the woods to set the record straight.

"You know what people want?" he asked, stretching his arms over the length of the chair, his bony long fingers clutching the ends.

I always wondered how someone like Tealson could score a lingerie model as a piece on the side to a wife who was an ex-lingerie model. Then I thought about his boat, his car, his four holiday homes, his executive apartment in the city. There's a lot to be said for materialized wealth. People can talk about love all they want. Money is key here.

Lennon and McCartney famously said, "You can't buy me love." Bitch, please.

And believe me, I realize how contradictory that sounds. I mean, Olivia wasn't after my money, because when we met, I didn't have much of it. Maybe it was an investment of her time. Perhaps she saw bigger things in me. The parallels to my world were not lost on me.

I leaned back in my chair, bringing my hands together, pretending to be deep in thought. "I'm sure you're going to tell me."

His eyes narrowed. "Results, Atlas. Results."

I pointed to my desk. "I made four hundred million this week for this company."

"Oh, it's not about that. No one is questioning your ability to get a result...any *old* result."

"Then what's this about?"

"Let me tell you a story," he said, crossing his arms. "In 1979, my football coach took us all the way. Before then, we had been at the

bottom of the league and had been there for years. Our home crowds expected us to lose every time. And lose we did. Every damn game. We were at the bottom in every metric. People got used to it. We were a bunch of stragglers without any hope whatsoever. We had no talent, no equipment, and really shitty attitudes.”

The old man didn’t go into detail about what level of football he was talking about. I quickly did some math and figured he was probably referring to college ball. Once again, he didn’t bother going into it. And to be frank, I’m glad. Because I didn’t give a shit. But I listened anyway, with as much enthusiasm as I could fake.

“Then, we got a new coach, you see. His expectations were different from what we were used to. He woke us up, made us comfortable in the uncomfortable. He took us from the bottom of the league to the top, and we only dropped one game. A line call in the dying minute that went against us. We could have been undefeated. Anyway, we made it to the end, and we won the trophy.”

I stared at the old man, wondering how he could have ever played football. Surely, he would have been more at home running the water than on the field. I don’t know, maybe times had changed. Maybe he shrank as he grew older. Perhaps in his prime, he was a two hundred forty-five-pound linebacker.

“Uh huh,” I said. “And?”

“The next year,” he said, not even noticing my discomfort with the conversation, “management gave him an ultimatum: *Get us to the bowl without dropping a game or go find yourself another job.*”

“Huh,” I offered. “That seems quite harsh considering where you started and where he took you to.”

“The world is unfair, kid!”

“So what?” I said, leaning back in my chair. “You going to tell me he did it, that against all odds he achieved the near-impossible, that he turned you into back-to-back champions?”

“Hell, no!” he laughed. “We bombed...hard. Won three games the whole season. He lost his job! Took a gun and blew his brains out in his shitty little one-bedroom apartment.”

“Fuck,” I said. I didn’t know what to say or where all this was going.

“Damn right.”

“So...you’re considering me as a player and you the coach? That you can take me to the top of my game?”

He laughed. Really fucking hard.

“Fuck, kid. Did you miss the boat on that one! But you gave me a laugh, so I’m going to give you a pass.” Then the joy vanished from his face, and his eyes grew serious. “No, by the way, you arrogant little shit. The moral of the story is that when you achieve something, people don’t just want the same again. They want it bigger and better.”

He stared at me. There were several seconds of silence.

“So, I’m not talking about you getting the same old result. I’m talking about you making something bigger and better. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, reading you loud and clear. No pressure at all!”

He stood up. “Because I put my fucking neck out for you. Which means everything you do is a reflection on me. This office you have is yours because I gave it to you—don’t forget that. And that means I can revoke it at any time.”

Shit. Didn’t that sound familiar. I wonder what else Tealson and Talon had in common? On second thoughts, I don’t even want to think about it.

“I’ve done this for you, which means I want payment in due course. I gave you everything you needed: hardware, software, contacts, expense accounts, the list goes on. That all makes me wonder when the payoff will be.” He looked around the office. “Fucking Elton! Imagine if he was stock. Where I thought he was heading,

I would have invested a hell of a lot. And considering his lack of judgement, his monumental fuck up, that one decision he got wrong...well, I would've lost an absolute fortune. Not worth shit right now. Would've lost out big time."

At that, Tealson, evidently please with this accusatory tirade, stormed out of the office.

As the door swung shut behind him, a million thoughts raced through my mind. The bigger picture, the intricacies of it all, the machinations of such an approach. Hell, I even pondered the ethical nature of it all. I briefly thought about morals, but then I quickly discarded them. I'm an investment banker. Morals played little.

Finally, after pondering through the complications, an idea had formed. But I couldn't pull it off by myself. I needed help.

And that's where Sonja entered the story.

Chapter 9

IF YOU ASK ENOUGH QUESTIONS, you discover what you're looking for—and I asked around plenty. I was seeking a computer whiz because I had no intention of learning all that shit and doing it myself. To be perfectly honest, I could have if I wanted to; however, fast to market was more important. I was outsourcing. Being strategic. Being resourceful.

The hacking community and various dark web nodes referred to her as Fur, the Latin word for *thief*. I liked that. The symbolism of it all. She spent most of her time coding intricate protocols for sensitive collateral. She devoted her evenings breaking those same barriers and making money for a lot of people. I knew she was part of that list, but how much of that was true was a matter of debate. I didn't care who she connected with, or whatever shady shit she did to pay the rent. I only cared about her expertise and what she could do for me.

The meeting place was a diner on the outskirts of town. A place where the tables get wiped down once a day, where the seats are old and worn, and where the coffee tastes like you were gnawing on an old shoe. It felt like the perfect location to discuss this opportunity. I chose a booth farthest from the door and slid into it so I could still view the entrance.

A few other customers were also there, but I felt out of place in my gray suit, polished shoes, and professional overcoat. A trucker sat at the counter. He hadn't bothered to remove his cap as he alternated between shoveling eggs and guzzling coffee. He had his rig parked on the opposite side of the road. There was an older couple at a table, a map laid out between them, and they were pointing with spoons on the map, planning their next stop. Evidently, they owned the camper van out the front.

The waitress appeared from nowhere and poured me an unsolicited cup of coffee. I watched the thick black liquid ease into the cup and winced at the thought. Her brown hair, as dull as the look on her face, was in a tight bun. She was fifty, with plenty of wrinkles showcasing her experience.

“Thank you, Flo,” I said energetically. Maybe too enthusiastically.

“Huh?” she replied, her tone completely lacking in care or kindness.

I tapped my chest. “Your nametag. Flo.”

She looked at the tag. “Oh. Bitch quit last week. You eating or just wasting my time?”

The segue was seamless. I glanced around the diner. “Expecting a rush or something?”

She placed a hand on her hip. “Do you want a menu or not?” I could sense the irritation in her voice.

I smiled. “No, Flo. I’ll be fine drinking whatever this stuff is you poured into my cup.”

She left without a retort.

I stared through the glass windows into the parking lot, wondering if I should sip the coffee. I never communicated with Fur directly—only through a third party who assured me she was the best. They told me I would know when she arrived. I wasn’t sure what that meant. Was Fur really a twelve-year-old boy who would get dropped off by his parents? Christ, that would be awkward. The cops would have a field day with that one. Maybe Fur was a retired, seventy-year-old NASA astrophysicist with nothing better to do. Shit, perhaps Flo—or whatever her real name was—*was* Fur. I hoped it was someone I had no interest in fucking. I wasn’t looking for more complexity. Besides, I preferred to keep my business and pleasure separate.

Right then, the barking roar of a motorcycle stole my attention. It came to a stop to the left of the diner’s entrance. I didn’t know much about motorcycles, so I couldn’t tell you what it was, but it

was something like a Harley. The rider jumped off. From my vantage point, I could tell they were wearing a black leather jacket and a black helmet, their face hidden by a reflective visor. I watched as they pushed in through the front doors and stood there, scanning the interior. Ripped jeans and boots completed the profile. I held my breath as they looked at me. There was no mistake about it.

They approached, pulling off their helmet as they did and revealing her face. Young. Too young? Old enough to ride a motorcycle, I suppose, or at least steal one. She had short black hair that was streaked with pink and flattened by her headgear. Her dark eyes, accented with even darker eye makeup, stared at me as she slid into the booth opposite mine. Her face was like porcelain, with three stars inked below her left eye. I couldn't help but gaze at her ear and nose piercings. I found them intoxicating and had to stop myself from reaching over to touch her. Goddamn urges.

She pulled off her gloves and pushed them into her helmet. She messed her hair up, blew a bubble with the gum in her mouth, and cupped her hands on the table. There was silence as we took each other in.

“How old are you?” I challenged.

“Old enough to know better,” she replied.

Flo appeared with a cup.

“Beer,” Fur stated.

Flo left.

Fur looked down at the cup in my hands. “Christ, you're not actually drinking that shit, are you?”

“You come here often, then?”

She looked down at the table, then raised her head. “What do you want?”

“Who says I want something?”

She looked around the diner, then back at me. “Do I look stupid to you? You kind of stick out. Wait, you’re not a cop, are you? You’ve got to tell me you know.”

I scoffed. “I’m not a cop.”

We looked over each other until a beer bottle hit the table top. Fur grabbed it, took a gulp, then placed it down. She picked up her helmet. “Well, this was fun, but I’ve got better things to do.”

“Wait!” I said as she got up.

“Listen, kid. You’d better talk...and make it interesting.”

So, I did. I told her my idea, and what I wanted from her.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You know you could outsource that shit to India for a fraction of the cost. Why me?”

“Because I need something secure. Something locked down for certain people. I want it off the radar. I don’t want feds or anyone else sniffing around. I want everything separated. I need offshore accounts, and nothing traceable. I need you because I would rather do unethical shit with someone who deals with illegal shit. That way we’re both on the hook. Besides, I need someone I can trust.”

“And I look trustworthy to you? You do know what I do, right?”

I laughed. “Do I look trustworthy to you?”

She looked me over. “Nope. Sketchy as fuck.”

“Exactly! So, when do you think you can have something?”

“It’s going to cost you. And a shit load more than we first discussed.”

“I thought as much.” I pulled an envelope from my coat pocket and placed it on the table. I looked around the diner as I slid it over.

She scoffed. “No one around here gives a shit, trust me.”

She took the envelope and a quick look inside. “This is a down payment.”

“Of course. There is more coming, as well as a percentage in the profits.”

“How much of a percentage?”

I paused, just for a moment. “One.”

“One? Really?”

“Hey, one percent of a lot is a lot of money.”

“I think more like thirty-one.”

“What?” I said incredulously, almost spilling my cup. “Thirty-one? Are you serious? How about nothing? And you give me back my five grand, and I walk away?”

“I would wish you well with that.”

“Don’t think I can’t find a replacement.” I stared hard at her. “I found you. In fact, fuck it, I might just give the five g’s to a teenager in India.”

She leaned forward on the table. “And I could spend every waking moment splitting that bullshit wide open. I could take your funds. Crumble your capital. And drop a bread crumb to the SEC and the feds to top it off.”

“Oh, really?” I said, folding my arms.

She leaned forward. “Oh, I get really creative when I’ve got nothing to do.”

We looked at each other, sizing each other up. Eventually, she put a hand inside her jacket and pulled out a small device, about the size of a phone. She pressed a button and slid it over to me. I picked it up. A digital recording device.

“Listen,” she said. “This is a sign of good faith. Twenty-one percent.”

“Seven,” I countered.

And so, it continued. We settled on twelve. It seemed like a good number for both of us.

“You will make enough money to forget about all this other shit you’re doing and retire to a beach in the Bahamas,” I told her. “Trust me!”

“Yeah, well, I’d rather have a hut in Vietnam and a garage full of motorcycles.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” I said, shrugging. I held my hand out across the table. “Do we have a deal?”

She reached out and shook it, then asked, “Do you have a name?”

“Atlas.”

“Sonja,” she replied.

It turned out neither of us used fake names that day.

“So,” she said, “Where to from here?”

“I need something to show the prospective investors. Nothing too complete, but something that shows the capability.”

“When?”

I sipped the coffee and winced, then swallowed it against my will.

“End of the week.”

She looked at me, a blank look on her face.

I didn’t tell her, but she would make a damn fine poker player.

“Well, I’d better get started then.” She thrust the envelope full of cash into her pocket and stood at the end of the table. “Always a pleasure doing business.” She turned away.

“Wait!” I called out. “How am I supposed to get in contact with you? Do we just meet back here?”

She turned. “You aren’t supposed to get in contact with me. I’ll get in contact with you.”

“So, you’re walking out of here with my idea, five grand of my money, and no means for me to find you?”

She blew another bubble with her gum. “It certainly seems that way, doesn’t it? Oh, and if you think the device I gave you was the only recording I have, you’re not as smart as I think you are.” She winked, pulled on her helmet, and pulled away from the diner with a roar from her motorbike.

I liked her a lot.

Too much.

Chapter 10

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH and look over Taylor.

“Boom. Just like that, we have our players in the story. There’s me—the hero, of course—Talon, the ‘bad’ guy, and Sonja, the dazzling sidekick. And let’s not forget the supporting roles of old man Tealson and my very special friend with benefits, Olivia. There also were, and will be, a bunch of cameos that don’t mean shit, and so just like in the movies, we can ignore them.

“Now, I’m sure you see me as some kind of sociopath, or worse. But I’ve done numerous online assessments, and I passed them all. In fact, I believe the correct term is *antisocial personality disorder*. Which is the first problem, because I socialize all the time, even with...that guy...from accounts. Greg, or Brett, or something. Told me a joke once I’ll never forget.

“What about the other elements?” I steady myself in my seat and check each one off of my fingers. “Good intelligence. Well, can’t argue there. But what about delusions, unreliability, lack of remorse, insincerity, poor judgement, incapacity to love, trivial sex life?” I sit back and think about that last point.

“What does ‘trivial’ mean, anyhow? Anyway, the point is...well, shit, I can’t remember the damn point I was trying to make.”

I look down at my lap.

Just then, there’s a bang on the table, and I snap my head up. Grant is half standing, his hands still constrained to a bar on the table. His bulk is methodically heaving with every breath. His look has turned, his dark eyes are like inkwells swirling with hatred.

“Stop fucking me around. If you have something to say to me, then just say it. Or so help me, I will rip this bar off the table and ram it up your ass. Those guards would need to stick a shotgun against my head and pull the trigger to stop me. Atlas, I’ve got nothing to lose. Can you say the same?”

I sit back and look into his eyes. Menacing. Not the same ones I saw all those years ago. Certainly not the same ones I saw when the guards brought him into the room. Anger had been brewing within him, and now it had an outlet.

“Tick tock, Atlas,” Grant says, his words coming out between breaths.

“You know,” I replied, thoughtfully, “there’s a lot of argument about nature versus nurture. Does your environment change you?” I pause.

Grant doesn’t move.

I tap the table. “You know, I think it’s all bullshit. I mean, you take an innocent man and place him in jail, and he becomes an animal because they treat him as such. They strip him of everything, and so he returns to his primal desires—to survive at all costs.

“Now, you take a guilty man and set him free in the community, and what happens? He doesn’t go all soft. He doesn’t feel the warmth of society, doesn’t go right his wrongs. He doesn’t evolve with technology. No. The powers that be have simply given him a second chance to do another bad thing, but this time, to do it smarter. See? It’s not about where you are or how you grew up. It’s about black and white, right and wrong, good and evil.”

Grant tugs at his constraints. The metal clangs together and echoes around the room.

“Now, Grant. You know that’s just going to make the guards come in here.”

“Well, you had better get to it then! Before I bring this whole damn house crashing down! You can stick your stories in your ass and go to tell someone else. I’m done being walked through your bullshit.”

I stand and hold my hands out. “All right, all right. I get it. You just want to get to the punch line, huh? Well, believe me, the joke’s a hell of a lot funnier when you hear the setup. And let’s face it, you

know the ending. I mean, you're living it, right? You are the very end of the story. There is no more. For you, anyway. Me? I've got a yacht waiting for me."

I sit and slap my leg. "Aha! Goddamn, that's what I was getting to before! The point I was trying to make! Sit, Grant, please. We're so very close."

Grant silently, reluctantly, eases his tense frame into the chair.

"Very good, Grant. The point before was this. We have all our players. Everyone, that is, except one."

I lean forward and point.

"Everyone except you."

Chapter 11

IT WAS FRIDAY. ANTICIPATION had been building toward my first night as a player in Talon's lair. I called the number on the membership card from a payphone that somehow eluded evolution. Ever since I had conceived my brilliant idea, I'd been moving my extracurricular activities off the grid. Call it paranoia, call it genius. Either way, I was separating my worlds, and I wanted to dip into one without the baggage of the other.

After reading out my string of characters, I received the time and place and hung up without saying another word. I pulled out my phone and checked my bank account balance. After organizing the five grand for Sonja and waiting for my first increased wage to appear in the books, I was running low on funds.

I thought about how I could raise sufficient funds to make the evening more interesting. Perhaps I could skim some funds from the work accounts and replace the losses with my earnings. I could ask Olivia for some, but, geez, how would that look? I wondered if my hacker friend, Sonja, would want to give back some of the initial payment. Nah, she would have either purchased another motorcycle, given me a loan with a bunch of unacceptable conditions, or simply laughed in my face. I also could have busted into a convenience store, which was just as appealing as any of the other available options.

Which is why I ended up in a dodgy little pawn shop that felt half a world away. There were plenty around my area, and I passed several more getting to that one, but, as I said, I wanted to separate everything. I stood at the counter, which was a glass cabinet containing an array of weaponry: unloaded small arms, knives, knuckle dusters. God bless America, am I right?

"Can I help you?"

I looked up. At first glance, I wasn't sure if it was a man or a woman. There weren't any distinguishable features that gave away the

person's gender. If you held a gun to my head, I would say the person was a woman, but I'd never want to be in that situation to find out. But you'd be surprised at how little time ended up passing before I did find out. In my head, I called her "Mary."

Mary was wide, and that's putting it politely. Fat hung out from her short -sleeved, army-green shirt. Her breasts somehow collided with her belly, which overhung her elastic-waisted pants. Her yellow-tipped stubby fingers rapped on the top of the cabinet, her nails destroyed down to the wick.

"Yeah," I said, trying not to reveal my confusion about their gender in my tone. "I just want to pawn something."

"Yeah, well, this is a pawn shop. What've you got?"

I pulled up my sleeve and showed her my watch. I had stolen it from my caregiver after he had passed out in a drunken coma after one of his rages. Where that piece of shit got it from, I have no idea. After I had lifted it from his wrist, I had run as far away from that shithole as fast as I could. I've worn it every day since as a not-so-subtle reminder not to trust anyone you couldn't bludgeon with a sledgehammer.

"Meistersinger," I said, unfastening it and handing it over.

Mary looked it over dubiously, inspecting every inch. Her meaty hands fondled every surface. I felt ill watching her work. She was looking for any imperfection to justify the shitty price she was about to share with me. The search would be fruitless. Even what I was living on the streets, moving from couch to couch, that thing was the one thing I kept pristine.

"I'll give you fifty bucks for it," she said bluntly. Her words came out fast and cold.

"Fifty?" I scoffed. "What you are holding is a Meistersinger Pan-gaea. Recommended on that is three grand."

"Listen, pal, this isn't Macy's. I ain't payin' no retail and none of my clientele will be payin' no retail."

“Now, I know you can get a couple of grand for that...easy.”

She looked at me, poker-faced.

“Listen up,” I said, leaning forward. “Because I’m going to make you an offer. You give me a grand flat, and when I come back here on Monday, I’ll pay you twice that to get it back.”

She raised an eyebrow. Interest washed over her face, dollar signs in her eyes. She shifted her feet and folded her fat arms over her meaty chest. She couldn’t quite manage it, but I could tell she was readying for a fierce negotiation.

“How about when you come back in here, you give me three.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I’ll tell you what I can do. You give me two grand. When I come back, I’ll give you three. And I’ll personally give you five hundred bucks for the trouble.”

She chewed it over.

I leaned forward on the counter. “Now, I know there are twelve pawnbrokers in this neighborhood alone, and I’m damn sure they’d settle for terms not nearly as good as what I just offered you. I’d prefer to do business with someone as respectable and upstanding as yourself. Please don’t make me go elsewhere.”

“All right,” she finally countered. “But one final condition.”

I sighed. “What?”

“You give me a little kiss.” She smiled, her cheeks puffing out.

I stammered.

She smiled, a half-moon between two mountain peaks. “It’s either that or you’re going to have to come back here and finger bang my ass!”

I instantly reached up, grabbed a piece of fat from her face in each hand, and pulled her devil lips toward mine. I kept my mouth shut for fear of having some pink serpent invade my gums. The seconds ticked by slowly in my head. One second, two seconds, three seconds. I pushed her away.

Her eyes were wide, then her eyelashes fluttered as her brain caught up. “Well, we certainly have a deal, kid.” She waddled off to find some paperwork.

I wiped my lips. I would need half a bottle of whiskey to get rid of the enduring stench of fish and cigarettes.

She soon returned with her paperwork.

“ID.”

“Excuse me?” I replied.

“Identification. I need it for the paperwork.”

“Now, Mary—”

“Who the fuck’s Mary?” Her face screwed up like a peach.

I didn’t know what to say. Then I remembered Mary was the name *I* gave to her.

“It’s Janet, kid! Perhaps you need another kiss to remind you of that?”

“Oh, Janet,” I said. “I don’t think I could possibly take any more of your love today. You’ve worn me out! But I was wondering if we could do something different.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Different *how*?”

“I was thinking we could keep this between us.”

“Between us *how*?” Her eyes were slits.

I sighed. “How about you mark me down in your books as Romeo? After all, you’ll only be holding onto the watch for a couple of days, and then I’ll be back. It would be like I was never here.”

“What sort of shady shit are you pulling me into?”

I stood back. “Does it look like I’m into shady shit?”

She looked me over. “Yes. It does.”

Fair call. “Alright, Janet. I didn’t want to have to do this. I’ll throw an additional 500 your way to make my name disappear. How does that work?”

She chewed it over.

“Make it a grand.”

All the gush she had had for me evaporated in the blink of an eye. At her heart, she was an ice-cold bitch driven by the dollar. But aren't we all?

"For a grand, Janet, I want all your security cameras turned off when I come in."

"Oh, sounds like some sort of spy shit," she mused.

"You want the extra grand, Janet?"

She looked me over again, possibly contemplating if she could take me out if I tried anything shifty while the cameras were off. And she most certainly could, with very little trouble.

"All right, Romeo. You got yourself a deal."

"Ah, Juliette," I said sarcastically, "I think this is the start of a beautiful relationship."

"Oh, Romeo. Any bullshit, and I call the cops."

I placed a hand over my heart. "I promise to be on my very best behavior."

With money in my pocket, I left the store, feeling her eyes roam over every part of me as I did so. Violated. I felt violated. The things I did for money.

Chapter 12

I STOOD AT THE END of the bed. On the left side of the mattress was my money, fanned out to show the extent of my wealth. It was limited, and that was unfortunate, but I knew it was only the beginning. You had to start somewhere. On the right side, I had laid out my second-best suit. I chose my second-best suit just in case the night turned to shit and someone needed something nice to bury me in. If the night worked out, my best suit would become my fourth best.

My plan was simple. Watch people. Find my way in. Go big. Three simple steps. At the time, I thought, “What could go wrong?” But by the end of the night, I could easily answer that question. Oh, the value of hindsight.

But that was only one part of what I wanted to achieve that night. I was also looking for investors. Foremost on my list was Talon. I knew he had capital, more than enough funds to get me started. He was already part of the underworld. It didn't seem like much of a stretch for him. It felt like something he would gladly throw money at, given the returns I'd promise him. I would stake my life on it.

You may think that's harsh, or that I don't value my life very much. I call that *belief*. An overwhelming belief in my ability. An overwhelming belief in the idea. And, really, in the end, that's all you need. And surely, that belief would be enough to convince others of the concept. Once again, hindsight would prove golden.

My phone beeped and I checked it. Olivia, my extra special friend, was looking for my companionship. She suggested we meet at a ritzy, drug-fueled dance club downtown, nestled between a cigar smoke-filled gentleman's club and a cockroach enticing diner that offered pizza slices at a buck ninety-nine. Maybe I should have accepted the invitation. Instead, I politely declined (using work as an excuse) and promised to touch base later in the evening (ideally when

she was drunk and horny). Girls were one thing, the opportunity to make money was something else entirely.

I threw the phone on the bed. It dinged as it landed. I sighed. I wasn't in the mood for any lovey tête-à-tête with someone I was having a casual fling with.

However, the message wasn't from Olivia. It was from...well, at the time, I didn't know who it was from. The sender was a jumble of characters. The message itself wasn't any better—merely a hyperlink consisting of a string of randomized characters. I eyed it suspiciously, just like anyone would. One part of me was curious, the other concerned about hackers looking for access to my bank account details or web search history. Either would be embarrassing for entirely different reasons.

As I stared at the screen, a call came through, the phone vibrating in my hand as it rang. It was from an unknown number. I held the device to my ear.

"Hello?" My voice was shaky, like I had just been caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

A familiar voice responded.

"Click the link," Sonja said. And then she clicked off.

Puzzled, I brought the phone down from my ear and investigated the message once more. I was caught in that moment. In between *What's going to happen when I do?* and *Was the line secure enough for Sonja to make the phone call?* My paranoia was high—maybe too high, but most likely not high enough.

Casting aside my fears, I tapped the link. Right after I did, the screen went black. For a split second, I thought I had inadvertently infected my phone with a virus. I thought Sonja had screwed me. For a fleeting moment, I thought the feds were going to come crashing through my door. And then rational thinking and logic kicked in. I hadn't actually done anything yet. So, what was there to be nervous about?

A few seconds later, the screen went white and black, with a swirling ball filling the display. It looked alive. Smoke tendrils snaked to the edges of the screen. Something was loading, that was for damn sure. Then it loaded. The result was beautiful. I clicked through the dashboard and explored the capabilities. It wasn't perfect, but more than sufficient to demonstrate the concept to Talon. Sonja had delivered what I had asked for, and her timing couldn't have been better.



WET GARBAGE. THAT'S the smell that attacked my nostrils as I exited the cab. The taxi driver took off in a hurry as soon as I threw some money in his direction and escaped the rear seat, and he seemingly managed to hit every single water-filled pothole he could find as the engine roared.

I pulled my coat tightly around me and inspected the nondescript alley. Puddles from an evening shower littered the pavement. Rear entrances and dumpsters lined both sides.

Large dumpsters flanked the back door of the Chinese restaurant. An old, faded globe above the door cast a sickly glow upon the entrance. It appeared to be the only source of light along the stretch of alleyway.

The screen door squeaked open. Inside, numerous cooks handled woks over flames, jostling their contents. White-shirted wait staff ran in, dropped off dishes, picked up plates, and disappeared again into another room through a swinging door that was perpetually in motion. No one gave me a second glance. I got the feeling they were used to strangers walking in and taking up temporary residence in their basement.

Following the instructions I received that afternoon, I found the stairwell and descended the concrete steps. The cacophony of the kitchen slowly faded as I rounded the corner and found another set

of stairs. At the bottom was a door. In front of that door was something that should only exist in nightmares.

He was tall, solid. Not overly muscular. Not that he needed to be, with the shotgun at his side. He wore a tank top. Ink covered every available inch of skin with writing from the tips of his fingers up his arms and wrapping around his neck. Instead of hair on his head, he had even more tattoos, which created swirling patterns on his dome. Tribal? Cultural? I couldn't tell. His big black goatee that filled his face was so bushy, I couldn't see his mouth.

He stared down at me as I approached. I was about to carefully extract my membership card when he bashed a fist into the steel door behind him. I guess he figured no one would be stupid enough to approach uninvited, and there were plenty of eyes upstairs if the cops tried to raid the place. Besides, I seriously doubted Talon would operate without bribing a few officials. It seemed like a requirement for undertaking his sort of business.

After some muffled clicking and metal-on-metal scraping, the door opened toward us. I navigated my way around the guard and through the door, which promptly closed behind me. There I found another frightful-looking character. He was large in all departments. His stomach overhung his belt, his arms were more fat than muscle. He could crush me in a heartbeat. Islander. Maybe Samoan. That wonderful milk coffee color. A tribal tattoo (I guessed) swirled up his arm. At first, I was taken aback, and then I thought he might like Janet from the pawn shop. She, too, might appreciate someone who was more similar to her own stature.

I thrust a hand out. "I'm Atlas. Atlas Jones."

He grunted and kept his hands firmly planted on his weapon. As if it took all his effort to do so.

"So, are you single?"

He raised an eyebrow at this. "You're not my type, kid." A croaky voice, like the sound had to fight its way up his throat to get out.

I held up my hands. “No. That’s not what I meant.”

He pointed the butt of his rifle at me. “Best you be getting on, kid. You don’t want to be late.”

“I just need to see Talon, first.”

“Ah, I see. You’re new around here. How about you get in that room before I smash your fingers up real good so you have trouble holding that little dick of yours when you take a piss?”

With no further conversation, I turned and walked through a doorway on my immediate left.

The room I entered was dim and sparsely furnished. It reminded me of the room where I first met Talon and his associate. The banker’s lamp on the desk, the shadow that adorned the corners. This room was a replica. Although, behind the desk, instead of the head of an ominously seedy organization, was a woman pushing sixty who oozed *librarian*. She had tied her long brown hair into a bun and wore large, white-rimmed glasses, which were held to her person with a silver chain that draped over her shoulders.

She sucked in a lungful of nicotine as she looked me over, and then blew the smoke out toward the ceiling. “Cutting it kind of close, kid.” The wrinkles danced on her face as she spoke.

I approached the desk. “Yeah, I’m not too sure—”

“Oh,” she said with a warm smile. “You must be new. How lovely it is to meet you.” She held her scrawny hand out. “My name is Tessa. I’m the overseer.” Her voice was sweet, school-teacher-talking-to-a-first-year-student sweet.

I took her hand, and she squeezed. Hard.

She held me in check as her features dropped. “Now listen here, you little prick. Hand over your damn money so I can chip you in.” She leaned forward as much as her fake bosom would allow and sucked again on her cigarette. Clouds escaped her mouth as she spoke.

“Your little innocent boy attitude may work for you in there,” she said, pointing to the door at the other end of the room, “but you fuck with me in here, and I’ll put this cigarette out in your eye. You get me?”

I nodded. Fast. She released my throbbing hand, and I fumbled out a stack of notes.

“Where’s the rest of it?” she asked, her look of disapproval shrinking my balls.

I shrugged. “That’s all I got.”

“Shit.” She delicately placed her cigarette on her lips and inserted my stack of notes in a counting machine on the desk. She hit a button and let it do its thing. “You’re going to need to come with more next time or you ain’t going to last the first hour, let alone the night.”

“Is that a problem?”

She cocked her head. “Are two broken legs a problem?”

I swallowed. “Talon failed to mention that.”

“That’s not my problem.”

The machine finished its count. She collected a bump of brightly colored chips, stacked them up into a plastic carrier, and slid them over. “You seem like a fast learner. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

She took another puff, drawing the ash back to the filter. She gazed at me as she stubbed the remains into a smoking ashtray.

“What the fuck are you still doing here?”

Chapter 13

“AH, MR. JONES! ABOUT time you joined us.”

Talon stood just inside the room, his elbows resting on the bar, a near-empty glass in his hand. Why the fuck there was a bar in the basement of a Chinese restaurant wasn't a question I was willing to ask, so I'm going to ask you to keep an open mind on that one.

The room was wide and spacious. Dealers dressed in crisp white shirts and black bowties sat at each of the ten tables. Each table was covered in a black tablecloth that just barely skimmed the ground. The dealers were in the middle of final preparations for the game—feeding cards into the shuffling machine, checking their stocks of chips.

Meanwhile, the players milled around. Some sat at the bar ordering drinks, others were seated, ensuring they were aligned their chi's or some shit. A few were off in corners, going through their own pre-game rituals.

Behind the masses, there was a door. I locked my gaze on it. This wasn't just any door, mind you. It was *the* door. The door to the room I wanted to enter. A place I would need to work for—a place where the best players won and lost even more.

“I was about to send an associate to find you and revoke your membership,” Talon said, pushing himself off the bar and putting his arm around me. The smell of alcohol followed him around.

“I'm just getting used to the proceedings, the rules and regulations, and all that jazz,” I replied.

Talon sipped the remains of his drink. “Yeah, well, you're a fast learner.”

“People keep telling me that.”

He shrugged.

“Listen,” he said, holding his glass out in front of him and pointing. “That's your table over there. Table four.”

“Why table four?”

He turned, and suddenly we were face to face. “You got a fucking problem with the way I do things? You have an aversion to the number four? Unlucky number? Superstitious?”

“No, not at all.”

He tapped his glass on my chest. “You’re sitting at table four because the guy that usually sits at four, Aston, is floating in the Hudson with a bullet hole in the back of his head. Oh, and also with seven less fingers and no eyeballs.”

I learned pretty bloody quickly not to question how or why things were done.

“And just so we’re clear,” Talon continued. “I spooned his eyeball out and crushed it between slicing fingers four and five.”

I swallowed. “Well, it’s a good thing four is my lucky number,” I said, even though it wasn’t. I didn’t have a lucky number.

“It had better be,” he breathed at me.

“Hey, listen, I wanted to run something by—”

“Tables!” screamed the lady (if you could call her that) who chipped me in. I flinched and turned. She stood assertively in the doorway, hands on her hips, her small frame leaning against the door frame. It looked as if we were all getting told off for being late.

People instantly stopped mid-conversation and moved directly to their tables. *Don’t pass go, don’t collect two hundred dollars*, I thought. It was almost cultish in the way it happened. Apparently, the cashier had more power than I had thought.

Talon slapped my back. “Good luck, kid.”

“But...”

Ignoring me, Talon walked off across the room. He navigated the writhing mess of bodies attempting to get to their tables, saluting a few, patting others on the backs. At the door at the end of the room, he retrieved a card from his pocket and pushed it up against the frame. The door released, and he entered the void. Others fol-

lowed. The lucky few were a diverse bunch. A man in a black driver's cap. A lady wearing a fur scarf. A man with deeply tanned skin, wearing a white jacket. A lady with more diamonds visible on her person than a jeweler. A man with a huge nose but the height of a child. A black man clad in gold chains and loafers, who, when at the doorway, discretely turned in my direction. At first, I thought I saw fear in his eyes, and then a broad smile swept his face. It was as if his panic had turned to confidence. He placed a finger to his throat and slid it across. I swallowed. I was in the viper's nest. There was no turning back.

A faint glow grew in that room, and then the door promptly shut, sealing them inside. Or, more correctly, sealing us outside. The secrets that lay within that room teased my imagination. I fantasized a cork popping from a bottle of champagne. Prearranged stacks of chips on the table in such great numbers the players lacked the ability to carry them in. First class. High roller.

A whistle then blared, sharp and piercing. It came from behind me. I could feel the eyes of the room on me as I turned.

It was Tessa. She stood, hands on her hips, a scowl on her wrinkled features.

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

"I was just—"

"I don't give a shit what you were doing. You're cutting a fine line here. You're either in or you're out, none of this half-in bullshit. Now, I can get Hugo here to escort you out if you wish."

I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. I dared not turn around, mainly because I was sure whatever was in my imagination was infinitely better than whoever actually stood behind me.

"He'd be happy to do it," Tessa continued. "That is, if you don't mind a pair of broken legs and concussion in the process."

My throat tightened. My balls receded inside me.

“I’ll take that to mean you’re in.” She stepped forward. Her bony fingers reached around my coat lapels. Her long red nails shimmered in the light. She pulled me forward and planted a wrinkled kiss on me.

I was dumbstruck, immobile. Mesmerized? Not quite. Disgusted? Closer to the mark.

When she finished, she pushed me away and shrugged.

“I’ve had better. Now, get your arse to that table, because I’m not going to tell you twice.”

I nestled down in the last position, assuming the role of my predecessor, Aston, as instructed by Talon. The rest of the players were sitting to my right.

On the end, my lady in red—Seana. She eased a cigarette into her mouth. Her nails were black, her lipstick, red, much darker shade than her long, fiery locks. She made the mundane fantastical, turning it into an event—something people would pay to watch. Her background was as mysterious as the way she moved. Her long eyelashes folded down over piercing green eyes, like an eagle’s wings in slow-motion flight. The world stopped with her. Would it be enough? It wouldn’t be.

Next was an older gent, Leon, whom I’d wager was a retired porn star, or maybe a CEO of a tech company. A late bloomer to the twenty-first century who had enough of an idea to move quickly and be first with something. Deeply tanned. Not orange, more natural. Years on beaches, or at least on the water. Weathered. Expensive-looking dark suit. Smoldering, angry glare. I wondered if age meant seniority. It did. And if that somehow denoted skill. It didn’t.

A bearded man wearing a baseball cap at a weird angle. Olsen. He wore a heavy gold chain around his neck and a matching watch, which signified he knew more about his wealth than he did about the game itself. He didn’t talk to the other players, very much kept to himself. His bored expression told stories, and none of them were

good. I wondered if he had fallen into this position and was unable to get out, like falling into a wall—no longer able to see the top, just a tiny pinprick light in the darkness. Despair. I speculated he might play in that fashion. He did.

Then came the lady in a black pantsuit. Anja had slung her jacket over the back of the chair and was settled in for a long night. Her top was jet black, cut off at the shoulders, with a white collar and sleeves that were a series of swirling, patterned tattoos. She looked European, I guessed, definitely somewhere in the realms of Scandinavia. Her straight, dirty blonde hair fell evenly around her shoulders, and a pair of sunglasses finished the ensemble. She was hoping to hide her tells, to reveal as little as possible about her hand. She wasn't successful.

Next to me, a celebrity D-lister with a black hank creeping out of his gray blazer. Nate. He ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair to keep it away from his sweaty forehead. He massaged chips between his nervous fingers as if he thought he was a magician. He was not.

Then there was me. Falling so deep, so fast, finding myself in predicaments I couldn't (or wouldn't) say no to. Struggling to keep my head above water. My mind raced at such a remarkable pace, I thought I'd pass out.

So, there we were—me, Nate, Anja, Olsen, Leon, Seana. I should point out, I made these names up because I didn't know who the fuck they were. It was like a bad TV show where we would solve paranormal crimes. Nobody wants to see that shit. Anyway, this was the company I was surrounding myself with. They were who I needed to overcome to get a place in that other room. And I quickly found out—what you think you know and what you actually know are two different things. And that your reality doesn't count for shit when everyone else sees it differently.

Chapter 14

THE DEALER (WHOM I called Steve—but not to his face or to the others) began round one by dealing out a single card to each player, then proceeded to lay out two community cards face up, an ace and a jack. Everyone checked their standing, and Steve called for bets. That's when strategy kicked in, and all hell broke loose. Bet too low, and people leave you alone—which isn't what you're after if you have a dud card. But bet too high, and you could become a target. Psychology, reverse psychology, reverse-reverse psychology. Bluff, double bluff. The man playing the game playing the man. The dream within the dream...you get it. I was expecting everyone to throw in a few chips, at least enough to show interest but not to draw too much attention.

But what happened next disrupted my thinking. Seana placed five hundred on the table, followed by Leon, who threw down six hundred into the pot.

I held back a cough.

Even Olsen flicked in three hundred dollars' worth of chips, his expression remaining blank as he did so. The remaining players made their bets of similar proportions while I played catch up. It felt like a bad dream, where the green light had flashed to begin the race, and I was still trying to get into my damned car. I couldn't tell if time was going to fly or if this was going to be the longest night of my life.

When it came to my turn, I faltered. It was embarrassing. I had played this out so clearly in my mind, but this moment was truly unexpected.

"Bets, please," Steve repeated.

I fumbled my chips, two of them slipping through my fingers and rolling across the table into the pile that was massing. Four hundred worth. Steve eyed me like I was an idiot and tidied my chips for the pot.

“The new kid’s got balls,” someone—I didn’t catch who—said from the far end of the table.

With the setup complete, the first change began.

“Six,” Seana said, alerting the dealer to my place at the table.

“Card!” Steve barked at me.

I slid my card toward him as the other players watched. Steve replaced it with another—a four of diamonds.

“Six,” Leon said, once again calling out my position at the table.

I slid another card towards Steve and received a new card. I didn’t even bother looking at it.

“Six,” Olsen proclaimed, with the most emotion I had seen from him all night.

I, once again, relinquished my card.

The game continued, like you would expect, with Anja and Nate also nominating my position and cards. They left me with an eight of spades.

And then it was my turn.

By then, I had figured out what was happening: hazing. They were picking on the new kid. Unsettling me, cruelly welcoming me to the table. I wasn’t sure if I should be grateful and take my medicine or fight back. So, I flipped a mental coin and made my call.

“Two,” I announced.

The dealer paused. He exchanged an uneasy glance with Leon, who leaned forward on the table and turned to look at me. “Do you know who I am?”

He looked familiar, in that “seen-you-on-the-news” kind of way, but I couldn’t quite place him. Perhaps I should have known who he was, what he was capable of. Heck, I should have known who they *all* were. But how the hell was I going to find out the guest list? And even if I did, what good would that information do? At the end of the day, we were there to play cards and lose money. In the end, after all, the house always wins.

I decided diplomacy was the best course of action.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know who the fuck you are.”

He laughed, just a little, then exchanged looks with the rest of his game partners, who, very slowly, started to laugh nervously.

Thump! Leon’s hand on the table.

“Don’t fuck with me, kid. You may be new around here, but that’s no excuse for ignorance. There are people at these tables who have invested a lifetime of wealth.”

“And you’re going to use me to claw some of it back.”

“Perceptive,” Leon nodded. “I’ll give him that.”

“I thought we were playing cards here,” I retorted.

“Is there a problem here?” a booming voice behind me suddenly asked. I could sense a mass of body behind me—that sixth sense, when you just know someone is there.

The dealer looked at me and then at Leon.

“No, Hugo,” Leon replied, waving him away. “Just teaching the new meat the lay of the land.”

Hugo retired back to his post, his thick arms folded over his barrel chest, as Steve announce round two of the game was about to commence.

Steve sent our second cards whizzing around the table and added two down-facing cards to the community pile, joining the ace and jack. I peeked at my cards, the ones safely in my possession, the ones that couldn’t be taken away. Another eight. I now held two, and they were both black. As luck would have it, as the gods would anoint, my fellow players had gifted me something worth having. At worst, I had a pair. Still a shitty hand, mind you, because two numbered cards ain’t winning shit, especially here.

And so, the second stage of strategy began.

“Down,” Seana called. The dealer dismissed one of his hidden cards and replaced it with one from the deck in his hands.

This action continued down the line, with each player choosing a facedown card, leaving the ace and jack untouched. I guess they liked the face-up cards. Gave them the best chance of winning.

Then it came to me. I wondered how they would feel if I took their precious cards. Would Leon throw another tantrum? Would Seana put out her cigarette in my eye? Would Olsen finally show some emotion? I didn't have to wait long to find out.

"Ace," I called out.

There was a collective groan from the table.

"Thanks, fuckhead," I heard one of the gents say, like we were talking about the weather.

Ms. Sunglasses beside me slammed her drink down on the table.

I could feel Hugo's deep-set stare fixed on me.

Steve revealed the card, another ace, and placed it next to the jack. My heart sank, yet the collective movement of the table was skyward amidst a communal sigh. My mutiny thwarted, although I was sure I saw something from the dealer and wondered if anyone else noticed it. Maybe the tension was getting to me. I knew they had the upper hand; I just didn't know how far up the hand went.

The dealer called for bets, and the players manically threw chips into the pot, growing its wealth. The winner was going to walk away with (what I considered to be) a tidy sum, and the house was going to prosper as a result. There was no point hiding emotion at this point. No one was getting strung along. You were either in or out. I imagined what the others held. My lousy pair was certainly no hope for this game, and I should've backed out then and there. But I just couldn't help myself.

I paid into my pot. Was anyone getting strung along? Maybe. Okay, yes. But knowingly. More out of curiosity than anything. I could see my personal fortune diminish into a common pile on the table before my very eyes.

With betting finalized, Steve flipped both hidden community cards, one after the other. The first card was a seven of spades. The second was a three of hearts. The chances of me winning were minuscule. The odds of me making it out of the room at the end of the night with some chips to my name, even less so. I felt so far out of my depth. I could feel myself getting sucked farther and farther under the surface, the water changing color the deeper I went, the sunlight slowly being shut out.

Steve burned a card and laid his last one face down, his finger underneath it, letting the tension build before he revealed its value. Responsibility, they called it—the last card. With all the cards out, there aren't any more changes. You must make do with what you've got. You've got to take responsibility for the position you're in. No finger-pointing or blaming others at this point in the proceedings.

The tension was wearing me down. It was only the first hand, but it felt like we had been playing for hours. With all the changes, the cards being thrown back and forth, the accusations...every minute sapped mental resources. My energy was draining. No wonder ol' Olsen beside me was running low on happiness. I wonder how long he had been playing, how long it took for his enthusiasm to shrink into a ball that sat in his chest and gave him perpetual heartburn.

I've always had confidence—always believed I was right about everything. Before I left home, I had reminded myself I had a game plan and would stick to it no matter what. But not then, not at that moment. I was doubting everything—every action I took. I could feel myself slowly spiraling out of control. I needed a parachute to open, something to save me. I didn't know what to expect.

But then, it happened. The card turned. It was another eight. Three of a kind. The air was instantly sucked out of the room. Cards were tossed, aces and face cards littered the table. Two other sevens joined the mix, courtesy of Olsen, who must've thought he was onto a very good thing. It's just that my thing was marginally better.

It was clear: I had won the game and emerged on top.

With some surprise in his voice, Steve announced me as the winner and began to push the chips in my direction. I still couldn't believe my luck.

Apparently, neither could Leon. As soon as the declaration was made that I had won, he threw his hand down on the table.

"Bullshit!" he screamed. "This is absolute bullshit."

I looked around, waited for Hugo to appear and intercept any violence about to come my way. He wasn't there, not against the wall. Maybe he was stretching his legs, maybe ordering a beer at the bar, but he wasn't where I last saw him.

"You goddamn cheated!" Leon roared.

It felt like the room stopped at the word. Hugo appeared behind Leon.

"Everything all right here?"

Leon stood. "Yeah, that little fuck cheated," he said, waving a finger in my direction. "And I want everyone to know about it."

"That is a very serious allegation," a voice boomed from the other side of the room. It was Talon, standing at the door to the secret room. He had his arms crossed and a pissed off look on his face.

"You know the consequences."

Chapter 15

HUGO LED LEON AND ME out of the parlor, down a hall, and into another room. Two overhead florescent bulbs bathed the room in a dim glow, making the walls look brownish-yellow. The floor was concrete, and there was a grimy drain in the middle of the room. It reminded me of a prison cell, like the ones I had seen on TV. Our escort told us to wait, so we did.

At first, I squatted down in the far corner. Then, when my legs eventually gave out, I slid down to the floor. The minutes dragged by. I took turns between sitting with my legs straight out in front of me, crossed at the ankles, and my knees pulled up to my chest. Leon, on the other hand, paced back and forth against the far wall, his arms clutched tightly around himself. Back and forth, back and forth, he went, muttering to himself.

After about an hour, I cleared my throat. “How long do you think we’re going to be stuck in here?”

“Fucked, kid,” he spewed out, continuing to pace. “You’ve gone ahead and fucked us both.”

“He can’t just keep us in here, right? I mean, this is deprivation of liberty. You can’t just do that.”

Leon stopped and looked at me, his hands on his hips. “You think he gives a shit about that? Do you really think he gives a shit about you, or me, or getting rid of someone? You’ve fucked us.”

“What’s your problem with me?”

“My problem? My problem isn’t *with* you, my problem *is* you! You waltz in here and think you own that table. You know who owns that table, kid? I do. I fucking own that table. I’ve worked my way through it. You fucking kids today think you can just walk in and take stuff without putting in any fucking effort. Well, guess what? I put in the effort. That’s my table. And you. You just couldn’t sit there

and take your damn medicine. You just couldn't play it out. You had to pull that shit!"

I stood up. "Look, I've had enough of this. What shit was I supposed to have pulled? I played those damn cards out."

"An eight? Really? On the flop? Are you serious? To give you three of a kind?" He stared at me in disbelief. "Those odds are bull-shit. No way someone's doing that unless something's at play."

"Luck," I reported. "I was damn luck."

"Nah., I know what I saw. I had to call it out. So, fuck you, kid. You fucked us both."

"What?" I said, moving toward him. "You think I cheated, so you called it out and here we are, and you think that's my fault?"

"You're goddamned right," he said, walking up to me. We stood nose to nose.

"You some kind of fucking marionette or something?" I spat out. "You called it, gramps! That's on you. Don't you dare blame me for your actions."

The blow came surprisingly fast—a swift shot to my gut that had me keeling over, trying to catch a breath. I stumbled backward until I couldn't go back any farther. I braced myself with one hand on the wall and the other on my knee. His punch's power had been just as surprising as its speed. For a moment, I thought I would cough up blood. The geriatric pool yoga must have done Leon wonders.

"Respect your elders, you little shit," he snarled. "You haven't been where I've been, haven't seen what I've seen."

I tried to respond, but I couldn't draw in enough breath to form the words. I really needed to work on my core. I stared at my shoes, trying to maintain consciousness. Leon resumed his patrol of the far wall, his footsteps echoing at me.

Finally, I said, "You said we were fucked. What does that mean?"

Leon laughed. "Take a look around you. What do you think this room represents?"

I looked around. Honestly, it didn't tell me too much at all.

I was working up another question when the door swung open. I looked up. Talon dragged in a chair, scraping its legs on the concrete like fingers on a blackboard. He closed the door and eased himself down on the chair.

"Well, now," he groaned, as if the mere thought of being in the room tired him. "We have some business to attend to." He looked at Leon. "Jefferson, you accused our newest member here, Jones, of cheating. Now, this is something we take seriously, very seriously."

He pulled out a gun from the back of his pants. It was a black short-nosed revolver. *Smith & Wesson* was etched on the side of the barrel. It's amazing how much detail you can see in the face of possible death. I'm not even a fan of guns or any of that stuff.

Talon leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, the gun hanging loosely in his hands, as if he didn't care for it, either.

"Now, either you accused someone of cheating who wasn't..." he said, pointing the gun at Leon, leaving his sentence and firearm hanging. Then he pointed it at me. "Or you *did* cheat."

I stared at the end of the barrel, waiting for the flash, or the gunshot, an explosion of gunpowder. I wondered if I would see it before I heard it.

"Either way," Talon continued, "we've got a mess to clean up, I've got to keep order. Now, as you know, not everyone in there is totally above board and legit. In fact, some of them are downright assholes." He leaned back in the chair. "But I got to keep them in line. If they smell blood, there'll be a mutiny. If people start accusing other people of cheating, with nothing but a bad taste in their mouth, then this little world we have here will come crashing down to nothing." He stood. "I just can't let that happen. Way too much riding on this. So, I don't care if I gotta whack a long-time player or a scapegoat, if I need to pluck out some eyeballs with my fingers, I will. To be honest, I don't care either way." He waved the gun between us.

Leon squared up and pulled his jacket tight defiantly. I, on the other hand, was kind of shitting my pants. I wondered if it would hurt or how long it would take.

“So, who’s it gonna be?” Talon taunted. “Any volunteers?”

Silence. As you would expect.

He laughed. A little at first, then a gut-busting roar. I watched him in terror, my eyes wide, realizing I was in the presence of a complete nut job.

“I’m just kidding.” He looked at me. “Shit, you should’ve seen your face!” He continued laughing. He backed away, his joyous cackle echoing against the walls. He opened the door, disposed of his gun, and retrieved something else. He then turned, holding up a machete. It looked either dirty or rusted. The once sharp blade had a series of nicks taken out of it at random intervals, giving it a rough, serrated appearance.

Talon dropped his maniacal smile, and his face darkened. “The punishment for cheating isn’t death. You just get to lose a part of your body.”

He stepped toward me. “So, kid, you have a preference?”

Chapter 16

“A PREFERENCE FOR WHAT?” I attempted to ask as I backed away, the last few words getting caught in my throat and coming out garbled.

“I mean,” Talon said as he held up the machete, “do you want me to take your left or your right hand?”

“My what? Why the fuck do you want to do that?”

Talon stepped forward, like a lion stalking its prey. “If I catch you stealing, you need to pay the price. Here, under my roof, cheating is the same as stealing.”

I looked over to Leon. He was still standing there, obstinately, waiting to see what the outcome would be. He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes set in a hard stare.

I held up my hands. “I stole nothing! I didn’t cheat!”

“He says you did!” Talon swung the machete toward Leon.

“Fuck him!” I followed up. “He’s a fucking liar!”

Leon reared up. “Of course you fucking cheated!” He stepped forward, avoiding the blade that was still pointing in his direction. “I saw him do it, Talon. He’s in with that damn dealer. Dropped an eight on the flop! I mean, really!”

“Who gives a shit about an eight?”

“I give a shit when it gives him three of a kind.”

“Trips? Really?”

“Yeah,” Leon said. “It’s bullshit. That damn dealer is in on the act. Must’ve been.”

“So, the dealer should be in here, not the kid?”

“That fucking kid is in on it.” His face was red. “I can *feel* it. I guarantee it!”

Talon looked at me. “Hold out your hand.”

I froze. I couldn’t believe what the hell was going on.

“I told you,” I said, slowly, evenly. “I didn’t cheat.”

“I know,” Talon said. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

All the color drained from Leon’s face. “Now...” he managed. “Now, just a minute.”

Talon turned. “No. I’ve reviewed the footage—very closely. You know how seriously I take this. There’s nothing to suggest anything untoward took place, aside from extremely good luck. I mean, an eight on the flop, who’d have thought!”

“But, Talon, he must have cheated. He must have!”

“Hold out your hand.” The instruction was firm, like a tired teacher directing a class of four-year-olds about how to do trigonometry.

Leon started to, but then he retreated.

“Please, Talon. Don’t do this.”

“You know the rules.”

“But—”

“Now, Leon. You can either lose two fingers or lose the whole hand. I don’t give a shit which. You just figure which is better for your game.”

Leon looked down at his hands. I tried to imagine what was going through his mind. Was he actually considering which was better? Where was his innate desire to survive, to escape pain? Why wasn’t he fighting? Why didn’t he make a break for the door? Because he knew he couldn’t escape—that if he tried, the punishment would be worse.

He held out his left hand. It shook as Leon lifted it up. Talon approached—rather, stalked. Leon removed the rings that adorned his left hand, then pulled back his fingers, leaving his pinky and ring fingers shaking in the open, like dry leaves blowing in the autumn wind.

Talon worked up to them, like a snake slithering through the underbrush. His focus was solely on those fingers, not the owner. He opened his mouth as he hypnotically danced around them, his jaw ajar, teeth bared. I didn’t think he would do it. I remembered the sto-

ry he told me when we first met about how he popped out someone's eyeball. Back then, I thought it was all fairy tales and bullshit, something made up to scare me into obedience. Boy, had it worked. But the scene in front of me was immensely scarier than all of that.

Leon looked the other way, preparing to take his medicine. He breathed deeply, waiting for the initial impact, preparing himself for the incision, the crunching of Leon's teeth on bone. If there was any reason for me to doubt Talon's sanity, this was it. Surely this was it.

A whimper. And then the scene stopped. Leon faced me, a bead of sweat running down the length of his brown face. "Fuck you, kid," he mouthed. Talon, his jaw open, a finger in his mouth, stared at me with contempt. It was then I realized the noise had come from me. I had fucked up the moment. But why I had to be there to witness it, I didn't know.

I turned into the corner, squeezed my eyes shut, and placed my hands over my ears.

But it wasn't enough to stop the pictures forming in my mind.

Not enough to block out Leon's wailing as Talon bit through the bone.

I vomited, many times—until there was nothing left. I kept my eyes tightly closed. I tried to cleanse my mind, to think of Olivia, my plan, anything to erase the image of Talon biting off two of Leon's fingers. But it was no good. The more I tried to push it from my mind, the more it intruded into my consciousness.

A hand came to rest on my shoulder. I jumped, then turned, head down, half ashamed of my actions, half scared to look up in case Talon was standing over me with two flesh sausages in his mouth and blood caked on his face.

"Jesus Christ." It was Tessa. She held a lit cigarette in her fingers, her arms folded over her breasts, and that disapproving look on her face. "You fucking expect me to clean up this shit? Christ!"

I shook my head.

“For the love of God, kid, clean yourself up. Talon wants a word with your skinny arse.”

Chapter 17

I FOUND TALON IN THE parlor. He was sitting at my table, in my seat, stacking chips. He watched me watch him as he piled them into a tower, divided them, and then started again.

“Sit,” he ordered.

As I sat down in Leon’s position at the table, I stole a quick glance to Stone, who was sitting in the corner, watching me closely.

I struggled to look at Talon, instead focused on the chips that still sat in front of us.

“I’m sure you can appreciate what happened tonight,” he said.

I put my elbow on the table and rested my head in my hand. “Ah, I’m not sure I do.”

“Well, it’s quite simple. There are rules, and when someone breaks the rules, consequences need to be delivered. How I choose to exact the punishment is up to me. So, I’m not looking for your agreeance, but I am expecting your acceptance.”

That is how this world works. I guess I had nothing to worry about. If you did nothing wrong, there was nothing to be concerned with. Be a law-abiding citizen, and you won’t give a shit what the cops do.

“Consider it done,” I said.

“Good.” Talon grinned. “As per the rules of engagement, Leon’s chips are now yours. Congratulations. That makes quite a good night, considering the pittance you brought in with you, considering how little you played, how little you risked.”

“I feel like parts of my body were at risk.”

“Well, you put yourself in that situation. There’s no point blaming it on Leon. If you hadn’t had made such a point of being a shit, he might not have looked twice at you, even with your lucky break.”

I didn’t reply. It felt like he was scolding me, like I had done the wrong thing.

“Listen,” he continued. “You need to work on a bigger kitty.”

“Yeah,” I said, embarrassed. “I’m working on it.”

Talon pushed my chips, now stacked in four towers, in my direction. “Work faster.”

“That reminds me,” I said. “There was something—”

“You lost me a lot of money tonight,” Talon interrupted.

“Sorry? I don’t understand.”

“I said, you. Lost. Me. Money.”

“How?”

He pointed to the door. “What we do in there is not what you do out here.”

“What do you mean?”

“In there, we don’t bet on cards. We bet on people.”

“On people?”

“Yeah. We bet on who at each table will take home the goods. Do you know how long Leon has been at this table? He had my money. But shit, wouldn’t you know it, you got under his skin. I don’t know how you did it. In fact, I don’t even want to know *why* you did it. The fact is, it happened. And that set me back. A considerable amount. And you had to pull out an eight on the flop! Goddamn!”

Praise or contempt? I couldn’t distinguish.

“The fact is, kid, no one expected it.”

“I have a way to make it up to you,” I offered.

Talon raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really, kid? And what would that be?”

“A business proposition.”

Talon rolled his eyes big time. Didn’t even attempt to hide it. This would be a hard sell.

“Just hear me out. Five minutes. If you don’t like it, I’ll bail out and see you next week.”

Talon checked his watch. “All right, kid, I’m listening, but it had better be good.”

I took a deep breath. “People are a commodity. You of all people should know that. They are resources that perform, or they don’t. You bet on players’ performances. There are winners and losers out here, and depending on their decisions and your decisions, you either win or lose.”

“So?”

“Let me extrapolate. Imagine if everyone, anyone, had a discernible value. And imagine, just like the stock market, you could buy, sell, trade stocks in a person. If their stars on the rise and you buy at the right time, you’ll be on a good wicket. But buy into someone and they get arrested, lose their job, get involved in a smear campaign, and your stocks are in trouble.”

Talon stroked his moustache. “Sounds like an interesting concept.”

“More than a concept.” I pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket. “I’ve got an amazing proposition for you.”

My head slammed into the table with such force the chips fell around me. I yelped and cringed at the impact. My phone skittled over the table surface and into another stack of chips. A pistol cocked. It was that same pistol that had been placed against the side of my head earlier.

Talon placed his head on the table so we could look at each other.

“Who the fuck you think you are? Are you a cop?”

“What? No!”

“If I ask you, you have to tell me. Now, I’m going to ask you again. Are you a cop?”

“No!” I reinforced. Shit, I sounded like I was nervous, my voice fluctuated.

Talon sat up, and I was wretched onto my feet.

“Now,” Talon said. “Stone will search you. If he finds anything even *remotely* suspicious, like a plastic sheriff’s badge, things will be very unpleasant for you. Do you believe me?”

I nodded.

“What I did to Leon in the other room will feel like a weekend in the Bahamas compared to what will happen to you,” he continued. “You’d be surprised how many parts of the human body can be gnawed or plucked out before someone passes out.”

“I get the picture,” I said, raising my arms to the side and spreading my legs. “Stone? Do your worst.” Then I considered my words. “But, like, don’t actually do your worst. I mean, be thorough, but not that thorough.”

Stone grunted then roughly ran his hands over my body. He checked every pocket, even ran his hands through my hair. Removed my belt, looking over it before disposing of it on the table next to my face. Then he reached around and grabbed my cock and squeezed my balls a little too hard.

“Shit,” I said, flinching.

“Oh, Stone is thorough,” Talon commented.

Stone pulled down my briefs and ran a finger up my crack before getting me to squat and cough.

Talon looked me up and down. Spent a little too long looking at my tackle for my liking. I cupped my hands over my groin.

“Satisfied?” I asked, my eyebrows rising.

Talon smiled. “You can never be too careful, never be too...paranoid.”

I grunted and reached for my clothes. But before I could, Talon stomped his sandal on my underwear.

“Talk to me, kid. I want to hear your proposition. But I want you to tell me when you are at your most vulnerable.”

He removed his foot, and I shuffled, naked, to the table. I fumbled for my phone that lay just out of reach. I grabbed it on the second attempt, my junk rubbing against the table that God knows how many people had sat at. I reminded myself to disinfect my special areas, especially before I saw Olivia again. Nobody needs that shit.

I turned on my phone and opened the link Sonja had sent me. The screen came to life. A living, breathing simulation. Bar charts grew, line charts took shape, numbers pulsed. I angled the screen so Talon could see it.

“Explain this to me,” Talon said, his vision locked on my phone. And so, I did.

“The concept is simple,” I told him. “What if people were stocks? Everyone has a value, depending on a range of factors. Now, the average Joes and Sues, these are the non-volatile stocks. They may go up and down and little, but not in extremes—except for specific events. Let’s say Joe Smith is married, has two kids, pays his mortgage, and earns 100K a year. He has a profile. Known attributes. He has a certain value. But what he’s worth won’t change unless he contracts an incurable disease or wins the lottery, and those are difficult things to predict. It comes down to luck.

“And then you’ve got more affluent people. Celebrities, politicians, entrepreneurs, well-known folks. These are volatile stock, top tier. Think the Apples, Amazons, and the like. The stock that everybody wants but few can afford. High risk, high rewards. We’ve all seen celebrities do stupid shit and disappear from the radar forever. People who take the wrong fork in the road and end up mopping floors in a Starbucks instead of starring in the next blockbuster. Just like companies. Think of companies like Nokia and Kodak. Entities in their prime who made a bad call. Where are they now?”

So, the concept seemed straightforward. People will invest in people. Let’s call them investees. Now, the investees don’t use the money and, in turn, don’t pay dividends. I take the invested capital and invest in a side account, on the real stock market, using my superior market insight and prowess, and pay dividends from the proceeds. As long as the incomings are more than the outgoings, things would be okay. I, of course, take a cut, just like I would anyway.”

“And how much is that?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Let me continue. The best thing is there’s no regulation. The market is whatever I say it is, and if everyone thinks that’s fair, there shouldn’t be a problem. And this is probably the best part about it. There’s no one standing over my shoulder, no rules, no laws, no governing bodies. No one running to a lawyer to sue. None of that shit. I need a shit load of investors who realize the beauty in the anarchy,” I finished. “I need people like you.”

“I make plenty of money already. Why would I bother doing this?”

“For the same reason people buy and sell stocks in companies. To make more money than they have. Besides, you’re doing this now. You do it in that room every time people like me are throwing cards and chips around the table. All I’m doing is opening up the potential pool, expanding your horizons, increasing the opportunities.”

“Why don’t I just invest my money legally, on the exchange?”

I laughed. “You don’t strike me as the type to do anything legally.”

“There’s hope for you yet, kid. But tell me why, anyway.”

“The returns on this program are so much better. The average return on the stock market is around seven percent. I’ve estimated the return on the human market to be around fifteen, with dividends paid quarterly.”

Talon tapped the table and ran a tongue over his moustache. He was very interested.

“How the hell do you put a value on someone?”

“A range of metrics and characteristics,” I said, tapping my bare feet on the floor. “I don’t want to bore you with the idiosyncrasies of it all.”

“Bore me,” Talon said. His elbow was on the table, and his head was leaning against a fist. I didn’t know if he was genuinely curious or if he was testing me.

I took a deep breath. “As I said, a range of things.” I mentally checked them off as they spurted forth. “Lifestyle factors like age, family, exercise, health. Historical factors like family illness and inheritance. Professional factors like what they do and how much they get paid. The program even considers arrests and convictions. It tracks emails, text messages, publications. Everything. Everything is connected with this application,” I said, pointing to my phone, hoping and praying to God that Sonja would be able to make all of that possible. It turns out she could, by the way.

“Everything is live. If your investment runs a red light or has an affair, this impacts their value. It might be marginal, but it depends on who it is. People who are well-known and well-respected who do stupid shit, or complete losers who hit the big time, are representative of large swings. Think George Clooney getting arrested for robbery, assaulting a police officer, then urinating on the cruiser.”

“Large swings equal big money,” he added.

“Of course. Like anything. Big risk, big reward.”

Talon mulled this over, perhaps too much. I would like to say I could see his mind working behind his eyes, but the truth is, I just couldn't see it. I couldn't see beyond those dark, reflective pits. Nothing but my skinny, naked arms, with my hands still covering my genitals.

“And what do you want from me?”

“Starting capital.”

“Ah, and there it is.”

“Well, something like this doesn't fund itself. This is just a prototype, albeit a damn fine one. And I needed funds to bankroll the dividends.”

“I see.”

“And..”

“And what?”

“I also need your connections.”

“My connections?”

“Yes. You know people. People who could see the value in this. People who have as much to lose as I do. This will never get off the ground with mom and pop investors. Let’s face it, they wouldn’t want to be involved, anyhow. I need big people with big money. And the beauty of this—the real beauty of this? All of your returns will be clean.”

Talon raised an eyebrow. “My money’s already clean. There’s no need to launder it twice.”

“Sure, you tumble into something like the Chinese restaurant up top, but there’s still a limit to the amount they can handle, a limit you can transfer, an amount before banks ask questions. And then they talk to someone, and before you know it, a team of FBI agents are running around here like ants.”

He mulled this over. “Go on.”

“Everything is stored in an offshore account via a series of ghost transactions. Nobody will even know it exists. And if it doesn’t exist—” I paused to let him to complete my sentence.

“It can’t be traced.”

“Damn right. It’s your own private bank that you can draw from whenever you want at much, much better rates than any bank or investment could possibly provide.”

“And what’s to stop you taking my money and disappearing into the wilderness?”

“Two reasons. One, him and his finger up my arse,” I said, pointing to Stone, who stood motionless, his hands cupped in front of himself, waiting for instruction from his employer.

“And two, the money you give me pales in comparison to what I will make when this takes off.”

Talon smirked. “I like your confidence.” He leaned forward, his eyes narrow, his moustache twitching. “What guarantees do I have of my return?”

“I don’t control the market as much as I don’t control the decisions people make. You invest wisely, you’ll make your returns. Fuck it up, and that’s on you.”

“Which is why I’m looking for a percentage return.”

“I’ve spoken about your potential returns.”

“I’m not talking about a return on my investment,” he growled. “I want a return on all investments. I want to buy in. Not just on humans, but into the program.”

“On what terms?”

“On *my* terms! Who the fuck do you think I am?”

“But what does that mean?”

“You seem like a smart guy. I’m sure you can figure out what that means.”

I did know what that meant.

“How much are you planning on putting in?”

Talon looked to Stone and shrugged. “I’m thinking a quarter of a mill.”

I coughed. Showed my hand.

“And what about your initial investment? How much are you planning on putting on the humans?”

He stared at me. “Seventeen million. But you manage my affairs personally.”

“That kind of takes away from my impartiality.”

“I don’t give a shit. No one else needs to know. But you don’t handle anyone else’s business. Clear?”

We shook hands. I had a new business partner. He pulled me closer.

“Trust is very important to me. Above all else. With me or against me, I need to trust in you and your actions.”

I nodded. “How’s this for trust and loyalty? If you’re looking for who’s playing this table, I would turn your attention to the lady in red at position one. And Steve.”

He squeezed my hand tight. Beyond tight.

“Who the fuck is Steve?”

“You know,” I said, “the dealer.”

“You mean Isaac?”

“Yeah, sure, Isaac.”

Talon glanced at Stone, then back at me.

“You know what’s in store for you if all this is bullshit?”

I nodded.

But I was sure it would work.

Chapter 18

SO, THE SCENE WAS SET. The next week saw everything in motion. I won't bore you with the details—I know you've got better places to be—so I'm just going to hit the high points. My work week was a juggling act of keeping Tealson happy, finding equally lucrative investments to kick my human stock market into gear, and finding a new apartment to move into.

I had no problems syphoning some of Talon's investment to prop myself up. At the very least, a less shitty apartment in a slightly less shitty neighborhood. But when you had access to that kind of cash, why not go a little better, a little bigger? I found something in the Upper West Side—a single bedroom apartment for four and a half grand a month, complete with magnificent views of the city. With my newfound wealth, I could secure and furnish it within days.

Every few hours, it seemed, my phone was vibrating. Talon had secured another investor, someone interested in being part of The Humanist Network. Money was piling into the various accounts. Expectations were being raised. Talon made it clear he wanted a sizable piece of the pie, along with his investment returns. At that point, I was sure everyone would win. How could they not?

I spent my nights working through the algorithms. How does one value someone? In reality. I mean, I knew the words, but I needed to find a way this translated that into dollars and cents. Calculations, testing, computations, analysis. If this, then that. Cause and effect. What I ended up with was a series of equations that were crude and inefficient, but what the hell. They would do that job. It's not like anyone was looking over my shoulder, checking my work, complaining about the numbers. The numbers were the numbers. No one ever bothered to check the numbers. When you fill up with gas, you pay what you owe. You don't argue or negotiate the price per gallon

of fuel. You accept the price. The same applied to me. If it was close enough and made sense, no one would argue, barter, or negotiate.

Between energy drinks, I considered packing my meager items into boxes to take to the new apartment, but for all I cared, they could burn with the rest of the shitty dwelling.

I took an afternoon when I knew Tealson was off swinging a club at a course to knock out several chores. My first port of call was to the pawnshop to regain ownership of my watch. With my one win on the tables (plus Leon's pile of chips I had inherited), I had more than enough to get my watch back without further dipping into investments.

The bell above the pawnshop door sounded as I entered.

"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore out thou, Romeo?" Janet's voice boomed from behind the counter, her appearance sending a shiver down my spine. She had pulled her dark hair back, revealing more face than I cared to look at. Dark liner outlined her eyes, which peered out from her fat face.

"Art," I answered.

"What?" she replied, her chins wobbling.

"Wherefore *art* though. You know what, never mind."

"Absolutely never mind! The kid has returned. Now come over here and plant another one on Momma!"

Jesus Christ!

"Janet, my wonderful, I have only come for what is rightfully mine."

Janet pulled her top down over her shoulder and leaned on the glass cabinet top. "Well, why don't you just take me, then! We can go in the back room, and you can bang me into oblivion."

I pulled up her sleeve to cover her shoulder. "The watch, Janet, just the watch. *My* watch. Although, you would be a close second."

"Oh, kid," she sighed. "Maybe one day."

She returned with my watch and paperwork. I dropped three grand in cash on the counter. “As per our agreement,” I said. I signed her ledger (using “Romeo,” of course).

She picked up the stack of notes and flicked through it. “Certainly seems like it’s all here.”

“Now tell me, Janet.”

“Yes, my Romeo,” she responded, batting her eyes at me.

I leaned forward, our faces only marginally apart. “My Juliet, did you at all disable your recording equipment?”

“Why, yes,” she said, quivering. “That is what you wanted, dear Romeo.”

We moved closer to each other, our lips almost touching, our collective weight on the glass causing it to creak.

“Excellent, Juliet.” I pointed to the glass. “How much is that?”

She kept her eyes on mine, not wanting to break our connection. “Whatever it is, whatever price it is, you can have it for free. If you give me something.”

She bit her lip.

I was loathed to ask, but I did, anyway.

After that unpleasant encounter, I met up with Sonja in the same shitty diner where I had first secured her services. While I waited, I avoided the coffee and ordered three beers instead. I skulled one, hoping the cheap liquor would destroy the lingering taste. An entire pack of mints did little to quell the stench in every breath.

The roar of Sonja’s motorcycle preluded her entrance. She made her appearance, shoving the glass door open and marching in to an unheard song. Patrons and waitstaff alike ignored her as she strode toward me, whipping off her helmet and running a gloved hand through her purple and black hair. She chewed gum as she glared at me, the pissed-off look on her face cutting through the musky interior with little effort.

We took up our positions, facing each other in our booth. She slid her helmet across the bench, grabbed a beer, and took four large gulps. She slammed it back down on the table, the froth working its way up the neck and creating a white dome on top.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” she asked, dissatisfied, as if looking at me caused her pain.

“Just checking in,” I said, taking a swig of beer.

“Bullshit,” she countered. “You could have done that over the burner. So, I’ll ask you again, to what do I owe the pleasure?” She enunciated every syllable of her request with sparkling clarity.

I leaned forward on the table, trying desperately to hide my excitement. “I’m sure you’ve seen the money coming into the accounts?”

“I have.”

“Things are really kicking into gear.”

“I know.”

“We need to make sure this thing will fly when we hit the launch button.”

“It will.”

I eyed her. “I’m sorry, am I interrupting your busy week of dying your hair, getting a tattoo, or fixing your motorcycle?”

She drank the rest of her beer. “Yeah,” she said. “You’re positively fucking up my chi.”

I sighed, pulled out a flash drive, and slid it across the table. It skittered over the cracked bench top toward her. She watched and didn’t stop it as it fell into her lap. She looked down.

“And what’s that?”

“That is the brains of the system.”

She smirked. “I’m pretty sure *I*’m the brains of the system.”

I rolled my eyes. “You get the idea. Just make sure—”

She held up a hand. “What are you paying me for? Trust me, what you’ve seen so far is just the tip of the iceberg. The next version

will have everything you need.” She held up the flash drive. “Including whatever is on this drive.”

“The calculations,” I offered.

“Yeah, yeah, the calculations.”

“Don’t ‘yeah, yeah’ me. Include what I give you.”

This time, she rolled her eyes. “Yes, *Dad!*” She held up the drive. “I don’t get the big deal. The value of something is based on what people are willing to pay.”

I put an elbow on the table, rest my head in my palm, and massaged my temples with my thumb and middle finger. “No,” I said. “That’s not how it works.”

“Sure it is,” she said dismissively. “That’s why people negotiate when they buy a house or a car.”

“That’s different.”

“How is it different?”

I slammed my hand on the table. “It just is.”

She leaned back, folded her arms, and raised an eyebrow. She blew a bubble with her gum. It burst, and she worked it back into her mouth. “Fine,” she said between chews. “It just is.”

We looked at each other.

“So,” she said with a shrug. “Is there anything else, or can I go back to fixing motorcycles and getting tattoos?”

I finished my beer and wiped my mouth. “What else can you do?”

She waved over the waitress and ordered two more beers. They quickly arrived.

“What did you have in mind?”

I smiled. There was a lot on my mind.

On Thursday, I met Olivia at an upmarket coffee shop near my new apartment. I must say, when you had money, things moved damned fast. I had picked up the keys from the realtor and ordered

two overpriced coffees, waiting for my date. Right at seven, Olivia walked in.

I would like to say my heart leapt to attention as she breezed in the doors, her hair aflutter from a gust of wind outside. I would like to say time stopped as she slipped through the crowd. I would like to say that, would like to have felt that. But in reality, it was my groin that responded to her arrival. She wore tight jeans and suede pumps. Her coat was splayed, revealing a loose, white top that was unbuttoned to reveal part of her bosom. I wanted her, more than once.

But that would have to wait, I told myself. You didn't just jump to these things—not with someone like her. Contradictory, right? This time, I was sober.

She removed her coat and placed it on the back of her chair as she sat down.

“Well,” she said with a smile. “This is a surprise.”

“Well, I *am* known for my surprises.” That was bullshit.

She picked up her cup and took a sip. As she placed it down, she looked around.

“This is a little different than our usual spot. You know I don't care for any of this. I like you the way you are.”

“Well, that's a shame.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that I hope you don't mind getting used to it.”

“I'm used to it,” she said, taking another sip. “I've told you who my father is. It's just that I don't care for it. I don't need it.”

“So, none of this is good?”

She reached over and grabbed my hand. “This is good. To see you is good. I don't care about the periphery, as long as you are in the center, under a spotlight.”

Goddamn it. I stared into her eyes, looking for some form of sarcasm, some other underlying meaning to her words. Nothing but sincerity. Shit.

“Wait,” she said. “What did you mean about getting used to it?”

“Well,” I said gripping her hand tightly. “Things have changed a little at work.”

“Oh, more surprises.” She wiggled in her seat. “Do tell,” she said with a wink.

“I’d rather just show you.”

“Show me what?”

I flicked on the lights. The empty room lit up. Bare hardwood floors reflected the overhead banks of LED bulbs. The city lights twinkled outside the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was like a museum, clean and quiet.

“This place is yours?”

“Yeah,” I said, joining her at the window, two glasses of champagne in my hand (the bottle courtesy of the realtor). “All mine.” It wasn’t, but it could be if the money kept coming in. “I mean, when you’re the best investment banker in the city, this is what happens.”

“The city?”

“You got me. The Eastern seaboard.”

She took a glass and clinked. I watched her sip while she took in the view.

“Jesus Christ, it’s stunning.”

“It is.”

She turned to face me. “You have to be careful.”

“Oh really? Of what?”

“If you keep treating me to views like this, you’re going to find it very difficult to get me to leave.”

*28[I took a sip. “And here I thought you were here for me, not the view.”

She pouted. Cute. “You know what I mean.”

I smiled. “I know what you mean.”

We kissed, deeply, and ended up on the strategically-placed rug and throw cushions (also from the realtor). With the lights off, I

took her on as many surfaces as I could muster until I couldn't hold myself back any longer.

Later, while she slept off the workout, I stood on the balcony, enjoying the rest of the champagne, my back to the skyline. Through the glass, I watched her sleeping, shifting effortlessly amongst fifteen pillows. I was too wired. Too many things to think about, uncertain of my feelings for Olivia.

I turned and took in the city. Monochrome steel and glass monoliths were lit up at various intervals. Shades of gray and white and yellow. The city, it appeared, was also unable to find slumber.

The minutes turned to hours. I sleeplessly watched the skyline until the lights went out and the sun rose, signaling the start of the new day.

Chapter 19

FRIDAY—MID-MORNING. Time to check in. I found a bank of six payphones several blocks from the office. I had promised myself never to use the same phone twice in a row. More paranoia. I trust you know why. The more this kicked in, the more nervous I got. The higher the bank balances went, the more I realized I was forging deep relationships with very bad people. Guilty by association? For all my shortcomings, I still never considered myself a bad person.

The operator answered, and I read out my character code from memory. In return, she gave me the evening game's location. I made a mental note of it and hung up. I enjoyed the efficiency of the system, the transactional nature of it. You gave something, you got something. Nothing more, nothing less.

Back in the office, I put my weekly research to the test. One morning that week, I decided to invest heavily in a fledgling tech company out of Spain that seemed to be pregnant with potential. The thing is, this little company only had holdings in the thousands, but it was about to release AI. And not some shitty version of AI. Not some dude in a robot outfit, not some toy that followed you around. And certainly not some piece of software that creates memes. I'm talking about full-on intelligence. Think of turning your house into a living, breathing environment, where your house knows everything before you do. Not just climate control, not just lights and temperature. I'm talking about TV, cooking, cleaning.

As I had researched the company, everything connected subconsciously for me. So, I pooled work investments with my personal stash, as well as Talon's financial injection, into the company, and waited breathlessly for their announcement, which was expected that afternoon.

But there was no announcement. They had scheduled the press conference for three p.m. local time. I watched, waited, and then

panicked. As the hour came and went, the more sweat appeared on my forehead, the shorter my breaths became, and the tighter my chest felt. Had I been wrong? Surely not. The research was sound, the intelligence undeniable. You needed three points to draw a straight line, and I didn't have three—I had seven. Seven seemingly disconnected, almost random pieces of data. On the surface, on their own, they were separate. But in my eyes, together, they created the perfect picture. It was happening. It had to happen.

It was four p.m. Still nothing. As time ticked by, my sleeves became shorter, my tie became looser, my bladder became smaller. Normally, day to day, I wasn't one to get anxious or panicky. But when my expectations—not of others, but of my own intelligence—aren't met, then self-doubt creeps in. My initial thoughts of putting all my eggs in one basket, to halve the work required, seemed to be coming back to bite me.

Five p.m. Still nothing. I had sent emails. Sent text messages. Made phone calls. I received a range of responses from various individuals that would have made a politician go weak in the knees. I laid my head on my desk, my beautiful desk in my wonderful office with my tremendous views. Perfectly perfect. It felt like I was sitting on a powder-keg, waiting for the fuse to be lit, and the flame was getting closer to the wick. Teasing. Dance, monkey, dance.

Someone cleared their throat, and the sudden sound in my silent office made me jump in my chair and just about shit my pants. I looked up to see Tealson sitting opposite me. He rested his elbows on the arms of the chair, his palms together as if praying, his fingers tapping his lips. His right leg bounced on his left. That fatherly, disapproving look in his eyes. Like when a priest catches you masturbating in the confessional.

I ran a hand through my hair, straightened my tie, and rolled down my sleeves. If you can't play the part, look the part. "Mr. Tealson. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

“Don’t fuck with me, kid. What’s going on?”

I found one of my cufflinks and tried to thread it through my cuff. “What on earth are you talking about?” Sound confident. It’s important.

“Do you honestly think I wouldn’t know?”

He stood. I watched as he moved forward, leaning on the desk, looming over me.

“Know about what?” Play dumb. Nothing is wrong.

He folded his arms. “There’s that same smart-arse shit again. You don’t think I’m watching everything you do. Every transaction, every dollar.” His voice raised an octave with every word. “You dumped a large proportion of our funds into some shitball, two-cent company on the verge of sweet fuck-all, and you thought I wouldn’t find out?” His face contorted.

I finished my second cuff. Damn stupid silver fuckers. Magnetic cuffs. Now there’s a billion-dollar idea right there. Every year around the globe, retailers sell about two billion business shirts. Let’s say a quarter require cufflinks, and a quarter of those (initially) are sold with magnets sewn into the fabric. You can pick them up for a few cents in China and then sell them for ten bucks each. Five hundred million times ten dollars is a fuck-ton (technical term) of money. And people will pay an extra ten for a shirt so they didn’t have to fuck around with cufflinks. Shit, maybe I was in the wrong game. Maybe this human stock market idea was complete shit and I should turn my passions instead toward men’s fashion. But I digress.

I stood. “And what makes you think this won’t pay off?”

“Has it paid off?” He asked, cracking his knuckles, projecting superiority.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. I didn’t know what to say, other than, “Have I ever been wrong before?”

“There’s always a first time, kid. Always a first time. And fuck it, if it’s not this time, it will be eventually.”

“Well then, why the fuck did you put me in this job in the first place?”

*30[Tealson cracked his neck. “Because I thought you had some talent. But even the well-respected and all-powerful like me get it wrong sometimes. You fly a little close to the sun, and you’re going to get a little burnt, kid. But trust me when I say, I’m not going down in flames with you. I’ll use your skin as a parachute and your lifeless corpse as a cushion.”

He raised his hand back, ready to launch it into my face. He was going to hit me with a back hander across the cheek. It would sting and hurt like fuck. But then the pain would subside, and I would have learned a valuable lesson.

I closed my eyes and waited for the impact. My mind raced forward. What would happen after the impact? An apology? Would he make it up to me? Give me a pay raise? Would I cry? Whimper? Apologize for my actions? All I could think about was what would happen afterward.

After what felt like a tense eternity, a ding rang from my computer.

Still on edge, I opened my eyes and looked up. Tealson was gone. I stared around my empty office. I was alone.

I looked down at my computer and saw the company had made the announcement and their stock price was already rising. Investors from all over were seeing the unlimited potential of the technology. It would be in every home in every country. But none of them had picked up the stock like we did.]

“Have I ever failed you before?” I asked to the empty room. “No. No, I fucking haven’t.”

And yet Tealson’s words still echoed in my head.

You fly a little close to the sun, and you’re going to get a little burnt, kid.

Chapter 20

I WALKED THE LAST FEW blocks. It was a clear night, the moon looming large in the dark sky. A thin layer of moisture covered every surface. I skipped over a few puddles, my hands deep in my coat pockets, gripping the stack of notes I had amassed. A limo drove past me, windows impossibly black against its even darker paint job, its silver wheels spinning beyond comprehension, mesmerizing. And then another. And then another. It was a parade of chauffeur-driven automobiles, each more prestigious than the last, as if they were trying to outdo each other.

At the next corner, a big guy in a big coat asked to see my membership card. I obliged. As he spoke, he looked like a bulldog chewing on a bumblebee. If he wasn't working security, he could have been playing football. Hell, he might've even played football. I just knew he probably had some type of semi-automatic gun slung over his shoulder, hidden under his coat. He waved me through, telling me to walk around to the back.

The building stood starkly in the night. It was the Fulton Fish Market—a massive structure, the second largest of its kind in the world, handling millions of pounds of seafood every day. It was known as the New York Stock Exchange of Seafood. But tonight, it wasn't about the crustaceans or shellfish. It was about the game and, more importantly, the launch. Dark cars continued to drive past me toward the rear of the building as I continued my trek to the southeast corner, a hell of a journey over the four hundred thousand square foot facility. I didn't mind—it gave me time to think.

Several other security guards lined the building walls, checking the cars to make sure the people arriving were the ones who were supposed to be there. Compared to the locations of the other underground games, this seemed like a public display. I think more than

anything, Talon was putting on a show, flashing his weight to his special guests.

A guard directed me through a large entryway, which was normally used for loading trucks and trailers, where another guard pointed to my right. The smell of seafood clung to me, blending in with the smells of the concrete and steel interior. The occupants had turned on a few indoor lights, which cast large, sprawling shadows on the walls. My footfalls echoed with the others in the space who had come before and after me. Crates, boxes, and machinery lined the walls, and not a single employee was in sight.

I walked up a set of steel steps and through a doorway. Tessa was sitting there at a desk, a nearby lamp giving her wrinkled face an ominous glow. She was smoking a cigarette. Suitcases lined the walls behind her, and a guy wielding a shotgun stood there, guarding them. He looked German. Don't ask me why I thought that; he just did. He had a square face, with just as much brown, wavy hair below his mouth as above his eyes.

I approached. "Tessa, my beautiful, how are you this fine evening?"

She didn't flinch. "And how much tonight, kid?"

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised," I said, pulling out a stack of notes from my jacket pocket and placing the stack on the desk. "A bit more to play with tonight."

She huffed and looked at me. "See those suitcases behind me?"

I looked again but didn't need to.

"Imagine thirteen more stacks of bills."

"I see," I replied.

Tessa ignored me and arranged the appropriate number of chips into a chestnut box that had my ten-character sequence on the front and slid it across the desk. I guess my previous buy-in wasn't big enough to warrant my own box. Although, I had a feeling my con-

tainer would be decidedly empty compared to others who brought with them briefcases full of cash.

“Big night tonight, kid. Lots of big, important players. Best you don’t fuck this up, because if you do, a bullet in your mouth will be the least of your problems. Have you ever had your balls in a vice, young man? Enough pressure to make them pop? Makes for a fucking sound, that does.”

I smiled weakly and picked up my box.

She pointed to the room next door. “You’d better get in there. Not long before we start. Trust you make a good impression.”

“I always—”

“Table four,” she barked, waving me away. She had no time for my bullshit.

The room next door was twice as large as the rooms in which I had previously played the game. A makeshift bar straddled one wall. Booze sat on steel shelves; glasses still nestled in cardboard boxes until required use. It gave the place a funky industrial vibe. People milled around, some wearing expensive suits, others in long dresses, tumblers with various shades of liquid alternating with cigars and cigarettes.

If I were to hazard a guess, I would say the collective standing in that room were responsible for hundreds of deaths, billions of laundered funds, corruption to the highest powers—and not a single day spent in jail for any of it. Perhaps crime does pay. It also made me incredibly nervous. These people didn’t fear the law; they feared each other. One thing kept the peace when it came to things like this: respect.

I weaved through the traffic to get to the bar and nestled between two other players to order a drink. Over the cacophony, I shouted my command, and a girl in a tight, white business shirt, which was unbuttoned to her belly button, obliged. Her hair was blonde, her eyes blue. She sported a Celtic knot tattoo in her unre-

strained cleavage. I wanted her. I would have her later, after all the madness had died down, after all these underground bosses and dark figures were worshipping my brilliance.

Just then—a scoff. “You!”

I turned. Next to me was Leon. He held a drink in his bandaged hand, which had a stump where his pinky finger used to be. I’ll admit—I stared. I was curious! What can I say?

“In for a big game tonight?”

“Yeah,” he said. Then he spun off his stool and walked away.

The rest of the patrons followed suit and cleared out of the bar. I looked left, then looked right. I was now the only one waiting for a drink, which was strange, because I hadn’t heard the call to begin. I could recognize Tessa’s low-pitched holler, which wafted through the air like a police siren on a clear winter’s night. My drink arrived, and the gorgeous bartender disappeared just as quickly.

I picked up the heavy glass. Then I heard a cough, a clearing of a throat. I turned. At first, I saw nothing other than the entire room looking at me. But I realized it wasn’t me they were looking at. It was the person standing in front of me, who was hidden from my view because of his height. I looked down.

*31[“Do you know who I am, motherfucker?”

I took a sip from my drink, trying not to piss my pants.

“I would be a fool if I didn’t. You’re ‘The Devil,’ if I’m not mistaken.”

He smirked. “You are not mistaken.”

The Devil was four foot nothing, but he wasn’t one to fuck with. His reputation preceded him in my professional circles. Deep pockets, a thirst for anything up and coming, likes to diversify. All of this while having a strangle hold on the city, slowly choking it through organized crime. Rumor has it he didn’t have any links to the traditional families, so he started his own and elbowed his way to the top. There’s quite a bit to admire about him.

His black face was smooth, almost innocent, but his dark eyes portrayed something more sinister. He wore a plaid bow tie and a checkered dinner jacket. I so badly wanted to rub his shiny, bald head. I wanted to breathe on it and shine it with my sleeve. I wanted to grab his cheeks and shake them. Fuck, that would be funny. So funny. It would also be a death wish. And that death would come slowly.

“I wanted to come and introduce myself personally,” he said, his hardened drawl emanating from his fat lips.

I noticed a deep knife attack scar running along the side of his neck. The guy who did it—a hitman—well, let’s just say he didn’t enjoy the remaining six months of his life. Not just physically either, but mentally. That’s right. Mr. Devil here liked to fuck you from all angles.]

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“I’m looking forward to later on,” he said. “But I must say, you’d better not be wasting my time.”

Three loud claps echoed from the doorway, prompting an immediate hush.

Tessa stepped forward. “Dignitaries, honored guests, members of the police, ladies and gentlemen...”

My heart skipped a beat. *Did she say police?*

“Please prepare and take your seats at your designated tables. Let the games begin.”

Chapter 21

MY TABLE FEATURED USUAL suspects alongside me: Nate, Anja, Olsen, Leon (minus one finger), and Seana. But there was something different about Seana that night—it took me a full minute to figure out what it was. *The patch over her eye.* Shit! Don't know how I missed it, to tell you the truth. Talon had plucked her left eye out! I hoped to fuck he left my name out of his conversation with her.

My morbid curiosity took over. I found myself imagining how it had been done. Maybe with her knees rubbing against the rough concrete, as she looked up at him in despair. Maybe he stood over her, one hand on the back of her head to keep her steady, her hair running through his fingers. Perhaps his other hand held a knife, his arm pulled back, ready to plow in. She might have pleaded, begged, bartered, but he wouldn't have a bar of it. Once he sets his mind on something, it's a given. Her screams must have echoed around the room. Justice served. Balance maintained.

Made me sick thinking about it. I shook my head, tried to dissolve the daydream and focus on the game.

All the players nodded to each other in recognition, but everyone avoided eye contact with me. I didn't know whether they feared me after what happened to Leon, or if I just hadn't yet earned their respect. I wondered how the other players viewed Aston, the guy I replaced. Was it all slaps on the backs and high fives, or the same cold shoulder I received?

The newcomers, the bad guys with worse reputations, sat at their own tables, not lowering themselves to sit with Talon's standard fair of patronage. Each had a box in front of them, no doubt full of chips, ready to play, ready to win. But the elite, the worst of the worst, the bosses of the bosses, the ones whose names strike fear into the hearts

of their opposition—well, they weren't in the room. They were off in their own room, playing their own game.

I scanned my surroundings. There were cameras in every corner and evenly spaced out along the ceiling's edges.

At our table, our dealer (not Steve, or Isaac for that matter) shuffled the cards and prepared the first round. I wondered what fate had befallen our regular dealer. Cement shoes? Bullet in the skull? Worse? I doubted anyone would ever see him again. Isaac was most likely carved up, his body parts fed to pigs or dumped in twenty different parts of the city.

I flicked open my box to reveal my meager rations. A lot more than last time, but a lot less than everyone else. I would have to work very hard to get through the night and not have my ass end up in debt to the house. By the house, I of course mean Talon.

The night breezed past in a hazy dream of cards, liquor, and playing chips. I won some hands, lost others. This time, I was left alone by the group—a far cry from their hazing efforts the previous week. No one accused me of cheating. No one got taken away to have their fingers removed by Talon. (Thank God—the thought of it still made me queasy.) In fact, everyone was damned well behaved. But people were still on edge. They didn't want to fuck up, because with this crowd, Talon would make a spectacle of the punishment.

At the end of the night, Talon's regular clientele packed away their remaining chips in order to cash out with Tessa in the adjoining room. Talon mingled as they left, shook hands, patted shoulders, all under the watchful eye of Stone. It was always a successful night for the house, because with games like this, the house never lost.

When the last had left, Talon pushed the doors shut and turned. He clapped his hands and addressed his twenty special guests with the flair of a Vegas entertainer.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome, and congratulations.”

I sat at the bar, fresh from ordering an old fashioned, and watched as Talon centered himself in the room. He was wearing an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, revealing a white shirt underneath. Several gold necklaces hung from his scrawny neck. Pale pants, white socks, and sandals finished his ensemble.

I wondered how someone like Talon could command a room, especially a room like this, where the people consisted of a who's who of the national underworld. Then I remembered it doesn't take looks and fashion, but rather action and balls. You say you're going to do something, something menacing, and then go through with it when someone calls your bluff. That's how he did it, that's how he commanded respect, that's how he could make an offer to his long list of contacts, enemies, business partners, and influencers, and they would show up to hear it.

His audience clung to their respective tables. Fat cigars were lit by fatter, gold-ringed fingers. Serious women in pantsuits, sporting flowery lapels and cocktail dresses, sipped from tumblers. Their eyes shifted suspiciously, taking in everything and sizing up every aspect of the competition. Dinner jackets, bowties, hoodies, runners. The criminal elite knew nothing about social boundaries. If you had a talent and could spot a niche in the market, chances are you'd be successful.

"I trust you've all had a successful evening." A pause. "Except for you, Dennis!"

All eyes followed Talon's pointed finger across the room to a portly gent with gray sideburns and a salt-and-pepper goatee. "You motherfucker! You still owe me a hundred grand—so I hope you lost the lot!"

Cheers and laughter came from across the room. The fat man clapped and bowed his head.

"You can suck my fat dick!" he retorted, to more cheers.

"I'll leave that for Joey's wife! Right, Joey?"

Eyes shifted to the other side of the room where a man in white dinner coat with a protruding lavender collar saluted. Someone slapped him on the back.

“Well, she wouldn’t suck your tiny dick, Talon, no matter how much you paid her!”

A lady stood. She had a black top, black pants, and black high heels. A solid gold necklace hung around her neck. She pursed her black lips as the room fell silent.

She threw a hand to Talon. “Well, I would suck your dick, Talon!” She proclaimed. “If I could find it in your vagina!”

The room lost it. There were high fives and applause that would rival a Shakespeare playhouse.

I couldn’t tell how much of that was in good faith, good banter, or dire warnings.

Talon waved his hands to calm the ruckus.

“Now, I appreciate you coming and listening to this proposal. I’ve told you enough to get you interested, but now it’s time to commit. And if there’s anything I know you can all do, it’s follow through on your word.”

A guy in one corner spoke up: “But what are you getting out of this, Talon, huh? If we’re making a buck, I know you’re making ten!”

“Don’t you worry about what I’m getting. You, Timmy “cheap-ass” Chaplin, should be thinking about how much you’re getting out of this. But you cock-suckers don’t want to hear that from me, so I’ve got this little fucker to tell you all about it.”

He waved me forward, and I swallowed. It felt like I was entering a snake’s nest.

“Atlas here is going to tell us all about it and answer all of your questions.” He put an arm around my shoulders. “And if he doesn’t, someone will get a big surprise when they open their cold box of fresh seafood tomorrow morning.”

Claps from around the room. Dear God.

I pulled out my phone and pressed on the screen.

Everyone's phone in the room buzzed, dinged, or played some outrageous ringtone. It sounded like an out-of-tune symphony; a cacophony.

"Congratulations, everybody," I said. "I just sent you a link. Once you click on it, you become part of The Humanist Network, the first and only one of its kind on this fine planet."

Everyone checked their devices.

"I won't bore you with the details, and I know Talon here has given you the basics. So, let me just point out the interesting elements. I have preloaded 848 profiles into the system: celebrities, entertainers, sporting heroes, top Fortune 500 CEOs, dignitaries from every state, members of Congress...even the president. I've assigned everyone a value based on a range of characteristics. For years, companies have been saying that their most valuable asset is their people, and now, people *are* the asset."

I proceeded to share the rules of engagement, the boring admin shit. Stuff like what they got, what I got, fees, dividends, and holding accounts.

"Everything is stored on the dark web. Nothing is traced, nothing can be hacked. You are all ghosts. I run the system, and I'm the only one. And I should warn you, The Humanist Network has a dead man's switch. If I don't check in and enter a password every forty-eight hours, the system locks and distributes all your available funds to every known non-religious, public charity in the world. On top of this, all your information will be sent to every government agency and news outlet in the country.

"Now I should point out, this isn't a threat. This is a reality from part of the terms of our little relationship. You shouldn't see it as a hindrance, mind you. No, this should give you peace of mind. This should give you an incentive to keep me out of harm's way.

“I trust these terms are acceptable to you,” I said, smiling. “But if they aren’t? Well, I can’t help you.”

There was silence, and then a clapping of hands at the back of the room. The Devil stood (although you could hardly tell), applauding, a broad smile on his face. Others followed his lead.

I had suddenly become very popular.

Chapter 22

GRANT STARES AT ME, hard. He has been sitting quietly, listening to me ramble on, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the injection of his character into the story.

“You’ve been very patient, Grant. I appreciate that.”

He doesn’t respond—just sits there with a blank look on his face. His cuffed hands fidget, and he spends a few seconds rubbing his fingers together and picking at his nails. Not much else to do, I guess. I, on the other hand, had been standing up and moving around, adding gestures and visuals to my story. I had waved my hands around and acted it out. I want him to understand. I need him to feel it.

I clear my throat. “Weeks flittered by while—”

“Is this going anywhere?”

I pause, mid-sentence, and sit down. “Am I boring you, Grant?”

“Yes. You don’t want me to go, but you’re not saying anything to keep me here.”

“Well, I realize the conundrum—the paradoxical nature of your situation. But this is going somewhere. This will give you all the answers. I’ve told you that, right? I’m pretty sure I have.” I looked down at the table, searching the surface, as if it held the answer.

We look at each other.

“How much money did you make?” Grant asks.

“I don’t know. Enough.”

“What was your address?”

“None of your damn business,” I snap back. “What’s with all the questions?”

Grant leans forward. “Just get to it,” he says.

I look up into his narrow eyes. Who was in control of all of this?

“I’m in control here, Grant. I decide when I talk and what I talk about.”

“Of course,” he relents. “Of course, you are.”

“Of course, I am, dammit. I know exactly where I am and what I’m doing.” I think. Sometimes I wasn’t sure. Was this the right thing? It had to be, because I was here.

“So,” I continue, “as I was saying. The weeks. They flittered by.”
“Why?”

I pause again, stopping dead in my tracks. “Why *what?*”
“I don’t understand—why?”

“Why *what?*” I repeat.

“They’re essentially betting on people’s fortunes, and they’re paying you for the pleasure. Why not just invest that money themselves? Why not just bet their money on any number of completely legal activities?”

“Because.”

“Because?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Because.”

“Just seems like a convoluted way to make money.”

I lean back in my chair, noticing how uncomfortable it is, and cross my legs. “Do you know the most powerful word in the English language?” I ask him. “It’s ‘because.’ There was a study done in the seventies. The word ‘because’ triggers a response in us so strong that we ignore everything that comes after.”

“So, what comes after?”

I sigh. Loudly. Heavily. Obtusely.

“Because I’m not asking questions, because they can launder money, because bad people do bad things. Many reasons. It doesn’t matter *why* they did things, just that they did them. You just have to accept it. Stop trying to find reason or understanding.”

“I thought you wanted me to understand.”

I shake my head. “No. I want you to understand how you came to be here. I don’t need you to know every aspect of the lead-up. That’s not why I’m telling you.”

Grant parts his hands and pulls them apart from each other as much as he could, and nods. “Of course. Continue.”

“Are you going to let me this time?”

He clenches his lips shut. I’m sure if he were able, he would have zipped his mouth shut, turned the key in the lock, and tossed the key away.

“Fine,” I continue. “I will. But because I want to, I need to. And not because you gave me permission to do so.”

I stand up and roll my arms over, loosening up my shoulders, looking like I’m swimming freestyle. I feel suppressed. “Don’t you just love to stretch your arms out, Grant? I mean, doesn’t it feel like you’ve been held down for so long, and just waving them around is pure relief?”

I look at him, chained to the table.

“Oh. Sorry about that. Maybe it’s all of this. The talking. Really getting it off my chest.”

He remains silent, so I continue.

“As I was saying, the weeks flittered by. I was having a positive cash flow in both directions. Money, dirty or otherwise, was being invested in The Humanist Network. I, in turn, took that, along with considerable *legal* funds, and invested those on the legitimate stock market. I pulled money from companies on the verge of collapse and injected funds into new up-and-comers. I was doing things before the market knew what was happening. I was at the forefront.

“I didn’t see Tealson for days at a time. If my predictions—and I use that term loosely because I thought stuff *might* happen, versus me *actually* knowing them—kept paying off, he was happy, the company was happy, I was happy. More importantly, Talon was happy, and his band of merry men were at ease with their returns, along with their losses. When a celebrity married a Kardashian, their profile lifted. When a dodgy news source broke the story of a politician having an affair, their value decreased.

“I didn’t see Sonja—there was no need to. Everything was humming along. The system was working. There were a few requests to include some foreign dignitaries, and I obliged. A few days later, they resigned when someone leaked photos of them with a scantily-clad escort to the press. Another wanted a YouTube singer on the cards, so I added them, and soon they signed a record deal. Someone else wanted a down-and-out child star who works at Starbucks on the books. So, I did. They ended up winning a four-million-dollar jackpot at a casino the next day.

“Everything was going great. And then, suddenly, it wasn’t. It’s like the sun stopped rising in the morning. The switch went from good to bad so suddenly, I thought I was dreaming. No one has a fall from grace like this. It was like I was in a slow-motion car crash, being extremely conscious of the world around me as the car spun on its axis mid-air, and anything that wasn’t tied down was floating. I knew what was coming. The crash. The impact. The pain.

“Then, something interesting happened. There was a request to include Troy Ripley Rogers.”

“Who’s Troy Ripley Rogers?” Grant mumbles.

“You don’t know who Troy Ripley Rogers is? I’m not surprised. No one did. Well, very few people did, in the grand scheme of things. Rogers was a nobody. A low-level street dealer. Why, on earth, anybody wanted him in the network was beyond me. But who am I to say no to such things? I added him and gave him a very low value, as you would expect.”

“So, what happened?” Grant asks, genuinely interested.

“Well, remember there had been some new additions in recent times. Nobodies who became somebodies. A few people made a lot of money from those payoffs. Everyone else was watching. I often pictured them lying in bed with a dozen bought women, laying in the dark, their phone screen illuminating their faces, watching their investments rise and fall. Anyway, I guess a bunch of them saw a new

face and wanted to jump on the bandwagon early. Executing without due diligence. Because not only did Roger's value increase, but the police found him dead a day later. Nasty car accident. Decapitation. Gruesome. Makes me ill when I think about it.

"Anyway, a lot of people lost a lot of funds—one of the by-products of such an event. I mean, they got their cents on the dollar return, as you would for a company that goes bankrupt, but the lion's share came to me. Where I'm going with this is that a lot of people got pissed off. Someone had gamed the system, they thought. They thought they had found a loophole.

"The problem was they were pointing fingers at Talon. And for some reason, Talon was pointing at me. I don't know why he thought I had anything to do with it. I mean, who the hell am I? I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a murderer. Well, I wasn't back then."

I look at Grant, and his face grows dark. It looks like someone had extinguished the overhead fluorescents.

"You wanted to understand, Grant. This is what I want you to appreciate. So, listen up."

Chapter 23

IT WAS THURSDAY NIGHT, and Olivia and I were celebrating. We were enjoying the introduction to a long weekend. I can't remember what the holiday was—federal or state—and it didn't matter. A day off was a day off. We had been dancing in a club, grinding our bodies together amongst a writhing hoard of others. We might have dropped something while we were in there, but the base of the soundtrack had ripped through me like a torrent, my world a strobe of colors.

She was wearing a little sleeveless black number and red heels. Her ass mesmerized me as she went to the bar to get water or some shots. I couldn't remember what she said. She had been talking about her father's birthday party over the weekend, some family gathering she wanted me to attend. I told her I would think about it, but I wasn't sure I was ready for that kind of relationship. The only thing I was sure of was that I needed to take a piss.

I was standing at the urinal, trying to keep myself upright, whispering a mantra to myself to keep me conscious. Right then, the bathroom door burst open and two men entered, rudely interrupting my meditation. I opened my eyes. There was a scuffling of shoes and some harsh words. From my peripheral vision, I could see one was backtracking quickly, his hands up, apologizing. The argument continued as I shook a few times and zipped up. I could hear a body being shoved against the wall. It was rough and raw.

"When the fuck are you going to have the money, huh? It's well past due!" A voice boomed.

Fuck. Talk about déjà vu.

"Stone?" I called out as I stepped away from the porcelain bucket urinals.

While keeping a big hand on his prey, the aggressor turned, the overhead lights reflecting off his bald head. He saw me and smiled.

“Well, fuck me. Just the man I came to see,” he said.

“Oh, really?” I said, moving to the sink to wash my hands. I looked at myself in the mirror. Nothing but a blurry mess. I splashed water on my face and neck, drying my hands through my hair. In the reflection, I saw the other two looking at me.

I turned, leaning against the sink. “Who the fuck is this guy?”

Stone looked at him. “Consider yourself one lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

The man let go of his breath, no doubt having held it since the larger man had pinned him against the wall. But he sharply gasped as Stone’s left hook socked him on the side of his face, knocking him out instantly. Stone looked at the man.

“And let that be a warning to ya!”

“Nice quote,” I remarked.

He looked at me and released his grip, letting the unknown man slide down to the floor in a heap.

“That guy will have quite a headache when he wakes up,” I said.

Stone walked up. I could feel the space closing in around me.

“And if you don’t come with me right now, you’ll find out what that feels like.”

I held up my hands. “Woah, woah. Calm down. What’s going on?”

“Talon has requested your immediate presence.”

“Is that a fact?”

“That is a fucking fact. So, are you going to make this easy for you, or easy for me?”

“Let me just—”

But I didn’t get a chance to finish. The world suddenly collided into me like a supernova, light flashing everywhere as water enveloped sound. I heard something along the lines of, “I fucking told you, didn’t I?” before I sank to the ground.

Chapter 24

BLOOD. ITS UNMISTAKABLE taste was in my mouth. It was all I could taste. I tried to rationalize where I was. And where I was, exactly, was laying on a cold cement floor. I opened one of my eyes a crack, and my head throbbed. It had been Stone's fist, that much I remember. But everything leading up to that was a hazy memory, and anything after that was a blank. Blood. Why blood? I wondered if I had hit my face when I fell, or if it was the body's natural reaction to severe trauma to the head.

Opening my eye wider, I could see the grate in the floor. It made me think of the room where Talon bit off Leon's finger. The thought still was much too graphic in my head, the sound much too real. Churn. I felt sick. When did I last eat? And then I remembered. Olivia! We were at the club together.

I got up. The world swayed, and I landed back down on my ass. I crawled to the grate and vomited—more than once. Most of it was liquid, so a lot of it went down the drain without too much fuss. I pulled my head away from the remaining gelatinous gravy lingering an inch from my face.

I rolled over onto my ass and squinted at the dull overhead globe. What color was that? Ochre or saffron? Then I saw them. One seated and one standing, enveloped in shadow. But I knew who they were.

The one seated leaned forward on his chair, elbows on his knees. His long hair draped down over his shoulders, covering part of his face. "Welcome back, kid."

"Ah, Talon. To what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked.

"We need to talk."

I grunted as I stood. It took effort. I grabbed my head.

"Well, it would be great to be here without a concussion."

Stone folded his arms. "I told you it was going to be easy for you or easy for me. You made the wrong call."

I rubbed my head. I don't remember having the option. The floor. The walls. The dull globe hanging from the ceiling by a cord. "Hey," I said. "Is this the room?"

"What room?" Talon asked.

"Where you...you know...did...you know...to...that guy?"

Talon ignored the comment, waving it away as preposterous. He stood and walked over to me. "Like I said, we need to talk."

"Sure, but did you need to send *him*?" I said, pointing at Stone. "And does it need to be *here*?" I gestured around the room.

"Trust me, it will make it easier to say yes."

"Say yes to what?"

Talon put a hand on my shoulder. Looked me deep in the eyes. It was a strange connection. I neither felt fear nor comfort.

"There's a bunch of pissed off people out there, kid. The system screwed them over, and those people are not good people. They're bad people, and they're out for blood."

I sighed. "This is about Troy Ripley Rogers, isn't it? The nobody who everyone jumped to back? A shitload of cash, mind you. The same person that ended up missing a head and was investigated by an unconcerned police force. Am I reading that right?"

"Yeah, I think you got it. And I don't have a problem with any of that. People will always find a way to game the system—any system. And if investors don't undertake their due diligence, then fucks to them, am I right?"

"Absolutely," I nodded.

He put an arm around my shoulders, and we walked toward the wall. "It's just that those fuckers out there are blaming *me* for that."

We got to the wall. We turned, like dance partners, resumed our positions, and paced to the other side of the room. A quick glance to Stone showed he hadn't moved. He stood alone, hands clasped in front of himself, waiting for direction and enjoying watching me squirm under the wing of Talon.

“Because you’re a partner,” I said. “Because you get part of the profits for a dead human.”

It was simple. Given that, I could see people’s reasoning for pointing a finger at Talon. And it’s bloody obvious why they weren’t pointing anything at me.

“You could profit from such an act,” I stated.

He snapped his fingers. “Exactly, although no one’s profiting. It’s just that others are losing.”

“But you didn’t do it,” I said as we reached the wall. We turned and continued our conversation. “Unless you did.”

He chuckled. “No, I didn’t. But I can tell you who did.”

“I know who because I received the request.”

He tutted. “I know that *you* know. But don’t you want to know how *I* know?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

We stopped. Talon moved his hands to his face and rubbed it while he encircled me. It seemed like he was in pain, most likely from our interaction. I got nervous because Talon is not a person to piss off. In fact, ninety-nine percent of my address book was comprised of people I shouldn’t piss off. Then I remembered my little safety net, the thing that would stop any of those dangerous fucks wanting to blow my brains out. Entering that password every few days was an ingenious addition from Sonja.

“What?” I said. “It was The Devil. We both know it.”

He stopped rubbing. “And do you know why it was The Devil?”

I shrugged. “I guess because he can? It’s not my place to babysit everyone.”

“Well, maybe it’s time you did.”

“What are you talking about?” My head started to throb again.

“The Devil requested those profiles to manipulate the field.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“No, I don’t think you do. You’re thinking on the surface. You’re not thinking deep enough. Have you ever heard of Seasonal JT Recordings?”

It sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. So, I shrugged. Again.

“For someone who is so smart, you really aren’t. Seasonal JT Recordings is owned, indirectly, by The Devil.”

“So?”

“Seasonal JT Recordings signed that no-name internet singing sensation,” he said with a flurry of his hand.

“Oh,” I said, my memory finally catching up. “The online singer who was a nobody that became a somebody. Damn catchy tune she had.”

“Music’s subjective.” He waved away the argument. “So, you see?”

I nodded, then said, “No.”

Another sigh. “What about that kid star? The one that won big at the casino?”

“Yeah.”

“Royal Blue Casino.”

“And?”

“It’s also owned by The Devil.”

“Okay...”

Talon made a noise from somewhere deep in his throat. A grunt.

“He set people up,” he explained. “He made a fortune when he invested in her and nobody did anything. Then, he made some more cash with that douchebag. Again, nobody did anything. Then he pushes forward a nobody. But this is different. People feel like they’re missing out on the next biggest thing, so they dump a truckload of cash on them, only to be thoroughly disappointed when their invested asset winds up dead.”

I looked down, scuffed my feet. “Son of a bitch,” I said.

“Yeah. Now, do you know *why* he did it?”

"I guess he wants others to lose their investments."

"Exactly." He pulled out a cigarette, then a gold lighter. He cracked it against his leg, and a blue flame exploded from the top of it. He lit the cigarette, then dropped the lighter into his pocket as he drew a lungful of smoke, held it, and blew it into my face. "The Devil is looking to make a move; he's looking to take over. Word is he's tired of sharing the pie with everyone. So, the more he has, and the less everyone else has, the easier it is for him to accomplish his goal."

"What does this mean for you?" I asked, genuinely curious. I was looking forward to his answer. I had hitched my wagon to his caravan, so I was invested in any outcome that involved him.

"No, no, no," he said, flicking ash onto the ground. "What does this mean for *us*!"

"Woah," I said, distancing myself from Talon.

He threw his arms out. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"It's just that, this shit's on you. I just provided The Humanist Network. That's as far as my obligations go."

"Oh," Talon replied. "I'm afraid you're mistaken. You see, you and me, we're... connected. All of us here," he said, pointing to Stone, "we're all in this together. Don't ever forget this. Whatever happens to me, is going to happen to Stone..." He stepped forward. "Is going to happen to you." He puffed on his cigarette and blew smoke in my face. "It will eventually happen to you. And, ultimately, you will lose everything."

I thought about all I had achieved in the past few months, possessions I had amassed, relationships I had built, how far I had come. Was I prepared to lose it all? I came from nothing, but was I ready to go back there, to square one, to ground zero?

I resigned my post. "What do you need me to do?"

"That a boy!" Talon exclaimed. He turned on his heel and walked toward the wall. He clasped his hands behind his back. Confidence. Superiority. Fearlessness. "You will find somebody. A hu-

man. Someone in the system. Someone whose life is about to change. For the better.”

I massaged my temples. “And how the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

I sighed. “And then what? I find the human, and then what?”

He looked at me. Eyes cold, glazed over.

“Then you kill them.”

Chapter 25

“WHAT?” I COULDN’T COMPUTE that last bit. It seemed too unreal, too fantastic, too farfetched. “Can you repeat that?”

“I think you heard me,” Talon said.

“You want me to kill them?”

“So, you heard me.” He looked to Stone for an explanation but came up empty. “Why did you ask me to repeat it if you knew what I said?”

I shook my head. “That...that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you want me to kill someone.”

“Oh, that. Sure. But not straight away. I want you to promote the person. Leak the promotion, the pay raise, the new movie, the whatever, to the rest of the investors.” He clicked his fingers. “Make it something like a new feature. There’s a lot of bullshit profiles being added, some shit like that. Give them the facts, the real data, the inside information. Let them decide if they want to get onboard. I will...momentarily. When the stocks rise, I will pull out at the same time you kill the stock.” He smacked the back of one hand into the other.

He seemed to have it all planned out. Which scared me. In fact, the way he spoke about it petrified me. He was emotionless. Rational. Rattled things off like it was a shopping list. And maybe that wasn’t the concerning bit. I had been considering people, *humans*, as stocks, as bricks and mortar, as non-living entities. And make no mistake, I was sure I could find the asset he was talking about. Individual human value oscillated every day. It was inevitable I could find someone. People won, people lost. It was human nature. No, the concerning bit was what he wanted me to do when I found that person. I needed to change his mind, and the answer was staring at me in the face.

“You do realize that when a person dies, a percentage of the investment goes back to the investor? I’m not sure you’re going to achieve what you set out to do. Sure, people will lose money, but they’ll also get a quarter of their funds back.”

Talon rubbed his chin as he looked over at Stone and said, “Well, shit.” He seemed to stare for a long time as if waiting for Stone to give him the answer. Perhaps this was how he thought. I wasn’t sure because I had never seen Talon deep in thought before. He always seemed to know the answers.

“Got it,” he eventually announced, his voice pitched with excitement.

I held my breath.

Talon turned. “You don’t kill the person.”

Thank God. Relief swept through me. He had come to his senses.

“You kill their family and set them up for the murder.” He flashed a toothy smile.

My mind went blank—seriously empty. I couldn’t compute.

“Yeah,” he continued. “They get arrested, convicted, sent to jail. Price plummets to near zero. They get a death sentence? Even better! Everyone loses out, except for me. Perfect!”

“Listen,” I said, trying to back out of the situation. “You can do whatever you want. You don’t have to involve me. I can easily forget this conversation and carry on with my life.”

“No, no, no. *You* need to do this!” he said with emphasis.

“Why?” I pointed at Stone. “You’ve got someone perfectly capable of undertaking such tasks. You even know other people who have the skills necessary to do this. Why the hell would you want someone like me to do it?”

“Because of all the heat from everyone. We can’t be involved, any which way. No one will suspect you. I mean, look at you.” He stood back and inspected me with disdain, like an overzealous fashion designer picking apart the latest model.

I couldn't find words to reply.

"All the transactions are private, yes?"

I nodded like my head wasn't attached to my shoulders. "Yeah."

"Good. So, no one will ever know I pulled my investment before the big crash. There's no oversight, no committees. No one will know."

"Fine, do whatever you want. But why me?" I really couldn't give a shit about who lived and who died. As long as I didn't have to do anything, that would be great.

Talon mulled this over. Surely, he had an answer. Certainly, he knew I would ask the question. As psychotic as his response would sound to me, I'm sure it made perfect sense inside his own head.

He called Stone over with the flick of his hand. This wasn't good. It was never good when Stone was part of the conversation, usually because it ended up with me getting hurt or his finger in my crack. Despite standing in the middle of the room, I felt cornered. Surrounded by cement. Cold, hard. Unwavering. Unforgiving. Alone.

"Because," Talon said. "I told you to. Because you need to learn a lesson. Because you're playing with the big boys. Because you got into bed with The Devil. Because if you don't, there'll be consequences. And those consequences may not fall on you, but it's important you understand."

He shot a glance to Stone, who retrieved a device from his jacket pocket. Stone held up his phone to my face. There was a picture on it. I glanced at it, then stepped back and looked away.

"No!"

"Oh!" Talon said. "So, there's a little emotion in you after all. I had you pegged all wrong. I thought you were a 'win at all costs, damn everyone else' kind of guy."

I could feel their eyes on me, their expectations weighing on my shoulders.

“Take a good look, kid,” Talon said. “Soak it in. See what’s at stake. See that we have the power and reach to do anything we want to whoever we want. Look up. See.”

I looked again. A pain in my chest. It was Olivia, in her underwear, tied to a bed. She looked out of it. Unconscious? Dead? If anything had happened to her, I wished that was it. I’d rather her be dead than something else happen to her.

“That’s right,” Talon said. “Do this, and she stays safe. Don’t do what I say and, well, I’m sure you can imagine what Stone here could do with that tight, little body. Can you picture the damage, kid? Can you smell her fear? Can you hear her cry out? Can you taste her pain?”

I couldn’t breathe. Images in my head. All rational thought went out the window. I reached for the phone.

“Uh, uh,” Talon said, slapping my hand away. “Not yet. You don’t get her yet. Soon, but not yet.”

I tried to adjust the ledger, balance the deeds. I needed to kill people in order for Olivia to survive, to avoid something horrible. I felt weak and tired, like my knees were about to crumble. I wasn’t sure whether I could go on.

“Now you know we can get to you. Make you feel pain. You thought you were protected? Not from me, you’re not.”

“Then maybe I shut all of this down and run off with everything.”

Talon stepped closer. Invaded my personal space.

“Then we will kill you. Slowly. Methodically. Painfully. We’ll have a machine to wake you up when you pass out from the misery of it all. Lots of things can be removed from the human body before you bleed out, you know.”

I backed away, feeling sick.

"I'm not a killer, much less a cold-blooded killer," I managed. "You want me to do away with husbands, wives...children. How could I possibly live with myself afterward?"

Stone put his phone away (thank God, I couldn't bear to look at that image any longer) and retrieved two glass vials of clear liquid. He handed them to Talon, like a nurse in an operating theatre.

"This first one," he said, holding it out to me, "is for them." I looked at it. There was a piece of white tape on it with a hand-drawn image of a sad face, with X's for eyes. "This contains a designer drug called Tilt10. Think hallucinogens laced with psychotics, a side of sedative, and a pinch of anesthetic. They'll mostly be out of it. But don't worry, they won't feel a thing. And it won't show on a tox screen."

I took it. I accepted responsibility.

He held up the second one. "This one is for you." It also had some white tape and a hand-drawn face, this time with straight lines for the mouth and eyes. "Something to take the edge off."

I took that one, too. An automatic reaction, like shaking a hand or punching somebody in the face.

"If I were you," Talon said. "I wouldn't mix up the two."

I tried to picture myself undertaking the task, but just couldn't. I figured something would work itself out if I could just get Olivia out of there.

"Set someone up for murder? Really? Is this really a thing? I wouldn't know the first thing about how to do that."

"The first step is easy," Talon said. "Find the right target."

Stone stepped forward. "And the second step is to kill everyone else around them."

It felt hot. Too hot. I sweated as they outlined how they saw it happening. I didn't bother asking them why they hadn't done it already since they already knew so much about it. What would be the

point of asking that? They would just show me the picture of Olivia again. A spiral. A downward spiral. No progression.

Talon clapped his hands. "All right then. Orders given. Transaction complete. I think we're done here." He smiled.

I hated him so much. For everything. For making me do something I didn't want to do. *Are you going to do it?* I don't know.

"Just one last thing," I said. "If either of you two fuckers touches one hair on her head—"

I didn't finish the sentence. Just felt the heavy blow to the side of my head as I started to lay out my idle threat.

My world was black before I hit the ground.

Fucking Stone had done it again.

Chapter 26

CLOUDY PRISMS OF LIGHT. That's what I saw when I woke up. Different colors, various shapes. Nothing was a complete picture. The warmth of natural light was hitting me right in the face. The early morning baptism.

I tried to get a feel for my immediate surroundings. My head, which felt like it had been hit by a truck, was laying on a soft pillow. My body ached with every movement. My *naked* body. Jesus Christ! I was naked! What did Stone do? My ass! I put a hand down there, and everything seemed...normal. I guess there's no other word for it. I felt broken, in every way. Mentally. Physically. In between a rock and hard place. No good decisions. But where could I go? Who could I talk to? Junior! Maybe I could tell him everything, and he'd protect me. Or he'd feed me to the wolves. Maybe in time, he'd think this was a great idea and get me to do it anyway. Maybe I should distance myself from Olivia, for *her* own good.

Shit! Olivia. Where was she? What had they done? Every bad thought fluttered across my consciousness at light speed. I threw an arm out and it landed on skin. Warm, bare skin. I turned. There she was. Facing me, her perfect face floated on a blonde sea, her eyes closed in peaceful REM. Tangled in the sheet, her toned bare leg on top. I brushed a hand over it. She murmured and pushed her head down on the pillow.

I lifted the sheet to inspect her. No marks, no bruises. Very naked. I wasn't sure if this was for her or my benefit, or for Stone's, who no doubt undertook the task. I was sure Talon watched. He seemed like the type.

I brushed her hair from her face and leaned in to kiss her. Then I stopped. I held a hand up to my mouth, blew out, then sniffed it. In a word: terrible. Just terrible. I was about to raise myself when I looked down at her.

Her eyes were open, staring at me. “Were you checking your breath?”

“No. Yes.”

“Were you about to get up and brush your teeth so you could kiss me guilt-free?”

This girl was a goddamn mind reader. Well, given how things worked out for her, probably not.

“Maybe,” I replied coyly. Smart, very smart. Dashing, even. The thing of secret agents and superheroes.

“Come here then.” She grabbed me, pulling me toward her.

We kissed, more than once. Which led to a morning exercise that allowed us to sweat away the previous night’s sins. As we entangled ourselves in the sheets, I let it slip. The ‘L’ word. I didn’t mean for it. She caught me in a moment of weakness. I inwardly cringed. I’ve never said the word. To anyone. But I mumbled it to her, between kisses and touching and biting and sucking and licking. But make no mistake, she heard it. Loud and clear. She stopped, held my face, looked me deep in the eyes. Connection. Depth. And she said it back to me. I couldn’t breathe. Lost in her. In that moment, nothing else mattered. And all I wanted to do was to spend the rest of my life with her. I knew we would spend the rest of our lives together. If I could just keep her safe, keep her away from Talon and Stone and The Devil. Keep her at arm’s lengths from everything. I would give myself to her.

Two hours later, after a shower, some drugs, a change of clothes (Olivia magically found an overnight bag in my bedroom filled with her clothes), and more making out, we found ourselves in a café, waiting for our brunch order to arrive at the table.

“So, you don’t remember anything about last night?” I queried.

She picked up her latte, held it with both hands, and scrunched her face up as she tried to recall. Damn cute if you ask me.

“Nothing more than I already told you. I was waiting for you at our table but started to feel woozy. You carried me out to a taxi, took me back to your place, helped me get upstairs. That’s kind of it.”

I held my breath.

“Did we...you know?”

“Coitus?”

“Geez,” I said, sipping my coffee. “You make it sound so seedy.”

She stifled a laugh. “To be honest, I don’t remember.” She bit her lip. “I don’t think I would have been much use, anyhow. I was pretty out of it. Hit me out of nowhere, you know what I mean?”

I rubbed the side of my head. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

I sighed. Inwardly felt relief.

We looked at each other. Silence. Comfortable silence. The silence you picture existing fifty years into the future. The porch bench. Holding hands on a swing.

“Oh!” she said out of nowhere, hitting the table with her hand.

I jumped. “What?” Had she remembered something about the night before? I searched her face for a sign. Couldn’t read her. Maybe it hadn’t registered yet. The pain. The agony. The violation.

“I almost forgot. My dad is having a birthday party this weekend. And, well, I know you haven’t been overly welcoming of meeting my parents, but I figured this would be a great opportunity. I mean, I may have mentioned you to them. Once or twice.”

I felt like I was about to have a fucking heart attack. Meeting the parents. Is there anything more terrifying? Yes. Yes, there is. It’s Talon. It’s Stone. I had a task to accomplish, a blood-curdling demonic task, but a task nonetheless. I needed to focus, put my efforts into finding someone to set up. Not just anyone, but someone who was single. Someone with the most to gain and the least to lose.

Olivia must have seen the look in my face because she said, “Is everything okay? Look, if it causes you that much pain, then you don’t have to come.”

“It’s not that. It’s just...there’s a bit going on for me at the moment—some deadlines, some urgent tasks I just can’t get out of. I mean, I want to, I really do.”

She reached for my hand. Her fingers, long, delicate, soft.

“I’m sorry,” I offered.

“It’s okay,” she said. Soothing. Caramel. “I understand.”

Goddamn it. So damn understanding. So damn perfect. I loved her and hated her at the same time.

I smiled just the same. “Look, I’ll see what I can do, okay? Who knows what’ll happen?”

After breakfast and a long embrace, I made some excuses and saw Olivia into a taxi. I wanted to spend the day with her. I wanted to spend every day with her. Instead, I stood on the sidewalk watching the car drive off into the distance, a yellow box disappearing around the corner between a brick monolith and a Starbucks. Distractions. Mere interruptions. Things I didn’t need at that point. I had my hands plenty full without adding her breasts to the equation.

First things first. Second things second. My task required some research. I needed a target, which meant I needed to trawl the net to locate seemingly disconnected information and join the dots. Someone relatively unknown, but due for a windfall. No, I wasn’t looking for a target. I was looking for someone to kill. Scratch that. I was looking for someone I could set up for murder.

I sat down at my breakfast bar with my laptop, takeaway coffee in one hand, a stress ball the shape of a brain in the other. Bach was playing in the background. I once read Baroque music helps with concentration. Apparently, it evens out brainwaves or some shit. I like it because it made me sound pretentious.

I started with movie stars. They seemed the most likely to get good news. Some B-grade star could get a rebirth, or some unknown could get a shot at a role next to a big star in an Oscar hopeful. It happens all the time. Just not right then. Nothing. Nada. A dry spell

for tinsel town, or, at least, nothing that suited me. It was just the same Gibsons and Kidmans. I needed a Pauly Shore in a Spielberg life-changer.

I exchanged my coffee for a beer. Then I played my Xbox 360 for an hour. I stood in the kitchen and stabbed a kitchen knife into a watermelon. I pictured human flesh, the initial resistance of the skin and the ease at which the blade would enter the fleshy interior. I finished two more beers as I stared out the window, the peeled label at my feet. Felt like five minutes, but the day was quickly ending.

I questioned everything: what I had gotten myself into, what the end goal was. I even started to question my existence. Was heaven a thing? And if it was, would I get in? Probably not. Definitely not. After I did what Talon wanted me to do. How many Hail Marys are required for multiple homicides?

Politics. That was my next step. It was constantly in a state of flux. In the blink of an eye, the good guys can become the bad guys and vice versa. There was a lot to look through, so many layers of government I could focus my attention on. And so, I dug in. News stories. Reports. Blogs. Journals. Social media. Leaked emails. Hacked accounts. I trawled through multiple sites simultaneously.

Then I found something. Four things, actually. A blurred photo of a senator. A dinner reservation. A leaked brief from Congress. A hacked email. Each thing on its own was worthless, but together they were invaluable. I had found someone, a nobody in the bigger scheme of things, but someone destined to be somebody. A big somebody. A big White House somebody. Someone the masses didn't know yet.

I stared at the name, wanting it to change. Couldn't believe who it was. I parked it and kept looking, ignoring the fact that, out of all the research I had done, I had found the answer. But I couldn't accept it. Wouldn't. Shouldn't.

Minutes turned into hours in the artificial light. I pushed myself away from the laptop and paced the room. I retraced my steps. What did Talon really want? What was he trying to do? What would he do to me if I couldn't come through? I thought about running, about leaving town. Packing some bags, grabbing Olivia, and making a break for the border. Would Talon track us down? How much worse could things get? What about the police? And then I remembered how connected Talon was, how the top echelons of the force were at the network's big launch. It seemed I wasn't safe anywhere. With anyone. I didn't know what to do. I was in limbo. Pain in either direction. No way out. I felt trapped. As if I had fallen down the rabbit hole with no escape. Either he would do it, or I would.

I reached for my phone, then stopped. I picked it up, then put it down. I put on some Nirvana and drank another beer at the window. The city seemed so peaceful, so devoid of pain. I would bring hurt. To an entire family. A complete generation.

I felt sick.

Phone.

Text.

Your dad's birthday. I'm in.

I hated myself. My chest was tight. I fought hard to keep the tears in.

A minute later, a reply.

Awesome. I can't for you to meet him.

"Brilliant. But don't tell him. I want it to be a surprise."

And oh, boy, was it going to be one hell of a surprise.

I stared at my screen for a long time, until the image pixelated, and my eyes stung.

And still I stared.

Chapter 27

I HAD THREE DAYS. THREE days of planning. Three days of waiting. Three days of agony. Three excruciatingly long days until I had to perform the task. And that's how I saw it—a task. Something that had an empty checkbox next to it, waiting to be marked. It's what I needed for my sanity.

The weekend went by in a blur. It felt like I spent it at the window, watching the skyline come ablaze with night lights, which were then extinguished when the sun rose. Figments of people managed their way through the city. Matchbox cars navigated through the streets. Fuzzy. Insignificant. The world drowned.

I had faint recollections of Olivia coming around. An out-of-body experience. We sat on the rug in front of the fake fireplace and drank a bottle of wine. She laughed at my jokes, yet she was so much funnier than I was. Her intellect truly amazed me; she was definitively smarter than I. We kissed. Made love...I think. Things were hazy. Out of body, like I said. It was a shame she would have to die.

Monday seemed to arrive well before it should have. But I guess that was no different than any other Monday. Throughout the day, Tealson congratulated me or berated me, depending on the circumstance. I couldn't differentiate because I wasn't listening. I mean, I gave all the cues I was, but hell, he's so caught up in himself he wouldn't have even known.

I was thinking about how I could do it, what the easiest way was. Using a gun went to the top of my list. But there were things like ballistics, bullet trajectories, penetrating points of entry, gunshot residue. I had seen plenty of crime shows and movies, so I knew my shit. Poison's no good. There's no emotion. I needed something up close and personal. The police needed to believe it. It had to be real.

I ended up in a place I had spent more time in the past few months than I care to mention. Someone else was there, so I hung

around shitty, cheap, second-hand stereos and TVs until they left. A man in a red cap walked out with a phone—a burner. He was probably a drug dealer, or wanted to be. Made me want to get a similar flip phone just in case. That'd save me finding a new payphone every time I wanted to find out where the next game was or needed to arrange a meet with Sonja. Which reminded me. I needed to see Sonja soon. Very soon.

The door shut, and I heard a resounding, “Romeo!” coming from the counter.

“My dearest Juliet,” I cried back. “And how is your security today, my love?”

“As scarce as the pubes on my pussy, Romeo. Maybe you should come and count them.”

I sauntered to the display cabinet where she was standing. That coy look on her face. Our old routine. We both wanted something, and we both knew the other person did as well. I leaned on the counter, my palms flat on the glass surface, my shoulders up near my ears. Adorable. That's what I was going for.

“My God, darling,” I said. “You look more incredible every time I see you.”

“Oh, my Romeo. You make me soaking wet with your words.”

The thought turned my stomach.

“What can I do for you? Another cash advance?”

“No, no,” I said. “Not today. Today, I'm a buyer.”

“I see,” she said, a hint of curiosity in her words. “And what is your area of attention today? Electronics? A new watch?”

“Something a bit more salacious,” I replied.

She raised an eyebrow. I pointed down. “One of those.”

“One of those?” she repeated.

We looked down together at the small switchblades neatly aligned within the glass cabinet. “What are you up to, then?” he enquired.

“Best you don’t ask,” I said.

“Are you looking for a little protection?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Or are you trying to look scary?”

“Yeah,” I said after thinking about it. “That, too.”

“Well, those things in there aren’t much use for more than carving pumpkins.” She leaned forward. “Now, if you’re looking for a little something, I might have what you’re after.”

She bent down, disappearing from view. There were shuffling noises, scraping, perhaps a drawer being opened. She reappeared with a grin on her face. She placed a black velvet tray on the glass top and placed a hand on either side.

On it was a knife, the blade the same length as the handle. The grip looked like it was ivory, with silver fittings. The blade was polished—it looked sharp and menacing.

“Genuine Sicilian fighting knife. Four-and-a-half-inch single-edged blade. Rhino horn handle. Nickel frame. Once owned, and used, by the one and only Vito Rizzuto of Rizzuto crime family fame.”

I didn’t know who that was. “Is that a fact?” I said, trying to sound intelligent. “I do like history.”

“Would make a fantastic gift. You know, if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“I guess. How’d you come by it?”

“Best you not ask,” she retorted.

Touché.

“I’ll take it. How much?”

“For you...two grand.”

I coughed. Loudly.

“Look,” I said. “I appreciate the sentimentality, but I’m not paying sentimentality prices, if you get my drift.”

“Sure,” she said. “I’ve got fifty buck hunting knives if you just want to slit a deer’s throat.”

Sheesh. A hunting knife. It didn’t feel right, didn’t feel like something they would purchase, own, or use. Why was this harder than it should be? Buy a knife. Stick it in someone’s heart. Do A. Do B. Get result. Easy as that.

I sighed. “Fine,” I said. “But I’m only paying a grand.”

“Do I look like a charity to you?”

“My love, I thought we had something. I thought there was something between us.”

She chewed her lip. “Fourteen hundred.”

I nodded.

“And,” she continued, “you come back here. Two fingers this time.”

I threw my head back. “Fine!” The things I do. “But there are a few other things as well.”

“Oh, really? What other things.”

I took a deep breath and looked over my shoulder in case a customer had silently slipped into the store.

“I’ll need a receipt for that.”

“And?”

“And I want it backdated...I don’t know, maybe, six months?”

She turned as if caught off guard. “What sort of shady shit are you involving me in here?”

I looked down, ashamed. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Look, I don’t mind the dubious stuff. Spent time here and there. But you’ve piqued my interest.”

“Listen, I really think it’s best you don’t know.”

“Nothing you can tell me? Come on?”

Her eyes drooped at the sides. She was desperate.

“Well, there is one more thing. Maybe this gives it away.”

She looked in expectantly.

“Some cops may come in asking about this knife.” I pulled out my phone and pulled up an image. “If they show you some photos, I want you to tell them this guy bought it.”

“That guy? Really?”

I nodded.

“He doesn’t look like someone who’d use that knife.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just say he did it.”

She looked me up and down. She was contemplating playing along. I could see it in her face. Worst case, she would throw me under the bus, which would be fine, I guess. She didn’t know who I was, anyway. Besides, I look like more than half the population. They wouldn’t be able to track me down with her information.

“I said two fingers, right?” she asked.

I looked at her.

She grinned. “Better make it three.”

Chapter 28

I SAT ON THE BENCH seat and stared at the door. I was on my third beer. She was late. My hands shook as I noted three missed calls and four unanswered emails from Tealson.

I had found a target. His family—a wife, a son, a daughter—were to become collateral damage. I knew where they lived. I knew where they holidayed. Social media was a gem. I even knew they owned two Maltese pure breeds named Cookie and Penny. I knew what their lounge looked like, the fact they had a deck overlooking a pool. I knew where they ate, what they ate.

I had a weapon, the object that would do the job. The cover story seemed solid. I had the pawn shop owner on my side. At least she better be, after what I did for her. I tried to picture myself using the fighting knife to slit a throat or puncture a chest. I prayed the liquid from Talon would do the trick, that it would wipe them out before I had to, that my part in the physical murder was purely for the story that forensics would piece together.

I had the means and opportunity. There was only one thing missing: motive. Why would someone on the verge of success do something as horrible as murder his whole family? Not to mention the two dogs. No, scrap that—not the dogs. I wasn't a complete animal. I didn't think a mental snap would be enough. PTSD? Some military-related incident coming back to haunt him? No. An argument that got out of hand? Maybe. It was a start. But it needed to be more. He needed out. Domestic abuse? No one would believe it. Besides, there wasn't a shred of evidence to back it up.

My thoughts led me to the diner and to a meeting with Sonja. I put my head down on the table while I waited. I needed to get a move on. Time was short. Lots needed to get done. I wished for it to be over with already. That the day was D-day plus one. That every-

thing was in the rear-view mirror, and I was accelerating away from it at breakneck speed.

A beer bottle plunked down on the table aroused me. I looked up. Sonja was there, drinking a beer, watching me. I didn't even hear her come in, let alone slide into the booth.

"You all right, there, sleeping beauty?" she asked.

"I wasn't sleeping. I was just thinking."

She took another swig. "Didn't look that way to me."

"I don't give a shit what it looked like!"

She rolled her eyes.

"How long have you been there?"

She shrugged. "What matters is I'm here now."

Then I noticed it. A half dozen beer bottles lined up on the table against the wall.

"Jesus," I exhaled.

"Yeah, yeah. Now, what are you bothering me now for?"

"Did you drink those?" I asked incredulously.

"Do you know how busy I am?"

"Like, all of them? How long have you been here?"

Another swig. "Not everything is as it seems."

"Yeah, well, I'm not supporting your drinking habit."

"You can afford it."

"So can you!" I threw back at her.

She sat back and smirked, somewhat satisfied I had snapped back at her.

"Why am I here? Why have you called on me? Why have you interrupted my slumber?"

"Because I need you."

"No shit," she said, sitting back, disinterest flooded her features. "You always call on me when you don't know what to do. Sometimes, I wonder about you."

“Yeah, well I’ve gotten myself into something.” I contemplated how much I should tell her.

“And how may my brilliance service your excellency today?” She slowly bowed her head.

I took a deep lungful of air. Then I told her everything. The request (or more correctly, the orders) from Talon, the threats, the drugs. I told her about the target. What that meant for Oliva. What that meant for me. The fact I had the future murder weapon in my pocket.

She looked at me blankly. Was she bored?

“Why don’t you just shoot them? Or poison them? Save you the heartache.”

I told her my thoughts on why that couldn’t work.

“So, conspiracy to commit murder.”

“What are you, a cop?”

“No,” she defended. “Are you?”

I sat back. “No, shit, of course not.”

“Why do you keep dragging me into your shit?”

“I...I don’t know who else.” I looked down at the table.

She finished her beer. Another one magically appeared in front of her. She thanked the waitress, who removed one empty bottle without uttering a single word.

“Well,” she said, “we are connected in so many ways. So, I guess, if you wanted to go down this route, then we are really in this together. But what exactly are you asking me to do?”

Motive. I had the *what*. I just didn’t have the *who*.

“I need to find someone,” I said. A person close to the target. Ideally single. Someone who my target could have an affair with.”

She pulled out her phone and tapped away. She swigged her beer while she read, and then kept going. I waited. I looked around the diner. Nothing had changed. There was an overweight guy eating eggs at the counter, his big rig out front. An elderly couple sat at a

table, pointing to a map, their caravan parked under the awning. The waitress noiselessly did laps of the establishment, filling coffee cups, tending to bills. I could make out part of Sonja's bike through the glass doors. I heard something that resembled music, but it was too faint to figure out what it was. Maybe something from the eighties or early nineties. Whatever it was, a crackle interrupted the song every few seconds, like the signal was just out of reach and the antenna only caught it if the wind blew just right.

"There," Sonja said at last. "Isabelle Chalmers. Don't know why that took me so long. I think I was making it harder than it should have been."

"Great. Who's Isabelle Chalmers?"

"Intern in his office. Young. Pretty. Unattached."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh, good."

"Should we make it look like some sort of suicide pact?" she queried.

"Whatever it looks like...I need you to create a trail. Text messages between the two. Say, for six months. Flirting, sexting, I don't care, just make it believable."

"What about pics? Can I send pics? Everyone is doing it."

I rubbed my head. "Sure, whatever."

"Because I can, like, photoshop their heads on naked bodies and shit."

"Fine!" I hushed.

She looked at me as she swigged her beer. There was a gleam in her eyes—a surreptitious wink. She leaned forward. "You know you have to kill her too, right?"

I sighed. She was right. She was always right.

"I guess," I said, resigned.

"No! Not 'guess.' This won't work if she's alive. She can deny it six ways from Sunday. Plus, there's no other evidence to suggest anything between them. Besides, I can't add something to her phone bill

from six months ago, it wouldn't line up. If they look too hard, someone is bound to spot it. If she were alive, they would undoubtedly check."

I stared at her, but she faded into the seat. My mind was deep in thought, too deep in thought. Task. Business transaction. Needed to keep my mind off the emotive and keep it entirely in the rational. It was my only chance at pulling off any of this stuff.

"You're gonna see it through, right?" Her voice was soft, soothing, hypnotic...convincing. "I mean, I don't want to do all this shit and then find out you didn't have the *cajones* to go through with it."

I wondered if it took balls to kill someone, or a psychotic ailment, like a depersonalization disorder. I'd like to think in the moment I could get there. In fact, I was banking on it.

"It'll happen. It has to happen."

"I see," she said, skeptically. "So, when are you planning on doing the deed?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Well, that doesn't leave us any time."

"No," I said. "No, it doesn't."

"Best be on my way." She stared at me.

I stared back.

She cleared her throat.

I raised my eyebrows.

She held out a hand.

"Oh, sorry." I reached inside my jacket and pulled out a thick envelope and slid it across the table.

She stuffed it into her jacket, zipped it up, and scooted off the bench, helmet in one hand, finishing the beer with her other.

"Hey," I said. "Is there any way the app can send out a group announcement?"

"Sure is," she said. "It's in the app. You'll find it."

"Right." I stared off again, lost in thought again.

“Listen. When it comes down to it, when it’s time, just pretend they don’t exist. It’s easy to kill someone who isn’t really there.”

She always knew what to say.

Chapter 29

I GAZE AT TAYLOR.

“D-day. This was it. I had acquired the target—which was you, by the way, just in case you were thinking this was about something else. I got the weapon, and the back story was clean. Sonja had found the fake love interest, and she was ready to upload texts to mobile devices. A bottle of champagne chilled in my fridge at home. It was all set.”

He seems very uncomfortable in his chair. His face is going red. Looks like he’s just run a half marathon. Sweat beads on his forehead, and, with his hands still locked to the table, he attempts to dab it with his shoulder.

“My God, man, are you okay?”

He mumbles a reply. I can’t understand it.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

“I said, ‘So many innocent people.’”

“But, of course. What’s that expression? Something about breaking eggs to make an omelet? No, that’s not it. Shells in the yolk? Nope. Whatever it is, whatever metaphor you want, as sad and as dark and as depressing as it may be, that’s what was required. One doesn’t magically become two. You need to add something to it.” I looked down. “Or, I guess, you could subtract a negative number. I suppose mathematically that’s correct.” I snapped my head up. “But that doesn’t make any sense here.”

I can see he’s not focusing.

“Grant. Grant? Grant! Listen to me. Stay with me man, we’re almost there. We’re so close to the end. But I’m here with you for this one. We’ll step through it together. You and me. So, you know. You know everything I went through to accomplish what I needed to accomplish. And at the end, there will be no more or no less—it’ll just be.”

More mumbles.

"I'm sorry, Grant, but you must speak up. It's really getting on my nerves, you know?"

"I just don't understand why it was me, why it was my family."

I stand up. The chair vanishes from under me, sliding backward. "Jesus, Grant! Haven't you been listening to anything I've been telling you?" I lean on the table, my palms flat. "It had to be you. There was no one else."

Taylor moves his hands in circular motions. It looks like he's running a finger over the table, as far as his constraints will allow him. Maybe it helps him think, or maybe it's a nervous tick, something he picked up in solitary confinement to keep him occupied for twenty-three hours a day.

"Tell me everything," he slurs. "I want to know every detail."

"For fuck's sake, Taylor. That's what I've been trying to do for the past hour. Let me do this, then they can go pump your veins full of some poisonous shit, and you can go see your family again."

He sniffs, his eyes downcast, and focuses on the table.

I gather the fallen chair and slide it neatly under the table. I prefer to be standing for this next bit. Actions always help tell a story. I run a hand over my tie and straighten my jacket. Just because I'm talking about murder doesn't mean I have to look unprofessional.

"You know," I say, "assassins are not serial killers."

"Really?" Taylor replies.

"Oh, yes, it's a common misconception and quite the debate among psychologists and law enforcement. You see, serial killers murder based on emotion. Contract killers do so for financial recompense."

"I see." More hand-rubbing on the table.

"Unless you're talking about the Iceman, of course. And we won't."

"So, which are you?"

“Sorry?” The question puts me off-guard.

“Are you a hitman or serial killer?”

I think about the question. I never considered myself in either camp, one way or the other. “A little from column A, a little from column B. I had to out of necessity. Talon forced me. I had no choice.”

“You had a choice. You always have a choice. You aren’t a puppet. That’s what you told that Leon person. That he had to take ownership for his decisions.”

Son of a bitch.

He continues. “Maybe you should start taking responsibility for the things you do.”

“Well, we can agree to disagree all day, Grant. The bottom line was I had to do this to protect Olivia. Which is quite the paradox, when you think about it. I had to kill her to save her. What Talon and Stone would have done to her, haunted my dreams. Strange how things work out.”

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?” he asks. “Something you’ve forgotten?”

“I...I don’t think so. Not so far. Is there something you want to know?”

A hard stare.

“No. You’ll tell me when the time is right.”

“Well, then listen up, Mr. Taylor. I’m about to tell you all.”

Chapter 30

I LEFT MY APARTMENT at six in the evening. Black shirt, dark pants, black shoes. Shit. I looked like someone who kills people. They were older clothes. I was planning on burning everything at the end of the task anyway. Like I said, I've seen the shows. This was how people got arrested—they kept the clothes. They attempted to wash the blood out. Suckers. I would destroy my belongings shortly after I completed the deed.

I had slicked back my hair and grown out my stubble over the past few days to change up my appearance. An old pair of reading glasses finished my ensemble. I know, I was quite the criminal mastermind. In my left pocket was a pair of latex gloves, in my right was the knife. I tapped both pockets as if they were talking to me, begging me to caress them.

I instructed the taxi to drop me off a block from Isabelle's house. I passed some notes to the driver, more than enough for the trip and a tip, and sashayed down a cracked and broken pathway between rows of houses. I knew this was the right place, thanks to a satellite image of the area I had found online. The end of the path would spit me out onto her street, and her house would be on the left.

If social media was anything to go by, the street in question was a quiet suburban entity. And if her posts of her early evening activities were accurate, she'd be showing up at any time with a white terrier in tow.

On my left, a chain link barrier gave way to a fence made of white palings. I peeked between the slats and saw the small, well-manicured yard—it was devoid of people. I neared the end of the path, about to walk into the street, and then stopped. She wasn't there, and I wasn't ready. My heart was beating wildly. So much preparation and planning was coming undone because she decided to change her routine. The waiting made me nervous, my head turned into a jumbled

mess. Nausea grew inside me, worked its way up into my chest. Burning sensations in my throat.

I stopped and turned around, making gestures that made me look like I was lost or had forgotten something at the other end. I turned. Then, I heard the noise. A fence opened behind me, followed by some encouraging words to an accompanying canine.

I moved to the fence, hurriedly pulling on the gloves. My forehead was covered in sweat. Felt like I was standing on the surface of the sun. I had half a hand in one, my fingers stuck in the wrong holes, when I heard footsteps coming up behind me, rubber-soled footfalls mixed with a rapid patter of dog paws on the concrete. I abandoned the gloves, cursing myself for not keeping myself in control.

As Isabelle neared my shoulder, I spun, Blackberry in hand, map application open. I held it to her face.

“Excuse me,” I began, in my friendliest tone. I was conscious of my accelerated heart rate and what impacts this could have on my delivery, so I tried to slow it all down. “I’m a little lost. I’m looking for Short Street.”

“Oh,” she said, confused. “That one rings a bell.” She took the phone from me and held it close. “I’m sure it’s around here somewhere.” She used the thumbwheel to scroll around the screen. “Ah, here!”

She lowered the device to show me the map, but my response wasn’t words. I swung the open knife toward her. To be honest, I had my eyes shut, but I figured I would hit somewhere close to where I intended. It was surprising how easily the sharp tip pierced the skin.

I opened my eyes. Hers were wide open, shock written across her face. She reached up to the handle, lifting her dog off the ground. It growled as she stumbled back. She tried to scream, but the blade had pierced her windpipe, making that a difficult task to accomplish. Blood flowed freely. I must have hit an artery, which was great because that would speed up the entire process.

She was collapsing when I grabbed her. I gently laid her down against her fence. Her hands were around her neck. She looked up at me. She tried to swallow, speak, something.

“Now,” I said. “This may hurt a little.”

I moved her hands away from the knife grip and tenderly wrapped a hand around it. I took a deep breath and slowly twisted the handle. I fought against the restraints: tendons, skin. Bile rose in my throat. The thought of what I was doing replaying again and again in my mind. I yanked the knife out; a small spurt of blood followed. Her body shuddered, and she emitted a sappy, wet, gurgling groan. The dog pattered around with uncertainty and whined.

The temptation to run was strong. However, I continued to oversee my victim, watching her life ilk away as I fought the urge to vomit. I'm not afraid to say this, but it was kind of beautiful, watching someone pass away. Her eyes glazed over and remained open. Silence returned. The dog was now laying down, its head on its owner's stomach.

Methodically, I used her clothes to wipe the blood off the blade, then carefully folded the knife's blade into the handle. Death was in the knife's history, and now it was in its present. It would also be there for the future.

Fifteen minutes later, I was three blocks away, hair messed up, glasses discarded down a drain, and in the back of a taxi I flagged down. I was on my way to do something I never thought I would do, coming from something I never thought I *could* do. But I did. And I was strangely comfortable with the outcome.

I felt nothing. No heartache, no feeling of remorse. Isabelle was a task, a checkbox, an action I needed to complete. I mentally ticked it off. One down. I guess on the surface it was sad. She was collateral damage. I suppose it should have upset me, but it didn't. It felt as natural and normal as brushing my teeth. I pondered all of this on

the drive over, even trying to force some feeling about what had happened, but I got distracted by a flock of ducks.

I walked the rest of the way to Olivia's parents' house and stood outside in the shadows. The double-story brick home loomed in front of me, waiting for me. The white-framed windows were aglow with festivity, with a warm glow seeping out through every opening. Hedges lined the property's perimeter. A white path parted the lush lawns like a runway, flanked by evenly-dispersed lights that lead me to the front door.

I extracted the vial that Talon gave me, the one with the normal face, and tipped a few drops of the liquid in my mouth. It was tasteless, yet the effect was instant.

The scene before me became a watercolor.

I was an empty canvas.

I was craving.

Chapter 31

BUT THE FRONT DOOR wasn't where I was heading. Instead, I skirted the household, fighting through foliage, and arrived at the rear entrance. Peering in, I could see the empty kitchen. I could make out the sounds of laughter and cheer beyond the double glazing. I would soon silence them all. That was the outcome. That was the requirement. It had to be that way—it just had to be.

I leaned against the house and investigated the void that was the darkened backyard. It yawned open, wanting to swallow me. Shades of black bled together like strokes from a paintbrush.

I took time putting on the gloves, ensuring each finger was in its right place. No point leaving prints or trying to remember what I needed to wipe down. I took a deep breath of the cold night air. Refreshing. Stinging.

The door handle turned easily. No need to keep the doors locked in this neighborhood, I supposed. *Affluent* was the term I would use, and rightly so. Heat hit my face as I stepped through the entrance. The voices grew louder. I closed the door silently behind me.

The professional kitchen spread out in front of me. Benches, cupboards, and appliances lined both walls. An island bench filled the space in-between. On top of it were several empty champagne glasses and a stainless-steel bucket of ice.

Then I heard words. Footsteps coming from the far end of the kitchen. Feet. Coming down backward. More words shouting up, finalizing orders. Then she was in the kitchen. Olivia. Her head was in the fridge. She hadn't seen me. She shut the door, bottle in hand. Then she turned around and let out a stifled scream.

"Jesus Christ! You scared the shit out of me!" she scoffed. Her look of anguish quickly gave way to a smile. It was sliding off her face, her eyes off-kilter. Damn. If I had taken any more of that stuff, I'd be seeing unicorns pooping rainbows.

I gripped my hands behind my back and attempted to maintain decorum. The sound of ice being shuffled. Her head grew large. It looked like a balloon. Arms were around me, embracing me, squeezing me.

“I’m so glad you could make it.”

I attempted to match her exuberance. When she pulled away, I tucked my hands behind me. Then she kissed me—long, deep. Her tongue snaked down my throat and into my chest. I gasped.

She eased back. She held me by the shoulders and stared at me. A laser beam that burned my retinas.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I didn’t know what my pupils were doing, but she danced in time to my heartbeat.

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head and squeezing my eyes shut. “Just a...long day. Busy. That’s all. I’m okay, really. Excited to be here. Thanks for inviting me.” The words escaped in a jumbled mess.

“Okay, okay, slow down. Sounds like you had a few shots before coming over.” She smiled. Damn that smile. “I get it. Meeting the parents is a big deal.”

“Such a big deal,” I repeated.

Then her face changed. She was inspecting my shirt, touching it. “Eek, what is that?”

Shit.

Inspected her fingers.

“Oh...damn. They were painting something in my building, and I think I must have nudged it on the way past, and then, you know, taxi cab. Can’t trust those. I hope it’s still okay for me to be here.”

“Of course.”

She went to the sink to wash her hands. A contaminated crime scene. That turned out to be quite an unexpected revelation. It would make sense that Isabelle’s blood would be in the house. She unknowingly did me a favor.

“While you’re here,” she said, drying her hands on a kitchen towel, “You can help me bring up some things.”

I pushed myself against the island bench, hands still clasped at my back. “How about you take some things up? I’ll get the next bottle of bubbles ready for you.”

“So you can be the hero and bring it in?” she said with a wink. She sauntered toward me, her limbs breaking off and reattaching in a different order. “Would you be my big, strong hero?” A leg for an arm, a foot against her face, brushing her hair away.

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Umm. You just take that stuff upstairs, and I’ll be anything you want me to be.”

When I looked up, she was gone, but her voice was as clear as if she was right in front of me. “I’ll be right back, then.” Slow. Sultry. Under different circumstances, I would have fucked her right there in her parent’s kitchen, right in the same house where I was about to murder people. I was such a badass.

“The champagne bottle, badass!”

I spun. Sonja leaned against the doorway leading out into the yard. She crossed her arms as she chewed some gum.

“When did you get here?”

“I’ve always been here, Atlas. Besides, I knew you couldn’t do this by yourself. Knew you didn’t have it in you.”

“I did Isabelle, didn’t I?”

“More or less,” she said. She blew a bubble and it burst. A deflated balloon hung from her mouth. I stared, mesmerized.

She pointed. “You haven’t got much time.”

Time. Always the enemy. I rounded the bench and eased the bottle from the ice, my gloved hands slipping on the wet bottle. I hurriedly removed the top and quietly released the cork into my hands. I dug out the second vial from my pocket and tipped the contents in, some finding their way over the lip and dribbled down the neck. Goddamn it.

“I just knew you’d fuck this up!”

“Jesus, Sonja, you’re not being very supportive.” She nodded at me.

Arms around me. I was spinning, feeling weightless. Lips, kissing, zero gravity.

“Who are you talking to, baby?” Her lips didn’t move.

I suddenly became very self-conscious that I was staring at her mouth, so I gave each part of her face due attention. It must have been good enough.

“Come and toast with us,” she said.

“You guys have this one, this last one. Then you can introduce me, the wonderful me. It’ll surprise the shit out of them!”

Then she vanished. I wasn’t sure if I was hallucinating, but the bottle was missing, and I was alone. Even Sonja had left me. I faintly heard the clinking of glasses followed by a boisterous cheer. The time had come. It was time to make peace.

I heard noises emanating from the short staircase that led the lounge room. Shouting, groaning. A bang, then a solid mass falling onto the wooden floorboards. Then smaller noises followed, heavy footsteps on the stairs, hands hitting walls. Olivia appeared at the doorway. Sweat bled from her face, and her eyes were glazed over.

“Atlas...help me...” she gasped. Damsel in distress.

She stumbled toward me, six arms waving wildly, blurred. Her mouth was where her eyes should be, her ears missing. A horribly disfigured object hurtled itself at me. I steadied myself. It fell forward, legs discontinuing to work. I caught it. I caught her. Olivia. Mutant. Heavy in my arms, her full weight.

I called her name—at least I think I did. There was no response. I turned her in my arms so she faced away from me. I placed one hand over her mouth and squeezed her nose shut with the other. It was a difficult task, given my condition, and we ended up a tangled mess on the floor. I maintained my grip on her, or at least what I thought

was her. She didn't fight. She didn't squirm. She gave up. Her life was given up.

After three minutes—at least, I think it was three minutes—I pulled myself up. Time moved at a volatile pace. The light changed in the kitchen. Shadows shifted and transformed. I was thirsty. I drank from the tap, but it did nothing to quench my thirst, did nothing to stop the desert expanding in my throat.

Suddenly, I was upstairs in the lounge room. A woman was slumped over the metal frame of the coffee table, the surface now a million pieces of glass that radiated from her body. I crept around her body, the glass shards crunching under my feet. I pulled the knife out of my pocket and ejected the blade. I stabbed her four times in the back of the neck. Blood spurted out with every strike. It was god-damn messy, but it didn't bother me. She was a mannequin. Lifeless. Non-existent. I pictured the watermelon. I was in my apartment stabbing the knife into a watermelon. The blade pierced the skin easily and sunk in. Deep. There was no sound apart from my grunts as I drove the blade into her. I hit bone. Another victim.

A young man, near the front door, was lying awkwardly against the wall. Was he trying to escape? Perhaps. His body was flat, but the side of his face leaned against the wall. His hand was around his neck. He looked to be the same age as Olivia. But then his features disappeared. I grabbed a fistful of his hair, pulled it back, and ran the blade across his throat. A thin trail of blood followed. I decided it wasn't good enough and repeated the process. Back and forth until bits of jagged skin flew loose with every stroke.

I stood. Blood covered my clothes. My gloved hands were slick with red. I almost dropped the knife. To my left was the real victim in all of this—Mr. Grant Taylor. You. You had fallen backward. You were wearing a powder blue vest and matching pants. You hadn't removed your tie yet, but it was loose. You had overturned a small table

as you fell into unconsciousness. The table's residents, porcelain figurines from a holiday, lay in unrepairable states around you.

So many signs of a struggle. More evidence to support the story that would later be told to the police and sold to a jury.

I placed the knife in your open hand and stepped back, gently peeling off my glove, ensuring the bloody mess stayed contained. The latex ball ended up in my pocket. I didn't need to be careful with it at that point. Everything on me was doomed for a fireplace or metal drum, anyhow. I squatted down and forced your hand around the knife handle, ensuring a clean set of bloody prints ended up there.

I stood, admiring the mess around me.

And that was that.

Almost.

Chapter 32

I APPROACH MY CHAIR, taking in Taylor's cold face.

"And what more can I possibly share? The details at this point are a little fuzzy, but I can tell you I wiped the knife grip clean and pushed it into your hand, ensuring your fingers left a nice clean print. I made an anonymous call to the cops, saying I heard a disturbance at your address. I bribed the pawn shop owner to say you bought the knife from her months before the killings. You may remember her vivid description of you when she was on the witness stand."

I pause and gauge his reaction, but his head is down, his concentration on his hands resting on the table.

"Tell me, Grant. What was it like?"

"What was what like?" he asks matter-of-factly.

"Waking to the sounds of a dozen squad cars zeroing in on your house. Of hearing your front door being kicked in. Of seeing the bodies around you as they roused you. Of feeling the cold steel wrapped around your wrists as they slapped the cuffs on you."

He looks up at me. Sighs. "It's something that never leaves you. That sound of metal clicking into metal, of being pushed into the back of a cruiser. Of never being released into the free world again."

I clap my hands together. "And that's it. That's everything."

His eyes follow me around the room. "That can't be everything."

"That's why you're here. That's why the state is about to execute you. That's what happened to your family. They were collateral damage. They died because of you."

"No, they died because of *you*! Because of the actions *you* took!"

"To-may-to, to-mah-to, Grant. You can look at it any way you want. But the result is you're about to be led away to a chamber, strapped down onto a gurney, and a deadly cocktail will be pumped into your veins. You know, it'll be a damn pity I can't stay to watch it. Oh, and don't expect a call from the governor either. Trust me, I've

paid him up.” I cock my head to the ceiling and tap my chin. “A lot less than the judge, your lawyer, and the warden, mind you, but I suppose it’s all relative.”

We stare at each other. Grant’s eyes modulate from a cold blue to a deep brown. His nose grows big and wide, and then lean and pointy. His cheeks puff out and retract. His facial hair stands up and then retracts.

“Is there anything you want to say?” I ask, wanting to elicit a reaction from his features.

“What do you really want to tell me?”

I scoff. “There’s nothing else, Grant. Nothing. That’s it. I may have left off a bit here and there, but that’s it.”

“There must be more. Must be one more thing.”

“I just wanted you to know. That’s all.”

Grant puffs out his cheeks, taking in deep breaths.

“Guards!” he calls, all the while locking onto my stare. He turns his head slightly and calls again louder this time. “Guards!”

The door opens. Santiago and Darnell enter. They exchange glances with me and Grant.

“Guards!” He yells again, straining against his bonds. His face is red, his hair frazzled. “Guards!”

They flank him, placing their hands on his shoulders. “He killed them! He did it! He confessed to it! All of it! I’m innocent!” Spit flies from his quivering lips.

“Come on, Grant,” Darnell groans. “Time to go.”]

“But he did it!” Grant yells. “You guys must’ve heard! He’s guilty!”

“Shut it,” Santiago shouts.

“You can’t do this to me! You can’t kill me!”

“The chaplain is waiting, Grant. It’s too late for any of that.”

One moment. That moment. Within the struggle, a look from Grant accompanied by a clicking of fingers. They wrestle Grant out

the door in a flurry of words I can't understand, with the slamming of the door silencing his rant. I'm alone in the silence, waiting for Carl to escort me back to the entrance. So much has happened, and there's still so much to do.

I look over the room while I wait. The flat table. The walls a little closer than they were when I entered the room. They vibrate. As if they're alive. The color swirls. They come closer and closer. They are hugging me. Suffocating me.

I can't move.

I can't breathe.

My brain pulses, every sound a jackhammer inside my skull.

I can do nothing but wait.

Chapter 33

KOLTON: YOU'RE GOING to have to give me something, Taylor. Something I can go on. I want to help you, but you got to give me something.

TAYLOR: Wait, now I remember.

KOLTON: Remember what?

TAYLOR: His name.

KOLTON: Whose name?

TAYLOR: His name... [indecipherable]

KOLTON: Repeat that for me, Grant. Clearly. For the record.

TAYLOR: *Sloan*. I knew I'd remember. What about him? Have you spoken to him?

KOLTON: Who's Sloan?

TAYLOR: My daughter's boyfriend. He was supposed to be there.

KOLTON: Where?

TAYLOR: At the party. Olivia invited him. But he didn't show. I don't know if...but isn't that strange?

KOLTON: Does this Sloan have a last name?

TAYLOR: I...I don't know. Surely, you can find out.

KOLTON: I'm just looking for as much help as I can get.

BARR: I think my client has been more than helpful under the circumstances.

KOLTON: Grant, can you describe him for me?

TAYLOR: I've never met him. But I'm sure you can find something on him. Text messages, emails, something.

KOLTON: Are you trying to feed me some bullshit right now? I don't want to be wasting my time—

TAYLOR: No! I'm telling you—

KOLTON: Because all the evidence is pointing right at you.

BARR: My client has given you a compelling reason to investigate further, detective. It certainly wouldn't be hard to convince the DA to throw this out because you failed to investigate another potential suspect.

KOLTON: And I think you should inform your client of the potential outcomes of a murder trial, considering the amount of evidence pointed right at him. Indisputable evidence.

BARR: My client won't be answering any more questions.

KOLTON: Is there anything else you want to tell me?

TAYLOR: No.

KOLTON: Are you sure?

BARR: My client has said enough, detective.

KOLTON: Very well, then. Interview terminated.

Chapter 34

GRANT IS GONE, BUT I'm still in the same room. I notice how small—claustrophobically tiny—it is. I am now sitting on a chair that is incredibly uncomfortable. It wobbles under my weight, and I can't find any relief, no matter what position I put myself in. I think about standing, but I remember they told me to sit and not move. That's an impossible command, as impractical as not breathing. My tired legs tingle.

There's nothing on the walls. Just white. But not arctic white or off-white. It's cream-colored, if someone had left the cream outside in the sun for a week, and now it's bordering on gray. Across the room from me is a mustard-colored door. I've been staring at it for ages, waiting for it to open, eagerly anticipating the moment when Carl will come and get me and escort me back to the entrance.

Beside the door is a video camera. I hadn't noticed it before, which is strange, because it's in my line of vision. I can tell it's on because its little red light is on. I don't know why there's a camera there; not sure what it's supposed to capture. Is someone watching it somewhere? Perhaps some poor sod sitting at a table in a dark room, staring at the grainy image while shoveling handfuls of popcorn into their mouth.

I'm thirsty. I wish Carl or Santiago or Darnell or anyone would come to give me some water. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I bite down on my tongue. My mouth floods with saliva, and I swallow it down. How much longer is this going to take?

The door opens unexpectedly, making me jump. Not because I'm jumpy, or nervous, or uncertain, but because I was thinking the door was a static picture. I get to my feet, believing Carl is here to escort me away, back to the entrance, back to my car, back to the airport, back to my life.

But it's not Carl. It's Grant Taylor. He's not dressed in his orange garb—he's uncuffed, unflanked by guards. He's wearing a white coat, with a white business shirt underneath that's held in place with a checkered bowtie. He carries a clipboard under one arm. He looks different—fuller, fatter, more olive, less white. More aware, less resigned.

"What the hell is going on here?" I say, standing up. "Do the guards know you're walking around in a doctor's coat? Shit, are you trying to escape? Holy shit, you're trying to escape!"

He pushes his wire-frame glasses up his nose. "Sit down."

"I can't have that, Grant. I can't have you out there spreading my story. That was just for us!"

"Sit," he repeats. It's a short, barking command that almost pushes me over.

I observe him with infinite detail. His demeanor has changed. Authority and power radiate out of him.

I take a deep breath. "Guards!" I yell at the top of my lungs. "Guards!" I repeat.

Taylor puts the clipboard on the table and holds out his hands. "Shhh. Come now." His voice is calmer. "There's no need for this. Let me explain. Please sit so I can help you understand."

I ignore him.

The door opens again, and I wait for a surprised Santiago or Darnell to realize a death row prisoner is escaping on their watch. But there are no guards—just another man. Dark, closely-cropped hair, graying at the sides. Green eyes. Wearing a suit and a loose tie. He is very familiar to me; I would recognize him anywhere.

They both sit. Taylor places his clipboard down in front of himself.

I turn my attention to the new entrant. "Mr. Tealson?" I ask. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"You," he says, pointing at me. "Sit the fuck down!"

I obey immediately, like Pavlov's dog. I look at the patch on his head, above his left eye.

"What happened to you?"

"Shut the fuck up!" he barks back at me and folds his arms.

Grant gives him a look, and Tealson replies with one that says, "I told you so."

I lean forward on the table and direct my words toward Tealson. "Look, I don't know how you followed me here, but what's going on? You do know that's Grant Taylor, right? The convicted murderer? They're about to execute him, for fuck's sake."

Tealson just stares at me, chewing invisible gum. He looks like he's trying to keep his arms pressed against his body. A tiger in a cage. Wants to pounce. Eventually he leans to Grant and whispers, "This isn't working. We need to change."

Taylor adjusts himself in his seat. Clears his throat. "Agreed. Let's talk to someone else." Then he looks at me. "It's time," Taylor says. He clasps his hands over the clipboard. "It's time to stop this charade."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's a nice story," he says. "But you're missing the one thing we need."

I shake my head. "Sorry, I don't follow you."

"What's your name?" Taylor asks.

"Atlas," I reply. "Atlas Jones. I told you that when I arrived. Now, I'd really like to be on my way. You can do whatever it is you were trying to do. I won't tell anybody."

Taylor shakes his head. "Let's just stay here for a little moment, shall we?" He doesn't wait for my answer. "Now, we'd like to talk to..." He refers to his clipboard, flips some paper, and flicks it back. "Sloan. We'd like to talk to Sloan, please."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We would like to talk to Sloan, please," he repeats. "Sloan Jates."

"I don't know any Sloan. Sorry. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd really like to leave."

"*You* are Sloan Jates," Taylor says.

"Why do you keep saying that?" I ask, exasperated. "I know who I am!"

I look to Tealson for support—something, anything.

Tealson ignores my request and asks, "What year is it?"

"What do you mean by that? Why do you keep asking me these ridiculous questions?"

"Just answer the question," Tealson says firmly.

I compose myself. I run a hand over my tie then run my fingers through my hair. The last thing you want to do in a situation like this is sound crazy. *You need to be in control of the things you say and how you say it*, I tell myself. *If you go off ranting and raving, they'll think it's the voices in your head. You can't let them know about the voices in your head. They are for you.* I learned that a long time ago.

"It's 2011." I point to Taylor. "I came here because you are due for execution."

Taylor brings his hands together on the table, making a steeple with his fingers. "Sloan, the year is 2019."

It's a trick. *They always try and trick you, to get you to say something you didn't want to say. You need to show confidence.* I will not be the punchline.

I smile. "Ah, I see what you guys are trying to do here. Did the warden put you up to this?" I look around the room. "Is this a prank?" I wait for Carl to escort me out.

"The year is 2019," Taylor repeats. "Your name is Sloan Jates."

I stiffen, then stretch my neck. It cracks. *Don't listen to them. Don't let them in. Don't let them trick you. Don't let them control you.*

Taylor turns his clipboard around and positions it in front of me. "Let me help you understand."

There are two names written on an otherwise blank piece of paper, one on top of the other.

“Look,” Taylor says as he pulls a pen from his breast pocket. “Atlas Jones, who you claim to be, this persona, is an anagram of your name, Sloan Jates.” He points from name to name, showing how the letters change position. “See? The same letters. You are Sloan Jates.”

“I...I don’t know what you are talking about.” I grab my head to quell the throb that’s pulsing in my brain. I pull away, the burning sensation working its way across my skull.

“We can tell you everything,” Taylor says, “but we first need to talk with Sloan. I know this must be hard, but I need you to try.”

I rub my forehead. “Just because you keep saying it doesn’t make it true. I know who I am!” Out of the corner of my eyes I see something. I look down, trying to reason with what I’m seeing. “What happened to my clothes?” I say, tugging at a white gown.

Taylor sighs. “I’m sorry for what is about to happen. There doesn’t appear to be any other way, not now, not like there used to be.”

I fold my arms. It feels uncomfortable. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Look again,” Taylor says, pushing forward with his agenda. “The people you claim to play poker with. What did you call them? You gave them names.”

“I did. Seana, Leon, Olsen, Anja, and Nate.”

“Don’t you find that interesting, Sloan?”

Sloan. The name doesn’t resonate. I shrug.

Taylor picks up his pen again and I’m instantly transfixed. He points to the first letter of each name on the list. “Seana, Leon, Olsen, Anja, and Nate. You created names based on each letter in *your* name.”

“But, why would I do that? My name is Atlas,” I charge. “Atlas Jones.”

“And each name,” Taylor continues, “is also an anagram of your name, Sloan Jates. See? Seana, Leon, Olsen. They’re characters that are part of you.” He shows me how, but it makes no sense why I would do it.

“Still means nothing,” I say defiantly. My head now feels like it’s splitting in two. “Can I go now? I would really like to go now.”

Tealson crosses his arms. “No, you cannot fucking go now.”

Taylor continues. “Let’s look at the characters in your story, shall we?” He moves the clipboard in front of himself, pen in hand. “As-ton, Janet, Stone, Tessa, Talon, Elton.” He writes each down the side of the page. He then moves the page back in front of me. I look but don’t touch. Touching means interest. Interest means ownership. Ownership means taking responsibility. What am I taking responsibility for? *What have you done?*

Taylor points at each name with his pen as he talks. “Every single one of these names is an anagram of yours. All the letters are contained within your name, Sloan Jates.”

I look at all the letters on the page. They jump and move about, creating new combinations. Anjela. Easton. Jetson.

“Is it still a coincidence, Sloan?” Taylor asks, his eyes peering over the top of his glasses.

Sloan. Sloan. Sloan. “Well, what about you, Grant Taylor? That isn’t an anagram. Same with Olivia. And what about Isabelle Chalmers? What about them? This is all bullshit!”

I shouldn’t have said “bullshit.” That’s too aggressive. Aggression means you’re panicking. Panicking means you’re guilty. *You’re not guilty...are you?* I should’ve said something along the lines of, “I disagree with your hypothesis,” or something wonky like that. *Don’t let them be the intellectual superiority. You’re smarter than they are; they just don’t realize it yet.*

“You are correct, Sloan,” Taylor says. “Grant and Olivia and Isabelle are real people. But I am not Grant Taylor, as much as you think I am, or as much as you want me to be.”

I look at him. He looks at me. My head is spinning. *Keep your head.* I can't. *Keep it.*

“My name is Dr. Galdini. I...run this facility.” A slight pause. Small oscillations in pitch. Is he nervous? Lying? “You, Sloan, are a patient here.”

My breath catches in my throat. I don't know what to say. I don't know what is real. Were they implanting reality into me—or helping me see the real world?

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “No!”

How much could I trust? Nothing felt real—not the room I was in or the clothes on my back. I looked down. My Armani suit replaced with plain white garbs. I ran a hand over them, inspecting the magic trick, then looked at my hands. Are these my hands? Nothing is familiar.

Sloan? Sloan. *Sloan.*

I look at Tealson, but say to Taylor, “I guess you're about to tell me this isn't my boss, Mr. Tealson.”

I mouth to Tealson, *Get me out of here.*

He looks over to Taylor (or Dr. Galdini, if he's to be believed), who waves an inviting hand toward me.

“My name is Kolton,” he states, disappointment mixes with frustration.

I shake my head. “No, I'm fairly sure you are Mr. Tealson. I should know. We worked together for many years. You're the reason I am who I am today.”

The recipient of my remark scoffs openly.

“Kolton is here to find out information—a critical piece of information we thought you knew,” Taylor says.

Tealson says. “Everything you’ve said is complete bullshit. You’ve never owned an apartment on the West Side. Wakefield & Gold doesn’t exist. You don’t even know what year it is. You’re talking about events and television shows from eight years ago. You’re unreliable. I don’t trust anything you say.”

“Which is why we need to talk to Sloan,” Taylor adds.

He stands and places his palms on the table, his bulk looming over me. “I need to know, Sloan. I need to know. And you’re going to tell me what I want to hear.”

Taylor places a hand on Tealson’s arm. “Okay. We need not escalate things. This will not help the situation. You know who we don’t want to talk to.”

I rise, slowly, keeping eye contact with Tealson. I cock my head to the side. “I’m telling you the truth! I don’t know who Sloan is. My name is Atlas Jones.”

Sloan. *Sloan. Sloan!*

• • • •

I STUMBLE BACK, MY ears ringing. I blink slowly. The scene around me fades to black, then to white. My eyelids flutter as I take in my surroundings. I look at my hands, turning them over. They look familiar.

I look up and point to the man on the right. “Hey, I know you. Galdini, right? Doctor Galdini?”

“Sloan?” he replies.

“Yeah,” I reply. “What are we doing here?” I look over to the other person sitting at the table. “Oh. You. Kolton. I heard about you. Heard about both of you.”

“Very good,” Galdini says.

“Yeah,” I say. “People been talking.” I tap the side of my head. “Up here, you know.”

I take my seat. “So, what are we doing here?”

Galdini shifts uneasily in his chair. “You know something, Sloan, something that’s locked away in that brain of yours. We need it from you. May someone, one of those people in your head, told you what it was, told you to keep a secret.”

I look down at the table, searching my memory banks. “Nah. I’d remember something like that. And even if I did remember, I probably wouldn’t tell you anyway. A secret is only good if three people know about it, and two of those people are dead!”

“That may be true, Sloan,” Galdini says. “We’ve been down this route before, more times than I care to admit.”

I avert my eyes. How many times have I been in this room, having this conversation? I look around, yearning for familiarization to reveal itself to me. What do they really want from me?

“You are proving to be a tough nut to crack,” the doctor adds.

“And let me guess,” I say. “This is something The Devil is after? He’s not here, is he?” There’s a hint of fear in my voice, for very good reason. I’ve heard the stories, and my stomach churns at the thought of them.

The two men share glances with each other, and then back to me. “Yes, Sloan,” Galdini says. “The Devil. He will be here soon. And if you haven’t told us what we want to know, things will get ugly.”

“How the hell can I possibly tell you something if you don’t tell me what it is you want?”

“We thought Atlas might know.”

I feel a pang of recognition, but then it’s gone, falling through my fingertips. “Who the hell is Atlas?”

Kolton stands. “I’ve had enough of this shit!”

Galdini jumps up, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Kolton, take it easy.”

“No, doctor!” Kolton says, shrugging the doctor’s hand off his body. “Your shit isn’t working. I’ll do this the old-fashioned way.”

He moves before I can blink. Kolton leans over the table, his fists around the neck of my gown, hauling me toward him, his face growing in my vision. In a split second, I'm out of my chair and pulled up onto the table.

It's the perfect distraction, and I reach for it, sliding it up my sleeve like a Dicken's pickpocket.

Between flailing limbs and a red face, between the spit-laden threats, I hear Galdini call out. Everything is in slow motion. The world is fading slowly, disintegrating before my eyes. And then I hear other voices. They are familiar, yet distant, somewhere deep. But they're growing louder. I can hear them. I can feel them. My God, what is happening to me?

I sense movement in the background. The door opens, and I catch glimpses of two burly men as they enter the room. Barrel-chested orderlies dressed in white. One is Hispanic and the other African-American.

Commotion. Everyone is yelling. It's doing my head in, making the colors swirl into a dull gray. I am drowning, and the deep voice below me is rising. Who are you? *I am here to protect you.*

Kolton releases me, and I fall backward, landing flat on my arse. My vision clears, and the room hits me like a bus. Clarity. I shake my head. *Who are you? Where did you go? Are you Atlas?* But there's no reply.

I look up at the two men. One is holding a jacket, the buckles and straps hanging from it.

"Did you hear them?" I ask.

They ignore me and tell me to get up. I want to, but I'm still confused as hell. One of them helps me up. It's Santiago. I have a thing for names.

"Arms!" barks Darnell.

I stand as instructed, and they get the jacket on me. I don't struggle. Fighting only makes it worse. Much worse. Plus, I have bigger

things on my mind. Something is happening to me, and I don't know what it is.

"Hey," I say to Darnell, "do you know how I hurt my head?"

He ignores me. Everyone ignores me.

I hear the detective and the doctor talking in hushed tones. I see their words as colors.

Kolton's face is red. "Goddamn it, doc. You said this shit would work!"

"We'll try again tomorrow, and the day after if necessary. We're getting close, I'm sure of it."

"Christ, we haven't got the time for that. We need something different, and we need it done now."

"We?" Galdini responds. "Or you?"

Kolton squares the doctor up. "Hey, don't forget what I've got on you, what I can do to you. What *he* can do to you."

One nurse zips my jacket up the back and tightens the buckles while the other stands in front of me, uncomfortably close.

"We will get it," Galdini pleads. "I just need some more time."

"Well, I don't know how much more time I've got." They stand close to each other, in each other's space. "I don't need to tell you what'll happen if we don't get it. To both of us."

Galdini sighed. "Fine. I'll try something tonight to activate his trauma and get back to Atlas. He's been the closest so far."

There's the damn name again: Atlas.

The two nurses strap my arms around my body. I hear the buckles. Sounds like the clanking of a cell door.

"But what if he pieces it all together? What if he remembers everything? What if Sloan tells Atlas, and Atlas buries it?" Kolton asks.

Galdini sighs. "Don't worry about any of that. There are many layers applied here, and the drugs are keeping everyone in line and separate."

“Fine. You just do whatever it is that you do so I can get what I need.”

Galdini nods reluctantly. “This is the difference between science and art, detective, and the huge amount of gray area in between. If the human brain was simple enough for us to understand, then we’d be so simple we couldn’t.”

“Yeah. I’ve seen the meme.”

“We just need to push the right buttons and pull the right levers.”

The detective pokes a finger into the doctor’s chest. “All of this could disappear in an instant. So, if you don’t want to see the inside of a tiny cell with a very large cellmate, do what you have to do to get what we need.”

Galdini waves his hands, ushering the detective to lower his.

I stand there, watching the scene, flanked by Santiago and Darnell. They’re showing me off, as if they’re proud of their efforts.

Galdini looks me over, considers his words, and purses his lips. “Ten milligrams of Aripiprazole¹. Then take him back to his room. I will see him later for...further treatment.” Someone snickers, but I can’t tell if it comes from villainous thoughts or just disgust.

The two nurses nod, then guide me out of the room under the careful gaze of the doctor and the detective.

I have a feeling I will seem both again soon.

Very soon.

1. <https://www.webmd.com/drugs/2/drug-64439/abilify+oral/details>

Chapter 35

I SHUFFLE DOWN CREAM corridors and white hallways. I'm being guided by hands on my upper arms and back like I'm a dangerous criminal, like I could somehow escape my bonds and make a run for it. But where could I go? I don't even know where I am. My escorts' rubber soles squeak on the linoleum. Every other overhead fluorescent bulb is flickering. No wonder everyone in here is crazy. The pulsing strobes and associated clicking noises are enough to drive anyone insane.

Some doors are open, others are closed. On my left, a nurse stands at a solid steel door, looking in through the plexiglass of the viewing portal. The prisoner—I don't know any other term for who he is—patiently stands at the glass, peering out. As I pass them, the patient makes eye contact with me. He has long greasy hair and a thin, spindly moustache. His eyes widen and he bares his teeth, taking an imaginary bite of me. The nurse turns to see what that patient is looking at. He has a scar running down the right side of his face, from his eye to his lips. I wonder if he received the mark here or by some other nefarious means.

Further down on my right, a door is open. Inside, an impossibly large woman is pacing between her bed and the wall—a distance of just two steps. She mutters incoherently to herself as she turns and takes the brief journey back to her bed. She then stops, as if she senses me. She turns her head toward me. Her eyes are dead, but she is muttering something. Talking to me. Then she blows me a kiss, winks, and continues her selfish conversation, recommencing her solo voyage.

I watch her as we shuffle along, try to place her in my memory, but to no use.

Santiago shoves me in the back. “What the hell are you looking at, freak? Just keep walking. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Can’t wait to get out of here,” Darnell adds.

We enter an open doorway. The room is expansive, with tables and chairs arranged around the space. It’s some kind of rec room, or eatery, or gathering point. There is a window at the far wall, frosted and open. But it’s not a portal that allows people to look out at the brown grass and dead flowers—instead it frames an older woman, sitting there, smoking a cigarette. She’s in conversation with yet another nurse. His hair is black, slicked back. Is he trying to pick her up? She must be three times his age. Maybe beggars can’t be choosers. Judging by the bored expression on her face, he won’t be successful. But what do I know? She could blow him in the store room twenty minutes from now. I wonder if she would remove her teeth first.

We pass a table, where five people are engaged in a game of something that isn’t immediately obvious. They don’t notice me—or, if they do, they don’t draw attention to it. They mostly ignore each other. Some rock back and forth in their chairs; others are drooling. Some are restrained, wearing a straitjacket, as I am; others fidget wildly. The first has bright green eyes staring out from her emotionless face. Every now and then, she jerks her head toward the lights, like a dog that has picked up on a scent.

The second is grimacing. At regular intervals, he swears at one of his companions, then turns to an open space and starts jabbering, spit flying from his mouth.

The third person is a midget, although I’m sure that’s somewhat derogatory. Perhaps *little person* is better. Anyway, she’s entirely proportional, the size of a child. Her feet don’t touch the ground. She watches everything, saying nothing.

The fourth person is a guy, and he is morbidly fat. The chair barely holds his form. He is also in a straitjacket; that is, to say, they’ve attempted to restrain him. His bulk stretches the device beyond its limits. They’ve used additional attachments to secure the jacket

buckles in place. He stares through me. A thin line of spit connects his mouth to the table.

The final person is a man with a beard. He frantically rubs his hands, then plays with the strands of his beard, plucking out stray hairs. He constantly looks over his shoulder. I don't know what he's waiting for.

Why these five people are together is beyond me. Maybe Elton by the window is charged with looking after them for a period of time, or maybe visiting time has just ended, or maybe they're busy cramming drugs down their throats. Possibly they're here for his entertainment—maybe he's hoping one of them will kick something off that will give him absolute discretion to respond.

They remind me of characters in a story, like I had seen them or heard their descriptions somewhere else. I shake it off. As I look over them, I can hear whispering.

“Do you guys hear that?”

“Keep moving,” Darnell responds. “Just keep walking.” Then he mumbles something like “I hate this fuckin' place.”

“I hear that,” Santiago responds.

I reach the window, escorts at my side.

She extinguishes her cigarette in an ashtray. “Heya there, Sloan.”

I smile, but she doesn't. She pops two small paper cups on the counter.

“Bon *appétit*,” she grunts, mispronouncing it, most likely on purpose.

I look down. My arms are useless, restrained against my body. I lift my head and look at her as if to ask, *How am I supposed to take that, Tessa?*

She looks back with an I-don't-give-a-shit look.

Santiago picks up the first cup and tips the contents into my mouth. I can feel the pills on my tongue. Before I'm ready, Santiago tips a small amount of liquid into my mouth. Darnell shouts, “Swal-

low!” and I obey the order. There’s a joke here about spitting or swallowing, but I’m in no mood to tell it.

I stare at Tessa, watching wisps of smoke border her features before dissipating into nothingness. Her eyes sink into her skull. Her skin tightens against her face, revealing bones, then tears.

Sloan. Sloan. “Sloan!” I jolt my head around. Santiago is there. “Stop fucking around! I don’t have time for this. I want to get the fuck outta here.” He looks around, disgust on his features. “Hate this fucking place.”

A few steps from the dispensary, the pills’ effects kick in. The world skews off center, and my legs feel like jelly. My extremities tingle. Distorted sound interweaves with the minutiae of the universe.

Down the rabbit hole I go.

Chapter 36

THE ROOM IS DARK; I don't know what time it is. Shades of purple and gray make up my visual landscape. There's nothing in my room except the bed I'm lying in, and there's nothing on the walls except a door. If I turn my head just right, I can see it. A block of black in a wall of gray. There's a yellow glow under it—the light from the corridor. I wait for the shadow.

I am restrained on my bed, wearing a straitjacket. Thick leather straps attached to the bedframe wrap around me, holding me down. I feel like I'm being punished, but I don't know why. I don't know what I've done. But I know I am here for him. I feel like I am living the same night over and over, and maybe I am. Perhaps I'm stuck in a loop.

There's a jangle of keys, metal scraping on metal, and the door swings inward. The influx of luminance makes me turn. I hear a figure step into the room—the squeaks of shoes on the polished floors, trying desperately, futilely, to be quiet. The door closes, and I turn back. A dark figure on a light background. It's funny how color moves like that.

He walks toward me, the darkness of his silhouette growing bigger, looming over me. I smell alcohol. He is drunk, again. He always comes when he drinks, or at least I think he does. The smell wafts from him, like cheap cologne. It mixes with his body odor. Sweat and bourbon.

“It's time for your medicine, Sloan.”

I heard the unmistakable unzipping of a fly. It seems to echo in the darkness. I turn my head to face the wall, but I feel pressure on my head. Fat fingers around my cranium, turning me back around.

“Come on, Sloan. I need to punish you, just like your daddy used to do.”

I feel something moving on my lips, round and soft. They work their way in, rubbing against my gums. His fingers, edging closer to pry my mouth open.

“Don’t make this any harder than it needs to be.”

I can’t fight, my mouth opens.

“That’s right. I want you to take it all. But you can’t tell anyone about our little secret. No one would believe you anyway, a little liar like you.”

I can feel it coming closer, the moment closing in on me. I am powerless.

“And don’t you even think about biting me, or I will give you the hiding of your life, you better believe it.”

I can feel it on my lips, pushing its way inside. He groans. I am numb. I close my eyes. I am drifting away. Darkness, darkens evermore.

And then, light. The setting sun over the coastline, orange rays exploding between palm trees that dot the side of the road. My hair waves in the wind, and I feel the gust work its way through the open buttons of my shirt. The top is down. I push my sunglasses onto my head and return my arm to the sill. My other hand is on the wheel as we power down a straight road, 350 horses chomping at the miles as we push toward the border.

“What the hell are we doing to do when we get there?”

I turn to Sonja. She’s wearing a scarf over her head. Strands of purple and black flutter in the wind. She’s wearing oversized, white-framed sunglasses. I see the star tattoo on the side of her head, and I reach out and touch it.

“Did you hear that? What was that?”

Ignore it.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, and I’m thrust against the door. I pull down on the steering wheel and the vehicle swerves off the lanes. I regain control and look over to her.

“Shit, did you feel that?”

She looks at me and smiles. She shuffles toward me, as close as she can get, save for the center console. She puts an arm around my neck, playing with my hair. Her other hand is on my thigh, and I instinctively push down further on the accelerator. She comes in close, her breath on my neck, my ear.

She whispers.

“Can we do that?” I ask, innocence in my voice, my eyes on the road. “Are you sure that’s okay?”

I feel it then. The cold blade under my fingers. Serrated edge. The handle has grips for fingers.

She whispers again.

It’s time to wake up. It’s time to kill.

Now I know what I need to do.

She always knows what to say.

Chapter 37

I SNAP MY EYES OPEN. Where am I? Last I recall, I was on my bed, restrained, constrained, tied down like an animal. This room has warm lighting—browns and oranges fill my vision. I sit up, free from all constraints, and look at the doctor.

Galdini's eyes are wide, his hands at the pen sticking out from under his chin. It's his pen, the one I snatched away during the altercation with Kolton in that room. I can't believe nobody saw me take it, can't believe the nurses didn't check my hands before they strapped that fucking jacket on me. And while I knew how I got it, I have no idea how it came to be impaled in the doctor's throat.

Blood coats his fingers. He grunts, or groans, or maybe he is trying to talk to me.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" I scream at him.

Moans. Galdini backs up to his desk that sits at the other end of the room. He bumps a stack of folders and they crash to the floor like a felled redwood.

I stand, try to look away, but it's like a car crash, and I can't pull my stare from the spluttering mess erupting out of his neck. Approach slowly, a tiger on the prowl.

"I don't want to do this anymore. Just tell me what you want."

He pushes a pile of papers out of the way and reaches for his desk phone. I step forward and push him out of the way. Galdini rolls off the edge of the desk and stumbles to the ground, still making noises. I yank the cable out of the phone base.

"You've done this to me," I tell him. "Turned me into something I'm not."

He's now on his hands and knees, slowly crawling to the door, unsure of how to move and maintain pressure on the ballpoint protruding from his lower jaw at the same time.

Do it! Finish the job!

I stand over him. “I can hear them.” I grip my head. “There’s something in my head, and they’re telling me to do things. What do you want with me?”

He’s closer to the door now. On his stomach, red fingers reaching for the doorknob.

But I can’t let that happen. I know what I need to do. She told me what I need to do, how to protect myself, how to defend both of us.

I lift my foot and slam it down on the back of the doctor’s head. The slipper doesn’t make much of an impact, yet there is a squelch just the same. I do it again. And again. And again, until there is a bloody mess on the floor.

“You! You did this. You’re fucking with my brain!”

Galdini doesn’t get up. I don’t know if he’s dead or unconscious or in some other state. His head is mashed; something is broken. A pool of blood seeps out from his head. If he gets up, if he survives, he will have one hell of a headache. Despite the violence, the scene washes over me like a wave at the beach. There is something there—remorse? Guilt?—one minute, and then it’s gone. I’m back to normal. Nothing to see here.

I take in my surroundings, the room glowing thanks to strategically-placed lamps. At the other end of the room is a deep-red couch on an oriental rug. Leather-spined books and anatomy ornaments line available wall space.

Approach the desk, an island in a sea of paper. I walk over the mess and find a single beige folder sitting proudly on the surface. My name is on the tab. I start to open it but stop when I hear footsteps outside the door. I need to escape, to get as far away from here as possible. Storytime will need to come later.

I search the desk drawers for anything I can use and come up with a few hundred dollars held together with a money clip, and a set of Mercedes-branded car keys. Behind the desk is a cupboard,

which I raid for anything I can get changed into. The clothes are a little loose (light blue long-sleeved shirt and gray slacks still in a dry-cleaning wrapper), and the shoes (polished black leather) are half a size too small, but oh, well. I thread the file into the back of my pants—the best hiding place I can manage, given the circumstances. I make sure it ends up under the waistband of my underpants or else it will fall into the ass of my pants. I'm uncomfortable enough already. A white coat from the hat rack in the corner completes my transformation, from patient to doctor, from bottom of the food chain to the top...from hunted to hunter.

I look down at the body. Galdini hasn't moved.

You need to go.

Yeah, I know. I need to go.

I ease the door open and peek out into the corridor. It's empty. And white, bright white. A vast contrast from the cave-like office I was in. Doors line the opposite wall, and I'm sure the same is true for my side of the passageway.

I take one last look at Galdini and express supreme guilt for my actions.

It's not your fault.

I know. It was his fault. It's their fault.

It's always their fault.

I know. What would I do without you?

Get killed?

Touché.

I step out into the corridor, ease the door shut behind me, and sneak down the hallway. When I reach the end, I press myself against the wall. In front of me, the space yawns open. As I peer around the corner, I can see an uninspired waiting area that incorporates a half dozen black plastic chairs, several horrible scenic paintings (most likely crafted by a patient who had no hands), and a front desk. A young female nurse inhabits this space, her attention absorbed in a

paperback, ignoring the ramblings of a male nurse who's draped over the counter like a coat. Both are head-to-toe in white.

Across from me are a set of closed double doors with frosted panels set into them. Large lettering announces what lies beyond: "Ward A." To my right, a similar set of doors: "Ward B." I assume behind me, where I came from, are offices, meeting rooms, and spaces where family members discuss treatment plans with doctors. Doctors like Galdini. The late Galdini. *Motherfucker*. Yeah, he was a motherfucker. I think it was Gandhi who said, "*I shall not weep for you because you're a cunt.*" Man, he was all over this revenge shit. A visionary.

As I stand there, wondering how the hell to get out, I see it. On the other side of the corridor I'm hiding in—a mere four feet away—is the answer. A red panel with "FIRE" in white lettering on it. I slowly reach out for the panel, hoping no one sees me, and yank it down.

Bells ring across the facility. Moans and cries pulse from behind the ward doors. The beasts are awake.

I hear scuffling of feet, confusion. I dart out from the corridor into the waiting area. Both nurses are standing, each expecting the other to act. Fight, flight, fright.

"Get in there!" I yell, pointing to somewhere behind me. "I'll wait for the fire truck!"

They hesitate, unsure of their actions.

"Go!" I yell.

They evacuate the area as quickly as I do. As they swipe into the wards, I burst through the double doors, jump down the concrete steps two at a time, and skid to a halt in the gravel at the bottom. I fumble the keys out of my pocket and frantically press the button on the fob. A flash to my left catches my attention, and I run toward it—a green sedan.

I slide into the driver's seat and key the ignition. The engine bursts to life. I'm bathed in the soft instrumental glow, the tachometer needle jumping. I look over to the passenger side.

"Where to?"

She mouths some words. I take them to mean, "Just get the fuck out of here."

"Fair enough," I reply. "We'll figure that out on the way."

Chapter 38

THE VEHICLE HUGS THE curvature in the road as I drive through the main gate—an eight-foot wrought iron fence. It sways and creaks as we speed past it. A large sign indicates the name of the place, which we're bolting away from like a pack of wild horses: "Brennan Fields Psychiatric Facility."

The tires kick up gravel as we speed away, rocks hitting the undercarriage as if we're under attack. Large trees on either side of the road come together to create a continuous arch. The moon dances between missing foliage. I can't see anything beyond the wide angle of the headlights—nothing aside from darkness.

We follow the road, because there's no other route to follow. No turnoffs, no driveways, no entryways, no intersections. It's like the facility we just left was the end of the line. Maybe it was the end of the road for me, and I wouldn't have been able to do that without her.

I look over. She smiles. Her pale skin is tight across her face. She's like a porcelain doll, and she has me in her trance. Then she holds up a hand and points at the windscreen. What is it? What are you trying to tell me?

Turning to look, I jam my foot on the brake and lock my arms against the steering wheel. I fight the urge to clench my eyes, to hide from the impending impact. The car decelerates quickly, alternating between skidding and rolling as the electronic drive system kicks in.

Dirt and dust cloud the car and billow in front of the headlight beams. I spot a sign through the fog. Left to the coast. Right to the city. I don't know which city, or how close the city may be. Both facts were excluded from the signage, which I guess made it a poor marker.

The flutter in my chest subsides with resounding ease. I look left, then right. In both directions, the road curves around out of sight, swallowed by the night. The rear-view mirror is lit up with the red glow of my brake lights, allowing me to see the last few feet of the

road before that, too, melts into darkness. I half expect a glowing set of eyes to approach out of the gloom to come and get us, but there's nothing. No reason to suspect we're being followed, that a hunter is following our scent.

I look at the sign. "Which way?"

No response.

"We can make a run to the coast, hit the border, get the as far away from this place as possible."

No response.

"Or I guess we could try and figure out what the hell is going on."

No response.

"What do you think?"

I look over, but there's no one there.

"City it is," I say to myself. A gut feeling. Maybe it was some strange connection, or maybe it was a coincidence. Underlying all of that was the fundamental pull to find out what Galdini and Kolton want from me. I'll have to check with the others.

The car negotiates the smooth surface with ease, the speedometer needle peaking near maximum speed. Eventually, tall, lit-up buildings rise out of the ground. The city is very much awake, even at this early hour. It's a beacon on the stormy seas, an oasis in the desert, or any other metaphor you wish to use. A massive blob of light petering out into specks that resemble stars—unnamed constellations orbiting the city center.

Wide streets. Neon signs. Pedestrians marching between buildings—some entering, others leaving, none paying any attention to us. I need to dump the car, so I pull into a multilevel parking garage. I take a ticket, knowing full well I have no intention of coming back for it.

Cars dot each level, but I keep spiraling up. I find a space between two large trucks that dwarf the car, like a pair of nurses loom-

ing over a subdued patient. What? Too soon? If someone comes looking for the Mercedes, I want them to have to work for it.

I kill the engine and the vehicle falls silent. I look over the car for anything of value, anything I can use. Some change in the center console. In the glovebox I find some chocolate bars and a gun. At first, that's all I think it is; however, the more I handle it, I realize it's a Beretta 92FS. It feels very natural in my hands.

With the gun tucked into the back of my pants, I locate an exit and descend the concrete steps. The garage door squeaks as I push it open and step onto the street next to the entrance. People walk past me, caught up in their own little worlds. A man wearing a white cowboy hat, sporting a healthy white moustache, pushes past my left. An Asian couple in brightly colored silk robes rush past my right.

Between the bodies, I see a sign for lodgings. Unlike its brothers and sisters, this building has no neon signs—not even a catchy name. It states on a dirty, sunbeaten sign it has cheap accommodations where belongings are safe. It looks derelict. Some of the windows are boarded up, and others are lit with a dull orange glow. The brickwork is patchy and uncertain.

On the adjacent street corner is a hotel with so many levels, I can't see the top. Out front, in the wraparound driveway, a valet is swapping car keys for a ticket. The glass-walled restaurant that takes up the majority of the ground floor is hosting silent festivities. It seems like a great place to blend in, to disappear.

And that's exactly why I check both directions before marching across the street to this dump across from me.

Chapter 39

I FORCE THE CREAKY door open against its will. A bell above the door sounds as I step inside. The air is thick and musky—the interior dark and dated, somehow repelling the outside world. A shield. A cave. An old chair sits pronounced in the corner, its aging leather torn and tattered. A threadbare runner lines a stairway to my left. Some of the balustrades are missing. In front of me, a desk sits empty.

I approach and ding the bell. It clunks, the joy of its high-pitched ring having left it a decade ago. I look around the square lobby while I wait. Dull-colored paintings line the wall. They appear to be city motifs—perhaps this city, maybe another. The yellows are humbling, the browns disgraced. The gold-painted frames are worn and chipped.

I turn back, and there's someone standing there. He looks like he's seen a ghost, with a look of shock or disbelief written on his face. I'm pretty sure I'm not a ghost, although maybe I am, and all of this is some kind of transition point. Certainly would explain a few things. His eyes are wide; a cigar hangs from his lips. His deeply tanned skin suggests Native American or Arab. Maybe both. Perhaps neither.

“Is everything okay?” I ask. I look down at his name tag—bold silver letters on a black background, the badge itself crooked on a shirt that is the color of cold gravy. “Frank?” I add.

“Yeah, yeah,” he mumbles, his voice concealing his cultural lineage, whatever it is. The cigar falls from his lips and he catches it awkwardly. It dances on his hand and he fumbles it to an ashtray. “It's just that I wasn't expecting the likes of you...I mean, any, really, any visitors tonight.”

“Well, I need a room.”

His eyes dart over my shoulder and then back to me. “Su—sure.”

He looks at me in silence. The awkwardness grows as we stare, each waiting for the other to begin.

“For a night,” I venture.

“A night?”

“That’s what I said. Actually, better make it a week, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“I don’t know? What business is it of yours?”

He threads his thumbs into his suspenders and runs them from his nipples to his pants.

I lean on the counter. “Can I speak to the manager?”

“I’m the night manager,” he grumbles, an air of disgruntled authoritarianism in his voice.

“Well, then, can I speak to the day manager?”

He sighs. “I’m also the day manager.”

“Why didn’t you just say you were the manager then?”

He ignores the question. “Is there a conference in town I should know about?”

“Conference?”

“You know, medical conference?”

I follow his gaze downward, to my chest. It’s then I notice I’m still wearing the coat I took from Galdini’s office. “Ah,” I start. “No, just fancy dress.”

When I look up, his eyes aren’t on mine—he’s concentrating on something over my shoulder. He is motionless, breathless, his eyes narrowed. I turn to follow his gaze. The front door is open. Rain pelts down just beyond the entrance, smacking the pavement with brutal force. A lightning strike and thunderclap combine to light up the scene and shake the foundations of the hotel. The sound reverberates and continues to echo around the room before petering out into a low rumble.

I turn back. His eyes are wide, his mouth stuck open, his skin pasty white. The lightshow outside seemingly has him trapped.

I click my fingers. "Hey, Frank. Can I grab that room?"

"Yeah," he says, finally making eye contact. "I'm going to get you to sign before I can check you in."

"I'll pay at checkout...if that works for you?" I hope it does.

His eyes narrow. "You don't...you've never...you don't remember..." He seems incapable of finishing a sentence. He's now inspecting me, acutely running a beady eye over me. "You don't know me?"

I shrug. "*Should* I know you?"

He shrugs in reply.

With his staring eyes locked to mine, he lifts an old, weighty volume from his side of the desk and drops it in front of me. It lands with a thud, causing a groan to emanate from the desk. The leather cracks as he peels back the cover and finds a blank page.

"Just your name," he says.

"Where?"

"Anywhere," he replies. "Makes no difference."

I scrawl "Sloan Jates" across the page.

"Aha," he says. "That explains it. Explains a lot."

He slams the ledger shut and throws a key on top. It's an old-school metal key attached to a rectangular piece of metal that's engraved with my room number. "Third floor," he says.

"Is that your best room?"

"It's *a* room."

Good enough.

He tries to smile but fails. "Well, best you get yourself settled in instead of hanging around here in the lobby."

I take the key. "Thank you for the hospitality."

He turns. "Third door on the left." After a brief interlude, he repeats himself, articulating his last word. "*The left.*"

The floor panels creak as I begin to make my way to the room.

"Best you take care of yourself," he calls out. "I don't want no trouble in here. Not tonight."

“Why would there be trouble?” Now I’m curious. I turn to get a response, but there’s nobody behind the desk.

Chapter 40

HE WAS RIGHT—IT IS *a* room. Maybe over in the hotel across the street, the rooms have a spa bath, balcony, and free minibar. Definitely pay television with some porn thrown in for good measure. My lodging has none of that. In fact, it has decidedly less than none of that.

I investigate the bathroom. The tub has markings, and I can't tell if they're rust or blood. The faucet drips nauseatingly into a basin that used to be white. A family of cockroaches roam behind the toilet, scattering as soon as I find their hiding place. None of this is appealing as you can imagine. Almost as if it's designed to repulse people, to purposefully push clientele away.

I return to the bedroom, which is surprisingly spacious. I'm not sure if that's due to the size of the area or because of the lack of other objects in it. Sonja is there, leaning back on the bed, inviting me to her. She talks to me, asks me some very deep questions, and I respond in kind.

"Of course," I respond.

I remove my coat, discard it unceremoniously in the corner of the room, and yank the file out of the back of my pants. The corner is dogeared from forcing it into my briefs. The mattress gives way under me as I sit next to Sonja, its springs having given up long ago.

"What was that?" I muse.

Sonja replies.

"Oh, well," I state. "I'm hoping this'll give some information about what they want. If I can find out what they want, I can do something with it."

Sonja speaks.

"Yeah, I know it looks boring," I sigh. "I can't do anything about that."

I open the cover. My photo is attached to the inside cover with a paper clip, along with some of my vitals: name, address, the usual bullshit.

Parents: deceased.

Guardians: numerous.

The bulk of the file begins with what looks like an official, albeit unfinished, psychiatric report. I skim the verbiage, noticing “Dissociative Identity Disorder” in the middle of a paragraph.

“What? This can’t be,” I say, gripping the folder.

...

“Because it just can’t,” I retort. “It doesn’t make sense.”

...

“Well, I’ve started now,” I say. “So, I might as well read the rest of it.”

There is a list of names listed down the center of the otherwise blank page: *Jason, Sloan, Atlas, Stone*, and so on. The inventory concludes with *Sonja* and *Tessa*. Recognition hits like a scud missile, then just as quickly, falls apart like broken glass. Sand through the hourglass. Who the fuck are these people and what have they got to do with me?

At the bottom of the page is: “*Jet*”

Once more—flashes. A footstep on the stairs. A knife in my hand. Bodies. Blood. Whimpering. Letters. Numbers. Gone, replaced with confetti, like the photographs were torn into tiny pieces and thrown into the air. It makes me feel sick, like I’m in a wildly accelerating car that brakes suddenly. It jolts me. I’m getting nauseous.

I run to the bathroom. Bugs scatter as I hover over the bowl, screeching like a wild animal, but nothing comes up. It sits in my throat—stomach acid limbo. I spit, hit the flush, and watch it swirl in the water.

I’m wiping my mouth as I return to the bedroom. I lay down, hands over my eyes.

“Who the fuck is ‘Jet’? Who are these people? I don’t get it.”

I wait for a reply but don’t get any. A few more deep breaths and I sit up, satisfied my stomach has steadied itself. I return to the folder, eager to see more, concerned with how it’s going to affect me.

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

...

“Really? Do you think that’s practical?” I say, raising an eyebrow.

...

“Well, of course. Finding out is number one on the list.”

...

“No, that’s like number four or something,” I announce.

I flick through the bulk, each subsequent page blank, save for some handwritten scrawls over them. Words like *bipolar*, *time*, *schizophrenia*, *forgetfulness*, *map*, *key*. The rest of the pages are blank...except for the last page.

It’s not blank, nor pristine in its condition. It is brown, tattered. Parts of the edging are missing. It reminds me of a pirate’s treasure map. There are numerous fold lines, deep crevasses in the paper. But it’s what’s on the paper that is far more intriguing and interesting than the paper itself. Numbers. Characters. Sequences. Combinations. They’re written in every direction, in every size. Every listing has been drawn over several times, uneven, crossing lines filling the page. Lines bridge characters together, so that one sequence could change tack and join the beginning of another sequence running in a different direction.

I stare at it, waiting for it to tell me something. But it doesn’t. It’s a jumbled mess of scribble, and I’m not sure why it’s included in the file or even who created it. The writing isn’t familiar. And the more I stare, the more I imagine the biro gushing black rivers in the valleys, staining the world. The more I stare, the more I feel myself slipping away. Safely. Quietly. Peacefully.

I blink and shake my head, feeling rested yet tired at the same time. I look around the room. “Why the hell am I here?”

Sonja comes into view. “What the hell are we doing here?”

Where else would we be?

“I can’t argue with that. Why are *you* here?”

Because you need me.

“I do, I absolutely do.” We look at each other, connected. “Sonja?”

Yes?

“Why am *I* here?”

You need to find out. Help the others.

“I...I can’t. I can’t do that.”

You can. You absolutely can.

“Are you sure?”

You have what they want.

“I’m scared.”

You’re not alone. But you must do this. You must seek the truth.

“What is the truth?”

That’s an excellent question.

“That doesn’t help!”

You’ll find it. Just be careful.

I trudge down the stairs with some dollars in my pocket and the file tucked once more in the back of my pants. The lock on the door looked feeble, and I couldn’t trust it, so I figure the file best stay with me for the moment.

Frank has his back turned; a phone receiver mashed to his ear. The cord is wrapped around him. Had he been practicing a pirouette while on the phone?

“Yes, I’m damn sure it’s him!” he states in a hushed tone. “Just be as unhelpful as possible, that’s all I’m saying...yeah, just like you always are!”

I clear my throat. He turns, drops the phone, and attempts to free himself from his binds.

“Can—can I help you?” His voice is scattered, like handful of dice thrown down a flight of stairs.

“Frank!” I shout, a little too exuberantly. I approach the desk, leaning onto it like a Burmese nestling into someone’s lap. “I’m looking for an internet café or something like that. Somewhere I can get on the internet, check some stuff out.”

His eyes narrow. “Sure,” he replies. “Out the door, circle back around, two or three blocks. You know the place.”

“I do?”

“You will.” Then he adds, “Oh, take your time. No rush at all. I’ll make sure no one goes up there. For your...you know, confidentiality.” He winks, forcing a smile, revealing teeth in various shades of yellow.

I stare a little too long, then make my way into the big bad world in search of answers.

As I walk out the door, I call out over my shoulder. “You’re a strange man, Frank.”

I ponder more questions on my short journey, but each one spins me around in circles. I’m on a hamster wheel—running hard but ultimately going nowhere.

Soon, I arrive at Barr’s Internet Emporium, which is nestled between a late-night sushi stall and an exotic dancer gentleman’s club. Almost fifty percent of these places pique my interest. Inside, the internet café is bright and clean. There’s a young couple, sitting much too close to each other in a booth, sharing a thick shake through multiple straws. There’s an elderly couple sipping coffee, looking at a map on a tablet. They pinch, zoom, and swipe their way across the state.

At the counter, I’m served by someone with the name of Barr, or so it says on his nametag.

“Well, it’s great to be served by the owner,” I say cheerfully.

“My name’s Oscar.” His voice’s composition is the opposite of the place’s interior.

“Then why are you wearing a nametag that says *Barr*?”

“Policy.”

“That’s stupid.”

He ignores me and points to a co-worker standing at the coffee machine. “That’s Stacy.” She turns, beaming a smile at us. Her nametag also says *Barr*.

“She’s Barr too.” He smiles. I don’t.

“I need to use a computer.”

“Obviously, not *really* Barr,” he explains, as if an explanation is necessary.

“I get it,” I say, looking for the conversation to progress.

“I mean, look at her. She’s a girl!”

My head pulses, my skull becomes tight. “Yes, I can see that. I just need a computer.”

“So, you see, it’s policy.” He slams his fist into the palm of his other hand.

Exhalation. I lean across the counter, motioning for Oscar to meet me halfway, which he does.

“Oscar, I’m going to say this once. If you don’t tell me where the computers are, I will beat you to death *with* Stacey. And trust me, there’ll be no happy ending. For you, anyway. Do you understand what I just said?”

He lifts an arm and points to a curtain.

“Through there?” I ask.

He nods.

“And it’s free?”

He nods again.

“My dear Oscar, I do believe we have come to an arrangement.”

I very much enjoy my powers of persuasion.

Chapter 41

THE CURTAINS ARE A portal to another dimension. One is occupied by young people whom I would barely classify as adults, connected to their respective machines via keyboards, mice, and headphones. Not a single person pays any attention as I stride through their dimly lit intergalactic battle arena. The only sounds are clicking, clacking, and swearing. Evidently, they pay little attention to the “Please respect our equipment” and “No swearing” signs that adorn most walls dispersed over a mural of a space Marine wearing metallic armor, with a futuristic weapon slung over their shoulder.

The room is long and narrow, flanked on both sides by walled pods. There’s a break in the sequence halfway down the left side. As I approach the gap, I see it leads to another identical room, giving the entire area the shape of a capital “H.”

I want to take residence in the corner farthest away from the hordes of techno-nerds, but I instead settle for a position between a teenage boy who takes up the space of two chairs as he sips a bottle of cola and a teenage girl with long, strawberry blonde hair wearing what looks like a dog collar around her neck. I’m sure it’s fashionable...I guess. The sounds of machine gun fire, alien gurgles, and Space Marine chatter float through the air, emanating from their snug-fitting headphones.

I get acquainted with my machine and open a browser. My fingers pause over the keys. There’s so much to search for, so many names, places, and events. I don’t know where to start. Or maybe I’m afraid to start. Scared of what I’ll find out. Not the fear of confirming the horrible things I’ve done, but of finding out what I thought to be real is a complete lie.

I look up at the mural on the wall, taking in the detail and imagining myself in the armor, carrying a big gun. There’s a personnel

number on the chest plate, as well as a code on the screen of the Marine's arm and a registration number on the weapon.

Taking a deep breath, I type and purposefully plunge down the rabbit hole, linking names and personas to articles, blogs, and exposés. I throw every name I know into the search engine: Atlas, Jet, Sonja, Kolton, Galdini, Taylor, Isabelle, me. Different combinations deliver varying results.

Atlas and Jet seem to be dead ends, a waste of time and mental effort. The useless information I uncover is Atlas is an author and screenwriter. He lives upstate in a town that doesn't register on any maps. The person called Jet seems to be from the other side of the tracks, dangerous and deadly, having been arrested for many murders but convicted of none. What those types of people have to do with me is as astounding as it is unanswerable.

The links between Galdini and Kolton, on the other hand, provide an interesting tapestry of information. And when I throw another name into the mix, it becomes even more frightening. Grant Taylor and Isabelle Chalmers become the center of the universe, the thing around which all others revolve. How or why is beyond me, but I know it must have something to do with what Kolton and Galdini are after. I search my mind for the event. Faint recollections of being in the house the night of the murders. I needed something from Grant. I just don't remember what.

As soon as I envision myself stepping through that doorway, my memory becomes shrouded in darkness, and a heavy blanket douses the neuron flames. Nothing fires. It's like walking around in the dark with your eyes shut and your hands tied behind your back. My head erupts in a pain that creeps down the left side of my body.

I know who I am. At least, I thought I did. The file I stole from Galdini's office suggests something very different. I had read it with a healthy dose of skepticism, as one often does when their beliefs are

challenged. It just couldn't be true—because I don't believe it can be true. And sometimes, that's all it takes.

I sit and stare at the screen until it blurs and pixelates. I think back to the file. To the last page. I picture it clearly—too clearly—like it's right in front of me, like I created it with my own hand. Letters. Numbers. Special characters.

And then, it occurs to me. I don't know how I didn't see it before when I was reading the tattered piece of paper. The page held different sequences of characters, yes, but all the arrangements had the same characters in them, just in a different order. Was this what they were after? Surely not, since I took it from Galdini's desk. They already had it in their possession. Yes, they already had the page, but maybe they didn't know which one on the page was the right one!

I bring the screen into focus and type out one of the strings of text from memory. It produces an error: *Your search did not return any results.* I try another one, but I receive the same result. Another one, then another, then another. All for nothing. But it must mean something.

It seems like there's nothing more I can learn here. But I know where I can find more answers—a place at the heart of all of this.

I step outside the safety of the dungeon curtains into the bright lights of the coffee shop. Waitresses dart back and forth from tables to counter, swiftly taking and dropping off orders. Smells of coffee and buttered popcorn hang in the air. As I walk, I wonder how long the watercolor that is my memory will last. Actually, that's not the right metaphor, because it's clear; what I know is so very clear. It's just what I know doesn't seem to be right, like someone taped over reality with a fake narrative.

"Thanks for dropping by," a cheery voice calls out from over my shoulder.

I turn slowly, glacially, still trying to find my feet in the shifting sands. It's Oscar, standing at the counter, a ridiculous smile on his

face, waving at me. I ignore his acknowledgement and turn, but then stop. I turn back, focusing my vision. His nametag is now a series of five characters. I stare at them, surreptitious in nature yet in plain sight. They resonate with me, but I don't know why. I try to find that spot in my memory they correlate to, but I come up empty. Something, somewhere, sometime.

A screeching car tire and revving engine steal my attention. A car has pulled up out front, and two shadowy figures are getting out of it. *Are they here for me? Or just in a hurry to get some caffeine? Do I wait and see what happens, or just start shooting?* It's dark outside, and I can't tell who they are or if they're armed. My heart rate increases exponentially.

I turn to Oscar. "Fire exit. Where is it?"

He points out the back, to the same mystical curtain that took me into another realm. I rush through it, almost colliding with the "too large for one chair" gamer who's probably on the prowl for the bathroom or another keg of cola. I turn down the adjoining corridor and into the identical room, identifying the fire door from huge stenciled letters and a metal bar across it.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"What the fuck are you going to do about this?" I murmur sullenly.

What the fuck are *you* going to do?

Chapter 42

I DON'T SLOW DOWN AS I careen into the fire door, jumping at it at the last second and falling into the alley. The screams of the pulsating alarm ring out around me. The ground is wet, with puddles dotting the area between dumpsters. A mist hangs in the air like smoke in a confined space.

There is a screech to my right at the far end of the alley—a shout breaking through the air. I don't wait to find out who it is or what they said. I sprint toward the other end of the back street. An accelerating car, its engine changing gears, looms behind me, its headlights burning into my back. I see my shadow elongate as I dance around pools of rainwater, the end of the alley within reach. I feel the heat of the engine like a breath on my neck.

I take the corner at speed and shoot out on the footpath. As dark windows blur by, I wait for the roar of the engine and squealing tires as the vehicle attempts the tight turn to follow me, but there is nothing. I don't stop running to find out what happened.

Sprinting to the end of the street, I take a right, cross over halfway down, through another alley, and then blast out onto a main road. Cars swerve around me as I fail to slow or even acknowledge their existence. I'm too preoccupied with keeping mine intact.

Four streets and several twists and turns later, I slow my steady sprint to a causal walk. I feel fresh, as if I'd just been out for a Sunday morning stroll. No burning, no pains. But then a sharp pain erupts across my cranium, like fireworks inside my skull. I tilt my head back and suck in a lungful of night air. And then hotdogs. I snap my eyes open. I fucking love hot dogs.

The aroma of boiled, mass-produced fun packages—mystery meat crammed into cellulose casings—finds my nostrils. I realize, even though my mind is fickle, I can't remember eating. Like, ever.

Not one single meal comes to mind. I'm drawn to the frankfurters' smell like a siren's call, unable to resist.

At the corner, I see a sign attracting patronage from every direction, advertising cheap slushies of every conceivable flavor and two-dollar coffee guaranteed to taste the same as one made by a barista. I seriously doubt that's the case, yet I lazily stroll toward it, nonetheless.

My mind ticks over, and the more it does, the more a second pair of footsteps become apparent. Leather shoes on wet cement, slightly out of step with my own. I can tell they're slightly shorter, but heavier, and not as fleet of foot. Yet their pace is quickening; they're closing the gap, gaining on their quarry.

I quicken my pace toward a shaft of light pouring out from a nearby convenience store onto the slick roads. The store is close—a beacon on a lonely street, an oasis in the desert.

The glass doors slide open, and I slip inside the store to the sound of an alerting buzzer. I disappear amidst shelves, making my way around various products that have no right to be assembled together, eventually nestling between shelves of potato chips on one side and shelves of dogfood on the other. I watch the entrance warily, waiting for someone to enter, listening for the buzzer to chime.

It does. The echo floats around me as the overhead fluorescent bulbs flicker above me. I clinch my fists and then release them, my energy coursing, my muscles compacted, straining. Hatred. Burning.

A bald, scowling man in a beige trench coat marches in. His coat flaps as he immediately darts into an aisle. I rush around and follow him down. He turns at the end and disappears again. I silently sneak toward the end and stop, my fist cocked for an encounter. My gun would be quicker, but messier—a last resort. Besides, I know I can handle one guy.

I can hear the squeaks of his shoes on the linoleum. He's searching for something. He cuts left, then right, unable to find me. Now

he's doubling back. He's heading right toward me, his footfalls ringing in my ears. The rubbing of his pantlegs against each other is revealing. Not very stealth-like.

I turn to meet him, one hand reaching for his lapel, the other balled into a fist, ready to swing into his face.

He freezes, his eyes wide with fear.

"Why are you following me?" I bark.

He tries to answer, but his jaw is trembling too much. I push him back toward a bank of fridges. Orange juice, milk, and cold drinks flash by—as does salsa, cookies, and peanut butter at the end of the aisles.

"What do you want?" I'm up in his face now, my eyes narrow. A snarl.

He slowly holds up an item in his hands.

"S, s, sour cream. My, my wife's pregnant."

I take a step back and draw my pistol in one smooth motion, pointing it between his eyes and releasing the safety.

"Who sent you?" I scream at him.

He says nothing, making a sound that gets caught in his throat, and breathes jaggedly. Then, a sharp smell breaks into my senses. Holding the gun in place, I look down at the dark patch in the front of his pants. A puddle pools at his feet.

I watch him. Gauge his facial expression for seconds, waiting to see if he falsified the act. Eventually, I sigh and drop the ordnance.

"Get the fuck out of here," I say, waving him away.

He pauses for a moment and then takes flight, dropping the sour cream as he makes a beeline for the door without fulfilling his husbandry duties.

I walk out of the store in a daze. I don't even bother hiding my weapon. I hold it against my head as I escape the spotlight of the store and head for the nearest and darkest alleyway.

I crouch down behind an overloaded dumpster, my back against a cold concrete wall. I clutch my head tighter, letting the paranoia wash over me. I look down and run a finger over the alley's cold surface, tracing into a puddle and then back out again. A perfect circle. I repeat the action, over and over, until my heart rate slows and my breathing nearly stops.

The alley closes in on me. It feels like the opposing wall is pressing up against my face. I move my hand in front of my eyes and see three other guns playing catch-up with the original. They whistle as I move them through the air. Colors swirl. A metallic taste in my mouth.

I muster all my strength and stand up, swaying. I don't want to be here anymore, can't do this anymore.

Not yet. Don't give up yet. There's still so much to find.

I'm tired of running. Sick of playing the game.

You don't have a choice.

All I want to do is lie down. I never asked for this.

Didn't you?

Chapter 43

I STUMBLE THROUGH THE open doorway and into the lobby. My view is cloudy, my senses dull. My throat and chest burn like I've just sculled half a bottle of whiskey. The walls seem to pulse with every breath I take, the stairway spiraling up into darkness that's impenetrable by the dull yellow lights of the empty reception. There's no one behind the desk. There's no sound. No creaks. No groans. No ticking clocks. No ringing telephone.

The front desk is my baseline as I attempt to force multiple images to come together into one seamless picture of reality. I stare at an oil painting hanging crookedly over the cracked leather of a single chair. The manager must've changed it. The abstract image displays a small white figure standing on the edge of a cliff. The rest of the canvas is a series of dark swirls on an even darker background.

I ease over to it, and as I do, subtle elements become clear. The different shades of black force a three-dimensional effect that my brain fails to understand. There's a key floating in the abyss, and the figure in the painting is reaching out for it. If they stretch anymore, they're likely to fall in; however, they may not have a choice, given the hand that's snaking its way from the frame, slithering closer to the figure, preparing to push them in. Mesmerizing, provocative, arousing.

Meaningless.

The room shifts, and the painting slides off the wall, crashes to ground, and the frame splinters into countless pieces. I can't tell if I'm swaying, if my movements are controlling the hotel. There's a low grumble outside, followed by a sharp bolt of lightning.

A hand comes to rest on my shoulder, and I spin around faster than what my cloudy head seems capable of. I stumble. But when I look up, there's no one there. I look back, and the picture is back on the wall, having reverted to an ancient watercolor of the city skyline.

I blink...or wink. I'm not sure what my eyelids are doing at this stage. I rub them to hide any evidence of my non-conforming body parts.

I shrug and commence my creaking journey, gripping the handrail and using it to haul my mentally and physically exhausted body onto the next set of stairs.

Three flights later, I fall onto the landing. Sonja leans against the far wall, chewing her gum eagerly and fidgeting like a kid with an attention deficit disorder.

"What is it?" I ask. The reply is a barrage of incomprehensible sound that pierces my temples and crumples my eyelids.

I grip my head. "Look, I'm tired. I'm not in the mood to talk right now." I rub my head. "Can we discuss this in the morning?" I stagger down the hall, bouncing from one wall to the next, as if the floor is experiencing turbulence.

She follows me to the door. I can feel her close behind me, the pressure on my numb limbs, helping me to my destination.

"No, I'm not drunk," I mumble.

...

"Huh?"

...

"No, I don't recall drinking anything. It just hit me all of a sudden."

...

"Yes, I do remember accurately. Why are you even asking me this?"

...

"Can we just get inside the room?"

She's beside the door while I fumble with the key.

Concentrate hard as I struggle to insert the key into the lock.

Her eyes are wide.

I turn the key.

She opens her mouth.

“Christ, Sonja! What is it?”

And then I see it, what she wanted to tell me. I stand and look back down the hallway. Every door is ajar, with some sort of dusty print on each frame or door. I turn and investigate the other direction, noticing the same irregularity.

“Huh, that’s weird.”

...

“Yes, I know. That’s what you were saying.”

...

“Because I couldn’t understand what you were saying.”

...

“Yes, I realize how contradictory that sounds. Look, I don’t want to argue about it.”

...

“Yes, I know we aren’t arguing.”

...

“No. *You’re* frustrating.”

I push my room door open.

And stop.

Chapter 44

THE ROOM IS A MESS. Like someone picked up every object in the room and threw it against a wall. The mattress is leaning against the window, its insides spilling out like a gutted pig. The box spring itself has a large tear across the top, and its contents are pulled out. The lamp is on the floor in several pieces, and the overhead bulb flickers like a strobe light. Cupboard doors are open, hanging off their hinges. The air is heavy, carrying a scent of sweat, uncertainty, and panic.

My sobriety hits me quicker than the drunken stupor that had grabbed a hold of my senses. My mental landscape is now sharp and focused. Sonja moves into the room, wraps her arms around herself, and shivers. Her gaze is uncertain as she inspects every inch of the room, contemplating it silently.

“What the fuck happened here?”

I was trying to tell you. They came looking for something.

“Who?”

I don't know who.

“What did they look like?”

They had masks on. I couldn't see who they were.

“What were they looking for?”

I'm not sure. But whatever it was, they didn't find it.

“How do you know that?”

Sonja points at the wall above where the bed used to be. I move farther into the room to get a better angle. Light streams in around the mattress to illuminate large capital letters written in an unknown substance: *We will find it eventually.* I step toward the message, peering up at the letters, resisting the urge to determine the substance that was used to make them.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter.

I don't think we should be here.

“You think? I came back here to rest, but now? I don’t think I need it.”

What are we going to do?

“I don’t know.” I bite my lip so hard it almost bleeds. “I guess we just keep doing what we’re doing. I need to figure out what all this is and hopefully find out what they want.”

Do you think they’ll leave us alone when they have it?

I circle the room. Past the bathroom with the dripping tap and smashed mirror. Past the cupboard with its destroyed doors. Past Sonja, her breath now a cloud of smoke that dissipates with every exhale. I stand at the mangled bed and read the graffiti again.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I guess if I knew what they wanted, we could figure out a trade or something. And even if I knew, I’m not even sure who they are. Maybe it has something to do with that detective, or maybe not.”

Do you trust him?

“No.” I turn to look at her. Innocence. “Just you. We need to stick together with this, at all costs, no matter what happens. Does that make sense?”

She nods. I want to reach out and touch her, to tell her everything will be okay. But that would be a lie. No way I can make a promise like that. All I know is things will get a whole lot worse before they get better.

Shh.

“Shh, what?”

Did you hear that?

“Hear what?”

Sonja turns her head, searching for a source.

Scratching.

I close my eyes, focus my listening, and search for something, anything.

She levels her eyes at me. *We need to get out of here.*

I turn. Heavy footfalls loom from down the hallway. I rush to the door, slam it shut, and lock it. Like that's going to do anything. I run to the window, pull down the mattress, and let it flop down onto its base. At least it's a *potential* obstacle for the *potential* intruders.

"Quick!" I order.

I slide the cloudy window open. The evening breeze, cool from the early rain, hits my face and invades my clothes. Sounds from the street float up toward me. In front of me, a metal cage—the fire escape. I'm halfway out the window, straddling the sill, when the door bursts open with a boom-like crunch. I steal a glance. Two masked figures, solid brutes, shrouded in darkness, stand in the entry, as if waiting for an invitation to enter. I don't offer them one, nor do I bother to wait and see if they're coming in.

Clangs of boots on grate ring out as I land heavily on the next platform, missing several steps in the process. This continues as I descend, choosing to skip multiple steps to reach the platform, pulling myself by the handrail to hit the next set of stairs at pace. I don't bother looking up. I can't hear anyone coming after me, but that doesn't mean they aren't there. I can feel them, smell them. Around I go again, all the way down.

I reach the bottom level, the end of my run—no more stairs. I hear metal footsteps far above me, each one sounding like a rifle being fired. I consider my few options. Stay and fight, or cut and run? I reach for the pistol tucked into the back of my pants. It's missing. I must have dropped it. I don't bother trying to think about where or when or how. It's a futile exercise. More clangs—louder, getting closer, shadows looming. I grab the handrail and lift myself up and over in one motion, hoping to hit my target.

I fall gracefully, catlike, keeping my feet below me, the drop feeling a lot longer in reality than perception. A voice calls out and bounces off the building walls, echoing over the alleyway. The slick road comes rising toward me, but that's not where I'm aiming.

I land heavily on the dumpster lid, leaving a crater in my wake. I continue to tumble forward and sideways, landing in the alley in a crouched position, waiting for my pursuers' guns to fire.

I turn my head. I can feel their eyes on me, watching my every move. They stand on the platform I jumped from, unwilling or unable to follow me. Maybe they don't need to.

A gunshot! Or was it a car backfiring? Doesn't matter, because I'm off, sprinting like a gazelle toward the end of the alley, to the open street beyond—framed by the hotel and another building. I skip over the bitumen furiously, watching various cars traveling left and right at regular intervals entering the scene and departing again. A green panel van with writing on the side, a deep blue sedan with black windows, an orange soft top four-wheel drive.

When I reach the portal, a taxi pulls up, and the rear door swings open. Without stopping, I throw myself into the back seat and tell the driver to go. He doesn't ask where, just pulls away. The force of the acceleration shuts the door.

I look out through the rain-spotted rear window, watching the scene diminish—the two figures in trench coats standing at the edge of the road, pointing toward me. A black car appears behind them, its occupants shrouded by dark tint. The rear suicide doors open and the two figures ease down into the seats. The headlights turn on, and the car whips out of the alley, its doors slamming as the back end gets away from the driver, before the tires bite into the road and straighten, leaving two identical black trails behind it. The rest of the traffic seems unfazed by the display.

I ease back down in the seat, looking over to Sonja.

“Are you okay?”

She nods.

Chapter 45

I DON'T REMEMBER EXACTLY how I got here, but I know the house I'm standing in front of—the memory is so clear it feels like it all happened yesterday. I hang onto the fence and push my face between the bars. Despite my familiarity with the property, I don't remember the six-foot wrought iron fence spanning the front lawn. Perhaps it's just out of context. Maybe in another place it would fit better. Yes, another place.

The streetlight that would have illuminated my spot had long since gone out, so I view the house in solemn silence. Grant Taylor's residence is a silent monolith in the middle of a leafy pond. The windows are like whirlpools. Police tape crisscrosses the front door, which is nestled at the end of a dark path.

I look up to the fence spikes and follow them to the corner, where they meet an equally tall stone wall. The barrier flanks the sloping property, disappearing into a fog. I figure I'd rather take my chances with a scraped knee than a pierced bottom.

Midway down the side of the property, I take a running jump at the wall. I fall short. Well short. I don't know how fit I thought I was, but I wasn't that. I need some leverage, something to stand on, but the area is dark, and nothing stood out.

"Jesus Christ, you are unfit!"

Sonja leans against the wall, blowing a huge bubble of gum.

"Shut the fuck up. I'm doing the best I can here."

"Well, if you want to get in, you're going to need to do a hell of a lot better than that."

"Hey, where the hell where you earlier? I could've used you back then, instead of your wonderful words of encouragement now!"

She inspected her nails. "I was busy." She sounded disinterested.

"Busy? Doing what?"

“Geez, you’re asking the wrong questions, kid. Best you get in that house. That’s what you came for.”

“Yeah, I know what I came for.” I level my gaze at her.

She watches me as she blows another bubble. She looks up to the top of the wall. The gum bubble bursts. She draws it back into her mouth and continues chewing. “You want me to give you a boost or something?”

“No, I do not want you to give me a boost or something. I got this. I was just, you know, prepping for my last effort.”

“Well, don’t have a stroke or heart attack getting it done.”

I squat down and push off hard. My fingers grip the top of the wall and I dangle for a moment.

I’ve done my bit. The rest is up to you.

I strain. I hear a sigh. Then I have more purchase, my hands are on the wall, and I scrape myself along the surface to get to the top. Getting up is one thing—getting down is another. I ease down the other side, once again hanging by my fingertips, my feet dangling into nothingness. The fog climbs up my legs like a vine. I take a breath and let go.

I land hard on the ground and tumble backwards. I stand up and brush the loose leaves off my coat, sucking in a few breaths.

“Would you hurry the fuck up?”

Sonja is standing by the back door, her hands on her hips, a look of expectation and worry on her face.

“I’m coming,” I reply.

“You haven’t got much time. Personally, I don’t even know why we’re here. Honestly, what good is it?”

“It’s for me. To understand what the hell is happening. I’m sorry if you don’t approve.”

The sharp cracking of a stick, followed by a rustle of undergrowth, cuts off the conversation. I turn to investigate, but, in the

darkness, it's a futile effort. On my own in the shadows, I feel a shiver run down my spine.

I put a shoulder to the door, and it gives way. I'm in the kitchen. From what I can see, it's how I remember it. Empty bottles on the counter. Dirty plates near the sink. What looks to be a dark powder on most surfaces. Is that where they dusted for fingerprints? I imagine an eagle-eyed crime scene detective running from corner to corner with a brush and pad of dust. If they loved it down here, they must've wet their pants upstairs. Surely it was every investigator's wet dream to sink themselves into such a horrific event.

The end of the kitchen. The three stairs that lead to the lounge room. I take them slowly, waiting for the moment where I can see evidence markers and body outlines, along with the destruction of coffee tables and ornaments.

I stand at the top step and look. Nothing. The room is pristine. Nothing to suggest that anything untoward took place. But I remember it so clearly! Stabbing necks, slicing throats, destruction of furniture—all so fresh in my mind, like it just happened. What I remember doesn't correlate at all with what I'm seeing, and an overwhelming sense to puke overtakes me.

Bile rises. Burning sensation in my throat. I run down the hallway. Second door on the left. No, the right. The bathroom door is open, and I'm greeted with polished white tile. The moment I arrive at the bowl, heaving chunks explode from deep within me. I lean on the wall and flush periodically. The very thought of puking makes me vomit again.

I wash my face. Lethargy sets in. Between bouts of dizziness, I stumble back out to the hall. Sonja is standing there.

"Geez," she says. "I've never seen you like this before."

"Well, I don't think I've been in this situation before...I don't think."

She folds her arms. “Perhaps you should get your shit together, because you’re close.”

“Close to what?”

“I don’t think you should go down there.”

“Down where?”

She turns her head and looks further down the hallway. I follow her gaze. Another door. Closed. Police tape attached across it. More black powder on the handle and door frame.

“Can’t we just stay here?” she pleads. “Just the two of us, away from everything?”

Softer now.

“Away... awa...aw...a...”

Her voice disappears, swallowed by the shadows.

As I approach the police-taped door, flashes of light rock my consciousness, like lightning strikes in a moonless desert. My vision is a mix of reality and experience, and I can’t tell one from the other.

I’m at the door, and every hair on my body is standing up. My senses are in overdrive. The familiarity is breathtaking. Hand near the handle. Electricity sparks. Flash. Reality. Flash. Reality.

The door opens.

A chair in the middle of the room.

And Grant Taylor is sitting in it.

Chapter 46

GRANT IS SOBBING. HIS head is on his chest, and his body heaves up and down methodically. Tape binds his wrists and ankles to the chair. He isn't wearing any shoes. There's a swath of blood across his shirt. I don't know if it's his or someone else's.

There are bodies on the floor, face down. Arms and legs intertwine, blood-stained torsos lying on top of each other. Blood. Blood everywhere. His wife and son. She is wearing a summer dress; five separate splotches cover her back. His head lies in a pool of blood.

There are moans, a scuffling of feet. The sound of resistance.

I am watching. I am there. There are two worlds folding in on one another.

"No!" Grant calls out between sobs. He musters, "Please don't hurt her," between heavy breaths.

"Last chance," I say, holding Olivia close to me. I'm holding a knife to her neck, but I know I won't use it, won't have to exact the same carnage I've already accomplished. It's not because I care about her—I really don't. I only care about completing the mission, doing what I need to in order to get what I need. People can only be pushed so far before they crumble and break down. I'm impressed with Grant's spirit and loyalty. Perhaps more people should be like him, lose like him, test themselves, push themselves to the edge of nothingness. This is when you find out what really matters to people.

Grant lifts his head, but he doesn't look at me. He looks through me. His eyes are half closed and puffy. Sweat glistens everywhere on his body. "What they'll do to me is worse. Much worse." He sighs. "You have no idea."

"Worse than this? There's not much left for you to lose. Just one. Just one more thing you care about that I can take from you. Are you prepared to do this to her?" I push her into view, into his line of vi-

sion. He clenches his eyes shut and turns away. He doesn't want to see the pain he's putting her through.

"I'll tell you." He takes a deep breath and repeats his statement, as if saying it twice makes it mean twice as much.

"Tell me. And she lives. You both do."

He looks up, this time at her. "I will. Just promise me you won't hurt her." I wonder what he can see, if the terror comes across, if he can see what I feel from her shaking, whimpering body.

"I promise." But I don't, not really.

"Oh, God. Please don't do this."

"Jesus Christ, Grant, I'm running out of patience. If you don't do this now..." I trail off, squeeze her neck, and let the whine of his daughter finish my threat. "All of this is your fault, Grant. If you had only coughed it up at the start, there wouldn't be bodies lying at your feet. I wouldn't have to threaten you like this. But you resisted, and I am patient and willing to do whatever it takes."

"Okay."

Then he's sitting at his desk, the change in environment so subtle I barely recognize the transition. His fingers glide over a keyboard, silently pressing keys. I relinquish my grip on Olivia and she dissolves into nothing. I join Grant around the other side of the desk, stand behind him. The screen is full of code. Lines and lines of script overlaid multiple times making it blur. In the middle of the screen is an empty box encapsulating a flashing cursor.

Grant pushes back from the terminal, looks up at me.

"It's..."

He whispers it to me. Tells me everything I need to know between gasps, as if his life force is being sucked away with each passing moment.

He's right. What they will do to him is so much worse. So much worse than this. What is worse than this? Indescribable pain. Is this not indescribable? Watching your family die? Perhaps I should do

him the favor, do Olivia the favor, save him the trouble of losing her later. They'll never see it coming.

I feel a presence. At first I think it is Sonja, but then I realize it's something else, someone who doesn't belong here.

What is the code?

Now I have it, locked away. Hidden. Deep.

I will ask again. What did he tell you?

It's in a safe place where you'll never find it. Hidden with my past: my childhood, who my foster parents were, what they did to me. There are so many twists and turns, so many rabbit holes to fall into. No. To get the key, you need a map, and you know better than anyone—you don't store the two together.

Tell me.

No. This is my leverage. This is the only way for her and me to get out of here.

Tell me!

No, you'll never let her live. I just want to make sure she's safe. Let her go. Take me. Just me.

Tell me or she dies.

If she dies, you'll never get anything. Believe me.

I don't believe you. Maybe she'll die, anyway.

Are you willing to take that risk?

"Sloan!"

I blink. The room resets. Grant is gone. A wooden desk sits alone in front of a large bay window, adorned with a lamp and stacks of papers—but no Grant. There is no chair. One wall consists of a bookshelf, holding more books than it was designed to, so someone had to stack them horizontally rather than vertically. A shaft of light pours over it all and hovers over a dark stain on the floor, like a spotlight from a search helicopter. The light moves over the room, eventually falling on my eyes. I shield them from the pain.

"Sloan!"

A voice over my shoulder. A familiar sound, though I can't place who it's from. Footsteps approach behind me, but I can't move; I'm restricted from turning to see who it is. They come around from my right, an odd crunch on the polished wood floors with every step.

A man appears, wearing a dark suit, his tie loosened. He stalks me, prowling around the perimeter. It's Kolton. His hands are in his pocket. He is careless...*or carefree.*

"What do you know?" He ventures. "What do you remember?"

I look down, searching my memory banks. I don't know much. The puzzle is incomplete, and I don't have enough pieces to finish it. It would help if I had the box so I could see the end product.

Kolton can see me struggling to remember. "Have you figured it out yet?" he asks.

"Figured out what?"

"This! All of this. What this is about?"

"I did this. I killed the family. The wife, the son, the daughter."

"More or less," Kolton responds.

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter. Why did you do it?"

"Because he asked me to get it," I say. "The Devil."

"And what did he ask you to do?"

"To get numbers from Grant."

"Go on," he prods.

"No! More than numbers. Characters. A code."

"Yes. That's what we want."

"But you have the code. I've seen the page from Galdini's file about me."

"We don't need *a* code; we need *the* code."

And then I think back to the piece of paper, the numerous arrangements of the same ten characters. Which one is the right one?

"I...I don't know."

“Oh, but someone does,” he says. “Atlas knows it, and he’s going to give it to us.”

“I don’t understand. Who’s Atlas?”

“You! You are Atlas. He’s here somewhere, and he has what we need.”

“Is that why you’re here? To help you find Atlas?”

Another smile. “No. That’s why *they’re* here!”

The room goes dark.

Chapter 47

LIGHT. FADING LIGHT. The setting sun is being swallowed by a swath of burning tall pines that dot the mountain range like a birthday cake. I lean on the paint-chipped porch railing, the planks under my feet shifting uneasily beneath me. I glimpse the Mustang at the foot of the stairs. A rumble sounds in the distance, and I look down at the rifle beside me, leaning against the balustrade.

“Not yet.” Her voice is soft but measured.

Sonja silently comes into my periphery. She leans down, her forearms resting on the rail. “Not yet,” she repeats. “Wait ’till they are closer.”

The rumble dies down, then returns, louder than before. It sounds like the earth is opening up, ready to consume us.

“Do you think we’re safe here? Do you think we can hold them off?”

She keeps her gaze to the ridgeline. “I think we’re in a bind, that’s for damn sure. But I also believe we’re exactly where we need to be.”

“You didn’t answer my other question. Can we hold them off?”

“No, I don’t think we can. That rifle there is not going to be enough.”

I turn to her. “Then let’s get out of here. We can hit the coast by Tuesday, Mexico by Thursday. You and me, let’s jump in the car and go.”

“What car?”

I turn and point. “That ...” There’s nothing there, nor any evidence it ever was.

I descend the stairs to investigate further. Then I turn back to talk to Sonja. Nothing. The house is gone as well. We’re standing on a small hill, surrounded by a mountain range. It’s like we’re standing in a crater. I spin, looking for a way out.

“Fuck!” I cry out. “This isn’t a good position to be in.”

“No,” she replies. “It’s the worst possible position to be in.”

I turn to her, grab her shoulders, and pull her toward me. “Do you remember what I told you?”

A blank look on her face.

“Remember! You have to remember! The map?”

She nods, slowly, methodically. “Yes.”

“They’re after it.”

Her eyes droop in a sad smile, a known realization.

“If they get it, it’s all over. Hold onto it,” I say. “Never let it go for anyone, whatever happens to me. It’s our only way out. Without it, we have nothing; we *are* nothing.”

A gust of wind buffets my pants.

She lifts her hands and places them over my eyes. Safety. Security. Love. In that moment, we could have been anywhere. In a tent in the Norwegian mountains, standing on a beach on an island in the middle of the Pacific. “It’s okay,” she says. “You’ve done your best. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. But sometimes there’s no way out, no escape. And the best we can hope for is a good fight.”

A howling wind yanks at me. We’re torn from each other as a rumble rolls around the ridgeline and trees tumble like dominos.

“Fuck! Don’t go!”

There’s no reply. She’s gone. I am alone. The wind picks up around the perimeter and swirls around me. It picks up rocks and stones, sucking them into the tunnel where they fling around the extremities. With each revolution, they get closer, inch by inch. I am surrounded; there’s no way out. I can sense them coming, ready to crush me. I put my hands up to protect myself, but I can’t.

My hands are bound behind my back.

And a rock is on a collision course.

Chapter 48

THE IMPACT OF A FIST against my face rouses me from my day-dream. My head flings to the left, resulting in me hitting the cold concrete floor. I'm sure I heard a loud crack as it happened, and now I taste blood filling my mouth. My face feels like a balloon; my vision is masked with hair, sweat, blood. I'm tied to a chair, which I thank God for—otherwise, I'd be sprawled out on the ground with a serious head injury.

I am righted by hands, the owners of which remain hidden. Every little sound is like an atomic bomb going off in my head. I slowly open my eyes. Things are hazy, dull. Hands are on my head, lifting my eyelids. Then the light floods in. First into my left eye, then into my right.

“Wakey, wakey...”

The words float in and out, with no particular source or end point. They are soft, spongy. The hands release my head, dropping it onto my chest. No strength. Through half-open eyes, pictures slowly combine into one: a gray concrete floor, a rusty silver drain, the legs of an empty chair.

Scuffing of feet. Black leather shoes come into view. I hear the creak of wood as the person sits, their weight shifting as they find comfort. I slowly lift my head. Gray slacks. Higher. White shirt. Black and yellow-striped tie. Higher. Sleeves rolled up. Hairy arms folded. Indecipherable tattoo. Higher. Square jaw. Higher. Cold eyes. Gray hair. Military buzzcut.

“Sloan?”

“Kolton.” Words are hard to say.

“Good boy,” he says evenly, but with sarcasm, not praise.

My lips are numb, and I can't work my tongue. “What's going on?” I blink a few times and try to look around. We're alone in a spotlight—a life raft in the abyss. “Where am I?”

“You’re at the facility.”

Facility? “What facility?”

“The psychiatric facility.”

How could I let this happen? “How did you get me back here?”

“Back? Back?” A laugh. Pity? No. Maniacal? Definitely. “Sloan, you never left.”

I snapped my eyes open, fighting against fatigue. “What the hell are you talking about?” I try to move, but I’m bound. Looking down, I note the off-white straitjacket pulling my arms across my body and holding them in place. Although my arms are numb, I can feel my fingers pushing into my ribs. But there is something else holding me down, something restraining me to the chair. I continue to attack my binds as I get used to the light and start to see beyond the limits of the overhead bulb.

Then I stop. Stained concrete surrounds me on all sides. I note a grate in the floor at my feet. The aroma of shit and vomit fill my lungs, and I breathe through my mouth to avoid it. I know this place, as real and raw as anything I know. This is a room where bad things happen.

Kolton smirks. “Maybe the doctor will be able to help you out.”

I think back to what I did, how I left Galdini in a pool of his own blood. “I doubt it. I think you’ll find the doctor is dead.”

“Hello, Sloan.” The voice hits me like a bullet, shaking me sober. I forget about everything—the fact I’m bound to a chair, the fact a cop has kidnapped me.

Doctor Galdini comes into my vision. I watch as he taps the detective on the shoulder, who immediately stands and takes his place behind the chair. The doctor eases himself down with no ailment. I look at his face, take him all in, looking for injuries I had caused by stabbing him in the neck with a pen.

He stares at me, silent, his hands placed on his legs. No, he's doing more than just looking—he's evaluating. His eyes narrow and enlarge, and I can almost hear his mind turning over.

I thought I was far from here. I thought I had escaped, even killed him. I search for injuries on him, but there are none. He looks just the same as when I awoke in that room, and he and Kolton were sitting across from me. Very much alive, not at all dead. I can't fathom, don't understand. I can't trust my own head, what I know, how I feel. *Yes, you can*, I tell myself. *Go with your gut*.

Eventually the doctor says, "I'm sure you're wondering what's happening."

I pull at my restraints. "You're goddamn right I am!" I try again and again to make sense of it all. "I thought you were dead."

"I was." He smiles. "At least, to you I was. In your mind I was."

"What?"

"In your mind. Let me guess. You thought you had killed me, then stole my car and drove to the city to investigate what was happening to you. Does that sound familiar?"

I guess it did. I nod.

"None of that actually happened," he says. "It was all up here." He taps the side of his head.

My eyelids flutter, my head spins. His words don't make sense. The thought is too fantastical for me to comprehend; I can't get my head around it. What was happening was too real, felt too tangible to be confused with a dream.

"Bullshit!" I reply. "This is some psycho crap."

"And why would I do that?"

I chew it over. I don't know why they would do that, which is half the problem. The other half was figuring out how to get out of here. But if I did, could I trust it? Would it be real or just another hallucination? Where does someone turn when they can't even trust their own mind, their own eyes?

“How do I know *this* is real?”

“Well, that’s an interesting point. Did you notice in your town you never felt pain? You never got hurt, you never felt tired?”

I think back: running from the internet café, jumping a story from the fire escape to the alley below.

“So, when I was getting chased around the city, even breaking in to Grant’s house, that was all in my head?”

Galdini cocks his head. “What do you think?”

I look down, embarrassed.

“What about all the information from the computer?” I mumble.

“Purely a way for you to access information, something that fit in with the environment, a way for you to make sense of your surroundings.”

“And when I felt drunk?”

“The drugs, Sloan. The drugs we put in your system to disrupt your patterns were catching up with you. You see, everything can be explained.”

I shake my head, looking up at his bespectacled face. “This can’t be. It just can’t.”

“In case you had any other doubt...” He holds up his hand. Kolton obeys the instruction and moves toward me. He swings, his fist purposefully flies through the air and collides with my face. There’s a loud crack, and my head jolts to the side. Pain tears up my face, and a ringing in my ears seems to erupt from my bandaged head.

“That,” says the doctor, “is how you know this is real. You felt that, right?”

Flashing lights. I shake my head. The hazy world, dark around the edges, slants before righting itself. More blood appears in my mouth. Yeah, I fucking felt that.

I am here. Just say the word.

Who are you?

The one that does the things you cannot do.

“Sloan? Are you still with me?”

I raise my head, defiant, an even glare. I spit a glob of bloody junk out of my mouth that lands with a squelch on the rough concrete ground.

Kolton cocks his fist for another encounter with my face, but Galdini stops him.

“No! That’s enough. Too much will bring *him* out. We can’t afford that.” Then he strokes his beard settle himself. He looks around the room, like he’s forgotten himself.

“I know what you’re after,” I say. “I don’t remember the code.”

Galdini snaps his gaze back to me. “Ah, so you do remember something after all. And you may not remember it,” he says as he points to my forehead. “But it’s in there somewhere.”

“Good fucking luck to you, Doc,” I spit.

He smiles in reply. Confidence. “We found it, you know. Your little hiding place. I must say, quite the spectacle. Hidden in plain sight.”

I stare at him, confused.

“The hotel, Sloan. The place where you keep all your little secrets. While you’ve been restrained to that chair, meandering around your imaginary city, with a series of drugs dancing around your system, we’ve been searching for the code deep in your subconscious.”

Then it occurred to me. The footsteps. The open doors. The people chasing me.

Realization.

“That’s right, Sloan,” Galdini continues. “We need that code—the right one. We’ve only got one shot at it, and time is ticking.”

I stop myself from looking away. “Why do you want it? What’s it for?”

Galdini stands up without saying a word.

Heavy footfalls, the sound of crunching gravel. A man appears. He sits while Galdini takes up his spot behind the chair next to Kolton. The hierarchy. Each new person seems more important than the last. Or perhaps it was respect. Or, worse, fear.

The latest arrival's skin is dark, his eyes darker, his stare unnerving and angry. The overhead lights reflect off his dome. He crosses his legs, a dark Italian leather shoe bobbing to its own beat. He joins his hands and places them on the knee of his suit pants, his knee-length coat dangling down around him. Despite his seemingly lean frame, the room feels smaller, hotter.

I look him up and down, veer away from his eyes, exchange a quick glance with the suits who are standing. I finally rest my gaze on the silent man.

He leans forward, his elbows on his knees, hate in his eyes.

"Do you know how much trouble you're causing me?" The Devil asks.

Chapter 49

I SWALLOW. HARD. I know what he's capable of.

He pulls out a slim silver box from his coat pocket, extracts a cigarette, and lights it with a gold lighter, which pushes out an invisible flame. He takes a deep draw, the end of the stick glowing. He sits back, crosses his legs. I'm not sure if he's waiting for a response or if his question was rhetorical.

"The doctor here assures me he's close. I beg to differ. My preference is that we do this the old-fashioned way."

"Listen. If you can just tell me what the code is for, maybe it'll jog something."

The Devil turns to the doctor, who thinks about a reply before slowly nodding. He turns back around, his dark eyes even darker. "Very well then," he states. "Maybe you start with telling me what you remember."

"You instructed me to get some information from Taylor, a code for something. A program. Everything else is a blur, at best."

The Devil clears his throat, preparing to tell a story.

"There is a considerable amount of funds sitting in a secret offshore account. Money that belongs to some very dangerous people. People who are looking to take over."

"More dangerous than you?" I quip.

"Oh, it would surprise you what other people are capable of." He takes another long draw from his cigarette, followed by an expulsion of smoke to the ceiling as he looks me up and down. I'm not sure why. He flicks ash to the ground. "These people are looking to take over and see me disappear into a shallow grave or bottom of the ocean. Taylor, being an investment banker, has the code to their account. It should've been an easy task, Sloan. But then again, you aren't always an easy person to deal with."

"Yes, I'm getting that impression."

The Devil doesn't laugh, or smirk, or smile. "Time's running out, Sloan. Codes change every three days. We're playing in a very limited window. You have the code, and I want it from you, and I need it before people realize what we're doing here."

"I told you, I don't remember the code."

"And there you have it," he says. He throws the rest of his cigarette onto the ground and stomps on it. "We've come full circle. This is why we're here; this is what we're trying to do, this is what we now have to clean up. It should've been simple. You threaten the family, then stick them with Tilt10, and nobody remembers a damn thing. A perfect crime."

"So, in the house, what went wrong?"

"*You* went wrong!" he roars. "Just couldn't fucking contain yourself! Took matters into your own hands." His eyes narrowed. "And then to top it all off, you ran. Went into hiding. Covered your tracks. I don't know why, and to be honest with you, I don't really care. We found you, and now you're going to tell me the damn code."

He stands, encircles me, eyes burning a hole through me. I can feel the hatred.

He comes back into view. "And just so you know, since you've got something of mine, I've got something of yours. And believe me, if you don't give me what I'm after, you'll never see yours again in one piece."

He clicks his fingers and the wall to my left flashes. I realize the inset in the wall is a window to the next room. Bright fluorescent bulbs ignite, sending the dark space ablaze—so much so I have to turn my head away.

"Look, Sloan. See what we have for you. See what you've forced us to do."

I turn. I stop. My heartbeat rises to uncontrollable levels. I can't breathe. I can't think. Through the glass, in the room, tied to a chair, is Sonja. Stripped to her underwear and tied to a chair. Her chin

rests on her chest, her black and pink hair swaying gently in an unknown breeze. Then another person comes into view. He's shirtless and flaunts his muscular physique in the window before approaching Sonja.

"What the fuck is this?" I demand.

"This is what's on the line," The Devil says.

"I told you—I don't remember," I plead.

"Well you'd better try, because the clock is ticking."

The man grabs Sonja's hair and yanks her head to the side. She blinks lazily, drugged out, not fully conscious. He brings his hand down and silently connects with her face. He lets go, and her head returns to its resting position. The room goes dark.

"What the fuck is going on here? Stop this shit!"

I fight against the restraints. My muscles contract.

I am here for you.

"What's going on here," Galdini interjects, "is just what we need to make this work."

I look back to the window and begin to scream.

"Sonja! Sonja!"

I will protect her. Let me out.

"She can't hear you, Sloan," Galdini says. "Not now, not yet."

"Let her go. Please, I'll do anything you want! Just let her go!"

"Well, well," The Devil says. "I love the desperation. Did you hear that, Kolton?"

"Yes, sir, I did. Seems like we've struck a chord."

"Now, gentlemen, please." Galdini composes himself, steadies his glasses. "Now, Sloan. I would like to speak with Atlas."

"I...I...I don't know. I just don't know."

Galdini clears his throat. "Sloan, when I first met you, you introduced me to forty-seven personalities that inhabit you. Personas you created to keep you safe from the repetitive and sustained abuse by your caregivers. Distinct personalities to help you manage your life.

One abusive relationship with a guardian after another. You weren't safe anywhere. No one cared about you—not them, and certainly not the state. Some orphan in a cardboard box isn't worth the trouble.”

I remember it clearly. The yelling, the hitting, the even worse abuse. Anger rises, as it always does. Are you there?

I am here. I am ready.

“One of your identities is Atlas. Someone you created to tell you stories, to hide you from your miserable existence. I would like to speak with him now.” He claps his hands. “Come forward, Atlas.”

I remember now: they would hit me, slap me across my face, pull my pants down and spank me, for no other reason than that I was there. They called me “kid” so they wouldn't have to remember my name. “*You fuckin' stupid kid.*” “*What'd you do now, kid?*” “*Where's my fuckin watch, kid?*” When they drank too much or had a bad day, I ran. I hid. But they'd always find me. Pull me from my hiding place. I was their punching bag, their way of coping. They treated me like an animal. Even worse—you wouldn't do that to an animal.

Yes. I can feel it. I'm here.

“Come forward, Atlas!” More direct now.

I swallow it down and mumble something, my heart still pounding from seeing Sonja tied up and abused. I can't concentrate. I plead with my eyes; emotions are taking over. Having trouble keeping it all together.

The doctor shifts uneasily in his chair. He adjusts his glasses.

“I need you to try harder, Sloan. I only want to talk to Atlas. Find Atlas for me.”

I am here.

So am I.

I shut my eyes. Atlas, are you here, inside of me?

We are here.

We are all here.

Bad things are going to happen.

I open my eyes.

“Atlas?” Galdini checks.

I shake, then lower, my head. Failure.

“You understand what’s at stake, Sloan. View your precious Sonja in the other room.”

I turn slowly. The man is leaning over her, gently stroking her face. It makes me sick to know someone else is touching her. My rage is building. Kolton speaks into an intercom system in the wall. The man’s head picks up at the sound of his voice. As if on cue, he winds up and slaps her again, her head rocking. He grips her hair with one hand and with the other, unbuttons his pants.

“No!” I shout. “No!”

Then the lights go out.

I scream.

Let me out.

“Now, I would like to talk to Atlas.”

My chest heaves. I pull, I fight, I use every ounce of energy to break my binds. But I am caught, like a rabbit in a trap. I resign myself. My head is a swirl of terrible thoughts, and I can’t shake any of them. I think about what’s happening to Sonja, and I want to kill everyone in the room. Galdini, Kolton, The Devil; all of them.

Let me kill them.

I can feel *him* come to the surface.

I close my eyes, release my breath.

And wait.

Chapter 50

A COOL WIND SOFTLY whips around us, my senses full of the gentle crashing of waves and the sea breeze. I pick up a handful of dry sand and cup it over with my other hand to keep it from escaping. A wave breaks and sizzles over the fine powder, reaching my feet, my chinos getting wet in the process. But I don't care. Not here. Not now. The water is warm. I reach out and let the sand fall through my fingers into the water below. The particles sink, shifting and swirling as the tide pulls back out.

I look to my left. A soulless beach stretches out to the horizon. To my right is the same.

"How long can we stay here?" I ask.

"As long as you want," she replies.

I turn. Sonja is next to me. She is entangled with my arm; her head is on my shoulder. She is warm, yet weightless.

"Can we stay here forever?"

I look down at her. Purple strands of hair dance in the breeze over her blue eyes. Bluer than I've ever seen them. She smiles, then lifts her head and stares out to the horizon, beyond the white tips of the waves.

"Not forever. I don't think you would want that."

"If it's with you, I would. I would give it all for you."

"But you can't. It just can't be that way."

Silence consumes us. Comfortable. Soothing. Melodic.

I pick up grains of sand and toss them into the wash of the wave as it approaches.

"Do you know who the others are?"

Her head snaps to look at me. She bites her lip. "I'm glad you remember the others."

“That’s just it. I don’t. But I’ve heard them, heard their voices like they were standing right next to me. And I’ve felt them, as real as you are touching me now.”

“All of them?”

I look down. “Yeah, I guess. Too many to count, too hard to separate. Some stronger and louder than others.”

Her face softens. Relief? She’s perfect. More perfect than every grain of sand on the beach, more perfect than the breeze, than the waves, than the sun. I am lucky. Beyond lucky. I don’t know what I’ve done or endured that allows me to be with her, to soak in her presence, to drink in her stare.

“It’s never easy to explain,” she says. “They’re part of you. They *are* you, as much as you are them.”

I snicker. “Makes me sound like a crazy person.”

She looks at me, almost upset at the insinuation. “Don’t say that, don’t ever say that.” She nuzzles back into my shoulder. “They’re helpers. They have roles to play, like anyone. Listen to them.”

I look out to the horizon, coated in warmth. “How do I know if this is real? If anything is real?”

Her grip tightened. “Because I am here.”

I want to tell her I love her, to confess everything to her. But I let it go, not willing to ruin this perfect moment. All that matters is I am here with Sonja—safe, peaceful, free. I close my eyes, soaking it in, absorbing it.

Then, a jolt. Sonja is gripping my arm. Our eyes meet. Hers are wide, her mouth open. It looks like fear is erupting from every pore, with every fiber in her spasming.

“Can you feel that?” she gasps. Her heart is a jackhammer; I can feel it even though she isn’t leaning against me.

“What is it?” I ask.

She breathes heavily. “They’re coming. I can feel them.”

Water washes against us, then leaves us, as if the ocean had sucked it back in.

“What do you mean?”

Suddenly, a wave jolts out of the ocean, five stories tall. It holds its place, threatening to crash down on us. I keep it in my gaze, not daring to look away. It stares back, water running up its back and gushing over the edge to fall back down to the ocean. It moans. Threatens.

“What the hell is happening?”

No reply.

“Sonja?” I grasp for Sonja but grab nothing but air—she’s out of reach, beyond my hands.

Then, a scream. I turn to see two trench-coated men forcibly dragging Sonja across the sand, her feet making parallel tracks in her wake. She fights against her abductors and kicks wildly, flicking sand behind her. The men are already up to the dunes. *How could they grab Sonja without me noticing? And cover that distance in such a short time?*

The roar of the wave approaches, and I sprint toward her, the crash narrowly missing me as it pounds the beach, sending a spray of wet sand in all directions. It rains on my back like a blast from a sub-machine gun. I stumble forward, crashing face-first into warm sand. I can feel a heartbeat, as if the beach is alive. It’s telling me to get up. I scan the beach and see the three of them disappear over a dune.

I am on my feet and running, digging deep into the sand, looking for propulsion, but the sand bogs me down. I feel like I’m running on the same spot. I call out for Sonja. Then, more screams. Screeching tires. Car doors slamming. A gunshot. Then another one. Then one more.

Then, silence.

I call out again. But nothing.

I stop at the peak of the dune and look down.

Where the sand meets the pavement, a car with open doors awaits. Two men lie face down in its shadow, blood staining the pure sand grains around them. Sonja stands, her arm outstretched, her hand shaking. Gun shaking.

I run to her, and she drops into my arms. I ease her down and we sit awkwardly, our limbs jumbled. She gasps for breath.

“I’m sorry,” she pants.

“Sorry for what?”

“I wasn’t fast enough.”

“What are you talking about?”

She reaches up and gently touches my lips, then traces down my shirt, along the line of buttons. Then she stops, moving her hands to my side. A blotch of red on my white shirt, growing, soaking, marking. No pain, just release. Warmth.

“I’m sorry,” she says again. “I tried to protect you. We all did.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s okay.”

I lean my head back and stare at the blue, cloudless sky. She feels lighter. Or am I going numb? I look down. She is on me, holding me, waiting.

Then she disappears, her body dissolving into a billion sand particles that wash over me. It’s warm, a blanket covering me. Everything is silent. The waves crashing on the shore have been replaced with my heartbeat. The soft breeze replaced by my own breathing.

Light.

Dark.

Everything melds into a single frame.

I am all.

All is me.



I BLINK. AGAIN. AGAIN. I’m standing in the middle of the room. My chest is heaving. Sweat covers me. Then searing pain in my

side. I cringe and place a hand over it. I then notice two things: the straitjacket is hanging from one of my arms, and I'm holding a gun in the other.

My head follows suit. Explosions of light particles disrupt my vision, lighting up the dark cavern. I turn slowly, get my bearings, trying to understand where I am. Four concrete walls. A discolored metal grate.

The two chairs that were in the middle of the room lay scattered in the corners, upturned. It's like an explosion went off. Perhaps one did.

Slumped against a wall is Kolton. He has a pen sticking out from his eye socket, a trail of blood running down and connecting to a river flowing from his neck. He's holding a gun. Not regulation—smaller. A secondary firearm. There's a hole in his chest where blood and tissue have spewed over his shirt.

At the door is Galdini. He lies on his back, a shocked expression on his face. His glasses lay within arm's reach, the frames mangled, the lenses smashed into unrecognizable shards. He might have been reaching for them, or he might have just fallen into that position. Blood flows from his back and his head. I don't bother turning him over to find the source of his injuries. They are violent enough to have stopped him breathing, which is good enough for me.

Kolton, Galdini. No Devil. Which means he must have escaped. It also means he feared for his life. Fears me.

I don't know what happened—I just awoke among death and carnage, with what I assume to be a gunshot wound in my side. Hurts like hell. Hurts when I move, hurts when I breathe. How this came to be, how all this occurred, is a mystery to me. But I am alive, escaped my restraints, and fought my way out. Apparently. It seems I am capable of so much more.

Sonja! The thought explodes in the front of my mind, coming to me out of nowhere. I turn to the dark window. No movement,

nothing beyond that I can make out. I hobble for the door, gritting my way through spikes of pain, and made it out into the corridor. I glance left and right. Nothing. No one.

I move to the next door down, the one for the room where Sonja was being held. It's ajar, and the steel barrier swings freely on its heavy hinges. The room is dark, yet with the light from the corridor I can see it's empty, save the upturned chair where Sonja was being restrained. Grief turns to anger. There's no time for any other emotion except hatred.

I look back down the corridor and notice a trail of blood on the floor. Maybe belonging to Sonja, or it could be The Devil's. I hope it's the latter.

It had better be the latter.

Chapter 51

I HOBBLE DOWN THE CORRIDOR, one hand on the gun, the other applying pressure to my side. I should create a tourniquet; I could do a lot of things. But my preservation is second on the list to making sure Sonja is okay.

The burning pain is now numb but hate still billows within me. I used to be afraid of The Devil. Everyone was. I adhered to his every command, undertook his directives: kill the FBI agent. Get the code from Taylor at all costs. I remember the instruction, but never my actions—just the outcome. Death and mayhem.

Yes, I used to be afraid of him. But now things are different. He hurt Sonja, the only person I ever cared about, the only person who ever cared about me. If he was trying to make a point, he did. He just didn't count on me escaping from a straitjacket and killing Galdini and Kolton. Now, I am the hunter. Now, I am to be feared. He crossed the line from which there's no coming back. I will not forgive or forget.

I ease my way down to the T junction and note the blood trail veering off to the left. Holding the gun up, I peer around the corner. Dark and scratched elevator doors greet me at the end of a short, dim hallway. A single faint bulb at the end illuminates the elevator entrance. The darkened walls and floor are smeared with dried blood, evidence of patients trying to escape. But there is no escape. Not from down here. Unless you are dead. This is where I executed some of my orders from The Devil. Kidnap people, extract information, dispose of the body in the furnace.

I am now dragging my foot over the ground to mitigate the discomfort in my side. My breathing is shallower, the air colder than before. Time. Time is always against me, never in my favor. I press the elevator call button with the gun barrel and then wait, thinking of what I'll do when I catch up with them.

My gun is at the ready as the doors to my ride groan open. Empty. It's a large box big enough for a gurney. I can smell blood and fear. A smear of blood coats the top button. I press it. I initially thought he would run for it, make a beeline to the exit, with Sonja in a tight grasp, and drive away as fast as possible. But what would be the endgame? He still needs what's in my head. I guess this will end one of two ways.

My rattling journey ends with metallic clunks. A corridor yawns open before me. Overhead bulbs flicker and spasm. Light ripples, shadows dance. My ears ring, but it's eerily silent. Doors line the corridor, with small squares of plexiglass set in them at eyelevel. More drops of blood lead away to the exit at the end.

I shuffle down, pushing my shoulder into the double doors. They are heavy and protest loudly as I make a space big enough for me to squeeze my head through. Beyond is a similar scene to what's behind me. Lights are either flickering or dead. There are doors along the right-hand side. There is, however, a big space on the left—the cafeteria.

I squeeze through the gap and the pain in my side screams at me. I try to take deep breaths to quell the agony, but it feels like my lungs have shrunk. Short breaths now as I take in the area. Tables have been pushed up to one end of the room, chairs stacked on the other. The dispensary window is closed, shut, locked. I lean against the entry frame, thinking about what I saw here just the other night. A cast of characters sitting around the table.

Warmth. I can feel it coat my fingers on my side. I move my hand away and bend over slightly to inspect the damage.

A sudden rush of wind and explosive crack above my head—where my head used to be—arrests my attention, echoes in my ears. I look up instinctively. A figure lurks in the shadows of the cafeteria, his arms raised. Santiago? Jeans, boots, dark T-shirt. I raise

my weapon and squeeze instinctively. A return gunshot at the same time.

A sizzle. Flesh burning.

For a moment, I'm stuck. My mind is active, but nothing registers. I try to move, but I can't. Then, ever so slowly, my muscles twitch and seize. Heat works its way up my chest and over my back. My legs are tired, my arms tense. I squeeze off two more rounds, and they sound like they're in slow motion. I can hear the air break as they fly. The scene in front of me is static, like a portrait. Dust falls.

And then the ground is rushing up at me. I fall heavily, awkwardly, like a sack of potatoes, with nothing to break my landing. Cold, hard. A blanket of a thousand needles covers my body. My side is agony. I lie there, my cheek against the dirt, and let it all pass. After a few minutes, I position my hands in front of me and lift my head up. I look for Santiago and see the soles of his boots, the rest of his body hidden by perspective.

Shuffling. Military boots come into view.

"Goddamn," he says. "You're a real pain in the fucking arse."

I cough, then groan. "Fuck you, Darnell."

He crouches down, puts his gun barrel under my chin and coaxes my head up. "Do you know how tempted I am to pull this damn trigger?"

"Do us both a favor and do it."

"Yeah, the boss will like that one!"

"Fuck him...fuck the code. He's not getting that money."

More laughter. "You still think this is about money?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Forget about it. Now, get your arse up."

"Yeah, you just forgot one thing."

He sighs. "What?"

I pull the trigger. The bullet tears through his boot. I hear the fibers break and rip, hear the hot tip break the skin, see the blood

spurt hurtle toward me like a wave. Darnell roars, pulls away, but not before the bullet creates carnage.

I roll onto my back, tilt my head, and take aim. Darnell comes into view, just for a second, and that's as long as I need. His head disappears in red mist.

Cold. Sweat. Shallow.

Standing is difficult. My body doesn't feel like my own. Yet I stagger over to the double doors. One of them is open enough for me to push through with little effort.

Another corridor. More doors, but these are different. A scream radiates from behind one of them. I follow the trail once more. I work my way to a door, white in the pale corridor, dimming overhead lights. The plaque, clear black letters on a silver backing, denotes it as Galdini's office. One thing on my mind, one thought. One action to finish this.

Another scream. I can't feel my hands, can't loosen the grip on the gun. My feet are numb. It feels like I'm ice skating. Then the edges of my vision, blur, then darken. The abyss closes in around me.

And it sucks me under.

Chapter 52

I STAND AT THE DOOR, uncertain of what to do. Everything feels so familiar, yet so foreign, kind of like that horizon between being asleep and awake. My body hurts, and I don't know why. I look down at the gash in my side. Not sure how I got it. I poke at it and flinch. That's when I see the gun in my other hand.

It's happened again. And not the first time. Sometimes I could be drinking coffee in a café, or driving in my car, or sitting on the beach, and the next thing I know I'm surrounded by nameless bodies, and I'm holding a weapon. It's a far cry away from the safety and security of a keyboard, but I've learned the best thing to do is to go with it. Don't question it, don't try to understand it, just let it happen. Let it play out.

The light overhead flickers, shining a dull glow over the melancholy grey door. Between the black graffiti tags I can see dark spots resulting from decades of water damage. There is a muted silver plaque on the door, but the letters have been lost to time. The handle is missing, leaving a hole in its absence, and meaning the door is slightly ajar. It gently rocks and the hinges complain, emitting an intermittent creak.

I push it open with the gun barrel and stumble inside. My vision alternates between worlds. One second, there is an inferno in the fireplace creating a warm luminance over the room. Leather-bound books line the walls. Armchairs surround a leather couch that's resting on an oriental rug. A desk, at the other end of the room is stacked high with papers and files.

I blink, and then it's dank and gray and cold. Dirt and dust cover every surface. The bookshelves are mostly empty, save for a few editions that lay sideways, their titles all but worn away. Most of the windows are broken, with holes about the size of a brick allowing cold air to billow through. Faded paper and leaves cover the floor.

I squeeze my eyes shut and fall against the doorframe for support as the scene continues to alternate.

“Missing your medication?” A voice booms out.

They stand there, appearing from the ether, dark figures out the darker shadows. He grasps Sonja in front of him with one hand, holds a gun against her head with the other.

“Help me,” she gasps, her eyes pleading with me.

Breath catches in my throat. I blink. Again. And again. Make sure it’s real. I step toward her.

“That’s close enough,” he broadcasts.

I stop in my tracks. Deep breath. Squeeze my fists. Almost unload a round into my foot.

He eyes me curiously, assesses my features, notes the gun in my hand. “Who am I talking to? Sloan? Jason? One of the others?”

“Fuck you, Levi. Where the hell am I? What have you done to me?”

He doesn’t answer my question. Maybe he can’t. Maybe he won’t. I shift my eye contact to Sonja.

“You okay, Sonja?”

Her eyes droop, her mouth turns downward. A single tear runs down her cheek.

“Help me. Please!” she repeats.

Her words, along with the look on her face, drive into me like a knife. I want to cry.

“It’s okay, Sonja. Everything is going to be okay.” I lied. Nothing about this is going to be okay. “I love you.”

“Ah, it’s you, Jason,” he says. “A dead giveaway.”

Sonja squirms against Levi’s unrelenting grip but she doesn’t respond to me. “I’ll do anything you want,” she says. I’m not sure who she’s speaking to.

Our eyes lock, and I am lost in her. I want to reach for her, to run away from this place. To fall into the abyss with her. I would die for her. Maybe I will.

She squirms again and Levi groans and grimaces. I notice the dark patch on his side.

“You should get that looked at,” I say.

He bares his teeth. “Through and through,” he huffs. “I’ll be just fine. Where’s my men, Jason? Doctor Galdini, Kolton? Are they dead? What about Darnell and Santiago? Did you kill them as well?”

I look down at the gun in my hand and shrug in reply. “Maybe. I’m not sure. No one’s told me yet.” I lift the gun, breath in the complex aroma of a fired weapon, unfortunately familiar. “Probably.”

“God damn it. The shit just follows you everywhere, doesn’t it, Jason? And now you’ve dragged Sonja here into your mess. If you had just given me what I wanted, I wouldn’t have to go to these extremes. I damn well told you that when we met not to fuck with me. You remember those old people in diner, Jason? What I did to them?”

How could I forget? “You’re an animal, Levi. A twisted fuck!” As I say these words it feels a little hypocritical, based on what I was capable of, given who I am.

Levi responds, breaking my train of thought.

“If you had just done what I wanted the *first* time, that old couple would still be alive, enjoying their retirement. It’s your fault, Jason. Don’t forget that. And if you’re not careful, Sonja is going to end up the same way.”

I point the firearm in Levi’s direction. “Don’t you fucking hurt her, Levi. Or so help me, God.”

It seems like a damn dangerous thing to do—irresponsible, even—given his head is such a small target next to someone I love. Given I’ve never fired a gun before—not me, anyhow.

He smirks. “I know you, Jason, all of you. You’re not going to pull that trigger because you don’t have the guts. That’s why we chose

you. When we caught you hacking into all those online casinos and managed funds, along with your medical records and personal history, we knew we had come across the perfect storm. You had the skills to do the job, the credibility of a guilty priest, and the motivation to keep your ass out of prison.”

“But then I found out who you really were and what you were really after. I had no choice but to run.”

“Well, now you have a choice.” He pushes the barrel hard against Sonja’s head. “Do you know how much trouble you’ve caused me in trying to get that damn code? It’s difficult, you know, pulling off this shit. Once we found you in that little dump of a hotel, all we had to do was pump some Tilt10 into you and let you talk. And man, we couldn’t shut you up. Just couldn’t get you to say the one damn thing we need! And now look at this mess. All the bodies.”

I thought Sonja would’ve been better off without me. Safer. But I was wrong. Very wrong. Now she’s just leverage.

I shake my head. “Fuck you, Levi! You’re not getting your hands on the code.”

He presses the gun harder against her head. “Do you want to check with Sonja first? Do you think she agrees with that analysis? We won’t stop, Jason. We will get it. You believe me, right? That we’ll do anything? You remember those old people from the diner?”

How can I ever forget? “You’re a god damn animal, Levi. Twisted Fuck!”

“If you had just done what I wanted the *first* time, they would still be alive. It’s your fault, Jason. Don’t forget that.”

The gun is heavy; I can feel it pull my arm down. It shakes a little. I run through the options in my mind, try to find a way out of this mess.

“Stop it, Jason,” Levi says. “I know what you’re thinking. There’s no way out.”

“So, what do you want to do? How do you think this is going to pan out?”

“Shit, I don’t know. It’s a genuine Mexican standoff situation. How long are you willing to stand here for?”

“As long as it takes.” The gun shakes a little more.

“The Senators will be here soon. Isabelle and Grant. They’re going to want answers, they expect results. They made that clear to you. And I tell you something, I’m not going to be the one who lets them down. They want that code, they need the code. If they get here and this isn’t sorted, all of us are in for a world of hurt.”

“I’m not scared of them, not anymore.”

“You should be!”

“I’ve taken precautions, just in case things went to shit... which they have.”

“Oh, you mean Olivia Barr?”

I stop breathing. He knows.

“Forget her,” he continued. “She’s gone—long gone—along with all the evidence you sent her.”

“But...How did you...”

“It’s over. There’s not going to be an investigation, there is no cavalry coming to your rescue. You’ve got nothing, Jason. Nothing and no one. Why not just give us what we need?”

I flick my eyes to Sonja.

“I’ve still got something,” I say solemnly.

“Oh, Jason. Listen, she doesn’t love you, whatever you may think.” He tightens his grasp on her and she groans. Anguish. “I mean, how could she? Someone like you!”

I look at her.

“He’s lying,” she huffed. “I love you. Just get me out of here.”

Couldn’t tell if it was true or not. Fewer options now. I raise the gun and point it at my head. The barrel feels strangely at home there. I cock the weapon.

“No!” Sonja screams. I couldn’t tell if it was anguish or desperation.

“Woah, woah, woah, big guy,” Levi says. “No need for that. Just take it easy.”

“Why? It solves so many problems. It stops anyone getting the code. It stops the voices; gets rid of the things I’ve seen. Stops thinking about the things I’ve done. It’s like wiping a hard drive, starting over.”

“But you wouldn’t be starting over now, would you?”

“Maybe not, not me anyway. But maybe there’s a chance for someone else.” I look at Sonja. Tears stream down her red cheeks. She sobs. Levi fights to keep her up, to bolster her weak knees.

I begin to squeeze the trigger. The amount of times I’ve been here, in this exact situation, with my life in the balance. I would hate the world, loathe my parents, lament the past. Look for a way out. Then *they* would come, the chatter, and the world would disappear, fade to black. And I thought it was done. But each time, it wasn’t. I would wake. A different time, a different place, and bad things would happen. But not this time. Not this time.

“Stop!” Levi yells. “Just stop. Fuck, Jason. What’s it going to take? What do I need to do to get that code?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. It’s too dangerous. You can’t do that to people, innocent people.”

“What the fuck do you care about people?” he shoots back. “People have done nothing but beat you down, tear you apart, break you. And now you want to protect them?”

“It’s just not right.”

“Listen to you, standing on your soapbox. How the fuck do you know what’s right? You think killing yourself is going to somehow clean your soul of everything you’ve done?”

I think about it. The bodies. The blood.

“Shit,” Levi spouts. “You’re fucking unstable, Jason. You need help. Real help. Let us help you.”

“No. This is better for me, better for everyone around me.”

“You think you’re doing the noble gesture here?” he retorts. “You pull that trigger, and I make sure Sonja suffers!”

I hold the trigger in place. Maybe it didn’t matter now.

Levi smirks. “Who are you really helping here, huh?”

We’re here, Jason.

We can help you.

Yes, let us help you.

You don’t need to do this.

We can find a way out.

Together.

All of us.

Together.

I squeeze my skull between my hand and the barrel, between life and death. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away.

“Shut up,” I plead. “Just leave me alone.”

Let me help you.

I can protect you.

We all can.

Let us.

Yes, let us.

I squeeze my eyes shut, will myself to do it, and squeeze the trigger. End it all.

Barked words disappear into the concoction of all the other voices in my head. Layers upon layers. Drowning in the audio. I can’t breathe. I hear Levi. I hear Sonja. I hear Jet. I hear Sloan. I hear Atlas. I hear Talon. I hear Stone. I hear Tessa. I hear Elton. I hear Tealson. I hear them all. All of them. I am them. They are me.

I open my eyes.

Silence.

In that second.

That millisecond.

Peace.

Chaos.

Serenity.

Panic.

Love.

Hate.

Light.

Dark.

Life.

...

It's getting dark. So very dark. It has to be this way.

...

Boom!

...

Then Death comes for the spoils.

Epilogue

LIGHT—BLINDING. PURE.

I cover my eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun cutting in through the window. Air gushes into the vehicle through an open window. There is static. White noise. The radio is seeking a signal. Snippets of sound over flowing wind and the soothing, constant whir of an engine. Louder and softer. Finally, a station's airwaves come through clearly.

“Police are investigating after four bodies were found at the old Brennan Fields Psychiatric Facility. They were alerted to the scene following an anonymous phone call reporting multiple gunshots at the abandoned hospital. Detectives remain at the scene; however, they have been unable to identify the bodies. For more on this story...”

More static. Music. Drums. Guitar. Acoustic. Melody. Harmony. Off.

“You awake back there?”

I grunt.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” she says.

She turns to look at me, then does a double take. “Come on, you. Get up here. You’re missing the view.”

I crawl over the middle console and ease into my seat. To my right, snow-capped peaks pierce an impossibly blue sky. To my left, past her, a picket fence of palm trees passes by in a blur. Beyond that, white waves crash and leave their marks on a white beach, creating the barrier between dry sand and the ocean. In front of us, a deserted highway disappears into the distance, swallowed by tomorrow.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “For everything.”

“You have to stop saying that.” I look out the window. “It seems like it all worked out in the end.”

I look down at my hands. “How...how did we get here? I mean, I don’t remember.”

Silence.

Then she says, "We'll talk all about it when we get there. There's a lot that happened."

I nod. "How long before we get there?"

"Soon. I think."

"And then beaches and palm trees?" I ask.

"And margaritas. And more than you could ever imagine."

Letting that sink in, I close my eyes, enjoying the breeze, the warmth on my arm resting on the windowsill.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, breaking the comfortable silence.

"Great. It's so damn peaceful here. I just hope it stays this way."

"Do you think it will? Is it over?" Trepidation.

I'm not sure what she wants to hear. I hope it is. But who can tell? At this stage, it's not about telling the truth; it's about giving the right answer.

I smile. "Yeah, it's over."

She reaches out a hand, and I grab it. I squeeze, hard. There's a future for us. A fresh start.

I never want to let her go.

Ever.

Outside, the landscape races by in an easy blur.

I peer into the side mirror.

Stop breathing.

"Hey," I say, staring at the reflection. "Remember, how you asked if it was over?" I look over to her.

She glances to me and registers the expression on my face. Smile drops. Checks the rear vision mirror and swears.

Grips the gear lever, down shifts, and piles on the gas.

Sometimes, what we want and what we get are two different things.

Acknowledgements

TBD

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About the Author

Writing for over a decade but just getting into self-publishing, I enjoy any story that makes me second guess what the hell is going on. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MC-ing conferences, and keynote speaking all over Australia.

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