



CONCRETE UNDERGROUND

Moxie Mezcal

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by Moxie Mezcal

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For Steph

BOOK ONE: The Rules

PLAYLIST

My My Metrocard | Le Tigre

Compared to What | David Holmes + Carl Hancock Rux

Red Dress | TV on the Radio

Id Engager | Of Montreal

Sheela-Na-Gig | PJ Harvey

Stagger Lee | Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Chapter 1. They Watch You Fuck

“They’ve got cameras everywhere, man. Not just in supermarkets and departments stores, they’re also on your cell phones and your computers at home. And they never turn off. You think they do, but they don’t.

“They’re always on, always watching you, sending them a continuous feed of your every move over satellite broadband connection.

“They watch you fuck, they watch you shit, they watch when you pick your nose at the stop light or when you chew out the clerk at 7-11 over nothing or when you walk past the lady collecting for the women’s shelter and you don’t put anything in her jar.

“They’re even watching us right now,” the hobo added and extended a grimy, gnarled digit to the small black orbs mounted at either end of the train car.

There were some days when I loved taking public transportation, and other days when I didn’t. On a good day, I liked to sit back and watch the show, study the rest of the passengers, read into their little ticks and mannerisms and body language, and try to guess at their back stories, giving them names and identities in my head. It was fun in a voyeuristic kind of way.

And luckily, today was a good day.

I watched the old Vietnamese woman with the cluster of plastic shopping bags gripped tightly in her hand like a cloud of tiny white bubbles. My eyes traced the deep lines grooving her face, and I wondered about the life that led her to this place.

I watched the lonely businessman staring longingly across the aisle at the beautiful Mexican girl in the tight jeans standing with her back to him. He fidgeted with the gold band on his finger, and I couldn’t tell if he was using it to remind himself of his commitment or if he was debating whether he should slyly slip it off and talk to her.

I watched the two black teenagers making out, completely absorbed in the novelty and excitement of newfound love. It never occurred to

them that their public display might seem cliché or rude or vulgar; their hearts had still not been hardened with the inevitable cynicism that familiarity and experience breed. Absorbed in their own private world, they were touching the divine.

And I even watched the bum with the wild, fiery orange mass of hair exploding from his pores, covering almost his entire face but for the small, narrow-set blue eyes peering out through the roughage. They were such a brilliant shade of blue that they made me think of the Fremen from Dune. In my head, I decided he was named Seamus Freeman.

“Everything gets streamed back to a giant server farm they keep up in the mountains, a massive concrete bunker that’s buried nine-tenths underground like an iceberg, so they’ll still be around after they take us all out with their WMDs.”

Mostly, though, I just tried not to watch the blonde sitting next to me – specifically, I was trying not to notice the satisfying way that she jiggled under the low cut of her pink Sate University tank top as she bopped her head pleasantly to whatever was being piped through her tiny white earbuds. I wasn’t altogether successful in that effort, but fortunately she seemed too engrossed in her Abnormal Psychology textbook to notice.

Finding myself staring again, I quickly averted my gaze and made eye contact across the aisle with a gruff middle-aged workman in black coveralls. He had looked up from his newspaper just in time to catch me ogling the blonde and shot me a sour, disapproving look.

I briefly thought about saying something to him, but before I could come up with anything smartass enough to be worth the effort, my cell phone went off. Several other passengers whipped their heads around to look at me as my ring tone sang out loudly:

I tried to call you before, but I lost my nerve.

I tried my imagination, but I was disturbed.

I pulled the phone out of my pocket; the display read: Jenny.

“Hey, what’s up?” I answered.

The chipper female voice on the other end said, “Not much, just getting ready. Last minute stuff, you know. Trying not to let my nerves drive me crazy.”

My eyes drifted back across the aisle to the workman’s newspaper. He had it folded around so I could see one of the interior pages, the one before the article he was reading. It had a full-spread advertisement for Abrasax, the search engine and software company. Along with their corporate logo, a stylized red drawing of a rising sun, the ad contained a photograph of their CEO, Dylan Maxwell, looking straight into the camera with his giant, creepy fucking eyes. It was the kind of picture that seemed like it was staring right at you no matter what angle you looked at it from. My skin crawled just looking at the fucking thing.

“So what are you doing?” Jenny continued over the phone.

“Not much, just trying to stop staring at some college chick’s tits,” I replied nonchalantly.

“What?”

The workman again raised his eyes from his paper to glare at me disdainfully.

I chuckled, “Nothing, I’m just on the Light Rail going to meet someone for an interview.”

“Cool, cool,” she responded dismissively and followed up with a carefully-timed pause before adding, “So you’re still coming tomorrow, right?”

“Of course I’ll be there. You think I’d miss my sister’s wedding?”

“It’s just that I know how you are, D,” she said in the voice she used when she wanted to nag without it sounding like nagging. It wasn’t actually as effective as she seemed to think. “I hardly ever see you anymore – ever since you got back from Oak Hill, you’re so... withdrawn. We used to be so close, and it means a lot to me for you to be there.”

I looked up and saw the workman watching me, eavesdropping on my half of the call. He quickly dropped his eyes back down to the newspaper and began riffling randomly through the pages. Anything to pass the time on a long train ride, I thought to myself, and then repeated to Jenny, “I’ll be there.”

“Great. It’ll be nice to have at least one person from my family there,” she continued. God, she could be so fucking relentless. “I mean, I’ll have friends there and everything, but it’s mostly all going to be Brad’s side, between his family and business contacts and all the politicos his uncle knows.”

The workman stopped fussing with his newspaper and held it fully spread out in both hands with the cover facing me, as if trying to hide as much of himself from my view as possible. It was a tabloid-sized alternative weekly with the title Concrete Underground spelled in cut-out lettering like a Sex Pistols album sleeve. The cover was a photo of city hall superimposed over a background of hundred-dollar bills with the caption: City Contracting Scandal Exposed, by D Quetzal, page 33.

I felt my spirits lift a little as a smug smirk spread across my face and I replied into the phone, “Speaking of Brad, I was meaning to ask you if he read the article yet.”

Jenny didn’t respond, but just let out a prolonged, exasperated sigh.

“That’s a yes. What did he think?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said tersely. “Please try not to be an asshole.”

I slid the phone back in my pocket and couldn’t help but feel a little triumphant. Call me immature, but there was something about getting under Jenny’s skin that I still found as entertaining as I had when we were kids. I guess that’s the beauty of siblings.

I whistled across the aisle at the workman to get his attention. He folded the newspaper sloppily on his lap and looked at me with blank, listless eyes.

“So what do you think about all that stuff going on with the city?” I asked, indicating his paper.

“I don’t read the fucking articles in these things,” he grumbled. “I just pick them up to see what movies are playing.”

I smiled and nodded my head in agreement. “Yeah, I’m with you, brother. A bunch of liberal paranoia bullshit, far as I’m concerned.”

He didn’t respond one way or another to my comment, but kept looking at me with a glazed-over, uninterested expression, as if waiting impatiently for me to get to the point of whatever I’d interrupted him for.

I glanced at the logo sewn in bright red letters into the breast of his coveralls, which read: Asterion Record Management.

“Hey, Asterion,” I said, pointing at the logo. “Didn’t you guys just get that big contract from the city?”

He jerked forward suddenly and jabbed a thick, calloused finger at me. “Look, faggot, I don’t know what you’re getting at, or if you’re trying to hit on me or what, but if you don’t get off my nuts and stop staring at me, you’re gonna be picking your teeth up off the floor.”

I bristled at his epithet and thought it was a pretty broad assumption to make as I smoothed the lapels of my crushed velvet jacket with a couple black-nailed fingers. I let my lips hang open loosely in a mischievous grin and stared him down, keeping my eyes locked unwaveringly on his.

The passengers immediately around us shifted uncomfortably in their seats and watched nervously. The blonde next to me bobbed her head obliviously, still buried in her textbook. And Seamus the hobo kept right on preaching.

“They use biometric analysis to sort through all the hours and hours of footage so they can follow you from one camera to the next, keeping you forever under their watchful eyes.”

I saw the workman’s eyes drift over to one of the opaque black orbs that housed a security camera. He sank back into his seat. I pursed my lips together and made an exaggerated kissing face at him.

The train lurched and jerked to a sudden stop.

“Well, girls, looks like this is where I get off,” I said, addressing the blonde’s chest with a tip of my hat as I stood up.

She yanked the earbud out of one ear and looked at me quizzically. “Huh?”

I recognized the music that spilled out of the stray bud as Le Tigre, which I found a bit surprising based on her appearance, expecting her tastes to run more pop and mainstream.

I shrugged and headed for the train door. On my way out, Seamus held out one hand to my chest to stop me, then passed me a piece of paper with the other. It was a half-sheet flyer, a cheap black-and-white photocopy with three narrow vertical pictures – a closeup of the

pyramid from the back of the dollar bill on the left, a police officer in riot gear in the middle, and a woman in lingerie on the right. The phrase "You Are Being Lied To..." was emblazoned across the top, and right below the images, it continued "Trust Us". At the very bottom, in tiny letters, was the words "The Highwater Society" along with a stylized logo of a globe with a crown floating above it.

"How do you know so much about all this?" I asked Seamus.

His deep blue eyes twinkled as he replied jovially, reeking of sweat, piss, and Mad Dog 20/20, "I used to work for Abrasax. I helped them build the damned thing."

Chapter 2. Can't Be Held Responsible

The address I had been given was a flophouse called Casa Salvador in the scummy side of downtown, the part where the city's redevelopment (read: "gentrification") efforts hadn't yet managed to drive out the sundry undesirable elements.

I walked inside past the front lobby. I could tell the desk manager wanted to hassle me, but he was too busy arguing with a middle-aged peroxide-blond woman in a leopard-print top. Her skin was leathery and weather beaten, and I guessed she was the type who was actually a good ten years younger than she looked.

I made my way up the narrow staircase that smelled of urine and bleach, going all the way to the third floor. I continued down the dimly lit hallway, past a series of closed doors that muffled the sounds of women faking moans of pleasure.

Room 313 was down at the far end of the hall, and its door was already slightly ajar. I knocked anyways, but there was no answer. Pushing the door open just enough to poke my head in, I called, "Hello? Is anybody in there?"

There was no response, so I went in and felt along the wall for the light switch. A single weak bulb came on, lighting up the tiny, sparse room with a dim yellow glow. The room was about 8 feet by 8 feet, and the only furniture was a dingy, unmade bed and a metal foot locker. There were no windows, no closet, and no bathroom. As I stepped all the way in, I noticed a wooden baseball bat propped up beside the door.

My watch said 6:20 – twenty minutes late for the interview. I sat on the edge of the bed to wait, hoping that maybe my contact had just stepped out momentarily.

After a few minutes, a phone started ringing out in the hallway. I let it ring six times with no one answering before I decided to get it – partly in the off chance it was my contact, but mostly out of morbid curiosity as to what kind of business someone would have calling this dump.

On my way to the door, though, a small blue flash of light caught my

eye. It came from inside a vent at the top of the opposite wall. I moved closer and saw that there was something blue and metallic stashed behind the grating. The flash must have been a reflection of light off the metal surface.

I slid the foot locker over and climbed up to get a closer look. Inside, I could make out what appeared to be a small rectangular box about five inches long and two inches thick. I tried to pull the vent loose but found it was screwed in place. Digging my pocketknife out of my jeans, I started loosening the screws and had managed to work two of the four out when I suddenly heard a voice call out from behind me.

“What are you doing here?”

I spun around to see an old man standing just inside the doorway, thin and gaunt, wearing a cheap brown suit. He had picked up the baseball bat and was pointing it at me threateningly, as if trying to keep me at bay. I stepped down off the locker, and he advanced on me quickly, extending the bat out to just barely tap my chest with the tip.

“Stay right there.”

“Whoa, calm down,” I said. “You called me and asked me to meet you here.”

“I didn’t call you. Who are you? Who sent you here?”

“Look, someone called and told me to come here. I’m a reporter.”

I started reaching inside my jacket to get my card, but he jabbed at me with the bat. It wasn’t close enough that he meant hit me, but close enough that I got the message.

“I’m just gonna reach into my pocket to get my business card and show you who I am.”

He watched me silently as I slowly tried again for my jacket pocket. I produced my card and handed it to him.

The top of the card was stamped the Concrete Underground cut-out logo. Underneath was printed:

D Quetzal

Punk-as-Fuck Investigative Journalist

He glanced at the card before training his gaze and the bat back on me.

“Is this supposed to be some kind of a joke?”

I took a couple steps forward. “It’s no joke. I’m a reporter and—”

He swung the bat square into my mid-section. I doubled over, my abdomen on fire from the blow. Before I could recover, another swing brought the bat down on the back of my head, dropping me to the floor as I quickly faded out of consciousness.

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I am having that dream again.

I sit in a crowded movie theater. On my right is an empty seat. To my left, a woman sits beside me. I think that I followed her into the theater because she looked familiar, like my old girlfriend from high school, but now I can see that she’s not who I thought she was. She rests her head on my shoulder, and I sweep away her purple hair from her forehead and give her a kiss.

I watch a man on the movie screen riding in a car as it drives onto a small airfield in the middle of the night. Actually, I don’t see the man himself; I see through his eyes. The man on the the screen is me; the me in the audience fades away, and I focus my concentration solely on the me on screen.

On screen, I get out of the car and am greeted by a short, balding man carrying a flashlight. He says something, but I can’t make out his words over the sound of the film projector behind me. I follow the man with the flashlight into one of the airplane hangers. It is dark all around.

There is a single plane in the hanger, a small private jet. The forward hatch is open and a rolling staircase has been moved into place. I follow the other man up the stairs and into the plane. Inside, the beam lights up only small parts of the cramped space randomly, the flashlight bouncing in the man’s hand as he walks down the aisle toward the back.

He stops at the end of the cabin and points the light at one of the seats. I move closer to see what he’s showing me. It is a woman. She

is dirty and disheveled – clothes torn, greasy black hair matted to her face with grime and sweat, large purple bruises on the exposed flesh of her neck where she has been strangled.

I kneel down and sweep away a few strands of hair to expose her face. I touch my hand to her cold skin, which feels almost unreal, like she's a wax dummy. Gently, tenderly, I run my fingers down along her lifeless cheek. I know her, but the me sitting in the theater can't quite place how or where from.

On screen, the man with the flashlight tells me, "Look in her hand." He moves the beam down so I can see her clenched fist. I force her grip open and see she's holding a necklace with a large, brilliant ruby mounted on a pendant. I flip the pendant around; there is a symbol etched on its back – a globe with a crown floating over it. I take the necklace from the dead woman's hand and stuff it in my pocket.

Back in the theater, I cough. The woman on my left shushes me angrily. The me on the screen whips his head around and looks over his shoulder, past the fourth wall and into the audience. I can see his face, and he isn't me. His deep blue eyes are filled with piercing anger, glaring at me through the darkness, projected larger than life.

The image on the screen flickers and dissolves briefly into static before cutting to a grainy, wide-angle shot of a room, the monochrome image washed in blue, giving the impression it is a feed from some kind of surveillance camera. The room is small and sparsely-furnished with only one occupant – a man sitting on the edge of a bed, his back turned to the camera. In the bottom right corner of the screen are digitized numbers reading: 00033.

I turn to my left. The woman beside me casts a disapproving look at me and says, "You shouldn't be here." Her face is covered by a half-mask made of dark gunmetal. I reach out to lift the mask, but when I see her face, I realize she's not who I thought she was.

I turn to my right and see a man sitting in the previously-empty seat, his face covered in a grotesque black mask pocked by red boils oozing puss. A long crooked nose protrudes from his mask, and underneath his lips part to reveal a mouthful of jagged yellow teeth jutting out from purple, bleeding gums.

The man in the mask starts laughing – a tinny and mechanical laugh, like the sound of a clanky old film projector.

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When I came to, my assailant was gone. I struggled slowly to my feet, feeling my head throbbing and my stomach stinging like hell. Then to make matters worse, that damned phone in the hallway started ringing again.

Once I finally regained my bearings, I realized that the vent cover had been fully removed and the box had been taken.

My head still swimming, I staggered out into the hallway in time to see the leopard-print lady from the lobby pick up the phone.

“Hello?” she answered and then turned her head to look directly at me.

“Yes, he is,” she said after a brief pause, then held out the receiver to me. “It’s for you.”

I took the phone from her and took out my reporter’s notebook from my back pocket. “D’s Sporting Goods. This is D speaking.”

“Did you find the parcel?” asked a man’s voice on the other end of the line, low and raspy, almost sounding mechanical.

“Who is this?”

“Did you get it?” he demanded.

I wrote the word “parcel” in my notebook. “You mean the little blue box? No, I was too busy getting bludgeoned into unconsciousness with a baseball bat. Now would you mind telling me who the fuck you are?”

I heard multiple voices whisper faintly in the background, but couldn’t clearly make out what they were saying. One of them might have said something like, “He’s going inside.”

“You shouldn’t have been late,” said the man. “You need to get out of there right now. If you don’t, we can’t be held responsible for what happens to you.”

The line went dead. I hung up the phone and made a few more notes before heading back downstairs. On my way through the lobby, the manager rushed out from behind the front desk to cut me off.

“Hey, there’s a visitor’s fee here. Twenty bucks,” he said.

“What?”

“All visitors pay twenty bucks. I have to clean up after you assholes. And between scrubbing the jizz stains out of the hookers’ rooms and mopping up vomit and blood and God knows what else in the dealers’ rooms, twenty bucks a pop don’t even start to cover it. So pay up – and that goes for you, too.”

I looked over my shoulder to see that the manager was also addressing a man who had just walked through the front door. He was a giant shit-kicking type, easily 6’8” and built like a bulldozer, with a shaved head and a dark olive complexion of indeterminate ethnicity. He wore leather pants, steel toe jack boots, and a black t-shirt with “Bad Seed” printed in white block lettering.

“What did you say?” asked the newcomer.

The manager stepped towards him, holding out his left hand face up and jabbing his right index finger down into the open palm. “You heard me. I said put some God-damned money, in my God-damned—”

The tall man head-butted the manager in the face, mashing his nose into a red squirting pulp. He looked up at me, blood dripping down his forehead, and said, “He shouldn’t have blasphemed.” I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not – probably wasn’t.

I just shrugged in tacit agreement and stepped past him towards the exit. On my way out the door, I looked back to see him heading upstairs. Something told me he was probably headed for room 313, but I’d be damned if I was going to follow him to find out.

Chapter 3. This Machine Kills Yuppies

“Congratulations, jackass, you just got us sued.”

My editor, Sharon, was standing in front of my desk. She was apparently not happy.

I shrugged, slouching further down in my chair, trying to hide from her gigantic crazy eyes behind my computer. It was a white laptop with a sticker that said “This Machine Kills Yuppies” slapped over the corporate logo on back.

She reached out with one of her freakish man-hands and slammed the screen shut. “Let me try this again. You just got us sued six times over.”

Sharon Sinclair was a six-foot-tall beast of a woman with a huge mane of wiry black and gray hair pulled back in a pony tail. I had every confidence that she could tear me in two and use my bloody carcass in some kinky hedonistic lesbian cult ritual or something. So I usually tried to choose my words with the appropriate care around her.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ, I haven’t even had my morning coffee yet, and my head’s still reeling from the Louisville Slugger that pummeled it last night. So I really don’t feel like dealing with whatever annoying hormonal episode you have going on here.”

She glared at me silently, watching me squirm a little before asking, “Are you done?”

“Probably.”

“Good,” she said with a suppressed grin as she took a seat next to me. “Because I just let you publicly accuse the mayor and the valley’s most powerful corporations of conspiring to defraud the taxpayers. So what’s your plan for keeping my ass off the firing line?”

I tilted back in my chair and met Sharon’s gaze. “Look, we knew we’d get a strong reaction. Let them sue. We have e-mails to back us up.”

“These legal briefings say your e-mails were forged,” she responded, waving a thick stack of papers in my face.

“Of course they’re gonna say that. That’s why I made sure to get corroboration. Abrasax confirmed that the e-mails between Dylan Maxwell and City Hall are legit. But you know all this, so I don’t know why we’re wasting time going over it again.”

“Because Abrasax is not returning calls or answering any questions related to your story. They won’t confirm that their spokesperson actually gave you that statement. They’ve cut you loose.”

I felt my stomach sink. “You’re kidding me?”

Sharon shook her head. “Nope. You know how you were telling me that their admission was almost too good to be true? Well guess what...?”

I leaned forward, propping myself against the desk on my elbows and massaging my temples. My headache was getting worse.

“It would make things a lot easier if you told me who your source on those e-mails was,” she pressed.

“I can’t. I promised them complete anonymity.”

“Fair enough,” she conceded, “but you got to give me something here, D. What’s your plan?”

“I have to talk to Abrasax again and make sure they’re still backing my story. Only this time I have to talk to Dylan Maxwell himself, not that horrible shrieking bitch flack, Lynch.” I paused, stroking my chin, then added, “He’ll probably be at my sister’s wedding tonight. Hell, it might make the thing actually worth going to.”

Sharon relaxed her posture a bit and softened her tone. “Nice to see you finally joined the conversation. Because if this thing goes to court, and you can’t get Maxwell to back up those e-mails, then I’m forced to go into damage control mode. And that starts with publishing a full retraction and shit-canning your sorry ass.”

Just then an intern appeared at the entrance of my cubicle with three full mail trays stacked on top of each other. “Here’s the mail you asked me to bring in, Ms. Sinclair,” she said meekly.

“Just set it down on his desk,” Sharon instructed with a nod. The intern obeyed, struggling with the weight as she hefted the load onto my desktop with a thud. She was typical of the girls Sharon brought in – idealistic college students with big vocabularies and big tits. Not that

I ever complained.

This particular intern had a lip ring and dyed jet-black hair. She wore a denim shorts over ripped black fishnet stockings and a carnation pink t-shirt with a silk screen of She-Ra that I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be ironic but at any rate was definitely a size or two too small. As I turned my gaze back to Sharon, I saw that she was also checking the girl out.

I shook my head. "Not worth your effort. I know her type. Probably has a long-term boyfriend, some dweeby music major with a pony tail or something."

"Says you," Sharon replied with a smirk. The intern stood there awkwardly, her eyes shifting back and forth between us.

"Prove me right, Princess of Power," I said.

"What?" the intern asked tentatively, her pale cheeks becoming flushed.

"Oh now don't go getting all embarrassed," I said. "I know we're living in more enlightened times and it'd be totally inappropriate for me to just ask you straight up if you like to eat box or not, and of course I want to be sensitive to all that bullshit. But this has to be settled, so just tell me this – which of the two of us would you be more likely to fuck?"

She-Ra shook her head, not quite sure to make of the situation. Finally, with an apologetic shrug, she answered, "Well I'm not gay, but definitely her."

Sharon laughed heartily as the intern walked away. I flashed a wolfish grin at her. "So what's all this?" I asked, indicating the mail trays.

"That's the hate mail generated by your article. Most of them just question your journalistic integrity – granted, they use some very colorful language to do it – but there are also a handful of bona fide death threats in there."

"I'm just surprised that many people actually read this paper," I muttered.

I wasn't really worried about the heat my article was bringing down. I knew Sharon could handle it, and I knew that she would get my back.

—

Sharon Sinclair ran away from home for the first time at age 14 to go see the Stooges. She ran away for the last time two years later and moved to New York. It was the late seventies, and she split her time between two movements – punk rock and gay lib. Somewhere along the way she got into journalism. She'd let me read some of her early stuff, and they were crazy good – frenetic gonzo journalism fueled by heroin and the self-righteous conviction that she was the coolest bitch on the planet.

By the time I met her, she had ended up here and started the Concrete Underground. It had meant something to her at some point, but now she'd just resigned herself to babysitting a bunch of mediocre smart-asses – present company most definitely included.

She drove a prehistoric beater with a biodiesel-converted engine. The rear bumper was plastered with old campaign stickers for failed Democratic candidates as her own little fuck-you to the world. Seriously. If only I were into homely dykes old enough to be my mother, I'd have proposed to this woman years ago.

—

I thumbed through the tray of hate mail absently, not really looking for anything at all, and came across a small blue envelope that caught my attention. It bore no stamp or postmark, but was addressed to me in care of the newspaper. The back flap was stamped in silver foil with the crowned globe symbol from my dream.

I unsealed the flap and pulled out the paper inside. It was a thick white sheet with a typewritten message:

Have you seen today's Morning Star?

Page 9-B

The Morning-Star was the major daily paper in the valley. As a rule, I never read it. So when I asked Stan, our movie listings editor, to borrow his copy, he was understandably suspicious. I had to promise to return it unharmed and not burn it in effigy or anything.

I pulled out the B-section, Local News, and flipped to page 9. Buried at the bottom of the page was a small one-column story about a woman found dead in a ditch on the side of Highway 77, about three miles south of the Hastings Airfield at the far southern tip of the valley. She had been strangled. Police found no identification on the body, and she did not match the descriptions of any known missing persons in the area. The police spokesman said that she was most likely a vagrant.

I turned the page. On the back of the article, page 10, there was a full-page color ad for Abrasax, again with a photograph of their CEO Dylan Maxwell. With his shaggy, jet-black hair, slim build, and loose, brazen way of carrying himself, people tended to think of him as more rock star than tech executive. I stared at the photograph, meditating on the way he seemed to gaze out from the page with those intense blue eyes. My brain flashed to an image of that same steely gaze projected larger than life on a movie screen. I felt a chill course through my body and make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, then imagined for a second that I could hear the sound of an old, clanky film projector.

Chapter 4. Strangers on a Bathroom Floor

There were a good many things I'd rather do on a Friday night than try to gain entry to the St. Augustine, an exclusive west-side hotel that catered to two types of clients – the rich and the powerful. And yet there I was, trying to weasel my way past some overgrown Aryan doorman blocking me from the grand ballroom.

"No, you don't understand. I'm a journalist, man. I have credentials."

I flashed him the first thing I found in my jacket pocket, which happened to be my press pass from a tech trade show two months past. It didn't seem to help my case. It probably also did not help that I showed up to a wedding in a five-star hotel wearing jeans and chancas. Or that I reeked of whiskey. In my defense, however, I had to rush straight from work to make it here, so there was no way I could have stopped both at home to change and at the bar to get suitably blitzed. Something had to give.

I persisted in arguing with the doorman until, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a very short, very angry young Mexican woman in a wedding dress charging towards us from across the ballroom.

"Now you've done it, Adolf. Get ready to see what happens when you infringe upon the rights of the Fourth Estate."

The young woman reached past the doorman and grabbed me by the arm.

"It's okay," she said. "He's my brother."

—

Jenny and I were twins, and we were always close growing up despite our very different personalities. Besides a birthday and a couple dead parents, there wasn't much else we shared in common. She was an over-achiever and a bit of a kiss-ass, always trying to make mom and dad proud, which she seemed to pull off with ease. She was the girl in high school who played every sport, joined every

club, ran the student council, and somehow still managed to pull A's without breaking a sweat. Intense doesn't even begin to describe her. I could never compete with that, so instead I decided to build an identity for myself as the rebel. Unfortunately, I somehow equated rebelling with turning into a giant asshole.

We grew up in a middle-class suburban family. Our father was a teacher and our mother an architect. They were the kind of couple that kept a date night to go dancing every Friday for the 31 years they were married. They died when Jenny and I were twenty-two. We sold the house where we grew up and split the cash; neither of us wanted to set foot in it again.

Jenny used the money to pay for her Master's. After school she went to work for James McPherson, one of the most powerful and richest men in the city. Aside from owning the St. Augustine, McPherson had interests in real estate, land development, venture capital, and other things I really should've known more about. The McPherson family was old money here going back to when this valley was nothing but orchards. If I said that at one time or another the McPherson family had owned every single square foot of land in our city, I'd probably be exaggerating – but not much.

Jenny ran the McPhersons' charitable foundation, which basically meant that not only did they have so much money that they had to start giving it away, but they even had to hire someone else just to get rid of it for them.

—

Jenny grabbed two glasses of scotch from the bartender and handed one to me.

"From the look of you – not to mention the smell – I know I really shouldn't be giving you this, but.." she trailed off and shrugged.

"Here's to your big day," I said as I clinked my glass to hers.

"So big that you showed up an hour late and missed the ceremony completely," she added, flashing me an expression of disapproval that made her look like our mother. I opened my mouth to protest, but mercifully she pressed her finger to my lips to silence me. "I'm just

happy you made it.”

“I am, too,” I replied.

We managed to sneak away from the reception through the hotel kitchen and out a service door that opened onto a loading dock at the back of the hotel. We sat on the dock and caught up over scotch and cigarettes.

“I haven’t smoked in ages,” Jenny said after exhaling a series of perfect rings. “If Brad saw me, he’d flip.”

“What are you going to do when he smells it on you?”

“Blame it on you, of course.”

I chuckled and stubbed out my cigarette butt. “Do you remember when we were in high school and we used to sneak out onto the roof over the garage to smoke?”

Jenny smiled. “Yeah, and I remember the time junior year when I came out to find you frying, babbling about spy satellites, government radio signals, and Philip K. Dick.”

“Yeah, and you blackmailed me for fifty bucks to keep from telling mom and dad,” I said with a grimace.

“Like they couldn’t figure it out anyways when you spent the next morning bug-eyed and twitchy during Sunday brunch with grandma.” Jenny laughed so hard she snorted.

“We used to be so close,” I said, letting a hint of genuine emotion escape my lips for the first time in as long as I could remember. “What happened?”

“I guess we grew up,” Jenny shrugged.

I scoffed. “Speak for yourself.”

The service door swung open and a large, square-jawed man stuck his head out onto the dock. “Jenny, I’ve been looking for you for half an hour.”

“Hi, Brad,” I said while chewing on the rocks from my scotch. “Nice party.”

He ignored me while Jenny stood up and walked over to him. “Why do you smell like smoke?” he asked.

“Sorry, honey. D was smoking, and the wind kept blowing it right into my face.”

“Let’s get back inside,” he replied coolly. “Our guests are waiting for us.” He held the door open as Jenny stepped inside.

“Hey Brad, I was meaning to ask you,” I called out as they left, “did you get a chance to read my article? I sent you a copy at your office.”

The door slammed shut.

—

Jenny met Brad through her work. Brad McPherson was James McPherson’s nephew and protégé. He managed a number of McPherson’s business holdings, including the venerable St. Augustine. Presumably that got him a discount for the reception. He also engineered a deal with the Mayor’s office for millions in city redevelopment money to help revitalize parts of downtown. Coincidentally, Brad’s uncle owned just over half of the land in the area slated for redevelopment.

It was hard to explain why I hated Brad so much. He was successful, charming as all hell, and from all accounts very committed to my sister. Granted, he had that moral blind spot that the rich and successful develop out of necessity, but he wasn’t at heart a bad person. Sure, I had always pictured Jenny ending up with a smarter man, someone who could match her intellectually, who was a little more like our dad – but on the other hand, I could see that Brad had the kind of all-American good looks and charisma that middle-class brown girls go crazy for. To her, he represented the last step of integration and acceptance, like her ticket into honorary WASP-dom.

So maybe it wasn’t that hard to explain why I hated him after all.

—

I made my way back through the reception, trying to count the faces I recognized out of Jenny’s guests. The sad thing was that she had almost no family there, so I knew more people from photos or TV than

from real life. There was the Mayor, two sitting congressmen, one senator, a handful of local politicians, the publisher of the Morning-Star, a smattering of billionaire venture capitalists, the CEOs of the city's dozen or so largest tech companies, and me.

One of these things is not like the others.

All of the city's best and brightest were here with one glaring exception – Dylan Maxwell.

I decided to find my assigned table, figuring it was a good place to kill time while I waited to see if Maxwell showed. When I got there, I realized Jenny had sat me next to my old high school friend Brian Lopez. She probably thought she was doing me a favor by giving me someone to talk to.

"Well if it isn't old Double-Dip himself," I said as I walked up to the table, slapping Brian on the back. "Good to see you, Bri-Bri."

Brian stood up, trying to force his grimacing lips into a smile. "D, good to see you."

He extended a pudgy hand to me. He had always been what they politely referred to as "husky" when we were kids, and time and age had not improved things. He shook my hand, gripping it tightly, and then introduced me to the other three people at our table – two of his co-workers from City Hall and his fiancée, Sandra.

"Nice to meet you," I said to Sandra, ignoring the other two. She was a few years older than him and it showed. Her facial features were harsh and uneven, but she compensated for it with an amazing body that she was showing off in a tight tan cocktail dress so low cut it threatened to spill out her ample cleavage.

"Very nice, congratulations," I said as lewdly as possible to Brian. He couldn't help but smile smugly; he was the nerd from high school whose newfound power and influence had nabbed him the kind of girl that used to laugh in his face.

"No really, she's hot. I definitely like what's going on up here," I continued, waving my hand in front of her chest. "Brian has always been a breast man."

"D, please..." Brian stammered.

I opened my mouth to say something else, but got distracted when I

noticed a woman walking through the reception hall in a multi-colored checkered ball gown and a black veil. That was weird. I considered asking the others at the table if they had seen her too, but then realized that their backs were to her.

I continued, “No seriously, you should have seen this guy in high school. Sometimes I think the only reason you used to hang out with me was to come over to my house and stare at my sister’s tits.” Brian’s face turned beet red. “It used to creep her out. In fact, I’m kinda surprised she invited you. You two never really used to get along.”

Brian took a deep breath. “A lot of things have changed since high school,” he said, pointedly. “Jennifer and I see each other professionally a lot now, and we have become friends.”

“That’s right, you work for the Mayor now,” I said, snapping my fingers as if it was just coming back to me. “I should have remembered because of that time you had me dragged out of the council meeting. I guess things have changed since high school. If you’ll excuse me, I need to go see a man about a drink.”

—

I walked out onto the terrace that led to the ballroom’s private garden and made my way to the terrace bar. After quickly downing two more shots of whiskey and taking a third to go, I meandered through the garden a bit and thought to myself that all things considered, I was having about as good a time as I could have at this thing.

As I turned a corner around a bush, I caught sight of a familiar face – Lilian Lynch, press secretary for Abrasax and conniving, backstabbing harpy. She was sitting on a bench, talking to someone who was hidden from my view by a topiary bull. She didn’t see me at first because her eyes were fixed on her companion.

“Look, just tell Max that I am handling it, and as for the Ariadne Key, I don’t know—”

She cut herself off as soon as she saw me approaching.

“Why Miss Lily, you look stunning. Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” I said loudly.

As I took my final steps closer, her companion came into view, and I recognized him as the shit-kicker from the flophouse, Mr. Bad Seed, albeit cleaned up and wearing a very expensive tuxedo that must have been custom made to fit someone of his size so well.

“I’ve got to get going,” he said to Lily as he stood up. “We’ll talk more later.”

That last line was meant for Lily, but he was looking at me when he delivered it. I was a tall guy myself, but he towered more than a half-foot over me, easily, and he was no less intimidating in the monkey suit than he had been covered in the flophouse manager’s blood.

I stepped aside to let him pass and then took his seat on the bench next to Lily. She was a thin redhead in her mid-thirties. Her skin looked like it was stretched too tightly over her body, like she was nothing but skin and bones, and she always had very serious, almost worried look to her face. Her thin lips seemed frozen into a permanent half-frown, and I don’t think I had ever seen her smile or laugh. Her humorlessness made her seem older than she really was, and the way you could see her skull so well-defined under her face always made her look somehow macabre to me, like she was dying a prolonged and agonizing death from some disease.

I noticed a scrap of paper in her left hand. I tried to inconspicuously glance at it and saw that it was a newspaper clipping of the “Woman found dead off Highway 77” article. She caught me looking and quickly stuffed the paper into her purse.

I returned my eyes to her. She was draped in a tight red dress with a plunging neckline. Although she did not appear entirely comfortable in it, it did show off her trim figure nicely. Between the dress, wearing her hair down, and the smoky eyeshadow she had on, I wasn’t lying when I called her stunning.

“I can’t believe you actually had the balls to show up here tonight,” she said with disgust, staring me down with a pair of steely gray eyes.

“What do you mean? It’s my sister’s wedding.”

“Yes, and a mere two days after you publicly accused your new brother-in-law, his family, and most of their closest business associates of conspiring to misappropriate city funds.”

“Yeah,” I conceded, “But how could I pass this up? Especially since I

heard single women get crazy horny and desperate at weddings. And I just want you to know, if your hormones are telling you to do something you're gonna regret in the morning, then baby, I am definitely willing to be your mistake."

Lily screwed up her face and mimed choking. "Ah, excuse me, Mr. Quetzal, but the thought of our skin touching just made me throw up in my mouth."

I grinned and looked at her reproachfully. "It's okay, you're not at work anymore. You can drop the hard-nosed flack routine and admit your true feelings."

"Okay, then speaking truthfully, when I first met you I thought you were gay. It made you seem a lot more interesting. Sometimes I like to imagine that you fake these pathetic attempts at fucking me just to stay in the closet, like being a chauvinistic asshole is your beard. It helps me keep from jamming a letter opener into my eye every time your number shows up on my caller ID."

I nodded and threw her a wink. "I get it, let's keep it professional. I'd only end up breaking your heart anyways."

She rubbed her temples in exasperation. "Listen, D, it's been a long night. Just tell me what it's going to take for you to leave me alone."

"An interview with your boss."

She guffawed loudly. "You can't be serious. Mr. Maxwell is very selective about the press he does. He won't even give a personal interview to the Morning-Star."

"I'm way better than the Morning-Star."

"You write senseless drivel to fill space between the movie listings and the hooker ads in a cheap rag that most people end up using to line their hamster cages."

"Yeah, but I look fucking suave doing it."

She rolled her eyes. "I can't tell if you put on this act intentionally to wear your adversaries down, or if you are just legitimately retarded."

I gave her my best roguish grin. "Well if I can't talk to Maxwell myself, maybe you can tell me why you all of a sudden won't take any calls about my story."

"Look, it's simple. I asked Mr. Maxwell for a statement regarding the

accusations you were making, and for some reason he told me to admit they were true. I have no idea why he did this, probably for the same reason he does most things – because he was bored and thought it would be good for a laugh. At any rate, he lost interest in your little story as soon as he hung up the phone with me, and he isn't likely to expend any more time or energy on you."

She paused, chuckling to herself and shaking her head before continuing. "As for me, I am avoiding any association with you for the same reason as everyone else in that ballroom. You're toxic, a pariah. No one's going to stick their necks out for you. Even if what you wrote is true, you've made powerful enemies who are going to tear you apart one way or another. And some of us are going to enjoy watching it."

I slumped down in the bench. "You know, Lily, you really are an epic fucking cunt."

"I may be a cunt, but at least I'm not a pussy," she sneered back and patted the top of my head condescendingly as she stood to leave.

I turned to my right to see a shrub trimmed into the shape of an elephant standing on its hind legs, its front legs raised up like arms. Setting my drink down on top of one of its front hooves, I took out my notebook and jotted a few notes on what I had overheard of her conversation. I drew a big fat circle around the phrase Ariadne Key.

When I finished, I took my drink back from the topiary elephant and tipped the glass to him in salutation.

"Here's to you."

—

I staggered back through the ballroom, my head swimming from the booze, which had crept up stealthily and then hit me all at once. My ears started ringing with a strange noise like the static crackle of radio interference mixed with a faint but incessant whine of a feedbacking speaker.

Bits of conversation faded in and out as I weaved between the wedding guests.

"—in way over his head. The man has no business being in an

executive-level position—”

“—shooting at Club Vox? It’s the third one this month downtown. A bunch of savages, no matter how many cops—”

“—fucking liberal crybabies with no idea what it takes to run a—”

“—only a matter of time before I make partner—”

“—did you see the nose dive their stock took—”

“—not to worry about re-election, no one’s dumb enough to try to run —”

My stomach churned, and the feedback in my head suddenly spiked with a loud squeal. I put my head down and barreled my way into the restroom.

Mercifully, it was empty. I stepped up to one of the sinks, braced myself against the counter with my arms, and stared into the mirror. My nose was bleeding. I looked down and saw a few perfectly-round dots of deep crimson had dripped onto the pristine white basin.

I leaned in and splashed a little water on my face, feeling my senses start to normalize and regain some focus and clarity. I switched off the faucet and looked back at my reflection in the mirror. Then I heard giggling coming from one of the stalls. It sounded like a woman’s.

“Hey, keep it down in there,” I called out. “Don’t want any of these uptight country club types catching you two getting nasty in there.”

“No, it’s not nasty – I’m alone in here,” a woman’s voice called back.

I perked up. “Um, that’s actually a little nastier. And extremely hot.”

The giggle returned, and the door to one of the stalls opened up. It was the girl I’d seen earlier in the motley dress and black veil. “Eww, I wasn’t doing anything in there. I was just hiding out.”

“Hiding out in the men’s room?” I asked.

She nodded emphatically. “Bathrooms are good places to hide out. They’re quiet, and they’re private. I started hiding out in bathrooms back when I was, like, 13, and my dad would drag me to boring dinners in stuffy restaurants with his boring friends.”

“Yeah, but hiding out in the men’s room?” I repeated.

“Women linger longer and they’re too chatty,” she explained. “Men’s

rooms are quieter and more likely to be empty.”

“Fair enough.”

The girl took a step closer, and I could see her more clearly through the veil. She was young, at most nineteen, with short brown hair and a pixie-like face. Her skin was pale, but there was something exotic about her features, implying she may have been of mixed ethnicity. She moved past me to the bathroom door and turned the deadbolt.

“Why’d you lock it?” I asked.

“I saw you out there; you looked like you could stand to hide out a little yourself,” she explained and started back to the far end of the bathroom. She sat on the floor, her back propped up against the wall under a small window. “Have a seat.”

“On the floor?”

“They keep things pretty clean in places like this,” she said and patted the cold white tiles next to her.

I reached up to slide the window open before joining her. Then I fished a pack of smokes out of my pocket and offered one to her.

“If we’re gonna break the rules, we might as well do it right. Do you smoke?”

“Yeah, all the time,” she said as she took it and lifted her veil. I lit our cigarettes and then watched her take a drag without inhaling. She held the smoke in her mouth for a second before spitting it back out in a messy cloud. It was obvious she had never had one before in her life.

“So it looked pretty brutal for you out there,” she said, trying to pose with the cigarette like a film star from the thirties. “Everyone you walked past was staring daggers at you. I mean, it’s obvious why they’ve got a problem with me,” she paused to indicate her dress, “but what’d you do to piss them off?”

I shrugged, then took a deep drag and held it in my lungs. “It’s complicated.”

“Ooh, mysterious,” she replied. “I like that.”

I smirked. “Besides, I never really fit in at things like this. I’m just here for my sister – to support her or whatever, even if I do think her new husband is a raging douchebag.”

She chuckled and took another phony drag. "So you're Jennifer's brother?"

I nodded. Then something clicked in my head; she definitely wasn't from our side of the family, and she was too young to be Jenny's friend or a professional acquaintance, so...

"You must be related to Brad then, right?" I asked, wincing.

"Yeah. Well actually it's complicated, and a little awkward for me to be telling you," she replied as she leaned forward conspiratorially. "The thing is, I'm actually married to Brad, too."

I laughed and half-choked on a mouthful of smoke. "You're kidding, right?"

She shook her head. "Brad and I met in the islands three years ago. We fell madly in love and were married in less than a month. Of course, his family disapproved and has never acknowledged it as valid. Still, they flew me out here and are letting me live on the family estate just to keep me quiet."

She was clearly lying. I laughed again, not knowing how else to respond.

"So if you're Jennifer's brother, and I'm your sister's husband's secret other wife, are we related?" she pondered. "What does that make us?"

"Strangers sitting on a bathroom floor," I said and flicked my cigarette butt into a urinal.

She laughed and slid closer to me. "Are you married?"

"Nope," I shook my head. "No wife for me, secret or otherwise."

"How about a girlfriend?" she pressed. "I saw you talking to Lilian Lynch, are you two together?"

I smirked. "No, Lily and I only know each other professionally. I'm trying to get an interview with her boss."

"Oh, you need to talk to Max?" she responded casually. "I can introduce you to him."

I did a double-take. "You know Dylan Maxwell?"

She nodded and reached into her purse to pull out a glossy rave card. One side was completely black. The other side was dark red with

white printing, showing an address, date, and time. "He'll be at this party tomorrow night. You can be my date. Meet me there, and I'll introduce you."

I slipped the card into my jacket pocket, not really sure what to make of her. I watched her look down at the barely-touched cigarette in her hand as if she had forgotten about it. She tossed it away, having lost interest, then got up off the floor.

"Well, I gotta get going," she said, smoothing out her gown with her hands. "I'll see you tomorrow, right? You better not stand me up."

I nodded my head. She crossed the bathroom and unlocked the door, then turned around to look back at me. "I don't even know your name."

"D."

"Dee, like John Dee?" she asked.

"No, like A, B, C, D."

"Cool beans. I'm Columbine," she said with a wink and then opened the door.

"Of course." I grinned. She was gone.

Chapter 5. Kind of a Douche, but Good for a Laugh

The next morning I called up my friend, Nick Unger, who worked for the police department. He agreed to meet me at the Casbah, a glorious little dive bar a few blocks from my apartment. It opened first thing in the morning, realizing the best drunks start early.

By the time he showed up I was already deep into my third drink and trying charm the bartender, Maggie, into comping my fourth. I was failing miserably as usual, but at least it was fun trying.

As soon as Nick walked through the front door, I slammed my palm down on the bar top. "Tricky Nicky! Have a drink, brother!"

He slid onto the bar stool beside me and smiled warmly at the bartender. "Has this low life been giving you grief, Maggie?"

She grinned at him. "Only since I opened the front door." Nick winked at her and ordered a half-pint of stout.

"Pansy," I scoffed and slammed the rest of my whiskey.

He shook his head. "God I miss you, you mad bastard. I can't imagine why Andrea won't let you come around the house anymore."

I shrugged. "I know, it's like as soon as she started squirting out brood, she suddenly gets all uptight about people starting fires in the middle of your living room."

"Imagine," he said as he raised his glass of beer.

I clinked my empty glass to his. "So guess who I ran into last night at Jenny's wedding?"

He shrugged.

"Brian Lopez."

He chuckled. "No shit. How is old Double-Dip?"

"Fat and sad," I replied while waving Maggie over for a refill. "And married to a smoking hottie. Well, married or engaged or whatever."

Nick nodded. "I met her. They were at a Police Union dinner around the holidays. She's a butterface."

I arched my eyebrow. "She had a face?"

Maggie rolled her eyes while she filled my glass. Nick caught her glance. "I know, he's got no class, but what are you gonna do?"

"Anyways," I continued, "she's way too hot for him, and that's not gonna end well. You just know that one of these days he's gonna come home and find her with the pool boy or some shit."

"Or with the pool boy, the plumber, and the mail man, all taking turns," Nick said. "Buddy of mine went to McKinley High with her, and apparently she had a reputation."

"Well, whatever... Brian's a douche now anyways, so fuck 'em."

"Yeah, he's a douche. Actually he's always been a douche." Nick drained the last of his beer. "Come to think of it, you've always been kind of a douche, too. But at least you're good for a laugh."

"I'll drink to that," I said, slapping a handful of bills down on the bar. "Next round's on me."

"Uh oh, Maggie," Nick chuckled. "If D's actually buying me a round, he must need something."

I flashed him a wolfish grin. "Let's head back to the patio and have a smoke, yeah?"

We went outside. I lit up, and he took a deep breath of my second-hand. He quit when he entered the academy and had to get his fix vicariously.

I showed him the article I clipped about the dead woman. "I need to know all there is to know about this."

He glanced at it and furrowed his brow. "What's to know? Some transient got scrubbed and left in a ditch on the side of the highway. Best guess is that she was hitchhiker who got picked up and wouldn't pay the fare." He bobbed his hand up and down in front of his pelvis to mime someone performing fellatio on him.

"There's really no ID, though? You couldn't match any fingerprints or dental records or biometrics and shit?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I don't think you really understand quite how those things work."

"So? I'm a journalist. It's not my job to understand things. I just ape

the sounds other people make, like a parrot.”

“Ape like a parrot – that’s poetic, really.” He chuckled then looked back at the article. “Look, there was one possible ID, but we looked into it and it didn’t pan out. I probably shouldn’t even mention this, knowing you, but one of the guys on the force thought he recognized her, said she looked like some lady who went missing a while ago. He remembered seeing her in the papers a lot, she used to run a computer company.”

I perked up at that last tidbit. “Really?” I pulled out my notebook and started scribbling.

“Settle down. We checked the dental records – yes, dental records,” he groaned, “and she wasn’t a match.”

“Could the records have been faked?” I asked.

“Only if you’re some kind of paranoid conspiracy theory nut job,” he replied.

“Sweet, I’m in like Flynn.”

“Why are you interested in this anyways?”

I took the clipping back from him. “Don’t worry about it. You know me, I just like to poke my nose in other people’s business.”

We went back inside and made small talk over one more round – long enough that Nick felt like he could politely ditch me to get back to his real life.

I stopped him as he was getting up to go. “Hey, if you’re free tonight, I could use someone to get my back at this party.” I dug into my pocket and showed him the invitation that Columbine had given me.

“You need someone to get your back at a party?” he asked skeptically.

“Brother, you wouldn’t believe the week I’ve had. I feel like I need a body guard just going down the street to get a taco.”

“I believe it. I still read your articles.” He looked over the invitation. It read:

LABYRINTHINE

ART • TECHNOLOGY • PERFORMANCE • INTERSECTIONS

SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 9:00 P.M.

2332 NORTH ALAMEDA AVE.

“This sounds a bit fruity,” he said with a raised eyebrow. “You’re really going to this?”

“Maybe. It’s for work,” I explained.

“I’ll pass. As tempting as it may sound to babysit you at some poofy circle jerk, I’m just going to stay home and nail my hot wife instead.”

“No you won’t. You have kids now, you’re not nailing anything,” I reminded him.

“Oh yeah,” he said disappointedly. Then he glanced back at the card. “What’s this symbol on the back about?”

“There’s no symbol. The back’s solid black.”

He shook his head. “It’s black ink on a black background. You have to hold it at the right angle to see it, like the Metallica Black Album cover.”

“Or White Light/White Heat.”

“Yeah.” He showed me. It was the crown-and-globe symbol again.

“I thought you were supposed to be an investigative journalist.”

—

Jenny turned her nose up at me as I sat down, sniffing loudly and filling her nostrils with the strong alcohol stink I was emitting. “So have you been drinking already this morning, or are you just still drunk from last night?”

“A little of both,” I said.

She peered at me disapprovingly over her iced latte. We were sitting at a table in front of a strip mall coffee shop. Jenny was wearing huge gold-rimmed sunglasses and had a decent collection of shopping bags gathered at her feet.

“Busy afternoon?” I asked.

“Just picking up a few things for Mexico. We leave tomorrow morning.”

My attention was drawn away by a group of men in black jumpsuits standing around in the parking lot next to a white van with the red Asterion logo painted on its side. It was hard to tell, but I thought one of them was the same guy I’d seen on the Light Rail a couple days before, the one who’d been reading the paper.

Jenny seemed to notice my distraction and followed my gaze. “Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just those Asterion guys seem to be everywhere now. I guess business must be booming.”

“Yeah, we hired them last month to archive our old financial records,” Jenny replied. “They came in and hauled everything away, I was so happy to get all that empty space back. Of course it doesn’t really matter now, since I’m going to have to find a new job when I get back from the honeymoon.

“Anyways, I’m rambling,” she admitted good-naturedly. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“I wanted to ask you about someone I met last night.”

She bared her teeth ecstatically in a knowing grin. “Really? A woman, I presume.”

“Settle down, it’s not like that. She’s just a girl who said she can help introduce me to Dylan Maxwell.”

“Was it Natalie?” she asked.

“I don’t know. She was wearing a motley dress and a black veil.”

“Yep, that’s Natalie,” Jenny confirmed.

“She said her name was Columbine.”

“Ugh, she’s still doing that?” Jenny smacked her lips in disgust. “That seems so macabre and distasteful.”

I paused. “Well, you know it has nothing to do with Colorado, right?”

Jenny ignored my comment. “She’s Brad’s cousin – James’ daughter. She’s kinda the black sheep of the family, if you couldn’t

guess.”

“Do you think she could really get me an interview with Maxwell?” I asked.

“If anyone can, it’d be her. They’re good friends.”

I pulled the rave card out of my pocket. “She told me to meet her at this party. I was kind of on-the-fence about going – it really doesn’t look like my kind of scene.”

“You should go,” Jenny said. “I think it would be good for you two to get to know each other. She’s a good kid, but she’s – I don’t know – lost, maybe. You could be a positive influence on her.”

“Really?” I asked in a voice that plainly showed my surprise. I don’t think my sister had ever described me as being a positive influence on anybody.

Jenny nodded. “Yeah. Now, Brad may not be so enthusiastic. He was pretty worked up last night when he heard that the two of you had locked yourselves in the men’s room, but I assured him that Natalie isn’t your type and nothing probably happened.”

I smirked, picturing him simultaneously clenching his jaw, his fists, and his sphincter as he imagined me defiling his little cousin in myriad unspeakable ways on a filthy bathroom floor.

“So please don’t fuck her,” she added. “Not even to spite Brad.”

I screwed up my face as if it was ludicrous to even suggest that. But secretly, if only for a second, the thought actually had crossed my mind.

“You still haven’t told me what he thought of my article.”

She shook her head. “Why do you keep asking? It obviously pissed him off, is it really that important for you to hear it from me?” I grinned, enjoying watching her get wound up. She realized that was what was going on, and it just made her angrier.

“Fine. You really want to know what he said about it? He thinks you just wrote it to get attention from me. He thinks it’s your weird, passive-aggressive play to sabotage our marriage, like you’re trying to make me choose between you and him. I told him that was crazy – that you wouldn’t endanger your career and your professional reputation over something as stupid and petty as that.”

I kept my eyes downcast so as not to meet her gaze and instead focused on the black-on-black symbol on the glossy rave card.

Chapter 6. Labyrinthine

I showed up at the address on Columbine's invitation just before eleven; it was a converted warehouse in an industrial zone on the city's north side. Since it was a Saturday night, everything else was empty for miles. The parking lot was filled with sports cars, hybrids, and shiny suburban tanks. The door facing the parking lot was open, spilling out muted lights and the din of yuppie chatter. It cast a somewhat foreboding aura over the entrance.

The first thing I noticed as I approached was the beefy refrigerator in a rented tux blocking the doorway. The second thing was the surveillance camera perched on the wall above his head.

I had stopped home and changed first, so I was sure I was dressed mostly appropriately for some rich faux-hipster art party – charcoal gray pinstripe jacket over a TV on the Radio t-shirt, skinny cuffed jeans, Docs, and a black fedora. I certainly didn't look any worse than the other idiots I saw filing in and out of the door. I even had an invitation. So I was fairly confident I'd be able to gain admission to this thing without incident.

"No, absolutely not," the doorman said, pressing a meaty palm into my chest.

"I was invited!" I said, exasperated. "I have documentation." I waved the rave card in front of his face.

"No dice."

I stepped aside to let a couple of aging goths through the door and wondered for a moment if the doorman somehow knew who I was. Then I noticed the ear piece he was wearing and my eyes darted back to the surveillance camera.

"Motherfucker," I spat and raised both arms to flip off the camera.

I didn't know it at the time, but at that moment Dylan Maxwell was sitting in front of a wall of monitors, laughing his ass off.

I circled around the building, looking for some kind of alternate entrance. To my chagrin, all the windows lined the top of the building

over thirty feet above my head. Reaching the back, I found a series of roll-up doors on the loading dock and one normal door that for didn't appear to have any handle or knob. It clearly opened only from the inside.

I cursed angrily under my breath, and just as I turned to descend the stairs off the loading dock, I heard the door open behind me. I twisted my head to see a woman emerge, her thick, long hair dyed a vibrant shade of purple.

She stood there, framed by the open doorway, looking statuesque and regal in a full-length black trench coat with a the belt cinched tight around her waist, showing off the curve of her hips. She had large brown eyes that seemed just a little too big and dark compared to the rest of her pale face. The rest of her features were angular and severe. I guessed her to be around my age and of Eastern European descent.

I watched her with my mouth hanging open as she propped the door open and pulled a pack of cloves from her pocket. Before I realized it, I had bounded back up the steps and pulled out my Bic to light her cigarette. She leaned in to touch its tip to the flame, her eyes rolling up to look at me. Then she uprighted herself and blew a steady stream of smoke into the night air.

"Thanks," she said.

I pulled out my own cigarettes and lit one for myself.

"Did you lock yourself out?" she asked with an amused grin.

"Nah," I explained, "the gestapo at the door wouldn't let me in, so I was looking for a way to sneak in."

"Really? Why wouldn't he let you in?"

"It's all political," I replied with a shake of my head. "Best not to worry about it."

"Political?" she repeated skeptically.

"Yeah, he's a dyed-in-the-wool Trotskyite, and I was trying to expound on the merits of Bakunin. I suggested that a state apparatus might not be necessary for workers to manage the means of production, and he just lost it."

Her grin spread wider. "So if I let you in, I'd basically be granting asylum to a political dissident in exile."

“Pretty much, yeah.”

She took a few more drags of her cigarette in silence while looking me over, trying to decide what to make of me.

The last third of her cigarette dropped to the ground, and she crushed it out under the ball of her bare foot.

“Okay, you’re in,” she said, taking me by the arm and leading me through the door. “I’m Violet, by the way.”

“I’m D.”

“I thought you might be,” she said nonchalantly. I looked at her inquisitively and wondered whether it was just a coincidence that she had run into me back here.

She continued, “You’re Col’s friend, right?”

I nodded my head. “Have you seen her in there?”

“Not yet, but I’m sure she’s around.”

She led me down a narrow hallway. I could hear the sounds of the party grow louder as we approached. We emerged through a set of black curtains onto a small makeshift stage. In front of us was a stool and a simple wire framework that looked like a crude skeleton of a person. The frame was partially covered by thin gold strands draped delicately from anchor points on the wire, creating a kind of skin over the skeleton.

Violet removed her trench coat, revealing a thin, gauzy gold gown underneath that was more or less completely see-through and clung maddeningly to the curves of her figure. Through the thin material, I could make out what looked like big burn scars running along the entire left side of her body.

She sat on the stool and resumed her sculpture. She took a few small thin rods of glass and wrapped a long gold strand around them, then delicately hung the whole piece with the others on the wire frame. She seemed to be using the glass rods to give the work its shape. The whole process looked impossibly intricate and extremely unstable. A stiff breeze could have probably collapsed the entire structure.

I stepped off the stage and joined the small group of people who gathered to watch her work. She weaved the strands together with gentle and precise movements. Her eyes were locked on her work with

a singular intensity.

I noticed that while she worked, her legs parted enough for the crowd to be able to see more-or-less clearly between them. This realization made my cheeks turn red, and I wondered whether she realized it or not. Then I saw the placard mounted at the base of the stage, giving the title of the installation: Sheela na Gig.

I stammered, "I probably should go find Columbine."

She turned to look at me, and I read in her face that she had all but completely forgotten I was there.

"Oh yeah, right. Have a good time tonight, D."

I walked away, filled simultaneously with the urges to break into a dance, rip out my own hair, and dump a bucket of ice down the front of my pants.

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The warehouse had been converted into a kind of futuristic art gallery teeming with pretentious cognoscenti, faux-bo street punks, yuppies playing like they still have souls, hyper-affected eccentrics, and vapid beautiful people dying to be seen.

Large black curtains had been hung to create a labyrinthine system of walls. The entire layout seemed designed to intentionally frustrate a guest's sense of direction. The floor was packed with art installations that incorporated elements of video, audio, live performance, and technological props.

One was a giant wall of LED-lights projecting random words and phrases. As I walked closer to it, I realized that the messages it displayed were actually snippets of conversations going on around it. The place must be wired with hidden microphones, I guessed, that fed into a computer with a speech-to-text converter. I looked around and saw several mics scattered about the space. I also found an alarming number of surveillance cameras like the one at the front door.

Another installation allowed people to stand in front of video cameras and see themselves displayed on monitors. Each monitor was labeled with a different disease: Jaundice, Shingles, Psoriasis,

Proteus Syndrome, Harlequin Ichthyosis. The images on the monitors were digitally manipulated to show what the subjects would look like with their respective afflictions.

At another, a jazz-fusion quintet performed, consisting of piano, tenor sax, trumpet, drums, and a DJ. They changed the mood, tempo, and style of their playing based on the people who walked by. If a couple passed while holding hands, the sax would blow a romantic theme. If a group of teenagers ran by, the drummer would cut loose into a short, frantic solo.

Behind them, three graffiti artists stood on a scaffolding, spray painting a mural influenced by the mood of the music. They sprayed slow, relaxed lines in blues and greens during mellow grooves. When the improvisation sped up or took on irregular syncopation, they switched to orange, red, and yellow hues, waving their arms frantically and haphazardly as they painted in large, bold strokes.

One installation was just a line of six stationary bicycles being ridden by guests wearing metal helmets, earphones, and big clunky video goggles. Seriously.

Another consisted of a row of large wooden confessionals that looked like they'd been ripped straight out of an old gothic cathedral. Inside, guests could kneel down and anonymously confess their deepest secrets into an old-fashioned metal microphone, which, according to the informational placard, fed into high-powered transmitters that broadcasted out to the wilds of space.

I finally came to a stop in front of an installation where two people stood on a platform in front of a row of touch screens, each displaying thumbnails of various video clips. The two operators mixed the images together into a montage, which was projected onto a large screen hanging over them. A nearby speaker stack was blasting Of Montreal's "Id Engager" to provide them inspiration. I whistled at the operator on the left. She looked up at me and smiled. It was Columbine.

She hopped down from the platform, giving someone else the chance to take over. "Hey, I was worried you weren't gonna show."

"Yeah, well, fashionably late and all that."

She hugged me, which caught me a little off-guard. She was dressed a little more traditionally tonight, wearing a pink Care Bears tank top with a black pleated skirt. rainbow-striped tights, and red

zebra-print boots. Jenny was right about her – definitely not my type, but cute all the same.

“Is Dylan Maxwell here?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen him yet, but don’t worry, he’ll be here. In the meantime, I have some people to introduce you to.”

She hooked her arm around mine and dragged me away to a small chill-out area with plush couches and a stainless steel coffee table, where we joined the goth couple who I had let past me at the door.

“D, this is Ilona and Aldous. Guys, this is the friend I was telling you about earlier,” Columbine said by way of introduction.

Ilona was Asian but had dyed her hair platinum blonde, almost translucent. I pegged her to be in her late-forties, probably just out of high school when The Cure first hit the scene, and her face was caked with dark, gothic makeup, and she wore a latex corset and a pair of tight pleather pants. Aldous looked as much as ten years her junior. He was black with a goatee and tight, carefully styled dreadlocks. He wore a long-tailed black velvet coat, a kilt, and colored contacts that gave him pink albino eyes.

“Col mentioned me earlier?” I said while we settled onto one of the couches.

“Yes,” Ilona said. “we were looking at one of the art pieces, which was about prostitution. We started talking about the type of man who would visit a prostitute.”

Aldous jumped in. “We were speculating whether some men actually need to feel such an overt monetary control over a woman in order to get off. And then Columbine told us the story about how you met.”

“Did she? And what exactly did she tell you?” I cast an inquisitive look at Columbine, but she was purposely avoiding my gaze and clearly trying not to laugh. Which I decided didn’t bode well for what I was about to hear.

Ilona chimed in helpfully, “About how you two met in a bar and talked to each other for a good half-hour before she realized that you thought she was a hooker. And then about how she played along, just to see what the experience was like,”

“She told you all that?” I kept my eyes on Columbine, who ventured

a peek at me out of the corner of her eye while casually moving her hand to hide her irrepressible grin.

“Do you mind if we ask you a few questions about your prostitution habit?” Aldous asked eagerly.

I looked from him to Ilona and finally over to Columbine, who eyed me expectantly. “Of course he doesn’t mind,” she blurted out from under her hand.

“Feel free,” I answered with a shrug, deciding it might be good for a laugh.

“How often do you visit prostitutes, say within a given month?” asked Ilona.

“Anywhere from three times to a dozen, it depends.”

“What’s the most you’ve ever paid for sex?” chimed in Aldous.

“Once I spent 10,000€ for a night with three Parisian hookers.”

“What’s the filthiest sex act you’ve ever paid for?” Ilona again, this time leaning in more closely.

I cast a sideways glance at her. “A bearded vicar. Look it up. It’s vile.”

Columbine snorted loudly, then quickly followed with a series of coughs, trying to play it off.

“You know,” Aldous said conspiratorially, “Ilona sometimes like to play out prostitution fantasies with me. She dresses up, goes out late at night, walks around the bad part of town for a while, and then I drive up in the car and pretend like I don’t know her. We’ve sometimes talked about letting her play it out for real.”

Ilona jumped in, “I want to know what it feels like to be paid for having sex with a man for whom I have absolutely no physical attraction or emotional feelings. I wonder if it would feel dirty or liberating... or perhaps both.”

The two of them looked at me expectantly, as if I was supposed to be saying something now. Then the light bulb went on in my head, and I realized what they were getting at.

I turned to check on Columbine, whose eyes were as big as half-dollar coins and was primed to explode into laughter at any second.

Then I turned back to look Aldous square in the eyes, and then over to Ilona. “Absolutely.” I handed one of my business cards to Aldous. “Give me a call sometime. That’s my cell number on the bottom.”

“Janine!” Columbine cried out abruptly as she leaped up from the couch and waved her arms frantically at a woman about twenty yards away. She grabbed me by the arm and yanked me up, exhibiting a surprising strength for her petite stature.

“Excuse us, we have to say hello to someone,” she said quickly through gritted teeth, running the syllables together as if the whole sentence were just one long word, barely able to hold back the torrent of laughter bubbling up from her gut. I held my hand up to the side of my face to mime a phone call with my thumb and pinkie as she dragged me away.

“So what was that all about?” I asked Columbine while she hurried me across the room.

“They’re just some old friends I wanted to mess with. You were perfect, by the way. I nearly peed myself.”

The woman Columbine had been waving at was a middle-aged college professor-type. The two women hugged each other, and then Columbine launched into introductions.

“You know, it’s funny that you two should meet here because Janine’s son Tim just started Seminary school, while D just moved back here from Massachusetts after leaving Seminary.”

“That is funny,” I agreed and nodded my head, curious where she was headed.

Columbine turned to Janine and added, by way of explanation, “D got kicked out when he told them about his decision to move forward with gender reassignment surgery.”

Janine looked to me with surprise in her eyes. I just nodded my head in confirmation. “I guess they frown on that sort of thing.”

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Things continued on like this as we circulated through the party and Columbine introduced me to everyone she knew, which seemed like

half of all the guests there. I spent the next ninety minutes posing as an award-winning playwright, a drug smuggler, her husband, a CIA “operative” (which I’m pretty sure was implied to mean assassin), and a descendant of deposed Russian aristocracy – depending on what the conversation happened to turn to.

“Everyone lies as these things to make themselves seem more interesting,” Columbine said by way of rationalization. “I at least make the effort to come up with good lies.”

I have to admit I did enjoy it, in a weird way. I had become impervious to surprise, deftly connecting with whatever curve ball she lobbed my way. Which is why I was all the more taken aback when I heard her introduce me as:

“This is my friend, D. He’s a reporter.”

I turned to see who she was talking to and instantly recognized him. Dylan Maxwell stood casually with his feet apart and hands buried in his pockets, teeth bared in a huge Cheshire Cat grin. A few errant strands of his chin-length jet black hair hung down in front of his pale blue eyes, giving him a rakish charm. Tall and lithe, he cut a striking figure in his black silk vest and matching tie over a blood red shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his mid-forearm, black slacks, and a pair of red Chucks. The tennies, while clashing with the rest of his outfit, were a kind of signature for him, and he was never without them – or at least that’s what it said in all his press materials.

“Pleased to meet you, D. My name’s Max,” he said, extending his hand.

“I know who you are, Mr. Maxwell,” I replied as we shook. He had a surprisingly strong grip that belied his slight build.

“Please, I really do insist you call me Max.”

I wasn’t usually one to lose my composure around the rich or famous, but when our hands clasped I felt an undeniable electricity emanating from his skin. The loose, laid-back, and brazenly arrogant way he carried himself made him come across as more like a rock star than a corporate exec, as countless others had observed before.

He continued, “That’s an interesting name you have.”

“It’s short for Dedalus, but try going through elementary school introducing yourself as that,” I explained.

“I see. Were your parents mythology buffs?”

I shook my head. “My dad had a hard-on for Joyce.”

“Ah, of course,” he said, tilting his head back. “I should have guessed from your sister’s middle name, Jennifer Bloom.” I was a little surprised by the mention of my sister, but I reasoned that it made sense for them to know of each other.

Max lifted his hand and casually pointed his index finger at me – not accusingly, but in the easy-going manner of someone accustomed to using his hands while speaking. “I read your article.”

I couldn’t help but crack a proud smile. “What did you think?”

“Loved it. I laughed so hard that I started crying.” He replied with a good-natured smile. “I think it might have been above some people’s heads though. I’ve heard that you’ve caused a bit of an uproar. But that’s the true artist’s burden, I suppose, to be unappreciated and misunderstood.”

I wasn’t sure if he was toying with me or if genuinely thought my article was supposed to be funny, but I decided to take advantage of the topic. “Well a lot of people don’t believe your company actually confirmed that the e-mails I cited were real.”

“Well, some people have just been around long enough to know you can’t believe everything you read in the paper,” he answered in a way that was dismissive without seeming like it was, very polite and personal. He gave me a wink, then turned away, clearly feeling he was done with the conversation.

I realized I was going to have to do something stupid to keep his attention. “You know, while we’re on the subject, I recently read something funny in the paper myself,” I blurted out. “It was a story in yesterday’s Morning-Star that said a dead woman was found on the side of Highway 77.”

Max stopped in his tracks – casually, not abruptly, keeping his posture relaxed and unconcerned. “I must have missed that one,” he said, the practiced evenness of his voice not betraying anything. “What was funny about it?”

“Well, they kept saying she was found in a ditch, but there wasn’t anything about how you found her three days earlier in the cabin of your private jet,” I ventured in an increasingly adversarial tone. “You’d

think that would be the kinda of detail a good reporter would mention.”

Max paused, allowing time for that Cheshire Cat grin to creep slowly back into his face. “But that’s assuming there are any good reporters left at the Morning Star.” He broke out into laughter and slapped his hand against my back like we were old friends. In spite of myself, I cracked a smile. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to take this guy out for a beer or punch him in his smug, pretty-boy face.

“Let’s get out of here, and I’ll show you where the real party is.” Max turned to Columbine and continued, “How does that sound, Col? Are you ready to go backstage?”

Chapter 7. No One Wants to Toil in Obscurity

Dylan Maxwell (Max to his friends) was the president/CEO/founder/whatever of Abrasax, one of the most successful dot-coms in the world and therefore one of the valley's largest employers and bona fide tax revenue cash-cow. This in turn made him one of the most powerful and influential people in the city. An active political fundraiser, patron of the arts, and venture capitalist – if you wanted to get anything done in this town, at some point you'd find yourself on hands and knees kissing those old red Chuck Taylors.

But all that was really just incidental – the thing that truly defined Max was his rock star mystique. Young, good-looking, charismatic, unconventional, and not afraid to say exactly what's on his mind, he had built up a strange cult of personality around himself that was as much about style as it was about the substance of Abrasax's business.

Anyone who ever wrote about the company said the same thing – Max ruled Abrasax with an iron fist. He personally oversaw everything from user interface and QA to design aesthetic and marketing campaigns. Employees evoked his name in debates like parish priests citing chapter and verse. The question wasn't good-or-bad, right-or-wrong – it was what will Max think?

As we got to know each other, he explained the situation to me like this: "It's not that dissent isn't tolerated. It just simply doesn't exist."

He gave me an example. "Say I pull some new concept out of my ass at the weekly executive meeting, some gem like 'user behavioral metrics' or 'achieving psychosocial harmonization' or whatever nonsense springs to mind. By the end of the day, you'll hear that same phrase echoing the halls throughout the entire campus. Everyone will be parroting it from the lowest mail room intern to the CFO's mistress."

But Max's professional life was only one part of the intricate personal mythology that had built up around him. The tales of excess and debauchery in his personal life were legendary. Max fucked the most beautiful people, ate at the most expensive restaurants, thoroughly trashed the most exclusive hotel rooms, and puked up the most exquisite liquors – all within conspicuous range of the camera's lens. He was like Keith Moon reincarnated with Bill Gates' bankroll in the age of TMZ. Tabloids and local bloggers ate his shtick up, further

propagating and embellishing the myth.

Even his back story morphed and evolved to service the myth. The canonical version went like this:

Dylan Maxwell was a native of the city born into a solidly upper middle class family. His mother was an orthodontist, his father an accomplished composer who experimented with electronic music and had scored a few moderately successful films. He showed an interest in computers from an early age, encouraged by his father who was himself quite the technophile and always had the latest equipment for his son to tinker with. By the time Max entered high school he already had a lucrative part-time business designing web sites and software applications for local companies. He quickly expanded this gig to include security consulting by hacking into the sites of several major banks and government agencies, then telling them about it and offering to help them fix the vulnerabilities.

At the age of 16, Max passed the equivalency exam and dropped out of high school. This allowed him to devote himself to his computer work full time. He tried taking a few college courses but lost interest in them quickly. By the time he turned 18, he had turned down multiple offers for jobs and scholarships and instead decided to travel abroad. This was where the official record got hazy.

There were a number of outlandish stories of his two years overseas; talk to a dozen different people who profess to know, truly know Dylan Maxwell, and you'll get a dozen different accounts, each more preposterous than the last. From what I could deduce reading between the lines, he first spent half a year backpacking through Europe, then spent the rest of the time in southeast Asia where he studied for some indeterminate period in a Tibetan monastery.

Aside from that, the story was a Choose Your Own Adventure. Turn to page 23, Max loses his virginity to a window hooker in Amsterdam while tripping on LSD and mushrooms, and the experience is terrifying to both parties involved. Turn to page 32, Max falls madly in love with a teenage ladyboy in Bangkok. Turn to page 42, Max gets in a bar fight in the eastern side of Berlin with a group of skinheads and ends up slicing open one's throat with a broken whiskey bottle. Turn to page 66, Max joins up with an underground sect of Kali worshipers and participates in at least one ritual killing. At a certain point, I began to suspect that Max was deliberately leaking misinformation, but he

vehemently denied this, instead preferring to compare the retelling of his life story to a game of Japanese Whispers.

In the end, all that really mattered was that the Max who returned to his home town two years later was no longer the shy, introverted kid who would rather stay inside pouring over lines of code than go outside and play baseball or talk to girls. The new Max wasted no time in making the rounds to potential investors to pitch his new startup, Abrasax.

Initially just a search engine, the company quickly expanded its reach to include e-mail, social networking, online storage and hosting, software development, and finally the web-based operating system Envisage that moved the user's entire computing experience onto Abrasax's servers. Max promoted it as giving users the freedom to access their documents and run their applications anywhere, any time, and on any computer. Critics complained that Abrasax would share user's data with advertisers to help target their marketing and in the process drive up Abrasax's own fees. However, the company's overwhelming surge in users and ad revenue ensured that critics were swiftly marginalized.

—

Max led Columbine and me to a remote part of the warehouse through a confusing series of twists and turns that I couldn't have possibly replicated. I would have sworn for a while it felt like we were just going in circles, except we never passed the same point twice. We finally arrived at a dead end wall – a real solid wall, not just more black curtains. It had three doors, each a different color – red, black, and white. There was a small white plastic placard affixed to the wall between the first and second doors, which read:

Gallery of Locked Doors

Or, Bell Out of Order

In the lower right corner was the same small crown and globe

symbol from the back of the rave card.

There was another group of people looking at the gallery – two couples, visibly drunk, laughing hysterically as they tried unsuccessfully to open the doors, twisting and yanking on door knobs and knocking repeatedly. They straightened up as they saw us approach and started to walk away.

As he passed me, one of the men said, “Good luck.”

Once they turned the corner, leaving no one in sight but the three of us, Max pulled out an old-fashioned bit key made out of red metal. He slid it into the lock of the red door and turned the knob. It opened, and he stepped to one side to let us through.

“Who needs luck when you’ve got a key?” I said as I passed him.

“Precisely,” Max said, tapping the butt of the key to my chest.

The door led to a descending flight of stairs. As we started down, I asked Max, “What’s that symbol about on the placard out there?”

“That’s the symbol for the Highwater Society. It lets us know where to find each other,” he answered.

“And what exactly is the Highwater Society?” I pressed.

“You’re about to meet them.”

The stairs brought us into a large, dimly-lit room adorned lavishly in reds and blacks. One side was a lounge area with a wet bar where about twenty people were hanging out – all young, beautiful, and immaculately dressed, drinking and talking too loudly in the way that only people who are desperate to be noticed can, like they are daring you not to eavesdrop.

Brian was there. So was Lily. Neither seemed happy to see me.

Columbine walked over to the bar and greeted Lily with a hug. Max exchanged brief greetings with a few of the other guests before being approached by a short man with prematurely thinning hair in an ostentatiously expensive suit.

“It’s getting late. When do we start?” he asked testily as he tapped his watch.

Max reached out to pinch his cheek and cooed condescendingly, “Patience, Peterman. I have to be a gracious host and show my guest

around.”

“We’ve been waiting here for two hours,” the other man responded.

“Then I’m sure you can wait a little bit longer. In the meantime, why not try enjoying yourself a little? Everyone else seems to be,” Max replied, and then added with a vicious grin, “And if you get really bored, I’m sure Lilian will be happy to entertain you.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Lily asked.

Max formed his lips into an “O” and held his right hand up in front of his mouth, curling his fingers into a circle and jerking it back and forth rhythmically while digging his tongue into the inside of his cheek to mime a blowjob. Lily fumed silently, not daring to fire back at her boss.

Max let out a small chuckle and led me by the arm to the far side of the room, which was dominated by a wall of video monitors, mixing boards, and other heavy-duty A/V equipment. The monitors displayed feeds from the surveillance cameras in the main art galleries. Six people sat in a row in front of the monitor bank, each wearing a pair of headphones that were plugged into the mixing consoles and presumably wired into the microphones upstairs.

Three of them were clustered in a group, obviously drunk and having a laugh. They giggled and commented back and forth playfully on what they were seeing and hearing.

Another was a serious young woman who was watching with a furrowed brow and scribbling notes furiously. Venturing a guess, I decided she looked like an anthropologist or sociology grad student doing research for some kind of dissertation or whatever it is that people who actually went to college do.

The man at the far end was obviously getting his jollies off. All of his monitors were tuned into cameras showing young women, and he had one hand buried discreetly under the mixing desk.

The man at the central console was older than the rest, with salt-and-pepper hair and a strange blue birthmark on the bridge of his nose that was shaped kind of like a question mark. He sat back in his chair as if to take in as much as possible; he looked like a king surveying his kingdom. I stepped in for a closer look. His eyes darted to and fro quickly, jumping from one screen to the next in a seemingly random sequence.

I felt Max move in behind me. “That’s Ben Garza. You should step back. Watchers rarely like it when they’re the ones being watched.”

I picked up one of the free headsets, which was plugged into a jack labeled Confessionals, and raised it to my ear. A woman’s voice came through sounding raw and sullen, as if she had been crying. There was something familiar about it. She said, “I wonder if I ever even had a chance of being happy. Like if I had made different choices, if I hadn’t fucked things up so bad, would it have made a difference? I wonder if there’s some other world out there, some alternate universe where I ended up happy.”

I realized why it sounded familiar – it sounded a lot like Lily. I looked back over my shoulder and saw her sitting next to Columbine. The two of them were laughing wildly, each holding a martini glass, as they chatted like good friends.

I glanced back at the video monitors and caught a brief glimpse of one of the feeds, a grainy, monochrome image washed in blue. It showed a man sitting on the edge of a bed in a nearly empty room. A digitized numeric display in the bottom right corner read: 00033.

I suddenly felt light-headed and took a couple steps back from the console, letting the headphones drop from my grip. Max reached out a hand to help stabilize me.

I closed my eyes and tried to regain my bearings, muttering, “Jesus Christ, the bum was right.”

“Pardon?”

“I met a bum on the train a couple days ago – wild orange hair, crazy blue eyes. He said he used to work for you and was ranting about how you were spying on people.”

Max smiled indulgently. “Spying implies a violation of trust, an assumption of privacy that is betrayed. We made no secret about the surveillance methods upstairs, so there is no assumption of privacy. Our equipment is in plain sight, and many of the art pieces themselves used it as an integral part.”

“In other words, you ‘re saying it’s okay to invade someone’s privacy as long as you give some notice, however perfunctory.”

“I’m saying that privacy as you understand it has become an archaic concept.”

I smirked. "Of course you would say this. You've made selling your customers' private information into a business model."

Max scoffed, then responded in a raised voice, taking on an almost professorial tone. "People willingly give my company access to their information when they use our products. We take that information and use it to give them the best possible customer experience. I make no secret of my company's business practices. And I'm sure anyone who complains about the price of gas in an e-mail and then suddenly sees an ad for the latest hybrid car knows exactly what I'm doing."

"Spare me the corporate spiel," I groaned. "What about the people that don't want you tracking what they buy and what sites they look at and what they talk about in their e-mail?"

"Then they can patronize our competitors," he replied dismissively. "Or realistically, they should stay off the internet altogether."

"Are you serious?"

"Very serious," he replied, and I realized he was no longer talking to just me – the rest of the room was listening as well. "The web has truly become the great democratizer of information in the most literal sense of the word – rule of the people, plural. Information is no longer the sole property of any one person. The question isn't why shouldn't you have the right to keep things to yourself? It's why shouldn't your business partners, your employers, your friends and family have the right to know who you really are?"

"I call bullshit," I said. "Even if you accept that argument, it's only valid based on the assumption of a social good. But what's the social good in all this?" I pointed at the monitors.

"The same social good that exists in any real art – purification of the human soul. Hold a mirror up and make us confront who we really are."

"Now I really call bullshit."

Max laughed. "Let me put it to you this way – I put forth to you that the age of surveillance is only a symptom of the new hyper-narcissism that has infected our collective reality tunnels. We invite the surveillance cameras into our homes because they are proof that someone is paying attention to us.

"Let me give you an example. You criticized my company for

collecting users' personal data, but people are voluntarily and intentionally sharing the most intimate minutiae of their lives everyday, and they love doing. Even as we speak my phone is being bombarded by tweets, e-mails, blog posts, and social network status updates from personal and professional acquaintances. Privacy is passé; it simply no longer exists as a social value. No one wants to toil in obscurity. Fame has become the new social currency of the 21st century. In the 19th century the struggle was between the working class and the ruling class over the means of production. By the end of the 20th century, the paradigm was made obsolete by new classes – the leisure class, the creative class, the consumer class. Now there's a whole new emerging class bringing another sea change, the celebrity class. Suddenly we have an entire stratus of people who are famous just for being famous. It doesn't matter if you aren't the most talented, or the most virtuous, or even the most beautiful, as long as people know who you are. We've built a brave new world where every man and woman can be a star."

His eyes locked in on mine as he presumably waited for me to respond to the depth and profundity of his argument.

"Jesus, are you still talking?"

Max broke into a chuckle and threw an arm over my shoulder.

"Brave New World, huh? That is the second Huxley synchronicity I've had tonight."

"Every one belongs to every one else," he quoted.

"Whatever. I just want you to tell people that I didn't lie in my article. Help me take some private information and hand it over to the masses," I said, relishing the chance to throw his own bullshit back in his face.

Max sucked on his teeth and made a disinterested expression. "I gave Lilian my statement, which she relayed to you accurately. I don't really have any interest in pursuing the matter further."

I didn't let up. "Why did you give me your statement in the first place?"

"Because, D, life is a game. And sometimes, to keep things interesting, you have to change the rules."

"I don't get what you—"

Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me. “We’re all set, boss,” said a loud, deep male voice.

I turned to see the man from the flophouse towering over me – the Bad Seed. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a distorted image of a bull that I recognized as a detail from Guernica.

“Ah, Saint Anthony. Always impeccable timing,” Max said.

The two men shook hands, then the larger man hooked his thumb in my direction. “What’s he doing here?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him. He’s a journalist,” Max said, putting a derisive emphasis on the last word. “Mr. D Quetzal, I’d like you to meet Saint Anthony, my special advisor.”

“Special advisor? What’s that mean? And what the fuck kind of name is Saint Anthony?”

“It’s a nick name,” Max explained. “He’s had it for years, on account of him being such a devout Catholic.”

“Yeah, I bet,” I scoffed.

“Saint” Anthony stared me down like he was two seconds from kicking the holy fucking shit out of me.

Max clapped his hands together to get the attention of the entire room. “Everybody upstairs. Curtain time in ten minutes.”

“We’re going back to the art show?” I asked.

“No,” Max replied. “I mean all the way upstairs.”

Chapter 8. Everyone Needs a Good Scare, Now and Then

I stood on top of the warehouse's roof, watching about three dozen of the city's best and brightest stand around and freeze their asses off. And, truth be told, I was enjoying the spectacle, even though it meant I was freezing my own off right along with them.

The anemic, refugee-thin heiresses shivering in their barely-there party dresses. The effete dot-com executives in thousand-dollar "distressed" jeans trying to look unaffected by the cold that's cracking their lips and shriveling their dicks. It warmed my spiteful, jealous little heart.

Columbine was busy circulating through the crowd, handing out sheets of paper, one a head. When she finished, she came over to sit with me on the parapet.

"What's this all about?" I asked as I grabbed one of the leftover sheets off the stack on her lap.

"This is tonight's game," she explained. "Scavenger hunt."

I looked down at the paper in my hands, which contained a list of items neatly printed in three evenly-spaced columns. The items were pretty far out there, things like an albino, a monkey's paw, a transgender prostitute, an original Matisse, a three-legged dog, a pickled punk, an ounce of heroin, and a human spleen.

"Scavenger hunt?" I repeated skeptically.

"Yeah. You have to try to find as many of the things on this list as you can and bring them back."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, I understand the concept of a scavenger hunt. I'm just wondering why a group of grown adults – the city's richest and most powerful bright young things, no less – would spend their Saturday night on one."

I heard footsteps behind me on the parapet, and then a new voice joined our conversation. "Imagine you were filthy rich, richer than any human being has any right to be. You can literally do and have anything you want. You've traveled the world, had the dirtiest sex

imaginable, imbibed the filthiest narcotics. What would you do for kicks when you grow tired of the same old thrills?”

I craned my head to the right and saw Max standing atop the parapet, hovering over my head. He grinned like a deranged Japanese oni, the cold night air turning his breath visible as it streamed out of his nostrils.

“All right, kids, listen up!” he called out to everyone on the rooftop. “We’re going to get started. I trust you’ve all had a chance to look over the list for tonight’s game. I see a few new faces, so let me bring you all up to speed.

“The object is simple – whoever brings back the most items from your list by sunrise is the winner, and whoever brings back the least is the loser. Aside from that, there are no rules. Steal, lie, cheat, break and enter, wander around the bad parts of town, work your connections, get your assistants out of bed, cash in all your favors.”

“So, what exactly do you get for winning?” I interjected.

He dug a small red metal box from his pants pocket. It was rectangular in shape, no more than five inches long and two high. “The winner gets what’s inside this box,”

“And what’s that?” I pressed.

“I swear to you, we didn’t script this,” Max said as an aside to his audience. A few light chuckles rippled through the crowd. “To find that out, D, I guess you’ll just have to win.”

“I guess so,” I replied. “And what if I lose?”

Max turned to smile at me once more, but this time he didn’t offer any further explanation.

“Weatherman says the sun rises just after seven. You have five hours give-or-take, children. I suggest you get moving.”

As everyone else cleared off the roof, Max put a hand on my shoulder, indicating that he wanted me to stick around. I noticed Saint Anthony and Lily were also not moving to leave – Anthony’s hand gripping her wrist tightly, her head hung sullenly.

Max paced back and forth along the parapet while his eyes darted back and forth among the three of us, that grin of his still fixed in place. This went on for several minutes, even after the last of the other

guests had left. The three of us just stood there in the cold and waited for Max to do something. I was miserable, Anthony didn't even seem to notice the weather, Lily was shivering so hard I thought her bones were going to shake right out of their sockets, and Max looked like he was savoring every second of it.

Eventually, I decided I was sick of listening to Lily's teeth chatter, so I slipped off my jacket and offered it to her.

"No!" Max yelled. "Everyone will remain dressed exactly the way they are."

I held out the jacket to Lily again, but she refused it, keeping her worried gaze fixed on her employer.

"Look at this thing," Max declared, stamping his foot on the parapet. "Ridiculous." His eyes returned to us just long enough to make sure he had our full attention. "What purpose does it serve? Think about it. Would it really be so dangerous to have just a plain flat edge? Is this little bit of wall going to actually save lives?"

I shrugged.

Max continued, "And if someone is actually dumb enough to fall off the side of a building, are we as a species really better off with that person alive and procreating? So much of our energy is expended styrofoam-padding and sterilizing our existences to protect us from ourselves, from our own humanity.

"We realize just how hopeless and fatalistic our human condition is, how we are at the mercy of forces beyond our control. So we try to trick ourselves into a false sense of security by dreaming up phantom perils, harmless straw men that we can build a wall around or bury under concrete and feel like we have control over our destinies.

"We pass more laws, we arm more cops, we build more prisons, and we lock up more of our neighbors in the name of our own freedom. Our fear of death drives us to poison ourselves with 'medicines' that at best only postpone the inevitable. And to what end? We still die of cancer, we still get sick – sometimes as side effects of the very drugs we take to keep us well. We still crash cars. We still make war. So where has all this gotten us as a species?"

"It's gotten me freezing my nuts off on a roof like a dumbass, wondering what the hell you're talking about," I offered.

“I’m talking about changing the rules of the game, D,” Max replied. “If you don’t make peace with your own mortality, you’ll never know what it’s like to truly be alive. The indigenous people who originally lived in this valley had a tradition of the vision quest – going out into the wilderness with nothing, surviving by your own wits, proving your worth as a human being and discovering who you really are in the fundamental core of your soul. But we’ve paved over the wilderness and blanketed the starry sky with GPS satellites. How many times have you actually stared your own death in the face, D?”

He paused more for effect than to actually give me a chance to answer, then launched right back into it.

“We as a society have made it too easy on ourselves, and it has made us fat and dumb and unimaginative. We sit in our offices and watch our TVs and plan for retirement and take out insurance policies and go on sad little stage-managed vacations, just not anywhere too dangerous or dirty, and we make sure we are all wearing our government-approved safety helmets and carrying our health plan cards in case something goes wrong. All that mad, innovative passion that elevated us above all other forms of life has been allowed to atrophy. We have stopped natural selection from purifying the species because deep in our heart of hearts, we are all terrified that we won’t make the cut.

“Changing the rules of the game is the only way to survive, to prevent being overtaken by a hungrier, more inventive competitor. We need to rediscover the exhilaration of painting ourselves into a corner that we don’t know we’ll get out of, of having our mettle tested with everything on the line. We need to remember how to feel the joy of the truly uncertain outcome. We need to gaze into the abyss.”

“I still don’t understand what that has to do with what we were talking about.”

“D, you wanted to know why I asked Lily to admit those e-mails were true, and I am telling you. You also asked me why a bunch of spoiled rich kids would waste their Saturday night on some dumbass scavenger hunt, and I’m telling you that, too. Everyone needs a good scare put into them now and then. Including the Highwater Society. Including me.”

I thought back to his reaction to my article – how he acted like it was

some kind of joke, something to amuse him. Like a game.

“Why don’t you tell Anthony and Lily about that funny thing you read in the paper?” Max asked, shaking me out of my own thoughts.

“Alright, well it was—” I started.

But Max interrupted me, his eyes growing big and wild, “No, tell them about it from up here.”

He extended his hand to help me up onto the parapet. It was just shy of a foot wide. I looked over the side and saw how high up were were, which was about the equivalent of a three-story building. I was suddenly very fucking aware of my own mortality.

“Don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe up here,” Max said. “And we’re not even that high up, anyways. There’s a chance you might not even die if you fell. So anyways, you were saying.”

I turned to address Anthony and Lily, “You know that article you two were looking at last night? The one about the woman found in a ditch? I know that he—” I pointed at Max “—moved her there after he found her in his private jet at Hastings Airfield.”

Saint Anthony stepped toward me with an open look of astonishment on his face. “How the fuck could you possibly know that?”

“Good question. D seems to know a lot of things he shouldn’t, these days,” Max shot back. Though he seemed to be addressing Anthony, his gaze was fixed on Lily. “Between that and certain e-mails he published in his paper, it seems someone is providing with quite a bit of privileged information.”

“He was also there on Thursday night, when I went to find Cobb,” Anthony added. I perked up, taking note of the name: Cobb.

“Really?” Max looked at me, his face exaggerating his astonishment like a true showman. “You are full of surprises, my new friend.”

Max then began inexplicably to sway side-to-side, gently at first, but gradually more pronounced. He then raised his hands up as if holding an invisible partner and started dancing. “I don’t know what’s come over me. Something about the starlight. I feel like dancing.”

He started humming a tune as he danced a simple waltz along the parapet. After a going a few measures solo, he looked over to Lily. “Care to join me, Lilian?”

She shook her head, but Anthony nudged her forward.

“You used to love to dance,” Max beckoned.

“She said she doesn’t want to,” I interjected.

“This doesn’t involve you,” Max replied as he helped Lily up. “If you want to dance with someone, dance with Anthony.”

Max and Lily danced simple steps, as much as the limited space on the parapet would allow. I felt my heart thumping inside my chest.

“Good, now spin,” Max said as he extended his arm over Lily’s head, keeping their hands locked together.

She obeyed, carefully rotating herself around with precarious foot maneuvers. Max reeled her back in and held her close to himself. I held my breath while watching it, wanting to jump out and grab hold of her, but fearing any sudden movement would throw off her balance.

“Good,” Max said gleefully. “Now dip.”

He suddenly dipped her backwards, off the side of the building, before whipping her back the other way and throwing her off the parapet into Anthony’s waiting arms.

I let loose a dizzying flurry of profanities at Max as he stepped down onto the roof.

“That was fun,” Max said, ignoring my outburst. “But we’re still no closer to learning who D’s source is.”

“Look,” I said, stepping off the parapet myself. “Lily had nothing to do with me finding out about those e-mails or anything else. If it makes you feel better, know that she has been nothing but a massive pain in my ass from the moment I met her.”

My eyes met Lily’s, who suddenly looked vulnerable and human – probably for the first time in the years I’ve dealt with her. There was something else, though, something more to her expression that felt unnatural to see in her. Then I realized what it was – she looked grateful to me.

“Besides,” I added, turning back to Max, “you wouldn’t believe how I found out about the woman in your airplane even if I did tell you.”

“Try me,” he replied with a shrug. “You’d be surprised how much I’ll believe.”

I inhaled deeply. "I saw it all in a dream."

I paused to see how they would react, but no one said anything. I explained about the dreams I'd been having, about watching Max go into the airplane and find the woman holding the necklace. Lily looked confused. Anthony looked incredulous. Max looked intrigued.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Anthony said.

"Yes," Max replied. "Too stupid to be a lie. If he was going to make something up, even a man of his limited vision could come up with a more believable story. At the very least I believe that that's what he believes."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Max answered me with another question, "How is it that you are having dreams about something that happened to me?"

"I honestly have no idea. I didn't even think anything of them until I saw the story in the paper. Somehow I knew as soon as I saw it that it was the same woman, and I knew instinctively that my dream was true."

Max stood silently pondering this information for a good minute or two, looking me over skeptically.

"I'll make you a deal," he finally said to me. "If you can give me a credible explanation as to why you are having that dream, then I will make all your legal troubles with your job go away. I will back your story to the letter."

"What's a 'credible explanation?'" I asked.

"Something that makes sense instinctively, something that clicks the way your dream did when you read that article."

"And if I do, you'll just make everything better like that?" I snapped my fingers. "Like it's just another game to you?"

"When you've had the life I've had, you realize the whole world is a game."

"What happens when you lose?" I challenged.

Max placed a hand on my back and started back towards the door to the stairwell leading downstairs. "That's right. You wanted to know about the game's loser, and I never properly answered. Why don't you

ask Jürgen?”

I looked at him blankly.

“Your hobo friend with the orange hair,” he explained. “Yes, he did in fact work for me.”

“What happened to him?” I asked. “How did he end up on the streets?”

Max’s smile suddenly took on a new menace – subtle, but undeniable. “He lost one of my games, of course.”

I let a single chuckle slip past my lips, as if he might be joking.

He rebuked, “Victory is hollow without the possibility of defeat. If the stakes aren’t high, if you’re not playing for keeps, then it’s all just masturbatory self-indulgence.”

—

We found Columbine waiting for us downstairs.

“Miss Columbine,” Max said. “Were you waiting for me or for tall, dark, and snarky?”

“Him,” she said as she hooked her arm around mine.

“Of course,” Max said with a nod. “And why not? See how he rocks that hipster-Philip-Marlowe look with his rumpled coat and slightly askew hat.” He reached out to fuss with my hat a little. “I hope you don’t mind if I walk you two out.”

“Not at all,” I said, knocking his hand back from my head.

Anthony and Lily also followed a few paces behind as Max led us through the art party towards the the back of the building. The party was winding down, most of the guests had left and a few of the installations were already coming down.

We came upon Violet and her sculpture, which was almost finished. It was a woman sitting on a rock, lounging casually and looking at herself in a hand mirror. There of course weren’t fine details, given the media used, but the figure was very fluid in its lines and structure. It was beautiful.

“Hang on, I want to just see this before we go,” I said as I moved to join the group of people still watching Violet work and admiring the finished product.

The others stepped in behind me. Anthony wedged himself between some people to get closer, stepping on a man’s foot in the process.

The man and Anthony exchanged some words. The other man got in Anthony’s face, apparently remembering some terrible advice from his childhood about standing up to bullies. Anthony pushed him back like a you would swat away a fly. The man came back and tried to shove Anthony, who promptly lifted him off the ground and tossed him away like a rag doll. Unfortunately, the man landed right on Violet.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion, although I was frozen in place and unable to react. The man flew into her with a tremendous force, knocking her off her stool and face-first into her sculpture. She ended up crumpled in a heap on the floor on top a pool of shattered glass and torn gold threads.

I leaped on stage to help her to her feet. Shards of glass had torn through her gown and implanted themselves in her skin. Small beads of red dotted her body.

Suddenly there was applause. I turned to see Max clapping. Others in the crowd looked at him, and then joined in.

Violet, standing at my side, took a bow.

“To create is sublime, as is to destroy. If we are not willing to destroy the beauty we have created, we become slaves to it,” Max expounded.

“Fuck this,” I rejoined.

BOOK TWO: The Woman in the Airplane

PLAYLIST

Good Woman | Cat Power

Light Rail Coyote | Sleater-Kinney

Stella | Ida Maria

Great Gig in the Sky | The Flaming Lips + Peaches

Still Walking | Throbbing Gristle

In the Aeroplane over the Sea | Neutral Milk Hotel

Chapter 9. A Good Man

Through the diner window I could see the sun beginning to peek out from behind the mountains, and I groaned, “Fuck, is it really morning already? I need more coffee.”

Columbine didn’t respond and instead continued slurping the last vestiges of orange juice through the straw poking out of the oversized glass in front of her. The sound was extremely irritating, but she had such a blissed-out expression that I didn’t have the heart to ask her to stop.

“Let me get this straight,” she said when she was finally satisfied that the glass was dry. “If you can explain why you’re having the dreams about the dead woman Max found in his plane, then Max will confirm your article was true so no one can sue you anymore. And so you’re going to try to figure out who she is and solve her murder, and you think that will somehow explain your dream.”

“That’s about right,” I confirmed, tapping my fingers restlessly on the formica table top. “It sounds kinda crazy, when you say it like that, huh?”

“It’s absolutely bonkers,” she replied with relish. “But I guess you can’t help that. We’re all mad here. I’m not all there myself.”

“Cute,” I smirked, and tried once more in vain to flag down our waiter so I could get a refill on my coffee.

We were having breakfast at an all-night diner called Sunny Side Up. Columbine recommended it; it was a popular hipster hang out that used only organic ingredients and had vegan menu items. The booths were tiny and cramped, the wait staff was snobby, and the décor hovered somewhere between hipster-ironic and just-plain-tacky. It was a little much to deal with on no sleep. My plan for coping was to chug down as much sustainably-grown, fairly-traded coffee as I could fit inside me.

Unfortunately, our waiter – a young college kid with a neck beard, giant flesh tunnels in his ears, and a practiced air of disaffection – seemed more interested in flirting with the redhead a few tables over

from us who had clearly ingested enough ecstasy to kill an elephant. Her body lolled about dreamily like her bones had turned to limp noodles, causing her thin white-girl-dreads to flop about wildly. And she had so much metal pierced through her face that I kept worrying that the weight from it all was going to become too much for her in this debilitated state, and sooner or later she'd lean too far forward past the tipping point and get pulled down face-first into her organic oatmeal.

"So what's your plan?" Columbine asked, snapping me out of my daydream.

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me with it," I replied.

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

—

I had decided to take Columbine into my confidence. She seemed sincere enough, despite the nagging question as to how much of a convenient coincidence our meeting had been. But more importantly, she was an insider in Max's world; she knew all the players, and her insight could be invaluable. Basically, she was a calculated risk worth taking.

I made this decision a couple hours earlier, after we left the warehouse party and decided to walk back into town together. Neither of us had a car and there was no late night bus service, as barbaric as that is for a city this size. Max offered to have his driver give us a lift, but the two of us were still so amped up from the party that the long walk seemed appealing. Although honestly, I was really angling for the chance to press her for more information and see if I could trust her. And for her part, I suspected that she would have agreed to just about anything if the end result was spending just a little more time with me.

We left the industrial sector by crossing the Guadalupe Bridge over San Hermes River, then decided to take the long way back and cut through the park. Even though it probably wasn't the safest move and ended up taking way longer than I expected, it gave her time to tell me more about herself and her life.

I half expected to hear some absurd story about being raised by wolves or running off with gypsies, but for once she was refreshingly

plausible.

She was born Natalie McPherson nineteen years ago last April. Her parents met when her father was already in his fifties and her mother was in her late twenties. James was just getting over the end of his second marriage, which was ending in divorce. His first wife died of leukemia. Neither marriage had produced any other children.

Natalie's mother was the daughter of one of James's business associates. They met at a charity auction for McPherson's foundation and had a brief romance that ended messily. However, eight months after that messy ending, their daughter was born. Her mother died three days later due to complications that arose during labor. James McPherson was left to care for his only child alone, and named her Natalie after her mother.

She rarely saw her father as a child and was instead raised by a series of nannies. She was an imaginative and gifted kid who skipped a grade in elementary school, but she also had behavior problems. She felt bored and stifled by school, prone to daydreaming and often having difficulty focusing on any single task for a length of time.

While in junior high, she caught the theater bug and began acting in a handful of local children's companies. By the time she was thirteen, she was already in high school and her drama department staged an original play she had written for their spring production. It was their first time they had done a student work. At age fifteen, her works were being performed locally by smaller troupes. She also starred in many of them.

She graduated high school early and decided to focus on theater full-time, but in the three years since hadn't yet managed to making any headway into having a major production.

Nor was she really showing much interest in getting involved with her father's business or pursuing any other career for that matter. In fact, she was fairly open about being generally aimless and unmotivated, which was one of the major factors contributing to the strained relationship with her father.

In fact, practically the only thing the two of them had in common anymore was Max, whom she met when he came to see one of her shows. Her father misinterpreted Max's interest in her as being sexual and, fearing Max's reputation as unrepentant man-slut, tried to keep

the two of them apart. Columbine picked up on this vibe immediately, so of course she made a point to spend as much time with him as possible, and the two of them soon became close friends.

—

“But before I let you in on all the details,” I continued, back at the diner, “I need to make sure you realize exactly what’s going on here.”

“What do you mean?” she asked and inclined her head, intrigued.

“Well, for starters, do you know why everyone is so upset by my article?”

She shook her head and confessed, “Sorry, I don’t really read your newspaper. Or any newspaper, for that matter.”

“Fair enough,” I replied. “In a nutshell, I basically accuse several powerful businessmen of bribing and threatening city officials into giving them fat government contracts. Businessmen like Max. And your father.”

“Oh,” she responded with amusement. “So I’m guessing that’s why you were getting the cold shoulder at your sister’s wedding, right?”

“Mostly. A lot of them just flat out personally hate me anyways, but the article didn’t help things much.”

“I’d imagine not,” she chuckled. “So tell me more, I’m intrigued. What specifically did your article say?”

“Well of course the focus was Max, who got the contract to provide citywide free wi-fi, which of course is generating huge ad revenue for him as well as subscription fees from people willing to pay for faster, ad-free service. I have e-mails between him and city officials, including the mayor’s chief of staff and the city administrator, where he makes some pretty severe threats if they don’t choose Abrasax. And when I say threats, I’m talking both personal and professional – and some just bizarre, horrifying shit.”

“Like what?” she asked, intrigued.

“He got so mad at one city staffer who wouldn’t return his calls that he threatened to have the guy fired and blacklisted, have his house

foreclosed, his teenage daughter violated, and his pet cat flayed alive.”

Columbine laughed and shook her head. “I’d like to think at least one of those was an empty threat. So who else did your article mention?”

“Asterion Records Management, who won the contract for the city’s records warehousing and digital archiving. Of course, they won the contract because they were the only ones given the chance to bid. Incidentally, their CFO had recently purchased gifts for several city council members, including a honeymoon to Asia for a newly-married member, an original Picasso for the council’s resident art-buff, and even paying to remodel the vice mayor’s kitchen. I was given copies of e-mails from an Asterion rep to city staff with detailed instructions on how to hide the source of the gifts.

“Then there was Inspiratech, who made millions on their contract to completely redo the network infrastructure in city hall and other city offices. But they won the contract only in the second round of voting. After the first round, the council member who cast the deciding vote against them was recalled from office by a vicious, well-funded campaign. No one knew how a tiny grassroots neighborhood committee behind the recall was able to raise that kind of money, but then I turned up several e-mails to the new council member suggesting he would be well-served by taking a more amenable stance on Inspiratech’s proposal.

“And finally,” I hesitated a little, “your father successfully lobbied the city to invest millions in redevelopment money in areas where he owns a lot of land, making the property values and the rents that he could charge skyrocket. Again, e-mails between your father’s lobbyists and city officials contain a host of thinly-veiled and not-even-thinly-veiled threats. Your father has been a king maker in this city for decades. All ten sitting council members and the mayor won their seats with his backing. You don’t ignore threats from a man like that.

“Those are the highlights, at least.”

I paused for a moment, unsure how Columbine was going to react.

“Yay, pancakes,” she sang.

I looked up to see that our waiter had finally dragged himself away from his ham-fisted attempts to pull some crunchy granola tail long enough to bring our food. He set down a mountain of buttermilk pancakes in front of Columbine and a bacon-and-egg muffin sandwich

in front of me. Columbine proceeded to drown her plate in maple syrup.

“Hey, do you think you could see your way to tossing a little coffee into this mug while you’re over here? I’m sure she won’t mind if you’re gone just a little longer,” I added, pointing at the redhead, who had picked up a pinch of her cold, congealing oatmeal and started rubbing it in her fingertips, no doubt tripping on the way its lumpy, grainy texture felt against her skin.

The waiter left in a huff and mercifully headed for the pot of coffee sitting on a warmer behind the counter.

“You shouldn’t be so mean to people, or so judgmental,” Columbine chided gently as we watched him go.

I sucked on my teeth and briefly considered a couple snappy rejoinders, but decided against them. “Yeah, I know,” I sighed. “It’s just these pretentious fucking drones with all the shit sticking out of their skin, it’s so phoney now, it’s de rigueur, like counter-culture is just another uniform to wear.”

“I think it’s neat,” she shrugged. “It’s like you’re taking control of your own body, turning it into something new, something better, not just passively accepting what you’ve been given. Haven’t you ever wanted to be someone else?”

I rolled my eyes in answer just as the waiter returned.

Once he finished refilling my coffee and Columbine had managed to choke down her first impossibly large forkful of pancake, she eagerly asked, “So what do you want me to do to help with your plan?”

“There are a few things I was hoping you could explain for me,” I replied, then dug an envelope out of my coat pocket and then laid it out on the table. It was blue and stamped with the crown-and-globe symbol in silver foil, just like the one I’d received the morning of Jenny’s wedding.

“What can you tell me about this?”

Columbine picked up the envelope. “Well that’s the symbol of the Highwater Society, like Max told you.”

“Yeah, but what exactly does that mean?” I pressed. “What is the Highwater Society?”

“It’s basically a social club for the richest of the rich. It started way back when the city was founded as an excuse for rich old men to get away from their wives and get drunk. Now they let in girls, and all the young tech millionaires have dropped the median age a good half-century or so, but the idea is pretty much just the same – rich people sitting around together to talk about how much better they are than everyone else.”

I nodded to the envelope in her hands. “Look inside.”

She opened the unsealed flap and pulled out the sheet of white paper inside. The page was headed “THE HIGHWATER SOCIETY” and contained a list of names with what appeared to be titles or positions. The titles were all taken from members of a king’s court – Steward, Chaplain, Seneschal, Cup-bearer. Columbine’s father was listed as as Chamberlain. The rest of the names were all prominent political and business leaders, most of whom were connected to the scandals in my article. At the very top of the list, however, was, “Dylan Maxwell – Fool.”

Columbine nodded her head as she slipped the paper back into the envelope. “Those are their officers. Where did you get this?”

“About two weeks ago, while I was still working on my article, I got a call from a woman claiming to have information about the e-mails I had been given – which caught my attention because at that point no one knew about them but me and my source. So I agreed to meet her, even though she wouldn’t tell me her name or how she was connected to my story.

“Anyways, I showed up at the café where she said she’d be, but she never showed. I waited for a little over an hour before I finally gave up, but when I got up to leave, I noticed someone had slipped this envelope into my computer bag.”

“Weird,” Columbine replied as her eyes grew bigger, clearly enjoying the cloak-and-dagger elements of my story.

I reached into my coat again and pulled out a second matching blue envelope and passed it across the table for her inspection.

“This one showed up at my office Friday morning. The article it references had to do with a dead woman being found in a ditch on the side of the highway,” I explained. “In my dream, the dead woman in Max’s airplane was holding a ruby necklace with this same crown-and-

globe symbol etched on it. That's how I knew it had to be the same woman; it was too much of a coincidence otherwise."

I could tell from Columbine's expression that the wheels were turning. "So does that mean the Highwater Society was responsible for killing her? Then again, she could also have been a member. But then why would they leave the necklace in her hand?" she asked excitedly, her mind racing through the implications.

"Those are all possibilities," I agreed. "But whatever the case, one thing's for sure – both the necklace and the body itself were left deliberately for Max to find. Someone was sending him a message. Which is the second thing I wanted to ask you about – and I know he's your friend, so this is going to be sensitive, but do you know of any enemies Max might have?"

Columbine stared silently at me in wide-eyed amazement for a moment, and then erupted into laughter.

"Yeah, you need a list? There's a phone book over by the bathrooms that'd give you a good start."

I rolled my eyes to let her know I was not amused.

"Look, you don't get as rich and successful as Max without stepping on more than your fair share of toes. And to be honest, he's involved in a lot things that aren't exactly on the up-and-up. The better question isn't who are his enemies, it's who'd be dumb enough to actually try and take him on?"

"Is he really that dangerous?" I asked.

"He's rich, brilliant, and completely sociopathic. It doesn't get any more dangerous than that."

"I thought he was your friend."

"He is, and I love him like brother," Columbine insisted. "But there are certain things I know enough not to ask about."

"Some friendship," I scoffed, then immediately regretted saying it.

"There you go being judgmental again," she said while waving her syrup-smeared knife at me. "Not everyone can be as cool and virtuous as you, Mr. Punk-as-Fuck Journalist, Crusader for Truth and Justice."

I shook my head. "I never claimed to be virtuous. I'm not a good man."

She didn't respond to this, and instead just shoveled the last forkful of pancake into her mouth.

I shook my head in astonishment. "How did a little thing like you manage to eat all that?"

"Don't let my petite stature fool you, there's a lot more to me than meets the eye." She winked. "Judge me by my size, do you?"

"You're such a dork," I said.

She got up to use the restroom while I scooped up the two blue envelopes and stuffed them back into my jacket. Then I took out my notebook and jotted down a few snippets from our conversation along with a couple things that stood out in my memory from last night:

Crown & Globe = Highwater, "how they find each other"

Max doesn't trust Lily, thinks she is my source

Saint Anthony: at flophouse looking for "Cobb"

I underlined the last word twice, then stashed the notebook and went up to the counter to settle the bill. As I paid, I noticed the waiter looking disappointedly at something behind me. I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see the redhead walking out the front door.

I smirked smugly to myself and started looking over the flyers laid out on the counter to pass the time while I waited for Columbine. It was the usual punk show half-sheets, cheap black-and-white zines, and political leaflets. Thumbing through them, I came across a small stack of half-sheets that I recognized as the same one that the bum handed me on the Light Rail: You Are Being Lied To... Trust Us.

When Columbine returned, I could tell she had something on her mind.

"There's something I just thought of, it might be relevant or it might not be," she said as we stepped outside.

"What is it?"

"Your list, it said that Max is the 'Fool' – do you know what that means?"

I shook my head.

“The Fool is the games master,” she explained. “He organizes the entertainment. And not everyone in the group is happy with the way Max is running the games. He has a tendency to raise the stakes, push the boundaries. He likes watching how people react when they’re backed into a corner.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said.

“I was just thinking that because of the necklace with the symbol, maybe the dead woman had something to do with Max’s games.”

“Yeah, that’s really good,” I said and fished out my notebook to write that down.

I noticed a cab coming up the street, so I waved it over and told Columbine it was for her.

“You’re not coming?” she asked.

I gave her an apologetic half-smile. “It’s been a long night, and I need to get home and get some rest.”

“Well, I could go with you,” she offered hopefully. “I don’t really have anything to do this afternoon anyways. I could just hang out while you nap, and then we could go out to dinner when you wake up.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but she cut me off before I had a chance. “No, I get it. It’s okay.”

Her cab drove off, and I started walking down the street to find another one. About a block away, I came across the redhead from the diner sitting on a bus bench, waving her hands slowly back and forth in front of her face and staring at them as if mesmerized.

I sat next to her. She looked up and smiled, but didn’t say a thing.

“You look like you could use some help,” I said.

She smiled widely and nodded. I was sure the smile was meant to be a sheepish grin, but she fucked it up and spread it ear-to-ear the way people do when they’re stoned.

Just then, I spotted another taxi and flagged it down. As it pulled up in front of us, I got up and held the door open for her.

“Come on, I’ll help you get home,” I told her.

She beamed appreciatively and got in. I watched with satisfaction as her ass made a perfect heart shape when she bent over, then followed her in and gave the cabbie my address.

I never claimed to be a good man.

Chapter 10. Cautionary Tale

I was late coming into work Monday morning and ran into Sharon in the front lobby. She was escorting out two women I didn't recognize, well dressed middle-aged professional-types in pants suits.

She reached a hand out to grab my shoulder and stop me as I tried to slink past. "Ms. Singh, Ms. Palmer, this is Dedalus Quetzal. He's the man you have to thank for the small fortune in legal fees your firm is charging this newspaper."

"You're still letting him work here?" one of the women asked incredulously.

"Work's maybe too strong a term when you're talking about D," Sharon replied.

"He smells like he's been drinking," the other woman added.

"He does indeed," Sharon nodded.

I broke free of Sharon's grip. "Really, ladies, I'd love to stay here and take part in whatever menopause-apalooza you have going on, but I have important journalist-type things to get to."

I headed inside, made straight for my desk, and started searching through my files for a mention of anyone named Cobb in connection with Abrasax or the other companies related to my article.

Nothing was coming up. None of the top brass were named Cobb, nor was anyone who might have reason to hold a grudge, like recent layoffs.

"Fucking insubordinate bastard," I grumbled as I tapped angrily on my laptop. "Why don't you ever tell me anything useful?"

"Funny, I was just about to say the same thing." I looked up to find Sharon leaning against my desk. "Please tell me you did something productive over the weekend."

"As a matter of fact I did," I replied without looking up from my laptop. "I had a nice little chat with Dylan Maxwell himself. Swell guy, excellent diction, you'd like him."

“And...?”

“We made a deal,” I answered. “I help him look into something, and in return he’ll back up the story.”

I decided that maybe Cobb was someone connected to Max from the past, so I logged onto the Morning-Star online archives to see if the name popped up in any old articles about Abrasax.

“Doesn’t seem entirely ethical,” Sharon mused.

“Do you actually give a shit?” I shot back, keeping my eyes locked on the screen.

“Not really,” she replied. “As long as you’re sure he’ll hold up his end of the deal.”

“Holy fucking shit,” I said, my jaw dropping.

My search of the archives returned dozens on articles. But the name Cobb wasn’t showing up in the articles themselves, it was in the by-line.

“Have you ever heard of a reporter named Patrick Cobb who worked for the Morning-Star back in the nineties?” I asked, looking up from the screen.

She folded her arms over her chest and sighed. “Are you serious? You’ve never heard of Patrick Cobb?”

I shook my head.

“And you claim to be journalist,” she muttered. “He’s a cautionary tale. If you’d ever actually shown up to any of your journalism classes at college, you’d have heard all about him.”

I shrugged. “I never really saw the point, so can you just give me the Cliffs Notes version?”

“He was one of the best, most fearless investigative reporters I’ve ever met, back when the Morning-Star used to be a real newspaper instead of a sad corporate lap dog. He was also a good friend,” she explained.

“So what happened? Why’s he a cautionary tale?”

“About ten or eleven years ago, he wrote an article alleging that the US military was selling arms to right wing paramilitary groups in Columbia. In it, he quoted an unnamed source, a commissioned army

officer, who claimed to have been ordered by his superiors to distribute the weapons to the death squads through his soldiers. They were supposed to be there training the legitimate Columbian army. After the article was published, it came out that the quotes were bogus and the officer never existed.”

“Oh, I do remember hearing about that,” I said. “But didn’t the bulk of his story later turn out to be true?”

“It didn’t matter, by that time, Cobb had already been discredited and fired from the paper. The right wing lambasted him as a prime example of the liberal media agenda run amok, and the left wing turned on him to prove what good, patriotic Americans they were. The national media turned on him and vilified him. At first he tried to defend himself, saying he had been misled, but after a while he gave up and just faded away. I ran into him about four years ago. He was a drunk, doing odd jobs and unable to hold onto any steady work. He was also completely paranoid and delusional, convinced that his fall from grace had been a deliberate plot orchestrated against him.”

“Orchestrated by whom?” I asked.

“He didn’t say for sure,” she said, then paused, as if debating whether she should continue. “It’s funny you should bring him up, though. At the same time that he broke the Columbian story, he had another on the back burner. It was a piece about human trafficking, girls being brought in from impoverished countries to work in the sex industry – southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Eastern Bloc. There had been a big police raid on some brothel; all the girls working there were undocumented and basically being held as prisoners. Cobb was doing some digging for a follow up, and I remember him telling me about a few people in high places who might have been connected. One was an up-and-coming young executive whose internet startup had only been around a year or two but was already making waves in a big way. Care to guess who?”

“Fuck,” I groaned, not needing to say his name out loud for confirmation.

“Why do you want to know about Cobb, anyways? Is this part of your favor for Maxwell?” she asked.

“I think I met him,” I said. “Do you have a picture of him?”

Sharon stood there motionless, studying me skeptically. “Yeah,” she

replied. "Let's go check my files."

I followed her to her office, where she opened a file cabinet and thumbed through it, then pulled out a folder. It was full of photographs and newspaper clippings about Cobb, which she laid out on the desk and picked through to find a clear head shot.

The intervening years had not been kind, for sure, but it was unmistakably the man from the flophouse.

"That's him," I said, taken aback. "He's the guy who hit me with the baseball bat last week."

"What?" Sharon shook her head, trying to wrap her brain around the implications. "What does Patrick Cobb have to do with your story?"

She looked to me for a response, but my attention was diverted to another photo on Sharon's desk. This one showed her and Cobb lined up on a stage along with a couple others holding plaques. Another row of people stood behind them on a slightly elevated platform. It was the woman at the far right of the back row who had caught my attention.

"Who is this?" I asked, holding up the picture.

Sharon squinted. "That's Jacinda Ngo. She used to be the head of Apex Computers. This was taken when Cobb and I won Feinman Journalism Fellowships. Apex was one of the sponsors, and she was a judge."

"She's dead," I said.

"Yeah, she died in a boating accident several years back," Sharon replied.

"No, she died last week," I corrected. "They found her body in a ditch at the side of the highway."

"I thought that was a vagrant," Sharon objected. "Why do you think it's her?"

"Hang on," I said, pulling my phone out to call Nick. When he answered, I switched it to speaker so Sharon could hear. "Hey, it's me. You remember how you said someone on the force thought he recognized the woman in the ditch as the head of some computer company? Was the woman he was thinking of named Jacinda Ngo?"

"Actually, I think that was it," he conceded hesitantly. "Why?"

“Long story, I don’t have time to go into it now. Do you think you can get me a picture of the body, like just take a photo of her face with your phone or something?” I asked.

“They cremated her already,” he replied, “but I’ll fax you some of the photos the medical examiner took.”

“Yeah, that’ll work,” I said. “Thanks for your help, Nick. And I hate to say this, but I kinda need them ASAP.”

“You always do,” he groaned before hanging up.

I looked back to Sharon, who was shaking her head in disbelief. “What the hell is going on here?”

I explained in as little detail as I could manage about the body found in Max’s airplane and the nature of my deal with Max, conveniently leaving out the bit about me dreaming the whole thing. I also recounted my visit to the flophouse and my run-in with Cobb. And though it wasn’t immediately clear how, I was sure that the two were somehow related.

“Did anyone at the flophouse know what Cobb was doing there?” Sharon asked.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask. Just as I was coming downstairs, I ran into one of Max’s thugs, and he didn’t really seem like he was in the mood to entertain questions.”

“You should go back and check it out,” Sharon said, almost absently, her eyes looking off into the distance, as if she were trying to sort something else out.

“It’s strange,” she added. “Whoever sent you in there to get that blue box, why didn’t they just get it themselves? I mean, they knew where it was, they knew when Cobb would be gone.”

I nodded. “I wondered about that, too. The only thing I could come up with was that they knew Max was after it. If he showed up or had someone watching the building, they might have been recognized, whereas I could come and go without raising any alarms.”

Sharon nodded, agreeing with the logic.

Just then my phone started playing the White Stripes’ “Blue Orchid”. It was Nick calling me back.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” he started. “In fact, I’m not telling

you this. Officially, I am telling you that the department requires that you submit a formal public records request in writing to view the file.”

“Got it,” I said. “So what about off the record?”

“Off the record – and I mean really off the record,” he added cautiously, “the pictures are gone.”

“What do you mean gone?” I asked.

“I mean gone. Missing. And not just like someone lost them or swiped them. There are no negatives, nothing in the electronic files. There is absolutely no evidence of what that corpse looked like.”

Chapter 11. She's Not Who I Thought She Was

Later that afternoon, I called up Columbine. "I've got some new info about our murder mystery. Wanna come along with me to go snoop around some unsavory elements?"

"Sounds fun, I'll come pick you up," she answered. "You are all hipster Philip Marlowe and shit."

She showed up ten minutes later in a light blue Volvo blasting Ida Maria. She wore a black trench coat, giant sunglasses, and a huge wide-brimmed hat. I assumed she was going for some kind of Mata Hari look.

I gave her directions to the Casa Salvador, and on the way there I shared with her the revelations about Patrick Cobb and Jacinda Ngo.

We walked inside and found the manager slumped in a chair behind the front desk watching a TV news report about some young hot shot lawyer who got caught breaking into the county morgue to steal the spleen from a corpse.

"Do you need a room?" the manger asked without bothering to look up from his little TV screen, his nose covered in thick bandages.

"No," I said, and took out a business card. "I'm a reporter. I was hoping to ask you a few questions."

"If you're not here to rent a room, then I don't have anything to say to you," he responded gruffly.

"Okay, we're here to rent a room," Columbine said and laid a hundred dollar bill on the counter. "That should cover it, right? So let's chat."

He snatched away the bill before I had a chance to object, then looked suspiciously between the two of us. "What do you want?"

I showed him a photograph of Cobb. "Recognize him?"

"Yeah, he stayed here. He left the same night you came by – the night that faggot in the leather pants broke my nose and you just sat their holding your dick."

“Better you than me,” I shrugged.

“Do you remember anything unusual about him?” Columbine cut in. I had to keep from grinning; she was playing the part perfectly.

“And if you actually make it believable, the little lady might be willing to drop another C-Note on that room,” I chimed in as I took out my notebook.

The manager snorted and looked back at the photograph. “You’re lucky, you know. Most of the time I can’t keep track of who comes and goes in this place; after a while they all kinda blend together. He stood out a little, though.”

“What made him different?” I asked.

“Well the first time I saw him, he came in with one of the girls. Then later he came back to stay himself. That’s a little weird,” he said.

“Why’s that?” Columbine asked.

“Because anyone who can afford to pay for one of the girl’s services can usually afford to stay in a nicer place than this dump,” he explained.

“Oh,” she replied meekly, realizing what kind of “girl” the manager was talking about.

“Who was the girl he came in with?” I asked while.

“I dunno, some Asian chick. Like I said, they all blend together, you know.”

I placed some more photos on the counter. “Was it any of these women?”

“Couldn’t say,” he repeated. “If you really want to know, you should talk to Stella upstairs in room 309. She knows all the girls.”

I nodded. “Okay, let’s get back to the man, then. About how long ago was it that he came in with the woman?”

“About a week ago. Then it was a day or two later that he checked in.” He pulled out a file of index cards and flipped through. “Yeah, it was Tuesday that he checked in. He only stayed two nights. The third day, Thursday, he paid for but left early. Actually, I think he left while you were upstairs.”

“Did he have any visitors while he was here?” I asked.

The manager shook his head. "Not that I noticed. He stayed in his room pretty much all day, kept to himself, and only went out after dark. I kinda got the impression that he was hiding out. I guess maybe you're who he was hiding from, huh? "

I smirked. "Could be. We'll go upstairs and see Stella now."

—

I knocked on the door to room 309. When it opened, I immediately recognized the woman who answered from my last visit here; she was the blonde who handed me the phone in the hallway.

She smiled wearily when she saw me. "Well, now. I honestly didn't think you'd be back."

"Stella?" I asked.

She nodded. "At least that's the name I give Johns."

"My name's D Quetzal. I'm a reporter," I said, showing her my card. "And this is Columbine."

"I know who you are," she replied to me. "He said you'd be coming back to ask questions. I said, 'Patrick, you knocked that boy out cold with a baseball bat. If the good Lord gave him any sense at all he's gonna stay far away from here.' But now here you are. So I guess you'd better come in."

She stepped aside to let us pass. Her room was laid out like Cobb's, but she had done a lot more to personalize and decorate it. She had placed a small wooden vanity with chipped paint in the corner and covered the walls with photos of old movie starlets. A small ornate lamp with a purple shade sat on the nightstand and gave the room a violet glow. She pulled the chair from the vanity over and offered it to Columbine. Then she sat herself on the edge of the bed and motioned for me to sit on the foot locker.

"Sorry I'm not really set up for entertaining," she chuckled.

"It's fine," I said as I sat down and took out my notebook, "I'm just a little taken aback. Are you saying you talked to Cobb about me?"

"Last night," she confirmed. "He came to say goodbye."

"Where was he going?" Columbine asked.

Stella didn't answer, but instead looked at her reproachfully.

"Do you know him well?" I cut in.

"No, I only met the man last week. We talked a little bit, that's all," she answered.

"The manager said the first time he came in here, it was to see a woman. Do you know who she was?"

Stella nodded, so I handed her the stack of photos I had tried to show the manager. She flipped through the pictures quickly, then suddenly stopped at one and her posture deflated. Finally, she flipped it around to show me; it was Jacinda Ngo.

"It's a beautiful picture of her," she said. "God, she looks so young. And look at those clothes she's wearing, so glamorous."

"Did you know her well?" I asked.

"Better than most," she answered. "I met her a little less than ten years ago, and our paths always seemed to cross from time to time. She called herself Isabel."

"Isabel," Columbine repeated and took the photo back from Stella, whose eyes were beginning to well up. Columbine's own face had fallen, too, clearly empathizing with the other woman's sorrow.

"It's such a shame," Stella added morosely.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Stella looked up at me, a little surprised. "She's dead. You didn't know that?"

"I did," I responded, "but how did you?"

"Because I was there when she died," she said matter-of-factly.

Columbine and I looked at each other in stunned silence.

"How did she die?" I finally asked, still reeling from her revelation.

Stella's face turned bitter. "Well, Patrick killed her, of course."

"Hang on," Columbine said, shaking her head in astonishment, "I think you better start at the beginning."

"It happened last Monday night," Stella began. "I saw them come

upstairs together and go into Isabel's room. I didn't think anything of it, of course. But then later I happened to be walking by and heard Isabel crying through the door. I went inside to check on her and found the two of them sitting on the bed.

"Isabel was holding something in her hands," she continued. "It looked like a photograph but I couldn't really see it clearly, and she folded it up and handed it back to Patrick before I could get a closer look. She looked up at me with tearful eyes and said to Patrick, 'I want Stella to be there when it happens. I want to hold her hand. I need a friend, someone to keep me from getting too scared.' I remember those words clearly.

"Patrick looked surprised and asked her something like, 'Are you sure you want to go through with this?' She said she did, and I of course had no idea what they were talking about, but I followed them just the same, downstairs to a car parked in the little alley on the side of the building. Once we got there, they explained what was going to happen, and I was horrified. I tried to talk them out of it, of course. But I could tell from Isabel's eyes that it wasn't going to do any good. 'I need you to do this for me, Stella. I need you to just trust me and help me get through this,' she said. 'But I understand if you can't.'

"How could I say no? I took her hands and held them as tight as I could and looked her straight in the eye. Then the most incredible look came over her – she looked relieved, at peace. Then Patrick came up behind her and wrapped the rope around her neck and strangled her.

"When she finally stopped moving, I helped Patrick lay her down on the back seat. Just before he drove off, he promised he'd come back to see me, to explain."

"Did he come back?" Columbine asked.

"He did," Stella said. "The next day he came back and checked into the same room where Isabel had been staying, room 313."

"What did he say?" I pressed. "Did he explain why she wanted to die?"

"Well, I don't suppose anyone could have ever really explained that – why someone would want to die. That's the type of thing you can't make someone understand; the only way to get it is to experience it yourself. But I suppose you're asking more about a sequence of events, and Patrick did at least try to explain that much to me as best

he could.

“The thing you have to understand first off is that Isabel had a past. She never talked about it of course, but it was obvious to anyone who would care to see that she wasn’t born into this life. But then I’m sure you know a little more about this than me, what with your picture of her and all. Patrick knew about her past, too, which is why someone hired him to find her. Well, find her and kill her.”

Columbine winced at her words. I objected, “But Patrick Cobb wasn’t a killer; he was a reporter. That doesn’t make sense.”

Stella smiled at me indulgently. “It’s amazing what desperate people will agree to do for a dollar. But as it turns out, you’re right. Patrick wasn’t a killer. When he finally found her, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he warned Isabel that people from her past were after her and offered to help her escape. To his surprise, however, she told him that she didn’t want to escape. She said she was tired of running, tired of pretending to be someone else. She said she had spent ten years hiding from her past, and she always knew that sooner or later it was going to catch up with her. So she asked Patrick to finish what he had been paid to do.”

When Stella finished, the silence hung heavy in the room. I finished writing down what she had said in my notebook and glanced over to Columbine, who no longer appeared to be having fun. I turned back to Stella and asked, “Did Cobb say who hired him, or did you ever get any indication from Isabel who from her past might be after her?”

“Patrick didn’t say. I’m not sure he even knew who they really were. And as for Isabel herself, she never talked about her past at all. The only thing was, well...”

Stella trailed off, hesitating as to whether she should continue. “What is it?” Columbine prodded.

“There was one funny thing about her. She had this special John that she’d go to see once a year on April 18th – the same day every year, like clockwork. I don’t know who he was, and I never saw him, but she told me about him. They had a special meeting place where he’d pick her up and take her to a fancy hotel. They’d stay in the penthouse, and she’d wash herself up with expensive soaps and lotions and perfumes. He’d give her a designer dress to wear to dinner, always at a fancy restaurant. He’d reserve them a private room and let

her order anything she wanted, no regard for the price, and they'd always have a rare bottle of champagne with their meal. Then she'd sleep over through the night in that big penthouse bed with silk sheets. In the morning, he'd drop her back off at the meeting place, and she wouldn't hear from him again until their next date."

"The same day every year like clockwork," I repeated. "How long was this going on?"

"Ever since I first met her."

"And you didn't have any who he might have been. No guesses, no clues."

"Well, he obviously had to be someone very rich,. As for clues..." Stella paused again. "I'm not sure if this'll help, but she'd always wear the same necklace whenever she was going to meet him – a ruby pendent, and she only ever wore it for him."

Columbine's eyes nearly popped out of her skull.

I smiled. "Thank you, Stella. You've been very helpful."

She glanced down at the photograph of Jacinda again, and the tears finally came. But something struck me as peculiar about the way she cried – it wasn't hysterical sobbing, and it wasn't mournful weeping. Then, as a wide, beaming smile spread across Stella's face, I realized with surprise that they were tears of pride.

"My God, she looks so beautiful. It's almost like she's an entirely different person. So confident, so powerful, like she's queen bitch of the world." She let a bittersweet chuckle escape her lips. "I thought I knew her pretty well, but looking at this photo... I guess she's not who I thought she was."

Chapter 12. She Begged Me To

I woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of someone coughing violently amid the heavy smell of cheap whiskey and stale sweat. I sat up, and though still groggy and disoriented, I thought I could make out a figure standing at the foot of my bed in the darkness.

I reached over and switched on the lamp on my nightstand.

The first thing I noticed as my eyes adjusted to the light was the snub-nosed .22 revolver leveled at my head. The second thing I noticed was the tall, gaunt man holding it. He was still dressed in the same well-worn suit as he was wearing when he took the swing at me in the flophouse. His face was badly bruised, his left hand taped up, and a bright red splotch was visible on his shirt inside his open suit jacket. He was shaking and stunk of alcohol; his skin was a sickly pale color.

"I'm sorry I hit you the other night," Cobb said. "When I saw you in my room, I assumed you were one of them."

"One of who?" I asked.

"Don't be dense," he sneered.

I sat up and picked the gunk out of my eyes. Cobb continued, "After you left that night, I followed you, checked up on you. You really are a reporter."

He chuckled bitterly to himself and lowered the gun. Then he reached into his jacket pocket with the bandaged hand and produced the shiny blue box I had seen behind the vent in his room.

"I need you to take this and keep it safe," he said, tossing it to me. "No one can know you have it."

I caught the box and turned it over in my fingers. It was cold and metallic, a rectangle of roughly five inches by two inches. There weren't any visible joints or hinges, or any apparent way to open it.

"You need the Ariadne Key to open it," he said. "I heard them say that Lilian Lynch could get it."

"Who are they, exactly?" I pressed.

He shook his head. "I don't know. Lynch was the one who approached me about tracking down Ngo. She was the only one I ever dealt."

"Did she say why they wanted her dead?" I pressed.

He shook his head feebly. "No, they didn't even tell me who she was, at first. Just said I was looking for a whore named Isabel. I didn't know until I saw her, then of course I recognized her.

"I wasn't going to do it. I mean, I've done some pretty repugnant shit for money, but Jacinda Ngo was an angel, there was no way I was going to hand her over to those bastards.

"So I tried to figure out who they were instead, to see if there was some way to stop them. I tailed Lynch for a few days until she finally met up with the others. It was at some abandoned building downtown. There was one other car parked outside beside hers, it was an old '57 Chevy Del Rey, blue, no plates. I snapped a photo of it on my way in.

"Inside, I couldn't get close enough to see any of them, but that was when I heard them talking about the box and opening it with the Ariadne Key. I waited until they all left and jimmied open the cabinet where they kept it locked up.

"Then I headed back to Jacinda to warn her, but she said was tired of running, tired of hiding. I don't know why, but she seemed especially shook up when she saw that photo of the blue car. She said she had done terrible things in her life and that she always knew she'd eventually have to pay for them. She begged me to go through with it. She fucking begged me to."

Outside, I heard the sound of a car pull up in front of my building. I jumped up to look out my window and saw a blue classic car come to a stop and idle for a couple seconds before taking off again down the street.

"Holy shit, is this the car?" I asked as I turned back to look at Cobb, but he was gone.

—

"Do you know where Lilian Lynch lives?" I barked into my cell phone.

“Yeah, of course. Why?” Columbine asked, the low grumble of her voice confirming that I had in fact just woken her up.

“I need you to give me her address. I have to go see her right now, it’s an emergency.”

There was a brief pause, then Columbine finally answered wearily, “Hang on, I’ll come pick you up and we’ll go over together.”

“Fine.”

“It’ll be a little while, though. That was my friend’s car I was borrowing, so I’ll have to work out getting it back from her.”

“Okay, but hurry,” I said and hung up.

About an hour and a half later, I got a text saying she was outside.

After bounding down the stairs, I found the same Volvo from earlier waiting in front of the building, but Columbine was in passenger seat. Violet was driving.

“She insisted on coming along,” Columbine explained with a playful cattiness as I climbed into the back seat. “She didn’t want me driving the car late at night.”

“I don’t want you driving it all,” Violet rebutted. “I didn’t even realize you took it this afternoon.”

Then she glanced up to look at me in the rearview, and our eyes locked on each other’s reflection.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I replied stupidly, feeling my cheeks grow warm and flush and suddenly becoming grateful that Columbine had insisted on picking me up.

About ten minutes later we arrived at Lilian Lynch’s townhouse, which was part of a very exclusive west-side development. Violet pulled the Volvo up behind a white Asterion van parked out in front. As I got out of the car and walked past it, I thought I heard a buzzing static noise coming from the back of the van. I paused for a closer listen, but then realized that Columbine was already at the iron gate, tapping numbers into the intercom.

I ran up to join the two women just in time to hear the intercom give its last couple beeps before cutting off. “No answer, she must not be

home,” Columbine said. “It’s okay, I know the code. We can just go upstairs and wait.”

She typed *71839 on the keypad and opened the gate. We continued up the stairs to Lily’s front door. Columbine fished the spare key out of its hiding place inside a wall-mounted light fixture and let us in.

As we walked into the living, we found the lights out and the place empty. Columbine continued on down the hallway to the bedroom door, but it was locked.

“I don’t know where she keeps this key,” she said apologetically and gave a few raps on the door. There was no answer, so she knocked again, more loudly.

“Lil, it’s me. Are you in there?”

Still, there was no response.

“Maybe she’s asleep,” Violet suggested.

Columbine knocked again. “Lil, wake up. I need to talk to you. It’s important.”

“What the hell is going on here?”

The three of us whipped around to see Lily behind us, walking into her apartment, dressed in a black cocktail dress and done up as if coming home from a night out.

“If you’re not in there, why’s the door locked?” Columbine asked.

With a bitter scowl affixed to her face, Lily pushed her way past me and stood next to Columbine.

“What do you mean? There’s no lock on that door.”

Lily tried to open the door but found that, indeed, it wouldn’t budge. “What the fuck?”

“Watch out,” I said and gave the door a few good, solid kicks. It finally gave way, and as the four of us ran in, I stooped down to pick up the screwdriver that someone had stuck into the jamb.

Then there was a scream, and I jumped up to find the three women standing frozen in terror.

Patrick Cobb was lying on top of Lily’s bed, completely naked, blood

leaking out all over the sheets from the gaping, jagged gash across his neck.

—

I paced back and forth across the room while Lily sat silently on the foot of the bed beside Cobb's corpse. The two of us were alone in the room.

"So explain to me again why we shouldn't call the police about the dead body in your bed?"

Lily sighed deeply. "I'm tired." She was slumped forward, her head hanging low, eyes downcast and locked onto her hands, which she rubbed together nervously. "Tired of the lies, tired of the sneaking around, tired of Max's fucking suspicious prodding all day, trying to see how far he can push me before I just snap."

Her voice had reached a bitter crescendo with that last word and then dropped off sharply. She sat there looking deflated and beaten, and I almost found myself feeling sorry for the cold-hearted bitch.

"Is that why you haven't given them the Ariadne Key yet?" I asked, taking a shot.

She nodded listlessly. "That's what this is all about," she pointed to Cobb, "they're sending me a message. Get back in line, or you're next. No one walks away."

"Who are they?" I asked.

She looked at me like I had just said the most ridiculous thing imaginable. "Like I'm going to tell you that."

"Why not tell Max?" I shot back. "He might forgive you if you come clean, especially if you hand over your accomplices."

She scoffed. "You don't know Max. There are no second chances with him. You're either with him, or you just vanish."

"Is that why you don't want to call the cops?" I probed. "Because if he finds out about it, he'll take it as proof you've been working against him?"

She nodded. I looked down at my shoes and kicked the ball of my

foot against her carpet a few times.

“Fuck,” I spat. “Well give me a hand with the son of a bitch, then.”

Chapter 13. Throw Up, Jerk Off, and Go Fetal

The Volvo pulled off the freeway and entered the industrial sector. I was riding shotgun and giving Violet directions to the San Hermes River through a series of back roads. As she drove, I would from time to time catch a whiff of her scent or sneak a glimpse at her face from the corner of my eye, and it was enough to make me forget the grisly cargo laying across the back seat.

“Turn here,” I instructed, “and you’re going to want to follow this dirt road to that small bridge over the river. This used to be where the train tracks crossed the river. But they moved the line like fifteen years ago. No one comes out this way anymore.”

“Looks good,” Violet agreed.

Suddenly I heard a sharp, wheezy gasp come from the back seat, followed by a series of wet gurgles.

Violet looked over her shoulder. “Oh fuck!”

Cobb lunged forward, wedged himself in the gap between our seats, and threw his arms around Violet’s neck. Blood sprayed everywhere, and the Volvo jerked violently to the right, veering off the road and cutting through a vacant lot.

In panic, Violet tried to stomp on the brake, but missed and instead hit the gas. We careened wildly through the lot, bouncing over cement dividers and scraping the passenger side of the car against a light post, sending a shower of sparks sailing through the black night air.

I saw that we were going to miss the bridge and instead head straight into the river. I jammed my hand under Cobb’s naked flesh and yanked on the emergency brake. The Volvo skidded to a stop just inches from the edge of the embankment.

Violet exploded out of the driver’s side door in a panic and scurried backward across the ground. I got out and threw open the back door. Cobb’s leg shot out, and his foot connected squarely in my face, breaking my nose. I dove in, yanked him free, and tossed him to the ground.

I sent my boot flying into Cobb's side and connected with a loud crack of ribs. I kept kicking him, half out of panic, half out of anger, my heart thumping loudly in my chest and my head buzzing from the rush of adrenaline.

Cobb flailed about wildly and gasped for air, moving his mouth like a fish out of water. Blood dribbled from his parted lips, bubbling up as it filled with air and then bursting.

Violet came up from behind me and nudged me aside, then raised a large boulder over her head and slammed it down, crushing the top half of Cobb's face and splattering chunks of gore across the ground like stepping on a ketchup packet.

There were no more bubbles forming on his lips.

"What the fuck was that?" Violet exclaimed. "How is that even possible?"

I clutched at my head, feeling a blinding pain shooting through my brain, vaguely aware of the faint sound of static somewhere at the edge of hearing. I wiped at my face and discovered my nose was bleeding.

"Fuck. Just give me a hand," I managed to groan.

We lugged Cobb out onto the bridge and rested him on top of the guard rail.

"Maybe we should find something to weigh the body down with," Violet ventured. "So it'll sink? I dunno, I don't have much experience with this sort of thing."

I peeked over the side of bridge. From this vantage point, I could faintly see the Guadalupe Bridge about a mile downstream. "Actually, the current looks pretty strong. It'll probably carry him far enough away before he washes up. If someone finds him, it'll just look like a bum who lost a fight or something."

"He's fucking naked," she objected.

"Fuck. Whatever," I said, losing my patience and heaving Cobb over the side, then watching as the river carried him out of sight.

"Oh shit," I said under my breath. "I think there's someone down there. Fuck, they've seen us."

I squinted my eyes to try to make out the two faint bodies walking

along the riverbank in the distance.

“Where, I don’t see anything?” Violet asked, her voice tinged with panic.

“Over there on the right,” I said, but when I looked back to where I’d seen them, there was nothing.

Violet hooked her arm through mine and gently tugged me in the direction of the car. “Come on, you’re just freaked out by this fucked-up situation. You need to relax.”

We walked back to the car and sank into our seats, taking a moment to decompress. “You’re not in any particular hurry to get home, are you?” she asked, biting her lower lip mischievously.

“Not particularly,” I replied and thought for a moment that maybe – just maybe – I had a shot with this girl.

She flashed a wry grin. “Open the glove compartment.”

I popped open the door and found a pipe, a lighter, and a rolled up sandwich baggie of pot.

“Tip tip hurrah,” I said and proceeded to pack a bowl while Violet plugged her iPod into the car’s stereo. I lit the bowl and took my first hit just as Neutral Milk Hotel started to play.

“Man, I haven’t heard this album in years,” I said as I exhaled a thick cloud of smoke.

“It’s one of my favorites,” Violet beamed, taking the pipe from me.

She leaned against me and rested her head on my chest as she took a couple tokes herself, then passed it back to me. We smoked in silence, just relaxing and enjoying to the music. I stroked my fingers through her vibrant purple hair, then leaned forward to inhale deeply and savor the sweet honey scent of her perfume.

When the bowl was cashed, Violet sat up to dump the ashes out the window. She turned to look at me, her eyelids heavy, lips curled into a half-smile, and seemed to be waiting for me to do something.

So I did.

I leaned forward and placed a hand on her cheek as I moved in to kiss her. Our lips locked softly but passionately. The stereo sang out:

What a beautiful dream

That could flash on the screen

In the blink of an eye and be gone from me

She pulled back, reluctantly, and lifted her left hand to show a ring on her finger.

“How did I not see that before?” I wondered aloud.

She giggled as she started up the car again. “You seem to have this ability to see only what you want to see and miss anything that’s convenient to miss.”

I broke into a huge, toothy grin and slumped over in the seat, banging my head against the passenger-side window a couple times. Violet continued to laugh as she drove back onto the main road.

“Do you wanna stop and check on Col and Lily before I drop you off?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’ll worry about it tomorrow. For now, I need to just get home, throw up, jerk off, wash all this fucking blood off me, and go fetal. Probably in that order.”

This set off another bout of giggles from Violet. “Thanks for the unnecessarily detailed and vulgar description.”

“It’s what I do,” I replied.

Chapter 14. Esoteric Psychological Warfare

I woke up the next morning to find a strange woman in my bedroom. I wasn't as happy about this as I normally would have been.

"Good morning, sunshine," she greeted me.

I sat up groggily in bed and rubbed my eyes. "Shit, I must still be stoned," I muttered.

The woman wore a very form-fitting black chauffeur's outfit complete with a matching cap. She sat on top of my dresser, legs crossed, thumbing through my copy of Dhalgren.

I dragged myself out of bed and pulled a pair of jeans on. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you spent the night here after a round of crazy, filthy monkey sex."

"Nah, I just got here like twenty minutes ago," she said, looking up from the book. "But I did bring your paper in for you."

"I don't subscribe," I replied, but then noticed that there was, in fact, a copy of today's Morning-Star sitting on the foot of my bed. I picked it up and scanned the headline: Peterman Indicted – Inspiratech VP Charged with Fraud, Embezzlement.

I recognized the man in the accompanying photo as the impatient man Max had words with at the warehouse party.

"Wanna go for a ride?" the woman asked with a suggestive hint in her voice that I prayed wasn't just in my head.

"Do I ever. Where to?"

She handed me a business card. It was printed in dark red ink on lighter red card stock with the Abrasax Inc. logo and the words: Dylan Maxwell, CEO/President.

I followed her out to the front of my building where we found a white limousine waiting for us. The engine fired up as we approached, and the woman opened the back door for me. I climbed in, and she followed after me, closing the door behind us.

"You're not driving?" I asked, puzzled, as the car pulled away from

the curb.

She took off her cap and shook out her long raven hair. “No, he just thought you’d like the uniform,” she said and slid closer to me on the seat.

I shrugged. “Yeah, he was right.”

—

I had never been up to the twenty-third floor of the Abrasax building before, despite my best efforts. The obsequious little intern who met me in the building’s front lobby had to swipe a special keycard in the elevator just to get there.

Once the elevator doors opened, I walked out into a vast reception area with a large rectangular reflecting pool, sky lights, and marble desk where Max’s assistant sat. She was a young freckle-faced woman with short-cropped red hair and a slim, boyish figure, wearing gray slacks and suspenders over a white blouse. Towering over her on the wall behind the desk was a giant LCD screen running a continuous loop of Abrasax commercials with no sound. The contrast of the bright, garish ad images against the serenity of the room gave it an unsettlingly hypnotic Clockwork Orange-esque feel.

Max’s assistant smiled when she saw me and intoned in a chipper voice, “Mr. Maxwell will be with you in just a minute. Please go in and wait inside.”

She pointed to the far end of the room where there were three doors – one white, one red, and one black. The white door slid open. I crossed the room and walked through it.

The door automatically closed behind me as I entered Max’s office. It felt like stepping inside a giant iPod. The entire room was painted white – the walls, the ceiling, and even the floor was white. It was sparsely furnished with only a few pieces of furniture – a white plastic desk and chair, a long white wet bar with a row of matching stools, a couple white pleather couches, and a glass coffee table. All the furniture had a shiny, plastic look with rounded edges and polished stainless steel accents. The walls were completely empty, and the entire room was devoid of any personal flourishes like art work,

baubles, or photographs.

I plopped myself down on one of the couches and waited. After sitting there a few minutes, I realized that the sound system was piping in Throbbing Gristle's 20 Jazz Funk Greats at a low, barely audible volume, which I took to be some esoteric form of psychological warfare on Max's part, a way to put his visitors off-balance.

I pulled the newspaper out of my messenger bag and decided to read the article about Peterman while I waited. It said that an anonymous tip had led authorities to information that revealed he'd been running an elaborate kickback scheme. He would guarantee certain suppliers sweetheart purchasing deals with Inspiratech in exchange for payments to an outside company he had set up, which somehow managed to pay him a hefty salary as a consultant despite being a completely imaginary business.

I opened the paper to see the rest of the article after the jump, but as I unfolded it, something fell out and landed on my lap. It was another blue envelope, stamped with the crown and globe emblem just like the others. Inside was another small white card with a typed message: Win Some, Lose Some.

I heard the quiet buzz of an electric door opening behind me and quickly stuffed the envelope into my inside jacket pocket.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Max said as he entered the room and extended his hand.

I stood up and shook his hand. He smiled at me congenially, then pointed down below my belt. "XYZ, D."

I looked down and saw that my fly was open, so I zipped up. Meanwhile, Max made a beeline for the wet bar. "How about something to drink?"

"Sounds good," I replied, sitting back down on the couch.

Max poured us two glasses of scotch. "So I gather the ride over here was okay," he smirked while walking back to the couch with the two glasses in one hand and the rest of the bottle in the other.

I took one of the glasses from him and drained its contents in a single gulp.

"You really should sip a whiskey this expensive," Max chided while

refilling my glass. I snapped my head back and drained the second glass just as quickly. Max grinned.

He happened to glance down and saw the copy of the Morning-Star laying beside me.

“Checking up on the competition?” he asked.

“More like admiring your handiwork.” I showed him the front page headline.

“Ah that,” Max said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Is this who lost your game Saturday night?”

He didn’t respond, but instead poured us another round of drinks.

“So I understand you ran into a little excitement last night at Lily’s condo,” Max said.

“Oh, did she tell you about it?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he scoffed. “I had her under surveillance.”

“Of course,” I conceded, remembering the van parked in front of Lily’s building.

“So who was he?” Max asked.

“The corpse? His name was Patrick Cobb, he used to be a reporter,” I replied, keeping an eye on Max to see how he reacted. His face remained stoic and unreadable.

I continued, “He was also the man who killed Jacinda Ngo. Not the first time with the fake boating accident, obviously, since that was all you. But I mean the second time, the real one that ended up with her corpse sitting in the back of your private jet.”

Max grinned in amusement. “So I take it you’ve been working on the challenge I gave you. What’ve you got?”

I took out my notebook and flipped through the pages. “Well, I know the dead woman was Jacinda Ngo, former head of Apex Computers who went missing ten years ago, presumed dead. I know that in fact she was not dead, but instead has been living on the streets under an assumed name, barely eking out an existence as a prostitute. I know that once a year you arranged a meeting with her, and I would venture to guess that you were the reason she managed to stay hidden so long. And finally, I know that Cobb was hired to kill her and leave her in

your airplane as some sort of message or attack against you. Again, if I had to guess, I'd say it had something to do with these games you've been playing with the Highwater Society. I think that maybe the reason she disappeared was that she was like Peterman – maybe she lost, too."

Max poured himself a fresh drink, filling the glass to the brim, and then downed it all in one extended chug. He didn't break eye contact with me for a second while doing this, and I imagined that – if only for a second – I detected a hint of surprise in those pretty baby blues.

"That's a good theory. Inventive. Not entirely accurate, but surprisingly close," he said as he stood up and began to pace the room.

"Jacinda Ngo never lost any game, but she was my first major project – the one who helped me realize the full potential of my work with the Highwater Society.

"When I met her, she was the most fundamentally unhappy person I had ever known. She felt trapped – by her job, her success, her money, her beauty, her ego. She begged me to help her feel alive again. She begged me to turn her into someone else.

"At first I started with the basic tricks; I showed her how to pick pockets, run small cons, the kinds of things that sheltered yuppies go apeshit over.

"But none of it worked – for Jacinda, it was just a tease, a temporary distraction. It was like drug addiction; she always needed more just to recapture that same rush. Eventually, I had to confront the simple, undeniable fact that Jacinda was fundamentally unhappy, and all she really wanted was to be somebody else, anybody else. And so I made it happen.

"Can you imagine what it must have been like? For the first time in years, she was truly alive. This was her vision quest – living or dying on her own wits, every day a challenge for survival. The uncertainty of where and when her next meal will come, of whether or not she'll even sleep with a roof over her head on any given night. She knew a kind of freedom that a couple narcissists like you and I could never begin to fathom. Total loss of ego, total immersion in a new personality.

"Once a year, every year, I visited her. I showed her the life she left behind, reminded her of who she had been, and offered her the

chance to come back. And every single time, she just laughed at me – indulgently, like you would laugh at a child’s flights of fancy. She would tell me that I just didn’t understand, that I couldn’t understand.”

Max circled around his desk and lowered himself into the chair. Meanwhile, I helped myself to another glass of his scotch.

“Wow, I could see how that type of thing would haunt you,” I said after gulping down the drink. “I mean, she obviously meant a lot to you. And to have been the one to find her body, to know that she had been murdered and that it was because of someone’s grudge against you. I can see why you’re having nightmares about that, reliving it over and over, even in your sleep. What I don’t understand, though, is why in the hell I’m also having your dreams.”

Max didn’t say anything, didn’t react at all, just sat perfectly still, keeping his eyes locked on me. Then slowly, his hand crept over and pushed a button on his desk, and I heard the low hum of an intercom coming to life.

“Diane, I want you to take down a statement. ‘A recent article in the weekly publication Concrete Underground by Mr. Dedalus Quetzal included information about the business dealings between Abrasax Incorporated and city officials. While Abrasax Incorporated acknowledges that the information is factually accurate, Abrasax stands behind its business practices and will continue to do everything in its power to provide the citizens of this great city with affordable internet access and a quality computing experience. At the same time, Abrasax disavows any attempts to bring legal action against the publication in retaliation for the article and stands committed to the principals of an open and free exchange of information.’ Make sure that goes to all the major media, including the Concrete Underground. Might as well send it to counsel, too, so we can get a jump on things at that end.”

He let go of the intercom and looked up at me, then twisted his mouth into that toothy Cheshire Cat grin of his.

“So, D, how would you like to come work for me?”

BOOK THREE: The Crowned Globe

PLAYLIST

Tear It Up | The Cramps

Dirty Business | The Dresden Dolls

Fuck the Pain Away | Peaches

Civilians | Joe Henry

The Real Ding | Cerberus Shoal

867-5309/Jenny | Tommy Tutone

Chapter 15. Blind Spots

“Sorry, I already have a job,” I said to Max.

He scoffed and tilted back in his chair, kicking his feet up onto the desk. “I’d hardly call that real work. How much do you actually get paid by that subversive little rag?”

I told him. He laughed. “I can more than triple that. And you won’t even have to give up your day job.”

“What do you want me to do, exactly?” I asked.

“Information, D, I want information. By hook or by crook. I fiend for it, like a junkie, and my hunger is insatiable. Therefore, I am willing to pay top dollar to anyone who can get it for me. Some get it by mining electronic data, as you’ve surmised, but that only goes so far. Surveillance is also a useful tool, and I have experts in that field as well – like Mr. Garza, whom you saw at the party on Saturday night. And then of course I have Saint Anthony, who uses his own uniquely inventive methods of extracting it.”

“How do I fit into all this?”

“What I want is for you to keep doing exactly what you have been. Talk to people, ask questions, piece puzzles together. Give me the human element, show me what’s in the blind spots where a surveillance camera can’t see. Just like you do for your paper, but now you’ll be reporting to me, and in the process you’ll enjoy all the access and resources that you need.”

“How do you know I won’t turn around and publish what I find out for you?” I asked.

“Go ahead,” Max shrugged. “Like anyone cares what you and your socialist friends print.”

I took a deep breath. “What the hell, I’m game. What’s my first assignment?”

“Lilian Lynch. She’s disappeared.”

“What do you mean?”

“Surveillance has her leaving home this morning at her normal time for coming to work, but she never showed up here. We tracked down her car using its GPS and found it abandoned on the side of the road with a handwritten note that said, ‘Fuck you, cocksucker.’ I’m assuming that was meant for me.

“She hasn’t been answering her phone, she hasn’t gone back to her condo, and she hasn’t made contact with any of her friends. For all intents and purposes, she has vanished into thin air.”

I made a couple notes in my notebook. “Why do you want me to find her for you? Don’t you have anyone in your organization who’d be better suited for this kind of thing?”

“I do,” he nodded. “The thing is, I can’t necessarily trust this to someone within my organization. You see, I’ve had well—” he paused, “—I guess you could call it a security breach. Let me start at the beginning.

“A few weeks ago, I received an anonymous letter attempting to blackmail me. The details aren’t important, suffice it to say that some person or persons claimed to have information that would be damaging to me and requested to be paid an exorbitant amount of money to keep it private. But – to be perfectly frank – this was not the first time this kind of threat has been made against me, so I didn’t think much of it.

“Once I found Jacinda’s dead body in my airplane, I started taking things a little more seriously. After some checking, my security analysts reported that there had in fact been a breach involving unauthorized access of sensitive information. Further investigation suggested Lily as the most likely culprit, and of course recent developments have borne this out. However, speaking frankly, she has neither the intellect, the vision, nor the constitution to conceive and execute a plot like this. She must have conspirators who are familiar enough with my operations to know the vulnerabilities.”

I smiled. “In other words, you can’t even trust your own people now.”

He nodded. “Which is why I need you. So find Lily, find her conspirators, and if you can manage it, recover the information they stole from me. Although I realize that you’d be reluctant to hand that over if you do.”

He led me back out to his assistant’s desk where he set me up with

the keys to an Abrasax company car and programmed his personal cell number into my phone.

Then he produced a red keycard badge bearing both the Abrasax corporate logo as well as the Highwater Society globe and crown symbol.

“This will get you anywhere you need to go,” Max said as he clipped it to my jacket. “Anywhere.”

—

Before leaving the building, I decided to put my new keycard to the test. I took the elevator down to the seventh floor, which housed Abrasax’s public relations and marketing division. The receptionist there knew me by sight and normally had standing orders from Lily to call security the minute she saw me. This time she smiled warmly and let me pass unobstructed.

I swiped the keycard at the door to the staff-only area, and it worked. I made my way back to the corner office with the name plate “Lilian Lynch, Communications Director” and again the badge let me in.

Lily’s office was extremely neat and orderly, which didn’t surprise me given how anal she came off. If Max had his people search it for evidence, then they did a damn fine job of covering their tracks.

The thing that struck me about her office was the unsettling atmosphere of pre-fabrication. She had gone out of her way to fill the space up, to make it appear lived in, but the more time you spent looking around, the more you realized how superficial it was. Instead of photos of her friends and family, all the frames had pictures taken at company events and professional conferences. The only art hanging on the walls were a few Abrasax promo posters along with her various awards and certifications. The books on her shelves were all style guides and business self-help books, *How to Be a More Assertive Asshole* and the like. Somehow this ended up feeling more cold and impersonal than if she had just left the room bare.

I poked around in her files but found just the expected work papers you’d see in any flack’s office – mostly spec sheets and collateral about various Abrasax products and services, old invoices of ad buys,

and clippings from past publicity campaigns.

I tried booting up her computer but couldn't guess her password. I gave up after a few attempts, but then happened to catch sight of something reflective flashing inside an the air vent in the ceiling. Remembering the box hidden in Cobb's room, I grabbed one of the visitor's chairs from Lily's desk and stepped up on it to look inside. I didn't find any key, but I did instead find a small surveillance camera.

The pristine, undisturbed state of the office made sense. There was no need to search it because if Lily had hidden anything significant here, Max would have already known.

I took some white out from Lily's desk and painted over the camera lens – honestly, just to be a dick.

On my way out of the office, I heard a cell phone start ringing and realized it wasn't mine. I looked around to figure out where it was coming from and tracked it down to the row of coat hangers mounted on the wall in the far corner of the room. She had a couple coats hanging, and I rifled through the pockets until I found her BlackBerry. By that time, the call had already gone to voicemail, but I browsed around and found her phone book, appointment calendar, call logs, and e-mails going back for six months stored in it.

Not wanting to walk away empty handed, I slipped the phone into my pocket.

Once outside Lily's office, I ran into three men – two dressed in security uniforms, one I recognized as the surveillance-nut from the party, the one with the birthmark whom Max had called Ben Garza.

"What were you doing in there?" one of the guards asked.

I flashed the red keycard badge that Max had given me. "I work here. I was looking into something for Mr. Maxwell."

The guard turned to consult in hushed tones with his partner and Garza. "You shouldn't have interfered with the surveillance equipment," he finally said as he turned back.

"Fuck off," I said, sensing an opportunity to press my advantage. "If you have a problem with the way I'm doing my job, go ahead and call up Max himself. I'm working directly on his orders, not some creepy peeping tom or a couple rent-a-cops."

I stared down the guard, who I could tell was salivating over the thought of taking his nightstick to the side of my head, but he just stood there bristling.

“Then get out of my way,” I scoffed and walked past them. Garza glared at me disdainfully, so I threw him a quick shoulder check on my way out. “Punk bitch.”

Chapter 16. Dirty Business

I took the elevator down to the fourth level of the underground garage and found space 423, which matched up with the tag on the keys Max gave me. A black Porsche Boxster was parked in the space.

I hopped in and fired it up, then gave Columbine a call as I drove out of the garage. I asked if could come pick her up, and she gave me her address.

On the way there, I made a quick stop at the civic center to see Nick.

I parked the Porsche in the red zone, left the Abrasax badge hanging from the rearview like a parking placard, and ran up the steps to the police headquarters. I asked the desk officer to see Nick, and when she asked if I had an appointment, I started ranting incoherently and flailing around like a mad man with Tourette's who thinks he's on fire.

Usually this type of behavior is frowned-upon in police stations, and I was about to be politely escorted into an interrogation cell by several large cops with nightsticks when Nick, who luckily had been passing by close enough to hear his name, intervened.

He hurried me into his office and locked the door. "This better be good."

I pulled out the three blue envelopes from my bag and dropped them on his desk. "What's all that?" he asked. "The love letters you've been writing me all these years but have been too shy to send?"

I threw my head back and held my gut, silently miming laughter. "These were sent to me anonymously. I need you to do cop stuff to them. Check for fingerprints, DNA, whatever crazy CSI shit you can come up with."

He had picked up the envelopes and started inspecting them, but then abruptly dropped them when he heard my request. "You could have told me you needed prints before I started handling them, you know."

I shrugged at him like he was speaking in tongues.

“Meet me at the Casbah after work,” he groaned in resignation.

Just then an attractive Indian sergeant poked her head in and told Nick, “Hey there’s a Porsche parked out in front in the fire lane. At the desk, they told me I should ask you about it.”

I gave Nick a couple quick pats on the back. “I gotta go.”

—

Twenty minutes later I pulled up to a small one-story duplex in a mostly run-down neighborhood on the east side. As I got out of the Porsche and approached the door, I could hear the Dresden Dolls’ “Dirty Business” blaring from inside. I knocked.

When the door opened, I was surprised to see it was Violet who answered. She was dressed casually in a white boy-beater and a pair of cotton pajama pants, and she still looked unbelievable. Her hair was tied back in a black bandanna, and she was splattered with different shades of paint.

“Come on in,” she said with a smile. “Col’s expecting you.”

She led me into her living room, which looked exactly the way I would have guessed it should look. The furniture was color-coordinated in dark shades of browns, creams, and burgundies. There was no television to serve as the focal point; instead, the couches and chairs were all arranged to face each other and facilitate conversation. The only visible piece of technology was the small MP3 player dock that was currently blaring out Amanda Palmer’s aggressive piano work. An entire wall was covered with jam-packed bookcases. A handful of modern art pieces were dotted around the room as accents. At the far end, a hallway split off leading to bedrooms on one side and a short flight of stairs on the other, which led into a lowered room that obviously served as her art studio.

“She’s getting dressed,” Violet said while turning down the music with a remote. “Go ahead and have a seat while you wait.”

We sat down together on a couch. She picked up one of her clove cigarettes, and I lit it for her.

As she smoked, she laid back and put her feet up on my lap. She

had small, delicate toes, and her nails were painted a metallic purple that matched her hair. I watched her silently, mesmerized by the fluidity and gracefulness of even her simplest movements. She looked elegant, like an old black-and-white movie starlet, even while lounging around in PJs.

I took one of her bare feet in my hands and started massaging it. She smiled and let out a small, satisfied sigh.

"So what, are you and Columbine roommates?" I asked.

"Pretty much. We let her stay in our spare room after she and her father had a big falling out. It was supposed to just be 'til they patched things up. That was three years ago."

"I see," I said. "'Us' being you and your husband."

She smiled silently. Then, as if on cue, the front door opened. I looked over my shoulder and saw Saint Anthony walking in, dressed in a charcoal gray suit caked with mud. He stopped in his tracks when he saw me on the couch with Violet's foot in my hands.

"Hi babe," she said, standing up and walking around the couch to greet him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and they kissed deeply while Anthony's hands reached down and cupped her ass, causing her to let out a playful giggle.

I fought back the urge to wretch.

Anthony and Violet finally broke off their embrace, then both turned to look at me. "I'll go remind Col that you're waiting," Violet said sheepishly and headed down the hallway.

In the meantime Anthony pulled off his suit jacket, revealing a white shirt underneath splattered with dried blood. I felt a knot in my stomach and prayed that it wasn't Lily's.

"I heard Max brought you on board the team," he said and stripped off the bloody shirt, acting perfectly nonchalant. I saw that he had a large sacred heart tattooed right in the middle of his perfectly-chiseled chest. He opened a coat closet next to the front door and took out a hooded sweater.

"Word travels fast," I responded as he zipped up the sweater over his tattoo. I realized that I had been staring and that he noticed it, too. I caught his narrow, menacing gaze and suddenly felt unsettlingly like

an albino mouse dropped into a python's cage.

Mercifully, Columbine came bouncing into the room only seconds later, her ebullience instantly cutting through the tension. She was pulling off a rockabilly look in tight blue jeans with short cuffed legs, a red checkered halter top, big hoop earrings, and her hair tied back in a handkerchief. Big cat's-eye sunglasses and cherry red lipstick provided the finishing touches.

"Let's blow this joint, daddy-o," she said.

"Well come on, little mama," I replied, grateful for the bailout, and led her outside to the Porsche.

"Nice ride, where'd you get it?"

"Max," I said, plugging my phone into the deck and switching it to MP3 mode. "He put me on the payroll."

From the speakers, the late great Lux Interior wailed: Well come on, little mama, let's tear this damn place up.

—

I drove us back to Lily's and brought Columbine up to speed on the blackmail plot, Lily's disappearance, and Max's job offer.

"So you sold your soul to the devil. Nice," she teased as we got out of the car. "So much for being all hardcore independent, anti-corporate, punk-as-fuck journalist."

"It's only selling out if I back down and don't publish whatever dirt I find on Max in the process," I countered.

"Just keep telling yourself that," she said in a playfully mocking way as she typed in the code to open Lily's gate.

"It's still so strange to think that Lily is mixed up in all this," she continued as we walked upstairs. "I mean, she's certainly got reason to hate Max, but she's not really the blackmail and conspiracy type. She's my friend and all, but frankly she just doesn't have enough imagination."

"Hold on, what did you mean about having reason to hate Max?" I asked.

She replied, "Well they had a pretty messy break-up. I don't think she ever really got over him."

"What? I didn't even know they dated."

"Dated? They were engaged," she squealed. "How did you not know that?"

I shrugged. "So what happened?"

"He was a beast to her. I'm not even sure why he proposed to her in the first place, other than just to torment her. The way I understand it is they had a fling, she got clingy, and he retaliated by stringing her along and slowly breaking her spirit. The amazing thing was that she was willing to put up with his abuse and his cheating, and in the end he still had to be the one to call it off. I was there when it happened. We were at a party, and someone asked if they had set a date for the wedding yet. He just shook his head and said, 'No, I don't think that's happening any more. Marriage just isn't my style.' Lily was standing right next to him; her jaw dropped."

"Fuck that's harsh," I marveled, shaking my head.

Once we got upstairs, we saw that the front door was hanging open with the wood around the knob splintered as if it had been kicked in.

We went inside and saw that the condo had literally been torn apart from top to bottom, the furniture overturned and disassembled, shelves emptied, and even the couch cushions had been hollowed out.

We found more of the same as we made our way through the rest of the rooms. Every kitchen cabinet and drawer had been tossed, every closet emptied. In the bathroom, they had emptied out all the bottles of shampoo, lotion, and all those millions of other unfathomable bottles women have. Inside her bedroom, the mattress had been ripped open and turned inside out. They even tore apart the stitching in her clothes to make sure nothing had been hidden inside the lining.

"Jesus, what happened to this place?" Columbine asked.

"Someone was in here looking for something," I replied.

"It must have been something tiny, like a needle in a haystack. Look," she said, holding up a Zippo lighter that had been sitting beside an incense holder. It was taken apart, as if something might have been hidden inside.

"I doubt we'll find any clues as to where she's gone here," I grumbled. "But we might as well give it a shot. You check up here, I'll go look around in the back."

"What, you mean snoop around?" Columbine asked, and I remembered that this must be harder for her since Lily was her friend.

"Look, she could be in danger. We can't pass up any clues that would help us track her down before something bad happens." As soon as I said that, my mind involuntarily flashed to the image of Saint Anthony drenched in blood.

We split up, and I started giving Lily's bedroom a cursory search but wasn't really sure what I was looking for. The most interesting thing I found was her lingerie drawer, which had been yanked out of the dresser and dumped upside-down on the floor. I had to satisfy my male curiosity; she actually had some pretty hot stuff. I picked up a red lace corset, and underneath I found a framed photo of Max and a vibrator. I picked up the latter and opened the battery compartment, but there was no Ariadne Key in there.

"Eww, way too pervo," I heard Columbine say behind me.

I stood up, chuckling. "I'm just trying to be thorough."

She rolled her eyes distastefully. "Well if you're done, I've got something to show you that might actually be important."

She led me out the the bathroom and pointed out a puddle of shampoo on the floor. Someone had stepped in it, leaving a man's footprint with a Burberry imprint stamped from the sole of the shoe.

"Well that's definitely not Lily's," I said, holding my own foot up to the print to compare. "It's a little smaller than mine, so I'd guess a size nine or nine-and-a-half."

We were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. We ran back out to the living room and found a middle aged man in a cheap suit standing just inside the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Fuck you, what are you doing here?" I shot back.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a police badge. "Detective Isaac Axelrod."

"Oops," Columbine mumbled behind me.

I took Axelrod by the arm and led him outside to the hallway. "Look, we were looking for our friend who lives here," I explained. She didn't show up to work, and she's not answering her phone. The door was busted in when we got here, so we came inside and found all this."

Axelrod nodded, but I got the distinct impression he hadn't listened to a word I said. "You don't know anything about any disturbance here last night, do you?"

I shook my head. "What kind of disturbance?"

"Not too sure. We got some reports from neighbors about some screams, excited voices, that kind of thing. Were you here last night?"

"No," I said.

Axelrod took down my contact information and told us we'd better clear out. I ran back inside to tell Columbine we were going. On my way out I made a detour to the restroom, intending to take a picture of the footprint with my phone. However, when I got there the shampoo puddle had been smeared, erasing the print.

—

As we got back into the Porsche, Lily's phone started ringing again. I looked down at the caller ID and saw it was the same number that tried to call earlier when I first found it.

I tossed the phone to Columbine. "Answer it."

She put it on speaker. "Hello?"

"Is Lily there?" a gruff male voice asked.

She looked at me questioningly. I toyed with the idea of having her impersonate Lily, but Lily had a very distinctive voice, high-pitched and shrill, that would be nearly impossible to duplicate. So instead, I shook my head.

"No, she's indisposed at the moment, but can I take a message?" Columbine chirped cheerfully while flashing me a what-the-hell look.

"Just tell her to call me back when she gets a chance," the man replied. "Jeff from the art department. Give her this number that I called from." Then he abruptly hung up.

Columbine handed me back the phone. "What was that about?"

"It's Lily's," I explained. "I found it in her office this morning. Look through her recent calls and see if anything jumps out at you."

"This seems like an invasion of privacy," she protested weakly, but scrolled through the numbers anyways. I watched her from the corner of my eye and noticed her stop scrolling abruptly, a flash of surprise in her eyes. It was gone in an instant, though, and she said, "I don't see anything really; they all look just like work related calls. She didn't exactly have a thriving social life."

I shrugged. "Was worth a shot. So, can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," she replied with a smile.

"Why did you destroy the footprint?" She deflated visibly, sinking into the seat and turning away from me. I continued, "You know whose shoe that was, don't you?"

"I know someone who wears Burberry shoes in a size nine," she said. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"Who?" I pressed.

"My father," she said.

"Oh," I muttered, practically able to taste the salty rank sweat of my foot in my mouth. "It's a fairly common shoe size, could be a coincidence."

Columbine tried to smile, but the shape her lips ended up in just looked spiteful and sour. She held up the phone for me to see and tapped the screen. "See this number? That's my father's house. She had a dozen calls from there in the past two weeks. You think that's a coincidence?"

A brief but uncomfortable silence passed between us, which Columbine finally broke by saying, "I'm going to go talk to him, ask him what's going on."

"You don't have to do that," I objected.

She nodded her head resolutely. "Look, it's possible he's innocent, but there's got to be a reason he's calling her so much. Maybe he has some idea where she went."

"Fine," I conceded. "Just be careful."

Chapter 17. Invisible Ink

After dropping off Columbine, I headed over to the Casbah and settled in at the bar to wait for Nick.

“Gotta hit the head, Mags,” I said upon entering and dashed straight to the bathroom. “But I expect you to have a double waiting for me when I get out.

A couple minutes later, I was settling in at the bar and tossing back the glass Maggie had left sitting at my usual spot.

“When are you guys gonna get that condom dispenser fixed?” I asked, jerking my thumb back towards the bathrooms as Maggie refilled my glass.

She chuckled. “Like you need to worry about that. You can’t get your sock pregnant, honey.”

“Ooh, I think I felt that one from all the way over here,” Nick called out from the front door. He pretended to wince in pain at Maggie’s barb as he walked up to the bar, but the balled fist in front of his mouth didn’t do anything to hide how much it made him smile.

He hopped up on the stool beside me and swung his hand like he was going to pat me on the back, but then sharply jerked it up and landed a resounding slap on the back of my head.

“Ow, what the fuck?”

He stuck his index finger right in my face. “Your little performance today got me in a lot of trouble. You need to tone your shit down. Why are you so bent on driving away the few people left who actually still give a shit about you?”

I shrugged. “Look, I know sometimes I can go over the line. And I’m sorry.” I grabbed hold of his shirt and buried my head into his shoulder melodramatically, mimicking gentle sobs.

“Piss off,” he said, pulling back and grinning. “And another thing, how the fuck did you get Isaac Axelrod so far up your ass?”

“Who?” I asked, momentarily confused before remembering, “Oh, you mean that fucking prick detective?”

Nick nodded. "He's got a crazy hard-on for you, nearly went through the roof when he found out you came by to see me. He's somehow got it into his head that you're involved with some murder, a vagrant who washed up on the riverbank with his throat slit. What's that all about?"

A flash of panic exploded into my head, but I fought to keep my cool. "It's just something related to the story I'm working," I explained, hoping he'd let it drop with as little probing as possible. "Look, I hope you know I had nothing to do with his death."

"Of course, I do," he replied. "And I tried to put in a good word for you, but he wasn't really receptive. The thing is, I know Axelrod, and he's a bulldog. Once he sinks his teeth into you, he doesn't let go. Whatever he thinks you've done, he'll find the proof that you're guilty. Even if it wasn't there before he showed up, you get my drift?"

I nodded. "And I do appreciate the warning and you trying to stand up for me."

"You better because after I did, my lieutenant came in and tore me a new one for trying to interfere with an open investigation. So this is gonna have to be the last favor you ask for, at least for a while."

"Shit," I grumbled. "Tell me you at least have one bit of good news."

"As a matter of fact, I do." He then laid out the three envelopes I had given him. "We found a few fingerprints. One set in particular showed up on all three pieces, clearly identifiable."

"Do you know whose they are?" I asked in disbelief over the luck.

"Sure do," he said. "They're yours, dumbass. Next time you want to lift prints off of something, you should be more careful handling it."

"Okay, okay, I get it," I said, exasperated. "Did you find any others?"

"Well, the prints were a mess, so I asked the boys in the lab to play around with them for a while and see what else they could come up with." He paused momentarily for dramatic effect, then dug a small battery-powered blacklight from his coat pocket, like the kind they use on TV news shows to find the jizz stains on hotel beds.

"Are you familiar with palimpsests?"

"Yeah, it's when one text is printed over another text on the same paper," I answered. "They were common in the middle ages when the church would wash the ink off pre-Christian writings so they could

reuse the paper for their liturgical texts. Like what happened to Archimedes. I read an article about how they use UV light and computer imaging to reconstruct the original writing.”

Nick nodded. “Damn, I’m impressed. I just stared at the lab guys blankly when they asked me that question.”

He switched on the blacklight and held it up to the first letter. Two words appeared on the page, just underneath the original message, handwritten in a large but neat script: Jacinda Ngo.

He moved the light away, and the words disappeared, leaving behind no trace on the pristine white paper.

Next he hovered over the second letter with the light, illuminating the words: Patrick Cobb.

Finally, he moved onto the third letter and revealed the hidden message: Lilian Lynch.

“Weird,” I said, lifting my gaze back to Nick. “So someone wrote the names on the paper, then bleached it out, and then typed another message on top of that.”

He switched off the light and stuffed it back in his pocket. “Now I know the the first name you think is the dead woman from the ditch. And the second is the vagrant whose throat Axelrod thinks you slit. So who’s number three?”

“Someone who may very well soon be dead herself, if she isn’t already. All three are related to my story.” I paused, taking a moment to process all this, then added, “The thing is, each letter arrived before the person named died.”

“Jesus,” Nick said. “So do you think the person who sent these is the killer?”

I shrugged, “It would stand to reason it’s the killer – or at least an accomplice – otherwise how would they know who’s next? On the other hand, though, why would the killer tell me who’s going to die before it happens and risk me being able to stop them?”

“Maybe they don’t consider you a real threat and they’re just trying to taunt you, calling their shots like Babe Ruth pointing to the stands over center field,” Nick suggested. “But then the next question is why go through all the trouble of creating these palimpsests in the first place?”

I tapped my finger on my busted-up nose, indicating that he had indeed hit upon the crux of the matter.

Chapter 18. Full Contact

After leaving the bar, I decided to stop by the Concrete Underground office to see if my files could help me figure out who the numbers in Lily's phone belonged to.

It was after hours, so the place was empty. I took out the phone and fired up my computer, then started searching.

Columbine was right; nearly all her calls were related to work. All the Abrasax numbers had uniform prefixes, 358 for landlines and 418 for cells, so those were easily set aside. After a few searches, I saw that most of the other numbers were also work-related – ad sales reps, PR consultants, reporters, and a few of her counterparts at other companies.

Then the phone started ringing again. It was that same number that kept calling – Jeff from the art department. I tapped the "Ignore" key, but then paused. This number didn't have the same prefix as the other Abrasax phone numbers.

"Fucking hell," I said aloud.

"Is someone out there?" another voice called out, making me jump up in surprise.

I followed the voice into Sharon's office, where I found her slumped in her desk chair with the lights out amid the unmistakable smell of pot smoke.

I switched on the lights. She pinched her eyes shut and let out a hiss. I noticed the ashtray sitting out on her desk with two roaches stubbed out in it, right next to one of her old photos of Patrick Cobb.

She squinted to see me as I took the seat across the desk and her eyes adjusted to the light. "You got something on your nose," she said.

I smirked and raised a couple fingers to touch the bandage. "It happens."

She plucked a sheet of paper out of her in-box and passed it over to me. "I'd ask what happened to you, but I honestly don't think I even want to know how you pulled this off."

I looked down. It was a press release on Abrasax letterhead with

Max's statement corroborating my article.

I gave her a smug grin and said, "Please give my apologies to Ms. Palmer and Ms. Singh for all the money their firm won't be charging you now."

"I don't think they're too worried about it," Sharon said with a roll of her eyes. "It's only a matter of time before you fuck up again."

We both shared a soft chuckle, and my eyes fell back to the desk and the photo of Cobb. Sharon followed my gaze and picked up the photo. Her lips curled into a half-smile that threatened to collapse into a frown.

"He's dead."

"I know," I said, but decided not to go into it any further than that.

"You remind me of him a little," she said, proudly regaining her composure. "Like a younger, more obnoxious version. You're both bold, uncompromising, and insufferably arrogant. He showed up with a few of those of his own, from time to time." She pointed at my nose. "He used to say that journalism needs to be a full-contact sport."

She stood up from her desk and started packing her things to leave. I wandered back to my own desk, fidgeting with Lily's phone in my pocket, thinking about the recurring phone calls and Cobb and full-contact journalism.

"Fuck," I mumbled under my breath. "I might as well do this fucking thing."

I pulled out the phone, found the last missed call, clicked "Reply by Text", and typed: Can't talk now. Have the Ariadne Key. Meet me in 2 hrs where Max found Jacinda.

"What are you doing?" Sharon asked as she locked up her office.

"Something incredibly stupid," I replied and sent the message.

"Well, I guess you might as well stick to your strengths."

—

Hastings Airfield was just outside the city limits and had areas

designated for both military and private use. A handful of the larger local tech companies kept their corporate jets in the civilian hangars, which while secure, were much easier to sneak into than the military side.

“Mr. Maxwell sent me to get some files he left on board,” I told the security guard, sticking my arm out the car window to show him my Abrasax keycard badge.

“Do you know where the hanger is?” the guard asked.

“Actually, he said you could point me in the right direction.”

I followed the guard’s instructions to Hanger 8, then decided it was smarter to park the Porsche at the other end of the airfield and walk back, figuring whoever I was meeting might turn tail if they saw it.

I found Max’s plane, and it looked exactly as it had in my dream. I stopped dead in my tracks, feeling a cold chill creep through my body and cause little goosebumps to bubble up through my skin. The air inside the hanger was cold and stale and completely, eerily still, and popped and crackled faintly like a cross between radio static and a dusty old LP stuck in the run-out groove.

I managed to move the rolling staircase into place and climbed up to the forward hatch.

Inside, the plane was dark. I made my way through the cabin to the back row of seats and found the one where Jacinda’s body had been. I sat down in her seat, and my skin crawled. The air hummed with an electric charge, and the static noise in my head grew louder and took on more clanky, mechanical qualities, like an old film projector.

I savored the sensation in a macabre way, closed my eyes, felt my heartbeat slow, and wondered what Jacinda’s dead flesh had felt like.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a door opening behind me. I jumped up and spun around to see a man in a black trench coat and wide-brim hat leaping out of the rear bathroom with his arm raised in an attack position. Before I had a chance to react, he brought the blackjack in his hand down on my temple with a sharp, powerful precision. I only caught a brief glimpse of his face with its ruddy features, bulbous nose, deeply-dimpled chin, and a long scar down the left cheek.

Then everything faded to black.

Chapter 19. Disassembled

When I regained consciousness, I found myself stripped naked and tied to a chair in a cold, dank room with concrete walls and floor. A large floodlight was shining directly in my face. In the darkness behind it, I could make out the faint shapes of people but couldn't distinguish any details or features. These amorphous dark blobs talked amongst themselves in hushed tones, too quiet for me to clearly hear more than clipped fragments.

A woman's voice: "—went to his house, I'm sure of it."

A man's, low and gravely: "—mistake to get him involved—"

Another woman: "—no more time, Max is getting—"

"He's awake," the man said, this time loudly.

The shapes shifted around, and the sound of their shoes clicking against the concrete floor echoed through the room. I was vaguely aware that one of them was coming closer, but still was startled when a large dark form broke out from the shadows and stepped in front of the floodlight's beam.

"Where is the Ariadne Key?" the gruff man's voice said as he leaned in closer to me. His face was covered by a smooth, featureless gunmetal mask with small slits over the eyes and mouth.

I jumped back in my seat but couldn't really go far because of the tight bonds. "Jesus-fucking-Christ man, what the fuck are you supposed to be, some kinda kinky steampunk gimp?"

He reached out with a gloved hand and squeezed my nose through the gauze bandage, causing the cartilage to crack and pop and a fresh jet of blood to squirt out from my nostrils.

I let out an shrill, agonized yelp. "Fuck, man, I don't really have your stupid fucking key. It was just a trick to lure you out into the open, dumbass."

"Do you take me for an idiot?" my masked captor replied. "I know you have it."

"And what are you, a human fucking lie detector? Are you some kind

of fruit? Is this your sick way of getting your jollies, tying naked men to chairs?"

He took a couple steps back and stood beside the floodlight, just at the edge of visibility between the shadow and light. Another man walked up and handed him something. This second man had a smaller, slighter build and wore a trench coat and hat. Though he didn't step fully into the light, I could make out enough of the contours of his face to recognize him as the one who attacked me in the plane.

The masked man walked back to me, holding his left hand outstretched, clutching the object he had been handed, something black and plastic and about the size of whiteboard eraser.

"Tell me where you hid it now, or things are going to get unpleasant for you."

"Okay," I sighed in defeat. "I hid it up my ass. Untie me and I'll let you have a look, as long as you promise to give me a reach-around when you're done."

He jabbed the plastic something into my chest, and I felt a strong electric shock course through my body. I let out an agonized scream.

"God damn, man, that feels fucking good," I said and gave as strong a laugh as I could manage without breaking into a cough. "You should have told me you were into rough trade."

He zapped me again with the taser, then moved it down to my genitals. "Where's the key?" he spat. "Where's the parcel?"

"Hey, watch it down there," I coughed weakly, "I'm starting to get a little chubby."

He shocked me again. I gritted my teeth together and felt streams of drool drip down my chin. My nostrils filled with the stench of my own sizzling pubic hair.

I slumped in the chair, my body searing with pain and instinctively trying to curl into a ball, causing my limbs to strain against the ropes.

"Wait... wait..." I pleaded weakly, groaning as I lifted my head to look him in his eye slits. "Don't tase me, bro."

I erupted into feeble, wheezing, laughter. He tased me three times in quick succession. I blacked out again.

—

I was still in the chair, but the floodlight was gone. The room was devoid of light except for a crack under the door, so I let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I was still groggy, just barely holding onto consciousness. Over in the corner by the door, I made out a small lump on the floor that was hopefully my clothes.

I called out for help, but got no response.

After calling a few more times, I started scooting my chair over in the direction of my clothes, which proved difficult since my arms and legs were still tied to the chair. It didn't help that my head was swimming and my muscles felt like jelly. I managed to make it about a third of the way across the room before I passed out again.

—

The next time I woke up, the light under the door was gone, and the room was pitch black. I called out for help again and got the same results as earlier.

I scooted the chair in the direction I remembered I was going. Every movement was painful. My muscles burned, my head was throbbing. I tried to push it out of mind and focused on taking it one inch at a time. Finally, after what seemed like ages, I bumped the chair against the wall. In the darkness, I couldn't tell where the clothes were in relation to where I ended up, but figured they had to be close. I positioned myself so my back was facing towards where I thought they'd be, then used my weight to rock the chair. After a couple times, I picked up enough momentum to tip myself over. I hit the hard concrete ground with a thud. My muscles screamed in agony. Once more, I passed out.

—

My phone woke me up. I recognized the strummed guitar intro of The Kinks' "Powerman" as Max's ringtone and was relieved that it sounded close behind me. I nudged and maneuvered myself until my

hands, which were still tied behind the chair, finally fell upon the fabric of my jeans. Slowly, painstakingly, I explored with my hands, tracing the seams until I found my front left pocket. Digging inside, I wrapped my fingers around the cool, comforting steel of my pocketknife.

It took me several minutes to manipulate the knife open and get the blade in position against the ropes. I had the handle gripped between my thumb and index fingers with the blade pointed back up my arm. Slowly, carefully, I began sawing through the bonds.

After what seemed like hours, I had one hand free. From there, I was able to cut myself loose fairly quickly, then struggled to my feet and slowly, painfully dressed myself.

I pulled the phone out of my jacket and called Max back. While it rang, I looked around the rest of the room. On one side, there was an open doorway that led out to another, larger room, which looked like it had once been a store of some kind but had long since been abandoned. I guessed the plain concrete room where I'd been held was used for storage or a stock room.

There was a second doorway at the other side of my room, which had a heavy metal door that most likely led outside. I tried it; mercifully, it was unlocked.

I emerged out into a grimy, nondescript downtown alleyway just as Max finally answered the phone. I winced and shielded my eyes from the sunlight.

"D? Where the hell have you been?"

"I don't know. What day is it?"

The metal door slammed shut behind me with a loud bang. The words, "Bell out of order, please knock" were spray painted on it.

On the phone, Max answered, "It's Thursday. Where are you?"

"Jesus, Thursday," I groaned. "Listen, I just spent the last day-and-a-half naked and tied to a chair, getting electrocuted."

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone.

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"Look, come pick me up and I'll explain," I replied while jogging out of the alleyway to look for a street sign. "Looks like I'm at the corner of

Mission and 27th.”

“I’ll be right there,” Max said and hung up.

—

Max gave me a ride back to the airfield so I could pick up the Porsche, and on the way I recounted the story of my ambush and kidnapping.

Luckily, the Porsche was still where I left it and didn’t look like it had been broken into. Everything inside was untouched – my laptop, Lily’s phone, my notes. My kidnappers obviously hadn’t found it.

I drove back home with my body aching and my head still swimming, savoring the thought of stretching out on a nice, soft bed.

I hauled myself upstairs with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, but it all sank as soon as I saw the front door to my apartment splintered and hanging off its hinges.

I felt my adrenaline spike as I rushed inside, slamming the door open and switching on the lights.

My apartment had been torn apart just like Lily’s, literally turned inside out and searched with a fine tooth comb.

Surveying the disastrous state, for some reason the image of the Tasmanian Devil popped into my head. I pictured that slobbering, whirling tornado of fuzz chewing up and spitting out all my worldly possessions, tearing a hole straight through the very fabric of my existence.

I just laughed – hysterically, bitterly, because I didn’t know what else to do. I felt as fragmented and disassembled as everything else in there.

Wearily, I trudged through the debris of my life and laid down in my bed. As my laughter died down and I closed my eyes, I said a little prayer under my breath thanking whoever was listening that my dumb ass at least had the wherewithal to hide Cobb’s blue box somewhere else.

Chapter 20. This Book Doesn't Make Any Sense

I woke up to the crunchy sounds of mastication and found Columbine sitting on my dresser with a brown bag of Mission tortilla chips in her lap, thumbing through Dhalgren.

“Déjà vu,” I said, massaging my temples as I climbed out of my bed. My head was throbbing, and it felt like I had only just barely fallen asleep. Glancing at the clock, I realized that was in fact the case; I hadn't been out more than twenty minutes. My heart sank.

“This book doesn't make any sense,” Columbine complained as she hopped off the dresser. She was wearing a blue Chinese silk dress with a dragon print. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and held in place by two chopsticks. “And your front door's busted. You should get it looked at, anyone could just waltz right in here.”

“Indeed,” I grunted as I threw on some clothes. “So what's up?”

“I've been trying to get ahold of you so I could tell you what happened to me last night. Max told me you finally re-surfaced, so I rushed right over.”

I snatched a couple chips from the bag and tossed them in my mouth. “Did he explain why I went missing?”

“Yeah, big whatevs, some mean bully pushed you around a little, boo-hoo. Anyways, I have to tell you what happened, it's really good.”

“Well, let's go have a seat then so you can tell me, as long as it's really good,” I replied as I headed out to the living room to settle into the couch before realizing the couch could no longer rightly even be called a couch.

“Fuck, on second thought, let's get out of here.”

—

I took Columbine downstairs to the little taqueria next to my apartment and proceeded to devour a burrito big enough to club a man

dead with while she told me her story.

“So after what we talked about Tuesday, the footprint and my father’s number on Lily’s phone and all that, I decided to go to his house yesterday to see if I could find out what their connection was.

“At first I didn’t see him anywhere, so I figured he was out. I decided to poke around a little in his office, but as I got closer, I heard voices coming from inside. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but I hid down the hall and waited until they came out, and I got a pretty good look at the two men he was with.

“One was a younger guy, about your age, in a suit. The second was shorter and wearing a black trench coat and a hat, which was weird. He also looked older, and his face was really rough and ruddy and had a big scar on one cheek.”

I realized that this had to be the same man who attacked me in the plane, and my face must have shown my surprise because Columbine paused and asked, “What is it?”

“Nothing. Go on, what happened next?”

“I followed them, being careful to hang back enough so they wouldn’t see me. They went outside and got into a weird, classic fifties-style car with a blue paint job.”

The same car I saw the night Cobb visited me, I thought.

Columbine continued, “After they took off, I ran back inside and grabbed the spare keys to my dad’s Jaguar from the key hook in the front entryway where he always keeps them. Then I drove after them.

“They headed up into the mountains out past the northeast city limit – I mean way out into the middle of nowhere. They finally stopped in an open clearing, parking next to another car that was already waiting. I stayed hidden behind an outcropping of rocks, close enough though that I could see.

“The other car was a black Escalade, and I recognized it right away as Saint Anthony’s. Then I saw him standing a little further past the cars, holding a shovel in his hands. There were two holes in the ground along with something that looked like it could have been a dead body covered in a tarp.

“My father and the other two men got out of the blue car and spoke

with him briefly. Anthony made a couple gestures toward the body and the two holes. After a while, the young guy walked over to one of the them and looked down into it. Anthony came up behind him while his back was turned and swung the shovel into his head, sending him toppling over into the hole.

“Anthony tossed the body in the tarp into the other grave, and then started filling them both in with dirt. The man in the trench coat got another shovel out of the Escalade and helped him while my father waited in the blue car.

“I left before they finished burying them, figuring the head start would help me get back without being seen.”

“That’s incredible,” I said when she finished. “So you didn’t see who was under the tarp?”

“No.”

I pressed, “Could you tell if it was someone big or small, at least, man or woman?”

She shook her head.

“Well, do you think you could find those graves again if we went out there?”

“Why?” she asked, suddenly defensive. “And why do you want to know if it’s a man or a woman?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but the look in her eyes said that she already knew why, even if she didn’t want to admit the possibility to herself.

I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. “Look, we need to know if it’s her. If it’s not, we know that we still have a chance to help her. And if it is... well, then at least we can find the bastards responsible.”

—

After eating, we hopped in the Porsche and re-traced the way back to the grave site. Before leaving town, we stopped at a hardware store where I picked up a couple shovels, some heavy-duty gloves, and a

pack of air filter masks.

The mountains that comprised the northeastern edge of the valley were sparsely developed – a handful of wealthy families owned vast chunks of it. There were some hillside estates and a few solar energy farms on the lower, bare foothills, but beyond that was just dense forest.

We ascended through narrow, winding mountain roads. After about fifteen minutes of climbing, we passed a large metal sign bearing the corporate logo of Asterion Record Management. Just above it on the same post was another, slightly smaller sign warning against trespassing. Soon after ignoring that, we came around a bend and saw a giant monolithic building come into view in the distance. The road leveled off as we reached the top of a plateau hidden amidst the foothills.

“What is that thing?” Columbine asked.

“Well, if this is Asterion’s property, that must be one of their storage facilities. I knew they owned a lot of land in these mountains, but I can’t imagine what they would need to store all the way out here.”

“Well, that’s not where we’re going, anyways,” she replied. “Pull off the road up here and follow those tire tracks.”

We drove out a couple more minutes until the tracks stopped. A few yards away, I saw the two graves.

“We’re here,” Columbine said with sufficient understatement.

I hopped out and circled around to the trunk to get the shovels. I offered her one, but she shook her head emphatically. So I started digging alone.

After about four feet, I hit something. Moving another shovelful of dirt aside, I saw that it was a black tarp. I dug a little further to excavate just enough of the corpse so that I was sure I had the head. As I knelt down to inspect it closer, I noticed a few errant strands of red hair poking out from under the tarp.

I winced, feeling the air escape from my lungs as if I’d been punched in the gut, and I reached out to pull back the sheets of black plastic covering the body’s face, despite the certainty that I already knew what I’d find.

I was wrong.

The face underneath the tarp wasn't Lily's; it was a man's. It took me a second to process this initial surprise, but then it dawned on me who exactly I was looking at.

He was Seamus, the bum from the Light Rail. The one who used to work for Max.

"Um, D," Columbine called out. "You'd better get up here."

I climbed out of the grave and followed her gaze down the road to two white vans heading straight for us.

We jumped back into the car and peeled out, frantically speeding back the way we came. Luckily, the Porsche was going to outrun and out-maneuver those vans any day, especially on winding roads like this. The only question was whether I was going to be able to handle the Porsche well enough at top speeds to keep us from taking a turn too wide and launching down an embankment. I gripped the wheel tightly, gritted my teeth, and tried to momentarily forget how spotty my DMV record actually was.

To my astonishment, I didn't kill us, and I almost began to believe I wasn't a complete fuck-up as we approached the final bend before reconnecting with the main highway.

But just as we came around the bend, I saw a roadblock set up ahead of us. I slammed on the brakes and barely avoided plowing into two large armored cars with "Asterion Records Management" painted on the sides, which were parked sideways end-to-end beside the "No Trespassing" sign I ignored earlier. Outside them, four armed security guards were waiting for us.

"Sir, I need you to step out of the vehicle," one of the guards said as he approached the driver's side window. The other three kept their rifles raised and trained on us.

There was really no way of getting out of this mess that I could see, so I figured I'd do the next best thing and make the experience as unpleasant for everyone involved. "Fuck you, you Rent-a-Cop swine," I said, "I'm a member of the press, and I know my rights."

The butt of the guard's rifle came sailing through the open window and connected with my face, spinning my head around and sending blood spurting out across the dashboard. While I reeled from the blow,

he opened the door and dragged me out of the car. Then he and another guard pinned me to the ground while a third searched me.

Meanwhile, the fourth went around to the other side and made Columbine get out of the car and searched her.

They tore violently at my clothes, manhandled me roughly while doing a full body search. When I saw the other one was doing the same to Columbine, I redoubled my efforts to break free, prompting the one searching me to stomp the hell out of my face.

Then I was lifted up and tossed into the back of one of the armored cars like a rag doll. Or at least this is what I surmised was probably happening, since I couldn't see a damned thing for all the blood gushing down my face.

—

The giant metal door swung open, and an old man who reminded me vaguely of Bela Lugosi entered. He appeared to be well into his seventies and decidedly worse-for-wear – mostly bald with small tufts of thin, wiry gray hair, his face wrinkled and craggy from years of stress, smoking, and booze. He dragged his shriveled carcass across the room with the manner of someone accustomed to taking his own sweet time about things, puffing on a small, hand-rolled cigarillo as he went.

He hovered over me as I lay on the cold metal examination table, gave me a quick once over, and took a couple more sucks on his pungent little butt before pronouncing his diagnosis.

“Young man, you are severely fucked-up,” he said in a thick eastern European accent that did indeed sound a lot like Lugosi.

He thrust a gnarled, nicotine-stained finger into my face and poked several sore spots. I hissed in exactly the kind of throbbing, blinding pain you'd expect to get from some jackbooted fascist dancing an Irish jig on my face.

He slid over a tray of various arcane surgical tools that looked more like twisted metal torture devices than anything else and proceeded to stitch up my face with all the care and sensitivity of a punch-drunk

prize fighter.

I passed out a couple times while he worked – not because he bothered to anesthetize me in any way, but just from sheer, overpowering agony.

—

I looked at my reflection in the small handheld mirror and thought for a moment that the sadistic fuck of a doctor had replaced the glass with a photo of ground beef left out to sit for a week.

There were three large, ragged lacerations stitched up haphazardly amid a lot of swelling and bruising. One was a giant gash above my right brow, another was a smaller crescent around the ridge of my left eye socket, and the third was a split in the side of my left cheek. My nose had also been re-broken, sloppily reset, and taped up.

I lifted a hand to trace the swollen, discolored contours of my face and had to actually fight to choke back a hysterical burst of tears.

“Don’t touch your face, you’ll upset the stitches,” the doctor admonished as he bent over the mildewy sink and washed an alarming amount of my blood off his hands and instruments.

Across the makeshift operating room, the metal door swung open again, and Max poked his head in.

“How’s he doing?”

“He’ll live,” the doctor replied as he sparked up another cigarillo. “Although you’d never believe it from the way this little sissy has been carrying on.”

Max chuckled and cut across the room. He was pristinely groomed and dressed in a classic black tuxedo with full-length coattails. I strained to hop off the table and groaned as I reached out to grab my shirt off a nearby chair.

“Here, I brought you a get-well-soon gift,” Max said and tossed me a little white pill bottle. “Be careful with these, you don’t want to take more than one or two a day.”

I shook four out onto my palm and tossed them into my mouth.

“I hope you didn’t have any plans tonight,” Max chided as he lifted my jacket off the back of the chair and helped me put it on. He straightened the lapels and then ran his hands down my front to smooth it out. While he did, he found the Abrasax badge sticking out of my pocket and held it up for me to see.

“You’re lucky they found this on you. Otherwise you’d be sitting in an interrogation cell right now instead of in the good doctor’s operating room.” He tucked it back into my coat and patted the pocket, indicating that it was safe and secure.

“Seems like an overreaction for simple trespassing.”

He grinned good-naturedly and explained, “They are pretty paranoid about security. Most of the records Asterion keeps up here come from major clients who are worried about corporate espionage and willing to pay top dollar to make sure their trade secrets stay just that. Now admittedly, what happened to you is on the extreme end of things, but you seem to have that effect on people.”

“No fucking kidding,” I spat back. “Seems like every time I turn around there’s someone waiting to kick my face in. It’s like my life has suddenly become one of those old pulp detective novels.”

“Hipster Philip Marlowe,” Max added with an amused snort.

“Yeah, well, it’s not a fucking joke, it’s my life. And it’s getting really fucking old, really fucking fast,” I snapped and buried my face in my hands. “It feels like everything is falling apart. Like I’m being disassembled piece by piece, physically, mentally, emotionally. And now I’m so fucking disfigured I can’t even recognize myself in the mirror. I’m just so fucking tired of it all.”

“Hey, I told you not to touch!” the doctor chastised as he reached out and swatted me in the back of the head, hard.

My face instinctively twisted into a sneer, but actually his blow was just the thing I needed to jolt me out of the emo self-pity-party I was slipping into. I turned back to Max and asked, “Where’s Columbine?”

“She’s fine – she’s waiting outside. She explained what happened, how you were digging up the dead body that you thought was Lily.” He paused, then added, “It’s not, incidentally. That was just a routine chore I asked Saint Anthony to handle for me, nothing to do with your assignment.”

“Wait, what?” I said, and pulled out my notebook as if I had somehow missed something. “So you’re the one who set up that whole meeting? Does that mean the guy who drives that old blue Chevy works for you, too?”

There was no hint of recognition in Max’s face as he shook his head. “What blue Chevy?”

“The guy who drove McPherson out to meet Anthony at the graves.”

Max looked at me silently with no reaction, his face remaining completely stoic and unchanged. And yet, there was something palpably different, possibly a nearly-imperceptible stiffening of his posture, or maybe even just a darkening of his aura, and I knew that he was both surprised by what I said and not a bit pleased.

Apparently, Columbine hadn’t been completely forthcoming with her account to him.

“You didn’t know McPherson was out there while Anthony buried them,” I crowed triumphantly.

I stared at Max, hoping for some kind of reaction, some flicker of frustration or anger to validate the fact that I’d finally been one step ahead of him for a change.

Suddenly, though, my vision started to blur, and I felt dizzy and light-headed. I reached out to brace myself against the back of the nearby chair, but my weight made it topple backwards, collapsing me to the ground. Max bent over to help me up, his stone visage finally cracked into a broad grin.

“I told you not to take so many of those pills.”

Chapter 21. The Existential Hitman

Max and I staggered clumsily into the main lobby of the Asterion building like a pair of doped-up conjoined twins, my left arm slung over his shoulders, his right arm wrapped tightly around my midsection, and our four legs tripping and tangling over each other.

Columbine and Saint Anthony were waiting to meet us. Anthony rushed over to help with his boss's burden, gripping me roughly and letting me slump my weight against his sturdy frame.

"What the hell's wrong with him?" Anthony asked.

Max mimed popping pills into his mouth.

Columbine also came over to join us, unable to hide her shock at seeing my face.

"I know," I slurred. "I look totally hardcore."

Columbine offered a weak smirk that nearly avoided looking patronizing. "No, you look like you got your ass kicked. Hardcore would be if the other guy looked like that."

Max leaned in to Anthony and softly said, "I need to talk to you."

They propped me up against the reception desk and walked off to speak privately in hushed tones.

I craned my neck to look around the rest of the lobby, which was basically a cavernous, unadorned concrete bunker. The large open space off to one side suggested it had been intended as a waiting area, but there were no tables or chairs of any kind. In fact, the only furniture at all was the tall reception desk that I was currently leaning on.

Behind it sat an elderly woman, presumably the receptionist, passing the time by knitting with blue yarn. She never once bothered to look up from her work to acknowledge our presence, and I wasn't entirely convinced she was even aware that we were there.

The wall behind her was covered with a large bank of small closed circuit TV monitors. It reminded me somewhat of the setup at the Labyrinthine party, but much larger. The images on the screens

appeared to be feeds from surveillance cameras throughout the storage facility, and each one had a five-digit number displayed at the bottom-right corner of the screen.

The images changed to a new feed every thirty seconds, and the sequence of the feeds was completely random and not related to the numeric identifiers.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” asked Columbine.

“Huh?” I said, pulling myself away from the videos. I followed her gaze over to Max and Anthony. “Oh, well I let slip that your father was out there when Anthony was burying those bodies, so I imagine the ‘Saint’ has some explaining to do.”

The two men suddenly broke into laughter and Max patted Anthony’s shoulder affectionately before they started back to us.

“Oh yeah, you can tell how much trouble he’s in,” Columbine added sarcastically.

I was about to say something snappy back, but my attention was drawn away by a video appearing on one of the screens. It showed a man sitting on the edge of a bed in a small, empty room. The image was washed in blue, and the number on the bottom of the screen read: 00033.

“How’re you feeling, still dizzy?” Max asked as he slid in next to me against the desk.

“Those numbers on the screen...” I asked, “do they correspond to the numbers of storage units here?”

Max looked over the monitors and nodded.

“Then what’s in that one, number 00033?” I asked and pointed out the screen where I’d seen the blue room, but it had already changed over to a different feed.

Max and Anthony exchanged a couple of looks that could only be described as significant.

“Anthony, would you mind giving our friend a ride home, since he’s obviously in no condition to drive himself?”

Anthony nodded at his boss’s request, then hooked a large meaty arm around me and dragged me along as the four of us exited the lobby.

There were two cars parked outside – the Porsche and Max’s limo. Max took Columbine’s arm and led her to his car, where the driver was waiting with the door already open. She looked hesitantly from Max to me, but even though Max was just grinning pleasantly, there was something in his eyes that told her this wasn’t up for debate. So she got in.

Meanwhile, Anthony tossed me into the Porsche’s passenger seat like a sack of laundry, then circled around to get in on the driver’s side.

“You’re not in any particular hurry to get home, are you?” he asked while firing up the engine.

I shook my head weakly, the motion causing tracers to blur across my vision, and I felt a distinctly unsettling sense of *déjà vu*.

—

I slumped back into the blood red vinyl couch and let my head fall over to one side, then felt a profound sense of relief as the darkness closed in on me.

SNAP!

I jerked my head up and opened my eyes to find Anthony’s hand hovering inches from my face, his thick meaty fingertips snapping together angrily.

“Keep your eyes on the prize, D,” he admonished and pointed his middle and index fingers at his own eyes, then rotated his hand so that they pointed at the blonde straddling my lap.

“And watch that you don’t spill your drink, man. You’ve been milking that same fucking glass for the last hour. Just cowboy up and pound the sumbitch.”

I looked down and saw that I was in fact holding a glass in danger of tipping out of my hand and spilling both scotch and mostly-melted-rocks all over the vinyl couch.

I snapped my head back and downed the last watered-down dregs from it.

“Oh good, your hands are free,” said the blonde, who was wearing a

white dress like Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*. She climbed off of me and turned around, then unfastened the halter of her dress, allowing the top half of it to fall loosely down to her waist. As she sat back down on my lap, grinding her ass against the hard bulge straining through my pants, she simultaneously grabbed both of my hands and lifted them up to cup her breasts, which somehow managed to feel even less natural than her dye-job looked. I gave it a fifty-fifty shot, however, that the Marilyn-esque mole on her left cheek was actually for real.

Anthony leaned back with a satisfied smirk, checked his watch, and then flagged down a passing cocktail waitress to order another round.

This place Anthony had brought me to used to be a Chinese restaurant about a half-mile away from the city's main airport, tucked away among the over-priced business hotels. The restaurant itself was shut down due to repeated health code violations, and the building had stayed boarded up with no new tenants ever since. At least that was how it looked on paper.

However, if you went around to the back after a certain time of night and knocked on what used to be the kitchen delivery door with a specific pattern of knocks, you'd find out that it had in fact been turned into some unholy triangulation of a strip club, a speakeasy, and a brothel.

Apparently, Max got the idea to take over the vacant space when the city council voted to ban alcohol from being served at all the legit strip clubs. This resulted in the twin atrocities of dry strip clubs and "bikini bars". Those in turn drove any self-respecting business traveler, stag party, or standard-issue pervert into Max's unregulated underground club. The fact that an anti-vice statute inspired him to create a place where a lap dance can end in full emission satisfied his twisted sense of humor to no end, I'm sure.

What I wasn't so sure about was why Anthony dragged me here in the first place, since all he'd done since we arrived was pound shots, call me gay, and pontificate inanely about his personal philosophy.

"You see, the thing about me, I like to keep it simple," Anthony declared between sips of his fresh drink. "Guys like you are always running around, asking questions, trying to make things more complicated than they need to be. And where does it get you in the

end? Are you any happier for it?"

I rolled my head over and saw him look at his watch again. "Me, it takes very little to make me happy," he continued. "A good drink, a rare steak, a sweet piece of pussy. That's what life's all about."

The stripper cupped my chin in her hand and jerked my head back so I was facing her.

"If you don't stop staring at him, I'm going to get jealous," she cooed teasingly and then proceeded to bury my face in her fake plastic tits and paw at my rapidly deflating hard-on through my slacks. "Do you want to go back into a private room where you'll be less distracted?"

She gave me a playful wink.

Anthony shook his head and tapped the face of his watch. "Nah, we've got some place to be." He dug a couple crumpled bills out of his jeans and slipped them under the stripper's garter, then added, "Besides, I'm pretty sure he's a fag."

She shrugged and climbed off me. "Figures."

Anthony yanked me to my feet and steered me across the dimly-lit club to one of the three long, oval stages on the main floor. We planted ourselves on two stools right at the edge of the stage, and Anthony pulled out a thick wad of bills.

"So, can I ask what the hell we're doing here, or is that a dumb question?" I ventured.

"I'm proving a point," he replied obliquely. "So stop being such a limp-dick fairy and enjoy the fucking show."

Just then the sound system fired up Peaches' "Fuck the Pain Away", and two women took the stage, one at each end. The one on our end wore a purple lace-up corset, black hot pants, fishnet stockings, and knee-high leather boots. She also had long purple hair and a black domino mask.

Anthony slapped the back of his hand into my chest like we were old pals. "Looks like that got your attention."

I suddenly was extremely uncomfortable.

He laid out five twenty-dollar bills in front of us on the stage, which got the stripper's attention, and she looked startled to see us sitting there.

But then I realized that she wasn't Violet. She didn't have any scars along the left side of her body.

Reluctantly, she danced over to us, and Anthony kept laying out enough currency for her to stay there for the rest of the song, despite the obvious uncertainty in her face.

Writhing on the stage, spreading her knees and thrusting her pelvis up at us, she slowly peeled off her clothes one piece at a time until only the domino mask was left. She glided her hands sensually along her smooth, ghostly pallid flesh and slipped two fingers between her glistening pink labia.

Anthony grinned in satisfaction and clamped his hand down on my shoulder while leering hungrily at her. I started to feel a knot of guilt twisting in my gut, but I couldn't take my eyes off the immaculate beauty on stage.

The song died down, and the stripper reached to scoop up the bills Anthony had laid out. As she extended her hand, Anthony quickly grabbed her wrist and gave her a good, startling jerk.

"So how about a private dance, honey?"

An unmistakable look of fear flashed in her eyes, but she slowly nodded in agreement.

Anthony insisted on dragging me along, and she led us to a small cubby hole in back of the club about the size of a department store dressing room. As Anthony and I sat down, she pulled a red velvet curtain across the entrance to give us privacy.

"Do you want me to dance for both of you together or one at a time?"

"Just me," Anthony answered. "He's only here to learn something."

The stripper climbed onto him and started her lap dance, still naked but for the domino mask. She did her best to act sexy and aroused, but she was nearly trembling with fear, like she was rubbing up against a ticking time bomb.

"You know what makes guys like me different from guys like you?"

I shook my head, at a loss and trying not to watch this poor terrified girl grinding her pussy against the unsettlingly large log in Anthony's jeans.

"Faith."

Even the stripper paused for a second and did a double-take, trying to process whether he actually just said what she thought she heard.

“I have faith in a higher power, faith in a grand design that’s larger than I could ever hope to comprehend. And this knowledge gives me freedom because I don’t have to worry about questioning how I fit into the big picture, all I have to do is play the role that’s been laid out for me.”

The stripper resumed her gyrations, although at this point the fear in her eyes was mostly replaced with a confusion that closely matched my own.

“Wait, hold on, I’m having trouble seeing the connection between being Dylan Maxwell’s violent thug and God’s divine plan.”

“Take it out.”

“Excuse me?”

Anthony rolled his eyes. “Not you, her.”

The stripper fumbled with the buttons on his fly. I quickly turned to look away.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

Anthony slapped me upside the head. “Don’t blaspheme!”

“What the fuck?” For a second I involuntarily jerked my head back to face him and caught a glimpse of the stripper straddling his left thigh while kissing his neck and pumping her hand back and forth between his legs. I quickly whipped my head away again.

He let out a low chuckle and then continued, “You see, I’m like an existential hitman. When people get too abstract, start questioning the natural order of things, looking under rocks that shouldn’t be turned over, losing sight of what really matters, that’s when I step in to put everything back into perspective. I make sure shit turns real real, real fast.”

He let out a series of low, gravelly grunts, and I could hear the stripper pumping her hand faster, hear the friction of dry skin on skin, until finally Anthony let out an extended groan and I felt his body shift and tense up on the seat next to me.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered, still turned away.

The stripper stood up and began to dress.

“Let me give you an example,” he said, giving my thigh a few hearty pats. “Say you’re a stripper, and you come into a place day-in, day-out, taking your clothes off for fat, ugly slobs and giving handjobs in some dark little closet. And you start asking questions about things like why is the rich asshole who owns this place taking such a big cut off all these poor working-class girls who are the ones stuck washing clumps of jizz out of their hair every night?”

“And that’s a dangerous question to ask because it leads to others – questions about fairness, about your station in life, about the exploitation of women. Heady stuff. It’s easy to get so wrapped up in these questions that you forget that at the end of the day, what it really boils down to is survival. But when you lose sight of that, you start making bad decisions.

“Decisions like, say, skimming off the top before giving your rich asshole owner his cut.”

The stripper suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, her fingers frozen in mid-action while lacing up her corset.

“Now to me, that’s just plain dumb,” he continued. “Imagine, throwing away your most basic biological imperative, survival itself, over some petty abstract notion of fairness or justice. But that’s what happens when you make things more complicated than they need to be.”

Anthony lunged forward like a panther, springing from his seat with blinding speed and slamming the stripper up against the wall, his massive, powerful hands tightening around her throat in a crushing grip.

I watched in stunned silence as he choked the life out of her, then let her collapse into a heap, her cheek landing in the small puddle of his white goo on the floor, the domino mask still affixed to her face.

Anthony meanwhile was left holding her purple wig, which had come off while she struggled. He tossed it onto my lap.

“Here’s a souvenir. Something to rub against your face on those long lonely nights when you’re jacking off and imagining what I’m doing to the real deal.”

I looked down at the disembodied wig and ran my fingers through its

synthetic locks.

“Fag,” Anthony snorted.

We walked out through club unmolested. Either no one realized what happened, or they all knew better than to let on that they did.

As we approached the Porsche, he tossed the keys to me.

“You can drive your fucking self home,” he said.

I didn’t actually agree, seeing as how I still couldn’t keep my eyes open and even when they were, I was seeing at least triple. But I was still too shell-shocked to even attempt to protest.

He continued on to a black Escalade parked nearby. I shook my head and wondered just how stage managed the night had been.

“You know, for someone who claims to like to keep it simple, you sure have a round-about way of making a point. This whole setup smacks of your boss. You should warn him he’s starting to get transparent.”

He stuck out a thick, bright pink tongue and licked it slowly across his front teeth. “You want it straight up? Here it goes: your job is Lily. Focus on her – go through her files, check the surveillance records on her, talk to people who knew her. Forget about McPherson, you’re barking up the wrong tree there. Keep your nose out of Asterion’s business, and for fuck’s sake, I never even want to hear the words ‘Room 33’ out of your mouth again. Is that simple enough for you?”

He climbed into his car, and I got in mine, made myself as comfortable as I could manage, and then quickly passed out.

Chapter 22. What the Fuck Is Wrong with You?

The next morning I dragged myself into Abrasax and asked Max to see the surveillance records on Lily.

“Ah, so I take it you and Saint Anthony had a nice chat on the way home last night,” he gloated.

“Yeah, it was so nice, I still have some of his spunk encrusted on my shoe.”

Max nodded in amusement while he tapped something into his phone. A second later, my phone buzzed. I checked it and saw that I had a text from him, which consisted of a 13-digit alphanumeric code.

“Go down to the 17th floor, show them that reference number, and they’ll set you up with the records,” he instructed.

“What’s wrong with writing it down on a sticky note?”

He scrunched up his face. “Ugh, paper is so barbaric. I also just sent them a message, so they know you’re on your way.”

—

I settled into a cramped private stall with a computer terminal and logged in to pull up the files on Lily. I was shocked by the breadth of the information collected.

Every credit card purchase, whether on her company or personal card, going back years. Same thing for phone, e-mail, and internet logs. One log compiled from the internal GPS from her cell phone and another from her car showing her each and every move. Video and audio surveillance of her home and office for the last two weeks, presumably when Max first became suspicious of her.

I watched the video feeds from her town house first. It looked like there were two cameras in her living room, one in her bedroom, and one in the kitchen. At least they had the decency not to put one in the bathroom.

Thankfully, they were all motion activated, so they only recorded when she was home. I played them back at 4x speed, scanning for anything that might be useful.

As I sat there, staring like a drone at the images flashing on the screen, my mind wandered. I thought about Seamus the bum saying, "They watch you fuck," on the Light Rail, and then days later ending up dead and buried. I thought about the dead stripper last night and how sorrowful her lifeless eyes looked peeking out from under that domino mask, and then for some reason that made me think about Columbine and the veil she wore the first time we met. Then I thought about Anthony holding that purple wig, and that morphed into Anthony holding Violet, taking her soft, shapely body into his arms and sliding his cock inside her, and I imagined her pussy looking exactly like the stripper's had as she gyrated on stage.

I slowed the video down to real time. On the screen, Lily had undressed and dug the sex toy out of her underwear drawer. Now she was lying back in bed and using it.

A wave of blood rushed to both my face and my crotch simultaneously, causing my cheeks to turn bright red and my penis to swell within my pants. I looked around. No one could see into or out of the booth I was in. So I unzipped my pants and started to masturbate.

On the screen, I watched the fuzzy, pixelated image of Lily plunging the dildo into herself as she writhed on the bed and bucked her hips wildly. Meanwhile, I jerked off furiously to reach my own orgasm, feeling the seed pumping out in short, powerful bursts.

I looked down at the floor and saw my semen pooled in the exact same shape as Anthony's had been last night. At first this surprised me, but soon that gave way to an overwhelming sense of nausea.

What the fuck did you just do? I wondered to myself.

My gaze returned to the video. Lily had put away the toy but taken out something else. Straining my eyes, I was able to recognize it as the framed photograph of Max. And from the gentle bob of her head, I could tell she was crying.

I suddenly felt dirty, like my skin was coated in an invisible layer of thick grime, and no matter how much I rubbed it wouldn't come off.

Fuck it, I need to get some air.

—

After grabbing a cigarette on the 17th floor smoker's balcony, I returned to my booth to find that someone had gone in while I was gone and mopped the floor clean. I tried not to think about the implications of this.

I resumed sifting through the records, but I couldn't focus on the work; my mind kept wandering. I wasn't sure if I was still twisted up from mixing pain pills with booze, or it was some after-effect of all the blows to the head I've been taking, or maybe even just mental strain from the epic fucked-up-edness of the past couple weeks. But for some reason I felt disassociated, like I wasn't actually in control of my own actions, like I'd severed the connection between my body and mind. It was as if I were a ghost watching my own body or a passive observer watching all this on a screen from somewhere else entirely.

I wondered whether I had even just jerked off here in this booth. It seemed hard to believe, and certainly it was much more convenient to tell myself I'd only imagined it. After all, there was no physical evidence it had happened.

I stared blankly at the screen, which contained rows and rows of data inputs, coordinates and time stamps sent from the GPS in Lily's car. My eyes unfocused and the characters blurred together into a wash of red, blue, and green pixels.

I rubbed my eyes, cursing the futility of my task before plunging right back into it.

Then, surprisingly, I noticed something interesting.

Every day over the past week, she stopped at the same point on her way home from work. It was a deviation from her normal route.

The terminal wasn't connected to the internet, so I took out my own cell and looked up the coordinates on Google Maps. It was a point on the Serra Expressway overpass where it crosses Highway 77, not far from the Guadalupe Bridge. Normally the Millennial Bridge would have been the quickest way for her to get home to the west side from downtown. Taking the Guadalupe Bridge would be at least a fifteen minute detour, so there must have been some reason behind it.

I considered whether it was worthwhile to go rushing straight out there.

Fuck it, I need to get some air, I thought and briefly paused to wonder why that sounded familiar.

On my way to the elevators, I ran into Max's assistant. I wondered how long she had been waiting around for me and whether she knew what I had done inside the booth. Then I wondered whether she had been the one who cleaned it up. That's ludicrous, I told myself as I pictured her on her hands and knees, naked but for a pair of vinyl gloves and a hair net, scrubbing at the floor with a sponge and bucket of sudsy water.

What the fuck is wrong with you? I screamed in my head – or maybe to my head.

"Mr. Maxwell asked me to give you this," she said and handed me a glossy rave card like the one Columbine gave me for the Labyrinthine party. "He said he was going to e-mail it to you, but then thought maybe you'd appreciate the feel of paper. I'm not sure what that means."

I looked over the card. One side was red with black lettering that read:

HIGHWATER SOCIETY
CORONATION ANNIVERSARY
MASQUERADE BALL
Saturday, March 20, 9:00 PM
Invitation Only
Costumes Mandatory

That was tomorrow night. It sounded intriguing, but I was a little weary of the bit about costumes. Then I flipped the card over. The other side was printed white-on-white. I held it at an angle so the light caught the ink just right to reveal the message:

YOU ARE BEING LIED TO...

TRUST US

Chapter 23. Sunsets, Mirrors & Convenient Illusions

“Yeah, I guess I’m going,” I said into the phone. “I’m just not sure about this whole costume thing.”

“Argh, why are you always such a wet blanket?” Columbine replied. “Have a little imagination. I bet you’re the kind of guy who likes to point out all the mirrors and wires during a magic show.”

“Of course, at least until some bitter cow inevitably starts mooing about how I’m spoiling the show for her snotty little brats.”

That got a laugh out of her. “So anyways, I wanna hang out tonight. Come get me?”

“No, I told you, I’m following that lead on Lily. And the way shit’s been going lately, I want you to stay out of it for a while. I don’t want to be responsible if something happens to you.”

“Boo,” she jeered in response.

“Listen, I’m almost there, I gotta go.”

“Okay, but at least come see me tomorrow before the party, then we can go together.”

“Sure,” I agreed before hanging up and pulling over the Porsche.

The sun was already setting as I parked on the shoulder of the overpass. I got out of the car and stood in the exact the spot where Lily would, according to her phone’s GPS. It was on the western shoulder of the expressway, facing toward the sun as it disappeared behind the Dientes Torcidos mountain range across the valley. I wondered if that was why Lily had been stopping here after work – to see that magnificent view of the sunset. Then I looked down at the cars whizzing by on Highway 77 and followed them as they crossed the Guadalupe Bridge over the San Hermes and vanished in the distance.

Twilight settled in, and I watched as little dots of fire flared up on the east bank, marking the shantytown that started under the bridge and spread north back up the river.

I thought about how each of those flames represented a cluster of people gathering around for warmth, people who had fallen through

the cracks and disappeared from society. People the rest of the city preferred to see as nameless, faceless, anonymous. I imagined what it would be like to end up down there, how easy it would be to lose your own sense of self, your identity – how easy it would be to be forgotten.

Suddenly I felt a strong, irresistible magnetism pulling me there, beckoning me. And somehow, I knew with absolute certainty that Lily was there.

—

The San Hermes River runs down from the mountains northeast of the valley and snakes its way right through the middle of our city.

The San Hermes River Park is actually a series of smaller parks, a long, narrow stretch of preserved open space that follows along either bank for miles, beginning from the old Guadalupe Bridge that connects the northern industrial zone to the city proper, and spanning all the way past the newer Millennial Bridge that was just completed before the turn of the century.

The park varies in width from small public gardens no wider than a city block all the way up to the ten mile wide area surrounding Hermosa Ravine, which is set up for campgrounds, hiking trails, rock climbing, and river rafting.

Hermosa Ravine is the park's heart, where people go to play, to escape, to fall in love. Millennial Bridge is its face, the point most visible to residents in the city proper, the shiny new monument that gets slapped on postcards and travel brochures as an homage to progress. And that makes Guadalupe Bridge the asshole. It's there and it serves a function, but it's ugly and smelly and most people would rather not think about it too much.

The shantytown, then, is the turd that the bridge squeezed out. It consisted of a couple hundred makeshift shacks cobbled together out of scrap metal, old wood, cardboard, plastic tarps, and anything else that could be scavenged.

Most of the people who lived by the river were undocumented – mostly newcomers who didn't have local family and hadn't been able to make any connections for a place to stay. Then of course you had

your junkies and your alcoholics who had been bounced from the shelters for continuing to use, your runaways, your garden variety crazies who were booted onto the street when County Mental Health closed half its beds, and finally other sundry people who for whatever reason found value in living off the grid – people who were hiding out, people who had nowhere else to go, and people who were feeding off the carcasses of the weak.

I passed by a mirrored closet door that had been refashioned into the wall of someone's shack and caught a glimpse of my reflection. The glass was cracked in an intricate spiderweb pattern in the upper left hand corner, but other than that it was in pretty good condition. I paused for a minute to look at myself in it and was disturbed how well I seemed to blend into the surroundings.

I hadn't shaved since before I was kidnapped, my shower this morning was at best perfunctory, and I hadn't had a chance to do laundry and therefore had been wearing the same tattered coat and torn jeans for days. Add to that my scarred and twisted mess of a face, and you'd think I purposely dressed in a kind of hobo camouflage.

Then suddenly a face appeared in profile in the broken glass. It was Lily's; she was talking to a dark-skinned Latin American woman about twenty yards behind me. I spun around and found the other woman cooking some unidentifiable animal on a spit over a metal drum fire, but Lily was nowhere in sight.

I ran over to her and shouted, "Where did that woman go that you were talking to, the redhead?"

She stared silently, half from lack of comprehension, half from panic caused by my frenzied state.

I tried again in Spanish, "¿Adónde se fue la pelirroja?"

She extended her hand out to point right, and I sprinted off.

Pumping my legs as hard as I could, I weaved my way through the dense crowd. From time to time I'd catch fleeting glimpses of her, flashes of her vivid red hair standing out against the drab surroundings, but she was always just at the edge of my sight, always rounding the next corner, always a step ahead of me.

I chased her through the haphazard, maze-like layout of the shantytown along a path that twisted and doubled back on itself. It

soon felt like I'd been running for miles, but I couldn't be sure that I wasn't going in circles.

Then, just as I felt my legs about to give, I saw her again, closer than she'd ever appeared before. I launched myself with renewed vigor and hurtled through a small group of migrant day-laborers. But when I broke through them, I saw that my target was really just Lily's reflection in a mirror. I scanned the area, but couldn't find her anywhere. Then I noticed a sickly-thin woman with flaxen hair and realized that the reflection was hers, and that the glow from a nearby fire was making her hair appear red in the mirror.

She noticed me staring and shot me a sour expression. It was hard to gauge her age; she gave the impression of someone very young, but who was aging prematurely from a harsh living. Her ashen gray skin had lost all the luster and freshness of youth, and her eyes were sunken deep into dark black sockets.

She wore a bare-midriff halter top and a tattered denim skirt. I imagined that she thought showing that much skin was somehow sexy, but on her it induced pity more than anything else. She was so emaciated that you could see the bones protruding grotesquely through her skin, making her frame look frail and brittle, like a strong wind would knock her over with enough force to snap every bone on impact. Her arms and legs were covered with track marks and needle holes, many of which had become infected.

"What are you looking at?" she demanded in a voice much throatier and raspier than I expected.

I opened my mouth to try and somehow explain, but then decided it wasn't worth the trouble. So instead I shrugged and was about to turn away when a familiar voice called out, "There you are, Claire!"

Violet walked up to the woman, Claire, and tried to throw a wool blanket over her but was rebuffed.

"Why'd you run off like that?" she asked, not yet noticing me.

Claire answered, "Because there's nothing else to say. We're done, give it up."

Violet was about to reply, but then finally caught sight of me out of the corner of her eye. She did a double-take. "D? What are you doing here?" She paused, and then peered more closely at me, unable to

stop her upper lip from curling in disgust. “And what happened to your face?”

I scratched my head. “Um, it’s a long story.”

She shifted her eyes back and forth between the two of us, trying to decide who was the lost cause and who was still worth trying to save.

Then Claire made the decision for her.

“I don’t have time for this. I’ve got to go make some money,” she said and pushed her way past us, then headed over to a group of four migrant workers who were squatting in a circle, playing cards. She knelt down beside them and tried to strike up a conversation with a mix of broken Spanish and clumsy attempts at seduction – awkwardly running her fingers through her hair and getting them caught in the tangled knots, placing her hand on one man’s arm but not being able to stop it from shaking.

“Jesus,” I muttered, “people actually pay for her? I mean seriously, I get that it’d be rough, being poor and alone in a foreign country, cut off from your wife for months, unable to speak the language – sure you’d be hard up. But her? It’d be like fucking Schindler’s List.”

Violet stared at me in wide-eyed disbelief, and I made a mental note to keep working on that whole thinking-about-shit-before-saying-it-out-loud trick.

“God, D, I never realized you were such an unbelievably callous asshole.”

“Look,” I tried to backpedal. “I’m just saying if I was gonna pay for it, I’d be a little bit more picky about the merchandise. I mean, not merchandise, I’m sure she’s a very nice girl and a real human being with feelings and all that, but she looks like fucking Skeletor. No, that came out wrong. I mean, she’s just not my type. I’m into curves – like you, I’d rather pay for you over her any day. Not that I’m calling you a whore, or saying that I would go to one, I’m just saying I’d sleep with you. No wait... look, in fairness, people usually realize that I’m an asshole right away, so you can’t hold it against me that you didn’t figure it out ‘til now.”

Stop. Talking. Right. Now. You. Fucking. Idiot!

Violet blinked her eyes silently.

“I’m going to assume that whatever did that to your face also gave you brain damage and just try to forget the last thirty seconds ever happened.”

“Thank you.”

“Now do you want to take a walk so you can explain what you’re doing here?”

—

We walked north along the riverbank, getting out of the shantytown and enjoying the quiet serenity of the park at night. I explained, briefly, that I’d had a hunch that Lily was hiding out there and came looking for her. Then I told her about the twin beatings I’d received – the first one when I was kidnapped from the plane, and the second by Asterion security. I debated also telling her about my trip to the strip club last night with her husband, but decided against it since I couldn’t be sure of my own motives on that one.

She softened her attitude towards me, but there was still a distance between us – we weren’t connecting the way we had before. I wondered if it was because my insane rant made her realize I was a terrible, insensitive pig, or because I suddenly looked like Quasimodo and there just wasn’t the same physical spark anymore.

At one point during our walk, I leaned in close to get a whiff of her perfume, not thinking she’d notice, but she happened to turn towards me at just the wrong moment. She thought I was leaning in for a kiss and recoiled sharply. I could tell from her eyes she instantly regretted it, but neither of us said anything. We just acted like it didn’t happen.

“So who’s Claire, how do you know her?” I asked.

“She was staying at the shelter where I work for a while. She’s a good kid, but she’s had it rough – a dirt poor family of six kids, an abusive drunk father, a pair of older brothers who molested her, a history of addiction. But she’s a fighter, and I really thought she was going to turn herself around. Then the shelter found out that she was using again so they kicked her out. I convinced them to give her a second chance, but she’d have to go back into rehab and prove that she could stay clean. I came out here to tell her, but she won’t do it.

She's got that weird kind of pride some people get, the kind that makes them so afraid of failing that they don't want to even try, that way they'll always have that excuse – it's not that I can't do it, I just choose not to."

I didn't even know what to say, so for once I had the good sense to stay quiet.

"You know," she added, "she's only sixteen in two months."

"Christ," I said, "I had her pegged at least ten years older than that."

Violet nodded.

"That must be a rough job," I continued. "I mean, everyone you meet is at rock bottom. It'd be hard to keep from getting dragged down, too. You'd have to make sure to come up for air now and then so you don't forget how nice it is to feel a little bit of sunshine on your face."

"It's not all just doom and gloom," she objected. "You meet some really inspiring people with incredible stories of courage, of perseverance, of redemption. That's the thing, you have to remember that everyone is a living, breathing person with their own histories, their own dreams. Too often those at the bottom get written off, tucked away in some corner and forgotten. Places like the shantytown exist because it's more convenient for the people in power to hide those who are struggling from the rest of us. But it's all just smoke and mirrors, like stage magic – they haven't really gone anywhere, but you believe they've disappeared because that's what you want to believe. It's like the setting sun, it doesn't cease to exist after it drops below the horizon."

My eyes wandered up ahead to a bridge in the distance, the one that the old train tracks used to cross. I thought I saw a couple figures standing on it, dropping something off the side, but I blinked and they were gone.

"I think quantum theory would beg to differ with you," I replied, stopping to turn towards her. "But I get what you're saying. It's just... don't look down too harshly on people for believing in the thing that comes most easily. I think sometimes we need to hang onto a few convenient illusions just to keep ourselves going. I mean, not to be a dick or anything, but have you taken a look in the mirror? You're married to a murderous thug with a black hole where his conscience should be."

Fuck. Did I just say that?

Violet, miraculously, did not slap me. She did not scream. But she did bite back.

“That’s true. But then are you any better? Pining after some girl you just met despite the fact that she’s decidedly unavailable. Somehow convincing yourself that, despite her murderous thug of a husband, you’re sure she’s really just a sweet and innocent girl at heart, and it’s got to be some mistake that she ended up with him. Holding out hope that one day she’ll realize what she wants is a nice, sensitive guy she can take home to mommy, and then somehow that’ll lead her to the arrogant, self-absorbed, misogynistic asshole with a chip on his shoulder and severe issues with his own masculinity who’s been nipping at her heels.”

“Touché,” I said with a grin and took a step closer to her. Then I slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her in closer to me.

“You can’t be serious,” she protested, smirking, as I pressed my body into hers.

“Dead serious. And you’ve got me all wrong,” I replied. “What I’m really thinking is, ‘If this chick is fucked-up in the head enough to hang around with that unstable psychopath, then this unstable psychopath is going to be right up her alley.’”

She raised her head to meet my gaze, our lips hovering mere inches apart. “As if you’re ever gonna get ‘up my alley’ now. You’re ugly as sin now.”

She pulled back from me, and her gloriously full, gorgeous lips curled into a triumphant grin. Then she turned and walked away.

“Oh come on, there’s got to be some chance,” I called out after her while laughing boisterously. “Not even a little?”

“Not even if you paid me,” she called back, her words echoing loudly through the night.

Chapter 24. Didn't This Already Happen?

When I went to pick up Columbine for the party, I noted with some relief that while Violet's Volvo was parked out front, Anthony's Escalade was nowhere in sight.

I rang the doorbell, and Violet answered in a long black widow's-peaked wig and a Vampira costume that looked like she was mere seconds from falling out of.

"Nice costume," she said.

"I'm not wearing one," I replied.

"Yeah, I noticed."

I grinned and pointed to her chest. "If you're not careful, soon you won't be either."

"Don't worry," she laughed. "The girls are glued securely into place."

"That's a shame," I said as she led me in.

"Col's in her room getting ready, first door on the right. I was thinking we could all drive together."

I grunted in agreement before making my way down the hallway and knocking on Columbine's door.

"Come in."

I went inside and found her sitting in front of a vanity, putting her makeup on. She was wearing a glittery green tube dress.

"Oh, no, no, no," she declared as soon as she saw my reflection in her mirror. "You are not getting away with not wearing a costume."

"This is my costume," I protested while taking a seat on her bed, next to a blonde up-do wig and a pair of sequined fairy wings. Then I kicked out my leg and pointed to the red Chuck Taylor All-Star on my foot. "Look."

Columbine laughed, but then shook her head and gave me an emphatic thumbs-down.

"He'll love it, though."

“Of course he will,” she agreed and stood up. “Help me get those on.”

I held up the wings while she slipped her arms through the straps and secured them to her back. Then she added the wig.

“Maybe I should have been Peter Pan,” I said.

“That would have definitely been fitting.”

As soon as we returned to the living room, Violet poked her head in from her workshop and waved us over.

“Hey, I have something for you to wear as a costume.”

We walked down the steps to find her standing in the middle of the room, holding something hidden behind her back.

“So I tried to think up the perfect costume for you,” she said. “And there was one thing that you desperately need to improve your look.” She whipped her hands out to show what she was holding, “A mask.”

“Thanks, that is really helpful for my self-esteem,” I said as I took the mask from her and felt the cold, heavy gunmetal. It was just like the one in my dream – grotesque with boils and a long crooked nose. Two motley ribbons hung off either side.

I put it on, and Violet circled around behind me to tie the ribbons.

“Look at it this way,” Columbine chimed in helpfully, “It’d be worse if people saw your face and thought that you were already wearing a mask. Like you were supposed to be a gross Night of the Living Dead guy or something.”

Violet brought over a hand held mirror for me to see how it looked. It was uncanny how closely it resembled my dream. I let out a faint laugh, which sounded tiny and mechanical as it reverberated within the mask, making me think of a clanking old film projector.

“You made this?” I asked.

“Yeah, a while ago. It’s just something I had lying around.”

I scanned the workshop to survey the array of tools and supplies she had assembled – paints and canvases, big chunks of clay for sculpting, metalworking tools, a mini oven, sheet metal, a half-mannequin with latex prosthetics added to its face like movie makeup, a big spice rack loaded up with various corrosive chemicals for god-

knows-what. She even had a couple tubs set up with pulp and water; it looked like she was making her own paper by hand.

“You certainly keep busy,” I said.

Just then, we heard a car pull up outside, and a few seconds later Saint Anthony appeared at the door. He was wearing what I supposed was a Minotaur costume comprised of two giant metal horns sprouting from his head and a thick brass ring hanging from the cartilage between his nostrils. He was bare-chested, showing off his sacred heart tattoo, in only a very form-fitting pair of leather shorts and knee-high boots.

“Are we ready to go?” he asked the three of us .

“Chomping at the bit,” I replied.

—

I clearly remembered arriving at the party in Anthony’s Escalade. Things became fuzzy after that.

We pulled up in front of a huge white art deco behemoth. I recognized it right away; I had often seen it from afar, most often from the Light Rail Green Line that ran along the elevated median of Highway 77. I had always assumed it was a Mormon Temple or something.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“It’s the Highwater Building,” Columbine explained. “This is where they meet.”

We got out and turned the car over to the valet, then proceeded up a massive white marble staircase to a set of three large, church-like arched double doors.

The doors opened into an expansive foyer decorated in golds and reds. Directly ahead of us was a set of three short steps at least 10 yards wide that lead up to a large entryway framed on either side by giant red curtains that had been pulled open to reveal the ballroom. The architecture was very Gaudí-esque with wavy lines and arches, giving it a very skeletal feeling, as if entering into the carcass of a great Leviathan. Most of the floor and even patches on the walls were

covered with mosaics of broken tile.

On either side of us was a set of stairways that lead up to a mezzanine, which had three identically-shaped closed doors – one red, one white, and one black.

The four of us made our way into the ballroom, which was already jam-packed with people in costumes ranging from the ornate to the playful to the risqué. In the center of the room stood a raised platform with a jazz trio consisting of piano, acoustic guitar, and upright bass, each member dressed in white, playing instrumental standards. A team of servers zipped around and between the throngs of revelers, each dressed in a tuxedo and a featureless gunmetal mask, exactly like the one my interrogator had worn.

I flagged down one of the servers with a tray of wine glasses and, after being assured they were complimentary, snagged four. Violet and Anthony each accepted one, Columbine declined hers, and I drained the remaining two in about three seconds flat.

“So I take it you’re not on the clock tonight,” Violet said.

“On the contrary, this is how I do my best work,” I replied.

Anthony butted between us, putting one hand on my shoulder and cupping Violet’s ass with the other. “So what first, then? Mingle, grab something to eat, or head straight to the dance floor?”

“Bathroom,” Columbine said resolutely.

“Well let’s go then,” Anthony replied and started walking, keeping his hand firmly gripped on his wife’s perfect ass.

Columbine slipped her arm around mine and motioned for us to follow behind them.

“We all have to go to the bathroom together?” I asked, genuinely confused.

She just chuckled. “Don’t be so provincial.”

—

Columbine inhaled forcefully through her nose as she swept her head over the length of the toilet tank lid.

“God damn, that’s smooth!” she exclaimed as she whipped herself back upright.

“Don’t blaspheme,” Anthony said and poured some more of the white powder onto the little hand-sized mirror perched atop the toilet tank.

Columbine handed me the short plastic straw. Anthony finished sculpting the lines, and I stepped up and took my bump.

“Jesus Christ, yuppies and coke, does it get any more clichéd?” I asked before passing the straw over to Violet.

“I said don’t fucking blaspheme,” Anthony repeated.

“You know, I can never tell if you’re trying to be funny when you say that.”

—

After leaving the bathroom, we headed over to the hors d’oeuvres table. The other three began picking over the sundry offerings, but I didn’t feel much like eating. Then Anthony and Violet started feeding each other little puff pastries and brie en croute, and that just killed my appetite even more.

On stage, the trio had moved past instrumentals and onto vocal songs. They were in the middle of a song I recognized but couldn’t quite place. It had a jaunty, staccato guitar rhythm, over which the piano player crooned in a scratchy, whiskey-drenched voice:

Pray for you, pray for me, sing it like a song,
Life is short, but by the grace of God, the night is long.

“Fuck, who sings this song?” I asked of no one in particular.

“That guy does,” Columbine replied, pointing up at the pianist.

Violet erupted into uncontrollable giggles, and Col and I simultaneously turned to see that she had spilled some caviar onto her cleavage and that Anthony had playfully leaned in to lick it off.

“Didn’t this already happen?” Columbine whispered.

I grabbed two glasses of wine and pounded them both in quick succession.

“I take it you’re not on the clock tonight,” Violet said.

“This is how I do my best work,” I muttered gruffly in response.

“Didn’t this already happen?” Columbine repeated and giggled softly.

She was right, there was something familiar about this moment, but I couldn’t quite place it. My head started spinning, and everything felt fragmented.

I held up my empty glass and looked inside.

“Jesus, is someone putting something in my wine? I don’t think cocaine is supposed to do this,” I mumbled as I staggered away from the other three.

—

I ended up back in the bathroom. Saint Anthony had given me a little plastic bag of my own. I wasn’t really sure when that had happened. But at any rate, I had it now, and I was digging the white powder out with the key from the Porsche and sniffing it straight out of the grooves.

“I tell you,” I said to the man in the next stall, “the profession just hasn’t been the same since Thompson offed himself. He was the last of the titans. No one has any balls anymore. I mean, ‘embedded journalist’ – what the fuck is that?”

I reached into my pockets to dig out my cigarettes, but fumbled the pack and dropped it into the toilet. “Motherfucker!” I shouted.

The man in the next stall kept our conversation going, unfazed by my outburst, “The problem is that there’s nothing hidden anymore, so there’s nothing real to report. Everything’s out in the open. People still cheat, steal, backstab, and even kill to get ahead, but now they’ll do it live on prime time network TV. Everybody ODeD on scandal – Watergate, Iran-Contra, blow jobs in the oval office – it’s too hard to maintain such a high level of outrage indefinitely. Eventually fatigue

sets in and it becomes easier just to look the other way, so long as I'm not personally hurt by it. Nothing's shocking."

"Shit, you're right," I said, taking another bump off my key. "What am I doing with my life? I'm stuck in a dead profession. I've got to get out of this bathroom and make something of myself."

—

I wandered back to the band's platform, hoping to find Columbine and the others, but they weren't there. I decided to light up a cigarette while I waited for them to come back.

"Wait, did this already happen? Was this before I dropped them in the toilet?" I mumbled to no one in particular, my lit smoke bouncing up and down between my lips. A waiter in a gunmetal mask walked up and asked me to put the smoke out. I tossed it into one of the glasses on his tray, then grabbed two others off it and pounded them both in quick succession.

The lights dimmed, and a spotlight fell upon the platform, illuminating a woman with voluminous blonde hair and tight, red sequined dress clinging to her tall, lithe frame.

The piano began the introduction to "Superstar" by the Carpenters. Then the rest of the band joined in, and the woman began to sing.

And then I realized she wasn't a woman.

His voice was soft and smooth, barely whispering, but still deep. I stood there, transfixed, and watched him perform.

About half way through the song, I finally recognized that it was Max.

—

Max and I walked together through the party. He was still in drag and trying to explain his theory about the last episode of Twin Peaks. It involved something to do with time having a physical shape like a Möbius strip, only the shape existed in a different dimension that we can't see, the way that a sphere exists in a dimension that a circle

doesn't.

"Or it's like, what a Möbius strip is to a figure eight drawn on a piece of paper, that's what time's shape is to a Möbius strip. Four-dimensional."

"What the fuck are you babbling about?" I demanded as I drained another glass of wine.

"I'm telling you how the last episode could take place twenty-five years before the dream Cooper had at the beginning of the first season."

We walked past Violet and Anthony. They were pressed against a wall in an embrace, feeding each other hors d'oeuvres. A dollop of caviar dripped off a cracker onto Violet's cleavage, and Anthony leaned in to lick it off.

"Wait, what?" I said, looking away from them and back to Max.

"Look, did you ever see the long version of the pilot?"

—

I sat next to Max on a red velvet couch. The room was dimly lit by a trio of candle fixtures on the wall. A beautiful woman in a black corset and stockings walked toward us slowly, seductively. She had long, jet black hair and light mocha skin. Her face was obscured by a gunmetal mask like the servers downstairs, except hers was a half-mask, exposing her full, ruby red lips.

Max turned to look at me with knowing grin.

"Wait, this didn't happen yet," I said.

—

"What didn't happen yet?" the strawberry-blonde next to me asked.

"I don't know, I'm starting to get a little rough around the edges," I replied.

She shook her head. "You shouldn't have drank so much before coming down here. Maybe you should just hang back; it can get pretty dangerous."

We were sitting around in a sub-basement under the Highwater Building, which was full of crates and metal storage containers. There were a little more than a dozen of us, but we had all broken into smaller groups to socialize while we waited for the game to start.

My clique consisted of the strawberry-blonde, who was about my age, and another man in his late-thirties. She was the head of governmental affairs at Abrasax, and he ran R&D for Inspiritech. Both were card-carrying member of the Highwater Society.

They both looked like athletic types and were dressed like they were going hiking or rock climbing or something. The woman was wearing a tank top and cargo pants, while the man had on a flak jacket over a t-shirt and camouflage pants. Both were carrying backpacks loaded up with serious outdoors gear – flashlights, ropes, carabiners, pulleys.

"He can't back out now," the man replied, shaking his head. "Especially not his first time."

The woman had engaged me in conversation because she thought I was someone she knew from high school. Even though we quickly figured out that she was mistaken, she still invited me to stay and talk with them.

I decided to accept the offer, honestly, because she was the best looking of the women in my immediate field of vision. She wasn't exactly my type, but attractive nonetheless – a peppy, girl-next-door type with big green eyes, a china doll face, and a pair of tits just a touch too large for her slight frame.

My appreciation of that last feature was not lost on her companion, who would periodically catch me looking and respond by moving in closer to her, as if marking his territory. When he did this, she would wait just long enough not to be rude, and then take a couple steps herself, reestablishing the distance between them. I took it less as a signal to me of her availability, and more as a signal too him of their boundaries.

"Are you nervous?" the man asked me.

I shook my head. "Should I be?"

He smiled and shrugged. "I guess we'll see."

"Do you remember your first time, how nervous you were?" the woman teased. "I thought you were going to shit yourself."

The man chuckled and explained to me, "A colleague from work – really he was more like my mentor – convinced me to start playing as a networking opportunity. The next thing I know it's two in the morning and Max is teaching me how to break into a bank."

"It's really not that hard once you get the hang of it," the woman chimed in.

"Why does Dylan Maxwell need to know how to break into a bank?" I asked. "He can't need the money."

"It was part of the game," the man replied, drawing out and over-annunciating every word to indicate the answer should have been obvious to me. "The object was to see who could find the most interesting thing in a safety deposit box. The guy who won found an actual human heart; it had been treated or whatever to preserve it, but Max had it checked out and verified it was legit."

A few minutes later, a hatch door in the ground opened up, and Max emerged from the opening. "We're good to go," he announced. "Come on down."

One by one, we descended into the hatch down a ladder, which brought us into a decaying room that looked like it might have once been a bank vault. Max led us out of the vault into another room, which indeed could have once been the lobby of a bank, but looked as if it had been built in the 19th century and left to rot ever since.

Which, as Max explained, actually was the case.

"This town was first founded in the shadow of the east foothills," he said. "It was just a stopover on the trail to the gold mines up north, a place for men looking to make their fortunes to stock up and refresh themselves. The mining supply stores, banks, and gold brokers did pretty good business; the bars and whore houses did better."

We walked through the bank lobby and out what was once the front door, which opened into a large tunnel about a story high buttressed by concrete. The length of the tunnel was lined on either side by the remnants of the facades of old buildings. Directly across from the bank was the storefront with a painted wooden sign for McPherson's

General Store.

“This used to be Main Street,” Max continued. “You see, the 1906 quake caused a land slide that buried the old town. However, by that time the city’s most powerful businessmen had realized the true value of this valley – that practically anything would grow in its soil – so they simply rebuilt the city on top of the ruins.

“Back in the fifties, during the cold war, the city started looking into building underground fallout shelters in case of nuclear attack. They discovered the remnants of the old town and decided to preserve them as a historical site. It now exists as a labyrinthine series of subterranean tunnels connecting the old buildings. The idea was to make them safe for tourists to walk through, but the funding dried up and the project was never completed. These tunnels snake around, under, above, and through the old buildings in an intricate maze with a total length of over thirty miles if laid end-to end. The buildings themselves have multiple rooms, some have multiple stories, some basements, and all are in a dangerous state of ill-repair. So watch yourselves out there,” he added with a mischievous grin.

He then reached into his pocket and produced another small red metal box. “Somewhere in the ruins of old town there is hidden a box that looks exactly like this. This one is empty, but the other contains something very valuable. Find it, and it’s yours to keep.”

—

I was back upstairs in the Highwater Building, wandering through a maze of unfamiliar hallways. I was looking for the bathroom again, but I must have made a wrong turn somewhere because I was completely lost.

I turned a corner and saw one of the masked servers.

“Hey, do you know which way leads back to the main ballroom?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said, approaching me. “But first, you have to tell me where you hid the Ariadne Key.”

The voice was unmistakable; this was the same man who had

interrogated me with the taser. I turned to run, but he was on top of me before I had even made it a yard.

“Not quite ready to talk yet?” he said as I felt a cold blade press into the flesh of my neck. “Look ahead.”

Inexplicably, I lifted my eyes and obeyed him. Directly in front of us, painted on the wall, was the crowned globe symbol of the Highwater Society. It shifted and shimmered, as if it had been painted in mercury, having a hypnotic effect on me.

I felt myself slipping into a trance, which was broken only when I felt jostled from behind. I turned to see Violet and my assailant struggling on the floor, each trying to wrest the dagger away from each other. I reached into my pocket and dug out my pocketknife, then jammed it into the base of his neck.

He let out an anguished cry and sent the back of his fist flying into my nose, stunning me. He knocked over Violet and tore off around a corner into a connecting hallway. We tried to give chase, but by the time we recovered and made it around the corner, he was gone without a trace.

“Come on, let’s get you outside for some fresh air,” Violet told me.

I followed her back the other way.

“It was lucky you happened to be going by,” I said, still shook-up.

“It wasn’t all luck,” she said. “Turns out you were right.”

I looked at her questioningly.

“I’m starting to pop out,” she explained, grinning while adjusting her dress around her cleavage. “I was headed for the bathroom to fix myself up.”

“Was the bathroom that way?” I asked.

“Yeah, you were right outside it when I found you,” she said.

“I’ve been so confused tonight,” I replied.

—

“Don’t worry,” Columbine said, her face scant inches from mine.

“Someone was slipping something into your drinks. They were trying to disorient you so they could get information. It’s just messing with your head a little, but you should be fine by tomorrow morning.”

She rolled over away from me and returned to the arms of the young man lying next to her, whom she had been cuddling.

I stood up found myself in a large open room illuminated only by black lights and star light coming in from the massive glass sun roofs overhead. The walls were all mirrors.

The floor was covered with blankets, pillows, and cushions, on top of which couples and sometimes groups of more were laying down and embracing each other. They were all fully clothed, and there wasn’t any overt sexual activity. There wasn’t even really any kissing. It was just people holding each other.

I treaded carefully over the bodies until I found the strawberry-blonde from underground with her arms wrapped around a dark-haired woman I didn’t recognize. She was behind the other woman, cradling her body against her own.

I laid down behind her in the same position, pressing my pelvis snugly up against her ass. “Congratulations,” I said.

She looked over her shoulder and flashed me a smile. “Thank you.”

“So what did you get for winning?”

She shook her head playfully, “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“I guess I’ll just have to win another game myself to find out,” I replied.

“Some day. But don’t expect it to happen right away. These people take their competitions seriously, and this was your first time, after all.”

I nodded, and then after a pause added, “You know, you never told me what your first game was like.”

She turned her head back to face forward, looking away from me. “Well, let’s see,” she began. “I joined when I was sixteen. My father was already a member, and he thought it would be good for me. On the first night I went out with Max, there were only a handful of us, like six or seven, all women. Max helped us get into these horrible disguises, like big wigs and trashy make-up, leopard print and bustiers and leather skirts. Then he drove us down to the north end of San

Hermes Park late at night with nothing but the clothes on our backs and turned us loose with all the drug dealers, the vagrants, the junkies, the hookers. And he told us the one who had made the most money by daybreak was the winner.

“I was the one who lost that night. I didn’t make a single cent. I wanted to play the game, I thought I could, and I even found a man. I got into his car, and he drove down the street and pulled into the empty parking lot of a middle school. He parked the car and didn’t say anything, just unfastened his seat belt, reclined his seat, and unzipped himself. Then he looked at me with the most disgusting face I’ve ever seen – I still can see it to this day – and I realized that this wasn’t about sex to him, it wasn’t about getting off. He hated himself for being ugly, for being old, for being fat, for being too much of an asshole for any woman to voluntarily put up with. And he hated me for being young and beautiful, he hated me for making him desire me. And this was his way of getting revenge, by subordinating me to him, by taking me down to his level. Somehow, looking at him in the car with his disgusting little prick peeking up out of his open pants, I knew all this to be true, and it made me sick. I opened the car door and ran out as fast as I could, I ran for something like a dozen blocks before I finally collapsed, and I just felt sick. I tried to throw up to see if it would help, but I could only dry heave. So then I just went back to the park and waited for daybreak to come and told Max what happened. And so I lost.

“A week later my father lost his job. Max leaked to the paper that he had been keeping a mistress who was drawing a salary of \$500,000 a year from his company as a ‘consultant’ even though she never set foot in the building and hardly spoke a word of English. He had also been using his expense account to fly them overseas for vacations under the guise of market research. Two days after this all came out, he killed himself. My mom and I lost everything and ended up on the streets. Instead of going away to an ivy league university, I had to stay with her and work two jobs to put myself through community college. It was rough, but I ended up finishing my degree at State and getting a scholarship to Stanford to get my Master’s. The day I graduated, Max came to see me and told to me that he never harms the people who lose his games. He just tests them, shows them who they really are. I told him that I already knew this. And then he offered me a job.”

At that moment, I felt a strange longing come over me that I couldn’t

quite explain. For some reason, I found myself wishing that I had actually been the person she thought I was earlier that night, her friend from high school. I didn't really know what to do, what to say, or even how to feel about what she had just told me. I just felt restless, like I had to do something, anything. So of course I did the most stupid thing possible.

I leaned my head forward and pressed my lips the side of her neck, kissing her skin softly.

Immediately I felt her body tense, so I pulled back. We stayed still for another uncomfortable silence.

"Please leave," she said.

I stood up and saw Max standing across the room, leaning casually against the far wall. I walked over to meet him.

"Cuddle parties. They're becoming more and more popular with young professionals," he explained. "People who are so alienated, so wrapped up in their jobs, in technology, in creature comforts, that even the simplest acts of human affection become salacious. We have to schedule in any human contact, pencil it in on your calendar and treat it as anonymous as a date with a prostitute, just another transaction or business dealing, just another meeting to take or appointment to keep. Ours is a generation so neutered we can't even manage a proper orgy."

"It's doing my head in, honestly," I told him. "I guess I'm just old-fashioned some ways; I need something more visceral."

"Luckily, I think I can arrange for that, too."

—

We were sitting on a red velvet couch.

A beautiful woman in a black corset and stockings was walking towards us slowly, seductively. She had long, jet black hair and light mocha skin. Her face was obscured by a gunmetal mask like the servers downstairs, except hers was a half-mask, exposing her full, ruby red lips.

Max turned to look at me with a knowing grin.

“Shit, everything’s running together, like side two of Abbey Road.”

“Just shut up and enjoy this,” Max said, shaking his head. “Would it help you if I made her wear a purple wig?”

The woman knelt between my legs and started working the zipper on my pants open. She leaned forward and buried her face into my lap.

I rolled my eyes back and savored the feeling. Then I opened them again when I felt Max’s hand on my chin. He slipped his fingers around to the left side of my jaw and turned my head right, towards him. I let him control my movements and parted my lips as he leaned in to press his against mine.

—

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. The sun shone brightly through an open window. I was wrapped in black silk sheets and spooning Max, who was still asleep. We were both naked.

I reached out and touched him, as if I needed to prove to myself it was real. He snorted and rolled over, hovering halfway between waking and sleep, then mumbled something that sounded like, “Didn’t this already happen?”

Chapter 25. Whatever You Want Most

“Are you still having the dreams?” Max asked me as he took a sip of his tea.

We were sitting in his bed, naked and loosely wrapped in sheets.

“No, they stopped about the time I met you,” I replied, enjoying the warmth of my own cup in my hands. It was a Japanese-style stone mug, rough to the touch, with small lotus flowers painted on the sides.

Max cast a sideways glance at me. “I am,” he said and drained the rest of his tea.

He stood up and moved over to his closet, keeping his back to me as he put on a red and black Japanese silk kimono. “Have you figured out why you were having them, yet?”

“No,” I replied, getting out of bed myself and hunting around for my clothes – unsuccessfully.

He nodded. His demeanor was more restrained, more serious than I had ever seen him before. He wasn’t wrapping everything in his usual forced irony. Honestly, it was a little unsettling.

“You know, when you first told me that you were having that dream, I thought that there was one painfully obvious explanation,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, you knew where her body was hidden. Logically, there are only two ways that was possible – either you found her there, or you were the one who put her there.” He let out a dry, bitter chuckle. “That first time you brought her up, I thought you were confessing.”

“Wait, you thought I killed her?”

He chuckled again. “Yes. It actually made perfect sense to me at the time. I thought that since you were a reporter investigating my activities, you had uncovered certain damaging information about me in the process. It wouldn’t have been the first time – your friend Cobb stumbled upon the same information back in his own time. Anyways, it seemed to follow that you were a likely suspect for my blackmailer. So when you first mentioned Jacinda’s body being in my plane, my natural

assumption was that you were trying to let me know that you were my adversary, and that you weren't afraid of me knowing your identity."

I laughed. I didn't know how else to react, so I just laughed.

Max joined in.

—

We descended together down the spiral staircase into his living room. It was a vast open decorated in the same minimalist style as his office. The walls were completely bare, devoid of photos, pieces of art, or personal touches. There were a few white couches, all pristinely clean, interspersed with black side tables and coffee tables. Everything was laid out in a precise, geometric pattern, and though it was obviously intended to entertain guests, the entire room had a cold, antiseptic feel to it.

I couldn't decide if he preferred such stark surroundings to avoid betraying anything of himself psychologically, or if he was legitimately this soulless.

As I stepped off the staircase, we found Columbine laying on one of the couches, looking rumpled and bleary-eyed, as if she had just woken up herself. I immediately regretted the fact that I hadn't been able to find my clothes to dress before leaving Max's bedroom.

She was wearing a men's shirt that fit her like a loose nightgown, and it took me a second to recognize it as mine. "Sorry," she said, noticing that I was looking at the shirt. "I found it on the ground when I came in last night, and I put it on so I wouldn't have to sleep in my costume."

Her eyes, however, betrayed that she knew the shirt was mine when she picked it up and that she had worn it as more than just something to cover herself.

Max had doubtlessly picked up on this as well. "Well I don't know about the two of you," he said jovially as he slapped me on the back, "but I could sure go for some more tea."

He headed into the kitchen to fix some. Meanwhile, I hunted around and found my pants.

“My cell phone’s missing,” I said as I slipped them on and felt around the pockets – mostly to fill the awkward silence.

“I haven’t seen it,” Columbine replied. “Your stuff was kinda scattered all around when I came in last night, though.”

I nodded and continued to cast about for some way of making small talk. “So how did you end up here, anyways? Why didn’t you go back to Violet’s?”

She shrugged. “I did, but as soon as I pulled up I could tell they were in the living room, and I didn’t want to interrupt, you know.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“She means, they were in the living room, fucking,” Max chimed in as he re-entered carrying a tray with a tea pot and three cups.

I felt a knot in my stomach as I imagined Violet and Anthony together. Columbine seemed to relish watching my reaction.

Max set the tray on a coffee table and continued talking in a light, conversational tone while serving us. “You missed a good game last night, Col. I took everyone underground. D even played. Of course, he got beat by a girl, but at least he played.”

Still trying to shake the mental image of Anthony fucking Violet from my head, I said, “That reminds me, I was meaning to ask you for a favor. Whoever the big loser was last night, when you go to ruin his life like you did to Peterman, can you at least give me the scoop?”

Max laughed. “Do you honestly expect me to sit around for a week waiting for your paper to go to print? I hate to be the one to break this to you, but that’s not how news works anymore. Get yourself a blog, and we’ll talk.”

Columbine grinned, trying to keep her face down so I wouldn’t see.

Max added, “You don’t really remember much from last night, do you?”

I shook my head. “No, and honestly I’m probably the better for it. I just wish I could remember what I did with my phone.”

“Oh, you lost it last night,” Max replied.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Jenny’s flying back in today and she’s supposed to call me later. I’ll have to go back and find it.”

“I’ll drive you,” Max offered. “I have some quick business to take care of there, anyways.”

—

We went back to the Highwater Building after breakfast. As we walked inside, Max explained that it was most likely I lost my phone upstairs toward the end of the night. “Go ahead while I take care of what I need to do downstairs. Your keycard should be able to get me anywhere you need to go.”

So I proceeded alone up to the mezzanine and its three colored doors. I decided to try the middle one first, which was painted white. It was locked, but I noticed an electronic card reader beside it. I held my card up to the reader and heard a loud click. I tried the knob again, and it opened.

The door led into the large room with the sun roof and mirrored walls where the “cuddle party” had been. It was now empty but for a small cleaning crew, who said they hadn’t found any stray phones.

I doubled back out to the mezzanine and tried the black door next, but my keycard didn’t unlock it. I thought it was a little strange, considering what Max had said, but just shrugged it off and tried the red door instead. It clicked like the first one had, and I turned the knob.

This one opened into a narrow hallway with three more doors – two along the left wall, the third at the far end. The right wall was made of one-way glass that looked into the room with the sun roof.

The other walls were covered in golden wallpaper embossed with faint floral patterns, while the dark red carpet had a pattern of intricate gold lines intertwining like a celtic cross.

I heard sobbing coming from the far door and treaded quietly down the hallway to see what it was. Slowly opening the door, taking care to be as silent as possible, I peeked inside.

I recognized the room with the velvet couch where Max had taken me last night. There were three people inside. One man stood in the corner facing away from me. He was bent forward over a second person, a woman, whom I also couldn’t see clearly except to tell that

she was sitting in a chair and wearing only underwear. The third man reclined on the velvet couch across the room. I could see him clearly and had no trouble recognizing him.

“Saint Anthony,” I said as I opened the door fully.

He sat up and smiled broadly. “Come back to admire your handiwork?”

“What do you mean?”

I walked further into the room and got a clearer view of the other two people. The standing man was the old doctor who fixed me up at Asterion, and his patient was the masked woman from last night. She had been badly beaten; large bruises covered her face and neck, her nose had been broken, and a large crescent shaped laceration had split around her left eye. The doctor was busy stitching her up.

The woman glanced up to see me and immediately began trembling in terror, her eyes welling up with tears. I took a step closer, and she leaped up from her seat and screamed incoherently in Spanish.

Behind me, Saint Anthony laughed.

“What the fuck happened to her?” I demanded.

“You did,” Anthony replied.

“Bullshit,” I spat angrily, feeling nauseous.

The woman kept screaming, despite the doctor’s best efforts to calm her down. “I think you better leave,” he finally said to me over his shoulder.

I turned to go, but the door was closed behind me. Painted on the back side, where I now could see it, was another crowned globe sigil like the one I saw last night, shimmering hypnotically in strange metallic paint. Suddenly, fragmented memories started rushing back to me.

—

I was on top of this woman, thrusting violently and grunting like an animal. Max laid beside us, watching, barking at me to do it harder and faster. I looked down at her face, saw her biting her lower lip in pain,

and noticed the mask had slipped and was covering her eyes.

I grabbed the mask and pulled it out of the way, revealing her face.

“Holy shit,” Max said. “It’s your sister.”

“She’s not my sister,” I said.

“D, you’re fucking your sister,” Max insisted.

I looked down at the woman, and she did bear an unsettling resemblance.

“It’s not her,” I repeated.

“D, it is me,” the woman said, her Spanish accent thick and sweet.

Max started laughing – a deep, resonant laughter that filled the room.

“Shut up!” I screamed.

The woman said, “D, it’s me, Jenny.”

Everything flashed red with rage.

–

I was back out in the hallway, fallen to my knees and doubled over to vomit all over that plush red carpet. I could still hear the sound of Max’s laughter. Then I looked up and realized he was there, standing over me

“Do you remember now who lost the game?” he asked. “You did. You were the last one out before I sealed the hatch.”

“You drugged me,” I said feebly. “I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Nobody made you do anything you didn’t want to do,” Max replied. “Let’s not kid ourselves, we both know you’ve got some serious issues with women.”

Anthony and the doctor walked out of the room to join us. “I’ve done as much as I can,” he said to Max. “But she’ll be scarred, and the nose could not be reset properly.”

All three of us looked back to see the woman standing in the doorway. I thought to myself, Goddamn you, Max, she does look

almost exactly like Jenny.

“Get her out of here,” Max instructed Anthony.

“Where is he taking her?” I asked as I watched Anthony grab the girl roughly and drag her down the hallway.

“I frankly don’t care,” Max responded. “She’s no good to me anymore. Would you want a whore that looks like that?”

“So what, you’re gonna toss her out on the street like trash?” I yelled at him. “She’s a human being, for fuck’s sake. And for all your bullshit and intellectual posturing, you’re just a glorified pimp.”

“Oh, you are certainly not in any position to lecture me on feminism, friend,” Max responded. “I give people what they want – their dreams, their most secret fantasies. I can’t help it if the world is full of sick children stunted by sexual repression.”

He took a seat beside me on the floor and continued, “D, I’m going to let you in on a little secret. What I give to the people who win my games is exactly the same thing I give to the losers – I give them whatever it is they desire most. Whether that’s a punishment or a reward is up to them.”

“This is not what I wanted,” I growled back.

“Sometimes what a person wants is good for them, and sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes people want to lose. Sometimes they find themselves at a point in their lives where they need to be punished, and I am happy to oblige. Sometimes they choose to take their adversity and use it to spur themselves to become better. And sometimes they are happier just wallowing masochistically in their own misery.”

My head had stopped spinning, and I was starting to think more clearly. I sat up and propped my back against the wall. He rested his head on my shoulder.

“I don’t trade in base wish-fulfillment. I’m not interested in empty escapism. I show people who they really are. I purify human souls in the crucible of pain and struggle. I turn base matter into gold. That’s what I’m about, and that’s what the Highwater Society is about, even if they need to be reminded of it from time to time.”

Suddenly I heard music playing and a voice singing.

I tried to call you before, but I lost my nerve.

I tried my imagination, but I was disturbed.

It took me a few seconds to realize that it was coming from Max's pants. He pulled my cell phone out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID display, then began to chuckle.

"That's your ringtone for your sister?" he said with amusement.
"That's going to be stuck in my head all day now."

He tossed me the phone, but the call went to voice-mail before I could answer.

As we walked out of the building and back to the car, Max sang over and over, "Eight six seven five three-oh ni-iiine."

Chapter 26. It Felt Good

Jenny's message said that her plane had landed and she wanted to invite me to dinner with her. And Brad. At James McPherson's house. So naturally I called her back and said yes.

I also called up Columbine to see if she wanted to tag along, but her response was a terse "No."

McPherson lived in up in the forested hills at the northwestern edge of the valley. It was a long, winding drive to his mansion, but the Boxster handled it just fine.

I arrived about twenty minutes early, hoping to get a chance to talk with McPherson himself before everyone else arrived. As I entered the house, McPherson was walking into the foyer from inside, escorting out two men – Max's friend Peterman and my friend Brian. They didn't notice me right away.

"All I'm saying is we can't afford to underestimate him," Peterman, his tone of voice and their body language implying that this was the tail end of a conversation that he was not willing to drop. "He is dangerous, and sooner or later everyone in this organization is going to have to pay the piper for his sins."

Brian caught sight of me and shot me a contemptuous glare. McPherson turned his head, following Brian's gaze.

"Ah, Mr. Quetzal, you are early," he said gregariously.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything," I replied.

"Not at all, I was just showing my guests out."

The two other men exited quickly, leaving me alone with McPherson.

"We were actually just discussing your new employer," he explained.

"I gathered."

He smiled. "Yes, Max and I are good friends going back more than a decade now. But he does have a tendency to rub people the wrong way, as I'm sure you've noticed."

He led me down a hallway to a set of large oak double doors. They

opened into his study, which was remarkable for how busy it was. One entire wall was dominated with overstuffed book cases. The opposite wall was literally covered with framed pictures, awards, declarations, newspaper clippings, and other remembrances of his life, all hung with scant centimeters of space between frames. A third wall was taken up by two large curio cabinets, one on each side of the double doors leading into the room, filled with various gifts and trinkets.

The rest of the room was filled with furniture – couches, chairs, coffee tables, end tables, short bookcases – all expensive antiques, all covered with more books and trinkets.

He seemed to have a neurotic compulsion to surround himself with things, giving the entire place an almost desperate feel. It was almost as if he was worried in his age that his life was slipping through his fingers like falling sand, and he was trying to hold tight onto as many little grains as he could.

I sat in an arm chair in front of his large mahogany desk, while he poured us each a glass of brandy.

I continued, “The thing I don’t understand is why you all put him in charge to begin with if you were so concerned with him being a loose cannon. I mean, anyone who talks to him more than a couple minutes is going to quickly figure out that Max’s hardware is severely mis-wired.”

“What do you mean, put him in charge?” he asked.

“Doesn’t he run your Highwater Society?”

“Good lord, no,” McPherson laughed. “I don’t know what he’s told you, but there’s a lot more to the Highwater Society than Max’s little games. The fact of the matter is that Max did us a very big favor once by helping us recover something we had lost, and so we repaid him with a largely ceremonial position, which he in turn has managed to make a bloody mess of.”

“So what’s your group really all about then?”

McPherson leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. “It’s not something I can just tell you, it’s something you can only learn through your own experience. I will tell you, though, that our organization goes back a very long time.”

“Back to when your family first set up shop in this valley to bilk

money from gold miners?”

“Yes, we have existed in this city since its founding, but we also have antecedents that span back centuries in the old world.”

I stifled a laugh. “What are you, the fucking Illuminati or something? Rosicrucians? Stone Cutters?”

He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a ring with the crown and globe symbol. “Are you telling me you don’t know what this sigil means?”

The symbol started to shimmer like the one I’d seen last night, and suddenly I heard a loud, piercing shriek of feedback along with the incessant mechanical clatter of a film projector. I gritted my teeth and tried suppress the cacophony in my head.

“Now, I don’t tell you this to poison the well for you with your boss,” he continued. “But if you’re going to be part of our family now, it’s time you started figuring these things out.”

“What do you mean, part of the family?” I asked, the noise subsiding.

“I mean just that. Not only is your sister married to my nephew and heir, but now my daughter has apparently decided that the sun rises and sets on your head. You’re one of us.”

“I haven’t fucked Columbine,” I blurted out.

“Pardon?”

“Natalie, I mean. We’re not a couple. Whatever. Nevermind.” Where the fuck did that come from?

A brief look of concern flashed across his face but soon resolved itself into a magnanimous grin. “Be that as it may, I understand you’ve been spending a lot of time with her,” he said, sipping his brandy. “Incidentally, I hope she’s well; I haven’t had a chance to see her in quite some time.”

“She’s good,” I replied. “In fact, she came here to see you a few days ago, but you were leaving just as she pulled up. She said you were riding with some other men in an old classic car – a blue Chevy Del Rey.”

I studied him closely for a reaction. If he was surprised or made nervous by my mention of the blue car, his face didn’t betray it.

“Really?” McPherson responded, shaking his head. “Well, my daughter does like to tell stories, so it wouldn’t surprise me if that little detail is one of her embellishments.”

“That’s true, she does like to tell stories,” I said and shot the entire glass of brandy he had set in front of me. “I guess I’ll just have to ask Anthony about it, since that’s who blue car man drove you to meet.”

Again, no reaction – not even a twitch.

“You know, you really should sip a liquor this fine,” he admonished.

I burst into laughter, which caused him to arch an eyebrow quizzically.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “But do you ever feel like you’re life is one of those old cartoons where you keep running in a straight line, but the same scenery keeps cycling back around every couple frames?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

I shrugged my shoulders, then looked down at a row of framed photos on the desk. They were all of Columbine, each one showing her at a different age.

I picked up the furthest one from me, which showed her as an infant sitting in the lap of a woman. The picture had been cropped to focus on the child, so most of the woman was out of frame. Only her hands and chest were visible.

“Nice picture,” I said. “Who’s that holding her?”

“Her mother,” he replied.

“I thought her mother died during labor.”

“No.” McPherson shook his head and frowned. “She died when Natalie was still very young, though. Shortly after this picture was taken, in fact. Why’d you think she died during childbirth?”

“That’s what she told me. But as you said, she likes to embellish her stories,” I explained. “Why’d you cut her mom out of the picture?”

He sucked his teeth distastefully. “Her mother and I were never married. Things didn’t end on good terms between us.”

“What does that mean?”

McPherson didn’t respond. I shifted restlessly in my chair, my

patience wearing thin, and finally blurted out, “Okay, fine, let’s stop pussyfooting around this thing. Let me ask you this – why have you been calling Lily Lynch so much lately? What’s the story there?”

McPherson furrowed his brow pensively and pushed the tips of his fingers together, forming his hands into an A. “Lynch – wait, are you talking about Natalie’s friend, that unpleasant little woman who works for Max? I don’t remember speaking with her lately, and I can’t imagine why I should have.”

The way he kept playing dumb was starting to grate on my nerves. I decided to provoke him a little. Leaning in over the table conspiratorially, I gave him a knowing wink and asked, “You were fucking her, weren’t you?”

His cheeks immediately glowed bright pink. “Excuse me.”

I put up my hands as if to say I meant no harm. “I can’t say I blame you. I’ve imagined what she was like between the sheets myself once or twice. I bet she likes it rough, doesn’t she? Pulling her hair, holding her down, maybe slapping her around a bit. I can tell her type – just like I can tell yours. But hey, takes two to know, right, and who doesn’t like a little of the rough stuff?”

He stood up and lunged toward me menacingly, slamming his palms down on the desktop, his face flush with rage. “Listen, I don’t know what kind of stories my daughter has been telling you about me, but I am not some kind of monster – despite whatever she might believe I did or didn’t do to her.”

At first I stared at him blankly in confusion, but then something clicked in my head, and Columbine’s animosity towards her father made a lot more sense.

Then I hit him.

I hit the bastard hard, and then I hit him again.

And it felt good.

McPherson spat a couple wads of blood and teeth onto the slick finish of his desktop.

On my way out of the house, I found Jenny and Brad waiting in the drawing room.

“What’s wrong?” Jenny asked as she stood up to meet me.

“I just accused your new father-in-law of colluding with blackmailers and murderers. Then I knocked a couple of teeth out for molesting his daughter.”

“You what?” Brad yelled.

“Brad, Jesus, just mind your own fucking business, you cunt,” I snarled as I headed for the door.

Jenny grabbed my arm. “D, wait.”

I shrugged her off. “Jenny, I’m not really in the mood for a lecture now, so save it.”

She looked at me with hurt in her eyes. “Why are you so intent on driving away the few people left who actually care about you?”

“You know, this is the second time this week someone has asked me that. I still don’t have a good answer.”

Chapter 27. Would It Have Made a Difference?

I pounded my fist against the steering wheel in frustration as I sped down the hill, twisting along the narrow mountain road, not really sure where I was heading.

I switched the radio onto the local junior college station. The music was strange and ethereal. A woman sang surreal stream-of-consciousness lyrics over a single acoustic guitar plucking repetitive arpeggios with typewriter sounds in the background. It was hypnotic and unsettling at the same time. I could feel the hairs standing up on my arms.

A magic for the chosen few
Confused as well as clarified
Unknown, a pixel in your TV screen
Give me truth and I'll show you how you lie
Give me lies and I will know yourself

A phone started ringing, but when I picked up mine I realized it was the wrong one. I opened the glove box to grab Lily's phone and looked down at the caller ID display, which read: HOME.

I clicked the green button to answer.

"I wonder if I ever even had a chance of being happy. Like if I had made different choices, if I hadn't fucked things up so bad, would it have made a difference? I wonder if there's some other world out there, some alternate universe where I ended up happy."

"Who is this?" I asked, even though the voice was unmistakably Lily's.

"Meet me at my place in an hour. I need to talk to you."

The line went dead.

Suddenly, a pair of headlights flashed in my rearview, and I glanced

up to see them bearing down on me fast. At first the car was obscured in the darkness, but as it came closer, I recognized it as the blue Chevy. Fucking bastard McPherson sicked his dog on me.

I felt it tap my back bumper. The car was now close enough that I could make out the driver's scarred, ruddy face in the rearview – it was the man who attacked me in Max's plane, the same one who drove McPherson out to meet Anthony at the graves.

I sped up, but the Del Rey kept pace and tapped me two more times.

He pulled up beside me on the left and started drifting right, trying to force me off the road. The two cars scraped together as I tried to accelerate, but I couldn't shake him. I was sure the Porsche could take him, but I didn't want to risk opening it up to full speed at night on such a winding road.

We came up on a sharp left turn, and I knew right away that I was going too fast and he had pushed me too far over. I took the turn wide and my right tires left the pavement. The wheel jerked out of my hands as the Porsche veered off down the embankment and crashed headfirst into a tree.

I heard the Del Rey continue on down the mountain, its sound getting faint in the distance.

The airbag had deployed and saved me from any real harm, but I was still sore from the impact and covered in shattered glass. I staggered out of the Porsche, which was totaled, and sat down on the dirty ground, feeling twigs and dead leaves crackling underneath me.

When I had finally regained my bearings, I called Columbine on my cell phone and explained what happened. "Can you get your hands on a car and pick me up?"

"I'm kind of tied up at the moment. Can you wait?"

"No. I don't have time to explain now, but I have somewhere to be. Do you think you could send someone to pick me up?"

"How about Violet?" Columbine offered.

I hesitated but decided I really didn't have a choice. "Okay."

Violet pulled up twenty minutes later. "Rough night?"

"Hardy-har," I replied as I climbed into her Volvo.

She flashed her toothy smile at me. God, I melted whenever I saw that smile. "So where are we headed?"

"Lily's."

I instructed her to take an overly-complicated route, sticking to back streets and going around in circles a few times to make sure we weren't being followed. By the time we finally arrived, it was just a hair past the hour-mark from when Lily originally called me.

As we turned the corner onto Lily's block, we found the blue Del Rey parked in front of her building. I told Violet to keep going past it and park a couple blocks away. Then I doubled back on foot, being careful to stay as hidden as possible.

I was crouched behind the hedges of the building next door when I saw the blue car's driver emerge from Lily's front gate, wearing a long trench coat and hat just like before. I stayed down until he pulled away, then ran into the building.

When I reached Lily's condo, the door was ajar. I went inside and switched the lights on, finding it empty. Everything was still the way I remembered it – meaning thoroughly trashed. Deciding to wait, I sat down on the couch.

Ten minutes later, the door opened, and Lily walked in. She looked like a bum; her skin and clothes were covered with dirt, her hair tangled and matted. She wore a stained white tank top and dirty torn jeans. Her feet were bare, raw, and bleeding.

"Jesus Christ, what happened to you?"

She smirked and pointed at my face. "I was just about to ask you the same thing."

"Hey, be nice, I'm sensitive about my new look."

"You shouldn't be, it's no more hideous than your old one."

It was good to see she hadn't lost her touch.

"So you really were hiding out in the shantytown?" I asked.

“Yes, I figured it was the last place anyone would think to look for me. Until of course you showed up.”

She walked over to the tattered remains of her couch, fixed a couple of cushions on it as well as she could, and sank down into it, savoring what probably was still the most comfortable seat she’d had all week.

“So what did you need to see me about?” I asked.

“Why haven’t you done anything with the parcel that Cobb gave you?”

“I can’t open the box. He told me the Ariadne Key would open it, but I still haven’t been able to find it.”

Lily sighed and shook her head. “You really don’t know as much about what’s going on as you lead others to believe.” I looked at her blankly. “You’ve been carrying it around with you for the past several days. The key is in my phone.”

I pulled out her BlackBerry. “Inside this?”

She snatched it away from me. Then she popped open the back panel and removed the micro-SD card.

“How is that supposed to open the box?”

“It doesn’t. It’s a trick box. You press in on both ends at once and the drawer slides out. The Ariadne Key unlocks the data inside.”

“A cryptographic key,” I said as I took the card from her, thinking that I probably should have figured that out a lot earlier. “So what now?”

“Now we go get the parcel, and I’ll show you what you’ve been sitting on all week. We’ll send it to all the newspapers, to the police and the mayor. Once the information is out, they can’t use it to blackmail Max anymore, and Max won’t be able to hurt me.”

“Just like that, you’re turning against your conspirators?” I asked.

“That’s the only way I’ll ever be safe,” she responded.

“Okay, but first you’ll have to get yourself cleaned up. The place where I have it hidden is a classy establishment,” I said.

“You won’t get any argument from me,” she replied. “A nice warm shower sounds just like heaven right now.”

Lily disappeared into the bathroom, and soon after I heard the

shower start. This left me alone to think about what she had just told me. It was possible that she was telling the truth, but on the other hand, it was equally possible that she was playing me to get her hands on Cobb's box and turn it over to the blackmailers.

It stood to reason, at least in my mind, that if she was telling the truth, it didn't matter if she came with me or not; as long as I went public with whatever data was in that box, the outcome would be the same either way. She only had to come along if she was planning on double-crossing me.

It made sense at the time, but considering what happened later, I never got to find out which was really the case. Looking back, however, I replayed that same line of reasoning over and over in my head, but it never did much to keep me from wondering if things would have turned out differently that night if I had trusted her.

But anyways, I made up my mind to slip quietly out of the condo while Lily showered and went back to Violet's car alone.

"How did it go?" she greeted me.

"Well, I could use a drink," I replied. "You're not in any rush to get home, are you?"

Chapter 28. Dispenser

I was worried that the man in the blue car might have somehow followed us after leaving Lily's, so I decided to kill a couple hours at the Casbah with Violet before getting down to business. We traded shots, took over the jukebox, and danced like a couple of spastic monkeys. I couldn't remember the last time I'd enjoyed myself so much.

Finally, I decided I'd waited long enough to proceed without arousing the suspicions of anyone who might be watching.

Violet was in the middle of a heated – if slurred – debate with the bartender Maggie about the relative merits of Steinem vs. Paglia or some shit like that when I abruptly announced, “I gotta hit the head. Hey Mags, did they get around to fixing that condom machine yet?”

The two women simultaneously whipped their heads around to look at me in disbelief. “Oh I don't think you'll need to worry about it tonight, dear,” Maggie replied.

I staggered back to the restroom, laughing all the way. After relieving myself into the porcelain trough, I walked over to the condom dispenser and pried open its face.

Cobb's blue box was hidden in the change repository. Holding it carefully, I pushed in on each end. One side sprang back out, revealing a small drawer containing a USB flash drive. I stuffed it into my pocket with Lily's memory card, then replaced the box in the condom machine and closed it all back up just as it had been.

When I returned, Violet had already gathered up her coat and purse and was leaning unsteadily against the bar.

“Are you ready to leave?” I asked. “I don't think you're in any condition to drive.”

“You can drive, then—,” she said, then added playfully, “—to your place. Did you get the machine to work?”

“No.”

“Pity,” she replied, then grabbed me by the neck of my shirt and pulled me in to give me a sloppy, passionate kiss.

—

Ten minutes later, I was pressed up against my front door, reaching blindly behind myself with my keys in one hand, trying to find the keyhole as Violet wrapped her legs around me and kissed me hungrily. I finally managed to get the door open, then staggered backwards into the room. I carried her over to the kitchen counter while she sucked on my earlobe, not missing a beat. Then, as I set her down, I unzipped her skirt and worked off her panties while kissing down her neck. Dropping to my knees, I lifted her left leg and licked my tongue along the leather of her knee-high Docs until I hit the smooth, creamy flesh of her legs. I planted a series of kisses and bites along the skin of her inner thigh, working my way up, enjoying the way my lips felt against her burn scars. Finally, I reached her pussy and propped her leg up on my shoulders as she leaned back and spread herself open.

I lightly teased her vulva with my tongue for a while before moving on to firm, rapid licks, gliding my tongue between her lips, tasting her juices and savoring her scent. At first I felt her hands running through my hair and the gentle rocking of her pelvis as her body responded to me, and she let out some quiet, breathy gasps. Soon, however, I noticed she stopped responding.

I lifted my head to find her slumped against a cabinet, passed out cold. It didn't do a whole lot for my ego.

I carried her into the bedroom and tucked her into my bed, then returned to the front room.

Settling in at my desk, I loaded both the USB drive and the memory card into my laptop and successfully opened the contents of the drive, which was a folder labeled "Project Ariadne" containing a number of different files.

It took me a solid four hours to pour through them. In a nutshell, they detailed a vast smuggling operation that Max had been tapped into ever since his return stateside.

Records of financial transactions with foreign governments, Russian and Japanese mobs, and a whole host of other unsavory characters. Detailed logs of shipments Max brought in through the port in

unmarked containers with forged customs seals, including dates, times, ship info, and even what was in the cargo. Most of the shipments were drugs. The rest were split pretty evenly between weapons and women, the latter coming from Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. All told, he averaged about a dozen shipments a year, each one painstakingly detailed and documented in the file.

How could he keep records like this? I thought to myself. Did he really believe they'd never be found?

Shaking my head, but with a huge grin on my face, I logged onto the dashboard for the Concrete Underground website. After a little digging, I found the blog Sharon had set up for me about a year ago, but I had never done anything with. I created a post titled "The Last Will & Testament of Patrick Cobb" and began uploading the thumb drive's files as attachments.

While I waited for them to transfer, I glanced back through the documents a second time, and something new caught my attention. Of all the shipments listed, there was only one that didn't give a description of the cargo. It was one of the earliest, sent from Dubai. I went through the rest of the files; there were a few other documents that referenced that shipment, but none said what was in it. Instead, they were all related to the construction of a special underground storage unit at Asterion, designated 33.

My computer sounded a loud alert to tell me the upload was complete. Then I zipped the files and e-mailed them to everyone I could think of – the Morning Star, the major tech bloggers, the Smoking Gun, every left wing web site in my bookmarks, all the local TV stations, 24-hour cable news, the mayor, the Governor, the freaking White House. And of course a copy went to Max.

When I was done, I leaned back in my chair with a cigarette and a bottle of scotch, my sense of smug self-satisfaction overshadowing the near certainty that I had just signed my own death warrant. The first rays of sunlight were just starting to stream in through the cracks between my venetian blinds, and I knew it was only a matter of time before there was a knock on my door.

Then there was a knock on my door.

I jumped up from the chair – and nearly jumped out of my skin – then ran to look through the peephole to see who it was.

Fucking Axelrod.

I opened the door to find the detective accompanied by two uniformed officers. "Gentlemen, what a pleasant surprise. Can I offer you some joe? Or maybe hair of the dog?"

"We're not going to be staying long," Axelrod replied. "Neither will you, for that matter. We're taking you in for questioning in the murder of Lilian Lynch."

I was taken aback but tried not to let it show. Had Lily really been killed?

"I'd love to help you out, detective, I really would, but I've got to get to work."

Axelrod's eyes dropped to the nearly-empty bottle in my hand. "You always go to work drunk?"

"Dedication to duty, detective. It's what separates great men like us from the rabble."

I heard the creak of a door opening behind me.

"D, is something wrong?" Violet asked, red-eyed and hung-over, wearing only her tank top and completely naked from the waist down.

That could have been timed better.

A wry grin spread across Axelrod's lips. "Is she the one who drives that Volvo parked out front?" Without waiting for an answer, he instructed the other cops, "Bring her, too."

Chapter 29. Ghosts

Axelrod set a series of photographs on the steel table in front of me. The first one showed Lily naked and sprawled out on her shower floor, lying in a pool of her own blood. The second one was a close-up of her lifeless face, her lips parted slightly, her eyes staring off vacantly. The third was pulled back, showing more of the shower, the walls streaked with bright red blood. The last two were close-ups of her wrists with large, jagged gashes sliced deep into the skin.

I picked up the first one and pretended to study it closely, then screwed my face up into a sour expression. "Jesus, Axelrod, are these cum stains? Do you beat off to pictures of dead naked women?"

I flung the print back onto the table and smiled at the detective, who was leaning back on his chair and running his tongue along his teeth.

"Funny guy. I got one for you, stop me if you think you've heard it before. A faggot and a whore walk into a bar. But half an hour before that, this same faggot walked in and out of a dead woman's condo, right around the estimated time of death, walking right past the surveillance cameras in the front lobby."

"That's not very funny," I replied. "I mean, the material's good enough, but comedy is all about the delivery."

"How's this one? Earlier this week, a vagrant who got picked up for urinating in the middle of a 7-11 told the arresting officer that he had seen a Mexican man and a woman with purple hair get out of a light blue Volvo and dump a dead body into the San Hermes River. Of course, no one thought anything of it, at least until we found a corpse washed up on the riverbank.

"So we started asking around about this corpse, had anyone seen him, and it turns out, earlier that same night, he was seen walking into your apartment building. Two corpses, and you were the last person to see either of them alive."

He paused to see if I would react. "What's the matter, D? No witty come-back? No sophomoric vulgarities?"

I sucked on my teeth. "I want a lawyer," I said. "And a phone call. I

know my rights. I'm an American, dammit, and an esteemed member of the Fourth Estate."

Suddenly there was a knock on the interrogation room door. Axelrod opened it and poked his head outside. A rapid exchange took place, but I couldn't make out clearly what was being said. After a few seconds, Axelrod stepped fully outside and shut the door behind him.

Five minutes later the door opened again, but it wasn't Axelrod who entered.

"Well played, D," Max applauded. "Well played, indeed."

He grabbed Axelrod's seat and dragged it around the table to sit beside me. Then he pulled a flask from out of his jacket and offered me a drink.

"Are you here to kill me?" I asked as I took a swig.

"Yes. The flask is poisoned," he replied.

I paused, then took another sip and passed it back to him. He took a healthy gulp himself.

"I should kill you, you know," he continued. "You've given my P.R. department one hell of an a-bomb to deal with, and on the same day that you saw fit to deprive them of my chief flack."

"What – you think I killed Lily?"

"Didn't you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Shit, I was about to ask if it was you."

That got a smile out of him.

"Well the police seem pretty convinced of your guilt. After all, you were the last person there last night, and you have been snooping around her apartment and her office a lot recently. Also, they found her cell phone in your apartment. Add to that the number of heated public exchanges that the two of you were known to have, most recently at your sister's wedding, and things do not look good for you at all, D."

"You set me up," I spat. "You killed her and you set me up to take the fall, you son of a bitch."

"No. Well, maybe yes. I certainly intended to. And part of the reason I hired you was indeed so you'd be an easy scapegoat if her death ever got traced back to me. But alas, I did not kill her. Someone else

be me to the punch. And if it wasn't me, and you say it wasn't you, then the question is, who?"

I took a deep breath, then nodded. "Your blackmailers would be the obvious guess. Lily was working with them, as you know, but when she realized you were onto her and you started turning up the pressure, she got cold feet and tried to back out. So it stands to reason that her conspirators decided she was too big a liability to keep alive. I mean, since we're assuming it wasn't me. Or you."

"So who are they?"

"Well I don't have any names yet. There are two of them I know about for sure. The first is about average height, medium build, and wore a gunmetal mask every time I saw him, like the ones your servers at the Highwater party had. He was the one who tortured me, and then attacked me again Friday night at the party. I stabbed him in the neck with my pocketknife.

"The second man is shorter with a slighter build. He's got a very ruddy face with a bulbous nose and a scar along his cheek. He's the one that drives the old blue Chevy Del Rey."

"The one that you said drove McPherson out to meet Anthony?"

I hesitated, "Yeah, that's the other thing. I still haven't figured out what that was all about, or how Anthony fits into this – but as for McPherson..." I trailed off. "The thing is, these guys are good, but they're amateurs. The one who interrogated me didn't have the slightest idea what he was doing. I've seen Anthony in action, so I know what a professional looks like, and these guys don't make the cut. So for them to have lasted so many rounds in the ring with you, they have to be getting help from someone. Someone with resources.

"Now McPherson, he'd been in contact with Lily before she disappeared. And I found his shoe print in her apartment the day she went missing. I had a chat with him last night about this stuff, and he got very agitated. Then as soon as I leave, this guy in the blue car appears out of nowhere and runs me off the road. So I ask you, would McPherson have any reason to want to see you taken down?"

Max took out his iPhone and tapped a message into it, keeping his eyes downcast. "Well thank you for that, D. I obviously picked the right man for the job. Should you ever need a reference, I'll be happy to have my secretary type up some flattering lies."

He stood to go.

"Hold on," I said. "Where does that leave us?"

"You just publicly smeared me, D. Where do you think that leaves us? We are done."

"What do you mean done?"

"Done. As in I walk out this door, and that's the last you ever see of me. I'll make sure you are released; I can do that much in return for the information you've given me. But after today, we don't exist to each other."

"Strangers when we meet?"

"Not even that. Like ghosts. If I walk past you on the street, I won't see you wave or hear you say hello. As far as I'm concerned, you don't really exist."

"And I'm supposed to just forget about all the rest of this?"

"Yes. Forget about Lily and Jacinda Ngo and Patrick Cobb. Forget about me and the Highwater Society and McPherson. Forget about men in blue cars. Certainly forget about Saint Anthony, and if you have the slightest bit of sense left in that thick skull, you'll forget about that wife of his, too."

BOOK FOUR: The Man in the Blue Car

PLAYLIST

Convinced of the Hex | The Flaming Lips

I Will Posses Your Heart | Death Cab for Cutie

A Good Man Is Hard to Find | Bessie Smith

Lua | Conor Oberst + Gillian Welch

Still Burning | Lydia Lunch

Blood Part 2 | Buck 65 + Sufjan Stevens

Chapter 30. Payback Is a Bitch

Max made good on his promise, and within twenty minutes I was back on the street, wondering if I really could write off this whole convoluted mess and pretend that the last two weeks had never happened.

On my way out of the station, I tried to stop by Nick's desk to say hi. I stood in the open doorway of his office and rapped a couple times on the inside of the jamb. He didn't even look up to acknowledge my presence; he just stayed hunched over his desk, filling out some paperwork longhand. I gave a couple more knocks, but still no response, so I just stood there watching him, waiting for him to cave. After about five minutes or so, I gave up and left.

Once outside the station, I realized I had the whole day to myself, and I didn't really know what to do with it. I tried calling Columbine, figuring she'd be good for killing a few hours, but she wasn't answering her phone.

Then I tried Jenny to see if I could smooth things over after last night, but she didn't answer either. A few seconds after I hung up on her voicemail, a text message appeared: I feel like I don't know who you are anymore. Don't call – at least not for a while.

Bored, alone, and restless, I just started walking.

As I meandered aimlessly through the city streets, I realized that I was being followed by at least two different vehicles. One was a white Crown Victoria tailing me at a hamfistedly indiscreet distance. The driver and passenger were both obviously cops; no one wears mustaches like that but cops and '70s porn stars.

The second one was a white Asterion van who was doing a much better job of hanging back. Which made sense – obviously Max would hire only the very best.

Eventually I ended up at the Concrete Underground office, as if led there instinctively or drawn by some powerful inevitability. I was not looking forward to the conversation I was about to have with Sharon, but I knew it had to happen. There was really nowhere else for me to

go.

“You are so fired, I can’t even describe how fired you are in words. It’s like, even if you somehow managed to get re-hired again, the entirety of space-time itself would bend over backwards in order to course-correct and make sure you stay fired. That’s how fired you are.”

“Ah, so I take it you’ve seen what I posted on the website,” I said.

“Yes, and so did Abrasax’s legal department. Would you care to guess how that is working out for us?” Sharon replied. She was sitting behind her desk with She-Ra the intern at her side, wagging her tail like a good little lap dog.

“Why do you always look more beat up every time I see you?” She-Ra chimed in. “Are you in a fight club? You seem like the kind of pseudo-macho douche-bag who’d be in a fight club.”

I groaned, “Seriously, where do you dig these chicks up? Do you explicitly state that their bra size has to be bigger than their IQ? Would it kill you to bring on an actual reporter for once?”

“Be nice,” Sharon reproached. “Amy’s technically more of a reporter than you are, now. I just gave her your beat.”

“What’s an Amy?” I asked.

Sharon pointed to the intern, who raised her hand.

“Perfect. Give my job to the Princess of Power. I always wanted to strike out on my own anyways. Print is dead; I am starting a blog called ‘Irresponsible Voodoo Sex Imperative’ and I’m going to make my logo the picture from the Christmas office party when I stapled the Xerox of Ann Coulter to my face.”

—

As I walked outside of the office and jaywalked across the street to the Light Rail station, I noticed the Asterion van and the Crown Vic idling within eyeshot. Even after I boarded the train, I’d occasionally glance out the window and catch sight of them following alongside.

Some days I liked riding public transportation, and some days I didn’t. On a good day, it was fun in a voyeuristic sort of way. On a bad

day, though, it could be a nerve-wracking, paranoid experience. Those were the days when I realized that I was just on display just as much as everyone else.

This was a bad day.

I scanned the strange, uncaring faces of the other passengers, wondering if any of them were on Max's payroll. Then I looked up at the opaque black half-domes mounted at either end of the car and realized they didn't need to be.

I curled up into a ball on my seat in the back row, wishing I could disappear into the speckled blue pattern of the seat upholstery, like a chameleon.

—

When I walked through my front door, I noticed a blue flash coming from behind the air conditioning vent. I climbed on top of the couch and used my pocketknife to work the screws out. Removing the grate, I saw the blinking LED of a Bluetooth video camera.

I threw it onto the ground and stomped on it repeatedly with as much force as I could muster, so much force that I could feel the burning from my strained muscles shooting up my leg. As I stood doubled-over, rubbing my sore thigh and staring at the shattered bits on floor, my first thought was: there must be a server hidden around here somewhere to pick up its feed. The second thought was: there are probably more cameras, too.

I spent the next three hours dismantling my tiny apartment with an exacting and meticulous attention to detail. I pulled up floorboards and ripped out vents. I took every piece of furniture or cabinet or drawer that had been picked to pieces by the blackmailers and tore them into even smaller pieces. I punched holes in the dry wall. I never found any server or other cameras or hidden microphones.

Maybe it wasn't feeding to anything, was my first thought. Maybe they just put the one in a visible place to fuck with me, knowing I would find it and go crazy with paranoia.

My second thought was: or maybe I'm just not looking hard enough.

I shook my head; I was tired and not thinking clearly. I laid down on the decimated mess that could no longer rightly be called my bed, hoping that the solution would become obvious after a little rest.

I laid there for an hour, unable to fall asleep, just staring up at the ceiling and imagining Max watching me and laughing.

This is stupid, I thought to myself. I need to get out of this disaster and get some perspective. Maybe some fresh air will help me clear my head.

I went outside and got as far as the front of the building, where I found both the Asterion van and the cops still parked and waiting for me. As soon as I appeared, the Crown Vic fired up its engine, and the driver of the van started talking into a walkie-talkie.

I turned around and went back to my apartment.

On the way in, I noticed a blue envelope sitting on the floor under the front door. I wondered if it just appeared in the brief time I was gone, or if I had somehow missed it before.

Careful not to look at it too long, I quickly stepped all the way inside and shut the door before picking it up. Even then I kept it closed. Finding my light-pen among the rabble around what used to be my desk, I took the envelope into the now-empty coat closet. Keeping the closet light off, I opened the envelope in the dark and used the light from my pen to read the note inside: Payback is a bitch.

Clearly Max's blackmailers weren't happy that I had stolen their thunder by going public with the dirt they had on him.

Stuffing the paper into my pocket, I realized I had to find a blacklight bulb to see if this one had a hidden message like the others. I couldn't risk the tails following me, though.

I walked back into my bedroom, opened my window, and worked the mesh screen out of its frame. Then I jumped, letting the hedges below do what little they could to cushion my two-story fall. I quickly hopped the back fence behind my building and into the apartment complex on the next street over. I ran out into the middle of the street and looked around. Seeing no sign of the van or the cops, I decided it was safe to proceed.

When I walked into the head shop on Delany Avenue, there were two customers and one clerk inside. Luckily, all three were

preoccupied as the clerk was helping the other two pick out a glass pipe. As surreptitiously as possible, I moved over to the blacklight display and held the new note underneath.

Like the others, this one had a hidden message, a single handwritten name: Natalie McPherson.

I took out my cell and tried calling her again. She still wasn't answering.

Chapter 31. Good

As soon as Violet opened the front door, my blood began to boil.

“What the hell happened to you?”

She shied away from the doorway, trying to hide the swollen purple bruises on her face. “Don’t be dense. What do you think happened?”

“Anthony hit you?” I asked incredulously.

“He heard that the police found me half-naked in your apartment, and then reacted exactly the way you’d expect him to,” she explained as she led me into the living room.

The room showed visible signs of a fight. The coffee table was tilted over with one missing leg, the couch was pushed out of place, and one of the bookcases had its shelves smashed, spilling out all the books onto the floor in front of it, as if someone had been thrown into it.

I felt my cheeks grow flush as the anger swelled up inside me like a pressurized canister, ready to explode.

“I am going to kill that son of a bitch,” I raged.

“Yeah, right,” she scoffed. “What are you doing here, anyways?”

I took a deep breath, trying to refocus my thoughts. “Is Columbine around?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t seen her today. In fact, I haven’t heard from her since she asked me to pick you up last night. Why?”

I cursed under my breath. “She’s in danger. Can you think of anywhere else she might be?”

“She could be with Max.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but she was right; Max was logically the next person to check with. But that was assuming he’d answer my call.

I found his number in my cell, then held it out to her and instructed, “Call from your land line.”

“Why don’t you?”

“If he sees my number, he won’t pick up.”

Reluctantly, she took it and dialed the number on her living room phone. She put the call on speaker so I could hear.

He answered after a couple rings, "Is it done?"

"What?" Violet asked, confused.

There was a pause. "Who is this?"

"Violet. Is this Max?"

"Ah, yes. Sorry, I saw the number and assumed you were Anthony."

"Oh," she replied. "I was just calling to ask if you've seen Columbine recently."

"Not since yesterday morning."

"You don't happen to have any idea where she is, do you?"

"Nope," Max said, trailing off into a brief silence before adding, "How did you get this number, by the way?"

Violet looked at me with a questioning shrug. I tried to silently mouth hang up, but she didn't get it.

"Hang up," I whispered as I mimed hanging up the phone.

Max gave his best movie villain laugh, short staccato bursts of sadistic glee. "You better watch out, Violet – I think I just heard a ghost. Dear Anthony won't be too happy to find out his house is haunted."

I reached out to grab the handset and slam it back down, cutting off the call.

The blood had drained from Violet's face. "Well," she said softly, trying to maintain her composure. "I guess I should get out of here. Let me grab a few things, then we'll go look for Col."

"Okay," I replied, not sure what else to say. She disappeared down the hallway, and I paced around awkwardly, still fuming. I started tidying things up, mostly because I didn't know what else to do with myself. I knelt beside the broken bookcase and as I organized the fallen books into stacks, I noticed several were not in English. One was a German Kafka hardcover, another was a thick Bible-sized paperback with a picture of Fyodor Dostoyevsky on the cover along with Cyrillic characters. There were a few others in some other Eastern European language I didn't recognize.

Violet returned shortly with a tattered old blue rolling luggage case that had the initials HGA stitched onto its face. She packed fast, I thought to myself. I wonder if she already had the case ready to go.

She glanced down and saw one of the tomes in my hand, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

“Are all these yours? I mean, you speak Russian and German?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I speak several languages. I’ve preferred to read the classics in their original tongue ever since university.”

“Where’d you go to school?”

“Charles University in Prague,” she replied. “Briefly. But that doesn’t really seem important right now, shouldn’t we be looking for Columbine? And you can explain what the hell’s happening on the way.”

“Of course,” I said. “I was just thinking, though, we should probably grab her things, too. I mean, we probably don’t want to have to make a second trip here.”

Violet nodded in agreement, and the two of us went to Columbine’s room.

Her clothes were scattered haphazardly across the room along with a few other personal items, like toiletries, a make up case, a few magazines, and an MP3 player. After hunting around a little bit, I found a case in the closet, similar to Violet’s but smaller.

“I’m going to leave a note in case she comes back before we find her,” she said, walking over the vanity.

“It’s a good thought,” I said, “but if Anthony sees it he’ll know where to find us.”

“No he won’t,” she replied and picked up a stray tube of lipstick, which she used to write on the mirror.

I packed as much of Columbine’s stuff as I could into the case and had just managed to force the zipper shut when Violet finished her note: Meet me where we buried the Queen – V.

We spent the next couple hours checking all of Columbine's regular haunts for any sign of her – a steady stream of coffeehouses, vintage clothing stores, art galleries, public parks, and music stores. Violet drove while I explained about Max's blackmailers and the notes I had been receiving with hidden messages that seemed to indicate who would be the next person to die.

"I'm assuming the notes are coming from the blackmailers. The first few seemed designed to draw me in deeper into the investigation of Patrick Cobb and Jacinda Ngo so that they could use me as a pawn to recover the information that Cobb stole from them. Of course, that plan backfired, and their last note was obviously intended to signal their displeasure.

"Which all makes sense on the face of it, until you consider the hidden messages. Why would the blackmailers want me to know the identity of their next target?"

Violet thought about this for a moment, furrowing her brow, then said, "You're assuming that the blackmailers know about the hidden messages, but what if there are two different people responsible for the different messages?"

"I don't follow," I said.

"Say there was one person, one of your blackmailers, who dictated the message to a second person who actually made and delivered them. They needed someone who could make the paper and do the printing by hand in case you went to the police, so they couldn't be traced. Now let's say this second person wasn't completely on board with the blackmailers' intentions and wanted to help you, so she devised a way to warn you about their next target without arousing their suspicion."

"I hadn't considered that," I said meekly as my mouth hung open and my brain tried to process what she was telling me. "I suppose it would be fairly easy for this second person to accomplish, assuming she had a workshop set up with the necessary tools and materials."

Violet nodded her head and conceded, "It wouldn't be that hard at all."

"Of course," I added, "you would wonder why she wouldn't just reveal the blackmailers' identities to me, save me some hassle."

Violet smiled and shrugged. “She probably doesn’t know them, or else she would have. She probably only has one single point of contact with them, someone very close who trusted her with the task, and someone she’s afraid of enough that she would take such pains to hide the help she’s been giving you.”

“Like her husband?” I ventured.

“Like her husband,” she agreed.

Eventually we exhausted the list of places we could think to look for Columbine.

“Where to next?” I asked.

“Well, there is one more place we could check. In a way it’s the last place I’d expect to find her. But in another way, it should have been an obvious place to start.”

“Her father’s house?”

Violet nodded.

—

We rang the bell at McPherson’s twice, but there was no answer, so I tried the door and found it was unlocked. Inside, loud music echoed throughout the house – Bessie Smith’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”.

We followed the sound down one of the hallways and into McPherson’s study, where we found the old man sitting slumped forward over his desk, his head twisted around so that it was facing up even though the rest of him was facing down.

I moved closer to the desk, staring in morbid fascination at the way his neck bones poked out against his skin. The skin was pulled taught and creased around the protruding bone, looking pallid and plastic, almost synthetic. Then I noticed his left hand was clutching something. Kneeling down, I pried open his fingers and found Jacinda’s ruby necklace engraved with the crown and globe sigil. I felt my skin crawl as a sense of déjà vu washed over me and filled me with the irrational conviction that there was a theaterful of people watching over my shoulder.

Suddenly, the music stopped. I bounced back up and saw Violet standing next to the stereo with her finger on a button, looking at me apologetically.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I said.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?”

I shook my head. “The cops already suspect me of Lily’s murder – probably Cobb and Jacinda, too. And I’m pretty sure they’ve got you pegged as an accomplice. If they find us here with a corpse, it’ll be all over.”

We tried as best we could to leave everything the way we found it and wipe away any fingerprints. As we got back into the Volvo and Violet started the engine, she said, “So I guess the note was wrong. Columbine wasn’t the next one to die after all.”

“No, the blackmailers didn’t have anything to do with this,” I replied. “Max was the one who ended up with the necklace, and I’m pretty sure this is what he was talking about when he asked you if ‘it’ was done.”

As we drove out through McPherson’s front gate, I noticed the surveillance camera perched above it.

“Where to next?” I asked.

“San Hermes River Park.”

“Why there?”

“Because that’s where my note to Col said to meet us,” she explained.

—

Violet parked the Volvo in one of the lots near Millennial Bridge, and we began to trek down a particularly steep and uneven hiking trail. About halfway to the river bank, we realized that the trail wasn’t actually a real trail, and we were in fact trying to navigate a shortcut through the undergrowth in the dark of night.

I was the first one to bite it, sticking my foot into a gopher hole and face-planting into the ground. When I came back up, my face was encrusted with dead leaves and dirt. Seeing me covered in shit

somehow cut through the tension of the rest of the evening, and Violet broke out into hysterical laughter. She laughed so hard, in fact, that she didn't notice the watermelon sized boulder in front of her, and she went down too.

From that moment, we laughed the rest of the hike down, getting louder each time one of us stumbled or lost our footing. Coming down the last stretch, I wrapped my arm around her waist so we could lean against each other for support.

That was how we were posed when the ground leveled out and we saw Columbine sitting on a large fallen tree branch at the river's edge, watching our approach.

"Awesome. So what, you're just going to nail all of my friends, then?" she called out. "I can't wait 'til it's Anthony's turn."

"What's she mean?" Violet asked.

"He fucked Max," Columbine answered.

Violet looked me over in amused surprise. "Of course he did."

"Where have you been?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Around," she shrugged.

"Why weren't you answering my calls?"

"I guess I was a little sore," she said, her eyes downcast. "I tried calling you last night, and I think your pocket answered. I kept asking if you were there, but you never said anything. Then I heard a woman moaning in the background." She turned her gaze to Violet and added, "I guess I should have recognized the moans."

Violet's face sunk with guilt.

"Hey, check it out, it was still there," Columbine said abruptly, digging a small Russian doll out of her jacket pocket and showing it to Violet. It was painted like the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland and had bits of dirt still stuck to it.

"Is there anything in it?" I asked.

"There used to be a necklace. My mom left it for me when she passed. But I took it out a while ago."

"Col," Violet said gingerly, "honey, your father's dead."

Columbine looked down at the doll, turned it over in her hands a couple times, then said, "Good."

Chapter 32. Just Another Game

The three of us checked into a motel off of Highway 77 a few miles out of town to the south of Hastings Airfield. The place was a run down sinkhole called The Motley Fool, which I'm sure had something to do with Columbine picking it.

I paid in cash and registered under a fake name. The clerk was a small Vietnamese woman who spoke in broken English and sat behind a window of bullet-proof glass; she didn't seem too eager to ask questions.

On the way over I had explained to Columbine about the notes and her possibly being targeted by the blackmailers. Once we settled into the room, I came up with some precautions we should take until we could be sure Columbine was safe.

"Leave the room as little as possible and stay close by. There's a gas station with a convenience store just across the street, and that should be as far as you'll need to go. If you absolutely have to travel, take public transit or cabs, and try to transfer a few times, make sure you aren't followed. Don't go anywhere you might be recognized."

"I could put together a disguise," Columbine offered. "Maybe a long black wig and a Russian accent – oh, and patch on my eye."

She cupped a hand over her right eye playfully, and I wondered whether this was just some weird coping mechanism or if the whole situation really was some kind of game to her.

"You probably shouldn't call anyone either – from the hotel phone or your cell," I continued. "Tomorrow I'll take the car into town and leave it parked at my place. It's not safe to leave it sitting out in front here. In the meantime, Violet should stay here in case anything happens. One of us should be with Columbine at all times."

"What about my job?" Violet jumped in.

"Look, it's up to you, but if Anthony's looking for you, that'll be the first place he checks. And if Max told him that I was at your house – and I'm sure he has..." I trailed off, feeling like I didn't really need to finish the thought.

Violet shook her head. "This is so surreal. I mean, are we really dealing with a matter of life or death here? It's hard to believe this is actually happening, it feels like at any second I'm going to wake up and realize this is all a dream."

—

None of us felt like going to sleep that night. I gave it my best shot, but couldn't manage to nod off despite my total exhaustion – both mental and physical.

Columbine spent the night laying on one of the twin beds watching late night TV. Violet sat up on the other bed, reading a dog-eared pulp detective paperback. I, meanwhile, sat cross-legged on the floor with my notebook, hoping that in reviewing the information I'd gathered, some kind of clue or explanation would emerge.

After chasing my own tail this way for an hour, I decided to take a break. I went out onto the catwalk outside our room and chain smoked while leaning over the guardrail. Somewhere in the middle of my third cigarette, Violet came out to join me.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she hopped up to perch herself on the guardrail.

"Yeah, I'm just trying to clear my head a little, get some perspective."

She took out one of her cloves, and I reached up to light it for her. "What's your plan for tomorrow once you get back into town?"

"Good question. I'll let you know when I figure it out," I replied with a shrug. "I mean, obviously I've got to find the blackmailers and, I dunno, somehow stop them from hurting Columbine. I guess turning them over to Max would do the trick, but I'd need a lot of hard evidence for that to work. My credibility with him is kind of low right now.

"As far as I know there are three of them left. One was the guy who attacked me the other night at the party; unfortunately, he's worn a mask every time I've run into him. The second is an older man with a ruddy face and a scar on his cheek who drives a blue 1950's Chevy. I've actually seen him, at least, but I still don't have a name. So that leaves Anthony, who I know is connected to all this, but without any

proof Max will definitely take his word over mine. I suppose I could go first thing in the morning and try to beat a confession out of him.”

I followed that up with a self-deprecatory laugh, but Violet still furrowed her brow with worry. “I know you’re joking, but promise me you’ll stay away from him. He’d kill you.”

I was of course joking, but all the same my pride bristled to hear her undermine my masculinity with such certainty. Which, in turn, made me realize I might not have been joking entirely. An image popped into my head of myself emptying a gun into a bloodied and beaten Saint Anthony.

Violet shivered as she exhaled smoke, then pulled her coat closed tighter. “This is so surreal, hiding out like this. I guess it’s just hard to wrap my head around. Why would these people want to hurt Col, anyways?”

I shrugged, “Their note implied that they saw her as a way to get revenge against me. But now I’m not so sure that’s the whole story.”

“What do you mean?”

I nodded. “After I thought about it some more, I realized there are more obvious targets if they’re just trying to get back at me – like my sister for one. So then I took myself out of the equation and asked what would be the primary motive driving the blackmailers now that their plan has gone down the tubes? Obviously, the most important thing would be to stay hidden, especially from Max. With that in mind, the only reason it would be worth the risk of resurfacing to kill someone is if they thought that person could identify them to Max.”

“Are you saying Columbine knows who they are?”

“I don’t think so,” I said as I stubbed out my cigarette. “But they might think she does. You see, there’s a good chance that her father was mixed up with them.”

Violet’s surprise was visible. “But that doesn’t make sense. Why would James McPherson blackmail anybody?”

I nodded my head to sympathize with her confusion. “It’s still vague to me, just a theory, but I think there might be a power struggle within the Highwater Society – Max and his allies on one side and all the old guard led by McPherson on the other. Max likes to talk about changing the rules of the game, shaking things up to keep life interesting.

Inevitably, he starts stepping on people's toes, develops a reputation as a loose cannon. Whatever Highwater is, whatever they're doing, they rely on secrecy; Max's games and his general disdain for subtlety endanger that. Perhaps McPherson got to the point where he felt Max was getting to be too dangerous. Or maybe he started to worry that Max could threaten his leadership. Either way, let's assume he wanted to neutralize Max, but couldn't be seen to openly attack him; suddenly the blackmailers and their cloak-and-dagger nonsense start to make a little more sense."

Violet tilted her head to the side. "I suppose it does, but it's still a little hard to swallow. I mean, you're making a couple pretty big leaps, assumption-wise."

"That's just the problem; it's all speculation," I said. "And once you start down that path, it's hard to stop. Because once you start considering the possibility of McPherson wanting to get rid of Max, you start to realize that it's just as possible that Max is trying to get McPherson out of the way."

"Think about it. McPherson is the one who ended up dead, while Max is still alive. Could Max have been trying to set McPherson up so he had an excuse to kill him? Or maybe it was someone else entirely, a third party scheming to pit the two giants against each other while they wait patiently for an opportunity to make their own play. This is the kind of thing that's been going around in my head ad nauseum, leading me around in circles of endless theories and conjecture, like a I'm caught in a Möbius Strip."

"I see what you mean about needing some perspective," Violet said as she turned around flicked her dying cigarette butt off the catwalk. I watched as it arced through the air and was extinguished, disappearing into the dark of the night.

—

Dawn started to peek through the the motel room curtains. Violet had finally dozed off on one of the beds, while Columbine and I sat up on the other, still watching TV – or rather staring vacantly at the screen, only vaguely aware of what it was showing at any given time. I was delirious with exhaustion and still couldn't sleep. Columbine had

been going strong all night but was finally starting to show signs of slowing down. She yawned like a cat and stretched out on the bed, laying her head on my lap. I stroked her hair absently while the local morning news started.

“Let’s run away together,” Columbine purred.

I chuckled absently, only half-comprehending her.

“No, I mean it. We should get out of this godforsaken city. Run far away from Max and the Highwater Society and blackmailers and men in blue cars. We could start a new life together on the road like gypsies, see the world, meet new people, have adventures. It will be awesome.”

I chuckled again, this time louder. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course. It’s not like there’s anything left for us here. One of my best friends is dead, another just had my father murdered, and the third is on the run from her psychotic husband. You lost your job and effectively got yourself blacklisted in this town. Name one good reason why we shouldn’t go.”

“Who’s to say they won’t come looking for you – for us? These people are dangerous; if they want you badly enough, they may hunt you to the ends of the earth.”

Now it was Columbine’s turn to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“You,” she replied. “You take it so seriously, but it’s just another game to him.”

I leaned forward to look down at her grinning face. “What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you considered the possibility that none of this is real, that there never was any blackmail? That it’s all just smoke and mirrors meant to keep us jumping through hoops and running in circles chasing our own tails for Max’s amusement.”

“That’s pretty far out there,” I said.

“So’s Max,” Columbine replied. “He said it himself – what would you do for fun if you were rich and bored and had absolutely no concern for human life or human suffering?”

I opened my mouth to respond but couldn't find any words, so I just sat there slack-jawed, staring at the TV.

"I guess I should be going soon," I muttered, then slowly rose from the bed. "I'm gonna hop in the shower really quick."

I turned the shower on to give the water a chance to heat up and started to undress. Through the closed bathroom door, I could hear Violet and Columbine resume talking just loudly enough for me to hear.

"You shouldn't mess with his head like that," Violet chided. "He's twisted around enough as it is."

"What do you mean?" Columbine replied.

"That stuff about Max and his games, it wasn't funny."

"Who said I was joking?"

Violet made a disapproving grunt and said, "Don't tell me you're starting to get caught up in D's paranoia."

Columbine chuckled. "He is a little too into this conspiracy theory stuff, even for me. Sometimes I feel like none of this is really happening, but I'm just playing along with his delusions."

There was a pause. "You really are in love with him, aren't you?" Violet asked with possibly just a hint of remorse.

"We wouldn't be here, otherwise."

There was nothing more after that. I stepped into the shower, wondering if they'd intentionally talked loud enough for me to hear or not.

Chapter 33. No Matter How Desperately You Want It

The next morning I drove the Volvo out to my apartment to pick up a couple changes of clothes and a few other essentials. However, as I walked up the stairs, I noticed my front door was hanging ajar. As I made my approach, taking care to be as quiet as possible, my mind ran through the various nefarious possibilities of who was waiting on the other side. Saint Anthony maybe, or Axelrod back to put the squeeze on me for McPherson. The masked man and his taser. Max and a .44 Magnum. The ruddy-faced man and his infernal blue car, somehow hidden away behind the couch, ready to peel out and run me down as soon as I entered.

I opened the door cautiously and saw Brad McPherson sitting on the tattered remains of my couch, then thought to myself that I might have actually preferred the alternatives.

“Brad, what have you done to my apartment?” I said in mock-surprise and held my arms outstretched to indicate the vast disarray surrounding us.

“D, always good to see you,” he replied in a condescending parody of friendliness. “Please have a seat, I want to talk with you.”

I picked up one of the bare cushions that had been stripped from its cover and tossed it on the couch frame, then took a seat.

“What about? Sports? The weather? Or your honeymoon – I never did get a chance to ask you guys about it the other night. Was this resort nice? How about the beach? Did you have a good time fucking my sister?”

I could see it was taking everything Brad had not to tear off and punch me in the face. Already my morning was looking up.

“Actually,” he said, veins throbbing in his temples and neck, “I was hoping to talk to you about these accusations you’ve been making lately, this stuff you posted online. Look, whoever’s duped you into believing those documents are real obviously went through a lot of trouble to—”

My laughter cut him off. “For fuck’s sake, Brad, give me a little credit.

You don't really expect me to fall for a cheesy head game like that, do you?"

Brad took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm not here to debate with you. The point is, true or not, the implications of your actions could be extremely damaging to this city in ways you haven't considered. My uncle's death, aside from being tragic on a personal level, leaves behind a considerable leadership vacuum. He was a driving force behind getting people to believe in this city and its industry – investors, customers, government. If we appear weak, if people lose faith in us, they'll start pulling money out of this city's businesses. That may not mean anything to you, but think about the consequences for jobs, tax revenue, local charities."

"Save your breath; I get it," I said. "What's it got to do with me?"

Brad continued, "We need to fill the void my uncle left, and like it or not, Dylan Maxwell is a major asset. It doesn't help anyone to have him undermined by wild allegations of criminal behavior."

I laughed again. "So he's holding your leash now, is that it? Fucking bastard couldn't just have me shot like any civilized man. No, he sends you to annoy me to death."

"Nobody sent me, and no one is trying to kill you. There's no reason to get paranoid."

I cut him off, "So Max ascends to the throne of the Highwater Society by offing your uncle and you all stand around and applaud politely, 'The king is dead, long live the king.' Have you no shame, man?"

Brad shook his head. "Dylan Maxwell is not the head of Highwater, I have been nominated to take over my uncle's duties, and Max is supporting me. And as for the circumstances of my uncle's death, I will ensure it is thoroughly investigated, and I am confident that we won't find any evidence of Max's involvement."

"That's beautiful. And when the time comes, I'm sure they'll say Max didn't have anything to do with your death, either."

Then Brad reached out and put his hand on my shoulder – a friendly, reassuring gesture that was so unexpected it actually made me flinch.

He said, "D, you keep talking about Highwater like we're your enemies. Yet you chose to work for Dylan Maxwell. You're friends with

my cousin. And as much I may not like it, we're brothers now; you mean a lot to Jenny, and she means the world to me. You're one of us now, and you need to start working with us, not against us."

"That's funny; you're uncle said the same thing. Problem is, you guys keep too many secrets for my tastes. I'd maybe see my way to helping you a little more clearly if someone would explain to me what it is you all actually do."

"The purpose of Highwater – well, it's not really something that can be easily put into words. It can only be understood by experiencing it first-hand, learning it for yourself."

"Your uncle said that, too. It didn't make much sense then, still doesn't now. How about you try something a little easier then, like telling me what Max has hidden away beneath the Asterion facility in Storage Unit 33?"

Brad stood up abruptly. His voice took on a sarcastic, almost threatening edge. "You know, D, for someone so intent on exposing other people's secrets, your life isn't exactly an open book."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, you never told your old newspaper that you were kicked out of journalism school for fabricating quotes in your articles. I'd say the Concrete Underground would be interested in light of its current legal problems – not to mention to mention the rest of the media covering this story. The same would apply to the time you spent in Oak Hill, or what you did to get sent there."

I jumped up and got in his face. "You know what, tell Max that I don't care what kind of dirt he thinks he's dug up on me. Tell him not to bother trying to threaten me or reason with me anymore. "

He held up his hands, gesturing that he didn't want to fight. "I told you, I'm not here on Max's behalf," Brad said. "I'm here out of respect for your sister – and for my cousin." He paused – a significant pause, I thought – and added, "Do you know where she is, by the way? I've been looking everywhere for her."

I lifted up the couch cushion and mimed like I was looking for something, then sifted through the debris on the floor with my foot and shrugged.

Brad grinned spitefully and nodded his head. "It's got to be hard on

her, losing both of them in such quick succession. Anyways, tell her to give me a call, if you happen to hear from her,” he said as he left.

I followed him outside and watched him descend the stairs. He could have been asking about Columbine out of legitimate concern, I told myself. Of course, he could have also had ulterior motives.

After all, if anyone had gained from McPherson’s death, it was certainly him.

After he disappeared around the corner of the building, I hopped down the stairs myself and crossed the courtyard, peeking around the corner just in time to see him getting into his car. As soon as he drove away, I ran into the Volvo and tailed after him.

I glanced in the rearview and saw the Crown Vic a few yards behind me. A little further behind it, there was the white Asterion van.

—

Brad’s car pulled into the parking garage adjacent to the Abrasax building. I parked the Volvo at a metered spot across the street and ran inside, then staked out a place to hide behind a planter of Birds of Paradise while I waited for him. Soon enough, I spotted him crossing the lobby toward the elevators. I made sure to keep a safe distance behind until he got into one of the cars, then I watched the digital display above the doors to see what floor he got off on. It stopped at seven. I took the next car up.

When I got out on the public relations floor, the receptionist cheerfully waved me towards the press briefing room. Apparently she hadn’t yet got the memo that I was persona-non-grata again.

I slipped into the large briefing room where a full press conference was in progress. Curiously, Jenny was the one at the podium, answering a question about McPherson’s death with the requisite sensitivity and pathos. Brad was standing off to the side of the stage, right beside Max.

I stood at the back of the room, glaring at them for a few minutes before Max glanced over and recognized me. He discreetly slipped off the stage and came back to talk to me.

“I don’t think you quite get how this ghost thing is supposed to work,” he said with a smirk as he leaned in close to me.

On stage, Jenny took another question, this one from some hack I recognized from the Morning-Star.

“The DA has decided not to pursue any charges against Mr. Maxwell, citing concerns that the documents in question were forged,” Jenny answered. “Obviously, we applaud this decision and look forward to putting the matter behind us as quickly as possible so Mr. Maxwell can continue to focus his energies on providing our customers with a quality online experience.”

“What the fuck?” I asked, turning to Max.

He grinned triumphantly and handed me a business card. It read: Jennifer McPherson, Abrasax Communications Director.

“I thought it was only appropriate, really, to replace Lily with another woman who will never fuck you no matter how desperately you may want it.”

I whirled around and landed a punch solidly on his jaw, causing a large crack to sound throughout the room, followed by stunned gasps and general frantic rustling among the assembled press.

Before I even realized what was happening, Abrasax security guards managed to drag me kicking and screaming out of the briefing room.

Saint Anthony was waiting for me outside, sitting on top of the receptionist’s desk, clapping his thick meaty palms together in delight. Then too late, I realized why the receptionist had so willingly let me in.

“Bravo!” he shouted, hopping down from the desk. The three security guards who were holding me forced me to stand upright.

He sent one of his fists into my abdomen, hitting me so hard I wanted to puke. He landed a couple more shots to my gut, then followed with a right hook to the side of my face. There was probably a lot more after that, too, but mercifully I blacked out.

Chapter 34. The Same Stories, Over and Over

I woke up to find myself getting dragged out of Saint Anthony's Escalade. It took a while for my vision to come back into focus, so the first thing I saw clearly was the black metal door with the spray-painted message: Bell Out of Order, Please Knock. I looked around and recognized the alleyway off of 27th and Mission, and I realized where they were taking me.

Anthony held the door open and shoved me inside. Max was already waiting for us, standing in the middle of the room behind a man who was covered in blood and tied to a chair. The man in the chair was wearing the same grotesque mask I had worn to the Highwater party.

In the far corner of the room behind Max, I also saw Ben Garza, who wore a black turtleneck and looked like he was going out of his way to lurk in the shadows.

"I should have known the only person crazy enough to blackmail you was you."

Max looked at me confused for a moment, then chuckled. "Oh, I get it, because of this place. No, I'm not the one who brought you here before. I'm just someone who isn't shy about borrowing a good idea. And I didn't fabricate my own blackmailing, although that's a very amusing theory just the same."

The captive squirmed in the chair, straining against his bonds, and tried to say something. But it came out muffled, suggesting that he was gagged under the mask.

"Quiet, you," Max admonished with a mock sternness as he circled around to kneel beside the chair, revealing a bloody pair of gardening shears in his hand.

"It's an interesting choice of mask," he said. "It reminds me of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Are you familiar with it? Our friend Columbine certainly is."

I didn't respond. As usual, this didn't deter him one bit.

"One of the things I find fascinating about the *Commedia*," he

continued, “is that it reminds us how few stories there actually are in this world. We just keep retelling the same handful over and over again across the centuries, from primitive cave drawings and ancient myths to comic books and summer blockbusters. We’re very simple creatures that way. It all boils down to the same basic instincts driving us – greed, fear, lust, love, ambition, vanity, jealousy. Once you understand the Commedia, all our stories become so... predictable.”

I scratched my head. “Once again, I have no fucking clue how what you’re saying has anything to do with anything.”

Max stood next to me and put the hand with the bloody shears on my shoulder, casually, like we were having a friendly conversation. “The other thing that interests me about the Commedia is the use of masks. It relies on stock characters, archetypes, that are instantly recognizable to the audience. The mask is a key part of that – which is ironic when you think about it. In Commedia, the mask defines a character’s identity, whereas normally a mask is intended to conceal identity. Sometimes I like to think about how the masks we try to hide behind can betray us, and how they can come to define us.”

“Still not seeing how this is relevant,” I said.

“It’s relevant because you two tried very hard to conceal his identity, and you almost pulled it off.” Max pointed back at the man in the chair. “Granted, he was an obvious suspect when I first learned that you had gotten your hands on the e-mails between me and City Hall. So I had my people look into it, but they couldn’t find any substantial connection between the two of you since your falling-out after high school. I mean, you really had everyone fooled into thinking you guys hated each other.”

“We do hate each other,” I said. “Brian only gave me those e-mails because he overheard the Mayor badmouthing him to the chief of staff. They didn’t realize he was in the next room listening in.”

“Ahh, well, the Commedia strikes again,” Max said with palpable satisfaction. “Even in this age of technological wonders, it still boils down the the same base passions.”

Max pulled off the mask, revealing Brian’s bloody face with two empty eye sockets.

I felt light headed and nauseous. “So how did you figure it out?” I asked Max, managing to somehow keep from getting sick.

“It was Garza actually. He poured through days of surveillance footage to figure out how you coordinated the hand-off.”

I looked scornfully back to Garza, who was still skulking in the back of the room, tugging up on his turtleneck nervously, and I wondered what his deal was. “Don’t say much, do you?”

“Yeah, what’s the matter, Ben? You usually never shut the fuck up.” Max chimed in.

Just then something clicked in my head, and I realized that I had in fact never heard Garza speak. I walked over to him and clamped a hand on his shoulder, just at the base of his neck in mock-congratulation, saying, “Nice detective work, asshole.”

It was a simple, innocuous gesture, not violent or forceful at all, but Garza winced in pain as my hand touched his neck,

“Sorry,” I said, pulling my hand back. “Did you hurt yourself?” I turned back to look at Max, who was wearing an expression of curiosity. “So what’s the score? Is this the end of the road for me and Brian?”

Max shook his head. “I think your friend has sufficiently learned his lesson. And as for you – I hope you have learned something as well. I have been indulgent of you up to this point, but there are consequences for going too far.”

Chapter 35. Just Like in the Movies

After Max let me go, I waited across the street until I saw Garza emerge from the alleyway. I followed him on foot down to the nearest major road, where he flagged down a cab. I flagged down another and told my driver to follow the first one, just like in the movies.

Garza got dropped off in front of the building right next door to the Casa Salvador. It was an old tenement that had been condemned. I followed him inside and up the stairs, taking my shoes off and treading lightly to avoid making any noise.

He was squatting in a number of different units on the top floor. The place was filthy – the floor was almost completely covered in laundry, fast food containers, soda bottles, old mail, and other assorted trash.

One of the rooms had a bare futon mattress, so I took that to be where he slept and started snooping around.

There was one window on the far wall of the room, and through it I could see across into the windows of the flophouse next door. I grinned when I realized that the hallway telephone on the third floor was plainly visible from this vantage point.

Under one of the piles of the dirty laundry strewn about was a cheap metal lock box. After popping the lock open with my knife, I found two interesting things inside – a smooth, featureless gunmetal mask and a Browning 9mm with a silencer. I checked the latter to make sure it was loaded, then took it with me.

I walked into another room and found Garza sitting at a desk that housed six monitors of various shapes and sizes hooked up to a stuffed server rack beside the desk.

I raised the gun and trained it on the back of his head. His eyes shifted over to look at me in the monitors' reflections.

"So what, are you going to shoot me?" he asked in a gruff voice that I instantly recognized.

"There's a good chance."

"Then why don't you stop wasting my time and just get it over with?"

he said as he shuffled some papers around on his desktop.

“Because first you have to give me something in exchange for doing you this favor?”

“Favor?” he repeated as he fidgeted with a heavy glass pyramid paperweight.

I nodded, fixing my eyes on his hand. “Compared to what Max would do if I turned you over to him, a quick and clean bullet to the head is a favor.”

Suddenly Garza lobbed the pyramid at my head. Thankfully, I anticipated his move and was able to duck out of the way in time. The paperweight flew past, missing only by inches, and put a hole in the drywall behind me. Garza made a move for the door, but I was able to squeeze off a shot from the Browning, which tore right through his midsection.

He doubled over and collapsed to his knees, clutching at his stomach as blood seeped through the front of his shirt. I walked over to him and pressed the muzzle to his temple.

“As I was saying, you are going to repay me for this favor. I want you to tell me who your partner is, the one who drives that blue Chevy.”

“Why do you care?” Garza spat derisively. “He’s a pawn, a rube. Just like that Lynch bitch and your girlfriend with the purple hair.”

“Whose pawns? McPherson’s?”

He laughed, “What? You really have no fucking clue what’s going on, do you?”

His eyes locked on mine with a gleeful, mischievous twinkle. I didn’t respond but instead just kept staring him down. Finally, he looked away and added, “They were all my pawns. It was my plan all along.”

I scoffed, “I’m not sure you wanna go around broadcasting that too loudly. Seemed like a pretty dumbass plan to begin with, even before I went and let the cat out of the bag on your secret little flash drive. Which, incidentally, Max doesn’t seem to be that bothered by anyways.”

Garza bristled at this. “Max is an ass. He’s all bluster and bravado, trying to hide how scared he really is. You read the documents, right? Ask him what he’s keeping hidden under the Asterion facility, then see

how fucking cool he acts.”

We were interrupted by the squeak of an opening door and both simultaneously looked up to see the ruddy-faced man standing in the doorway, dressed in his usual trench coat and hat. As soon as he saw me, he bolted. I leapt up and chased after him, leaving Garza bleeding on the floor.

I hurtled out into the hallway just in time to see the other man disappear behind a door at the far end. I sprinted across and flung open the door, revealing a flight of stairs leading up.

As I emerged onto the roof, I watched him take a running start and launch himself off the edge, leaping over to the Casa Salvador. Taking a deep breath, I steeled myself to make my own attempt, leaving a trail of profanities in my wake as I jumped the thankfully narrow chasm between the two rooftops, landing just as my quarry began descending the fire escape on the other side of the roof.

I ran and looked over the side of the building, but didn't see him anywhere on the fire escape or the ground. I surmised that he must have gone into the building and, as I flew down the first flight of steps, noticed the third story window was open.

I lunged into the building right as the door of Room 313 slammed shut. Bursting through that door, I found him standing just inside the room with his back to me, and I tackled him onto the bed.

But when I looked down at the man struggling under my weight, I saw that it wasn't a man at all. It was Stella, dressed in the man's coat and hat. Her face was white with shock, and she held out her hands, which were clutching Columbine's Queen of Hearts Russian doll.

“He told me to give this to you,” she said.

“Who did?”

“The man in the hallway.”

I ran back out through the door and found myself staring down the business end of a can of mace.

He fired, and I howled in pain. I dropped to the floor and writhed in blind agony while the mace seared my eyes.

Finally, I felt hands gripping me and turning me over to lie on my side.

“Open your eyes,” a voice barked.

I obeyed and immediately felt some kind of liquid splashing into them.

“Now blink,” the voice said again.

When my vision finally cleared, I saw Stella standing above me, sans the disguise and holding a carton of milk. “Get up, and be careful not to touch your eyes.”

She helped me up and guided me to the bathroom down the hall, where she had me wash my hands and face thoroughly.

When I finished, I followed her back to her own room, 309, and sat on the bed with her.

“How are you feeling?”

“Peachy,” I replied as I blinked my eyes obsessively and grimaced.

“The effect should wear off gradually, but in the meantime you’re gonna want to keep your eyes moist,” she said and handed me a small plastic bottle of Visine.

I leaned back on the bed and squeezed a couple drops into each eye. “Thanks. You’ve done this before, I take it.”

“In my line of work, macing’s the least of our worries,” she replied, shaking her head. “You should see some of the sick shit that happens. Girls are cut up, bruised, burned, broken bones, you name it. But then, you probably don’t want to be listening to all this, given the state you’re in right now.”

“No, it’s fine,” I replied, still blinking my eyes furiously. “Keep talking; it helps to have something to focus on other than the burning.”

Stella shrugged, “If you say so. Myself, I’ve been knocked around a few times, few bumps and bruises, but I’m lucky.

“I saw one girl with her cheeks sliced open from her mouth like a smile, like in that movie,” she continued, drawing invisible lines extending from each corner of her mouth, like a giant smile. “And the little Vietnamese girl down the hall, she’s missing part of her nose that a rat chewed off after some guy left her handcuffed to a bed in a flea bag motel. Then another girl I know has scars all over one side of her body, covering her almost from head to toe, from chemical burns.”

“Wait,” I interjected. “Who’s this?”

“The girl from the shelter, Knossos Sanctuary, down on 32nd Street.”

“You’ve stayed in that shelter?” I probed.

“Yeah, a couple times. That’s where I first met Isabel, as a matter of fact, she was in and out of there a lot. But anyways, back to this girl who showed up with the burns, that was several years ago, back when she hardly spoke any English and you couldn’t understand even the little bit that she did on account of her accent. Not Russian, but something like that. Smart kid, though, really got her life together, and now she works there. Even with that crazy hair of hers – you’ll never guess what color it is.”

“Purple,” I said barely audibly.

“Yeah, how’d you guess? You must know her, huh?”

“I thought so, but I’m starting to realize she’s not exactly who I thought she was.”

Stella patted me on the knee. “Ain’t that just the way of the world?”

—

Meanwhile, a team of men dressed in black Asterion jumpsuits entered the building next door and found Garza on the floor, bleeding profusely and wishing I’d finished him off.

Chapter 36. If I Had Been Paying Attention

Once I recovered enough to get on the move, I raced to the Motley Fool as fast as the Volvo would take me, darting in and out of traffic as I careened down Highway 77.

I opened the door to find Violet laying on one of the beds, bound, gagged, and blindfolded. I flew over and helped her get free, then yelled, “What happened?”

“That man just burst in here and hit me, knocked me out. When I came to, I was like this. Where’s Col, is she alright?”

“She’s gone, they took her,” I replied. “Who was it?”

“I think it was the man you talked about before, the one with the scar who wears the long coat and hat.”

“Fuck!” I screamed in frustration, then took the Russian doll out of my coat pocket and showed it to her. “He had this. He wanted me to know they had her.”

Violet’s face sank as she turned the doll over in her hands. “How did they find her? We were so careful.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But we’ve got to come up with a plan before—”

“Wait, listen,” she cut me off, then shook the doll. There was definitely something rattling inside.

We pried the two halves open, revealing a smaller version of the same doll nested inside. We opened that one up, and then another, peeling through several layers of ever-shrinking replicas until finally we opened up the last one and found a micro-SD memory card.

—

Violet and I made it about three paces into Max’s office before we both froze in our tracks as Max’s chair swiveled around to reveal Saint Anthony sitting behind the desk, grinning from ear to ear.

I drew the Browning and leveled it at his head. "Where's Max?"

A voice behind us called, "Hail, hail, the gang's all here."

I spun around and saw Max perched on a stool at the wet bar, reading Crowley's Book of Lies. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We need your help," I replied, keeping the gun trained on Anthony. "The blackmailers have Columbine."

"Fascinating," he said with a yawn, then looked down at his hand and started picking miniscule specks of dirt out from under his fingernails. "What's it got to do with me?"

"She's your friend, too," I said. "Don't you want to make sure she's safe?"

"She's a plucky gal with a strong sense of adventure," Max replied distractedly.

I set the gun down on Max's coffee table and produced the micro-SD card from my pocket. "You might be interested in hearing what's on this."

He took it from me, then walked over to the wall and pressed lightly on a panel. It slid open mechanically, revealing a flat screen hidden inside.

A video flashed on, showing a deformed, wretched figure that might have at one time been Ben Garza strung up like a side of beef, howling in agony while a group of men in black jumpsuits tortured him. But the image quickly flickered and changed to a computer desktop display as Max inserted the card into a slot on the side of the screen.

He shot me a sideways grin, looking very pleased with himself indeed.

Meanwhile, Violet had stealthily moved to pick up the Browning where I left it. Anthony noticed, however, and as soon she raised it, his hand was gripped tightly around her wrist, digging his thumb into a pressure point until she dropped it.

"Nice try," he muttered quietly to her.

Max and I were oblivious to all this. If I had been paying attention, I would have realized that Violet was not trying to aim the gun at Anthony.

Meanwhile, the screen displayed the memory card's contents, which was a single audio file. He tapped the file's icon, and the recording started to play. It was a man's voice, very deep and digitally processed like a cheap movie effect, so as to obscure the speaker's identity.

"If you want to see your friend again, meet me the San Hermes Park tonight. At the eastern end of Millennial Bridge, 3:30 am. Bring Dylan Maxwell with you. Just him, no one else, and come unarmed."

After it finished, it automatically looped and repeated until Max touched the screen again to silence it. "Intriguing choice of a location," was all he said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"That's where we held the memorial service for her mother after she died." He paused briefly, then added, "You know, the first time she died."

I arched an eyebrow. "Wait, what do you mean?"

"The 'boating accident,'" Max replied, using his fingers to draw quotation marks in the air as he spoke.

Suddenly, it felt like the ground had dropped out from under me. I was dumbfounded. "You mean Jacinda Ngo?"

Max's eyes grew wide with surprise and a smile spread across his face. He looked over my shoulder to Violet and started to laugh.

Violet stared at me with her mouth hanging open. "I assumed you knew."

I was reeling from this revelation. Why had Columbine kept that from me? Was her connection to Jacinda the reason she had been targeted?

Max clapped his hands together once to get our attention and then tapped on his watch face. "Well, time's a-wastin'. Not that I don't love savoring D's utter humiliation, but we're about to walk into what is absolutely guaranteed to be a trap, and we have very little time to devise a proper strategy of attack."

Chapter 37. Past the Point of Pretenses

Max, Violet, Anthony, and I rode together in the Volvo, while an armored car carrying a detail of Abrasax security guards followed behind at a decidedly indiscreet distance. I had seen them loading up before we left and knew they were packing enough firepower to make a Michigan militiaman blush. Somehow this knowledge was not the least bit comforting to me.

Anthony drove with Max riding shotgun and Violet and me in back. We decided to approach the Millennial Bridge from the north, since that would be least visible route and therefore the best bet for concealing the cavalry. This meant taking the winding, heavily-forested roads down Hermosa Ravine. As we entered the park, Max was finishing up on the phone with the two man scout team he had sent ahead of us.

"That's good," he said into his cell, "just make sure you guys pull back far enough to stay out of sight. They probably won't show if they see you there."

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Well no one's there, so presumably they're waiting for you to arrive first so they can be sure the coast is clear. Once we get there, I'll have the A-Team hang back until they crawl out of the woodwork." He had a gleeful twinkle in his eye, like a kid unwrapping a Christmas present. "This paramilitary stuff is fun. It's giving me all sorts of ideas for games at the next Highwater party."

"Lovely," Violet grumbled to me. "He's gonna get us shot while he's playing commando."

We pulled off the main road onto a narrower dirt road that followed along the top edge of a steep embankment. We were still five miles from the turn off that would take us to Millennial Bridge. I looked out the rear driver's side window and saw how the ground dropped away sharply and disappeared into the darkness.

Suddenly, I heard another motor roar to life. I looked around but couldn't see any other car, save for the one keeping pace behind us.

“Where is that coming from?” Violet shouted.

“I don’t know. I don’t see anything,” Anthony replied as the sound grew louder.

“There!” Max yelled and pointed out the window. There was a dark shape tearing through the trees off to our right, several yards ahead of us, a car with its lights off. Even though I couldn’t make it out clearly, I didn’t really need to; I knew exactly what car it was. And at the speed we were going, we were headed right for a collision with it.

Anthony slammed on the breaks, but the blue Chevy swerved toward us to compensate for our sudden deceleration. It hit us square in the front passenger side, sending both cars crashing down the embankment.

—

I woke up upside down and covered in glass. Turning to my right, I saw that Violet was still strapped into her seat, unconscious. Up front, neither Max nor Anthony was anywhere to be found.

I tried the seat belt, which was jammed. Digging in my pockets, I found my knife and managed to cut myself free. The window next to me was already mostly broken, so I twisted myself around and kicked the remaining glass out of the frame.

I crawled free of the wreckage and slowly, painfully clambered to my feet. It took a moment for my head to stop spinning enough that I could get my bearings. I looked back up the embankment that we had rolled down and saw no sign of the armored car that had been following us. They were probably continuing along the road we had been on, trying to find an access way that would lead them down to us. I figured that gave us maybe five or ten minutes until they would catch up, which was obviously the point of the ambush.

Scanning the area, I saw the blue car sitting a couple yards away from the overturned Volvo, positioned between it and the river. Looking behind me, I found Max was staggering along in a daze about ten yards away, just before the treeline. He looked disoriented and shaky, but at least he was on his feet. I circled around the car to the driver’s side and climbed halfway into the back to cut Violet free.

Suddenly I heard a gun shot. After pulling myself back out of the car, I looked up to see that Max had frozen in his tracks and was staring past me. I followed his gaze to the driver climbing out of the blue car with an old WWII Luger drawn. The tail of his trench coat fluttered behind him in the night air, and he tore off his wide brim hat that had fallen forward and obscured his vision. This gave me a clearer view of his face, which looked like it was literally about to fall off of his skull like leprous skin.

The muzzle flashed and another shot rang out as he darted past me. The second shot stirred Max from his stupor, and he quickly spun around and took flight into the treeline.

I sprang up and tried to intercept the man in the coat, but was tackled myself by Saint Anthony, who pounced from out of nowhere. He was on top of me as soon as we hit the ground.

“You set us up,” he growled and managed to land two crushing blows to my face before I could get my hand with the knife free. I jabbed blindly into his side, repeatedly digging the small blade into his skin.

It was enough to throw him off balance, and I was able to topple him over and break free. I ran about a dozen yards before my legs gave out and I face planted into undergrowth.

A voice called out from behind me, “D, look to your left – ten o’clock.” I lifted my head and caught sight of something blue and shiny hidden in a shrub. Reaching my hand through the small brittle branches, ignoring the pain as they poked into my skin, I wrapped my fingers around the cool metal. I pulled the object free and raised it up to examine it in the moonlight. It was a gun with a casing cast from blue metal.

I spun around to find Anthony staggering towards me and unloaded the clip at him frantically. I wasn’t sure exactly how many of my shots hit, but it was enough to send him collapsing to his knees.

As Anthony dropped, he revealed Violet limping towards us behind him. She walked right past the crumpled, hacking form of her husband and threw her arms around me.

A wet, gurgling laugh bubbled up from Anthony’s throat. “I knew you were in on this from the beginning. I tried to warn him, but he wouldn’t listen.” He let loose a raspy cough, spraying blood onto the ground,

and added bitterly, "Either wouldn't listen, or didn't care."

"Kill him," Violet said softly and cast her eyes down at the gun in my hand. "There's another clip in the bushes."

I stared at her blankly for a moment, then she sighed and knelt down to fish the second clip out of the undergrowth.

I snapped the new clip into place and cocked the slider to load a round into the chamber. Slowly, reluctantly, I raised the gun and pressed the barrel into Anthony's temple. He bared his teeth and let out a loud, earth-shaking roar that echoed through the night. I pulled the trigger.

He toppled back and landed on the ground with a thud. Violet rested her weight against me as I clicked on the safety and slid the gun into the waist of my jeans.

"Where is everyone else?" she asked.

"Max took off that way, back up the embankment. The driver from the blue car ran after him."

"Any sign of Columbine?"

I pushed her back gently. "I think we're past the point of pretenses."

"I suppose so," she replied while nonchalantly lowering her eyes to the gun. "So you've figured it out, then?"

"Enough of it," I said and took her hand. "Come on, let's go find them before Max's goons show up."

—

We ran deeper into the woods, following the trail of blood and broken branches that Max and his pursuer had left behind. The uphill climb and uneven terrain would have made things rough even if we weren't tore up. As it was, my legs burned, my body ached, and my vision was blurred by the constant trickle of blood rolling down my forehead and into my eyes. Violet didn't look much better, her limp growing more pronounced as she leaned on me for support.

After about fifteen minutes, we finally found Max sitting on a small landing where the ground had leveled off. He was propped up against

a tree, panting heavily, his face caked with mud and blood.

"Where is she?" I asked.

He pointed to a spot where the landing dropped off sharply a few yards further past his tree. I made my way over and looked down. The corpse in the trench coat laid sprawled at the bottom of a steep, rocky embankment. "I guess he lost his footing," Max explained.

We trekked back to find an easier way down, Violet still leaning on me while I kept Max two paces ahead of us, where I could keep the gun trained on him.

As we approached the body, it was obvious the neck was broken, with bone poking grotesquely through the taught skin just as it had in McPherson. The Luger had landed on top of a rock a couple feet away.

I knelt down and flipped the body over. The expertly applied latex makeup was already partially ripped off, the bulbous prosthetic nose dangling off to one side. I peeled the rest of the latex away, exposing Columbine's face underneath.

The shock in Max's face was palpable. Of course, there wasn't even feigned shock in Violet's face, which was chillingly emotionless.

"Makeup and prosthetics," I explained as I handed Max the remnants of the nose. "The suit was padded to give her bulk, and the elevator shoes gave her height." I kicked her feet. "They're probably what killed her, too."

"They certainly couldn't have made running across that incline any easier," Max agreed.

Something blue sparkled in the moonlight from around Columbine's neck. I picked it up and realized it was a sapphire necklace, almost identical to the one Jacinda had been holding in my dream, but for the color of the stone. It even had the crowned globe symbol etched onto the back.

I stood up and held it out for the two of them to see.

"That was the necklace her mother left for her in the doll," Violet explained.

"The necklace in Jacinda's hand was meant to send you a message," I said to Max. "It's just too bad you didn't figure out

everything it was meant to say.”

Max shook his head in disbelief and opened his mouth, but all he could manage to say was a single word: “Why?”

Violet chimed in bitterly, “Maybe it has something to do with the fact that you helped her mother abandon her and hid that knowledge from her for years despite being one of the few people in this world she could supposedly trust.”

Max shrugged apologetically. “No, I get that. I just meant, I don’t get why all this smoke and mirrors – the disguise, the blue car.”

It was my turn to jump in. “It’s like you said – imagine you’re rich and bored, what would you do for fun? You have an overactive imagination, a flair for theatrics, and a past riddled with abuse and abandonment. You’re like a child stuck in arrested development, and you truly believe it when someone tells you that life is just a game.”

Max chuckled, trying desperately to hang onto his mask of practiced indifference, but the grief twisted his face into something pathetic and detestable. He dropped to his knees and cradled his friend’s lifeless head, and for the first time ever I realized I was witnessing a one-hundred-percent genuine human reaction from him.

I glanced up and saw the twinkling of flashlights along the top of a distant ridge, heading our way.

“We better move,” I said to the two of them. I lowered my head to give Columbine’s body one last forlorn look, then noticed that the Luger was missing.

I looked up just in time to see Violet pressing it into Max’s temple.

She squeezed the trigger. It clicked; the chamber was empty.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled.

“What do you think I’m doing?” she replied. “Give me your gun.”

“No,” I blurted out, more in surprise than protest. “He’s unarmed and defenseless. We’re not going to just shoot him in cold blood.”

“What do you suggest we do with him?” Violet asked, her voice cracking in exasperation. “He is going to kill me the first chance he gets – probably you, too.”

Max nodded his head and cracked a rueful grin through the blood

dripping down his face. “I could deny it, but honestly, who am I trying to fool?”

I looked down at the blue gun in my hand contemplatively. “No,” I finally said, trying to sound as resolute as possible. “I need him alive.”

Violet looked at me incredulously; Max, curiously.

“He has to show me what’s hidden under the Asterion storage facility in Room 33.”

Chapter 38. Stop!

We were able to drive right up to the Asterion facility without any interference from security, which I saw as simultaneously good and bad. Good because I didn't actually have a plan for dealing with them other than putting a gun to Max's head and praying that they wanted to keep him alive more than they wanted to keep me out. Bad because I felt fairly certain it meant we were walking into a trap.

"Open the door," I said to Max.

"I don't have my key," Max replied, staring blankly at me.

"Then how can I get in?" I asked.

"Why don't you try using yours?" he said in a tone that suggested the answer should have been obvious.

I dug the Abrasax keycard out of my jacket pocket and swiped it in the card reader. The door opened slowly while emitting a low mechanical buzzing sound.

The three of us walked into the cavernous lobby and found the same elderly receptionist sitting behind her desk, not looking up from her knitting even to acknowledge our presence.

Behind her, the wall of CCTV screens were all showing black-and-white static. She didn't seem to notice them, either.

At the far right end of the room were three metal doors, each one differently colored: the one on the left was red, and I recognized that as leading to the hallway with the operating room where I'd been last time. The middle door was white, and the right one was black.

Max walked over to the black door and opened it outward, holding it for us to enter. The door led down a flight of stairs. I looked at Violet, who looked silently back at me, and then started down the stairs. Violet followed behind me, and Max brought up the rear.

The stairwell continued on for several flights, enough that I lost count. When I finally reached the bottom, I found a blue door with the Highwater globe and crown sigil drawn in metallic silver paint. It was modified, however, so that the crown was positioned below with its

apex overlapping the globe, as if penetrating it suggestively. A small number 1 was painted below it. As I opened the door, I felt a blast of cold air.

We entered into a long hallway whose walls were lined with computer racks filled with servers, switches, cables, and various other tech equipment. Both the ceiling and floors were solid concrete, reminding me uncomfortably of a fallout shelter. The hallway extended like this both directions as far as I could see.

Max pushed us aside to take the lead once again. He started down the hallway to the left. "Stay close. You don't want to get lost down here."

"What is all this stuff?" Violet asked.

"This is Abrasax's server farm," Max explained.

"So this is where you keep all the data you steal from your customers when you spy on them?" I said.

"Yes, D, this is where we keep it," Max replied patronizingly, then turned right abruptly where there was a break in the server racks. He snaked a twisted path through the labyrinthine rack setup.

"This place is like a maze," Violet remarked.

Max turned around and flashed her an are-you-kidding-me look. "That's the idea."

"How do you know you're going the right way?" I asked.

Max sighed. "Because I have the way memorized. I know exactly the number of steps to take, which direction to turn, which path to follow. If we don't go precisely the right way, we could end up lost down here for hours, maybe even days. Of course, if I have to break my concentration and answer your questions every five seconds, that's exactly what's going to happen."

We followed him silently through a couple more turns.

"So," I repeated, "how do you know you're going the right way?"

He groaned and moved quickly to the end of the particular corridor we were following. He swept aside a thick strand of banded data cables to reveal a small square plate stamped with the inverted crown and globe sigil and the number 2. "As long as we keep seeing the markers, we know we're going the right way."

—

After two hours of following Max through this high-tech maze, we reached a large triangular clearing about twenty feet by twenty feet. An oval-shaped bench sat in the middle, upholstered in black crushed velvet. On the far wall was another marker with the Highwater sigil and the number 13.

Max took a seat and motioned for us to do the same. “We need a rest,” he said.

The three of us squeezed onto the bench together all tight and cozy – me in the middle, Violet and Max on either side of me, both of them doubtless running through a similar calculus, trying to determine what will be their best opportunity to off the other, and probably also me in the process.

After several minutes of tense silence, Max finally said, “So McPherson probably didn’t have anything to do with it, then?”

“No,” I answered. “I think Columbine fabricated his involvement so she could pit her two enemies against each other.”

Max’s lips twisted into a grin of begrudging admiration. “I suppose I should feel bad about offing poor James then, but frankly I’m more impressed with Columbine. I didn’t think the kid had it in her.”

He then leaned forward and looked past me at Violet. “And so how do you fit into all this?”

Violet narrowed her eyes and glared disdainfully at him. “You really don’t remember me?”

Max shook his head, but perhaps a little unconvincingly.

Violet turned her gaze to me with an amused smirk. “You know, don’t you?”

I nodded. “I think I’ve figured it out.”

Max looked at me questioningly. “Please, enlighten me.”

I took a deep breath, savoring my Hercule Poirot moment.

—

The woman who called herself Violet was born in what was then Czechoslovakia five years before the Velvet Revolution. Unfortunately, the fall of the Iron Curtain didn't do much to improve the financial fortunes of her family. The oldest of seven sisters, it fell on her to provide for the others - her father was disabled, her mother had died during the birth of her youngest sister. She struggled to balance work, college, and home life, but soon became overwhelmed and wanted nothing more than to escape.

When she was 19, she was approached in a club by a glamorous older woman who offered to set her up with a modeling job in the United States. She would be able to send back extra money for her family while saving up enough to pay for the rest of her schooling.

Upon reaching America, she was taken to a derelict hotel where she essentially became a prisoner. There were about a dozen girls all together staying there from different parts of the world. Mostly they were kept under the watch of a handful of violent thugs who didn't speak their languages or care to try. Occasionally, the man who owned the brothel would come by to check on things. He was a young man, handsome and always very well dressed, except for his funny red shoes.

Several times a night they would be forced to dress up in ridiculous underwear and paraded out to a room where strange men would look at them like they were cattle, sizing them up as objects, often without even being able to look them in the eyes.

When she was picked, she would follow one of the men back into a private room to be used however he wanted. If she was lucky, all he'd demand was a straight fuck and it'd be over quick. But for some men, that wasn't enough - they wanted to hit her, to call her degrading names, to smear her in filth and bind her like a slave. They wanted to make her cry, to make her suffer, to feel like they had power over her.

Sometimes, when she couldn't sleep, she would lie alone in the darkness and tell herself that she was being punished for wanting to escape her family.

Eventually, a man came along for whom simple pain wasn't enough; he had to give her something to remember him by. When the brothel's

owner saw her scars, he kicked her out onto the streets. She was left alone and afraid in a country she didn't know filled with people she couldn't trust. But she was free.

She dyed her hair and started calling herself Violet, transforming herself into a new person. In time her English improved, and she began working at the women's shelter that had taken her in. Through her work, she met other girls who had been lured away from their homes by false promises and forced into slavery. And eventually, she learned the name of the man who was responsible for bringing them to this country.

She started moving in social circles that would put her in contact with people who knew Dylan Maxwell. Early on, she befriended a young girl whose father was one of Maxwell's most important investors. They had a lot in common; not least of which, both women used fake names to help them forget where they came from. Through this friendship, she was introduced to the man who worked as Maxwell's chief enforcer. They began a romantic relationship and were soon married.

Through these connections, she learned more about her enemy and discovered the weaknesses in his armor. Slowly, methodically, she formed her plan, waiting for her perfect opportunity.

The final missing piece came when another woman with a fake name walked into Violet's shelter – a woman who Violet discovered used to be named Jacinda.

She found one of Maxwell's discontented lieutenants - a social misfit with delusions of grandeur named Ben Garza – who could be easily manipulated by a beautiful woman. She planted the idea of blackmail in his head and convinced him it was his own.

Then she confronted her friend Columbine with the truth about her mother. After that, it didn't take much to convince her to seek revenge against both Jacinda and Max. It was Violet's idea to enlist the journalist Patrick Cobb to find Jacinda and kill her. Columbine suggested reaching out to Lilian Lynch, who would be an easily controlled pawn. Columbine also came up with the more dramatic flairs in the plan – partly because a little smoke and mirrors would help hide their identities, but mostly because she thought it was fun.

Of course, Garza believed all their ideas to be his own, but then he

never realized what Violet was really up to. The blackmail plot was supposed to fail – she knew that Max would never pay. Cobb was supposed to go public with the information; unfortunately, Cobb turned out to be unreliable. So Violet found someone new to step in and fill his role.

Someone suave, witty, and devastatingly handsome.

Soon things began unraveling according to plan, and Violet and Columbine set up Saint Anthony and McPherson as their scapegoats, hoping to force Max into direct conflict with the only people who would have a legitimate shot at bringing him down. Either McPherson would crush Max, or Max would wipe out McPherson and face retribution from the Highwater Society.

Things hadn't necessarily gone down that smoothly, but Violet had improvised like a jazz master and was now so close to her revenge that she could taste it. She had beaten him at his own game, developed a trap as elaborate as any he could devise and made him walk right into it.

But was it really that simple?

No sooner than I had put the pieces together did I start to see gaping holes in it.

I mean, really – a beautiful and mysterious woman needs me (and only me) to help her exact revenge on the monster who ruined her life? But why me of all people?

Clearly, there are more dangerous assassins in the world than a suburbanite journalist who can barely change a flat. Hell, there are even better journalists – certainly far more credible ones.

Was I a prime mover in this chain of events or just Violet's pawn? Am I special, an integral piece of the puzzle, or a rube who happened to be in the right place at the right time? Too much is left unanswered by the latter, while the former feels hollow and self-aggrandizing.

Jesus, the way I tell it, she only ever married Anthony as a calculated move to help her get to Max. Is it really that impossible for her to have genuinely loved him, or is that just more convenient for me to believe?

And what about the dreams?

—

“You’re over-thinking this all too much, you know,” Max said as we passed the 32nd marker.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You wanted to know who the dead woman in my airplane was, who killed her, and why she died. Check. You wanted to uncover the identities of my blackmailers, and you’ve done that, too. You wanted to uncover a damning secret that exposes me for the vile black-hearted villain I am while simultaneously making a name for yourself as a journalist, and I’d say that’s a big fat check on that one, too. Hell, you’ve even got the girl,” he said and pointed at Violet.

“Look,” he continued, “I get it. You feel like you’ve been used, you’re upset and confused, and you’re hoping that whatever you find here will somehow give you answers. I don’t know what you expect – a pile of dead hookers, a computer hacked into the White House, the Loch Ness Monster, or the new Number Two. But there’s no man behind the curtain waiting to make your dreams come true or explain the mysteries of the universe. That’s not how life works. Life is messy and confusing and you just have to be happy with whatever joy and meaning you can scrape out of it.

“So quit while you’re ahead. Run off together, have lots of passionate crazy-person sex and make little foul-mouthed, purple-haired babies. If you turn around right now and ride off into the sunset, then you’ve won.”

We rounded another corner to find ourselves in another large clearing, this one coming to a dead end with a pair of giant metal doors tinted blue on the far wall. In the middle of the cleavage between the two doors, there was a big metal wheel the size of a big rig’s hubcap with the Highwater sigil and the number 33.

I answered, “Fuck it, we’ve come this far, might as well see this thing through.”

I crossed over to the doors and placed both my hands on either side of the wheel. I felt surge of energy coming from behind the metal, and every hair on my body stood on end.

I rotated the wheel a quarter-turn counter-clockwise until I felt it click into place. I heard a sudden burst of air, like a hermetic seal being broken, and watched as the doors slowly parted.

My ears rang with a piercing shriek of feedback, followed by the crackle of static and a tinny, mechanical laugh.

As I stepped through the open door, I heard a voice call out:

“Stop!”

BOOK FIVE: The Concrete Underground

PLAYLIST

By This River | Brian Eno

Elderly Woman Behind the Counter in a Small Town | Pearl Jam

Oompa Radar | Goldfrapp

Elephant Woman | Blonde Redhead

Art Is Hard | Cursive

The Good and the Bad Guy | My Brightest Diamond

Chapter 39. “Cured” Isn’t an Accurate Term

I sit in the dark theater, laughing as the old projector clanks loudly behind me.

On screen, I am lying in bed at the Motley Fool. The sound of someone knocking on our door wakes me up. I roll over and see a naked woman laying next to me. She has purple hair and a gunmetal half-mask. I stand up and slip on my boxers as I slowly stagger towards the door.

As soon as I crack it open, Detective Axelrod and a team of uniformed officers storm the room. Two of them slam me against the wall and handcuff me. As they spin me around, I see that they have rolled the woman over. She is dead – her neck has been clearly broken. Her hair falls off her head, and I realize it was just a wig.

She’s not who I thought she was.

Then they remove the mask, and I see her face.

“Columbine,” I whisper.

“Is this really happening,” I groan in the theater, “or is it another dream?”

—

Amy pulled her car into the Oak Hill Psychiatric Center visitor lot. On her way into the building, she flashed her Morning-Star press credentials to the guard at the front desk. She was met by a blonde doctor in her early forties waiting in the lobby.

“Amy Thompson?” the doctor asked with a smile.

“Yes,” Amy answered and shook the woman’s hand.

“I’m Dr. Sara Soderquist. Pleased to meet you,” she replied warmly, letting her gaze linger momentarily as she looked Amy over, appreciating the way her tight ribbed sweater clung to her curves. Noticing this, Amy started to fidget ostentatiously with her engagement

ring.

Sara continued as she led Amy to the elevators, “I hope you didn’t have too much trouble finding us up here. It’s quite a drive from the city.”

“Not at all, a nice scenic drive through the mountains was actually a welcome change. My car was in the shop for a week and a half, and I was stuck taking public transportation.”

The elevator door opened and the two women entered. Sara pushed the button for the third floor, then replied, “Ah, I actually used to know the city’s transit system pretty well. I took the Light Rail every day back when I was going to State – one transfer, 40 minutes to campus and 40 minutes back. At least it gave me a chance to catch up on my reading, so it wasn’t all bad – once I learned to deal with all the crazies talking to themselves and pervs staring down my top.” She chuckled and laid a hand gently on Amy’s forearm.

The elevator arrived. Amy shifted uncomfortably, but tried to hide it with an indulgent smile. “Anyways, I’m sure you’re busy so we can just get right down to it.”

“Of course,” Sara said. “He’s right up here.”

She led her down a long hallway lined with heavy metal doors leading into patients’ rooms, finally stopping in front of one marked 33. It had no window, but a small closed-circuit monitor was mounted on the wall beside it, displaying a blue-tinted video feed of the room’s interior.

It was small but clean and sparsely furnished with one bed, a small wooden table in the corner, and a matching wooden chair. A stack of notebooks was piled neatly on top of the table.

A man sat on the edge of the bed staring out a window in the far wall. He had long black unkempt hair and a thick black beard, both streaked with hints of early gray.

“When we spoke over the phone you seemed to already know a bit about him,” Sara said, “but I’ll just give you a quick run down of the basics.”

Amy nodded while pulling out her phone and switching on the voice recorder function.

Sara continued, "He was arrested twenty-three years ago. The police found him in a motel room with a dead prostitute in his bed; he had broken her neck. Upon subsequent psychiatric evaluation, it was determined that he was suffering from a number of severe mental disorders. I won't bore you with the jargon, you can pull what you need from the file. Suffice it to say he had almost no grasp on reality in any meaningful sense of the word. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed into psychiatric care. He's been with us ever since."

Amy nodded along to Sara's explanation, typing notes onto her phone's keyboard while the recorder kept rolling. "So how does the Highwater Society fit into all this?"

"Before his arrest, he had been the recipient of a grant from the Highwater Society. In his illness, he convinced himself that somehow they had him framed for the murder, like it was some nefarious conspiracy – the details of which were always vague and inconsistent from one day to the next. The irony is that the Highwater Society have been his only real benefactors. They've paid for him to stay and be treated here so that he actually had a shot at recovery rather than rotting away in County."

"And now he's cured?" Amy prompted.

"'Cured' isn't really an accurate term." Sara corrected. "His illness has been successfully treated to the point where we're confident that he is no longer a danger to himself or others."

"But you're releasing him," Amy pressed.

"Yes," Sara said with a nod. "He's ready to start re-assimilating into the outside world."

Amy looked back at the screen. The man had stood up and moved over to the table. He was rearranging the notebooks, his movements slow and deliberate, stacking and restacking.

"What can you tell me about the play?" Amy asked, keeping her eyes on the man.

"From what I understand, this is the play he was writing at the time of his arrest, the one that the Highwater Society originally gave him the grant for. It's also very powerfully linked to his illness; when he began to lose his grip on reality, he gradually integrated aspects of the play

into his delusions. It was as if he had lost the ability to distinguish between reality and his own fictional inventions. In my personal opinion, I don't think the Highwater Society's plan to go ahead with staging the play is the best thing for him, especially so soon after his release, but I guess they own the work now so it's their right to do what they want with it."

"Is he going to see it?"

Sara shrugged. "You'll have to ask him."

Amy watched as the man finally finished organizing the notebooks into six meticulous little stacks of perfectly-matched height, stood back and surveyed them momentarily, and decided he was satisfied. There was something familiar about him, although she couldn't quite place it.

Then he – meaning I – turned and smiled at the camera. A chill ran down her spine as she thought to herself, It looks like he's smiling right at me, as if somehow he can see me through the screen.

—

Amy sat down on the footlocker and turned her phone's recorder back on. I sat across from her on the wooden chair and rubbed my hands together slowly, enjoying the sound of the rough, dry skin.

"So, Mr. Quetzal, are you happy to be finally going home?"

I thought the question over for a second and sucked on my teeth. "I've been living in this room for over two decades. From what I understand, the place where I was living before this has been bulldozed and turned into a parking garage. So I wouldn't quite say I'm 'going home' – but yes."

"Where are you going to live after you're released?" she asked.

"My sister's coming to get me," I answered. "I'll be staying with her until I can get back on my feet."

She hesitated momentarily, trying to make it seem like she didn't really want to ask the next question. "Do you believe you've been cured?"

"I'm not sure that 'cured' is the right word," I replied. "But I realize

now how sick I was. I'm much less confused than I used to be."

"So you no longer believe that the Highwater Society or anyone else tried to frame you or is conspiring against you?" she pressed.

I shook my head. "I know that no one else is to blame for the things that have happened in my life."

"You know, you sound like you're reading from a script," she said, leaning forward as if to examine me more closely. "You're saying all the right things, but there's no conviction in your voice."

I shrugged dismissively and let my eyes wander off to look back to the stacks of notebooks on the table beside me.

She followed my gaze. "What's up with the notebooks?"

"They're nothing really, just gibberish. I write for the sake of writing; it's therapeutic. But they're not intended for others to read, so I doubt they would make much sense to you."

"Do you feel the same way about your play? How do you feel that it's actually going to be performed?"

I smiled – a big, toothy grin that Amy found profoundly unsettling.

"I think it'll be good for a laugh."

Chapter 40. What's So Funny?

Jenny lived in a chic loft atop a west side high rise. The main room consisted of a single large open space with the living room, dining room, and kitchen all flowing into one another. As we walked in, I noticed a package wrapped with shiny blue paper and a silver ribbon sitting on the buffet table behind the couch. Jenny smiled broadly when she saw me looking at it.

"Welcome home, D," she said.

I walked over to the table and sat my small suitcase beside it while I inspected the box. I picked it up and tested its weight; it was fairly light for its size. "Open it," she urged.

"After dinner," I said. "I need to clean up and settle in first."

"Bathroom's down the hall on the left. Your room's the second door on the right. I'll put your bag in it," she said as she snatched the suitcase from my hands. I started to protest, but decided she was on too much of a roll fussing over me. "Wow, this thing is really heavy," she commented as she lugged it out of the room.

I circled around the couch and picked the TV remote off the coffee table. There were no buttons on it, just a touch screen. I tapped the screen a couple times, but nothing happened. Then I felt around the edges and found a small black button. I pressed it, and two bottom panels butterflyed out from under the accursed thing, presenting a full keyboard. Disheartened, I gave up. It felt like I had gone through a time warp or something; they didn't really keep the patients up to date on the latest technological advances in the nut house.

"Here, let me help you," Jenny said as she returned. She took the control from my hands, slid the keyboard panels back into it, and swiped her fingers across the touch screen deftly. The TV came to life; a news anchor was rambling on about some new war we had got ourselves into.

"What's with all the notebooks in your suitcase?" Jenny asked.

"You snoop too much," I replied. She laughed.

“Are the clothes you’re wearing the only ones you have?” I nodded my head in response. “Okay, we’ll go find you some new ones first thing in the morning. I already told the office I’d be working from home for a while so we could spend some time together. Anyways, I left a couple of towels and some sweats by the sink in the bathroom in case you want to take a shower while I get dinner ready. But we can watch a little TV first if you want.”

“No,” I said, glancing back at the images of soldiers marching through piles of disembodied chunks of human. “A shower sounds like the right call.”

I picked up the remote and tried to turn the TV off by imitating Jenny’s earlier finger movements, but I only succeeded in turning the volume up. “Here let me,” she said as she took it from me again and turned it off.

“Fucking hell,” I mumbled as I headed off down the hallway.

—

I felt out of it. Too much was happening too fast, too much newness to take in all at once. Retreating into the tight, enclosed space of the bathroom was a relief. I kept the light switched off and enjoyed the peaceful darkness.

I stared into the mirror, mesmerized by my own reflection, which I saw more clearly as my eyes adjusted to the dark. It had been years since I looked into one, and to be honest I was a little surprised by what I saw. I had aged a lot more than I expected, and I’d never really got used to all the scars and bumps I’d picked up before being locked away.

I ran my fingers over the unfamiliar terrain of my face and started to laugh.

As my laugh died down, I saw my reflection begin to frown, and it asked me, “What’s so funny?”

—

I returned from the shower wearing a Yeah Yeah Yeahs reunion tour t-shirt and a pair of gray sweat pants. Both were a little too big for me. I found that the table had already been set for three places for dinner. Jenny was on the couch, and when she turned to see me, her jaw dropped.

I had shaved, and not just my beard – I had also taken the razor to my head and eyebrows. With my pasty, barren cranium, I looked like Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

“It looks... good,” she offered. After a pause, she added, “And by good I mean creepy.”

The sound of a buzzer rang out, and Jenny reached over to pick up the TV remote. The bottom of the screen displayed the word INTERCOM. “Come on up,” she said aloud and tapped the the remote. INTERCOM flashed red and vanished from the screen as a the buzz sounded again.

“I hope you don’t mind some company for dinner,” she said as she jumped up and ran to the dinner table. She uncorked the bottle of red wine that was sitting out and filled all three glasses.

When the front door opened a minute later and I recognized the visitor, I let out a boisterous laugh.

“Tricky Nicky!” I exclaimed.

He grinned as he walked over and held out his hand. “Whatever,” I scoffed and knocked his hand away, then gave him a hug.

“How the hell have you been man? You look good.” I said.

“You look like a Hare Krishna,” he replied with a chuckle.

“How’re Andrea and the kids?” I asked.

“Actually, we’ve have been separated for about seven years now. She and the kids live in Arizona,” he responded.

“Sorry to hear.” I patted his shoulder, then looked from him to Jenny, who was smiling a bit awkwardly. Then I looked down at the men’s clothes I was wearing that Jenny just happened to have lying around. “Oh man, you’re fucking my sister aren’t you?”

Jenny and Nick spent most of dinner catching me up on what I had missed over the last couple decades – what they'd been through in their own lives, what happened to old friends and family, stuff like that. I just soaked it all in, enjoying the taste of a home-cooked meal and savoring the half-glass of wine Jenny allowed me.

"So, D, what are your plans now?" Nick asked as he finished the last bite of his steak.

"Watch some TV, probably take a shit, then go to bed," I replied. "Maybe rub one out before I fall asleep."

Jenny nearly choked on her mouthful of wine, but Nick just laughed. "Same old D," he said. "You know what I meant, though. If you want, I can help you find some work. Just let me know what you're interested in."

"I don't think D would do very well in a nine-to-five," Jenny objected. "He's a writer who's days away from seeing his first play produced. Who knows what kind of opportunities he'll have after that?"

He looked skeptically from her to me, then drained the last of the wine in his glass. "They're really going through with it?"

"Why shouldn't they?" she asked defensively.

"Just seems like it's in kind of bad taste," he ventured.

"It is," I agreed.

Jenny just shook her head dismissively, as if to say that we both couldn't be taken seriously.

Soon we had cleared the table and settled down on the couch in front of the TV. We were watching some sitcom full of slang and pop culture references I didn't understand. I kept an eye on the other two for cues on when I should laugh so I could pretend that I got the jokes. I was afraid they might get uncomfortable otherwise.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said suddenly as she jumped up from her seat to retrieve my gift. "Open it."

I slowly untied the silver ribbon and tore away the blue wrapping paper, revealing a large white box. I opened the lid and pulled out a mass of crumpled blue tissue paper. At the bottom of the box was a grotesque black gunmetal mask, covered in boils and with a large

bulbous nose. I lifted it out of the box and looked at Jenny.

“What’s that?” Jenny asked in confusion.

“Why are you asking me? Didn’t you wrap this?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “No, I had it wrapped at the store. They must have got your present mixed up. It was supposed to be a computer for you to write with.”

I looked back at the mask in my hands and began to laugh uncontrollably.

“What’s so funny?” Nick asked.

Chapter 41. All Your Dreams Ground to Dust

Dawn was just breaking, but the air was still gray and cold enough that I could see my breath. I wore a hooded sweater that I found in the coat closet by the front door; it had a Police Officer's Association logo on it so I assumed it was Nick's.

I hadn't slept at all that night and instead just sat up waiting for the morning to come. As soon as it was late enough for the first joggers to start emerging onto the street, I decided to go for a walk.

It's always weird coming back to a place after a long absence. The city was just enough like I remembered to make it disconcerting when I saw something new and unfamiliar. I suddenly felt like a very old man, resenting a world that continued to grow and evolve while I stood still. Every place, every sight that I recognized filled me with a strange, nostalgic sort of comfort – a Halal market, a thrift store, a dirty little taqueria – all refugees from the incessant march to homogenization and corporatization.

I wandered aimlessly for nearly an hour with no particular route or destination in mind. Eventually, I found myself at the corner of Mission and 27th. At first it didn't even occur to me where I was, but then I recognized the alley that led behind the storefronts.

I went down the alley and came to the place where the "Bell-out-of-order" door had been, but it was gone. Instead, there was a solid brick wall covered with graffiti. One piece of graffiti was a warped, monstrous drawing of the white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland holding a Dali-esque melting pocket watch with the cover flipped open to the side so that the two circles together formed a figure-eight. The hour hand was positioned just before the four, while the minute hand was two ticks away from the 12. There was a caption to the right of the image, stenciled in block letters, that read: All your dreams are ground to dust in the gears of time.

I let out a chuckle.

Doubling back to the front of the building, I found that the store had been reopened for business. I walked in through the front door, noting with amusement that it was my first time coming in this way.

Inside, I found a small, cramped used book store called Invisible Ink. The walls were all lined with jam-packed bookshelves that stretched all the way to the ceiling. The front portion of the store was filled with tables placed so closely together that there was only room for one person at a time in the narrow little walkways between them. The table tops were covered with boxes of books marked "Clearance", with even more boxes sitting on the ground underneath.

No one was at the register.

I made my way further in and went up three small steps to the back of the store where long columns of bookcases spanned the full length to the far wall, again leaving only narrow passages between them. I continued down one of the aisles until I finally found the doorway that led to the back room. It was covered by a curtain of dangling strings of red beads. As I reached in to sweep them aside, I met a woman walking out carrying a box of books. She was startled to see me.

"Oh, hello," she said in a distinctive high-pitched voice, regaining her composure. "I didn't expect anyone in so early. We're not actually open yet."

"The door was unlocked."

"I know, it's a bad habit to be so careless, but honestly my trouble is usually getting people to come in here, not keeping them out," she replied with a good-natured smile. She was a small, slender woman about ten years older than me, her face well-worn with laugh lines around her mouth and eyes. She had bright red hair tied back tightly in a pony tail, the color just a shade too vibrant to be natural, belying a touch of pride that would not let herself go gray.

"Here, let me help you with that," I offered and took the box from her. She led me back to the front of the store and had me set it on the counter next to the register.

She picked up a price gun and started to label the books in the box as she asked, "So what brings you in today?"

"I was just looking for something to read," I shrugged. "Can you recommend anything?"

"I can recommend a great many things," she replied with a grin. "What kind of books do you normally read?"

"Mysteries," I answered.

She screwed up her face. “I don’t really care for those myself; they always try to trick you, deliberately throwing in extraneous plot lines just to confuse and misguide you, withholding important information until the last chapter, using vague and misleading descriptions so you don’t notice something that should be plain as day.” She paused for a breath, shaking her head. I chuckled in amusement. “And it’s always too convenient the way everything wraps up so neat and tidy at the end,” she couldn’t resist adding. “Life’s not like that.”

“So what would you say I should read instead?”

She paused, staring at me with a searching look. “It’s the funniest thing,” she said, “but I seem to recognize your face—”

She broke off when we heard the front door open. A young woman in her mid-twenties entered carrying a toddler in one arm and a cardboard tray with drinks in her other.

“Grandma!” the little girl shouted as her mother passed her over the counter to the older woman.

The young woman set the drinks down on the counter and handed one of the white cups to the shopkeeper. “Here’s your tea, mom.”

I slipped out the front door unnoticed, smiling to myself and whispering under my breath, “I wonder if I ever even had a chance of being happy.”

—

Jenny bought me a tiny little computer so I could write more. I asked her what she thought I should write, but she didn’t have an answer.

I told her that staying cooped up inside her condo was stifling my creative energies, so every day she drove me to the State University library so I could have a more inspiring environment to write. For three hours a day I’d sit on a bench outside the library and watch all the college girls walking up and down the steps leading up to the front entrance. I never even turned the computer on.

The first day I struck up a conversation with an attractive journalism student with brown hair and sad eyes for the better part of an hour. Once I got her going, she did most of the talking, practically gushed

her life's story to me. At the very end I tried to convince her to switch majors, but I didn't think she was going to listen to me.

The second day I didn't talk to anyone.

The third day a blind man came to visit me.

"They said you'd be here," he said as he took a seat next to me without waiting to be invited.

"Yep, they let me out a few days ago," I answered without looking at him, keeping my eyes on a blonde in a miniskirt who was bending over to pick up her dropped cell phone. "I would have looked you up, of course, but I've been busy."

"Of course," he replied.

I turned to look at him for the first time. His clothes were ratty and torn and covered with stains. His thick, wiry black hair was shot through with gray as was his unkempt beard. His hollow eye sockets were hidden behind large, black sunglasses. His tough, leathery flesh hung loosely off his frame, and though he was still heavysset, he looked somehow less robust than I remembered him. He looked frail, like he was made out of sticks and crumpled leaves.

"So how the hell have you been keeping yourself, Bri-Bri?" I asked.

He snorted.

We sat in silence for a few minutes.

To my surprise, I was the one who finally broke the silence. "Look at us, a couple of sad old men on a bench."

"We're not that old," he replied.

"Yeah, but we look it. And I feel like an old man now. Everything is unfamiliar and confusing, My whole life is gone, taken from me. There's really nothing for me in this world anymore. I don't belong here."

"No, you don't," he responded. "Neither one of us does."

"It's too perfect. I don't think I'll be staying around much longer. There's just one last thing I've got to set right, then I'm gone."

"Where will you go?" he asked.

I let out a chuckle. "You always did have a shit sense of humor."

—

I found Jenny in tears that night. She wandered off while I did the dishes. After finishing, I headed back to my room to get ready for bed and found her sitting on the edge of the futon, crying. My notebooks from Oak Hill were laid out on the bed.

“I thought you had been writing all that time you were there,” she said as I entered the room.

“I was.”

“I mean real writing. I thought you were doing more plays, stories, anything. Not all this—” she pointed to the notebooks “—this nonsense.”

“I was crazy, Jenny,” I said. “I wasn’t trying to write anything profound or meaningful. It was just a way to pass the time.”

I picked up one of the notebooks and flipped through it. It was filled with pages and pages of jibberish – nonsensical ramblings, half-true recollections of my childhood, pornographic fantasies, descriptions of the other people in the hospital, bits of other books that I could remember.

At first I had been writing within the lines. Then I filled in all the margins and other blank spaces. Then I filled in the tiny blank spaces between lines, then between words. I wrote on the pages and re-wrote on them several times over. In a couple of the later notebooks I even deliberately used a lighter ink during my first few passes writing in them so I could go back later and rewrite over it in darker ink.

Jenny look at me with tears in her eyes as if looking at a stranger. “I don’t understand what happened to you.”

Chapter 42. The Bad Guy

I fell violently ill on the night of the play.

And when I say violently ill, I mean two straight hours spent hugging porcelain and aggressively expelling every last morsel of foreign matter from my stomach. I mean profuse sweating and hallucinatory fever dreams. I mean heading towards the light.

“I don’t think he should go tonight,” I heard Nick say on the other side of the closed bathroom door.

“He’s just a little nervous – opening night jitters. He’ll be fine,” Jenny replied.

When we finally left, it was already twenty minutes after the scheduled start of the pre-show cocktail reception, as my sister repeatedly pointed out.

On the drive over, Jenny fretted hopelessly, a nervous wreck. Nick was pissed off at her for not listening to him and fussing too much. And I just sat quietly in the back seat, hallucinating pleasantly, oblivious to it all.

—

A woman in male drag yelled at me from her perch atop five-foot tall stilts, beckoning me to come inside and witness the wondrous spectacle that was about to unfold, which was so amazing and fantastical that it would make me doubt my very senses. She wore a bright green coat with full tails, a pair of yellow corduroy slacks long enough to cover the stilts, a purple bow tie, and a green top hat with purple trim. She had a monocle in her right eye and a fake curly mustache drawn on her face in Sharpie. I stared at her for several minutes while Jenny and Nick exchanged pleasantries with some people they knew outside the theater. When I felt Nick tugging at my arm, I took that as my cue to follow them in.

Jenny handed our tickets to a large, burly Mexican wearing an old-

time strongman leotard. Two slender, effeminate teenage boys in blue wigs and blue corsets were handing out playbills. I took one and read the cover:

Concrete Underground
or, The Harlequin

A Tragic Comedy
by Dedalus Quetzal

Goldfrapp's "Oompa Radar" blasted through the house speakers as we made our way through the front lobby, which was packed with patrons crowding around carnival sideshow performance artists – a man in a jester's costume juggling fire, a female sword-swallower dressed as a gypsy, a naked snake man with a forked tongue and green scales painted on his skin, and a pair of teenage girls who appeared to be conjoined twins in black lace lingerie and heavy gothic makeup. One of the twins played a ukulele while her sister sang in French: Ange, je peux me voir dans vos yeux.

I was pretty confident that at least half of this was actually happening outside of my fever dreams.

After we found our seats, Jenny and Nick immediately left to continue circulating among the audience, finding people they knew or wanted to know. Jenny seemed upset that I chose stay behind at our seats. From time to time I would see her point me out to whomever she was talking with. I decided to read the playbill, hoping it would both kill time and effectively hide my face.

According to the booklet, the play was being produced by something called the Trismegestus Theater Company under a grant from the Highwater Society. Dylan Maxwell was listed as a member of the theater's board of directors.

There was a full page towards the back entitled, "About the Playwright" that described my courageous struggle with mental illness. It was a pretty funny bit. I almost wished I had wrote it.

I flipped back through the book and stopped at the cast of

characters, which some pretentious douche had labeled “Dramatis Personæ.” It read:

D Our hero & Pierrot, a journalist
Natalie A true zany, our Columbina
James The pater familia & hapless Pantalone
Lily La Signora, the damsel in distress
Max James’s protege, a wily Brighella
Anthony A dangerous Punch indeed
Violet Our Judy wears her scars with pride
Harlequin An invisible hand pulls invisible strings

I was interrupted by a hand on my shoulder. “Glad you could make it.”

I turned to see Max, just as thin and beautiful as ever and still sporting the same black suit and red Chucks. While his hair had turned completely silver, his face was remarkably well-preserved, showing hardly any signs of wrinkling, still as smooth and perfect as I remembered. The bastard must feed nightly on the souls of uncorrupted youths or something.

I waved the program at him. “Well played, sir. I assume you are responsible for all this.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Max said. “I may have suggested the play at one of the board meetings, but I can’t take credit for any creative input.”

“What about this list of characters. Are you telling me you didn’t come up with these?” I asked skeptically.

“What do you mean? You wrote them. These are the descriptions from your manuscript.” He looked genuinely confused. Of course he would, I thought.

The house lights flashed off and on, and Max quickly excused himself as the audience took their seats. Nick and Jenny returned; she sat on my left while he sat to the left of her. The seat on my right, the

aisle seat, remained empty.

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I heard the sound of an old film projector coming to life amplified over the P.A. system, which was turned up so loudly it began to feed back and picked up a low crackle of static interference. A blue-washed video played on a translucent screen in front of the stage. The reel showed archival footage of carnival sideshow performers.

Suddenly the stage lights came up, illuminating the bare set behind the screen. Then the actors appeared, each wearing a gunmetal mask of the Commedia dell'Arte counterpart named in the program, and began to dress the set. The incessant noise continued to blare from the speakers as they moved the props and furniture into place, dancing playfully with each other as if the speakers were playing music instead of this unholy cacophony. As the sound finally died down, the set was completed and the actors took their places.

The plot of the play was pretty straightforward. It was set at the summer home of a wealthy family whose members were coming together for a week-long vacation. The dress and style of speech placed the time in the early twentieth century, though it was never explicitly stated. The main character was a reporter assigned to write a feature for the society page of the local metropolitan daily.

The first act played out like a comedy of errors as Natalie, the maid, gleefully helped the reporter uncover the family's dirty secrets.

Max was embezzling money from his employer, James, right under his nose. James was too old and senile to notice, and spent what little wits he had left devising opportunities to rape Natalie, who was later revealed to be his illegitimate daughter. Anthony, a deranged sadist with an explosive temper, beat his wife, whom he met while she was working in a brothel.

Despite the dark subject matter, though, the play strangely attempted to be light and humorous, full of slapstick physical comedy and double-entendres.

As the act drew to a close, Max's embezzlement scheme was discovered, except he arranged for it to appear that his fiancée, Lily,

was responsible. She was later found murdered. Meanwhile, Natalie took the reporter down into the catacombs beneath the house, which she said held a terrible secret.

Once underground, they discovered a complex system of tunnels and bunkers built from concrete. Natalie explained that it was constructed as a place to hide in the event of an atomic bomb attack; oddly, neither character questioned this anachronism. The act ended as they discover a locked chamber. Natalie stole the key from James during one of their trysts, and as the two of them opened the door, they found a Harlequin locked inside.

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The house lights came up for intermission and I was glad to be able to go outside. I needed to get some air and get away from the crowd, so I headed around to the back of the theater and took a seat on a stoop leading to a stage entrance. I sat there hugging my knees and shaking, trying to fight the urge to be sick again.

After a couple of minutes, I heard the door behind me open. The actress playing Violet appeared, still wearing her costume with half-mask and purple wig. She produced a silver cigarette case from her small hand bag.

“You look like you need one of these,” she said as she opened the case and offered it to me. I took one of the hand-rolled cloves, and she took one for herself. We smoked silently, enjoying the cool night air and the sweet taste of the smoke.

When I returned to my seat, Jenny and Nick were both visibly concerned at my appearance. I’m sure I looked terrible; my face felt cold and clammy, my head was swimming, and it was all I could do to keep from doubling over into dry heaves right there.

“Do you need to go?” Nick asked.

“I’m fine,” I replied as I waved him off dismissively and sank back into my seat.

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When the curtain raised for the second act, the set was dressed with more modern accoutrements, like a television, a computer, and contemporary furniture. The actors' wardrobes were now more fitting with the turn of the millennium, and all the actors had changed masks. Natalie wore the mask of Judy, Max had taken Pantalone's, Violet was Columbine, Anthony was Pierrot. The character of the reporter was inexplicably absent for the first few scenes until he re-emerged dressed as the Harlequin, dressed in a motley suit and wearing a grotesque gunmetal mask.

The man sitting to my right leaned in to whisper in my ear, "The Harlequin character can be viewed as a kind of working-class hero; he is a servant who always gets the better of his masters through trickery, simultaneously exposing and exploiting their buffoonery. In this respect, he is often viewed as a sort of avatar of trickster god Hermes. To look upon the face of God is to invite madness into your heart."

"Shh!" Jenny admonished sharply to my right. I turned to her to apologize, but the emanating light from the stage washed us both in a blue glow, giving her hair a vivid purple tint.

I felt the nausea swell within my gut and finally overwhelm me. I jumped up from my seat abruptly and tripped over the feet of the man sitting to my right, causing me to stumble clumsily into the aisle. I turned to apologize, but then remembered that the seat had been empty. So instead I just staggered down the aisle to the exit.

Once I made it to the lobby, a concerned usher pointed me in the direction of the men's room.

Thankfully it was empty, and I quickly collapsed into one of the stalls and dry-heaved loudly into the bowl. I wretched so hard I could feel the capillaries burst in my face, making my skin warm and red. When the sickness subsided, I struggled awkwardly to my feet. Then I thought heard laughter coming from the stall next to me.

I hobbled out and over to the next stall, then opened the door slowly. No one was in there; I must have imagined the sound. I was just about to turn away when I noticed the vent in the wall. Something blue and metallic caught my eye from behind the cover. I stepped up onto the toilet so I could reach the grating and found that it was missing its bottom two screws. I was able to pull it out just far enough to snake my

fingers into the opening and slide out the thin blue object.

When I realized what it was, I couldn't help but laugh.

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I waited out the rest of the play in the lobby. The concerned usher offered to let me back in to sit in the back row, but I declined, telling him I wanted to be close to the bathroom just in case. I was lying though; I felt fine.

I knew the play was over when I heard the muffled sound of applause coming through the closed doors. Soon after, the doors opened and the lobby was flooded with people filing out. The sound system blasted Cursive's "Art Is Hard" as the sideshow performers reappeared and the freakish carnival atmosphere returned.

A crowd of people gathered around to congratulate me. Someone asked if I was going to make it to the after-party. I told them I probably would not.

"Nonsense," I heard Max say behind me and spun around to find him grinning proudly. "Of course, he's going."

Max threw an arm around my shoulder. "Too bad you missed the ending," he said good-naturedly as he led me away from the crowd to the side of the room. "But then I suppose you already knew how it turned out."

"Not really," I shook my head. "But it really doesn't matter. I realized a long time ago not to worry about whodunnit; the more answers you find, the more questions they'll keep raising. I'm more a man of action now, trying not to over-think things."

"I'm not sure I follow," Max said, his smile taking on a menacing quality.

I leaned in close to him and whispered into his ear, "You tricked me into that room. You fabricated those files and leaked them to the blackmailers. You knew I would go in."

He just kept on smiling. I couldn't be sure he heard me over the din of the crowd.

I drew the blue knife out from my waistband and plunged it into Max's stomach repeatedly, feeling his warm blood gushing out onto my hand. Then I pulled it out and thrust it back in again and again, penetrating his firm, sculpted flesh, tearing apart that exquisite body. After five or six stabs, his legs gave out and he fell back onto the floor. And when he looked up at me, that smug bastard actually had a triumphant grin on his face.

"I always knew you were the right man for the job," he said, spraying blood everywhere as he opened his mouth. Or maybe I just imagined I heard it.

I dropped down on top of him and hacked away at his throat a few times just to make sure the bastard was dead.

When the rage passed and the haze lifted from my mind, I stood up and turned to face the assembled crowd, who were all staring back at me, frozen in place like human statues. Suddenly a single person started to applaud. My eyes darted over their faces, following the sound to its source. Jenny stepped forward from between two men and continued clapping, smiling gleefully.

A couple knowing chuckles rippled through the crowd, and several more people joined in with the applause. A man elbowed his friend playfully in the ribs, and a palpable relief spread over their expressions. They started clapping, too, then a few more, and a few more, until the lobby was filled with boisterous applause.

"Such a realistic effect!" I heard a voice say.

"Just like the end of the play!" said another.

"If we are not willing to destroy the beauty we have created, we become slaves to it," someone else quoted sagely from somewhere, trying to sound intellectual.

I was reeling, slowly pushing my way through the crowd in a daze. Hands patted me on the back. Strangers smiled at me and flashed me thumbs-up.

I finally found the front door and was happy to once again be outside in the open night air. I took deep breaths, filling my lungs like a drowning man who miraculously resurfaces.

There was a long black car parked out in front of the theater with its engine running. When I was halfway down the path to the sidewalk,

the passenger side door popped open. I stopped in my tracks, not sure what to do. A few seconds later, I heard a scream come from inside the theater and figured my mind was made up for me.

I bounded the last of the way to the car and hopped in. The actress who played Violet was in the driver seat, still wearing her half-mask and purple wig from the play.

“Where to?” she asked.

I sank into the seat and looked down at my blood-drenched clothes and said, “Anywhere that isn’t here.”

She stepped on the gas and peeled away.

“Are you sure?” asked a voice behind me, drifting up front from the back seat. “You can leave a place, you can leave a situation. You can quit a job, move to a different house, forget a thing that has happened, or even give up on a love. But the one thing you can never walk away from is yourself.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, so rather than think about it too much, I just reached out and turned on the stereo.

The music was slow and atmospheric with a woman crooning longingly:

Sometimes when I tell the story of you,
I make you out to be the bad guy.

Nine clues to solve the mystery of CONCRETE UNDERGROUND

1. What happens to Violet's sculpture. What is the significance of this?
2. D successfully completed the job for which Max selected him. What was it?
3. Note the appearances of colored metals.
4. Do you believe that Max really did not recognize Violet?
5. Note the appearances of doors and keys.
6. Note the relationship between D, Jenny, and Nick at the end of the novel. This is the ideal situation for D.
7. Who does D meet in the bookstore?
8. Who gives the warning to stop before D enters Room 33? Who is

being warned?

9. Who built the labyrinth?

GUERRILLA FICTION MANIFESTO

1. Guerrilla fiction is defined by independent, artist-driven production and distribution of literary works.
2. Guerrilla fiction is based on the belief that the traditional model of book publishing only benefits one person – some guy in New York making money off other people's creativity – at the expense of both artist and audience.
3. Guerrilla fiction is possible because the tools for creating and sharing art are widely available to anyone with access to a computer and an internet connection.
4. Guerrilla fiction favors the electronic distribution of literature as an environmentally-responsible alternative to traditional publishers' slavish devotion to paper.
5. Guerrilla fiction favors cheap, zine-style photocopies over more wasteful formats favored by traditional publishers. Guerrilla fiction believes that neither the artist nor the audience is served well when works are released only as expensive hardcovers.
6. Guerrilla fiction favors the promotion of art through direct

connection between the artist and audience – using web sites, social networks, community involvement, word of mouth, and face-to-face human interaction.

7. Guerrilla fiction makes the distribution of art an extension of the interpersonal relationship between the artist and the audience, rather than the commercial relationship between the publisher and the consumer.
8. Guerrilla fiction believes that getting art to the audience is more important than getting money to the artist.
9. Guerrilla fiction keeps all rights in the hands of the artist.
10. Guerrilla fiction does not need to be sanctioned or validated.

About the Author

Moxie Mezcal lives under an assumed name in San Jose, California.

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