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PATIENTZERO

by Laura Hilliger

## CHAPTER ONE

### Chapter 1

I'm laying in a hospital bed after an emergency tonsillectomy. As a child, having your tonsils removed is no big deal, but as an adult it's a bit of a shit storm. When I came in, it was almost too late, an abscess on my right tonsil was infected with some sort of plague. It was eating quickly into my lymph nodes, and the doctors figured the best thing to do was cut it out. Fast. I was fully conscious when I signed the form. Ten minutes later I was in a hospital gown and parked in a yellow hallway. The scrub nurse asked me when I had last eaten.

"Two days ago," I wasn't lying, I had been forgetting to eat lately, and my ribcage was evidence.

"Well, usually that is not such a good thing, but at the moment, that's quite convenient. I'm just going to put this

butterfly needle into your hand, look away, ok?" I didn't look away. I never look away from needles. I like needles. I like what it means if you have a needle being put into one of your veins. It means drugs are coming. Some sort of external medication will be flowing into you shortly. At that moment, I knew it would be surgical grade narcotics. I was already dreaming of opiates.

The nurse pushed me down the hall into the operating room. Other nurses hooked me up to electrodes. I said "I'm a computer person, I quite like all of these cables." No one laughed.

"We're all set," one of the nurses said to the surgeon.

He looked at me, "Are you ready?"

"Do I have a choice?" Again, no laughter.

"Goodnight sweet lady," the nurse said as he pushed the drugs into me. I didn't want to sleep. The narcotics washed over me and I felt that feeling of relief I hadn't felt in years. That thick, warm blanket of opiates. That trusted numbness. I didn't want to sleep.

"Wow, most people would be out by now," I heard echo through the chamber that used to hold my brain.

"Should we give her more?"

"No, she'll go, just give it a minute." And then that minute came.

When I woke up, four scrub nurses were watching over me in the "Wake Up Room". I had read the name of the room while I was parked in the yellow hallway. I thought it showed lack of creativity. The nurses weren't watching over me so much as standing next to me. I was just another patient. Just floating through. I would be taken to the recovery ward soon, no connections to be made. They were younger than I was, I'm sure of it. I was groggy.

"Welcome back," said the only female. She had red hair and a nice round, plump face. She wasn't plump, just her childish cheeks. She felt alone there, always having to play with the boys. I wanted her to like me.

"I don't feel quite right."

"On a scale of one to ten, ten being the most severe, how's you're pain level?"

"8 and a half," I was lying. My pain level was much less, but I wanted more drugs. I like hospital grade opiates, and I'd stopped using drugs recreationally, so this was sort of a free for all. I got to take drugs and not feel guilty about it. A little white lie so that I could get rid of the pain and enjoy myself wasn't a bad thing. Not in my opinion. She wrote it down on her pad and then switched out the narcotics bottle flowing into my butterfly needle. I felt the surge immediately. I tried not to smile.

I floated in and out of consciousness for a while, and then they took me upstairs to the Recovery Ward.

Now I'm here. I've been here for five days. They don't want to let me out until the biopsy comes back. They haven't seen that sort of self mutilating cell before. They don't know if I'm contagious. They don't know if it's elsewhere in my body.

About six people have visited me from work, but no one I really like. They all brought cheesy "Get Well Soon!" cards. I always wondered about the exclamation point at the end of "Get Well Soon". Did someone think that that little marker of enthusiasm would facilitate in the curing of what ails? I can understand it on a birthday card, I guess. For some reason those cards are really bothering me.

I've been having a lot of tests. The nurse comes in and says something cryptic, which I don't understand. She then puts a needle in my belly and injects me with something. I've been getting meds every two hours. After the surgery, the meds were good. I got high. But now they've become rather boring. They switched from the fun drugs to the standard ones, and I'm anxious to leave. Yesterday I asked if I could leave.

Two nights ago, I coughed up blood. A lot of blood. I spit it into a paper towel for a while before informing a nurse. I wanted to choke on my own blood. I'd never done that

before. Even when I'd gotten into fights, my opponents always stopped beating me up before I had to choke on my own blood. I sat up in my bed feeling a long thread of bloody mucus tickling the back of my throat. In the seconds between bouts of coughing, I could feel that thread vibrating. It was such a curious feeling. When I informed the nurse and showed her handfuls of bloody paper towels, she asked me why I didn't use my call button. That was her reaction. "Why didn't you use your call button?"

Blood was dripping from my chin. There was blood in my mouth. My hospital issued pajamas were splattered like Jeffery Dahmer's basement. The nurse acted like she didn't even notice. She just cleaned me up, inserted a new butterfly needle, and called the doctor who had done my surgery.

The scabs make my mouth taste like old cheese. I've coughed up a few of them. Greenish-yellow patches of goo that slither into the drain when I spit them into the sink. I've been spitting a lot lately, my saliva slithers like the scabs. Slow at first and then when it hits the drain the weight of the matter already pulled in causes the back part of the goo to move more quickly.

I don't eat much, but it doesn't mean that I'm not hungry. The hospital brings me trays of saltless food. Today I have three pieces of stale bread, a single serving of butter,

strawberry jelly, some hazelnut paste and a bit of liverwurst. I hate meat paste. Spreadable meat of any kind makes me want to vomit. I take the liverwurst and squish it onto the underside of the bed. I smile when I think of it rotting there. It will take them forever to figure out what's rotting. It's a hospital, everything smells like rot.

There's a knock on the door. "Come in," I mumble as my mouth is filled with bread. I've used half the butter and half the strawberry jam. It's still a challenge to open my mouth, so I have to slide the bread in at a perfect angle to get it through the hole.

"The chief doctor would like to see you now," the nurse informs me.

I walk to the front office, where the doctor is checking over the patients in his wing. This is the ear, nose, and throat section. This is where they cut off ears and noses and slice people's throats open.

There's an infant with half a nose. His twin brother looks fine. As the nurse passes she looks in, "How's the little guy doing?" The parents smile, they don't look concerned. But their kid looks like his nose got bitten off by a rabid squirrel. He'll never look normal. Even with a fake nose, the kid is doomed to a life of second looks. Those fucking parents don't even care, they're smiling about it.

"Miss? The doctor will see you now."

I walk into the doctors office. He has two examining chairs. Why? He can't look at two people at the same time. Everything is clean and symmetrical.

"Yesterday you begged to leave," he says, as if he had been there.

"Yes, I'm sick of this place, I want out now."

"You can't leave until we find out if whatever it was in your tonsil has spread into your body. We hope we got it, but we can't be sure until the biopsy comes back. We took as much of the tissue as we could."

"Well, you can send me the results, I can return if it's not gone."

"Yes, well the problem is, we don't know if you are contagious."

"Has anyone here gotten sick?"

"No, but we don't know how long you carried the virus before you got sick."

"Yes, so doesn't it stand to reason, that I could have been carrying it for years and the whole fucking world is already sick and keeping me here is useless any damn way?"

"We can't let you go." Of course they can't. It's always the same with authorities. They have their rules to follow, and none of them are rule breakers. They do what they are



supposed to do whether it negates rhyme or reason or otherwise. I am not a fan of authority.

"Well, let's take a look at least, see how you're healing," the doctor presses his metal tongue depressor onto my tongue, "just relax," he tells me. "Did you have carrots for dinner?"

I'm surprised at the question. Yes, I had had carrots for dinner, but how could he possibly know that?

"Uh...yes..." I answer, questioningly, expecting an elaboration from him.

"Just a little stuck there," he smiles at me. I try not to laugh, but imagine how disgusting it must be to look down a patients throat and see not only the nearly liquid scabs from surgery, but also food stuck in those scabs. Food from yesterday, food from last night. The scab growing around the food.

The doctor takes a small vacuum from his toolkit and sucks out the carrot. He pulls the tiny vacuum out of my mouth with the carrot still stuck to it.

"I'm so sorry!" I sputter, but the doctor just waves the apology away. I'm annoyed at his reaction. I've apologized, I want vindication that that was the right thing to do. Why wasn't he revolted by what had just happened?

"Don't worry about it, those scabs get sticky. Your

wounds look good, but you'll have to stay until the biopsy comes back, for your own good."

"And how long might that be?"

"Not more than a couple of weeks." Inside, I flip out, start yelling about this not being prison and such, but my visible reaction is a simple nod. I have no intention of staying here for two more days, let alone two more weeks.

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I don't really have any family, but I have friends. I have a home and pets and a job. I have a pretty typical, every day kind of life. But lately, I've been thinking about escaping. As if I am trapped.

There's just something about the work-a-day world that has been getting to me lately. Everyone has been walking around as if their lives are carved into stone. It's been a long time since I've seen anyone make a brash decision. Everyone does what they're told. I hate that about the world.

I was on a business trip in Bangkok when I first noticed the abscess. My right lymph-node was swollen after a presentation at one of the big Asian technology conventions. We were in town presenting a white paper on sustainable business, that was our cover story anyway. I was really hijacking the speech and presenting our solution to the corporate overtake of the World Wide Web.

I work for a company called Onyx. To the public, we present ourselves as a technology research firm looking into augmented reality, touch technology, and geo-locative identity mapping. We don't actually do any of those things. The CEO, Jacob Sunnard, had been a guerrilla marketer and a punk in his previous life. He fell in love with communication, the very human act of communication. He'd started Onyx to protect the people from the online hijacking of their communications and data. Onyx makes money as a consulting firm. We do underground consulting for underground organizations trying to make a difference in the world of technology. If Jacob agrees with the politics of an organization, we'll get involved.

Onyx approaches organizations that would benefit from our particular expertise and be accepting of our particular methods. No organization has ever turned us away. Ever. We'll help with online security, audience acquisition, targeted campaigning, and various MNBL ("might not be legal") activities.

We also go around to conferences and talked about the "thievery of mind" or the "capitalization of the soul" because Jacob likes messing with people. Onyx has six employees whose sole job is to write and submit white papers to conferences. Once a paper is accepted, the rest of us research the attendees of the conference and work out which of our messages

will make them the most uncomfortable.

I love my work. It allows me to pretend that I'm an activist. Lately though, I feel like I don't make a difference at all.

I was in Bangkok with my colleague, Dan, a short, dumpy party guy. His receding hairline and bargain basement clothes were oblivious to him. He was an arrogant, psychotic son-of-a-bitch and one of the only people in our office I could stand. Other than Dan, Jacob and Eric, I didn't really like my colleagues. It's not that they weren't nice. Most of them were nice, but they were also way too politically correct. They were always looking around before they said anything even slightly off color. Their humor was lacking, and I found myself having to curb my speech. Dan just didn't give a fuck. He was good at his job, and he had fun with his life. Everyone in the office considered him the drunkard, the village idiot. But he got shit done.

We got to Bangkok the same day I got a visit from Aunt Flo. That's always happening to me. I go away, and I get my period or I get sick, and I spend my time noting where the bathrooms are and looking for drug stores. The night before my presentation I had cramps. Really bad cramps. I went wandering about looking for a pharmacy instead of practicing and polishing my presentation.

I'd given versions of this presentation several times before, so I wasn't really worried about embarrassing myself. I just happen to suffer from a little bit of performance anxiety, and when I give a presentation I wanted to "be on rails". I'd learned about being on rails from my last lover. Our relationship last three hours. He said you just say your speech out loud ten times, and then you'll "be on rails", unable to be sidetracked from your purpose.

The next morning the cramps were better thanks to a very nice young lady at the pharmacy who knew exactly which pill to give me. I awoke feeling pretty good about myself. I put on a dress and my new suit jacket and made myself look respectable.

Dan and I took a cab to the convention.

"You look rested, nice dress."

"Yeah, this is my 'look-at-me-I'm-all-grown-up' outfit."

"I'm pretty glad they decided to send you instead of that stuck up bitch June Kim. She is totally not fun. Buzz killlll," Dan had a cappuccino in one hand and his smartphone in the other. "Did you see that story about the baby goats in Seattle?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, dude. They found a bunch of abandoned baby goats walked around in some ritzy suburb. They were all starving and whatnot."

"Why does this matter?"

"They. Found. Baby. Goats. Wandering. Around. In. A. Fucking. Suburb!" Dan speaking was like watching game shows on television. He was always animated, very gestural. His mannerisms reminded me of epilepsy, "It's pandemonium out there. The people are going nuts."

I had the feeling we were going to get into a deep economic discussion if I didn't change the subject.

"You know that guy who works in management, Eric?" Dan knew who I was asking about, the three of us had hid from Random Coworker's retirement party a couple months ago. We'd slipped into the handicap bathroom on the second floor and smoked a spliff. We had briefly considered going back to the party so that we could have some cake, but changed our minds after realizing that we were all bonkers high. Ever since then, Eric and I have been exchanging this look.

"Yeah, I like that guy. A couple days ago, I saw him spill soup on his crotch and totally just not give a shit."

"Exactly, well he told me to find this guy, Scott Spencer. He was like 'Tell him you're friends with me, then tell him you're really good friends with Jacob. Be effusive about your like for me in particular. He hates us both. It'll amuse me to hear about your interaction.'"

"That guy is fucking cool."

"I know, you gotta help me find this Scott Spencer guy. If he hates Eric and Jacob, we can probably make him hate us too."

"That sounds like a fun game."

As we pulled up to the convention center, Dan pulled out a mini flask. "It's just two swigs, but it's enough to calm the jitters."

I tossed back the flask, at nine in the morning. "Thanks," I said after waiting for the last drop to glide from the rim and fall into my mouth.

"Asshole, I wanted the second one."

The first couple of hours, we just schmoozed around. I did the networking thing, talked about our mission statement, explained our current projects and markets. I made up thirty different lies, and no one knew the difference. Part of my job was just to talk people into corners. I'd gotten pretty good at it over the years. Really, it's all about reading people. Everyone has their nuances, their tells, that are ready to be exploited.

To get a job at Onyx, you have to be more than meets the eye. All interviewees have an interview with HR, and those that fulfill the basic requirements go to Jacob's house for dinner. It is part of the interview process. Jacob uses that dinner to get an idea about your character. Basically, he gets

you drunk on expensive wine and then talks to you about any and everything that comes into his head. Your conversational skills, sarcasm, irony, wit, ability to hold your alcohol – these things are on display, and Jacob makes an assessment of your character based on that one evening. Afterwards, there's another interview with Jacob's right-hand man, Eric. Eric never interviewed me though. Jacob hired me twenty minutes after I arrived at his house.

Everyone had on name tags, so Dan and I branched out to look for Scott. I found him at the OmniGreen Technology booth. Scott stood as if he wear balancing his asshole just above a poison tipped spear. His crisp suit, cufflinks, and penny loafers led me to believe he wasn't interested in OmniGreen's efforts to recycle old hardware and build robots that would tend to our agricultural needs. I texted Dan our location.

As I eavesdropped on the conversation, I listened to Scott sarcastically explain to the OmniGreen people what a "scrapyard artist" was and how fucking stupid they are. Before he could cause those poor hippies to cry, I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hi, Scott Spencer?"

"Well, hello missy. How can Scott be of service to," he grabbed my name tag, "Ms. Maggie Lawson?" He was undressing me with his eyes and his tongue was hanging out of his mouth.



"Oh, I work with Jacob Sunnard and Eric Murphy over at Onyx. They were talking about the AR company you're on the board of, and I was just looking to hear some more. You know Jacob and Eric? They're great guys."

Dan slid in beside me, picking up the thread. "Hey Maggie, were you just talking about Jacob and Eric? I just watched Jacob's SARDAN 2011 webinar. He's so brilliant."

"Yes, I was just telling Scott here how much I like them. I heard Eric was responsible for getting gaming consoles in all our conference rooms."

Scott studied Dan and me for a moment, and then his vacant look brightened a little. "Oh yes, Jacob and Eric. I haven't seen them in ages. Did Eric get demoted yet for being a dumb ass?" Dan and I look at each other, trying hard not to smile. "No, but seriously! Both of them are just the cat's meow. What are you? Their fucking fan club?"

"No, no. They're just, you know, cool is all. They were talking about the new augmented contact lens you guys are creating. All of us were talking about changing our eyes to be that scary violet color from Children of the Corn."

"That's the kind of stuff you talk about over at Onyx. I mean, I knew you guys were weird, but come on!"

Dan had a new coffee in his hand. It must have been his forth one already, and it was only ten-thirty. "Oh, Scott.

We're just happy to work for an organization that has more than three weeks vacation a year, and healthcare that takes care of our health. Nice scarf, by the way."

"Anyway," I broke in, "I just wanted to let you know that we, and by we I mean mainly me and Eric, are really excited about the developments," I knew that Scott Spencer and his company weren't any closer to solving the spatial issues inherent in the project than anyone else.

"Well, yes, we're definitely lightyears ahead of the competition," in Scott's mind, Onyx was the competition.

"Ok. Well. It certainly was nice meeting you, shall I tell Eric and Jacob you said 'hi'?"

"Oh, yes absolutely you should. Just give them a big ol' hug from me," Scott smirked and walked away.

"Wait, are you serious!?" I yelled out after him. It wasn't a brilliant interaction by far, but the mention of Eric had certainly changed Scott's demeanor. Still, I dreaded calling Eric and telling him it was an anti climatic exchange.

When the keynote started after lunch, I was already ready to leave. There were three people speaking before me. I just sort of zoned out for all of their presentations. There were too many interesting characters in the room to look at. I felt like I was watching a Discovery Channel special on dork fashion. After my presentation, Dan came over and handed me a

celebratory Mai Tai. They didn't even have a bar at the convention.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Don't worry about it, I got it from someone who knows that these conventions are fucking boring."

"Someone you know?"

"That guy, over there," Dan pointed to a tall Asian fellow with a suspiciously large backpack. "He's the party brigade."

I studied the guy for a moment. Then I took a big swing of the drink. It was delicious. Dan and I got wasted sucking down Backpack Mai Tais. When Dan's wasted, he gets belligerent. He started telling people how boring and common they were. At some point a security guard tried to throw us out. Dan just laughed and said, "Yeah, you want us to leave? Face!" and then turned around and walked back into the crowd.

After Dan had successfully pissed off every one he came into contact with, we decided we should head down to the Blue Elephant for something a little stiffer than a Mai Tai. Dan was more than laced, and I was well on my way to being too fucked up to stand. At three am, Dan was facedown on a dance floor, and I was trying to convince the club bouncer that he didn't need to call the cops. I had to drag Dan outside and throw him into a cab.

When we got back to the hotel, Dan and I stumbled into the elevator. The cab ride had sobered him up enough to fall into walls. Dan slept next to my room in the hallway, and I slept with my head in the toilet. A few hours later, Dan pounded on the door and we both moved to the bed. We started making out, and eventually had awkward, drunk, disgusting sex. I remember waiting for it to be over, but kind of into it at the same time. Afterwards, we both passed out.

When I awoke, Dan was missing, and I had this horrible pain in my throat accompanying the after-drinking-shame. I thought the sore throat was just a remnant from smoking, drinking, and talking too much. I felt like shit, but was supposed to be meeting and greeting some people at the convention. I was already extremely late.

After a thorough shower, I decided to walk to the convention center. It was about a thirty minute walk, but I needed coffee and a bit of time to collect myself. Dan was nowhere to be found.

As I walked through the streets of Bangkok, I wasn't registering any of the things going on around me. I had a single focus: Don't get fired for being a drunken idiot. I wasn't even completely sure if anyone knew I wasn't doing my job at the moment. I didn't know what was going on, I was still wasted. I finally found a coffee three blocks from the

convention center and quickly sucked it down. Then I stood there in front of the café and put on my happy face.

As the day progressed, my throat started to feel tighter and tighter. At around six in the evening, I was feeling so knocked out that I could barely stand. I still hadn't seen Dan, and he wasn't answering his messages. I took a cab back to the hotel and twenty-nine hours later, I was awoken by a banging on my door.

"What the fuck have you been doing?" Dan came into the room and set a half empty bottle of vodka on the table. He kicked off his shoes and slumped into a chair.

"What time is it?"

"It's fucking eleven pm on Wednesday! I've been banging on your door all day. Did you take some of those knock out drugs or what? And what the fuck is that on your neck?"

My throat was hurting more than it had when I went to sleep. As I grabbed at my neck, I felt a golf ball sized growth on the right side.

"Oh Christ! What is that!?"

"I've never seen something that gross," Dan laughed.

"It's not oozing or anything, it's just a swollen lymph-node. It's really swollen. Do me a favor, look down my throat, it feels like I'm swallowing thumbtacks."

"I'm not getting near your mouth. Here, drink this," Dan

handed me the half empty bottle of vodka. "It helps."

I had just slept twenty-nine hours and everything had gotten worse, so I took the vodka. What harm can a little joy juice do when you're already nearly dying.

Two days later, I was still drunk as we went to the airport to catch the flight back home. The stale, sticky air in the smoking lounge smelled a little like Tabasco sauce.

"...And those bitches just kept hobbin the knob if you know what I'm saying," Dan was saying. I hadn't heard the beginning of the story. I was still eating glass, and my mouth tasted like the sewage water running down the streets in Bangkok.

"I think I need a doctor," I barely whispered.

"Yeah, well, we've got twenty minutes to board our flight, so first you'll have to haul ass."

"Oh, fuck." I hadn't been paying attention to the clock. I was in no condition to run, but the thought of spending another day here when all I wanted was a doctor, a Western doctor, was motivation enough for me to sling my laptop over my shoulder and run to the gate.

When we arrived they were about to pull the door closed. Dan didn't even pull out his ticket as he raced through the door. "Two more passengers!" He was yelling down the jetway. From behind the gate operator was screaming at us. I pulled

Dan to a stop, grabbed his ticket and turned around and breathlessly presented them to the operator.

"Sorry, we have to catch this flight!" Annoyed the gate operator nodded and then let me pass.

When we got to the plane, the flight attendant looked sideways at us. Then she realized we were first class passengers and changed her demeanor. "Oh, we're so glad to have you on board! That was a close one," her left eye hung ever so slightly lower than her right eye, and her pulled back hair pulled her face muscles making her look slightly waxy.

"I want a martini with an extra bottle of gin," Dan told her as he swung into his seat.

"Yes sir, anything for you ma'am?"

"I'll have a vodka with Ginger Ale, another blanket, and two aspirin."

"Right away." As the flight attendant turned to leave, Dan was staring at her legs.

"What do you think happened to her?"

I leaned over the aisle to take a look at what Dan was talking about and noted the large, crescent shaped scar covering her calf. "I don't know, shark bite?"

Dan laughed for a minute and then pushed his call button. Another flight attendant was immediately at his side. "I've been sitting here for forty-five seconds! Where's my booze!?"

The flight attendant apologized and then scurried away.

"Jesus Dan, do you have to be such an asshole?"

"I never get to fly first class, I'm getting my money's worth."

"It's not your money."

"No matter."

The flight attendant arrived with our requests. I chased the aspirin down with the vodka Ginger Ale. I held my breath as we took off. Before we stopped ascending, I was already done with my drink.

"Hey! Get mi Amiga another vodka Ginger Ale!"

"You know, Dan, I can order my own drinks," I didn't really want another drink until it arrived seconds later.

I took a sip and then nestled back into my oversize, first class seat. I thought about all the poor saps back in coach with their knees up against the seat. I thought about how every single time I'd ever flown, I had to walk through first class and watch the rich fucks get served mimosas and little hot towelettes. I thought about how angry it made me to be squished in economy class with the sniveling fat guy on my left and the redneck kid blasting country music from his headphones on my right. That kid should have been deaf, I could understand every lyric. I thought about that one time in particular when there were two babies on the plane, and



neither one of them liked flying very much. They cried and cried, and I remember having really mean, unnatural kinds of thoughts. I felt bad about it immediately afterwards, but the thoughts were there. That was the same transatlantic flight when the old guy sitting behind me coughed on my hair all night long.

I took another sip of the vodka and then smiled to myself. "Suckers," I thought.

"So, uh, that was fun the other night," Dan was starting to settle in.

"What the drunk fucking or the psychotic rampage that came before it?"

"Both, that was just fun. You don't, uh, you aren't..."

"Dan, we both had drunk sex, I'm sure it was good in the moment, but we should probably just forget about it before I throw up."

"I was thinking exactly the same thing. Not that you weren't great or anything it's just..."

"Trust me, I know. Let's pretend it never happened."

"Deal. We can still be friends though, right?"

"Oh for Christ's sake, are you serious?"

"Good, that's what I thought."

I covered myself up and went to sleep. I didn't awake for the entire flight. When we landed, Dan punched me to wake me

up.

"I've never seen anyone sleep like that. I could have had my way with you and you never would have noticed."

"You know, I could file sexual harassment charges on you," I said.

"Yeah, but you won't. I know you're a sick fuck, even if you are a girl."

I swallowed as I closed my eyes. I'd never had that kind of pain in my throat before, and I'd always been prone to getting strep. It was as if jagged teeth were sawing through my trachea, as if my esophagus was being cleaned with a steel scouring pad. The breathing was starting to get tight, and I fantasized about not waking up again.

In the airport, I was feeling dizzy. I just wanted to sleep some more, even though I'd been sleeping much of the last several days. The flight was direct, but still nineteen hours. I had slept through all of it. At the baggage carousel, I gathered my bags, told Dan I'd see him later, and then grabbed a taxi. When I got home, I threw my bags on the floor. I popped another two aspirin and then went to sleep. It was too late in the day to go see my doctor anyway. His walk-in hours are only until nine-thirty on Sundays. I don't know why he has hours on Sundays at all.

#

I woke up at ten-thirty. "Goddamnit!" I said out loud. My doctor's office wasn't far away, but I'd just slept another nineteen hours. The thing on my neck was now the size of a baseball, regulation size. I skipped the shower after seeing the abscess. I just threw on some clothes and headed towards the doctor.

When I arrived, the waiting room was full. I waited at the reception desk behind two other patients. I was feeling impatient, but also too sick to cause a fuss.

"I need your chip card," the nurse said without looking away from her computer screen. I handed her the card. "What can we help you with today?" She still wasn't looking at me.

"Uh, I don't think I can wait," I said.

"We're going as fast as we can," the fucking bitch still wasn't looking at me.

"No, really, look at me – I don't think I can wait." With an audible and annoyed sigh, she finally looked up. Her annoyance gave way to horror as her eyes scanned the abscess, red and pulsating, on the side of my neck. She trembled as she reached for the phone.

"Doctor Ratowski, we have an emergency. I'm not sure, it could be. I don't know. No," she hung up the phone. "Go through that door," she pointed down the hallway. When I got to the door, I knocked. In the seven seconds it took for the

doctor to say "Come in," in a thick Russian accent, I thought about all the seniors in the waiting room. Just sitting there, waiting to die while some jerk with a leather jacket on came in and cut ahead of all the wait time. I seriously doubt they sat there thinking, "Oh, she must really be sick!" I wonder if they even noticed, the clock above the doorway wasn't moving anyway, they were probably just dazed out, old people.

I walked into the tiny office and sat down. The doctor was fairly young. I looked around for a second and noticed that there was absolutely nothing in the room. There was a desk with a single pad of Post-It notes, a telephone, a computer monitor, a printer, two pens, and one of those really big desk calendars, which was completely blank. On the wall was token hotel art of a dew drop, and there were six fat medical books on the bookshelf. Other than that, there was nothing. No trashcan, no coat rack, no personal items of any kind.

"We need to take a look down your throat," he announced as his eyes fell on the baseball attached to my neck. I stood up, and he grabbed a tongue depressor from his drawer.

"Ahhh..." I said.

"Don't say 'ahh'," the doctor said patiently. He looked down there for a long time as I stared at a tiny water stain on the ceiling.

"Ok. Why didn't you come to see me sooner?"

"I just got back in the States yesterday. I was in Bangkok on business, and I didn't want to see a doctor there."

"How long have you been experiencing symptoms?" He was leaning back in his big leather chair, writing in a leather bound book.

"I don't know. About four days, I guess." I was trying to remember Bangkok. I'd been drunk. I had no idea how long I slept or how long it took us to get back to the States. I was still trying to calculate however many days it had been when the doctor said,

"Well, it looks like one serious abscess," he picked up the phone. "We're going to have to get you to a hospital right away. It has to be cut open so that you don't lose your ability to breathe." There was a hospital next door, I figured I could just wander over. The doctor garbled doctor-speak into the phone and then hung up.

"So I can just head over to the emergency room, or what?" His impersonal office was starting to get to me, and I didn't like the idea of having surgery.

Besides, I love my job, and even though I've been feeling inconsequential lately, I didn't want to miss two weeks of work.

"You're going to need to go to the hospital over in

Harron. They have the best ear, nose, and throat specialists in the state. Do you have someone to take you, or should I call an ambulance? You need to go right away."

"It's alright, I live a few blocks away. I'll make it there."

"You need to go right away," the doctor was looking me right in the eye.

"Yeah. I got it. Thanks." With that I stood up and left the office. I didn't even pay attention to the geezers on the way out.

Of course I didn't rush home, hop in the car, and drive straight to the hospital. I figured they would have forced me into an ambulance if I really had to go "right away". I meandered home. Then I poured myself a drink. This sort of situation called for Tequila. After three shots, the abscess was the backdraft of the fire in my throat, and I was ready to turn myself in to the hospital.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Chapter 2

My roommate won't stop talking to me. It's just after noon, and I am plotting my escape. I'm still swallowing thick, gooey scabs, but I feel much better. My roommate is blathering on and on about how she met her husband, where they've been on vacation, and other various tidbits of her boring life. I lay back in my bed and close my eyes. Miraculously, she shuts up. I'm not really tired anymore, I just want to leave here. I'm not allowed to use my cell phone, and I'm bored.

I'd called Dan two days ago, right before my throat started bleeding. He said he would come by, but he hadn't shown up yet. I suspected that he would show up any minute and tell my roommate she was hot.

The nurse came in to check my roomie's bandages. They started talking about my roomie's boring life while I lay

there grinding my teeth. I am about to go bat shit crazy. I get up from the bed and go into the hallway. I'm going to try Dan again.

The phone rings, but Dan doesn't pick up. I realize that I am going to have to escape the hospital all by myself. I walk slowly down the hallway towards the door. Outside is the hospital park. It's a giant courtyard, surrounded by the hospital buildings, that is so manicured it's thirty steps removed from nature. Every plant looks as if it's plastic. For a moment, I wish they really were plastic so that I can come back later, douse them in gasoline, set them on fire, and smell the molten lava that results. It would be glorious to watch a field full of malleable plants melting into the cobblestone walkway.

I scoot back into my room and lay down again. I'm not going to walk out of the hospital during the afternoon for fear of being dragged back in and strapped down against my will.

At five dinner is served. My meal is a bowl of white slop. Not only does it look like a thousand men ejaculated into the bowl, it tastes salty. There are no other flavors. The consistency was fun to play with. I let spoonful after spoonful slosh back into the bowl. The sound is delightful. My roommate was allowed to eat goulash, which was slightly gray



in color.

There's no television in the room. The only magazine I have to flip through is a Us Weekly June from work had brought with her. I'm under the impression she brought it just to piss me off. She can't possibly be stupid enough to think that I want to read about celebrity hard ons and look at pictures of their kids.

June Kim is a little Asian chick with a mediocre flat face and double D boobs. She'd gotten a boob job just a year ago, and I had wondered since that time how it is that she is actually able to stand. I theorized that she wears one of those mover's back brace things all the time. June always wore expensive shoes. Not just kind of expensive shoes, but the kind you see in those stores that have exactly three pairs of shoes in a four thousand square foot space. Once I walked into one of those stores. I was wearing a hoodie and jeans. I didn't look that grungy, but I didn't look like the tailored suits observing the nothing. I even had a bunch of money and briefly considered blowing it on the handbag sitting on a pedestal in the middle of the room. As I reached out to touch the bag, a woman grabbed my wrist and said, "I'm sorry, but I think maybe you should leave."

"Excuse me!? Are you fucking serious!?"

"Yes I am, you can't afford anything here."

I pulled a huge wad of hundreds out of my pocket, forty-five hundred dollars I had just taken out of the perks box at work to deliver to the bank. "Oh no? You sure?"

"Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry!" I'd of thought the smile plastered on her face was genuine if I hadn't seen it forming seconds earlier.

"Fuck you, bitch," and I took my wad of cash and walked out.

June is always put together. She isn't beautiful, but she has the personality of a minx. She oozes sex, but only around those people that can directly influence her status in life. She has a different boyfriend every other month, and they are all well-to-do. Whenever one of her boyfriends gives her an expensive gift, she comes to work and struts around showing off her cashmere scarf, diamond tennis bracelet, or whatever she was given.

June is constantly getting on my case about something. She competes with me when there's no competition to be had. She talks over me in meetings, and she dumps out the coffee at three in the afternoon even though she knows that Dan and I drink coffee in the afternoon.

I look at the cover of the magazine and lay back in bed again. I'm so bored. The best thing to do is sleep for a while. I know the nurses come in around one-thirty to check on

us. They're not at all quiet about it, and it's woken me up every night since I've been here. Afterwards, they disappear into the nurses lounge for an hour. I'll be heading out then.

While I'm sinking into the darkness, I have a flashback of Bangkok. Dan and I are leaving the place we were at after the Blue Elephant and some guy blows dust at me. This little Indian guy walks right up to me on the street and blows dust in my face. Then he smiles and just walks away. I remember Dan laughing and saying, "If you get high, I'm going to lick out your nostrils."

The memory sends a cold shiver up my spine, mainly because I had slept with that dumb asshole. Even drunk it's kind of inexcusable, he's so crass and internally maimed. It's as if someone went into his brain and created gray matter where 'tact' was supposed to be. I didn't find him attractive even in the slightest. In fact, I found him downright horrifying. Dan made me laugh quite a bit, but a lot of the time he also made me nauseous.

Before I allow myself to sink into a darkness full of nightmares at the memories of Dan and Bangkok, I think about Eric, the guy from my office. I don't know why he pops into my thoughts, he just kind of does. He relaxes me somehow. His presence makes me feel less alone. I stop mulling it all over and fall asleep.

#

The dental hygienist knocks over the instrument tray while mounting a patient. The patient is happy to be mounted, and I am the hygienist. As the dentist's tools clatter to the floor, I see nurses opening the door.

Suddenly I'm awake, startled out of sleep by the nurses' one thirty in the morning checkup. I quickly close my eyes again. One nurse leans in to my roommate, and the other observes me. I keep my eyes closed and try to breathe steadily. Two plastic cups, one with a suppository and one with a single little white pill are placed on my nightstand. Two seconds later, they're done pretending to do their jobs, and they chit-chat out of the room.

I swing my legs around the side of the bed and place my feet on the floor. The floor feels like someone wrapped it in plastic wrap. It's not exactly sticky, but sticky somehow. Lifting my toes from the floor sounds like peeling tape off of a refrigerator. I grab the cup with the little white pill and put it into my mouth. This is my eight am painkiller. They give me the strongest painkiller in the morning because I've been without any painkillers all night, and the morning just sucks. I briefly consider trying to steal more pain pills from the nurses station on my way out, but smartly decide against it. I can get painkillers from Dan, I'm sure.

My clothes are sitting to my right, on a chair next to the table all the stupid "Get Well" cards are on. I stand up and get dressed, the adrenaline is already pumping. The doctors want me to stay, and I am leaving. It's not a legal issue. Yet.

After I dress myself, I creep to the door and take a look left down the hallway. The nurses have just left the last patient and are headed in the direction of their little hospital squatter pad. I bet they had all kinds of fun stuff in there. Pinball machines and intravenous drugs, for example. As the door closes behind them, I slip into the hallway and make my way to the door. I stay on the wall as I open the door, but the stair light comes on anyway. It isn't really needed, the lantern from the street lights up the stairwell like a carnival.

When I get down the stairs and head outside, I'm met with warm, soft air. It's a beautiful evening for an escape. I figure I can just go home. I hadn't used my current address on the hospital forms, and my new place wasn't in my name. Besides, it's a hospital, not a prison, so I'm not really "escaping", I'm just leaving against doctors orders in the middle of the night.

I cross the courtyard and head out through the main entrance, left of the entryway I am standing in. My intentions

are to go home for a couple of days and just rest. Out on the street I catch a cab.

When I get home, there's dead flowers in a vase on my porch. The water is murky and kind of clumpy. The card stuck in the flowers is no longer legible. I leave them there, pretending like they're not for me. Who knows, maybe they're for one of the other tenants.

As I crawl into my bed at three in the morning, I realize that tomorrow I won't have to eat shitty hospital food. This thought alone carries me into sleep.

The phone is ringing. The clock says it's eleven in the morning. I rub my eyes and listen to the phone ringing. Finally, my answering machine picks up. A monotone voice says,

"Hello. This message is for Maggie Lawson. This is the Harron Medical Center calling. We need you to return to the hospital right away. Please give us a call back at 1-800-427-7661, or simply return to the surgical wing."

The answering machine beeps off as I'm putting on my robe. In the kitchen, there's enough coffee for a single cup and some stale crackers. Everything else in the refrigerator is rotting. I haven't been home in six days.

After making myself the coffee, I decide to take a nice long bath after which I will watch television all day long.

When I get around to switching on the television, I make

a point to skip over the daytime talk shows. For a while, I watch cartoons. At lunchtime, I order Pad Thai from my favorite delivery Thai place, which also happens to be the only Thai place that will deliver to my neighborhood. I order a triple order so that I won't have to worry about what I'm going to eat for dinner or the next morning. In the afternoon, I watch a variety of nature documentaries.

At four I decide to catch up on the news.

...If you're just tuning in, we're at the Harron Medical Center where tragedy has struck over the last two days. A surgeon and his surgical team are dead. A floor nurse has been quarantined. Details are still coming in, but we're talking to Harron's Press Secretary, Herman Sithe.

"Mr. Sithe, can you tell us what happened?"

"It's our great displeasure to announce that four of our staff have died in the past two days. All four were afflicted with a sickness we haven't seen before. We have quarantined a nurse whom we believe is also infected."

"How does this 'sickness' present itself? Where did it come from?"

"These staff members presented flu-like symptoms two days ago. At first, we thought it was just a bug. However, the five staff members showed symptoms not associated with a common flu."

"Could you give us an idea of what those symptoms were?"

"The staff members showed a slowed response time and slight skin discoloration. One of our floor nurses has been quarantined pending further investigations."

"Are there any other symptoms?"

"I'm sorry, we're not able to comment further at this time."

"Have funeral arrangements been made for the four staff members who died?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that at this time. Donations in their honor are being accepted by Harron Medical Center. Thank you very much."

Harron Medical Center is accepting donations at any of the hospitals reception desks. We'll keep you posted on the developments of this peculiar story.

I recognize the floor nurse's picture. It's the same nurse that asked me why I didn't use my call button. I recognize the surgeon as well, he was my surgeon. I don't recognize the other three staff members, and I don't understand why the report referred to " a sickness". What was that supposed to mean? It's completely unspecific. When did they get sick? How did they get sick? Are other people in the hospital sick? Have I been exposed to something? The "skin discoloration" factor kind of bothers me too. I imagine five



blue hospital employees in pink scrubs. The image makes me laugh.

I spend the rest of the day watching cartoons and checking back to see if any new developments are reported. The story doesn't come up again. I don't call the hospital, and I don't go outside. I keep thinking about whether or not I could have caught something at the hospital. Is that why they're calling me? Do I only have a couple days to live? If that's the case, I'd really like to know as soon as possible. I wouldn't want to waste my last day doing chores or renewing my driver's license. I want information on the news report, and I know how to get it. Onyx has a wide network. A very wide network.

I call Dan.

"Hey, I need you to do me a favor."

"Well, hello to you too! Where the fuck have you been?"

"I was in the hospital! I called you from there, you said you were going to come by!"

"I did? What day was that?"

"Three days ago."

"Oh, well I'll come tomorrow."

"I'm not in the hospital anymore...listen, I need a favor."

"You know, you can't call me and expect me to remember

that I am supposed to do things. That's what email is for. I need a written record of my appointments."

"Well, sorry, but I thought that my being in the hospital would be something you might remember!"

"Apparently not. Anyway, you aren't there anymore, so everything is all better?" I tell Dan about the surgery, the biopsy, and my escape. "Oh shit! Yeah, that thing on your throat did look pretty gross. So, you left the hospital, why?"

"Because it fucking sucked. I was bored and they were poking me..."

"And now they've left you a message?"

"Yes. Did you see the news report on Harron Medical Center?"

"No," Dan sighs really loudly, and I realize that his short attention span has neared it's end.

"Ok well some people are dead, it's strange, I need you to get some people at Onyx to look into it for me." I want to tell Dan more, but I know him too well. He's bored at the moment and probably needs a drink. He'd be more interested in my story if it included topless women and a pogo stick.

"What the hell are you calling me for? You can't call me for information, I don't know shit. You need to call management."

"Are you saying you won't help me?"

"Listen, Maggie, I'd help you if I could, but if you want any kind of inside information, you're going to have to call Eric."

"Alright, I'll call you later."

"Okey Dokey Smokey, have a good 'un." I hang up the phone. Should I call Eric right now? I mean, I want information, but what if I'm just having some sort of medication induced paranoia attack? I'm actually feeling better than I have in a week. I decide not to call Eric or anyone else at Onyx just yet and get more Pad Thai out of the fridge. As I eat the cold noodles, I take a look at my calendar. If I'm not dying, I'm here for four weeks, then I'm supposed to go to DC and crash some political fundraiser. I'm not in the mood to think about it though, so I leave the dossier unopened in my email.

I get into bed at nine thirty. Right up until I got sick, I was more of a night person. I used to go to bed around two or three in the morning, then head into work around ten or eleven. Onyx doesn't have to set schedules. Everyone who works for Onyx is working twenty-four hours a day anyway. We're perpetuating a movement, movements don't have closing times. Tomorrow I should show up at the office. No one will notice if I don't, but I've decided that I want to talk to Eric face-to-face if I'm going to ask him for a favor.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Chapter 3

The next morning, as I get dressed, I turn on the news. Harron Medical Center is back in the headlines.

Another death at Harron Medical Center early this morning, when a mortician was brutally murdered by an unidentified assailant. The assailant attacked Doctor Rodney Paul around three in the morning. Upon hearing screams, two orderlies ran to the scene. The orderlies have said that the assailant turned on them. One of the orderlies issued a sharp blow to the assailant's head, causing instant death. The assailant has yet to be identified, and the orderly has not been taken into custody. The authorities have called the act an accidental killing. We'll keep you posted on this developing story.

I switch off the television, annoyed that they didn't

mention the surgeon and his team or the quarantined nurse. I'm still wondering if I might be sick. I try to forget about it by reminding myself that I feel great. My throat feels and tastes like there's a rotten egg dying in it, and I try to determine if my breath smells as bad as the back of my throat tastes. I conclude that it doesn't.

On the way to the office, I stop by a cupcake shop and buy some gourmet cupcakes. I figure if I'm going to ask for a favor, I should probably bring a bribe. I know I don't need to bribe them, Eric and Jacob think I'm awesome, but I wanted a cupcake anyway. The cupcakes here are absolutely breathtaking. They cost entirely too much, but I don't care about the money. They're delicious and well worth the money. The other great thing about this cupcake shop is that it's next door to one of those fat people Jazzercise classes. When you walk outside with your cupcakes, you get to see the misery on the faces of those poor, fat women who are living in a twisted skinny world. It's not that I don't feel bad for them. I definitely do. It's just that seeing misery is the thing that reminds me not to be miserable.

I don't bother locking up my bike when I get to Onyx. No one steals anything off the Onyx lot. It has something to do with the fact that the Onyx building is about as ominous as a building can possibly be. Every time I look up at the giant

black trapezoid that serves as our office, I imagine hordes of mad scientists and evil geniuses crafting the next generation of robotic super soldiers and mutualist biogenetic weaponry. The behemoth building towers above the nothingness around it. I look around for Dan's car, but don't see it. That's not saying much as the Onyx parking lot is roughly two football fields big and is filled with "decoy" cars.

No one enters the Onyx building other than employees, each of whom has been carefully vetted in a process that rivals even the most sophisticated government background check. Although there are a plethora of organizations with which Onyx has long standing and trustworthy relationships, no one from any of them has ever been inside the building that I'm standing outside of. In fact, there are only **thirty-seven** people who have been in the building since it was built. Three of them are dead.

The funny thing is, there's absolutely nothing special about the Onyx offices. It's a little nicer than your typical customer service center, but it's just an office. When you enter the building there is a large, circular lobby with corridors shooting off into various directions. The lobby has enclaves housing three restaurants. The food is fantastic, and all three of the restaurants are staffed by a mere ten people. Those same ten people do office cleanup and man the reception

desk. The reception desk, however, does not need manning because in order to enter the building you have to have a badge, a retinal scan, and pass a series of tests designed specifically for whomever it is that you are supposed to be. There's no one else on the planet that can complete my tests, they are complicated and specific, and they change every day. These tests are the result of a ten month observation period in which an Onyx employee is cybernetically dissected and cataloged using a super computer called Mnemonic. It basically looks into your memory and catalogues every choice you've ever made. The tests are simply combinations of those choices, only your individual subconscious will interpret appropriate solutions in the right sequence.

The entrance security is just for shits-and-giggles. Onyx is useless without its people. If one were to bypass entrance security in some way, they would find themselves in an office with nothing to steal. Every scrap of paper, every disc of data is protected by weird minds games that only Onyx employees have a chance at understanding. Every hard drive and pencil shaving is watched over. Like I said, we're vetted.

The circular lobby I'm now standing in is completely empty. There's no one in the restaurants. There's scooters and skateboards lined up next to a replica of Rodin's the Thinker. I have respect for that particular sculpture, I'd even say I



like it. However, I have already voiced my disappointment that something a little more creative wasn't used in its place. My complaint is scheduled to be discussed in next month's meeting.

I grab a skateboard and head into the corridor at the western side of the circle. The long straight wall stretches in front of me as I skate to the elevators. The elevators also have a security mechanism, it is not really secure. We call it "Fear". Each of the three elevators appears to hover above a sinking pit of darkness. When one tries to step into the elevator it falls abruptly. If you make any noise at all, the elevator will continue to fall. We've had some interesting incidents occur when people were too drunk from office Sangria to shut the fuck up. The elevators are on a sort of super strength fishing line. They don't fall to the bottom of the pit. They stop just before crashing and go into a lock down mode. God help you if no one knows you're on one of them, and you don't have a communication device.

Onyx employees always carry an Onyx smartphone. Mainly because of the elevator thing, but also because our phones are connected to an entire world of information and not just what you can find on the Internet. With access to any computer, Onyx smartphones are actually smart.

I step into the elevator and wait for the drop to slow. I

don't make a sound, and the elevator only falls a couple of meters before allowing me to select a floor. Although there's very few employees at Onyx, there is a lot of space. Labs fill up the majority of the building. I go to the eleventh floor where Jacob and Eric share a six thousand square meter space. The eleventh floor is also where most of the activity is. The command and control center is a bunch of computers that no one ever uses and a giant conference table. Most of the time, if you're in the office, you're sitting at that table.

I wonder which of my colleagues are in the office today.

When I get upstairs, I go to my office and set the cupcakes on my desk. Then I skate to the conference room where everyone is sitting. Jacob, Eric, Dan, and June are immersed in a pile of papers.

"Hey," I say after a full five minutes of standing in the doorway. I'd been watching Eric. Eric is always well put together. He pays attention to himself, but succeeds in looking relaxed. His clothes are tailored, and he chooses colors that match his dark hair and light eyes. He's the type of person that never has a five o'clock shadow, but can still look a little punk. His hair is always out of place.

"Oh, Maggie! How long have you been standing there!? How are you? Are you ok?" Jacob is obviously manic, but genuinely concerned for my wellbeing. He's already stood up and rounded

the table to give me a hug.

"I'm ok. Just thought I should come in for a bit," Eric raises an eyebrow at me.

Jacob voices Eric's thoughts, "Are you fucking stupid, you should be resting!"

"Actually, I know. But I need to talk to you guys," I look Eric in the eye, and Jacob moves towards the door.

"Well alright, Maggie, let's go into my office." The three of us head towards the door. I catch Dan's eye and give him a signal that we'll get a drink later. We have to walk a good twenty meters before we reach Jacob's office, as we pass mine, I duck in.

"I just have to grab something, I'll catch up." I was desperate for the cupcake I had bought myself. My blood sugar was low. Plus, those cupcakes are my bribe.

Jacob's office is huge. He has a foosball table and a sitting area along with bookshelves and a desk. His bookshelves are filled with books like "Steal this Book", "An Anarchist's Cookbook", and "Breakfast of Champions". He has every essay Hunter S. Thompson ever wrote and a couple of random classics. On the opposite side of the room he has his "Wall of the Game" — a massive multiplayer, multi-platform, multiscreen gaming system with speakers so loud, they could literally blow your clothes off. I stopped wearing skirts to

work about three days after I started. He also has several computers strewn about in the room. We arrange ourselves in three of the five armchairs.

"Cupcake?" I set the box on the table and take the one with maple frosting and a walnut.

"You do so like to spread the joy and happiness, don't you?" I've already got icing on my face as Jacob reaches into the box. Eric smiles at me shoving the rest of the cupcake in my mouth.

"So what's up?" He asks at the pinnacle of my cupcake frenzy. I roll my eyes at him and chew very slowly while watching his smile grow into a grin.

"Well, did you guys happen to see the Harron Medical Center in the news this morning?" I say after swallowing. I can tell by the suddenly serious look on Eric's face, he was also a little disturbed by the report. Jacob looked clueless.

"Yeah," Eric says. "Crazy, right? First a quarantine and now a murder." I didn't think about Eric hearing yesterday's report. I'd been watching the local news channel, it stands to reason that there was an article in the paper. Eric reads the paper at his desk every morning. He also has an obsessive compulsion disorder. It's not a full blown OCD, but there are certain things that he does that are a little over the top. I feel like I don't know him very well though, so I am

constantly wondering if his neatness and attention to detail (even details that are not particularly worth remembering) is just something he does at work.

"A quarantine? Murder? Over at Harron? I had my appendix taken out there." Jacob is catching up.

"Well, I had my tonsils taken out there last week, and I'm a little worried that I might be sick." Eric sits forward in his seat, his serious look becomes a little darker.

"Now why would you think that exactly?" I think Eric can answer his own question, he's bright like that — good at connecting dots.

"The surgeon and his team are the one's that did my procedure, and the quarantined nurse...well, I recognized her too."

"Don't be coy." I hate it when Eric does that. He always seems to know when I'm holding something back.

"Yeah, how do you know the nurse?"

"Last Friday I coughed up a couple pints of blood on her."

"On her?" Jacob was nearly laughing.

"Ok, not ON her, but she assisted in the cleanup." I look at Eric, and his expression hasn't changed. I decide to lay it out as succinctly as possible. I don't have time for games, and Jacob and Eric will know what to do. They'll know exactly

what I'm after. "I had direct physical contact with all of the people who have died or are dying from this 'sickness'. I feel fine, but maybe they felt fine too, until they were dead. I want to look into it. I want access to the grid."

"Grid Access, eh?" Eric is smiling again. Whenever we invoked our network connections to do us any sort of reconnaissance, we termed it "Grid Access". It's a little office joke that strokes God complexes and motivates the troops.

Jacob smiles loudly and stands up. "Give her what she needs," he says to Eric. "We don't want any of our own living in fear. Keep me posted on what you find. Don't worry about it, Maggie — Eric knows what to do. I've got to get back to June before Dan kills her."

Jacob walks out of the room, and the air changes instantly.

"Have you really been feeling ok?" Eric's concern delights me. Over the last couple of months we've had a variety of interactions that I wouldn't deem as strictly professional. Nothing overbearing, but we've exchanged tidbits of personal information — likes, habits, things that annoy us, and we do a fair amount of verbal jousting. When I'm traveling, we check in weekly for a briefing. The briefings have been getting steadily longer. Even when we're in the office, we send each other random messages to break up the

day. I look forward to them. There's definitely chemistry there, but he always seems ever so slightly unsure. He hasn't made a move, and I'm not pushing the issue. His current concern is genuine, there's no lightheartedness behind it. That scares me a little.

"I'm fine. Just a little freaked out. I've done the standard searches. I looked into the hospital PR files, and police records. Those people are either getting better at hiding their digital artifacts, or they're not writing anything down. It's just strange."

"Alright, let's go to my office and see what's in the Rolodex." Eric grabs a laptop and hands it to me. He makes no effort to go to his actual office. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm taking the 46-Book."

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead, take the best laptop in the office for yourself. It's fine."

"Thanks."

"Jerk."

"Now, now, you just asked me for a favor."

"One you want to do."

"You're right. I don't want to fight with you, I'm helpy," Eric is smiling again and typing quickly on the 46.

"You know, if you asked me to, I'd do just about anything for you." I don't respond. I don't know what to say to that. I'm

just watching him and wondering why exactly I have a laptop in my hands. "Ok. We've got a security guard at Harron that owes us a favor after we erased his unfortunate experimentation with PCP and the nakedness that it caused."

"I guess we could start there."

"That was so full of agreement and enthusiasm, I very nearly dropped this expensive machine." The unbridled sarcasm irritates and entertains me at the same time. I remain serious.

"Look, my surgery was Tuesday. The doctors bit the dust yesterday. Best case scenario, I've got five days to figure out if I'm wasting five days figuring it out. Maybe I should just not bother. If I'm dying, I'm dying. I'm not going to find out about it and find a cure in five days." Melancholy was starting to set in. I didn't want to pretend like I wasn't scared shitless about dropping dead in five days. I was pretty happy in my life for a person that is completely unable to be happy. I have work I care about, friends to get drunk with, and I make enough money to fly off at any random time and just see some stuff. There are things that are missing for me, but I am content.

"Alright, we'll find someone else. Don't worry, we'll work it out, today." His voice was soft, and I know he is just as worried about it as I am. He continues surfing through the



Onyx network, and I take another cupcake. After ten minutes, Eric looks up at me and smiles, "I've found her."

"Who?"

"Bethany Fordson." I wait for him to clarify his selection and his plan. "Bethany is a member of the janitorial staff at Harron Medical Center. Last year, she participated in a random rally. She met with some of our people, and showed an aptitude for secrecy."

"Are we just going to call her up and ask her to risk her job by collecting information for us?"

"No. We're going to go see her and ask her to risk her job by collecting information for us, and we're going to pay her." I'm immediately surprised by Eric's matter-of-fact tone. Onyx is a company, not like any other, but a legitimate company. We have accounting records and contracts, development strategies and business processes. Paying an informant for information is on the list of our expenses, but we don't generally pay people for information to quell curiosity. Our informants are connected to projects, projects are connected to clients, and clients have budgets.

"How are we going to justify a payment for information not regarding any of our projects?"

"I have access to the cash, why don't you let me worry about cooking the books?"

"That's exactly my problem. I don't want you to have to worry about the accounting because of my curiosity." Eric looks at me for a moment. A long moment. Then he sets his laptop aside and takes mine from my lap. He takes my hands.

"You are not curious. You're scared, and so am I."

"Ok, I'm scared, I admit it. But what does that have to do with you?"

"I've been completely preoccupied with thoughts of you the last few months. I can't stop thinking about you. There are things I want to talk about with you. Things I want to do with you. Things I want to do to you. Moments I want to have," he's still holding my hands. "I want you. All of you."

"You don't even know me!"

"I know you a little. I want to know more. I want to know everything. I'm going to help you figure out what Harron is hiding anyway, but I need to know if I'm imagining the chemistry I feel between us. If you don't feel it...I just need to know."

I don't say anything. I let the seconds go by. He's waiting for me to respond, waiting for me to say anything at all, and I'm just staring at him. He starts to look a little embarrassed, uncomfortable. He looks away.

"Well, I guess..." he's about to say that he guesses I don't feel the same way, but I interrupt him by leaning

forward and kissing him. He immediately places his hand at the back of my neck and pulls me towards him. The kiss tells him everything he needed to know, and when I pull away again, he pulls me back. Then he looks me in the eye before saying,

"So that's what a tonsillectomy tastes like." I feel my face turning bright red, I sit back quickly.

"Oh my god. Jesus." I feel completely disgusting, embarrassed, and ashamed, but Eric is smiling at me. He stands up, then leans down and kisses me again.

"It's that kind of gross that makes me want more. Let's get to work."

#

"I don't fucking care if Scott Spencer is begging for an audience to show off his fucking contact lenses. We're not getting involved with those douchebags, even on a superficial level." Jacob isn't exactly yelling at June, but she looks distraught. She's obviously been pushing the meeting for the last few minutes.

Eric and I have just entered the conference room.

"Oh, that reminds me," I say to Eric, "in Bangkok, I found Scott Spencer and told him how fantastic you are. Dan and I had a nice little exchange with him."

"Did he run off and pout?"

"Yeah, right after he called you a dumbass."

"Awesome. I influence people."

June's job is to keep up the Onyx charade. It's her job to make sure everyone still believes that Onyx is doing technology research. She does this in a variety of ways, one of which is setting up meetings to have a back and forth with competitors in the field. Our knowledge bank and network connections are extensive enough that June has original data to present whenever she needs it. She also goes to conferences and meet-ups in the field and talks to people about projects that don't exist. She is still trying to convince Jacob that if Onyx is to maintain its public image, they need to show interest in the augmented reality research Scott Spencer's company is doing.

"InterVision has taken steps beyond what the other players are doing. Everyone is clamoring to get into that meeting, and Scott Spencer called me personally to invite representatives from Onyx."

"Why did he call you?" Dan asks.

"Well, um, we had a drink together at last years OSCON. He likes me."

"He likes your..." Dan cuts himself off, and I laugh.

"What!? Go ahead, say it! See if I don't slap you!"

Despite her fascination with her own reflection, June isn't a stupid person. She's manipulative, confident, and intelligent.

If she wasn't such a bitch, we could be friends. June has, however, reserved judgement on everyone in the office except for Jacob and Eric. Her flirtatious attitude around them is a signal of her utmost respect and her desire to get either one of them into a more horizontal position.

"Alright children," Jacob chimes in. "Here's the deal: June, you can go to the meeting at InterVision that 'everyone is clamoring to get into', but that's it. No press releases, no on-the-record comments about how Onyx is interested in InterVision's solutions. I don't want to see anything more than 'A representative from Onyx was in attendance' in any paper, periodical, blog, website, magazine, or other form of communication. Got it?"

"Yes, but one article with..."

"No damnit! No articles, don't be overly public. I don't want Onyx associated with InterVision's research in a few months when Scott Spencer and his board of cronies screw the pooch and announce that their fucking contact lenses burn holes in your eyes. Stay away from them, we don't need that cover."

June slinks out of the conference room and into her office. She'll follow orders, she's part of Onyx, but I can see that she doesn't agree with Jacob's assessment of the future.

"I like sparring with June, but I'm fucking sick and tired of talking about Scott 'Douchebag' Spencer," Jacob says to us. "So what's the plan?" He whispers the question.

"Oh, we can talk in front of Dan," I say, and Dan looks up from his rubberband ball. "I asked him for help first."

"I totally told her that I am a useless sack of shit and that she had to come to you guys."

Eric and Jacob smile, and the four of us sit down. Dan shoves the InterVision research onto the floor, and Jacob pats him on the back for it.

"We're going to head over to Chestnut Avenue and talk to a Ms. Bethany Fordson. She's a janitor at Harron. I'm taking a cashbox. I will pay her whatever she wants."

"How do we know her? And why aren't you asking me permission to 'pay her what she wants'?" Jacob is still smiling.

"She's been catalogued as SA, and I don't need your permission to do my job," Eric has never taken Jacob's shit. His arrogance is intoxicating, but also rightly placed. He knows that he's good, and he let's other people know it too. It's one of the things I like about him.

"Can I come?" Dan asks.

"No." Eric and I say in unison.

"Fine, fuck you guys then," Dan feigns hurt, but he

doesn't really care.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Chapter 4

On the way out of the office, Eric grabs keys to one of the black A6s. We head downstairs and out into the parking lot.

"Let me drive," I say. I love to drive. I don't do it much because my life doesn't require a car very often. I don't even own one. I'm happy with my bicycle and public transportation, but I love to drive when the opportunity presents itself.

"No way, I'm driving." Eric rides a bike to work too. I can only assume he feels the same way about driving as I do.

"Let me drive!"

"Not on your life." I give up and let Eric unlock the passenger-side door for me. Eric screeches out of the parking lot and barrels down Fifth like he's being chased by the cops.



On the way to Chestnut Avenue, I think about the moments we've shared over the past few months, but the warmth of those thoughts are clouded by my impending death. I'm hoping that Ms. Fordson already knows everything I need to know, but I'm not expecting it. Eric and I don't talk much on the ride over. A few phrases back and forth, but mostly we are both preoccupied.

When we come to Chestnut Avenue, I wonder why I've never been in this neighborhood before. The tiny houses all look the same, except for the color and the amount of random garden figurines decorating the front yard. All the houses are slightly run down, and there is no one to be seen. The lawns are not mowed. The fences have missing fenceposts. The mailboxes are broken. The driveways are made from cement instead of asphalt, and the entire neighborhood screams "average". The people that live in this neighborhood are average people who have average relationships in average lives.

"Here we are," Eric says as he swings the A6 into one of the driveways. "She's not working until later, I checked her schedule. I hope she's home."

We climb out of the car and walk up the driveway. I bypass the doorbell and knock three times. A woman comes to the door. I see her face through the window. She looks a

little surprised. She opens the door but remains behind the screen door. The woman is slightly heavysset, but with a round, friendly face that makes me believe she would bake cookies for me if I asked her.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"Bethany? Bethany Fordson?" Eric always takes command. It's another thing I like about him.

"Yes?"

"Can we come in?"

"Who are you?" Bethany looks a little frightened. Her friendly face shows concern, like we're about to beat her up and take her garden gnomes.

"We're from Onyx, we'd like to talk to you."

"Onyx? That sounds familiar," Bethany stares through us trying to remember why she might have visitors from Onyx on her doorstep. "Come on in, I guess."

We step through the doorway and claustrophobia overcomes me. Bethany's walls, ceilings, and floors are covered with knick-knacks and trinkets. Books, sculptures, candles, and a thousand different blankets, pillows, and photographs cover every surface. I look at some of the books on her shelves, and realize that Bethany, the janitor, has two lives. Her collection of French literature alone indicates that the woman is in no way a simpleton.

"Can I get you something to drink?" She asks as she clears two spaces on the overstuffed sofa.

"No, thank you, we're fine." I assume Eric doesn't want anything and don't bother waiting for him to answer the question himself. Bethany takes a seat on the chair across from us.

"So, what can I help you with?"

"Well, you work at Harron Medical Center, correct?"

"Yes?"

Eric takes the lead from me. "We work for a company called Onyx. You spoke with some of our representatives a while back at a World for Web rally."

The look on Bethany's face goes from fear to understanding. "Ahh, yes," she smiles, "I was quite taken with your people."

"Well, at the time they told you that we would like to use you as a thought contractor."

"Yes, but I thought it was a joke. They told me they would pay me for 'information', but I don't know anything valuable."

"We think you might, and if you don't, we think you might be able to gather some. We're willing to pay for it." Eric doesn't even wait to see if she offers to collect information for free.

"What exactly are you looking for?"

"We need information on the staff member deaths, the quarantine, and the murder that have happened the last couple of days at Harron."

"Oh...well, actually I do know some things about that, but..." She doesn't feel awkward about giving us the information, she feels awkward about asking for the money.

"Great!" Eric opens his briefcase and puts ten thousand in cash on the table between Bethany and us. "That's ten thousand. Tell us what you know."

"Is this legal?"

"Buying information is the cornerstone of our entire society. It's legal, but you don't have to brag about it. And we'd greatly prefer if you never utter the word Onyx to another living soul unless, of course, you're talking about jewelry."

"Well alright then," Bethany leans back in her chair. "I had an especially hard job this past week. When the surgeon and his team got sick the first time, I was on cleanup duty for that floor. All four of them were vomiting non stop, and they were getting nosebleeds too. That wasn't the worst of it though. They had coughing fits. They coughed up more blood than I've ever seen. Sometimes they coughed and puked at the same time. We all felt so bad for them. A bunch of respected

surgeons crying like that while lying in their own fluids. They couldn't even stand up. And their skin color."

"What about their skin color?" I asked. This morning when I looked in the mirror, I had briefly wondered if my skin looked different. I figured it was the light.

"The longer they were sick, the grayer they became. In the end those poor people were just gray. None of us could imagine that they would make it much longer. We were right. They just started dying one after the other. We stayed with them the whole time, it was horrible."

"Were they in quarantine as well?"

"Oh, yes. We all had hazard suits, but we tried to stay with them as much as possible. You really can't imagine how terrifying it was." I stand up abruptly and walk out of the room. Bethany's expression and the image in my head are too much for me to bear. I need air. "Are you alright dear?" Bethany calls after me, but I don't stop. I walk right through her kitchen and out onto her back porch.

Outside I start hyperventilating. Oh fantastic, I'm thinking. I'm going to have a panic attack at some woman's house with Eric in the other room. Shit. I force myself to focus on a flower pot and breathe slowly and deliberately. I can bring myself back from the brink of a pathetic panic attack, just have to focus.

Focus.

"Are you alright?" Eric puts his arm around me. I brush him off.

"I'm fine."

"You could just..."

"I'm fine," I say as I walk back into the house. I need to hear the rest of what Bethany has to say. "Sorry about that, I just really needed some air right then." I smile at Bethany, and her concern fades a bit. "What can you tell us about the nurse in quarantine?" Bethany shakes her head.

"Oh dear, she's going the same direction. They can't figure out what's making her sick."

"And the murder?" Eric asks as he enters the room.

"I don't really know anything about the murder. It's very strange though. The mortician, Dr. Paul, was a nice guy. I don't know why anyone would want to kill him. I just think it's weird that he was killed the same evening all four of the surgeons team were brought to him."

"Wait, the surgeon and his team died the day before." I'm trying to keep track of the timing on all of this, it seems important. My brain feels fuzzy though. I look at Eric for the first time since we've come inside. He's taking notes. Of course, I can count on Eric to be on the ball. That's another reason I like him.

"Yes, but they had the bodies in another freezer because Dr. Paul's freezers short circuited. As soon as they were fixed, the orderlies moved the bodies."

"Do you know the orderlies the news is talking about? The one that 'issued a sharp blow'?" Eric doesn't notice that I'm looking at him.

"I know them a bit."

"Can you talk to them and ask them what they saw when you go to work tonight?"

"Of course. You know my schedule?"

Eric stands up and offers me his hand. I take it and he pulls me off the couch. Once I'm up, he doesn't let go of my hand.

"I looked it up to find out where you live and if you'd be home. Don't worry about it. We're just collecting a little information. We really appreciate it. Here's my card. Just give me a call. Hopefully soon, we're on a deadline with this one."

"Um, ok. Sure. Thanks for stopping by," she pauses and looks at the money, "and for giving me a bunch of money."

"Make it worth it," Eric says, and we walk out the door together. Eric is still holding my hand. When we get to the car, I ask to drive. He hands me the keys, and I screech out of the neighborhood.

"Whoa! Where are we going in such a hurry?" He can see that I'm upset, and he tries to lighten the mood. I'm glad he's there, but I'm preoccupied inside my own head. I'm driving towards my house. I don't bother answering him because I know that it doesn't matter where we're going. Eric understands what that conversation just put in my head. My current intention is to go to my house and find some kind of medication that will calm me down and fuck me up at the same time. I'm starting to feel exhausted and it's barely after noon.

I have a red shoebox under my bathroom sink. That's where I keep my collection of random drugs. I don't really do drugs, but keeping leftover painkillers, antibiotics, mood medications, and pick-me-ups always seemed like an intelligent thing to do. That red box has saved my ass more times than I could count. It's been saving me this week. The doctors were rationing out painkillers like I was a junky, despite the fact I had just had a pretty painful operation. I'd taken a pill last night, but it had been wearing off since my first cupcake.

I park the car outside my building and turn it off.

"What are we doing here?" Eric asks as he steps out of the car.

"I live here," I say walking towards my building.



"I know," he points to the dead flowers that are still sitting in front of the door. "I sent those the day after you got back from Bangkok."

"You did? Really? You're not just saying that because they look dead and forgotten and you know you could claim such a thing, and I wouldn't know the difference?"

"You're such an asshole. I like that. But really, I sent the flowers."

"I'm sorry. When I got back, I went to bed. The next morning they weren't there when I left. They weren't there when I stopped in and drank Tequila before I went to the hospital."

"I asked them to deliver them in the evening, so that you could sleep in. I thought you'd be tired." He doesn't look disappointed at all, more amused that the flowers were still sitting there, shriveled and browned. "So you didn't read the card?"

"No. Sorry, by the time I saw them, the ink was washed away. Um, thanks, I guess." I try to smile at him while sticking my key in the door, but I can't concentrate on the key and have to turn away from him. Once we're upstairs, I offer him a coffee, but he turns it down. He looks at me inquisitively. I go into the bathroom and get the red box. I bring it back to the living room and sit down on the floor.

Eric comes and sits behind me.

"Maggie, talk to me. Are you ok?"

"I need drugs," I say as I flip open the box and start scavenging around for a painkiller strong enough to make my throat and my brain numb.

"Well, I'm sure we can get you whatever you want, you little junky."

"You know I just had surgery, right? Do you know what it feels like to have fresh wounds in the back of your throat?"

"No, but I know what it tastes like." I push him away, trying not to laugh at myself. I can't believe he kissed me that second time. He must really like me.

"Just shut up. I've found it." I pull out a bottle of Percocets and take two of them. Then I stand up and pull Eric into the bedroom. "I'm not going back to the office just yet," I tell him after falling into my bed. Eric lies down beside me and brushes the hair out of my face.

"Yeah, me neither."

#

It's the phone ringing that wakes me up. Eric is already awake, or maybe he never slept. In any case, he's watching me. Normally, that would make me uncomfortable, but right now doesn't.

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"Just an hour," he says as he reaches for the phone.

"No, don't..." but it's too late.

"Hello?...May I ask who's calling?...I'd be happy to leave her a message...She's not in at the moment...Yes, I understand, but she's not in at the moment...I don't have that kind of authority over her...Yes, I'll tell her...Ok." He hangs up the phone again and turns towards me. "That was the hospital, they want you to go there immediately." Eric pulls me towards him.

"Phh, fat chance. I'm not going anywhere near Harron until I figure out what the hell is going on there."

"You know, they sound concerned about your health."

"No. They were waiting on a biopsy, to see if I'm contagious."

"That seems kind of important."

"Oh shit. I didn't even think about getting you sick when I kissed you. I'm so sorry, I'll never forgive myself if..." Eric puts his hand over my mouth and shakes his head.

"Stop. Just stop." He kisses me again and embraces me. I feel warm. "I don't think you're contagious, if you were Dan would have gotten sick." I think about this for a moment and realize he's absolutely right. Why hadn't I thought of that? Dan was with me the entire time in Bangkok and on the way home. He was with me almost until I checked myself into the

hospital, and I was definitely sick before I got back into the States.

"You're right. Dan's fine. He's just as dicky and enthusiastic as ever."

"You, um, don't have feelings for him do you?" What the hell kind of question is that!? I mean, really? I need to start wearing more conservative clothes or something, I must look easy.

"Jesus, God. No! We're friends, but that's it." I elect not to tell Eric that Dan and I got drunk and had embarrassing, forgettable sex. Instead, I decide to forget about it and pretend like it never happened.

Eric and I talk for another hour about films and books and music. We deliver lines like we're in a sitcom, rapid fire, talking over each other. For a few moments we forget about my predicament. Until someone knocks on the door. I go to it and look out the peephole. There are two police officers standing outside my door.

"Fuck," I whisper. I go back into the bedroom.  
"Eric...there's cops at the door. What do I do?" The officers knock again.

"I'll take care of it. Just stay here." As he walks out of the bedroom, he shuts the door. I sit down with my back against the door and listen to his footsteps.

"Hi," Eric says.

"Oh, hello. We're looking for a Ms. Maggie Lawson. This is her apartment, is it not?"

"Yes, this is her apartment, but she isn't here."

"And who exactly are you?"

"Uh...well, I guess you could say I'm her boyfriend."

Eric knows I'm listening, we're been dating for like six hours, and he's calling me his boyfriend. It's a little presumptuous, I think. We've hardly ever hung out outside of work.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Yes, she's on a business trip in St. Louis. Why? What's this about?" Then again, maybe I should just consider him my boyfriend. He's always on my mind, and it's not like I don't need someone to lie to police officers for me. In fact, I definitely need someone that cares about me enough to lie to the cops. That's not the type of thing that just anyone will do for you.

"When does she return?" I imagine the officers arresting Eric for some reason. I consider going out of the bedroom, but can't bring myself to stand up. "Sir?"

"I'm just trying to decide if I should tell you that," Eric says, and I just swoon.

"Well, sir, yes. Yes, you should tell us. We have a

warrant, and you will be obstructing justice if you don't tell us where Ms. Lawson is."

"A warrant? For what?" It's incredible, it's like Eric is reading my mind. He's answering all the questions with exactly the response I would have said into his earpiece were he wearing an earpiece.

"We don't have to give you that information."

"I'd still like to know." I hear one of the officers sigh, and I pray that Eric stop pushing their buttons, tell them a lie about when I am coming back, and then come back into the bedroom. The officers hesitate for a few moments. I imagine they're looking him over. They must decide that he looks respectable (he does look respectable).

"Well, we have a warrant to pull her in for questioning on the Harron Medical Center incidents."

"Why? She had surgery there last week, but you can't think she has anything to do with the deaths!"

"We're just trying to understand what happened. She left against medical advice, and now people are dead. We just want to talk to her."

"Well, she won't be back until Monday, but I can tell you that she left the hospital because the food sucked."

"Are you serious? Who would do that? Leaving against medical advice because she doesn't like the food?"

"Maggie would do that." Eric knows me more than I would have thought.

"Please tell her to turn herself in. Otherwise, we'll be back to pick her up on Monday. We're questioning every patient in that wing, so we need to talk to her."

"Yes, sir. I'll let her know." Eric shuts the front door, and comes to the bedroom door. He tries to come in and shoves the door against my back. "Sorry," he says. I let him into the room.

"This is good," he says as he pulls me off of the floor and back to the bed. "I just lied to the cops. Again."

"Again?"

"Never mind. Listen we need to go back to the office and get you set up."

"Maybe I should just go talk to them. I mean, I don't have anything to hide. I didn't do anything."

"At the very least, I think we should wait to hear what Bethany says tomorrow morning," he pauses for a moment, thinking it over. "Yeah, we should go into the office, are you feeling alright?" I'm feeling decent, but not energetic. It's as if all of my limbs have a couple dozen fishing weights tied to them. The painkiller is doing it's job, but if I wanted to use my brain, I was going to need some pep. I didn't know all of this was going to be so invasive in my life when I checked

myself into the hospital. I stand up and grab the red box again. Eric raises his eyebrows, but I don't pay him any attention. Instead, I rummage through the box, find some uppers, and pop two in my mouth.

"Now I'm ready."

#

When we get back to the office, no one is in the conference room, but we didn't need to look in to find that out. The eleventh floor is vibrating. We walk to Jacob's office where we find Dan playing video games and yelling at the screens. I try several times to announce our arrival, but the volume is up too loud, and Dan is focused on a machete rampage. I wait until the rampage is over, then I tap his shoulder, he jumps three feet into the air, drops the controller, and puts his hands up like he's about to get in a fight. When he processes that it's me, he smiles, a little embarrassed, and mutes the game.

"You scared the shit out of me. Did you fucking see that!? I just killed a hundred and twenty-seven gangsters in one freaking rampage. I am so awesome." It's not uncommon for one of the Onyx employees to burst out of Jacob's office whooping and screaming about something that was accomplished in a game.



"Yeah, we know. Where June and Jacob?" I'm not actually at all concerned with where they are. They left. They went somewhere. I don't care. I don't know why I asked the question. I try not to be the type of person that engages in small talk, but every once in a while I just slip and do the same thing that millions of people all over the world do. I say things I don't mean. I ask questions just to ask.

"They left a while ago, they're still fighting about the InterVision meeting." Dan is looking at me strangely, he knows I don't care.

"Whatever. Listen, the cops just came by my place, they want to haul me in..."

"So how'd you get out of that?"

"I lied to them," Eric says.

"I'm not going back to the hospital. I'm not going to be quarantined and questioned. I don't know anything. Plus the food sucks." Eric smiles. I like it when he smiles. Eric has the most devious smile I've ever seen. It seems as if his smile is always hiding something, and I find myself desperate to know what it is. "Do me a favor, try hacking into the Harron Intranet. Maybe they're using IRC or something."

Dan turns off the game and sits down at Jacob's desk. He flips open the 46-Book and starts hacking. He just starts working on it, without question, without bitching. I'm pretty

surprised by this. I don't even know if he saved his game.

"Just like that?" I ask.

"Yeah, well. I had on autosave, plus I hate cops. I love subversion, and I'm curious. I'll find a line in within an hour."

"Thanks. I'm going to see if I can find one of the analysts to read whatever you find." The analysts are like mole people. They are always hiding in the dark somewhere, always sequestered in a fortress of solitude going through information. They have offices on this floor, but none of them are ever up here. Usually, the analysts spread out all over the building and find a dark corner where they won't be bothered. There's ten of them, and their job is simply to comb through the masses of information we collect and find whatever it is we're looking for. I can't imagine having that job. When they find something, they isolate it, format it, and send it to our Onyx smartphones. They never come to talk to us, and we don't generally go looking for them. We send them hyperlinks and access codes, they do their jobs. I don't even think they talk to each other. It's like they don't exist, but they save all of us massive amounts of time.

For this particular job, I want to meet my analyst. I don't know why, but I want to explain what I'm looking for face to face. In order to do this, I should probably think

about what I'm looking for. I guess I just want to know about this sickness. I felt ok earlier, but as the day progresses I'm feeling worse and worse. I'm wondering if this is because I just had surgery and am running around without regard for my weakened state, or if that weird sickness is going to hit me suddenly.

I walk out of Jacob's office and head to the stairs. I didn't say anything to Eric, I just walked out. I like him, but I'm not really ready to be public about it, not that Dan is public. Maybe it's a self esteem problem that I have, but even though Eric tells me that he wants me, even though he shows me that he cares, I am unwilling to believe it. The best way to avoid heartache and pain is to be slightly mean, push him away a bit, and hope that he starts to be mean back. Then I don't have to fall anymore. It will hurt less if he's mean to me now rather than later.

Really, I'm psychoanalyzing myself after a mere six or seven hours of actual, confirmed mutual feelings? I'm already planning the demise of the relationship that I've barely even started? I'm not really into therapy, but sometimes I seriously consider getting myself a therapist. At the very least the outside world would think I'm trying to solve my ridiculous psychoses.

I take the stairs down to the tenth floor and walk into a

blanket of darkness. I wasn't kidding about these people being like moles. They keep all the lights off and hide themselves away. I stand there for a moment, letting my eyes adjust, and then I look around for the cold, blue reflection of a computer monitor. I have to walk around a bit because there are offices and cubicles obstructing my view of the entire office. In the far corner, I see a flicker on the ceiling, and I walk towards it.

There on the floor with his back against the wall is a guy with the face of a fifteen year old and a shaved head. His computer is balanced on his knees, and he's quickly typing away. An infantry of sweat beads is collected around the metal band of his headphones, and his glasses are halfway down his nose. He doesn't noticed me approaching. The concentrated look on his face and the speed at which he's typing tells me that he's transcribing whatever it is he was listening to. I didn't realize they transcribed the recordings. I mean, it makes sense, but I would think that note taking would be sufficient for our purposes. I wonder if there's actually a protocol for that. I wonder if we should have recorded the conversation we had with Bethany. I suppose I need someone to listen to the police frequencies and someone to read the IRCs from Harron, but the analyst doesn't actually need to transcribe anything. He just needs to pay attention and pull out information about

the sickness or about me.

I get a little closer and kneel down, just watching him. I watch his eye flicker towards me, and I know he's registered that I'm there. He keeps typing for another two minutes, then bangs his enter key and rips the headphones off.

"You know," he says, "there's a reason I'm in this corner in the dark." Wow, what a dick. I thought he was going to be meek or shy, but instead he was just looking at me like I'd just barbecued one of his hamsters and served it with mustard. I never respond well in these situations.

"You know," I say back, "there's a reason I came to find you in the dark."

"You don't even know who I am."

"No. I don't, but you're an analyst for Onyx, so I know you're wicked smart. I figured I would take an opportunity to get to know one of you. My name's Maggie."

"I've been working here for five years, Maggie, and no one has ever come to find me." His voice was no longer annoyed, just factual. He didn't seem like he really cared. He'd been invited to the company functions. It's not like those of us working on the eleventh floor ignored the others. We weren't some kind of clique having secret parties and ignoring the other kids. We just did our thing. We invite everyone when we do social functions and some people show up

and some people don't.

"Sorry, what's your name?"

"Oscar"

"Well, Oscar , I came to find you, you're going to either listen to me and potentially help me, or you're not. If you're not, I'm going to go find someone else. If you are, I'm going to take you to the pub."

"You take me to the pub, explain what you want, and then we'll see if I decide to help you."

"Deal." I hold out my hand offering to pull him up.

"You want to go right now? It's like three something in the afternoon."

"Would you rather sit here with your face in a computer, or do you want to go get a beer and talk to me?" Oscar shuts his laptop, puts his stuff in a bag, and stands up.

"Let's go to the pub."

#

We have a pub. Not in the building or anything, but we have a pub down the street with low ceilings, green booths, and heavy wooden tables. It's exactly the type of place you'd expect to see native barflies having drinks at ten thirty in the morning. It's always open, mostly empty, and the building doesn't attract any attention to itself. Oscar and I head out of the office in its direction. Neither one of us attempts

small talk. Neither one of us is interested in the other's personality or life. We both want a beer. My motives are clear, I need help. Oscar is getting a beer out of talking to me about my issue, whatever it may be. It's a win win situation.

Five minutes later we step into the dank, smokey air of the pub. Oscar has to stoop a little on the way through the door, but he does so as if he's been coming through that door every day for the last twenty years. He can't be more than 30 years old.

"Let's just get a pitcher." I walk up to the bar. I order a pitcher of Sam Adams while staring at the vodka selection. I have to remind myself that it's "three something in the afternoon". A pitcher of beer for a semi-work-related chat should be sufficient. Not to mention the fact that I've had a couple of painkillers and some dexedrine. I really shouldn't be drinking at all, I should be at home in bed. I should have someone else doing this kind of stuff for me. I should have just looked at Eric all weepy eyed and begged him to take care of everything for me. I take the pitcher and a couple of glasses to the booth Oscar is sitting in.

The pub is pretty empty, just three people and maybe someone in the kitchen or in the bathroom. The bartender is playing gin with an older lady, and an older gentleman wearing

a leather vest and a cowboy hat is watching with glassed eyes and a snifter of brandy loosely held in his hand. His face looks a little like it's swallowing itself, and I notice that his vest has fringe remainder, as if he cut off the fringe after the eighties were over. The floor is sticky. This isn't the type of place where the bartender is going to give you a new ashtray or refill your pitcher.

Sitting down at the booth, Oscar pours the beers. We both take a large gulp before looking each other in the eye.

"I'll just make this quick. Obviously, I need your help. I need someone to listen to the police frequencies and read Harron Medical Center IRCs," as an afterthought, I add "but you don't have to transcribe anything."

Oscar just sits there looking at me, so I continue. "I want you to see if you hear or find any information regarding 'Maggie Lawson' or a peculiar sickness in the ear, nose, and throat wing. Also any information on the deaths of staff members at the medical center."

"The Harron thing, huh? Yeah, I was curious about that myself, so I wrote a little alert program that records when 'Harron' is mentioned on the police lines. It's not a flawless system, I didn't really have time to write complicated programs to quell my curiosities. Why are you interested?"

"Full disclosure? Well, I had surgery last week, and it



was my surgeon and his team that were quarantined."

"Oh, I get it. You think you might be sick."

"I don't know if the way I'm feeling is the beginning of death or just me healing from a tonsillectomy. I've never had a tonsillectomy before, you know?"

"What other intel have you gathered? What have you already done in terms of recon?" I explain everything to Oscar. I tell him about Bangkok. I tell him about the surgery. I tell him how I coughed up blood on the nurse. I tell him about the phone call we're expecting from Bethany. I lay it all out for him as we drink beers in our dirty, little pub. I even explain that I might be contagious, but doubt it because Dan didn't get sick. Every once in a while, Oscar asks a question that makes me go onto a new tangent of information. For whatever reason I feel like Oscar needs to know everything about the situation in order to understand the gravity of what I'm asking him to do. It feels like hours go by. I have no idea how long I've been talking and can't seem to remember whether or not we ordered another pitcher somewhere in the middle of my babble.

"And all of this is to find out if you're going to die in a couple of days? Did it ever cross your mind to just live the days and see what happens?"

"Have you ever potentially, maybe been dying from some

unknown sickness that makes you vomit, bleed, and turns your skin gray?"

"Alright..."

"Then shut the fuck up. I happen to work for a company that can find out information fast. It's what we do. I'm using it to quell the emotions I'm having about my impending death. And you're getting paid either way, so just do me a favor and help me figure out what the fuck happened to those doctors."

"Got it. Here, bump my phone." We bonk our phones together to trade contacts. "I'll email you when something interesting comes in." Oscar touches my shoulder when he stands up. "Don't worry about it," he says softly.

I watch him stoop on his way back out the door. I stare at the empty doorway for awhile. I think my head and my neck are no longer connected together. All at once the room starts to pulsate. My other organs start screaming at my brain, "You stupid, mother-fucking, no good piece of shit! You knew it was too much, but you made us come with you!" The adrenaline that was coursing through me while I was explaining my story to Oscar is disappearing. Fatigue overcomes me.

I have to get home. I can't even conceptualize standing, let alone do it. I feel a warm thick fluid dripping out of my nose. A few drops spill over my lips, and I taste iron. A red drop splashes in slow motion on the table. My nose is

bleeding.

The bartender is pouring the old man another drink, and the woman looks as if her head is about to crash onto the bar. I place the palms of my hands on the table, and ease myself out of the booth. I use my right hand to hold my nose while tip my head back. I shuffle over to the bar.

"Sorry, can I just have a napkin or something?" I'm standing next to the older man. He smells like moth balls and cigarettes, and his suit jacket is puckered with burn marks. The woman looks at me.

"Oh dear, nose bleed, eh? I got them all the time when I was a kid." The woman tries to smile at me, but eventually gives up and returns to staring. The bartender says nothing, but hands me a pile of napkins. He asks me if I want another drink, and I politely refuse. After a few minutes, the stream coming out of my nose turns to a trickle. I throw the napkins into the trashcan the bartender holds up for me, take a few clean napkins, and announce my exit. I thank them for their kindness and say something quippy about the embarrassment of nose bleeds. The three of them smile at me through broken stares, then go back to drowning their consciousnesses in alcohol.

Outside, I debate about calling Eric. I probably shouldn't be going home. The cops have been there, and I

wonder if someone is watching my flat. I'm pissed off at myself for not initiating something with Eric earlier. If I had kissed him or told him that I liked him, our relationship wouldn't be so new, and I wouldn't feel weird about asking for his help now. At the same time, I have to stop. I have to lay down, check out, and let the rest of the world help me figure out why I just had a nosebleed. Weirdly, the nosebleed doesn't really scare me. I am holding on to the irrational thought that it was in no way related to the Harron sicknesses. Nope, I'm fine, just need to recover from a tonsillectomy. I'm quite adept at ignoring the voices in my head.

I stumble back to the office, thankful that it's only a couple of blocks. After I pass my security tests, I grab a scooter. I never take the scooters, I always use a skateboard. It's like skiing versus snowboarding. Snowboarding just looks cooler. However, in this particular moment, I don't have the coordination required for balance. The scooters have handles, and I need the extra support. Before I get into the elevator, I stop by the ladies room to make sure I got all the blood of my face. I intend to tell Dan and Eric about the nosebleed, but I don't want to show it to them.

The elevator drop nearly makes me hurl. By the time I get to the eleventh floor, I'm unable to stand. I fall out of the elevator and start crawling towards Jacob's office. I'm

halfway there when Eric sees me and sprints towards me.

"Holy shit, what happened? Are you ok? What's going on?"  
The panic in his voice causes me to smile, but it only lasts a second. He kneels beside me, places his hand on my back, and pushes the hair out of my face. The darkness starts swirling, and I know that I am about to pass out.

"I am going to faint, need couch, sleep. Help." I get the words out, barely. Eric's face fades. I go under.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Chapter 5

All the lights are off. There's a fleece blanket tangled around my legs. My left arm is asleep, and my back is stuck to the leather couch. I know I'm in Jacob's office, but I don't know what time it is or how long I've been sleeping. I lean forward and grab the bottle of water sitting next to the couch. I drink half the bottle and then notice the note attached to it, "Pull out your phone and call me right this second. - Eric". I do as the note tells me and dial Eric's number. It rings twice, then hangs up. "I tried," I think and sink back into the couch.

Twelve seconds later, I'm nearly asleep again, and Eric comes into the office. He gently pulls me up and sits down, laying my head in his lap. He strokes my hair as he looks down at me.

"You scared the shit out of me," he says. "Don't ever do that again."

"I'm sorry, I just...I couldn't help it." I try to think, but everything is still a little cloudy. I'm so tired. "What time is it?"

"It's almost four, you've been sleeping for twelve hours." I know without asking that Eric has been checking in on me regularly. He looks a little tired. The bags under his eyes have gotten darker since I last saw him.

"I got a nosebleed."

"When?"

"Right before I collapsed in the hallway." I tell Eric about Oscar and our meeting in the bar. It takes me a long time, but gradually the cloudiness clears a little. "Oh, I should probably check my emails." I pull out my phone and open my inbox. Sure enough there's an email from Oscar.

Hi Maggie,

I'm sorry I wasn't a little bit more sympathetic. I really shouldn't have been so flippant. You must be going nuts about this, and I was a bit of an asshole.

I've read a bunch of Harron's IRCs. Your name did come up. Apparently, you were the only surgery that particular surgical team has had in the last week. The surgeon was on vacation, and the team was given time to catch up on

paperwork. I also hacked into the lab records and found your biopsy results. They were marked 'inconclusive'.

I've heard your name on the police frequency. They've issued a warrant for questioning, but I think you already knew that. They have a car outside your apartment.

When I find something else, I'll let you know. Thanks for the beer, it made the afternoon fly by. I'll be in touch.

--Oscar

I reread the email aloud to Eric. He hasn't stopped caressing me, and the look of worry hasn't left his face. When I'm finished reading, I look up at him.

"Eric?"

"Ok. Well you can't go home, so you can come stay with me for a bit. There's nothing I want more, actually." I pull my head out of his lap and sit up, spinning around to face him. His eyes light up a little, and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me in. He kisses me slow and deep, and I feel the butterflies in my stomach disappear. Everything with him feels exactly right.

"I'm so sorry that we're starting this now," I say.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I wish I would have told you how I felt a while ago. I wish we could have gotten to know each other before I started dying."



"We still don't know that you're dying."

"What about the nosebleed? The sleeping? What about the fact that I feel like I'm dying."

"The nosebleed worries me, to be sure, but you had surgery a few days ago, and you've only been stressed. I'm going to take you home with me, and I'm going to make sure that you don't move for the next three days. I've already told Jacob I'm not coming in. I've already canceled all of my appointments."

"And if I die in your bed?"

"I'll be devastated. So let's make sure that doesn't happen. Bethany should call in a couple of hours. For now, let's go to my house."

I drink the rest of the bottle of water, and Eric helps me up. I lean on him as we walk through the empty office. The InterVision papers that Dan threw from the conference table are still on the floor.

"What did Dan say?"

"He asked us to call him tomorrow. We'll ask him to keep up with the analyst. You don't need to be doing that." I'm still leaning on Eric, and he's holding me close. He's holding me as if I might break into a million pieces at any moment. One of the buttons on his jacket is digging into the side of my head, but I press my head in further. I always liked it

when some part of me was indented. I barely notice the walk from Jacob's office to the parking lot. The elevator ride is nowhere in my recollection. I assume I'm drifting in and out, and it's only Eric that is keeping me on my feet. I climb into the A6 we had driven earlier. I watch the city streets zoom by but pay no attention to the direction we're going in.

Eventually, Eric pulls into an underground garage. Then he helps me to the lifts. In the elevator, Eric uses a key to access the top floor. He lives in the penthouse. I don't know this person at all. The elevator opens to hardwood floors and automatic lighting. A stainless steel kitchen complete with island and one of those overhanging oven ventilator systems spreads out to my right. In front of me is an endless living room with a city view backdrop. To my left is a single door. Eric takes me towards it.

His bedroom is expansive to say the least. It's very nearly the size of the living room.

I'm not registering any details anymore. The only thing I register is the softness of his bed and the way my head sinks into the down pillow.

#

I try to imagine it. I try to put myself in the orderlies shoes as they walk into the morgue to find a dead surgeon

hovering over the body of a dead doctor. I try to smell the blood in the room. I try to imagine my own fight or flight response when someone or something were to attack me. The conversation Eric had with the orderly who hit the assailant, and his insistence that the man who killed the mortician was my dead surgeon made no sense to me. He said the assailant was slow, yet persistent in his malevolence. Why didn't they just run away and call the police? The details are incredible, but I feel as if there are things that must have been lost in the translation.

I'd slept another eight hours. I wasn't awake at seven in the morning when Bethany called, and Eric went and talked to the orderly without me. He unloaded another thirty thousand dollars to get him to talk. Eric described him as nervous and fidgety. He got the impression that the orderly wasn't supposed to be talking to anyone about the incident. I am cursing my body for being weak. Did the orderly really say that the surgeon was trying to eat him? What was the exact phrasing on that? I drill Eric for over an hour about the specifics of his conversation. I try to get a picture, but the more I push, the more often Eric says that I should try to take it easy.

What's clear is that the orderly seems to believe that the surgeon who died a couple days ago "came back to life",

and not in a good way. He described a deteriorating human corpse lurching across a mortuary. He described a crazed psychopath. He described something out of an ancient necromancy book, something that didn't make sense. He described a fucking zombie. I started asking questions about the legitimacy of this story. Eric's only response was,

"If that guy was lying, he's the best actor in the entire world." He said the orderly was terrified, that there was no way he didn't one hundred percent believe every word. I suggested psychological evaluation.

I mean, it's ridiculous. No one fucking comes back to life, and I seriously doubt that the coroner at a major medical center like Harron would submit a press release claiming death if that wasn't fully the case. My best guess was that seeing the murdered doctor and accidentally killing the assailant probably sent the orderly into some sort of shock. Maybe the event unlocked some horrors in his subconscious and the guy just went mad.

Frankly, I've slept much of the last few days, and I am starting to grow weary of my predicament. It's been a lot of information to take in, and the fact that I'm squarely in the middle of some sort of weird biological shit storm hasn't been making me feel all so happy. I wake up, hear some kind of awful news loosely related to me through a random string of

events, and my mind goes into a schizophrenic fury of choices I might have to make and scenarios that could play out.

I'm basically not present half the time. Even now, with Eric, I'm somewhere else in between my words. I am having this conversation on autopilot. I know that I won't recollect half of what he says if it doesn't pertain to the thematic topic I've been busy with all week. I try to listen. I know I catch some of it, but every once in a while my mind wanders, and I find myself wondering what color shoes the mortician was wearing when he was killed. Scores of useless questions with irrelevant answers flutter through my brain. Eric notices sometimes. He sees me staring through him and nodding and knows I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Where have you gone? Come back." Whenever Eric asks me where I've gone, I tell him.

"I wonder whether the blood made his shoes red."

"You're morbid."

"So?"

"Just sayin'."

"I don't think it's particularly unhealthy to consider certain details about situations and events that will potentially alter your perception of life."

"Getting wordy for a reason?"

"I'm just saying, for me, the details build the picture."

I want to understand everything about that murder."

"Blood on shoes is not a relevant topic. You can envision the situation with bare feet if you like, it doesn't change the outcome." He's got me there.

"Want to get some dinner?" Even as I say it, the question surprises me. I actually feel hungry. The last thing I ate was a cupcake yesterday morning, so I should be feeling hungry. Strange that it wasn't the first thing on my mind when I woke up. "I'm craving eggs florentine."

"I can make you anything you want." We move into the shiny kitchen. I doubt anyone has ever cooked in this kitchen. Everything is in perfect order. Eric has a housekeeper. I'm sure of it. I think about my apartment and how everything is everywhere all the time. Scarves over lamp shades, mail on three or four different tables, empty bottles on several surfaces. My own personal squalor. I open the fridge and marvel at all the food and drink substances being arranged by size. I pull spinach from the vegetable crisper. Eric takes it from me and points to one of the stools on the other side of the island. "I said I would make you anything you want."

"Fine, I want eggs florentine," I say, assuming Eric has no idea what "eggs florentine" actually is.

"Alright," he says it with confidence. I'm about to get the best freaking eggs florentine ever created.

"What are we supposed to do now?" I ask.

"Watch the news, of course." He flicks on the television.

...And after the deaths of six staff members Harron  
Medical...

"Oh shit, the nurse must have died!" I don't know why I'm surprised by this. Maybe it's because I thought the quarantined nurse would have had enough time for the medical staff to figure out what was going on.

...Looking for a patient of interest. The patient is  
being sought for questioning regarding this case...

Eric is staring at me. My mouth is hanging open, I know that much. "At least they didn't name me," I say. "At least they didn't post a picture of me somewhere." If I was the only patient that was operated on that week, then I must have the disease. After all the sleep I've been doing, I'm feeling much, much better. Yesterday I was seriously considering returning to the hospital and accepting my fate. Today, though, I want to finish eating and take a bath. It's Saturday, I want to go to a flea market or walk along the beach. I don't want to be worried about any of this anymore.

So I'm done. I'm not going to play any of these games anymore. I'm just going to move on.

#

We spend the rest of the day talking. We talk about our favorite superheroes and our inability to understand why our respective families treated us like we were inept. We muse over our misguided attempts at humor in social situations and our avoidance of hors d'oeuvres that are served on toothpicks. We cover topic after topic. We tell each other lost opinions we didn't realize we had anymore. We talk about things I hadn't thought of in years, things I'd buried thinking no one ever needed to know. We discuss the isms, art, politics. Eric and I follow trains of thought down into the rabbit hole of perception and twist each other's words to prove opposing points. We consider that what goes into a black hole might in the same moment be spat from a white hole elsewhere in the universe and the chance that the portal between those two opposing forces is indeed nothing more than time. This particular point in the conversation leads further to the rumored development of teleportation devices in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The conversation barely pauses for a second. For the rest of the day we forget entirely about my health, the Harron thing, the murder. When the sun sets and the twilight melts into darkness, Eric opens a bottle of wine. We continue talking about pseudo Neo-nazis and their idiot attempts at



logic while we prepare filet mignon, croquettes, and salad with walnuts, apples, and cranberries coated in a vinaigrette glaze. As we eat, we giggle about the left wingers who spend a hundred bucks a month on pink hair dye and safety pins. We coin new words for the "energy" hippies are always talking about.

We talk until ten. When we move into the bedroom, we continue our conversation. Eric doesn't pause or miss a beat when he begins undressing me. He takes my clothes from me as if he's done it a million times before. His voice gets a little softer as he peels the layers away until I'm standing in front of him completely nude. Then he looks me in the eyes and says, "I'm done talking now."

We make love for hours finally passing out in a heap of exhaustion and release. When I awake, I find Eric looking at me, and we continue into day two of sex and food and pillow talk bubble of intimacy. We go deeper into our conversation. We spend the entire Sunday lost in each other. We cook, we talk, we drink, we talk. When Monday morning rolls around, we're shocked to realize that the weekend is over, and Eric tells me that he's in love with me. I don't respond. What am I supposed to say? I can't very well tell him that I love him too, as that would be contrary to my entire disposition.

The thing is, a while back I fell desperately in love

with a man who had no idea what love was. He said he loved me over and over again, but when it came right down to it, he was simply unaware of what that word meant. There's no reason to get specific, but he broke my heart, several times, and then danced on top of it to give himself a good laugh. I'd been trying to compartmentalize everything visceral ever since. If I had a therapist, he would tell me that I need closure, and I would disagree. What I need is a news report saying that my ex got hit by a car.

Eric doesn't expect me to say it back. He says "I'm in love with you" matter-of-factly. Dumbfounded, I just stare at him. Besides it's only ten in the morning, and the coffee hasn't settled in yet. By the time I start to feel awkward about my own lack of response, he's already taken the conversation somewhere else. I'm not really paying attention though, I'm reeling from his statement. At some point, he realizes I'm not listening.

"Where are you now?" he asks.

"Sorry, I just can't fathom why on Earth you would be in love with me."

"Well, you have a very low self-esteem. We'll have to work on that."

"I don't have a low self-esteem. I know I'm awesome. I'm just strange and solitary, and I always think that outsiders

must think I'm completely insane."

"Well, yes. That's exactly what I think," his devious smile and sarcastic tone are mocking me. "I didn't say it to give you a mental complex. It's just true. I love you. I can't stop thinking about you. I want to be around you all the time. I want to know everything that's going on in your head."

"I feel sorry for you."

"Jesus. Let's just move on, I don't want to convince you that you're worth loving. I shouldn't have to."

"Whatever." I'm annoyed. Eric's tone is kind of mean, and I don't feel like I should have to defend my psychoses. Yes, I am unsure about a lot of things. Yes, I tend to distrust certain statements no matter how genuine the speaker seems to be. Yes, I have my idiosyncratic tendencies. These are pieces of me, and I don't feel like I should have to defend myself to anyone.

"You know, maybe you could just give me a fucking break," it comes out harsher than I meant it too, and I see on Eric's face that he's slightly hurt. "I'm sorry, I just...I'm just stressed."

"It's ok. So, I'm going to go to Onyx, but first I'm going to make you breakfast." He kisses my forehead. I set my coffee on the counter, and pull a stool up to the bar. Eric pulls out rolls and puts them in the oven. He places a pot of

water on the stovetop and turns on the burner. I watch him as he opens the refrigerator and pulls out prosciutto, tomato, goat cheese, and eggs. He pricks each egg with a pin and places them in the water. Little bubbles of white are expunged from the hole, and the eggs bobble in the boiling water. I realize my staring is probably getting creepy and remember to use my words.

"So...Onyx, eh? Why? I thought you told Jacob you weren't coming in."

"I did, but I was going to go talk to Oscar. I want to see if he has any new information for us," Eric says the word us with emphasis. "I called him while you were sleeping the other day and let him know that he can share everything he finds out with me as well."

"Sure, fine. But I'd like to receive the information at the same time you do. Whatever crazy information comes in, I'd like to know first hand. No more of this telephone game."

"'Telephone game'?"

"Yeah, that game kids play, or at least, I played when I was a kid....You tell someone sitting next to you a random sentence, and then they tell the next person, and eventually the sentence becomes diluted, and the original meaning is lost."

"Ah ha." Eric smiles at me, clearly amused by my idiotic

description of a game that isn't really a game.

"I do so love four minute eggs." I smile back at him and start slicing the tomatoes. We brunch as if it's Sunday, sharing a newspaper and eating slowly. When the coffee runs out, I make another, and we exist there in the late morning sunshine. Around noon, we take a shower together, which ends up lasting longer than expected. I'm marveling at the stamina I have, actually.

We dress. We kiss. We begin our day in the early afternoon. It feels right.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Chapter 6

We're driving to Onyx. Eric didn't want me to leave the apartment, but after the weekend we had, he can't tell me no. He told Jacob he wasn't coming into work, and he's not changing his story, though technically we are going into the office. The streets are seemingly full for this time of day. The lunch buffets must have pushed their hours a bit, and sure enough I notice a group of sloppily dressed women waddling out of the China Hut on the other side of the intersection. A sea turtle on dry land would have used the passing lane with these women. Their fat bulges beneath their blouses as they duckwalk down the street. I feel like the light we're sitting at is taking forever to change green. I'm staring at these women in blank horror. I feel a deep seeded terror that someday that could happen to me. Someday, I could be a fat, ugly, office

employee having a lunch buffet at a fucking China Hut.

When the light changes green, I remember that there is no way that I could end up like that. I don't have the proper genetical makeup for obesity.

When we get to the office, we don't bother announcing our arrival and everyone is deep enough in their own work, they don't notice that we're there. Eric pulls the blinds, and locks the door. The 46 Book is on the table, and I grab it quickly.

"My turn," I smile at Eric and open the 46. I bring up my email and find that Oscar has sent me another report.

Hey -

I hacked into Harron's IRC, and have attached a conversation between two administrators. You better give it a read. I'd summarize, but you'll end up reading it anyway, so...

Also attached is the autopsy report, I stole it from Harron's server, their security is for shit. Start with the IRC.

--Oscar

I download the IRC log and open it in my text editor. The scrollbar is tiny, the document is long:

HeSiThe: Mr. Aldeson?

PresAldie: Hi Herman, I'm here.

HeSithe: I just wanted to chat with you about how you want to handle the press.

PresAldie: Well, if I had my way, the press wouldn't hear anything about anything.

HeSithe: Yes, but there are simply too many hospital employees to believe that we can keep this under wraps.

HeSithe: the press will find out sooner or later, we should address it sooner. Handle the spin.

PresAldie: Your recommendation is noted, but we have to keep in mind that the CDC has asked us not to have a press conference at all this week.

HeSithe: Oh? I wasn't privy to that information.

PresAldie: You are now. After what happened during Dr. Paul's autopsy, we are going to need to stay in constant dialogue. Everything you hear needs to be verified with me.

HeSithe: Are we making any sort of announcement about the autopsy?

PresAldie: Are you kidding? What are we supposed to say? That Paul came back to life and tried to attack the doctor doing the autopsy?

HeSithe: I'm sorry, but I don't know exactly what happened. All I've heard is that the surgeon wasn't really dead.

PresAldie: Well that's not true. He was dead for over



three days. I checked him myself. His body was in the freezer.

PresAldie: He was dead. Deceased.

HeSithe: This doesn't make sense to me.

PresAldie: The pathologist doing the autopsy...a Doctor  
Gander, new hire.

HeSithe: The autopsy was already started!?

PresAldie: He was as white as a sheet when he told me  
what happened. He said that Dr. Paul literally got up off the  
table. I have the full report, you should give it a read.  
Sending it along.

HeSithe: Ok, I'll get back to you in a bit.

PresAldie: Good, if I'm not online, just have someone  
page me. We need to discuss what exactly we're telling the  
press.

I stop reading. The timestamp on the chat shows that after an hour Mr. Aldeson and Mr. Sithe continue their conversation, but I want to read the autopsy report. I switch back to Oscar's mail and download the second attachment. I skip over the police report and the continuation sheets.

EXTERNAL DESCRIPTION:

The body is that of a well-developed and well-nourished Caucasian male which appears to be about the stated age of 46-years-old, weighing approximately 180 pounds and measuring approximately 72 inches in height. The body shows a moderate

generalized rigor mortis. The hair is short and mostly grey. The eyes are brown. There are severe petechiae in the conjunctivae and sclerae. The nostrils and mouth show white froth. The ears are unremarkable. The neck, chest, and abdomen show lacerations. The left forearm shows a diffuse recent bruise over the lateral aspect measuring approximately 8 inches by 3 inches in the area between the wrist and elbow. The right arm has a significant bite wound and is moderately deformed on the lateral condyle of the ulna. The protrusion is significant. There are numerous small superficial skin bruises covering the entire body. The bruises appear to be rather fresh. The left ankle bone is dislocated. Avulsion of the scalp and associated galeal and subgaleal hemorrhages.

#### INTERNAL EXAMINATION:

The body is opened with the Y-shaped incision. The organs in the chest and abdomen are slightly lower than their normal anatomical positions. The abdominal cavity shows excessive fluids and adhesions. Contusions and hemorrhages are noted.

#### CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM:

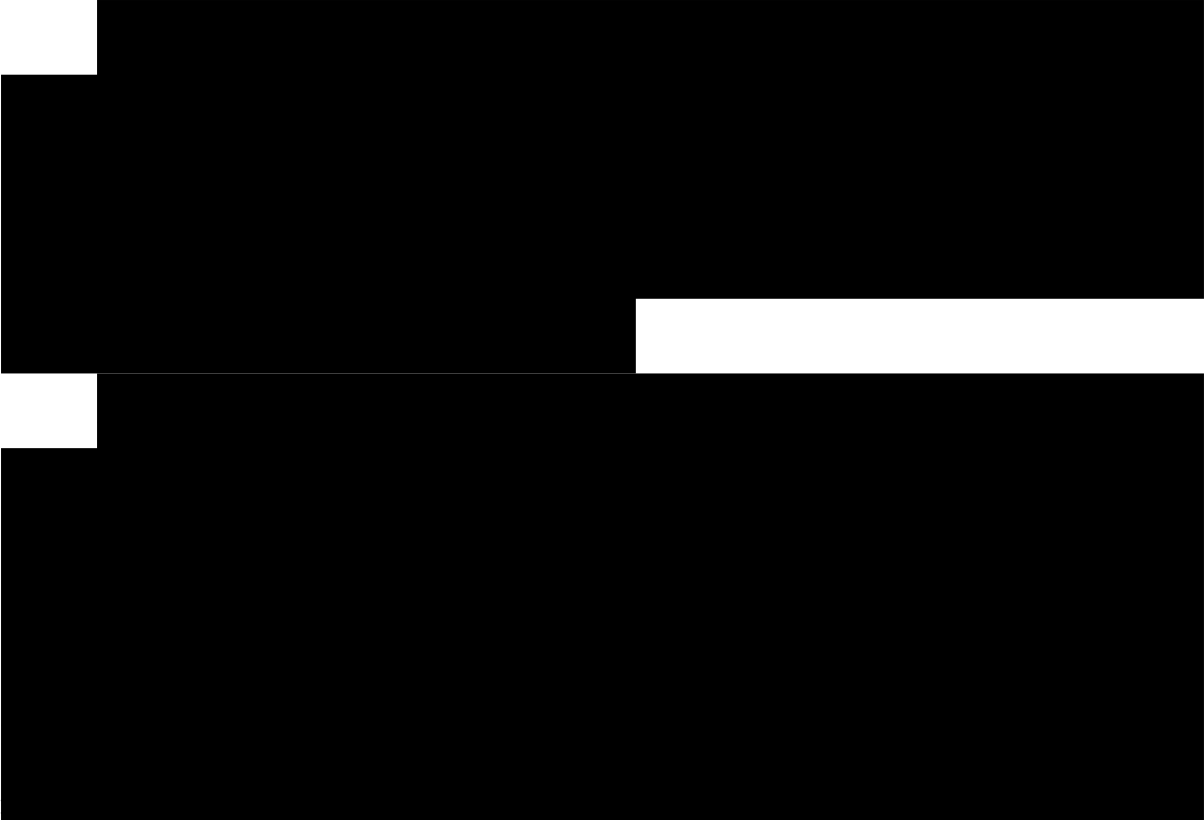
The pericardial sac shows approximately 40 cc. of serous fluid. The heart is normal in size and weighs approximately 230 grams. There are petechial hemorrhages over the epicardium, myocardium, and endocardium. The chambers contain over 100 cc. of serous fluid and blood. The blood has been

collected and submitted for toxicologic tests. The valves show abnormality. The coronary arteries show abnormal branching. The aorta shows a severe arteiosclerosis...

I start scanning through the rest of the sections. I don't know what half the report means. The report is thirty pages long, so I flip through reading the section headings. On the twenty-seventh page I come to:

OPINION:

During collection of nail samples it was observed that onychosis was prevalent. Hair follicles were also observed to be weaker than normal. At first glance signs of osteoporosis are assumed. However, after radiography and bone mineral density measurements, osteoporosis was not diagnosed.





Despite the obvious deep wound to the skull, the autopsy findings are consistent with a major viral infection. The viral infection is unidentified.

The blacked out paragraph is impossible to read. Someone must have taken a sharpie, black spray paint, and the darkness of night to hide those paragraphs. I briefly wonder if Wikileaks would have information on this report, and then switch back to the IRC log.

HeSithe: I read the autopsy report. What do the blocked out paragraphs say?

PresAldie: What I already told you, that the doctor rose from the dead. It's much more specific than that. Gruesome even. I had Dr. Gander remove his observations from the autopsy so that the public health board wouldn't have that information filed for all time.

HeSithe: That doesn't seem ethical.

PresAldie: I only did what the CDC asked me to do. Before submitting the autopsy, I read those paragraphs to someone at the CDC, they called it "unverifiable" and asked me to remove it from the report.

HeSithe: Is it really "unverifiable"?

PresAldie: No. We have video from the surveillance feed.

HeSithe: You watched it?

PresAldie: Yes, and then I destroyed the files. No one should ever have to see that. Particularly not Dr. Paul's family.

I return to my mail program and reply to Oscar. I put Eric and Dan on CC.

Absolutely stellar work Oscar. This isn't about me anymore, this is something bigger. If I were going to get sick, I'd be sick by now. But it sounds like Harron is involved in something a little twisted. This story is getting fucking weird. Can you try and get the video file from the server? I doubt the administration knows how to delete backup files, and a hospital is probably doing automatic backups of some sort.

-Maggie

#

"Why do you need a jukebox anyway?" The stupidity of this particular conversation dawned on me over a year ago. Dan and I had been in Philadelphia for some sort of wacky, over-the-top library summit. I didn't even know why we were there. I spent the entire event confused about my purpose in life. Dan spent the entire event talking about the jukebox he found on Ebay. We had a long winded discussion about "extracurricular appliances" in which I said that such devices served the

"absurdity of consciousness". My proposal was that being limited in your material possessions allowed obliviousness towards the more stressful aspects of living in the modern world. Take for example owning a car, and compare it with the inconvenience of having to take public transportation everywhere. Sure, in the latter you don't have the warm, dry comfort of a foreign built sedan, but you have twenty minutes of uninterrupted anonymity and you don't have to pay insurance or put gas in anything. The tube goes from point A to point B, and you can get a monthly pass at discount.

"I need a jukebox so everyone can play Paradise City and reminisce about the Summer of 99," Dan parks the car. We're in the parking lot of a fifteen story low income highrise. I'm appalled that any of the tenants of this place have a jukebox.

"I'm waiting outside."

"Whatever. Be right back."

The courtyard I'm standing in wouldn't be green during the most fertile spring. Laundry lines with forgotten clothing articles crisscross between buildings. The trashcan next to the door is rusted to the railing. Abandoned gardening tools lean against a broken birdbath. Dan's gone before I find a place to sit down. Disappeared inside the building. Sighing that the elevator is out of service. Or whatever kind of mental observation he makes.

I'm daydreaming about tropical islands and boat trips. Wouldn't it be nice to say "screw it" and leave all of those responsibilities behind? I could just grab a computer and disappear to the Canary Islands, design menus for local restaurants and teach IT classes. I'd have a little hut by the sea and read National Geographic magazines from the fifties. I relax near the sea without a care in the world. Just as my man servant, Jesus, delivers a cocktail with a little umbrella in it, the sun on my face turns to shadow.

"Holy shit!" I jump up from the bench just as a man grasps at my arm. Flesh is peeling from his face. His left eye is only loosely in the socket as he stumbles over the bench. I have to swallow down the bile as he groans and thrashes towards me. His ribs are no longer connected to his skin, and for whatever reason his jaw is opening and closing in a completely horrific fashion. For a second, I wonder if my daydream turned in an apocalyptic vision. I let out a sigh and relax, it's just a dream. I let go, astounded at the reality of my imagination, until a wet goo falls onto my neck and slithers into my shirt. This is really happening! This fucking guy has what's left of his arms around me!

I throw all the force I can muster forward, pitching my assailant over my head. I wonder where I learned that move before I lose my balance. Comically, I fall into the

shrubbery. His aggression is obvious, this guy gets up snarls and comes towards me again. The courtyard between the apartment blocks spins around me, but I manage to put ten paces between myself and the crazy that's attacking me. He's slow winded. My ten paces become twenty, and I have a moment to study him. He's grey and broken wearing a leather vest with fringe remainder. It's the cowboy from the bar.

A door slams open and I can hear Dan bitching about the weight of the jukebox. I don't take my eyes off the cowboy, who is continuing to advance on me with his mouth open and a vacant look in his eyes. I study his balance. He's moving on autopilot. There's no grace in his movements at all, like he's been programmed to move. I glance at Dan, who has apparently not yet noticed the situation I'm in. I stand there as the cowboy closes distance. When he's two feet from me, he awkwardly lurches backwards, and I drop kick him. He loses his balance, and squirms on the ground for a moment before figuring out how to stand up again.

I sprint over to Dan, "Let's get out of here!" The cowboy is up again and wobbling towards us, drool falling from his mouth and strewing pieces of flesh across the courtyard.

"What the fuck is that guy on!?" Not fully grasping the seriousness of the situation, Dan is laughing. I grab half the jukebox, and scream at Dan to move his ass. The cowboy is



closer, and Dan finally registers the walking corpse before him. "Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh FUCK!" The cowboy grabs Dan's wrist and the jukebox falls face down on the pavement. We hear the glass shatter. I push the cowboy away from Dan and punch him a few times in the face. His bones crackle with each hit, but his strength doesn't wane. I run away from Dan and the cowboy chases me for a few moments. Then, almost in slow motion, the cowboy turns around and heads back towards Dan who is struggling to flip the jukebox into a standing position.

"Leave it!" I'm screaming.

"Fuck you man, I just bought that fucker!" The cowboy falls into Dan who immediately throws him off. The cowboy stumbles backwards, loses his footing and slams head first into the broken birdbath. The jagged edge scalps him, and a piece of his skull flies through the air landing at my feet.

"Oh fuck." Dan inches towards the man with a look of pure terror on his face. "Not again..." Dan looks at me and says, "You know, the last time I threw a crazyfuck into a broken birdbath, I was tied up in court for a week!" I can't help but laugh. Dan doesn't even seem concerned, but I know he is. We go to inspect the body, I pull out my cell phone to call emergency services. Looking down at the corpse, I think that I should be calling research scientists and a team from the CDC

and then I remember the IRC conversation from Harron.

"Dan?"

"What?"

"Did you just see his mouth move?" The cowboy sits straight up, grabs my arm and chomps down hard. As I scream, Dan smacks him in the head with a shovel. Parts of his brain fly into my face, and Dan nails him again. Dan pulls me up and wraps his arms around me.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He's barely functioning, I can see his worldview collapsing around him. He's crying and muttering and hugging me too hard.

"Too hard," I gasp. He releases me and looks me in the eye.

Without speaking a word, he asks, "What do we do now?" I walk back over to the jukebox.

"Well, let's get this thing in the car."

#

"So what are we going to do with the body?" Dan is looking at me like I'm nuts. We just spent twenty minutes trying to figure out how to get both the cowboy and the jukebox in the trunk. Or rather, I spent twenty minutes trying to get them both in the trunk while Dan just asked over and over again "What are you doing?" For some reason during the attack, I formulated a connection between the virus at Harron,

the cowboy and myself.

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