



**I WILL
KILL YOU**

**HALO
SCOT**

HALO SCOT

I Will Kill You

Copyright © 2022 by Halo Scot

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition

ISBN: 9798824565607

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

*To those we've lost along the way,
and to those we've yet to find.*

May miracles rise from your shadows.

Cleanup on Wall Street

Alex

Corporate America: a psychopath's wet dream.

Land of the free (if you're rich), home of the brave (if you're poor). A melting pot of dream corpses. Sour milk and bloody honey. Creepy Uncle Sam, your mother's brother who asks to see your tits at parties. Yankee Dingleberry. The big, bad, bold US of A. You can do everything as long as it changes nothing. Such opportunity. Such ennui. So many lost souls willing to pay *anything* to find themselves again. It's my civic duty to help them. How could I turn them away? You got a problem; I got a fix. Sure, it might cost a literal arm and leg, but I'll clean your conscience with my own, dirty my heart so yours shines (fool's) gold.

What would you pay for peace of mind? What is the price to erase regret? Lucky for you, I got an app for that: *No Questions Asked, NQA* for short (click the money icon to see current deals). It's an easy, user-friendly way to throw dollars at troubles (don't

miss Two-for-One Tuesdays). I prey on their desperation; they leech off my generosity. And there is *so* much desperation. Thank God for New York. No, thank Satan. I am the City That Never Sleeps, and I've poisoned the Big Apple. We're late for my ten o'clock, though, so keep up, and watch out for dog shit. Yup, that shit there, the one you stomped. At least now you smell like freedom.

"Ciao, Tony," the receptionist calls as we enter the building—come along.

My name's not Tony, but people like when I'm Tony, so today, I'm Tony. Tomorrow, I'll be Vinny, Joey, Louie, Frankie, or another name softened with a conniving long "e." Frank is a dick, but Frankie is your friend—a friend you owe money and *antipasto* and a get-well-soon card for his *nonna*, but a friend the same. And I don't speak Italian, despite my embezzled accent, but I *am* half Italian, half Egyptian. There's the lonely truth in the lie stack, and it's best to breed lies from rotten truth, but enough blabbering. We're late, my client's early, and I doubt you got the chops for fancy talking.

"Nice to meet you, Pete," I say, sitting across the table. My client looks ready to shit himself, if he hasn't already. In his NQA request, he listed "body cleanup," blunt and bland with no euphemism or code word—a newbie classic. I don't usually take on newbies, but finances are tight as a CEO's overbite, so newbies we must.

"Tony, hi," Pete says. He sweats through his collared shirt, dank with pit stains and stomach-roll prints. I should pity him, but you know I don't, and *he's* the one who killed some guy, not me. Well, not this guy. But cross me, betray me, fuck me over, stab me in the back, and I will kill you, too.

Pete stares. I wait. Can't ask questions—part of NQA's holy

“Terms and Conditions”—so I let him come to me. He doesn’t.

“Pete, you’re new, I get it, but you gotta give me something, buddy,” I say. “And I can’t ask questions, so spill.”

Pete swallows and eyes the ceiling, hoping God will answer his prayers. But Pete doesn’t believe in God, and God doesn’t believe in him, so the room remains silent and awkward.

“There’s a body on Wall Street,” Pete whispers. “Near the subway station. I stuffed it behind a fence.”

“Behind a fence,” I repeat.

He nods.

“Behind a see-through, public fence,” I say.

Another nod.

I shake my head and *tsk-tsk* the poor dickhead. “Petie, Petie, Petie—”

“It’s Pete,” he says.

“It’ll be Greg soon if you can’t get your shit together.”

“I didn’t mean to kill—”

I raise a hand, and he stops. “I don’t care, and I don’t want to know. Plausible deniability, and all that jazz.” My lawyers are still up my ass about the last gig. Wasn’t my fault NYPD had a retirement party the same night. I buy most cops, but not all and not those. Then again, Rockefeller Center is a poor choice for slaughter—too much visibility and too many tourists. I should run a webinar on responsible murder...

“Here.” Pete hands me a slip of paper. “GPS coordinates.”

You gotta be shittin’ me. Newbie, indeed. “You wrote it down. Wow. If someone finds this, you’re dead or in jail wishing you were dead. Petie, buddy—”

“It’s Pete.”

“Soon-to-be Greg, fuck up again, and you’ll be asking for papers, not cleanup. If you like living in Manhattan, lie low for

a few days. I'll sort this out, but do nothing else stupid."

"Thank you, Tony," Pete breathes with relief. "I owe you one."

"Nope, you owe me \$5,239.91," I say, "payable by bank check only. Mail it to the PO box in the FAQs. If I get it within the week, all's good. If I don't, the front page of *The New York Times* might look familiar."

"Got it."

"Good."

Pete lifts his hand to shake, but I'm already out the door. He's a shit client, but he's got one thing going for him. He didn't mention my scar.

* * *

Ever been to New York? The city, I mean, or "The City," if you worship her. I don't. You shouldn't, either.

It's a city of contradictions: standoffish but sympathetic, distant but diplomatic, preppy but polite, cold but kind. A smile earns you a frown. A nod earns you a shake. Eye contact earns you first spot on the weird list, and small talk is grounds for arrest. Great place to live—for criminals, that is. The American West is too flashy (they notice every smudge in the swank), and the South is too friendly (hard to dump a body where everyone knows your name), but the Northeast is prime for crime (go ahead, cringe—I did).

And I do love crime. Why? Society is curated. You see what they want you to see, and like what they want you to like. Safety nets and security blankets soften our country. Everything is so fucking *fake*. Except fear. And death. Therein lies reality, the primal beast who trades "please" and "thanks" for knives and bullets, for truth and revenge, and truth is a bloody thing. We're

mad in Manhattan—let's make that *Madhattan*, aka Flotsam City, and I am *Batmad*...or maybe *Batmad* in *Madhattan* just has a sinus infection.

Fuck, I'm preachy today. Pete, aka Petie, aka soon-to-be Greg, made me so. I hate incompetence, and he's the king. I also hate the heat, the gritty sweat, the shadowless sidewalks, and the half-dead commuters pining for sharp-dressed, alcohol-soaked nights.

But it's not night. It's day. And it's hot. Every step unsticks my balls from my thighs, despite my silk briefs. (Don't judge. Georgina gave them to me for Christmas, and you don't question Georgina. You'll meet her soon.)

We got a long walk to Wall Street, though, so we should do a mirror scene, stuck inside my head as you are. How did you get there, by the way? I didn't invite you here, yet here you are. Did Halo send you? Can't trust Scot. Before you know it, you'll fall in love with a monster.

Ah, here's a grimy, fingerprint-greased, sketchy-ad-stickered window for us to use. The reflection is dull, but I'll fill in the edges. At thirty-four years old, I'm tall, dark, and handsome. Well, I'm tall and dark. Handsome is subjective, but no one's told me otherwise. What? Truth isn't arrogance. Aren't we all about empowerment in this day and age? Or does that only apply to celebrity sob stories and politicians' kids? Here, I'll lose half of you, and the half who stays should consider therapy.

Anyway, I'm tall (but not towering), dark (sometimes sultry), and possibly (definitely) handsome, which helps in the horny, nepotism-drenched, business climate. With olive skin, dark brown curls, and gray-green eyes, I stand out in a room but blend into the crowd. I'm lean but not cut, just your average, approachable, everyday man with street-corner charm, a secret-

lined smile, and a slight New York accent buffed by Wall Street shine. A white, button-down shirt and charcoal khakis uniform me in the army of the streets: cuffs rolled up, black pea coat draped over my broad-but-not-erotica-broad shoulders. Some would say I'm dashing. Others would call me a douche. Both are preferable to the truth.

That's the part you see: the self-made businessman out for a late-lunch stroll in the City That Never Sleeps. You scoff at his concerns and envy his swagger, but you'd spread your legs in a heartbeat and beg him to bend you over a counter. I straddle intimidating and welcoming—and your thighs, upon request. No, I'm not perfect. Yes, I smoke and drink too much. But this is NYC; the air quality will kill you fastest.

People trust me. People *want* me. I sharpen charisma and channel mania into drive. He's a handsome fuck, this Tony, sometimes Vinny, sometimes Joey, Louie, or Frankie. But Alex? Who is he?

Here's the part you don't see: knives in one pocket, cigarettes in the other, liquor coupons shoved in my coat. Insomnia-ringed eyes, brow-to-cheekbone scar, voice hoarse from crying myself to sleep. Arm and torso tattoos of Italian and Arabic poems reflect a damaged, softer side, and my thousand-yard stare sees too much and cares too little. All are constant reminders of an unhealable wound. To give my kids a normal, happy, stable life (yes, I hear your surprise at my procreation), I embrace psychopathy...after I lost her.

Shit, that got dark. We're supposed to have fun this book. Let's rewind.

Hello, Reader. I'll call you Bob. Nice to meet you, Bob, though I'm sure you'll regret me by the end. I'm Alex, or Alessandro Osman. My parents got trigger-happy with my first name, but it

could have been worse. Ma (Italian) and Mom (Egyptian) fought over shoving all our ancestors on my birth certificate, but the hospital (bless them) vetoed their preferred name: Alessandro Giacomo Domenico Mido Karim Ayad Osman. My six siblings were less lucky, but being the youngest has perks. In the end, Ma gave my first name, Mom gave my last, and they left out the middle to avoid divorce.

Despite my country-sized family, I'm a lone wolf, Red Riding Hood's crush with *American Psycho* aspirations. Less *Goodfellas*, more *Ocean's Eleven*. Knives over guns, cunning over chaos. I will kill you, but only as a last resort, though I've had a surprising number of last resorts. Sure, I maim at will, but kill too soon, and you lose your advantage. Fear is a powerful motivator, and the dead don't fear. I'm not a genius, but I *am* ingenious, and that's how I survive.

We've reached Wall Street, and clouds threaten a storm. Since summer, every afternoon, the sky rains liquid shits. It's the hottest heatwave on record, the most dogged of dog days. Between swamp-level humidity and wet-fart asphalt, it's a miracle anyone's out at all. New Yorkers hate rules, so we'll sweat through our clothes and pass out from heat exhaustion before we admit it's too hot. But it *is* too hot, and Pete is too stupid, and this day is a diarrheic diaper overflowing with regret.

As promised, the bloated corpse waits at Pete's GPS coordinates (stupid as Cupid, that one). At least the murder weapon still hides in the corpse's chest. Bless New York's high weirdness threshold. No one's reported it yet. They think it's a papier-mâché art installation for a college student's thesis.

I burn Pete's paper and call it in. The phone rings, beeps twice, and I say, "Wolves cry hunger: Wall Street Station." Then

I hang up. Unlike Pete's paper, this is an encrypted line. The company motto opens the high-risk extension number, then logs the location. Cleaners will arrive in minutes, so I leave and wander toward white-collar hell.

Good job, Bob. You did all right. A little squeamish at the corpse, but you'll adapt. Don't worry, less of this in the future, more gory fun. I rarely do street work anymore, only when the situation is delicate—meaning Pete is an idiot. We both agree on that, even if you're pissed you ended up here, in my fucked-up head, in my messed-up life. Careful, though. You'll relate to me yet.

White-Collar Hell

Alex

Welcome to Rockefeller Center, declared a New York City Landmark in 1985, and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1987. Prestigious and crowded, affluent yet artsy, it's the perfect place to run a criminal empire, hiding right in the bleeding heart of America. Okay, more like America's moist, hairy armpit.

Stop a second, and breathe in that beautiful, industrial, stars-and-stripes pollution. Feel free and powerful yet? Before you can answer, rain starts and thunder roars, saving you from awkward indecision. No time to gawk at tourists, food trucks, or vendors selling cheap, gaudy, plastic shit. I cross to my office building and nod at the doorman, then pass below the behemoth sign that proclaims my legacy in blood-red print: Apex. It's pretentious, but so am I, and I built this kingdom from scratch, so I deserve some masturbatory decor.

Bob, stop it. You're judging me. That's not nice. What is it

now? Crime or arrogance or the sign's font? It's crime? Ah, I see. Despite multiple economic depressions—sorry, “recessions,” because God forbid we panic—I'm supposed to attend college, get a degree that means shit, drown in student debt, and turn out underappreciated, undervalued, and under-everything? No. That ain't how I work.

What about scholarships? So glad you asked, Bob. Yes, what about scholarships I couldn't win because my parents couldn't afford high-rent areas with pricey private schools and showy extracurriculars? But it's *my* fault, right? Of course it is. I'm no poster child, so I'm labeled the problem child, ushered into shadows while some palatable kid with the same socioeconomic crutches but a better attitude takes center stage.

Oh, no, no, no, I'm not bitter, Bob. It all worked out in the end...for the most part. You either play by the rules or make your own game, and I'm a gamemaster, a troublemaker, an all-around hell-raiser.

Back to Apex.

I bask in air-conditioned ecstasy, then ride the elevator to the top, to management offices and important cubicles, if a cubicle could ever be important. Our motto perches over every doorway: *Wolves cry hunger*. In other words, ambition is never satisfied, and desire never rests. Clever, I know. Whiskey inspired it. That, and my poisonous appetite. I'll eat myself yet, and not in the sexy, self-fellating way—which if you can do, I commend you.

The elevator opens, and my empire awaits. Sleek and modern, bigwigs' corner offices brag leather chairs and swollen desks, and a white-cubicle checkerboard nests between glass walls. Through polished windows writhes unpolished NYC: smog, traffic, sirens, newborn thunderstorm, subways belching com-

muters, taxis honking at existence, and suits power-walking to immortal meetings. We even got abstract artwork on the walls, because we're cultured, dammit.

Some of my employees work here, in the office, as the reputable financial institution we make-believe. They work on *NQA* app updates, bug fixes, and customer service, along with insurance fraud. We target rich assholes filthy with abuse lawsuits, then hack a fake name onto their life insurance policies. After waiting an unsuspecting amount of time, my other employees—the street crew—kill them in a “freak accident.” Last, my office team uses the fake name to claim insurance, then wires blood money through a network of offshore accounts.

I offer a great split of clean and dirty work, equal opportunity for every Myers–Briggs personality. As CEO, I must provide incentives for loyalty—outside death threats. I mean, you *can* leave Apex, if you'd like to shorten your lifespan. But most don't leave. Most stay till retirement, another shady area with a move-off-grid-or-die ultimatum.

Why do they stay? Thanks for asking, Bob. You're not as bad as they say. But you should ask: *Why wouldn't they stay?* I offer top-notch salaries, six-hour workdays, unlimited PTO, early dismissal on Fridays, paid health and dental insurance (family plans, too), tuition reimbursement, free childcare, gym discounts, and pensions—benefits to keep lips shut and minds open. There are also break rooms with coffee, tea, and beer, as well as beanbags and TVs, plus annual company retreats to places like Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, Singapore, Germany, and Belize—notice a pattern? You should. Gotta check on that blood money.

Apex's perks erase morality. We kill, but we also have quarterly pizza parties with glittery strippers, and there's nothing

like lust to ease your conscience. The libido is a powerful tool, and we are all reptiles at the core despite our hundred-thread-count, cotton-blend button-downs. In a world where—big breath—working-class citizens struggle beneath leagues of student debt, villainous insurance plans, soaring housing costs, and festering mental health, where most work many jobs to survive with no retirement in sight, where our overeducated generation struggles with underemployment, where financial crashes crucified our futures, where we suffocate on low wages in a stagnating job environment and shit economy, where society gaslights and strangles us, where everyone tags us as lazy and entitled in a barren market, where the world blames us for upheaval and tells us to follow in our parents' footsteps despite the changing times, common decency gets you far.

That escalated.

Anyway, I'm a savior, or so they tell me. Naked glitter parties fix all problems, just saying.

Back to work. Deja (CFO), Jorge (CTO), and Li Jie (HR manager) spot me across the floor. All three are forces of nature, so we shouldn't ignore them, Bob, regardless of your antisocial request. They're Apex's zenith—beneath me, of course—all sharks in their own right. That's why I hired them. They can smell blood and make cities bleed. But they're also kind, and kindness goes a long way. No one wants to work with a twat. Or a dick. Or a prick. Or any fucking genital. I hired the best, and I give the best freedom to work.

"Mr. Osman," Jorge greets. My employees call me Mr. Osman, and I call them their given names—rank, status, and appearance bullshit. (Bob, get back in your cage.)

"Thank God you're here," Deja says.

We thank God too often. Satan deserves the real respect.

He's responsible for all we do at Apex, if you believe. (Mom is Muslim, and Ma is Catholic, so they gave me a diverse religious upbringing.)

"Morale is down," Li Jie says. "Way down. After last month's buyout, everyone's worried about layoffs."

Last month, to pay the bills, I sold extra shares to our stockholders. Because everyone's dramatic, they called it a buyout, but I still own the vast majority of Apex.

"There will be no layoffs," I say, leaning against a cubicle. The resident employee glares up, notices me, then blushes and winks. I fucked him...maybe...after the buyout? That night was hazy.

"We know that," Deja says, "but *they* need reassurance." She motions toward the cubicle garden.

"You want a speech."

The bigwig trinity nods.

I sigh. "Gather VPs, managers, and supervisors—hell, get everyone, and bring them to the cafeteria."

* * *

Hungry, Bob? Grab a snack from the vending machine, then meet me by the stage.

This wasn't my afternoon plan, by the way. I'd hoped to doze in meetings, sign important papers, and nod or shake my head in vague approval or disapproval, in case my decision bites me in a week. Ambiguity has saved my ass more than once.

Moving on. You got your snack, I got my mic, so let's do this. Yes, I agree, the cafeteria is obnoxious. A three-story stadium with massive windows is excessive, but I have many employees, and they all need to eat. There's plenty of seating,

rows of tables with benches, and every imaginable food and drink. Calm down, Bob. I know *you* know, but *they* don't know, so deal with exposition now and then.

Let's start. Storm paints the glass, thunder rattles the building, and lightning strobes the room—perfect for a pep talk. I take the stage. You should, too. Wait, you don't have a choice. You're stuck in my head, just like me.

"Fuck, it's hot," I say into the mic and earn chuckles all around. Shut up, Bob. Weather is the universal mediator, and profanity earns street cred. *See? He's like us.* We both know that's false, but let them pretend they can reach my heights—or depths.

"It's been a tough month," I continue. "For that, I apologize." From the sidelines, Deja, Jorge, and Li Jie urge me on. "Several of you have expressed concern about the buyout." *Expressed* concern? *Expressed* is forever tied to lactation for me. Grow a few kids, and every word shifts meaning. "But there's no reason to worry. There will be no layoffs, and salaries will increase by five percent over the summer." There are cheers...and relief. Money calms all fires, but we're not out of the woods yet. Best add some punch and pizzazz.

I start sucking: "You all deserve this. *Never* underestimate your worth. It's easy to doubt yourselves, but I never doubt you." Boost them so they ignore the shitstorm. Embrace the mania, Bob. It works.

"The older I get, the fewer fucks I give," I say. "Hoard those fucks. Don't let anyone take them away."

My employees cheer.

"You can do it. Chokeslam distrust. Punch doubt in the teeth. Hit insecurity in the throat. Elbow uncertainty in the gut."

They cheer louder.

"Slaughter negative voices. Bodycheck impostor syndrome.

Roundhouse-kick reservation. Slap hesitation in the face with a wet fish wrapped in an oily turd. Burn self-hatred in a bonfire, and toast marshmallows in the dying embers of its oozing carcass.”

They cheer their souls free, unleashed by lunacy.

“Conquer each workday. Autopsy your soul. Bare your truth, and smash a motherfucking gong.”

Note to self: Buy a motherfucking gong.

“Measure life with kindness, not money. Be kind to others, and be kind to yourself. Eviscerate this company with kindness.”

They go as crazy as I am, and I wallow in their praise. Ambiguity yields high ROI, and profits will soon jump on the validation-horny train.

“You are worthy. You deserve the stars. Believe in miracles, because you are a miracle. Let’s carry Apex into the future atop a blazing mountain of glory.”

When you give the speech that makes you question your sanity...again...for the hundredth time...

Okay, at this point, I should embrace my insanity.

Anyone else burned out? My skull is a vat of charred chicken livers blended with brain pudding. But that’s normal for me.

Great work, Bob. You were skeptical at first, but I knew you’d join in. Morale’s up, so time for a smoke break, then the dreaded meetings and paperwork. It’s hard to be me, but it’s harder to be you, shoved between neurons as you are. Let’s press on through the cosmic, septic sludge. If we’re lucky, we’ll exit this book in one piece, though you never know with Halo, the bloodthirsty savage.

My Tears Are Dry

Erin

Dear Sandy,
I know you hate that nickname, but Alex is the world's man, while Sandy is my man, and you will always be my man, be mine.

By the time you read this, I will be gone. I won't lie, these years together haven't been easy, but they've been true, and this is my last chance to thank you. So thank you for loving me, for protecting me, for working two jobs to support our beautiful family. I couldn't be prouder of how far you've come. I was the rock, and you were the fire, and together, we made what should be forever.

But it's not, and that's okay. I know you disagree, but it's okay, Sandy, and it's okay to cry. Let yourself feel. Let yourself heal. Let yourself live again. This is my end, but it is not yours. I hope you find a new love, a better love. I hope you let me go. I hope the world is gentle, that the children give you strength. I hope you see my smile in every mirror but find new windows to explore.

MY TEARS ARE DRY

I'll send as many of these as I can, but I'm fading, love, and I want you to move on. Move on for me. Live for me. Find someone new, and love them more than you loved me. Ignite the city with your beauty, Sandy. You have so much more to give.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Bourbon Blitz

Alex

The letters started a day after she passed, as if *she* chose her fate instead of a curse. Delivered at random intervals to Apex, a company started during the despair of her diagnosis, I both yearn and dread their arrival.

Erin must have told the post office to deliver them posthumously according to a pattern only she could see. That's how she was, seeing patterns in people everyone else ignored. She saw something in me and told me so, but I never realized my potential till she was gone.

Sorry, Bob. I warned you, didn't I? Can't trust Scot, and can't trust me.

But her latest letter burns: *I hope you let me go*. Erin was wise as the stars, but she never understood how much I loved her, wanted her, cherished her, *needed* her. She was my soulmate, my second half and better half, the half of my heart that made me whole. I'm not whole anymore. Everything inside me is

broken, Bob, and I'm inches from collapse.

This is my end, but it is not yours.

It's not only her words. It's her handwriting, too, her handwriting, her perfume, her skin cells left on paper. I hear her melodic voice, see her freckly grin, grieve her burgundy hair, and mourn her river-blue eyes. She was my rock, scrawny but strong, warm but fierce, my stay-at-home warrior who made our dingy apartment a home.

I was the rock, and you were the fire, and together, we made what should be forever.

We moved after she died. Couldn't drown in memories. That's what I thought, anyway. But memories are stalkers. No matter how far you run, how much you smoke, how deep you drink, they always find you in every bar, kiss, and grin. Death of a loved one, moving, and job loss fall under "Most Stressful Life Events." In the past year, I've suffered all three.

Let yourself feel. Let yourself heal. Let yourself live again.

Live for me.

Christ, Bob, I can't do this anymore, though I've told myself that every day for the past year. And every day for the past year, I've forced myself to forget. But the storm's over, the workday's done, so let's head to my favorite watering hole.

Bar Four is not special, nor is it the fourth bar of anything. In fact, I'm surprised it's still around. It squats between Banksy's Deli and Mario's Magic Emporium, a sex shop for grad students (the toys are cheap, Bob, and you deserve better). Oil films every distressed counter, and dirt coats the floor, footprints dancing throughout. Lights flicker, stools creak, the glasses are foggy, and the bathroom reeks.

You wonder why I'm here, Bob, because we know I'm worth far more than this. I belong in a West Village tavern like

Hooley's Lounge, laughing at plebs with pursed lips, pinkie out, sipping single-malt Scotch from diamond tumblers. Instead, I'm chugging shit-brown bourbon from a plastic cup, squished between sticky men and clammy women in an end-of-the-road, washed-up shack. It's hot as blood. Air conditioning can't overcome the constant *squeak-squeak* of the door opening and closing, *opening and closing*, letting out drunks and letting in desperation, escaping the heatwave for hell.

So why do I come here? Simple answer: No one knows me here. No one expects the straight-backed, devilishly handsome (yet approachable) CEO of a Fortune 500 company to mingle with this crowd. No offense to this crowd; I was one of them last year. Then I plunged to rock bottom while Apex shot sky-high. Fuck, I wish Erin could see this. Well, not *this* exactly—she doesn't need to see that dude pissing in a corner, or that chick changing her nipple ring—but my success, *our* success.

If not for her, I'd be nothing. I was the rocket, but she was my wings, holding me steady through storms. Without her support, the rocket kept going, but I fell from the cockpit, plunged into the ocean, and drowned in the Mariana Trench.

Yes, Bob, the rocket symbolizes Apex. Keep up, or you'll fuck up my soliloquy.

Where was I? Ah, yes, soul-crushing, heart-wrenching, spirit-slaying despair. Have you ever loved someone, Bob? Wait, don't answer that. Have you ever *fallen* in love? Because everyone loves, but not all fall down. I fell, Bob. I fell *hard*, and I'll never fly again. So I do what any reasonable, responsible adult does in times of crisis: I ignore anguish and fuck a fellow empty soul.

This one's blonde. I like blondes, always have, but Erin surprised me with red. No one knows what they want or need till it slaps them in the face, and Erin sure slapped me.

Back to the blonde. Her name's Sara—or Sarai, or Sally, or Sasha—and she's seen some shit, too. There's no spark between us, no connection outside our groins. As I pound her over the slimy bathroom sink, thighs sticky with sweat and desire, tits and balls swinging like lassos, my conscience warns me to stop. To pause. To ask about her. To care about her. To do what Erin prayed in her letter: *live, let go, move on, find someone new*.

How, Bob? How can I live when I'm dead inside? How can I let go of my only lifeboat? How can I move on when there's no shore in sight? How can I find someone new when I'm someone gone? I don't exist anymore. Not since Erin died. This tunnel is endless, this pit eternal. As Sara/Sarai/Sally/Sasha and I release together in a mutual grunt, tears sting my eyes while passion fades to pain.

I pull out, slingshot the condom into the trash, and help Sara Whatever-the-Fuck back into her lacy cocktail dress. We nod at each other—awkward, understanding—and shuffle back to our respective netherworlds in the bar.

I drink too much—surprising, given the stench. Then I realize with a fuck-myself panic that it's late, I have kids, I'm supposed to do things, know things, to have my shit together, to pretend I can function when my heart's ripped out and my soul's mauled apart.

Shit. Okay, I'll behave. Or not. But I do pay, settling my tab with a black card (a credit card for rich, crazy fucks like me). I should head to my penthouse, check on Georgina and my girls. I should read to them. Sing to them. Help them brush their teeth and put on pajamas. And I do those things often, but not tonight. I'm always broken, but tonight, I'm bare.

Go on and judge, Bob, but they can't see me like this. *You* don't want to see me like this, and you're an adult. Imagine

what my five-year-old twins would think if Daddy stumbled in with alcohol breath and tobacco stains, eyes bloodshot and hair disheveled, clothes crusty with a stranger's orgasm. No. Can't go back. Not yet. Georgina will care for them; she always does. That's why I pay her, to do what Erin did, what I cannot: to sail steady.

You have so much more to give.

But I have other, lesser work that I can busy myself with now. Next on the checklist for reasonable, responsible adults: Erase hardship with hard work. Grown-ups don't fix their problems; they find other problems. And I got a pesky problem for my bourbon-blitzed mind to solve.

Lab Rat Race

Alex

Ronny Perkins is my problem. He was a good boy who became a bad boy, a straight-laced citizen tainted with greed. He applied to Apex as sales lead for *NQA* and stayed for six months, then he wanted to “diversify his résumé.” Contrary to your opinion, Bob, I was civil and polite. When Ronny handed me his resignation, I asked how much to keep him at Apex. As the respectable, debonair CEO that I am, I offered raises, bonuses, free wine, you name it. And you know what Ronny did? The nerve of him, Bob. Go on and seethe between my brain lobes. Ronny told me to, and I quote, “Fuck off, Osman. I saw your accounts, and you’re dirty as shit.”

That hurt, Bob. I’m not legal, but I care for my people. Ronny got comfortable. He worked half as hard and took twice as much. He mooched booze and fucked my glittery strippers. Then he left when it suited him, but it didn’t suit me, and you

know what I said about leaving, about retirement, so tonight's the perfect night to avoid grief with gore. Erin called me fire, and fire consumes me since I lost her.

Hurry, Bob. We've reached the Lab, and you don't want to miss out. If you did, you'd have ditched this book at the first fucking F-bomb, but you're horny for carnage, too. Don't pretend you're above me. We're both sick-ass fucks, unzipping our flies for every violent scene. We worked all day, drank ourselves stupid, smoked ourselves free, then had our release. (I assume you got off to Sara's bouncing tits, too.) Now, it's time to play.

Remember what I told you about rich assholes? Here's another implementation of company policy. All rich people aren't assholes, of course—take me, for example. Okay, bad example, but some exist. Maybe. Anyway, this is where I go Robin Hood on society, if Robin Hood were a drunk, deranged madman.

"Mr. Osman?" Panic strangles Ronny's voice as I yank the bag off his head. Respectful now, are we? Death makes saints of us all. Ronny squints in the buttery glow of a light bulb dangling above my tool table. Strapped to a dentist chair like a low-budget porno, he drinks in his surroundings with rising terror.

We're in an abandoned warehouse in Hell's Kitchen, a warehouse I pay the city to keep abandoned. Good old New York, corrupt from birth. The building is a basic bitch with brick walls, dusty floors, and grime-smearred windows that sever outside from in. Ronny and I are in our own world here, plus the Surgeon, a nameless femme fatale with searing looks and smarts. The government exiled her, then I hired her. She ensures my Lab Rats live till I want them dead. Yes, we've fucked once or

twice, Bob, but that's not the point of this conversation.

"Mr. Osman," Ronny says again, but this time it's no question.

"Ronny," I greet the near-corpse.

Fear tortures Ronny's features. "Please, I'm sorry. I'll do anything if—"

"I let you go?"

He nods his head.

I shake my head. "No. I offered you the world, but the world wasn't good enough. You made your bed, and you shit in mine."

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry, and I'll do anything, I swear. Name it, and it's done."

"We tried that before, and you lost, so there are consequences. I don't do participation trophies." I grin while Ronny pisses himself and vomits green chunks. "But if you cooperate, this can be a quickie in every definition of the term."

"Don't fuck me."

"Don't fuck with me, and I won't."

I don't want to fuck Ronny. I've had men, loved men, but I need my men principled, not pathetic. Looking at Ronny, I'm flaccid with disgust, so I turn toward other tools.

"Scalpel, sir?" the Surgeon asks. Her lab coat strains over her ample chest—that was for you, Bob, not me. This isn't a porno, regardless of your request. I'd describe her volumized hair and dick-squeezing thighs, but now is not the time or place. She's a literal genius, so show some respect.

"Yes, please." I take the blade and twirl it between my fingers. "I need Glabella's bank account numbers, plus your own."

Glabella is Ronny's new employer, a frozen yogurt chain. Did anyone research its definition? Glabella means forehead, the smooth part between and above the eyebrows. Who the hell names their company Forehead? Fuck Glabella, and fuck frozen

yogurt. Eat ice cream, for fuck's sake. *But yogurt's healthy.* Shut up, Bob. If you smother yogurt with chocolate chips, cookie bits, hot fudge, and brownies, it's not healthy anymore, is it? Like dipping celery in caramel, or carrots in cake batter.

"You'll kill me anyway, so why tell you?" Ronny asks.

He's a dumb one, worse than Pete. "Tell me now, and I'll kill you fast," I say. "Tell me later, and I'll kill you slow. But you *will* tell me, Ronny. They all do. Learn from their mistakes."

He gulps. "They?"

"They." Yes, there were others in grungier shadows. No one starts in a torture palace. I utilized many basements before I reached the Lab's prestige.

This is Ronny's crux, his point of no return, a formative moment in this night's narrative. Will he tell me the account numbers, and I'll end it, then you'll smack your (nipple) boner back down? Or will he hold out, and we'll have fun, then we'll all go home satisfied (except for Ronny, of course)? He's weak, sure thing, but sometimes weak ones surprise me.

What would you do, Bob? Would you tell me now or make me wait? Are you a tattler or a tease? I peg you as a tease: slight masochism, BDSM tendencies, a hidden stash of whips under a trapdoor. Kidding, Bob. You're as boring as they come. Doubt you've ever licked a turd. Yep, you'd tattler in a heartbeat, but Ronny does not.

"Go to hell," Ronny says.

If I were a proper supervillain, one versed in 1980s jargon, I'd say, "I'm already in hell." But that sounds corny, and I'm far beneath hell. If we use a tamer response, something like, "One last chance," that's bloated with cliché, and I gave him many last chances. I was soft on him, too soft. So I settle for an oldie but goodie: a self-indulgent monologue.

“Ronny,” I say, “you see what you see, and you know what you know. What you see and know is I’m a successful CEO—with shady finances, same as all tycoons. But what you don’t see and know is I was like you a year ago. I was nobody, I was poor, I was desperate, so I changed, unlike you. I took life by the balls, punched fate in the face, and cogs creaked the other way. Then I lost my wife. She was everything to me, and her death took everything from me.

“When you crawled to Apex itching for glory, I gave you glory. When you resigned, I offered the universe on a silver platter, but nothing satisfied you. Know why? Because you’re broken, too. We both fill voids with superficial bullshit, but nothing will complete us. Nothing will make us whole. I have an excuse; you have only your ego. Go to hell? Never left, same as you, but I like it here.

“So, Ronny boy, the bank accounts or this gets ugly...and messy. For my late wife’s sake, I’ll give you one more chance.”

Okay, I added some ’80s spice and cliché, but I didn’t cackle or play opera or twirl my mustache, not that I have a mustache. Should I? It’s hard to rock one without pedophile vibes.

“Ronny?” I press.

Unmoved by my speech, Ronny spits at me. Well, he tries to spit at me, but he’s bound to the dentist chair, so it lands on his chest, and that gives me an idea.

“Immobilize him, but don’t numb him,” I tell the Surgeon. “I want him to feel everything.”

She injects a paralyzing agent into Ronny’s IV (some seventeen-syllable, neuromuscular-blocking agent I can never remember no matter how often we use it). Ronny jerks then stills, eyes wide as blood moons. But he can still suffer pain, and talk, and pivot his horror-stricken gaze.

How much do you want to see, Bob? Not that you have a choice, but manners consist of asking, not agreeing, so here I am asking: You want it all? Of course you do. You want it all, and you want it now. There's a savage in everyone, so enjoy.

I lower the scalpel to Ronny's trembling chest, then slice through his shirt and flesh. The Surgeon smiles. Ronny screams. Blood-curdling shrieks. Geysers of gore. This is delicious. Curling my fingers, I rip his skin till his rib cage lies bare, chalk-white bones in meaty tissue. With a bone saw, I cut the sternum and crack open his ribs, exposing his spastic heart. The organ palpitates while Ronny screeches, tears streaming down his cheeks in panic and agony.

I stroke Ronny's pulpy heart—tender, in lullaby—as blood pumps beneath my gore-painted fingers. Too slow. One hundred and twenty beats per minute—fast, but not dangerous for Ronny's youth. Best change that.

I open my hand, and the Surgeon passes me a hammer. Accompanied by saliva-gurgling sob-squeals, I smash the hammer into the heart. Ronny erupts. Howls escape his mouth as blood escapes his chest, and his pulse races toward two hundred then beyond. That's better. Constant anxiety. Constant reminders. Constant retribution for disdain and disrespect. I return the hammer to the Surgeon, then clamp Ronny's heart with my fist, squeezing rage into his butchered chest. Beneath my grasp, his heart throbs in revolt, thuds against my pulse, united in anguish.

"The bank accounts, Ronny," I whisper into his ear.

"Fuck...you," Ronny stutters between scarlet-steeped teeth.

I squeeze his heart again: screams, blood, the whole shebang. Does anyone use "shebang" anymore, Bob? You strike me as someone who would keep that dream alive, but back to the

nightmare.

"Ronny, I don't like repeating myself," I say, jerking off his heart.

Ronny gasps and gags on blood and drool, but he'll give in soon. I know his type. They pretend they're special, powerful, useful, with balls big as Kentucky and brains sharp as razors. But they castrate their ambition, their will dull as sitcoms. When push comes to shove, they welcome the fall.

Because it *hurts*, Bob, and they've never suffered pain before. Not real pain. Not pain like grief, like heartbreak (literally in this case). The worst they've experienced is a broken bone here, a minor surgery there, but not the grisly, gritty torture of life cracking you open and exposing your core.

A torture I endure every day.

Yes, Bob, it's a metaphor. Stop nitpicking. You're ruining my flow.

I squeeze Ronny's heart again. Blood feathers between my fingers, under my nails, onto the floor, the *drip-drip-drip* of the Grim Reaper's ringtone. He's fading fast, as I knew he would, groaning nonsense and sputtering prayers. Comfort always overrides courage. Stop pain, and forget glory. Give me freedom. Give me peace.

"Make it...stop," Ronny mumbles. "Please...make it...stop."

"Only you can do that," I whisper, heart in hand.

He sighs, then surrenders. "For me...routing number: 046244639...account number: 21811919. And for Glabella...routing number: 804601430...account number: 49936333."

I nod at the Surgeon, and she verifies their validity. "Such a shame," I tell Ronny. "You could have avoided all that pain."

"Done," the Surgeon says.

Perfect. Profitable. A hopeful end to a horrid night. Funds

laundered and wired to offshore accounts. I told you before that I care for my people—the loyal ones, at least. Tomorrow, *The New York Times* will boast Apex's stock boost, and employees will receive surprise bonuses. They'll accuse Glabella of insurance fraud—ironic and unfair, I know, but this is New York, not the Vatican. You're right, bad comparison.

With a last look at Ronny's piss-soiled, vomit-coated, blood-crusted body, I squeeze his heart till it bursts. *I killed a boy, and I liked it.* Death splatters the Surgeon and me, and we should go, we should stop, we should learn from our mistakes, we should grow up and move on, but we don't. Instead, we eye each other through red-misted carnage and morph into monsters, possessed by adrenaline. Lust shreds our clothes as talons claw our bodies. Using Ronny's blood as lube, we collide in rapture then release.

It's quick. It's dirty. And it's fucking heaven. After, we clean Ronny, then we clean ourselves. There's a shower in the back and extra clothes of every size. What? I don't know who will use the torture palace, and I want every sadist to feel right at home.

Don't judge, Bob. *You* barged into *my* brain. I didn't invite you, and I don't deserve your insults. Yes, a man died tonight—a limp, flaccid, disloyal man—but a whole company benefits, a company full of devoted employees with families and children, with mortgages and dreams.

Good people should win, even if bad people fight their battles, and my employees *are* good people, Bob, even if I am not. So shove your judgment up your ass, and enjoy the party. You're hard as a rock, and I know it.

My Eyes Are Fire

Erin

Dear Sandy,
My beautiful Sandy. My beautiful and dangerous Sandy.

There's darkness in you, love, but there's also light. I've seen your shadows, and I've seen your stars. Fight it, Sandy. Be the man you show me, the man you show our girls.

As I weaken, you strengthen, but you strengthen in threatening ways. I don't like the beast I see, yet I fear he's the beast you need to survive. Remember, Sandy, when the wolf leaves, find the man you were with me.

Find the man who changed our babies' diapers, who found a smile for every tear. Find the man who offered me a Cheerio, because we couldn't afford a ring. Find the man who read poetry not because he liked it, but because I liked it, and he wanted to understand me. Find the man who laughed at storms and danced in the rain and made silly faces to cheer up our kids when rent was late, the apartment

was cold, dinner was crackers, and dessert was one chocolate chip cut in fourths.

I know that man embarrasses you, but that man made you, and that man loved me. Remember that man as you remember me. Take care of him, and take care of yourself. The road ahead is rocky, but these memories are your compass.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Parenthood Prison

Alex

If anyone wonders what parenthood is like, it's re-microwaving coffee seven times only to drink it cold, stepping in paint, sitting on a Triceratops, saving Donald Duck from the toilet, worrying why everything is wet, and explaining why you don't want boogers as presents, all before noon.

This morning is no different. My identical twins, Ana and Dee, are merciless, the five-year-old rascals. They have my dark brown curls and olive skin but Erin's wiry build and river-blue eyes. Those eyes haunt me, and lift me. They're snapshots of Erin. Guess there's no joy without pain. You get that, Bob. I know you do.

Unfortunately, my girls also have my ambition. They somersault on the gray-leather couch, lick the glass coffee table, fart in the white-brick atrium, juggle toys in the air, and smudge snotograms on windowed walls for all Times Square to see. The

tiny sprites whiz through the living area and buzz between our four bedrooms—one room for each of us plus one for Georgina (who better get her ass back here soon).

Fuck bingo, and fuck her friends. Once a month, Georgina leaves me alone with my demons. I dread these days. I can't handle them, and this validates the other parents' whispers and society's doubt. Erin was a master. She could flip pancakes with a baby on her hip, rocking the other in a bassinet at her feet, while paying bills with her phone on speaker. I can't do two of those at once, and failure stings extra strong today after her letter, her words, her voice, scent, and caress.

...when the wolf leaves, find the man you were with me.

He died with you, love, and he'll never return. No, Bob, I meant Erin, not you. We haven't reached the terms-of-endearment stage of our friendship yet.

...these memories are your compass.

"Ana, Dee, back out here," I shout into my bedroom, where the twin savages fashion my quilt as charcoal wings. They drop the quilt, jump off my bed, burp on my nightstands, and follow me back into parenthood prison.

I sit them on the couch, contain them with a fleece blanket, and summon mind-numbing TV—something with mutant dogs, butterfly ninjas, and melted-brain sing-alongs. Ana and Dee fidget then settle, reluctant. Losing Erin was hard for them, but they were young, forming nascent memories, and Georgina stepped in to carry us all through. And Georgina better fucking return before I shove potatoes in my ears to mute this ghastly show.

I retreat into the kitchen—still within the open-floor plan, but far enough away to pretend at freedom. Crouching over granite counters, hiding behind stainless-steel ignorance, I

perch on a stool and shovel lasagna down my throat. My kids are distracted, but we don't have long, an hour tops. You saw their destructive reach, Bob. The rooftop balcony helps some, but afternoon approaches along with the daily thunderstorm, so we must stay inside and jail ourselves within my parental deficit. Central air huffs in agreed disgust as the heatwave scorches on.

I can't fucking do this.

I trade lasagna for grappa and settle into a corner. Georgina will return soon—she *better* return soon—and one shot is nothing. One shot is everything. One shot is a lifeline through this everlasting storm. I can chance it. I don't need to drive. I'm usually too drunk to drive, so I don't have my own car anymore. If I go to the office later, I'll call a company car or walk. Walking is good. Walking is escape.

Thunder shakes the penthouse, and Times Square sparkles with capitalism: flashing headlights from annoyed commuters, blinding rainbows of loudmouthed billboards, conversational roars of wide-eyed sightseers, and wanna-buy-a-watch creepsters. If you're a visitor, New York's glow arouses you. For Manhattanites, it's an infuriating beacon that draws tourists in plague-of-moths proportions. Go see the Statue of Liberty or Ellis Island. Better yet, visit another borough, since you're so hipster and trendsetting. Manhattan is for the rich and bitchy. Let us keep our center-of-the-universe reputation.

Because the world *does* revolve around us, Bob. If not, why do you all flock here? There's a gravity to the rude, crowded, dirty, smelly, noisy, costly cosmopolis. Sure, we're aggressive, competitive, always rushing to nowhere, but we got your back in a pinch, as long as you repay the favor. People are tough and rough, judgmental and street-smart, yet we'll cover your tab if you got a good story. And don't try to surprise us with your

small-town tales. New Yorkers are as desensitized as vibrator addicts. We've seen everything from naked cowboys to banana blow jobs, so unless your nipples shoot fireworks, we ain't interested.

I'm not from here originally. Few are from Manhattan originally. It's a cultural brothel, an expat orgy that welcomes every size and shape of human—as long as you pay the galaxy-sized price. Brooklyn is similar, where my family lives, where Erin and I built a life, a home.

I've seen your shadows, and I've seen your stars.

From the couch, my girls giggle, and my stress eases a touch. That's Erin's giggle, her high-pitched, snorting laugh. She hated that snort, but I loved it. I loved all her imperfections, her buried-treasure beauty, the pieces of her puzzle she showed only to me. I take a second shot of grappa before memory whiplashes into grief, and Georgina finally strolls through the door.

Georgina Martin is seventy-five years old, and she battled each of those years to the death in a pit of vipers. Her hair is a silver spiderweb, her eyes onyx bullets. Her body hunches, yet she's grapevine strong, her skin papery and tan. She takes nobody's shit, especially not mine, and I let her talk back, because she saw me through grief and glory. She watches my kids and handles my logistics, my bills, managing the life I suffocate beneath.

"Thank God," I say.

"You're drunk," Georgina says, her voice the croak of an irritated frog. She strides toward me in her steadfast, graceful way and yanks the grappa from my grasp. "You need friends."

"I need alcohol."

"Get out there. Find love."

That's what Georgina wants, why she left her nursing home to nanny for me. But she doesn't only want love; she wants *true* love. And as someone who has experienced the rise and fall of true love's empire, I advise against it.

"Here." I hand her a wad of bills and point toward the snot-painted windows. "Take more if you need it, but please—"

"I got it, Mr. Osman," Georgina says. She pockets the money and holds her hand out for more.

I dump another money chunk into her palm, then she smiles and cleans my dumpster-fire life.

"Pippa!" Ana and Dee shout from the couch. They call her by her middle name, since it's easier to pronounce. Georgina often becomes Vagina with them. Yes, Bob, it's funny, but I can't have my girls telling their elitist teachers that Vagina is picking them up after school—though I, too, am surprised Pippa hasn't become Penis.

When it's not summer, the limitless wasteland feared by all parents of young demons, Ana and Dee attend a private school in downtown Manhattan: the Reid Fletcher Hadley School, RFHS for short. You know it's legit when there are three posh names in a row—legit and pricey. It's a school my mothers wished for me but could never afford, so their dream traveled through me to my girls. With sky-high tuition and sell-your-grandma-for-cash uniforms, RFHS is a wild-card ticket to the Ivies, a bought and bribed label of prestige. Apart from my obese bank account, Ana and Dee are also phenomenal students. They got Erin's brains, a small slice of mercy.

"My girls!" Georgina exclaims. She wraps my twins in a hug. "What a mess you've made. Come, come, help me fix this."

They listen to her as they never listen to me, so I kiss their foreheads goodbye and head out into the storm.

On my way through rainy Times Square, my reflection taunts me from neon-splashed stores, scar wiggling in the windows. When Erin died, I died, too. I sobbed, screamed, bawled, broke. After leaving the kids with Georgina, I barhopped till I blacked out. I woke in the hospital, victim to a doctor's "you were lucky" and "you almost lost your eye" condescensions.

Apparently, I picked a fight with a gangster who gave me a brow-to-cheekbone warning to never cross their turf again. Good guess, Bob. I did cross their turf again, but the next time, I crossed as Apex. The gangster doesn't exist anymore, and neither does the gang, but the scar he carved over the left side of my face is a constant reminder of the day I lost everything. He may as well have cut "Erin" into me. This scar is my sword, my weakness turned weapon, the fiery launch of Apex from the darkest depth of the abyss.

What, Bob? Don't like my twisted, eye-for-an-eye way? It's ambition, not fraud. Innovation, not forgery. If others don't grab fate by the swollen testicles and twist till the universe cries for its mommy, that's their own damn fault.

Cross-Country Roamer

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. Her most recent was at a nursing home—or as she referred to it: “The Devil’s Anus.”

“You want to get rid of me.” Those were the words she uttered to her son when her kids checked her in.

“No, Mom, we want to take care of you,” Dylan said.

“Bullshit,” Georgina swore. “You’re like your mother, leaving me for a younger man.”

“We all need to move on. Jason wants to get married—”

“And you can’t start your life with an old fart lingering about.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to,” Georgina said.

“Stop it, both of you,” Alayna, her daughter, said. “Dylan, sign the papers. Georgina, suck it up. I have a client meeting in an hour that I cannot miss.”

“Don’t call me Georgina.”

"Then don't act like a Georgina."

"After all I've done for you, this is how you repay me?"

"We've done more for you than you've ever done for us."

Dylan stepped in front of his knife-in-the-heart sister. "Listen, Mom, you know we love you, but this is best for us all. It'll be great, you'll see. Make friends. Have fun."

"I hate people," Georgina said.

"That's the spirit," Alayna said with a forehead kiss. "Gotta go. Behave. Don't traumatize the nurses with goiter stories." She walked away, leaving Dylan without backup.

"We'll check on you, promise." Dylan signed his mother's papers and left Georgina with only her scowl.

"Welcome to Sunset Haven, a home for young souls in old bodies," a nurse exclaimed.

"Go to hell," Georgina snapped.

The nurse did not. Instead, she guided them down the hall with an exhausting assault of joy. "On the left, we have the game room. Bingo is no joke. Watch out for Susan; she cheats and licks chips. On the right, there's the dining room. We serve meals three times a day, but snacks are always available. Despite what Nancy says, there is no conspiracy to spike the milk, but don't tell her that, or she'll pee on you in your sleep. Next is the infirmary; a doctor is always on call. Mildred got her tits done and will ask you to touch them. Squeeze the left, not the right, 'cause the right one squeaks."

Just like her kids to skim on her. Sunset Haven was the shittiest nursing home on the east coast, a logistical farce with more lawsuits than residents, despite its shore location. Runoff from the ritz, most likely. The musty twat stuffed between New England's shiny legs. The sob stories that bigwigs hid from their marble palaces.

"And here we have your new home," the nurse announced.

Georgina had seen worse. She had also seen better. A bed, a bathroom. A desk, TV, and bookcase. Gallstone-gold walls, urine-yellow lamps, and arthritic furniture sagging with compressed wood. At least it had a beach view, though it had a dumpster view, too. She squinted toward the trash, and the nurse answered her unspoken question.

"That's David. He eats garbage."

"You let him?" Georgina asked, baffled.

She shrugged. "He's got two months to live, so might as well."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'm not. He's a cranky bastard who shits in my shoes. Anyway, your buddy nurse will arrive soon."

"Buddy nurse?"

"Your assigned best friend while you're here."

Georgina didn't point out the impossibility of "assigned best friend."

The nurse clapped her hands, startling Georgina. "Great. If there's anything you need, press the button on your bed. And welcome again, Georgina. I know you'll love it here."

Georgina knew she was as full of shit as her shoes.

* * *

Georgina's buddy nurse was not much of a buddy. He put the Dick in Richard, and Georgina thought him far too young for such responsibility.

"Need anything?" Dick asked, eyes glued to his phone.

"No," Georgina grunted. She headed to the dining room to complain about her kids, her ex-wife, and Dick's lacking qualifications, justifying her misanthropy with this ironclad

list.

Upon her arrival, a nurse spotted her and beamed. "Welcome to Sunset Haven, a home for—"

"Stop," Georgina said.

He did not. "Do you require assistance gathering your snack? Dinner is in an hour, but help yourself to our wide array of—"

"No." Georgina left the nurse with flapping gums, swiped a tray, and filled it with everything Alayna begged her not to eat: greasy potato chips, oily doughnuts, fried cookies, caramel popcorn, and soggy biscuits. If she was in a junk place, she would eat junk food. At that thought, she grabbed a soda can, too, and trudged toward the floor-to-ceiling window with a pile of angst.

The nurse didn't follow, but he waved from the entrance, and the wave caused a nearby group to notice Georgina's presence. Georgina didn't like this. In reply, she slammed her tray down on her table and ravaged an innocent doughnut.

"You're new," a fellow resident said from an adjacent table.

"Hmph," Georgina grunted through a mouthful of heart attack. She turned away, toward the window. Beyond lied Long Island Sound. Dylan liked it. Georgina did not. "Fake ocean," that's what she called it, water sheltered by a track mark of land, belching the sulfuric stench of Connecticut's vaginal beach. It wasn't the wide, open ocean. It wasn't the big, blue sea. It was a poser, pure and simple, and like most other things, Georgina hated posers.

"What's your name?" the same resident asked.

"Georgina."

"Do you like the view?"

"No." Georgina was not a fan of crumbly sand and pubic-hair shrubs. She was even less a fan of exhibitionism, which tourists

and returning snowbirds practiced as a profession before the lighthouses, yachts, and McMansions.

"I'm Mildred."

Shit, the one with the tits. "I didn't ask."

"You catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

"But rotten corpses catch the most."

Mildred gawked, but her tits stayed in their hammock, so Georgina counted this as her first win.

"Have you heard about Linda?" Mildred asked her table, unimpressed with Georgina's expert cynicism. "She's getting a divorce."

There were gasps. This annoyed Georgina for two reasons. Reason one: Divorce was common, hardly warranting such drama. Reason two: Divorce reminded her of her promiscuous ex-wife, and she'd long ago burned all reminders of Mary.

"Poor Linda," another resident said. From her conspicuous lack of milk, Georgina guessed this was Nancy. "Marriage is a conspiracy to subjugate upstanding citizens into submission, like milk." Definitely Nancy.

"Divorce isn't a conspiracy," yet another resident said. "Divorce is triple penetration with razor-edged dildos."

"Susan," Nancy chastised, "I hope that's a rhetorical statement."

"We all experiment when we're young," Susan said with a shrug. "And it's true. I've been through five, been widowed twice. Death is preferable to divorce."

Through their antics, Georgina clenched her jaw hard enough to break a tooth. That was a thought. If she broke a tooth, perhaps they'd release her—or give her a colonoscopy. For some reason, that was the go-to procedure for "people of a certain age," of an age she'd now acquired. However, as she

listened to the genitalia debate, she wondered if a little rectal discomfort was worth some peace and quiet...

"Back to Linda," Mildred said.

"Yes, Linda," Nancy said. "We should write her a card so she doesn't feel old and worthless."

"Before you talk about me behind my back, make sure you're behind my back," Linda said, sitting down at the table.

"Linda, you're here," Charlie said—he wore a name tag. Georgina didn't care why. "How can we help? A card? Some booze? A treadmill?"

"I don't need a treadmill. I need a fuckmill. That's why Bill left. Said I was dry as Dubai."

"Maybe he didn't moisten your swamp."

"Charlie, just no," Carol said. (Nancy spit-whispered her name to Georgina, and Georgina scowled deeper.)

"I'm gay," Charlie said. "I don't know about lady jungles."

"Both of you, *stop*," Mildred said. Stressed, she squeezed her tits. To Georgina's chagrin, the nurse was correct. The right one did squeak.

Georgina sliced a biscuit in two, stuffed it full of popcorn, then shoved it in her mouth, chewing at a loud and irate pace.

"So, Linda, how's your daughter?" Nancy asked. "Heard she got into trouble with the law."

"Nancy, you can't ask about that," Mildred said.

"It's fine," Linda said. "We're all stressed about the divorce, so she snuck whiskey into her kids' bake sale."

"How?"

"Apple juice boxes."

"Smart."

"I taught her well. Anyway, I guess the principal drank one and accidentally got trashed."

"Accidentally, my ass," Susan said. "Whiskey and apple juice taste nothing alike."

"I know," Linda said, "but the principal had cop friends, so she's stuck doing community service for a month."

"Georgina," Mildred said, "join us."

"No," Georgina said, escalating her consumption.

"Ooh, a newbie," Susan declared. "Should we make her do the dance?"

"No," Georgina said again.

"What's got your titties in a tangle?" Nancy asked.

"No," Georgina said a third time, though it didn't make sense, like everything else.

Georgina finished her snack and left her fellow residents behind as she returned to her room. Some would call her room decrepit. Georgina called it nostalgic. Linoleum peeled from the floor, windows cast a grungy glow, and dust motes swirled in the air. Stuffy and mildewy, with no air conditioning, it reminded her of summer-camp days in America's sweaty underbelly, a place few knew and fewer stayed.

Sunset Haven faded while memories rose. As spring died and summer sprung from its ashes, the Eastern Seaboard reached hellish temperatures. Georgina liked the heat, her damp cleavage, her sticky armpits, the way warmth rejuvenated her like a womb. She remembered sleepless nights in nylon tents beneath a bulbous moon, how ferns swayed with invisible fingers, how the forest cradled her and many lovers in a humid, swampy mist when she lost her innocence in those formative, tick-impregnated woods.

* * *

Georgina was originally a southern gal, where things were easier. Sure, Florida had a bad reputation—especially rural Florida, where Georgina sprouted—but it taught its residents three things.

One: Splurge for air conditioning, not bidets.

Two: Don't eat at Waffle House before a wedding rehearsal.

Three: Never flush lizards down the toilet; they'll crawl back out.

Georgina cherished those days: jogging through mangroves, running from alligators, swatting at mosquitoes, groaning at termite damage, and chugging spiked peach tea. When she moved to teach preschool in Miami, everything felt *wrong*. Like they distilled Florida into tourist-friendly sample packs and slapped "coconut," "palm tree," or "sunshine" on every road sign. But rent was doable, and work was steady, so Georgina stayed. And stayed. And stayed, and *stayed*, and **stayed**, till she shapeshifted into a divorced old lady with grown-ass kids.

"You're crabby, Mom," Dylan told her.

"Leave Miami," Alayna said. "Try somewhere new."

"No," Georgina told them a dozen times.

She wanted to see their careers take off, and they did. Dylan and Alayna launched themselves to the top, and she couldn't be prouder of them—truly.

While her kids bloomed, Georgina withered in retirement. She was nobody anymore, so finally, she moved north. No one moved north. The older you got, the deeper you dove. Northerners infested Florida, and Floridians infested Mexico, bloating the equator with gray hair and back-in-my-day complaints. But Georgina moved north.

"Why, Mom?" Dylan asked, confused. "What's so great about New England?"

Georgina shrugged. "It's different."

"It's preppy."

"Maybe, but I won't need to wrestle alligators off the porch."

"True, but they have bears instead."

Again, Georgina shrugged. "I'm bored, and I'm old. These eyes need new scenes, and these lungs need new air."

Dylan and Alayna agreed, then followed.

When Georgina first arrived up north, New England impressed her, though novelty wore off within a week. It was different, indeed, and cold most of the year—that was the first thing she noticed—except for soggy, humid summers. It was also indecisive, four seasons in a day, as Mark Twain or some hotshot once said. Sun, clouds, rain, hail, repeat. Connecticut was chaotic, and Georgina liked chaos. What she didn't like were bugs, rodents, and peach-pleated shorts.

"They're from *west* of the river," Jane, a native, told her. "They're the stereotype: teenagers with BMWs, money old as the hills, yachts and granite countertops and closets big as bedrooms."

"What's *east* of the river?" Georgina asked.

Jane beamed—with a slight cross-eyed twinge. "Peace and quiet. Farms and forests. Beaches, hiking trails, and craft beer."

"Plus cows and sheep," Joe, Jane's husband, interjected, "and incest and emigration."

Then Jane and Joe devolved into an argument about Connecticut's identity crisis, socioeconomic disparity between counties, and its Industrial Age glory. On tiptoes, Georgina removed herself from the heightening debate.

She didn't mind Connecticut. It wasn't as exciting as some other states—okay, as *most* other states. But it was stable, for the most part.

Truth be told, she missed Mary. More accurately, she missed having a partner, someone with whom to share life. She wanted intimacy: not only sex, but affection, too. Trust that brewed in tender mornings. Warmth that grew from fragile nights. Peace that came with routine and guarantee. She wanted rhythm, an underlying heartbeat, and therein lied the real reason for her move: romance. Though she wasn't young, she didn't want to be. She wanted no flat stomach, nor keen eyesight, nor life stretching out over an infinite horizon. But she *would* like their reception, the way society dropped its pants at their every approach and let them have their way.

Georgina couldn't confess that to her kids. They'd worry too much. "What you need is a good southern girl," Dylan would say, but Georgina had run out of southern women to taste—pun intended. She shared a little with Alayna, but her cold-hearted daughter took her confession as proof that her mother was old, lonely, and unable to live alone anymore. Alayna forced Dylan to co-sign and check Georgina into Sunset Haven.

In short, Georgina was north of the Mason–Dixon line, in a foreign state, in an alien culture. They were friendly in their northern way, and her loins ached to melt an old, Yankee heart.

* * *

Georgina waited three years. Every evening, she lied in bed, pining for love, gazing through the oily window. In the muggy, late-spring night, the moon was a swollen testicle, blue-balled by the sun, and Georgina felt its frustration. You didn't find love; love found you. It snuck up on you when you weren't searching, when you looked the other way, and attacked like an alligator in the dark.

But year after year passed, and still nothing. Her children moved on, allowed her to leave Sunset Haven, but Georgina stayed, because she had nowhere to go, though she wanted to go everywhere. Some people were mysterious. Georgina was the opposite.

“You’re a blowtorch,” her ex-wife would often complain.

“I’m a star,” Georgina would correct.

And she was waiting for her sun.

Then Alex called. A month before Erin died, he invited Georgina to Manhattan. Here was her purpose. Here was her path. His kids needed a rock, and Georgina was a mountain. Through the dank, dewy, New England night, she finally found hope in the mosquito-ridden bowels of late spring.

Marketable Murder

Alex

The United States: a disunited country founded on revolution.
A revolution that never ends.

We're at war with each other, at war with ourselves. Don't worry, I won't get political. I have no interest in politics, except when politics serve me. Some say the Civil War still rages, and this divide fuels my empire. Hatred is a powerful ally. Stoke its fire, and use it as a bomb.

"It's too much," Leila sobs. "I can't pay it, Benny."

Today, I'm Benny, a socialist to his core—doing more street work than anticipated, but business rejuvenates me. And after the bourbon-murder-fuck scene, you agree I need rejuvenating, Bob.

See, Benny wants free healthcare and education for all, and Leila drowns beneath Herculean insurance claims and egregious student loans. I'm what she needs, and she's what

I need. I'm sure we can strike a deal. She submitted an NQA request to make her debt "go away," which Apex can do, of course, but funds must come from somewhere.

"Tell me your marketable skills," I say. There's that phrase: marketable skills. It's the corporate way of asking if we can scratch each other's ass cracks.

Leila nods, blue hair dancing in the bookstore's window light. "SEO, HTML, CSS."

All hail acronyms and algorithms.

"Great," I say. "If you make a few website updates on Redville Estates, I'll wipe your debt."

"Like that?"

"Like that."

She crinkles her nose. "What's the catch?"

The catch? The catch is that, if you get caught, Leila, you're royally fucked, while I escape scot-free. Read the bloody fine print.

"It's all in our 'Terms and Conditions,'" I say.

Leila nods. She didn't read the policies before, and she won't read them now, but there *are* policies, so she believes I'm a professional. She shouldn't. You know better, Bob. I feel your disapproval.

"Redville Estates?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

"Why Redville?"

The real answer: Redville is filthier than I am, deep-throating corruption by the fistful, and I could use their cash in better ways than office swimming pools and dive bars. Their accounts would cover Leila's debt and overdose Apex for the year. No more financial strain and extra company parties (clothes optional) make happy employees, and happy employees are

horny employees, and Benny is horny. I mean Alex. Who am I again?

Enough of that. Can't wander off this often, Bob, or people will question our sanity.

Back to the bookstore.

My staged answer: "Redville is corrupt, Leila, and Manhattan deserves better. Narcissists and criminals run the board. It breaks my heart to have such awful, greedy people in power."

Tears glitter Leila's eyes. "*Exactly*, Benny. I knew I could trust you."

No, you trust a fake persona I sculpted from your social media interests. Careful, Leila. Here there be wolves.

I send her an encrypted text with login credentials and website updates. Leila memorizes the information, then I remote-wipe it from her phone—a fancy trick I'm rather proud of. In minutes, Redville Estates boasts a new homepage with controversial stories: doll genitalia, animal-bone sex toys, and the board's supposed participation in a company-time orgy with mayonnaise-greased feather boas. Mayonnaise is a code word. By tomorrow morning, Redville's CEO will be dead. A beautiful use of marketable murder.

Yes, Bob, I agree we should be more open-minded as a culture, but Redville is a financial firm. Money is steady, not risqué. It's a dollar-bill palace built with tried-and-true tedium. There are no deer-femur dildos or feather-boar cock rings there.

I count to ten, then Google explodes, reporting on the heightening "Redville Scandal." Time to go, Bob. Time to shed Benny and find Alex again.

"You're free," I say, standing.

"Sorry?" Leila asks.

"I wiped your loans and claims, as promised."

She smiles and reaches for me, but I shirk her attempted hug. Is an attempted hug like attempted murder? It should be. People should pay for unsolicited joy.

"You never saw me, you don't know me, and you weren't here today. Nod if you understand," I say.

Deflated but relieved, Leila nods.

"Good."

I leave the bookstore for the heatwave, and New York hits me like a subway train: steamed-piss sidewalks, rage-infused air, sweat-drenched crowd, and cat-drowning humidity. A taxi honks as I step into the street. I dodge scratched buses and dented sedans to reach the company car, a luxury model with jet-black paint and tinted windows. With a baritone click, I open the door and sink into the black-leather back seat, relishing the air conditioning. Sweet, sexy aristocracy—I mean democracy, of course.

"Where to, Mr. Osman?" the driver asks. He's my favorite: Johnny Maker. Yes, it sounds like a stripper name, Bob, because it is. Manhattan is expensive. We hustle every part of ourselves in every way we can. Johnny's good, too. Watched him once or twice. Yanks the audience by their groins and captivates them from nipples to nuts.

"The office," I say.

Johnny nods, then hits the gas, gliding through choppy streets. Traffic is shit. Traffic is always shit. If you want glitter, you gotta take grit. We're not far, only a few blocks over, but our short trip to Rockefeller Center lasts almost an hour. I scroll through news articles, shoot Deja a feel-better-I-don't-care text, send Jorge a new company policy on required undergarments during work hours (I don't like to be "that person," Bob, but some nipples are aggressive), and catch up on *The Writing*

Community Chat Show. By the time we reach Apex, the grouchy sun sinks below the skyscraper horizon, and thunder cloaks our afternoon.

“Mr. Osman...Mr. Osman...Mr. Osman...Mr. Osman...”

A surname chant greets my arrival, percolated across a dozen grinning mouths. I duck into the cafeteria and play the accessible CEO, then retreat as a team-building meeting begins. There are matching lanyards, mats for trust falls, and “Apex Loves You” T-shirts, my brand stamped on every inch of swag. Someone even tattooed my logo across their tits.

Up to the top floor, the elite floor, and a gong smash welcomes me. Told you I’d buy one. Though I now regret it as my skull echoes with the monster of my own creation—one of many monsters.

“We have a problem, Mr. Osman,” Deja says, catching me in her net. No, Bob, she’s my CFO, not CTO. Keep up with the letter vomit.

“We always have problems, Deja,” I say. “That’s why I hired you. Handle it.” It’s tequila-shot, cigarette-threesome time.

“This one requires a...delicate touch.”

“Use Jorge or Li Jie. I’m busy.” For fuck’s sake, let me drink myself to sleep. Naps are important, drunken naps especially. I don’t want to dream. I want to drown.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Deja says, “but you’ll want to see this first.”

I sigh and make it the longest, loudest, most obnoxious sigh there ever was. “Fine.”

Deja leads me to her corner office, then ushers us both inside. The room is dark, blinds drawn, and I blink twice to adjust to the sight.

Ah, shit. Fucking hell. Christ’s bloody scrotum. It was a matter of time, but today? Really, fate? Couldn’t have waited a

few more liquor-flooded weeks?

"Thank you, Deja," I say. "I'll take it from here."

She nods and leaves.

I turn toward the problem. But it's not only a problem, a snag, a hitch, a skip-in-the-step drawback. This is a "they found the tie-dye dick pics" and "call in those shady cousins" fuck-up.

Tied to Deja's chair is Hank. Besides his inability to soften his name (nobody'd take Hanky seriously), he's street crew, and street crew don't mix with office crew. That's rule one of Apex: Keep those worlds apart. Don't mix blood and gold. Separate muscle and money.

"Hank, this is unfortunate." I cross my arms, lean against the closed door.

Hank shakes worse than a coked-up hooker on Saturday night. "Mr. Osman, I can explain."

"I'm sure you can, and I don't care. You know the code. If you got an issue, call me, but don't come here."

"It's an emergency."

"Life is an emergency. As I said, I don't care."

"Perkins survived."

I snort-laugh, like Erin did. "I assure you he did not. I cracked open his rib cage and squeezed his heart till it burst in my bare hand."

Hank stares in horror, despite all he's seen. Sure, it sounds bad if you hear it like that, but I don't have time to euphemize reality into something like "his life faded before my tearful eyes."

"Then someone stole his identity," Hank says once he recovers.

"Impossible," I say. "We drained his bank accounts and erased his records."

"There's someone walking around with the name Rob Perkins.

That's all I know, so I followed him home to...clean up."

Fucking idiot.

"Rob Perkins?" I ask, teeth clenched.

"Yes," Hank says.

"Our hit was *Ronny* Perkins."

Hank pales. "Maybe they're related?"

"They're not. Perkins is a common surname, and I vetted family connections before the hit. What did you do, Hank?"

He gulps and shivers in his bonds. "Um...I cleaned up, or tried to...but Rob...escaped."

I bite my lip till I taste copper. "Okay. *Okay*. I'll fix your fuck-up, Hank."

"Thank you, Mr. Osman. I swear it won't happen next time."

"I know, because there won't be a next time."

Confusion and terror mutate Hank's features as I cross the room and slide a blade under his jaw.

"I wish I could slit your throat," I whisper. "I wish I could sever your trachea and fuck your windpipe till you bleed out. I wish I could plunge my huge dick into your gore-warm neck stump and thrust myself to climax through your desperate screams. But I can't, Hank. Know why?" I point down as Hank shifts himself, but the chair's leather, so that's rectifiable. "Carpet. *Expensive* carpet. Ever cleaned blood out of carpet? Of course not, 'cause you can't. And this carpet—this expensive, silver-threaded carpet—saves you from a worse fate."

I shove a couple pills down Hank's throat. In seconds, he drops dead. I make a phone call and say, "Wolves cry hunger: Apex, top floor." Then I swipe a few records and suffer the infernal heat to find Rob (not Ronny) Perkins.

Shitstorm Central

Alex

This is not good, Bob. In fact, this is a tornado of liquid shits. What? We all have that fast-food story we regret. Back to the shitstorm. We must find and neutralize Rob Perkins—most likely kill him, yes. Death-threat ultimatums make people anxious, so it's better to deliver death without threat. I'll reason with him. And explain. And smooth-talk. And wink and grin and laugh in an effortless, sunshine-out-of-my-sphincter way. But I doubt Rob'll listen. He's a professor, you see, at Columbia University, so he's better than us. His résumé told me so. Though I welcome his hubris. It's how I found him so fast, full name and work history all jizzed online.

How should we kill him, Bob? Bleach is a favorite, but no time to shop. That also makes for an awkward conversation: "Hello, Mx./Ms./Mr. Receptionist, I need a gallon of bleach, a funnel, and a gag, but don't worry, this is all in the name

of science.” Science is a slut. Okay, no bleach. What about a temple shot? Too loud, too obvious. Guns leave trails. Knives are nostalgic, but there might be carpet (RIP, Hank), and we can’t risk evidence, not this far down the rabbit hole. We could use pills, but those are traceable if we use them too much (again, RIP, Hank). Seems we got a dilemma, Bob.

I jump from the unmarked company car to the sidewalk and wave Johnny on. I’ll find my own way back, because I shouldn’t be here, and Apex shouldn’t be here. Hank shouldn’t have fucked up his job, and I shouldn’t have fucked up by hiring him. So much shit to juggle, so much shit falling down. Rob has office hours now for his summer courses—assuming he keeps his schedule after his near-death scare—so we’ll head to his office, and on the way, we’ll—

“Sir, are you here for the masquerade?” a student asks, stopping me. She sags beneath an armful of fliers and slides Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses up her avian nose.

“No,” I say, hurrying past. A masquerade? Smell the wealth, Bob? It drips from her armpits. Sorry, I mean Columbia is a merit-based institution.

“It’s a fundraiser,” she continues. “We want to raise money for a winter trip to Australia.”

“Get Mommy to pay for it. Outta my way.”

Her mouth falls open. “Excuse me, sir, but I’m here on scholarship.”

“Were your prep schools, private tutors, dance classes, and violin lessons also on scholarship?” I ask.

“How the hell could you know—”

“Designer clothes, cut quads, and fingertip calluses. Now, *move*.”

She does, and I barge through Columbia University, quaking

with rage. It's old, it's Ivy, it's elite. Colonnaded buildings mock my approach as students frown from manicured lawns and walkways. It's obvious I don't belong. I'm not rich, talented, or unique enough. Sure, I got a sob story that can gather a crowd, but it's not marketable or politicized. I lost my wife, but there was no bias or bigotry. It was a plain and simple death, boring by Hollywood's standards, dull by the government's. They couldn't use me, so they discarded me.

I find Rob's building, then weave through hallways and stairways till I reach his office: Doctor Rob Perkins, PhD in Archaeology. Wait, his full name is Rob? Not Robert? Not Roberto? No wonder he's a twat, overcompensating for lack of length. His website bio mentions his doctorate five times and his Porsche three times in a farce of eight inches. No one wants that much dick, Bob. It gets in the way. Trust me.

Behind the door, I hear shuffles, panic, papers fluttering like fallen leaves, and furniture screeching in frantic search. Hank threatened him, the wrong man, then fucked up the kill, so Rob came here. But *what* is he doing here? What is he looking for? Should I pause and ask, or find an expensive pen to stab his jugular? Okay, Bob, you're right. The method is crude, but Rob might like the weapon. Gold-plated manslaughter is a compliment. He'd die with class.

I crack open the door. "Lose something?"

Rob freezes, bent over a leather briefcase, Armani suit flapping like a flag of surrender. He's clean-cut and clean-shaven, a blend of Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise. Boring. Predictable. Scarless and lifeless. No students are around, so I lock his door behind me.

"Who are you?" asks Rob. Sorry, you're right, Bob. He prefers his title plus his full name with every reference.

Let's try again.

"Who are you?" asks Dr. Rob Perkins.

"A friend," I say. "I've come to apologize for Hank."

Dr. Rob Perkins blanches with understanding, but my phone interrupts us. Yes, I should've put it on silent, but back-to-back murders are distracting. To escalate embarrassment, my ringtone is ABBA. They should swap "if you change your mind" with "if you lose your mind."

Dr. Rob Perkins freezes with fear. That's convenient. Stay paralyzed, PhD.

"One moment," I say, then I answer, because it's Georgina, my girls, my weakness, my humanity.

"Mr. Osman, a question," Georgina says.

"Now is not the best time," I say. "Now is actually the worst time. Can it wait?"

"No. I need this Saturday off."

"Why?"

"None of your business."

"My business employs you, so it very well is."

Georgina sighs. "I have a date."

I return her sigh threefold. "Georgina, this is a prime example of something that can wait. I'm rather busy right now."

Dr. Rob Perkins nods in agreement. Wait, that's a twitch.

"I've waited months for her to say yes, so no, Mr. Osman, it cannot wait," Georgina says.

"Is this the cleaning lady?" I ask.

"Yes. Whenever I see her, my loins ache with—"

"Fine, take Saturday off. Gotta go. Kiss the kids for me." I cut the call.

"You have kids?" Dr. Rob Perkins asks, mortified.

I ignore him. "What are you looking for, Doc?"

“What are you doing in my office?”

“I told you, to apologize.” And possibly kill. Probably kill. “Hank screwed up, and I’m sorry for his behavior.”

“Hank? That psycho who tried to staple my eyelids shut in my own home?”

My respect for Hank rises an inch, a nascent erection. Nice touch, fresh corpse.

“Hank was...unstable,” I say. “He got the wrong guy.”

“You think Hank was unstable because he got the wrong guy, not because he tried to mutilate my face?” Dr. Rob Perkins asks. He squeaks at the end with fear. It’s cute.

“It was a simple misunderstanding.”

“Nothing is simple about this.”

“Then I’ll make it simple: Leave the country and live.” Look at that mercy, Bob. Erin would be proud—of mercy, not murder.

“If I stay?” Dr. Rob Perkins asks.

“You’re a coward, not an idiot, so take the out and leave. You already planned on it.”

“Pardon?”

“You’re packing for Monaco.” I point at his briefcase, at the plucked papers, tickets, and passport crammed beneath his laptop and selfie stick. Wait, he’s hightailing it out of here, and his selfie stick makes the cut? Right again, Bob. He deserves to die.

Dr. Rob Perkins gulps with guilt. “I’m going on vacation.”

“You’re avoiding an audit. Not as clean as you claim, are you, Doc? Tax evasion’s hard to prove, but sexual harassment’s easy as pie. You got text message printouts here, and lawyer bills there. Maybe Hank did you a favor, eh?”

“Fuck you.” Dr. Rob Perkins’s face reddens with shame.

Yes, Doc, you’re dirty as shit, dirtier than me perhaps. That’s

rule two of Apex: Use their crimes to clear your own. Deflect attacks with counterattacks. Threaten to expose their deepest secrets in their most coveted temple. For Dr. Rob Perkins, that's Columbia University, the place he belongs and we do not.

"No one would believe you anyway," he adds.

"Maybe not me, but NYPD believes cash," I say. "That's why you haven't called the police. Don't want an investigation while lawyers are already scrambling to cover your cock."

Dr. Rob Perkins blushes further, and I know I've hit gold. "It's time for you to leave."

"Likewise," I say.

Neither of us moves. Well, I wanted to be a good boy—you know I did, Bob—but bad boys always win.

"I'm not in the business of offering second chances, Doc," I say.

The longer I'm here, the greater the risk. We must limit visibility on Hank's fuck-up, and I'm in the open. Sure, there are obstacles to block cops from tracing Hank to Apex to me, but I don't want to use those obstacles, Bob. Drive into a brick wall enough times, and the last time, the wall goes instead of the car. We must seem hypochondriac clean with no dirty laundry even if we're the filthiest assholes on the whole fucking planet.

"I won't be bossed around," says Dr. Rob Perkins, because he's never been bossed around or bullied or told he's anything but pretty, perfect, and powerful. That's why society forgives his tax evasion, sexual harassment, and casual use of the passive voice.

Time for plan B, Bob. I feel you drooling with excitement, but please keep my neurons slobber-free.

"Pity," I say, slipping on gloves. "You won't be bossed around, and I won't be blackmailed by Hank's mistake. It seems we've

reached an impasse.”

Dr. Rob Perkins opens his mouth to babble more scholarly drivel—we’re lucky he doesn’t weaponize Shakespeare, Bob—but I lunge and plunge a needle into his neck, quick and vicious. (I’m impressed by my speed, too, Bob.) As I depress the syringe, his eyes widen in betrayal, though he shouldn’t feel betrayed. I offered him more mercy than most.

Dr. Rob Perkins collapses and dies.

Heroin always comes in handy.

They’ll call it an overdose, and I stage it as such, then call, “Wolves cry hunger: Columbia University.” Poor Dr. Rob Perkins, evading taxes and lawsuits, struck down by hedonism in his very own office. “The Perverted Professor” and “Corrupt Columbia,” that’s what headlines will say—in *The New York Times*, of course, because Dr. Rob Perkins deserves the best.

Fever Dream

Alex

Crisis averted, Bob. I feel your relief.
I clean Dr. Rob Perkins's office and make a few calls—with no help from you—then sneak out of his office, back into the hall.

The nonempty hall. *Shit.*

"Hello," my emergency says. My emergency is hot.

Stop it, Bob. None of this insta-love bullshit. Even if her blue-violet eyes are sharp as knives. Even if a burgundy streak bloodies her sleek, black hair. Even if silver hoops in her ears and nose sparkle like fresh wounds. Even if her skin shines like moonlight, her voice cracks like lightning, and she commands the cosmos despite her small size.

"Hello," I mumble, lobotomized in her presence. Dammit, Bob, I'm such a douche. Feel free to skim this scene.

Remember Dr. Rob Perkins. Remember the lukewarm corpse behind the door. Remember Erin, Ana and Dee, Apex and their

legacy.

“Did you know Dr. Perkins?” my emergency asks. Her gaze is shrewd, clever as time. She sees through bullshit like a hot blade through flesh.

“Not well,” I say, “but better than most.” Vague, that’s good. I don’t know his favorite color or book, but I know his lawsuits, so that’s intimate enough.

It thunders outside, and rain whips against the building. My emergency knows I’m lying, but she strategizes her next move as I fumble for a limp-dick excuse.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” she asks, and I tense.

There is no fucking way she could know that. Is she crazy, too, or as cunning as she seems, a waking fever dream?

“Sorry?” I try to sound insulted, but I instead sound aroused. A shitstorm, indeed.

“I heard you two arguing,” she says. “Didn’t catch much, but it sounded intense. Then Dr. Perkins fell silent, so I assume he’s dead, and I assume you killed him.”

“Or maybe he’s napping,” I say, scrambling. “Or studying. Or reading. Not all quiet types are corpses.”

“But most mysteries are monsters.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

“You did.”

“Then call the police.”

“Given your indifference, I assume you own the police, though I could call the FBI. They’re tougher to bribe.”

I’m in over my head, Bob. This girl is ice. She smothers my fire. I’m out of ammunition, and she’s starting a war. I should kill her. She’s a witness to this crime. If she turns me in, I’m done, Apex is done, my girls are done, and Erin’s memory is *done*.

"You don't need to kill me," she says, reading my mind. "I won't report you."

Walk away, Alex. No, fuck that. Run.

"Why?" I ask. "If I killed Dr. Perkins—as you claim, as I deny—why let me go?"

"He was a dick. He deserved it," she says without flinch or hesitation.

Damn. She's not Erin, not Erin at all, but she stirs the same storm inside me, a storm I haven't felt since she died.

"I didn't kill him," I say again. It's futile, and I'm futile, grasping at slimy straws.

"Sure you didn't, and I'm Red Riding Hood." She winks, and I sink.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Use your eyes, hotshot." She nods toward the opposite office. The door plaque proclaims: Doctor Emma Rose Claire, PhDs in Egyptology, Archaeology, and East Asian Cultures.

PhDs *plural*? *Three* doctorates? A genuine genius, and I'm a fucking fool.

"And you are?" she asks.

I should say Benny. Or Joey. Or Vinny. She knows I killed a man, for fuck's sake, so I should lie, scam, skedaddle my ass back to Apex. But I don't, because she's one of those face-slap, gut-punch, universal beacons that makes me believe in a higher pattern, if not a higher power.

"Alex," I say.

"Alex...?"

"Osman." *Fuck.* "No middle name, no PhD."

Emma smiles. "Now, we both have leverage. Later, Alex."

"Later, Doctor."

"Call me Emma."

She disappears into her office, and I take to the streets,
thrumming with hope's fatal edge.

My Heart Is Ash

Erin

Dear Sandy,
You're a wolf, love.
My pain gives you power, and this destroys me. I know you want to provide; you always have. I know you want to support our girls; there's no one better. But listen to me, Sandy. You are more than money, more than power, more than this ill-fated legacy you crave. Ana and Dee don't need an emperor. They need a father first and only.

When I'm gone, honor me through our girls. I'm always with you. Don't lose yourself when you lose me. Remember when they were born? I was high risk, and they weren't breathing. You almost lost me then, but I almost lost you, too. Your eyes turned feral, jade to onyx, and you sharpened into a monster. We had many scares: pneumonia, car crash, allergies, anaphylactic shock. After each one, I saw that monster again. He reared his head, a flash of cruelty, then retreated once I recovered.

But I won't recover this time. You don't recover from stage-four pancreatic cancer, the silent killer, the hand reaching to pull me into the void. I was destined to die, and you were destined to drown.

Fight it, Sandy. You're stronger than the stars. Use your fire to forge freedom, not fear. I wish we had more time, but time is stingy, frugal, unwilling to let love last.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Ambitious Nightmares

Alex

Friday night is a blur. Erin's letter sends me over the edge of the breach, then a belated hospital bill skewers me senseless.

Don't lose yourself when you lose me.

That's the thing about death, Bob: *They* die, but we don't. We still get their bills, documents, mail, paperwork, and answer endless calls, emails, texts, telling doctors, dentists, insurance, school, the DMV, and electric, water, gas, oil, internet, transportation, and credit card companies that Erin Lee Dunne is gone forever, never to return. They are relentless reminders of all I lost, all I loved, as fate forces me to answer soul-crippling questions to snotty customer service reps and impatient salespeople. Yes, she's dead. Yes, take her name off everything. Yes, she doesn't exist.

I was destined to die, and you were destined to drown.

I know, sweetheart, so why thwart destiny? You can't save

me anymore, and I never could save myself. It's constant, inescapable hell. Hot tears and searing anguish. Heart-torn-from-its-cage damnation.

Fight it, Sandy.

But I don't.

I drown.

Club after club, bar after bar, I drink myself into oceanic depths and smoke myself into a stupor. My dick enters mouths, cunts, and asses, while appendages pierce me the same. It's a rowdy, bawdy, neon night, but it offers release—several releases, most of them comical. It's hard to be classy in a coupe, or a closet, or the bathroom floor of a studio apartment the guy claims is his till a stranger walks in on my spread ass cheeks. That works out, though. He joins us in the end. Nothing like angry sex to erase all regrets.

I stumble home at midnight. Drank in the office since noon, then guzzled Manhattan's watering holes through nightfall. Georgina smells it on me. She glares from the couch, swaddled in a blanket like an unwanted present, glowing with Times Square's billboards.

"You're late, and I have tomorrow off," she snaps, then glances at her watch. "Make that today."

"Sorry," I slur. "Erin...hospital."

Georgina understands, but she doesn't relent. "You look like rotten cabbage, and you smell like a dead walrus. Clean yourself up. The girls missed you tonight."

Guilt stabs me. "I know, but you're better for them."

"Bullshit, Mr. Osman. They need their father."

Ana and Dee don't need an emperor. They need a father first and only.

All you women, ganging up on me, stealing my heart and

crushing it like a fucking grape.

"I know," I whisper. "Go to bed. I got them."

Georgina softens a smidge. "They love you. Don't forget that."

"Night, Georgina."

"Night, Mr. Osman."

She pads through the penthouse to her bedroom. I stagger to the shower to scrub New York off my skin. Next, I change into a bathrobe and walk to my girls' bedrooms. First Ana, then Dee: twin forehead kisses, shoulder squeezes, and hair ruffles. In their dormant state, with river-blue eyes shut, their resemblance to Erin fades. They look like me: dark brown locks, bronze limbs, breath stuttering with ambitious nightmares.

I'm always with you.

"They're all you," I'd tell Erin after work. "They're yours, too," she'd say, flipping pancakes, and I'd shake my head. She did all the work; I just paid the bills. Fuck, I miss her like sunshine. Dee snorts in her sleep, an answer from Erin. I smile then cry, tucked by Dee's side in her tiny twin bed.

* * *

Morning arrives like a hammer: skull-splitting hangover, stomach-purging threats, sour-milk mind, soggy-bread body. *Fuck*. Consequences always catch up, ruthless and vindictive. *Let me do stupid shit without backlash for one damn night*, I pray. Nobody answers, and nobody cares, so I pop ten ibuprofen, drink a quart of water, then burn toast and get the girls ready.

Ana and Dee are not impressed. "Where's Georgina?" they ask.

"On a date," I rasp, voice parched from alcohol and tears.

"With...?" Ana chirps.

"Donna, the cleaning lady."

"What are they doing?" Dee asks.

"Sword fighting or something else dangerous," I say. "Hurry up. Grandmom and Grandma want to see you."

Clumsy, I usher the girls into clothes then a company car, and we make our way to Brooklyn.

Ever been to a family party, Bob? Stupid question, answer's yes. But ever been to a *huge* family party? One where there are enough cousins to start an army? Where you buy extra folding tables, because thirty is not enough? Where nosy relatives ask why you don't have twelve kids, twenty jobs, cook pasta from scratch, and drive forty miles to buy the right cheese? Where your bloodline flocks by the dozens, weighted with overstuffed plates of hummus, bruschetta, falafel, lasagna, pasta, pie, kebab, and kofta? Where everyone asks if you want to chat, then eat, then chill, then eat, then play cards, then eat, then *eat*, then *eat*? Where neighbors call the cops, because your aunts do naked keg stands while farting in three-part harmony? Batshit crazy runs in the family, but I'm the only murder whore.

You're a wolf, love.

When we exit the company car, greetings assault us: *how you been, you're too skinny, where are my girls, taste this sauce, you look awful, why so late, visit more often, I won't live forever, you know.* Ana and Dee brighten at the attention, then skip off to find Mom and Ma. I slip into shadows and wait out my headache.

"Got any bourbon?" I croak at Mido.

My cousin grins, brown eyes glinting, black curls dancing. "Got something better. Ever try a Screaming Purple Jesus?"

"No cocktails, just liquor."

"Golden Grain? It's 190 proof."

“Perfect.”

We down two shots, then lean against the brownstone. This is where I grew up: sidewalk neighborhood, fenced-in fun, wild backyard, overcapacity apartment complex. It could have been worse, but it could have been better, though Mom and Ma could make any place a home. They adopted all seven of us from Italian-Egyptian blends to look like a family, to look like them. My brothers and sisters were normal kids, but I was always the runt. As the youngest, they teased and tortured me with “love,” or so said Ma.

My siblings bonded with each other, but I never bonded with them. I was unlucky number seven, fed leftovers, dressed in hand-me-downs, too small to matter, too young to understand. Even now, I fade at these gatherings. My family ignores me after cursory cheek kisses and greetings. But I prefer it this way, only Mido and me, shoved in a corner of the celebration-choked backyard.

“It’s hot as shit,” Mido says, wiping sweat from his forehead.

He’s my age, also the youngest but one of twelve. Growing up, we’d find solace in each other’s sorrow, but my sorrow remains while his evaporated long ago. He found a dream, a husband, and an escape. I found a nightmare, a corpse, and a cage.

“How’s Jerry?” I ask.

Mido beams. “Good. How’s Apex?”

“Good.”

His husband, my work: our identities.

“The girls are getting big,” he says as family members stam-pede between us.

“Yeah,” I say, eager to end talk which leads to Erin, to moving on. You don’t move on from grief. You hide more, lie better, pretend at recovery while you’re still addicted to a ghost.

“Do anything fun?” Mido asks. “Any parties? Any dates?”
Told you.

“Some parties,” I say. By parties, I mean taboo-stuffed nights doused in bodily fluids, chugging cheap champagne while a crowd chugged my cock. You’re right, Bob. That was crude.

“Meet anyone?” he presses.

For fuck’s sake, I know he’s concerned about me (rightfully so), but let’s talk about the satanic storms, or the roasting city. There are more important topics than my tragic character arc.

“No,” I say, but my mind flits to Emma. She sparked something in me, but I’m not ready for another fire. I’m still burned out from the last emotional apocalypse. Love heals the deepest wounds, and grief carves the worst.

“C’mon, strapping guy like you could have anyone,” Mido says.

He thinks he is helping. He is not.

“I’m happy single,” I lie. I’m not happy, and I’m not single. Erin still owns me, will *always* own me.

“Well, if you change your mind—”

“I’ll let you know.”

I won’t.

The rest of the party passes in peace. Mom and Ma occupy Ana and Dee while I tune out to stories about Mido’s and Jerry’s pottery business. I, too, am surprised by their success, Bob, but the rich love to curate hobbies, and ceramics boast of luxury, of prestige—the way they make them, with platinum inlay and diamond borders. Gaudy, I know, but gaudy pays the bills. Hence, my silver-threaded carpet that saved Hank from horny sadism.

As clouds threaten yet another thunderstorm, we say goodbye, cheeks kiss-raw and pinched. Then we flee Brooklyn for

Manhattan's gilded skyline while *Story of a Storyteller* hums from the speakers.

"Daddy?" Ana asks.

"Yes, sweetheart?" I say.

"Do you miss Mommy?"

Heart punch. Gut stab. A bloody soul origami of anger and pain. "Every day, love. Every single day."

"I miss Mommy, too," Ana says.

"Me, too," Dee says. "Can you read to us, Daddy? Like she did?"

I swallow hard, find my voice. "Of course," I whisper, sobs in my throat, howls in my mind. "Of course."

A Beautiful Thing Is Never Perfect

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was a ship hostess in the Mediterranean.

All around the world, from each region, she sent herself postcards with proverbs scrawled on the back. She did this to remember the places she'd lived, the people she'd been, because we all change, become different people, and we should remember those people as we progress to move on.

Her handwriting was not crisp, but it was clean, and Georgina wanted to memorize this version of herself: the artsy, cruise ship host. She was young, in her twenties, and as most vicenarians, she knew everything at once and nothing at all. On her postcard stretched the Amalfi Coast: vibrant Positano slapped on a cliff, the sky crystal and the sea turquoise. The proverbs she chose were cute, catchy. She wanted bold, not boring, and suffered from both.

Italy told her, "If you can't live longer, live deeper," but

Georgina would live forever.

Croatia told her, "The way it came is the way it will go," and Georgina always arrived and left with a bang.

France told her, "Truth is more valuable if it takes you a few years to find it," but Georgina didn't care for truth when lies were more loyal.

Slovenia told her, "Speak the truth, but leave immediately after," and we already know how double-decade Georgina felt about truth.

Last, but not least, Egypt told her, "A beautiful thing is never perfect," and Georgina agreed. A beautiful thing is never perfect, and a perfect thing is never beautiful.

Down the Cyber Hole

Alex

A bloody thing is never perfect, and a perfect thing is never bloody.

“She’s divine, Mr. Osman.”

“Don’t need details, Georgina.”

Georgina doesn’t listen. She organizes my bills with one hand and cooks crêpes for my twins with the other.

“Donna is a goddess,” Georgina says. “She’s smart, funny, headstrong, ripe—”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“—glowing, and stunning. We had the most amazing date, and we didn’t even have sex.”

“Again, don’t need details.”

“Usually, after I go down—”

“Georgina—”

“—and do the tornado—”

“Georgina!”

She smirks. "Please, Mr. Osman, you are no saint."

"I never claimed to be," I say, "but I don't want to hear about vaginas first thing in the fucking morning."

"After you chain-banged them last night?"

"Precisely."

"You know," she says, "you should go on a proper date, one where you remember their name. You need people. You need community."

"I got community," I say. "I got a company to run, a family to feed. Finances are finally up. Apex needs me."

"You're impossible."

"Thank you."

Bitter, I sip coffee as Ana and Dee prattle in the background about cars, buses, and childhood whims. Georgina got home around midnight, then I escaped at one. After another night of charred cigarettes, sticky alcohol, and questionable street food, I feel like shit. No, I feel like vomited-on, stomped-on, drowned-with-decade-old-sewer-gunk shit. Yes, Bob, it's my own damn fault, but that doesn't help me, does it? I don't need your judgment, nor do I need play-by-plays of Georgina's sexcapades, so I unlock my phone and retreat into scrolling limbo.

News stories, status updates, video recommendations, and high-priority emails assault my eyeballs and deliver the sweet, buzzing erasure of electronic overstimulation. I dive into the cyber hole—okay, you're right, Bob, cyber hole doesn't work. Sounds like a robot's rectum. Anyway, I let technology ravish my brain and achieve a small measure of peace.

Somehow, I end up on Columbia University's website, checking on Dr. Rob Perkins, ensuring no leads, no ties to Apex, no links to me. I'm *thorough*, Bob, not creepy. A semicolon

can fuck up a rocket launch, and we don't want to explode on the ground. Okay, so maybe Dr. Emma Rose Claire is in the same department, but as my only living witness to date, she deserves extra attention. I mean, she knows I killed a man, and she doesn't care. No cops at my doorstep, no FBI at the office. It's sketchy, Bob. Suspicious, even. So I grab her address, social media accounts, email, phone number, and résumé—to be safe.

Hmm, curious. Despite her genius IQ and overwhelming accomplishments, she doesn't brag in her CV—unlike Dr. Rob Perkins. Then again, she doesn't need to. Her education and experience could belong to ten scholars, so listing cold, hard facts is more than enough.

Who are you, Emma Rose?

Twenty-seven years old. French and Japanese fathers. Small-town prodigy who left for college at eleven. Three Ivy doctorates in liberal arts, and a tenured professorship at Columbia University. *Tenured* in her twenties? She's dangerous. Maybe a psychopath. Wait, that's me. But who the hell with her status excuses *murder*? You're right, Bob, we must dig further.

Only child from a loving family. No history of neglect or abuse. Middle-class mediocrity at its finest. She writes in her latest dissertation about apathy and its “defeatist effects on ambition in rural America,” so I assume she had a safe life and now wants adventure. It's a stretch, but it's the only explanation for her murder tolerance. Her favorite Spotify playlist has several songs craving adventure and other dangerous things, so we'll go with that.

To be sure, I could text her.

No, Alex, don't do it. I appreciate your concern, Bob, but it's not necessary. I can't trust her, so I must threaten her. And if we happen to drift into casual territory, it's essential to ensure

Apex's security. That sounds billboard-barfable, right?

But what should I say? Let's keep it brief.

ALEX: Hope you're enjoying the weekend.

Perfect. Colloquial, yet threatening. *Enjoy the weekend, but remember your enjoyment is because of my mercy.* I know I can't send that, Bob. Too Hannibal Lecter, and I'm more Patrick Bateman.

EMMA: Took you long enough, hotshot.

Fuck, she knows it's me. Well, that's the point. It's not like I'm off the grid. I'm New York's prodigal son, ruler of an empire and owner of a legacy. People know my name. They can find my address. I do not hide who I am, only what I do.

But Emma knows both.

EMMA: Guess you found my SSN, too. Time to leave the country?

She's joking, right? Dammit, Bob, she's the cat, and I'm the mouse. No, I'm the rat.

ALEX: It's never a bad time to visit Monaco.

EMMA: It's never a bad time to call the FBI.

Touché, love. I should stop. Instead, I smile.

EMMA: How is the body-burying business today?

ALEX: I wouldn't be a professional if there were a body left to bury.

EMMA: Yet you left a witness. Why?

Instinct. Loneliness. Feeling something after feeling nothing for months.

ALEX: Yet you let me go. Why?

EMMA: We all make mistakes.

"Daddy, look at my llama monster," Dee interrupts. She drops a wad of damp paper in my lap. It's more llama than monster, and its eyes bleed red marker. Like father, like daughter.

"Beautiful, sweetheart," I say, then slap it on the fridge.

Dee returns to Ana, and I return to regret.

ALEX: Any plans for today?

Georgina shoots me a wary glare. She knows I keep few friends, and I rarely text more than one-sentence demands.

EMMA: Grading students' papers. You?

ALEX: I'm off.

EMMA: Didn't think murder was a nine-to-five.

ALEX: I value work-life balance.

EMMA: Me, too. Boundaries are important.

And that's a burn. Yes, I'm invading her privacy, Bob, but every moment she lives, she's invading mine. She knows who I am, what I do, where I work. Her confession could topple Apex.

ALEX: Balance is important, too. You should get out more.

EMMA: Lie low?

ALEX: Travel the world.

EMMA: Join witness protection?

ALEX: Never too late to redefine yourself.

EMMA: True, Alex Osman, Apex CEO. How's Times Square, by the way?

So she researched me, too. I should panic. Instead, I'm flattered. She's interested in me...or afraid of me...same difference. No, she's not afraid at all.

ALEX: Not as nice as Central Park.

I know where you live, too, Emma.

EMMA: True, I have more police.

ALEX: Yeah, most of my friends live near you.

Attack and parry, attack and parry. This is too much fun.

ALEX: Gotta go. Big week and all.

EMMA: Enjoy your corruption.

ALEX: Enjoy your elitism.

The conversation dies.

Shit, Bob, this is a poisoned apple, but I can't stop humping the tree.

Small-Town Prodigy

Emma

Emma Rose Claire was a genius. Everything was easy, and nothing was hard, and that made for a bland, boring life.

“I want action. I want adventure,” she’d beg more than once.

As the most esteemed export from her small town—after fried waffles—Dad and Pa deflected with her prodigy status. She was an only child, a blessing by all accounts. There were many tries before her, using Dad’s sperm and Pa’s sister’s egg, but only one surrogate took. Emma was a miracle, so they revered—and pressured—her as such.

“Action and adventure are for ordinary people,” Dad would say.

“And you are far from ordinary,” Pa would add.

So Emma made a deal. “After my doctorate, I’ll travel the world.”

But she didn’t. Everyone wanted to speak to the tiny girl

from No Man's Land, America, who went to college at eleven and earned her first doctorate at sixteen—because that's what it was: her *first* doctorate. Two more came after, but nothing was enough. Ambition was greedy, her fans more so. Dad and Pa were kind, loving, but colleagues flaunted her as a “shiny young thing” wherever she went. She attended no prom, nor school dances, nor teenage parties with keg stands and bad choices. She was a model citizen, and this model citizen had cracks.

Emma didn't have a normal childhood, and she didn't have normal friends. Everyone was jealous or took advantage; she was a god or pet in every situation. She never felt at home, and she wanted a home, a partner, some kids, a creaking door they'd never fix, a living room cluttered with toys. Instead, she had “greatness” shoved down her throat every fucking day.

The deeper you were, the shallower people treated you. If they couldn't connect, they condescended. Despite Emma's genius, most belittled her. She was short, small, and soft around the edges, so people sexualized her beauty or diminished her mind. She defended every breath, guarded every emotion, because any slip would empower their doubts.

Yes, Emma realized she came off as arrogant, but she was a genius, so this was her truth. She'd rather people envy her confidence than ignore her intellect, though this made for few friends. There *was* Jami. There was always Jami Barisse. He was her only childhood friend—a good friend, but not a best friend—and he filled in the gaps when Emma's loneliness barked. He was flexible, adaptable, and played her every missing piece: confidant, conspiracist, ice-cream thief, movie-night pillow. But Jami was a free spirit, and Emma was too shrewd to fly. He was an actor, and she was an academic, and their friendship had more windows than walls.

Still, Jami was the one she confided in, and Emma talked him down from the clouds. When NYU rejected him, she helped him plan a new audition. When Juilliard accepted him, she held his blue hair while he retched celebration. When Broadway offered him his wildest dreams, she set his bills to autopay and organized logistics around late-night performances.

When Emma received her diagnosis, he helped her, too. Dad and Pa panicked as Emma froze with shock, but Jami was there, silver eyes glossy with tears, rubbing her back with a slender, brown arm.

“C’est une erreur,” Pa said, palms at his temples. *This is a mistake.*

“Gomen, René,” Dad said. *Sorry.*

“Ils ont tort. Elle est parfaite, Raiden.” They are wrong. She is perfect.

“Kanojo wa mada kanpekidesu.” She is still perfect.

They tangled themselves in French, Japanese, and English, swearing in three languages at any doctor they could find, leaving Emma to Jami and an uncertain future.

Emma was used to easy, but life was no longer easy, and she buckled beneath the hammer fall. She had a broken heart—literally. The official diagnosis was trigeminy: a triple heartbeat, plus a leaky valve. If this arrhythmia worsened, it could lead to ventricular tachycardia, then cardiac arrest—rapid pulse, then heart attack. But doctors couldn’t tell “for sure.” They covered their asses with ambiguities and blamed the EKG instead of themselves.

Nothing might happen. Everything might happen. They told her to monitor symptoms: fatigue, disorientation, breathing trouble, chest pain, heart palpitations. “But you might be fine and live a long life,” one doctor said. *Or you might die without*

warning in a year, Emma's fear added. There was nothing she could do outside of the normal checkup vomit: exercise, eat healthy, and don't smoke, drink, live, or have fun. On top of her heart, her gynecologist told Emma she was infertile, unable to have kids, a creaking door they'd never fix, a living room cluttered with toys. Two savage strokes: a broken heart and a severed future. Fate cut her thread before she could find its root.

But, as with all tragedies, life moved on. Emma did, too. The diagnosis faded beneath grants to submit, research to conduct, and classes to teach. Tear-blotched doctors' offices dimmed beneath routine, and laughter came easier. She filled emptiness with business.

There was still that itch, that urge for adventure, but temptation led to excitement led to palpitations. For now, Emma enjoyed scholastic success, and that was enough, that was nothing.

"Go on a date," Jami insisted after his latest award-winning show. They walked down technicolor Broadway, brushed by wigs, assaulted by hairspray, as rouge-lipped and eyeliner-stained actors waved in glitter-washed costumes.

"I'm too busy to date," Emma said.

"Bullshit. You're scared."

"You're nosy."

"I'm concerned. It's not the end of the world yet, Emma. Try something new before it is."

Emma rolled her eyes and ignored him for months, despite many nudges and setups. Jami was right; she was scared. She hated her safe life, but she craved security after the diagnosis. That needed to change. She needed to take a risk. Emptiness surfaced through business, and Emma resolved to live. She

was nobody's slave, least of all fear's, so she lifted her chin and changed with the summer heat.

Her first dates were flops: self-important girls and guys in outfits that could feed half the world if sold on the black market. They were fake, and Emma hated fake. Jami sent more her way, but hopefuls made Emma hopeless.

"This is pointless," she complained.

"This is necessary," Jami said. "Weed through duds to find the prize."

"I'm burned out on duds."

"Then take a break. Have meaningless sex. Let someone touch your titties and make you come like Old Faithful."

"For fuck's sake, Jami."

He shrugged, smug. "It always works. Orgasms clear your head."

"I can take care of myself."

"That's my girl."

Weeks blurred together. Jami found his forever in a camera-man, and Emma found never again at their wedding. She swore off dating; she boycotted love. Romance was for healthy hearts, and hers was already broken.

Then along came Alex, and he fucked up everything.

See, Emma was used to people's assumptions. She was small, so she was weak, delicate, frail, fragile, gentle, harmless—even if she was none of those things. But people were monsters of habit, and they categorized her as a corner instead of a stage. Not Alex. Not the wolfish man with gray-green eyes, a brow-to-cheek scar, dark brown curls, rolled-up cuffs, and olive skin inked with foreign tattoos.

Though he was taller, bigger, and stronger, Alex saw *her* as the threat, risk, poison, toxin, the powerful force from which

there was no retreat. In that moment, Emma knew she'd keep his secrets, damn the consequences, because he saw the titan within the termite. That was why she wouldn't call NYPD, nor FBI, nor anyone who came knocking. Alex viewed her as dangerous, and nobody thought her dangerous before.

Emma liked to be dangerous.

My Soul Is Dusk

Erin

Dear Sandy,
*The world is a stage, and you are its star.
 Remember me at sunset, but forget me at sunrise. Let
 days soothe your jagged pain, and let love heal your mortal wounds.
 You're free, healthy, and secure. You can do anything from here, leap
 any distance, fly any height. But avoid the storms in the sky.*

*I wish I could write more, but I'm tired as time. Chemo wears on
 me more than I admit to you, to the girls, to the doctors, to anyone,
 because I don't want you to remember me like this. I want you to
 remember me on our wedding day, hair wild, eyes full of forever. I
 love you, Sandy. Never forget that, but never let love hold you back.*

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Hell's Kitchen

Alex

Torture is a sensitive business.

Kill them too fast, and they don't talk enough.
Kill them too slow, and they don't talk at all. You must preserve their will to survive while destroying hopes of rebellion. It's a difficult balance, but one I've refined.

Another Lab Rat caught in Hell's Kitchen, and this warehouse lives again. The Surgeon winks across the pawned dentist chair, and in our halo of grimy light, we begin.

The world is a stage, and you are its star.

Not now, Erin. I need a distraction tonight.

What did she do? Thanks for asking, Bob. Best we get the audience on our side. Not your side? Come on, we both know you're as guilty as me. Shit, a text from Emma.

EMMA: Hey, hotshot. Li Jie says hi.

She went to my office. Another threat. Another tease. And fuck, I'm hard.

"Sir?" the Surgeon asks as her lab coat molests her curves.

"One sec, sorry," I say, then rush a response.

ALEX: Jami does, too.

I slide the phone into my pocket, then return to the abyss. I'm always one step ahead of everyone, but Emma's ten steps ahead of me.

Who is this? What did she do? I hear you, Bob. The Surgeon does, too, and she hates repetition, though she's horny for retribution.

Meet Gina Rischetti. She is a rich asshole. You feel sorry for her now, tied up and stripped down, but don't jump to conclusions. Assumptions are for those who can afford failure. We cannot. Anyway, Gina is a pedophile (and there swings your vote), a teacher who preys on orphanages by offering free tutoring in exchange for child pornography. It's disgusting on every level. We could report her to the police, but that's not justice. A life behind bars, bills paid and meals delivered, is nowhere near the suffering she deserves.

She also happens to be filthy rich, and Apex happens to need a new server room.

Ironically, *she* came to *me*. Gina submitted a request on the NQA app to hide her latest sins, but I can't ask no questions when it comes to kids. So I denied her request and found her address, then brought her here for vengeance. We snagged her life insurance—so many freak accidents this time of year—but we still need her banking password. She unfortunately does

not use the common “password” or “12345” or “dick123.” In fact, there’s extra encryption. The twat.

“Gina, it’s a displeasure to meet you,” I say, leaning against the tool table. The light bulb swings in agreement. “At this point, I usually offer those in your position an out: Tell me quick, and you’ll die quick.” Manhattan mercy in a nutshell. “However, I’ll make an exception for you. You will not die quick. You don’t deserve pity. But if you tell me soon, you may die easy.”

“What do you want?” Gina squirms within her bonds on the chair. She’s scrawny as a fawn, jaundiced in the Lab’s sickly glow. Straw-like hair sticks to her forehead, and mascara streaks her doll-like face, dainty lips painted red. She doesn’t look like a pedophile. Then again, nobody looks like what they are. I look normal, and that’s a worse lie than a political campaign.

“Your online banking password,” I say. “Bravo on the added security, but it makes my job difficult.”

“You’ll kill me.”

“We’ve established that.”

“Then why tell you?”

I sigh. The Surgeon sighs. Even you sigh, Bob. “To die easy,” I say. “My mind is a fucked-up monster, and I don’t want to let it free.”

Gina shivers. Her nipples perk. She squeezes her legs together in modesty—a modesty she never allows her victims. “I don’t want to die,” she whispers, tears filming her dark eyes.

“The feeling is not mutual.” I grab a knife from the table. The Surgeon salivates, then preps an IV. Don’t look glum, Bob. Of course we’ll get the password. It’s *American*, not *American’t*. (More like *Americrazy*.) You may punch me now. Wait, you’re not real...or I’m not.

Gina starts to say something, but I’m done with bullshit

excuses. The Surgeon pumps her full of paralyzer and staples her lips shut with five metallic crunches. Then I cut. Gina screams, muffled through her closed mouth, while I pry open her torso as I did with Ronny Perkins—*Ronny*, not Rob. The devil's in the details, Bob.

Autopsied Gina is a beautiful sight: skeleton dripping blood, a meaty cavern, heart tapping Hail Mary while lungs sputter hallelujah. I widen the flesh flaps and withdraw a handheld mixer from the tool table. Fondling her organs, I locate her spleen, appendix, and a kidney, then blend. Glorious karma. Tissue chunks confetti the air as Gina bucks in agony. Whisks gag on her gooey insides, the *glug-glug-glug* of too-thick batter. You're right, Bob. Needs more water.

I pour liquid into her torso, and the mixer settles into a rhythm. Within minutes, Gina's blended inside. Sludge lubricates her spared organs, the organs she needs to survive, and she must survive a little longer.

The Surgeon rips the staples from her lips, and Gina ejects a blood-curdling wail.

"I'm proud of that one," I say.

The Surgeon nods through Gina's scream. "You did well, sir."

But I'm not done yet. "The password, Gina. Don't encourage my imagination. Creativity is a greedy beast, and my impostor syndrome has claws."

"Fuck you," Gina spits, saliva threaded red.

"Don't give me ideas, love," I say. "You can still die easy. The password, or I try something new."

Heat makes me horny, and it's hot as Satan's dick. An idea tugs at my mind, insistent. Though I force it down, like an erection, it pops back up.

"I don't want to die," Gina repeats. She's bland, a true

disappointment, no charm or charisma whatsoever.

“Gina, I’ll give you one last chance. The password, *now*.”

She swivels her head and pierces me with oblivion. “Go to hell.”

And here we are again.

“Never left,” I say.

The Surgeon is a master, and this is her time to shine. What I’m about to attempt is mad, insane—no, it’s batshit crazy. But I excel at batshit crazy, and the Surgeon excels at keeping victims alive, so I tell her to begin.

She doesn’t clamp Gina’s lips this time. Instead, we relish her shrieks. With a scalpel, bone saw, and tiny torch, the Surgeon scalps Gina’s head, then severs the top half of her skull, cauterizing the surrounding skin. Like the pit of a huge peach, Gina’s brain lies half exposed. Its slimy wrinkles twinkle in the fairy-tale light. She thought herself a princess, but she was the evil stepsister in the end.

Now comes my part, my fifteen minutes of infamy. The Surgeon straddles Gina’s gory chest, cracked ribs between her thighs, and holds Gina’s head as I approach from above. I lower the dentist chair, unzip my fly—skim this scene if you have any morals at all. Then again, if you’re still here after the organ batter, your conscience is weaker than mine.

Leaning forward, I stroke Gina’s brain. It’s slippery as a cunt, and I rise like a rocket. She sobs a drumbeat of *please-please-please-please*, but she knows what she must do, and she won’t, so I fuck her skull. Literally mind-fucked, that’s what she is.

Since brain-fornication is tricky business, I contacted a specialist beforehand: Agent Young, Interpol’s finest. Well, he was Interpol’s finest before they fired him for selling (and fucking) body parts on the black market. Suits us, Bob, because

we have him to thank for tonight—and for the term “braingina.”

Young told me to avoid the brain’s frontal and lower areas. We need pedophile Gina to remember her password and speak, after all. So with my hands on her ears, pretending her head is her hips, I spread her hemispheres and thrust deep between. It’s a procedure for epilepsy—the hemispheric separation, not the mind-fucking. Yes, Bob, I’m a repulsive human being, but you knew that already. Don’t state the obvious.

Her brain smears my dick. Wrinkles rub my cock. Slime urges me faster, harder, and I wish I could last longer, but taboo is the best aphrodisiac. With a couple grunts, I release inside her dick-lobotomized skull. Gina moans, defeated, but she can still moan, so I didn’t fuck up what I shouldn’t have fucked up, though I fucked up everything else and fucked it good. Jizz drips from her naked brain to the dirty floor, and finally—*finally*—Gina speaks.

“The password...is...Rischetti_Gina_!@#123. R and G...are uppercase. And you need...my face...for facial recognition.”

I nod at the Surgeon. She logs in with the password and Gina’s face to her online banking account. We launder then wire the money to Apex’s offshore accounts, and Gina’s time here is done. After a few more mind-fucks. The Surgeon wants a turn, too, and her libido is insatiable. I also do some questionable things with Gina’s large intestine, but I hear you retching, Bob, so I’ll save that story for a drunken night in a West Village bar. Asphyxiation *does* intensify orgasm, by the way.

With a final goodbye, I puncture Gina’s heart. She bubbles then sinks into the void as the Surgeon and I tidy up. There is much cleanup this time. Ambition possessed me once again. But Gina was a pedophile, Bob, and I don’t tolerate pedophiles. You don’t either, even if you complain about this chapter.

In the middle of New York's muggy night, heavy with humidity and post-orgasm calm, the Surgeon and I wave farewell in the bowels of Hell's Kitchen.

One Last Job

Alex

I turn a corner, and pain drops me. Fist to the temple, knee to the gut.
Then darkness.

When I wake, I'm alone, bagged and bonded in a broken chair. They caught me, but they didn't catch the Surgeon, so I count that as a win. It's surprising nobody's kidnapped me yet, though I should've seen this coming. Blame Gina's moist, voluptuous brain.

"Alex Osman," a slithering voice greets, "you are one sick fuck."

"Thank you," I rasp, throat thick with Gina's rectal fluid—don't ask.

"Though I suppose that was an audition. An iron stomach is valuable."

"You're a voyeur?"

"An entrepreneur, and yes, I saw everything. You're lucky I

found you and not the cops.”

“The police are in my pocket, and it’s not polite to abduct your business partners. I learned that the hard way.”

A chuckle. A sigh. “You’re right. Where are my manners?”

The bag lifts from my head. Blinking, I stare into a face scarred worse than mine. Nightmares crisscross her forehead and cheeks, but her eyes blaze blue fire. Her hair is icy white, clipped short and gelled back, and she crosses her ivory legs beneath a tight, navy dress. I’d place her at mid-sixties, but those vicious scars throw me. Besides the ceiling light, shadows hide the room, so my world shrinks to her and me. Using my tricks against me, I see.

“Good,” she says, “you didn’t react.”

“To your beauty?” I ask.

“Nice try.”

“Why am I here?”

“I have a job proposition.”

One last job? Cliché, but tempting. Bob, still there? Good, pay attention.

“Let me guess,” I say. “Huge paycheck, fatal gig. Get rich, and die trying, but I’m already rich.”

The woman smiles. Her scars shift, wiggling like serpents. “There is risk involved, but the reward could set you free.”

“Free?”

“You have kids, Osman. You built Apex for them, but Apex jeopardizes them every moment it exists. This job would ensure you *and* your kids would never need to work again. You could sell your business, live your life.”

“When something’s too good to be true, it is.” Like Erin.

“I never claimed this would be good, only well paying. This job could fuck you up. Then again, you already crossed that

threshold.”

“Many times.”

Yes, Bob, I’m leery, too. But everything I do, I do for my kids. If I can set us all free, that’s a risk worth taking. Though sin has teeth. Crime doesn’t commit itself, and freedom demands sacrifice.

“Think on it,” the woman says, “but I will only offer once.”

“I don’t even know what you’re offering,” I say.

“I can’t tell you till you commit.”

“Agree blind? No thanks, I’m out.”

“It pays five billion dollars.”

Shit.

Here comes the mistake.

“Tell me your name, how you found me, and I’ll listen,” I say.

The woman nods. “My current name is Eva Maria, but my birth name was Anette Gustafsson.”

“Tired of mispronunciations? Criminal history too long?”

“Both. And Gina was bait. That’s how I found you. We chose someone you’d hate, someone with cash, and planted her within NQA.”

“Was she really a pedophile?” A brief spike of guilt.

“Many times over,” Eva says.

And it’s gone.

“Are you part of a company or working alone?” I ask.

“I’m a lone wolf, like you,” she says.

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“Good. I’m in a similar business, stealing from criminals.”

“We’re all criminals here, love.”

“The *worst* criminals, those who break not only the law, but morality, too: rapists, pedophiles, revolting creatures. I target them, frame them, and purge their accounts.”

"Why do you need me?" I ask.

"I outsource my dirty work," Eva says. "It's how I stay clean."

"And the job?"

"Bomb a building."

Oh. Well, then.

"That's outside my expertise," I say.

"You'll manage, sharp man like you," she says.

"Why bomb it?"

"You're supposed to ask no questions."

"To people who want me to erase stupid shit, like student debt, or an order of flamethrowing dildos. A bomb is a touch more noticeable."

Eva purses her lips, then dips her head. "Fine. I want to bomb the building, because I want its workers to suffer, and I want their money."

"A bit *Kill Bill*, but I'm down," I say. "Why the bloodthirsty revenge? What'd they do?"

"Drove my daughter to suicide. Gave her no outs. She was an employee at their news station, and they harassed her till she snapped."

I don't offer my sympathies, because Eva wouldn't accept them. Instead, I say, "So you'd kill the whole company? The innocent ones, too?"

"Nobody's innocent. They stood by and did nothing. Everyone knew her, and no one stepped in, despite 'employment progress reports' where bigwigs slammed her in public. I want them all dead."

Rage flickers Eva's scars, then her face smooths into calm.

I will regret this, Bob. Then I remember Ana and Dee, pray for our freedom, and say, "Give me a week," to a beast worse than me.

"This is an accept-or-leave-the-country offer," Eva says.

"I know. One week. Let me get my shit together."

"You've got some big-ass balls, Osman."

"As you've seen."

My Mind Is Rain

Erin

Dear Sandy,
*I don't know myself anymore. All I am is pain.
But I know you. I see you. I love you, Sandy. Don't
go away. But you do go away. Every day, you go away inside that
burgeoning beast—the company you call Apex. It owns you, love.
More than I do. It sinks its teeth into your mind and cages your soul
within its crimes.*

*Your darkness burns bright. I see it in your shadows, in your urges,
in the way your hands clasp mine firmer than they used to, resolved
upon your path. You used to be meek, the runt of the litter, the tiny
Osman boy who hid behind his older brothers and sisters. Then the
runt shot up. Now, you eclipse them all. Your mom and ma reached
out to me, worried about your change. But I don't think you did
change, Sandy. This was you all along, the onion core stripped away
by tragedy.*

My death is your birth. My ending is your beginning. My exodus

is your genesis. I am the cause, and you are the effect, and the world is your experiment. Be good to yourself, Sandy, and be good to others, too. They're not all bad. Some people are worth fighting for. Find someone who is.

Till my last breath, I fight for you.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

A Goddamn Fucking Party

Alex

You don't make Eva Maria wait.

You also don't kidnap Alex Osman, threaten him in a warehouse, then dump him on his doorstep, temple bruised and gut roiling. I know I'm a hypocrite, Bob. That's not the point. The point is that she embarrassed me, and nobody's embarrassed me since my childhood days as the Osman runt, rat of Brooklyn (when Brooklyn wasn't cool and hip and stuffed with avocado toast).

So Eva Maria can fucking wait.

Though she has. A week has passed. I must make my decision today: agree or leave the country. A sly move, one I've used, and I hate when karma backfires.

EMMA: Hey, hotshot. Today's a great day for database wipes.

ALEX: Hey, darling. Today's a great day to backpack through Europe.

Shit. Emma is a distraction, and I got a mistake to make, a family to feed, and a goddamn fucking party to throw. Well, a party. The fucking is TBD. Larry Pots is retiring—should we put “retiring” in quotes? He can unquoted retire if he lies low. And if he “retires,” he knows what will happen: an “accident.” But I’ll take care of his family, because I have morals, dammit. Or at least one moral.

Anyway, Larry is a VP. As CEO, I must pretend to give a shit. So here’s his fucking pool party to celebrate his menial contribution to society. Yes, Bob, a pool party, because society frowns upon murder parties.

EMMA: Busy today?

Busy? Not at all. I’m only sweating bullets in New York’s worst heatwave on record while managing hundreds of wasted employees in string bikinis and teensy trunks, failing to hide their juicy arousal while booze showers the air. This party is borderline orgy. All we need is glitter. Wait, bless Deja. She already brought that.

ALEX: It's tough to run the underworld.

Though the underworld more often runs me.

Your darkness burns bright.

You always knew me best, Erin.

EMMA: You have a villain complex.
ALEX: You have a Napoleon complex.
EMMA: Dick.
ALEX: Twat.
EMMA: Cunt.
ALEX: Cock.

Fuck, she stirs me in all the wrong ways.

My death is your birth.

EMMA: You're arrogant.
ALEX: You're condescending. We can't all whore ourselves out to Columbia, darling.
EMMA: You're right, hotshot. Some of us spread our legs for every filthy opportunity.

Damn, she's feisty today. I should pay more attention to the tipsy keg stands and drunken Marco Polo game, but she ruins me, Bob. She ruins me raw.

All I am is pain.

EMMA: Crime slut.
ALEX: School hooker. Betcha never jaywalked.
EMMA: Betcha can't read above third-grade level.

That one stings. Okay, they all sting. But she doesn't know my history, my poverty, the opportunity-deprived wasteland of my youth. We aren't all geniuses, and we can't all go Ivy. I hate her, want her, need her, burn for her. Rage mixes with desire and frustration till I'm as confused as I was in my teenage closet, flipping through glossy magazines debating between connection and attraction.

ALEX: Much as I enjoy this tit for tat--especially the tit--is there a point to your emotional bludgeoning?

EMMA: Poor baby, can't handle a little repartee? Not used to people speaking their minds? What a sad, lonely life you must lead with drones of your own creation.

The fucking cunt. She hits too close to home. No, she douses home in gasoline, then lights a match in the cellar.

ALEX: You can be a real bitch, you know that?

EMMA: You wanted to murder me. You're Bitch Supreme.

ALEX: You know nothing about me.

EMMA: Then tell me. Date? Tonight? Drinks at nine?

Is this how she flirts? Like how a razor blade tickles? I should craft a comeback, make her stew. But I don't, Bob. Instead, I brain-fart into the phone.

ALEX: What?

EMMA: I'm bored, and you're interesting. If we're at a ceasefire, let's meet properly.

Damn, I want to. Every part of me wants to, and that causes a bottleneck issue in my dolphin-patterned trunks. What? Dolphins are chic.

ALEX: Not yet.

EMMA: You tease. Okay, I'll be waiting.

ALEX: Is that a threat?

EMMA: Yes.

Fuck, Bob, she got me. I miss her barbs as soon as she's gone, addicted to her abrasive edge.

Some people are worth fighting for. Find someone who is.

Time for a speech. I wave my hand, and my employees rise from the pool, sparkling like diamonds. They double-fist drinks, their push-up bathing suits grinding against company policy. In a city where property is promiscuous, where shops switch owners yearly and stores go out of business monthly, the Queer Indie Club has survived economic booms and busts better than Barbie. Perched on a rooftop overlooking Manhattan, the QIC draws creatives from every walk of life, from the full spectrum of humanity. It's the one investment I'm proud of, with a pool, bar, café, and lounge. In the front, my groupies gather: Jorge, Deja, Li Jie, Lali, Anya, Steve, and Evan. You've met some, though you haven't met them all, but I can't introduce you, Bob, because it's time to speak.

Let's set the stage. Glittering, aquamarine pool. Blistering, ruthless sun. Congested city and sweating crowd. Stifling heat and crackling sky. A storm's coming, Bob. Then again, a storm's always coming.

"Welcome," I begin. Employees murmur in return. "Today, we say goodbye to our beloved VP, Larry Pots." Everyone hates him. "We have him to thank for NQA app optimizations and tightened insurance policies." He bribed NYPD and filed fraudulent claims. "Retirement is the dream." Retirement is a clogged toilet. "And life is meant to be lived. Stories are meant to be told. Cake is meant to be conquered." Cheers and honking laughs.

"But seriously," I continue, "we'll miss Larry." His office is already redecorated and reassigned. "Though I doubt Larry will miss us." More corporate snort-chuckles. "Truth is, life is short."

No, no, no, don't let out the heartbreak. *Stick with the bullshit, Osman.* "And I wish Larry the best on his next adventure." That's better. Gag-worthy and bile-coated well-wishes. "To Larry."

I raise a beer can—classy, I know—and chug while my employees copy me. Applause rises while we forget we despise Larry and hope he drowns in the pool.

My theory is this: Everyone has a Velociraptor in them. (No, that's not a dick euphemism, Bob.) In other words, everyone has the power to rip apart the world to get what they want. However, Larry's Velociraptor is lazy as molasses, and his drive is a horse-drawn carriage stuck behind a water buffalo. His retirement is a blessing, let's be honest. At least his name is friendly. He is also the reason behind beanbags in the break room, though I suspect his intentions were sexual in nature. You can never buy too much Lysol, Bob.

I wave to Larry, and he waves back, squinting in the storm-sharpened sunlight. He looks like a Disney villain who mated with a cat, then fled to a fish farm to live out his exile. An odd creature, but so are we all.

My employees want more. They linger, feathers in the breeze, greedy for me to say they are good enough, or it will be okay, even if they suck, the world is shit, and the only prize is death. Can't put that in a speech, Bob, so let's sugarcoat truth and pretend they're special, even if they're not special, nor chosen, nor fated for anything more than a flat ass from sitting in a cubicle for decades. But hope for change means more than change itself.

"You are worth *so much more* than the world sees," I start, and it's a good start, because drunken whoops sprinkle my speech. "You are more than a Social Security number, more than a paycheck, more than birthdates, heights, weights, and

fucking DNA sequences. You are *human*, and you deserve the sun.”

Employees cheer as the sun winks behind a cloud in mocking approval, and I resume: “When life gives you lemons...”

“Make lemonade,” the crowd roars.

“No,” I say, and they stall. “When life gives you lemons, fill them with gasoline, light them on fire, and launch lemon bombs at your enemies.”

“Yeah!” Their shout deafens the sky.

“Don’t wait for the storm to pass,” I say. “Become the storm.” Another shout. Another wildfire.

“Conquer your dreams,” I bellow, voice cracking. “Because you are the lightning. You are the thunder. You are the celestial rage let loose upon an unsuspecting world. Nothing can stand in your way.”

Employees erupt in alcohol-inspired battle cries that sound like dying pigeons. There. That’s better. They’re high on adrenaline, buzzed with liquor, ready to devour this party in giddy-eyed stupor.

EMMA: Well done, hotshot.

Fuck. Is she here? Watching me? Trailing me? Stalking me? Good thing I avoided potato chips, Bob. I bloat faster than a waterlogged corpse. If she sees me shirtless, I’d rather look somewhat presentable, even if I’m a hot mess overflowing with liquid shit on the inside.

ALEX: Graduated to stalker, darling? Do they teach that at Columbia?

EMMA: No, I learned from you. Kind of you to check on me last night, by the way.

Shit. She saw me. Okay, I wanted her to see me. Where's the thrill in true invisibility? I'm a shadow, not a snake.

ALEX: Central Park is sketchy at night.

EMMA: Thanks to you. Drinks too easy? You'd rather spy?

ALEX: Drinks are boring. You're not boring.

EMMA: Is that a compliment, Alex Osman?

ALEX: Don't let it go to your already big head. Get any cockier, and you'll pop.

Employees interrupt me with desperate-for-a-raise gratitude. I itch to return to my phone, to Emma, but it's good to make her wait. Whatever we have, it's dangerous, toxic. The longer I postpone it, the more time to plan escape.

EMMA: Get any more oblivious, and you'll get caught.

A blur passes my gaze. Not a blur. A girl. *Emma*. She is here. Inches from me. Close enough to kill. Close enough to kiss. A bikini. An earring. A small, pale ghost. A flash of blue-violet eyes. A flapping wing of sleek, black hair—with that burgundy streak, that gory temptation. Her blur fades with a whiff of rose, and I'm left with only memory. Like Erin.

EMMA: Nice trunks.

Blush warms my cheeks, despite my razor-blade life, and

decades melt from my soul. I'm no longer a widower, once again a teenager, self-conscious of my dolphin trunks, aviator sunglasses, and eye-threatening scar. Nervous, I tousle my dark curls into semi-styled disarray.

EMMA: The tats are my favorite, though.

I glance down at my shirtless chest, at the Italian and Arabic vines of text, and blush further. This is not how I imagined our first intimate encounter, yet she tripped me from hello.

EMMA: See you around, hotshot.

Damn, Bob. She drives me red-hot crazy. No, don't be jealous. You hold a special place in my heart, too—well, in my brain. What? Does "brain" trigger you after Gina? Don't worry, I can't fuck my own brain, so you're safe. For now.

Beggary in Love

Emma

JAMI: Hey, Doc. Got the lead in Antony and Cleopatra.
Run lines with me?

EMMA: You're a Broadway star. You don't need me.

JAMI: I always need you. It'll be fun.

EMMA: I hate Shakespeare.

JAMI. Shakespeare hates you, too. C'mon, it's a love story.

EMMA: It's a tragedy.

JAMI: Same difference. Please, please, please, help me practice?

EMMA: Okay, but you owe me.

JAMI: I pay in makeup and burritos. I got the good shit, the stuff you like.

EMMA: Extra guac?

JAMI: And sour cream.

EMMA: Deal.

I WILL KILL YOU

JAMI: Great, I'm sending you the script. You're Cleopatra, and I'm Antony. Start Act I, Scene 1, Line 18.

EMMA: "If it be love indeed, tell me how much."

JAMI: "There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd."

EMMA: "I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved."

JAMI: "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth."

A Threat, A Request, A Vow

Alex

Larry's retirement party winds down, a thunderstorm barks, and rain baptizes the QIC. Half remain on the rooftop, and half flee down to New York's brackish streets, turned to rivers in the downpour.

I prop an umbrella and wait. Patience is a virtue, Bob. So is cunnilingus. Sorry. Distracted. Fucking Emma, fucking everything up with her fucking smarts and smiles I want to fuck.

"Mr. Osman! Mr. Osman, sir!"

Georgina swims through the crowd, onyx eyes frantic, spider-web bun a mess. She cuts through the throng till she stumbles before me, hunched and heaving. If she's here, where the fuck are—

"Where are Ana and Dee?" I snap. Panic twists my chest, and my heart races with gunfire.

"Safe," Georgina croaks. "With your mothers."

“That wasn’t the plan.”

“Neither was this.”

A wrinkled hand tosses me an envelope, and I know what’s inside. Photographs. Two of them. One threat, one request. Ice pierces me as I wiggle the pictures from their paper shell.

The first is Ana and Dee: dark brown curls and river-blue eyes in a wiry, olive-tinted embrace. They look like Erin here. This is a recent snapshot from this week, and it’s from my phone. Across the bottom, silver pen scrawls: *Beautiful family, Osman*. In other words: *Don’t let this get ugly. Time’s up*.

The second is the target: Empire News. This is the company that drove Eva’s daughter to suicide. The skyscraper is a mirrored sword, and it neighbors the Empire State Building—a public, glaring target. Bombing it is like popping a nipple pimple without getting caught. It’s a bad (and messy) idea, but I have no other choice. Go big, or go home. No. Go big, or die.

“Where did you find these?” I rasp.

“Your penthouse,” Georgina says. “Under the door. I know it’s not my place, Mr. Osman, but this isn’t only about you anymore. This is about Ana. This is about Dee. This is about your mom and ma, about Donna and me. You continue down this path, and you drag us all down with you.”

“So you’re worried about your fucking girlfriend, is that it?”

“Did you not hear me? This is about your *children*, your family. End Apex, or Apex ends you.”

But Apex and I were just getting started, same as Erin. Truth is, I never had a choice, but I wanted a week to pretend at one. I made my decision during Eva’s offer: five billion dollars, five billion freedoms, five billion ways to protect Ana and Dee. This will set them up for life.

“One last job,” I whisper. “One last job, then we’re free,

Georgina.”

It’s a vow I doubt I can keep, but it’s a vow nonetheless, and a breakable vow is better than no vow at all. Hope, Bob. That’s all that counts. Hope...and money.

Worst case scenario, everyone dies.

Footprints in Forever

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was an accountant in the Americas.

She was in her thirties, and she was in her prime: smart, happy, confident, rich. The world was her oyster, and she was a pearl. *This* was the Georgina she wanted to remember, the self-assured businesswoman on top of life. So she sent herself a postcard from the Grand Canyon in all its red-rock, salmon-sunset glory. Cliché? Yes, but so was Georgina. As a tricenarian, she finally grew up, found herself, sprinted free, and chose proverbs based on her wings.

Mexico told her, “It’s not enough to learn how to ride; you must also learn how to fall,” and Georgina had fallen so many times, but she always got back up, bragging about bruises.

Peru told her, “It is better to prevent than to cure,” but Georgina threw caution to the wind in her new pursuit of life.

The Native Americans told her, “Don’t let yesterday use up

too much of today," along with, "We will be known forever by the tracks we leave," and Georgina honored both. Yesterday, she was a fool, but today, she was young, in love, leaving footprints in forever.

Free Doughnuts

Alex

“I don’t appreciate death threats,” I snarl into the phone.

“I don’t appreciate phone hacks,” Eva snaps.

“You started it. Threaten my family again, and I’ll—”

“You’ll what, Osman? You have no power here. You do what I say when I say it, then you walk free—if you succeed. *That’s* the deal. You want money? Then shut your mouth.”

I’m trapped, Bob. More trapped than ever. No choices. No opinions. I must shut up and obey, because nothing I say matters. I dug myself into a pit, and there’s no way out but down.

But there are many ways to burrow.

“When?” I ask.

“You have two weeks,” Eva says, then hangs up.

Two weeks is insane. Then again, so am I.

Do you like fishing, Bob? You seem like the type: a thin-lipped, broad-cheeked angler. Me? I hate it. But bait and tackle

is the perfect metaphor for what we must do next.

Eva wants me to bomb Empire News. Okay, but I'll do it my way, with my own crew and back doors. That means replacing hers. Hold on, Bob. There is about to be a high number of freak accidents.

Eva outsources her dirty work, and dirty work leaves stains. It doesn't take long to follow my phone hack to trails she muddled but couldn't erase—you can't erase anything, not truly, not fully. I memorize a list of names, then switch dolphin trunks for charcoal khakis and a white, button-down shirt. It's boring, but boring we must, because boring means innocent. I'm only an entry-level employee, smothered beneath rising insurance costs, caught between Manhattan's monsters on my way to a dead-end job in a backward city on a shithole planet in the middle of fuck-it-all space.

It's evening, and it's hot. *Still* hot, despite the thunderstorm. Haze pisses over the city. My armpits sour to month-old cheese as I walk block to block, sweating fountains. Cologne masks most of it—or makes me smell like cheddar dunked in Versace Eros—but appearances (and scents) don't matter tonight.

First order of business: gleeful massacre. I scour Manhattan from top to bottom—from Michelin-starred restaurants, to dive bars, to seedy food trucks—to gather Eva's spies in one place. *How?* Thanks for asking, Bob. It's simple: People will do anything for free shit, and free doughnuts are premium swag—even at night. This is the bait: fried cakes with sprinkles and sugar. Modest. Humble. Unassuming. Nothing bad ever came from accepting sweets from strangers. Yes, that was sarcasm. You're chatty tonight, Bob. That's good. Thought I broke you with Gina.

Anyway, I lure the near-corpses gang to Knight's Bakery, then

buy them a round of doughnuts. They fear this scarred stranger. Without the scar, I'm approachable, forgettable, but Erin left fangs behind. Yet they latch like pups to bitches' nipples after I tell a few embarrassing stories—ones I make up on the spot. Improvisation is essential to innovation, and I pick, preen, prune, and posture everything into shiny, sickly perfection. One doughnut round becomes two, all worrying about calorie bullshit, then two becomes three, and no one gives a fuck.

That's what's great about Knight's. The bakery is a shy assortment of pine seating with one display case. No frills. No fancy flairs. No clever menus, rollerblading servers, cutesy paintings of goldfish, or kitschy man buns with neon-streaked bangs. It's simple, succinct, and simplicity feigns security. *We're safe here*, they think. *Doughnuts and cupcakes will protect us. Frosting belongs with fun, sunshine, and ponies.* Well, I'm about to corrupt *My Little Pony* with *Silence of the Lambs*.

But not here. My girls like Knight's Bakery, and I must separate my worlds.

Across the street lies Merkel's, a prime place for murder. Ricky, the owner, knows me and owes me, so he allows my "parties" in his cellar.

"Hey, Ricky," I call.

"Hey, Nicky," he calls back.

To him, I'm Nicky. (Yes, Bob, for the rhyme.) Can't afford to loan him my real name. Weird shit happens downstairs. People still frown upon cannibalism, unfortunately. So judgmental. Food is food, am I right? Oh, take a joke. Lighten up, for fuck's sake. I hear your tight-twatted complaints. Speaking of jokes, is wet humor the opposite of dry humor? Would it make a moist joke? A damp chuckle? Would you laugh yourself soggy?

Anyway, Eva's spies follow me through Merkel's Saloon.

It's a hipster bar, and exactly as nauseous as that sounds. Stuffed with mutants who think uncool is cool till it's cool, these creatures frequent the underground how toddlers ride "motorcycles." They know many "things," have seen lots of "shit," and overuse "ironic," "totally," "overrated," and "actually" till their Google suggestions overflow with cult films and B-movie recommendations.

Allergic to Hollywood, industry, progress, and well-paying jobs, you can spot them cross-legged in cafés or tacky bars like this with stickered computers or skanky typewriters, snacking on twigs while sipping obscure drinks. Their uniform consists of beanies (despite the heatwave), bushy beards, oily ponytails, pastel shorts, and thonged sandals made from some biodegradable shit that will fall apart in a week. Save the environment by recycling ignorance. There's also the odd handlebar mustache I'd like to repurpose as a noose, a respectable number of chunky headphones, and a surplus of square-rimmed glasses. Many dictate into their phones—loud and haughty, with eavesdropping assurance—and belt-laugh about capitalism even if Mommy pays their bills.

Careful, Bob, for these are touchy pests, offended by every booger, insulted by every burp. Though they hold six-figure art degrees and are well educated by society's low standards, they snap shut their paper-thin minds and souls. *They* can tell *you* how wrong you are, can accuse you of falsehoods till their lips match their blue highlights, but you must not retaliate, for their tears summon more of their kind. They multiply, breed quick as bunnies, spread faster than any plague. *Do not engage.* If you do, they'll cage you within their "debate," aka a list of ill-researched claims and abusive commentary about your character. Let them "win," then back away.

C'mon, Bob, through the cesspool to the cellar, where the real fun begins. After an unsolicited nostril flare and brief rebuke about my machine-made shirt, we survive the hipsters and reach the bottom of yet another pit.

Eva's gang quiets, stiffens, and scans the dim room. Concrete whispers into the dark, spongy with shadows. On one side, there's an oven, and that's its only resemblance to the bakery. But this oven is special. Piled with rusty axes, cleavers, and muffin tins, it boasts of an ambition far greater than doughnuts.

Ever watch *Sweeney Todd*, Bob? I'm not one for musicals—too much gut-churning joy—but this one struck home. Todd is a murderous barber who kills his victims, then gives them to Mrs. Lovett to bake into meat pies. Her customers are none the wiser, and neither are Ricky's upstairs.

But pies are boring, antique, reminiscent of a mid-century carnival or a midlife crisis. We're modern and chic, so we'll upgrade to muffins. Grief beef? Fleshcakes? Not as catchy as I'd like, and they're muffins, not cupcakes—a vital difference. Cupcakes are for celebration; muffins are for mourning. You eat a cupcake to honor a birthday, wedding, anniversary, or baptism. You eat a muffin to sulk in shame, through shaking hands and blurred tears, a sob in your throat, regret in your ears.

Also, cupcakes are sweet, but muffins can be savory, like these. They go well with bone broth (also human-made), especially those cooked with sirloin or filet mignon. So tender and juicy, Bob. I hear you salivating. Or is that bile?

That tangent was gratuitous. Back on track, for there's much to do.

I return my attention to Eva's gang. Their nerves rise. Ah, fuck. I made the weird face I make when I talk to you, when I

zone off into space on my thought roller coasters that always end in a broken track, a crumpled car, and a suspicious amount of fire, given the lack of fuel. I'm a summer blockbuster, an action movie. Even if I don't make sense, shit always explodes.

"Sorry, doughnut coma," I say, and their nerves settle with relieved laughter. Humor means harmless, right? *Wrong*. Exactly, Bob. You're catching on. Since "the fastest, untraceable way to kill many people at once" yields a flagged search history and a smoking-hot agent at one's door, I've devised my own method through trial and error. And there were *many* errors, but after a year of grief erasing my body, mind, and soul, I've found the best way.

Yup, you guessed it: I spiked the doughnuts with sedative. We've started already, but the sedative acts slow, so they should be feeling it right...about...*now*. Eva's gang faints in drumroll, a fleshy *splat-splat-splat* upon concrete. Bait, then tackle. Didn't hurt. Didn't last. No time to cry murder. One second, they were awake. Now, they're asleep, soon to be dead. Kill your darlings—that's what it means, right? I'm merciful...sometimes. And I need this done fast.

I turn on more lights. Shadows reveal a wood chipper and an industrial blender. First, the wood chipper, one by one. A bucket collects human mulch, then ferries it into the industrial blender. In a matter of minutes—while adding olive oil and garlic, of course—the blender squirts batter into tins. After twenty minutes in the oven, I deliver the muffins upstairs. I do this all alone. Fewer accomplices, fewer leaks. Less liability means better odds.

Cleanup is quick. I call in a crew, the same crew who will have second jobs at Empire News come morning. On my way out of Merkel's, I spot my muffins amid the hipster crowd,

who'd appreciate the recycled materials if they knew—or they'd practice hypocrisy (they're experts, after all). No, they suspect nothing of the “hormone-free beef,” and they're too drunk to notice the pulpy aftertaste. It's good for them. Fat sops up alcohol. They should thank me for their hangover-free mornings.

Second order of business: cocaine-powdered orgy. For fuck's sake, what now, Bob? Murder makes me horny.

Summer Snow

Alex

S now in the summer, what a paradox.

I head to Tribeca in Lower Manhattan for some good, old-fashioned, illegal fun. I know a few people—acquaintances, not friends—and barge into their industrial loft with dollar bills between my fingers (plus a complimentary batch of muffins). I should head home and kiss my girls goodnight. I should scheme about Eva and mope about Erin. I should do many things, but I don't. You don't. The rules aren't hard, but no one follows them, because the world isn't built for the wilderness within.

I shove a couple hundreds into a pair of tits—*very* nice tits, Bob—then grab my poison and slump on a couch. It's hard as a cock, leather stretched like a condom, and I shift, failing to get comfortable. Doesn't matter. I won't care in a few minutes. On the coffee table I pour snow, sniff, stones, rocks, pebbles, blow, flake, white, wash—catching on? Yes, Bob, it's divine cocaine. I

don't do it often, but when I do, I do it all the way. Isn't that a meme? Never mind.

With a playing card, I scrape the fine powder into a sharp line. Then I snort escape, flinch from the chemical smell, twitch my nose at the burn, and smile at the numbness in my mouth—a wild smile, a savage grin. Some describe coke as sweet, floral, but it always tastes like gas to me, like the constant potential for fire. In the coffee table's reflection, my mouth stretches into a clown's, pupils dilated, fake joy engaged. They want me less miserable? Less heartbroken? Less depressed and dejected and down? Well, I'll show them.

In a minute, it hits me. Sweat soaks my skin. My temperature rises. My heart rockets to Saturn, and my blood pressure storms. *You are alive, Alex Osman. You are living every life at once.* It only lasts half an hour, but that's more than enough when every moment is infinity and every second is destiny.

I leap to my feet and find my favorite corner. They're waiting for me, my trash-bag gang. We use, abuse, and discard each other, then stagger away broken before dawn shines a spotlight. They get naked. I get naked. We rip, tear, and stain each other with lust. Ever have days when everything seems off? Well, cocaine turns everything (and everyone) on. Way on. Too far on and too far gone.

Pleasure catapults me to euphoria. Energy and excitement. Anger and anxiety. Familiar and frightening. Stimulation and sensitivity. Swings from glee to power. I am alert. I am awake. I am the universe. (There's a chance of diarrhea, but we don't mention that, and we wouldn't care, not in this state.)

Every kiss is a tornado. Every clawing embrace is branched lightning. Every grunt-addled thrust is a pulsing torpedo through rapture-flooded waters, writhing with decadence. The

face in my crotch is a supernova; the crotch in my face is ambrosia. It's the best sex of my life a thousand times over. Kiss, grind, fuck, repeat. Ad infinitum pleasure. I wind down, snort up. Roll over, launch free. Ride the waves through the darkest part of the night.

One last go, then I'm done. The crash is bad. The aftermath hurts. Everything feels *normal*, and normal sucks. Back to humdrum, workaday, run-of-the-mill life. If only cocaine-state were real-state. Sure, there are risks for panic attack, heart attack, and stroke, but the twenty-first century is a constant stroke. We're all numb and dizzy from stress and failure, from a society with expectations larger than Neptune's cock. Trident, my ass. That's a dick if I ever saw one, horny Ancient Rome.

"The fall is always the hardest," says a girl tangled in my arms. She's the only one awake; the rest form a blanket over my sweaty, powdered torso.

"No," I croak, "getting up is the hardest."

"That's why there's therapy."

"Can't afford therapy." *I can, but Gary can't*—the man I act tonight.

"Then go to church," the girl says. "I went to confession when I couldn't afford therapy."

"Priests aren't exactly understanding," I say.

"True, but it's a free ear. Venting is ninety percent of the process. Ignore their bias, and use their service. It's like karma for their bigotry. I still go sometimes to share my anti-Catholic exploits and sense the priest tense behind the screen."

I chuckle, then reprimand myself. Gary is secretive, seductive. He doesn't weaken to laughter.

"We got a mutual friend, by the way," the girl says. "Well, a friend of a friend. I know Jami, and Jami knows Emma. She

told us about you.”

I freeze. Liquid shits threaten. “Oh? What’d she say?”

“That you run a big company. That you’re often lost.”

“Bad sense of direction. Got it from my moms.”

The girl chuckles. “She said you deflect.”

She knows me too well.

And as if on cue...

EMMA: Deck the halls, hotshot. So much snow.
Christmas in July?

Fucking shit. How does she know everything? She’s a genius, all right, in a whole other league. This girl is her insurance in a web of protection. Can’t kill her now, not that I would have before.

ALEX: Jangling my bells.
EMMA: Up on the housetop?
ALEX: With three ships.
EMMA: In the bleak midsummer?
ALEX: Upon the midnight clear.
EMMA: I’m cringing for you.
ALEX: Joy to the world, darling.

I’m playing with fire. No, I’m playing with bombs.

Third order of business: home.

Heat My Blood

Emma

JAMI: You're late.

EMMA: I was busy.

JAMI: Texting your Antony? Your star-crossed lover?

EMMA: Shut up, Jami.

JAMI: Struck a nerve, did I?

EMMA: Sorry, he drives me crazy.

JAMI: So does mine, sometimes literally.

EMMA: Same here.

JAMI: Wanna skip practice? We can commiserate over kettle corn and sitcoms.

EMMA: Nah, I'm fine, and sitcoms suck. Let's go. Who am I tonight?

JAMI: Cleopatra again. I'll start. Act I, Scene 3, Line 391. "You'll heat my blood: no more."

EMMA: "You can do better yet, but this is meetly."

JAMI: "Now, by my sword--"

EMMA: "And target. Still he mends, but this is not the best."

Bacon Regrets

Alex

When I arrive home, it's morning. My girls are up. Cartoons blast through the penthouse. Georgina cooks eggs and bacon over a hissing stove. I sneak to the shower, and when I emerge, there's a plate at the island for me. Ana and Dee finished breakfast and currently sing a disturbing song.

Ana: "It's almost over."

Dee: "Oh, it's almost over."

Ana: "You don't need your liver."

Dee: "Yeah, yeah!"

We can all relate.

Georgina shoots me a dark glare, and I shrug. What do you want, woman? They should be Erin's, but they're mine through and through. I'm doing the best I can. So what if they hear a few work calls? All's fun and games at their age. Then again, all's fun and games at mine, too.

"Daddy, eat your eggs," Ana says as I finish my bacon.

"You're right, sweetheart. I should," I say with a hair-ruffle and cheek-kiss. Though the eggs look like fertile discharge, I swallow my meal with minimal gagging. No, Bob, it's not Georgina; she's an excellent cook. It's cannibalism followed by shitloads of cocaine.

I need a nap. No, I need a hundred-year coma. But Ana misses me, and Dee brings me blocks. After a human-muffin barf into a disappointed toilet, I sit before a windowed wall and build misshapen dinosaurs above Times Square's flustered crowd.

"Daddy, a Triceratops has three horns," Dee says.

"Mine has five," I mutter.

"That's a Pentaceratops," Ana says. "Chomp from *Dinosaur King* is a Triceratops. He has three."

Well, Daddy from *A Night of Mistakes* has five.

But I amputate two horns to make them happy, then continue building our reptilian army. This is the person I could be, should be, would have been with Erin. This is my heaven; Apex is my hell, my eternal damnation. No. Not eternal. Eva is my ticket free. I don't trust her, of course, but she shouldn't trust me, either.

"Daddy, I need a Parasaurolophus," Ana says.

"A what?" I ask. Fuck, I'm too hungover for paleontology.

"A Parasaurolophus," Dee says. "It's an herbivore from the Late Cretaceous Period."

I grin at the flash of Erin's brilliance. "You're still five, right?" Dee chuckles. "Yes, Daddy."

With Dee's help, I build a "near crested lizard" (shitty nickname, if you ask me) while Georgina cleans the kitchen with escalating sighs.

"Something wrong, Pippa?" I ask, using the girls' nickname

for her.

"You forgot again," Georgina says.

"Forgot what?"

"Last night was date night with Donna, but you never came home, so I canceled."

"Sorry, work was crazy." The understatement of the eon.

"Hmph."

"I'll make it up to you. Take today and tomorrow off."

Georgina raises her eyebrows. I'm surprised, too, Bob. We both know I'm a hot mess. But I miss my girls, I miss Erin's legacy, I overuse Georgina, and I need time to think about Eva, about Emma, about Empire News, about everything and everyone I'm about to fuck up or fuck over. So today and tomorrow, I'll build dinosaurs till I'm cross-eyed, cook chicken nuggets, and read about ridiculous situations involving dancing hippos, tap-dancing ferrets, and donkeys who paint with their toes. Do donkeys have toes? Google? Anyone?

"Are you sure, Mr. Osman?" Georgina asks, uncertain.

Hell no, but it's right. "Go, have fun."

She doesn't wait for me to change my mind. In seconds, the seventy-five-year-old darts from the penthouse, spry as a teenager. I'm happy for her. Really, I am. Georgina's worst fear was dying without knowing true love, and she found true love in Donna—thanks to me. What? Without my desperate plea for help, she'd never move north, meet Donna, and have this happily ever after. Okay, I'm jealous. Who wouldn't be? They're perfect for each other, and Erin was perfect for me. Then I lost her, and I lost myself, but you're bored of these soul-bleeding rants.

EMMA: Drinks tonight? Or are you still a tease?

Oh, the little...

ALEX: As I said, drinks are boring.

EMMA: I can be boring. Ask me about unification during Egypt's Early Dynastic Period.

ALEX: Not boring. I'm Egyptian. Well, half. But I suppose you know that already.

EMMA: Your moms were chatty.

So she met my mothers. Touché, love. But we are birds of a feather.

ALEX: Raiden said you visited Brooklyn, and René appreciated my restaurant suggestions.

EMMA: Yes, my fathers mentioned you.

We are too alike, Bob. There's a spark here, a rabid flame that could lead to disaster. Then again, my life is already a disaster.

EMMA: If not drinks, then what?

Why does she press me? Why does she push? She's better than I'll ever be, and I'm trying to release her from my insanity.

ALEX: Nothing. Find a cute hipster and discuss apathy's defeatist effects on ambition in rural America.

EMMA: Don't want a cute hipster, can't live off sprouts. And I'm impressed. Few read my dissertations. What's the matter, hotshot? Too scared

to date?

She approaches truth, and this is supposed to be fun. Truth is not fun. Truth is an atom bomb. Truth is a bloody, wild, flammable thing.

“Daddy, who are you texting?” Dee asks while Ana decapitates a Carnotaurus.

“No one, sweetheart.” *Everyone.*

ALEX: Find someone safe, Emma.

EMMA: I don't want safe, Alex.

Shit. Fuck. Fuck it all to hell. I want to let her go, set her free, but she's stuck, I'm stuck, and we tiptoe around the edge of the breach.

EMMA: Come on, hotshot. A date never killed anyone.

Au contraire...

ALEX: Can't. Kids.

There. That's a turnoff. I have baggage and duty and responsibility. Keep your distance. Run far away.

EMMA: Bring them, too. Ana and Dee, right?

Dammit, Ma. You leak all my secrets. And I bet Mom spilled about Erin, too.

“That's not right, Daddy,” Ana whines. “Velociraptors are

small. Yours is bigger than the Brachiosaurus.”

“This one’s a mutant,” I say.

“But it’s wrong,” Dee says.

“Wrong is okay. Wrong is how we learn.” Shit, unsolicited wisdom drop. Unprepared for that.

ALEX: Gotta go, darling. Enjoy your freedom.

EMMA: Freedom is overrated.

Says the eagle to the worm.

My Gut Is Rage

Erin

Dear Sandy,
I'm angry, angrier than I've ever been, and that anger is at you.

I don't want fury this close to the end, but if I don't vent here, I will never rest in peace. And I must rest in peace. I must let everything go, set everything free. Sorry for this letter, Sandy, but it's necessary, because we're broken now, everything is broken now, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Apex is killing you. Cigarettes, alcohol, cocaine, and hookers steal you every night. I know it's hard with young twins and a dying wife, but you escape these moments when you should treasure them. I'm tired of your last-minute changes, your knee-jerk plans, your dramatic and emotional damage. I'm sick of keeping your secrets. The world loves you and shuns me; you fuck me, then discard me. Ana and Dee need stability, control, but you're mayhem in a man.

I worry, Sandy. I worry about you, our girls, our legacy, because I

still love you, I'll always love you, and I see your end, too, if you don't change. I know it's hard. I know I don't understand. But you've been shitty to me and shittier to yourself. Find an anchor, or you'll sink in this storm.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Empire of Corpses

Alex

I'm exhausted, Bob. My bones are tired. Two days with Ana and Dee drained all my energy: endless sippy cups, cupcake crumbs, broken toys, and boogers. Georgina returns from her love fest with Donna, and within seconds, I fall asleep on the couch. When I wake, tangled in a fleece blanket, I shower fast, then head to Apex.

...nothing will ever be the same again.

You called it, Erin.

I never thought meetings would excite me, but I crave sitting in one place for longer than a minute. As I slump into a chair in a conference room, Deja, Jorge, and Li Jie join me.

"Enjoy your staycation, Mr. Osman?" Jorge asks.

Anyone who uses "staycation" in conversation should suffer the worst form of gastric discomfort.

"It was great," I say. If you count crushed Hot Wheels, melted Barbies, and hourly tantrums as "great." I recline in the chair,

inhale coffee like air, and say, “Update me on NQA,” to catch a breather. I don’t care about updates, but they care about updates, and this buys me time to relish caffeinated bliss.

“We have more tickets than ever,” Jorge, the CTO, says. “We’ve upgraded the database to handle additional requests, and the servers have had no issues thus far.”

Thank Gina for the new server room. Told you we needed it.

“We’ve also expanded NQA’s design team and hired two dozen interns,” Li Jie, the HR manager, says.

Interns mean cheap—I mean opportunity.

“And we have increased our profit margin by twenty percent since the start of summer,” Deja, the CFO, interjects.

Thank Redville Estates for the boost. Everyone plays a part.

“Good work,” I say. More requests, more lost souls, more corpses, more cash. We’re steady, so let’s fuck it all up. “What do you know about Empire News?”

Three days have passed in my two-week window. It’s time to set more gears into motion—besides the human muffins. That was first on this bloody checklist.

...you’re mayhem in a man.

“Their cybersecurity is top of the line,” Jorge says. “I doubt the CIA could hack them.”

“They’re a new company,” Deja says, “but fast becoming one of the leading media corporations on the Eastern Seaboard.”

“Their employees are loyal,” Li Jie says. “We modeled our benefits off theirs.”

“Any areas for improvement?” I ask. At their unease, I add, “They’re a prospective new client. I want to see what we can offer.”

They relax. They shouldn’t. But I’m used to spitting bullshit, and they’re used to swallowing lies. Lies are red, death is blue,

murder is sweet, and so are you. I'm not crazy; you're crazy. If you got a problem, I will kill you, too. Yes, you, Bob, though we should separate first.

"They're in the negative this quarter," Deja says, "because of new laptops for management."

"Only for management?" I add.

"Yes."

"Would that cause issues among entry-level employees?"

"I doubt it," Li Jie says. "They love the perks, and their laptops still work. No reason to upgrade."

"Anything else? Any business opportunities?" I ask. *Any loopholes?*

"Their security is pristine," Jorge says. "I'm sorry, sir."

"All of their security? Or *some* of their security? If security is flawless in certain areas, it's weak in others. Nothing is invincible, Jorge. There's always a loose brick, a consequence for the strength of others. Look in the opposite direction—through the window, not the wall."

Jorge shifts, uncomfortable. He has a true heart, a good soul. He knows what we do here, but he ignores it for comfort and stability. Corruption funds his life, his loved ones. I fulfill Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Once that pyramid stands, it's impossible to collapse.

Find an anchor, or you'll sink in this storm.

"If we win them as a client and boost their security, I will give company-wide, year-end bonuses and raises," I say. "I want us all happy, Jorge."

He nods, relaxes, smiles, surrenders. Good boy. "Well, their main systems are impenetrable, but there are a few smaller areas of concern."

"How can we help them?" I ask.

“Physical security,” Jorge says, “and cybersecurity in common areas. Empire News is inclusive, transparent—it’s company culture. Because of this inclusion, there’s no fob to enter. Anyone can visit, at any time. There are metal detectors, but nothing advanced. Once you reach high-priority areas, security increases, but building entry has almost none.

“Security is even worse in the garage beneath the building,” Deja says. “There’s no fee to park, and no metal detector or scanner to enter. You can take the elevator to any floor from there. And the whole building is glass—because of the transparency clause in their bylaws, taken literally—so they are vulnerable from the outside.”

“There are also issues with the common areas,” Li Jie says. “Their public Wi-Fi doesn’t require a password—again, because of inclusion and transparency. They want everyone to feel at home and emphasize usability over security in these regards. Because of easy access, many employees use this Wi-Fi instead of the password-protected Wi-Fi. Empire News has rules against this, but they don’t enforce them. They also don’t monitor employees’ search histories or encrypt emails, and many interns drop files via Bluetooth.”

“Let me guess: because they’re inclusive and transparent?” I ask.

Li Jie chuckles, nervous. “Yes, sir.”

Inclusive and transparent, my ass. They drove a woman to suicide. Hypocrisy knows no bounds.

“The Bluetooth files aren’t important,” Li Jie continues, “but they could be a gateway.”

“Sounds like they have several liabilities we could improve for them,” I say. “Entryway and garage security, plus noninvasive email encryption and search history monitoring, plus public

Wi-Fi and Bluetooth user authentication.”

“They might not be open to changes,” Deja warns.

“Draft plans in accordance with their company policy, and we’ll see what they say.”

We won’t see what they say. This is busy work. I have the prize. I’ll use employees’ search histories and emails for blackmail, then I’ll exploit their transparent, inclusive culture and force them to plant their own bombs. Extortion will ensure obedience, and my inside crew will ensure cooperation. Easy. Well, not easy. We’re about to kill shitloads of people, Bob. But once you bypass morality, the heart pumps so much stronger.

Sing Because You Have a Song

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was a tour guide in Asia.

She was in her forties, and she was a warrior: steady, strong, stable, resilient. Existential crises could fuck themselves silly, because quadragenarian Georgina loved her life. With a beautiful wife and two adorable kids, she knew what she was, what she loved, and what she'd fight for, her reason to live. Family was her buried treasure she pirated from decades past. Her ragtag youth granted her perspective, power, and she learned to let things go, to forgive and forget. She knew what was important, and she was happy in her skin, crow's feet and all, so she let down her hair, spiderweb though it was. It's not how we live but why we live that matters.

With her newfound gravitas, this version of Georgina chose a postcard of Singapore's Gardens by the Bay. Taken at night, the waterfront gardens and tourist-strewn walkways ignited

with neon awe. Trees branched toward indigo sky, and flowers rippled under stars. Georgina loved Singapore, and Singapore loved her. They were both larger than life.

Singapore told her many things, most of them whispers, but her favorite proverb scrawled on the postcard was, "Those who speak loud are boastful. Those who speak softly are unsure. Those who don't speak are dangerous." Georgina always spoke in song.

China sympathized and told her, "A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song."

Then Korea smiled and added, "Even though words have no wings, they can still fly a thousand miles."

So Georgina flew thousands of miles, and Tibet told her, "If you don't know where you are going, then any road will do."

After she found her road and learned her song, Pakistan told her, "Pride is concerned with who is right. Humility is concerned with what is right." So Georgina humbled herself and cherished failure.

Last, a return trip to China told her, "It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness." Georgina didn't curse darkness anymore. She needed both shadows and stars to show her the way home.

It's Not Stalking if It's Mutual

Alex

After an afternoon of scheming, stalking Empire News employees, and persuading Jorge, Deja, and Li Jie that the explosives in the diagrams demonstrate vulnerability, I need a fucking break.

Let's go to Columbia, Bob. Not the country, the university. The country is spelled Colombia. Didn't you ever take geography? No, I suppose you took neuroscience. That was a joke...since you're in my brain...damn, I'm tired. You're right, that was weak.

I brave the sleazy thunderstorm, then skim the pilfered schedule, find the correct lecture hall, and take a seat. This is new for me, Bob. I never went to college. Couldn't afford it. Couldn't cheat my way in. When Apex soared, when money flowed, I didn't go because of my girls. If I left, the system would deem me unfit, thief custody, and dump them into foster care. *Change your life, it's easy*, they say. Then they lock the doors,

shutter the windows, and burn every road till the world is ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

But I digress.

Anyway, this lecture hall is larger than my mothers' whole complex. With stadium seating and fluorescent lighting, it has an ancient vibe littered with modernity. Beneath an "Introduction to Archaeology" headline, a chalkboard boasts: "History of Archaeology," "Principles of Excavation," "Evolutionary Theory," "Ethics Arguments," "Inquiry Structure," "Geophysical Prospecting," and "Typology Methodology."

The students are not impressed by the big words. They slump in their seats, eyelids heavy, earbuds dangling, laptops open to Twitter or Instagram. No, that dog is not cute, Tim. Neither is that two-headed hamster. Shit, Bob, have I reached the "what is wrong with our youth" phase? No, nothing's wrong with our youth, but everything's wrong with our society, and these elitist kids yawn at what I would have killed for at their age.

Okay, not all are elitist, but most reek of cash. Truckloads of cash. Designer shirts, stylishly ripped jeans, tailored hoodies, dysfunctional cardigans, polished shoes, blinding watches, biweekly-cut hair, snow-white teeth, manicured nails, Hollywood-level makeup, tortoiseshell glasses, diamonds and pearls, signature perfume, and more gadgets than a secret agent. They wear only natural wool and cotton clothes from luxury brands. They even groom their nostrils. And they're late for golf or sailing.

I know about the rich, because I study the rich—they're my best clients. Because of the image they must uphold, and a reputation that must remain squeaky clean, they pay extra and on time. *Always* on time. Most of *NQA*'s users are as wealthy as Satan.

But I'm not here for the top one percent. I'm here for her, the chalkboard girl, the triple-doctorate genius who resuscitates a comatose class. She's tiny, yet she commands their respect, a general to her army. Most assume short means submissive and soft means weak. But she's not submissive, nor weak, nor subtle, nor any stereotype used as a chain. (Her blog is insightful—you should read it, Bob.)

"I get it's summer," Emma says. "I get you don't want to be here, taking a course, when there are pool parties, keg stands, and music festivals outside." She cuts her fierce, blue-violet eyes over the rustling students, and they sit straighter, at attention. Tucking a midnight strand behind her pale ear, she says, "So let's talk about sex."

Then she glances at me, and fuck, Bob, what planet is this? She winks and taps her nose ring, as if to say, "I see you, hotshot, and you're right where I want you." Or perhaps I'm overreacting. I'm always overreacting. Erin hated that about me. I called it passion, she called it temper, and here we are, still in disagreement. That's the issue with death, Bob. They end, but nothing else does. Arguments hang in limbo, debates remain unresolved, and time squeezes these wounds till you second-guess every sneeze.

"The phallus and fertility are common symbols among ancient artifacts," Emma begins, then she's off, and I drink in every word, entranced. Online, she's a star, but in person, she's the sun.

The lecture ends. I wait for the students—now mesmerized by Dr. Claire—to leak from the hall. She waits at the front, and I wait in the seats, at a stalemate.

EMMA: Still stalking me?

ALEX: It's not stalking if it's mutual.

EMMA: Drinks are easier than a restraining order.

ALEX: But a restraining order is more fun.

There's a pause, breath, shared hesitation.

ALEX: Great lecture. Especially the erupting dick bit.

EMMA: Pompeii was a horny volcano.

Another pause. More shared panic.

EMMA: Why are you here, Alex?

ALEX: To observe.

EMMA: Me or the dick artifacts?

ALEX: You. The dicks were a bonus.

EMMA: Shall we text forever, or can I buy you coffee?

ALEX: Too late for coffee.

A third pause, and I've lost her. I should lose her. I'm broken, a burden. *No one should suffer your misery.* That's what Erin said in a moment of anger. I deserved it, but she didn't deserve my response: *Cancer is your karma.* I'll never forgive myself for that. I didn't mean it, of course. Stress from doctors, hospitals, chemo, and kids melted my brain into primeval sludge. But I *did* say it, and she *did* hear it, and it ruined the end for us both.

EMMA: I know about Erin. Is she why you won't?

Mom and Ma, keep your mouths shut.

ALEX: Won't what?

EMMA: Live.

I slide my phone into my pocket. Emma does the same, and we eye each other across the lecture hall. If I leave, this ends. If I stay, this burns. I'm at a crossroads, Bob. After loss, do you live again, love again, risk it all to lose again? Because nothing lasts. Erin taught me that. And I can't survive another soul-crippling scar.

But it's not my choice to make. Emma walks through the seats and perches beside me, facing the same direction.

"I won't pretend I understand," Emma says. "I've never lost someone close before. Hell, I've never cared about someone so much to hurt so much. And I should leave you alone, stop bothering you, but I can't. I don't know why, Alex, but something in you speaks to something in me. I know your past. I know your present. I know the dangers you escape and the dangers you create. But still, I feel a pull, and I can't ignore it unless you tell me to stop. If you tell me to leave, I'll go, and you'll never hear from me again. I won't call the police or FBI or anyone. You have my word, but tell me what happens now. Where do we go from here? Nowhere? Everywhere? I need a direction, Alex. Take my hand, or set me free."

I knew we couldn't play forever, that this game would reach an inevitable end. But I'm not ready to choose. This was supposed to be cat and mouse, back and forth, to and fro, not forward. The pendulum stops swinging, and I know that, whatever I choose, I'll regret the decision the rest of my life. If I let her go, I'll chase her forever. If I let her in, I'll worry I'll lose her forever. What is better, Bob? To chase forever or worry forever? To run

or fret? To leap or land?

“Where do we go from here?” Emma repeats in a whisper.

I pause. Wait. Breathe. Commit. “Coffee. I was wrong. It’s not too late.”

She smiles. “It’s never too late.”

Coffee and Karma

Alex

The café is named Karma. That's not funny, fate. It's a pop-up shop on the edge of campus that makes the "best espresso in Manhattan." It doesn't, but I'm half Italian, so I'm an impossible critic. Ma makes the best, hands down. If I don't agree, she'll whip me in pre-participation-trophy fashion.

Emma and I grab coffees, then sit at a folding table. It's post-thunderstorm, but the rain washed nothing away. It's still hot. Humid. Muggy. Smothering. But Emma doesn't notice, and I don't care. It's our first date. I haven't been on a date in a year, since Erin died. Sure, I've fucked tons of people, but sex and love aren't the same, no matter how hard I try.

"You're a pain in the ass, you know that?" Emma asks.

"Sometimes literally," I say.

She snorts and shakes her head. "Well, we already know about each other, so small talk and awkward childhoods are off the

table.”

“That’s unfortunate. I’d hoped to be fake for at least three dates.”

“*Three* dates? And here I thought you had track shoes.”

“Oh, I do, but you glued them to the ground.”

“So let’s be real.”

“I’m allergic to truth,” I say between espresso sips. Okay, the coffee isn’t bad, Bob, but it’s not authentic by half. Better than the “Neapolitan” pie they push near Grand Central. I swear, if my ancestors could see that greasy, thick-crust ed monstrosity...

“Then why are we here?” she asks.

“Because you threatened me.”

“With coffee?”

“You weaponized caffeine.”

“I’m sick of games, Alex.”

“Fine, Emma, you want the truth?” I snap, and we both jump. “I want you, and I don’t want to want you, and my life is a dumpster fire, and I’m in a shitstorm of guilt and grief, and I don’t want to drag you into this storm, but I can’t survive this storm without you. There? Are you fucking happy?”

“Yes, hotshot. Quite happy.” Emma licks the rim of her cup, victorious, and I burn alive, as I knew I would. She’s gasoline, and I’m fire. This will only end in flames.

“Sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to snap, but losing Erin was hard, okay? We grew up together. She was always there, then she wasn’t. Cancer was a surprise. She was young, healthy, stronger than everyone, but it claimed her of all people. She was the best of us, and death took her. I wish it took me. She could always hold it together. I never could or can. Everyone treated me nice for a month, but that was it. A month to grieve, then back to bullshit.

"When she went, I was a wreck. Hearing her heart stop, her last breath, panicking at raising our kids alone...it was too much. Too much baggage and too much pain. Grief ruined me. That's why I kept my distance. That's why I tried to let you go. But I'm selfish, and you'll regret it, because there's a part of my heart I'll never get back. I can't give you everything, Emma, and you deserve someone who can."

There. That's the truth. That should scare her away.

"I don't need everything," Emma whispers. "I only need something. For some reason, I need you, Alex, and I think you need me, too."

You lucky fuck. I know, Bob. "You remind me of Erin," I say, swirling my espresso. "I know I shouldn't say it, that you don't want to hear it, but it's true."

"It's an honor. I know how much she meant to you—how much she still means to you."

"Don't," I rasp, lips trembling.

Emma frowns. "Don't what?"

"Understand. I don't deserve sympathy."

"Well, too fucking bad." She grins, and I pull myself together.

"Let's go on a walk," I say.

"Okay." She stands and slides her hand into mine.

The connection kills me. Skin on skin. Pulse on pulse. Blood on blood. Life on life. Joined in danger, we walk to Central Park. When we arrive, Emma settles closer to me, relaxed in the contrived countryside, a reminder of her rural home. Around us looms the skyscraper-fringed jungle with cotton-ball trees, canopied walkways, and silky grass. Sunset warms puddles filthy with footsteps, coral with dusk, and a nearby lake steams with mist. It's a retreat from the swarming, crash-and-burn metropolis, from the urban battlefield where you are never

good enough, where you can never work hard enough, where you can never compete with the millions of other starving, desperate, bloodthirsty ants.

Emma and I talk. We talk bullshit. We talk hope. We talk what binds us. We talk what breaks us. We commiserate in chronic loneliness, in our few fake friends, in our lone-wolf statuses. Emma is an only child, and I'm the runt of seven. She grew up middle class, and I grew up dirt poor. She's a country girl, and I'm a city boy. She left for college at eleven, and I couldn't afford college. She has three doctorates; I have no degrees. She has few relatives; I have an army. Her family is calm; mine is a circus. Her students annoy her; my employees frustrate me. Love and loss never touched her; love and loss ruined me.

We know all this from stalking each other, but hearing it given freely is different. Intimate, even. Trust forged in the dark. She keeps my secrets, and I keep her dreams. Most underestimate Emma because of her age and size, but I fear her power. Always have. You should, too, Bob. She could unravel us all.

"You shouldn't smoke," Emma says as I light my third cigarette.

"Blame the world, not me," I say mid-drag. "But I suppose you'll say I shouldn't blame the world for my problems."

"No, I planned on citing scientific articles to support my claim."

"You're sexy when you cross-reference."

She rolls her eyes. "So what happens now, hotshot? You know me, I know you, and it's getting late. My place or yours?"

I stall, and she waits. This is the point of no return. It's all fun and games till my home becomes hers, or hers becomes mine. Then we nosedive into love, and the barricade I built after Erin

torpedoed my foundation crumbles into the foamy sea. Emma is lightning, and I am thunder. We're electric, destructive, but after all I've suffered, I need structure, Bob.

"Can't," I rasp. "Kids."

"I'd love to meet them," Emma says.

"I can't, Emma. Sorry, but I can't. Not tonight. Maybe soon, but there's a lot going on—"

And she doesn't care. On tiptoe, she yanks my jaw down and kisses me like a musical: foot popped, back arched, eyes closed, arms a necklace. I try to push her away, but I can't. My body decides, and I draw her close, one hand on her hip, the other in her hair. We kiss for a moment, we kiss for infinity, and when our lips gasp apart, we smile the same smile.

"School stole my childhood," Emma whispers. She traces my scar with a fingernail, and fire scorches my veins. "Because of early college, I missed out on proms, dances, parties, you name it. But I will not miss out on you, Alex Osman. Get that through your thick, sick skull. I want *you* and *everything* that makes you: kids, grief, history, regret. I choose you *because of* those things."

"Why, Emma?" I whisper back, tangled in her rose-scented limbs. "I'm broken, ruined. You deserve better."

"I'm broken, too. Did you know that I'm infertile? I can't have kids, and I've always wanted to have kids, to make kids, to grow tiny humans inside me. But I can't, and it kills me. Some call me a miracle, but I want *that* miracle, the miracle of birth. I can't even use a surrogate like my dads did, because it's a problem with my eggs. Dammit, Alex, I can speak five languages, I have three Ivy doctorates, and I hold a tenured professorship at Columbia University, but I cannot make a baby."

Tears shine Emma's gaze. She's brave enough to be vulnerable,

strong enough to let me in, powerful enough to break herself down and build herself up again. I don't deserve her, Bob. You know I don't. I know I don't. The world knows I don't. But for some strange reason, she chooses me.

"So, hotshot," Emma continues, "you think your kids are baggage, but they're blessings to me. They give me hope. I always wanted a family, siblings, cousins, chaos. Instead, everything was focused on me. It's lonely at the top. You know this. Apex and Columbia are mountains, and we're stranded at the peaks. But it doesn't need to be that way. I'm here, and I'll wait for you, because I care. No, I more than care, but if I tell you the truth, I'll scare you away."

She kisses me again, then abandons me for her apartment while I sway, shell-shocked, near a star-sprinkled puddle. I should walk her home, but I can't move, Bob, and I don't move for a very long time.

Our Terrene Moon

Emma

JAMI: You're in love.

EMMA: Am not.

JAMI: Are too.

EMMA: D2.

JAMI: What?

EMMA: Star Wars, you twat. Am I still Cleopatra?

JAMI: For now. Act III, Scene 13, Line 2437.

EMMA: "Have you done yet?"

JAMI: "Alack, our terrene moon is now eclipsed; and it portends alone the fall of Antony."

EMMA: "I must stay his time."

JAMI: "To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes with one that ties his points?"

EMMA: "Not know me yet?"

JAMI: "Cold-hearted toward me?"

EMMA: You passive-aggressive dick.

JAMI: Shakespeare didn't write that.

EMMA: He should have.

You've Got Blackmail

Alex

I avoid Emma for days. *Stay away, darling. Stay far, far away. I'm in shit deeper than the Mariana Trench.* She dropped too much truth, and I'm still recovering from her bombs.

Speaking of bombs...

We're halfway through Eva's two-week deadline. One week left, and there's shit to do. Certain death is a great distraction. Screaming kids are, too. Ana and Dee woke up five times last night, bawling for Erin. They still have nightmares about losing her, about losing me, about those swift, savage strikes through their fairy-tale lives. Georgina usually handles nighttime, but she was on yet another date with Donna (fuck love at first sight), and I wanted to comfort them, given my absences of late. Of late? Does that sound pedantic, Bob? You're right, it does, and you would know about pedantry.

Anyway, this is the fun bit, digging for blackmail. Thanks to Jorge and the "inclusive" culture at Empire News, it's easy

to access employees' search histories and unencrypted emails. People ask Google for too much shit, Bob, and they put too much in emails. You can piece together a person from insecure searches and passive-aggressive messages to bosses or lovers.

We overestimate cyberspace's loyalties. You access the internet alone, tell it your deepest secrets, and pour your heart into the cyber void. Mx. World Wide Web remembers all your shattered bits. They wait till the right moment, then smash your skull, fuck your brain—wait, that's me. Never mind, Bob. My tired mind thinks crazy thoughts. My alert mind does, too, but that's beside the point.

Empire News employees are not as inclusive as they claim, nor are they transparent. Though many search histories fart tedious phrases like "cornbread recipe," "best wine for weight loss," "can I eat my pimples," and "yeast infection cure," there is the odd red flag. Infidelity comprises most: "Does a blow job count as cheating?" is searched often. Tax evasion is second most. Listen, if you're gonna dodge taxes, don't search the internet. "Do I need to report under-the-table cash earnings?" lights up more dashboards than mine.

I make a list of faithless spouses, illegitimate children, tax falsification, and embezzlement cases, along with a few unsavory fetishes (no, you should *not* shove severed rabbit feet up your ass). Then I send Jorge my document to blackmail compliance—an encrypted document, of course. We're not stupid, and we got more than one skeleton in our closet. Hell, we got an undead army.

A knock at the door.

"Come in," I say.

Li Jie peeks through the crack. "Mr. Osman, there's been an incident."

This should be good, Bob.

"An incident?" I ask.

The HR manager nods. "Sorry, sir, but I don't know how to handle it."

"What happened?"

"A beanbag ripped."

"That hardly seems like a matter for the CEO."

"I agree, but expanded polystyrene beads filled the bag, and the interns have petitioned to replace the plastic filling with something sustainable—like dry beans."

The nerve of them. I give them six-hour workdays, shortened Fridays, unlimited PTO, paid insurance, break rooms, tuition reimbursement, free childcare, annual retreats, gym discounts, pensions, and fucking strippers, but it's not good enough for the royally screwed next generation. And you think we millennials are bad.

"Fire them," I say.

Li Jie blinks like a diarrheic dove on the verge of liquid shits. "Sorry, sir?"

"Fire them," I repeat. "If they're ungrateful for my generosity, fire them. Do you know why we use plastic beans, Li Jie?"

"No, sir."

"Because real beans are expensive. Everyone cares about the environment till the environment eats their salary."

"I could explain—" Li Jie starts.

"No," I interrupt. "They're comfortable, and their demands will only increase. We have the best benefits in Manhattan. If that's not enough, and they're unwilling to research before they complain, they're out. Make room for people who care. I'd rather pay thankful, humble employees than entitled douchebags. I bet they were on rowing teams."

"They were, but how is that relevant?"

"Never mind. Fire them, and hire a new batch."

"Yes, sir."

Li Jie leaves in a nervous puff, and we're lucky he did, Bob, because my filing cabinet is wiggling. What? I couldn't take it to the Lab, because the Surgeon is on vacation. Yes, street crew don't mix with office crew, but I make the rules, so I can bend or break them. (Sorry, Hank, I know it's hypocritical.) Apex is falling down, so I should, too.

"Finally, you're awake," I tell my animated furniture. Sheet metal echoes with tinny thuds, and I kick it to quiet it. "You know why you're here and what you must do to leave."

The filing cabinet resident, aka Edward Pinnick, does know, and he doesn't do it. *How does a person fit in a filing cabinet?* Great question, Bob. First, hollow out a large filing cabinet (at least fifty-two inches tall), then turn the drawers into hinged flaps. Makeshift engineering. Bloodlust is the mother of invention. Next, break the limbs, dislocate the joints, and bind wrists to ankles behind the spine. In my case, get your crew to do it, then give them bonuses and the afternoon off. Money cancels all consciences. You'd never do that in a million years, till a million dollars cancel those years, then you'd do it today.

Anyway, Edward—let's call him Eddie—is a trial run, and it mostly worked out. Sure, there are compound fractures, places where bones slice through flesh, but Eddie fits. That's all that matters. Blood, fear piss, and terror shits pool beneath his fidgeting rump. Don't worry about the carpet, because the filing cabinet is sealed. The smell is disgusting and delicious, from fear and power. Because fear means power, and power means change. Everyone says to change your life, but they don't specify how.

“Eddie, dear boy, answer in grunts for all I care,” I tell the whimpering cabinet. “I don’t need a soliloquy, though I do appreciate theatrics. Now, what do you know about Eva Maria? She trusts you alone as her personal tailor, so she must’ve told you something. Maybe her real name? Her daughter’s name? How she got her scars? Her outsourcing method? Where she finds billions of dollars? If those dollars are counterfeit?”

The filing cabinet coughs. “Her...real name...is Dorothy Gibbins.”

I shake my head, though Eddie can’t see. “Oh, Eddie. You assume I know nothing and gamble on the first question. *Never* gamble on the first of anything. The first and last are decoys or distractions. I know Eva’s real name, so I also know you lied to me. I don’t like liars. We’re here to bond, to build trust. How can I believe anything you say when your first answer is a lie?”

“You...sick...*bastard*,” Eddie spits between pain and panic.

“One of those two things is true,” I say. “Back to Eva. What do you know? Regain my trust, and I might let you go.”

“Let you go” is a vague phrase. It could mean freedom, escape. Or it could mean death. Though death is freedom, in a way. No more bills, phone calls, angry emails, corporate bullshit, or shitfaced world filled with constipated opportunities. I’m not bitter, Bob. You’re bitter.

“Eva keeps...a journal,” Eddie wheezes as his origami limbs squish his lungs.

I lean forward. “Does she now?”

“Yes...she doesn’t...use electronics...for anything important.”

Yet paper is traceable, too.

“What does this journal look like?” I ask.

“Black leather...but it doesn’t matter,” Eddie says. “She always...keeps it...close. Better men...than you...have tried...”

and failed.”

But have worse men, Bob? That’s the real question. Most men are better than me, and most men fail. Why? They won’t do what’s necessary. They’re afraid of sacrifice, and fear twists their nuts.

So Eva keeps a journal, and she keeps it close. How to get it? Seduction is an option, but that’s a dead end. Eva’s libido is drier than Weetabix, and even oysters won’t pop that pearl. No journal, then. Another way in.

“What else?” I ask.

Eddie sobs. “I don’t fucking know. What do you want from me? I fix her dresses, that’s all.”

Hmm, you’re right, Bob. Eddie’s not wheezing anymore. Needs more pressure. I open the top flap of the hollowed-out filing cabinet. The literal human knot—ooh, the *mancramé* (I’m proud of that one)—squints at me. It’s an odd sight, even to my practiced eyes. His soiled suit rips at the seams, stark-white bones pierce cheap fabric, and limbs bow-tie behind him in an ever-rising puddle of blood, piss, and shit.

“I’ll flip you, Eddie,” I say. “I’ll flip you in your own filth. Would that loosen your tongue? Or should I literally loosen your tongue? I don’t need your mouth for answers. There’s a program that tracks eye movement. You’ve lost nothing yet—remember that. I’ve taken no fingers, toes, arms, legs, dick, balls, or eyeballs. Repay my mercy, or this will get messy.”

Eddie’s lips tremble. He hiccups, anxious. The cabinet death-rattles. “I...I guess I...I guess I do...know one thing,” he whispers.

“You *guess* you know, or you *actually* know?” I snap. “Don’t waste my time with bullshit. Doctors can still put you back together. Don’t make me Humpty Dumpty your ass.”

Can't tell if that was weak or witty, Bob. Too many nursery rhymes. Worlds bleeding together. At least it scares Eddie, not that it takes much to scare Eddie, the human friendship bracelet.

"I'm not...bullshitting," Eddie pants. It's hard to breathe when braided together. "Eva has...a secret."

"I'm sure she has many," I say. "I need a secret that *helps* me."

"This...will help. She has...a husband."

"Many people do."

"A husband...who doesn't know...about her secret wife...Lily Stevens."

Juicy as a tenderloin. Pit them against each other, and Eva unwinds. I can't trust her, and she can't trust me. If she backfires on our deal, her life will backfire, too. Nobody's bulletproof.

"Beautiful, Eddie," I say with holiday cheer. "Thanks for everything."

Now comes the fun. First, I rip the flaps off the filing cabinet. Next, I slice Eddie's stomach. I lasso his intestines around his neck, then pluck out his eyeballs and force them down his throat. As he chokes on his lack of foresight, blood filling the cabinet, I fulfill my promise. I flip him (with difficulty) so he drowns in his own filth. Last, I saw off his ribs and shove them all up his ass.

No, Bob, I'm not crazy. Okay, I'm crazy, but don't take this out of context. You come upon this scene without warning, and it looks insane, but realize what I must do to survive. Did I enjoy it? Yes. Was it fun? Yes. Do I have blackmail to ensure Eva's cooperation, to secure a financial future for my children? Yes. Everything I do, I do for them. Everyone I kill, I kill for them. If my greatest sin in life is loving my kids too much, then I can die in peace.

Sure, I've hurt people along the way, done the right thing if not the good thing, suffered blame and backlash from those thrown in my path. I used to break myself for everyone else, but if I'm broken, how can I support Ana and Dee? Life dealt me the shittiest hand, then forced me to play a rigged game. Hate me now, but everyone has their reckoning. I'm not perfect, and neither are you, Bob. Judgment comes for us all. I've made peace with my sins. Have you?

My Love Is Forever

Erin

Dear Sandy,
I'm sorry. You don't deserve my rage. Or maybe you do, but I deserve yours, too.

This is a shitty situation. I don't blame you, and I hope you don't blame me. Twins are tough. Poverty is brutal. Cancer is cruel. We were never meant to last, Sandy. Life has always been against us. Cursed from the start, we made the best of impossible, and I'm glad we grew up together, that we survived together till now.

Though we don't have much longer together. You are an amazing father, and you will find love again. You will make someone else happy, and they will make you happy, too. My life is over, but yours is not, and our girls' lives are just beginning. Live for them if you can't live for yourself. Love them if you can't love yourself.

Do you know Kurt Vonnegut? He's my favorite author. If you ever need to remember my soul, my spark, my smile, my strength, read one of his books. In Slaughterhouse-Five, he likens time to

a mountain, to an unchanging and immortal constant. I love this interpretation, this hopeful truth, that time just is, and we move through it, around it, over it, under it, that we are always dead and alive and unborn and stardust, all at once, all the time.

What I'm trying to say, Sandy, is our spirit is eternal. Somewhere, somewhen, there's a version of you and a version of me, young and in love, perched on a rooftop, praying to a sunset, living forever in a photograph. But that was them, and this is us, and we'll never be them again. It was beautiful when it was beautiful, and it was ugly when it was ugly, and it's over, Sandy. It's over, and you must let go.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Federal Bureau of Invagination

Alex

Invagination: the act of turning something inside out to form a cavity. Thought you'd need the definition, Bob. In other words, shit caught up to me. I wanted to help, but I hurt instead. I wanted to do the right thing for my kids, but the right thing is not always the good thing, and I'm the scapegoat, as always.

Everyone begs justice, and everything begs redemption. Though the FBI don't have to be dicks about it. Special Agent Taylor, aka Twatwaffle, glares over my desk in a black suit plus sunglasses. I smile my Hollywood smile...even if I'm playing the villain.

"How may I help you today?" I ask. See, Bob? I used "may" instead of "can," because "may" implies subjugation, that it's an honor to serve, while "can" implies ability to do so, which insinuates annoyance on my part, and I must bow to them, empower them, make them feel worthy of everything when

they're worthy of nothing. Or perhaps I'm paranoid. Definitely paranoid. But who wouldn't be with a dead wife, young kids, a white-collar criminal empire, and literal skeletons littered in closets across Manhattan?!

Calm. I'm calm. Cool. Collected and levelheaded.

I'm chaos in a powder keg.

"You tell us, Mr."—Twatwaffle reads her tablet—"Alessandro Osman."

"Please, call me Alex," I say.

"Okay, Alex," she says, lips pursed. "There have been suspicious reports regarding your corporate endeavors as of late."

Yep, "of late" still sounds pedantic.

"I apologize for the confusion, and I'm happy to alleviate any concerns." Smell the bullshit on my tongue? I'm rimming her, Bob, and she's not appreciative. Most thank me after, but she's a tough ass to crack.

Twatwaffle slides me the tablet. "Explain these entries, then."

The screen glows with *NQA* users, linked deaths, and insurance fraud accusations. It's not the first time this has happened, but it's the worst time by far.

Again, I smile a blockbuster grin. "Sorry, I don't follow."

"This is a list of felonies, Mr. Osman."

"Alex."

"*Alex.*" The agent rolls her eyes. "If you can't clarify these infractions, you are facing a lifetime in prison."

"I should, if those allegations were true," I say. "Agent Taylor, this is a grievous misunderstanding, and I apologize for any inconvenience it caused. Let me explain: We were hacked last week. Despite our ironclad security precautions, they still slipped through. You know how ruthless and vindictive cybercriminals are. They're self-important hacktivists with no

moral code.”

Twatwaffle’s skeptical. “Why target you?”

“Because Apex is a Fortune 500 company, and they want corporate America to burn,” I say. “They’re a plague, costing honest businessmen valuable time and energy. I only wish to help others. We’re a tech company that focuses on empowering the next generation. I donate to charity on a regular basis.” *To cover my ass.* “I offer the best benefits in Manhattan.” *To throw off their scent.* “Because I care about my employees.” *To buy loyalty through bribes.* “They’re good people, and they’re doing good work. This list is insulting—slander, really. Sorry you’ve wasted your time with this. I’m happy to offer any documentation you need regarding the hack and the actual database entries from the information in question.”

So much corporate speak, so much bullshit jargon. Punch me, Bob, if I start barfing pension data. Wait, you can’t. You’re still locked in my head.

“I want to trust you, Alex,” Twatwaffle says.

“And I want to trust you, Agent Taylor,” I say, “but it’s hard when you insult my character and embarrass me in my own office.” Turn defense to offense, and confuse their conscience. Doubt is a weapon, Bob. Wield it wisely.

Special Agent Twatwaffle hesitates. “I intended neither insult nor embarrassment.” Then she shoots her last shot. “It must be hard, raising your kids alone. I’m sorry about your wife. She seemed lovely.”

We were never meant to last, Sandy.

The fucking cunt-ass bitch. But I show no rage. Instead, I allow one tear to fall beneath my scar—that’s luck.

Somewhere, sometime, there’s a version of you and a version of me, young and in love, perched on a rooftop, praying to a sunset,

living forever in a photograph.

"Very," I whisper. "But it made me strong and gave me purpose. I live for my girls. Apex is their legacy, and I will do nothing to jeopardize its success."

It's over, and you must let go.

There. That severs suspicion. I love my kids, so I'm incapable of sin, because they are pure, even if I am not.

"That's what Dr. Claire said," Twatwaffle says. "I spotted you two together in Central Park and saw how much she meant to you, so I spoke to her earlier."

...you will find love again.

I smile yet again, through the panic. They contacted Emma, and she covered for me. Emma covered for me. She covered for me and lied to the fucking FBI.

"Dr. Claire insisted you love your kids more than anything," the agent continues, "and you would never risk them, so this must be a mistake or a hack. She signed a sworn statement. Given her reputation, we trust her testimony."

Riddled with shock, I manage to nod. Fake it long enough, and muscle memory takes over. "I love, need, and cherish Ana and Dee. They're all that's left of Erin. I would never do anything to endanger my children." I endanger them every day by trying to free them every day. What's worse? A stable cage or life-threatening freedom? That was rhetorical, Bob. Nobody cares about you or your opinion.

"Good, then we're done here," Twatwaffle says. "Send us the pre-hack data, and we'll clear your record."

"You'll have it within the hour," I say.

We stand, grin, shake hands, part ways. Then I sink into my chair, relieved and dumbfounded. *Why would Emma do that?* To clear my head, I busy myself: hack records to seem unhacked,

then soothe the FBI with irony. I have backup plans for my backup plans, and this is a routine drill. After pinning the fake cybercrime on a well-hated hacker group—called something masturbatory like “Soldiers of Armageddon”—I contain the situation. Agent Taylor is happy. The FBI are happy. Apex employees are happy.

I am not happy.

ALEX: Why?

Two minutes and thirty-seven seconds pass. It’s an eternity.

EMMA: So you'd owe me, hotshot.

ALEX: Seriously, why?

EMMA: They can track our texts.

ALEX: I encrypted our conversation. Why, Emma? Why cover for me?

Three minutes and forty-eight seconds pass. It’s hell.

...we are always dead and alive and unborn and stardust, all at once, all the time.

EMMA: Because you're a good father. Even if you're a bad man, or a good man who does bad things, you're a good father. No, you're a great father. And you love your kids. You need them, they need you, and you'd both break without each other. I'd never let anyone take them away, and the FBI would take them away if they knew the truth about what you do.

Shit. Wow. I don’t deserve her. I don’t deserve Ana and Dee. I don’t deserve any of this get-out-of-jail-free life.

Live for them if you can't live for yourself. Love them if you can't love yourself.

ALEX: I don't know how to thank you. You didn't need to do that.

EMMA: I know, but I wanted to. I care, hotshot, and you've had a rough life. I might not understand, but I sympathize. Give yourself a break. However, if you want to make it up to me, take me out for dinner. I assume you have an afternoon filled with foolhardy slaughter and reckless revenge, but afterward, come get me.

Dammit, she knows me too well.

ALEX: Deal.

But first, what Emma said.

Slaughter Fest

Alex

Someone ratted me out to the FBI, Bob. Or multiple someones. But I have methods in place for shit like this, and people to employ if necessary.

Now, it's necessary.

I'm pissed. No, I'm livid. Yes, I'm imperfect, flawed, a walking disaster, but I give my employees *everything*. Keep your mouth shut, and you can live easy. But some don't want to live easy. Some want to live hard, honest, but good intentions become bad decisions faster than a teenager spunks his sock.

Time for a party.

No, time for a slaughter fest.

These people I employ are special. They obey. They don't talk. They don't read, write, or petition for organic fucking beanbags. No, they only do one thing: kill. Don't ask how I found them. Some secrets are best kept. But they exist, and they're mine, and they find traitors within minutes of my FBI

shakedown. They're expensive contractors, so I only use them when necessary, though necessary approaches often. Betrayal spreads faster than herpes. Snip it in the bud, or the whole company will itch for months.

The contractors deposit traitors in the Lab, then leave. The Surgeon is on vacation—as I told you before, but you usually need a reminder—and I am ready for some fun.

"You know what you did," I say. They don't try to run. They can't. Street crew surround the building, as they saw on their way into this hellhole. The bulb-lit warehouse echoes with hyperventilation. Brick walls whisper threats, windows flash grime, and dusty footsteps ghost the floor. A dozen Lab Rats. A dozen experiments. We won't use the dentist chair today. No, I want this over quick and dirty—emphasis on dirty.

"I trusted you, and you betrayed that trust," I continue. "But first, you took my money, mooched my benefits, and enjoyed the fruits of *my* labor—*mine*. You're freeloaders." I spit at my feet. "Was it so hard to look the other way when I paved your lives with gold?"

A few piss themselves. The ambitious ones shit themselves. Nothing scares me anymore, not after losing what scared me most: Erin. Single-parenthood is a gauntlet. Survival is not guaranteed. When she died, I fell apart—hence, Georgina. Erin was the rock, then she left, dumping all her duty on me. She handled every chaos, and I buckled beneath every feather.

Shaking on the floor, arms around my knees, tears drenching my cheeks, I remember shaking, seizing, sputtering nonsensical mantras: "I can do this. *I can do this*. I can do this, because I am already doing this. *I am already doing this*, and I'm not doing it alone. I'm not alone. *I am not alone*. I was right. I was valid. She left. *She left me*. I wasn't crazy. *I'm always crazy*. This is what I

excel at: plans, schemes, sorting, organizing. No more worries. No room for doubts. Do only essentials. Love myself. *Love myself as much as I love my kids.* Trust myself. *Trust myself as much as my kids trust me.* If I must be a rock, then I will become a rock.

“Start, and I’ll find my rhythm. Have faith. *Have faith in me.* Rebuild the confidence I once had. Rediscover the strength I used to command. Never go back. *Never become that person again.* Train my brain. Don’t panic. *Don’t fucking panic.* This is a blank slate. Breathe. Smile. Laugh. Have fun. This is anxiety, not reality. Make a calm, comfortable, peaceful atmosphere for Ana and Dee, and it will become the same for me. They make me a better person. I can relax. *Fucking relax.* Enable. Empower. *Become efficient.* No more isolation. *Community equals salvation.* Every step forward is another step free. *I survived the past, and I’ll survive the future.* My kids are my home. *My kids are my home, and I will not let them go.*

“Be strong. Be steady. Be proud. I choose this. *I choose this path.* Change. *If change must happen, change without panic.* Adjust. *If new things arise, adjust my course.* Adapt, don’t freeze. Of course I can do this. *I must do this.* Everything is easier from here. *This is easier than everything else I’ve done, than watching my wife fade, than hearing her heart beat its last cadence.* Follow routine, and calm will follow. I will get used to this. I worry too much. *I worry about what might happen, but I must only focus on what is happening.* It will get easier. *I am not afraid anymore.*

“Yes, I fucked up, but I stood up when it was right. I am building them a sanctuary. All that goes toward that is nothing to stress over. They are worth every hardship. Ana and Dee are my purpose and strength. They make me the best version of myself. *They are my purpose. They are my purpose. They are my*

purpose and strength."

Adulging is a shriveled testicle.

And I have not succeeded at it all.

But these traitors didn't suffer that trial. They didn't endure mind-splitting panic. (Hi, Bob.) They didn't fail to function, then force function despite their broken, missing, jagged pieces. Try driving a car with no engine. That is grief: impossibility. No, these traitors had it easy—ergo, betrayal. Okay, Bob, "ergo" is pedantic, too. Anyway, these people are soft, I am sharp, and knives always slice through butter, through flesh.

"You stabbed me in the back," I rasp, and they tremble. "You didn't listen. You gaslit my concerns. You made *me* seem crazy and unsupportive when I gave you a corporate refuge. What more do you want? Servants? Slaves? My benefits are fit for royalty, but *I* was wrong, right? Because you can never be wrong, and I can never disagree, so you conditioned me to cede, to give you party after party, raise after raise, bonus after bonus, till you bled me dry with your controlling, manipulative, arrogant demands. But I doubted myself, and that's on me. I gave away too much of my power to employees who didn't care. Then *you* informed the FBI, not me. *You* created this powder-keg situation, not me. And I will *never* doubt myself again."

I retrieve a ziplock from my pocket, then toss it on the floor. The traitors form a circle around the white powder, piss sticky beneath their soles, shit lumpy within their pants. The room does not smell good, Bob. Should have bought that air freshener. They sell starter packs for only \$2.97. No, this is not product placement. I didn't name the brand, did I? Though I'm sure you'll hurry off to the brand that rhymes with pear dick on the overlord that rhymes with Babylon, who most likely has me on

a watch list. *Don't feed the corporate pigs.* I hear your complaint, Bob. But they make it easy, and we need easy when life is so fucking hard. You judge from the tower, but it's a different story from the moat.

"Snort it," I snap.

The traitors flutter their lips, twitch their eyes, shuffle their feet, clench their fists. *What is he planning?* Justice, Bob. They did not obey me when I asked with smiles, when I cushioned their lives with cash, so I must force them to see reality. Look through *my* window. See *my* monsters. I am done submitting. I gave away strength by giving them comfort, and I am done playing nice. Okay, I never played nice, but I played fair, and I'm done with fair. Even if the easy thing feels familiar, we must do the hard thing to do the right thing to survive.

Hence, cocaine.

"Snort it," I repeat. They fluster further. You're right, Bob, maybe they don't know how. "Make lines with the powder, then use a rolled-up dollar bill to inhale." I hate explaining jokes—I mean crimes. "And I know you have many dollars, because I gave them to you."

"Off the...f-f-floor?" the bravest stutters. By bravest, I mean least cowardly. She looks like a plucked chicken, sweating bullets and cawing nonsense.

"Yes, off the fucking floor. I raised you to godlike heights, but you betrayed my trust, so now, you can kneel." They don't. "KNEEL." They do.

From clammy palms come dollar bills, rolled with wobbly fingers. Plucked Chicken uses a credit card to draw cocaine lines on the warehouse floor. The traitors drop to their knees and snort through dirty money. Clumsy and clunky, lines disappear. In minutes, phase one is done.

“Here is the story,” I say. “Corporate nobodies grow bored with glossy Manhattan, so they seek out its underbelly in Hell’s Kitchen. They do coke, laced with fuck knows what, and a party turns slaughter fest, because they can’t handle the heat.”

And they can’t. This is tainted coke, not the good shit. Yellow snow full of dog piss and cat puke. They’re wired: quivering limbs, bugged-out eyes, melted-wax faces, snare-drum hearts. Their minds redline, and fear tightens to terror. Drugs produce the wildest dreams, or the fiercest nightmares.

“But wait, there’s more,” I say, a genie singing through their bad trips. “These corporate nobodies crack and escape drug-induced mania through murder. ‘Make it stop,’ they beg each other. And an unnamed someone offers them knives.”

Knives appear, as promised—out of thin air, the traitors think. In truth, knives were there all along. Ignore an object, and it doesn’t exist, but focus on an object, and only it exists. The Brooklyn boy with stormy eyes and matted curls is a shadow, but the Manhattan man with the scarred face is a star.

So traitors take knives, betrayal-sharp knives, and obey my prayer. Like magic, my words guide their actions, and in the urine-gold spotlight, they rip each other apart. To be honest, I take notes, Bob. They’re rabid wolves, and their creativity impresses me. Sure, there’s the obvious eye-gouging and throat-slitting, but they add rib-sparring, ear-eating, femur-penetration, and spine-deep-throating to my most-played favorites. Blood floods the floor, lungs drift along gore, and plucked hearts slide between livers and bladders. The warehouse is red, its people are carcasses, and after a disco disaster (I do love a party), chaos settles to carnage.

They’re dead, I’m alive, and it’s time to move on.

I exit the warehouse and tell street crew, “Clean up, then take

the week off.”

They listen, clean, and leave. Soon after, cops find bodies in a different warehouse, and newspapers squeal with headlines: “Millennials Ruin Everything,” “Corporate Carnage,” “Hell in Hell’s Kitchen,” “Murder in Manhattan,” “New York Shitty,” “America’s Dirty Little Future,” and “Nepotistic Knives.”

But nobody remembers the man with the knives.

Jinx, You Owe Me a Date

Alex

It's still the same day, Bob. The same fucking day of FBI genital-sucking and slaughter-fest mayhem.

And because it's the same day, albeit late in the same day, I owe Emma a date. She lied to the FBI, covered for my wretched ass, and I don't deserve her. I dug this pit, jumped in the hole, dumped dirt over my life, invited maggots into my grave, so I must climb free alone—even if I bring the whole cemetery with me.

Erin once told me giving birth is like shitting out a molten bowling ball while riding a broken unicycle. That is my current level of stress. Okay, slight exaggeration, Bob, but you get the picture.

ALEX: Here.

No pick-up line, no clever quip. I wait at the bottom of her Central Park complex, broiling in the heat like a marinated swordfish. Nerves glue my legs to the sidewalk, and this earns curses from passersby: *dickweed*, *asshole*, *fuckwad*, *shitdemon* (this last one's origin concerns me). Her building is beige and blocky in a stubborn, iron-willed, Yankee sort of way. *I hate it here, but here's my home*. That's the New York vibe.

EMMA: Come up.

ALEX: Come down.

If I enter, I'll never return, and I must return for my kids. They are my everything, even if I suck at bake sales, meet-and-greets, party favors, and birthday bashes. I stick out like a sore, gangrenous thumb among the manicured and polished parents. But I love my kids, so if I must endure endless parties and soirées (unnecessary word choice, Tina, aka Brie's mom) to support Erin's legacy, I'll clench my teeth and sing along.

That's the issue. I'm not over Erin, and I'll never let her go. Emma deserves someone whole, not broken, but she wants me, and dammit, I need her.

EMMA: No more games, Alex.

ALEX: This isn't a game. We're going out, so the most efficient course of action is for you to meet me here, then we can go together. It's logical.

EMMA: Vulcan now, are you?

ALEX: Yoda now, are you?

I smile in the pause, and I know she does the same. There's a rhythm between us that transcends distance, and this rhythm

always yanks me back to her, no matter how fast or far I run.

EMMA: I'm happy being Yoda. Star Wars is superior.

ALEX: Take that back.

EMMA: Make me.

Such a fucking tease.

And I soak her up like a bloody fool.

ALEX: Why did you cover for me?

EMMA: I already told you. You're a great father. A shitty person, but a great father.

ALEX: But you said it was a hack. We both told the same lie, and that's not luck. How did you know my backup plan?

EMMA: You're not hard to figure out. And jinx, you owe me a date, so get your bullheaded ass up here.

ALEX: Bullheaded? Emphasis on the bull? As in hung like a bull?

EMMA: As in this is bullshit.

Well, we can't keep her waiting, Bob. You know the saying: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." Mr. Congreve knew his shit. What? You're surprised I can drop seventeenth-century lines like it's hot? I have no college degree, but I've swooned many grad students with a syrupy tongue. (Vermont maple syrup is the undefeated best, if you take my advice literally.)

As I ascend, Emma descends, and we meet halfway on the stairs. She tucks inky hair behind pale ears and winks a blue-violet eye, stunning in the window light. A silver, strapless dress hugs her curves, and I'm not equipped for this level of warfare, Bob.

She unlocks her phone. We're both awkward and shy.

EMMA: Hey, hotshot.

ALEX: Hey, darling.

EMMA: Done with your murder rave, or shall we make an illicit detour?

ALEX: All done. My night is yours.

She loops her arm through mine, and it's a wing in a chain. I'm free, and I'm trapped. The future is a fanged beast with bloody talons, eyes dripping with hungry alarm, as we exit onto sticky, polychrome streets.

"Don't look so scared," Emma whispers. "You're the one who bites."

Damn her.

I guide us through Manhattan. No car tonight. The evening is dank and murky, but I need fresh air—well, New York's fresh air, which is as fresh as a rotten, crap-coated turnip. Still, the walk saves me from Emma. She's intoxicating, Bob. No, she's poisonous. I heed Erin's ghost, the damage loss carved, and will myself not to follow, but my feet ignore my pleas.

New York at night is American lore. This is "The Dream." The rich, rude, loud, snobby, obnoxious, media-drenched dream. Let's add selfish, fat, and lazy, because what is America without her stereotypes? We're workaholics, optimistic and idealistic, traits ingrained from our frontier past. Everything costs more than we make, and everything takes longer than we have. We're overbusy, and life is expensive, so we turn toward escape, toward glittering entertainment. Ignorance and arrogance, imperialism and fanaticism, consumption and capitalism and materialism—that's America, right? Smuggle

success, and bootleg innovation. Even if we're hardworking and generous, we're uncultured and untraveled, choosing violence over education. Shoot first, ask questions later. Yes, Bob, I realize that means interrogating a corpse.

For fuck's sake, what now? Too preachy? Well, I need a distraction from Emma's venom, and annoying diatribes are my only defense. Fine, Bob, back to New York.

The city is a rainbow blur of slimy headlights, greasy reflections, and winking windows in urban constellations. Histogram skyscrapers block a saber-toothed skyline, and candy-coated billboards belch a pay-to-play life. Jazzy lights streak in time-lapse, trapping us in a moment, wingless flies in amber. Spandex-clad wannabes in over-tight statements stampede the streets, shout over the throng. Be louder, bolder, stronger than the others—but there are millions of others in NYC. No one is more than a crowd, and this is one huge fucking crowd. It's a logjam, a traffic jam, a holdup, backup, tie-up dead end. A deadlock, a gridlock, a standoff, standstill bottleneck. (Dolphins are becoming a theme. Ask Agent Young about his costume and impression.)

"Talking to yourself, hotshot?" Emma asks.

Shit, Bob, did she hear us? No, I tuck you deep inside my lobes. That's a disturbing image.

"Hearing things again, darling?" I return. For now, it buys me innocence.

Emma chuckles, and it's champagne bubbles. "Where are you taking me? To an abandoned warehouse with no cell service on the outskirts of a forgotten street?"

I smile. "If you insist, but that's a bit far for our second date."

"You're the one who wants to take it slow."

"And why are you in such a rush?"

Truth flickers across Emma's beauty, but she brushes off doubt and returns my smile. "Life is short. Live while you can."

Fear clenches my heart. I trip on the sidewalk, cover it with swagger. Life isn't short. It's microscopic. We're a grain of sand on a fathomless beach, a butterfly in an endless sky. Erin was a butterfly, a monarch butterfly, but even she faded in the end.

"You're too serious," Emma says. "Lighten up."

"Says the star to the shark," I murmur.

"Not your best analogy."

"I'm distracted."

"By those naked, square-dancing hippies?" She points across the street, and damn, she's not lying.

"This is New York," I say. "Nothing fazes me."

"Some things should faze you."

"Like you?"

"Like me."

I motion toward the next skyscraper. We enter a building, then ride an elevator to the top, to the QIC. No Larry this time, nor "retirement" party, only Emma and me on a Manhattan rooftop, sweltering in the summer night. I lead her by the café, through the bar, around the pool, and toward the lounge, a simple seating area that overlooks New York's decaying horizon. We sink onto a loveseat and prop our feet on the coffee table. I order beers and nachos as we face the city and dodge each other. Well, I dodge her, but she doesn't dodge me.

"Beers and nachos," Emma says, snapping a tortilla with her teeth.

I sip my beer. Alcohol first. "Not fancy enough for you highbrow types?"

"On the contrary, it reminds me of dorm life, and we're not

as fancy as you think. You're the one with polished shoes."

Because I clean off blood every night. Instead, I say, "Anyone who uses 'on the contrary' in casual conversation is fancy to the highest degree."

"Was that a college pun?"

"An unintentional one."

"And is this unintentional? Because I'm pulling teeth here." Emma withers me with her gaze. She's a spitfire, a firecracker, and in this moment, she reminds me of Erin.

I hope you find a new love, a better love. I hope you let me go.

"Sorry," I whisper. "It's hard for me to connect...after Erin."

"I'm not her, and I'll never be her," Emma whispers back. "If you can't move on, I can't do this anymore."

"It's not that. I have moved on."

"Then why won't you let me in?"

"Because I care, Emma," I snap. "I care about you, and I can't lose you, too. You know I'm broken." But I cannot crumble, not now, not ever. Too many rely on me, and I'm so close to freedom. "I tried to save you, but you keep coming back."

"Because I care, too, dumbass," she spits. "That's what life is: learning, loving, losing, healing. There is no purpose without change. I will die, and you will die, and we will all fucking die, then rot in the goddamn ground. But you're so focused on the end that you won't even start."

"If I start, I won't stop, and I'm a mess. I can't handle you, and I can't handle this feeling, and I can't slow myself down from what will lead to disast—"

She kisses me. She tangles cheesy fingers in my hair and kisses me stupid.

And I kiss her back.

Bottles crash to the ground. Beer floods the rooftop. Nachos

confetti the air. There's no one around, and we wouldn't care if there were, because this moment is a bomb. In the background, fireworks burn the sky—the reason I took her here—but we don't see them.

I starve for her, and she starves for me. She rips off my clothes. I tear off her dress. Then I am her, she is me, and everything falls down. It's over. It's done. We lie on the loveseat, her head on my chest, welded together by the marrow in our bones. I was right to fear this fall, this flight. There's no going back. There's no escape.

"You're still afraid," Emma breathes against my neck.

I shiver and say, "You scare me. *This* scares me." I motion toward our knotted bodies.

"No one else views me as intimidating."

"Then everyone else is a fucking idiot."

"On that, we agree."

Kissed by a Lie

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was a translator in Russia.

She was in her fifties, and she was lost: divorced, stranded, devastated, heartbroken. Even her body abandoned her with brittle bones, aching joints, and waning eyesight, hearing, muscles, memory. Her hair was gray, and she shrank in body, mind, and soul. Still sharp as a tack—well, a child-friendly tack—Georgina was all too aware of life's swift and merciless shift. She knew who she was, but she didn't trust herself anymore. She had neither faith nor belief in the mirror's stranger. Insomnia didn't help. Neither did her hyper bladder. But Russia *did* help. She rediscovered her soul in St. Petersburg, in a postcard of sprawling Catherine Palace dressed in baby-blue, snow-white, and all-that-glitters-is-not-gold truth.

Russia told her, "Better to be slapped with the truth than kissed by a lie," and truth had slapped Georgina—not a wrist-

slap, but a bitch-slap. This was why Georgina preferred lies, but she saw why slap-happy truth was right, and the honest, naked, brutal truth was that she needed to fly solo for this phase. Without truth, she would not change, and she *needed* to change for herself, for her kids. Their family split, and they needed to heal. Her moment of truth was inevitable as death, because truth will out, will set you free.

So Russia told her next, "There is no shame in not knowing; the shame lies in not finding out," and quinquagenarian Georgina still had much to learn. She wanted comfort, security, but marriage became the opposite, and her family bore her shame.

Russia interjected, "When the rich make war, it's the poor that die," and her children had suffered her heartbreak, too. She wished to be a rock, a mountain. Instead, she became an avalanche, burying them beneath regret. But Georgina would rise again. If not for herself, for her kids. She was not yet brave, but she was humbled, humiliated, and from these truth-ridden depths, she'd launch them all free.

Strawberry Milk Panic

Alex

This isn't good, Bob.

My willpower is jelly. Emma lowers my defenses to storm-the-castle-and-fuck-all-the-livestock surrender. I need a moment to rest, relax, sit down, eat a whole loaf of bread, drink a gallon of strawberry milk, blast Gregorian chants, and swaddle myself in a tarp to recreate the womb. Not your style? Then you can fuck yourself. It does wonders for me, though quality strawberry milk is tough to find.

"Where are you, hotshot?" Emma sings into my mouth.

"Naked, on a Manhattan rooftop, tangled with a beautiful yet possibly hostile woman," I speak around her lips.

"Possibly hostile?"

"Definitely hostile."

Emma chuckles against my teeth. "This won't end well, will it?"

"Depends on your definition of 'well.'" I flip her onto her back

and cover her with my body. “Will it end pretty? Probably not, but most pretty things are ugly at the end. Will it end happy? Hopefully, because you’re the one person in the world who makes me feel this way. That’s why you scare me. We’re too volatile to last.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m not.”

“Drunk on lust. Infatuation lasts only months. Then what?”

“Is your idea of dirty talk reciting statistics?” I ask.

“Math is sexy,” she says.

“On that, we disagree.”

I lower myself toward her, but she holds me steady.

“Wait, I need—” Emma starts.

“I can’t give you commitment,” I snap, falling off her. “You know that. Everything’s too messy right now.”

She chews her lips, and we pull on our clothes in the universal dress-of-shame.

“I don’t mind messy, but I do mind dishonesty,” she says.

“I haven’t lied to you,” I say.

“You led me on.”

“I was sincere from the start.”

“You flirted, then we fucked. Honesty isn’t only about words. Actions lie, too, and your actions said you cared.”

“I *do* care. I told you.”

“I don’t think you can care anymore, and I don’t trust you to tell the truth. I don’t think you even trust yourself.”

She shakes her head, and everything falls apart. “I can’t do this. I thought I could, that sex could be just sex, but I can’t, and sex is never just sex. Sorry, Alex, but I need something more.”

I clench my fists and pray for strength, but strength is not power, and I have only the latter. “I can’t do more yet. Maybe in

a few months, but not now. Don't leave, Emma. I want you—"

"No, you *need* me. Love is selfless, not selfish."

"Love?"

She blushes, stands, leans away. "Good night, Osman. Take care of yourself."

Then she leaves. She leaves, Bob. I lose her before I could love her. My deepest fear came true. *Go. Don't go. Go. Don't go.* My feet war between staying and sprinting, between letting her go and chasing her into the streets. But she's right. I *do* need her, and need is unhealthy—toxic, even. She deserves better. She deserves more.

I wait an hour, drink myself into apathy, then wander toward my penthouse, toward my two stakes in the ground. When Erin died, the hospital offered adoption and foster care options for the girls. Was it enticing? Yes, and I hate myself for admitting that. But when you work full time, suck at everything domestic, and just lost half your soul, any relief—even if it's bad or temporary—feels right in the midst of so much wrong. I didn't think I could raise two young kids alone. It scared me—no, it *terrified* me.

Yet, in the end, I couldn't let them go. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't fight for them, so if our lives are messy and crazy, but we're together, that's all I need. They're my home, and leaving would destroy me.

I could never tell them goodbye. Even if I'm a dumpster fire, they are my salvation. I'm not a normal or natural parent, but I love my kids more than anything. They are mine, and I am theirs, but Erin is gone, and I must grieve to move on.

See, Bob, I lied to Emma. I haven't moved on. You never move on from death. Grief haunts you always, and I can't shake Erin's ghost. She's in the twins' river-blue eyes. She's in the

scar that carves my face. She's in Brooklyn, with my family, at every sidewalk and corner. She's in the mailbox, sending letters beyond the grave. And sometimes, she's in calls, emails, and texts, notifying me that a balance is due, a document needs a signature, or a company has her data in cyberspace's indifferent web. She's gone, but her echo isn't. No matter how many times I update her records, someone always seeks her rebirth. The most recent was a cheap furniture store—talk about disrespect. The last way I want to remember my late wife is an ad for floral-print ottomans.

Why can't you get over Erin? Because you don't mourn the end, Bob. You mourn the beginning. You mourn the spark, the rush of attraction, the addiction of hope, and the danger of dreams. Even if we're no longer the kids who met and fell in desperate love, a part of me will always love a part of her. We're inseparable, that part. When she died, that part of me died, too. But somewhere, sometime, there is a boy and a girl, overlooking Brooklyn, whispering secrets into the muggy August night. They're young and free, reckless and naive, dangling their hearts on tattered strings over the balcony.

Was it worth it? That's what everyone asks. Was love worth loss? Was pleasure worth pain? But love is a moment, and loss is eternal. Pleasure is a womb, and pain is the grave. The immortal is invincible and always wins in the end.

When I reach the penthouse, my girls are asleep. Georgina is, too—from all those shenanigans with Donna I know too much about. I tiptoe toward the twins' bedrooms, crack their doors, and savor their deep-breathing lullaby. *I fought for you. I fought for you, and I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm doing it for you. If I lose you, I'll never recover, and I'll never forgive myself. I know I should see you more often, and I will soon, but if Eva delivers, then*

we'll be set. You'll have a legacy. You'll be safe and free.

Fool. I know, Bob. There's no such thing as safe or free.

Love Enraged

Emma

EMMA: He's a dick.

JAMI: You fucked?

EMMA: We fucked.

JAMI: Bad sex?

EMMA: Great sex.

JAMI: Then what's wrong?

EMMA: He's afraid.

JAMI: Of...?

EMMA: Never mind, let's practice.

JAMI: Horny for Shakespeare?

EMMA: Never.

JAMI: Always. You're Cleopatra. Act IV, Scene 12, Line 2939.

EMMA: "Why is my lord enraged against his love?" For fuck's sake, Jami, quit the psych bullshit.

JAMI: Do I sense projection, Doc?

EMMA: You're an ass.

LOVE ENRAGED

JAMI: Also not Shakespeare's words. "Vanish, or I shall give thee thy deserving."

EMMA: Fuck off, or I shall give thee thy whipping.

JAMI: And I shall fancy thy penalty, o'er wrought with wall-eyed addiction.

EMMA: I care not for thy humor.

JAMI: Art thou so dense?

EMMA: Art thou so enchafed?

JAMI: I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means.

EMMA: It means angry.

JAMI: Good, no lotion required.

Burned Pancakes and Other Mistakes

Alex

Pancakes: the ultimate comfort food. Unless you suck at cooking, burn flapjack after flapjack, and endure hours of brutal screaming while your five-year-old twins get hungrier and hungrier, passing vicious judgment on your character in the act. I am not a floppy butt, Ana, nor am I a poopcake, Dee. But no matter how many times “we’ve talked about this,” kids are savage, feral, unruly creatures, and they only learn under a blue moon after a million sanity sacrifices.

My moms call me mid-pancake fiasco, asking for the twins who have escalated to Velociraptor screeches. Then my gaggle of siblings pretends at concern, then my cousin Mido asks if I want to buy some pottery, then Donna reschedules my cleaning appointment because of Georgina, then Deja updates me on the Empire News “plan,” then Johnny Maker asks if I need a car today, then the Surgeon notifies me about maintenance for the

Lab. So when Eva calls last, I am at my wits' end.

"What?" I snap into the phone, nestled in my neck, as pancake batter splatters the granite counters. There, these are fucking fine. I can't make a goddamn Stegosaurus, so pretend this chunky, vomit-like flapjack is a dinosaur. I'm encouraging their imagination. Yes, that's it. Parenting is a series of justifications and excuses.

Ana and Dee quiet down with frowns at my butchered pancakes. Sorry, kids, but you're stuck with me. If my dinosaurs look like barf, deal with it till you visit Sophie's mom, who can make you *PJ Masks* pancakes iced with vegan frosting.

"Osman," a serpentine voice breathes.

"Gustafsson," I answer, and she shirks from her true name—or one of her "true" names. Bloody snake. Can't pin her down.

"Three days. Ready?"

Three days left to bomb a building, kill innocent people, worry about my kids, and pine over Emma's absence. She hasn't texted me since our star-crossed, rooftop date. I wish I could say I didn't text her, too, that I played it cool, but we all know I have no self-control.

"Yep," I say.

Ana and Dee fuss for more, so I dump two more pancake abominations on their plates. Fingerprints smudge the coffee table, and crumbs dust the blanket rumped on the couch. Through the windowed wall, Times Square sizzles with summer mania, a hodgepodge of commuters and tourists with fear of missing out. It's lethal, this fear, pushing us to do everything that means nothing and nothing that means everything.

"And...?" Eva presses.

"And it's set," I say.

"I need details. What's your plan?"

"This smells like a test. A magician never reveals his tricks."

I sense a smile through the line. "Good," she says, "though you're more con artist than magician."

"Same difference. Why'd you really call? Another friendly threat? Or something else?"

"You seem like a man who needs reminders."

"And you seem like a woman who needs incentives. I'll deliver—you have my word—but will you? After all is said and done, how can I trust you won't throw me to the wolves?"

"Because you're a wolf yourself, Osman. I'm sure you've made precautions to ensure my cooperation. Curious what you found."

"If I tell, they're no longer precautions, are they?"

Eva is a slippery one. Every question is an answer, and every answer is a lie. She wants to draw me out, see my hand, rig the game, but I've played too much poker to fold so fast.

"You're smarter than you look," Eva says.

"And you're softer than you seem," I say. "Let's play nice and end this fair, okay?"

"That is my intention, but I fear you have others."

"I doubt you fear anything."

"We all fear. You know this more than most."

Callous bitch.

"Gotta go," I say. "Crime doesn't commit itself. Talk later."

"Wait," Eva says.

So I wait.

Like a fucking dog.

"I hope your twins are well," she continues. "They've been through so much, losing their mother and all."

It'd be a shame if they lost their father, too.

Her unspoken threat swishes between us, a cat's tail pre-

attack, and I load all my cannons.

“Let me make something very clear,” I say, voice low as hell. “Threaten me all you want, but leave my kids out of this.” Then I say something I shouldn’t say, show a card I should hide longer, because my nerves are frayed, my mind shot, from juggling a household on a pinkie toe. “I know about Lily. Don’t fuck with me.”

Eva’s quiet for a century. My girls chatter in the background. The weight of the universe hangs between us.

“Edward Pinnick,” Eva finally whispers. It’s not a question. She’s connected the bloody dots in a corpse constellation. “His disappearance was convenient. I should have known. You’ve researched me, bravo, but I’ve researched you, too. Despite its stellar reputation, the Reid Fletcher Hadley School does not secure its files in an appropriate manner, particularly regarding students’ residences and doctors’ offices. Can’t trust the elite. They think they’re invulnerable, but we know better, don’t we, Osman? You destroy me, and I destroy you. Threats only work if you can survive the rebound, but you have no armor.”

I freeze over a charred pancake. Eva’s right. I’m a fool. My only weapon backfired into my defenseless fort. I spent too much time on the sword and not the shield. Wherever I go, whatever I do, Ana and Dee will always stand in the crosshairs unless I change, unless I grow. One last job. One last chance to set everything right.

Smoke alarms shriek, and my girls join hell’s chorus.

I turn off the stove, drown the fiery pancake, smash the alarms with a broom, and calm the twins. Eva waits, patient and smug.

“They’re lucky to have you,” she says. “Though I’m disappointed at how you handled this situation. Lily’s better than bait. Perhaps we both need space, some time to think.”

I WILL KILL YOU

She goes dark, and I see red.

My Loss Is Eternal

Erin

Dear Sandy,
We were never perfect, were we? But it's easier to cling to comfort than admit defeat.

I wonder if our end was inevitable. If not death, then divorce would have divided us. I know you think we're the real deal, true love and all that fairy-tale fluff, but we're not, Sandy. We never were. You are a dreamer, and your head's so often in the clouds that you forget about the rest of us down here. Don't stop dreaming, but find an anchor to root your dreams, because if you can't stand alone, you won't fly at all.

You're manic, romantic, and too charismatic for anyone's good. I don't say this to insult you, but to ground you. Ana and Dee need a father, not a figure. Find joy in the mundane. Find peace in the tedium. I know you think you aren't a rock, but that's because you never let yourself settle. I'm steady as the breeze, because I choose to stand still.

But you run before you try, leap before you look, and one of these days, you won't be able to run or leap away from your problems. They'll corner you on a cliff, force you to change, and threaten everything if you don't. Learn patience, love. Learn calm.

I don't want to hurt you. I want to free you. We were broken from the start, so don't cry for me any longer. See our cracks. We would have ended with a crash if not a crumble. You hold onto an idea of us, not the actual us who fell apart.

Let go, Sandy. I know you haven't, and I know you must. If I can wish one thing into the living world, I wish you let me go.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Rock Bottomless Pit

Alex

It's not far to rock bottom. A few wrong turns, and you're in hell's deepest pits.
...if you can't stand alone, you won't fly at all.

I've been here before—with Erin, of course. Each time I return, it beckons me further. There's an allure to failure, to defeat, to disaster. Don't believe me? Think of car crashes. We rubberneck destruction, eager to know more, thankful it's not us while wishing for adventure. You understand, Bob. I know you do. You've been at rock bottom for all this book.

If I can wish one thing into the living world, I wish you let me go.

I need this job. Without this job, I'm nothing. With this job, I'm everything. I need out, I need freedom, I need a future for my children. But I fucked up. I played a card too soon, and the deck is now stacked against me.

C'mon, think. I know, Bob. I fucking know. So I rack my brain for answers, but no answers come. There are questions,

an armada of them, and enough doubts to fill an ocean. You know what's a great thought-loosener? Bourbon, no ice, never ice—why dilute perfection? Georgina returns from her date, flushed and glowing—don't ask why. (I learned that the hard way...or the moist way? Anyway...)

"Where are my babies?" Georgina cries into the penthouse.

"Pippa!" Ana and Dee cry, relieved for someone competent. They leap from the couch and wrap her in a hug.

Ana and Dee need a father, not a figure.

"Everything okay, Mr. Osman?" Georgina futzes with my twins' curls. I forgot to brush their hair, and they resemble electrocuted lions.

"Yes, fine. Thank you, Georgina." I kiss my girls goodbye and leave—no, let's be honest, I run away.

I'm not good with commitment, Bob. Emma knows this and cuts me out. *I can't do this anymore.* Erin knew this and used it against me. *You have a responsibility to them. You're their father. It's your duty. Get your shit together, Sandy.* I heard it a million times, in a million permutations of the same argument. But I never wanted to leave or lose them. I only wanted to breathe. Erin didn't understand this, that love turns to fear when it's strong enough, fierce enough, and I never thought I was enough, so I'd stay away to think. Like now.

Bar Four is always packed, even in the morning, though its shit-brown bourbon is shittier this early. I land on a creaky stool and tap the oily counter. The bartender doesn't ask; she pours. And pours. Till one shot becomes ten, and bourbon isn't enough. She understands. After an over-the-shoulder manager-check, she slides me a white packet, then nods at the bathroom.

This is not my finest hour, Bob, snorting coke off a toilet

seat in a urine-sticky stall. An errant turd swims in the bowl as I inhale three lines back to back to back. Coke helps. As intended, my mind bursts, and thoughts flare into being.

I should call Eva. I shouldn't call Eva. If I call Eva, I'm weak. If I wait, I'm strong. Let her doubt herself. I'll prove her wrong. She needs me. She can't ghost me forever. Like Emma. They'll both come around. Emma. Emma Rose. Maybe I should text her. Only once more. She didn't reply to the dozen other messages, but I'll say something perfect this time. She'll need to respond. And if I can fix things with Emma, I can fix things with Eva.

No, I shouldn't contact either of them. I must appear in control, or I will fuck it all up—again. I'm so close to freedom, to forever, to a future for my children. Hang on, Osman. Hold on tight. I can do this. I must do this. Eva will come around. She can't do this without me, and the deadline's days away. Everything's set up, and she knows this, needs this, needs me. That's it. She needs me, and everything will be fine. Everything will work out. Another shot, another line, and everything will work out.

The day passes in a drug-fueled blur. Cigarette smoke. Cocaine hail. Bourbon baths and absinthe showers. I feast on sweaty bodies, pining after Emma, panting in the heat, chain-banging through bars till day melts to night. After licking beer off a salty nipple and snorting blow off a rock-hard cock, I sober in an alley, propped against a dumpster at three in the morning. *In the morning.* It's the next day. I lost a day. Only two days to freedom...or failure.

I should call Eva. I shouldn't call Eva. Not this again. I must wait. That's how you handle a snake. Let it come to you, let it make the first move, then dodge its strikes and stomp on its skull. So with Eva, I must wait. I showed a card, but I didn't show my hand, and I'm still in the game. This is a break, but

she'll return to the table. She needs me. *She needs me.* Or all is lost, and then some.

But what about Emma? Exactly, Bob. What about Emma? With her, I showed all my cards, played a losing hand, and blew the game. I need a new start, a fresh start, but redemption carries a heavy price.

ALEX: Hey.

Pathetic. I know, Bob, but we must start somewhere.

ALEX: I know you're angry, and you should be. I'm an idiot. Let's start over. Hi, I'm Alex Osman, Apex CEO and professional asshole. Can I buy you a drink, Dr. Claire, and apologize for everything?

Corny, cheesy, tacky, cliché. Fuck, Bob, why so pissed tonight? Is my brain too cramped for your egghead taste? Sorry I didn't deck out my lobes in marble countertops, crystal chandeliers, and velvet throw pillows to suit your swank.

ALEX: I'm begging here. I'll do anything.

Loser freak. Okay, Bob, that was unnecessary. I know you're annoyed, but let's stop with the insults till I rehydrate, at least. Indulge my starry-eyed fantasy for one goddamn night.

EMMA: Anything?

She answered. But why is she up now, this late...or this early? Never mind, wrong question. Why am I waiting to reply?

ALEX: Anything.

This is it, Bob. This is my redemption, where I fix her, then I fix me, then I free—

EMMA: Fuck off.

No. No, Bob, this isn't the end. That's not how it goes. She forgives me. She *must* forgive me. Yes, I fucked up, but I fucked up for the right reasons. I care too much, feel too much, love too much. Everything always and forever hurts.

ALEX: Emma, please.

EMMA: You said you'd do anything, and I told you to fuck off, so fuck off, Alex, and leave me alone.

This is a mistake. This isn't her. She doesn't understand. No one understands. I only wish to help, but the world is static, and I am romantic. There's no room for dreams in the disUnited States. Land of the free, my ass. More like land of the beast, home of the grave. We're all broken here. Even you, Bob. *Especially* you.

I should text her back and explain. I should bare myself, call her, and say, "You're right. You're right about everything. You deserve honesty and commitment, even if I'm afraid. I love you, Emma, and I lost the last person I loved, but I can't lose you. You're special—no, you're *exceptional*. Erin was wonderful, but you're a wonder, and I want to build forever together, if you'll let me grow strong enough to deserve you."

But I don't say that. I don't call or text or contact her in any way. She wants space, so I give her space, because I'm scared to

death of the death of love, too scared to start, too fried to try.

What now? Dunno, Bob. I must wait for Eva, but Emma won't wait for me, and my girls are my only purpose in purgatory. *Live for them. Fight for them.* I am, and I have, but I'm still so fucking weak. Erin would know what to do. She always did. Even if it took a lip-chewing, hair-twirling minute, she always solved every problem.

Except the last one.

Erin should have lived, and I should have died. The world doesn't need me, but it sure needs her. She was a song in the shadows, beauty in the bleak. Without her, life cages me with ugly, brackets me with pain, and smothers me with demons masquerading as clowns.

Enough. I must stop this cycle, or this cycle will stop me. I need a distraction, something to shock myself free, something brutal or savage or vicious, like me. No, I need something barbaric, something to defibrillate my mind. Buckle up, Bob, because my brain's about to roller-coaster.

Dorothy and Me

Alex

I scan the alley, in search of escape: tin cans, piss smear, shattered bottle, jagged glass. Nothing I haven't done. Nothing I haven't felt. I've flooded my system with all brands of liquor, sliced myself bloody, gouged myself sane. No, I can't drink or cut my way out of this one. I must find something else.

College freshmen giggle near the alley's mouth, then I'm alone again in Manhattan's dirty dark. Windows flutter with televisions. Their glow leaks into the alley. No one can see me, even if I can see them. For a moment, I'm invisible, invincible, and I scan the alley again, praying for salvation.

There. *Seek, and ye shall find.* A dead deer lies near the closest doorway. Did fate place it in my path? Surprising in the city, for a deer to go unnoticed. I'm not religious, but I believe in a higher pattern, if not a higher power, as I told you before. This deer is here for a reason, and so am I. Stupid creatures, if you

ask me. Always in headlights, skulls on walls, decapitated by inaction. If there's one animal you don't want to be, it's a deer. Be a tiger, a wolf, a bear, or even a fucking donkey, but never a deer. Never a poor, pathetic deer.

Let's name her Dorothy.

I roll to my feet, draw a steadying breath, and tiptoe toward Dorothy. Adrenaline animates me. I've never done this before, Bob. I've done many things, many horrible things, but never this. Never did I dare.

Now, I dare.

I must shock myself out of this spiral, or I'll drown in life's drain. Then I can prove my worth to Eva, free my girls, and win Emma back.

But first, the deer.

The dead deer.

Dorothy.

The alley is empty. It's only Dorothy and me. I run my fingers through her russet coat. Her chest doesn't rise or tick. She's lukewarm, fresh death. I rise with anticipation. Don't judge, Bob. You'd do the same. Or maybe you wouldn't, but that's why there are no books about you.

How to do this...how to do this...

Let's just start.

I remove a rubber from my pocket, unzip my pants, and unroll it over my painfully ready state. Even after my debaucherous day, my appetite lingers. Wolves cry hunger. Ambition is never satisfied, and desire never rests.

Dorothy is dry. I lift her tail and circle her sex, loosening her for my conquering. Alley's still empty, and city's still oblivious, so I squirt coconut oil on her cunt, rubbing outside and in. Thank God for free samples, and for vegans. At my last disco

romp, a busty brunette shoved packets in my pockets, boasting labels like “organic,” “non-GMO,” “cold-pressed,” and “virgin” (we laughed at that as I sucked her tit and she snail-trailed my leg). But I don’t care about all that shit, Bob. If it slicks my dick, I’m in.

And I’m in.

Jesus fucking Christ, I’m in, and taboo hardens me to iron.

Dorothy groans—wait, that’s me. She’s so tight, and I’m so stiff, and I hadn’t planned on fucking a dead animal on the sidewalk in an abandoned alley at three in the morning, but here we are, Bob. Here we fucking are.

I prop Dorothy on her chest, her thin ass in the air, and I wish I could say I last minutes, but I last only seconds, then explode. I buck-thrust forward, wail in my throat, and collapse on her spine as I twitch back to reality.

Beneath me, Dorothy deflates. I want more, Bob. I want so much fucking more. She shocked me free, and I’m clear again—clear as I ever am, as summer-fogged rain. Necrophilic bestiality was not on my bucket list, but it should have been, Bob. There’s something primal about fucking an animal, and something powerful about fucking death, because death is a heartless thief—robbing babies, looting love. Sticking it to him (in a literal sense) gives me a measure of pride.

You fucked me over, death, so I fucked you bloody—or rather, bloodless. You took Erin, so I took Dorothy, and as this slack, gaping, ravaged deer crosses the River Styx, I hope Hades punishes you as you’ve punished me. Erin deserved better than your savage scythe. She deserved more than a cashed-in, kick-the-bucket, hope-you-die-well card. But that’s all you gave her, and you gave me even less.

I snap off the condom and shove it down Dorothy’s throat.

I WILL KILL YOU

Take that, death, my little murder slut. Smell the daisies, count the worms, sleep with the fish, rest in peace.

With a Wound I Must Be Cured

Emma

JAMI: Did you get the hair dye? I mailed it this morning.

EMMA: Yep, thanks, works great.

JAMI: And the burritos?

EMMA: Already eaten.

JAMI: Still moping over the Lord of Coitus?

EMMA: Jami.

JAMI: Emma.

EMMA: Start. Am I Cleopatra?

JAMI: No, you're Eros. Act IV, Scene 14, Line 3047.

EMMA: "What would my lord?"

JAMI: "Since Cleopatra died, I have lived in such dishonor, that the gods detest my baseness." Then I blab, still need to learn that. Do your next line.

EMMA: "The gods withhold me. Shall I do that which all the Parthian darts, though enemy, lost aim, and could not?"

JAMI: "Eros, wouldst thou be window'd in great Rome and see thy master thus with pleach'd arms, bending down his corrigible neck, his face subdued to penetrative shame, whilst the wheel'd seat of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branded his baseness that ensued?"

EMMA: "I would not see't."

JAMI: Shit, what's next?

EMMA: You say, "Come, then; for with a wound I must be cured."

JAMI: Ah, need to learn that, too. Sorry, drunk.

EMMA: Drunk Shakespeare is better than sober Shakespeare.

JAMI: Wanna order a large pie and cry over Titanic?

EMMA: Another time.

JAMI: I'll get garlic bread, too.

EMMA: Another time, Jami.

JAMI: Okay, ray of sunshine.

Litmus Test of Time

Alex

I burn Dorothy to ash. Can't leave evidence, and can't leave proof.

No one questions the flames in the alley. New York is full of hot messes and dumpster fires. This is another lost cause, another fucked-up case. I throw weed into the glow to mask the burning flesh, then hear a "not those damn kids again" remark from above. But Granny Jane won't call the cops, because she smokes, too. I would know. We've partied together. She's upset she wasn't included, but I'll leave a treat on her windowsill, an apology and a bribe—they come as one.

I'm sober-ish, clear-ish, so I leave the alley for the streets. It's after four, and Manhattan stirs. So many cogs in this concrete machine, so many last-ditch efforts to fly. But we all crash here. We all burn out. Like Dorothy. Like Erin. Like Emma. Like me.

Headlights turn a corner, blind me, trap me. I duck into an alley, but it's too late. They're on me. Fists pummel the

dark, feet kick the night, and bruises bloom over my gut. Pain flares, fierce and angry. Faces fade into shadows, and they're everywhere, I'm nowhere, and the ground cracks my wrist as I greet asphalt, dripping copper.

Who are they? What do they want? Well, Bob, the answers to those questions are numerous and varied. White-collar crime attracts as many enemies as friends, and I've made powerful rivals in my brief underworld reign. Most powerful, however, is Eva Maria. If I had to guess through my throbbing agony, I'd say she outsourced these attack dogs. It's a test. Or an end. Either way, if I survive, I pass and she fails.

Another volley of punches, and I retch gore on leather shoes. Yep, Eva Maria. She hires the finest. And those shoes *are* fine, Bob, even drenched with bloody vomit. Kicks to my chest, ribs cracked, heart bludgeoned, and I see stars. I can't faint. If I faint, I die, and I can't die while my twins live. *Think, Osman. Use that fucked-up, sick-bastard mind to think.* I know, Bob. I'm trying. *I'm trying.*

I got a lighter in my pocket, the same I used for Dorothy. More fire? Too repetitive? Nah, we all want to watch things burn. No escape. No retribution. Final as fate's hammer.

I grab the closest shadow and yank them down, ram the lighter up a nostril, then ignite. A wounded-beast shriek pierces the dark. The shadow claws their face, dislodges the inferno, and my lighter returns to my palm. It's been a while since I've fought scrappy, since I dodged bullies in pre-hipster Brooklyn, but muscle memory is loyal as blood. I roll to my feet, sense shifting in the dark, then target noses, groins, and knees with elbows, knives, and fire.

Shadows disperse into people as litter burns. Fire's catching. Feel it, Bob? Flames can never keep secrets. My attackers dress

sharp and sleek, reeking of corruption. Eva, indeed. A woman lunges toward me; I flip her over my hip. A man throws a wide punch; I catch his arm, break his wrist. A fist squashes my diaphragm; I gasp, winded, but I don't need air to slice stomachs and sever arteries.

Crimson sprays the humid air. There are only four left; the others drain on the ground. The first draws a knife; I reverse it into their chest. The second seizes my throat; I break their thumbs, then crush their nose. The third kicks out my knees; I rise up, then head-butt their chin. The fourth, the last, punches my cheekbone with a branch-splitting crack. I grab their arm, swing them down, and smash their face into the ground.

It's over. It's done. I'm alone. I'm free.

Yes, definitely a test. *How do you know?* Thanks for playing along, Bob. I know, because there were no guns. Eva gave me a chance to win, to redeem myself. Or I'm woozy from blood loss. Lots of blood loss. But from where? I survey my battered body: bruised torso, cracked ribs, swollen throat, bloody nose, bashed cheekbone, broken wrist. Ah, it's the wrist: compound fracture, bone sticking out. That's not good, Bob, and I don't do hospitals, not since Erin died.

Back to waiting for Eva, to licking my wounds. I need to get out of here. Sirens on the horizon. Alarms in the sky. Choppers churn the dark, and tires screech over asphalt.

Time to go, Bob.

Always Find a Song

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was a teacher in Scandinavia.

She was in her sixties, and she was reborn: bold, brave, dauntless, unapologetic. After losing her ex-wife, she lost herself, then she found herself again. This better self believed in herself, trusted herself, rising after her worst fall yet to make her own rules, no holds barred. Sexagenarian Georgina survived a renaissance. She was a new woman, and she was the same woman, a *true* woman who wanted more, living in the moment with years of moments as her guide. Her family didn't split. It grew. Her kids were happy and grown. Heartbreak was joy's trampoline. She found light again in life, people, and things.

In line with her new outlook, she sent herself a postcard of Sognefjord, King of the Fjords, in Norway. Those still, glass waters cradled by rugged peaks mirrored her resurrection bracketed by struggle. The sky was blue, and Georgina was

blue-sky thinking in the wild blue yonder.

Norway listened, then told her, "Straight ahead is shortest, but not always easiest," along with, "Only she who wanders finds new paths," and Georgina took the curviest, most crooked path, but it was the right path in the end. She was happy. Her kids were happy. Even her ex-wife was happy—though Mary could still go to hell in a handbasket. (Angst was healthy in small amounts, Georgina believed.)

Sweden agreed and told her, "Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow," and joy had never been so promiscuous. Life was on fire, and Georgina was, too.

Finland chipped in with, "Even a small star shines in the darkness," and though Georgina was a small star, damn, she burned bright.

Iceland knew why Georgina changed, so they told her, "A wise man changes his mind; a fool never will," in approval since they also believed, "Character is always corrupted by prosperity," because poverty of body, mind, and soul forced Georgina to grow.

Last, Sweden revisited and wished her well with, "Those who wish to sing always find a song." By now, Georgina had many songs, many wings, many souls, because she was many different people, had lived many different places, and had learned many different, difficult things in many different, difficult ways. Georgina was a phoenix, and her sixties set her free.

Throttle Down

Alex

Car theft is not my best idea.
Neither is it my worst.

But I don't own a car after Erin died—usually too drunk or broken to drive—and I can't call a company car, because it'd rouse suspicion. Johnny Maker is a good guy and a great driver, but he's also a hustler, and hustling me in this state would earn a pretty, dirty penny in many enemy dens. Hand me over, sell me out. Can't risk it, Bob. Can't trust New York.

So I steal a fucking car.

It's not a fast car, nor a nice car, but it's a good car, and it drives. That's the mistake most make with car theft: They steal a sexy car, and cops catch them in minutes. Wealth sticks out, Bob. It's shiny. It sparkles. Don't want a ride-or-die, crash-and-burn, rack-and-ruin superstar. Can't zoom a Ferrari, Maserati, Bugatti, Pagani, Lamborghini, Mercedes, Aston Martin, Rolls-Royce, or Bentley with their multimillion-dollar price tags and

custom red-apple or silver-bullet paint jobs through Manhattan streets without attracting paparazzi, NYPD, or FBI tails.

No, Bob, you want to steal a Honda Fit, an older one in nondescript blue—the duller, the better. Hatchbacks thwart suspicion, driven by parents, outdoorsmen, or cross-country road-trippers, trunks stuffed with muffins, backs clogged with booster seats, bumpers cluttered with save-the-world stickers. Limited horsepower, subcompact speed. Zero to sixty in minutes, not seconds.

This is the car you steal, Bob: a decade-old, chipped-paint, front-wheel-drive hatchback with dented doors and fingerprint-smeared glass. Not too shitty, or cops will suspect drugs. Not too nice, or cops will suspect fraud. So I find a give-up-on-life-blue Honda Fit with a rolled-down window, hop in the driver's seat, and hot-wire its ignition. She sighs to life, a geezer woken from a nap, and we glide through Manhattan toward escape.

Alarms fade, and sirens race in the opposite direction toward a blood-orange Mercedes I tipped off—anonymous, of course. I got a few tricks left up my sleeves, though my sleeves get shorter by the hour. Yeah, that was weak, Bob, but so am I—dehydrated, hungover, losing fucktons of blood. The car rattles beneath my clumsy commands, and I almost blast through a stop sign. The Honda is a jellyfish, not a jaguar, but we're almost there...we're almost—

We're hit. Out of nowhere. Passenger-side door. Headlights, squeaking brakes, crunching metal, flesh-digging seat belt, whiplash skull. Memories of Erin, of kids, of another crash, of heart-freezing guilt. No, she's gone, they're here, I'm here—I must remain *here*. Static rings my ears. Glitter flashes my eyes. Shock seizes my body, grief lacerates my mind, and anguish

battles my soul.

Erin, save me...

Emma, save me...

No one can save you but yourself.

I know, Bob.

Struggle. Suffering. An eon underwater. A life spent alighting ashes, building bricks from ruins. An existence wasted running up a down escalator. Running from everywhere. Rushing to nowhere. Ruling an empire of corpses, of ghosts. I'm fading, failing, fainting, Bob. But I must hold on. I must set us free.

Who am I?

What am I?

Where do I go?

I unbuckle my seat belt, kick open the door. The other car left. A hit-and-run. Can't blame them. Played that card before. Staggering, stumbling, I find the sidewalk, then sink. The stolen Honda smokes in the street, and I must escape. I must disappear. The gas cap is open. Fate? Or fortune? Wait, that was me, a fail-safe.

I still have the lighter.

So I find a newspaper. Crumple it into a ball. Ignite it. Throw it. A ninth-inning pitch. It strikes true—a bit of luck, one I'll pay for, or paid for—and the car explodes. Heat billows over me, stings my nostrils, waters my eyes. But it's erased. I'm erased. Now, I must drag myself home.

No.

Not home.

Can't go home like this.

I'm bruised, bloody, broken, bleary. Georgina would send me to the hospital, and I can't go to the hospital. I can't, Bob. I fucking can't. Another place, somewhere safe, somewhere

sound. *No, Alex. You can't go there.* But I can, Bob. I can, I must, I will, because there's nowhere else to turn.

I'm almost there already. She'll know what to do. She's smart. She's the sun. Even if she hates my guts, she'll save my guts. Or not. Then everything will fail. Everyone will die. They'll steal my girls, then my soul, then all my work will fall down, *down, down, DOWN.*

Wherein the Worship of the Whole World Lies

Emma

JAMI: You're Eros again.

EMMA: I want to be Cleopatra.

JAMI: Me, too. She's the shit. But you can't always get...

EMMA: Start.

JAMI: Yes, Your Highness. Act IV, Scene 14, Line 3078. "When I did make thee free, sworeest thou not then to do this when I bade thee? Do it at once; or thy precedent services are all but accidents unpurposed. Draw, and come."

EMMA: "Turn from me, then, that noble countenance, wherein the worship of the whole world lies."

JAMI: "Lo thee."

EMMA: "My sword is drawn."

JAMI: "Then let it do at once the thing why thou hast drawn it."

EMMA: "My dear master, my captain, and my emperor, let me say, before I strike this bloody stroke, farewell."

JAMI: "'Tis said, man; and farewell."

EMMA: "Farewell, great chief. Shall I strike now?"

JAMI: "Now, Eros."

EMMA: "Why, there then: thus I do escape the sorrow of Antony's death." Lovely. Shakespeare was a miserable fuck.

JAMI: You have that in common.

Keep Calm and Eat Cake

Alex

She's a block away. My subconscious is a survivor.
My subconscious is also insane.
We're here. Central Park. Beige, blocky building. Oh, c'mon, Bob, I'm handing this one to you. I hate asking for help, but I need help, because my girls need help, so I'll bite the bullet and text.

ALEX: Help.

Silence. Quiet. The tick-tock of madness. A clock. Or a bomb. Or a nuke itching to burst.

EMMA: What happened this time?

Honesty is the best policy, Bob...unless it's company policy.

ALEX: Cocaine orgy, then I fucked a dead deer, murdered assassins, stole a car, and exploded said car.

More silence. More timekeeping clickety-clack.

EMMA: You fucked a dead deer?

ALEX: I fucked a dead deer.

EMMA: Seriously?

ALEX: Unfortunately.

Another pause. Break. Lull. Panic. Attack.

EMMA: Come up.

Thank Satan's asshole.

The entrance dings, unlocked. I climb the stairs to Emma's apartment—can't risk witnesses in the elevator (everyone's lazy this early). She waits at the door. Her eyes don't widen. Her lips don't purse. She doesn't gasp, scream, cry, or retreat. No, all Doctor Emma Rose Claire does is cross her moon-pale arms.

"You are a fucking idiot," she says. "An abysmal, disgusting, repugnant imbecile."

"Please don't use big words while I'm bleeding," I rasp.

Emma helps me inside with an over-rough touch. Her apartment is her mirror. I didn't want to enter, because I knew I'd never exit—mentally, at least. Now that I'm here, I settle to dangerous levels, a snail stuck in the mud.

It's warm, cozy, comfortable: *home*. Creamy walls and soft-white counters. Ivory couches and jade-green rugs. Lanterns, candles, and fairy lights in every window, on every sill. Book-

shelves stocked with rainbows. Everything is gentle, nothing like me.

"You need a doctor," Emma says, voice tight.

"You are a doctor," I say.

"Not that kind of doctor."

"I can't go to the hospital."

"Erin?"

"Erin."

She sighs. "This isn't fair. If you die—"

"I won't," I say. "Just...fix me."

"You're lucky I'm a genius."

"I'm lucky you're *kind*."

"You've lost more blood than I thought." She shakes her head, then resigns. "Bathroom first. You're filthy, and we can't risk infection. Remove your clothes, then get in the tub."

"I like you bossy," I say.

"This isn't a joke, Alex. You're fucking with me, and you're fucking with my life. But I still have a heart, unlike you, so strip then get in."

You're right, Bob, her tone arouses me further. Emma sees my reaction. I blush and shrug. What the hell, we all love a bathtub scene.

Blood wisps into water as Emma fills the tub: blood from me, blood from assassins, and blood from Dorothy, too. Wow, this was a fucked-up night. Let's set the bar here and no lower. We must reclaim some shred of dignity.

"Why up so early?" I ask, yearning for normal.

"Shut up," Emma says. "We're not lovers, nor friends, so quit the chitchat."

"Whatever we are, whatever I fucked up, I still care about you. That's why I asked, but I'll shut up if you prefer."

"I prefer."

"Okay."

She removes a washcloth from a cabinet, lathers it with soap, and scrubs my limbs. The water is too hot, her strokes are too harsh, yet despite her aggressive bedside manner, I relax. *I trust her*, I realize, then fear trails realization. I trust her completely, and she trusts me, too. Why else help an injured criminal before dawn?

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm desperate. Maybe I should tell fear to fuck off and dick doubt to next year.

"Sorry," I whisper. "Sorry for everything. I'm bad at life and worse at love, but I do love you, Emma. I love you so much it hurts. That's why I run, because it hurts, because I'm afraid, because I'm a sheep in wolf's clothing, and I can't handle it anymore."

Emma scrubs harder, but her resolve softens. A small smirk quirks her lips. "It's a wolf in sheep's clothing, dumbass. And I love you, too. I shouldn't, but I do. You're a pain in the ass and a hot fucking mess, but I can't help it. No one sees me or fears me like you do. You make me feel *strong*. And I should make you wait, but I can't waste time angry. Life is too short to stay mad for long."

We're terminal now. Love is soul cancer. The voiced "I love you" spells render stakes in our hearts, nails in our coffins.

"Though you're not off the hook yet," she adds.

"Good, punish me hard."

She slaps me with the washcloth, and I grin.

"So," I say, "why up so early?"

"Heartburn," Emma says, looking away. She scours my torso, and I wince. "Damn, hotshot, they beat the shit out of you." She prods my stomach, chest, shoulders, her fingers seeking

red and purple blood, bruises, broken bones. “Contusions, whiplash, dehydration, tracheal trauma, cracked ribs but no internal bleeding, left cheekbone hairline fracture, left wrist compound fracture. At least your nose stopped bleeding. You’re a mess.”

“And hungover.”

“And a dumpster fire.”

“You wanted adventure.” I lean forward to kiss her, but she washcloth-slaps me again.

“I make the rules now,” she says.

I recline in her tub as she sanitizes my wounds.

“What will it take?” I ask.

“Hmm?”

“To win you back.”

“I’m not a fucking prize.” Emma drains the tub and motions for me to towel off. Wincing, I oblige.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” I dress in her fathers’ clothes: René’s plaid sweatpants and Raiden’s orange “Keep Calm and Eat Cake” T-shirt. Not my style. Not anyone’s style. The outfit is a horrendous affront to fashion, but I don’t complain, because Emma’s here, talking to me. Even if everything hurts and bleeds, I can handle it now. Fine, Bob, go ahead and gag. We both know this won’t end well.

Emma leads me to her kitchen. We sit on stools as she rests my left wrist on the island. “Sure you don’t want a hospital?” she asks.

“Positive,” I say.

“Then I must set this.” She motions at my bone, piercing flesh, cracked chalk skewering swollen fruit. Blood drips on the granite, awaiting my reply.

“Okay.”

"It will hurt."

"Most things do."

Without ceremony, she grabs my arm and snaps it into alignment. Bone disappears beneath skin. Red speckles the counter. Pain thrums through me, excruciating and consuming. A cry escapes my throat. I bite my lip, fall forward, brace against the island.

Emma doesn't wait for my recovery. She stitches the wound, then splints my wrist.

"Jesus fucking Christ, woman," I rasp. "You could have warned me."

"I did warn you," she says.

"With a countdown or something."

"Didn't realize I had to handhold you."

"Where'd you learn this, anyway?" I point at the stitches and splint, now done.

"I took a few medical classes for fun."

"For *fun*?"

"I get bored." She shrugs. "That's all I can do for you. The whiplash should disappear in a few days, and the wrist, ribs, and cheekbone should heal in about six weeks. I don't know about your throat, and these are all guesses. I'm no physician. Oh, drink water. Lots of it. And eat greasy pizza."

"Why?" I ask.

"For the hangover. You're still dehydrated. I'll get it."

Emma removes two soggy slices from her fridge, microwaves them, then slides me a plate along with a glass of water.

"Eat," she commands. "Drink."

"Emma, you don't need to—"

"Shut up and eat, Alex."

"Yes, ma'am."

With aching bites, I chew the food, finish the water, and drink a second glass. Emma won't speak till I'm done.

"Happy?" I ask.

"No," she snaps. "You said you needed time to commit, then you show up at my door, bloody and broken, begging for help. How the hell is that fair, Alex? You can't treat people like this. As I told you, love is selfless, not selfish, and you're a selfish fucking asshole. Yes, I love you, but dammit, you make love difficult."

This has gone on long enough. (I hear your complaints, Bob.) So I do what I should have done after she told me to fuck off: explain, bare myself, reach out to let her in. What we do and how we act in our darkest hour matters most. It's easy to smile in sunshine, but it's hard to smile in storm, and I've always laughed in the rain.

"You're right, Emma, I do," I whisper. "I complicate and catastrophize everything. I've tried to change, to learn, to grow, but I'm stuck, because I'm afraid. You scare me to death."

"Me?" Emma asks. Her brows crinkle; her face softens. "Why me?"

You'll recognize this part, Bob, though I'll improvise for authenticity. Every good performance requires a degree of spontaneity.

Nursing my broken wrist, rubbing the bruise over my scar, I confess: "Because I love you, Emma, and I lost the last person I loved, but I can't lose you. Erin was wonderful, but you're a wonder, and I want to build forever together, if you'll let me grow strong enough to deserve you. That's why I can't commit, because I'm not strong enough yet."

Emma's lips wobble, at the brink of a sob, but she holds it together as I cannot. "You're wrong, Alex. You *are* strong

enough. There's great sadness in you, and from great sadness comes great strength. Relationships aren't perfect. They aren't pristine. Life is messy, and people are messier. I don't want perfection. I want passion. I want to figure out life *together*, to grow *together* and strengthen each other. Don't commit to forever. Commit to tomorrow."

Tears brim my swollen eyes, and I nod. "I can do that, commit to tomorrow."

"Me, too," she says.

"Can I kiss you now, or am I still in timeout?"

"You're always in timeout."

Regardless, she kisses me, and everything else fades. This is true love, Bob: messy, angry, clumsy, confusing, balancing on a needle while the world falls away. I was right to fear, but I was wrong to run. Yes, it scares me, but panic is power's compass. Cut through the forest to reach the beach on the other side.

Emma breaks the kiss and says, "I didn't plan on you, Alex Osman. I didn't plan on you at all."

I didn't plan on Emma either. God knows I didn't, and Bob knows I didn't. But what we don't plan shows our strength. When Erin died, the kids showed me mine. I didn't think I could raise them alone, but we're never really alone, are we? It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes an army to steal them away. Maybe Emma is the same. Maybe I can rise to the occasion, despite fear. Or maybe I'm delusional again, manic and romantic, as Erin often complained. But I'm a dreamer, so I must dream.

"Sorry I'm not a parent-approved hipster with a beard, man bun, and vegan cheese," I breathe between our lips.

Emma chuckles. "You'd look terrible in a man bun."

"O ye of little faith."

"Don't tell me you've tried it."

"I'm from Brooklyn," I say. "It's a tax write-off there."

"But you're in Manhattan now," she says. "No man buns allowed."

"My family still lives in Brooklyn. They forced me."

"I doubt anyone could force you to do anything." She shifts backward, crosses her legs, and returns to professor mode: crisp, clean, sharp, neat. "Speaking of which, what the hell happened tonight? And no deer details, please."

That's okay. Dorothy doesn't kiss and tell, and gentlemen don't kill and tell.

"I broke," I say. "Again. Then one of my associates sent assassins after me. I killed them all, stole a car, got T-boned, escaped the stolen car, and blew it up to cover my tracks."

"Are you serious?"

"Dead-deer serious."

"That's fucking disgusting." Emma shakes her head. "Why assassins?"

"Because I fucked up," I say. "Played a card too soon, and my associate doesn't trust me anymore. Though I suspect it was a test."

"What now?"

"Lie low, wait for her to contact me." You know, the usual summer blockbuster drama.

"Why not leave the country?" she asks.

"The job pays well...*very* well," I say. "It could buy freedom."

"You can't buy freedom."

"I can sure as hell try. And it's not freedom for me."

"For Ana and Dee?"

I nod. "After all they've been through, they need this...and I need this. I must give them something after all the nothing."

This is their legacy.”

Emma sighs. “I’d tell you to be careful, but you’d fuck careful’s corpse.”

“Yeah, I did—”

“Don’t want details.”

“Got it.”

We pause, silent, and watch the sunrise. Streets steam with dawn, and traffic buzzes through Manhattan. It’s morning, and I have two days till redemption. I can do this. I *must* do this. Nothing happened before, because nothing happens till it’s meant to happen, and it’s meant to happen now. I can feel it, taste it, smell it. I wasn’t ready before, but I *am* ready now. There’s pattern in everything, pattern and purpose. Chaos yields to control, and that’s fate, Bob. Gravity runs the cosmos. Life is too powerful to not hold meaning.

Emma smiles at me, and I smile back.

Then her face melts with agony, and I burn.

My Ghost Is Memory

Erin

Dear Sandy,
*I love the boy you buried.
 That boy was soft, sweet, gentle, sensitive. He wasn't
 afraid of being wrong, and he always knew the right thing to say.
 But you killed him. Slaughtered him. Drove a stake into his heart
 and strung him up to dry.*

*I don't know this new boy, this new man, this new you. He scares
 me. Repulses me. Disgusts me. Horrifies me with his dogmatic ideals
 and rigid, bigoted, hardheaded ways. You used to be tender. You used
 to be kind. But now, you're money, driven by numbers, a skeleton
 puppet of New York's venomous bite.*

*I want you back. I want that Brooklyn boy with big eyes and small
 fears, the boy who laughed in the rain and sang to the sky. I miss
 him. I mourn him. I keep dreaming about him. At least he lives on
 in Ana and Dee, as I will, too. They have the best of us.*

Find that boy again, Sandy. If not for me, then for you, because

*you'll need him after I'm gone, and someone else might need him,
too.*

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Bleeding Song in Your Heart

Alex

One ambulance. Two loves. Two losses. A year ago and today.

Sirens, flashes, beeps, antiseptic. Too many people, a school of fish, drowning beneath grief's endless sea.

Emma collapsed. Erin did, too. I'm in two moments in time, bridged by trauma, bisected by pain.

"Where are our girls?" Erin weeps.

"With Georgina," I whisper. "Shh, love, it'll all be okay."

"It was never okay, Sandy."

I love the boy you buried.

We barrel through city streets. Red pulses the windows. Sirens screech louder. Tires squeal over pavement while the ambulance cuts through daybreak.

I clutch Emma's limp hand. A mask hides her face, helps her breathe. Nodes freckle her collarbone, monitor her heart. Tubes and an IV branch from her limbs, follicles of death and

fate. She's pale as snow, eyelids fluttering like wind chimes.
Hold on, Emma. Hold on for me.

"Hold on, Erin. Hold on for me."

"I held on as long as I could, but it's time to go. Everything hurts. I need it to stop. Don't make me stay. I always thought we'd be forever, but nothing's forever, so let me go."

"I can't. I won't. Come back to me, sweetheart. Don't leave me alone. I can't do this without you. I need you, Erin. I need you so fucking much."

"No, you don't. You don't need or miss or want or love me, because you aren't grieving me. You're grieving what we were. You're grieving a lie."

Sobs. Sharp turns.

Equipment rattles. Monitors chorus disaster.

You used to be tender. You used to be kind.

"Sir? Sir, can you help us with her details?" an EMT asks me.
Paramedics circle Emma, vultures around roadkill.

"Emma Rose Claire," I rasp.

"Is she your wife?"

A hard swallow. A bloodless heart. "No, we're...friends. She's a professor at Columbia."

"And you are?"

"No one important."

"Your name, sir?"

I should tell the truth. Might save Emma's life. Never know who owes me one...or five.

"Alex Osman," I say.

The EMT blushes. "You're the CEO of Apex?"

"Yep." And unfortunately still in plaid sweats with a "Keep Calm and Eat Cake" shirt.

"We're losing her," a paramedic calls.

Erin's monitors riot with alarms.

"She's fading," the EMT says.

Emma's monitors swell with shrieks.

We reach the hospital. They rush Erin toward Oncology, and I follow, jelly-limbed.

We park. There's a flurry of machines, bodies, medicines, frantic shouts, and desperate pleas. Paramedics rush Emma through the ER toward the CCU, the Cardiac Care Unit. I don't understand what's happening, but everything's happening, and everything's too much. It's six-thirty in the morning, and the day is already too long.

"Sir, we must sedate her," a nurse tells me.

No, she can't sleep. She might never wake. "Please...?" My question trails off. There is no answer, no solution. This is hell. There's only one door down.

"We need your permission," the nurse presses.

I look at Erin, a shell of her storm: ashen skin, gaunt limbs, sunken gut, strength leeches. Illness rusts her burgundy hair, stringy and greasy with struggle. Her river-blue eyes mute to gray, and she nods at me, my rock till the end.

"Will it save her?" I rasp.

The nurse shifts, uncomfortable. "It will buy us time."

"Okay, do it."

"She's in cardiac arrest," a doctor calls.

A flock surrounds Emma and yanks me away. I flail, thrash, kick against their grip, but they ignore my sob-laden shrieks and usher me into the waiting room.

Time passes. Too much. Too little. Then a nurse finds me as I try to escape.

"Sir, you must wait here," the nurse says. "You're not related, nor married, so you can't follow her in."

"What's happening to her?" I sob.

"Sorry, sir, but we can't share that information. Can you give us a little background on what you were doing tonight? It might save her life." He eyes my injuries, then scans me up and down. "Were you both in an accident?"

"Let me see Emma, and I'll tell you."

"I can't do that, sir, but if you give me details, it might save her life."

Her life? She's dying? No, not again. Never again. I can't do this. I can't love again, lose again, live again only to burn alive. My hands quiver, body shakes, lips sputter, muscles tense as the nurse clutches my shoulders.

"She's down," the nurse says.

Erin lies still. Too still. A shadow of the end. This isn't her end, but it will be soon. I can't save her from her demons, and she can't save me from mine.

"Sir, we're here to help you and her, but we must know what happened," the nurse says.

"She..." I start, but I stop, shivering with fear.

"It's okay, take your time."

"I walked into a door."

"A door?" the nurse asks, skeptical.

"A door," I say. "I sleepwalked into a door and broke my wrist, among other things." That's a story with enough embarrassment to throw him off.

"It must have been an aggressive door. Then what?"

"Then I went to Emma's, and she helped me."

"Why didn't you come to the hospital?"

A slice of truth: "Memories of my late wife."

Sympathy softens the nurse's face. "Oh, I'm sorry."

He's not, but he tries. He sees too much tragedy to care

about each one. I should know; he owes me. Apex forged him a pharmaceutical license to lift drugs from storage. Nurse Jerry Forbes: pretentious name, pathetic name-holder. But he doesn't recognize me yet. Let's change that, Bob.

"Jerry, I know it's against protocol, but please. I love her, and I can't lose someone I love again," I say.

The nurse squints, peers at my bruised face. Nothing, nothing, then a rush of fear. "You."

"Me. How's that license? Renewal time?"

Jerry chews his cheek and swallows hard. He's a different person now, a better person, humbled and obedient. We're all many different people at once, aren't we, Bob? Trying on personas like flashy, tacky hats.

"My apologies, Mr. Osman," the nurse says. "I didn't recognize you at first. How can we help you today?"

"Emma," I say. "She complained of heartburn, then fainted. Why?"

Jerry breathes deep, contemplates his Hippocratic Oath, then ignores Greece and all their wisdom. "Emma has a heart condition: trigeminy. It led to ventricular tachycardia and cardiac arrest tonight."

Dread ice-washes my own heart. "Wait, what?" I croak, throat dry.

"Trigeminy is a triple heartbeat, an arrhythmia. If kept under check, it can be harmless, but under stress, anxiety, or excess caffeine and alcohol, it worsens into heart palpitations and heart attack. Emma also has a leaky valve, and this exacerbated her condition."

"Emma had a heart attack?" Because of me. I was her catalyst. Guilt weighs my soul with iron chains. "Can you fix her?"

"Surgery is an option," Jerry says, "but it's invasive, and

recovery isn't always complete. We can manage trigeminy with lifestyle choices, and that's what we recommend to our patients. We only operate as a last resort."

"She almost died," I shout. "Isn't that a last fucking resort?"

"She'll be okay. This has never happened to her before."

"How many fucking heart attacks must she have before you fix her?"

"As I said, Mr. Osman, surgery is invasive, and Emma has been managing her condition for years."

But she didn't tell me.

And I fucked everything up.

I was the stress. I was the knife.

So I should leave. I should leave the hospital and never return. Every moment I'm with her, I put her at risk. And I almost do. I swear I almost leave, Bob, but she pulls me back.

Again.

"Mr. Osman? Dr. Claire would like to see you," a doctor announces from the CCU doorway.

I leave Jerry with a blackmail glare and follow the doctor through the door, down the hall. Everything is bright, blinding, sterile, inhuman. Patients whimper through desiccated bodies. Nurses fawn over sweat-beaded foreheads. Doctors scratch diagnoses on clipboards with frowns. Tissue-burdened family and friends emerge, sniffing, from rooms.

I tried to run, but I returned in the end. Erin wafts through corridors, nightmares on the wind. I clench my jaw against crippling panic, force my feet to follow, to trudge through leagues of spasmodic terror. Then I cope as I coped a year ago, initiated into single-parenthood with a volcano and an avalanche.

This is anxiety, not reality. I'm not afraid anymore. Everything

will work out. Stop the panic. Sever the spiral. Focus only on what's next. Every step I take is another step forward. It's a process. I'll learn. Look how far I've come. I must become a rock for them, for my purpose, for Ana and Dee. They are my strength. They reflect my power. I can do this. I will do this. I must do this. I am doing this.

It sounds crazy, because it is. But we all need a little crazy to find the right path, and this is the right path. This is the only way. Despite pain, panic, horror, terror, I must move forward, and I must fly free.

"We're here, sir," the doctor says. "We defibrillated her heart, and Emma's stable." She waves me inside a room, then closes the door behind me.

"Hey, hotshot," Emma whispers.

I was wrong, Bob. I can't fly free. She shackles me to the floor, and I sink into her prison. I should be strong. I should be steady. But I can't pretend everything is okay anymore, because nothing's ever been okay, and nothing will ever be again, so I melt, wither, crumble, collapse.

I crawl to Emma's bedside and curl near her on the sheets. She strokes me while I bawl into her shoulders, soothing me with a hum, settling me with her calm. Tubes and wires pierce her flesh, and I howl harder, louder, as I realize what I've done.

"This is my fault," I wail. "This is all my fucking fault."

"I know you have a villain complex, but you're not that powerful," Emma teases.

"I stressed you out. I gave you a heart attack," I ugly-cry.

"Life stressed me out, and I've been this way for years. Don't flatter yourself. Your ego's not big enough to give people heart attacks yet." She winks, but I still bawl.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask. "I could have...I would

have—”

“You could and would have done nothing, Alex, because this is something you cannot change.”

“I should go.”

“You won’t.”

“I’m a risk to you,” I say.

“And I’m a risk to you,” Emma says. “I know your crimes. Call it even. But you don’t stress me. You excite me. Where’s the fun in tiptoeing through life? I’d rather bushwhack my way through, you know? Find something new, something strange, something daring.”

“It’s too dangerous. I can’t lose you, too.”

“But you *will* lose me. You’ll lose everyone and everything. It doesn’t make you broken. It makes you human. Life is about shared experience, shared trauma, and shared healing, but you won’t live at all if you don’t let me in.”

“I can’t save you,” I say.

“I don’t need saving,” she says.

“I couldn’t save Erin.”

“And she couldn’t save you.”

“I’m a burden.”

“We all are.”

I claw at my hair, still damp from Emma’s tub, and exhale frustration into her hospital gown. “Why, Emma? Why love a monster? You know what I’ve done. You know what I’ll do.”

Emma shimmies toward me. On our sides, we curl as fetuses, two halves of a heart. “We’re all monsters in some way to someone. But we’re all human, too, and the human part of me loves the human part of you.”

Find that boy again, Sandy. If not for me, then for you, because you’ll need him after I’m gone, and someone else might need him,

too.

I didn't know the Brooklyn boy survived—the kind, soft, sweet, weak, little boy—but he did, and he's here, near Emma on the bed.

"I don't deserve you," I whisper into Emma's black hair.

"You deserve as much as we all do," Emma says, "whether that's everything, or nothing, or something in between."

"Don't die. I won't survive." *He* won't survive, the boy Erin missed.

"Death is a gift. Without it, there's no life."

Ninety-Nine Lies

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was a travel writer in Africa, and this was her favorite version of herself, her favorite person and favorite path.

She was in her seventies, and she was at peace: happy, content, fulfilled, satisfied. Septuagenarian Georgina was brave and free after being bold, broken, steady, strong, and she liked this Georgina best. She creaked and squeaked, but scars made the person, and Georgina earned them all. This was before the nursing home and all that jazz: a regression. This was also before Alex Osman fell apart, before Erin left and Emma arrived, before he babbled to his imaginary friend (Georgina worried but didn't judge), and before she fell in love with his beloved girls, gaining a second family: a correction. Life has a way of fixing its course, if you listen to the market, to the magic, and Africa was pure magic.

Georgina sent herself a postcard from Namibia's Skeleton

Coast. On tawny sand, sapphire waves beached whale and seal skeletons onto a shoreline ribbed with dunes and bones. She would have stayed forever if forever were a place.

Namibia told Georgina many things, but only one thing in words: "The wind does not break a tree that bends." So Georgina bent, then swayed, then danced in the oven-hot breeze. She never wanted to leave, but Africa called from all her countries, and Georgina left to listen.

Sierra Leone told her, "Quarrels end, but words once spoken never die," and Georgina still suffered from immortal words, spoken in anger or pain, but she walked on.

Ghana told her, "The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people," and Georgina wept, because she saw this in every street, brothers fighting, sisters screaming, families driven apart by hate. Too much hate. Love makes the world go 'round, but hate ignites the sun.

Zimbabwe told her, "If you can walk, you can dance. If you can talk, you can sing." So Georgina danced and sang herself to sleep in every country, under every sky.

Botswana told her, "Ninety-nine lies may help you, but the hundredth will give you away," though Georgina told all her lies long ago. Each stole a piece of her soul. She still kept secrets, but secrets aren't lies, and these secrets ensured she would survive.

Last, Mother Africa told her, from the continent as a whole, "The path is made by walking," then, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Georgina walked away decades, sprinted away years, was alone, smothered, toxic, together, and now, she earned her peace.

Then came the nursing home.

Then Alex called.

Then Alex and Erin fought.

Then Alex lost Erin.
Then Alex lost himself.
Then Alex made Bob.
Then Emma came along.
Then Georgina fell in love with Donna.
Then everything fell apart.
Again.

Let Him That Loves Me Strike Me Dead

Emma

JAMI: WTF? YOU'RE IN THE HOSPITAL?

EMMA: I'm fine. Calm your tits.

JAMI: I'll calm my tits when you calm yours. Raiden called me. He told me about your heart attack. Are you okay? Wait, stupid question, of course you're not. I can send extra burritos, double your foundation order. I'M NOT GOOD IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS. TELL ME WHAT TO DO, DOC.

EMMA: Relax, Jami. This isn't an emergency. Let's run your lines.

JAMI: Fuck Shakespeare. I'm worried about you.

EMMA: As I said, I'm fine.

JAMI: Are you sure?

EMMA: I'm sure. Who am I? Cleopatra? Eros?

JAMI: You're a bunch of people this time, all the guards. Act IV, Scene 14, Line 3111. "I have done my

work in, friends: O, make an end of what I have begun."

EMMA: Second Guard says, "The star is fall'n." First Guard says, "And time is at his period." All say, "Alas, and woe."

JAMI: "Let him that loves me strike me dead."

EMMA: First Guard says, "Not I." Second Guard says, "Nor I." Third Guard says, "Nor anyone."

JAMI: This is not helping.

EMMA: Then go jerk off or something.

JAMI: Jerk off to what? Heart attacks? Shakespeare?

EMMA: He's got nice lips.

JAMI: You really are sick.

Fear Finds a Way

Alex

They release Emma at noon.
“She’s fine,” the doctors say. But I don’t trust doctors, same as I don’t trust myself, same as you shouldn’t trust me. None of us could save Erin, and none of us are ready for the end.

First order of business: I drop Emma off at her apartment. Her fathers meet us there. They fuss over her, worried sick. I explain the hospital visit, and they eye my clothes—*their* clothes—but don’t ask.

Once in safe hands, I leave Emma for Times Square, for my penthouse, for home. I enter, and Georgina glares at me, then pities me, then wraps me in a crooked hug, spiderweb hair in my eyes and mouth.

“You’re a mess,” she says, pulling away.

“So I’ve heard,” I say, then start for the shower. No time to rest, nap, eat, or play. I shoo Ana and Dee away with shame in

my chest and ready myself for another cursed day. You can't escape fear, Bob. We all must face fear in the end. *Jurassic Park* was close, but fear finds a way, not life. Life rarely finds a way, unless it's a way free. Death is the stubborn one.

EMMA: Hanging in there? Or still falling apart?

I shower and dress before I reply. At least clean, I feel capable. Mostly. Or not. It's another facade, one of many, designed to animate my long-dead bones.

ALEX: I'm always falling apart. Sorry. For everything.

EMMA: Can't blame yourself. My heart was always broken.

Clever girl. Clever, passive-aggressive, genius girl.

"Daddy, we wrote you a story," Ana says. She and Dee hover in my bedroom doorway, small bodies leaning against the frame.

"Not now, girls, I have to—"

What do I have to do? A million things. I have a million things to do, Bob: follow up with Apex about the fake Empire News plan, wait for Eva to contact me about the real Empire News plan, lock and load blackmail, hack search histories and emails, move spies into position, pretend I give a shit about employees, sign off on NQA's flashy new features, and build fucking bombs.

But there are Ana and Dee.

Sometimes, two are more than a million.

"Never mind, come here." I pat the silk quilt. The twins rush to my sides, snuggle me, then litter me with cracker crumbs, sticky fingers, and threadbare stuffed animals.

Ana hands me their story, stapled together by Georgina. On the front, there are stick figures of Ana, Dee, me, and Georgina, with a blur on the side—that must be Erin. My mouth dries, and a lump lodges in my throat. Their mother is reduced to a smear. That's how they remember her, as a breeze, as a blur. She left when they were little, and she's gone before they grow.

"What's it about?" I ask, choking back tears.

"Read it, Daddy," Dee says. She points at what I presume is the title, scrawled in a cuneiform only they understand.

"Help me out, sweetheart. Daddy's tired."

"Why are you tired?"

A long list of regrets.

"It's called *The Cheesy Sun*," Ana says.

"Cheesy?" I ask.

"Yes," Dee says, as if this is obvious. Her tone reminds me of Erin.

"I thought the moon was cheese," I say.

"No, Daddy, it's the sun," Ana says. "It melts."

Fair enough.

"Okay, then," I continue, "*The Cheesy Sun*, by Ana and Dee Dunne-Osman." I turn the page to an orange scribble. "It was hot in New York—*very* hot."

"That's not how it goes," Dee says.

Picky and stubborn, like me.

"How 'bout you read it to me, baby girl?" I ask. "That way, it'll be right."

Dee plucks the story from my hands and begins. "The sun was mad."

"Because it had no food," Ana says.

"It burned all the cookies," Dee says, "and it was cranky."

"So it found some nachos."

"And melted some cheese."

"Then Georgina made salsa."

"And it was happy."

I relate to the sun.

"Beautiful, girls," I say with a soft clap.

"We also wrote a story about a butt," Ana says.

I should correct them, say it's improper, but fuck it, let 'em be. They're kids. We're all kids. We should worry more about bombs and less about butts.

"We wrote a story about a pasta superhero, too," Dee says.

"A pasta superhero?" I ask.

"Yup, day or night, pasta delight."

I chuckle and clutch them close.

"What happened to your wrist, Daddy?" Ana asks. Her river-blue eyes widen with concern. She frowns at the splint as if it's a snake, ready to strike.

"Nothing important," I say. "It's broken, that's all."

"Does it hurt?" Dee asks.

Like a hurricane in hell.

"Not much," I say.

"And your face, why is it purple?" Ana points at my bruise.

"I broke my cheekbone, too."

"You should be more careful, Daddy," Dee says.

"You are right, as always, sweetheart."

Georgina appears in the doorway. A smile tightens her wrinkles, and warmth floods her onyx eyes. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Osman, but you have a visitor."

Panic returns. "Are they armed?"

She rolls her eyes. "No, she's not."

"You let someone in?"

"She insisted."

"You can't let people in, Georgina. I have—"

"Friends in low places, yep, but she's a special case, sir."

Georgina disappears; in her place fades Emma. *Emma*. Here in my home, as my home: inky hair, rose scent, ivory glow, blue-violet eyes. She points at the story and says, "*The Cheesy Sun*, loved it."

Dee beams. "See? She gets it, Daddy."

"Who are you?" Ana asks.

"Ana, it's impolite to—" I start.

But Emma interrupts me. "Emma. Emma Rose Claire."

"That's a pretty name," Ana says. "I'm Ana, and this is Dee."

"Thanks. Your names are pretty, too."

"What do you do?" Dee asks.

"I'm a professor, a teacher."

"That's cool. I like teachers."

Georgina reappears in the doorway, cheeks flushed and smug. "Girls, come help me with the dough. I'm making cookies."

"Cookies!" Ana and Dee screech, then patter after Georgina. Damn her and her matchmaking obsession.

The door closes behind them. It's only Emma and me. She lingers by the door. "You look like shit."

"I feel like shit," I say. "But I shouldn't complain. You're the one who had a heart attack." Guilt pierces me, and shame twists knives in my chest.

Emma shrugs. "Another thing to cross off my bucket list."

"You're insane."

"That's your brand." She crosses the room and perches beside me on the bed. "Are you okay, Alex? Be honest, for once."

"I'm never okay, Emma." I wince. Too needy, Bob. Too needy and weak.

"Relatively, then. On a scale of dead deer to murder party,

where are you at?"

Despite all the fear, all the panic, I laugh, then laugh harder, then double over in fresh pain. My broken ribs flare with agony, but it's worth it for this, for *her*.

"Somewhere in the middle," I rasp.

Emma nods. "Slow and brutal torture stage, got it."

"You know me too well." I reach into a nightstand and remove a flask from its drawer.

"Bedroom stash, classy. Bourbon? Gin?"

"Vodka. Want some?"

"Sure."

We drink side by side, pass the flask till it's empty. Pain subsides, but panic rises. Who are we? What are we? Where do we go? We're at the edge of eternity. What we choose now decides fate.

"I'm about to do something stupid," I slur.

She giggles, half drunk. "You're always about to do something stupid."

"Thanks for your confidence."

"I *am* confident. You're always stupid, but you always succeed."

"You need to work on your compliments."

"You need to work on your everything."

"Can't argue with that." I fall back on the bed in a puff of pillow. "I fucked up, Emma. I fucked up bad."

Emma reclines and lands beside me. We lie together, elbows kissing. "Be specific," she says. "You fuck up a lot."

"Apex, NQA, my whole fucking empire," I say. "I built it for my girls, to support them. But it's become something ugly."

"Most great things do." She rolls toward me on the bed and tucks herself under my arm. "You have a good heart. A sick

mind, but a good heart. You'll figure it out. You always do."

"No, I don't. Not in the right way."

"Right is relative."

"Like dead deer and murder parties?"

"Exactly."

We let silence breed, hold each other like anchors.

"Whatever happens next, I'm here, Alex," Emma whispers.

"I'm always here."

"You can't make that promise," I whisper back. Erin promised the same.

"I can, and I am. Shut up for once and listen."

"I'm listening."

"When this is over, I want your family to be my family...if that's what you want, of course."

I turn toward her, confused. "Wait, what?"

"Ana and Dee," Emma says. "I know I just met them, but sometimes you just know. I want them. I want you. And I want to share them with you."

Tears sting my eyes, soothe my bruises, brush my lips. "Emma, you don't need to—"

"I told you, I *want* to. You know I'm infertile. You know I want kids. You know I want *you*, Alex. I want you and yours."

"I...I can't...I don't—"

"Then don't," she says. "Family is found, and we found each other."

"Damn you, Emma Rose. Damn you, and bless you."

My Star Is Dust

Erin

Dear Sandy,
This hospital has become our home. The doctors say I don't have long now. I'm relieved, but you aren't.

That's your flaw: You hold onto things too long. You don't let go of the broken or dying. You cling to rot, hang onto decay, find the spoiled amid the special. You aren't losing me; I'm leaving you, so let me go. Whether in death or life, I'd leave you the same, because we are that broken, dying, rotting, decaying, spoiled thing in the mud you can't let sink.

Our marriage is toxic. Our love is septic. Infection spread through our relationship, turning smiles to frowns. You can't see this, because cancer overshadows the underlying truth: We were never forever. We were never meant to last. The further I fall, the more I realize our failure. I thought, like you, that we were true. I thought we were fire, but we were only ash.

I love you. I hate you. I'm done with you, and you're done with me,

too, even if you won't admit it. I don't want to hurt you—or maybe I do. Maybe I want to hurt you so hard you never return. Maybe I want to stab you deep, sever grief at its roots so it never has a chance to grow.

Remember who I was, not who you wanted me to be. I was the demon in your heart, not the angel in your head. Remember the truth, not the lie, not the fantasy contrived from hardship. Struggle made us who we are. Poverty toughened our minds. Cancer froze our souls. My death will set you free.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Bye-Bye, Babies

Ana & Dee

We miss Mommy. We miss Daddy, too.
Daddy is sad. He won't play with us anymore.
His face is always red. His eyes are always shiny.
He cries a lot. Sometimes, he yells. We cry and yell, too.

Pippa watches us. She says Daddy needs time. She says Mommy loves us, but she had to go. We don't understand. She said she would never go. Pippa says Mommy was sick. Daddy looks sick, too. We don't want him to go.

Pippa says it's okay to be sad, but we're sad a lot. Daddy is sad, too. He's sad, and he's mad. We want Daddy to read, but he only works. Pippa makes us cookies, but we don't want cookies. We want Daddy.

Sleep is scary. We have nightmares about Mommy. Daddy says they're not true, but we remember the screams. They screamed a lot, then Mommy left.

Daddy's always busy. We want to hug him, but he shakes too

much. Pippa hugs us, but she's not Daddy. We want Daddy back. We want Mommy back, too. We look everywhere for her, but we can't find her yet.

Sin Has Teeth

Alex

Day passes. Night falls. Morning breaks. One day till the end. Tomorrow, everything changes or crumbles.
We were never forever.

I know, Erin. Fuck, I know.

So I wait for Eva. A power play. I must look in control. Can't contact her first, or all goes to shit...again. I need this job. I need freedom. I need escape. But you know this, Bob. You know this and the rest, but you don't know it all. Neither do I, because I've buried the stars.

Remember the truth, not the lie...

My phone rings. My phone fucking rings, and I can't find it, Bob. It's not on the counter, in the couch, on the coffee table—there! Jesus fucking Christ, I forgot it on a stool.

"Hello?" I answer. My voice is hoarser than usual from the crash: tracheal trauma, or whatever fancy phrase Emma used.

"Osman," Eva says.

Finally.

This is it, Bob.

This is the end.

My death will set you free.

"Eva," I rasp.

"Before we begin, let me be clear. I'm not happy with you. If you use Lily again, I'll go to Brooklyn myself and end your whole fucking bloodline. Got it?"

"Got it, and same. Threaten Ana and Dee, or any of my family again, and I'll return every favor."

"Glad we understand each other. Now, for the job. I don't trust you, but I need you, and you survived my test."

I was right, Bob. No guns, one chance. The assassination was less attempt, more assessment, a final application.

"And you waited for me to contact you," Eva adds. "Good boy."

Cold bitch. "I know the game, love."

"But I make the rules. You survived, so tomorrow's a go. Good luck, Osman. If you succeed, my offer stands."

Five billion dollars.

If I succeed.

If I survive.

"I will," I say. *I must.*

Eva doesn't hear me. She's gone. Again.

It's the endgame, Bob. Last game. Last chance. A one-in-a-million chance, but half a chance is all I need. Pawns in place. Board and bombs locked and loaded. It's time for stalemate, checkmate, or devastating defeat.

Freedom Demands Sacrifice

Alex

Measure twice, cut once.
 But *the best-laid plans of mice and men...*
 See Robert Burns for the end.

Regardless, my plan clicks into place, ticks an explosion, and redemption barrels forward. After two mayhem-soaked weeks, today, we bomb a building, Bob.

First: meetings (because it wouldn't be corporate without fucking meetings). The report by Deja, Jorge, and Li Jie about the news station's weaknesses, drafted under the guise of a prospective client, serves as a decoy. This morning at Apex, I announced company-wide bonuses and raises, given early for good behavior. Money erases suspicion around the "client" responsible and the reason behind our partnership. Now, at Empire News, bigwigs meet in conference rooms to discuss solutions to our report. All fat fish swim in one plump pond, because if we're gonna do this, Bob, we're gonna do it right.

Second: spies. In Empire News, I replaced Eva's people with my own. My crew move into position, sliding ribbon-tied packages under cubicles, bespoke bombs built by your favorite psychopath, yours truly. These ne'er-do-well employees know what to do. We blackmailed them last week with emails and search histories, tucking X-marks-the-spot building maps into their murder favor. *Plant Tracy here* (we named the bombs for convenience), *and your boss and/or spouse won't hear of your fraud, falsification, fetish, infidelity, embezzlement*—choose your favorite crime. A few refused; those few died. No room for morals when freedom's at stake.

Third: scan. My spies retreat, their job done, and from Apex, I open my burner laptop. A program loads, a building blueprint of Empire News overlaid with blinking, blue dots: bombs. Explosives rest on structural pressure points, ready to detonate, for me to pull the trigger...or press "ENTER." (The twenty-first century lacks drama.) Everything checks out, every bomb in its place. Blackmail and bribes, fear and fortune, are the only tools you'll ever need.

Fourth: explode. It's not hard to bomb a building, after you get over the massacre bit. We're killing shitloads of people, but most people are shitty. No? Okay, Bob, then tell me the last time you walked down a busy sidewalk, through a crowded subway, or across a mobbed street, and thought to yourself, "Wow, look at all these nice people, smiling sunshine, helping me out, carrying me along." Never, that's when.

Those pricks are the people we're killing: Joe Dick, Mary Twat, Karen Bitchface, Chuck Fuckwad. We're bombing those who shove you out of their way, who steal your seat and cut you in the coffee line. We aren't killing nurses, doctors, teachers, or heroes. We're killing assholes with three first names who

are too good for the normal brew and instead order a salted-caramel, nonfat, soy latte with sugar-free syrup, cinnamon in a snowflake pattern, five pumps of vanilla, and three pumps of hazelnut, served at exactly one hundred and twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit. *This* is the enemy, Bob, the fucker who speaks in a fake accent, holding up the line of single parents and working-class people with a bourgeois, kitschy attempt at elitism. Well, guess what, John Paul George III? The rich don't shop at Starbucks.

That escalated.

Back to fourth: explode. Bomb the building. Slay those responsible for driving Eva's daughter to suicide. Harassment is brutal; I've suffered myself. But killing a company? For a second, I hesitate—for your sake, not mine. I made my decision long ago: revenge without regret.

I press "ENTER."

The building falls.

Empire News burns.

Floors collapse against each other, a vertical domino from sky to street. Windows shatter in glassy hail, and smoke gusts through naked frames. Debris rains down, and flames lick the fallen titan. First come screams. Next come sirens. The wreckage is a chimney, puffing ash into summer heat. This is where guilt should spark, where shame should stir, where I should cry about what I've done and all I've harmed. But I don't feel guilt or shame. Not here, not now. All I feel is five billion dollars rising from the ruins.

Outside my office, employees panic. Televisions blink on. Phones flash with updates. "How could this happen?" echoes from every mouth. Within minutes, there are answers. News channels report gas leaks. The lines burst at structural weak-

nesses, and a spark set off a chain reaction. A terrible tragedy, one I planned. Empire News was old, not up to code, and its errors hid the planted bombs. No one will suspect foul play, because the building was foul from the start. The plan follows through, and it's a success, if success includes slaughter. It usually does. Wars are won with blood, not bandages.

My phone rings. Eva. Money. Freedom. Future. Done.

"Hello," I say.

"Good work, Osman," Eva says. "The money is yours, freedom for the taking."

I check my accounts, and it's there: five billion dollars. With a few commands, I launder then wire the funds to offshore accounts, special nest eggs with added security. We did it, Bob. We fucking did it. The risk was worth the reward.

"Though I should make a confession," Eva adds, her words a serpent. "I have no daughter, but you have two, and they were still inside."

The Visiting Moon

Emma

JAMI: I need you.

EMMA: I'm busy.

JAMI: Your heart okay?

EMMA: Good as new.

JAMI: Then give me a minute. Opening night is tomorrow.

EMMA: Fine, one minute. Who am I?

JAMI: Cleopatra again, your favorite. Act IV, Scene 15, Line 3227. Antony starts. "The miserable change now at my end lament nor sorrow at; but please your thoughts in feeding them with those my former fortunes wherein I lived, the greatest prince o' the world, the noblest; and do now not basely die, not cowardly put off my helmet to my countryman--a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquish'd. Now my spirit is going; I can no more."

I WILL KILL YOU

EMMA: "Noblest of men, woo't die? Hast thou no care of me? Shall I abide in this dull world, which in thy absence is no better than a sty? O, see, my women, the crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord. O, wither'd is the garland of the war, the soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls are level now with men; the odds is gone, and there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon." You die.

JAMI: I die.

EMMA: Took you long enough.

JAMI: Sympathetic as always.

EMMA: Gotta go, talk later. Good luck.

JAMI: You, too.

Snakes and Ladders

Alex

Terror dries my tongue. “Inside?” I croak. “What are you talking about?”

“Your daughters were inside Empire News,” Eva says. “Ana and Dee went on a tour. Georgina took them, at my request.”

“No...w-what...how d-d-did...”

“You wanted freedom, so I set you free.”

No.

NO.

I lost them. I can't lose them. I won't survive their loss. They're my girls. They're everything. All went to plan except the plan itself, and the plan was for them, and if they're not here...if they're dead...if they're gone...if it's my fault...

Panic drowns me. Fear, dread, shock. Nerves, alarm, anxiety. Fierce love morphs into fierce horror, and I crumble beneath chaos. Sweat, chill, shiver, shake. Tremble, tingle, crack, sway.

Heart races, charges. Breath stops, stutters. Chest clenches, tightens, pounds. Muscles cramp, spasm, flush. Hot, then cold. Hurt, then numb. Weak, dizzy, I choke, gag, stagger, fall.

On the floor, I curl. A ball. A bomb. My bomb. My girls. They're all I have left. All that's left of Erin. I can't breathe, think, move, act. No control. Nausea bubbles up my throat, and I retch onto carpet, silver-threaded carpet, the shine of greed. Mountains stifle me. Oceans smother me. New York suffocates me with an impossible lie: *You can win*. You can, but every victory is another's defeat.

Defeat. Dead. My girls. My beautiful, sweet, baby-doll girls. They're gone, and I'm done, and it's over, and I lost. *I lost*. I can't. I won't. I must. I'm not—

Check, Alex. Check before you break.

Yes. Right, Bob. I'll check.

I crawl back to my desk, wipe vomit from my lips. "I want to see them," I growl into the phone. "I want to see my girls."

"They're gone, buried in the wreck," Eva says.

"No, they were home, they were safe, they were—"

"Did you hear me, Osman? They're gone. *Dead*. Let go of them. You can leave New York now. You can come with me."

"Come with you?" I scoff, gag again, heave, choke again. "Oh, I'll come with you, Eva, then I will kill you in the most brutal way imaginable, and we both know the limitless nature of my fucked-up, sick-bastard mind."

"Listen for a moment. You're grieving, that's normal. But I've done you a favor, one you might not understand yet. Your kids were a burden, so I removed that burden. This job was a tryout. I have no daughter, as I told you, but you have two, so they were your strongest incentive. I wanted to see if I could trust you with bigger jobs, and I can. You're too good to let go, Osman.

You passed my tests. Nobody passes my tests.”

She used me, Bob. She forced me to kill my kids. Never trust a snake. Freedom corrupted me, America’s filthy dream, and Lady Liberty fucked me bloody. There was no daughter, no suicide, no revenge. All those people died for nothing. Ana and Dee died for *nothing*.

No.

I won’t believe it till I see their faces.

I won’t rest till they rest in peace.

“I kept my word,” Eva slithers. “You have your money. Shall we make more?”

I let her wait. Seconds tick. Rage replaces anguish. “No,” I whisper. “I will never work for you again.”

“You’re alone. Where else will you go? What else will you do?”

“I will find them, then I will find you.”

My Story Is Done

Erin

Dear Sandy,
 This is my last letter. This is my last goodbye.
 People come into our lives for a reason, when we're ready. They change us, and those changes remain, guiding us toward or away from paths and purpose. We become the people we love. Even when they change, when you change, when the people you were die out and the people you are live on, you carry each other into the future as different people to different places.

Love never dies, same as hope. It lives on in memories, in moments, in a tear-choked chuckle at a café's postcard with the dream you shared stamped on the front: Italy, Ireland, Scotland, Greece. You both said maybe one day, then one day maybe, then maybe became never with death or divorce. But Scotland's still there, and you'll always share that dream.

You'll always carry that love, that loss. You'll always cry at the beach over washed-away footprints in the spot where everything was

perfect for one instant, for one infinity, where the sky sang for your one moment of song. You don't wish it never happened. You wish it didn't hurt. But it does hurt, and it will hurt forever, because you tried, you failed, you shot so high to fall so far, because you were brave, they were brave, love is brave, and bravery costs pain.

So bare your scars with pride. You loved. You lost. And you will live on, because you're lucky. Love is lucky. Loss is lucky. Both teach us how to fly, to fall, to grow new wings, to seek new and better skies. Find a new star to seek. Find a new sky to soar across. Find a new pair of wings, and fly yourself free.

A part of me will always love you, and a part of you will always love me, but you must find new parts to strengthen, to nurture, to grow. You're not done yet, my love. I hope you live long enough to forget me. Or if you can't forget me, forgive me for leaving. So goodbye, Sandy. Goodbye, and good night.

My tears are dry.

My eyes are fire.

My heart is ash.

My soul is dusk.

My mind is rain.

My gut is rage.

My love is forever.

My loss is eternal.

My ghost is memory.

My star is dust.

My story is done.

Let me go, and let her in.

All my love, always,

Erin xoxo

Lies Make the World Go 'Round

Alex

The heatwave breaks. Storms subside, air clears.

New York is just as dirty.

Johnny Maker drives me toward the carcass of Empire News. Outside the company car, caution tape and officials force pedestrians and rubberneckers back, *back, back* from tragedy, but they can't stop the horde. A fleshy sea overtakes authority, and bedlam ensues, clogging the streets.

It takes an hour to reach the skyscraper's grave, and we gain entrance with my hastily forged papers. Today, I'm Lenny Jordan, FBI contractor. NYPD cops scan my face, sunglasses, scar, and decide I look jaded enough for government work. Johnny lets me out and drives away, as ordered. Can't have him witness whatever comes next.

This is my last goodbye.

There's nothing left. The building is a cavern, a concrete and metal cemetery. Debris curves into the earth, a smoldering pit

of wreckage. Blood wafts on the wind, and ash snows onto paramedics and police.

"Ana," I whisper, "Dee." Then louder: "Ana, Dee, Georgina!"

My cries fade among those crying the same: for employees and bosses, for parents and children, for family and friends, for colleagues and loved ones and first dates and last chances. *I did this. I killed them all.* And I should care, but I don't, because my stampeding heart can only focus on one thing through the gory haze: the hope of a five-year-old answer, a chorused soprano reply.

"Ana, Dee, Georgina!" I repeat. And repeat. And repeat, *and repeat, and fucking repeat.* They don't respond. No one does. Everyone here is gone. The wreckage is a tomb, and we are its watchers, pallbearers at funerals with empty coffins and haunted crypts.

A part of me will always love you, and a part of you will always love me...

I wait an hour. Scour the ruins. Sift through remains. Nothing. *Nothing.* But they don't feel like nothing. They feel like everything. I can't live without them, but I'm still alive, so they must be, too.

Maybe Eva was wrong. Maybe they escaped. Maybe they started here then left for home, for a museum, for anywhere else. They're five. They have short attention spans. That's it. They didn't, couldn't, wouldn't have stayed. Georgina took them. That's right. She took them, and they're safe.

I call Georgina. No answer. I call her again. Same sterile voicemail: "Leave a message after the—"

Shit.

Next, I call Deja. Apex grieves the Empire News disaster, but they do not grieve too much, nor too hard. They have early

bonuses and raises, after all. Has she heard from Georgina? No, she hasn't, but she's concerned about my girls. I tell her not to worry, don't call the police, I'll find them, and hang up before she suspects my hysteria.

After, I call Donna, but she hasn't heard from Georgina since last night. Mido, my cousin, can't hear me over his kiln. I want to call Emma, but I can't call Emma. I won't risk her heart. She could have another attack.

Last, reluctant, I call my mothers.

"Mom? Ma?" My voice cracks, and they know.

"Darling, what's wrong?" Ma asks.

"Sweetheart, we're here," Mom says.

No. *No*. I don't deserve them. *I* did this. *I* killed Ana and Dee. *I* fucked everything up to give them everything.

"Have you spoken to Georgina today?" I ask. Best start slow, ease into tragedy.

"Today?" Mom pauses a moment. "Yes, she called this morning with the girls."

Hope revs in my chest, and I let it redline. "What time this morning?"

"Hmm...it had to be...around ten? Eleven?"

Relief floods me, but I hold it at bay. "Are you sure? Are you absolutely positive?"

"It was during our baking show, so ten earliest, eleven latest," Mom says. "The girls look well, darling. Visit Brooklyn soon."

"I will, I will," I say, frantic. If Georgina called, if Ana and Dee are safe, then where are they? "Did Georgina mention their plans? Work's been crazy, and I couldn't catch her call."

"Central Park, I think," Ma says. "Yes, Central Park. The girls had lots of energy and wanted to run around."

Central Park? With Emma? Makes sense. Then Eva lied.

They weren't in the wreck. But why lie? Why crucify me with catastrophe? Nothing makes sense. Well, money does, but nothing else.

"Great, thank you," I breathe into the phone. "Sorry, I've been paranoid after Erin."

"You've had a tough year, love," Ma says.

"Be gentle with yourself," Mom says.

I slaughtered an entire company. I don't deserve gentle, nor anything kind.

But I say, "Okay," to pretend I'm still their youngest, sweetest, quietest son, the *Brooklyn boy with big eyes and small fears, the boy who laughed in the rain and sang to the sky*. Damn you, Erin. Come back to me.

I hope you live long enough to forget me.

"Ana and Dee remind me of Erin, you know," Mom says, "before she got sick. They have her eyes and laugh, but they have your fire."

Let me go, and let her in.

"Yeah, cancer was hard on her," I say, distracted. Must get to Central Park. Must find Georgina. Must understand why Eva lied, why Georgina fled, why everything went so right only to turn so wrong.

"Cancer?" Ma asks. Concern laces her voice.

"Alex, honey," Mom says, worried, "Erin didn't have cancer."

Dissonance

Alex

Erin didn't have cancer.

It doesn't land. In the background of my mothers' call, music purrs through speakers: dissonant violins, heated drums, a guitar that squeals and shrieks.

"No," I rasp. "No, she told me...there were doctors...and chemo..."

"Then she was sicker than we realized," Mom laments.

"Maybe you should talk to someone, sweetheart," Ma says.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask. "Erin died. She had stage-four pancreatic cancer, and she *died*. Why would you lie about that?"

"We didn't lie, Alessandro," Ma says. "Erin did."

"You don't remember?" Mom asks.

I don't, and a piss-sticky sidewalk is not the place for a gut-wrenching flashback. "I can't do this now. Call you later. Love you."

“Wait, Alex—”

I can’t. My girls are all I have, and they’re all I am. I stop searching for what I want and instead search for who needs me. They need me, and I need them. They’re my home, and I am theirs.

I take a cab to Central Park. It’s a beast to get lost in, and I’m fucking lost in all fucking ways. Georgina’s here, somewhere, but I’m nowhere. Flocks of hippies, hipsters, jocks, cheerleaders, singers, artists, performers, and drones pace the park, sprawled on blankets, towels, hoodies, shawls, celebrating the heatwave’s end, murmuring about Empire News—worried, but not too worried, because the sky is treat-yourself blue.

I search for half an hour, upset organic picnics, overturn study groups, but they’re not here, Bob. They’re not here, and I’m losing it...again. Can’t call police. They’d take Ana and Dee away. *If they’re here. If they’re alive. They are alive. I’m alive, so they’re alive, too*, I remind myself for the umpteenth time.

There. *There*. Papery skin, silver hair, messy bun, graceful hunch. It’s her. It’s Georgina. But she’s alone. Only her. No girls. I sprint toward her, ignoring brow raises and eye rolls. C’mon, people, this is New York. You’ve seen much weirder shit than a panic jog.

Grabbing Georgina’s shoulder, I whirl her around. “Where are they?” I snarl.

She doesn’t flinch. “Mr. Osman, this is not the place for this conversation.”

“Where are my girls?!” I roar. Heads swivel, but no one moves.

Georgina clears her throat and says, “Excellent delivery. Try for more inflection next time.”

The crowd relaxes, because we’re actors, this is a play, life is a stage, everything is fake.

"This way," Georgina murmurs. We head to the edge of Central Park, toward a sidewalk.

"Where are they, Georgina?" I ask, desperate. "Where are Ana and Dee?"

"Alive."

I sink to cement, collapse, sob. No one judges—as I said, this is New York. I thought they were gone. I thought I killed, ruined, destroyed them. I thought I saved them only to slay them in the end. I thought everything was for nothing, but they were here all along. It's gonna be okay, Bob. Whatever comes next, it's gonna be okay. Ana and Dee are alive. *Alive*. I can handle anything else.

Standing, I wipe snot from my nose and ask, "How?"

"Me," Georgina says, annoyed. "A woman called this morning and suggested we tour Empire News. I didn't like her tone. She reminded me of Nancy from the nursing home, and that woman was a nutcase. There was something else, too, call it gut instinct or mother's intuition. So I did what the woman said, took the girls to Empire News and waved to security cameras, but we left through the emergency elevator five minutes later."

Eva didn't lie. She thinks they died. Or does she? Nothing makes sense, but my girls are alive, so nothing else matters.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" I ask.

"She can track our calls," Georgina says. "That woman found me once. She won't find me again."

"Smart."

The nanny shrugs. "I've lived many lives. I know lots of shit. Some of it comes in handy."

"Where are my girls now?" I ask.

"With Emma," Georgina says.

"But her heart—"

“—is fine. She’s happy. Healthy. Worry about yourself, sir. You look awful.”

“Take me to them.”

“Of course.”

Georgina leads me to Emma’s nearby building, up the elevator, and into her apartment. Candles flicker on granite counters. Fairy lights twinkle in sunny windows. Jade-green rugs carry vacuum marks, and disinfectant wafts from ivory couches. It’s clean, comfortable: *home*.

Emma’s here. My girls are not. She lifts a blue book from a bookcase, then leans on the island, flipping it open.

“Emma, where are Ana and Dee?” Georgina asks, voicing my concern as I stall.

“In my bedroom, playing,” Emma says.

Her voice is sweet, but there’s a new timbre, a sinuous scrape. Well, of course there is, she survived a heart attack. Black hair frames her smile, the burgundy streak more pronounced, clumps of whitish gel near her ears. Her blue-violet eyes swirl like a river, and freckles sweep her pale nose. Odd. Don’t remember freckles. She must wear foundation.

“Thanks for your help,” I say. “I’ll bring them home.”

“They’re happy, let them play.”

“I need to see them, Emma.”

“They’re busy, Alex. Relax.”

I don’t relax. “I thought they *died*,” I shout at the last person I ever thought I’d shout at. “I need them *now*.”

“I need them, too,” she says, twirling the burgundy strand.

I peer closer, and something starts to click, something I wish would stay buried. “You look different.”

Emma chuckles. “You really don’t remember, do you? And here I thought I was the fool.”

No, I don't remember, but I remember I don't want to remember.

"I never thought this would work," she says, "but you both are thick as bricks."

Georgina eyes me, and I nod toward the bedroom, urge her to find the twins.

Emma stops us with a glare. "Move, and you'll never see them again."

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, confused and horrified.

"Taking back what's mine."

Break Me Now

Alex

Erin didn't have cancer.
You really don't remember, do you?
 "Emma, what's going on?" I ask.

"You always pick the crazy ones, Sandy," Emma says. "I would know. I'm one of them. Well, two of them. Make that three."

Oh, shit.

"No..." I breathe. "No, it can't be."

Georgina stands beside me, frozen. We're both stunned, shocked. It's impossible. Inevitable.

"You're Erin...you're alive," I say.

"I'm Eva, too," Emma says—Erin/Emma/Eva says. Let's go with Erin.

"But...how?"

"Remember, Sandy. Remember what happened."

"You had cancer, then you died. You were in the hospital. All those visits to Oncology...I'm not making this up."

"We didn't go to Oncology. We went to the Psych Ward. You took me away from my babies, and I'll never forgive you for that."

Then I see it: that face, that expression. It is Erin, and it was Erin all along. Erin's river-blue eyes are Emma's blue-violet eyes are Eva's blue-fire eyes, three ghosts of the same. That burgundy streak hints at the rest. Her hair isn't black; it's red. The whitish clumps aren't gel; they're temporary dye to become Eva. She's three women, all brilliant, and I'm only one man, no match against them all.

"Your heart...your infertility...are they true?" I ask.

"No," Erin says. "Lies and performances. Funny how far you get with threats—but you know this, and I learned from the best. Though it seems you lied to yourself, too. You erased me, replaced truth with something softer. And you thought *I* was insane."

I never denied insanity—you know this, Bob. But how deep does insanity go? Fear prickles my mind. I must see my girls, hug them, kiss them, tell them (and me) it will be okay.

"We belong together," Erin says. "You want me as Erin, as Emma, as Eva, as everyone I become. It's time to heal. Take me back. Let's become a family again."

Not till I remember. "Fill in the gaps," I say.

"Only you can do that. You wouldn't believe me. I'll tell you what happened today, though. As Eva, I told Georgina to take our girls to Empire News. From there, I would have rescued the kids before the bomb, faked their deaths, and ran away with them, then returned for you, if you proved trustworthy—hence, faking their deaths, even to you. It was the perfect cover to start a new life together, but Georgina didn't listen. Yet she brought them to me in the end, so it all worked out, didn't it?"

"The money—"

"—is fake. I've learned some new skills in our time apart."

Five billion fools. All for nothing. All for *fucking* nothing. No freedom. No release. No legacy. No future.

"I want to start over, Sandy," Erin says. "Eva was bait. Emma was a second chance. You left me as Erin, so I became Emma, but if you leave me as Emma, I can change again. I love you, I want you back, and I want our family back. *Please*."

"Why?" I ask, mind wild, heart frantic. "Why go to all the trouble? Why not just talk to me?"

"My thoughts exactly, but you filed a restraining order against me. So I became another person to win you back, and I won back you and the kids. I told you before, I want your family to be my family, and you agreed. Family is found, and we keep finding each other. You can't escape me. You'll fall in love with me all over again. You always do, and you always will."

Then why did I leave her? Why a restraining order? I must remember, Bob, or I'll make the same mistakes. Don't look at me like that. You know I'm unreliable. I lie a lot, even to myself.

"The letters," I say. "You wrote letters telling me to let you go. Why write them if you want me back?"

"To let *Erin* go, to let *Emma* in," Erin says. "Erin's death was Emma's birth. I *am* a different person, Sandy. You are, too. We both changed, but we still love each other. Why do you think I was insistent on dating you? How do you think I knew *exactly* what to say? I moved fast, because I know you, I want you, and you want me, too."

"But you mentioned cancer in the letters."

"Because you brainwashed yourself with that lie."

"And Raiden? René?" I ask.

"Actors," she says. "Hollywood washouts. I hired them, and

Jami helped with makeup and dye—plus facial prosthetics for Eva. Lily was a lie, but then again, aren't we all?"

"Your doctorates? Your small-town home?"

"Lies and bribes."

"How'd you pay for it all? We were poor, painfully so."

"Seems we bloomed apart. I had time, loads of it, because of the restraining order, so I took a few coding classes."

This isn't the Erin I remember. This isn't true love. No, this isn't the Erin I *want* to remember, and we were never true. I brainwashed myself to replace psychopathy with cancer.

Memories nag, knocking to enter.

I'm not ready yet.

I can't handle truth.

I never could.

So I grieved a lie.

"Let me see Ana and Dee," I say.

"Please," Georgina begs. She's been silent thus far. This is all news to her. As my girls' nanny, she was with them, not us. Georgina knew times were tough, but that's all, and she let me hang onto Erin's dream till I was strong enough to let go.

"I need them, Erin," I whisper.

"I need them, too, Sandy," Erin whispers back. "You don't want to take this to court, with Empire News and all. They'd never grant custody to a felon."

Shit. Dammit. Fuck it all to hell. There goes her last nail in my coffin. Erin set me up. The job was bait; the bombs are blackmail. She'll reclaim our kids with its threat. *No.* She can't have them. They're mine. *Mine.* I fought for them once, and I'll fight for them forever.

"They'd never grant custody to a ghost, either," I say. "You're dead. No papers, no nothing."

“Erin is dead, but Emma Rose Claire, tenured professor at Columbia University, is an excellent guardian,” she says. “I have new papers, credentials, everything. You erased me, but I resurrected myself as the better option. The court will side with me, and I’ll adopt the girls. You have no leverage. But if you want to play, let’s play, Sandy. You always did like games.”

“They didn’t recognize you,” I realize.

“What?”

“Ana and Dee saw you, and they didn’t recognize you. It wasn’t only makeup, Erin. Kids should recognize their mother, but you’ve changed so much that even they don’t know you.”

Erin bares her teeth: rabid, feral. “They’re *my* children.”

“They’re mine, too, and I’m taking them home,” I snap. “Goodbye, Erin. I can finally let you go.”

“No. As I said before, move, and you’ll never see them again. They’re wearing bomb belts.” She tilts the blue book forward and reveals a hollow within its pages. A red button blinks on the detonator.

Fear flashes.

Panic flows.

Then memories return.

Simon Says

Ana & Dee

“**M**ommy, we’re hungry,” we say.
 “Then get some food,” Mommy says. She’s still in her pajamas. We’re not supposed to be in our pajamas. If we don’t get dressed, Mommy yells at us. We’re also not supposed to yell, but Mommy says grown-ups can yell. Mommy yelled a lot today. Her hair is angry. She is angry, too.

“There’s no food left.”

“Ungrateful little shits.”

“Daddy said that’s a bad word,” we say.

“Fuck Daddy,” Mommy says. “You want food? Go buy some.”

She throws fancy paper at us. We don’t move. We’re not supposed to move unless she says we can. We’re very good at Simon Says.

“What?” she asks. “I thought you were hungry? Go to the store, and make yourselves useful.”

“We need a grown-up,” we say.

Mommy smiles. It's a not-nice smile. "Then you better find someone else. Go. Scram. Get out."

We cry. We're not supposed to cry. Mommy hits us. She slaps our cheeks. We cry harder. Mommy hits us harder. We try to stop, but we can't. She grabs our arms and squeezes till our fingers feel funny.

"Here are your options, you little fucks: Buy food at the store, or shut the hell up," Mommy says. She lets go, and we stop crying. We try to sniff away our boogers, but they fall out of our nose. Mommy throws a towel at us, and we wipe our faces. Then she takes the towel and whips our bottoms. It hurts, but we don't cry. We learn things, because we are smart.

"We'll tell Daddy you're not being nice," we say.

"Tell Daddy, and I'll spank you so hard you won't shit for a week," Mommy says. "Got it?"

We nod. We don't go to the store. We're very hungry. Daddy comes home later, but he can't help us. He keeps falling over. We're supposed to be asleep, but we listen at our door.

"Drunk again?" Mommy hisses. She sounds like a snake. "You're a loser, Sandy. A drunk, pathetic loser."

"Anyone would be...married to you," Daddy says. His voice is funny. He talks weird. The words are gooey. It scares us. We snuggle together.

"Fucking prick." Mommy spits at him and kicks his foot. That's not nice. "Wet your dick in another whore tonight? Pounded another underage student in a college bar? Trying to relive the glory days you never had?"

"No." Daddy breathes loud. We don't like it. "I hired...a nanny."

"A nanny?" Mommy laughs. It's a not-nice laugh. "How the fuck can we afford a nanny?"

"Apex is doing well."

"So you replace me? I'm their *mother*. They're *mine*. You can't take them away from me."

"I'm not replacing you," Daddy says. "I'm getting you help."

"I don't need your fucking help," Mommy says. "You tried to help with doctors, with hospitals, but they all did nothing. Know why? *You're* the crazy one, Sandy. *You're* the freak."

"They didn't help, because you didn't let them help."

"Bullshit. You're the one who needs help. Look at yourself, Sandy. You're a fucking wreck."

"Hence, the nanny."

"What's a nanny?" we whisper to each other. We don't know, but we're not supposed to whisper. Mommy hears us and yanks open the door.

"Bed, *now*," Mommy says. She looks scary. We want to cry, but we're not supposed to cry.

"Let me see them," Daddy says. "Let me see my girls."

We want to see Daddy, but Mommy says, "They're asleep."

We're not asleep. Mommy lied. We're not supposed to lie. Mommy kicks us when we lie.

"We miss Daddy," we say.

Mommy kneels. She blocks us from Daddy. He can't see us. He can't see her pinch our arms.

"Go to sleep, or you'll stay in the closet tomorrow," she says. "*All day tomorrow.*"

We don't like the closet. We don't fit, and Mommy doesn't feed us on closet days. Daddy doesn't know about closet days. He doesn't know about anything. But we can't tell him, or Mommy will hurt Daddy, too.

"Go to bed," Mommy says.

We go to bed.

But we don't sleep.

* * *

It's morning, and we're sick. We're not supposed to be sick. Mommy is mad.

"Blow your nose, you disgusting shits," she says.

We try, but we can't. It's hard. We start to cry. We're not supposed to cry. We're supposed to learn. We did learn. But it's still hard, and we still cry. Mommy hits us. We cry harder. She shoves us into the closet. We yell. We're not supposed to yell. She kicks our stomachs. We can't breathe, so we stop.

"Listen here, you little fucks," Mommy says. "You're gonna stay there all day. Know why? You cried. You don't cry. You're not babies anymore, and only babies cry."

"Daddy cries," we say, sniffing.

Mommy snaps. She screams in our faces and shakes us till our ears ring. "YOUR FATHER IS A FREAK, AND YOU ARE, TOO! SHUT THE FUCK UP, AND STAY THERE!"

She slams the closet door and bangs on the other side. It's loud. We're scared, but we don't cry. We won't cry anymore. She stops banging. We cuddle together and stay quiet all day. Daddy will be home soon. Maybe. But Mommy changes with Daddy. She tells us to keep her secrets, or she'll break our wrists. She broke our toes after we told Daddy we were hungry. That hurt a lot. Wrists are bigger than toes. Wrists will hurt more.

The closet opens. It's dark outside.

"Piss, then sleep," Mommy says. She looks tired. She always looks tired.

"What does 'piss' mean?" we ask.

Mommy slaps us. "Go fucking pee-pee, then go to bed."

"Can we eat first?"

"No. Pee, then bed, or no food tomorrow, too."

We pee. We go to bed. We're thirsty. We're hungry. But Daddy doesn't come home, and Mommy doesn't sleep. We can't sneak into the kitchen, so we shiver till we dream. They're not-nice dreams.

* * *

"I hate you," Mommy says.

We scream, but Mommy covers our mouths. She's in our bed. Her knees hurt our tummies. It's night, but she's awake. Daddy's asleep. He's back, but he can't help us. He snores too loud.

"I hate you," Mommy says again. "Before you, I was beautiful. After you, I'm broken. I gave you my stomach. I gave you my tits. Now, I'm loose and flabby. That's why Daddy fucks those whores, because *you* ruined me. You destroyed me, Ana and Dee. You're monsters, and you took *everything* from me. One day, I'll take everything from you, too. I hate you, and I always have."

She moves her hands from our mouths to our throats and squeezes. We don't cry. We don't yell. We're not supposed to cry or yell.

Mommy stops. We cough. She hits us. We hold our teddy bears tight.

"Go back to sleep," she says. "If you don't, I will kill you. If you tell Daddy, I will kill him."

She leaves. We don't cry. We won't cry. We're not supposed to cry. We sleep. We miss Daddy. We miss Mommy, too. She used to be fun. She's not fun anymore. She's not nice, either.

But Mommy says love hurts, and this hurts, so we know she loves us.

A Sour Song

Alex

I remember now. I remember everything, Bob. I split my soul to survive. Grief was easier than betrayal, than treachery, so Erin died in my mind, and I grieved her lie instead of reality.

Erin was sick—in mind, not body. She never had cancer; she was psychotic. I was, too, but I hid my demons better, and I always loved my kids. She did not, and I didn't trust her. I didn't feel safe in our home.

We were poor. Dirt poor. I worked two full-time jobs, and we scraped by, but poverty damaged us both. I coped. Erin didn't. I offered her beer, bourbon, cigars, cocaine, but she slapped me away each time. My methods were toxic, but I was functional. She was not, and neither were our girls.

Erin neglected them. That's the cold, hard, honest truth. I couldn't admit it, couldn't understand it, and forgave it with "we're busy," "we're tired," and "she didn't mean to" excuses. It

was not right, but she was their mother. She was supposed to care for them, to love them, to hold them tight when life grew scary. Instead, Ana and Dee suffered. When I'd return from work, I'd find them starving. Erin was a stay-at-home mom, but she hadn't fed them all day. The twins' ribs herringboned their chests, and their cheeks sunk into their skulls. Those cheeks should have been fat, puffy, round, rosy, but they were gaunt as a corpse.

There were bruises, too. Bruises I ignored. Kids played rough. Bruises were normal. I didn't suspect Erin, because I couldn't juggle life without her. I'm not domestic—you know this, Bob—and in a drowning world, you need each other to stay afloat. But poverty was her catalyst. She cracked after we married, and I kept praying the Erin I loved would return, because I *did* love Erin. I loved her so fucking much—when she was Erin, not an error.

We argued through the years. Neighbors called the cops several times. Then Erin would switch on her charm, composed and sweet, and they'd leave smiling, apologizing, with "sorry for the trouble" farewells. I couldn't trust the police. They'd side with her, not me, and the girls wouldn't survive with her. On Erin's hard-to-find good days, she was decent, but on her all-too-common bad days, she was violent, dangerous. Ana and Dee would suffer with her as they suffered for years, and I needed it over. I needed it done.

Then came our last argument, and it was a blowout. I found a fingerprint bruise on Ana's arm, and Dee sprained her wrist, because "Mommy pushed me, and that wasn't nice, Daddy." Here was my proof. Here was validation. I asked Georgina, recently hired, to take the kids to my mothers'. I told her, "Wait till I call, till *only* I call. Don't answer if it's Erin." Georgina

nodded and didn't question the request. She heard a few of our fights, and she trusted me, because she loved my girls, too.

Once they left, I cracked. "How could you?" I shouted. "Those are our *children*. How could you do that to them?"

"You're crazy, Sandy," Erin said. "Pulling stories out of your ass."

"You *hit* them. I saw the bruises. You've hurt them for years, and I should have stopped you sooner, but I couldn't prove it. Now, I can, because they can talk, and they told me."

"They lie."

"They're four. They don't know how."

"I'm not perfect. No one is."

"I'm not talking about perfection. I'm talking about abuse. I'm talking about neglect."

"How *dare* you?!" she screeched. "I am their mother!"

"But you were never their mom," I said. "I'm taking them. They're not safe here."

"Take them, and I will kill them. I swear on their lives that I'll hunt you down, take them back, kill them in their sleep, and frame you for the murders. Then, only after you're broken and begging, I will kill you, too. If you don't take them? If they stay? I'll tell the police *you* hit them, *you* hurt them, because *you're* the monster, not me. *You're* the one building Apex from blood. If they believe neither of us? Then they'll take our girls away. Ana and Dee will rot in a foster home or orphanage and die of an overdose in their twenties. Is that what you want, Sandy? IS THAT WHAT YOU FUCKING WANT?!"

Erin was right. It was this or the system, and I couldn't feed them to the system. It was over. She won. But it wasn't enough to win. She needed to destroy me, too.

She grabbed a knife, and I panicked.

"You want to steal my children from me?" Erin seethed, bloodlust in her eyes. "You want to rip my babies away?"

"I want to save them, Erin," I said. "Look at yourself. You're deranged."

"Deranged? DERANGED?" She laughed and proved my point. "There is no love fiercer than a mother's love, Alessandro. Stand in my way, and I will kill you where you stand."

She lunged. I didn't duck. The knife split my face, and this is the truth behind my scar. There was no knife fight; there was only Erin. She dug into my flesh, cut my brow and cheek, and sawed toward my eye while she screamed, "*I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you.*" Blood dripped into my gaze, too much and too fast. I leaned away, but she followed. "*I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you.*"

I would have died, Bob. This is where I would have died, and the girls would have died, too, under Erin's abuse. But I didn't die. Erin didn't kill me, though she tried her best.

See, Georgina had lived many lives, and one was as a cop. She waited, respected us, but when she saw my fear, she bugged my apartment before she left with the girls. After Erin threatened my life, Georgina called the police and gave them the recording. (Bless her soul, she removed the bit about Apex.)

They took Erin away. I filed a restraining order, then Georgina pulled some strings to avoid an investigation into me. She saved my life, all our lives, because she loved Ana and Dee, and Erin was wrong. Our love was fiercer than a mother's love, because Erin was never their mother. I was their mother. Georgina was their mother. Grandmom and Grandma were their mothers, too. "Mother" is a feeling, and Erin never felt it, never gave it, never had it, and never deserved the title.

I lied to Ana and Dee, and I lied to myself, too. From her good

days, I created the Erin persona we know and love as a kind wife and caring mother. I pretended Erin was beautiful, not broken, and I wanted them to remember their mother this way. It was easier for Erin to die an angel than live a demon, so I sainted her memory and anointed her ghost. Even if “Mommy loved you so much” was a lie, that lie let my girls sleep at night, and I loved them stronger in her wake.

Yes, I fail at life, living, cooking, cleaning, but I *do* love my kids, Bob. I love them more than anything, and they are my compass. Whatever way forward, we go together.

Crisscross Applesauce

Ana & Dee

Mommy screams. She screams a lot. She calls Daddy bad words, and Daddy drinks all their juice.

“You lied to me,” Mommy yells. We’re not supposed to yell. “You betrayed me.” Her voice is scratchy. She sounds like a dinosaur. We like dinosaurs, but we don’t like her voice. It’s a not-nice voice.

“No, Erin, it’s not like that, I promise,” Daddy says. He raises his hand, but Mommy didn’t ask a question. We think he’s confused. “It meant nothing.”

“Then why’d you fuck her, huh? If it meant nothing, why’d you fuck the goddamn shit out of her, Sandy?”

“Those are bad words,” we say.

Pippa nods. She sits crisscross applesauce beside us. We build castles with blocks, but they all fall down. “Being a grown-up is hard, my loves.”

“Being a kid is hard, too.”

Pippa smiles. A glass crashes in the kitchen. She closes the door, but we can still hear everything. Mommy and Daddy aren't playing nice. We're supposed to play nice.

"Why are Mommy and Daddy fighting?" we ask.

Pippa builds a tower. The blocks wiggle but stay. "It's... complicated."

"What's 'complicated' mean?"

"Messy. Tough. Like a puzzle with too many pieces, and none of them quite fit. That's what being a grown-up is like. It's...frustrating."

We know what "frustrating" means. Mommy calls us frustrating.

Pippa looks at the door. A bang, then crying. We're not supposed to cry.

"Mommy and Daddy love you both very much," Pippa says. "Remember that. Whatever else happens, remember that they love you, girls."

More bangs, more crying. We're not supposed to cry. Mommy puts us in timeout if we don't behave. But Mommy and Daddy aren't behaving, and they aren't in timeout.

"We're scared," we say.

"Me, too," Pippa says.

"Grown-ups don't get scared."

"Everyone gets scared," she says. "It's okay to be scared. Fear is a compass. It shows you where to go and how to grow."

"We don't understand."

Pippa smiles again and cups our faces. "You will someday, but not today. Today is already too full. You're too young for all...this."

Another glass crashes in the kitchen. Mommy screams so loud it shakes the windows. We're scared, but we don't cry.

We're not supposed to cry.

"I GAVE YOU EVERYTHING, YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!" Mommy yells. We're not supposed to yell. "YOU USED ME, THEN YOU THREW ME AWAY! WHAT AM I, YOUR TRASH? YOUR FUCKING WHORE? KNOCK ME UP, THEN MOVE ON TO THE NEXT SLUT?! COME ON, DADDY, MAKE MORE KIDS, 'CAUSE YOU'RE SUCH A GOOD FUCKING FATHER TO OURS! BET YOU CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER THEIR NAMES, YOU DIRTY FUCKING ANIMAL!"

"You're out of your goddamn mind," Daddy says.

"YOU'RE ONE TO TALK, YOU SICK FUCK! I SAW YOUR SEARCH HISTORY! I SAW WHAT GETS YOU OFF! AM I NOT DEAD ENOUGH TO PLEASE YOU?!"

"Erin, calm down, or I'm taking the kids."

There's a pause. Mommy uses a quiet voice, but it's a not-nice voice, too. "Try, and I will kill you."

"For fuck's sake, relax, deep breaths," Daddy says. "Remember what the doctor said."

"Fuck the doctor, and fuck you," Mommy says. "Where is she, the little cunt? Where is your shiny new slut? Pumped her full of babies, did you? Stretched her out to abandon her like me?!"

Pippa hugs us and covers our ears. We can't hear anymore, but we feel bangs through the floor, thumps in the next room. The door shakes, then slams open. Mommy runs for us, but Daddy holds her back. They're scary. Monsters with fluffy hair and red eyes. Mommy claws the floor, crawling to us, but Daddy grabs her feet and pulls her away. We want to cry, but we can't. We won't. We're not supposed to cry.

Pippa stands. We stand, too. She grabs our hands. We can hear again as she leads us past Mommy and Daddy, wrestling

on the floor. They're playing rough. We're not supposed to play rough.

"Hide them, Georgina," Daddy tells Pippa. Mommy kicks him in the face. "I'll call you when it's safe."

"It's never safe, Mr. Osman," Pippa says.

"She's their mother. I can't—"

"You must." Then Pippa turns to us and says, "Come on, girls." She drags us through the apartment, away from Mommy and Daddy. We miss Mommy and Daddy. We love Mommy and Daddy. But we want them to behave.

Behind us, Mommy yells at Daddy. We're not supposed to yell. "I hate you! I will kill you! I hate you! I WILL KILL YOU! I HATE YOU! I WILL KILL YOU! LET ME GO, YOU FUCKING FREAK!"

"Erin, please," Daddy says. "Erin, come back to me."

"*You* left me. *You* fucked that slut. Was she pretty? Was she tight? Did she get you off, or did you think of dead shit to get hard, you sick fucking bastard?"

"Erin, stop it. The kids are right there."

But we're not there anymore. Pippa runs us outside and sits us on a bench. We're cold. We're scared. We want to cry, but we're not supposed to cry. Mommy hits us when we cry.

"Girls, listen to me," Pippa says. "I am right here. I am *always* right here. You're safe now. It's going to be okay. I'm here. You're safe. It's okay."

We won't cry. We promised Mommy we won't cry. It makes her angry, and she's scary when she's angry.

"Ana, Dee, it's okay. I'm here. You can cry, my loves."

"We can't," we whisper.

Pippa frowns. "Why not?"

We can't tell her, and we can't tell Daddy. If we tell about

Mommy, then Mommy won't feed us, and Mommy will hurt Daddy. Mommy doesn't like to feed us, but she likes to hurt Daddy. We're not supposed to hurt people. It's not nice.

"Let's get ice cream," Pippa says.

We nod. We like ice cream.

But we're still scared. We still miss Mommy and Daddy. We want them to play nice.

End of the Road to Nowhere

Alex

“I remember,” I say.

Erin sneers. “Good, then you remember why I need them.”

“I remember why you can’t have them. You strapped *bombs* to them, Erin. Let them go, and I’ll let you go. Please. *Please*. Just don’t hurt them. Don’t take them from me.”

“But you took them from me.”

“Because you’re a danger to them and yourself.”

“You’re a monster,” Erin howls. “A murderer. For fuck’s sake, Sandy, you fucked a dead deer.”

I wince. “Yes, I fucked up, but Ana and Dee are my home. They’re happy, healthy, and they have been for the past year. Don’t mess up their stability.”

“Stability? STABILITY? We’re both maniacs. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

I should break down. I should fall apart. Everything surfaces

like skulls in a graveyard, then crashes down in a skeleton avalanche. But instead of panic, I feel power, because Erin was never my anchor. Ana and Dee were my strength all along. They ground me and guide me, forever and always. I want them. I need them. This is choice, not chance.

The road ahead focuses, and I let fantasy go. Erin was never that woman, but Ana and Dee are always my girls. *Only* my girls. I'll save them, Bob. I promise. I *must*.

"You're right," I say, slow and steady.

Erin glares at me, skeptical, blue eyes burning.

"We're maniacs, lunatics, total psychotic freaks. But I'm different from you, know why?"

She shakes her head.

"You will do anything to steal them back, but I will do anything to set them free."

I stab myself. I remove a knife from my pocket, and I stab myself in my stomach. Erin shrieks, detonator forgotten, because here's the thing, Bob: She *does* love me, and she wants me back. She tried to kill me once and failed, and failure made her desperate to repent. I love her, and she loves me. We're star-crossed murderers, tragic souls. So I stab deeper, and Erin shrieks louder, because she loves me, she hates me, she wants to kill me, she wants to save me. We're a paradox. Only one can survive.

Georgina uses my distraction to charge Erin from the side. They fall in a knot of limbs. Bleeding, limping, I reach the kitchen island, yank the detonator's wires. The blinking stops, and I collapse.

"NO," Erin roars. "STAY WITH ME, SANDY. YOU LOVE ME. I KNOW YOU LOVE ME. WHY WON'T YOU LOVE ME?!"

I stabbed deep. Red everywhere. Too much blood. Had to make it believable. Erin believes. She bawls at my feet. Georgina rescues my screaming five-year-olds from the bedroom, then removes their bomb belts. The twins are safe. I smile, at peace.

There's a fleshy splat. Erin stops shrieking. Georgina knocks her out, a temple kick. She straps the bomb belts to my late wife—ex-wife? Semantics, Bob. No use now.

Ana and Dee rush me, attack me with hugs. Everything hurts, but they're here, they're *alive*, wide-eyed and crying, shouting with lungs that breathe and hearts that beat.

"Mr. Osman, it's time to go," Georgina says.

"Can't," I wheeze, gushing blood, so much blood. "Ana and Dee...they're too good for Erin and me. They need you...not us. Take them, Georgina...Pippa. Take them...save them...raise them...*please*."

See? I *am* selfless, Bob—at the end, at least. I'm strong enough to let Ana and Dee go, because I *am* a maniac. They deserve better. They deserve more. Georgina is that better and more. She is more than a rock; she is a mountain. Ana and Dee are young. They'll recover. They'll survive. Then they'll thrive under Georgina's wings. I'm letting them go to set them free, because *this* is freedom, and *this* is their future: a freedom and future with Georgina, not me.

I can rest now. I can rest in peace. I'm not proud of who I was, but I'm proud of who I became. The last thing I did, I did for my kids. It was right, it was good, it was brave, and it was love. That's what it was, Bob. It was *love*. Because love isn't patient or kind. No, love is *fierce*. Love is a weapon. Love is a warrior. Love is an army that storms castles, a fleet that crosses oceans, the force at the heart of every battle cry. And I love my

girls, Bob. I know nothing else, but I know I love them, and now, they're free.

The last things I hear as everything dims are my girls' weeping lullabies and Georgina's muffled words: "You big, dumb, stupid idiot."

Sea Steps

Alex

Two people walk toward each other on the shore. Waves lap at their feet. One person moves. The other stays on course.

Alex was always the one who moved, but his footprints stuck. The ocean washed the other's footprints away.

Alex changed. Erin didn't.

He adapted. She pretended.

Emma Rose Claire was a lie.

A beautiful lie, but a lie the same.

And Emma's lie showed Erin's truth. Death didn't free Alex, nor money, nor fame, but this lie did. Alex and Erin grew up together. They were formative, fledgling, flames fated to burn out. She was his everything when he had nothing. It devastated him to look at her and feel loss instead of love.

Shove two opposites together. They attract, then explode. Their marriage was a powder keg, and its ending was an atom

bomb. Alex didn't want to remember the ending; he wanted to remember the beginning. But the beginning wasn't better, only faded with time. Life is harsh, and comfort shines bright. We seek what we know, even if what we know is wrong.

Change is a beast we must tame to survive.

Alex survived.

Then again, he was a beast, too.

She Who Lives Long Lives Well

Georgina

Georgina had lived many lives. One was a paramedic, another was a cleaner, and yet another was witness protection. All arose from her police history, from meeting criminals and choosing crooks over cops. Crooks had reasons; cops had regulations. Georgina sided with passion over practicality.

These three lives allowed Georgina to save Mr. Osman. She was a warrior, a pioneer, the true American spirit without all the flashy propaganda touting craft beer, string bikinis, dolphin trunks, avocado toast, pumpkin seltzer, non-GMO kale, and disposable income. (Georgina didn't mind the bikinis, but she minded everything else.)

Alex bled out on Emma's floor—and Georgina used “Emma,” not “Erin,” because the woman chose her name as well as her fate. Emma lied unconscious, a crescent near Alex and their girls, sobbing into their father's gory shirt. They went to *him*,

not her. That was how Georgina knew she should save this man, a man who did terrible, horrible, unspeakable things, yet who loved with a fierceness above all the rest.

First, Georgina settled the girls. “Ana and Dee, come here, my loves.” They wouldn’t leave their father’s side. “I’m gonna help your daddy, okay? I need a little space, but you can watch.”

They shouldn’t watch—that’s what most would say. *Shelter* five-year-olds. *Protect* five-year-olds. But kids should see the big, bad, scary world and know they can fight, not hide. Sometimes you need a sword, not a shield. *Are there monsters in the dark?* Ana and Dee would often ask. And Georgina would always answer, *Yes, my loves. There are monsters in the dark, but those monsters are you.* Become the beast you fear. It’s how she raised her own two kids, and it’s what she taught Ana and Dee.

“We need to stop the bleeding,” Georgina said.

She removed a first aid kit from her skirt (she always bought skirts with deep pockets). Then she snapped on latex gloves and handed pairs to Ana and Dee. The gloves were twice as big as their hands, but they were here, they were helping, and helping calmed them. With wads of gauze, Georgina applied pressure to Alex’s stomach, but blood soaked through every dressing. He stabbed deep, but he didn’t nick an artery or organ, so Georgina waited, and waited, and hummed patience into the room.

The bleeding stopped. “Good job, girls,” Georgina said. She cleaned and sewed Alex’s wound as the girls handed her antiseptic, a needle, and surgical thread. Alex was stable, but he still needed fluids and a blood transfusion. Georgina wasn’t concerned. She had hefty pensions from her many lives. Instead of investing in summer homes, fancy yachts, tropical getaways, or liposuction, Georgina invested in the sky.

She dialed her phone. It rang five times.

"Hello?" a woman answered.

"Donna, darling, how do you feel about Tuscany?"

"I'll be there in a minute."

It was their code: a cry, a dream. Georgina texted her girlfriend the address, and she arrived in minutes. Donna washed the girls of their father's blood, then ushered them outside, into Central Park toward an ice cream truck, while Georgina finished inside.

Alex and Emma lied on the floor. Emma would wake soon, but she couldn't wake ever. Alex couldn't kill her. He never had it in him, despite all the others he took. Emma was his tragic flaw. If she lived, she'd hunt him again, find him again, become an army of women to win him over again. And Alex would fall in love again, *again*, and ***again***, because they *did* love each other, even if their love was a wild, vicious, savage thing.

But if Alex fell again, he'd fall all the way down. Ana and Dee had suffered enough. It was time for Georgina to do the hard thing, the right thing, to save the girls and to save Alex himself. She found a luggage cart, then hoisted Alex on it and covered him with blankets. Next, she fixed and pocketed the blue book, then pushed Alex into the elevator. Last, Georgina cleaned up.

If you were in Central Park during this midday in summer, you'd notice a flash, a growl, a smoking building. "More bombs," people screamed after the Empire News tragedy. Erin meant them for her children, so Georgina let karma sing. After a quick visit to Alex's penthouse, and a grab from a stash they never wanted to use, they left.

They left it all behind.

Bat Out of Hell

Alex

I wake on a plane. IVs pierce my arms. Fluids and blood pump through my veins.

It's a dream. Or a nightmare. Aren't they the same?

It's dark. I sit, wince, clench a stomach raw with sutures. *You stabbed yourself*. Ah, that's right, Bob. I stabbed myself to free my kids of Erin...and me. *You fucking idiot*. Got it, Bob. No need to twist the knife. But if I stabbed myself, how am I alive? *Am I alive?* Is death a transatlantic private plane with ample cabin space, shuttered windows, and complimentary top-shelf bourbon?

"Hello, Mr. Osman," Georgina says from the dark. She sits beside me and checks my wounds—they've multiplied, like lies. "Sleep well?"

"Where are Ana and Dee? What happened?" I ask.

"They're here, with us," she says, and I relax. "As for what happened, I took some creative license."

“Should I worry?”

“You should thank me.” She scowls at me, then her gaze softens. “You’re a tough man to work for, but you’re also the best boss I’ve ever had, and I’ve had many.”

“What happened, Georgina?” I ask, hesitant.

“You’re free, sir,” she says.

“You killed Erin.”

She nods. “With the bombs she intended for your girls. NYPD called it a murder-suicide. ‘Doctor Emma Claire of Columbia University killed herself. She took Apex CEO Alessandro Osman along with his twin daughters, Ana and Dee Dunne-Osman, plus Georgina Martin and Donna McBrian with her.’ Apex mourns your loss. Deja Jones, the new CEO, gave a moving speech.”

“We’re dead?”

She nods again.

“Good,” I say. “What else?”

“This is my plane—you’re welcome,” Georgina says. “And I emptied the stash: fake names, passports, licenses, birth certificates, everything. We’re Italian now, sir, headed to Tuscany.”

Ah, the stash, a backup plan I hoped to never use. After the restraining order, I made it as a precaution against Erin, then I forgot about Erin and the precaution. Seems I was the one who left the country in the end. Everything was for nothing. No, not nothing. Ana, Dee, Georgina, Donna, and I are a family now, and that’s what I need: a family, not an army, not anymore, not with Erin gone. *Erin is gone*. It shouldn’t hurt, but it does. I couldn’t kill her—I’d kill myself first and almost did—but Georgina killed her and saved us. We’re all here, alive and together.

I've always been searching for home, for family, but I was looking in the wrong places and people. New York was never home; it was happenstance. Erin was never family; she was a fever. Ana and Dee are home and family; they hold the best parts of their mother and me. We're free. We're all finally free.

Except for you, Bob.

"Are you mad, Mr. Osman?" Georgina asks.

"Mad?" I frown. "Why would I be mad?"

"Apex, sir. I lost you Apex."

I shake my head. "No, Apex was lost from the start. She's in better hands now. Deja will care for her like I never could."

"And the money? I'm sorry."

"That was my fault, not yours. I should have seen through the con, but I was desperate."

"Are you still?"

"Still what?"

"Still desperate?" Georgina asks.

I pause. "No. No, I'm not desperate, not anymore. This feels *right*, you know?"

"I know, sir, but you didn't need to stab yourself. I would have handled Erin."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I've lived many lives," she says.

"So I've heard: cop, cleaner, paramedic, witness protection, nanny—am I missing any?"

"You're missing most."

"A puzzle to the end, my dear Georgina. Wait, you're not Georgina anymore, and I'm not Alex. I forget what we chose. Who are we now?"

"I'm Gianna," Georgina says, "and you're Rocco."

"Rocco?" I wince.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we all know I was not in my right mind. Okay, Rocco it is. What about the girls?"

"Ana is Sofia, and Dee is Chiara."

"At least I didn't fuck them up. And Donna? I assume she's here. Did you get papers for her, too?"

"Of course. She's Rosa now. Rosa Masària."

"Are we all Masària?"

Georgina—*Gianna* nods. "We're your mothers, and your girls are our granddaughters."

"Do my real mothers know?" I ask.

"Yes, I told them the PG version. They're happy for you, though they miss the girls."

"They can always visit."

"They arrive in a week."

"Yep, that's them." I fiddle with an IV, chew my cheek, scan *Gianna's* stoic face. "Why? Why do this for me? You could have let me die. The girls are better off with you."

"With all due respect, no, they aren't, sir. They need their father, and I need you, too. Many care about you, even if you push everyone away. You've helped a lot of people. You've changed a lot of lives. You're no longer a lone wolf."

She shows me her phone. The screen glows with memorial services dedicated to me. I "died" in "Emma's" penthouse, and thousands lay flowers in Central Park, commemorating my life and my children's lives. We're famous, the new "thoughts and prayers." Yes, Bob, we both know I don't deserve it, but my girls deserve it. *Gianna* and *Rosa* do, too.

If it takes a sinner to make a saint, why punish the sinner?

Kiss and Cry Wolf

Alex

Erin was right, when she was Emma: You can't buy freedom.
But you can make it.

And this *is* freedom, Bob. Fucking Christ, this is freedom on fire. I didn't know I wanted it till I saw it, and now, I *need* it and can never leave it.

Italy is a dream. Lime hills, rolling under an amber sun. Tangerine mornings, rose-violet evenings, nights under diamond stars and a sand-dollar moon. Tender land. Serene sea. Air perfumed with grapes and lemons. At dawn, fog wades in valleys between hilltop towns, and cypress trees line footpaths between villages. At dusk, workers return from manicured vineyards, waving to neighbors, laughing among friends. Children skip through streets, and parents cycle home for dinner. Streetlamps flicker. Church bells toll. Minstrels tune beside market stalls. It's quieter than New York, but it's

bolder, too. Everything is vibrant, not violent, wine instead of blood, flowers instead of flames.

This is our *life*. This is our *home*: a limestone villa with a russet-tiled roof, dozens of rooms, and doors to nowhere. My girls love it. They're kids again, splashing in the pool, pattering down hallways, hiding behind statues, jumping through arches, cartwheeling through the courtyard. I stroll through the colonnade and watch them as fountains mist rainbows, larks dance among olive branches, and cats stretch in sunlit patches.

(I don't know where the cats come from, but Georgina feeds them, and you don't question Georgina. She knows shit, and she gets shit done. So I let her keep the damn cats.)

The twins are *happy*, and that is freedom, Bob. Children's laughter is the ultimate freedom. After chaos, after grief, I finally land. This is our refuge. This is my sanctuary. Nowhere else moves me like this, grounds me like this. Italy is our cradle.

We've lived in Tuscany for a month, learned Italian in three weeks, and my mothers—the real ones—visited twice. My siblings couldn't care less, and Mido is busy with pottery, but it doesn't matter, because they were never family, anyway. My family is here: Gianna, Rosa, Sofia, and Chiara (Georgina, Donna, Ana, and Dee—you're welcome), plus Mom and Ma when they come. And there's a vintner named Luca who won me, heart and soul. He's mine, and I'm his, true instead of toxic, pure instead of poison. I fell, then I flew, and he is my fairy tale. This is our future, our freedom, our fresh start...and my redemption.

My injuries healed fast. I took that as a sign. I fucked up, but I fixed it in the end. Well, Georgina fixed it, but I deserve some credit. I stabbed myself, for fuck's sake. Then I took a page from Erin's book—the reinvention one, not the crazy-bitch-

gone-rogue one—and changed my name, changed my fate. But that's the past, that's Alex, and I'm Rocco now (though I go by Roc to sound like less of a douche).

Do I deserve this happy ending? Of course not. Alex deserves nothing.

But Roc does.

He hasn't killed anyone.

Yet.

Though I must be Alex one last time.

Bob's Your Uncle Sam

Alex

I'd hoped to do this in person, Bob, but shit hit the fan. You understand.

Sorry about the wait. I know it's been a month, but life is so good, and you are a reminder of all the bad. I hope the Surgeon fed you, though. She promised me she would. She did? Nod harder, because my connection's fuzzy. Okay, she did, good, *good*. Oh, there she is. Wonderful, we're all here.

Let's get a good look at you, Bob: bald head, flabby skin, pit stains, beetle eyes. Still the same, even after a year. That basement's done no favors for you. Oh, it's my fault, is it? I kept you watered, fed, and pruned, like a fucking plant, so quit your bitching. You earned this cage. No? Agree to disagree. You know what you did, and you know why you're there. Not only in my head, after all, are you? Gotta love a burner phone.

Yes, Reader, Bob exists, and I lied, because you are not Bob, a fact I forgot till Erin's true death. Bob is real, unlike you. He's

chained to a chair in the Lab's basement, as he has been for the last year. I propped a phone by his jaw and carried another in my pocket, a channel always open between us. Why? Because I was lonely, I wanted to talk, and that's what Bob does: He only *talks*. But he cannot live after what he did and all he saw.

Meet Doctor Robert Michael Fillmore, MD in Psychiatry. His name and title are too fancy, so I demoted him to Bob. Why? Because Bob sucks at his job. He was supposed to save Erin, to salvage her sanity. We visited him in the hospital, spent countless hours with a fraud, and wasted shitloads of money we didn't have. I loved my wife, and Bob couldn't save her, so no one can save him now. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad Erin's dead. She needed to die, and Georgina was strong enough to kill her when I was not. But if Bob had saved Erin, fixed her, healed her, had done his fucking job like I paid him for, we wouldn't be here. This is *his* fault.

I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you.

Easy there, Erin. One voice in my head at a time.

"Well, Bob, it's time we both moved on," I say aloud.

The Surgeon steps forward in the grungy basement. Shackles clunk to the floor, and Bob sobs. He always sobs. That's why I mute him.

"You should have saved her," I continue.

His lips flap in response, but no sound emerges from the video call. I like it this way, a silent movie, a noir throwback to the good old days. But the old days were never good, were they? Bob knows this. He's a psychiatrist. So let's start the new days with a bang. Burn the past to bless the future.

The Surgeon likes my idea. She rolls up her sleeves, then straddles Bob, unbuttoning his shirt with blood-painted fingernails. Next come his trousers, then his sweat-stained socks and

year-old boxers. Soon, Bob is naked. It's not a pretty sight, but it's not ugly, either. Don't judge. If I caged you in a warehouse basement for a year, you'd look worse, so hold your criticism for the PTO meeting, okay?

Bob wriggles like an overgrown worm. He's unchained, free, but freedom's a stranger, so he remains in the chair and whimpers. The Surgeon flips her hair and brandishes a knife. Bob whimpers harder. Good fucking Lord, I wish I were there.

"Cut," I order.

The Surgeon cuts deep: armpits, eardrums, belly button, asshole. Bob can't hear anymore, but he never listened anyway. Blood spurts from gaping wounds, and he's crying...or screaming. Either way, his face purples with pain. He's a giant, gory plum, veiny and pulpy, a soft and juicy fruit. Succulent, that's the word. He looks succulent...and ready.

"Fill him up," I say.

The Surgeon smiles. She unravels hoses from shadows and sticks one in each wound. Bob bucks on the chair, but he doesn't run. He doesn't remember how. That's true entrapment, when escape becomes myth. Obedient and submissive, squawking in agony and convulsing with dread, Bob just sits there as the Surgeon screws hoses into his gashes, then glues them to his flesh. He's watertight now, sealed like a submarine.

Being the genius that she is, the Surgeon perfected this next part. She connects the hoses to tanks, then pumps gasoline into Bob. It burns—I can tell from his bug-eyed horror. Especially his ass. Gas is shitty lube, take that from me, and learn from my mistakes. But we aren't using it for lube. We're using it for fuel.

Bob bloats with gas, and the Surgeon flips off the pump. Next comes her magnum condom opus. After detaching the hoses from tanks, she attaches them to blowtorches. Don't worry, the

hoses are fireproof, but Bob is not. He's mushy and flammable, a gasoline waterbed, and his face contorts with terror.

I take Bob's hysteria as a compliment. The devil's in the details, so I must have done a devil of a job. We're about to have a devil of a time, for idle hands are the devil's playthings, an idle brain is the devil's workshop, and I've idled for far too long. One last chance to dine with the devil, give the devil his due, and raise the devil. One last time to play devil's advocate as the handsome devil in disguise to free my girls. Why? Because the devil looks after his own. The devil's children have the devil's luck, and the devil is a lucky fuck. Yes, I feel your disgust, your disapproval, but I got a devil-may-care attitude, and better the devil you know.

Speak of the devil...

"Light him up," I say.

The Surgeon sparks the blowtorches. Flames billow through hoses into Bob: armpits, eardrums, belly button, asshole. Six fires, a cursed number to end a cursed life.

There goes Barbecue Bob, burning from the inside out, charred and crispy, tender and juicy, a prime cut of human meat. His skin bubbles as fires roast his organs, arteries, and flesh. His eyeballs boil in their sockets, then ooze down his cheeks like melted cheese. He stops screaming; he can't anymore. His lips curl back from his teeth and reveal a stark-white skull. He's a skeleton now. A dead skeleton, then dust.

The Surgeon waits till only ash remains, then gathers Bob in a jar. She'll bring it with her wherever she goes next, for she's free of me, her contract closed. I trust her, and she trusts me. We both know what will happen if we don't behave. She's a new woman now, as I'm a new man, and I wish her the best as she burns down the Lab.

It's gone. Erased. Destroyed. Reborn. No one is what they seem.

Goodbye, Bob.

Goodbye, Alex.

Goodbye, Apex and apex predator.

Goodbye, Uncle Sam. Bob's your uncle, and he's gone, too.

Goodbye, America, land of the beast, home of the grave, a melting pot of dicks and money, in Yankee Futile US of A.

Goodbye, Reader. Can't let you live, either. Don't blame the bullet. Blame the gun.

Crack.

Acknowledgments

What a disturbing ride through my brain this has been. Thank you so much for letting me corrupt you, and congratulations on making it to the end of my rusty, rickety roller coaster of (literal) mindfuckery. This book was very cathartic to write, and it was also quite fun—yes, that makes me a bad egg, but are you really surprised by now?

I value every single person who has retweeted, read, or reviewed my work, and everyone who has gifted words of encouragement. Thank you from the bottomless pit of my wretched, frigid heart.

There are a few I'd like to shout-out individually for their "Nicolas Cage as a feral Jedi duck" level of support. In no particular order...

To Queer Indie: A *huge* thanks to Dr. Mario "Maestro" Dell'Olio, TT Banks, Ash Knight, and A.C. "Drewmonster" Merkel for your powerful friendship. It's a girthy honor to belong to this outstanding empire.

To Team Corpse, the elite members of my Murder Court: Thank you millions for your epic support, for giving my vicious word monster a chance, and for offering your linguistic sacrifices to Lord Algorithm after consuming my book beast's ARC.

To my ride-or-die team, including but not limited to Agent Ross Young (organ expert), Lali A. Love (a beacon of light), Rose

J. Fairchild (my Valkyrie), S.P. O'Farrell (the "O" is silent), Anya Pavelle, M.E. Aster, M.J. Falke, and Riv Rains: Thank you all for being ridiculously generous with your time, energy, enthusiasm, courage, and kindness, plus extra thanks for indulging my madness and not blocking me when I ask macabre questions about organ fondling and brain fornication. (If we're gonna do it, we're gonna do it right.)

To *The Writing Community Chat Show*, *Story of a Storyteller*, *The Tiny Bookcase*, *Boomers on Books*, *The Shadow's Project*, *Steve Talks Books*, *GBHBL*, *What The Book*, *Human Chapters*, *Words & Pictures*, and everyone in the "Press" section of my website: Thank you for believing in me before I believed in myself.

To family, blood and found: Thank you for being there for me through my Shit Pits and Shit Mountains. I've been insanely blessed and lucky with the people in my life, and I can only hope to pay it back or pay it forward one day.

To S and C: You are, and always will be, my very best creations. I am ridiculously proud of your bravery and kindness. Thank you for teaching me about the fiercest form of love, dance parties that shake the floor, snuggle heaps on Sunday mornings, giant predator chicken games, and keeping an endless cheese supply in the fridge (extra sharp cheddar or bust). Love you both a dangerous amount.

Last, to you, Reader: Thank you for tasting the soggiest depths of my rotten mind. Here's to never outgrowing dragon make-believe, lightsaber noises in public places, soul tribes forged in the dead of night, and dreams that won't give up.

I apologize to anyone I've missed, but know I appreciate you, Bob.

All the love and chaos, always,
Halo "Sick Fuck" Scot

Reviews are authors' superheroes.

They save us from the villainous Lord Algorithm to lend us credibility and visibility. If you have read my book and would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and BookBub or even a few simple words (ex. "There's something wrong with Halo." or "Halo pulverized my mind and cackled while doing so."), I would be forever grateful and will award you an esteemed spot in my empire once I achieve galactic domination.

It's easy and quick as fleshcakes. Thank you a million sacrificial goats for your support.

About the Author

Halo Scot is the author of *I Will Kill You* (novel), *The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams* (novella), and the Rift Cycle (series). The books in the Rift Cycle have been among Amazon's Top 10 New Releases in the LGBTQ+ Science Fiction and LGBTQ+ Horror categories.

Halo has been featured in Publishers Weekly's Indie Spotlight and, as a founding member of QueerIndie.com, in Pop Pride Week, an event hosted by ReedPop, BookCon, and New York Comic Con. Further antics are available on HaloScot.com.

You can connect with me on:

 <https://haloscot.com>

 https://twitter.com/halo_scot

 <https://www.facebook.com/authorhaloscot>

Subscribe to my newsletter:

 <https://haloscot.com/news>

Also by Halo Scot

***The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams* (novella):**

Mars has a shadow, a mirror world torn from the chaos of an eons-old rivalry between gods and titans. An elite few protect this secret to preserve the peace. But when a girl comes along with the power to reunite Mars, worlds collide in cosmic war.

Rift Cycle (series):

We all become monsters at the edge of the breach. In a post-apocalyptic world where season of birth determines power, interrealm war beckons two lost and fated souls. Content warning: A highly graphic series intended for mature audiences. Book order: *Edge of the Breach*, *Echoes of Blood*, *Eye of the Brave*, *Elegy of the Void*.

