

2014

# Smokers

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# SMOKERS

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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2014

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## DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, thanks for all your support.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Smokers* is a multi-perspective surveillance spy thriller that juxtaposes the days leading up to the financial collapse with the days leading to the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. The first three chapters of book set up the multiple narrative point of view construct that will drive the narrative. Opening in New York, March 2007, a year before the financial collapse or the knowledge of the collapse and its implications becomes available to the public. We follow James, an administrative assistant at a hedge fund in the financial district. As the chapter unfolds we learn more about his home life. His father, who spouts conspiracy theories and has cold war fears, suffers from a pulmonary disease and uses an iron lung as a life support machine, which is presided over by the family nurse, Shammi, a legalized citizen who emigrated from India. His encounter with a mysterious stranger, who introduces herself as Odessa, leads him to Coney Island and down the rabbit hole that involves the Brighton mob, surveillance and the CIA, and the financial collapse, all so James and the reader can answer the question, who is Odessa?

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## CHAPTER 1

### Crocodiles

Smoke folds its way into the air, disappearing. I'm not even sure it's there till it hits me. Suits check their Blackberries, the tickers, the emails, the schedule, while taxis drive by. The sidewalk collects ash. They exhale and the smoke swirls. The incoming breeze from the Upper Bay collides with the raw meat smell of Chinatown and hits us in the Financial District.

At the end of the break, when all the butts are stomped out, the analysts make their way back in to stare at the same information on even larger screens. The workers inside manage over ten billion in assets, wireless transactions confirmed with the click of a mouse, orders fired into space till the information pulses. The signals surrounding us are controlled by the men who work at places like Maxim, men who know how to manipulate instruments in a global market saturated with variables, a world where a shift in even just a penny in the price of oil has profound effects on soybeans and other such things.

My job title, administrative assistant, requires me to sustain the environment, bolstering productivity to peak efficiency. Admins aren't treated with the same regard as the others, but we aren't feared either. Not like the junior analysts swimming in the competitive pools, trying to be noticed. We're treated as afterthoughts. It doesn't bother me. I like my job. I work with world-makers.

Bill slaps my hand too hard. “Yo yo, James.” Ketchup crusts the side of his mouth. He swings the door open like he’s trying to prove a point. Objects are lighter in his new universe of barbells and protein shakes that dominate his post-work routine. His collar scrapes against his neck.

We proceed through the bronzed turnstiles, sliding our keycards through a scanner that flashes green, beeps positive. Two security guards sit straight-faced behind a marble counter, nodding slowly as we move along. A central statue of an aluminum woman shrinks the open space in the lobby. She reaches to the ceiling, back arched, body leaping midair, hair weaving in a tangle of Medusa strands. Bill grins and leans in. I know what comes next. “Madonna on the rocks with the tits.”

We ascend thirty-two stories. The elevator chain creaks as we climb. Rumors persist of an upgrade to a safer sounding higher speed machine, but that’s all they’ll ever be. People like Jeremy Vaughn want to manage money, not people. “The record speaks,” he says, throwing the messages away. The rate of return, the exclusivity, that’s what Maxim is about. The lobby with the angel of death at the center, the squished faced security guards, the elevator in need of renovation, are all designs meant to keep the clients at bay.

“We still on for Saturday?” Bill says.

“What’s Saturday?”

“Skee ball and crocodiles.”

“Shit, yeah, I guess I am.”

“You’re always good for a firm commitment James.”

I tongue the top of my mouth, anticipating the burn left from melted cheese. The elevator opens. As we make our way through the halls back to our respective desks no one notices us. The men are busy.

I'm not sure if Jackie O was a runner. They named the Central Park Reservoir after her. She did like the place and I suppose that was reason enough.

A black fence surrounds the water. Two paths circle the fence. Runners dust gravel from the pathway into the air as they weave in and out of tourists snapping pictures, smiling against the skyline of the east or westside. The wider loop below has less traffic, less tourists, provides a longer track, but it's not as grand, making it too easy to lose sight of the city. It doesn't matter what time of year, we're here, even now in the waning March days, blowing into our hands, wearing headbands that cover our ears, flying by the water.

Most Saturday mornings I'm here, preempting the rush, pushing forward with the knowledge that later tonight I'll be in a Crocodile den. The UWS and UES residents will arrive later after they recover from their hangovers or have brunch or recover at brunch.

The park, the quiet park, is filled with strange statues and stages which all serve to commemorate something, either other people or countries or times or wars. I've read their captions but can never remember them. There's only one that stays with me, the small plaque of Jackie O, her profile informing those who pass that this place is hers. My father used to talk about her. The last time she was seen in public she was taking a stroll in the park. All the times she must have spent drifting with those oval shades shielding her from the onlookers. Did she ever see herself in the grainy film, inside the convertible,

trying to reattach the blown off pieces of skull? For a long time it was illegal to get a copy of the Zapruder, but people did. She must have seen it. The silent film projected, the reel unspools with a steady click, and she watches over and over from behind tinted glass. If you watch anything enough times you can deal with it, understand it, accept it.

Down 96th street I can usually spot one. A gray beard with a plaid jacket rummages through his pockets, searching for what can only be one thing. Finally, he slips his hand out with a cigarette loaded between his fingers. I follow him across the street. When he turns back he sees me rolling my neck, barely registering his existence. Pushing down on his lighter he squints my way and sucks it in, and then he carries on. I follow.

The key is to play it cool. Find the line of smoke based on the conditions on the ground, the proximity to the target. The man steams ahead. When it hits me just right it's strong, almost like the real thing, just more filtered. Find the line, Feel the smoke. Eyes closed. Hold. Exhale. Open. Step forward. Repeat.

The old man looks back once or twice, but I never meet his eyes. I am the runner. The sidewalks, the convenience store fronts, the signs, fascinate the runner coming down from his high.

Five blocks later the butt's stomped and I'm swimming. The Asian woman who runs the fruit cart stops me with an open mouth, the confusion evident in the space between her teeth. She asks me what I'm doing. I shrug, giving the impression that she's the crazy one. But she's been watching. From her apron pouch she pulls out a pack of Camels and flips the pack open. She pushes them toward me, ignoring my shaking head, my shut jaw. Saliva, slightly metallic, fills my mouth. The bananas are priced three for a dollar. Fruits are sectioned into quadrants, red deliciouses, strawberries, grapes, cherries.

I point to a pomegranate that appears to have the makings of a winner. She laughs as she bags it and takes my money. I breathe again.

Shammi opens the door of Dad's Brooklyn brownstone wrapped in a black and gold sari. The fabric drapes across her chest, folding around her hips in one smooth crease. She pulls me in, squeezing tight. My chin touches the one streak of gray that run down her black hair.

Masala, Shammi's own blend of spices, scents the house. She's been Dad's nurse for close to twenty years. And every Saturday she presents us with a feast of samosas, curries, paneers, and roti. In another life she could have been a mother feeding an army of kids. She had to settle for me and Dad, this tradition.

"How's he doing?"

She stirs a can of tomato paste into a pot filled with onions, garlic, and red chili powder. Her nostrils flare, but I can't tell if it's in response to the question or the food.

"Same, he's always the same."

"How are you?"

"Fine, fine." She nods in the direction of the door.

"Chill, I was just about to see him."

"You," she says, hesitating, "chill." She stares me down, arm against her side.

Time to leave.

In the diamond shaped living room the shades are drawn. Air pumps rhythmically, compressing through a diaphragm. Eyes in the mirror widen. The beige cylinder, a relic from another age, supported by steel legs, houses my father's body. The legs stand on a

wooden floor, which rests on a cement base glued to the earth since before World War II, Prewar design. It indicates class, but really it just means old.

He lies inside the pipeline, but instead of oil it pumps oxygen into the encased specimen, negative pressure, an act that mimics breathing, only sealed, safe. Time was hundreds of these space-aged vessels lined hospital floors, saving scores of lives from polio, but not anymore, now new technology exists. Still, a select few insist on its perfection, an act of replication they refuse to believe another device could achieve. He's been in there since I was young since the diagnosis, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, (COPD).

His bald head pops out the rubber collar that ensures the seal. I swear his head's grown in size over the years while the rest of him has shrunk, the wrinkles stretching down his neck, emphasizing the exertion required between the two parts. Dad scans the room from a four by four rectangular mirror fixed securely to the cylinder. Nothing in the tilted reflection escapes him.

Our initial silences are battles of attrition. The corner grandfather clock keeps perfect time, the pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth. "You going to stand there all day?"

"Wasn't planning on it." I sit on the chair besides the lung, hands clasped between my knees. "How you feeling today?"

"Dandy, Yankee doodle dandee. And yourself," he says squinting, "you look skinny."

"I've been running."

"From who?"

“I’ve been jogging around the Jackie Kennedy Reservoir.”

He blinks rapidly like he’s processing the information. “You mean the Central Park Reservoir?”

“They renamed it after her. A long time ago.”

“Strange choice, don’t you think?” The cylinder continues with its persistent cycle. “Kennedy, that name, just wants to choke the life out of you.” The Park Slope kids, visible through a crack in the blinds, flip their skateboards, trying not to fall. “You listening?”

“Shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, Dad.”

“They’re not all dead yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He clears his throat. “Ike, there was a man you depend on. Sturdy. I was there, remember, all those years of service. There are no accidents. Kennedy, he was too indecisive, and in the critical moment, when men in the field needed his support, he grounded the birds. A man like that, a good-looking man like that needs friends, not the other things.” He gets like this every time. Delusions of an imagined life, too much time spent alone, looking at glass.

I get up, stepping around his head to scan the bookshelf against the wall. Almanacs line the shelves. History and trends my boys, the numbers, trust them, nothing else. I graze the years with my fingers. “Have a favorite?”

“They’re all equal.”

I like them too, but not like him. It’s all he wants to read, all he wanted me to read.

“Where you going?”

“Going to check on Shamm.”

She’s scooping mounds of rice pilaf loaded with peas and diced carrots into a bowl. Steam rises from the pile. It smells like life. She stops when she sees me. “Come now James, he doesn’t mean anything.”

“He means it all. That’s the problem.”

In a kind of tacit agreement, she shakes her head side to side.

“Need any help?”

She points to the pot of palak paneer, pureed spinach mixed with cubes of cottage cheese and butter and directs me where to pour it, warning me to be careful, that it’s hot.

“Crocodile Lounge. Be there.” Bill’s text denotes excitement and demand.

Located by Union Square the spot offers the versatility to move to the East or West Village. Bill will want to stay.

The bartender slides me a raffle ticket as he pours my beer. Each ticket comes with a miniature pizza made to order by a group of three working behind a counter at the far end of the bar. They furiously knead dough, working harder as the night progresses, opening and closing the steel oven, the never ending loop of insertion and removal, yelling the orders as they come and go, taking a moment to watch the people attempt to eat their piping hot creations. Toppings cost extra.

Bill’s beyond the oven, rolling a brown ball, in the small enclave dedicated to old games. He practices his throw, trying to perfect the glide of his arm, visualizing its ascent up the incline, the drop into the hole, the score, the glory. The sides of the Skee-Ball machine are painted in the shape of a crocodile jaw, perpetually frozen with its mouth



wide-open. He aims for the hundreds in the top right and left corners. With each failed shot he grips the ball tighter. His mimed stroke becomes more severe, his bicep bulging through the sleeves of his polo, the form less refined. He needs to relax, needs to remember you always score.

“What up James?”

“Challenge?”

“As long as you don’t mind getting your ass kicked,” he says, throwing a ball up in the air, “I’m the king of Skee.” Gel drips down his spiky hair, mixes with the sweat on his forehead, and solidifies into a polish. I sip my beer. It’s cold, good. Bill takes a bigger gulp.

Best two out of three turns into best of five which becomes best of ten. A group of twenty-something girls wait behind us. The crocodile keeps swallowing the dollar bills, its mouth buzzing. Bill’s inclination to shoot for the century marks dooms him. Doesn’t help that girls are watching. The angle is too severe to consistently hit the score. Too many bounces in and out, rimming the white rubber molding. But Bill doesn’t understand. And he doesn’t always lose.

The crocodile wants the ball directly down the gullet, the 30s and 40s where the ring is wider, the bounce more forgiving. Each time it goes down the crocodile roars its programmed roar. If you break 300 it belches in approval, digesting the hardwood till flecks go flying every which way.

Final score: 7 games to 3. Bill examines his large palms, disbelieving the outcome, his neck redder than before.

“You okay?”

“Guess I’m not drunk enough.”

“Maybe you need to work out more.”

He slaps my back a little too hard. We apologize to the girls and pass through the crowd of burned and soon to be burned tongues. Exposure from the oven door causes the heat to come out in waves till it mixes with the body heat, the temperature rising as more people come inside, moving closer and closer, layering the density.

Bill forces his way to the bar. No one complains. He comes back with half-full beers and two green shots. “It’s a bomb,” he says, holding the shooters over the beers. “To the best damn admins in the city.” We do get the job done. I follow his lead. The shot clinks against the bottom of the pint glass. Head spills over. An open jaw rises from the class. Bill pushes the drink to my mouth. When I’m done, he’s already getting us one more, while I try to hold it inside.

“What is it exactly?”

“He said it was their special.” He points to the bartender. Green light cascades across his face as he goes person to person. “Crocodile juice. Sounds healthy, doesn’t it? Next round’s on you.”

The night continues. Drafts swell. The head spills on the already wet floor. 90s hip hop and 80s rock filters through the speakers. Bill talks to girls. I watch, seated on a bench that lines the side wall. The beer is cold. I hold an aluminum tray of pizza, promising myself that I’ll wait, that I won’t burn myself and then proceed to burn my mouth again. The beer offers relief, but the damage is done. The green-skinned bartenders mix drinks with blackened nails, their toughened shells impervious to the screams coming at them from the other side. They hold up bottles with a green liquid.

The crowd goes quiet. Their pelican mouths open wide, leaning over the wooden stern, bunching together, clamoring for a taste. They pour the bottles until they're empty. But no one leaves. They want more and they're willing to pay for it. Conversations abound.

“The proclivity of the masses to dilute the quality of coffee through consumption of Starbucks signals the end of commerce. Companies will grow so large, sucking in any smaller entity, that competition will be an afterthought. In the end we'll only have one company. Sure, they'll give us different names, but that coffee we drink, the money will find its way back to Google Starbucks Coffee. Digital coffee.”

“She never bothers me really. She said she'd go out with us. We even waited for her to get back home from work and as soon as she gets back she says she's too tired. I mean she could have told us earlier and we would have gone out without her instead of waiting two hours. I mean it didn't bother me, but still, I'm not going to take that shit.”

“No, I'm telling you she really said that, but I was like, that sounds like a bad idea you know, but she insisted.”

“Did you see that guy?”

“See that girl?”

“Ass.”

“Tits.”

“What!?”

“Creep.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“Drinks are so expensive.”

“That's such a cool tattoo.”

“This music sucks.”

“Where we going next? I’m not going to Midtown.”

“The streets are crowded. I just want you to be safe. I want to be there to make sure you’re safe.”

“Here, drink this.”

I swallow and I hear and I see. Bill hovers by a group of girls dancing in a protective circle that acts a defensive mechanism. He shimmies closer, trying to break in. Leaning forward, he says something. A girl a whole head shorter than him faces him, shrugging. He smiles as he makes his way to the bar, easily brushing off the pelicans.

As he hands me a drink he’s laughing. I smile back. I feel like a glazed Krispy Kreme, saturated, sweet, full. A group of people enter, ready to open tabs with plastic. Every Monday Visa and Mastercard stock should rise based on all the closed bar tabs, but maybe that’s already built into the share price. Smoke wafts in from the door. I can almost see it. I try to inhale, but only get cheese. Silver trays with left over slices pile on the tables around me.

By the entrance a girl with bleach blonde hair taps the rim of a martini glass, bored. She sips and then she sees me. Her bare shoulders turn up. I nod, but her expression remains the same. Bill drops down next to me and obscures my view. “Come on man,” I say, trying to move him off me. He apologizes with a wink and slides so we’re not touching. But it’s too late, when I try to find her, she’s gone. I give Bill my beer, telling him I’ll be right back, knowing it’ll be gone by then.

Outside, I rest against a wall while the storks puff smoke. The cold transforms their breath into fog, creating a smoke mixture that’s cold by the time it reaches me. I

pretend to text and scroll and surf while I inhale the folds, the blend of brands. Bulbs from the taxis light up the street. Drivers slow as they pass, searching for a fare that's not too drunk as to pose a threat to the upholstery.

Then I see her, the martini girl. From a wristlet she pulls out an American Spirits pack. Organic. Long smoke. Strong head rush. She lights up and takes in the surroundings, the things around her, until she lands on me.

“Hey.”

“Hello,” she says, stepping closer. Her voice sounds foreign.

“Where are you from?” and I hate the question as soon as I ask it.

“Ukraine.” She blows smoke to the sky, trying not to strike me. “And you, where are you from?”

“I'm from here,” I say, pointing to the ground.

She regards the butt-covered street. “Here is good.” She inches closer, using her arms to keep balance. “You're handsome,” she says. “What are you?”

“I'm an American.”

She appears disappointed. “Yes, I've heard of this. I thought maybe you were something more,” she says, touching her finger to lips, searching for the word, “intricate, yes?” She goes on. She tells me her name is Odessa. She tells me she's new. She takes a long drag and stumbles into me upon exhale.

I catch her by the bare skin of her shoulders. “Thank you.” She brings the smoke to her lips. “Want one?”

“No thanks.”

She leans into my chest, resting her head against me. I wrap my arms around her, tapping not quite rubbing her back through a black cardigan that can't offer much comfort. She looks up to me and takes a drag. She pulls me down till our lips touch. Her mouth draws open. Smoke fills me, warms me. I hold it as she pulls back. "Take me home." The smoke exits through my nostrils.

"I don't know where you live."

"Take me with you." She falls forward, limp. I hold her, trying to shake her awake. People glance our way. The bouncer snarls. "Please," she says louder, snuggling closer.

I open the door of a pulled over taxi and help her in. "UES," I tell the driver.

He says something about her being too drunk.

I empathize, I really do, but it's too late, we're in this together. "Just go man."

He grunts, and then he drives, giving me the rearview glare, condemning my soul the entire journey. The car rolls uptown through empty lanes, the corridors between the high rise structures. We blur through the dotted green lights that hang suspended, all synchronized and aligned, as we head in the direction of home.

I lead her through the doors. She mumbles in Ukrainian. The words, though foreign, seem random like a child reciting language in her dreams. I lead her to my bed and cover her. On my nightstand I leave a glass of water and a note so when she wakes she'll have an idea of where she is, who I am.

I sleep on my couch, but mainly I think of her, attempting to discern her outline in the darkness. I hope she knows what the UES is. It's a long way from Union Square. An even longer way from other places.

By the time I'm up she's already gone. I was hoping she'd wake me. I'd take her to brunch. We'd sit outside. Drink mimosas. I'd watch her smoke. Exchange numbers. Laugh off the night before. I hope she remembers some of it, wasn't too fearful.

She made my bed before leaving. The gray comforter with the gray sheets underneath appears strange tucked in. I pick up the note but don't recognize the handwriting. There's an address, neatly penciled, *3000 Mermaid Ave, Coney Island*. Nothing else. No number or name or time. Just a place.

“A Russian?”

“Will you stop?” I wipe his mouth. Crumbs of gajar halwa, a sweet dessert of grated carrots, milk, and butter, fly from his hole.

“A Ruskie?”

“She's Ukrainian Dad.”

He squints. “You think there's a difference?” The diaphragm continues to compress, creating the pause in conversation.

Behind the kitchen door, a faucet runs over dishes. It's been running too long. Shammi thinks I can't see her feet through the cracks. “Miles and miles of difference.”

Wrinkles crease over his bald head. It's turning a beet like color, borscht like even. I swallow another spoonful. The carrot specks soothe my throat as it goes down.

“Don't go. This is too strange. Do normal things like a normal person. This, this, is a bad idea. Surely you see that.”

“I’m just checking it out. No harm.” Why’d I even bother stopping by? I didn’t want to tell him and somehow he pried it out, breaking down my reflection.

“What killed the cat?” I wipe again, even as he repeats the question.

“Will you calm down?”

The compression forces him to regain some composure. “What’s her name?” he breathes out.

“Odessa.”

His eyes dart back and forth. “Codename Odessa.”

“I need to go. It’s another forty minutes.”

“Odessa, southern city by the Black Sea. You sure she’s a girl? Odessa where they massacred twenty-five thousand Jews until the reds came with their tanks, liberation tanks. Odessa, supposedly freed from Soviet rule in ’91. Odessa, the rouge group ushering Nazis to safety, an underground railroad of war criminals. Odessa Belikov, KGB ICE Commander, warned Castro before we took him out, is this who you refer to? Tell me, what is she?”

I move to leave. He’s been stuck for so long, so apart, connected through memories and histories, all circulating in his mind. It’s not the Cold War anymore.

Shammi opens the door for me on the way out. She seems worn down. It’s not fair that she has to be here, locked in. If not for her, I’d be smoking alone in my room while the lung downstairs recycled air, moving closer to the day when the men in white suits would fit me for my predisposition, sizing me up for my own custom cylinder, rolling me next to my father. Two lungs beating continuously. Two mirrors reflecting the other, waiting for one last negative compression.



“Bye Dad,” I yell out.

I can see his face in the mirror. He’s trying to say something, but struggling with the words. His voice seems to filter through the machine. “You don’t even know your terms.”

The sun begins to set. Days undergo the transition, growing shorter and darker. Every year it hits me with the same surprise. Underground, in the subway caves of the Metro Transit Authority, I wait for the orange line of the F train. Nothing changes down here. They may install a new ticket machine, introduce a new map design, change the garbled conductor’s voice to the smooth automation of a recording, but the tunnels, the people, the tracks never change. Maybe if I slept and woke up a hundred years from now it’d be different. Maybe they’d name the subway lines after dead men on the verge of being forgotten. Last stop: Coney Island.

## CHAPTER 2

### Survey

James taps his foot on the floor of the subway car. The nervous tic sometimes extends to his restless leg. The train emerges aboveground, revealing a less packed Brooklyn with high rise projects, lower income households, ethnically concentrated neighborhoods. Three young black men sit on a bench across from the subject, conversing loudly, heads covered in hooded sweatshirts, each lettered with a capital R. James avoids eye contact. They notice his avoidance and speak louder. He pulls out his phone. Surveillance indicates no incoming messages. Perhaps this is a time check or an attempt at avoidance. ETA: 8 minutes.

Three men identified as Charles Baker Jones, Sheldrick Anthony, and Maurice Anthony. Currently employed at Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs, Coney Island staple and tourist attraction. No criminal records. Sheldrick and Maurice Anthony are fraternal twins, similar in appearance, often mistaken as identical, age 17. Charles is their older cousin on their mother's side, age 18. His main residence has been the Anthony household dating back five years. Charles will be attending Rutgers in the Fall of 2008 on a football scholarship. Projected position is running back/kick returner/short yardage screen target. Scouting reports indicate a lack of football acumen, but a wealth of athletic talent. He's a project player, a slash man to be honed, a 2/3 star recruit with four star potential. Psychological profile reveals a troubled childhood. Mother, Clara, never married, currently lives in a halfway house in Camden, NJ. Charles feels the pressure to

succeed, making him a strong target for boosters. He slaps his hands together in twelve-second intervals when he speaks, generally avoiding eye contact. “I’m going to support my brothers. I mean that’s the whole point. I’m going to the school. School’s going to support me, I gotta support them. It’s simple. It’s like, one day, I was walking home and I got jumped by these jokers. They really had me, pushed me up against a wall. This one clown takes a knife out. He’s got one of those cheap ass jail tats, a tear drop or some shit on his face. He tells me he wants my pack, my wallet, my shoes, everything. The clown holds the blade to my face, presses down, junkie motherfucker. Says he’s gonna teach me a lesson, starts laughing, squealing like he’s getting off on this shit. I hear it sometimes, that squealing when I wake up, like he’s outside the window. But then Maurice and Quan(Sheldrick Anthony) they come out of nowhere and tackle the dude. The knife falls on the street. And I tackle one of ‘em and the others go running off while we beat them down. But that’s what I’m telling you. We watch out. They didn’t have to get into that shit, but that’s what family does.” A sense of loyalty bodes well for a team dynamic. Charles dreams of scoring touchdowns, draped in the red jersey of the Scarlet Knights. When he’s on the field, operating in open space, the world slows. He sees the blocks, anticipates the opposition hurtling forward, their mouths foaming at the prospect of knocking him out. And he sees how the moving parts create the space he needs to follow in order to get there. He feels the churning in his legs, molecules readying themselves in charge, through his calves and thighs, till there’s an explosion of energy, a burst and the whole things speeds up, the picture in his mind becomes reality, as the jerseys blur past, his feet shifting, the stiff arming, stutter stepping, speed changing, whatever it takes to the

preserve the lanes, to create new ones, to keep the churn and the rock alive, the entire field visible. They can't catch him. They won't. His body, his will, is greater.

Sheldrick(Quan) and Maurice Anthony have both been earmarked for acceptances at Rutgers. They recount their cousin coming in from the rain five years ago though the subject is never talked about. Maurice paces their small apartment before the cousin arrives, angry at the thought that another kid was going to invade their world, taking more from what little they had. He didn't care if it was his cousin. Sheldrick tries to calm his brother down, remind him that Charles was cool. But Maurice, who is attempting to cultivate a thin mustache isn't having it. This was an affront, didn't matter who it was. They had nothing to give and here comes this kid. Sorry kid, it's a tough world, but we got to do what we got to do to survive. Sheldrick disagreed with Maurice's Darwinian mentality, an attitude that seemed cruel to apply to human beings, especially blood relatives. Sheldrick has shown a proficiency in science, specifically biology. His thoughts frequently shift to the idea of living and breathing things, how they function in relation to the other, the invisible processes that govern life, although he never brings these interests up to Maurice or his mother at the dinner table when they talk about their days. What really got him going were the drosophila flies. Mr. Grody, their old science teacher, told the class about chromosomes, DNA, and embryos. When he started talking about these flies, how they illustrate the principles, with a goofy grin Quan knew something was up. Soon, they were cultivating their own Drosophila colonies. Luckily, Maurice was his partner, and he didn't give a shit, which meant Quan got to do it all, watch it all unfold. So the male approaches the lady like he's cool as shit. He taps her with his leg, kind of like foreplay before they get down to it. He then flies around her, trying to impress her,

shows her all that he is. Then he sticks his wing out, like a dick, sticking it out, shaking it. And if she's so inclined, impressed enough, she receives him, and the whole thing's over after a couple seconds. In three days' time there's an egg. A day after that they hatch. These weird little things crawl out, larvae, all transparent so you can their insides, their organs. They are fed and the larvae grow into a pupal, getting this case around it. A week passes and they are full grown flies. Quan witnesses the whole thing. Life is biology, and all the rest is nonsense, especially Maurice's anger over Charles coming to live with them. By the end of the month, the flies begin to die, dropping, squirming, until it's over. Quan knows it's stupid, that in a way it's kind of the point, the process of life unfolding, but he still feels bad for his drosophila farm, still feels responsible, when they die, tasting bitterness, a sense of exploitation at the back of his choked back tears.

When Charles walked in, carrying a backpack that turned out to be his sole possession, his face puffy and bruised, from what or where the two brothers never asked, but when they saw him any sense of threat or uncertainty dissipated. The kid needed help. He was one of them and if this could happen to him, something in both Quan and Maurice knew the potential existed for it to happen to each of them. So when Maurice slaps Charles' hand and says, "Wassup man?" Quan can exhale. Even though Charles was already a big dude and older, the two brothers knew he needed someone to take care, so that's what they did. Within a year, they'll be college kids. For now they'll work at Nathan's, cleaning the counters, making the dogs, ringing the registers, until they're finally free from all of it, all the bullshit. The train continues to roll. In the end, the white guy sitting across from them, trying to not to look their way, in the end the guy's just a

little too scared for his own good. Guys like that shouldn't be venturing out alone, especially as it gets darker.

In the end, James' suspicions, if they were suspicions, prove unwarranted.

James walks to Mermaid Avenue, visibility diminishing, a stutter in his steps. He tries to make out the numbers on the store fronts, the convenience stores, apartments, and fast food places, and realizes he's going in the wrong direction. He crosses the street and reverses course. Checks his phone again. Records indicate no incoming calls or messages, further suggestive of a compulsive behavior. Individuals in states of heightened stress and solitude often use phones to normalize appearance in social settings. Dr. Luisia McCenna's 2005 study on the matter suggests women use their mobile devices when walking alone, a behavior that occurs at a higher frequency in urban environments. When subjects were asked why they responded by dismissing the impetus behind the question, saying it was simply a convenient time to catch up with people. However, McCenna's data and investigative skills(stare-down technique accentuated by arched eyebrows) forced the majority to eventually yield that they needed to speak with someone, that it made them feel safer, the phone signaling to strangers around them an off limits zone, an act that not only keeps others away, but signals a silent radius. Headphones and mp3 players were also found to be viable alternatives. Crime reports indicate a higher likelihood of mugging and/or assault if the subject is distracted with such devices though, the idea being less awareness allows for an element of surprise on the part of the perpetrator. Additionally, the technology indicates the subject's socio-economic status, their "mark-ability" as it were, a term McCenna coined in the study, a term she believes will achieve a level of prevalence in the zeitgeist It is McCenna's hope

that she raises the profile of this phenomenon to reduce crime. An unfortunate incident in New York's the Lower East Side while the doctor herself was on a phone, in the middle of an average morning, served as the inspiration for the study. McCenna stills thinks back to it. She swallows, rubbing the reddened skin, the imprints etched into her throat. The marks will fade, but she has a feeling the memory will remain, not so much the assault, but this, looking at herself in the bathroom mirror at the police station, the busy noise beyond the door that indicates there's a world of problems that makes your problem insignificant, the knowledge that they'll never find him. Indeed, she thinks it's quite logical, although unproven, that over the course of a person's lifetime, the memory of looking at one's self in a mirror, an everyday behavior, will be defined by four to five specific images, one being a baseline, the others beings attached to events. So when she thinks of a mirror, she thinks of herself in a prom dress, trying to cover up a pimple at the tip of her nose, the moments after giving birth to Madeline, an experience that she promises she'll never go through again after she sees herself again for the first time, the stylist asking her what she thought of the cut, too short, too blonde, and for some reason being unable to answer, feeling age creeping in the veins, wanting to turn away, but being unable to because of the expectation of the stylist waiting with that sideways tilt holding a comb you wish to God he wasn't holding to his mouth, and now, the victim, alone, in the grimy downtown station, the marks reminding you of a noose while you wonder why you, what part did you play, determining to recognize your condition, why do these things happen to all of us at some point, the images of all those women on phones, headphones plugged, blinded to the world outside, you're going to figure it out, you are going to help them, prevent it from happening again, you are powerful, you hate clichés,

especially the tired New York ones, think they don't allow people to deal with reality, but here, now, you think it's appropriate as you squeeze the porcelain sink while the water from the leaky faucet drips, here in this reflection you see what you need to do, you draw from it, and she says, "Never again."

James stands in front of 3000 Mermaid Avenue and attempts to veil his confusion with a look of amusement. He thinks this must be some joke, that the whole thing must be part of some mix up, that Odessa is going to pop out and say surprise, that she must be watching him, a thought not too removed from a certain reality, but one James will never access.

James stands 5'10, eighty feet shorter than the apartment building under construction in front of him. He peers at the steel girders, noting the rectangular shells that need to be filled with windows. Brown hair blows into his eyes, but all he must be thinking about are the blonde locks of a certain Ukrainian woman.

To say a moment like this has happened before would be a fabrication. That is not to say that the growing desolation at the pit of James's stomach is an entirely new sensation. That these memories come flooding back now is as much of an inevitability as the sound of the waves on the shoreline, a sound that all lone beach-goers tend to notice as their sense of insignificance rises with the advancing tide, forcing them to evaluate just how and why they got here and where it all went so wrong.

Four years earlier: 2003. James attended ----- in the City, a solid, if not entirely prestigious University. If James's life were classified as normal, which, due to the circumstances of his birth, it cannot, college would represent the rebellious stage, a



time of growing independence that includes the rejection of the father, signified by the infrequency of his visits during this time despite the close proximity, a decision that he would come to regret but at the time being unable to help himself, a sensation he described to a friend as, “Relief, like realizing you’ve only been taking half-breaths your entire life and then you get to feel a full one and you know that something been holding you back, how do you go back to that, how Monk?”

James majors in Finance(BS). He holds aspirations of working for a startup, being part of something from the beginning. Like the majority of his peers, he chooses to indulge. That his roommate, Monk Chu(real name: Adam Chu) manufactures fake ids, his specialty being the state of New Jersey, eases their ability for consumption. The license is relatively easy to copy due to the fact that the state had not yet transitioned to digital production, giving the cards a glossy lamination often unevenly aligned with the plastic covering, all of which makes Chu believe that many of his fakes exceed the quality of the NJDMV. The sheer volume of students that circulate through their ten by ten dorm room facilitates James’s social climb. Popularity, rather than being based on social status or wealth, can more simply be attributed to a numbers game requiring far less personality than most young men and women have the experience to appreciate.

In the course of his college career James’s heart will be broken, which will lead him to a state of depression marked by feelings of isolation and inadequacy physically manifested in initial weight loss followed by weight gain, sorrow while listening to The Cure’s “Pictures of You” and “Boys Don’t Cry” on repeat, oversleeping, a two pack a day habit, and the more than occasional gravity bong courtesy of Monk Chu’s fake ID slush fund, providing James with enough substance to fill the cavity of what he believes

to be his crushed, flushed out, and nonexistent heart. The cause of his heartbreak occurs at 1:10 AM in the Spring semester of his sophomore year on the rooftop of Grace Cohen and Priya Shivani's apartment building. But this event is preceded by several others. A hungover James answers the knock on his door wearing mesh shorts, no shirt, scruff sprouting from his chin.

When Steffie Langely sees James she takes a step back. She expects to see an Asian man with the last name Chu, although she was never explicitly told he was Asian, she just assumed. She takes two steps forward, stretches her hand out, and says, "Monk."

James, squinty eyed and bleary, can already feel a flutter, an aura about this nervous girl with a tight body(5'5 35-24-28, blue eyes, gymnast till she was 15) and the most pronounced dimples. He thanks God that Monk went to the commons for his weekly "Wake-Bake-Munch," a phrase he yells aloud several times before running out the door for a considerable mix of waffles, eggs, bacon, and soft serve, rinsed and repeated with a custom blend of pineapple and orange juice. "Not Monk," James says, leaning against the door frame, "roommate, James."

"I'll come back later."

"Need ID?" He ushers her inside, smelling her lavender body wash as she passes by. After finding the digital camera on Monk's cluttered desk, which is scattered with papers and pencils, he tells her to "stand there," pointing to the white wall backdrop on his roommate's side of the room.

She adjust her curls. They bob up and down. Each wraps in a way that James later mistakenly compares to a Fibonacci sequence, formulating that her entire being is part of

some mathematical equation that amounts to perfection, the curl serving as an embodiment of the sequence that defines her internal structure. “How do I look?”

He nods. “The right,” he directs, pointing his index finger straight up, using his thumb as the backbone, forming a 90 degree angle.

She shifts her open toed feet, pushing aside a pile of textbooks on mechanical engineering that Monk has not bothered opening yet. Despite his outward demeanor, the state of his room, and his illegal activities Monk Chu will graduate ----- in 2005 with a degree in Engineering(BS) and a GPA of 3.57. A recommendation letter will praise Chu’s ability to concentrate on the given task in front of him with unparalleled focus. The Professor’s letter will fail to mention Chu’s propensity to laugh at seemingly random intervals in class, often to the consternation of others and to the eventual dismay of his current employers, who come to regret his hiring, the noise from his cubicle creating an atmosphere that they feel undermines the environment, giving employees more permission to goof off based on the laughter, which seems to indicate a man who watches cat videos(the result of an offhand comment by Chu during a company picnic when speaking about his fear of cats, a comment he follows with a laugh, but does not regard as humorous in the slightest) on YouTube all day instead of actually working, and if Chu can do it, why can’t they? Unfortunately, to the dismay of the company, a search of his hard drive and browsing history reveals no non-work related dalliances besides a mass of forwarded emails from his colleagues mainly consisting of links to cat videos. To implicate Chu on the basis of the inbox would require them to implicate others. Beyond this, no evidence exists that any of the emails were ever opened. Almost all seem to have been deleted within moments of their reception. Chu’s actual work is impeccable, but the

laughter is too much for his superiors. They fear it's ruining an atmosphere that it's taken years to cultivate. The company fears a harsh rebuke letter to all employees on the need for professional conduct will make them appear stodgy and stern, a sentiment which may hurt them in their quest to make it to the annual "Best Companies to Work For" list, a list they covet almost as much as they fear making the "Worst Companies to Work For" list. Additionally, they fear what would happen if Monk's behavior persists in spite of the letter, how his chortling would serve as the ultimate defiance, forcing their hand to fire him on un-fireable grounds, everyone would know, making them look even worse, subsequently undoing decades of meticulously crafted corporate culture, proudly stated on the About Us section of their website. The CEO and CCO(Chief Cultural Officer) hold weekly meetings over lunches mainly consisting of shrimp cocktails and bottles of a '97 Malbec that the CEO has a particular fondness for, lunches that invariably end with the two Chiefs continuing the discussion at Rick's Cabaret(SYMB: RICK), while two women with aliases Nixon and Lacey loosen the gentleman's ties, as their dialogue on the subject of one Monk Chu continues. In the end they reach the conclusion that seclusion is the only way. But the only way to be secluded in a New York building is a corner office, glassed off and silent, reserved for higher ups. Interestingly, as their weekly sessions continue over a period of three months, they come around to the idea. They have developed a certain affection for the "laughing maniac," an association between any mention of him and all the good times shared. So while they originally anticipated some sort of sabotage most likely involving an infestation of cat videos on his hard drive, the very idea of Chu not being in their lives causes each of the Chiefs to experience a sensation in their stomach not dissimilar to acid reflux. In the end, they decide promotion

and sound proofing are the only ways. After reaching a decision, they spend another month of lunches to make absolutely sure. They slap each other on the back, each congratulating the other for their due diligence, becoming misty eyed during their last meeting in the Champagne Room as Nixon and Lacey bounce on their laps with their glittered and moisturized bodies. The idea of administering a drug test never occurs to them, not that they would go along with it now given the sensitivity of their stomachs to the name, “Monk Chu.”

“Smile,” James says in a way he thinks sounds charming, but to Steffie sounds more like a directive.

Her lips go wide, curving to formulate a pronounced dimple on each end, impressing her cheeks symmetrically.

He presses down, one click, two clicks, three, four.

“Did it come out okay?”

He grunts, realizes he’s just grunted, and tries to transform his grunt into a throat clearing cough by putting his hand to his mouth before he ekes out, “Good, good.”

“Are you all right?”

James hesitates and recovers. “I’m fine. Sorry, had a bit of a rough night. I’ll get Monk to get on this when he gets back. He has your info, right?”

“Yeah, he’s got it.”

“Cool, why don’t you come back tonight?” James pictures Monk coming home and dropping on the bed for his post-brunch coma. He’ll prevent his slumber through whatever means necessary, whether that means yelling at him or bribing him. Focus, he will get Monk to focus on the task.

“Thanks,” she says, backing out the room till she’s in the hallway. “Nice to meet you.” Steffie bows with an exaggerated courtesy.

“Yeah,” is all James says as she walks away.

Steffie leaves, thinking James carries a strange resentment toward her. Maybe it was his hangover or having to deal with his roommate’s ID scam, but mainly she thinks it has something to do with her. She is intrigued to say the least.

James and Steffie are in the bowels of the East Village rock venue, The Mercury Lounge(capacity 250 people, occupancy now at 110). The band playing on stage, Time News Roman, consists of lead singer Ben Rogers(Benji), bassist Richard Bright(Bright), drummer Helga Stroff(Helgie), and guitarist Anthony Lotto(Tony). They all have day jobs, but Tony’s the only one with an actual career track, having completed a degree in Information Technology from Syracuse University(BS ’00). Tony serves as a security consultant for -----, a top five accounting firm. The company pays him to hack into the software of clients in order to expose potential flaws in their security protocols. When asked if he likes his job Tony replies, “It pays.” He plays the riff that opens their first song, “Sans Serif,” a strum that is elegiac, defined by an echo that lasts five to ten-seconds a little too long so audience members begin to glance at each other sheepishly, most likely thinking, is this it? But right before it becomes too embarrassing, Tony descends into shorter and shorter rhythms. He wants to sound like Radiohead, but in reality he’s much closer to U2, Edge-like. As the melody kicks in, Helgie comes in with the drum beat, biceps curled, frazzled hair covering her face while the sticks pound, the notes being struck with such singular power, the reverberation felt within each audience

member. Bright provides stability with the bass. Benji brushes his hair aside, even though it falls back in place when he grabs the microphone. He projects with a quiet force, “Sans Sands Sands Sands,” the voice growing louder, Helga rolling now, “Serif Sereef Sereeeef,” Tony fingering the strings, “Sans Sereef, Saaannnsss Seerrreefff,” half the audience thinking(including James, not Steffie) that Benji’s saying Sands Sheriff. The one thing Tony truly loves is playing, these moments, and yet he is prepared to give it up. The band is dangerously close to reaching a level of recognition, murmurs of a van tour from Bright, the real activist in the group. A tour would signify the need to make a choice, the career or the band, a choice he’s already made, even as he plays with the thrill of being on stage as Helga’s drums behind him drive into his very core. The safety of a career, a life, cannot be sacrificed, not even for his fellow heathens who he secretly considers to be his best friends. Benji is the only way who feels the same way about Tony, although Tony doesn’t know it due to Benji’s tendency to speak softly and rarely off-stage so Tony only tends to catch a word from him here and there.

Steffie drifts in front of James. A green paper band circles her wrist, the result of the forged NJ ID in her pocket, a bracelet that enables her to purchase seven dollar beers and nine dollar mixed drinks(shelf liquor).

James hovers behind, getting closer but not too close, backing off whenever he infringes on the personal bubble he’s ascribed her frame.

Steffie smirks, aware.

He tries to dance, but is unsure how to, a frequent problem that arises with rock shows and young adults yearning for intimacy. For a moment his hand hovers an inch from her waist, but he pulls away, preferring to play it cool. He doesn’t like the way she

gleams at the lead singer who looks like a knockoff Julian Casablancas(Lead Singer: The Strokes). In general, he hates the way girls fawn over bands during a show. That the same thing happens to him when he observes female musicians is a fact that will not become apparent until two years from now when he finds himself utterly enamored with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs play as Karen O blows kisses at the audience.

James thinks he likes the music, but is unsure if he should comment between songs. If Steffie doesn't like it, it might open a rift far vaster than that one foot two inches separating them now.

Steffie waits for James to do something that will allow her to react, do, or say anything. The fact that it takes the entire set for James to ask, "What do you think?" causes her to laugh at the awkward boy, a moment of levity James interprets as his charm shining through, when in reality what occurs in Steffie's mind is James's relegation to a region of her mind that recognizes him as a non-sexual entity, a relegation that does not preclude friendship and, in this case, promotes it.

So as Times New Roman returns for their encore, "Arial Assault", a bombastic number that Tony feels doesn't achieve the level of aesthetic both lyrically and musically that they should be striving for, but doesn't say anything because of his IT job because in his mind if he says something now and quits the band he'll just be that asshole who didn't want to play the one song audiences universally responded to. As Tony joins in the chorus:

Arial Assault, Cracking Key  
So much more the more of me, Cracking key  
Arial Arial, Arial Assault



Benji intones with what sounds like an Eddie Vedder(Lead Singer: Pearl Jam) impersonation, while Steffie leans back against James, sending another signal.

Steffie, who is somewhat aware of James's interest, has a case of the aching feet and is willing to risk a little leaning if it means relief, an action of questionable cruelty, but, at that time, no one quite knew where this thing would go.

The motions continue, Steffie and James shift from being acquaintances to friends who spend more and more time together, a move that has both of their respective groups wondering, "What's their status?", with speculative asides. She studies art history. Has a real thing for Gauguin and Seurat, initially inspired from seeing the musical, *Sundays in the Park with George*(Creator: Sondheim, Stephen) as a fourteen year old girl. She takes James to the MoMA(Museum of Modern Art) and tries to explain the significance of all those things. James likes to listen. He's under the impression that he's learning, that she's forcing him to expand his interests, interests no one bothered to nourish, in short, that she is making him a better man.

Date like activities persist. In James, Steffie finds someone to say yes to all those New York things that everyone always says they'll do, but never get around to, the barrier in her case being the inclination on the part of most of her friend to work hard/play hard, the play hard aspect of this dichotomy representing a propensity for clubbing/dancing/drinking/hooking up that she enjoys, but lately has been leaving her feeling empty and dry the next morning in a state she believes borders on depression.

And it's not that both parties move unaware. Steffie understands the dubious tangle that may occur if James "like likes" her. Comments about the opposite sex, the attractiveness of certain males, are meant to provide clarity to the situation, comments

that James takes as indicative of the progressiveness of their relationship, their openness, their honesty. James gets the hypocrisy of this stance given his inability to make a move or open up to the girl, but usually ignores such thoughts by focusing on the weather(Spring, Median high 64 degrees).

After a month of coming back to a stoned Monk, who stares at the ceiling, a pair of noise canceling headphones wrapped around each ear, the ears hearing a techno playlist comprised of The Chemical Brothers, Fatboy Slim, Daft Punk, and The Beastie Boys, entitled Easy Listening, a title Monk does not view as ironic, James will get tired of his roommate's persistent question, "Did you fuck her yet?" To Chu's credit, he will cease asking the question at the end of this period, proclaiming that "she's a fuckin' bitch" for not engaging in sexual relations with James, who he assures, quite emphatically, a hand on his shoulder, headphones clinging to his neck, "you're fuckin' awesome," a refrain that will eventually cause James to harbor some serious doubts.

He doesn't think it explicitly, but there is an implicit "I love you," in his heart which aches(arrhythmia from stress, not uncommon) when he projects her, envisions the move, kissing her, confessing, her loving response, while the fear of no reciprocity lingers, what that rejection would mean causes the actual paralysis, the ache, the uncertainty of being.

The confrontation happens on a spring day near the end of term. James walks out of his father's brownstone(no internal surveillance), his head is down, fists squeezed, a slow step down the steps. For some reason instead of taking the subway back to the dorm

he elects a taxi, a move that expedites travel 20-30 minutes, but at a cost five times higher, traffic dependent.

Ali Muhammad, taxi driver, aged 53, legalized citizen, emigrated from Iran, sporting a long black beard, takes note of the despondency painted on his passenger's face and calls his wife via Bluetooth, hoping to avoid any interaction. Parsi Muhammed answers, used to the average of six calls she receives during Ali's shift. Their small Jackson Heights apartment smells of biriyani, a tradition Persian dish of spiced rice minced with meat(customarily chicken, fish, lamb, or goat) and vegetables, producing a taste profile both rich and complex. Parsi divides her focus between Ali's complaints over all the depressed people in this country, all these white kids moping, probably on drugs, and frying the onions, which she plans to layer into the cooked rice, currently simmering on low heat. She agrees with him with a verbal cue equivalent to "yes" or "sure," a cue that comforts Ali.

He asks her what she's doing. She mention the biriyani, aware of the effect it will have on her husband. The boy stares out the window, like a fool, while Ali Muhammed salivates at the prospect of arriving home to the warmth of Parsi's biriyani, one of the few things he treasures in the world, a remnant from the days before the Revolution. Ali feels better, feels a sense of justice, looks at the boy and sees another fare, a stepping stone to get what he deserves. He speeds in and out of the lanes of the Manhattan Bridge as he says goodbye. Running adjacent, the Brooklyn Bridge occupies the attention of both men. Even Ali Muhammed admits that he finds it beautiful, "like a postcard, what is real, but could be from another time, a better place than the one here," he says with large hands pushing against the air underneath his fingers like there's a concrete box below them.

James resolves to confess for reasons not entirely known. An off campus party at Steffie's friends' apartment in the East Village, complete with a rooftop pavilion that features the lit up Midtown skyline, twinkling bright, substituting the stars. Priya Patel and Grace Cohen, the hosts, do not think highly of James and are weary of Steffie's continued insistence that the two are just friends, a phrase she repeats while waving her hand in front of her face, dismissing the question like swatting a fly. They have their doubts, but the more James hangs without incident the more they are inclined to think that they are wrong, a thought they will not express to Steffie in the "I knew it" aftermath.

Priya(BS Finance), born in Parsippany, NJ, was Steffie's freshman roommate. She is a second generation Indian with a penchant for sarcasm that men find intimidating, but other women respond to. In her room, she brushes her black hair, staring until she's satisfied with the straightness. She steals glances at Grace Cohen who's pacing beyond her, the sound of her footsteps filling the two bedroom apartment as she constantly adjusts her sparkly silver halter top in the mirrored hallways. Priya knows Grace worries about her weight and she has reason to. She would never say it to her, of course, but she is on the path to chubbiness, something Priya knows Grace's mother nags her about on daily phone calls. Grace paces, much like she's doing now, unaware that Priya can hear her, even with the door shut. All the factors work together to make Priya feel even worse for even thinking about her roommate's weight. At the very least, her boobs are fantastic, evidenced by the show of cleavage, and that's one positive of the weight gain, a gain Priya attributes to the city's temptations, what with its drunken delectables, pizza slices,

and restaurants, followed by the best wakeup hangover brunch food on the planet, accompanied by the option of bottomless Mimosas or Bloody Mary's.

Grace frequently brings up the James/Steffie issue, leading Priya to believe that Grace (BS Marketing, Cherry Hill, NJ) does not like Steffie very much and perhaps feels a certain attraction toward James or a desire for someone to dote on her the way he does on "that girlie", an expression Grace uses to reference Steffie when alone with Priya, leaving Priya unsure of how she should respond, so she says nothing, which she hopes is rebuke enough. Grace fidgets in the mirror, her skirt hugging a bit too tightly about her hips, skin tanned, top adjusted to reveal the buxomness that the "Jewish Princess" (Priya's nickname, never spoken aloud, except during the uncovering process) has to offer.

The party features a predominantly 19-21 year old crowd conversing and drinking, mainly mixed drinks/beer/and the occasional shot. The Outcast song "Hey Ya" plays on the speakers from the double album *The Love Below*, featuring Andre 3000 and Big Boi, each disc a showcase for one of the performers, an obvious precursor to the group's eventual breakup. James holds his solo cup, palms sweating. Monk Chu remains at his side, head bobbing, fist pumping to Andre 3000's demand to "shake it like a Polaroid picture." Steffie sits on a stone ledge on the roof, a vodka soda in hand.

"Now or never," James thinks, stuttering forward, but before he reaches her she is approached by another man, Ted Nagler, dressed in a pink Polo shirt with a popped collar, a man who reeks of Giorgio Armani's Aqua di Gio, a man James finds easy to hate, an attitude intensified when she laughs at something he says, his bewilderment increasing as Steffie slivers over to make room "for that fuckin' douche bag" (Monk

Chu's words). James chugs the rest of his beer and sidesteps to the makeshift bar, pouring himself a rum and coke whose measurements amount to double, slightly warm.

As he sips, Grace Cohen taps him. He smiles, says hi, thanks her for hosting, asks her how her semester's been, his sips growing into gulps while he listens to whatever answers she gives, answers that a girl like Steffie would never give. He introduces Grace to Monk Chu even though he's sure they've met before. To his surprise they play along.

Chu makes darting looks at Grace's chest and resolves to get to know her better. He takes over for James with his engaged hysterical manner, highlighted by a cackle of laughter an average of every four minutes, a laughter Grace finds infectious.

James nods, gulping along as *The Love Below* transitions to the Big Boi side. Priya stands at the midway point of the roof, a sort of middle ground between Steffie and James, forming a triangle. She sees Steffie and Ted sharing a cigarette, blowing smoke off the tenth floor, their bodies tilted against each other. She sees James, red-faced, staring at the two with drunken eyes while Steffie pretends not to notice him.

The inevitable moment comes as Big Boi sings "I Like the Way You Move." The party has swelled and more people are dancing. Nagler's hands are on Steffie's hips. Her body grinds against his. James continues to watch, drinking all the while. All the while Monk smokes a spliff (mixture of marijuana and tobacco) in Grace's room downstairs followed by a make-out session. Grace falls asleep before it goes further, causing Monk to laugh as he lies next to her on the bed while she snores. It will be three weeks before they can complete the promise of this night when they secretly meet at a local bar for drinks, unbeknownst to either group of friends. So James, already dizzy, the spins taking hold, witnesses Steffie's tongue go into Nagler's mouth in a PDA display that causes him

to feel the simultaneous need to wretch and cry. The Empire State Building shines behind them, its glowing white antenna a steeple, a beacon erect, a perfect picture really, except for the fact that she's with the wrong man in front of the right man. James thinks he sees Steffie watching him watching them, but she looks away, continuing the kiss while Nagler sways his khaki wearing legs sides to side in a move designed to showcase his sexuality.

Nagler has only a vague recollection of making out with Steffie on the roof, many of his weekends from his college years erased or blurred from a cocaine habit that he still regrets to this day. Currently, he's enrolled in a treatment program and sincerely hopes to get over it. His requests for Steffie's contact information were denied.

Steffie admits to seeing James, that crushed glassy stare, admits that she felt shitty, but also offers that it needed to be done. She sensed the change in James, felt the danger of a confession, which was something she was ill equipped to handle. The logical step was to hook up with a guy in front of James so he'd get the hint, a plan she hoped would still preserve their friendship, something she knew his confession and her rejection of him in "that way" would not have been able to do, a hope she realized to be "utterly hopeless."

James rushes from the rooftop. Priya follows close behind, calls his name. As he flies down the gray concrete stairs, the fluorescent lights shining with an epileptic flash, his queasiness expands while the visibility diminishes, the tears in his eyes rising, the pain of watching coupled with the shame of feeling the need to cry "like some pussy" really taking its toll. He stumbles, almost falling, catching himself by bracing against the exit to the seventh floor. Priya catches up to him, saying things he would not expect her

to say, rubbing his back, assuring him that he's a great guy, saying it'll be alright, he'll find someone, the sympathy of someone not quite a stranger, but close while James buzzes, thinking, where do these things come from, these bursts, these words, the randomness, of not knowing anyone, the willful ignorance.

They stare. She closes her eyes. James knows what to do. He moves aside a strand of her hair, cups his hand gently against the side of her face, inches closer to her lips. But he can't hold it in any longer and the contents of the night come spilling out. Priya suppresses her horror, continuing to rub his heaving back, tolerating the sounds, feeling responsible for James's plight, having witnessed the events leading to the crash. She leads him down one floor to their apartment(607) and eases him onto the couch, removing his shoes, but not going so far as to remove his socks.

Throughout the night James drifts in and out of the changing lights, the people and voices, the murmurs that sound like judgment, a pain in his head. A cold palm caresses his cheek, water held to his mouth trickles down his parched throat, the tenderness impressing itself. When he opens his eyes he's not surprised to see Steffie above him with a sorry smile, the glass in one hand, his cheek in the other. This memory will stick with James. He will often think of it before drifting to sleep. He'll remember her fondly because of this one enshrined moment. He'll hold onto this more than that the immediate pain and depression that will consume the next three to four months of his life, a depression that he will officially mark as over after a one night stand with an Australian tourist, an encounter that will provide him with a renewed sense of self-worth, a sense that allows him to move on, albeit with a jaded glint, an exterior James thinks is far more impervious to emotional attachment than the present reality suggests.



As he lingers on the beach with the scribbled address, James feels undeniably stupid for thinking that this random girl, this Odessa, would be interested.

He throws stones, trying to make them skip, but the lack of snap causes an immediate sink in the ocean. A mist of salt water sprays James. He treks back in the darkness to the boardwalk, following the glowing signs of the carnival (rides 65% operational) and the Cyclone, the wooden roller coaster icon. A pelican squawks behind him, hoping to be fed. James stops and faces the expecting bird. Digging into the ground, he throws a volley of sand into the air, not necessarily directed at the bird, but enough that it flies away. He uses his jeans to wipe off the remaining sediment.

The stroll continues into Brighton (1.5 miles away) with James turning away from the coast. Despite the long day he shows little signs of fatigue. The Russian names of the convenience stores, the aboveground train running diagonally through the street, the people speaking in foreign accents, the unfamiliarity, creates the feel of a place that is and is not New York.

James stops in front of what appears to be a bar/restaurant with an awning that reads *Vorontsov*. He considers entering, but changes his mind when he sees the lack of people inside. Three doors down, he stops when he passes a closed market. The name of the mark, bolded in red italics confounds and mocks him, but perhaps it's something more. It's her name, *Odessa*.

Searching, James enters *Vorontsov* and sits on a stool. Two rows of tables run down the restaurant, a space between acting as a long aisle that leads directly to the kitchen and the bar besides it.

The husky bartender, Alexander Dvornik, shrugs his wide shoulders at James, who responds by asking for a beer. Rather than ask him what he wants, Dvornik turns around and pours a draft from a lever that reads Obolon. He sets the glass down, but does not respond to the thank you.

James grasps the pints, trying to make eyes with the barkeep. He feels sweaty. After half a beer(5.6%), he finally risks it. “Excuse me, yeah, hi, I was just wondering if you knew who owned the shop Odessa, the one that’s a couple buildings over.”

Dvornik leans forward, the gray bristles in his mustache become visible. The musk from his cologne is strong. The smell reminds James of the cleaner Shammi uses to wash the grandfather clock.

“It’s okay if you don’t know—”

“Everybody know everybody.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“See, I met this girl,” James says, grinning.

“Yes, girls. Russian girls better, yes?”

“This might seem silly—”

“I like jokes. My grandfather used to tell me jokes. He used to tell me about this fisherman. Fisherman is talking to his friend. He tells his friend, ‘My fuckin’ neighbor. When I go fishing he goes to my wife.’ The friend says this is terrible, but fisherman shakes his head and says, ‘It’s worse. When I choose to stay home to be with wife, he goes to my fishnets.’”

James laughs, timing the response precisely, although he doesn't quite appreciate the humor.

"Now you?"

"I don't really know any jokes. But listen, maybe you'll find this funny. I met this girl the other night. She said her name was Odessa. Gives me an address and everything. I thought when I saw the sign that maybe she works there or maybe her parents named it after her. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, a little shorter than me. Anything?"

Dvornik turns his head down, shoulders convulsing.

"Do you know her?"

He looks up and laughs, exposing a mouth with two missing teeth. "This is good joke. Odessa is right there," he says, pointing his thumb to the door.

All James sees are the empty tables, the empty street, the mounted flatscreen playing a strange music video with women dancing with men in polar bear costumes.

"What do you mean?"

"Not joking?"

"No."

The large man flushes. He knows what it's like to be played, having never truly encountered success or love throughout his thirty-nine years on this earth, except for perhaps one instance. "This is Odessa," he says, slapping his hands on the bar. "Brighton is Little Odessa."

"Brighton is Odessa?"

"It's the other name, the nickname."

James understands, nodding silently.

His embarrassment fuels Dvornik's embarrassment. The bartender pours another beer and slides it across. "On the house."

"Thanks."

"The girls are always playing jokes."

"Yeah, they do seem to do that." The next hour goes by with each man exchanging information mainly related to women, Dvornik taking the opportunity to tell James about a woman named whose real name ended up being Netya, a story that James finds too convoluted to follow, but still finds entertaining, the strange turns, mentions of theft, infidelity, and hospital visits featuring family members who ended up not being family members, a stolen kidneys ring, Dvornik waking up one morning in a bathtub full of ice thinking the worst of the woman he thought he loved, but seeing the letter of apology, signed Netya, revealing her true identity to be that of a person who couldn't actually go through with her original intention, the letter double-edged, showing Dvornik that he had been lied to, manipulated, but yes, someone was indeed capable of loving him, a feeling that enables him to forget what offenses she may have perpetrated, after all she couldn't take his kidney so that must prove it, fostering the hope that she'll come back to him someday, this entire realization occurring as he towels off his frozen body, the ice cubes melting on the dirty bathroom tiles.

As James gets up to leave, Dvornik tells him to come back and asks for his business card. He slides it over. The emblem of Maxim, a duplicate of the statue in the lobby, the woman reaching up to the sky, embosses the card.

Dvornik slides his finger over the lettering. "An investment man."

"Oh yes," James says, feeling heady, "the best, the very best."

Dvornik squints at the lettering.

“I mean, I don’t really make any decisions, but the company I work for is pretty big. Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong friend,” he says, a smile returning. “Investment is good.”

“Money making money.”

After an initial look of confusion, he repeats the phrase, “Money making money. This is a good expression. Very American.”

They shake hands. Dvornik watches the young man leave. He flips the card between his fat fingers and thinks about throwing it away, but then he thinks about certain obligations, and the obligations compel him to do differently

## CHAPTER 3

### *SEN*

S.E.N. Commission Report

Inception Date: June 1960

Here follows the model report of the agency's commission of the SEN(Surveillance Extension Network). Original proposal submitted by Lucas Steadman.

Lucas Steadman stands 5 feet 8 inches tall with a crew cut styled after J. Edgar. He compulsively smokes Lucky Strikes, unfiltered, pulling the pack from his inside suit pocket.

Steadman's idea is a simple one, one that many of his colleagues find redundant, but that the Proto-Director finds inspired. The SEN's purpose is to act as a supporting branch based on information gathering of individual subjects. Monitoring will be so in-depth and extensive that the predictive element of the subject's next move is transformed to certainty from the current guesswork that has defined a series of failed global operations, most notably the inability to prevent the Castro regime's rise to power. Entire biographies will be assembled based on interrogation methods that will be as severe as necessary. A portrait of the subject's life based not only on observation, but on how others perceive the subject will create the models necessary for prediction.

At the time of its commission, agents refer to the planned network as Steadman's Exhaustive Nausea. But Steadman does not show any hint of discomfort when confronted

with the acronym. He polishes his black shoes till he sees his smoked reflection in the gloss. A vision for the SEN, the way it will expand until it becomes the true force within the agency he sincerely loves, but presently thinks is too concerned with influence after the fact rather than predicting the next move of the actors they seek to influence, insulates him. If anticipation can be strengthened, if profiles can be developed for prediction, then actors can be manipulated into making a choice that they believe to be beneficial to their own desires. Manipulation of subjects on the ground can thereby lead to a reduction in the number of covert actions and direct interventions, most of which become far too elaborate with far too many operatives involved that failure is too often a foregone conclusion. In the vision the agency is less reactive to situations, a line in keeping with the original aim of the charter to produce a force based on the all-important I, information.

In a basement office filled with steel cabinets, Steadman flips through the files, alone. He needs to find the right agents, men who do not whisper or spend their time making jokes, men committed to his ideas. Black and white photos of potentials stare back at him, but they're all lacking. He's seen the look before, the James Bond glint, boys seeking adventure, not patriots interested in information and certainly not intelligence. The coffee taste in his mouth grows bitterer the more files he sees. The Proto-Director approved the project, but without the resources necessary to support the operation, the time commitment needed for success, to develop strategies, work out kinks in methodology, identify the right targets. So right now all he has are these files, these men are the one hope for the future. Approval is one thing, but what Steadman knows he really needs, and the sooner the better, are results. The extensive workups on the majors:

Castro, Kennedy, Krushev, although not in the style he would have preferred, leave little in ways of contribution. Nothing of significance could be uncovered by focusing on those three that another element in the agency wouldn't take credit for. The SEN's success would need to be singular, unique, based off the principles, a study of the periphery players around the majors would reveal the future, this Steadman knows as he sets down another disappointing stack of candidates, brimming with some small satisfaction when the files hit the floor.

The underground office becomes home. He ignores his shaking caffeine-fueled hand as he lifts the coffee mug. All he sees are profiles. He stares them down, seeing how long their black and white eyes can keep gazing back. He waits for the click of shoes outside the door, the men who want results, but so far nothing, there is no sound, but there is less time.

Caroline Mints enters her DC apartment. She turns on the light, grasps for the revolver in her purse, grips the rough handle. The perpetrator is not visible, but the presence is apparent in the altered light, the changed air, the way the room's attention is divided, and a lingering scent, tobacco. She waits, content to scan the space, the white walls, one of which is adorned with a half-scale replica of Picasso's *Guernica*, which still ends up taking up the entire length of the side adjacent to her. The painting, a housewarming gift from her mother, provides little color and in Caroline's estimation gives her home a forlorn sensibility, a painting for our times, she thinks. Minutes pass.

Her father, a thirty year military man, retired major, described Caroline as his pride and joy. Before his demise, he recalled how when he went downstairs for his daily



5 AM jog, she was already by the door, ready to join. This ethic for physical and intellectual excellence can be directly correlated to Mint's only child status. Like many military families, theirs was a gypsy like existence of relocations. That Caroline grew into a true beauty with jet black hair and dark skin, like her mother's, was a fact lost on her as well as the people around her due to the conservative style of dress she preferred, mainly because her father preferred it, slacks, a pony tail, arms behind at attention, a face Caroline believes to be expressionless, but is stern, if anything.

Her mother, Pia, watches in horror that eventually turns into a resigned acceptance as their only child succumbs to the life of the father. In the hours she spends alone while the other two go off, she recedes further into the kitchen, perfecting recipes, reading art books while her productions bake, her pineapple upside down cake a true revelation in the minds of all who taste it, a group that does not include the Major and Caroline, who observe in horror as Pia balloons on the couch, swelled fingers tracing the outlines of Michelangelo's *David* one week, Degas *The Dead Fox* the next. The swinging doorway reveals the network of pastries and pies, whose recipes Pia has spent months perfecting, only to see them go uneaten, rotting away. Bite marks and the missing slices that mark the desserts all belong to one culprit, who forces herself to eat, to enjoy, providing her with the vague satisfaction of an imagined reality where people, friends and family, are the ones responsible for the consumption. The pages of her heavy hardcover art books stick together, bound by traces of sugar and syrup. Caroline finds the habit repellant, and yet, this initial attitude plants a seed, a seed that will result in framed artwork displayed on her walls.

Caroline's emulation of the major obscures her beauty until training at the Agency when senior operative Strom Brothers cannot help, but experience a certain excitement when she walks by, which in itself was remarkable given his advanced age(73), a rush that takes time to parse due to her boyish appearance. The next day he follows her into the cafeteria and calls her to attention with a slight cough. He is surprised by the speed at which she rises, her lack of protest as he reaches for her hair, working his fingers through the tightly pulled back strands until he undoes the bun so it all falls down to her shoulders. He continues to style it, lingering for a couple moments too long, the onlookers in the cafeteria looking on with a mixture of amusement and bewilderment, but trying not to stare given Strom's seniority, so they steal quick glances at the bologna sandwich(standard issue lunch) and green apple on their trays before going back, their mouths becoming more agape as Strom transforms Caroline Mint from butch to beauty. She remains motionless even as Strom reaches a more erect disposition below, a position no one has the moxie to comment on, the senior operative deciding immediately to fast track the woman's training to his special field division, a division nicknamed FF, specializing in espionage based on seduction, which at the time, all seemed so glamorous. The move provides Caroline with a renewed sense of self based on an underappreciated femininity, which carries an added layer of anxiety to her sleepless nights as she wishes she hadn't been such a pain to her mother, another reason why *Guernica* occupies an entire wall. But even the new Caroline with her longer hair, curled at the edges, wearing a dark red dress, slit running dangerously high during a training dinner at the ----- Hotel, will conclude that the FF Division was simply a way for Strom Brothers to play Barbie with a roomful of attractive and deadly women, a fact that probably intensified

their sexuality in Strom's bifocaled eyes, ever watchful, ever hidden, but never untoward physically or verbally beyond the initial touch, which gave Caroline such a rush that it required all her discipline to repress the blood rushing to her cheeks, the glow trying to burst from within, as she hunched over Strom, stale meat breath and all, perceives what others do not, a moment that will replay in her mind as they lower the man's casket, draped in the red, white, and blue, into the ground with a three gun salute while she wears her hair down in remembrance of the man who saw. His death was brought on by a heart attack in the ----- Hotel. No mention of the woman he was with gets to his family. Even though it was not his wife, Caroline finds no impropriety in the act. Shortly after the burial, the FF division is shut down. Caroline cannot exactly say she is surprised. She is restless, ready, aware, all evidenced by the stillness with which she waits at her apartment entrance clutching a gun, head tilted to the side, with the knowledge that she is not alone, an instinct that cannot be taught, which is the very skill that makes her a prime candidate for the SEN and is the very reason that she is not alone at this precise moment.

"Don't shoot." Lucas Steadman rises from behind a living room couch, where he's been waiting for the past ten minutes. "I'm a company man."

The man with the pencil frame, the black suit black tie standard issue, the long neck, has a familiar if inexact presence.

Sensing the process he says, "S.E.N."

She tries not to let her disgust show. "Mr. Steadman."

He lights a cigarette, paying no particular attention to Mint's annoyance.

From the kitchen, she tosses him a cheap ashtray that Steadman fumbles against his chest before getting hold of it.

“How did you know I was here Ms. Mint?”

“How did you get in Mr. Steadman?”

“It’s my job.” In reality, Steadman had a terrible time breaking in, having barely passed the locksmithship section of basic training, passing only because the teacher, William Samson, took a shining to him, Steadman a willing listener to the old man’s complaints over being passed over. He never once suspected that Steadman’s poor lockwork was an ulterior motive for the friendship, a motive Steadman still disguises by sending annual Christmas and birthday cards, a thing the lonely Samson treasures so much he even keeps the envelopes.

“It’s my job too. I knew it was different, the space, the smell, the feel.”

“Remarkable.” Steadman clears his throat. “Do you mind putting it away?”

Mint, unaware that she’s gripping the handle tighter than ever, complies and lowers her weapon.

He ashes into the tray. “Tell me Ms. Mint,” he says, seeming to derive pleasure from saying her name, “what do you envision the role of the SEN as being in our beloved agency?”

Mint rises to attention. “I believe it has the potential to greatly expand the agency’s ability to be a force in intelligence gathering and preemptive action.” Mint had read the proposal. She finds the idea excessive and redundant, but she isn’t about to say that to Steadman, not as she’s hovering unassigned, a remnant of a joke division, now defunct.

“My sentiments precisely.”

The way Steadman leers at her, as if he’s trying to scan every detail as he sucks down the Lucky between his stained coffee teeth, but the more she watches him watch her, the more the SEN makes sense.

“I choose you to be my second in command. We will oversee the implementation of the initial protocol. Ms. Mint?”

As Caroline Mint stands to, her bronzed cheeks flush red, and the expression on her mouth inverts. A smile escapes her pursed lips.

## CHAPTER 4

### Metropolis

We imagine a crowd huddled around a speaker in a conference room, listening. But they don't have to be in a conference room. They could be in a house, on a yacht, at their desks, all synced to the call, but it's better to imagine the investor on the other end as one mass. It gives the pitch weight when you picture a crowd that's yearning to receive. Before the call he taps my shoulder and says, "Remember, they need us. Let's not get in their way." Jeremy Vaughn says this every time.

"Gentleman, an instrument is a beautiful thing. But it's only a tool, an object, a dead thing that means nothing without the right man pulling the strings. You have the information. You have the numbers. We've out-averaged the S+P 500 by 12% annually. The economy is growing. Globalization. Tech. China. Commodities. The Dow ended 2005 at 10,717. In 2006 it was 12,463. That's a difference of One thousand-Seven hundred-Forty-Six and where were you? Were you taking advantage or were you behind it, reading Forbes and saying to yourself, 'Wow, if only.' It's just a drop in the bucket, gentleman. It's no longer about investing, but leveraging your money. Where you going to be when we close in 2007, in 2008?" he asks, challenging them.

"Maxim isn't just another hole, it's a game-changer, it's where you go when you're done pussyfooting and are ready for the next step. We're not for the faint of heart. We keep it small, we keep it simple, you're either on board and with us or we're not

interested in you. We're not here to field your calls and comfort you. This is a partnership that you're buying into. We're here to perform, to produce profits, to achieve profit perfection. That is what we do. That is what we know." Jeremy leans over his desk, headset on, and speaks directly into the receiver. "Gentleman, my own money's at stake, directly invested in the welfare of the firm. I'm not some stockbroker trying to push companies I don't give a shit about because of a mandate from the higher ups. That's not how we do things here. Here, at Maxim, accountability and honesty are essential aspects of our trading philosophy." Jeremy answers questions. His responses are more or less what's already been said. The secret is that as much as he wants these people to sign with him, as much as that adds to his cache, he's confident that if not them, than someone else. And he's right. That's why we'll always win, always grow, because there's a line of people seeking to be part of all that is happening, who want their money to make money, who are tired of the conservative styles of a bygone era, mutual funds and bonds and Coca-Cola stock, who want to join in. We won't even return a phone call unless the investor has the potential to dedicate, at minimum, five million, an amount that grows as Maxim's increases its total equity. The word's out on the Street and everyone's trying their best not to be left behind. "My assistant James will provide you with all the details, relevant paperwork, etc., so we can get this ball rolling. Thank you. Buh-bye."

Jeremy Vaughn, aged 42, looks through the glass walls of his office and nods at my pantomimed applause. Another close. This one represents thirty-million dollars from a pool of private investors, growing his managed assets to two hundred million, which accounts for nearly 15% of the firm's total capital.

I prepare the paperwork, scrolling through the screens, filling out as much detail on the forms as possible. The key to being an assistant is efficiency and the appearance of organization. Without a clean workspace they'd never be able to tell what kind of job we do. My desk is a model of control. On the polished gray surface, Clorox wiped at the end of each day, rests a desktop with two widescreen monitors. All papers are in the a long sliding drawer, sectioned off by category, alphabetically. I wear a wireless headset for my phone to avoid the twist of wires. It's also easier to talk and type. The desk is not only a representation of who I am, but of Jeremy Vaughn, and by extension, Maxim Capital. It's like in high school when you go on the field trip and the teacher tells you to be on your best behavior because you reflect on them, on the school, on your parents, so keep on point. And you didn't want to be an embarrassment so you act the part, at least most people do I think, and the ones who don't, well they just don't get why appearances matter, what they hold, what messages it sends, the comfort it provides when a person like Vaughn can walk by my desk and not notice a thing. I know it seems like nothing, it seems trivial or natural or obvious, but it's stunning how many people, people in this very office like Bill can't get a handle on the concept.

Jeremy exits his office. He seems to admire the surroundings, the landscape, the people in the background, busying themselves with some task. He puts his hand out. I shake it, feeling the bristles on the other side. He is a hairy man. "I guess both our year-end bonuses just got a little fatter." He squeezes tighter. He's right. I'll probably see an extra thousand thrown my way, while he'll get six figures.

"That was some fine work."



“Thanks,” he says. “It’s simple really, a simple matter of assuring them that a monkey isn’t on the other end. Give them a couple sentences strung together and they’re ready to play ball.”

“You the man,” I say, trying to shake off his humility, to let him know that I understand.

“Okay. I need a smoke. I just like, I don’t know.” He begins to leave, but after a few steps he turns round. “Don’t fuck up the paperwork. This should go as smooth as possible, none of that back and forth twenty questions bullshit.”

“Sure.” Before going to the elevator he travels the rounds to spread the news. Even though the deal isn’t officially done, he can’t help himself. The investors will go through more diligence. I’ll act as a blockade, answering any questions, sending and resending information, until finally they’ll demand to speak with Jeremy. He’ll come on the line, annoyed of course, telling the client if they have doubts they should invest someplace else. Soon after this a wire transfer will take place.

“I heard Vaughn got another.”

I inhale the secondhand, but the question gets in the way. “It would appear so.”

Bill’s head seems bigger today. Maybe he’s wearing a smaller shirt. “Damn, I wish I had that kind of action.” Bill works for Jacque Richard, a French expatriate, now dual citizen, and one of the founding partners, a man with a conservative trading strategy, more interested in collecting checks than growing the client base. Rumors of his retirement have persisted for the past two years, but he’s still here.

“Jacques seems like a nice guy.” Leaning against the building, I follow each floor, trying to count each level without becoming dizzy. The stone exterior gives it a Gothic appearance. A pair of gargoyles at the top keep a watchful eye, their backs hunched, mouths snarled, wings edged reptilian.

“But he’s too old. Doesn’t mix it up in the Octagon anymore,” he says, taking the stance of a UFC fighter, two rolled boulders by his forehead, Kimbo Slice style.

“He seems like a neat old man, real clean,” Bill laughs. Jacques wears a three piece suit every day with hair slicked back that’s never too glossy or greasy. He strolls the hallways of busy men like he’s somewhere else, an umbrella tucked under his arm. Whenever he passes by desk he nods in my direction.

“So you going to search for her again?”

I try another inhale, but get nothing except Bill’s cologne. “Fuck you.”

“What? It’s a serious question.”

“And it’s a serious response.”

“Don’t forget, you left me for her.”

“Stranded in the valley of crocodiles.”

“You know how many of those little pizzas I ended up eating?” he asks, smiling, stepping so he’s directly in front of me.

“I don’t—”

“I had the shits all day Sunday.”

I walk away.

“What?” We enter the doors.

“I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous man. I mean, I can get you some prunes if it’ll help. The shits, that’s what unites us all, our constitutions. When I look at Jacques or Jeremy or even you, when you’re acting so high and mighty, or even a hot girl at a club, I tell myself it’s okay, he shits, she shits, I shit, we all shit, we’re united”

“It’s a powerful argument for equality, MLK could have used it.”

“I have a dream where we’ll all shit together, black, white, and brown, definitely brown.”

We pass by the statue of the silver woman, the curved lines of her arms reaching, the strands flowing back from an imagined wind blowing against her. “Please don’t—”

“Madonna on the Rocks with the tits.”

My phone blinks red. Two new messages, the first asks me to express mail documents which I’ve already done. The second: “Hello James, James Steadman? This is Alex from Little Odessa. Please call me when you have the chance. I have a friend who needs an investment man. He is a good man James, real good, best man really. Call please.” How do I explain to this guy what Maxim is? I guess I could refer him to one of those large financial firms that advertise on TV. Shit, he’d probably get screwed over there. Best to let it be. He was a nice guy, though. Still, nothing I can do.

Jacques walks by and wraps his knuckles on my desk.

I nod.

He nods.

I smile.

He smiles and then he says, “Good.”

Monk Chu eats the bar nuts. He's pretty much the same guy since college, except fleshier, his face and neck bloated, but I guess that's the consequence of a corner office and continued indulgence. He laughs, his mouth filled with crumbled nutmeat. We're at The Skinny, a bar that prides itself in its length and its meager width. A narrow corridor runs a straight line down, making it impossible to have a crowd behind you while sitting on a stool.

“So what do you think?”

He squints, searching for a response. His voice is strained and not his own. “What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

“What is that, Jack Nicholson?”

He slaps my shoulder. “Paul Newman, *Cool Hand Luke*.”

“Never seen it.”

His eyebrows rise as he sips. The head of his beer clings to his upper lip. “You should. It's instructive.” He wipes with his sleeve.

“Stoners and your movies.”

Monk laughs. Sometimes I wish he wouldn't. “What you need are normal avenues to meet people.”

“Like?”

“Bars, clubs, dating websites, friends, friends of friends, that's the real ticket.”

“Okay.”

He laughs again, this time it sounds more compulsive.

“I did meet her at a bar you know.”

“No offense, but following an address on a piece of paper, what kind of move is that? This is not a normal avenue.” His eyes grow wide like something has suddenly occurred to him. “It’s a trap!”

“What?”

“*Return of the Jedi*, the fishy guy with the Asian Fresh off the Boat accent. Damn, what was his name?” He rubs the glass, drawing circles in the frost as he searches.

“We’re getting sidetracked.”

“Admiral Akbar, Admiral Akbar realizes ‘it’s a fully operational Death Star!’”

“Enough with the movies.”

“Frankly, my dear,” he says before shifting back to his regular octave, “you’re not giving me a lot to go on.” He laughs again. “You can come back to my place and smoke.”

“I can’t. I get paranoid.” And a little sad. Plus I can’t smoke directly, I don’t do that anymore. Monk keeps asking, though, out of politeness.

“At least hang while I smoke then.”

“Doesn’t it get boring?”

He finishes his beer. “Everything else is boring, this flat reality, this long bar, these eight hour watch as your ass gets fat jobs, these after work happy hours that never end, every day the same bitching and complaining, and don’t get me started on the email chains and the incessant cat videos, videos that clog the inbox like it was a litter box.”

“What’s that from?”

He spits into his empty glass. “I don’t remember,” he says, laughing.

Monk's studio in the East Village overlooks the hustle of St. Mark's Street, a one way street filled with pedestrians and shops, open till late, real late. You can get your piercing and tattoo followed by a bowl of Udon noodles. The street noise filters through the windows, the light through the blinds.

When Monk flips a switch a digital projector turns on and a screen unspools. While this happens, he goes to the kitchen, where a stack of dirty dishes are piled high, and comes back with a blunt rolled from a hollowed cherry flavored cigar and pops in the Dvd.

My phone vibrates, reads Dad, but I ignore the call. It's probably Shammi calling to confirm lunch. He still uses her like she's a secretary. She never says anything. She's forced to take it.

The motion picture begins. "Black and white?"

"And German," Monk says, dragging. The ember glows. Thick cherry smoke rises to the ceiling.

An epigram flashes across the screen. The words appear hazy. "THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN BRAIN AND HANDS MUST BE THE HEART!"

Orchestral music chimes in. A series of gears, spinning wheels, cogs in a large and unseen machine, rotates. A whistle blows. "SHIFT CHANGE." Below the earth's surface the workers march in tandem, lined like soldiers, downtrodden, beat down, one set moving toward a large elevator to go work, the others coming in the opposite direction, going home.

"It's also silent. There's dialogue, but none that we can hear. Still, there's so much sound," he laughs.

Weed smoke is easier than cigarettes, especially in a contained space. The aroma lingers longer, the effects are more buzz worthy on the whole. Maybe that's just the placebo effect. I sit on the floor, back against a couch as the drama of *Metropolis* unfolds and Monk speaks.

“When they made this it was the most expensive movie ever produced.”

A young man, pale skin, eyes bugging out, pleads with his father, the CEO for the big city, who has dismissed an incompetent worker. In this city, dismissal means more, it means going to the depths, it means joining the drones from the opening scenes, it means hard labor for life. The son, the young Fredrer sees cruelty in his father's action and storms out to find the fired man, who is on the verge of shooting himself. Fredrer stops him, tells him he'll take his place, that he'll travel to the depths instead.

“An expressionist experimental film with a budget, compare that with the big budget shit today, fuckin' Leo.”

A crazy scientist with cyborg hands speaks with the CEO. They share a deceased love in common, Fredrer's mother who died giving birth, but she's not dead to the scientist. Enter reanimated robot corpse complete with two ample cups on her chest. Beautiful and terrifying, the future, the machine man. The CEO freaks out as he stares into the living dead eyes of his former wife.

“Frankenstein's monster, the Bride.”

The metal woman, made flesh, the eyes lingering as they scan her son, but can this be real? Flashes of pain hit the screen, the camera spinning, as he descends into hell.

“Worker slaves.” Monk rises. Sparks another blunt. His shirt is unbuttoned, exposing a layer of flab that bounces with each drag, the images projecting onto him as

he drifts in front of the screen. The female who's really the robot appears on Monk's chest and screams down at the workers, urging the gathered group to join her, to revolt, the sinister music heightening the tension, seemingly emboldening them, but do they hear it? The crowd rushes through his body like a group of ants, encasing his skin. Smoke spills from his grinning mouth, the light from outside the only color beaming into the apartment. Monk Chu runs in place like he's rioting with the workers. Ash falls to the ground. Carpet burns, but no one cares. A pocket vibrates, the buzzing, the score growing louder, heightening the chaos of class warfare, as Monk removes his shirt in the hazy room. My smoke has a name. Her name is Odessa. I can see it spelled out. It isn't like the other times. Monk twirls into the kitchen and says, "Popcorn."

I check the time on my phone. I'm informed of three missed calls, two voicemails, and a new text message. "James, come home, your father's sick."

The message might appear obvious, but this is different. When I hear her, I know it's different. What am I doing? Shammi's choking voice tells me I need to come home. She doesn't say what's wrong. She can't quite say it. Then nothing. I run out onto St. Mark's, passing people without a worry or care in the world. Monk's laughter echoes through the busy street.



## CHAPTER 5

### Scheme

Caroline Mint wonders what she's doing, not at this precise moment, but in the scheme. She wires the small house, a shack, with the P-90 recorder, set to activate when it detects sound. It's an ingenious device that she secures into a hollowed out cinder block. She wonders how anyone can sleep in the country with the heat. Her skin runs sticky, embalmed. Despite an intensive drying regiment and trips to the bathroom to pad the problem, she cannot achieve a level of aridness that meets her satisfaction. She knows she's dry and yet, she feels moist. She finds her predicament a worrisome indicator for the future relations between the two countries, America and this place, this island, this Cuba, this Havana.

She listens to the conversations of Angel Mercado, Castro's personal barber, unsure what it will yield with regards to the nation's best interests. The barber does not possess launch codes and from what she can tell, no specific insight into the future plans of the regime besides unsupported conjecture that sounds more like barbershop speak than anything, conversation that changes register and pitch to a squeaky octave whenever Angel encounters a representative of the newly established government.

The barber does not even know when Castro will require his services, usually a slight trim of the beard and marginal cut of the leader's curly browns. A military jeep will stop in front of the shop. Angel will apologize to the mound of hair he is currently

shaping. The man he is currently working on will stare wide-eyed into his own reflection, watching as Angel collects his tools, always packed and ready, from under his workstation. He will leave with the two military men, young boys outfitted in green wearing dark berets while the air in the five countered shop will circulate unbreathed until they are comfortably away. Angel will give a parting look to the glass window featuring the bolded yellow lettering, *Mercados*. In his mind it is the finest barbershop in the country, an opinion he knows is biased, but truly in his heart believes, Castro providing the final stamp of validation that he is special and skilled, a fact he appreciates, but which is tamed by the lurking terror at the pit of his stomach, which, even he will admit, has grown a little too large for his liking.

But this is what Steadman demands and Mint follows orders. So she'll survey Angel, stay in the shadows, emerging under the guise of Marcella Gomez, reporter for *Excelsior*, a Mexico City based liberal newspaper, an identity she developed with the late Strom Brothers, former senior agent in the Agency.

Steadman was specific in the main directive, repeating to her with rapid delivery, "No military targets. We're missing something. Remember, Castro was a citizen. The key is thoroughness. Complete profiles. Set up surveillance, establish the routine of the subject's life and then expand the net. Expand it to others. Create new targets based on the initial contact. I repeat, no military subjects."

Caroline sleeps four hours a night. She spends most of her time listening to tape, constructing the profile, watching Angel's movements from the darkened corners of his periphery.

Angel stands 5'4, balding, with bushy white hair at the sides of his head. He believes in God, possessing a particular fondness for the visage of the Virgin Mary. He trusts in a hard day's work, a bit of rum with a dash of water, a good woman who isn't too expensive, savoring a quality piece of steak. Angel lives and let lives. As he cuts hair, he speaks his mind with the other barbers, the men seated, the men waiting, waving his arms in the air to express his passion. On any given day what he says changes. Based on his varied opinions he does not have an entrenched opinion on the recent government restructuring. Angel sleeps on a thin mattress on the floor, draped in a white undershirt and whispers the name "Adriana," while he gets under the covers, which begin to move as the barber breathes heavier, eventually moaning in release before sleep.

The object of Angel's nightly fantasy is Adriana Cortes, who still recalls the chubby short boy who used to come into her father's store, stammering as he tried to buy a bottle of Coca-Cola. "What is he doing now?" she inquires during the interview, smiling at the mention of his name, her left eye drooping, her right scanning the person she assumes to be an intelligence agent from the Cuban government. Adriana, tall at 5'10, mole on her lower right cheek, relates the story of how she found a young Angel crying outside one day. She felt bad, took the then fourteen year old boy into her toned arms, strengthened from stacking shelves, and held him against her chest, swaying back and forth, allowing his tears to fall on her blouse, Angel inching closer, the embrace becoming tighter, staying like this for some time, the repeated refrain, "Shhh...shhh...shhh..." like nursing a baby, pulling away at the stabbing in her leg, seeing the grin on his round face, realizing that the tears are in fact joyous, a phenomenon she did not think possible until now, seeing the gleam in his wet eyes followed by the quick

change, a recognition of an act, the confusion and shame as he peers down at the floor. She watches as the boy runs out the store and flies through traffic to get away. This was her last meeting with him, she says with a hint of regret, unaware that the boy she had a fondness for is now a grown man(47) who still calls her name, who lies with her every night, thinking of her kindness, remaining loving and faithful in his own disordered way.

In the hotel, Caroline Mint crushes Steadman's secure message into a ball.

*More info. Adriana Cortes. Expand her. Expand them all.-LS*

Proto-Director, McDuffy C. -----, pulls from the bottle of 12 year aged Glennfiditch he found at the back of Lucas Steadman's filing cabinet. McDuffy flips through the stacks of paper, impressed by the number of pages Steadman has compiled in the brief amount of time since the SEN's inception. He points to the cabinet and Larry Anderson complies. Anderson is a quiet man and the personal assistant to the Proto-Director. He gets the job done without asking questions, a quality McDuffy ruminates upon as he watches the man pick a lock with a Swiss Army knife.

Anderson refuses when McDuffy offers him the bottle. He knows his superior, unlike other men, will not take offense. McDuffy, for all his drinking, the square jaw, the company cut, is really a pushover, affable and happy, generally excited for whatever's next. Larry Anderson believes McDuffy possesses an unbridled optimism when it comes to the future, a quality lacking in these frenetic days, but one he knows to be necessary, one he knows to be part of the quintessential American fabric. Breaking into Steadman's office, the locked files, may seem invasive, but McDuffy treats it like a game, rubbing his knuckles, peering over Larry's shoulder as the lock is dealt with and falls to the floor.

And when the game's finished, when Steadman enters with a clenched mouth, McDuffy doesn't even bat an eyelid at the pale man before him.

"What are you doing here Director?"

McDuffy pulls. The bottle glugs. "My job. I must say I'm pleased with what I've seen," he says, sitting in the chair behind Steadman's desk, attempting to recline, but failing due to the chair's inability to recline. He slides the bottle across the table.

Steadman picks it up and drinks, glancing back with a cold stare when he's finished. "You are Lawrence Anderson."

Larry is unsure what to say, but hates the way his name was spoken, almost robotically, like he's being recorded.

"Call him Larry. Always so formal Steadman. Tell me, do you sleep?"

"Director, in the future, if you could notify me—"

McDuffy reaches for more. Steadman shoves the bottle to Larry's chest and Larry places the bottle in the outstretched palm. He pulls and says, "I'll goddamn notify you when you deserve to be notified. Right now, you don't matter enough."

"Yes."

"Yes," McDuffy mimics. Steadman seems to bring out the misery in the Director's usually cheerful disposition. Larry wonders at the way the two interact and how it could have possibly led to the creation of the SEN. "Progress report."

"10 agents in the field. Interviewing and profiling three potentials."

"Good, and what have you learned?"

"Too early to tell. The intel, we need to time to develop—"

McDuffy slams his fist on the desk, an act of anger that Larry thinks is premeditated. In fact, Larry Anderson is beginning to suspect that this whole thing is an act on McDuffy's part meant to prod and expedite results from this joke initiative. What's strange, though, is the look Steadman keeps stealing at Larry, who's between the two men, separating them. It's like Steadman's checking to see what effect the exchange produces in him, as if the whole break-in, the entire conversation between these two is taking place for his benefit. Larry doesn't understand, but his question soon becomes a secondary thought. "I need you out in the field. We need results Lucas. There's only one way, you know that."

"As you say sir."

"So where to, what's your most promising lead?"

"Cuba."

McDuffy leans forward. Whiskey fumes fill the office. "Mint's there, one of Brother's, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Well, say hello from all of us here." Larry doesn't like the fact that the Director's been drinking so much. His thoughts seem somewhat confused. Anderson senses something unspoken, senses the scrutiny of both men.

"Sir, I'm convinced it might be a good idea to have additional support and as you know, all my agents are occupied. The situation may prove dicey based on Mint's latest report. She has a man on the inside."

"Quite right. We can't afford another mess up. Well, I think you're in luck. In my mind there's no better man for the job than Larry here."

“Yes?”

“No one better.” They both turn to him. “Larry, what do you say? Ready to get back on that horse?” Anderson grits his teeth and grazes the pocketed knife tucked away. “Jesus Man, say something. Agree to back up Steadman in Havana. Watch his skinny ass, you hear?”

Larry agrees like he has a choice. He never wanted to go out in the field again. He wonders why McDuffy’s doing this, what he did wrong to deserve this. Steadman’s dangerous, unhinged, likely to get them both killed, but maybe that’s why he’s needed, to control the situation.

Steadman lights a Lucky and exhales. He offers his new partner a smoke. McDuffy chugs from the bottle and wipes his mouth with his jacket. “Jesus, you two look like you need some sun. And as always, the Agency provides.”

## CHAPTER 6

### Sickness

In the cab to Brooklyn my thoughts drift to a familiar place. I've been waiting for him to die ever since they put him in that capsule. That thing has kept him alive all these years. Mechanized compressions continue through the night, through sleep, the noise a reminder of the thing downstairs that holds my father captive, that hold us all at bay.

The name on the laminated ID card framed in the divider between driver and rider reads *Ali Muhammed*. He speaks Arabic into a headset. I wonder what he says. It's such an angry sounding language, garbled. Maybe that's why we don't get along.

The television monitor in the back plays thirty-second spots intended to promote the City, the latest TV shows and movies, the newest Broadway production. People flash on the screen with sanitized smiles. I mute the screen, pressing on the sound icon. Alex Trebek appears and asks a Jeopardy question. His mouth moves as points his index finger at the screen. Since he shaved the mustache he seems softer, less interesting.

"Everything okay?" the driver asks. It's hard to tell if he's asking me or the person on the other end of his headset. He tilts his head back, ignoring the road, and repeats the question, his lips forming a wide O, as he says, "Okay?"

My right eye twitches, a facial tic I've had since I've been a kid. I turn my head to the good side. "Yeah, it's fine."

"You certain?"



People use cabbies as surrogate therapists similar to bartenders. You can unload your problems, confess secrets, share the pain, and just walk away, clean, or you can remain silent, pretending like they don't exist. I've never enjoyed burdening these random people, but I've done it, and in this case, Ali Muhammed asked twice. It's difficult to say the words, they stick inside. "It's my father, he's, he's sick, my father's sick."

"Yes? Is this serious? Cancer?"

"I don't exactly know. Maybe, probably. He has health problems." There are so many lights. So much energy being used, being wasted. Five boroughs of bulbs lighting the sky.

"Do not worry. It is as God wills it."

Yes, this is fate. This has been decided in the stars. This is scripture.

"My father, he died in Iran during the revolution. The government, they took his property and took him away. We fled the country, me and my mother. Never saw him after that."

"I'm sorry."

He shakes his head, dismissing my response. "No, no. You will see, there is no sorry, there is only yes, as God wills it."

"Of course." Ali Muhammed justifies the Febreze smell in the car when he pulls out a plastic cup and spits out red juice. It must be some kind of tobacco.

"My wife, she die last year."

"I'm sorry."

He laughs, lifting both hands from the steering wheel to the sides of his face, palms facing me. “No, you don’t see. Allahu Akbar, as He wills it, yes?” He nods his head and closes his eyes, before returning to the traffic and swerving so we don’t hit the car in front of us that’s braking.

When I pay he inserts a card into the money sender, a plastic drawer in the divider that no one ever uses to pay their fare, preferring instead to pay through the large window between driver and passenger. “If you need a cab, call me.” I place the card into my wallet. He waves as he drives a way.

I climb the steps I’ve climbed so many times, using the rail as support. They feel steeper now, like when I was a boy, coming home from school.

Shammi leads me. I follow the sari’s silhouette, the purple folds, through the dark house. She hasn’t said a word. We move through the sliding doors. The machines continues its steady breaths, the rubber tendon pushing air in one motion. She squeezes my shoulder before leaves us.

As I sit on the stool, I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror attached to the lung, aware that even as I look away I’m still captured. His eyes are closed like a baby in an incubator, helpless and supported all at once.

I press down on his forehead. His skin is warm. The perspiration rises between the cracks of my fingers.

The balls underneath his eyelids oscillate back and forth. He must be dreaming about being whole, erect on two feet, or maybe his dream’s about being in the lung forever, unchanging, watching the shapes of the world contained within a mirror. Maybe he’s thinking about me, inventing stories of a better version of his son. Settled down with

kids he can instruct as they read the Almanac aloud to him, the good old American family unit with Granddad cast in iron. I know it's selfish and maybe even perverse, but I always thought he'd be dead before I grew up, really grew up. What kind of life would it be with him in it?

When he wakes he squints, trying to decipher what I'm doing, who I am. "Can you please remove yourself?" His voice is soft. "I'm not some puppy dog. After a breath he gazes at me through the mirror.

"How are you?"

He scans me like he thinks my question's a strange one. "They tell me I've got it in a bad way. They tell me it was only a matter of time to which I replied 'no shit.' Doctors, always explaining the fact of death like it's a sort of revelation that only they have stumbled upon."

The flash, like an electric shock, shoots through my brain. My mouth twitches. I can't control it. It just happens.

"Same tic? It's a shame you got something like that, something that reveals the cards." His voice slows. "Must have got it from your mother's side."

He's never told me much. Only that she died giving birth, that they hadn't known each other very long. Bastard never he even had a picture of them together. "How would you know?"

He shakes his head. "It's like they think that I don't realize that I'm in this damn thing." Spit trails out of his mouth, "Like I don't realize I'm the man's who been on the inside all these years, my limbs solidifying, growing weaker, submerged. The only thing I have is this yapper, which is slowly being infected too, paralysis, the slow moving death,

the cold. Doctors...doctors...they think, they think, they can come in here and tell me,” he says, his voice becoming unsteady, face reddening, vibrations on his loose skin, “that I’m the one who’s dying to which I say, doctor, tell me something interesting like the box score of the Yankees game to which this fucker, this Dr. Samuelson, his pearly whites flashing, I swear that man’s just a set of teeth, actually whips out his phone and starts reading, starts reading the box score, batter by batter. Jeter 0 for 4, Rodriguez 1 for 3, and me, I can’t, I have to wait and take it on the chin when I should be smacking the grin off, I can’t do a thing.”

“Calm down Dad.” He shakes and his eyes roll back into his head. I hold his head down until the tremors pass and he is still.

“Dad,” I say, feeling the expelled breath from his lips as the compression continues to force its way down.

His eyelids barely open. Stares up at nothing particular. It’s only us. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I need to rest.”

I walk into the kitchen. She must have heard. “He’s okay. He’s sleeping now.”

“I heard. Don’t worry, he can’t help it.” She places special emphasis on the t’s when she speaks. Always has. Two steaming mugs are on the kitchen counter. I can smell the chocolate. Little marshmallows float to the surface.

“Thanks.” We sit in silence, hugging our mugs for warmth.

“You’re too skinny James.”

She’s been crying. It’s funny, I never noticed it too much when I was younger, but nowadays it’s like she’s always on the brink. I guess I would be too if I had to spend so

much time with him. A part of me wonders if she worries over what's going to happen to her when he goes. Her entire life has been wrapped up with the sad trials and tribulation of the Steadmans and for what, to end up with what? "Did they say how long?"

She attempts to speak, but nothing comes out.

"It's okay. Please, don't worry Shamm, it's going to be okay." I go to her. She rests her head on me as she loses it, wiping the tears with the sari scarf that rests on her shoulders. I place her hands in mine. They are rough and calloused. She shouldn't be made to endure this. She shouldn't have to. "What do I need to do?"

"Be here James, you need to be here." She lowers her head and puts her trembling lips on the back of my hand like she's trying to assure herself, assure me. She could ask me anything and I'd do it.

"Okay Shamm, don't worry. I will. I'll be here."

One foot and then the other. I watch them run on the reservoir track, leaving imprints in the gravel. It rained last night, one of those earth shattering thunderstorms, the ones that allow you to catch a glimmer into why storms freak out cats and dogs. The wind struck my building and I actually felt it sway, thirty floors up. People sought cover on the sidewalks, seeking shelter within the cornered walls of their apartments, stacked side by side every which way, the bulbs flickering on one by one, revealing all the people at their windows peering out, astonished by the clarity with which they can see the sheer amount of area being rained upon, the lightning flashes and the thunder sounds uptown downtown eastside westside. We watch together, apart, connected.

It's still raining now, more of a cold mist, the one that induces your skin to pimple like from the first break of a sweat. The track is virtually empty this early, except for a few stragglers, the people with the compulsion. I try not to think about how far I've run, how many loops I've circled around Jackie O. The skyline looms behind the trees. Water collects on the leaves till the weight becomes too much and the drops trickle down. The mist mixes with the sweat till I don't know what part is me, what part the rain.

My father's going to die soon. I'm going to be with him, back home in that Brooklyn brownstone. And when he dies I'll go back to my studio, to this life. I'll go back to counting circles around a name my father hates for reasons no one could ever understand and life will go on and I'll move on and Maxim will grow and I'll make more money and I'll find a girl, a girl I can marry and Shammi will be there and there'll be tears in her eyes and I'll tell her it's okay and I'll know, we'll both know, that it's the truth.

## CHAPTER 7

### Firsthand

Cold and rainy. 47 degrees Fahrenheit, SW wind 3 MPH. Subject run circles path of the Jackie O reservoir. 8:45 AM.

James runs five miles, average time of 8:45 per. He hunches over, sweating, trying to stretch, covering his mouth, but he can't hold it in any longer, and proceeds to vomit, mainly clear. Embarrassed, he power walks out the park to the street until he reaches his apartment. He packs a rollaway suitcase and showers, coming out clean shaven and dry after 20 minutes.

In his small kitchen, James rips a hole in a piece of whole wheat bread and toasts in a frying pan, two minutes on each side. He cracks an egg, pouring its insides into the hole. The yolk simmers. On average James consumes *eggs in a basket* three times a week. He flips the toast with the egg firmly cooked into place and squeezes a dollop of ketchup along with the a sprinkle of shredded cheddar(2% milk).

He eats holding the bread with the egg inside over a paper towel to catch any drip. When he finishes, he wipes a bit of yolk from the side of his mouth and pats his forehead dry of sweat, the after-sweat, the result of the run, the hot shower, and the subsequent elevated heartbeat.

On the R train James's attention drifts to the MTA subway map. He slowly blinks the time away, the seat next to him occupied by his baggage. He looks past the window at the black tunnel and senses movement, but is unable to discern what, if anything, is on the other side of that window besides darkness.

He enters his father's brownstone. (P.D.: Request to infiltrate residence denied repeatedly. Note, that monitoring without access to the residence renders Steadman's surveillance incomplete.) The rain continues to fall from a slow moving and vast storm system that currently blankets New York and parts of northern New Jersey. The weather wears on the actual brownstones, the sedimentary rock that comprise the brownstone. A quarry from Passaic County in New Jersey supplied the stones for the Steadman residence long before it became their home. Ten years earlier, the stones at the base of the house began to delaminate. The renovation project included creating a slurry mix of concrete to the solidify the stone, raising the question of how much the home was the original home, how much did the alteration change the structure, did it still deserve to be called brownstone, and if the structure itself is different, perhaps it was time to call it something less deceitful.

Ali Muhammad's card, tucked in James's wallet, monitors the subject's vitals and seems to function properly. Vitals change in an hour. James's heartbeat spikes along with his blood pressure, perhaps a response to stress, but at this point it is only speculation due to the limitations imposed on the file. In time, they return to a normal, but still slightly heightened state.



Another two hours pass before the subject exits the brownstone. The dampened street surrounds him, the desolation of a rainy Saturday afternoon, the wet walk to the subway stop. His strides are deliberate, but slow. He watches each step like he's afraid he's going to slip. He does not slip.

There are several empty seats in the car, but James chooses to stand for the duration of the 42 minute journey, getting off at Coney Island. He wears a blue rain coat and NY Mets hat, his hands tucked into his denim jeans, size 10 Adidas sneakers. He walks with purpose, stopping at 3000 Mermaid Avenue. The building appears to be in the same state of construction. He studies it and then moves on.

James enters Nathan's Hot Dogs, founded in 1916 by Polish immigrant Nathan Handwerker, and site of the annual hot dog eating contest, an event that has grown in popularity and notoriety with the emergence of the sport of competitive eating, a sport primed to exploit the American values of competition and consumption, a deadly combination that reinforces poor health choices, leading to the rise of obesity and heart disease on the national level, which if Agency projections hold, will eventually constitute the greatest threat to the public not only from a health standpoint, but also due to the economic repercussions associated with rising healthcare costs, ultimately making the cost untenable, leading to an eventual outsourcing of care to foreign countries that offer cheaper services. This is already happening on a smaller scale.

As he approaches the counter, James does not recognize Sheldrick(Quan) Anthony at the cash register. He does, however, hesitate before ordering. He waits to be asked for his order, but the boy doesn't say anything. James wonders what he's done wrong. He asks for a chili dog with fries and a diet coke and waits.

Quan, still showing signs of disturbance due to the debriefing, has apparently made the connection between James and the uncovering process, revealing an astuteness that bodes well for his future and validates the recommendation for Agency recruitment, that is, of course, if he can process this simple order.

Quan turns back and speaks to the kitchen. The red dogs are being grilled. Oil from the fryer bubbles. His brother, Maurice, sees Quan and knows something's wrong, the reason becoming more apparent when he sees the man wearing the Mets cap. The three boys have clearly developed a theory concerning the reason for their interview. Maurice presses down the hairs of his mustache in acknowledgement.

James fills the disposable cups with ketchup, using the dispenser by the entrance. Quan gestures to his cousin, future college football player Charles Anthony who is busy clearing the trays left on the tables by former patrons who couldn't bring themselves to throw away their trash in the trashcans and leave their trays for easy collection. Charles, no stranger to his cousins' expressions becomes stone-faced, bull-like, when he sees them, a defense mechanism response that is at least somewhat responsible for his football scholarship.

All three brothers are behind the counter. Quan has sent the order and collected the money from James. They slowly slide the tray over to James's arms, together. He acknowledges the sullen trio of brother-brother-cousin, muttering a quick thanks along with something inaudible before retreating to a table. The three boys continue to stare until their manager comes over and asks "What the hell are you three doing?" a question that divides them, but does little to diffuse the tension, the continued sideways glances, the head nods passing continually between them.

James cannot help but notice that they're watching him, that he is, for some reason, a pariah in this place, an object, and as a result only manages to eat half his crinkled fries before abruptly leaving to the collective relief of Quan, Maurice, and Charles.

A local convenience store owned by Olga and Boris Bushba, aged 52 and 57, respectively, serves as James's next location. Olga works the store, keeping an eye on the young man with her arms crossed over her overweight frame, her weight tilted on her left leg, which is half an inch longer than the right, black flats from the Payless Shoes on Atlantic Avenue housing her aching feet.

James flips through magazines, seemingly picking them at random. Intentions unclear.

He hears Olga's loud cough and recognizes the suggestion behind it. He removes his hands from his pockets. They shake, a tremor Olga doesn't notice, but further evidenced by a rising heart rate as he approaches her.

Clearing his throat he says, "Pack of Camels." He picks at a red Bic, stuck in the plastic molding and dislodges it. "This too."

It has been four years and three days since the last smoke of James Steadman. His father's condition, the sudden move, the long run, the unsteady weather, are all factors in the decision, a clear stress response, but it's not enough, there's more, unknown events contained in that house. (PD: Once again, access requested. Respond with official response ASAP. We must know why. We've spent too many resources not to know, not

to know why at this precise moment James smokes, chooses this, PD, please, all my work depends on it.)

James steps into the cool air and slams the top of the pack against his palm twelve times with varying degrees of force. He rips the ring of clear plastic, tears the foil off under the flap, and puts a single cigarette between his lips. Before lifting the lighter he pauses, but ultimately sets the smoke ablaze, pulling in deeply, eyes closed with the inhale, opened with the blow out.

Another drag and another, spending an average of nine-seconds between each inhale, leaning his back against the wall of the store, much to Olga's cross armed dismay. When he finishes he throws the still smoking butt on the pavement and removes another Camel from the pack. Walking away, he leaves behind a trail.

James walks on the wet sand, continuing to smoke with his head down, not even looking at the ocean, ignoring the patches of earth clinging to his heels, stopping only once to shake his feet dry, an effort that proves futile due to the lack of effort on his part. The reasoning, the trigger, behind the act is unclear. His father's condition has worsened, but he knew that going into that space. Something happened inside there. The profile, incomplete.

After a drag of his sixth cigarette, he smirks, but the expression seems indicative of grief as opposed to joy, like he's stretching the muscles of his mouth to see if they're still capable of the act. James sucks in air like he's preparing, he starts sprinting, back to the boardwalk, running fast, to the wooden planks for some reason as if he. Once on the walkway he runs faster, clear of the sand like he's possessed or seen -----, unanticipated.

Eyes wider. He seems to see. Recognition. (SUBJECT APPROACHING VANTAGE POINT, NOT ENOUGH TIME FOR REPOSITION)

“Odessa!” he yells.

The smoke acts as a sort of break from reality.

(SUBJECT MOVING CLOSER)

A smoke break, a break of smoke.

“Odessa,” quieter, he steps. Too late. (CONTACT IMMINENT)

“James.”

“You look so different.”

“James.”

“Why do you, your hair, the clothing, what happened to your voice?”

“James.” (VOICE RECOVERING TO ODESSA)

“What’s happening?”

“James.”

(PD, I have been compromised. Request Exit. Initiating emergency protocol. The rush to one’s, lightheaded, strange to induce such a thing on one’s self, what did I, how did he know?)

“Odessa,” he says. Subject’s arms beneath me, easing the fall. Good of him. The sound of the waves crashing. The Ferris wheel is off, unlit, still, stuck maybe. Sand sprays, carried by the wind. The smoke surrounds us.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Burn*

Lucas Steadman studies Caroline Mint through a disguised hole in a hotel bathroom. She debriefs Ruben Raymo, casual acquaintance of Angel Mercado, the barber, the focal point of the surveillance until this point. He likes the way she works, the disguise of representing herself as a KGB agent, the directness of her questions, which are tinged with an overwrought accent that Ruben would have no means to detect as false, the way she slaps the pliers in her palms like a Bond villain, the ability to suggest pain without the messiness of inflicting it, the exception being one plucked nail from the subject's big toe, currently bleeding through the bandage, necessary to show a capability and willingness for violence. She projects calm. This agent will get the information, regardless of how long, and all this behind enemy lines. Ruben, a fisherman with a slight lisp never stood, or more precisely, never-seated-all-tied-up a chance.

Using an already dampened handkerchief, Steadman wipes the sweat from his forehead. Ever since he arrived under the order of Proto-Director McDuffy he has been unable to stop the sweat, not with a fan blowing, not with air conditioning. He even sweats during the daily cold shower that is routine. It's as if his skin is allergic to the climate and the only way to combat the air is through an expulsion of all the water from within.

Steadman's presence in the field came as no surprise. It was one of McDuffy's conditions that facilitated the creation of the SEN. "You need to see how to work it, this idea of yours. You need to hone it so it's your own, show these goons the beauty of it, the simplicity. Your efforts can refocus the agency so we are in the business of information, not the business of business. We've become too consumed with interests, but I don't even know who wants what anymore. There too many of them, too many side deals, private holdings, payoffs. Like this Castro thing." It was no secret, Steadman knew, that the SEN's creation occurred after the revolution. They didn't see it coming. They didn't realize how much could be lost until it was too late. "This country's got too much invested in that land. That's why he's a dead man. But maybe something good can come of it. Maybe you can get the real dirt, show us what's really going on. You're just the freak to do it. I'm relying on you not to make me look like an idiot. Figure this thing out using your methods, not theirs, make a real thing out of this thing you thought up and there'll be no end to what we can accomplish."

Steadman never could follow McDuffy's ramblings, but this time the point was clear. "Yes sir, I know sir. I won't let you down sir."

The variable Steadman did not predict was the presence of Larry Anderson, McDuffy's personal warrant boy. He senses Anderson watching him, knows the man's always behind him, reporting back, even now, as he peers through the small hole in the wall that reveals Mint as she encircles another subject.

Larry surveys. Even though he can't see the work, only Steadman's sweaty head, the thinning mop of hair, he's certain he's seeing enough.

Steadman, smoking a Lucky, says to Mint, “A man like that is bad for morale.”

“Whose morale?”

“Me, you, the department.”

“You mean me and you.”

Steadman, lying back against the headboard of the hotel bed, shirt unbuttoned three holes, exposing a shaved pale chest, smiles. The ease with which he does it unnerves Mint. Something unnatural about it. She wishes he would stop, which he does, thankfully, when he continues. “There are others Ms. Mint. Recruitment, expansion, an influx of resources, greater access, these are all ongoing processes happening right now as we sit here in this hot spot.”

“Yes,” Mint says, knowing it’s not true, that everything depends on this operation. Standing by the closed blinds of the balcony door, she sips a glass of water.

“Don’t worry, you’re still the prime agent. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t be here,” he says, the grin returning, the grin of man trying to imitate other men.

The toilet flushes and Larry Anderson emerges. He’s unnerved by the scene. Every minute he leaves them alone is an opportunity for the two to discuss him. He wonders what they say as he resumes looking at Steadman, unaware that in his own way, Steadman is doing the same thing to him. Larry doesn’t grasp the purpose of the SEN, doesn’t like that the reason Mint is second in command is the gleam with which Steadman admires her assets, which, even Larry will admit, are impressive. Still, she doesn’t belong, having been the sad project of a horny old man now dead who liked to play dress up. He keeps all this to himself. He is here to observe and offer assistance, not that they asked for it or will ask for it.



Steadman clears his throat. It sounds like something thick is caught inside and his exertion does little to alleviate the stain in his voice. “So what did you get from the fisherman?”

“Didn’t you watch?”

Larry finds their back and forth flirtations to be an inappropriate allocation of Agency time and resources, an opinion the Proto-Director would surely laugh at. He can see it now, McDuffy swirling the glass, “Boy, you’re confused, we’re not the commies, we’re the actual beings, hot-blooded,” followed by a guzzle, the exhale, the fumes from his hot breath.

“Tell it to me straight Mint.”

“The specifics will be available in my report, but Raymo confirms a long held suspicion. Angel Mercado lives in terrible fear. He has no political allegiance. Bautista, Castro, it doesn’t matter as long as he’s safe, as long as he feels safe.”

Steadman sensing a “But?”

“But, he’s more fearful of Castro like most citizens, the violence of the takeover, executions, the rumors. He wants to live, survive.”

Steadman places his feet on the floor. “Just like the rest of us,” he says, leaning forward. “Sometimes I wake with cold sweats, warmer sweats here of course. My doctor calls them the night terror. The bombs explode overhead, clouds descend, covering all of us in ash, preserving our bodies in a cast of white, arms raised to the heavens in a permanent cast of terror, just like Pompeii. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“There’s a woman too, the love interest.”

“Someone we can use?”

Caroline turns her head toward Larry. Again, Larry gets the impression that this is all for his benefit, although he has no evidence for the claim.

“The relationship can be exploited.”

“As you say Mint.”

Larry Anderson is afraid for reasons he can't explain or more precisely, chooses not to examine.

Mint wakes in the early morning(4:15 AM). Through the hole she listens to the noises from Larry and Lucas's room. Loud moaning, a horrified snore, a mix between heavy breathing and a pig's squeal, belongs to Lucas. Despite numerous attempts, she's been unable to learn of Lucas's origins, the file sealed, any friends nonexistent, colleagues unwilling to speak. Mint is impressed, but the night noise indicates clearly enough that he's hiding something, maybe even from himself, that who he is actually far different than the projection of the tough-talking-Lucky-smoking-SOB-all-knowing head of the SEN. She realizes, not without a certain degree of pleasure, that he does indeed suffer.

Like Steadman, Anderson, the man undoubtedly reporting back to McDuffy, does not seem prepared for this kind of work. His mind is made up and taking one look at Anderson looking at Steadman, the way he fails to hide the disgust toward his current partner is not the sort of transparency an agent should ever project. There's something more, though, something she can't figure out. Anderson's being used by McDuffy, but it's possible that Steadman had a role in it as well. Mint would feel bad for Anderson,

after all, he's just following orders, but his lack of affection for the SEN puts her at odds with him, and no amount of empathy is going to jeopardize her ascension.

Sitting on the closed toilet lid, Mint files her nails with legs crossed, a cotton bathrobe over her body. She hears Anderson rise, can sense his agitated pacing, and knows the man's in trouble, that sleep matters to certain people, certainly to people like him. She enjoys filing. She never did this when she was a girl. The Major wouldn't have approved. Her mother tried to show her once, but she rolled her eyes and clipped her nails. They snapped off one by one while her mother's lips trembled before she let her be, going down the stairs probably to bake something. It's only ten years later when Mint, seated in the office of Strom Brothers, decorated with plaques, photos with Presidents, keys to various oversized doors, she is given the preparation kit (four shades of lipstick, makeup, .22 caliber revolver with leg strap/holster, knife) for the now defunct FF division to register that she's been a cruel daughter, a realization she does not betray as she stands upright and stares into the speculative eyes of her superior. She promises to spend more time with her mother, Pia, when things stabilize. She envisions a tour of the White House, the monuments, and the Smithsonian, walking arm in arm till their legs ache and the pain assures her, assures them both, that they have indeed made up for lost time. First, there is the Cuba business, the need to show the men in suits that she is a force to be reckoned with, and after that, when it's done, there will be time for penance.

Larry Anderson paces, formulating a theory in the darkness that Steadman's snores, if they can be called that, are part of an intentional strategy to annoy, aggravate, and unhinge. What's worse though, is that the strategy's working.

He grits his teeth, swallowing his spit compulsively, a habit he became aware of after reading his psych work-up, a file he borrowed from McDuffy's office cabinet, a fact unknown to the Proto-Director. The file noted the habits were stress induced, "the subject clearly unaware of the behavior, which on a separate note, brings into question the qualification of his dentist, who surely should brought the attention of the impacted molars to Anderson's attention." But Larry's aware now and he still cannot help himself. If anything, after reading the report, the compulsion to grit and swallow increased, as if the expectation of the act forces him to oblige, a self-fulfilling psych evaluation if there ever was one.

When he paces he fantasizes about suffocating Steadman with his pillow, knowing that he could do it easily, knowing that the SEN head wouldn't have a chance.

Larry conjures an image of a steak, a big T-bone, sizzling on a stove, the saliva dripping from Ruth's (German Shepard, 5 years old) mouth as she anticipates the bone, the joy, the pleasure of biting down, the juice like candy.

He hopes to throw a baseball into the mitt of his soon to be 8 year old son, Walt, while his wife, Patty, sits on a lawn chair, sipping iced tea. This is what he fights for, this home, these people, this life. He needs to remind himself that they're trying to take this away.

He pictures Patty in his arms, gripping her hips on a night not too long ago. After whipping the curtains shut he throws her on the bed. Her brunette bob is tied into two schoolgirl pony tails. She pulls her suckling thumb out of her mouth, saying in the most innocent, yet devil-tinted voice, "Ouch Daddy, that hurt, not so hard," emphasizing the hardness of the *r*. Larry jumps on the bed and rips her blouse off with his left hand,

unbuttons his with the right, his heart rate rising as he swallows saliva as Patty pouts, on the verge of tears, the jostle of his belt loosening, trousers falling, being grasped, swallowed by the world, by this tiny girl, his Patty Pouty, surrendering to it, losing everything even for a few moments, moment they would never speak of later, but to exist as this Larry, to become his desires with a woman who wants the same from him, this is what he protects, this is what Larry Anderson needs to get back to. He doesn't care what he needs to do or how he needs to do it and if that means taking out that snoring son of a bitch than all the better.

Lucas Steadman sleeps deeply. He sleeps, sweating through his shirt. He sleeps, dreaming of cataclysms and the end of the world, the mushroom clouds, the red phone, children playing in radiation pools, babies born without faces or limbs like chickens ready to be roasted, the foreign planes flying overhead, the sonic boom, the bombs falling like boulders from the sky, rolling out of the cargo holds. John Wayne limps in the distance into the artificial sunset, guiding him to the next circle where the machine guns mow down rows of people in the blinding landscape, his retinas burning white, as he scans the desert graves. Stalin laughs from an unlatched casket, Hitler joining in on a split screen, his body blown to pieces as they broadcast from the blown to pieces bunker. They both toast, raising invisible glasses to the three horsemen, each riding a tank like a conquering hero, Kennedy, Castro, and Khrushchev. Steadman knows it's no coincidence that the *K* sound defines them all, even his own horse. Now, Ike, that was a man you could trust, military background, straight shooter, a man who signed off without asking too many question, but his slogan, *I Like Ike*, is in flames, he's gone.

As he goes through the nightly terror of having his skin flayed off by two men who resemble Angel Mercado and Ruben Raymo something different happens before they can finish. A light, starlight, appears and shoots through the flames, extinguishing them, transforming the fire into crystal. He peers through the glass and sees her looking straight back, her face a carved alabaster, identical to the picture in the personnel file, except with wings behind her back as she floats in the air above the crystal. He steps forward, trying to get closer and kisses her feet. They taste like salt. Falling to his knees, he begs for mercy, prays for success. The angel acknowledges him and flies away.

He watches the departing figure of the Mint Angel. As she ascends higher he shouts, "Will it be okay?" certain that she can hear the question.

She turns back. Her wings flutter, butterfly wings, black with an orange streak dashing down, white dots stamped on her spine. She opens her mouth, revealing a dark oval void. As she resumes her flight, leaving him behind to torment, Steadman weeps.

It resumes with his feet and moves upwards, slowly, surely, the singe, the temperature rising, the skin peels back, scorched, Steadman is aware that he is on fire and the pain, the pain spreads.

## CHAPTER 9

### Mantra

Shammi sits cross-legged on the gray carpet in the Kali temple, the hard concrete underneath her. The mixed crowd of thirty-three people chants, “Om Namah Shivaya, Shivaya Namah-Oh, Om Namah Shivaya, Shivaya Namah-Oh.” The mantra, an ode to Shiva, the Destroyer in the triumvirate structure of the Hindu trinity with Bramaha serving as the creator and Vishnu, the preserver, continues for three minutes and preludes the bhajans.

Following a moment of silence, one of the singers in the front row, leads the chorus. After he sings a line they repeat it, echoing the voice beat for beat. Shammi does not sing. She enjoys listening, using the time as time to think. He sings, “Ganesha Sharanam, Sharanam Ganesha,” followed by the crowd, *Ganesha Sharanam Sharanam Ganesha*.

The temple, nothing more than a converted basement, contains paintings of various deities on the walls. Rama, Sita, and Lakshman stand while Hanuman, the monkey god, bent on one knee, bows before his lord, an image from *The Ramayana*. Vishnu lies in a giant sea shell. Durga Ma offers a blessing her palm facing outward as if waving hello. Baby Kirshna tops over a jar of ghee, peering through the frame mischievously. Shiva, perched atop Mount Kaliash, eyes half-open, one leg folded, gazes upon the world as a lone ascetic, lost in meditation.

*Shanmukhanatha Subrahmanyam, Subrahmanyam Sai Naathasubrahmanayam, Shiva Shiva Shiva Subrahmanyam, Hara Hara Hara Hara Subrahmanyam.*(Sing the names of Lord Subrahmanyam, Lord of Six Faces, Sing the Names)

At the center of the temple is the six foot black marble statue of Kali Maa. She stares out, eyes painted white, the irises red her tongue darting out. In her two left arms she holds a trident and a cup made of a human skull. In her right arms she holds a sword and the severed head of a demon, a man with unkempt hair and a mustache, eyes closed.

Shammi watches Her as the harmony of the bhajan intensifies, the crowd singing in a frenzy, induced by the visage of Kali, mother, creator and destroyer, and the stymied heat of their close bodies in the poorly ventilated space.

Kali vanquishes evil, protecting the ones She loves. They say the demon Raktabija ravaged the earth, killing at will, devouring the devotees of the Lord. When the other gods fought him, as they spilled his blood on the dirt battlefield, they realized, to their collective horror, that every drop spilt resulted in another demon, a replicate Raktabija emerging from the stain. He laughed with each birth, spreading the guts of the slain over his grizzled and scarred belly, where the consumed screamed out in pain from within. They cried for death. They cried for salvation. Even the gods prayed.

She wonders if he's going to be okay. She remembers holding his hand, walking in the park, how that small child was embarrassed by her, how others on the street gave her a dismissive glance, barely registering her existence, the help. The way he ran to the swings, the urgency with which he fled from her was almost more than she could bear. She felt guilty to feel such a thing, when she knew, when she reminded herself of how



very lucky she was while also realizing that luck and desolation were not two competing states.

And Kali answered, appearing from the earth, in her terrible and furious state, wielding the weapons of salvation. Raktabaji, laughing harder now, charged her, all his forms, the multitude attacking like an army converging on a single target to seek and destroy. One by one she decimated the demon, beheading her opponent one by one, her sword blazing with fire so that not a drop of blood spills on the field. Raktabaji, in all his evil, in all his swarm, is defeated. There is only the sea of corpses.

Walking home, not even attempting to hold James's hand, letting him lead on. The boy, turning back, asking, but really demanding, they stop for ice cream. Shammi shaking her head no. She was so young, meant for so much more, meant to lead, but she had made certain sacrifices for the sake of others in another life, a life she chooses not to dwell upon. This was now the extent of her power, to deny a boy his wish. "Why?" he said, moaning, but stopping when he considers her, when he perceives in her that deep melancholy. "Okay," he mumbles, slowing down so he's by her side. He reaches for her. She allows him to hold her hand. He squeezes. She squeezes back, harder, too hard probably, but he doesn't say anything, he continues despite the pain.

The devotees offered their thanks to Kali Maa, prostrating before her holy feet in reverence to the Mother. But Kali's blood lust rages on and she swings her still flaming sword and trident down on those who would worship her. Her rage knows no bounds.

She is death, the end of the world, the incarnation of the end. Again, the people pray, even the gods, and again they are answered.

Shammi picks at the carpet with her fingernails. The vibration from the voices surround her, producing a space of calm, of peace, but her thoughts wander. She needs to tell him the truth, if she loves him she will, if he loves him, he will. The father sacrifices so much for the son and she knows he's prepared to be buried with the truth, but she can't see a point in it. She can't force his confession, but she can, she can say the things, because it's her time to give, regardless of the outcome, whatever happens to her, she would have still been lucky, but the others, her brothers, them she cannot forget. She rises to her feet, slowly getting up on her aching knees, relieved to stretch, and be free of the hard floor. The aarti begins. The priest, draped in orange robes, holds the tray, lit with three candles, and circles Kali Maa with the flames. The smoke trails behind, creating a haze between Shammi and the idol.

Shiva, Kali's consort, and an aspect of Kali Herself, awakens from his meditation and descends from Mount Kailash onto the field. He appears in beggar's garb, a white tunic covering his waist, a white cloth tied over his chest. He lies directly in the path of Kali, who continues to lay waste to the earth, the bodies continuing to pile. In her rage she presses on, trampling the beggar. An ominous feeling gives her pause. She looks at the body underneath her. It is in this instant that she perceives the truth of who. In shock, in horror, and shame, she sticks out her tongue.

Shammi wonders what's in Kali's expression, what occurs in this moment. Does She believe She's killed Shiva, that She's destroyed her reason for being? Does She comprehend the extent to which She has gone off the path? Or is the answer something more? Seeing the battlefield, the slain innocent, the strewn bodies, does She see in her bloodlust a warning of her power, of the need to control her anger, or is the field, the dead, simply a reflection of the truth of Her, life and death, mercy and punishment, all indiscriminate choices, the whims of God, without reason or rhyme, without justice? Is Kali's surprise as She steps on Shiva the depiction of God realizing the truth, seeing Herself, the endless cycle of life and death that favors no one, is this God finally becoming aware of Her own madness?

Bill presses the bar away from his chest and brings it back down to the bench. A set of 10. Rest. Repeat. The goal is three sets. The burn with the 25th press is trying, causing him to question if can press another one. On his lips, the whispered grunt, "Come on, come on," followed by the thought, the workout mantra Bill relies on when things get tough, when he's unsure if he can do another, when the blood vessels feel like they're going to burst, the muscles tremor, the weakness visible, the affliction of pain threatening to override, the mantra, the power, "THIS IS THE MONEY." THIS IS THE MONEY carries the weight of the a mystical place where muscle forms, where the push of that bar is the only action that will provide sustenance and growth, not just physically, but as a flesh and blood human being. So whenever Bill's overwhelmed at work, whenever fear spikes as he approaches a girl, whenever he does something he doesn't want to, but

knows he should, he finds himself repeating, THIS IS THE MONEY, “how I become the better Bill.”

Bill stops at the 29th press, unable to complete the final rep. He sits on the bench, head down, towel draped on his shoulder, the pecs spasm, his arms swaying as if they're made of Jell-O. He wipes down the wet spot left by his backside, drenched a darker shade of blue.

The gym, surrounded by mirrors on all four sides, allows him the satisfaction of watching himself work out. He claims this is a matter of technique, but delving deeper, he admits he likes to watch the transformation as he expands, the bulge of his bicep from every curl of the free weight, the lean meanness, "a man not to be fucked with," a man capable of sculpting something out of himself, an Adonis, the Adonis. Bill has a vague notion of who Adonis is, correctly associates him with the Greeks, a perfect man, holding in his mind an image of Da Vinci's *David*. He does not know Adonis was killed for being too beautiful, destroyed by gods jealous of his grace. Adonis, stabbed by a wild boar sent from Artemis or Aeres or Zeus, bleeds out in the forest, resting in the weeping arms of his mother, the goddess, Aphrodite, unaware that he dies out of spite for his own beauty. It is unclear if this knowledge would change Bill's model for physical perfection, although it is more unlikely that he would adopt the more apt model of Narcissus.

The mix of young professionals and middle aged men with big black belts strapped to their waists produces a sweat stench, everyone's BO coalescing in the airwaves where the latest hip hop from Hot 97 blares through the speakers. He tries to out-lift who he can. Those he can't he notes as marks for the future, goals. He nods in the direction of Marcos, a stout man, who seems to have a bit of a gut, a gut that can't really

be a gut, because the way Marcos squats, the power with which he lifts, the ease of it, the composure of his calves, the way his muscles absorb the weight, the way he pushes through, the bronzed skin glowing, the efficiency of his technique, is something a man with a gut could not do. Marcos who is peaceful, strong, consistent, nonchalant and cool, respected and known by everyone, Marcos is always IN THE MONEY.

As he squats, Bill says, "You the man Marcos," to which the middle aged Dominican responds to with a stare and a steady exhale, emanating in a way Bill finds dismissive and disheartening for reasons he can't explain.

Bill watches James Steadman from his corner of Maxim. He works with a methodical concentration, moving from one task to the next robotically, compulsively even. He's busy, but you could never tell it by looking at him. Bill wishes he could work like that, without feeling the building pressure of the day, the need for some kind of acknowledgment from his direct superior, Jacques Richard.

Richard made a name for himself in the tech boom of the late 90s, serving as a fund manager at -----, one of the top 5 investment firms on Wall Street. He came to Maxim Capital as a valuable recruit, an asset manager of repute, to help establish the hedge fund as credible and stable. Lately, things have been different. Bill has heard the rumors, transferred the annoyed phone calls, Jacques isn't pulling his weight like the others, isn't as aggressive compared to the other fund managers and his returns are slipping. Certain clients have transferred to other managers, leaving a loyal client fund that is relatively small and includes over 5 million dollars of Richard's own money. Now, it doesn't seem like Jacques is even part of the firm. He doesn't socialize with others, does

not attend the charity events, just goes on these long walks, an umbrella tucked under his arm, his gaunt features stretched back along with his slicked hair, gray at the sides. For the life of him, Bill cannot understand why he pauses in front of Steadman's desk like that, chit chat? No, Bill senses conspiracy between the Frenchman and his friend, who seems to think he's so much better, so much smarter just because he's systematic. Bill finds comfort in the fact that James is just a little off, that despite his outward appearance there is some "real fucked up shit going on inside."

"Come into my office," the voice commands through his headset.

Bill steps in. Through the window he sees the murky water of the Hudson. It's a hazy day. It always seems hazier in the Financial District, a result of the water. Across the river is Hoboken. Bill wonders if he can see his apartment from here. He wonders what it would be like to spend the day behind Jacques' desk, loaded with two wide screen monitors relaying the scrolling numbers, each of which contains the information, the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Theta, each of which is unique and important, though he does not know exactly why, although he wishes he did, wishes he wasn't so ignorant as these investment flies buzzed the office with their language.

A picture of Jacques with his college aged daughter, a sullen looking girl with dark cheekbones that Bill initially took for his boss's wife, is turned outward, a display for the world to express his normalcy, a display which Bill, after nearly two years of working for the man, knows to be patently false.

"Please sit." Jacques turns away from the monitors and wheels his chair forward with his feet, leaning until his face pokes through, the small fans whirring, cooling the core of the systems.

"Bill." Jacques pronounces the name like there are two e's stuck inside the consonants instead of an *i*. "Bill, I must tell you something. I owe it to you."

His stomach churns. The neck pushes, scratches against his collar. He fights against his skin turning red, thinks he's winning the fight, but there's no mirror to confirm. The reflection in the framed picture of Jacques and his daughter is blurred and indistinct.

"I have been attempting to negotiate my departure from Maxim. It seems I am no longer the right fit here," Jacques says, his fingers pressing down on the oak desk.

Bill does not enjoy the way vowels sound coming out of Richard's mouth. They're stretched, wrong.

"Within one month's time, I will exit Maxim and set up my own fund with a few other managers, older men, more far-sighted men."

THIS IS THE MONEY. The image of the Adonis, Da Vinci's DAVID. "Sir, it has been a pleasure working for you and I'll follow you."

Jacques blinks, once and again, his eyes wider than before. "Yes?"

"Oh, yes."

Richard rises from his chair, walks behind Bill, who peers out the glass, less interested in finding his apartment than when he entered. Jacques places his hands on Bill's shoulders and squeezes. Bill thinks the action is supposed to offer comfort. "Such a strong boy. Bill, I must tell you that that will not happen. I'm afraid the position has been filled, but Bill, you have my words, I will put in the word for you to stay on here Bill."

Jacques squeezing tighter, his grip surprisingly strong, "You trust me, correct?"

"Yes."

Tighter. "And you will not tell anyone what I have told you, yes?"

"Yes."

Jacques brushes off his shoulders like they're covered with dust. "Good, discretion, or the appearance of discretion is paramount. I cannot stress this enough. Vital to your future as well, yes?"

Bill begins to raise in hand in salute before stopping himself.

"Thank you Bill, thank you for your services." They shake on it. "What a strong boy."

Bill sits back down and peers at the busy corridors, the voices, the papers, the charts and screens, the scrolls with tickers indicating the latest movement of the indices, all positive, all bright in the green, everyone busy and happy, ignorant to the fact of what just happened, ignorant of the Jell-O sensation coming over Bill's proud and muscled limbs, limbs that in all likelihood have just been shit-canned.



## CHAPTER 10

### Rights

The hospital is quiet, as quiet as it gets anyway. Emergencies are ordinary here. They aren't met with panic. People walk with purpose, sidestepping the bereavement, the anxiety, as they nurse the bodies in their respective hours of crisis.

A white blanket covers her body. She seems peaceful, still, face slightly turned to the right like she's listening to the beeps coming from the machines. I stand by the base of the bed. I'm not family, not really a friend, not much of anything, except the subject of this girl, this woman, this Odessa.

Outside, the lights are off on Coney Island, the barebones of the mechanical wonders barely visible against the rising tide.

They asked me who she was. I told them her name was Odessa, Odessa Belikhov. It was the name my father had said before I first set out to find her. They asked me who I was when they lifted her body into the ambulance. A friend, her boyfriend. They asked if she had any relatives they could contact. No, she's alone. The EMTs both sighed and shook their heads in a way that made me feel responsible, but I didn't intend this. In the ride over, I held her hand while the lights spun and the siren wailed. I wanted her to be okay, whoever she was, whatever she wanted. They kept checking her pulse, kept asking questions I didn't know the answers to. Eventually, they stopped. Her skin was soft. I kept on waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. I was the only one there for

her. As the ambulance swerved, I pressed tighter and, for a moment, she squeezed back, but it was too brief for me to know if it was real.

I can't smell her, only the ammonia. The black hair, the thin eyebrows, the dried broken lips, are enough to tell me that this woman's name is not Odessa. She is a lie, a lie that won't speak the truth, can't speak. The life monitors signal what appear to be steady vitals, but I'm no doctor. I am good at reading though, seeing signs, it's how I saw her, this Odessa, this Coney Island spy who keeps falling in my arms, lying in my beds, keeping secrets, unable to share. I'm not supposed to be here, not supposed to watch, but no one gave her permission either. That look, when she realized I saw her, that I had found her out; she was terrified, she didn't anticipate it, couldn't hear my father's words when he spilled the truth, words that sounded like nonsense, until I saw the shock in her eyes, the real ones.

The lung in Brooklyn compressed as he spoke. There was relief in his voice, a sense of joy almost, a preparedness. "What if I told you, you were being watched?" He scans me in the mirror, waiting for the follow up question, but I don't give him the satisfaction.

"You can't see those who watch, but what if you could, could you bear it, would you really want to see them, knowing there's nothing you could ever do to stop them? And it's not just you, it's everyone around you. Imagine what that would be, the implication of that knowledge. Could you ever be free again, ever breathe the same way knowing this thing?" He clears his throat. "I know you've never bought into what I've said."

"It's not—"

“Just quiet now. Let me speak. I can’t make you believe, but just promise you won’t go getting all emotional or anything till I’m done.”

“I promise.”

“Good,” he says, continuing, “There was a boy once, a boy with a vision of where this world was headed, a boy with a notion of how to stop the fires from spreading, the fires from the bombs. The boy made a vow, a vow to his country. Do you know what it means, to vow? It means making a choice, it means making a promise to yourself and your country, it means sacrifice at the expense of self. The problem with vows is that they blind us to a greater truth, the truth that we are surrounded by pretenders. Anyone can make a vow, but few can inhabit it. That’s where I lose, I lost to the pretenders, to people I trusted, people who were supposed to believe in the same things I did. The world’s coming for you and I’m partially to blame, but it was only a matter of time in the scheme of it.” His eyes began to moisten. “We don’t have to pretend if we don’t want to. I’m not going to be here forever and I can’t keep protecting you. The world’s too big now. There are things you have a right to know, but you also have the right not to know.”

The shades were drawn, blocking the outside. It’s a shame to cover it up, it does things to the mind, warps it. He doesn’t see the world as clearly as he could. He’s tired of it, or worse, he can no longer bare it, being in that thing. At least that’s what I thought when I sat there listening.

“It stopped being about right and wrong. Hell, maybe it never. No, for some of us it was. Became too much about growth for growth’s sake, ambition, promotion. This iron thing I’m in, I made it and I deserve it, but you’re just a bystander and it’s not right that you’re stuck between us, that you’ll suffer as a result, you’ll suffer from people you’ve

never met for reasons you won't understand. And we will suffer. It's the only thing they do, even when they try not to, especially when they try not to. But dammit if my son isn't going to know the truth, you have the right, the whole world has the goddamn right!"

"Calm down," I saw, wiping his damp forehead with a towel.

"You're a good kid, James. This whole arrangement was meant to be different, better. I know you don't—"

"It's okay Dad."

He stretched his head back, turning away from the mirror as if in pain. "You can draw them out. The signs, they're there. Change your behavior. Do something unexpected from your regular pattern, something personal. It will draw them closer. Then you'll see, if your eyes are wide enough. It has to be when you leave this house, that's when they'll be the most disoriented, within hours of when you leave. Only if you want it."

"Why—"

"I'm telling you because I'm afraid. They're closer. I can smell them. We're older. It was only ever a matter of time. There's blood in the water, all you, all you need to do is look outside."

I patted his head dry. Tired from his confession, he fell asleep right there. The clock continued to tick, the pendulum swinging behind the glass casing. Wrinkles lined his forehead, dark circles under his eyes. He's a liar. He's not a liar. I'm like him. I'm not like him. I'm afraid of tomorrow, always have been, afraid of being alone, staying that way because despite my efforts it's how I've always been.

In the kitchen, Shammi hugged me. “Did you hear?” I asked, even though I knew she had. “Is any of it true?”

She pulled away and used the counter as support. “James, *beta*, your father is complicated, you know.” She looked like she was going to cry. She keeps using it as her go to excuse to get me to do what she wants.

“How sick is he, I mean, in the head?”

“He’s your father. How can you say such things?”

“Why can’t you just tell me?”

“What can I tell you that’s going to change anything, there is no answer like that.”

“It’s a simple question.”

“It’s not so simple,” she said, wincing, “you know this.”

“So you’re not going to say anything?”

She crossed her arms, but uncrossed them just as quickly. She tried to move closer, reach out to me, but I stepped back. She seemed to shrink in that moment. “What can I say?”

“Fine,” I said, heading to the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked, following.

“I need some air.”

“James, stop, please. You’re safe here and it’s getting late.”

I unlocked the door and studied the stairs below. “No Shammi, I’m not,” I said, turning back. “Being here, it’s not just him. It’s the both of you. No one says anything. You both just want me here, but you never tell me anything real.”

She tried to stop me, but I walked away. “I have to go,” I said, ignoring her.

To go through all that only to be here in front of a hospital bed with this person, I feel like I should be grateful that my father's spoke some truth, but I don't feel that, I'm less certain. What are they all doing? My father was right, I have a right not to know. I can't go back there to see him, to see them, for what, to tell them they've been right. My fingers graze the top of the filters from the pack in my pocket. This is what it took, smoke in the lungs, in the air, promises broken. This is giving up, this is relief.

Outside it's dark. Little Odessa, Brighton, a city of Ukrainian refugees making a home, claiming this place by the sea, a home on the other side of the world. They've changed the street names, even the storefronts to their native tongue, erasing the English so the awnings have been transformed, providing the impression that this place is different, but it's not.

The bar sign flashes. I'm searching for a familiar face inside, a man who almost lost a kidney. I hope he's real, I could use something real.

I keep drinking. Alexander Dvornik does the talking. We both smoke, tapping out in an ashtray on the counter. "This is a great country, but it's also a motherfucker. You can build a life, but first you must give a little something, you must sell. This place, this government, the people, they have a piece of everything, every little piece of pie this is what they say, yes?"

I gulp and concur. He pours another one, sliding the glass over.

"Do not worry my friend. There's nothing you can do so do nothing. Let them watch, let them see. What difference? Motherfuckers," he says, spitting on the bar. "Now you?"

I hesitate, but he insists. I spit next to his bubble. He laughs. “Not a big one, but it will do.” He wipes the collective saliva away with a rag. “Feel better?”

“Yes. Yeah, I do.”

“There is another reason I am happy to see you my friend.” He rests his elbows on the counter, examining the area he just wiped. “You said you were an investment man.”

“Not really, I’m only an assistant.”

“Excellent. I need you to set up meeting with my boss and your boss. They have business.”

“Really, you too Alex?”

He wipes the clean wood and pinches his neck.

“I could lose my job. My boss, we don’t have meetings in person like that. It’s not how it works. I can’t go—”

“Please my friend. Such things aren’t for men like us to decide. Let them talk. Sometimes you cannot say no, yes, it would prove too dangerous. Everybody owes somebody something in this world.” He presses his index finger down on the bar to express the severity of the point.

## CHAPTER 11

### *Diplomat*

Larry Anderson sits on the bar stool of the hotel bar, his back stiff, waiting for his contact who is now over 30 minutes late. An ice water sweats onto the napkin underneath it. He sweeps the perspiration from the glass across his forehead.

The contact arrives, settling into the stool next to his. He is a Venezuelan diplomat, Augusto Riskey, Chief Assistant to the Ambassador, and on the Agency payroll. Currently, he acts as the relay man between Anderson and Proto-Director McDuffy.

The bartender, a cleanly shaven man clad in a white tuxedo, places a drink in front of the diplomat. Riskey accepts it with a nod, the skin under his chin doubling as he tilts his head.

Anderson doesn't like the familiarity between the two. Doesn't trust it.

"Updates?" Riskey inquires.

"Tell them no evidence of Soviet presence in terms of troops, base presence, or weapons cache. They're wasting time."

"On what?"

Anderson swings his chair to Riskey and leans in. "I repeat, they're wasting time."

"Of course."



A band begins to play on a small stage at the back of the bar. The tables in front of them are empty. The guitarist twangs along, wearing a loose fitting beige shirt, buttoned, untucked, hanging over the waist. The drummer follows with a steady, if unspectacular beat. A woman in a black dress sits at the side of the stage, scanning the audience, a part of the band, but apart from the band. "Who is she?"

"She," Risquez says taking a measured sip. "She is the Silent Singer."

The Silent Singer, Gabriella, the daughter of Roberta Vasquez, a well-known fortune teller from -----, and Victor Truz, deceased infantryman of the army. She became the Silent Singer in order to support her ailing mother. She promised the guitarist and his cousin, the drummer, of a local band that she would draw a crowd, that her mother had predicted that she would be the most famous singer in the country, a lie that she knew would attract attention. Word quickly spread that the fortune teller's daughter would perform.

As the crowd entered the wooden bar they looked at the band and the veiled singer with a sense of anticipation, a sense that something was going to happen. People wondered how the daughter would be like the mother, what gift would she offer.

The band played. The young Gabriella slowly stepped to the center of the stage, the music thumping behind her, and stared out at the crowd of one hundred people, packed wall to wall in the club. They waited for her to sing. No sound emanated through the veil, shadowed black to match the dress lining the curve of her hips. Her stance, the band, left the crowd with the impression that she was on the verge.

Some in the crowd shouted at her. Some joined in the obscenities, but the rest of the crowd, the silent half, soon silenced the others. Something was happening. They were

beginning to feel something, some presence, some awe. As they played faster her gaze intensified as she stepped forward into the bright light and in one swift stroke swept the veil away.

While Gabriella was never noted as a true beauty, the fierceness with which she stood on the stage, the way her bushy eyebrows bridged and connected across her forehead, the presence and pomp she exhibited with a simple thrust gave the crowd a sense of exuberance. Coupled with the mystery of what was happening, provided the impression that they were witnesses to the otherworldly, the mystical. She challenged what they expected, what they felt they deserved, but then, gazing back at her, they realized the strangeness of their expectation. Grown men and women wept. When they got home they prayed.

Gabriella and the band achieved a rising popularity for a while. They even managed to play before Bautista before he left. But even then they were moving closer to the end. Gabriella tried to perform for Che and Castro, but they weren't interested in her talents as a singer.

Now, they play before random crowds, hotel bars, the occasional club. The Silent Singer, perhaps sensing her own demise, no longer peers out from front and center, but from the side, unveiled. She sees the white man at the bar and zeroes in, perhaps for the fun of it, but mainly because she can tell he's trying to avoid being seen.

Larry Anderson tries to turn away from the band, but for some reason he keeps coming back to her. "Bunch of mumbo jumbo in this country," he mutters.

Risquez agrees. "Si, jumbo," he says, trying hard to enunciate the j. "So you possess no interest in why the people respond to this?"

"Why should I?"

Gabriella continues to look. Even though she no longer needs the theatrics of the veil, she knows her gaze still has an effect.

"No reason Anderson, no reason."

Larry finishes the remaining contents of his water. He thinks of his wife. Thinks of throwing her on the bed, the way her ponytails would fall to each side of her as her head hit the pillow. All these thoughts as the Silent Singer stares. "I need to get out of here. Anything else for me?"

"Si, your man says, he says." Risquez rubs his forehead.

"Jesus, what is it?"

"He say it is time to relieve the pitcher. He say the relief pitcher is ready."

Anderson grabs the cup with the bit of rum left in the Diplomat's cup and swallows it down. "Is that it?"

"Si."

Anderson pulls out the white envelope from his inside jacket pocket and slides in under the counter into Risquez's sweaty palms.

"Gracias."

Anderson cups the vial, carefully dropping it in the inside pocket where the envelope used to be, glad to have a tool. He shoots one last look at The Silent Singer and mutters under his breath. She nods as if accepting a compliment. Anderson walks into the Havana night, the music of the band following him into the street lined with shiny blue and red Chevy's that remind the agent of better days.

Steadman pushes against the door. Practical Espionage, the Agency class, stressed lock-picking was a simple matter of leverage, that leverage was a simple matter of exerting pressure, of extending one's will over a mechanism, a bolt, that it was never a matter of brawn, but of brain. At the time Steadman thought the whole thing ridiculous, an opinion he still holds, even now, as he braces his shoulder, forcing the weight of his body against the door that acts as a barrier between him and the now vacant room of Ms. Caroline Mint.

He breaches through after bribing a passing housekeeper carrying a stack of fresh towels. After opening the door the housekeeper gives Steadman the white towels and walks away, whistling. Lucas likes the man's style. It's how a clandestine operation should be handled, swiftly and without any unnecessary tension.

It's not that Lucas distrusts Caroline. In all the people he's come in contact with, she's the one who's proven most useful in the field, most willing to not only see the mission through, but to see it as he envisions it, covert action as a crutch, a backbone, for intelligence gathering, not the other way, not the way Dulles envisions it, but the way the original charter envisioned it. For all the derision surrounding the activities of the SEN, she gets it, or at least pretends to, which is good enough, for now. Steadman is content to let them think he's building a network of low level operatives, low risk if captured, men to carry out any orders. But this is not what he intends, not what he sees as the long range goal of his project.

His aim is to see the world as it really is through the eyes of the citizens on the ground, a catalogue of human existence across the globe. What do they believe, what do they think, yearn for, how will they act in the future? Understand the average citizen,

understand a life, and then you can understand a country, understand how to direct it, where to push, what it needs, how to prevent the threat of undue influence, currently the Soviets.

Steadman's reviewed the reports, the pages and pages that tell the story of failed initiatives to infiltrate the curtain, install a high a profile agent in the Politburo, all failing, resulting in the deaths of forgotten unsung men who never stood a chance to begin with because they lacked the basic information of what it means to be a Soviet. It was one thing to support the underground with cases of cash, but to do so without comprehending the Soviet mind seemed inexplicable to Lucas, operations destined to end in death, operations that kept on repeating, information readily available for anyone interested in reading between the lines of the glowing station reports that proclaimed progress without providing any hard evidence.

Lucas desires a complete picture of Mint, to see the unseen details of her life, what she whispers in her sleep. This is his attempt at thoroughness.

He stacks the towels on the floor of the bathroom and proceeds. A floral bedspread adorns each of the two beds. Each is neatly made, tucked taut. Steadman stares at each, trying to discern which one she sleeps in as he steps into the narrow inlet separating each. Bending downs he sniffs the covers, lifting the spread, his nose grazing the soft cotton, repeating the exercise on the other bed, but the results prove inconclusive. He can't even find a hair besides a single black strand on the shared night-table that looks like it's on display, laid diagonally over the numbers of the white telephone.

Steadman lodges the recorder under the nightstand, in the back right corner, directly under the phone.

Wiping the dust away with a dampened handkerchief, Steadman squirms. Before leaving he rifles through the drawers where Mint's clothing is succinctly tucked and folded. He runs his fingers over the garments, stealing glances at the door, sensing that his time is up, even though he knows Mint will not be returning for another two hours. He stops at a section of black and white, swallowing as he flips the tag that reads 34B.

Industrious as ever, Ms. Caroline Mint waits in the passenger seat of a taxi outside the hotel bar, Palacio. The driver squirms. She tosses the old man a few bills to relax him. He knows he's part of something he wants no part in. Smart man. She presses more bills into his unsuspecting hand. The paper falls to the floor.

"How much longer?" he asks, searching near the pedals.

"Not long."

Her colleague is inside. She needs him to come out so she can go in. Mint had little difficulty following him. Anderson did not expect it, did not suspect her. For that he can be forgiven, but it doesn't mean he's any less of a fool. She runs her fingers through her hair. She likes feeling it in the dark when she doesn't have to see the artificial blonde.

Anderson leaves the bar after 50 minutes, arms swinging wildly, red-faced, covert as always, making his way down the empty sidewalk of the street lined with parked cars. He resembles a chicken in a pen with too much space and too little company, Mint's father would say.

"Gracias," she says, stepping onto the curb.

"De nada," the driver mumbles before speeding down the cobbled street.

The black heels work in tandem with music, adding a much needed bass to the jams of the guitar. The few heads on the stools turn to glance at the source of the beat only to see Mint striding in, wearing a black cocktail dress, slit riding up to her knee, revealing the promise of so much more, a mane of wavy hair that reminds the people in the bar of an image of a woman that they have only witnessed through film and celluloid. Even to Risquez, no stranger to a global brand of woman due to the perks of diplomacy, she is a vision. Mint knows this. It's what Strom Brothers trained her to be, what he made her.

Mint notices the woman onstage to the side of the band, staring out, saggy arms tucked in. She wonders why she doesn't sing. Eventually, she concludes that she's waiting for the next song or perhaps the one after that.

She orders a glass of red from a table in a line of vacant tables in front of the stage. The bartender comes over, cloth draped over his bent arm as he holds the bottle up for her approval. "Yes, yes," she says in her feigned voice, not bothering to look at him, even as tells her that he hopes she enjoys, the statement meant to induce a response indicated by the man's awkward pause, Mint taking pleasure in the cold silence that forces him to eventually walk away. Risquez watches, grinning at the woman with an air, he thinks, the blood pumping in his veins.

The deep red rests on the table. The lushness, the color, the stillness, provide the illusion of solidity, appropriate, given the wine's role as prop, a magnet meant to complete the picture, to transform the dynamics of the sad and empty Palacio into a local joint more alive and exuberant in its mystery. It would help if the singer actually sang. No matter, makes it easier to hear.

Risqueze boldly sits in the chair besides her, yelling for the bartender to bring him a drink. "English?" he asks.

"Swedish, but I speak English," the covered Mint replies.

Risqueze laughs. "Of course, my darling. Sweden, this is a cold country, yes?"

Mint stares ahead, nodding in acknowledgement.

"Let me offer my congratulations then Madame."

"Why?" she asks, turning to him.

"For escaping the cold." Risqueze inches closer, tapping his fingers on the table.

"You will never freeze again, a woman like you, a beauty like you, should never freeze."

They lock eyes, the inscrutable Mint, arms folded in her lap, and the smug Venezuelan. Mint leans in, the straight lips become a smile, growing wider, till the lush lips shift into a wide mouthed laughter. Risqueze joins in with his own hearty burst. Even the approaching waiter laughs, the other patrons, the musicians on stage. Risqueze believes he's unlocked the mystery of this Valkyrie.

Mint knows she's closer. The bar is changing. Soon, she'll have what she needs.

Everyone's happy, all laughs, all, except the Silent Singer. She locks eyes on Mint and for a moment they connect and share in the knowledge that despite Mint's expression, the undrunken glass speaks for itself.



## CHAPTER 12

### Secretary

James sits at his desk, answering the phone when it rings, sending emails when they need sending. No hint of the tumultuousness of the recent days appears evident from afar, but a closer look reveals the vague outline of a mustache and beard. The unshaven patchwork indicate the change, although the slow-growth limits the perception. The most telling switch is the odor of smoke that clings to his body. Although his direct superior, fund manager Jeremy Vaughn, has not noticed the new habit, the uptick in the brow of Jacques Richard indicates a degree of visibility to others.

Vaughn hunches over his glass desk and peers into the scrolling images on the screen. The upticks, the slight turns, the market movement, drives his day. He shimmies his hips back and forth, squeezing a custom Maxim stress ball.

By using market collateral, a mixture of consolidated debt based on mortgages, Vaughn has been able to leverage his money to acquire more assets, which he diversifies in an array of global banking opportunities. The growth has well-exceeded expectation, leading to more clients, the client growth essential in continuing the percentage profit gains in his estimation. He steals glances at his secretary, James, watching as he goes through each task lifelessly.

The vision of his ideal secretary, revealed over a sushi lunch with a friend, is someone who is “smoking hot,” long legs, wears short skirts to the office, the length of it on the verge for being inappropriate, and glossy lips, also borderline appropriate. A

certain someone who brightens the days when they become boring, someone who serves as validation for his place in the world, a woman to serve, a woman for others to envy, but James was recommended by HR and he gave the right answers. There was no reason not to hire him, even if he seemed a bit distant. But now, if he had a chance to do it all over.

As the ticks trend higher, Vaughn slides off his handcrafted Berluti leather shoes and rubs his feet together, trying to calculate what each increase signifies to the net gain of the portfolio, to the bonus, knowing he has a chance of being the firm's top earner, the fund manager of the year. Growing up in North Carolina, attending school at ----- (Economics BA, Finance MBA), he never envisioned that in less than fifteen years that he'd be here. Now that he's here, his view has changed. He sees the potential and he wants it, wants to be known, and the only way to be known is through growth. So when the market line curves higher, the correlative growth in his portfolio causes his blood to rush.

Vaughn balances on the arches of his feet when the Outlook box on his computer beeps, reminding him with an appointment with The Dvornik Group. He clicks the message to retrieve further information regarding the call, mainly how much money they represent, because "he needs to keep feeding it."

Vaughn's work-obsessed life is not shocking given the industry. What is more surprising is the boredom Jeremy experiences in his time outside the office, the lack of excitement. He's unmarried, has few, if any, close friends in the city, most having moved away to the next stage of their live in the suburbs of New Jersey and Connecticut. Social events are set up by people at the office, and while they are fun, they still prove to be

work. As he munches on a dragon roll, thinking of how to revel in his success with others, his tired eyes trained on Conan O'Brien's fluffy red hair, bouncing with so much life on his 60 inch plasma, hoping for an appearance from the masturbating bear, a barely touched tumbler of whiskey on the wooden floor, he will predictably fall asleep with two rolls left, a dash of soy sauce stuck to his lips, head tilted back with an open mouth. When he wakes he will wake with a shrug of embarrassment until he realizes there's no reason for the response due to the lack of witnesses, which will bring him back to the original thought of reveling in his success with others.

James leans against the Maxim building, puffing smoke. He watches the way the sun refracts off the reflective glass of the structure, the way light courses through the busy streets, frying the heads of men in suits, men rushing to grab a bite, a salad, a soup, a sandwich, a slice, a falafel or gyro from the vendors, who chop with purpose during the busy hour, sweat beading as they shove the wraps to men still fumbling with their wallets.

Two town cars pull up to the building. Men of various sizes, shirts collared with the top two buttons unbuttoned, get out and scan the building from behind the comfort of identical designer sunglasses. That James does not yet suspect something can be seen with his steady exhalation. The change occurs when the last man exits, the only familiar face in the bunch, a face that James, for some reason, has refused to accept would actually ever show after countless messages explaining how pointless the meeting would be for all involved.

Alexander Dvornik, dressed similar to the other men, appears uncomfortable and constricted in his unfitted blazer, which hug his massive shoulders. He takes small steps,

unsure of himself, he joins his comrades on the sidewalk. The group enters through the revolving doors.

James takes a long, resigned drag, and stomps out the butt before rushing behind them, through the door, by the Aluminum Woman. He comes to the aid of the irate men who are shouting at the two seated security guards whose expressions remain unfazed, which only serves to feed the bark of the group who, despite being inside, continue to wear their shades.

He tries to get their attention, but they do not hear him. Finally, he says, “Alexander,” repeating the name twice more before he’s heard. The husky bartender and the group of six men slowly turn and become silent, transferring their gaze at the man they’ve been told is responsible for a meeting, a meeting that it presently being denied to them.

Alexander greets him with a hearty handshake. The others say nothing. “Something wrong. These men tell us we do not have an appointment, but this cannot be true.” The words sound amiable, but the expression, which the others cannot see, pleads with urgency, his sweaty anxious palm a reminder of the need for action, for greeting, for respect, for a pass to travel onwards and upwards.

All the while James thinks, hopes, than an Outlook appointment is all one needs to establish legitimacy, hopes that this is not the last day of his employment, hopes that these Ukrainian men represent something legitimate.

He signs the clipboard. The guards remain seated, leaning back, nodding as the seven guests are created from a few strokes of a chained pen.

James motions for them to follow him through the turnstiles. They hesitate, glancing at the two guards, who seem to have ceased their resistance. When they are all piled in, James enters, flanked by Alex on his right. Their bodies squeeze together, faces inches from the silver door. The creaky chain lifts them to the required height.

They spill into the floor. For a moment, the Maxim men, so unaccustomed to visitors, pause, fixing upon the group of strangers. Even Jacques Richard peers out from a flicked blind, eyebrow raised. James, turning his head down to the floor says, "This way gentleman," leading them. He directs them to a side room with 10 chairs, a projection screen front and center, a dusty brochure placed in front of each position.

Vaughn clears his throat as he swings in, pressing down on James's shoulders, giving him an extra squeeze to signify the "fuck-up." He secretly hopes his secretary only made a live meeting due to the depth of the shaded men's pockets, the other part hoping this act will serve as a first warning for James, for the lack of information. Vaughn understands the desire for secrecy, but this is too much, a gross oversight by his inferior, that goes grosser the more time he spends dwelling upon the transgression.

He introduces himself to the nodding men who do not bother getting up, who seem to be making themselves comfortable, fingers intertwined over their stomachs. Vaughn interprets this as a positive sign. They should be desperate at the end. He enjoys the challenge. The saliva builds. He swallows.

One of the seated men at the center of the conference table points to James. "You leave now." A silence hangs in the air. Vaughn pulls his subordinate close and whispers, "Get the fuck out."

James, unsure if a fleck of spit hits his ear, leaves. He looks to the lumbering man who was only ever supposed to be an outlet for frustration, maybe a source of information regarding a woman who ended up not really existing.

Alex shrugs his shoulders, but his face says more, continues the desperate plea, an expression that says in no uncertain terms, "this is for the best my friend, the best."

## CHAPTER 13

### Hospital-Bed

The agent in the hospital bed does her part amid the beep beep, the vital currents that monitor, that remind her she is alive, tell her that her eyes are only closed due to protocol, but still, the lingering questions remain.

The agent in the bed feels the cool sheets on her skin, the footsteps by her side, employees all, but no coworkers, the recovery squad is late, but what if they don't know, but no, the agent knows, She knows, and the agent knows that she does not really know how long it's been, despite the fact that she's been keeping time for so long, she hasn't felt the full force weight of it until now, the strangle of the blanket, the itch at the tip of her nose that needs to be scratched, but due to protocol cannot be scratched.

The agent reconciles her fear of being trapped by falling back on the training, the courage of the Agency program, the strength of the STROM Core, named after the man who laid the foundational principle, which led to the character of Odessa Belikhov into hibernation status, the place her character is needed most at this time apparently.

The agent knows by the footsteps that the subject has arrived, the Camel smell announcing his presence, the dependent personality ready to attach to the character in the bed, the character that he, at the very least, must suspect to be false.

Still, he doesn't care, content to wait, to watch, to visit and kneel, to inch closer, but not touch, to hover until the moment comes to what, the moment where he can what, confront me, tell me that he knows when he doesn't really know a damn thing, that

coming here, that his being here, is the only damn reason that I am still here, that I am the proverbial cheese to his mouse, but they are happy to not pull the lever on the trap, happy to let the back and forth, the predictable pattern continue, while what, someone else watches, someone else replaces me, and I am left to the comatose induction, “the consequence of failure,” and you don’t ever have a choice in it, the control is set, the reports are mere thoughts to be transcribed at a later date, but what if the charade doesn’t end, She wouldn’t do that, knowing full well that of course She would, that the setback provides its own opportunity, reducing one’s exposure because this Steadman can’t help himself from drifting through that door, from telling me things, asking me things, thinking I can’t really hear when I get all of it, but there’s no one to share it with so it doesn’t even matter James, the Dvorniks and Vaughns and Chus of the world, but keep talking, don’t leave before you’re done because when you leave I’m just left with this sprawl of thoughts, abandonment by all the forces, even Her, but you James, you pathetic boy who falls in love at the drop of a hat still come and it doesn’t matter if I’m only an impromptu therapy session and I don’t care that your father’s dying because he’s been dying and damnit, that’s what fathers do; so call me Odessa and whisper your secrets because for now, at least, you’re safe, and there may come a day when you aren’t, when the mass catalogue of Steadman reaches its logical conclusion, and for all intents and purposes it’s going to be because it’s my fault, but we don’t think in terms of fault, only action, which tells us only what I need to know; so James, I have to tell you I don’t know why I’ve spent all this time collecting your life into a file, all this time pretending not to hate you and the utter insignificance of you and by extension, me represent, and the thought that you were the means to a promotion, a more interesting life, and now you, by



my side, above my itchy nose, which I know you wouldn't dare to touch, are the only thing I have.

James, don't you see, the agent in the hospital bed, unable to squirm, sees just how fuckin' round and round the whole thing is, content, at least, in the joy that the PD isn't constantly demanding, reading, questioning my every move, my worth, my whole being, despite the STROM Core training, which James, if you must know, and you never will, I passed with flying fuckin' colors top marks top o' class, this former Boston rat who became Odessa Belikhov passed with flyin' fuckin' colors, but you would never know it, so we're together, and maybe She's been proven right, still James, here we are, failures together, in the throes of dying between the nicotine and ammonia lining of these walls and goddamnit James it could be worse, after all, we could both be fuckin' dead without ever knowing what any of it was all fuckin' for, what any of this was worth.

James, is that your hand?

## CHAPTER 14

### Pastimes

Mint under the guise of a Swedish reporter searches the Venezuelan diplomat's, Augusto Riskey, house. He sleeps soundly, snoring loudly, an effect insured by the influence of -----, a high dosage that gives Mint a sense of security. Still, she searches in the dark embassy home, aware that his secret ties to Larry Anderson carries the crucial information to fill in the gaps.

She knows his actions come from a senior source, probably the Proto-Director, but she needs proof, more evidence. The thought of torturing Larry enters her mind, but she quickly dismisses it due to what may be perceived as extreme measures.

The disorder with which Riskey's clothes are piled haphazardly on the floor irks Mint. Flipping through the wad of currency, she smells America, that crisp new dollar scent as if the bills were printed just for this occasion. It's weighty enough to prove that Anderson does not act alone.

Crawling on the marble floor, she rifles through the drawers, sifting with her fingers, careful not to cause disruption. From the floor, she shifts her attention to the white walls, whose rough surface scratches her knuckles, when she knocks for hollow points, storage areas, a popular customization in their trade. Through the window, the lit walls of the embassy, the dewy grass. As her fingers move closer to the sliding closet she discovers a painted over latch no larger than a quarter. Twisting, she pries it open,

checking Risquez as she does it, comforted by the continuous rise and fall of his belly. The latch contains a key hole, but Mint has no key.

She removes the kit from the hidden pocket sewn into the back of the dress, another creation of the FF division, and goes to work, using the two narrow metal prods, trying to recall Samson's training.

As hour two approaches, the sweat running down Mint's back, the task grows more hopeless, causing reconsideration. In an attempt to refocus she thinks of her father, recently deceased, what he would think. Propelled by Risquez's snores, which seem to mock her, pushed by Anderson's betrayal, the condescending prick, she decides to buckle down. She hates to even think it, but she wishes Steadman was with her now, helping her in whatever way he could. She realizes the SEN is nothing more than the two of them, that they are the only two who give a damn.

While Mint struggles, Steadman examines the case file of the barber, sensing that something is wrong with them.

He smokes a Lucky and watches Larry Anderson sleep, jealous of the peaceful countenance. If Steadman wasn't so disturbed he'd sleep right now just to wake him with his night terror. For now, that pleasure would have to wait.

He hunches forward, maximizing the lamp light. The words on the report, they're not good enough. It's not that they're wrong. They follow the protocol like any other standard issue report. But what if the standardization is the problem? It's not enough to be like the other cogs. Different information needs different presentation. Distinction ultimately creates identity.

Tapping the smoke, Steadman studies the accumulation of ash in the tray, wonders how much ash one smoke can produce, wonders if it changes by brand, by person, by climate. He wonders what this information can reveal, knows it must reveal something, that it's a piece in a picture. It's also precisely the type of question that would get him laughed at by all those agents happy to continue in their failure because for them it was never about results, but the next move, the fun of course correction, the fun of pushing buttons and seeing what would happen rather than to be true ciphers of data, interpreters of information, what they should be.

If the SEN could present the information, design it, so people were forced to engage with it, if the information itself was compelling in and of itself, then its justification would be self-evident.

Lucas Steadman circles the name Angel Mercado with a black pen, pressing down on the paper till it's indented. Something in the plight of the barber, something in his story, his meagerness, compels him as he continues circling, ignoring the fallen ash collecting on the hotel carpet.

Three hours persistence yields Mint the results she desires. The compartment unbolts and the door swings out, revealing a square small enough for her to reach inside, where she finds one manila folder.

In the dimly lit corridor outside the bedroom, she opens it. One stapled section is the last will and testament of Augusto Riskey, currently being revised. Mints shakes her head at the amounts listed, enough to keep the diplomat happy well after his service.

Behind the will, she discovers a pamphlet printed in English. It's American. The image on the cover is of a man swinging a baseball bat. The bat blurs around the hitter's head as his hips turn. It is entitled *Baseball—America's Past, Present, and Future—A Guide to the Game*.

Mint unfolds the document. The pages contain instructions meant to introduce the game historically followed by a guide to general concepts and strategy. On the back, a glossary of terms runs the length of the entire page. One term and only one is highlighted in yellow, "Relief Pitcher," a replacement position intended to secure victory or relieve the active pitcher due to deficiency. The relief pitcher maintains the status quo or is brought in to address failure of a performance that is in the throes of danger. Mint believes that the message cannot concern maintenance because in that case a message would not be required. The code exists as part of another scenario, but to what end she does not know. Steadman might, however, and Anderson, how was the message going to trigger him? She needs to get to Lucas so they can formulate a plan and prevent that son of a bitch from seeing it through. They need time. It can work.

She places the materials back as she found them, leaves Risquez a note thanking him with a number that can reach her. If he calls the concierge will inform him she has recently departed, thus closing the loop.

On the road in front of the compound she waits for her taxi, tapping her foot. She ignores the disdainful look from the guard.

It's a breezy morning, pleasantly cool. The air, though damp, does not stick. In the distance the cab appears. As it approaches, a green jeep careens down the other side

of the road, honking wildly. A young man hangs out the side, enjoying the wind. The taxi driver, doors still locked, shrugs at Mint, and drives away.

Mint turns to the guard and asks him to unlock the gate. Her request is denied.

The jeep, its back covered in tarp, swings from the opposite end of the road in a tight U till it's positioned. "Excuse me Miss, but please please get inside," the young man hanging out the side screams gleefully, imitating an English accent, repeating the phrase more insistently when Mint explains her status in the country, her relation to the embassy compound locked behind them.

Realizing her lack of options, Mint follows the boy to the back of truck, trying to formulate what is happening and more importantly, why. One other person, hooded, is in the back of the jeep. When she sits on the bench across from her, the answer takes shape. The Silent Singer puckers her lips together, shakes her head, and snaps her tongue, a disapproving sound that informs Mint that she shouldn't be here, that she, of all people, should have known better.

## CHAPTER 15

### Brotherhood

The meeting in the rarely used conference room has been going on for one hour and forty-five minutes. Behind the embossed glass colors in the shape of people move. No one has asked for my assistance. No forms have been requested. No beverages required. I wonder if Vaughn's sitting there being polite, all the while coming up with the speech he's going to use to fire me. Something something about responsibility, accountability, respectability, the need for professionalism, and above all else never schedule an interview with men who in all likelihood are affiliated with organized crime, in this case the Brighton mob. My phone rings. "What the hell," Bill says.

I swivel my chair and find him, the faraway figure on the other side. "Just another meeting."

"Must be some big fuckers," but there's something in his voice.

"What is it?"

"Why are they here?"

"They agreed to meet in person."

"What else? How much they got?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Nice. Bonus for Vaughn, bonus for you, must be nice."

"I have to run. They're on the other line."

“Tits,” he says hanging up, while I pretend to talk to them for Bill’s satisfaction, so he won’t suspect anything.

I’m going to visit Odessa again tonight. I’ve been seeing her for the past two weeks. Her condition hasn’t changed. They refuse to tell me what’s wrong with her exactly. I don’t have clearance.

Even though I’m still living at home, I haven’t really spoken to Shammi or my father beyond the usual refrains, and we all accept it. We all wait for it to crack. I need to leave that house. No reason to be there, but not yet. If he gets worse and I’m not there. The truth is, she’s going to wake up and when she sees me she’ll come clean and tell me what I need to know. She owes it to me. She would know she owes it to me and I’d believe her.

My phone rings. It’s Vaughn. He asks me to join them. He sounds excited, almost frantic, but he’s pretending to stay in control.

I record the details of the office, of my desk, for good measure. It was a solid run. I slip on the blazer from the back of my chair, button the top button, roll my neck, cracking it, and go to them. I know people watch, trying to get a peek inside.

As the door swings shut, I find myself in a room with seven Ukrainian men in sunglasses, including Alexander Dvornik. They stand by their chairs, hands folded in identical poses. Vaughn’s at the far side, the city behind him, sun hitting his back. “He’s now present,” he announces.

“Excellent,” a woman’s voice from the center of the table says. Everyone watches the intercom like the voice on the other end is here with us. “James, I’d like to personally



thank you for arranging the meeting. We are most pleased,” she says. The voice is direct, the accent not as severe as Alexander’s.

“Yes, we are,” Vaughn says, filling the silence. He looks my way. All the other men nod in agreement.

“We will see you all tonight. We are most looking forward to it,” the voice says, followed by the sound of the dial tone, which I stop when no one else bothers to move.

Alexander greets me first. With relief, he slaps my back. As the others line up and perform the same motion, he waits by my side. Some of the hands are sweaty, others dry, but they’re all firm. Vaughn mutters under his breath, “Who would have thought.”

Dvornik squeezes my shoulder. “Now we go.”

“Where?” I ask.

“We celebrate, celebrate partnership.”

“Partnership.”

“Money making money, yes?”

“Yes,” I say, walking with him to the elevator where they all wait for us.

Before the doors close I see Bill. He mouths the question, “What the fuck?” I shake my head, trying to mirror his confusion. The doors shut and the elevator chain creaks as we descend.

In the town car no one speaks. We’re crammed in tight. They packed me in with four strangers, including the driver. Vaughn and Alexander are in the sedan leading us. We’re on the Westside Highway heading toward Brighton.

All us men pressed together create a cologne stench, the fabric of our clothes rubbing against each other. I crack the window. The driver closes the window. Someone

mumbles “AC” as way of explanation, but who spoke is unclear. The AC blasts through the vents. Looking outside, I try to ignore the men without ignoring them. I think they stare, although it’s impossible to tell with their sunglasses.

The driver switches the dial, turning the radio on. Static sounds through the speakers, Someone says something in Russian. The others laugh. I politely smile like I’m in on the joke. They laugh harder. The radio scans to the nearest station, which turns out to be Hot 97. A song by The Black-Eyed Peas plays. The men bob their heads, doing their best to stretch out. The man next to me asks, “Do you like this song?”

“It’s got a good beat.”

“My name is Dimitri. This is Ivan,” he says pointing to the man to his left, the only one without any expression. “Up front is Alyosha, and the driver is Smerydakov,” who tips his hat without taking his eyes off the road.

“Hello everyone. It’s a pleasure.”

Someone in the song screams “Louder.” Smerydakov, the driver, complies and turns the volume up. Each of the men pulls out a cigarette.

“Smoke?” Dimitri asks, flipping his pack to me. I slide one out, which he promptly lights. The smoke builds. Ivan circulates a silver ash tray amongst us.

Alyosha, in the passenger seat turns to me. I can see my reflection in his glasses. “James, answer us, do you like to party?”

The rest of them face me, even Smerydakov. Dimitri drum rolls on the seat, smacking the black leather faster and faster, the cigarette clenched between his teeth.

“Yes, I like to party.” Dimitri’s drum roll crescendos and he laughs. Smerydakov returns

to the road. Ivan stares out the window like I said nothing at all. Alyosha removes his sunglasses and sucks on them before saying, “Then we will party. We will party.”

Ivan, on the other side of the car, concurs more seriously. Letting out a deep breath he says, “We must celebrate.”

We fall out of the smoking car on a side-street. Dimitri pushes me forward, leading to me to what appears to be an ordinary two story house with a dimly lit entrance.

Two women, no older than twenty, dressed in suits greet us from behind a podium and point to an ornate door to their left, carved with various inscriptions and Russian lettering, that looks like it belongs in a museum. They both push on the door till it gives. We follow one of them down a winding rickety staircase. Dust kicks in the air, which I swat away until I see that the others simply ignore it. Oil lamps line the walls on the way down, making the next step visible, but little else. The descent continues several levels, the spiral intensifying the dizzying effect.

We begin to pass doors, each labelled with a number that counts down the levels starting with a seven marked in roman numerals. VI. Each has a circular gold handle polished clean that connects to the wooden frame. V. As we go down the tranches we are silent and single-filed. IV. The steps beneath us creak from the weight. III. Ivan, leading, clears his throat. II. Stopping, he knocks on the floor II three times and speaks. The door cracks open.

A small man in a gray suit absorbs him before shifting to each of us, his eyes widening as he scours the details of our faces. He replies and resignedly lets us in. Ivan nods respectfully and enters.

When I step forward he stops me, holding up two fingers. We watch the others go in, each bowing before stepping through the frame. Then he says, “Now, you go.” I nod before entering. He looks at me, surprised.

Inside, I pass through a dark hallway with a red curtain at the end of it. Music plays. Classical, an organ arrangement with violins, and more. The old man behind me sits on a wooden stool and brushes me forward with a wave when he notices I’ve stopped. The music grows louder. Through the heavy curtain, layered in folds that brush against me, that I have to push away, there is the open space, a room that I’m on the edge of, a grand hall that has no business being in a house like this. A chandelier dangles down from the ceiling, seven floors higher. The fine crystals glow, matching a series of crystal lamps on each level. The room is shaped in a circle, with walkways on each floor, balconies from which people can watch the spectacle below on II, but no one’s there now.

The band plays from a sidestage, concentrating on their notes, observing little else, dressed in black coats. Tables, each with enough space for twelve people, scatter the hall. Patterned rugs carpet the ground. Larger version hang like banners, running down the levels, dividing the hall into four sections.

A man wraps his arm around me and shoves a shot glass filled with clear liquid into my hand.

“It is nice, yes?” Alex says, squeezing me, asking me for forgiveness or reassurance or something.

I drink. “Vodka?” I say, barely able to speak.

“The best. Only for sipping. Tonight is long night my friend.”

All the men, including Vaughn, sport a happy smirk. They all have the same glasses filled with the same clear liquid. We raise them in cheers, in consummation, and swallow. The night begins.

Waitresses with trays refill our glasses, serve us food, wrapped appetizers, some of the recognizable, others not.

Through the curtain, more people join. Women with fur coats and high slits. Men with cherub faces, bulbous little Gorbachevs congratulating each other. Vaughn saddles next to me. “I don’t want to know how you know these people, James. You know you can’t pull this shit again.” He finishes his drink and sets it down. “All that aside, it’s a fuckin’ great surprise.”

“Jeremy, I don’t think—”

“No no, it’s all good, fuck it.” He has a strange twinkle in his eye. “This should cinch it.” He seems happy. “Tell me, what’s 2% of 50 million?”

“Um...” He’s referring to his management fee, what he collects off the top no matter what, not including the percentage he receives based on performance, but there’s no way.

He slaps me on the back. “Can you feel it James? I’m rising. We’re rising, together, like freshly baked bread.”

Alyosha calls Vaughn to his table and introduces him to a tall blonde woman who gazes at him affectionately. He balances back and forth on the soles of his shoes. Soon, they’re all laughing.

A group of men gather in front of the band. They all begin to sing, chanting some old song. They hold onto to each other, a sign of camaraderie, but also to keep balance as

they sway, paying tribute. Alex is to one side of them, trying to have fun, watching me watching him.

When they're done I pull him aside. "What the fuck did you do? What's going on?"

A waiter slips a drink into both our hands somehow and scurries away. Alex raises his glass. I stop him, putting my arm on his. "Don't do that," he says. He drinks the contents in one swift gulp. "Not for me or you to ask what." He wipes the side of his mouth. "Me and you, we say yes, please, thank you. Me and you answer. Do not ask."

The vodka stings my throat. He's right. What does it matter? We're all just getting richer anyway. I light a smoke and offer him one. He shakes his head. "I insist," I tell him.

He finally accepts, morphing back into the man who first served me. "I forget, I must say yes, yes?"

We both smoke. The crowd gets drunker, hollering as a troupe of dancers put on a show in the center of the space. People crowd the walkways of the upper levels in search of more privacy. I spot Vaughn two floors above kissing the neck of that woman he was just introduced to.

The chandelier dims. From the swinging kitchen door, a massive frosted cake lined with sparklers, is rolled into the hall. Someone yells out Vaughn's name and points to him. He appears stunned, unsure. The woman whispers to him. He waves and they all erupt in applause. Even me.

The small man in the gray suit appears next to me. He yells something at Alex and points to me. "You come with us," he says.

Alex leads the way, rubbing his cheek, as if he's desperate to sober up.

"Where are we going?"

"No questions. Come now, James."

As we make our way through the curtains, the music starts to fade. Reaching the wooden staircase it's silent as if the entire party was insulated, like it doesn't exist outside that room.

The old man coughs. Dust sticks to the glass case containing the flame.

We turn left and descend toward I.

## CHAPTER 16

### Extraction

After the successful extraction of Agent L-----, codename Odessa, the recovery process begins according to protocol.

Clearly weakened from her stay, the agent sips on a cold glass of water seated at a steel table. Her posture remains stiff, but while answering questions she keeps peering up at the camera recording in the corner rather than straight ahead. She knows the procedure, but like so many others before a sense of endangerment looms in spite of the rational knowledge of the process. The room, designed to isolate, confines one's sense of connection to the outside.

The camera records her story, compiling the details that led to exposure. She speaks slowly, deliberately, trying to disguise the agitation, hiding the New England accent so desperately honed, that seeks to unmask her.

It should be noted that until this point in the agent's career, her results have ranged from acceptable to impeccable. Acting under the direct orders of the P.D, L-----, has created a profile of the subject with historical depth as well as exemplary views from those he interacted with. Her career arc, the rise in the ranks, mirrors that of her mentor ----. Still, despite her success, the recent failure carries with it the threat of dismissal.

Tapping her nails on the table, she repeats, "The inability to survey within the house created a major hole in intelligence. Something significant occurred, something that alerted the subject to my presence, something that made him aware."



The automated voice, projected through the speakers integrated into the ceiling, asks, “Do you have evidence?”

She examines her nails and wonders who cut them. “This is speculation. The evidence is in that house in Brooklyn.”

The temperature is lowered. L-----, still robed in her hospital gown, shows no awareness, doesn't even rub the goosebumps prickling through her skin. While the agent's testimony is credible, the process requires thoroughness, an aspect detailed in one of the Agent's initial research papers. *Physical interaction should be avoided. The longer the subject lacks awareness the easier the subject is to mark. However, should this line be compromised, interrogation begs for exhaustion, not only to yield more information from the interviewee, but also to quell any notion of defiance or retribution, thus causing loyalty for lack of a better alternative.*

The computer voice explains that this is not retribution, even as L-----'s teeth chatter as she repeats her story of how she was discovered, explaining that this is a simple matter of process. The agents responds, “I understand.” Then, looking directly into the camera, “But perhaps there's a flaw in the design when you turn it against the very same people who do in fact understand.” The green light on the camera blinks as the data from the footage is stored.

“There is no flaw. These are procedures to increase probability, even in cases as,” the voice says, pausing, “as regrettable as yours. Don't you agree?”

The agent nods her head and gives in. She rubs her arms. The friction creates warmth. As time passes, the act becomes one for psychological benefit rather than actual benefit, due to the decrease in temperature. As the atmosphere drops to below freezing,

the agent sinks to the cold floor, huddling her body closer as she again responds to the same list of questions. Before a new round of questioning, the agent asks, “Why, why wasn’t I extracted sooner?” The tone signals despair and a growing resentment.

“The subject visited you methodically. It made his pattern predictable. That was your intention, wasn’t it, when you sent the subject to Coney Island?”

“No.”

“What was your intention?”

“To see what he would do. To put him someplace new and different to see what would happen, to give him some life. You’re right in way, it was an experiment.”

“What was your intention?”

“I was bored. It was a mistake. I wanted to use the cover from training, the one they teach us all, and actually do something in the field, as something of a tribute. Sure, I modified the story, but you know this. I was sending the reports, received the necessary approval before contact with the subject, and no one tried to stop me.”

“What was your intention?”

“I know I fucked up.” She draws circles with her fingers on the floor. “Why wasn’t I just left there to rot?”

“At a certain point it becomes important to listen to one’s agent,” the woman behind the glass says.

The agent’s expression changes to one of surprise as she faces the camera and the thought that She is here.

“Just a few more hours. Then you’ll be out. Just repeat the story.”

The agent rises to her feet. “Where are you going?” she asks. She receives no response. The agent knows that she’s alone with the camera and a recording that prods her from a set list. Life monitors attached to her will prevent any real damage. She simply has to endure and soon she’ll be on the other side of the walls, and then they’ll let her resume her work.

Shammi Malakar waters a row of flowers on the windowsill from outside the brownstone. The flowers line each side of the entrance and require her to stretch to reach all of them. When she bends to the bucket on the steps to refill her cup she grimaces. The expression indicates the stress her weight has imposed on her joints over time. This picture of her contrasts from her origins, and is the furthest thing away from what she once was. Yet, in all these years she’s remained loyal, protecting her interests, but perhaps that aspect of her has decayed as well. Still, without her, it would have been impossible to be certain.

Shammi came of age in Naxalbari, India, region in West Bengal. There is no birth certificate that can verify her actual age. The daughter of tea estate workers, Shammi worked the fields, picking tea leaves with her parents and two older brothers. They sheared the leaves, crouched down under the sun, their skin crisped, and placed them in burlap bag strapped to their heads, slung to their backs, the weight of it growing heavier as the day progressed. Most nights, they went to sleep exhausted and hungry. They worked merely for the right to live on the estate, their wage deducted for the right to occupy a small shack so they were left with little to survive, let alone accumulate. Post-

Independence, political movements emerged in India that caused schisms in the social structures that governed locations like Naxalbari.

In view of the fire, her father read the paper that he later showed her. On the cover were the two white and the Chinese man. She soon learned the names as her father explained to them: Marx, Lenin, Mao.

Although the communist party existed in several forms, most notably the CPI(Communist Party of India) and CPM(Communist Party Marxist) neither served the needs of the Naxalabari villagers, having aligned too much with the parliament.

Her family listed to their father explain it over dinner. They ate roti and watered down lentils while he spoke. He spoke, a true believer, but more than that; the infectiousness of his resolve to change things, the way her brothers listened silently as their food grew cold, her mother flattening the bread with her palms, while he explained Mao, how the war could be won by the villagers, the backbone of the country, who could, over time, isolate the cities, and then, they wouldn't have to be slaves to the landowners. Before sleeping, Shammi waited for him to kneel beside her on the floor. "Rani, beta, time to bed," he said, wishing her goodnight by kissing her forehead. She slept, excited and comforted, certain that he would change things for the better. He was so certain, so she was too.

Over twenty-thousand of these Neo-Maoists assembled, almost all of them poor, for the movement known as Spring Thunder in 1967. Organized, they meted out justice like revolutionaries, executing landlords, taking possession of the land, gathering weapons, forming a new political administration to run the villages and communicate with central leadership. It was just like her father said it would be. They won. In the

process they inspired others across the country to fight, to protest the capitalist leanings of their Western-aligned governments. Her father took a lead administrative role in their village, frequently speaking with the leadership. But every night, he came back to his princess still tired, but proud instead of beaten. He told her everything, maybe because she was the only one who really listened and seemed to understand. He never held back, and she barely kept up. When he kissed her on the forehead, she tried her hardest not to laugh as the bristles of his mustache tickled her.

The Agency only took notice in 1968 when McNamara(former Secretary of Defense, then acting World Bank head) was met with protests when he landed in Calcutta(Kolkata). He got on the phone and reported the incidents and insisted something be done. People gathered, burned trolleys, held signs. Crowds gathered to hang the war criminal due to his involvement with the Vietnam intervention. In the streets they chanted, “Go Back McNamara, McNamara Hangman, go to hell!”

Her two brothers teased Shammi about not knowing who McNamara was, but they desisted and clapped with the others when she screamed the slogan.

After three years, rumors circulated concerning government attacks, torture units, assassinations. In the cities they rounded up communists, imprisoning them. Later, they marched and shot groups of them, mainly young men in the streets. Surely, they expanded their net till they pushed into the villages.

In a small forest, outside the tea estate, Shammi and her brothers walked in silence, searching for him. The evening brought rain, but there was enough light. Even in the distance, when she saw the tree, she knew it was him, hanging by the neck, a

suspicion confirmed when her brothers pulled down their father's body while she kept watch. It couldn't be him. He was so pale.

The family fled the village that night, despite the protests from her brothers to stay and fight. They could not refuse their mother who stood there, staring at them, shaking, speaking in a firm whisper that demanded obedience. In accordance with Hindu tradition they burned her father's body, though Shammi admits even then that she was an atheist and she believes her father was too, in the same fields that worked them so hard that they were forced to try and forge a better life. The tea leaves burned.

Now, nearly forty years later she waters plants for Lucas Steadman, who laid down, in principle, the groundwork for the ---. For some reason, she goes to temple once a week despite her views. Her habit of picking at the carpet reveals a mind ill at ease with religion, bored even, but that doesn't affect her attendance. Her confusion suggests a crisis of conscious, a need to seek justification from a higher power, a signal that she may be prepared to jeopardize the arrangement.

She is so distracted that she does not notice the agent at the bottom of the steps, steps she slowly climbs down staring at her bare feet so as not to fall. Finally, she sees. "You, you're not supposed to be here." To which the agent responds, "There has been a development. The breach in terms changes the arrangement. I'm going inside. She will be in touch shortly." Shammi can only watch the agent enter, alone. Even she knows there's nothing to be done.

## CHAPTER 17

### *Flight*

Angel Mercado often dwells on his own inadequacy. The fact that he lives alone, unmarried, still pining over a woman (Adriana Cortes) he barely knew is not lost upon him, especially during business hours when he's forced to listen to the heads of hair complain over their wives, their mistresses, their sons and daughters. If only he had such problems, but he never tells them that.

He continued with the clippers, pretending to empathize, making sure his customers knew they were in the right, even agreeing when they told him he was lucky to be alone, although no one fully pressed on with this line of thought when they noticed Angel's muted acceptance of their statement, a statement no one truly clung to when pressed, which ultimately created a customer loyalty at the shop that far exceeded the client retention resulting from good haircuts, the underlying sentiment being that Angel was a good man, honorable. The loyalty Angel inspired increased his shop's popularity so that Mercado's became associated with quality, not that the haircuts were bad, simply uninspired, which is all to say this is why he was considered good enough by Castro.

At the end of the workday, while the barber sweeps hair, the curls and colors sliding on the floor, combining in one furry mass, the bell connected to the door announces the entrance of a customer. Angel signals for the person to wait, his back turned while he completes his task and contemplates doing one more cut before closing. Before he finishes, though, he smells jasmine. The sweet perfume causes him to see a

face, familiar and yet, not quite the image he projected as his fantasy for so many nights. “Adriana,” he says, stepping forward, ignoring the sound of the broom hitting the ground behind him.

She stands taller. Her lips quiver as she speaks his name. The mole above the left side of her mouth appears to twitch. And who’s to know why, whether it’s the confidence from the shop, being Castro’s man, or perhaps the renewed sense of opportunity, the ability to seize a moment he’s only dreamed, that Angel takes Adriana’s tremors as a mirror to his own unrequited passion, so much so that he inches closer, touches her waist with tired fingers, rising with his toes, and kisses her. It feels, to him, that she kisses back.

For Angel, it doesn’t matter how this could be, why she entered the shop. He’s uninterested in questions, afraid of them, better to respond than to ask. This attitude is what marks him as a candidate. It’s the primary reason Adriana, this woman who belongs to memory, is before him now. Angel yearns so much to accept good fortune that he fears not only to ask, but even to wonder at this astounding turn of events and why it’s happening.

He kisses her again, pressing the carved rosary covering her heart, thanking God in the same moment. The franticness of his movements reveals his propensity to be stirred, but also proves the significance of their connection, at least, in his mind. Her tears fall onto the thin patch of hair covering his scalp. This is further proof. He pronounces that he loves her, that he always has.



Adriana, finding it difficult to speak, kisses the barber's forehead and brings him tight to her bosom. Tears continue to be shed. For her part, they very well may be a signal of love, but not one of happiness, certainly not happiness.

Caroline Mint studies her reflection with one eye swollen shut. The left side, puffed and blackened, throbs, from the slaps and the fists. They left the right side intact, saving it as relic to remember her initial appearance. After the initial interrogation, crude and basic in its execution, they wheeled a mirror into the tent(location unknown) to show her the damage and left her alone to ponder the results. She tries not to touch the bruise, tries not to think of the words puss-blood, broken-capillaries, purple-pressure, shooting-pain-cracked-skin.

The sound of laughter enters from between a small slit in the tent. The men are outside, at least two of them, waiting to continue their questions. Her father said that "pain is a simple matter of weakness leaving the body," but he never had to confront the prospect of his own deterioration as the result of torture. Mint knows these kids would simply destroy her without a second thought. She is some sort of enemy. They don't need to know more and in some ways they don't want to know more. Protocol suggests silence and lies followed by more silence. She has the silent part down. Mint struggles with which lie to tell, which one will set her free without jeopardizing her to people with a license to kill. They ignored her pleas, the reporter cover, they won't stop till they hear something else.

The dimensions of the tent do not exceed more than twenty square feet. Beneath her the dirt ground, scattered with weeds, is marked with patches of blood, dust,

fingernails. She needs to buy time. She needs a secret of value. They'll just kill her. Reporters don't mean anything. They would know how to crack a reporter and if she didn't crack it would mean she was lying and they were right. Either way, it ends the same.

The boy with the long hair enters the tent, tiptoeing, acting like he's trying not to disturb her. Mint sits down on the cot, slightly elevated off the ground, her arms crossed, avoiding the mirror. The other boy, the driver, enters behind, a rifle strapped to his back. Without looking at each other they shout, "Patria o Muerte Venceremos!" The long-haired boy clamps Mint's cheeks, twisting her neck so she stares up at him. "Do you know what this means?"

"Extranjero," the other officer mutters, before spitting.

The boy releases Mint and studies her. "Gringa?" he asks, sniffing behind her ear.

She chooses not to respond. Pain wrings like her skull's been split in two, but she's not going to give them the satisfaction.

The boy reaches down Mint's dress, sliding his hands down, forcefully caressing, squeezing her. He moves to the zipper behind her neck. Mint cannot see his face, only his hair, the immaculate black curls, boyish and conditioned by the weather, and the soldier behind who pretends not to see.

The Major would die before he would betray his country and so would she, so would she, as the fingertips touch her skin, imprinting these moments into her. "I'm a reporter," she says.

Digging in, he scratches into her back till her skin collects under his nails and holds her knees to prevent her from kicking. In a calm voice the long-haired boy says,

“No you are not that. You are something more, more intricate.” He kisses her on the cheek, presses the pulp of the other side. “I like you, I do. But why die here? You don’t have to die, not like us. I will die here, maybe soon, maybe someday a long time from now, but you, why should you die, for what oppressor will you die for?”

“Stop,” Mint begs, “please.”

The boy considers her request before shaking his head and saying quite clearly, “No. Give me more.” He holds the straps of the dress and rolls his wrist methodically so the straps grow tighter. “More,” he says. The boy rips the dress, tearing the fabric across, exposing the agent further. As the dress falls, Mint reels back, breaking her legs free enough to kick. She strikes out, throwing the soldier back, the force of the impact causing the boy to scream out, as he falls, still clinging to the dress. When she rises, she sees the other soldier with his rifle trained on her, ready to shoot her scratched and bloodied body, his finger on the trigger. Mint knows she’s going to die. That it’s her fault. That she’s the one responsible. That she never accomplished anything. Never saved anyone. Never loved anyone, except a perverted old man and her parents. Her father, so proud, but her mother, poor Pia, why didn’t she just pretend to like her pies, why couldn’t she at least act the role.

And these two boys who she knows nothing, nothing of who they are or why they got here, they’re so ready to kill. She wonders if they even know why. *Fatherland or Death*, that’s what they shouted, that’s what they’ve been shouting, that’s the slogan that set these boys free and turned them into what, torturers, executioners, is that it? *Fatherland or Death, We shall overcome*. Though they may not exactly know it, Mint knows she’s the very thing they desire to destroy, the enemy within their grasp. Perhaps,

this goes beyond a random act of violence, perhaps this is justice, but staring down the barrel of a rifle ready to scatter her with bullets, Mint reassures herself that this is not what it's supposed to be.

The Silent Singer, at the entrance of the tent, shrieks. Although the voice is shrill, Mint is glad to hear the terror in her own mind projected by another.

The sound of the first bullet is thud-like, hollow. It pierces the tent, leaving a hole behind, highlighting the dust-bits in the air. Ready for the next shot to hit her, Mint is certain of one thing, she's not ready.

When she closes her eyes another voice shouts out. It's like the whole world mourns with her.

First, her legs are swept from underneath her. A great weight straddles her chest. Opening her eyes, the long-haired boy, his nose likely broken, holds her down and grins. Mint, dizzy, perceives a halo hovering over his head, even as his blood trickles onto her stomach.

He holds something in his grasp. The kit. "I knew you were something more," he says, wiping his face with his sleeves, letting the contents of the kit, the lock-pick, the make-up, the pill, all fall onto her before sliding off till there's one object left.

He slides it out, taking pleasure in the gleam. She wants this to end. A part of her hopes he will, but she remains silent. The knife's edge rests against her throat, begins to serrate skin, as the boy makes another request, "Now, please, the truth, please."

Steadman watches the barber from across the street, a telescope pointed from the second floor down into the shop. He rented the apartment from a family of four who were

all too happy to accept the offer from the foreign businessman. Steadman hates to pay off anyone, thinks it's become too much a part of Agency protocol, but sometimes that's what the job requires. They didn't have the technology to survey without the vantage point, and they needed a vantage point.

The barber goes through his task, sweeping hair in his methodical fashion, swinging his hips as he hums a song, anything to get the work done.

Behind the SEN head, Larry Anderson observes from a distance, sometimes moving closer to Steadman's shoulder, but mainly staying back, shifting his weight between feet. Steadman wonders at the man's agitation, doesn't think highly of it, but tries his best to ignore, to hopefully set an example for the man to model. He smokes, reminding himself that his is just business as usual even though he knows the waters are untested, even though Mint never returned and hasn't made contact for over two days, even though he has an unsettledness in his gut. He reminds himself he doesn't buy into things like guts or intuitions or emotions in the field, that they're best left to amateurs, to men like Larry Anderson pacing behind, men who can't wait, who can't see work through, but if there's one virtue he knows he possesses it's patience.

Anderson claps. Turning, Steadman says, "What was that?"

"Damn fly."

Lucas doesn't see any fly.

"You ready to call it?" Anderson asks.

"No, I leave when he leaves."

"Isn't this *her* job?"

The fly passes the telescope lens and for a moment becomes larger than the magnified world.

Lucas swallows, tastes tobacco and ash. “It’s all our jobs. It’s one mission. We have one purpose.”

“I’m not one of yours. No need to talk to me like that.”

He turns away from the scope and addresses Anderson. “You seem to be under the impression that you mean something in all this, but rest assured, you do not.”

Steadman tries to suppress his smile, but only succeeds in appearing monstrous. “You’re a pair of eyes and not even a good one at that. I mean, look at you.”

Anderson removes his handkerchief and wipes the sweat from his brow. “At least I’m here—”

“Whatever Ms. Mint’s reasons are I’m sure—”

“A woman you dumb fuck. That’s who you pick for the job. She wasn’t going to cut it from the start. How could you do it to her? When the Proto-Director hears—”

As he approaches, Steadman throws his smoke on the ground and pokes at Anderson, his mouth biting forward like a bird. “He doesn’t care. You’re out here to get toughened up. He needed a breather from your presence and I can see why.”

Steadman stops poking when he notices Anderson’s lack of response, who in his estimation, should be taking a swing at him. Instead of lashing out, Anderson steps to the window. “You think that’s all I am. Bless your heart. Take a gander. Your boy has company.”

Peering into the scope, a woman next to the barber's side. She seems familiar. Upon closer scrutiny, he identifies her the woman he wanted Mint to expand her case study of, Adriana Cortes. Angel embraces her. He is happy.

"What a coincidence," Anderson says, grinning, wrapping his arm around Steadman, compressing his shoulder too tightly, but the man being squeezed is too preoccupied to care.

"What is this," he says, a whisper.

"This is what's known as being pro-active. This is what it looks like when the game changes."

Steadman feels the fly land on his neck and swats at it. His side stings as he pulls his hand back to the smeared mixture of blood and blackness. The fly wasn't really a fly at all.

## CHAPTER 18

### DOM

The door is not numbered. The old man, Alexander, and I wait outside. No one knocks or says a word. A peephole sticks out of the frame. The music from the party upstairs has faded out. Our faces are shadowed. A light flashes for a moment, blinding us. Then a voice speaks through an intercom. "Send him inside. You two stay."

The old man shoves me through. I look back at Alex, but he doesn't meet my eyes, even as the door closes.

No one is inside. The room is long, but not very wide. A metallic desk with a worn leather chair behind it centers the space. A couple of oil paintings line the walls to the right and left. They're pictures of dreary meadows, featuring animals grazing. At the end there's another door with another peephole with presumably someone behind it. It smells musty, the smell of old water seeped into the air, unable to escape.

"Hello," but no one hellos back. So again, I wait, walking the length of checkered linoleum flooring, examining the art more carefully. One of the paintings has a group of pigs steeped in mud, a windmill spinning in the distance. In the corner of the canvass there's a small boy, some farmer's child, rolling in the mud with a pig. It'd be cute if the day wasn't so dark and glum. The boy appears depraved, destitute, sickly even, which isn't a fair portrayal. Boys will be boys.

While I judge the work on the walls, the door at the far end slides open. First, I hear the voice. "Hello," she says, stepping forward to greet me, "my name is Irina. Good



to meet you.” I was not expecting someone so old, so frail. Her movements are slow. A crease in her blue blouse, tucked into a pair of loose pants, forms as she walks with her hands behind her back. A scarf covers her head, accentuates the length of her nose so it seems to point at its tip. “Please have a seat,” she says, pointing to the two wooden chairs situated in front of the desk. I sit down. She sits down, resting her elbows on the surface. “Would you like a drink?” she asks without waiting for my reply. From a drawer she pulls out a bottle and places it between us, followed by two glasses, which clink together as she holds them with her fingers. She pours the brown syrupy liquid. “To partnership,” she says, lifting the glass till I toast her.

I sip the sweet and bitter drink.

“Benedictine,” she says, anticipating the question. “They say the recipe comes from French monks in the 16th century.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Most lies are.”

I nod, pretending to know what she’s talking about.

She flips the bottle. “See the initials.” *DOM*. “Deo Optimo Maximo. To God, most good, most great.” She laughs. “French monks, what a story. Invoking the Holy Father to sell liquor. What do you think of that?”

“Sounds sacrilegious.”

“Hmm, sacrilegious,” she says, contemplating, drinking more, her lips wet. “I think you are right, but I also think that this is why it is so tasty.”

I lift my glass.

“James Steadman, I must say I’m surprised.” She squints, peering at both sides of the room like we’re not alone, and moves closer to me, sliding her chair forward. Her breath is sweet and yet, it stings. “Most men would be much more upset, much more anxious, but you seem almost calm, why is this?”

“I guess lately a lot has happened to put things in perspective. Earlier today I thought I was going to get fired, but now I know I’m not. I can handle the rest—”

“As long as you have the job.”

“I don’t mind being in the dark.”

“Has anything else given you perspective?”

I finish my drink and set the glass down, unsure of what to say. “My father, he, he’s sick.”

She blinks slowly, sympathy blinks. “Yes, this happens in life unfortunately. Everything else must seem more quiet, yes?”

She’s wrong, but I don’t care to explain how. “Yes.” She refills my glass. “So why did you pick me, pick us?”

Her mouth straightens. “It’s simple. You were an opportunity. More than that a sign that it was time to get in, a way to get in. Everyone invests, even us, but it’s time for us to expand how we invest.”

“What do you invest in?”

“Odessa,” she says, leaning back, her chair squeaking. “These streets. These people. Like your friend, Mr. Alexander who thinks he’s so clever for bringing you to me. I’ll let him think that. It’s important to him. People need their victories. He did give me a name and Maxim, your boss, fit our criteria. Is your meeting with him and his

sharing of that information luck or providence? I don't care. It's inconsequential. Always let people believe what they need to believe. Now, our bonds are strengthened. Alex possesses responsibility. He will be a better man as a result. I manage people and they pay me for my services."

She pours another drink. "This Alexander, I arranged to extract the oaf out of Ukraine to bring him here. I give him a job. He works for me, the bar, and repays me when it's time. When he's in trouble, I help and that man does have a way of finding trouble. It's his nature, like a boy."

"Then, since he owes me, the neighborhood, one day he brings me your name. For so long the neighborhood has been able to sustain itself. We help each other, bring more people from home to this country, becoming bigger, stronger, but it's not so simple anymore." She pours from the bottle and speaks with more authority. "Now so many restrictions. Ever since the Arabs blew up the World Trade. Homeland Security. Immigration. It's so hard now, not like before. Before, it was ten thousand dollars and a personal escort through the airport by the immigration chief at JFK."

The problem of diminishing returns.

"So now we, I must find new ways to earn. I'm tired of relying on these people," she says, glancing at the ceiling. "These people, all the drinking, the parties, forget work. My sons, you met them at the office, always wearing those stupid sunglasses, what will they do when I'm gone how will they last? No, it's a new era. We need people like your boss."

"But not like me?"

She shakes her head. “No, we don’t need you anymore James, but it’s nice having people like you, people we can call, people who listen.”

Irina stands and comes around the table till she’s over me. “I met you out of curiosity and also to offer you a token of our appreciation. This is tradition. It must be done. Everything must be paid for so there are no mistakes later.”

“What?”

“Relax, could be anything. Money, watches, a girl,” she says blankly like they’re all the same. “Consider it a token for your troubles, a way for us to level the relationship. So tell, what is it? Don’t be shy.” She tickles me under the throat or tries to anyway.

I wonder if she could. I mean, why not. “I need information.”

“What information?”

“Did Alex ever tell you how we met?”

“For a girl.”

“That’s right. Thing is I want to know more about her, who she really is, where she’s from, her history.”

“Is that it?”

“I think she’s lying about who she is.”

Irina nods. “This can be done. Where is she?”

“In the Coney Island Hospital, in a coma.”

Irina squints. “More complicated.”

“But it can done.”

“Yes, it can, we just need to do a little more investigation. Her name?”

“Odessa,” I say, “Odessa Belikhov, or at least that’s the name she’s under.”

Something changes in Irina's expression, but only for a moment.

"Is there something wrong?"

"No, no," she says, "it is a good name, a strong name."

I follow Alexander following the old man up the spiral staircase. While Alex and I continue, the man sits on his stool, resuming his position as gatekeeper to the party. Outside, in the quiet night, I suck in the fresh air. It's just an ordinary street, but inside that building is another world. Maybe all the buildings, all the doors to all the rooms, are like that here. Underground banquet halls filled with the songs and vodka and laughter and sex and smoke and old women sipping their Benedictine cups.

"I am sorry," Alex says.

"No, it's fine. We all get something out of it. All's well that ends well."

He grins. "Yes, that's ends well."

I begin to walk away.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"The hospital."

"Wait wait, I'll drive you." He fumbles for the keys to the town car.

"You sure you can drive?"

The car beeps, signaling it's been unlocked. He shrugs. "At this hour, easy."

I get in the car even though I know better.

Alex drives with his window cracked. Parked vehicles line the streets. Traffic lights serve as beacons, guiding us onward. My eyes droop, but I want to see her. I want to see her sleep, to know. I want to be there when she wakes, to be the first thing she sees,

to remind her, to have her explain just what she got out of it, to have her explain just why she did it.

The black tint on the car windows gives the night a darker shade.

Alex clears his throat. "A man goes to doctor, tell him, 'Doctor, after I get married I lose my vision.' The doctor says, 'Well, what symptoms do you have?' And the man responds, 'Doctor, I do not see my money anymore.'" Alex laughs. The joke isn't that funny, but there's something in the way he says it that causes me to laugh too. It feels good. Soon we're both in hysterics.

"That's why it's best to stay single," I tell him to which he pounds the steering wheel in agreement.

We pull into the hospital entrance. "Bye, Alex. Thanks for all the shit you just put me through."

"You are most welcome," he says, his eyes half closed. "Don't worry. I wait here. I'll drive you home after, yes?"

"You don't—"

"There is only yes, James." He drives away into the parking lot.

My shoes click on the polished floors. The smell of smoke clings to my exterior, but I ignore the few people looking my way. I act like I belong because I'm not supposed to be here.

The faint sound of television sets rings out. Talk show host banter, infomercials, the reruns of old shows. Ricky announces to Lucy that he has arrived home.

I knock on the door and enter. The bed is surrounded on all sides by a curtain. The window framing the city is steamed on the edges from the heater. I slide the curtain from the rails.

The bed is empty. The empty bed. She's not here. Clean sheets, the tucked in blanket, the detergent. Where could she have been moved? Why? I search for signs, but it's all stock, the space has been recycled to resemble something fresh, like it never contained anyone, like I never spent time in here watching her, like none of it ever happened, but I was here and she was here. She's dead. I've lost her. There's no difference. There is a difference. I know there's a city outside the window, but it's too dark to discern what's there besides shapes sprouting from the ground.

Outside, I go to the nurses' station and inquire. The woman behind the desk recognizes me luckily. I ask her where she is.

"Discharged earlier today," she says, surprised I do not know.

"She woke up?"

The nurse scans her computer screen and comes away confused. "I'm sorry, I can't share that information."

"She woke up."

The nurse squares me down. "Don't take that tone with me."

"I just need the truth, ma'am."

She sighs. She's tired. "Her mother came and got her."

"Her mother? Did she leave an address?"

“Shouldn’t you know that?” she says, her voice rising, pronouncing judgment, condemning me, recognizing a threat. “There’s no way you’re getting that information.” She picks up a phone. “You’re not supposed to be here. I’m getting security.”

I walk away. Steps sound behind me, but I don’t turn to see who guarantees my exit. The hospital beds are filled with people, sick people, dying people, but at night they cease to exist, they sleep in darkened rooms.

I find the car, slamming the door shut once inside. Alex wakes up with a start, bleary-eyed. I tell him what happened, but he doesn’t seem to get it. “You better tell your boss. It might be harder for her to find any info out.”

Alex shrugs off my concerns. “Ms. Irina is a capable woman, a smart woman. Do not worry. She take care of everything. You will find your Odessa in Little Odessa,” he says, pulling away, driving to the Brooklyn brownstone I once considered home.

The car pulls away. I’m alone. It’s still dark, but the sky’s changing colors. Crossing the street, I light a smoke, making my way to the house.

Then I see her. Shammi’s at the top of the steps peering down at me. I toss the cigarette, but it’s too late. I know she saw. She sits back down and sobs. I go to her. “Shamm, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.” I sit by her side till our sides touch. She cries harder.

She mutters my name, attempts to say something else, but the words don’t come out so she reverts to repeating my name like it’s the only word she knows, her primary source of pain.



I never meant. “I’m sorry Shammi. I promise I’ll stop. I was just being stupid.” I hold out the pack. “Now watch,” I say, squeezing the cardboard till the white sticks poke out and break at the seams, forcing the tobacco to spill. Winding back, I throw the smokes as far as I can, not caring where they land.

She leans against me as I help her to her feet. Before twisting the handle of the door she whispers, “I love you like you are my son.”

I kiss her warm forehead. “I love you too, Shamm. You know that. You’re my Mom.”

She wipes her face with her chunni, which dangles down her chest like a scarf. Inside, she climbs the steps. “Goodnight James. Go to your father before bed.”

“Isn’t he asleep?”

“Go to him.”

I gently push the sliding doors to the living space my father inhabits. Compressions from the lung aren’t visible, but the sound imbues the room with the thud of a heartbeat. I find the stool. Everything is where it normally is, as it should be. I can discern the shape of his round head. “Dad, you awake? Shammi said you asked for me.”

He doesn’t say anything. I repeat my question. Still, silence. I move closer, but can’t tell if he’s conscious. I scan the mirror, but it’s too dark.

I press the button on the side of my phone that lights the screen. Slowly, I bring it from my leg to his head. Blue eyes stare at me. I flinch back. “What are you doing?” The screen flickers off. I wait for him to respond, but he does not speak.

Again, I ask him why he’s silent and am met with silence. With my cell phone I scan his head, searching for cracks. “What’s wrong?” He blinks once and again. The lung

compresses. He squirms, blinking in tandem with every compression of air forced into him.

“Will you say something? You’re freaking me out.” His eyes go wider. The side of his cheek moves, shifting back and forth. I hear the grinding, his teeth meeting, the top and bottom crushing against each other. “Stop that.” I use the light from the phone after allowing for a few moments of darkness. Maybe this is it. This is it, he’s lost it. “Can you speak? Should I call the doctor?”

He shakes his head. I press my palm down, but his temperature seems normal. “It’s okay,” I say, holding his cheek, trying to comfort him. He rocks his head violently, trying to throw me off. “What are you doing?” but he continues shaking. He attempts to bite my fingers, snapping down. Luckily, I retract them in time. “Jesus.” I get up and let the room go dark.

I feel my way to the windows. The blinds are drawn. They shouldn’t be drawn. I pull them up. The early morning filters through. As the day continues it’ll get brighter and brighter.

When I turn back, I see his eyes in the mirror. “What are you looking at? What’s there to see?” He offers no response. He simply continues to watch, a sentinel.

## CHAPTER 19

### Induction

The barber spares no expense. The host ushers them through the lobby into the dining hall of Hotel Palacio. As they pass the bar, the bartender, wiping a glass clean, acknowledges Angel with a tilt of the head, a token of respect. The men on their chairs glance at the newcomers. Angel holds his head high, Adriana walking close behind.

The waiter slides the chair out and waits for her to begin sitting before pushing it forward. He repeats the process with Angel, but slides the chair too forcefully, hitting the back of the barber's legs so he falls into the seated position. His feet barely reach the rich carpet.

A single white candle burns between them. Wax drips off the side. The stage is empty, the black curtains drawn. The tables surrounding them are vacant, the intimacy secure. Angel rubs his wet palms on the smooth tablecloth and swallows.

They enjoy the meal, a blackened whole fish, its skin crisped. Angel ignores the hardened eye socket and bites into the salted exterior, which soon melds with the buttery flakes, the flesh dissolving as he chews.

The waiter refills Adriana's water, ignoring Angel's half-full glass. The barber turns, but decides against saying something to the waiter's back. He notices the bartender watching them, smiling. Angel nods. The man nods back, his expression unchanged.

After the plates are cleared, Angel stares at Adriana, reaching his hands across the table until they cover hers. He clears his throat. His mouth opens and then it closes. He lets out a small squeal and begins to blush. Angel Mercado cannot find the words.

She removes her hands from under his. They reverse positions so her longer slender hands cover his shorter chubbier ones. To Angel's surprise her palms are sweaty, just like his. He appears relieved.

She asks him if he's ever desired to go to America. The barber expresses a mixture of affirmation and negation. Unsure of the purpose of the question, he attempts to remain noncommittal, a skill developed after years listening to mounds of hair.

Lowering her head, she leans close. Angel does the same till the only thing separating them is a flame. Adriana squeezes when she asks him if he loves her, if he'll do anything, if he's prepared to marry her, her voice cracking, if he would live with her in America.

After all these years, Angel has his chance. He answers yes to questions, yes, yes, yes. He declares that he will give her anything, that it doesn't matter where he goes, he can cut hair anywhere. Then, the thought occurs, displayed in a confused crease on his forehead, how?

When she reveals the plans she speaks in halted breaths in halted breaths, confirming what must be done. She informs him of her contact, the assurances she's received that after the operation's successful completion they, the two of them, have been guaranteed safe passage and not only that, but a future together, a house, a life.

Angel slips back into his chair, the color draining, his mouth drying.

She promises that no one will ever know it was him, that it will be hours before any symptoms appear and by then, they'll both be gone, the island behind them, the future ahead. This, she swears, is the truth. "Te amo."

"Una vez más."

"Te amo. Te amo."

Angel closes his mouth and sniffs. "Amor. Mi Amor. Mi Amor."

From her purse, she removes the 4 ounce glass bottle and sets it down in the center of the table. It's such a small thing, such an innocent object that the barber uses with every cut, massaging a healthy helping of the olive-colored tonic on all those scalps.

Angel hides the container in his jacket pocket.

On their way out, the bartender wishes him a good night. Angel mimics the expression back.

Steadman wears sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt. He dips his toes into the sand as the tide breaks. The hotel waitstaff pops open another Coca-Cola bottle. "No glass," Steadman says, taking the drink, lifting it to his mouth, the fizz sparks dampening his upper lip. The waiter lets him be.

The grains of sand are finer here, smoother. With his index finger he traces a cross with a circle on each end and a larger one in the center. The image appears Biblical, but it allows him to visualize the parties in play, the agency at the center, the actors in Cuba on the periphery. Anderson wasn't sent to monitor, but to control. Mint is missing. In the late afternoon the beach grows desolate. He looks in both directions, but doesn't see her, knows he won't see her.

The bottle perspires, the coldness diminishes, the sugar sticks to his teeth.

The last circle on the cross, the smallest one, represents the self. He has been rendered insignificant. Ripples in the ocean extend beyond the horizon, they are gentle, infinite.

The SEN was meant to be different and for them to use it in this way, right in front of him. Assassination brings destruction, chaos, the mushroom cloud reigns ash, the night terror. He knows it's his fault, he gave them the keys.

Steadman kicks sand into the air. Grains carry in the breeze and strike him. Teeth clenched, he screams. Walking to the water he wades in to his knees. He squints down at the red label, the cursive lettering, the remaining brown liquid foaming, and chucks the bottle into the ocean. It plops into the sea, submerging before bouncing up and floating on its side. The waves come in. The bottle will return to shore be disposed. When the cola returns someone will be there to pick it up. "No," Steadman says. "No," he repeats, unsure of how he's going to do it, still he persists, "No."

They surround her in the tent. Her blood smears the dirt. The cuts burn. They stopped. Three figures huddle, casting shadows. They wait, they wait, they wait for what? Scattered footprints mark the ground, remnants of the struggle. Mint does not remember the last time she ate. She does not know why she thinks of food. She is not hungry.

The flap is brushed aside. While the figure approaches, the shadows dissipate. A soft touch caresses the cheek that is not swelled over. The contact indicates empathy, affection, a change in tactics. The figure drapes a robe over her exposed body, kisses her forehead, says, "So unnecessary," the accent indicative of Russian, educated.

Lifting her head, Mint finds the KGB agent, the long blond hair, deep blue eyes, the tall ballerina figure of a killer dressed business casual with a suit jacket. She presses her mouth to the top of Mint's head and inhales. "An American spy, such a pity. Why do you trouble these people? For how long will your country always try to intervene, the people have spoken. They do not want you here." She casts a glance at the two soldiers. "They are a free people who determine their own fate."

The Russian mocks them. Mint gazes at the boys, fools. The burns subside, replaced with the pressure of swelling, her skin unable to contain the result of the blows. Numbness sets in. "Your silence confirms your guilt. You know this."

"I will ask once and only once," the Russian says, sifting through Mint's hair. She nods at the soldier with the strap. He aims the gun, square. Mint stares down the rifle's barrel, the circular hole that demands answers. "Tell us what you know and I promise you will return to your country alive. If you say nothing, if you lie, I cannot protect you." The long-haired boy gazes on, sweat dripping. He rubs his fingertips together. He is unprepared. "You will die here. No one will ever know. Your body, your name, whatever it is, will be forgotten. You will be mourned in whispers while your Intelligence service erases your memory from their outstanding record of success. You know this."

"Why should I believe you?"

The agent holds Mint's face with her cold palms. "Consider it a professional courtesy. Regardless of what you believe, we are not in the business of killing. You follow orders as do I. It is mistake to credit this idea of allegiance. There is none of it, there is only the next move. So much better to live. Make up for mistakes later." The agent releases Mint from her grasp. "Now, what is your name."

She clears her dry throat, it scratches. “Mint, Caroline Mint,” she says, refusing to turn away from her enemy.

“Excellent, excellent. I am Belikhov, Odessa Belikhov.”

A metallic taste slides over Mint’s tongue, flows through her veins. “Now you know my name at least.”

“At least?”

Mint pictures her father, imagines the Major inside the tent with them, behind her. To die in the service of one’s country is a great honor. You don’t do the work to get medals or accolades. You do not do it for appreciation. You do it for reasons higher. You do it out of the belief of creating a better world. Mint refuses, she cannot go back on the principle. She resolves to accept her fate, to assume responsibility. That’s what it means to be an agent, even if she was the only one who understood it.

The Russian, biting her lower lip, waves the shooter off. Confused he lowers the gun. The Silent Singer steps back and turns to leave. “No, you stop.” The Singer walks back to where she was. “You are as much a part of this thing.”

Odessa reaches into her inside jacket pocket and removes a glass container along with a doctor’s needle.

“What is that?”

“It speaks.” She taps the bottle. The clear liquid shakes. “Scientists, our scientists are the best in the world.”

Mint suppresses her amusement. Sodium Pentothal might work on some, but it was far too primitive for someone like her, someone trained not only to administer it effectively, but also to resist its effects. She’d speak, yes, but it’d all be babble, a stream



of shit they wouldn't be able to decipher into anything meaningful. Maybe it'd be enough, whatever she said, maybe they'd accept it as meaningful.

Odessa raises an eyebrow. "You," she says, pointing to the boy, "hold her down, and hold her arm left arm up so I can see." The boy grips her as the Russian steps forward, pricking the needle in, drawing liquid. "I know what you think. I assure you it is not that. This," she says, "is special, very rare, but we are rare creatures. This might be uncomfortable." She searches for the right vein. "I apologize ahead of time. This liquid has pain inside of it." The point of the needle penetrates Mint's skin. Odessa pushes the lever. The drugs begins its course. "And now that pain is inside. Forever it will be inside you."

The players in front of her appear to blur, her limbs relax, the barbiturate effects, but there's more, there's a snake crawling the length of her spine starting at the tailbone, coiling itself, extending over every sliver of her body, yet she still sees. Three figures move closer, their eyes wide, inspecting her. She clenches the edges of her chair. "What is it? What did you give me?"

"Ms. Mint, we gave the world vodka. Surely, you did not expect that we would stop there when it came to truth serum."

Caroline breathes, in through the nose, out through the mouth, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Strom, why didn't she sleep with the old man before he passed? He was the only one who would ever. Mint should have seen this coming, her mother, Pia. She was born from a weak mother. This is what was bound to happen.

"You will say too much. It is inevitable. But you will speak truths. Soon you will stumble onto the things you seek to hide because you seek to hide them. You do have my

word, when you give me what I want, you will be free. The greater the resistance, the stronger the urge. This you know.”

Betrayal, it's natural, stares her down, pounds inside while the shadows cross and the Singer sings silently, a con surely, but Mint hears her voice in the quietude. She needs to sleep with Steadman. It follows. He is the one on her side, the one to depend on. The SEN, the SEN, she sees now what it could be. Running behind the Major's boots, he refuses to ever slow. She starts by his side, but always falls behind as they circle the base under the dark morning sky, the frigid air, but he never slows, never peers behind, choosing to push forward like she doesn't exist, his daughter, his only child, but she won't stop even as he outpaces her, she will continue and one day she will be faster and when she's ahead she will stop and wait for her father, to be at his side, to let him know that it is not a weakness and he'll come to realize how wrong he was, except when the day arrives, as she passes him, assured that he will not catch up, Caroline cannot find it in herself to stop, so she pushes forward, harder, and she can't breathe, but it doesn't matter and when she looks back he's not there because she's moved too far beyond him, and when the next morning comes he isn't downstairs, waiting, like he always is, at the bottom of the steps, but he's never coming down at this hour again, and she turns to the world outside, the air as cold as it always is, like nothing ever happened.

“It is a touching story.”

A field fills with men holding bats swinging for the fences, generations of Americans passing down knowledge and a love for the game. The fool, the liar, he was supposed to be on their side, he was supposed to let them create true intelligence. Mint

sees Larry Anderson at the hotel bar talking to the diplomat. Though she is not conscious of it, the drug induces her to utter his name.

## CHAPTER 20

### Camera

The doorway opens to the hall. The hall leads to the kitchen. From the kitchen, a swinging door opens to the diamond shaped room, whose sliding doors go back into the hallway. To the left, wooden steps ascend to the second floor where two bedrooms, a bathroom, and another bedroom occupy the space with each bedroom sectioned in equally proportionate dimensions.

Within the room, lies a man encased. The man receives oxygen through the device that encases him. His eyes are closed, but it is unclear if he sleeps. He is the father of the subject, but beyond that little else exists of him on the present record, the knowledge he possesses, the knowledge he imparts.

It is evening. The grandfather clock in the corner displays 5:30 PM. The house is empty, except for the man. It is unclear if he sleeps. Light from the setting sun pierces the blinds.

No pictures line the walls, no albums are uncovered from the shelves. Even the subject's space contains no posters, images, or remnants of youth.

A cable outlet in the kitchen has no television connected to it. Devoid of screens, the house is silent. Street noise filters through, barely audible, the sound diminishing as the night progresses.

The man blinks. A mirror attached to the device displays the inverted image, the head scanning the area. His eyes stop searching and fix on an object. The man opens his

mouth. He does not speak. Instead, he shakes his head side to side, always returning to the object in the mirror.

His refusal to speak reveals awareness of the object's purpose. The clock's bells chime at 6 PM. The device continues to pump.

The man chews the side of his mouth. Soon, blood stains his teeth. He tastes the blood. He swallows the blood. A small trickle still escapes from the cut, but he does not appear to notice, even as it steadily smears his teeth.

A voice sounds. It is not the man's voice and the house is empty. The tone of the voice is calm. It asks a series of questions, questions to which the man does not reply. Blood trickles, but he is unaware. The mirror reflects the room, not the man. Questions persist. His silence continues in the empty residence.

The pendulum within the glass swings, counting seconds, as the time accumulates. The voice continues, repeating the series of questions. The room darkens. A woman weeps outside. The man's blinks in faster intervals, yet he does not sleep, eyes remain focused on the object.

The subject enters the house, the weeping woman from outside pinned to his chest. The voice goes silent. The woman and the subject speak. The exchange is recorded.

The woman climbs the stairs. She proceeds to the bedroom on the right and closes the door. Without turning the lamp switch, she falls on top of the comforter on her queen-sized bed, her head face down in a pillow. After two minutes she rises and looks out her window. No cars move. She sees no people.

Clutching her chest she stops in front of the dresser and drops to her knees. The wood beneath the carpet creaks. Folding her hands on the smooth surface, her head down, she begins to mutter. Her lips move rapidly. The words are indecipherable.

The subject advances down the hallway, flipping a switch on the wall. He moves through the sliding doors into the diamond-shaped room and sits on the empty stool.

The man continues in his refusal to speak, even to his son's questions, his offers of support. The exchange is recorded.

When the subject pulls the string, the blinds shift and light filters through, but the man's eyes are already closed.

The subject exits, ascending the stairs, falling asleep on his bed.

Even though his eyes are closed, the man still hears. The voice sounds again, quieter, with a series of questions. The man is silent. He must listen. The voice persists.

## CHAPTER 21

### Comandantes

On April 15th, El Comandante(Castro, Fidel) addresses the nation. His voice plays through radios, filtering through the shops and home and street cars. He affirms his commitment to socialism, to the free man, who will have the power to rise in this new vision of the world. The vision is in danger, however. It must be protected, it will be protected by all of them till death. The revolution lives, the radio announces. “Patria o Muerte Venceremos!”

The men in Mercado’s sitting in their respective chairs, the men waiting for their turn to sit, and the barbers themselves listen in silence. Angel holds a pair of scissors by a head of hair, but does not clip. His back straightens. The customers take it as a token of respect and grumble their assent. Soon, the others barbers cease cutting. As the address continues, more men mutter their approval, their resolve to defend the vision. All the men are old enough to still remember the sting of broken promises(Platt Amendment) and the corruption. El Jefe Maximo, at least, gave them hope for something different, something better, a world where they would not be sold out to the Spanish or the Americans, a place of their own making their own constitution.

The sealed tonic bottle, tucked in Angel’s white coat, presses against his belly. In the full shop, Angel smiles at the order of it, everything falling into place. Customers served, customers waiting, the tidy shop, his business where the hair is swept, the awning with his name, his name that announces to the street that this place is special.

When the soldiers arrive, Angel is ready, the kit prepared and packaged. The address continues in the background while the two officers, two he's never seen before, one with long hair, the other squinting, walk with him to the jeep outside. After his speech, the leader will pose for a photograph. He must appear distinguished in his own special way.

Angel peers through the window, peers through his own name. The barbers, now that he's gone, have resumed cutting. The barber sighs.

While sighing, he feels a belt moving across his body, a hand touching his stomach, the belt fastens. In the back, seated next to him, a woman with blonde hair inspects the buckle. "For protection," she says, "Mr. Barber."

Angel nods at the foreigner. He's the only one in the jeep wearing one. Pulling away, the two boys grimace at the sidewalks. The strange woman remains fixed on him. A glint of light flashes from the second story of the building across the shop, causing a temporary loss of vision.

Thoughts drift to later. When they marry they'll build a new shop, proudly gazing as the glassmaker installs the window, etches their name. Though the name will remain the same, it will have changed, it will be more. It doesn't matter what country they're in, as long as they are together, as long as they can share the name.

Inside, the two agents argue over the merits of the operation. From the window, they see the jeep approach and come to a stop. Two soldiers exit and enter the subject's barbershop. A woman, in the back of the car, gets out and walks into the street lined with



parked cars. She stretches her arms as she glances at the buildings. “Who is she?”

Steadman says.

“What does it matter?”

“Appearance indicates foreign national.”

“One of ours?”

Steadman’s studied the files, the pictures, the profiles. “Not one of ours.” She’s not dressed like a soldier or an agent. The way she absorbs everything like it’s an object of fascination, it’s the face of a tourist, of someone jotting down notes for a scrapbook, of someone happy.

In the kitchen, a radio transmits Castro’s declarations, his renewed commitments to the eastern bloc. “He can see it coming.”

“It doesn’t matter. He can’t do a damn thing. All he has are words. He’s panicked. It’s a cry for help. The walls are caving in. You think these people are going to defend him when the time comes? He’s right where we need him to be.”

Steadman paces the apartment while his partner remains glued to the window. Communication fails between the two. What can he say to such a man in such a place who believes in such things?

Anderson wets his lips. “She is a fine piece,” the agent begins before realizing who he’s speaking to.

“It’s a weapon.”

“What?”

“That skin, that hair, that happiness, it’s a weapon.”

“A fear of sexuality—”

“Should govern all men.”

“is a fear for little boys.”

The woman bends and checks the back tire, bouncing on her toes, heels in the air.

“Getting a good look?”

“Oh, I am,” Anderson, says, sniffing.

“She is our enemy.”

“She’s a blonde, that’s all she is.”

“You have to call it off.”

Anderson turns, “What?”

“The variables have changed.”

“This is real life, they always change in the field.”

“We do not know who she is, what she represents.”

Anderson puckers his lips and stares at Steadman. “You desire to get to know her more intimately. I get it, I really do, I do too.”

Clearing his throat, Steadman says, “This isn’t a time for jokes.”

Anderson, doing his best to imitate the voice of Proto-Director McDuffy, “You’re too serious man. We’re the Americans, hot blooded men, we must never lose sight of that. Now lighten the fuck up.”

“The operation has been compromised.”

“You have no evidence.”

Steadman, searching his pockets, finds the newspaper clipping from the Florida Sentinel. The article pertains to the Agency training ex-Cuban nationals. It is dated

several months prior to the current date. “You really think they aren’t prepared, really think they don’t see us coming?”

“How do you know about the fish?”

“I’m trying to stop them. We need to gather—”

The car door slams shut. The agents rush to the window, peer through the telescope into the car, as the woman buckles the barber. The jeep drives away, vanishing from view. “It’s too late now.”

“No, you must have a fail-safe.” Anderson does not answer. This is an answer.

They step into the living room and gather their belongings. “The birds strike in the morning. The fish land at dusk. The pitcher will be replaced by a reliever.” Anderson looks to the radio, squinting at the transmission, as if he can see the radio waves. “And he’ll finally shut up.”

“They know we’re coming. They’ll be prepared—”

“We’re the stars and stripes. You honestly think they have a chance?” Anderson rips the paper clipping away from Steadman and crumbles it into a ball. “All the articles, all the reports in the world, it don’t make a bit of difference.”

“With information we can institute control.”

Anderson laughs at his partner. “That bullshit might work with the higher-ups, but it doesn’t mean shit in this reality.”

“You understand so little about intelligence it astounds me.”

“Soon we’ll be out of here. The barber’s girl is coming with.”

“And Angel?”

“Didn’t you see that jeep drive away? He’s beyond us.”

“Mint?”

“Maybe when this is over and we’re in possession, you’ll find her, probably on a beach somewhere working on her tan.”

“I won’t leave her.”

“You’re not. She left us. Plus, these are the direct orders of the Proto-Director.”

“He wants us back?”

Anderson squeezes his shoulder. “We’re going to be celebrated. We turned Cuba. The two of us, your precious SEN. We need to work on our stories.” Anderson and Steadman are face to face, inches of space between their profiles. “This is how the game is played.”

Steadman considers the barber, reviewing an imagined scenario where one day, in the future, he would walk through the doors of Mercados, and ask Angel for a haircut, patiently watching as the barber goes to work, performing his magic while he sits in the chair without saying a word, simply gesturing through payment. Direct interaction with the subject, the first subject who proved so vital to the development. Before leaving, he’d shake the hand of the man who never knew how much he meant to the person whose hair he just cut.

The agent turns the dial down on the radio. “Enough,” he says.

“Yes,” Steadman agrees, succumbing to the weight of it, convinced by his inferior of the things that will come to pass. “Yes.” He studies the room, the window that peers down to the street below, the ruined potential and it’s almost too much to bare, but he does not have the time to think.

The door knocks. Both agents face the sound. “We’ve been compromised.” The knock persists, louder.

“Relax,” Anderson says, peering through the eyehole. “It’s just the owners coming to collect their keys.”

Steadman steps backward, shifting his body into the frame of the bathroom. “Don’t answer,” he whispers.

With their hands on their respective handles, Anderson shakes his head in disgust at his technical superior, “You’re such a pussy.”

Steadman is unsure of the sequence, if Anderson’s ever began to turn the knob, but he does witness the apartment door collapse on Agent Anderson, while he shuts the bathroom, locking it. Boots gather round a body. The faint whimpers of help as a man is dragged against his will outside, down the hallway, the cries that no one answers, the stench of urine from the toilet in darkness, his back against the closed door. Silence, moments of time that he cannot bring himself to count, and the resumption of the footsteps, their approach.

The knock on the door. Steadman knows what’s next, but his limbs won’t go. They remain stuck, dead, awaiting the moment they are crashed down upon.

The two soldiers escort the barber, one at each side, through the compound, an army base on the outskirts of the city. Odessa Belikhov walks behind on the gray cement flooring. They advance through a series of doors, each one leading to a shorter hallway. Fluorescent lights line the ceiling, draining their skin of color.

The last hallway ends with a door that leads to a small room. Within, there is a mirror lodged on a metallic table with a seat behind. Next to the table is a sink with a basin of plastic molding, large enough for a head of hair. The chair in front of the sink is reversed. The barber set his bag on the table.

A lack of windows creates a sense of confinement, intensified when the door closes from the outside. Angel waits. No one speaks. The soldiers, positioned at attention, stare at the wall in front of them, barricading the door with their bodies. In the upper corner a loudspeaker emits static. Angel turns to it, though the others remain fixed.

A voice speaks through the intercom, but it does not address them. Angel has heard the man's voice before, from the radio.

The broadcast refers to events, events that are in motion. The man seems panicked, but is surprisingly coherent announcing the destruction of the Air Force, the violence erupting in the streets as citizens march, united, the true revolutionaries he calls them, the people brave enough to overthrow the dictator. The voice continues, describing the chaos as Castro's army deserts him when they see the overwhelming will that rises against them. The tide is changing, the rebel army is unified in its quest for justice and freedom. It is a matter of time before the new days of democracy and peace.

Angel glances to the soldiers, but they remain expressionless. Maybe it's because they are so young. Things are happening just as Adriana said. Soon it would be over. Soon they'd be together. Soon he'd have his reward.

The broadcast stops as the announcer declares April 16th as a day that will be remembered in the annals of history, etched into the memory of the Cuban people as liberation day. April 16th, a fine number to commemorate a new beginning.

A square box on Angel's watch contains a number that displays the date. Currently, it reads 4/15. The announcer must have been mistaken, a simple matter of getting a date wrong. When Angel glances up, he notices the soldiers' leer and realizes that there is something in the error. The announcer meant it, April 16th, a recording, not a live broadcast as declared, not meant for now, a recording for tomorrow. But if that is the case how could it be true.

The long haired boy asks Angel if he knows the future. The barber shakes his head. "This man," he says, pointing to the speaker, "knows of the future. This man sees bombs. This man speaks for the people, an independent voice, a visionary. Or perhaps he is someone like you, someone working with others to stir trouble, working with the oppressors. With this they think they can stop us, with this?" he says, shutting off the recording. The boy sweeps his hair, tucking it behind his ear, exposing the vein bulging down his forehead. "Please, sit," he says, forcing Angel into the chair.

While he continues speaking, the other soldier methodically removes the items from Angel's bag, neatly placing the items in a row on the counter. The barber studies his reflection. His grips the arms. When the blonde woman sees what he's doing, she simply shrugs as if to say he should have known better. The soldier removes the final item and slowly unfolds the straight razor.

"Traitors like you are the reason this country can never progress." The boy is young, too young for such ideas. They are not his own. The boy lectures, spending an equal amount of time glancing at his reflection as he does looking down at his captive. Angel tries to stay attentive, but drifts to his own face, the loose skin, years carved, waste. He will deny the accusations. It is preposterous to think that he would. Yes, they

will. But the barber does not speak. In this moment, he does not possess the capacity for lies, ever the listener, always the subject. This was the role he perfected, the reason they kept coming back. “Tell me, why did you do it?”

He swallows, his body slackens, like he’s simply going to sag and fall off the chair till he’s sunk on the floor, somehow slipping through cracks, dissolving into the dirt, until nothing’s left. But before, he promises. He will not speak her name. Whatever they do, he will protect it. She will be safe. The boy leans in and Angel frees a word from his body, “Money.”

For a moment the boy appears content. Then, he slams his fist on the table, scattering the items so carefully assembled. “You are the lowest form of man. You will sacrifice the future of the people.” He spits on the floor. “For money. Do you know how many have us have died, how many have risked our lives to escape shackles of the imperialists?”

Angel shakes his head. Adriana loves him. She will be safe, please God, he prays, let my love be safe, let me die for her, let this be my vow to her, let me be brave once, he thinks, trying to maintain eyes with the soldier. Acid burns his stomach. He tries to cover his belly, but the boy stops him. “Does it pain?” he asks, pressing on the abdomen.

“What’s this?” Reaching into the flap, he pulls out a bottle.

“Tonic.”

He sets the container down and nods. Looking back, he says, “Would you like to cut my hair?”

“If you like.”

“You are a prisoner now. Rise.”



Angel stands, using the arms as support. The boy sits, commanding, “Cut my hair like you would for El Caballo, with the same respect. Just a trim,” he says, showing with his fingers just how much the barber should clip off, “and when you finish with me, you will cut Javier’s hair.”

The other soldier lifts his handgun so it’s a few feet from the barber’s head. Angel stares at the barrel.

“I hope you understand, but this is for our protection.”

“Protection?”

“Yes, you are a dangerous man,” the boy laughs. “I mean, how could you think you could possibly do it?” Leaning forward, he picks up the razor, and holds the blade under his throat. “Were you just going to slice, go straight across his throat?” He shakes his head, his shoulders bobbing in amusement. “Let me tell you, it never would have worked. You have no conviction, that is why your kind will always fail. Look at you, you are the barber. You’re not even that. Now, you are nothing.”

Angel considers this. “Yes,” he coughs, “what you say, sir.”

“Now hurry. Time is precious.” The boy tosses the razor onto the table.

Brown strands softly skim between Angel’s fingers. With a spray bottle he dampens the hair. After a breath, he touches the items, lingering on the scissors before gripping the container of hair tonic. “Please sit,” he says, directing the boy to the chair, watching as he reclines, his eyes closed. He pours the oily liquid onto his open palm and distributes it throughout the mop till the hair clings to his scalp. “This is good for the health of the hair,” he says, even as the skin on his fingertips begin to tingle. Using the

sink, he washes the remaining residue off his hands. The run off fall circles the drain in a trail of white foam.

As Angel moves to cut, the boy's eyes flash, widening in horror. His mouth opens, but no sound escapes. Clenching, his jaw locks together, his body convulses. His eyes roll back into his head and in the process he perceives his likely last sight, most likely, the barber. Angel reels back, eyes bulging, wobbling as the strength flees from his legs. The boy rolls off the chair in the throes of convulsions.

The soldier with the gun aimed shouts, his voice breaking, the words unintelligible to Angel, who, still fixed on the boy, whispers, "No," only faintly registering the pain searing across his palms. "No," he repeats, falling to one knee, as the questions flood his mind. Did he administer the tonic incorrectly? It wasn't supposed to happen like this. She had promised, She promised. Had she lied, had she lied about everything? The boy on the floor, did he deserve this, how could he have done this? It was supposed to be easy, painless.

The metallic barrel slams into the side of Angel's skull. The soldier shouts questions the barber cannot comprehend, cannot answer.

Tremors from the long-haired boy's body soon cease, though his feet still twitch, the boots, standard issue, hitting against each other. The woman's voice declares, "Dead."

In his last moments Angel hears the screams, a friend's lament, it sounds like love, the pain of loss, of being stripped of everything that matters. But Adriana still lives and for this he will be grateful, despite her betrayal, how could she, but no she was frightened, she was good, he will love her, yes, this is right, Angel believes, even as the

chamber fills with the bullet, the bullet that he doesn't even hear being fired when the boy pulls the trigger, propelling the cast lead that ends his life.

Two bodies lie on the blood-covered floor. Spatters cover the soldier's uniform while the Russian speaks into his ear, telling the boy what he already knows. The barber was not to be harmed until a full interrogation, until the leader finished questioning him personally. Direct orders were given. They were given because after all this, the barber was not going to be executed, punished yes, but not killed for being manipulated. The soldier drops his gun. Odessa massages his shoulders as she says, "Now, you must run," pushing him away.

He flees down the hallways through the series of doors, each door connecting to a longer corridor, leaving behind red bootprints to which the KGB representative smirks, enjoying the conclusion of the game.

The door will fall imminently, the hinges collapsing as the wood splinters and the weight of it crashes down on the head of the SEN. Outside, the knock, persists, the handle twisting with greater and greater force.

The agent slides his palms against the cold tiles. It feels wet, but it must be an effect of temperature mixed with the sweat from his palms. He removes the kit from the hidden pocket sewn into the jacket, touching the items until he finds the circular tablet, preparing for the end. It's like an aspirin. Maybe that's all it is. Slipping it into his mouth, he rolls it over his tongue. Chalk exterior dissolves, bringing him closer to the poison, the end. Dying in service would be so much more rewarding if he had actually achieved his

goal. But this, death in a Havana bathroom. They'd find his body laid out and laugh at the dead American next to the dirty toilet.

Steadman sticks his tongue out. At the tip, he tries crossing his eyes so he can see the pill, but it's too dark. Where did it go wrong? It was too easy to blame Anderson. The blame was his, the failure singular. The knock is followed by a voice, a voice that says his name, "Steadman, Lucas, Steadman, Lucas," growing louder. They know too much. Already betrayed by Anderson, the son of a—

"Lucas, it's me."

Dizziness sets in, the effects of the toxin absorbed through the glands, but he hasn't swallowed. "Me who?"

"It's Caroline, it's Mint."

"Have you been compromised?" Of course she has, how else would she be on the other side? This truth requires him to swallow.

"Let me in. I'll tell you everything. We need to leave the city before she comes back."

"Who is she?"

"Odessa, she's KGB, she's in the city, probably going to work on Anderson. She let me go, but I followed her here."

"You betrayed us." Steadman is not outraged. The thing isn't anger. What is the thing? Rising to his feet, bracing against the door, he plucks the pill, slipping it back into his jacket, aware that something manufactured for a single purpose, slivers of it, streams through his blood. For now, he is alive and that is enough. He twists the lock. Light flashes through the cracks.

In the space there is only the agent and the agent. Steadman acknowledges his subordinate and stumbles out the bathroom. Mint catches him, holding him so he does not fall.

“Your...what did they do?” he says as she sets him down.

She looks out the window.

“I’m sorry.”

“What did you do?” Rifling through his pockets, she finds the wet tablet. It’s much too small, too much has gone. “What did you do?”

“I thought, I guess I thought you were someone else Mint.”

He reaches out and touches the bruise. “I wanted you to succeed, for us to win, even the barber. Now, what do we do? We’re a failed experiment. They were right.”

“I refuse to believe that,” Mint says, helping him rise to his feet. “We’re going to survive. Once we get to the base, we’ll fly home. Then we’ll fix things, we’ll get it right. I’ll get it right.”

The two agents walk out of the apartment into the empty hallway. No soldiers greet them, no men take them away. There’s only the sound behind the doors, the sound of families, of televisions and radio reports relaying the latest events on the ground.

Steadman, his head slumping into Mint’s neck, his lips pressing against her bruised exterior, limps away from the building where they watched.

They make their way to the car. From the car to the base. From the base to the plane, from the plane to home. Through the window, Steadman gazes at the sea below. Dead fish wash upon the shore. The sky, devoid of birds, is perfectly clear.

-----END OF SEN COMMISSION REPORT-----

## CHAPTER 22

### Transformer

Monk Chu rests on his full-sized bed. The clock radio reads 7:30. It plays the sounds of ocean waves, gradually rising in pitch until the user turns the alarm off. The waves have been crashing for over ten minutes. Monk woke ten minutes before the alarm.

Now, he stares at a black smudge on his ceiling. The mark appears to confound him. The digital minutes progress. The waves swell, more indicative of a storm than a gentle sea morning where the sun glistens over the ripples creating bobbing triangles that peak with a flash. In a whisper, replicating a New England accent Monk says, “Hey, you promised me a shitload of fish,” as another minute ticks by. The line, a reference to Mark Wahlberg’s character in the 2000 film, *The Perfect Storm*, a hit despite mixed critical and audience reception, conjures memories of the ill-fated voyage undertaken by a group of fishermen.

Monk turns on his side. Dirty clothes in need of laundering litter his space. He has made attempts to clean in the past, but the piles always returns so he chooses to live with them rather than engage in the futility. The ocean rises higher.

The condition he finds himself in, the apathy, the inability to shut off the sound, the piles, indicate a general depression. He’s slow to rise, does not want to work. Perhaps this will be the day he does not. He confronts the clock, one hand on the pillow. Tidal

waves crash through the speakers. Monk rubs his bleary eyes. Moisture absorbs into his skin. “Those poor assholes,” he mutters.

He sits up swiftly, his feet touching the dress shirt from the day before, shoulders hunched, gazing at the space between his feet. Reaching, he switches the storm off.

While he readies himself, he checks emails from his laptop and taps on the touchpad until the music from the playlist, “Morning Work,” begins. Buttoning his shirt, he scans profiles, smiling as he goes through the pictures. He messages James to confirm their after work rendezvous.

While he struggles with pulling his socks over his ankles a song plays that forces him to pause. Lou Reed sings “A Perfect Day,” the 1972 piece from the New York artist’s second solo album, *Transformer*. The tune offers tempered hope, beginning with notes of optimism with Reed proclaiming, “It’s such a perfect day,” but ends with the singer slightly reneging on the position stating softly, “You’re going to reap just what you sow,” the line ultimately a provocation that must cause Monk to doubt just what he sows, a fact evidenced not only by signs of depression, but also by his search history, which, pornographic history excluded, is primarily comprised of searches for alternative lifestyles in different locations ranging from teaching English in Thailand to backpacking through South America to working at a commune, perhaps a literal reaction to what Chu sows.

With his tie swinging behind his back, Monk swishes spearmint toothpaste in his mouth, and spits. Throughout the processes, he avoids the bathroom mirror above the sink, only vaguely taking in the outline of his reflection, tilting his head down to check



his hair, dabbing enough water on a rogue patch, flattening it with moisture and a dollop of invisible hair gel that gives his strands a gleam and general crispness.

Before exiting, he plugs his headphones into his iPod, the entire catalog set to shuffle. An algorithm insures randomness, yet Monk still listens intently at what the device selects, searching the music for meaning. On this day, the shuffle produces Huey Lewis's "The Power of Love", No Doubt's "Spider-Webs", The Flaming Lips "She Don't Use Jelly", TLC's "Waterfalls", and the Talking Heads "Psycho Killer", a list that carries Chu from his door through St. Marks and the subway till he's aboveground, holding his overly sweetened coffee poured by the vendor, a husband and wife couple, in the lobby, sipping the drink from his corner office chair, deliberating on the shuffle's importance, pretending to read emails when really he's deleting his cat-video-infested spam folder, a mindless task that allow Monk to wander elsewhere.

Monk meets James for dinner at a local haunt specializing in Korean fried chicken, flavored with a barbecue coating that crunches when biting down into the steaming white meat between bone and skin. They sip Sapporo(fermented rice beer, origin: Japan) as they wait for food.

The scruff around James's face has grown into a recognizable pattern that Monk identifies from the fallout of his former roommate's broken heart. "So how's work going?" An innocuous question, safe, easy.

"It's going," he says, arms crossed, leaning forward.

"Yeah?"

"I mean, it's been weird."

“Stressful?” Monk asks, encouraging expression, sensing that the two of them share something.

James relates the story of the banquet house with the descending floors, the strange men, the conversation with Irina.

“I wish that was my job. It sounds like fun.”

“It’s not.”

“Come on, you’re the man who knew too little, the Cary Grant, *North by Northwest* shit.”

The waitress sets down the plate of steaming chicken that is too hot to eat in the middle of the table. Monk glances his reflection in the porcelain and promptly turns away. James studies the waitress, watching as she shifts her attention to the next table.

“Do you know her?”

“You recognize her from somewhere?”

“You saying all Asians look alike cracker?”

Smiling, James says, “As always, you’re a mind reader.”

The chicken glistens. Monk is the first to bite in, rolling the meat over his tongue to avoid the burn. “But seriously,” Chu says, chewing, “I know the feeling. It’s the city. We’re always seeing people we don’t know again and again.”

James picks a piece off from a breast and blows on the steam from the flesh, redirecting to the ceiling.

“It does something. All these familiar strangers. That waitress, you’ve probably done yoga with her,” Monk says, taking another bite, “The table behind, we’ve been drunk with them at Lit Lounge.”

“Bogo night.”

“The chef, he probably used to date my cousin.”

“Then again, who hasn’t?”

Monk nods gravely. “She may have a problem.”

Both friends enjoy their chicken, insisting that the last piece belongs to the other, ultimately deciding to split the leg with a knife and fork in a manner that proves inefficient.

“What ever happened to the girl?” Monk asks, peering up.

“She didn’t work out,” James says, leaving no possibility for further questioning.

After paying the bill they wander down the noisy street. The people are out, so many of them, so many to track, assemble. “I need to tell you something, but you can’t be mad.”

“What?”

“I kind of did something.”

“What?”

“It was the night you jet out of my place.”

“Metropolis.”

“Yeah, you left and I got to thinking that the both of us need something,” Monk laughs, seemingly inadvertently.

“We need the opposite sex. We need connection.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I signed us up for dating profiles.”

“...”

“I’ve been managing your account, sending out messages, got a couple of prospects lined up.”

“Come on man, it’s not the time, plus that stuff, the people on it—”

“No risk, no reward. I mean, what’s the downside?” They approach the street corner. “Go left on 2nd.”

“Why?”

“We’re meeting two people.”

“Who?”

“The first responders,” Monk laughs before saying, “what, too soon?” upon seeing his friend’s reaction.

The two girls, Melissa and Nicole, both function as media buyers for ----. They speak and say things. They say things, they speak(refer to transcript for full exchange).

James appears to relax for the first time in weeks. The group laughs at jokes that are not funny. This is what new people with hidden motivations do to impress, to form certain impressions. Gregariousness, wit, humor, and some leg, these are the combinations Melissa and Nicole seem practiced in as they manipulate the two boys, ordering a second martini, which will not only loosen them up, but allow them to appear looser, rendering actions excusable because after all, it’s just the booze. These boys, do they ever stop to wonder why it’s so easy, never. They are forming a connection. It’s supposed to be easy. And this is easy.

They sit on short stools, surrounding a square table with four coasters, a candle burning between their drinks. Girls sit with shaved legs crossed, skin showing. Boys, wide stance, leaning forward, bodies so interested, expressions unblinking.

Melissa marks James, the other Monk. The bar is a quiet spot with few others inside. The voice of the group carries, making their conversation loud enough to hear, but they don't care, even when he knows he's most likely being listened to.

When the girls rise to use the bathroom in tandem, Melissa stumbles on a foot, his foot. James prevents her fall, saving her, gripping her like in the moment before an embrace. After apologies, the girls retreat.

Monk shoots James smugness.

“Alright, you were right.”

Monk laughs, perhaps compulsively, perhaps joy.

“They're great. Normal, you know?”

“Yeah, what took us this long? Six million people and we were sitting on our asses alone.”

The girls return and the group resumes their exchange, each exhibiting the expression they deem to be appropriate for the moment. Melissa, head tilted down, careful to adjust her dress at the chest, draws attention. Throughout the conversation her eyes return to James, never for too long, but long enough. The glance, soft, filled with wonder, giddiness, is a method.

Monk's laughter, sets the mood as they all relax and pretend like they know each other. Another group enters the bar and moves to a back table. Each of the four suppresses laughter as the new group takes a seat like there's something funny about

them, how different they are. One is boring, the other interesting. They revel, speak louder, drink freely. This is an impulse.

The boys split the bill, ignoring the protests from the women. “We got this, we got this,” they say, assuring them that it’s not a problem. They are too inebriated and aroused to care about cost. They tip twenty percent.

The two boys separate, arm draped over the shoulder of their respective online concubine, diving at the corner. Monk and his go right, James left. Monk whispers into her ear until she laughs. “Honey, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” he says as they diverge. The prior subject diverges left, marked by this Melissa media buyer, his behavior, his body indicating that he will engage with this. They hold hands, moving further away, down the street in the other direction. Monk Chu, the behavior, the only question, his place or hers, protocol dictates his surveillance may be transferred due to the pressing need of the persons walking the other way, the mystery of James’s actions. (Request for subject transfer. Response acknowledged. Response Understood.)

James holding her, their arms locked. She has a good smile, straight, pearly, and more than enough body. Her head rests against him, the perfume wafts Gourmand, a desert fragrance of caramel swirl mixed into a vanilla milk pool. Men respond to food as opposed to flowers, studies have shown. (Response Understood)

In a taxi cab, they travel upwards to the subject’s studio. In the car, their lips connect, the back of their heads framed in the back window. He wants it, wants to believe so badly, that someone wants him, that he doesn’t even care who it is, doesn’t even care that he’s just met a stranger, doesn’t find it strange, trusts so much in it even after. Like this is a return to reality. (Response Acknowledged)

James holds open the door to his building, fumbling with his keys while Melissa stares at him, back on the wall, projecting.

They go into the space and resume the consummation as the door shuts.

(Response Acknowledged)

So it continues. She plays a part, filling a void, and everyone resumes the happy life, even as the walls close in while the voice repeats the questions, and the temperature drops, chilling to the bone, moving you down to the floor until the climate switches and it's so hot you strip off your clothes, but you're surrounded by cameras on all sides, cameras that you are told are on your side, while the voice repeats the questions, disregarding your responses, which don't change, and even though you know you shouldn't, a voice inside begins to tell you that you're a liar, that your answers are shit so you decide to frame it differently, but the questions persist and you know, but don't know whether or not you've made a mistake, but you did, didn't you, where are you now, under the blinking green light recording it all, despite her promises that you'd be out soon, you trusted her, and this is what, protocol, so that means what, that you have to watch the feed of him, the feed of the only man who gave a damn to even come to a hospital bed, you have to watch this man get seduced, sitting back, accepting it, but for what, what if the whole thing didn't mean a damn from the outset. (I understand that the request was denied. I had to follow anyway.)

The handle, still warm. The key fits. The key unlocks the door. I enter.

-----END TRANSMISSION-----

## CHAPTER 23

### *Portrait*

The man in the iron lung remains silent to the voice that presses him. Light appears through the window, highlighting the dust particles in the air. The dust falls to the carpet, covers the wooden shelves, the glass casing over the clock and pendulum. He looks to the reflection. Under the cracks of the kitchen door there is a shadow. Over the course of the day it grows larger until it disappears entirely, subsumed by the night. The dust accumulates. Questions persist while he drifts in and out of consciousness. His flesh grows colder.

He begins to hum. The sounds, unintelligible, do not ease the pain. They indicate that he is breaking, shifting closer to a confession. Or perhaps this is the final sacrifice of Lucas Steadman, pioneer, patriot, but most of all, father, at least as he envisions himself. That's not how anyone will remember him, of course. Perhaps that's the point, if more people knew it wouldn't be much of a sacrifice. The heroics exist in the secrets, in the unknown spaces, the forgotten zones whose only reprieve is a record, a sealed record that exists against the wishes of the hero who, at this point, seems to desire to fade away into nothingness. Still, he should have considered this before he spoke the truth, before he broke the agreement. In the end, Lucas Steadman's secret is that he wants to be known, that he desires so much to be the hero that he rushes the sacrifice. This is an act of vanity, a savior complex embodied. He needs to believe that he does all this for James and not himself. Surely, that makes a type of sense. But it doesn't mean it is the truth. Whatever



the case may be there is one fact that even father lung will concede, Lucas Steadman is ready to die. He listens intently. Still, he refuses to respond. It's not enough to hear her say it. I need his confession. It's a matter of record.

Behind, the kitchen door, the shadow, responding on command, enters, a chunni covering her head. He will see that I see. Lucas Steadman will cease the insufferable humming and he will sing.

Shammi Malakar enters, studying the room in her slow approach. The man in the lung is unaware of her true allegiance. An innocent nurse, a substitute mother or even wife, she is not. She belongs to something else.

Since the day she found her father's body hanging on that tree with her brothers, Shammi Malakar committed herself to revolution. From the villages they coordinated efforts to spread the word, to liberate the people who were under the constraints of the only real type of oppression there is, economic.

Using her father's words, she collected all the sons and daughters of the massacred men, forming a unit that would not forget, that would strike back. The Maoists in the Mountains attacked military targets, senior level personnel in civilian arenas. They attempted to limit casualties, but accepted it as an aspect of the war they waged. Even as the newspapers condemned them, more joined the effort. They spread pamphlets of Nehru's portrait nestled between Hitler and Mussolini. To those who could not read, they explained the message, their goals, their hopes.

Her brothers left to care for their mother, but really Shammi knew they were tired, that marriage was a way to settle and stop the fighting. She attended the ceremony dressed in a beret and fatigues. The others in the crowd looked at her, the girls staring

astonished, the men stunned, some angered, but all fascinated as she passed them. It had been a fact of their lives, if it wasn't the government that killed them it would be the landowners.

She stood proudly at the front, between her mother and aunt, both garbed in saris. The priest in orange robes rapidly pronounced the rites in Sanskrit. No one knew what he said. He didn't eye the other guests nor the couples he presided over, but at the flames, the small square fire that consecrated the ceremony. The heat gleamed on his bald head, smearing the lines of red and white paint symbolized to his forehead. Her brother led his future wife, a small girl, in a circle around the fire. She followed, her hair draped, head tilted to the earth. Her younger brother and his wife followed them, both ceremonies identical.

All the while, Shammi sat on the ground, picking at the dirt, smiling whenever one of her brothers glanced at the crowd. Smoke from the fire folded into the star-littered sky, disappearing as it ascended higher. The priest never wiped his forehead, which by the end of the night was a mixture of red and white paint that matted into the black hairs of his brow.

As it is with all rebels, their success was their downfall. The efficiency with which they spread their disinformation, with which they bombed targets, necessitated response. The government, still weary from Naxaluri, even years after, appealed to the democratic interests of its foreign allies for assistance. No doubt the call was made as a cost-savings measure by a new government. The agency, well aware of the parameters, cared little for the motivation if it meant dealing a blow, gaining a new vantage point.

Finding them took over a year and involved the creation of several profiles, most helpful of which were Akshay Malakar(elderest brother), Rajkumar Rai(local landowner), and Sita Ram(tea estate worker). The issue resolved itself due to an enforced period of nonintervention, even after the Chandigarh bombing that gave Shammi Malakar the impression of safety that enabled her to return home for the birth of her second nephew(falsified story). For the full account of the operation beyond the Malakar's refer to The Shatabdi Report, which explicates matters in the subcontinent beyond the scope of the interested actor.

When Shammi enters the house, garbed in rebellion fashioned after Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, she does not suspect the trap. She's tired from the travel, from the work of training the new rebels, from the plans being generated to takeover Rajkumar Rai's holdings, an action that will incite the same reaction as Naxalbari, inspiring a renewed sense of revolt across the nation, like her father did.

Her brown eyes flash alert when the door shuts behind her and the figure of the foreign agent emerges from the back door.

The rebel pulls her pistol out, but refrains from firing. The agent sits, trying to ignore the barrel. "Please," she commands.

Shammi obeys and takes the seat, though the gun remains aimed.

The agent slides the manila folder across the wooden table that separates them. To her credit, the rebel maintains calm though she has been betrayed.

Within the folder, there is a collection of photographs. The images are attached to the persons she holds dear, her brothers, their children, even her mother whose skin has

wrinkled and body has shrunk. They all look directly into the camera, seemingly aware that a lens captures them.

“In the market eight civilians died.”

The rebel stares ahead, unaffected.

“Five men, two women, one child.”

“Seven.”

“What?”

“It was seven civilians.”

The agent clears her throat. “As you say.”

A man walks in. Both women’s attention divert to the suit. As he attempts to speak, the agent commands, “Get out.” He nods, his mouth slowly closing as he traces his steps backward so he doesn’t make a sound, searching the face of the agent under the barrel of the gun for a different command, but no signal comes.

“Major Kothari was your target,” the agent says. “I’m sure you are aware that there is a cost to such activity.”

Shammi lowers the gun, resting it on the table so it’s still aimed at the figure across from her. With her free hand, she spreads out the photographs, lining them up next to each other, creating a family portrait. She traces the glossy outlines. Her voice breaks as she strains the word, “Cost?”

“Your life. Their lives. The people killed demand justice. You of all people comprehend the principle of such a thing.”

Shammi studies the short haired white woman. It would be easy to pull the trigger, so easy, and yet. These photos, these people, this idea, the image of her father

projected onto those she loves. She couldn't. Her finger moves to the trigger, but does not squeeze. Instead, she unloads the clip and places the pistol on the table besides the images.

“For your sins you will be executed.”

The rebel lowers her head. The beret falls off. Her ponytail dangles to her side as she accepts her fate.

“Let me clarify,” the agent says, her voice growing softer. “You should be executed, but I'm going to save you. I'm going to use you and I will continue to use you until you are no longer useful. This is cost, this is penance. You will, however, have something most people in your line of work do not.”

“What?” she asks, still gazing down at the floor.

“Assurances, their safety,” the agent says, pointing to the photos. “As long as you continue to be useful you have not only have the agency assurances, but my personal guarantee that these photos will remain safe, as safe as I can keep them.” She neatly stacks the photos and slides them back into the folder.

Shammi attempts to sneer, but that's all it really comes off as, an attempt.

The agent rises straight to attention like a soldier. She leads Shammi to the door, to the world outside, to the men waiting to escort them away. “What, what do I call you?” the rebel asks.

“Proto-Director Mint, you'll report directly to me.”

She steps toward the man in the compressing lung. Following the directive, she sits on the stool. When his eyes open they do not search, they remain fixed on the nurse, the one who has been with him, nurtured him over the years of his life.

He swallows and states plainly, “She is known to you.”

It is not directed as a question, but it has the same effect.

“Since the beginning,” Shammi says. “I am sorry.”

His voice is parched, weak. “Every facet of my life, every facet of his life has been this, this house, this room, this city, and it’s been what?”

She wipes his brow. Bending, she kisses the space on his forehead between his eyes. “It’s all been—”

“How did she do it Shamm? How did she force you, all these years, your entire life?”

“It’s been a good life. Better than where it was going,” she pauses. “And we had James at least. He was a good thing for us. He’s good.”

“He is, but how is he, I mean he’s not exactly the sharpest—”

“No, he’s better than you think. Stronger.”

“Like you?” he spits out, refocusing on her reflection.

She does not look away from him. She remains fixed, staring back.

Lucas blinks. “I suppose I should have expected it.” He begins to laugh.

“What is it?”

“She always found a way.”

Shammi smirks. “Yes, she was never going to leave you alone.”

“I suppose it’s all been for nothing.”

She leans forward, past the mirror, their eyes connect. “No, you protected him. Without you what would it have been for him?” She gently holds the sides of his face. “You know this.”

“You know this,” he repeats. “I have work to do I suppose.”

“Yes, you do,” she says, releasing him. “I’ll heat up some food, there’s paneer masala and rice in the fridge.”

“Thank you,” Lucas says, as he watches her leave through the sliding kitchen door.

In the empty room the man speaks to a person who is not present. “I’m ready,” he says. “I’m ready.”

The voice, the automated voice responds, “Yes.”

“Yes,” Lucas mimics. “I’m not talking to the disembodied voice of Christmas past.”

“Of course.”

“There is only one person I’ll talk to.”

“Of course.”

“Tell her to get her ass over here. I’m ready for the confession. You hear me?”

“The Proto-Director is already on her way.”

His eyes search the mirror. “She is?”

The voice continues, “And Lucas, try to show a little respect in person. I did save your life once upon a time.”

“Caroline?”

The voice does not respond to the name in question. There is no need. Lucas awaits the sound of the door, hopes for the beep of the microwave to come sooner, and draws another breath from the machine.



## CHAPTER 24

### Runners

We're by the window and I'm showing Melissa the view. From twenty-eight floors up you can perceive the grid, the quadrants crawling with cars going downtown. The lights from the other apartments, most of them off, but the ones that are on, we can see so clearly. Television sets, people watching people streak by within screens. A man on the phone. A woman enters her home. More than anything though, the spaces that are the most visible are the ones where we can't see anyone, only their things.

This girl I just met, her chin's on my shoulder and she must find the gazing romantic because she starts nibbling on my lobe, biting it gently. It feels strange. Still, I stroke her hair, pretending to enjoy the sensation. I should kiss her. In time. Soon, she's licking, her tongue traveling the canals of my ear until it becomes unbearable.

My laughter offends her. "Sorry, just ticklish," I say.

She nods like she understands, like she's always understood, and begins to kiss me. When our mouths open she gently rolls her tongue over mine, darting faster as we progress, pushing me back, but grasping me tight so we stay connected. It's like she can't help herself. She's in the throes. Twisting my hair. Biting my neck. Her hand moves down my chest and rests on my crotch. She slides her index finger down the length of my zipper till she finds the tipping point and as she does she bites harder and sucks as if that'll heal me. I try to bite her shoulder, thinking it's what she wants, but she pulls away, shaking her head, saying in no uncertain terms that it's not time for that, that she will not

allow it, that this thing that we're doing is on her terms. She unbuckles my belt, sliding it out forcefully. It constricts, but she simply pulls harder until it gives and drops to the floor. Slowly, she pulls the zipper down and reaches inside. "Good," she whispers, continuing to massage it. "Pull them down. Let me see it."

I unbutton my slacks and they fall down my legs. Before I can remove them, she's already pressed into me, helping me with the buttons on the shirt, scratching at my bare chest, all the while continuing to rub my boxers, teasing me. "I want to play with it first," she says.

"Yes," I say. "Whatever you want."

"Do you want me to put it in my mouth?"

"Yes," I say.

"How much do you want it?"

"Very much."

"Is that all?" she asks, disappointed.

"I'll give you anything you want," I say, thinking it's more in line with the lines she likes.

"Anything?" she asks, grabbing it, squeezing.

"Yes," I say, closing my eyes.

"Sounds like a good—" but she doesn't finish the sentence. I feel her falling away, her fingers slipping. When I open my eyes, she's on the ground, hair covering her face, unconscious.

"Melissa," I say, kneeling down, my pants tight around my ankles. I try to shake her awake, but nothing. Her pulse is still strong, at least I think. "Melissa," and right as I

say her name a second time, there's a pressure. A force drills into my ear. Ringing. Arm down, I catch myself before hitting the floor. The pressure compressing like my brain's been downgraded and there are no thoughts. The ringing. A light flickers on. I see that face. "Odessa?"

"It'll be alright James, but first I need you to be quiet."

Something stings my side. My vision blurs, but I still recognize the shape that hovers above. "You can't," I try to say, "you can't," I say before the lights go out.

I drift in and out. A body slides on the hardwood floor. It doesn't have to be a body. It could be anything. Being moved.

The door closes and opens. I never had many friends growing up. I was too embarrassed to bring them home. What a terrible thing to have felt. I wonder whose fault that is, mine or his? A voice somewhere replies, *Why does it have to be anyone's fault?*

Someone pulls my eyelids back. I can't focus on the who, but I know who the who must be. Monk's words at the bar after I first told him about Odessa come back to me, *This is not a normal avenue, This is not a normal avenue.* Melissa was a normal avenue, though. And then she was on the floor.

Another sting jolts me. A shoulder supports my body up while a voice says, "Lean on me." This body guides me out the door. My head's too heavy to lift. It's too hard not to follow.

A car drives. A driver curses. I recognize something about him. A car stops. Getting out, I say, "Allahu Akbar." The man with the beard comes into focus. He gave me a card once. *Allahu Akbar* he mouths. I can't hear his voice through the window. The night is still dark, but not the darkest.

We stumble in, walking a path, leaving the streets, the cars, behind. Trees, fields of grass, the other world in the city, so close to home. I've been here so many times, but never at this time. A misty fog hangs suspended, clouding the park. She sets me down on a bench. "I'll be right back," she says. I know her face from the hospital, but this is different, she's so strong here, ready to do something, and yet there's something else going on, like she's angry, ready to launch at me, yet holding herself back for some reason. I watch her walk away.

I should leave. It'd be hard, but I know I can do it. I reach for the handle and push up, feeling some strength return. Through my throbbing ear, which feels hot and bruised when I touch it, I can hear the birds begin to sing, like I'm their morning entertainment. She did this to me, but if I walk away I won't ever know. Melissa, what did she do to her, what does she want from me? If I run, I can find help. I can't trust her. I've been looking at her, looking for her, and now I'm just going to leave without ever knowing. I'll go back to Dad. I'll ask him point blank for his help, give in to him, believe him, tell him that I need him now, that he can't just tell me a thing like that and go quiet, he needs to show me how I can save people, people like Melissa, people like me and Monk and Bill.

I see her returning in the distance. When she sees me at the bench, getting up, she stops. Two Styrofoam cups are in her hands. She left me alone because she trusted I wouldn't run, because she believes she knows me, because she thinks I want answers. I don't, I don't want to be a part of it. It's only in the moment before that she realizes. Her blue eyes widen. I can only imagine the coffee cups spilling on the dirt, black liquid pouring out when she sees me running, when she realizes she's miscalculated, watching me sprint as fast as I can, away from the thing called Odessa.

I don't know if she's chasing, but I run like she's right behind me. My dress shoes dig into the skin on my ankles. I must look ridiculous to whoever's watching.

The outer path of the Jackie O reservoir offers hope to lose her. I circle counterclockwise, peering back, but she's not there. I keep running harder, waiting till I hit the west side exit. My vision comes into focus. Running. I know how to run. Maybe she gave up. Maybe she was too surprised, too slow, too tired.

As the track curves, the water in the artificial lake becomes visible. It is still. A man sleep on a park bench. He's the first person I've seen. A city of six million people and it's just the two of us, the three of us, how is it possible?

My heart pounds. Beating through my chest. Thud thud. Through my shirt. Thud thud. Keep going. Thud thud. It keeps me going. One foot, then the other, leaving a mark in the ground, an imprint, a trail to follow. Legs cycling like they're not even mine.

The sun breaks through the clouds, beams fighting to splinter through the branches so they can land on the earth. She's still not behind, but she's there. Keep going. I break from the path, climbing a small mound of grass, stumbling as I descend like kids do, testing themselves against the forces because it's part of the game. You can't care if

you fall. I'm not a kid anymore. The sound of the branch snapping. I can see my foot slipping, but can't do anything to stop it, like I'm watching my body outside myself. Tumbling down, my limbs contort every which way. I try my best to go with it, even though it starts to hurt, twisting in ways I'm not supposed to, and it's no longer out of body, not when you feel pain, then it's you, then it's me, reeling.

From my belly, I turn over so I'm peering up at the sky from my back. The sun's still at it, rising, cracking through, across the horizon, a brand new day for all us sinners. I hold my grass-stained hands to my chest, trying to rub the dirt off the bruises, the cuts.

I get up on one knee and follow the trail left behind from the fall of my body, keeping my sights on the top of the hill. There's one tree perched on top, a tree that's missing at least one branch, probably more. That's where Odessa emerges, underneath its cover, breathing heavily, cheek flushed red, scanning the area. She doesn't know, she doesn't know where I am. How could she not know?

While she searches, I do my best to stay low to the ground. She seems desperate, lost, constricted under the weight of her black jacket. I slide back, moving slowly, staying fixed on her. Her head stops and her eyes center on me. "Please, stop," she yells, wiping sweat off her forehead.

I stand, brushing the dirt off my clothes. We both stare at each other. The sun's behind her, shining down. I do my best to block it my hand. "You stop. Stop chasing. Just leave me alone."

"That's not what you really want, James."

"What do I want?"

"You want answers," she says. "That's why you came to see me."

I step back. My chest continue to pound and I realize I'm not breathing. "That's not what I wanted," I say, sucking in air right after I say it. "I don't care about answers. You can keep them."

"That's not true." Her voice is hoarse, tired. "You need the truth. We all do."

"You want to know why—"

"Yes—"

"I came to see you," I say. "That's it. That's all. And it's just as delusional as wanting to hear what you have to say. It doesn't matter. I get that now."

She takes a step forward.

"Don't." She waits for me to continue. "Keep watching. Stay in the shadows. Do your thing. I won't stop you. Can't we just go back to whatever it was before I saw you, the real you?"

"That's no longer an option," she says, sounding pleased. "James, for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Fuck you, Odessa."

Her eyes flash, the expression incredulous, hands rolling into fists, her face saying in no uncertain terms, *Fuck me?* We both know it's time to start running again.

She's flying down the hill while I'm running through the park, making my way to the nearest west side exit. The subway can offer cover, escape. Down there I can disappear. There will be people, witnesses. There are always people there.

The air is heavy and filled with moisture. It keeps pressing against me, but it's not just me. She's still behind me, further than she should be. With some satisfaction, I

realize I'm outpacing her. Despite her efforts, she's fading. No amount of anger can change that.

The West Side opens up. The parked cars, the high-rise apartment buildings look less clinical. Maybe it's all the doormen keeping watch under the awnings, a greater sense of luxury, of boutique-ness imbues the neighborhood. An old woman walks her dogs, a small puffy thing with wobbly legs. They barely notice when I pass by them. A couple unclamps a food cart from the back of their SUV, glaring as I run by. No one cares in New York. It is, I am just a strange thing. It'll pass and I do. This isn't the city for witnesses.

I blur past the awnings, the storefronts, the shops, which are still empty. For a moment, my body reflects on their glass windows.

Turning the corner, I find the stop and rush down the steps, using the handrail for balance. As I approach the turnstile, I reach into my pocket. No wallet. No pass. I thought it was there, I should have felt it's absence. There's no MTA employee in the booth, sitting in the encasement, waiting to speak into a muffled intercom. I smile before I do it. I've lived here all my life and never done it. I swing my legs over, using the sides of the turnstile as support, till on the other side. They must have cameras here. I don't care anymore. I'm free. She isn't here yet. She won't know where I've gone.

Down another set of stairs, the way to Brooklyn. Shammi and Dad, they said I'd be safe there, protected. Home, that's what it's supposed to be, that place in the center of the world that somehow doesn't belong to the world.

I pick up a crumpled *Metro* paper from the ground and continue till I find a pillar to lean on, to cover me. If she comes from my direction, I'll have plenty of time to spot



her. If it's the other direction, I'll see her coming down the steps before she sees me. I hold the newspaper, covering my face, giving me enough clearance for my eyes to see above the edge. I can't help but notice a headline, a family of three found dead from carbon monoxide poisoning, the article containing a check list to make sure your detector is functioning and to demand your landlord to install one if he or she hasn't done so already. "A train is approaching," the prerecorded voice says. Almost. I hear it chugging over the tracks. Its lights illuminate the dark tunnel, the circle growing wider as it comes closer.

"You know, you're not actually supposed to read the paper."

I try to turn back.

"Don't," Odessa says, holding me by the shoulder, forcing another object into my back.

"Is that a—"

"You do what I tell you," she says, still breathing heavily, but trying to regain her composure. "We're getting on this train together."

"You wouldn't—"

"Fuck you, James," she says, pressing the metal barrel harder, holding me tighter. "If you run you'll leave me no choice."

"Why?" I ask, but the train drowns out my question as the cars fill the platform. The voice says something, but I don't know what, maybe watch your step. When the doors open, she nudges me inside, pointing me toward a bench of molded orange seats. We sit side by side.

“I’m tired of chasing you,” she says, as the doors close. The train begins to move, slowly, and then faster. Our car is empty, except for us. Her cheeks are still red. It makes her seem young, innocent. She sees me looking at her, but her expression doesn’t change. “Now, let’s talk.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Someplace safe, at least for a short while.”

“My father’s house,” I say, the only safe place I know.

She shakes her head and appears to process my answer before saying, “That’s not safe, not anymore. At least, not for me.”

“What do you mean?”

She rests her head on my shoulder. Her hair nestles into my neck. With her other hand, she has a gun stuck against my side. “It’s complicated, but we’ll figure it out together,” she says, closing her eyes to rest a while.

## CHAPTER 25

### Recorded

Operative Malakar seats the recorder by the man(Steadman, Lucas), the sick person encased in iron who breathes from air cycled through rubber. The operative, obeying protocol, leaves the recorder and Steadman, currently asleep, alone. The house carries a faint scent of curry powder like it's been sanded into the wood. Morning light filters through the open blinds. The clock reads 6:45 AM. It is a family heirloom, passed down from Steadman's grandfather(Irish immigrant) to his father to him, a piece of personal history that he hides like all aspects of the past, but why hide, why go through the effort of erasing the connective tissue between you and the past, unless you're afraid? Even his son doesn't know a thing, at least he used to not know a thing. It's unclear what he does know, although Steadman's profile assures the past remains shrouded, a psychology that stems from a discomfort of being seen, a discomfort that he's carried with him since the beginning. He's created a household where questions are simply not asked.

When he opens his eyes, he scans the room. "Why didn't you wake me? You were supposed to come sooner."

Steadman mulls the response. "Things always happen. I can't imagine it was more important than this." He licks his dry lips. "That's always been your problem, an inability to prioritize."

He laughs at the question posed. “Yes, you did leave her here. You got me. All this time and I never suspected. I mean, she was just the nurse, and a foreigner at that. She fit the part. I should have known you wouldn’t respect the arrangement.”

The response pleases him. “No formal reports. No devices on the premises. Good, good,” Lucas says, smiling. “You’re right, technically, it doesn’t break the agreement. You were always about the technicals.” He closes his eyes. A tear rolls down, leaving a wet trail on his cheek. “Sometimes in the morning, this happens, this irritation,” he explains.

“You should know before we get to the technicals that I’m glad you did it. I don’t care who she was or who she is, but we loved, yes, even your son, loved who she pretended to be. And I think that’s enough. It gave us some sort of chance, so thank you.”

The recorder repeats the questions.

“Look at us. Both so old. Do you think about dying, Caroline?”

The questions is asked, again.

“I do. It’s one of the side effects of this contraption.” Steadman’s head sticks out of the casing. Valves gauging pressure monitor the flow of oxygen.

The response affirms and reminds.

“You’re right. I’ve always thought about it. It’s in my nature. I still have the same dream, you know, the ashes, the angel, the burning. When I wake up, my feet like they are on fire, but I’ve grown to enjoy the sensation, the heat. It keeps me present, sharp, alive. You ever think that’s why so many people sign up to join?”

“Do you feel that’s why people sign up?”

“Stop it!” the subject yells, his expression changing to one of agitation. “Stop repeating,” he continues, breathing heavily. He waits till he regains balance. “What’s happened to us? It didn’t have to be like this. When I got sick, you could have left with me, but you stayed, that was your choice.”

“That was my choice?”

“Don’t get started. You could have the agency or James, not both.”

“Not both?”

“Don’t act like you didn’t get what you wanted. You got the position. I got a lung and you couldn’t even respect that.”

“You hide in a lung because you’re afraid.”

“I knew if I didn’t lock myself up, I’d ruin it for him because that’s what I do, that’s what we do, but it’s not about us. We’re talking about his life. Why do it to him?”

The recorder returns to the original line of questioning.

“Why did I break the...why did I tell him, Caroline?”

The recorder repeats the question once more.

“So you’re not going to talk to me like—”

The recorder repeats the question.

“Protocol, methods, I came up with half this bull—”

The recorder repeats itself.

“Odessa, Odessa.”

“What do—”

“My son comes home talking about a girl he meets at bar.”

“A bar?”

“A bar. Says her name was Odessa and that’s when I knew. It’s one thing to watch, but initiating contact. I’ve seen what happens. You said you would keep a distance.” In the tone there’s accusation, blame.

A question.

“It’s not just a name. You know that.” Steadman’s eyes dart back and forth, taking pleasure in what the reflection he sees in the mirror. “I met a man in Florida once.”

“In Florida?”

“Many years after our, excuse me, Anderson’s failure.”

“Failure.”

“It was a funny thing that report. No one questioned it. Not even me. There was a lot of mess to clean. McDuffy had screwed us, maybe he felt bad. I watched him read it, in my office, and when Angel, you remember him surely, when he died, McDuffy pours himself a drink and toasts to his soul. He meant it too. He felt bad for him,” Lucas says, taking a moment to breathe. “Then he gave us the blank check, the funding, the access, the keys we said we needed. All because he felt bad about sending that poor bastard out to do our dirty work.”

“The profiles capture people as they are, not as we wish them to be. If the acting director responded, he was responding to the truth.”

“But there was always the question of the soldier.”

“The soldier?”

“The one who got away. Where did he escape? What did he know?”

“What?”

“I found him after years of searching. His name in the report was Javier Mendez. He was stocking shelves at small supermarket in Miami.”

“You shouldn’t have done that Lucas.” The light in the room grows brighter. It doesn’t seem to bother him.

“It’s like he was prepared for it. He answered my questions about that day.”

“You should have accepted—”

“Don’t play coy. You knew I went down there.”

“Why didn’t you report me?”

“We had a son. You think I’m that kind of monster, Mint?”

“A son?”

“That’s why you gave James to me and that’s why you hate me. You were afraid that I’d tell.”

“That you’d tell?”

“Goddamnit! I went down to protect you, can’t you see that? To find a way to find that KGB bitch, to get back at her for what she did to you because, well you know why, I loved you.”

“You didn’t love me. You used me. You use everyone.”

Lucas shakes his head, trying to convince someone of his sincerity. He continues with his story. “This man, this Javier as he was called, I buy him a beer and sit across from him. Just two men talking, must have seemed like we were friends. I tell him about my investigation.”

“Investigation?”

“It was just a sunny day. Just like in Cuba. It was just like being there. Surrounded by Cubans too, maybe it’s all the same. And his beer’s sweating bullets while I’m holding a glass of water to my forehead as he verifies the story—his friend dying, the barber he killed, and it all adds up.”

“It all adds.”

“But there’s a problem. There are only four people in his memory, in that room: the barber, his friend, Odessa Belikhov, and him.”

“People invent the past in retrospect, creating discrepancies.”

“I asked him about the woman I saw, the woman by the jeep and he said she was just some foreigner they were dropping off at the base.”

“You believed him?”

Lucas stares wide-eyed in the mirror, looking through me, the image on the glass. “I pried further. I mean, I really dug into him. It took him months to recover, but I had to be sure.”

“Certainty.”

“Caroline Mint did not exist to this man. If she was there, she was either invisible or she was pretending to be something else, someone else.” He swallows before coming to it. “You betrayed us to save your own skin.”

“They betrayed the mission first. Anderson, McDuffy, they were just using us as a smoke screen for their own plots. Should I have died for those men?”

Lucas hesitates, but the name’s on the tip of his tongue, at the ready. “And the barber, Angel?”



“You think I wanted to give him up. I had to choose. It wasn’t my plan. I would have never used him that way, you know that.” The pressure from the machine rises. He exhales faster like it’s some sort of apology, like I do not see how he tries to manipulate the situation, deflecting. “If I had come to you then, in Havana, if I had told you about the cover story I invented, would you have helped me, lied with me, created Odessa with me?” I ask. “Don’t you see what that story bought us, how it made us? You were there, watching McDuffy, using the situation to squeeze every ounce out of him. That was the whole idea behind the report. It was never just about capturing people, was it? It was about how we did it. That was always the idea, wasn’t it? It worked exactly as wanted, but you needed me to do it. Now you want to lie there, all high and mighty after you investigated me, after you betrayed me, after I gave you the entire world?”

“I don’t know.”

Lucas turns away, but I stand over him so he can’t, so he has to answer. He would have betrayed me, we both know it. “When you found out, why didn’t you turn me in?”

His voice is dry, aired out. “All these years that happened after, what we became. We had just had James. And you were his and I couldn’t.”

“So, if it wasn’t for him, he’s the only reason, isn’t he, that I’m alive, that I’m not locked away or worse?”

“Call this off, Caroline. It’s not too late.” The lung compresses. It will continue. The object performs its function.

“I’ve lost track of him, Lucas.”

“What?”

“I just wanted to see him, always. To protect—”

“To control him.”

“No.”

“How did you lose him?”

“Odessa.”

“What?”

“Someone I thought I could trust took exception to the fact, well to her treatment. She will be dealt with accordingly.” When I find her, I’ll find something else too.

“You have to find her first. What did you do?” Still, with the accusation, the feigned innocence. It never suited him, nothing did, not even the Lucky’s he smoke, all part of an act to blend in.

“I fixed him up with a good girl. He was never going to find out. He could have been happy. They all could have been, pretending, just like your Shammi. You said it yourself.”

“You’re sick.”

The recorder repeats the question.

“You need to get a handle—”

The question.

“It doesn’t have to be like—”

A record requires a confession.

“A network of profiles,”

Running like constellations in the sky,

“Allowing us to forecast,”

The movement of the stars,

“For our protection,”

Threats keep rising from the earth,

“We can only see things after they happen,”

Even as we watch, the moment has passed,

“Everything is in the past now.”

The recorder repeats her question.

“I told my son about the existence of a government agency that monitors its citizens. I made him aware of his own surveillance despite my oath. I am a traitor, through and through, but I kept his mother safe. That’s right, I didn’t tell him about you, that’s what you want to know, isn’t it?”

“You want more?”

“I should have told him so much more.”

The irritation in his eyes. The slow breaths. Changing pressure in the valves.

“You can tell him, Caroline. You need to tell him. No one else can. It’s not too late for us.” I think he knows what I need to do. It’s not just for my sake anymore, it’s for all us now. He’s gone too far. Surely, he recognizes.

I hold his forehead. It’s damp and the moisture clings to my palm. The illness of his body has spread to his mind, of this there can be no mistake. His mouth, a mouth that

smoked, a mouth that kissed and gave me hope once, for a brief time, is no longer the same.

He tries to speak, but he cannot find his voice. Attempts to exhale are met with failure due to the artificial blockage. The lung poisons him with air, air that he cannot expel due to the device that seals his mouth and nose shut. I can feel it. I can feel it happening. His eyes grow wide, but he is trapped in the casing, realizing too late what is about to happen, that he is powerless, that this is how it will be, between the two of us. Perhaps he imagined something else. Slowly, peacefully, his eyelids droop, closing shut. Within the hour, the doctor will confirm it.

The operative sits in the kitchen, head down, staring at the marble counter island. Gray strands in her hair appear translucent.

“I want to thank you for not interfering,” the recorder says.

“Get out,” the operative responds.

“What will you tell him when he asks? You know what you need to—”

Shammi rises to her feet. “I’ll protect him from you, from all this, what I’ve always done, all my good life. Now get out,” she says, pointing in the direction of the door.

“Where would we be without you,” the recorder says, turning her back. Before exiting, I tell her, “This brownstone, this home, it’s yours, it belongs to you. He wanted you to have it. I want you to have it.”

“This is my payment?”

The recorder stops in the doorway. "Cost, payment, you determine the terms. We ask nothing else of you." The recorder leaves the house.

Inside the living room, the lung continues compressing into a dead man's body. A woman, finally alone, weeps openly in the soft morning light.

## CHAPTER 26

### Visions

We walk the Far Rockaway streets in the early morning, heads tilted to the ground. High-rise project buildings tower in the distance. People amble by us in the opposite direction, going to work, while we move against the grain. I haven't even called in sick. Ever since the meeting, Vaughn's been waiting for me to mess up. It doesn't matter that everything worked out. Somehow that's not the point. I could try to explain. Held captive by a government agent, detained for questioning after being drugged, chased, and kidnapped. Has to qualify for a personal day. Odessa squeezes my hand like she senses my thoughts, like she wants to tell me that I'm a fool for trying to turn away from her, from answers, that my job is bullshit when compared to the bigger things happening, but without a job all I'll be left are those bigger things.

The quiet between us is a competition. She wants to speak only after I bridge the divide. Let her wait. Sweat glides between our palms. There's nothing to be done, though. She's not letting go. After crossing the street, we reach a fenced barricade. Behind the black bars there's an apartment complex, towering into the cloudy sky. Odessa picks up the pace.

"Left," she says, turning us toward the entrance. She glances at the buzzer, but instead of pressing a button, she pulls a key from her pocket and unlocks the door. She lives here?

We pass a set of mailboxes under a set of buzzing fluorescent lights. The chipped paint on the flooring cracks at the corners. At the end of the hall, an elevator door opens, welcoming us. The chain creaks as we ascend, straining to deliver us, just like at Maxim.

Outside of apartment 33F, we wait. She holds the key out, but puts it away, deciding to knock instead. Three certain steady knocks.

A black kid with a thin mustache opens the door, allowing us inside. “Charles, Quan,” he yells, still glancing at the floor, while Odessa snaps the deadbolt. A big guy, wearing a Rutgers football jersey, comes out followed by a skinnier boy, slinking behind, peering around his frame. All three don’t look happy to see us. It’s not just that they’re angry or confused. They’re scared. I’ve seen this look before.

“Charles, Maurice, and Quan encountered the subject at the popular Coney Island establishment—”

“Nathan’s,” I say. The trio behind the register, sliding the tray forward.

“Precisely.”

The big one in the jersey speaks first. “What you doing here? We did everything you asked. You can’t be here. It’s not right.” He looks like he wants to take a swing.

“It’s cool, Charles. Let’s listen to what they have to say,” the smaller one says, emerging by his side. Charles crosses his arm and continues to stare us down.

The five of us fill up almost the entire space of the living room. Odessa and I stand on one side of a futon, the three brothers on the other. Behind them, an old TV with rabbit ears poking out gives way to barred windows that provide a view on the surrounding areas, the other projects, the aboveground subway line. All these people everywhere, traveling.

Odessa positions herself in the center of all of us. Her voice is distant, deliberate.  
“We require your assistance.”

The kid who opened the door throws his arms in the air. “What the fuck? What the fuck?” repeating the question more from desperation than anything else.

“Mo, chill,” the skinny one says, looking at Odessa like they’re the only two people in the room. Is this kid in on it too?

“Listen to your brother, Maurice.”

“How can we help?” Quan asks.

“I need a place to stay,” she says, “just for a short while.”

All three of them seem to let out a collective, “What?” It’s too much for the big guy to handle. He brushes off his brother and comes at me, grabbing my shirt, rolling the fabric with his fists. “Why the hell do you two—”

“Stop,” Odessa says. It does little good. Charles brings me closer to him, so we’re face to face, accusing me with his eyes for trespassing into their home, their lives. I never wanted. “I said stop,” she says, louder. “It’s just going to be me staying here for a short while. James has nothing to do with it.” Charles loosens his grip, but his eyes remain fixed with the knowledge that I’m to blame.

“I don’t get it,” Quan says.

“It’s not for you to get. It’s for you to provide.”

“For our future.”

“For the future,” Odessa affirms.

“This is bullshit,” Maurice says, nudging Charles away from me so we’re each back on our side of the futon.



“Complete bullshit,” Quan says, reaching his hand out toward Odessa. They shake in agreement.

“I have nothing to do with this,” I say, pleading with all of them. “I’m just like you. I don’t know what’s going on.”

They don’t respond. They don’t believe me. They’re right not to trust me. Maybe, I am responsible too. All these people, these people I’ve seen, they’re all waiting somewhere, holed up in their homes, trying to get on their days while living with the lurking suspicion that the knock is coming. There’s danger on the other side of that door. The danger isn’t just Odessa, it’s me. Something in me has done this to them. Something Odessa possesses of me has done this to them. The way she waits, patient, watching, drawing me to her. What if the whole thing’s an act? Even this, here. She’ll watch forever, in perpetuity. But watching isn’t enough. And watching isn’t just watching. It’s become something else, that thing that has made me a threat to these three brothers, these three scared boys that want nothing to do with it. “Odessa, why are you following me? What do you want?”

“Boys, will you leave me alone with James? We need to speak.”

The three of them move, their heads hung down in defeat, to the bedroom on the left and close the door.

“Have a seat,” she says, directing me to the futon. The springs coil beneath me and bounce back up. From the small kitchen to our right, she pours two glasses of water like she’s been living here for years, like this stuff is hers.

She gives me one glass and paces back and forth in front of the window, muttering as she devises her sales pitch, taking long sips in between. She sets the glass

down and begins. “Where should we start?” she asks anxiously, pretending that she didn’t just chase me down, hold me hostage, hurt that girl, that girl.

“What did you with Melissa?”

“Melissa,” she repeats. “Well, first of all, her name’s not really Melissa just like my name—”

“What did you do?”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t really hurt her. When she wakes up,” she says, reading her watch, “which should be shortly, she’ll be disoriented, but that pain is temporary. She failed in the field.”

“In the field? My apartment’s not a field.”

“She was an agent, James.”

“Like you?”

She hesitates. “If you like.”

“Jesus, how many of you are out there?”

“That information is classified. The work we do, the coverage required, necessitates large personnel.” She looks away, for a moment, guilt flashing.

It wasn’t just me. “Monk’s girl, too.”

She nods.

“Is he all right?”

“Without a doubt. You have to understand that his actions created a window, a way to initiate contact without arousing suspicion.”

“Monk,” I say.

“You should know that he’s a good friend. He was never in on any of it.”

“I know that. Of course I know that. You think I need you to tell me that? I don’t need you tell me that.”

“Yes, of course,” she says, but it sounds like she’s mocking me. All the things she knows that I don’t. I’m the child in this.

“Why then? Why follow me? Why all the trouble?”

“An excellent question. The answer is closer than you think.”

“I thought you weren’t going to be cryptic.”

She glances at the window and then back at me. Her mouth opens and then closes. Is this how she imagined it? The pitch is going wrong. Maybe she was never prepared for it. Finally, as if giving up, she unzips her jacket and sits next to me. Our legs touch. Her neck is red, stressed. A change of tactics. “How did you find me out that night on the boardwalk, when you caught me?”

All the cards on the table. Has this been the plan all along? “I saw you in the distance. You didn’t look anything like her or who you pretended to be. You were alone.”

She considers this. “That was enough? No, why did you look to begin with? The answer to this question, James, is the answer to your question of why. You don’t have to tell me, but if choose not to answer now, then I don’t think you’ll get another chance.”

Her leg begins to shake, but she’s unaware of it. “And neither will I.”

The truth will set you free, they say. The truth is trapped in an iron lung in Brooklyn. It’s not so hard, not when I look at her, when I remember her in that hospital bed. “My father, he told me that I was being watched, told me how to draw you out.”

“Smoke,” she says, grimacing in recognition of the trap. “Who is your father, James?”

“Lucas, Lucas Steadman.” I wait for her to say something, for the lightbulb to go off. If this is the answer than it should be working, unlocking the secrets, but she’s still searching. “Do you know him?”

“No no no,” she says, rubbing her forehead, closing her eyes. “I thought I’d recognize. No, it’s okay. Not entirely unsurprising. Information has been held back, but now I know what to look for, who to speak to. Your father is the key. What else? What else did he say?”

“Nothing, nothing. He refuses to say anything else, but you must know more about why you followed me.”

She swallows and stares at me with those cold Odessa eyes. “I followed orders. The orders were to develop your profile. I learned so much—”

“But why? I’m not a terrorist. What gives you the right? How could you do it, this entire time, not knowing?”

“It’s a matter of security, James. All individuals have the potential to pose a threat in the world we live in. Monitoring yields leads, often through tangential connection. You wouldn’t believe how many people, how many threats exists. All that information, all those people connected, someone has to protect us from the threat of the here and now. I mean, you read the news.”

“You would know.”

“We eliminate threats before they pose a threat through surveillance, information gathering, intelligence building,” she says like she’s reading off a pamphlet.

“You don’t believe any of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t be here, telling me these things, if you were a believer. You’re not supposed to be here,” I say, grabbing her leg to stop it from shaking, “you’re not supposed to be telling me these things, Odessa.”

She pauses, in search of the right thing to say. “Don’t you want to know my real name?”

“Whose orders are you following?”

“What, are you going to write to your Congressman?” she says, removing my hand.

“Who would do this?”

“It’s Sophia. My name’s Sophia.”

She doesn’t look like a, “Sophia.”

“It’s best if you don’t know more about who’s behind the curtain. It will just make things more dangerous, especially if they catch me.”

“What would they do?”

She brushes off the question like it doesn’t matter. But her leg’s shaking again and I know it’s on her mind. “Give me time. I need to find a way to approach your father safely. Then we’ll ask him the truth, together.”

“After we both know, what then? You planning on taking *them* down?”

“Nothing as grand as that. I’m looking for a way out, for safety and I believe this information will provide that.”

“You’ve dragged me into the question. Why couldn’t you keep a distance? You’ve dragged all these people into it, these kids into it.”

“How could you not want to know, James?”

“Because I want to live a normal life. Maybe these aren’t my questions.”

She puts both her knees on the futon and inches closer. “Why’d you come visit me in the hospital?”

“I already told you—”

“You wanted to see me?” she asks. “Well, I’m right here. You can see me. I want to watch you seeing me. Say my name.”

“Sophia.”

“Yes,” she says. “I’m not Odessa, she’s a story.”

“She’s not real.”

“Not anymore, but we can be real.”

“How?”

“By getting the truth. The information has power. It’s the way out for us both. I can’t change who you are and I can’t change what I did, but now there’s a chance.”

“There’s a chance.” I see her. She sees me. And we’re seeing this life ahead, outside of the scope of this thing. I held her hand when her eyes were closed. She held mine and I looked away. I take her hands now. Hold them with my own. She knows my habits, my patterns, my history. It should feel like violation, but she’s here now, confessing, struggling to make it right. Me and her are in this together. There’s a future beyond that we both want that extends to a day where she’s the girl and I’m the boy and that’s all there is. There’s a chance. She sees me seeing it.

I moves closer and she moves closer till our lips touch and we kiss for real this time, without the smoke getting in the way.

On the subway, back to work, I do my best to straighten up, flattening my hair, taking slow breaths. I'm over two hours late and didn't even give Vaughn the benefit of a call.

Sophia gave me my wallet back, but not my phone. She said she left it in my apartment, that it was a tracking device in a long list of tracking devices.

The train shifts underground as we get closer to the city. The half-empty car is filled with the familiar strangers—the workers, the summer kids, the headphone wearers, all avoiding eye level contact, except for a brief moment. Is this politeness, a lack of trust, both?

Sophia said she didn't know who might be watching, that when I returned to Maxim that I'd be tailed again. "You can't come back here," she said, guiding me out. "Once I figure out the plan, I'll find you. Then we'll go see him together, when I know it's safe for the two of us. Don't worry, they won't try anything until they know more, it's not their style."

"You mean, until they find you?"

"Yes, but they won't. We'll go to him when it's safe."

Safety, the word, the fact that it need to be said, means I'm not safe. Subway cars moving through tunnels with a rotating cast of characters, each of them capable of being one of them. At the Nostrand Avenue stop, a man, about my age, wearing a suit, gets on. He leans against the subway door, even though he's not supposed to. I keep waiting for it, but he never inspects the people in the car, not once. Is it because he knows I'm watching him? He keeps staring straight ahead, pretending to check the time, sidestepping when others get off the train, resuming the position. He doesn't have a newspaper to read or

anything. Must be waiting for me to get off so he can follow. I know his face, the signs. He's definitely one of them and I'm not going to let them get me this time. Through Jay St-MetroTech and High Street I keep vigil, even as more people fill the car, circulating around the clean-shaven agent who is too inhuman, too steady to be a regular of the MTA. He gets off at Fulton Street, one stop ahead. I see him pass by my window, but he doesn't notice me, he never cared. He's going to work, like me, nothing more than another James or the James I used to be. Maybe someone's following him.

I rub my hands together and close my eyes, waiting for the conductor to announce our arrival at Chambers St, allowing me to leave the musty seats, the crowd looking straight ahead, but not, looking at me, but not. I can hear their voices, their breathing, even as the train continues rolling over the tracks it's rolled down a million times before.

Through the lobby, I pass the aluminum woman and go through the turnstiles. Both guards shoot the sideways glance, but don't say a word. The elevator chains grind.

No one seems to notice my arrival. Everyone's too busy at their desks, talking into their headsets, staring at the information scrolling on their screens.

At my desk, I wait for Vaughn to summon me. He's at his desk grasping stress balls with the logo, Maxim, imprinted across them. The words stretch and contract with each squeeze.

My phone blinks red, signaling voicemails, messages that need to be checked. The computer powers on. I'm tapping on the mouse, waiting to cycle through my duties:



email, phone, correspondence with Vaughn over priority items when I hear the tapping on the glass. He's speaking into his headset, waving at me to join him inside.

“Excellent news. Once again, I apologize for the turbulence, but we'll have your funds transferred and sorted in no time.” He grits his teeth together as he listens to the voice on the other end. “What can I say, the man was getting old. He no longer had a place here. Let him go is what I said to the other partners. With this new information they were finally inclined to agree.” He laughs. “Yes, like an Eskimo drifting away, Eskimo Jacques.” He raises his eyebrows like I'm in on the conversation. “Yes, no, not at all, thank you, buh-bye.”

I take a seat while he rests on his desk. A red tie dangles down his chest, the point resting on his crotch, pointing at me. “James, James,” he says, “how long have you been with me?”

“Four years.”

“A presidential term.”

“A college degree.”

“Well, I hope you were able to get an education out of it,” he says, tucking his lower lip beneath his upper.

“What do you mean, *were*?”

“It has. Sadly, it has come to our attention that Jacques Richard will be opening his own fund,” he says, “and that you mean to join him.”

“What?”

“It's okay. This is business. I get it, but if you ask me, you're picking the wrong horse. You know my returns.” He sounds hurt, betrayed, doubted. There's something else

in the tone too, a confidence that I've made the wrong decision, a resignation that we were always meant to go our separate ways.

“Who told you this? I know a lot of crazy stuff has been happening lately, but you have to listen, you have to believe me, I never even talked to him—”

“Don't,” Vaughn says. “Mr. Richard himself confirmed it.”

“What?”

“Take it like a man. Own up. Move on. I get it, you have your regrets now, maybe you thought it was just a flirtation, but it's too late now, out of my hands,” he says, folding his arms across his chest.

“Too late,” I repeat. There's a cityscape behind him, rows of office cubicles filled with busy bees to my back. He's made up his mind. It's a decision that he's been inclined for. He's been waiting for an excuse. We both know it. There's so much he doesn't know, so much else going on in the world. I can have a life beyond Maxim, with her, that's what matters. “You're not going to listen to me anyway. It's what you do. When I walk out, it's not going to mean a thing to you.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” he says, rising from the desk, pulling his pants out of his ass. “You're good at what you do. This has simply run its course.”

“You're glad to be rid of me.”

“It's a matter of policy, James. You can't be here if you're going to work for a competitor.” He speaks down to me. I'm only an administrative assistant, disposable, and I'm taking too much time out of his day. “We need you to pack your things and go, immediately. Here,” he says, reaching from under his desk, and placing the cardboard

box in my hands, which open to receive it, “for your things.” As I exit, he says as an afterthought, “Judy in HR will call you later today and run through additional details.”

Back out at my desk, I wonder what’s even worth taking. My Clorox wipes? There’s nothing here, not even a picture frame. Everyone buzzes about, but I can tell they’re all pretending not to notice. They all know, that special hum of death hovers in the atmosphere whenever anyone goes. Fired. Everyone always watches the walk out, wondering how it would feel like if it was them, secretly happy that it’s not, that they have the luxury of seeing someone who isn’t them leave, never to return. I’ve been a fixture here, a staple, but I might as well be a plastic plant to them. I know I’m not friends with these people, but I know them, and it doesn’t count for anything. Life goes on at Maxim. The transactions continue. Money keeps generating money and as long as that continues no one’s going to care about the guy you’ve known for four years, holding a box in his hands, wearing a dumbstruck expression. If anything, they’ll remember it, discuss it over drinks, maybe even mimic it, laugh at it, anything to help them deal.

I set the box down and collect my jacket. Walking to the elevator, I gaze across the floor to Richard’s empty office, peering out into the Hudson, Bill’s vacant desk. He left his stuff behind too. Maybe Richard will give me a job. He’s got to give me something. Still, what is this job anyway? Maybe people will stop following me. Maybe the whole thing doesn’t have to be completely fucked.

The elevator doors close, compressing the last image of the men from Maxim, the busy men hard at work.

When I leave the guards don't even acknowledge my presence. The aluminum woman continues searching the heavens with arms outstretched, searching for answers in the sky.

## CHAPTER 27

### Messages

James exits Maxim through the revolving doors. Once outside, he takes a deep breath and exhales, eyes closed, a display of acceptance, relief. That the loss of James's occupation arrives not with a response of anger or panic, signals that the reduction might be the best thing for him, an opportunity to find a true calling, a blessing in disguise as it were.

Eyes opened, he sees the face of his colleague and friend, Bill Kearns. perched against the building, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Hey man," Bill Kearns says.

"Hey," James responds, shifting closer, surely surprised at the smoke, a change in behavior that can best be explained as a stress response. The action of smoking itself, however, typified in cultural images, is as much responsible for producing the behavior as any perceived benefit the smoking itself creates, which is all to say that smoking does not occur as a singular act of inhale/exhale, but is an action attached to a range of images from James Dean on his motorcycle(*The Wild One*) to Willy Loman(*Death of a Salesman*) walking across the stage to Edward R. Murrow reading the news(CBS Evening) as the smoke rose in folds, creating a depth of vision to the screen, a constant burn to answer the sober reality, a tool that gives the voice and the image authority. So Bill smoking is not simply a stressed man with a cigarette speaking to a friend, though it is that, it is also Bill's constructed self-image that the smoke contains, which is part of the

coating smoking provides, the illusion projected helps him fulfill a role, to say the things that need to be said. All the while the ash continues to form as the smoke ascends into the atmosphere, becoming invisible as it travels against the office windows, the gargoyles snarled expressions, finally dissipating into the skyline.

In the approach, James's nostrils flare, still absorbent, habituated, conditioned to the stimulant. "Want one?" Bill asks.

"No, I'm good." Clearly lying.

They linger in silence, each expecting the other to speak, each hesitant to engage in pity talk.

"I guess Vaughn broke the news."

"Richard, what the hell is he doing?"

"Beats me," Bill shrugs, avoiding eye contact with his friend like a child, an avoidance that prods.

"What's your story?"

To which, Bill pulls long and hard before explaining, voice breaking as he provides the reasoning.

Which can all be traced back to a late night in the office where Bill pretends to busy himself, waiting for both Richard(departure at 6 PM) and James(6:30 PM departure) to retire from the day's pursuit. Normally, Vaughn would have left, if not for a vague email that appears in his personal account that tells him they need to talk, privately, without Richard or James's presence. Bill sweats as he types, stealing glances at his boss whose chair faces the Hudson, his hesitance more a reflection of nerves, a fear of getting caught, than the ethical implications in his actions, an act seeded in the moment Richard

squeezed his hardened shoulders and essentially told him it was time to move on. Bill still wakes, feeling the condescension in the grip, like waking into a nightmare that squeezes you, mocks you, cuts you down, even as you grip heavier barbells for your military press, even as you fight against the pain, fight to break through the barrier that's going to cause Richard's fingers to break if he ever tries touching you again. So you realize the mantra, "In the Money," was never real motivation, nothing compared to the knots forming throughout your body, a body you try to sculpt to be impervious.

Which motivates Bill's Machiavellian plan to save himself by usurping a friend, in the end the only way to combat the enemy is through an alliance with the man on the other end of the spectrum(Vaughn, Jeremy). Richard's apparent affinity toward his friend serves as a hidden motivator. Even if he refuses to admit his jealousies, his actions are rife with them.

So as Bill enters the office of Maxim's rising star, rubbing his wet palms on his increasingly damp trousers, shooting through the straight hallway surrounded by the quadrants containing the workstations, that sinking sensation in his gut or muscled abdomen that he's been carrying with him for weeks dissolves into a calm that comes from having nothing to lose, an attitude which, if correctly assigned, reveals the true value of his friendship(nil). And if not nil, at the very least Bill has engaged in a zero sum game where the gain of his job comes at the expense of his friendship, leaving him between gain and loss, but again all this is a matter of valuation.

Vaughn listens intently as Bill explains Richard's intention to start his own fund, leaning forward the more Bill speaks, the city lights behind them. And when he comes to the question of the job, of Richard's intention to steal James, continuing even as Vaughn

utters a barely audible “son of a bitch,” Bill makes it known that he means to stay, explaining how he hopes “my act of loyalty will secure my future, ideally working for you, sir,” to which Vaughn slaps his hands together and repeats the phrase, “son of a bitch,” although this time the cadence has changed to match the grin on his face. Vaughn says he understands completely, that he completely gets it, as they shake on it, a shake that guarantees Bill’s future, his survival, his shoulders. “That French asshole was trying to do this on the DL,” Vaughn says pursing his lips, “well, we’re not going to let him. We’re going to steal as many of his clients. Breach of contract situation here. They’ve all been complaining about him anyway.” It bothers Bill that Vaughn does not even mention James, that he doesn’t even warrant the attention, but Bill gets it, he knows the policy, he knows that there are policies for these kinds of situations.

Bill’s summary omits several of these details, but still rests on the claim that he had no choice in the matter. He assures his friend that Richard will give him a job, that the man likes him so god damn much.

Young Steadman just takes it. Bill imagined a scenario where this would be the time James cracked and took a swing, a swing he’d be ready for, that Bill would be forced to react to on instinct, trying not hurt James in his defense of himself, but his friend does not swing, and Bill realizes he knew all along that this would be the reaction or lack thereof.

With Bill finished, James scans the surrounding area, staring at the people in the streets, the drivers in their cars, none of them look his way or so it appears. The only person he can make out who’s watching is Bill. “Do you have any idea what’s going on around us?” James asks.



Bill, unsure of the question, issues a slow, “No.”

“Me and you. Maxim and Vaughn and Richard, it’s all bullshit. There are people watching. Greater forces at work, working on me, working on you, but *you* would have no idea about that.”

Bill, stepping forward, an accusation in the *you*.

“Fuck you, fuck them, fuck it all,” James says, giving up, leaving his formers(job, friend, company) behind.

“Come on man, don’t be like that,” Bill says, bewildered by the response, somewhat worried, but really just happy to see him go, that’s that.

“Have a nice life,” James says, his back turned, walking away.

When Bill throws his cigarette to the ground, he does not bother stomping it out. Through the revolving doors, past Madonna on the rocks with the tits, he mutters to himself, “This is the money, this is the money,” repeating the line over and over again, the repetition an attempt to extinguish the lurking doubt, a doubt that’s all but dormant by the time he sits down at his new desk, wondering just where the hell he’s going to put the cardboard box staring him straight in the face.

Inside his Upper East studio, James sees the mess, the scattered bed sheets on the floor, bedside table overturned, broken glass still steeped in water. On the kitchen counter he finds his phone. Pushes the buttons. Dead.

He plugs it into the charger. The Research in Motion logo pops, filling the screen, green bars, one, then two, three, four, cycling. Leaving it, he undresses, waiting naked in the bathroom for the water to warm.

In the shower, he pries open the small window, looking downtown. Steam vents as drops cascade down his neck. He presses his arms straight against the tiles, transferring his weight forward, as the heat relaxes the bones in his neck, the peak of his vertebrae, perfect ovals stressed against his skin.

As he dries himself, he stares at his reflection, which becomes clearer as the steam evaporates. The bathroom mirror frames the wall above the base line of the sink. “Are you watching me now?” he asks. “What do you see?” James receives no response.

Opening his mouth, he forms an O. The O becomes a snarl, his expression widening to reveal his superior and inferior teeth. The snarl to a smile. The smile to a frown. Frown to a blank glaze, growing clearer as he inches toward the glass, his nose against the mirror, breathing his reflection away. “Now, I’m invisible,” he says. Stepping back, the steam fades. He is visible. “Are you happy now?” he asks. Who does he think he’s talking to?

After putting on a casual arrangement(jeans/t-shirt), James enters his kitchen and rummages for food. His phone blinks red, vibrates. There are messages, several messages, but he does not hear. Instead, he bites into a granola bar, chewing the grain into mush, swallowing with little pleasure. He’s in the middle of his second bar when he decides to approach the device.

Slowly, he lifts the phone to see the numerous voicemails from the woman he so nobly referred to as his mother. The phone slips from his shaking hand, dropping to the ground. James bends down, knees on the floor, and unplugs it, taking it in his hand. He crawls to his bed, holding the phone up, leaning against the frame. With his free hand he covers his face, hiding his expression.

His fingers do the necessary work to unlock the messages contained. He's been waiting for this news his whole life, but now that it arrives.

Her voice cracks, the act seemingly genuine, a plea to *call soon, where are you, James? Call please, so many messages, so many left at work, where are you, James? Please call, your father, come home now beta, he's gone*, and James continues to sit on the wooden floor against his bed, face covered, hidden from his window, listening to every single message, why James, why don't you stop, why don't you call her right this moment, this woman you called your mother, this woman begging you to call, *I need you, please, your father's gone, James, James is where, where are you, James?*

## CHAPTER 28

### Odessa

With a shifty-eyed grin, he pulls the lever. “One for you, one for me,” he says, pouring out the head, filling both glasses to the brim.

My phone vibrates on the bar. “Leave message,” Alex yells into the receiver, cupping the side of his mouth like the person on the other end can hear. “Why do you worry so much?” he asks. “You want job back? I make one call to Ms. Irina and she get you job back.”

“It’s not that,” I say, watching the air pockets in the beer bubble to the surface.

“What then?”

“Then what?” The next step in the process. In what direction does one move? Surely, not this. Definitely not this, this lateral move, stalling, it feels like going backward, but why be anywhere else? We continue drinking in the empty bar, Russian pop songs playing, electronic digital voices setting the mood.

He refills our glasses, two more Obolons. She said she’d contact me with a plan, said I couldn’t trust what I heard, that I couldn’t go back home without her. Odessa, what is she? No Odessa, no problem, *call me Sophia*. Her kiss draws me close, but this time it wasn’t just her kissing me, it was the other way too, wasn’t it? She’s rendered me missing. A missing person, a person who is missed. Shammi needs me, but the man will stay dead. Even this will heal and when she finally sees me she won’t be upset, it’ll be

relief and all that other panic won't matter, it'll go away. Sophia, I'll give her one night, that's what she's purchased, what she's earned.

“So a drunk man walks into a bar. He sees on the counter a jar filled with money, hundreds of dollars, yes? Man says to the bartender, ‘what is this?’ Bartender says, ‘Anyone who pass three tests gets the entire jar of money.’ The man asks what the tests is and bartender says, ‘first, give me ten dollars and I tell you.’ So drunk man gives him money, says, ‘Number one: you must drink entire jug of vodka. Number two: There is a dog chained up with the back with sore tooth, with your bare hands you must remove sore tooth with your bare hands. Number three: There is old woman upstairs, 90 year old, who her entire life never, never had orgasm, and well, you know what you need to do for her. The drunk man curses and says the bartender is crazy, that it is impossible. He orders a drink and drinks miserably. After one drink he has one more than another. Soon, he points at bartender and yells, ‘I'll do it, I can do it.’ So the man drinks the jug of vodka and stomps on the ground. Entire bar starts to chant his name, *Grigory, Grigory, Grigory*, they all say. Grigory goes outside to face the dog. From inside, they hear the wrestling, the screaming, the dog crying, and then nothing, all is quiet. Everyone in bar think Grigory must be dead. But then, door flies open, and there he is, shirt all bloody, scratches everywhere. He goes to bartender, his chest out like big man and says, ‘Tell me, now, where is this woman with the sore tooth?’”

“Wait, he had sex with the dog?”

“It's a joke. Jesus Christ! There is no dog, only joke dog.”

“Right, right,” I say, smiling. “It's funny.”

We continue drinking. Alex is disappointed. I'm disappointed.

“You’re smart man. You will get another job.” He clinks my glass with his as means of confirmation.

“I can’t keep doing what I’ve been doing.” The bar is empty, the empty bar. Alex burps. I follow his lead. “Yes, for the best,” he says, “for the best.”

He doesn’t tell me where he’s driving, says it’s a surprise. He cracks open the tinted windows of the town car, letting in a stream of warm air. The streets are dark, barely a person on them. The few that are walk as props, imbuing the scenery just enough so no one questions the destitution, the families who feed the need to remain closeted within their houses, behind the shades. The radio plays some song. It sounds familiar like every other song on the radio that you don’t recognize. Alex bobs his head, pretends to enjoy it.

We pull up in front of just another house, only it’s not. We’ve both seen the fortress within. “Come, come,” he says, getting out of the car.

“You want to tell me what this is about?” I ask, following him up the stairs.

“We found her, friend, we found her.” He sounds proud, happy.

“Who?” We stop at the door.

He squeezes my shoulder and laughs as he says it, unable to contain himself.

“Little Odessa.”

“She’s here?”

“She is here, everywhere.” The door opens. With his arm draped around me, he leads me inside.

Instead of two pretty ladies behind the podium, there is only the old man, who coughs his way down the creaky steps. At II, he guides us through the drapes, which skim against us, offering a comforting velvet resistance. Alex taps on my back, drumming in excitement. I can picture his wide grin behind me, a genuine happiness impossible to fake. The three of us wait at the entrance to the hall, which is completely dark.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, the only sound present. The chandelier light begins to illuminate the room, but it's still too dark to really see anything. The old man turns to me. Leering, he says, "Give me phone," extending his fingertips into my abdomen. "No phone here," he continues, exhaling.

"Don't get excited," I say.

"Give him phone," Alex says into my ear, prodding my side.

"You're not getting my phone," I tell the man. I turn to Alex. "Tell the man, he's not getting it."

The old man sticks his hand into my pockets and begins to rifle through them, searching, grabbing. "Stop," I say, but he digs deeper, scratching, his head stuck against my stomach. "Come on." I try to get a hold of him, but he's slippery, the more I try to stop him, the harder he clings. "Get off, man," I say. "Alex, help me out," but he's too busy laughing at the spectacle.

The light grows brighter. When I see her approach, I stop, but the old man keeps squirreling. When he's about to touch it, Irina pulls him off. "What the hell?" she yells.

The old man, sweating, chest heaving, appears panicked. He stops, but it's a brief moment of consideration. He turns back into me, hugging my waist, head barreling into even harder than before. I trip over my feet, falling to the carpet. Alex continues

laughing. Irina yells louder, more annoyed than angry. The old man ignores it and continues searching, letting out yipping sounds as he exerts himself against me, his fingers prying, desperate.

Eventually, Alex lifts him off me. He holds him, while I get up. “There, there,” Irina says, but it’s like she’s speaking to the room and not addressing either of us. The old man’s body hunches forward in Alex’s arms, his shirt untucked, his gray hair twisting to the ceiling. He struggles to regain his breath, his eyes staring at me with the same frenzy that he had while on the floor. “Chomu?” Irina says.

“Phone, phone,” he mutters, his fingers twitching.

“Phone, phone,” Irina mimics, shaking her head. “Uncle, who cares?”

Uncle appears confused. “My job,” he whispers.

“What job?” Irina asks.

The old man’s eyes lose any remaining luster, his slump complete. Alex releases him. We watch him disappear through the soft drapes.

The light grows brighter. The hall is empty with tables folded against the walls, chairs stacked to one corner, the balconies of the floors above deserted, the chemical scent of cleaner lingers in the air.

“Odessa, Odessa Belikhov,” Irina says, smirking. “Quite a name.”

“You found her?”

“There was no record of her in the hospital.”

“No record.”

“You knew this, part of the game.”

“I don’t—”



“It’s okay,” she says, shifting closer. “So boring, all that we do, but Alex told me what you want. I find her. When you said her name, this is who I picture.”

“I think you’ve made a—”

“No, no,” she says, peering into the curtained hallway. “Odessa, bring her,” she commands, speaking into the void.

A woman emerges, tall, blonde, Odessa-ish, except the menace isn’t there in those blue eyes, but maybe that was a thing I invented later. She stares straight, doesn’t glance my way, remaining focused on Irina. She navigates between me and Alex. Her skin’s pale, creamy, her neck thin, but strained, like it’s work to hold her head. A black dress clings to her, cinched and tailored to her curves, outfitted to perfection.

She’s by Irina’s side, the two of them facing the two of us. Alex nudges me with his elbow. The girl twirls and curtsy’s like she’s been trained. Finally, she looks at me, and I can tell, maybe because she’s trying so hard to hide it and there’s something so familiar in it, that she’s afraid, that she doesn’t want to be here, but for choices and reasons beyond herself, here is where she finds herself.

“Your Odessa,” Irina says.

“Odessa,” Alex says, nudging me.

“Odessa,” the girl repeats.

“Odessa,” I say in agreement.

We all wear our relieved expressions, certain of nothing in particular.

## CHAPTER 29

### Outsider

The agent watches under the assumption that she cannot be seen. Knowledge of being seen compromises the behavior of the subject under observation. An agent without invisibility is an agent without relevance, a threat that festers like a growth in the body in need of removal.

She's been on the outside for so long, requesting entry, emphasizing the need for access to complete the profile. Her requests are what prompted the change, the constant prodding making the flaw in the initial agreement with Father Lung evident.

Now, as the ambulance waits, collecting the man inside, its lights motionless, soundless, she sees that she's going to be on the outside for much longer, that she was simply too slow, rendered reactive rather than pro, an amateur in the field resembling a civilian, comprehending now in this moment of frustration that this is not who she wishes to be, more than that though, it is not who she is, it's not who we are.

The ambulance drives away with that once precious thing, now dead. The woman with the sari, only a nurse in her estimation, sits on the steps, clutching a phone, hoping for a call from the subject, her body leaning back and forth, the motion an act that fights against the shiver, though it is not cold. The agent watching zips her jacket tight, an act that mirrors, suggesting an attempt at empathy. They both fight against the reality of the situation and its relative warmth.

Shammi holds the phone to her face, staring down at the space between her knees, listening to the continuous ring, the familiar sound that leads to an automated recording that instructs her to wait for the beep. Her lips part, but nothing escapes. The message records a breeze, a car horn blaring in the distance, in all seven-seconds without words. She ends the call. The screen blinks the name, “James,” along with the duration of the message, followed by the instant shift to the Home screen, a switch that happens so quickly it causes her to question if the call ever took place. Despite this, she forgoes the impulse to immediately try again, knowing two things: that it wouldn’t do any good and that there are greater forces at work protecting James.

The agent watching witnesses the grief, processing the events that she, herself, set in motion, this Odessa(Lyon, Sophia), who held so much promise, holds herself responsible. How will she explain this to the subject? Without the best laid plan, what does she possess, except a knowledge of procedure and composition?

She takes one step forward into the sun. One step back, into the shade. To approach or to remain?

The choices Sophia makes, starting from graduating Summa cum laude from New England based ----- to active recruitment into the Agency to being identified by through her profile as the ideal SEN candidate to entering the elite fold of STROM training where she first encounters the Proto-Director, who, herself, rose from the very ranks, should not have led her here. The agent hesitates in that initial meeting with a premeditated mix of humility and awe, enough to impress respect without the residue of annoyance so often produced by the cloying inferiors so eager to please.

Throughout her training, the two walk, following the long curves of the underground hallway, side by side, leaving impressions, patiently attempting to break the exterior of the other, to reach that place of something earned, some closer approximation of the genuine.

On one such stroll, they stop outside an unassigned office. The Proto-Director, holding the key, muscles the door open in a surprising show of strength. Overhead fluorescent lights drain their faces of color. Filing cabinets from another age line the walls, occupying the majority of the room, accumulating dust. A cigarette stench lingers embedded in the fabric of the office. White paint on the walls has begun to crack, browning in the corners as if burned. An old computer, covered with a clear plastic sheet, rests on the workstation, a metallic desk screwed into the floor.

Sophia remains quiet, ready. Though she does not know the reason, she knows there is a good reason that she is here. “Have a seat,” the PD says, pointing to one of two chairs in front of the desk. Though she does not show it, she must be pleased when the PD sits in the chair besides her rather than the one behind the desk.

With their legs crossed, feet pointed, toes almost touching, they face one another. After the initial gaze, Sophia correctly reads the cue to speak. The casual air in her voice still allocates a measure of respect while, rightfully, acknowledging a change in their relationship. “This room appears to contain history.” Is that what we were there to discuss? Is that why I took her there?

“That’s what you’re smelling right now, history. In this room decisions were made regarding people’s lives.”

Sophia stares back, cold. “Hence, the smoke.”

“A stress response, completely unnecessary.”

“Cowardly.”

The PD smiles at the trainee’s ability to read. “Yes, a behavior best relegated to the past. Men in here talked, Russia, Lebanon, Bolivia, Iran, Cuba, the list goes on, almost every major operation for thirty years, this room had something to do with it.”

“What changed?” Curious eyes, body leaning forward, interest being sparked, or is this simply a reflection of the PD’s desire, projecting what she wants to see into the person before her?

“The right people were put in charge, people who put in more efficient protocols, accelerated the processes.”

“The right processes,” Sophia says in affirmation, appearing contemplative.

“One day new people will take over and institute their own procedures, insisting all the while that the people who came before them were doing it all wrong.”

“Yes, they will.” No hesitation, not even a bat of the eye-lid.

“Why did you join?” the PD asks, tone changing to one of formality, to one of someone who has just been insulted.

“I want your job one day.”

The raised eyebrow of annoyance. “Agent Lyon, do you know how many times I’ve heard that response? I expected more from you.”

“It’s just the truth,” a rapid reply, featuring a hint of those subdued New England roots in the voice, the panic real. “It’s why you brought—”

“I brought you here on a whim.”

“You brought me to show me the past.”

“It’s why this place still exists, as a reminder. It’s a relic, an indulgence of mine, one that I’m sure the future will rectify.”

“I promise—”

The PD waves her off, amused. “Please, don’t make promises.” She tilts her head toward the empty chair. “Who knows exactly why or how, but a man who used to sit right there selected me for the position that ultimately took me here. He saw something in me at a time when no one else was even interested in looking.”

“Sounds like a smart man.”

“At times, but see that empty chair, that’s all that’s left of him. We went as far as we could go.”

“We?” she asks.

The question lingers as that bit of something genuine and earned and though she does not know it, it’s the closest she’ll ever get to being in that house the way she wants. And all thrown away, like our conversation never happened, and why, for a boy, because she felt betrayed by the interrogation, is that it?

Now she hovers, beyond unassigned, an agent exposed, stuck between going forward and back, knowing both choices to be flawed, thinking now about how it all went wrong. But these fractures that happen, the effect is not irreversible if one recognizes. She can be recovered.

At the corner, the car stops, a car she will identify. It represents a chance at forgiveness, a chance to make the wrong right, to reverse the effects of the past. It’s not too late for her. She simply has to trust in it, in the process, in me. She will get inside. It’s who she is.

Little hesitation in the movement, she emerges on the sidewalk like any other city girl, not even glancing at the woman sitting alone at the top of the steps, and gets inside in order to face the consequences.

## CHAPTER 30

### Guest

The car ride begins quietly enough. Confronted with questions, maybe it's best to embrace silence. Alex and I ride in the front while this Odessa sits in the center seat behind us, alternating her gaze between the two of us.

"Why so quiet?" Ales asks. "This is happy, yes?"

"Yes," Odessa replies, her back straightening. He stares, using the rearview to monitor. She touches my shoulder and parrots the words, "This is happy."

"Good," he says, turning the radio on as he takes the onramp to the highway.

I shut it off. "What do you mean, good?"

The Odessa squeezes my shoulder tighter. "She is pretty, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then what?"

The girl leans forward and pecks my neck with kisses.

"Stop, stop." She retreats to the window, turning away from us, shielding her face from view. "You can't do this to people, can't just sell them like this, *prostitute them*," I say, so only he can hear.

Alex laughs, slapping the wheel, accelerating through traffic like it's a way to express himself. "Not a prostitute. She is a wife. What you wanted, what you asked for, to be happy. This arrangement, this is normal and she is very pretty, like your Odessa, except she is real because she is here, yes, so this is perfect, yes."



“This isn’t what I asked for.”

A sobbing whimper escapes from the back. We both turn. Odessa’s face is in her hands.

“Now, look what you do.” Alex leans across the medium and whispers through the side of his mouth. “Ms. Irina gave you gift. You must take the gift. Girl is scared. Right now, you must accept it to protect her. Understand?”

“I got it.” I got it when we first met, that fear in her face that she tried so hard to conceal.

“Understand?” he asks louder, so all of us hear.

“Yes,” I say. We continue the drive. The sobbing eases into a snuffle that reduces over time into silence.

“Good, where am I taking you?”

“Where have you been heading?”

“I’ve been going to no place. First, I needed to make sure you understand.”

“Satisfied?”

“Enough.”

I hold the phone in my palm. It vibrates and flashes her name and I think what have I done for the people I love, the ones that have been there, the ones who matter, these people of substance that seem so few and far between. “Take us home.”

“Home.”

“To Brooklyn.”

“Yes,” Alex says, focusing on the road.

It’s time to stop.

When we pull up, Shammi's sitting on the steps. The purple folds of her sari are the only parts of her I can see, her face too dark to make out an expression. "Wait here," I tell them, getting out.

Shammi stands. She towers. The spotlight's on me at the bottom of the stairs and I'm bringing her into it. In this moment, whoever watches for whatever reason, they're stealing something away from us. Still, I won't let her know, she has the right not to know, it's better that way, at least one of us can have that.

I climb till we're face to face. Lines circle her eyes. "Don't cry, Sham." She pushes into my chest and I hold her shaking body, brushing her hair, hiding her against me as best I can. I tell her I'm sorry. I tell her we'll be okay and I think if only I could make that true what a man I'd be.

The camera burns a hole in my back. I can feel it and I know the only thing I can do is let it burn. I'm sorry, Sophia, for losing this chance, going against the plan. As Shammi and I move through the doorway, it's clear it was never much of a choice, that you always go to those in need, the few that really do need you, because if you don't there's even less of a point to all this than I can handle.

We stop outside my father's room. The sliding door is latched shut. Shammi clings to the side of my arms, unable to speak.

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

"Good beta, good," but it doesn't sound like what she really wants to say. "Let me heat you some food. You must be hungry."

A car honks, an Alex honk.

“This isn’t going to make sense, but a girl’s going to stay with us, just for a short while. I’ll explain everything in the morning,” when I figure out just how to explain.

“Fine, James, fine.” She sounds so tired. “This is your home, now.”

“I love you Shamm, you know that, right?”

She rests her cold hand on my cheek. “Of course, I know,” she says. “Your father, he loved you James, do you know this?”

It’s a harder to question to answer, but you don’t always answer for your benefit. “I know.”

While she goes to the kitchen, I return to the car, helping Odessa out as Alex unloads the suitcase in the trunk. “You are making a good choice,” he says.

“The only choice, I thought.”

“Which is why it is such a nice choice,” he says, smiling, embracing, enveloping me. “You’ll see,” he says. “It is simple, James. You two get married—”

“Married?” I ask, trying to push away from him.

“Yes, of course, for citizenship, how else will she stay in country?”

Everyone’s playing and being played. “People never just give you things, do they? There are always strings attached.”

“Strings,” he says, confused.

“Strings.”

“This is good, I think, strings, like an instrument which makes music. So let us dance to it.”

“Just put on your red shoes and dance the blues,” and somewhere in the distance Monk Chu laughs.

Shammi, Odessa, and I eat in silence, seated at the kitchen counter. We each preside over a serving of basmati rice topped with a ladle full of rajma, a kidney bean curry, and a side of yogurt. She always gave me the exact same thing whenever I was sick. It's easy on the stomach, simple, soothing. Odessa spoons little morsels into her mouth, unsure of what she's ingesting, trying her best to ignore Shammi's stare. I'm too tired, too confused, and too hungry to mediate or explain. I just want my rajma.

When we finish, I show Odessa to the guest bedroom upstairs. Her suitcase is surprisingly light, even though it must be all she has. Maybe all that empty space is reserved for the future. "Are you okay?" I ask.

I can't read her expression. She simply nods and stiffly takes a seat on the bed. She thinks I'm going to close the door behind me and go to her. "Goodnight then," I say. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Goodnight," she says, closing her eyes as I shut the door, an image of relief.

I kiss Shammi on the cheek before I go to bed. "Who is she, James?"

I tell her not to worry, that we'll figure it out together, after sleep.

"Fine, fine," she says, a trace of anger in her voice, but it's a good kind of anger. It sounds like her.

When all the house is asleep, I move down the steps with my weight shifted to my toes, trying my best not to make any noise. Feeling the walls, I find the latch and unlock

it, sliding the door open. A glimmer of street light filters through the blinds. The grandfather clock ticks, the pendulum glinting in its swing.

I know this room or at least, I used to. It's quiet without the compressions. I place both palms on the iron lung. The metal is cold, the shell empty, the body gone, and soon to be cremated as per his wishes. Whatever he was trying to protect me from he failed. Why didn't he tell me everything? What did he do that was so bad that they decided to follow me? What is it in me, what did he pass on? All that's left is a husk without answers.

I find the stool and take my place next to the opening where his head used to be. *My son has the right to know, the right not to know.* Once you know, can you claw yourself back to ignorance?

"Can you see in the dark?" I ask them. "Can you hear me? Can you read my thoughts? Why do you, why am I a threat?"

All that responds is the newfound silence. I can almost hear him. *You think it's going to help appealing to their common humanity?*

"Who am I talking to?" I ask, rising.

I circle the lung, brushing it with my fingertips, the only thing left of him that was a part of him, still smells like him or maybe he smelled like it.

The ringing phone lights the room, the caller unknown. "Hello."

"It's me," she says. Sophia.

"Where are you?"

"I'm sorry about your father."

"How do you—"

“Listen, I don’t have long. What we wanted, I can’t do it. For a second, I thought it was possible, that maybe we could have—”

“We can.”

“No, there’s no point. I see it now. This is going to be painful, but you need to hear it.”

“What?”

“We will never speak again. I mistook my obsession with you as affection. It is a mistake, a syndrome, it isn’t real.”

“That’s bullshit. Where are you? We need to meet.”

“James—”

“Without you, I’ll never know the truth, what it all means.”

“What if it doesn’t mean anything?” she asks.

“That can’t, how can that be it?”

She clears her throat. “I’ve been instructed to inform you, James Steadman, that since the passing of your father, surveillance of your person and persons around you will cease immediately. We apologize for any inconvenience caused, but it was never intended for you to become aware.”

“Who instructed you?”

“The people in charge. You are no longer a person of interest.”

“No longer a—”

“Goodbye, James.”

“Odessa, wait.”

“That’s not my name, James.”

## CHAPTER 31

### Housing

The weeks following the death of the subject's father see a marked improvement in behavior. Though recent events have undoubtedly left an impact, his paranoid antics have subsided. No more talking to empty space. No more covering his face. Less sleep deprivation induced by stress, though his glances often linger too long on the random stranger, the parked car, the windows across the street. Regardless of the degree to which James believes that he travels unseen, his actions signal a resolve to live, the only rational and healthy choice possible.

Job loss has created the necessary outlet of time to regroup, reflect, and father himself to enter the world again. Morning rituals at Central Park have been replaced by a run that takes place, on average, between the hours of nine and eleven through Park Slope, often extending to other neighborhoods in the borough. The jog contains no discernible pattern. The lack of premeditation gives the activity a spontaneity that challenges the recorder.

As he approaches the street corner, James will turn right, go left, or crosswalk, car-permitting, straight through. There are no other choices, except these. Even when he appears lost on a block he's never been down, James takes it in stride, recognizing the game and the challenge to find his way back. If he's too tired, he allows himself to stop, walking hands on hips with a strained smile as he breathes, admiring the environment.

There are times, still, when he slows purposely, when just ahead, on these warm May days, a person blows smoke into the air, and he can't help himself, preferring to give into the habit, following, absorbing the secondhand, even if it's just an attempt that does not produce a real inhalation, the act appears to have a restorative effect bordering closer to a temporary pacification than any real relief.

Upon returning to the brownstone, James will join Odessa(real name TBD) and Shammi for breakfast in the kitchen. In the initial days of her stay, conversation has been limited to simple requests like the passing of salt, the pouring of milk, etc. Each new day however, brings a new sort of instruction that expands their range of communication. Often, James finds himself watching Odessa as she eats, naively believing she is unaware of his activity. He has so many questions about her and the future, yet he does not ask them, preferring to remain shortsighted about the whole affair. Whoever Odessa is, James rightfully recognizes her insignificance, a cast-off more object than person, and in this he must feel a sort of identification, the relative sense of isolation shared between them at this moment in time.

On what appears to be a typical morning, James enters the kitchen to find Shammi sitting at the table, visibly annoyed, while Odessa, an apron draped over a sunflower dress she bought on sale(29.99) from ----- at Atlantic Ave, cooks in front of the stove as things sizzle and simmer in pans and pots, each burner active. "What's this?" James asks.

Shammi shakes her head. Odessa says, "Please sit," and returns to cook.

"You allowed this?"

"She woke up before me," Shammi answers, though there is an appreciation in her tone that even she cannot hide.



James watches as Odessa hovers, going from dish to dish, flipping things, stirring, a nervous energy directing her movements. The kitchen, infused with the starch smell of potatoes, burning sausages, skin crisping, the steam rising from the boiling water, spreading as Odessa pours the pot into the sink, angled just enough for James to see the eggs inside.

She sets the table. Bits of eggshell cling to her wet hands. Delicately, she lowers the hot dishes to avoid scraping the table. James follows a blue vein running down the pale skin of her arm. Despite her compact frame, she remains sturdy and composed. Potato pancakes, chicken sausages swelled and creased with oil, boiled eggs, a plate of Wonder Bread, several slices pre-smothered with butter, a stew of white borscht, and tea served from the fancy tea set James hasn't seen in years. "Please," Odessa says, picking up a dish in each free hand, holding one up to Shammi, the other to James, who nods his head in acceptance, trying to make eye contact with the server, who simply stares straight ahead, her concentration seemingly reserved for a blank spot on the wall and holding the dishes as evenly as possible like she's holding the scales of justice.

They eat hesitantly at first, deliberating on each bite, assuring Odessa in their respective movements of the edibility of her food, while she waits, too anxious to eat, as the small portion on her plate grows cold. Eventually, she nibbles, biting a small corner from a piece of bread, chewing slowly. The theatrics of the production prove too much to take at that small bite for Shammi. She laughs, covering her mouth, embarrassed, the effort only causing her to laugh harder, shoulders convulsing.

Odessa turns to James, mouth open-wide.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” he says, trying to control his own laughter. He hasn’t seen that particular laugh in a long time and the more he dwells on Shammi, the more he loses the fight against his own suppression.

The laughter surrounds Odessa. Fight or flight instinct takes over. She rises from the table, fists clenched, incredulous as both Shammi and James attempt to apologize, failing to get any words out. “Stop! Stop it!” she demands, unable to comprehend the humor, believing the joke to be on her, the rage transforming into a sense of helplessness, the lump forming at the base of her neck, catching in her throat, rendering her speechless, making the choice to flee an easy one when faced with the assault. She flees the kitchen through the swinging door, climbing the stairs to the bedroom, a room which she only recently began to think of as hers and now has been rendered just as foreign as everything else. She rests against the door, thankful for the privacy, slowly growing alert to the footsteps creaking, which soon becomes a knock, the reverberation spreading as he continues. When he says her name, repeating it again and again, she closes her eyes.

Ultimately, she relents, letting James inside. He explains to her that they meant no offense, that they are sorry, that they appreciate the meal, that the situation has been so strange and tense for everyone that this was bound to happen. “We weren’t laughing at you. We were, we were just being happy.”

They stand with faces inches apart, James almost a foot taller than her. “Do you like me?” she asks.

“Yes, of course.”

She pulls him forward by the shirt till they kiss, the heat of Odessa's skin against James, her tears falling on him, so that when he nudges her away he's left with a bitter taste.

"You don't have to do that," James says. "This arrangement, whatever it is, isn't about that. You can do what you want, you understand that, yes?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. It's okay. We'll figure this out, get you settled, I promise. In the meantime, friends," he says, extending his hand.

"Friends," she says, shaking his hand.

"Now, come on, let's finish breakfast."

Odessa follows behind James, wiping her eyes with a tissue.

They sit, rejoining Shammi at the table. Odessa knives a piece of sausage and forks it into her mouth. As she chews, she glances to Shammi, then to James.

Shammi speaks first. "Food is good, *beta*." It's the first time James has heard her use that term when referencing someone else.

"It is good," James says, affably.

Odessa swallows "Yes, my food is best."

"Second-best," Shammi says.

"Okay-okay, second." All three of them laugh at the end of the exchange, a laugh that signals relaxation, a positive indicator for the future health of their relationship, a scene of domestic strife and resolution that portends the good things to come.

James ties his tie in a double Windsor, a technique perfected studying Internet instructional videos on his laptop the night before. Today's the day he either interviews with or confronts Jaques Richard. His silent brooding as he spoons another mouthful of cereal suggests an agitation closer to anger, but the meticulousness with which he prepares himself, undoing and redoing his tie, polishing his shoes, the slow shave of every careful razor stroke, reveals the need for approval.

Through numerous phone calls, messages left, emails sent, he finally receives a reply, a terse response that provides an address, a date, and a time, signed simply *J.R.* It was not so long ago that James received another message with an address to a place he had never been, an address that led him down a rabbit hole and his present condition, perhaps an added reason for his agitation.

He emerges from the subway, walking to the address, expecting to find an office building. Using his phone, he pulls the message and confirms the number, matching it to the six story building.

Outside the elevator, there is a buzzer, the levels one to five ordered vertically. The number for Richard is 4.

As he awaits a response, James identifies the small camera attached to the intercom, only the size of a nickel, that processes his image and relays it to whoever is watching, presumably Richard, but James must wonder about others. No voice tells him to come up. The buzzer simply sounds and the elevator arrives. James goes inside, swallows, and hits the button marked four.

When the doors open, James steps forward, surprised to already find himself inside Richard's home, which occupies the entire floor of the building. No one greets him. He waits. The elevator closes behind. An empty coat rack to his right. To his left, a rectangular foyer table holds an empty silver ashtray. Light enters the apartment through the long windows that act as walls, reflecting on the glossy hardwood flooring. "Hello," James says, loud, confidence-projecting. In the center of the room, four black leather sofas enclose a circular glass table. Beyond the furniture, an enclave leads to the kitchen. Pots and pans hang from a rack chained to the ceiling, arranged horizontally in size from left to right. Clear cabinets hold the kitchenware, each row containing its own type of item. The drawers that line the counters are each open, easily sliding on the tracks. An empty fridge, except for juices and condiments, awaits the afternoon when it will be filled with that night's food. Freshness and visibility dictate order.

"Hello," James says, a step forward, bolder. His voice projects to the guest bathroom currently being scrubbed, Pine-Sol lemon-scented. The woman cleaning appears startled, but the expression changes to weariness as she rises from her knees, hand clutching her back. She snaps the yellow gloves off. Exiting, she passes the stone sculpture of a naked woman pointing down at some distant spot on the ground. The statue's blank eyes stare straight ahead while her other hand rests on her heart. Melea Howard, the housecleaner, pulls out her duster, brushing off the loose particles that she perceives.

"Hello," James says, aware of the approaching shadow rounding the corner.

"Who are you?" Melea asks.

James clears his throat and introduces himself. "I have an appointment with Mr. Richard."

"So, why are you waiting there?" Melea asks, the irritation more pronounced with the hard way she enunciates her *t*'s.

"Where am I supposed to—"

"Come, this way," she says, turning.

James follows, past the sculpture, the lemon-scent, a small bedroom followed by an identical room with same plaid bedroom set, to a closed door at the end of the hallway.

"Thank you," he says, back straightening.

"Yeah, yeah," Melea replies, laughing as she goes back to work, clearly amused, although James is at a loss to explain why. He knocks on the door and clears his throat again.

From the other end of the hallway Melea yells, "Just go inside. He don't care."

"Are you sure?" but she has already walked out of view.

"Mr. Richard, I'm here for, for the appointment." He turns the circular handle, which is cold to the touch.

Once inside, James does not see him. He moves forward and accidentally steps on a pile of papers. He lifts his foot, but the imprint remains on the document. Stacks of papers line the floor in no discernible pattern. Beyond the stacks, there is an oak desk with two computer screens, modeled precisely after Richard's desk at Maxim. Empty bookshelves line both sides of the office, a converted master bedroom. The shelves are empty, the books that used to occupy the space, haphazardly thrown onto the floor, some

with their spines open, pages down, held in low esteem, but once they must have meant something.

Jacques peers at James from the small crack that runs between both screens.

“Hello,” he says, his voice soft.

“Hello,” James replies, seeing Richard’s eyes through the opening.

“It’s you.”

“I had an appointment.”

Richard brushes some crumbs off his white undershirt. He drapes the blazer hanging from his chair over his shoulders, buttoning the top button, leaving the bottom two undone. “You’ve come,” he says, hand extended, making his way forward.

James shakes it, wiping off the transferred perspiration on his trousers, when Richard turns back. Whatever James’s expectations were, he was not expecting to see this man, a man he thought highly of, holed up in his office, alone and disheveled, his gray/black hair frizzed without product slicking it back, face unshaven and bristling.

He accepts the offer to sit while Richard slides his chair to the side to face him without interference. “What have you to say?”

“I’ve come to ask for a job, sir,” James says, relying on rehearsed lines.

“A job as what?”

“As an assistant with your new fund.”

“Ah yes, the new fund,” Richard says, glancing at the stacks on the floor.

“It’s what you told them, that I was coming to work for you.”

Richard inches forward, back slumping. “Do you believe what they say?”

“Excuse me?”

Richard's voice grows louder, but he speaks each word with deliberation. "Do you believe what you have been told, Mr. Steadman?"

James appears to ponder the question. Again, the throat clear, before saying, quite unequivocally, "No."

"While this is a good answer, an answer that shows that you, yourself, are not a part of the fray, you must also know that this means I have nothing to offer you at this point."

"What's happened to you?"

Richard leans back, surprised at the question and its apparent sincerity. He looks out the window at the adjacent building of small offices. He sometimes watches the workers going about their tasks, while he remains very much in his own company. "A host of problems, both fiscal and personal in nature." A quick glance at the picture frame on the desk, the frame face down.

"I can help organize—"

Richard gets to his feet. "I don't want those books back on those shelves." He points to the stacks on the ground like he's accusing them. "Those, those papers stay."

"I didn't mean to offend."

"No, no, of course not," Richard says, exhaling. The phone rings, causing a pained expression to come over his face, brow furrowed. "They, they are coming for me."

James stands to attention, recognizing something familiar in Richard's anxieties.

"Who? Who is?"

"The investors. They all want their money back. Want to join your Vaughn. They have been, they have been accusing me," Richard says, covering his chest.



“What have you done?”

“It’s a simple matter. I’m looking out for their better interests.”

“Their better interests,” James says, the upturned eyebrow, skeptical. “So what, you’re not giving them their money back?”

Richard picks up one of the books on the floor. Opening it, he says, “The principles of value investing,” before letting it slip from his fingers onto the floor. “Did you meet Melea when you arrived?”

“Yes.”

“Would you imagine that she’s been dabbling in the real estate market, a bit of a mogul really, or at least she was?”

“That does sound surprising.”

“Yes, she used to own five townhouses in Queens, each valued between 200 and 300,000 dollars.”

Richard explains in principle, his version of Melea’s experience. After buying one townhouse, a home she had spent more than fifteen years saving for, a home that fulfills a lifelong ambition, Melea is approached by a representative of a lending company ---- Corp., that asks if she would like to refinance based on the increased value of her property. “The windfall at first glance carries little suspicion.” She uses the refinancing as means to purchase another house, expand her investments. “What could be more sound than a home? Rest assured, she is encouraged in this direction.” This cycle repeats itself until Melea goes from being the proud owner of one home to five. “The American dream, isn’t it, to own a home, to build capital, and then to invest?” Jacques’ observations reveal

a propensity for the paranoid. The fact that he faces lawsuits from two former and five current investors is conveniently omitted as he continues.

“So, she overextended herself?” James asks.

“One could say that. Melea would say that. I got her to unload two of the properties, but the others,” he says, shaking his head, “she’s been unable to make a payment in over one year.”

The phone rings, interrupting the conversation. As it sounds, Jacques picks up a stack of papers.

“What’s that?”

“This is evidence. Mortgages, defaults, Melea and more, a lot more like her.”

Richard imagines himself as a pioneer, but data indicates stability and even robustness in market forces. Recent technological trends coupled with the emerging BRIC economies working in tandem with the America sector carry an unknown potential, but certainly a positive one that would outweigh Richard’s bearish outlook.

“The lenders are making loans to people who can’t pay them back.”

“Yes,” Jacques says, “all so people like Vaughn and there are so many like him, can build returns, leverage more money, you must have heard him explain, surely.”

“Why did they want you gone?”

“How can they succeed if not for their tricks? And me, I cannot keep up with them.”

“Value investing, that’s what you do.”

“It is a dead model now,” Jacques says, running his hand through his scalp, staring at the black strands in his palm. “But, I’ve placed a good sized bet, everything I

own on defaults. Once there are enough of them,” he says, trailing off. “It’s not about value.” Richard takes a seat again and closes his eyes. “I’m betting on people to stop paying, on people to fail, all because we needed them. It is a dreadful feeling,” he says, opening his eyes to James, afraid of what he might think. “It is an artificial world we live in. The things people own, the houses they live in, it all rests on an assumption of value that is grossly overstated.”

“I can help you. I’ll answer your phones—”

“You don’t understand,” Richard says, pleading, “I have no money to pay you with, I’m not liquid, it is all tied.”

“What else?” James asks, distrustful, sensing the strain.

“I’ve begun to think that I might be wrong.” As he speaks, his mouth closes tight like he has to grate the words through his teeth.

“But what about—”

“What if it is a different world we live in? Maybe, I have misunderstood. There are forces that I am blind to. The bet, the bet should have begun to pay off months ago, but so far nothing. These men, on the phone constantly, they think I’ve lost my mind. Maybe enough people are invested in this thing that they have made that reality is inconsequential, value replaced by speculation, all because of desired outcomes. And the sums involved, there’s too much at risk, too much of an investment in the investment that they’ll do whatever they need to in order to protect against failure. But I see Melea, she lives here now. I know she exists. And if she exists—”

“I’ll work for free, until it pays off.”

Jacques peers up at James and laughs. “Was my doubt really that convincing?”

Yes James, why are you agreeing to go nowhere, earn nothing?

“I’ve had some recent experiences that, they’ve made me see things differently.”

“At Maxim,” he says, like it’s the answer, like it’s the answer for both of them.

James nods, but surely there must be more in this, a desire to defy convention, for independence, and what better way to show that than to join the ranks of the exiled.

Jacques escorts James out, past Melea’s singing as she cleans the kitchen, to the door. They shake hands, a gentleman’s agreement, fool’s terms. A certain lightness appears to have entered Jacques’s face, his body language significantly less slumped.

“Welcome to the home office,” Richard says, delighted at the pun. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

He leaves with a sense of purpose restored. As he walks onto the street, Jaques enters the bathroom attached to his office and proceeds to wash himself clean.

## CHAPTER 32

### Contest

There's this skinny guy from Japan, Takeru Kobayashi, whose image is plastered next to the words, 'champion' next to the number 53 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>. That number represents the winning record-setting number of hot dogs consumed in Nathan's Annual Hot Dog Contest.

"Really, it didn't used to be so much of a competition," Monk says, "except last year this American kid, our age I think, Joey Chestnut, eats 52 of them." The sign confirms as much.

"Americans have to win at everything."

"Chestnut's got the passion, the youth, and he's set his sights on the man with the belt. Greatness produces greater greatness."

We walk on the boardwalk, past Nathan's, and look out at the ocean, the few people scattered on the sand. "I'm glad you're building up your appetite."

"It's why we're here, right?"

"Right," I say. A stakeout, an interview, whatever it is. Go from there. They were the last ones to see her as far as I know. She could be in danger. She could be watching right now. Or maybe she was telling the truth and she's gone, they're all gone, and it's just me again. "Thanks for coming."

"No problemo," Monk says, laughing, his bleary eyes hidden behind a pair of reflective sunglasses. "I haven't been here in forever."

“A lot of people haven’t.” Families stroll by, old men and women sit on benches, talking like it’s part of the routine. Most of the people here must live nearby.

“I wonder why that is. I mean, it’s so trippy here. They have rides.”

“Must be too far.”

“Not trendy enough.”

“Asshole hipsters spending all their time in Park Slope and Williamsburg.”

Monk slaps my back. “Let’s come back here, Independence Day, for the contest.”

“Sure. We should. Could be an epic showdown.”

“The Rumble in the Coney Jungle,” Monk says, shadow boxing the air in front of him. I can see it.” He frames his hands in a rectangle. “The camera follows Kobayashi into his dressing room after he loses. Alone, he pulls up his shirt.” Monk pulls up his own shirt. “His stomach’s bulging out while he stares into the mirror, knowing he’ll never be a winner again.”

“He could have been a contender.”

“Instead of a bum, which is what he is.”

“Once you lose, you’ve lost.” Monk exhales. “Of course the whole scene will be taking place in Japanese so we’ll be reading subtitles at the bottom of the screen.”

“So, what’s the big deal?”

“I never trust those things.”

We bite into our hot dogs, each smothered in ketchup and mustard with a side of crinkled fries, and a large fountain soda marked big and bold with yellow lettering and green background. The three brothers aren’t here, at least not yet. “You think the girl over

there is cute?” Monk asks. She’s waiting in line, wearing a tight T-shirt with the female Bugs Bunny on it, dribbling a basketball. She could be from Ohio or maybe New Jersey.

“I guess.”

“You think she knows it’s a *Space Jam* reference?”

“Why don’t you talk to her?”

“Nah,” he says, “still too soon.”

Monk’s still depressed. The other girl, the one from the night out, the partner spy who claimed her name was Nicole, never called him back, even though they had, in Monk’s words, engaged in “some crazy fucking, dominatrix shit.” It must be some weird Agency training thing. I can’t tell him none of it was real. I don’t know what it would do to him, but it wouldn’t be good. The door swings open for more customers.

“I mean, we hit it off, had a good time, intimate you know. What the fuck is wrong with people in this city?” He tears at the bun and chews with intensity.

“It’s for the best.” Her stopping means they might be done with me and by virtue of that fact, they’d be done with him too. “Fuck her.”

“How long you want to wait?”

It’s a good question. “Let’s stay a little bit. I’ll get you chili cheese dog.”

“I have limits, man. Who do you think I am, Kobayashi?”

“You do kind of look like him.”

“And you look like George Washington, you and all your white brothers.”

When I get Monk his incentive, I ask the middle-aged woman behind the register if she knows the three of them, if she knows when they might be arriving.

“They’re done working here,” she says, handing me the receipt. “Your order number is 57.”

“They’re done, for good?”

“Yeah, they’re going to summer school or something.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “You said you’re their friend?”

“Sure,” I say. “Can I get that order to go?”

She rolls her eyes and yells something into open kitchen of greased and frying things behind her.

We’re on the train, heading to Rockaway. “Sorry for dragging you through this.”

“No problemo, this is fun, but I think that last hot dog was a mistake,” he says, clutching his stomach, “and we’re all going to have to suffer for it.” The train rolls over the tracks. Everyone’s looking straight ahead, minding their business. We share the same bench, our sides touching, and my thigh vibrates, but the vibration does not belong to me. People in the sealed car cannot be sure who’s responsible. Silent, but deadly.

After a couple wrong turns, I think we’re heading in the right directions. “Isn’t Jay-Z from here?” Monk asks. Summer’s started and the evenings have begun to stretch.

“I think so.”

“So this is a *hard knock life*,” he says, mimicking the song.

“Will you keep your voice down?” We pass people on the streets. It’s clear we stick out, that we’re here, but we’re not from here, which means we don’t belong here.

“Take your shades off.”



“Chill, buddy. Blacks are people too.” He laughs, his answer to everything.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

We walk in silence, approaching the projects that Sophia dragged me to it has to be the same one. The closer we get to the building, the more groups of people huddle together, talking, shooting the shit. A bunch of teenagers make buzzing sounds as we pass by them. “Polo-motherfuckers,” one of them says to applause. We continue, pretending not to hear. It’s times like this I wish I had a cigarette. A smoke buys you something. People don’t bother you. It gives you belonging.

“It’s Lacoste,” Monk says to me.

“Come on.” We follow the fencing, searching for the entrance to the complex. Kids on the other side are out playing, throwing footballs, struggling to catch in the fading light. They keep at it, even though they lose sight of the spiral till the last possible moment, till it’s on them, hitting their outstretched fingertips.

“I never could throw a good football,” I say. No one ever taught me, not that he would have even if he could. “You?”

Monk holds his hands up. “Too small, good enough for Nerf, though.”

There’s one kid bigger than the rest. He directs things, telling the others where to go, what they’re doing wrong. He seems to draw directions on his palm. After he’s done talking, they clap and disperse along an imaginary line, waiting till he yells, “Hike!”

The closer we get, the more familiar he becomes. The hands he uses to launch bombs, are the same one’s he had used to grab me. This time there’s no Odessa to intervene, no one to fear. “Stop,” I tell Monk.

After an errant throw, one that sails too long, over the head of a kid who mistimes his jump, he throws his fist across his body. “Damn,” he says, twisting to the fence.

I wave to him. It’s all I can think to do. His mouth hangs open and we both linger in our respective stances. He jogs over, ignoring the shouts from the kids who want to keep playing. We speak to each other through fence. “What are you doing here?”

“Just chill,” Monk says.

“Charles, right?”

“Who is this guy?” he asks, squinting at Monk.

“Don’t worry, he’s a friend of mine. He not one of them.”

“One of them,” he mutters.

“I just want to talk.”

He steps closer to the fence. Sweat beads his forehead. He looks down at the ground when he talks and slaps his hands together. “Come round to the entrance. We’ll talk there.” He walks away from us, from the kids, who then face us, arms crossed, certain of one thing, that we’re the assholes.

Monk and I wait at the entrance, just inside the framed doorway, designed into the fence. People circulate in and out, looking at us like they’re trying to figure out just what the hell we want. The minutes pass. “I don’t think he’s coming,” Monk says.

We continue to wait. “Do you know which apartment they’re in? Maybe we should buzz.”

“He said he’d be here.”

“What do you hope to get out of them?”

“They were the last people to see her. Maybe that means something.” I lean in close, covering my mouth, as I speak into his ear. “Maybe she left a message with them.”

Monk laughs. “Sorry,” he says immediately.

“It’s not your fault.”

He nods, but I can tell he feels guilty.

Another five minutes pass, then another. Evening’s gone and nighttime’s here. The door opens slowly, and Charles peeks his head out before opening it further. He approaches us followed by his two brothers, the one with the mustache to his left, the smaller one to his right.

“What you want?” the one with the mustache, Maurice says.

I cover my mouth. “I just want to know what happened.”

“What the hell did you do?” Charles says. “What the hell does this shit have to do with us?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have the answers. All I know is, I was being followed. It has something to do with my father and who he was.”

“Was?” Monk says, laughing again, slamming his mouth shut.

It’s a fact I’ve neglected to mention, even to my friend. “He passed recently.”

“What?”

“Sorry man,” Charles says followed by Maurice and Quan.

I’ve never talked about him, never got used to it. So how could I tell anyone now? What good does that do, except elicit apologies? “It’s alright. He’s been sick for a while.” They stare at me with that hollow expression, the outrage gone, replaced with something worse. “I was prepared. He was sick. There was nothing anyone could have done.

Pulmonary disease, in the lungs, he could barely breathe.” What the hell am I doing? They’ve stopped. He’s dead and she, she said she’s done with me, so what am I chasing? There’s nothing I could ever do to explain this, to explain him or her, to anybody.

“Covering your mouth isn’t going to do anything,” Quan says, stepping forward. “She needed a place to stay, a couple of hours to rest, and then she left.”

“That’s it?”

“She said she was sorry for the trouble and that she’d find a way to make it up to us one day.”

“Bullshit,” Maurice mumbles, but Quan ignores him.

“What else?” Monk asks.

“Nothing else,” Maurice replies, offended by the question.

“Relax,” Quan says, placing his hand on his brother, getting him to calm down. From his pocket, he pulls out a folded white envelope. Both his brothers appear surprised. “She said to give this to you when you showed up.”

I unfold it and open the flap. There’s a slip of paper inside, a slip with an address penciled in with handwriting I’ve seen before, an address in Brooklyn that I recognize as my own. There is no date or time, no mermaid. The message is clear. She knew it all along, she was never going to, which only means one thing. Time to go home.

## CHAPTER 33

### Renters

The listing: For sublet. Studio Apartment. UES. 550 square feet, Great Location, Lease runs thru Sept. 1st. Available Immediately. \$1400/month, is accompanied by four pictures. 1: The kitchen, pristine white stove with built in microwave. 2: The small living room and the bed behind it. 3: bathroom with built in mirror, open shower curtain that displays a hint of the city outside. 4: An inverted view from the bedroom to the door, natural light from the windows shines on the space.

It is a sparse description that carries the implicit message, *the apartment sells itself*, a simple matter of supply meeting an insatiable demand. While the listing contains no contact number, the website known just as much for the casual encounter, contains an email address from which to reach the subletter, James Steadman.

After several days, the subject posts another ad, undoubtedly surprised by the lack of response. The only alteration to the copy is next to “Great Location” featuring the additional enticement of “Near Central Park!” The exclamation softens the monotone of the original posting. An additional picture, 5: a clear sky image of the Central Park Reservoir complete with reflective water and when image enhanced, ducks.

The control measure that monitors Steadman’s communication prevents pleas from a host of interested parties, each begging for a viewing.

Before he seeks alternate means of listing, an email reaches through.

*Subject: Lease*

Hello,

I've been living in New York for the past two months and have been trying to get a place in the city. Just moved from Ohio, been living with my Uncle in Queens, and I really need to my own place. Your place seems great! I would love to sublet! Can we schedule a time for me to see the apartment?

Best Regards,

Tyler Yoder

----- Bank

Within minutes the response:

*Re: Lease*

Hi Tyler,

I can show you the place tomorrow evening. 7:30, if that works? Let me know. We can meet outside the building. My number is -----.

Best,

James

*Re: Re: Lease*

Awesome James, see you then!

-TY

The soon to be Tyler stares at the image of the subject on the screen, scrolling through the reports, the available ones, whistling when he reads some of the latest tribulations. He does not speak freely, but if he did, he would say, "You really fucked this one up." Instead, he whistles higher at the intriguing bits on the node that displays the

relevant information, aware of the gaze looking over his shoulder. Higher above, in the tower behind tinted glass, the PD monitors, following the curve of the complex, the agents at the stations, focused on the tasks of their tasks, the black walkways arcing between the stations, forming the concentric pattern, with the tower at the center. She pretends to focus elsewhere. The others, at their terminals, too immersed in the production of extending the profile, mapping the populace, are not aware that the overseer has lost oversight, that the focus is singular, bound to the plight of a man trying to rent an apartment.

The man who would be Tyler gets whatever information he can from the agent, the terminal manager, glancing over his shoulder. The operation is simple. The ease with which he accepts the information, the lack of gravity in his demeanor, speaks to the routine nature of the assignment. He is clearly unaware that beyond the terminals in this section, the tower watches. It may pretend to examine the other nodes, zooming in on their stations in order to build a holistic image, but the gaze is a transitory one. Throughout the days and the nights, the tower moves up and down the different floors of the complex, completing the inspection, providing a cursory glance at the interviews and uncovering process. But this is only routine, a surface procedure to conceal that the tower most often remains grounded at the lowest and most classified point, the deepest underground level of the structure, which spans the width and length of a football field. Instead of climbing higher to the other levels, the larger floors closer to the surface, dedicated to the broader strokes, profile production based on persons around the peripheries of the major cells that pose a threat, the tower remains sunk with the PD

inside. Encased in the convex panels that connect at the furthest point to form the curved ridges, Mint measures this thing of hers, alone.

She hardly leaves anymore, hardly says a word, but there she remains, sentinel, the expanse of the screens before her, counting the subjects within the nodes, and the subjects created by the subject.

Below us, deeper still, workers build, cleared for the task, unaware of the exact nature of their construction, another underground level to help the division remain at capacity.

Tyler-to-be returns wearing a suit and tie, clean-shaven, a cigarette stench wafting off him and seeks approval. After undoing the tie, allowing it to dangle in a post-work imitation, he smiles. “You don’t think this is too much of a cliché?”

“Clichés exist for a reason.”

“That they do,” he says, touching the tip of his nose, sniffing, the white powder under his nostrils visible.

“What did you do?”

“Relax, it’s a joke. Just some sugar.”

His grin disappears when the black phone at his station rings. He searches for help, childlike, but it’s too late. Holding the receiver to his ear, color drains from his face. After twenty-seconds, he says, “Yes, I understand.”

Would-be-Tyler<sup>2</sup> is more attentive and less jocular than his predecessor. Though he appears younger, his youth gives him an air of innocence that should be an effective device to disarm James’s distrust, certainly enough to complete the transaction, the ultimate goal of the operation as dictated by the Proto-Director.



The three-hour drive north is an easy one so late at night, one that Tyler2 completes with efficiency, though with a slightly elevated heartbeat, hands on 10 and 2 for the duration of the trip. He sits in silence, not even bothering to listen to the radio. The fact that he's here as replacement has changed the nature of the assignment, the knowledge that she will be watching him clearly weighing on the young agent. The terminal manager assures him of his success, yet throughout the night, he does not achieve a proper resting state, remaining sleepless. ("The fatigue can be an aid. You're like one of them now. It's a good thing, use it.")

"Thank you," Tyler2 responds with such sincerity that it arouses suspicion that the agent may originally be from the Midwest, a fact the terminal manager confirms when scanning his file (Dayton, Ohio).

("Spend the day preparing. Scout the building. Above all else, arrive within the window of time.") The last bit of procedure is the most obvious, the most important.

Tyler2 surveys the five block radius surrounding the building, arriving in the Upper East Side an hour before the appointment, a wholly reasonable time for a prospective renter. A striped blue tie hangs loose about the collar. As per the profile, he smokes cigarettes, although it's clear that the agent behind Tyler2 is not accustomed to them based on the sickly complexion that comes over him. ("Remain calm. Don't smoke anymore. It's enough.")

The agent nods, stomping the butt out on the sidewalk. A few feet in front, a street vendor packs and stores her fruit stand into the back of a large van. She shakes her head, presumably at the litter. (“Don’t worry, keep moving.”)

He keeps moving, hands in his pockets, stopping in front of the mosque at third avenue. Loudspeakers attached to the minarets project the Akşam. The wailing song marks the end of the day, the start of new one. “Has the subject been investigated for Islamic ties in the area?” the agent asks.

(“Keep moving, Tyler. Perform the task.”)

Outside the building, Tyler dials James’s number. “Hey, hey, James, this is Tyler.”

“I’ll be right down.”

“Cool, cool,” but the call ends too soon for the subject to hear the second cool.

(“You’re doing great. Keep it simple. Remember who you are.”) The instruction plays through his earpiece. He shows no response. This is good. This is the training.

James emerges from the entrance, wearing a collared shirt and slacks, and asks, “Tyler?”

They shake hands. “Nice to meet you, James.”

In the elevator ride to the 28th floor, they both face the door.

(“Ask a question.”)

“How long have you lived here?”

“Three years. It’s a good building. Laundry in the basement. Quiet neighbors,” he says as they step into the hallway. “To the left.”

“That’s great, that’s great,” Tyler2 says.

(“The repetition is annoying. Stick to the lines.”)

James shows Tyler<sup>2</sup> the apartment, taking him through the images posted; the kitchen, living room, bathroom. “Wow, that’s a great view,” he says, as they peer at the city before them.

(“Good, stick to it.”)

“Yeah,” James says. “I know you’re new to the city, but I’m pretty sure you won’t find a better deal.”

“Are others interested in renting?”

After a pause, he answers, “Several,” willing to lie.

“So I’d have to decide real quick?”

“Yes,” he says. “I know it sounds pricey.”

“1400 a month,” Tyler<sup>2</sup> says, landing the exasperation.

“But it’s a good deal. Besides that, you’re one of them anyway.”

Tyler<sup>2</sup>, started, wide-eyed, mouth-open. (“Say something!”) “One of them?”

James, that knowing voice, leaning his elbow on the counter, his arm pushing through the green sleeve, “Yes, one of them. Why does price matter to you?” he asks, accusation wrapped within the question.

(The phone rings, the PD calling, her voice at a loss, demanding, “How does he know?” and I say clearly so both she and Tyler<sup>2</sup> can hear, “He does not know. Continue as you were.”)

“I am concerned about the cost,” Tyler says, stumbling. “I am from Ohio. I just moved here. I live at my Uncle’s.”

(“More natural, less recitation.”)

“But you work for them.”

“I do?”

(“Good, play it dumb. It seems real.”)

“The email. It said you were in IB.”

“For ----- Bank. Is that a problem?”

James exhales, backing off. “Sorry, nothing. Just work stuff, don’t mean to take it out on you.” Richard’s bet continues to idle in irrelevance, leaving James to spend every day dealing with scores of angry men on phones demanding satisfaction, outraged to be losing out, surely planting seeds of doubt, doubt that now comes out as displaced anger against the larger institutions and in this case, Tyler2.

“No, I get it. I hate my job.”

(“Excellent.”)

They both sit on the kitchen stools and discuss terms, utilities, the landlord, cable, until finally the groundwork is established to achieve the objectives. “I love the place. I want to rent it right away, but I have two concerns.”

“Shoot.”

“Are you planning on moving back here or are you leaving permanently?”

“No, I’m gone, got a place in Brooklyn.”

“Oh Brooklyn, how is that?” the register in his voice pitching higher at the mention of the borough.

James smirks. “It’s up and coming. What’s your other question?”

“Oh, right,” Tyler says, snapping his fingers. “I need a place or it’d be easier anyway if I got a place that was furnished. I love your setup right now and I don’t have time to shop—”

“You want to buy my furniture?”

“Yeah, can we work something out?”

(“Good, not too pushy.”)

James scans the room, the couch, the bed, the nightstand. Does he think about the past, of all the things that have happened? “Yeah, sure. You can buy it. I don’t need this stuff anymore.”

“Fantastic.”

Outside, they shake hands again, a deal struck.

(“Light a smoke.”)

Tyler2 does not hesitate. He pulls out the pack.

(“Offer him.”)

Extending his arm, “You want one?”

James hesitates, then pulls out a stick and leans forward to the flame from the lighter being held out for him, closing his eyes in the inhale, then open for the blow out, following the smoke’s drift and disappearance from first-hand to second. “I don’t normally,” James says, “but this seems like the occasion for one.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone,” Tyler2 says, unable to hide the smugness in his voice.

## CHAPTER 34

### Speaker

All through the emails, the phone calls, the correspondence with lawyers, Richard instructs me to remain polite, to excuse them, these investors. “Some of them have been with me for over twenty years. We’ve had dinners together, gone on vacation, we must be patient,” he says, staring out the window, the offices across the street. He’s been doing that a lot recently, ever since I started a couple weeks ago.

The room is less cluttered now. Melea and I moved the books into a storage closet, stacked as many of the piles of mortgage documents onto the shelves from the floor. I sit behind Richard’s desk, answering the calls, doing my best to pacify the heads on the other end. We brought another desk in for him, but he never sits down at it. Instead, he paces, stares out the window. Every fifteen minutes or so, he’ll hunch over the desk to absorb numbers on the screen, only to walk away with his fists clenched, white-knuckled.

The phone rings. Every time it gives me that sinking feeling. I thought I’d be used to it by now. “Hello, this is BackPoint Partners, James speaking.” Backpoint, like a pressure point on the spine, the final point, the lasting mark, or as Jacques said, *the end result of all this mischievousness*.

“I’m sorry you feel that way. Have you read the latest newsletter? We lay out the reasoning behind the position.” A strategy built around the recognition of failure. The housing data has begun to reflect it, starting this past January, but now, even though it’s

June, the subprime bond market remains stable. *But it can't be real.* We track the numbers that bear it out and the other numbers that refuse to budge.

“Sir, the CDS...yes, that's right, credit default swaps—” and there's always something about this word that set them off so that they respond with something along the lines of: “I don't care what you assholes are making up. It fundamentally doesn't make sense.” We don't make sense. They don't make sense. Something has to give. But it's only wishful thinking. I can see it in him when he talks about this thing, this glint that wonders if this could go on forever.

One investor tried to convince me that Richard had lost his mind, that he had heard rumors that he was estranged from his family, of illicit drug use, that he was stealing his investors' money to invest in space exploration and the construction of moon colony based on the delusional premise of an impending global disaster that would leave the earth in ruins. The rumors have a source. It's a name he hates to say, but he finds himself saying anyway, “Maxim,” Richard grunts out.

“As you've been made aware, a provision in the fund agreement transferred over from Maxim,” and this is a bit of legal gray area, but we play it like there's no wiggle room, “prevents you from extracting funds from long-terms investments, and this allocation qualifies.” The frustration bursts on the other end, usually some spewage about America and the free market followed by the threat to seek legal action, “which is an option you are more than free to explore.”

“James, please,” Richard says, turning.

“Sir, I promise you, this will pay off. It requires time. We share your frustration, but remember, we're invested too, our money is pooled together, our success is tied.”

“Then fuckin’ untie it!” It always worked when Vaughn said it. Despite my efforts to mimic him, they respond to me differently.

“That’s not possible at the present moment.” Without their money, we lose the bet. “I’m going to go ahead and personally pass along your concerns to Mr. Richard. In the meantime, I’m going to resend the newsletter.”

The heavy breathing into the phone. I can almost hear it being squeezed on the other end, the hairy hand clutching it. “You son of a bitch.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, sir. Again, I’ll send you that information immediately.”

“You won’t get away with this.” We’re the crooks and maybe they’re right. These people have to know something, had to have done something to get their money.

“Goodbye, sir.”

Half the time they hang up, the other half still respond. This one does.

“Goodbye.”

I recline in the chair and create a log of the call on a spreadsheet.

“Who was it?” he asks.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Please.”

“Frank Hockett.”

“Oh, Frank,” he says. “Do you know how much I’ve made for him over—”

“Don’t. We’re not doing this again,” I say, leaning into the screens, shielding my face from his.



In the kitchen, we eat egg salad sandwiches prepared by Melea. She's somewhere in the apartment, singing, occupying herself, remaining productive, instead of just waiting.

Lunch is a time reserved for quiet, but he can't help himself. "Space, a moon what?"

"Colony."

"Colony. And they believe it," he says with a mouthful of egg. "You work and work to build trust, a reputation, but what good is it if it produces no loyalty?"

I snort at that.

"What?"

"You ever think the reason I'm here is because you weren't loyal."

He drops his sandwich. It barely lands in his plate. A piece of white egg shell falls out and shines on the marble tile. "You rather be there? At Maxim," he says, spit flying.

"That's not what I said."

"No," he says, thinking. "Bill, Bill, he simply, me and him, there was no." He's waving his arms trying to explain, wrapping his fingers like it's helping him draw the answer out. "A boy like that, always getting bigger, the muscles, there is something in it, in the way he did it, that I found off-putting."

"That's it?" Always being judged, watched, assessed not on our abilities, but on the things we think don't matter because we foolishly believe they don't enter in. How was Bill to know, how is anyone to know? People bide their time and when given the opportunity, the excuse, they'll find a way to get rid of you. You don't know what anyone's really looking at it, but it's not what you think it is. Sophia's watching, or she

was, or she still is. She didn't even know why. Someone was searching for something in me, some flaw, something I might not even recognize as a flaw, to bury me, to bury him. Now, he's gone and I'm here.

Richard's smiling at me, this serene expression he gets before he imparts wisdom. "Little things, small things, everyday interactions, it all adds together, building towards the greater relationship. Bill and I were not meant for the long-term. You think he would have followed me here without compensation?"

"I don't know. He might have."

He wags his index finger and says, "No," definitively. The assumption makes me wonder if I've made a terrible mistake about this whole thing. "Not after finding out all my other so called partners had dropped out, that my investors were suing me, many abandoning me to join with your Vaughn. Let's face it. Bill, he's too much of a bull."

"And me?"

"You," he says, surprised, "you are a nice boy."

I shake my head.

"Well, it is an honest answer at the very least."

I spend the rest of the afternoon drafting responses to various protesting parties, getting Richard's cursory approval. The market's holds steady, down slightly, nothing out of the ordinary. No news alerts that pop up about housing news.

Close to closing bell, he takes his customary compulsive trek to the computer. After a prolonged hunch, he sits down. His back obstructs the screen. Fingers tremble on

the mouse. The sun reflects on the wood flooring, creates a long shadowed outline of him that extends all the way from his desk to mine.

“What, what is it?”

“The bonds,” he says, “the bonds.” He spins his chair to face me. “The triple-b rated, they’ve started to fall.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean—”

“You’re right,” he says, lips pursed together. “It may just be variation. Call Mack.”

“What do I say?”

“It doesn’t matter. He sold us the bonds. Just try, trust me.”

I call, advancing beyond automated reception of the bank through his extension. One ring. Two ring. Three rings. Four. “Voicemail.”

“Leave a message.”

After we get through with that, he shouts at me to send him an email, hovering over me as I type. “Tell him to call us immediately.”

Within thirty-seconds, we receive a response. “It’s an out of office. Says he’ll be out for the next two days. It says he has the flu.”

Richard stretches his arms to the sky, more in relief than victory. “Get up,” he says.

When I rise, he embraces me, speaks into my ear. “Now, we know James. He’s hiding from us. This is what they do when things go wrong. Now, it’s going to turn. God help them.” His dark eyes are wet. The water swells, continuing to build and build.

## CHAPTER 35

### Acquisition

With the apartment in possession, Tyler2's task has been fulfilled. Yet he remains in the city. A cautious approach on her part. He sleeps on an air mattress in the middle of the subject's apartment, never the bed. James shows no active interest in his former residence, preferring to rid himself completely of the past. When Tyler2 negotiates the purchase for his possessions: the bed, the sofa, television, James barely bats an eye, agreeing to terms of sale on each. A moment of hesitation occurs after Tyler2 asks sheepishly, squeezing the back of his neck for something more.

“You want my bedding?”

“If it's not too much. I don't have time to shop and I like what you have going on here.”

Sincere and strange enough. James acquiesces and requests near to face value for the items, a price Tyler2 pays without a second thought. The transaction ends with James handing the keys over, rolling a suitcase out the door, feeling good about himself having extracted a bit more money from the investment banker who, despite the job title, seems to have no sense of what things cost.

We oversee from the complex, peering at the display screens at the terminal. The tower remains quiet, operating independent, issuing commands from above me. The phone does not ring, but it seems like it's going to, like it's pulsing, but it doesn't, so I continue watching, waiting for her to break the silence.

For the first time in two years, the price on the Richard's bond bet has moved in his favor. He interprets this as a sign of future winnings to come, but the market remains stable(06/29/07, DJIA Closing Price, 13408.62). James believes in the fund manager, though. He needs to. The switch in job has allowed him to forge a new life, to forget the painful events of the recent past, and to focus on the things in his control.

To go through a day, the planned and routine rhythms created by a home, a job, a run, is what it takes for him to forget, for him to have something to fill the void.

These things are so predictable. The two of them, Odessa and James, in the kitchen playing a type of pretend while Shammi, once a nurse, now less defined, sleeps upstairs. They cup their glasses, skin warm, a half-drunken bottle on the table, in a celebration of sorts, brought on by the recent turns. He says her name, his mouth forming a small O for his new "Odessa."

They sit together in a separate kind of silence. A flush of red on her cheeks. The clock in the other room reads 1:00 AM. The room remains unchanged, sectioned off, the doors on both sides shut. The iron machine that contained the man with the answers remains, sheathed within an old white sheet that keeps the dust off, that prevents them from seeing if they were to enter, not that they do. The prolonged estrangement of the room represents an inability on those within the house to process.

They sit and the seconds pass. She doesn't even bother asking about it, about that room, and does he stop to think about why? No, they remain together in the unspoken terrain, preferring to avoid all the things that surround them. She's going to use him, is using him, and he chooses not to see it because that's who he is, falling all over himself at the slightest flutter. It's terribly predictable, but that's the point of the profile. I know I'm

not the only one who sees it, who watches now. The tower, she's obsessed. With James she's not the director, she's involved in some other way, an emotional link shackles her to him.

Odessa's hand is on the table, fingertips pressed, palm lifted. James breathes through his nostrils and sighs. Slowly, he slides his hand across the surface and covers hers, flattening it. He says her name. She attempts to suppress a smile and fails. Two people, once strangers, who never should have intersected, find themselves together due to a variety of chance encounters that winds them closer and closer. Isolation, alienation, serve as the shared experience that connects them, that makes them take stock, and find value in the other. He leans forward. She meets him halfway. Their lips meet and it was only ever a matter of time with them, for this to happen, it comes as no surprise.

"Odessa," he says. It was the name he was meant to end up with.

An awkward goodnight at the top of the stairs, each unsure of what to do or say, leading to a peck on the cheek, that leaves them both in a state of exuberance, imagining the possibilities ahead. Once inside, this Odessa leans against the door, head back, chin lifted, hair pushed forward over her shoulders, a smile returning, a smile that transforms into a slight laugh. She covers her mouth, embarrassed.

In the bathroom, James washes his face and pats it dry. He stares into the mirror. A row of vanity lights above illuminate the room. He blinks, once, twice, and opens his mouth wide, as wide as possible like he's trying to stretch his muscles. "You get a good look?" he asks. A return of the habit, addressing himself and the imagined audience. Without a response, he'll never really know, and eventually it'll stop, he'll move on. His head hanging down, he says, "You know it didn't have to be this way. I was ready. It was

you. You ran away. We would have worked it out. You left me. After all that shit you did and said. I'm not going to apologize. She's a nice girl. She's real. She's here." He looks up, gazes at the reflection. He doesn't know. He can't. The agent is working it out the only way she knows how to do it, from the inside of this thing, this network of stations with a tower behind keeping watch. He squeezes the marble edges of the sink. "I can't shake the feeling that you're in trouble. Do me a favor, you owe me that. I don't need to see you. I get that I'm not going to see you. But do one thing, let me know that you're okay. Do that. We never have to meet or see each other again. I accept it. I can live my life, pretending, if you just let me know that you're okay, okay? Sophia, you have to do this for me." It's such a simple request. He doesn't trust the message, smart. There's no way James, no way of reaching, without, without a chance, a chance of ruining it. "I'm sorry," he says, before shutting off the light, and going to bed. There's simply no way, just no way, not without jeopardizing what I've been working toward, not when I'm on the verge of. James, you don't. You can't. The world doesn't work like. It's only a matter of time. I can fix it, this thing we've done, we do. And I get why you did it, why you say her name, but be careful with this Odessa. One day it'll be over and I promise, then, I'll let you know, I'll tell you every bit of truth I can figure because that's what I owe you, what I owe myself. I'm okay James. I'm doing the right thing. Sometimes you have to sacrifice and go above and beyond. But James, I'll be okay and I feel like you know, like you can see me when you look into that mirror, so please don't stop talking to me. One day you will, but don't do it yet. Things are happening James, an entire world behind the world, but it doesn't have to be this way, which is why I need, James you can hear me,

you know I'm okay. I have to believe you know, it's the only remaining choice left in me.

The station phone rings. All agents in the vicinity check their terminal and then to me as they trace the source of the sound, going quiet to listen to the conversation. I lift the black receiver to my ear. "You're handling this awfully well," she says, sounding pleased.

"I'm performing my job."

"Yes, yes you are. We all are."

"Is everything okay?"

"Meet me in the tower."

"The tower," but she's already gone, replaced by a click that signals the end of the call. No one see her there. They whisper as I move through the arcing walkways, passing the other nodes, the other operations, the screens that hold the lives of others.

There is an elevator at the bottom of the tower, but no button to call for it, just an intercom without a buzzer, a thumbprint scanner next to it. The white doors open, closing after I set both feet inside. It travels noiselessly, within seconds delivering me to her. No cameras are visible within the chamber, but I know they must be in here keeping a record.

The doors slide open. I step inside. She stands in the middle of the circular room, at the center of things. Terminals, just like the one's below, run along the sides of the walls. Above the stations, the tinted windows look out at the floor below, giving a full vantage of every square foot, every agent, each operation, which can be brought up on the main screen, larger than the rest in the center of the room that hangs on top of us. She squints as I move closer like she has trouble seeing me. Lines run down her face, giving



her sense of definition. Dark circles highlight the fleshy bags under her eyes. “Will you contact him?” she asks.

“No.”

“How can I trust you?” Her tone sounds more like procedure than concern.

“I’m here, aren’t I? I made my choice.”

She inches closer to me. Her body seems smaller than what it once was, shrunken.

“How does it make you feel when you watch him with her? The truth, please,” she says, preempting my lie.

“I don’t. I don’t know. I mean, she’s, we don’t even have her background.”

PD Mint clears her throat. “You don’t.”

“You do? Who is she?”

“She’s perfect. A nobody. What he needs.”

“Can I see the file?”

Her eyes flash. “No, you may not see the file. It’s sealed. No one sees it and this is a test. You need to trust me on this.”

“But—”

She puts her hand up to stop me. “We’re here to discuss the future. Leave it be. I’m going into the field, an extended operation.” She walks to the terminal that overlooks my section. I join her side. “Look at them,” she says, scanning the agents, attentive at their screens, “pretending not to show any interest when all they care about is you and me in here, right now.”

“This is unusual.”

“Yes it is.” She faces me and pauses as if gathering her thoughts. “I’m going to New York. The operation’s duration is undetermined, but it’s clear to me that it will be long enough to require an interim director. I want you to provide this oversight, from here.”

“From the tower?”

She opens a folder lying over one of the screen and delicately removes a stamped document, pinching it by the corners. It carries her signature, the approval of Proto-Director Mint. “You will preside, acting as Interim Director until I return.”

All the things I could uncover. “Why are you doing this?”

“I always imagined you up here, with me. For the sake of my operation, there’s no one better, no one more familiar than you”

Except for her. “Thank you.”

She puts her hand out. We shake, continuing to scrutinize the other, while those below struggle to see through the windows. “A temporary assignment,” she says, “don’t get too comfortable. I’ll be back. Consider this a test. It’s different than down there. Easier to get lost.”

## CHAPTER 36

### Pushers

In through the nose, out through the mouth, or is the other way? Maintain smaller strides. Less strain on the joints. Brother's Pizza, closed right now, but soon they'll be there. So many brothers spinning pizzas in this city. Family bonds strung with cheese and sauce. Three men, ranging in age and size, going from youngest and skinniest to oldest and fattest, lined side by side with identical skin tones, slightly tan, going about their day, love and resentment tossed in the air like dough.

The morning breeze at my back. Keep going. A tree grows in Brooklyn. That's from something, isn't it? Trees planted on the streets, fenced around the base, contained. One tree, one tree, one tree.

A dog on a leash. The owner in a tracksuit, talking on his phone, newspaper tucked under the arm. The morning routine. We all have one, like programming, even the bug-eyed pug whose nostrils flare as it searches for a corner to relieve itself, to leg-lift or not to leg-lift? It's a decision that requires a thought process. After all, it is a public display. I pass them by. The dog sniffs, unsure.

At the light coming up, I went right yesterday. Left today. Resist the urge to repeat. Change the pattern. Press on. Come on. Out through the mouth.

Must be a bakery on this street, bread rising behind a steamed window that continues collecting vapor, layers upon layers. The steam-like smoke. The smoke-like steam. People in the shop, absorbing fumes while they wait. The routine.

Right, crossing the blinking red hand that turns solid mid-cross, a woman in a Volvo shifts into gear, flying through the intersection behind me. Asshole. What's the rush? Maybe she had to get somewhere. A commute into the city, do you bride or tunnel? The choices weigh.

An old couple walks hand in hand. Pleasant morning for it, before it gets too hot, too crowded. Maybe they do this every day, maybe they've been doing it for years. People must recognize them then, familiar strangers, they're cute, models of possibility for the rest of us. Odessa and me, could it be us? Straight, keep it going, left at the next light.

What are we, me and her? She would never be with me if not for someone else, but she had a choice, I gave her one, made it clear, didn't I? We're happy. We have it. Keep going James, keep those legs going.

The symbol of Odessa is an anchor. A port city, a place to find relief for all those Ukrainian sailors out to sea. A home for them to return to after drifting in the ocean. To have a center. She can be that. I can be that for her. It's what Coney Island became for people like Odessa, Odessa's people. Another anchor city on the shoreline, a place to look upon the water and remember. Alex on the sand, contemplating the past, waves crashing. *No James, who do you think I am? A woman?*

She said her name was Odessa. There's no reason not to trust a name. But Dad didn't trust it. What does it mean to not miss someone? Does it mean you didn't love them? *Enough of this shit and stop running so much, you're skinny enough.* I knew you were lying or withholding the truth. No difference really. I just told myself you had lost it, being in that thing so long. *Am I just a thing? I housed him, knew him, saw you. I held*

*him till his last breath.* There are constant compressions in the world. Every time someone breathes.

Sophia's done. Sophia's staring out from every window. Across the street a cemetery, Green-Wood, good sidewalk to run along. Stitching and stretching, miles, acres. Outside the fence. Bodies in the ground below. Prestigious people. People who earned a spot for me to run past. It's what we're all working toward. A place to run in remembrance of the dead.

Two more minutes, two more and I'm done. Pain, push through. Needles piercing the side, knifing, sliced lungs. Come on.

Gloom and doom. Richard's forecast. The world's going to end. Subprime's going to lose us money, true, but so far everyone appears prepared to deal with the loss. Banks still recording record profits. *But they've started to admit the losses on their statements in subprime. This will grow. The loan ratings are shit. The rate of delinquency is real and it will rise.* All the people, their promotional rates expiring, the past catches up.

An older woman in the distance stops and begins searching her purse. Short gray strands with hints of black. Old to be smoking, she'd be a good smoking ad, still going and going. She pulls out a pack. If I stop, if I stop now, it'll be perfect. At a good distance, but close enough. Next to the cemetery, a straight line uninterrupted by traffic and crosswalks.

She lights the cigarette and I slow down, accepted the tired weight, ache in the knees. Push it. Keep going. Come on. The other side. The smoke hits me and it's time to give into to it, but why? This thing I do. That I stop for. Stalking people, leeching off

them. Come on. It's not that bad. It is. She puffs again, but I'm running faster. She takes another drag as I get closer. I'm going. Through the pain, fight it. The routine. Inches apart and she turns, hearing the footsteps approaching. Her mouth hangs open. Smoke drifts out. "Hi there," I say, nodding.

She remains still. Like she's thinking, like she's about to speak, but she does not speak. Probably not used to the friendly demeanor. Maybe she's foreign. Does seem a little out of place. Maybe the smoke helps her deal. Even when lost it gives you the appearance of having direction. It helps everyone deal with the things we're dealing with, even as it gently kills us.

## CHAPTER 37

### Tracer

She grabs the fence, bracing her weight with it. She holds tight, knuckles reddening. In the distance, the subject continues his run. On the other side, pathways run through hills covered by headstones. With her other hand she covers her chest, cringing in pain. The cigarette, still alive, blows smoke from the sidewalk up into the air. “Are you okay?”

Either she does not hear or chooses to ignore the question. “Do you require medical assistance?” Through her long navy dress, her knees chatter and buckle, moving her closer to the ground. Using the fence as support, she keeps herself propped. “I am sending—”

“He, he didn’t stop. He was supposed to stop.” After a pause, she continues, louder. “You said he would stop.”

“Must have not felt like it. It’s predictive modeling. It’s not full-proof.”

Operative Mint appears to smile, but there is something slanted and uneven in her disposition. “Of, of course,” she says. “I will try again. Change my appearance. It’s only a matter of time.” She loosens her grip, regains some composure. “It’s a matter of time.” The operative requires affirmation. It’s not like her.

“Yes, we will continue monitoring. Improve the model.”

“Good.” She begins to walk again, following the subject’s general direction.

“What if he’s quit doing it?”

“People don’t change overnight,” I assure her. “He’ll stop.”

“Yes, he’ll stop,” she says, parroting my tone. “Did you see, did you see how he looked at me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s like he knew me.”

“He did not identify you. No indication of any suspicion on his part.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she says. A smile lingers on her lips. “I want to follow his path, at least for a short while.”

I provide her with directions. Each step she takes is methodical like she’s imagining his footprints and filling them with her own, feeling what he feels, thinking his thoughts.

There’s no mistake of personal connection, but no evidence of lineage beyond conjecture. What does she hope to gain? “Right on 4th.”

Mint follows the traces.

“Why, why are you doing this?”

“Stay with mission protocol.”

“I would advise initiating the next phase before advancing too close to the subject’s residence.”

“Yes,” she says, quietly descending the steps of the nearest subway line(R).

After a transfer at Union Square, she emerges aboveground at 96th street. Tyler2 waits, dressed in a double-breasted suit and sunglasses. They converge on the corner. He slips the keys into her hands. Sweat slides from his palm to hers during the exchange.



(“Calm down.”)

Mint glances up at him, disgusted. “Have the arrangements been made?”

He nods.

“Use your words,” she says, pulling his glasses off.

(“Yes, say yes.”)

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” she says, eyebrow raised. “You’re dismissed.”

He nods again and scurries away in the opposite direction.

“Did you have to be so mean?”

She stuffs both the keys and the sunglasses in her purse, ignoring the question.

She stops at the local playground, paying particular attention to the hopscotchers, the pattern of their feet as they jump square to square.

Without additional guidance, she locates the building, taking the elevator to the 28th floor, and enters the apartment.

Using her fingertips, she grazes the kitchen counter, almost hesitant to move further inside. “Do you remember that room?”

“I remember,” I say. “I still can’t believe you took me there to be interrogated after everything.”

“That was protocol. That hurt you, didn’t it? I’ve been in a room like that before.” She finds the laptop on the nightstand and opens it. “That’s not the room I was referring to, though. Do you remember the place with the old files, the empty chairs?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“That room has all the answer Proto-Director Lyon.” The laptop displays a series of screens, each focused on James’s locales.

“Why are you calling me that? The assignment is temporary.”

She looks directly at the camera monitoring her, directly at me. “I am calling you that to buy you off. To keep you way from my son.”

It should be a surprise to hear her say it. “Why, why don’t you talk to him?”

Her mouth hangs open, just like when he passed her by in Green-Wood. And I know she can’t, that she’s too far removed. She sits down on the bed and begins to rock back and forth. She gazes out the window. “It’s a nicer view in person,” she says, softly.

Mint slips off her flats and lies down on the bed, turning on her side, face pressed on the pillow. She breathes in whatever scent is left behind. “Think of all the good you can do, Sophia. You can fix it, all my failures, turn that monster of mine into something better.”

I stare through the tower. The agents below go about their tasks, disconnected from one another, each suspicious, focused only on their case and how it might advance them.

“Just leave him alone. Let me watch over him. I’ll protect him—”

“Like you’ve been doing?”

She reaches under the comforter, the sheets, and pulls it over her. “I suppose you had nothing to do with it.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I know. I know. Sooner or later it happens to all of us, the mistakes, but you can make amends from where you are right now and only there.”

“What’s so bad in me that you would do all this to keep me away?”

She drapes the white sheet over her face, but continues speaking. “It’s not you. It’s what you know. He deserves a normal existence, it’s what I’ve always tried to give him. If you go back to him, if you tell him, if he finds out the whole painful truth about his life it’ll destroy him.”

“You don’t know that.”

She breathes slowly and rolls underneath the sheet. The sun shines through the window, highlighting the outline of her face. “I’m so tired, Sophia.”

“Mint?”

“It’s your choice. You’re in control now. There are things you will discover. Let him live his life. There’s nothing either of us can do, but watch. You know this. It’s why you came back.”

“It’s why I came back,” and when I say it, it sounds like the truth.

“Good, good,” Operative Mint says, closing her eyes. She falls asleep in her son’s bed, hidden beneath the covers, knowing that this is the closest she can ever be to him.

## CHAPTER 38

### Watcher

Jeremy Vaughn kisses the woman goodbye when they approach the bottom of the stairs, the door marked I. Her hand lingers on his crotch in a promise of things to come. She slithers between the other two men, Alex Dvornik and Bill Adams, and makes her way back to the party on II. “You, you wait outside,” Alex instructs Bill, who agrees and leans against the wall, doing his best to appear sober, despite the vodka fuming from his breath.

Once inside, Alex points to a chair at the far side of the room and instructs Vaughn to have a sit. A hidden door, meshed into the lining of the wall, slides open. Irina steps out of it. “Thank you for the hospitality,” Vaughn says, and he means it. Since becoming the primary fund manager of the Little Odessa syndicate, he has enjoyed all manners of entertainment mainly with the aid of Irina’s sons, who join him nightly. Days of falling asleep to *Late Night* and nearly empty sushi trays on his stomach have been replaced by nights on the town with his new friends and their friends, “these chicks who have icicle legs,” he says, grinning, “with a warm spot in between.” He feels like he belongs, confessing to his new assistant that “this is what it must feel like to belong to a community.” Bill, for his part, nods along and joins his boss for the ride, attempting to distance himself from the guilt stemming from his failure to workout, which results in muscle shrinkage and fat transformation. Although the change is hardly noticeable, Bill knows, evidenced by the prolonged period he spends staring at his reflection, pinching

his muscles in frustration. And here, today, another day of drinking, waiting for the boss on the outside.

On the other side of the door, Irina takes a seat on the steel table, forcing Vaughn to glance up at her as she asks the question on her mind. “What is your exposure to subprime?”

“Minimal. We’ll take some losses, it’s unavoidable, but we’re protected, hedged against downside risk.” He twists his head back, hoping for a friendly face, but finds that the large man is simply staring straight ahead at nothing in particular.

“Explain further.”

Vaughn laughs, almost embarrassed, seemingly at a loss. “You see, that’s not what I do. Now, don’t get me wrong. I appreciate your business. You are a small and valued client. That’s why I’m here, as a courtesy to a small, but valued client.”

“Courtesy,” Irina says, considering the word. She goes behind her desk, slides open a drawer, and removes a dark green bottle, emblmed with a red stamp.

“You don’t have to.”

She continues pouring a glass for herself and herself alone. When she sips, she arches an eyebrow to Alex, who promptly grabs Vaughn’s navy tie(Borrelli sevenfold) and pulls so that the knot constricts the fund manager’s throat through his collar. His tongue hangs out as he attempts to breathe, struggling with his arms to prevent the thing holding him from killing him, but his arms only roll feebly off, all he can do is beg the woman before him for mercy. He folds his hands together as if in prayer. She nods and the thing releases him. “I call, you come,” Irina says. “Now, tell me the truth.”

Vaughn, peeled over in the chair, removes a newspaper clipping tucked inside his jacket pocket. He hands it over and explains, wheezing the words out. “Bernake just testified. At most, the market will suffer a \$100 billion dollar loss, which is really nothing. We might suffer a small loss, but it will be offset.”

Irina scans the numbers and begins to read them aloud. “Growth forecast...real GDP to expand roughly 2.25% to 2.5% this year and 2.5 to 2.7% in 2008.”

“Yes, yes,” exactly, Vaughn says, grasping the tie that choked him, smiling eagerly. “This isn’t me saying it. This is the head of the Fed, the federal reserve.”

“Get out.” While Alex escorts the fund manager outside, throwing him into his assistant so that they both topple over, Irina continues holding the flimsy piece of paper. She falls back into her chair, mumbling to herself, “Newspaper clippings, he brings me newspaper clippings.” In one swift swig, she drains the remaining liqueur in her cup. When she attempts to set it down, the glass slips from the table onto the floor. It doesn’t shatter, but when she picks it up she notices the crack running down the side that effectively ruins it. She studies it, gazing at it for far too long.

On the other end of the island, the other fund manager grows more assured of himself with each passing day. The doubt he felt has now faded. However, his general disposition remains the same; quiet, ill at ease, sad; signaled by an inability to declare to anyone, including his investors, his success beyond sending out quarterly statements. His investors have not responded with thanks or gratitude, but all pending lawsuits against BackPoint Partners have been dropped.

Jacques Richard prepares two plates. The *foie gras* rests upon a bed of spinach. Around the organ, he spoons a mustard *jus*. Steam rises from the plates as he sets them down before his current roommate and housekeeper, Melea Howard. “I thought you said you were making duck legs.” The irritation is clear.

“Just try it. I will make the *confit* tomorrow.”

“Confit,” she mimics with laughter, knifing into the meat. “Liver never sits wells with me. Tastes too much like metal.”

“This time could be different. Preparation is everything,” Richard says, unfolding the napkin in his lap. “Bon appétit.”

Despite several bites, it becomes clear that the preparation has little to do with it. Melea works on the spinach, leaving the cut to the side.

“I’m sorry, my dear.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” she says, putting the knife down. “It’s, I’m—”

“What is it?”

She brings the clean napkin from her lap and sets it on the dining room table. She appears to be looking at Richard’s chest, but really she’s avoiding direct contact. “I, I really messed up,” she says, choking on the admission, as thoughts of all the sums due, the bank notifications, the failure to pay, the habit of sorting through the papers every night, knowing she’ll never be able to pay them. She dabs at the tears that stick to her cheeks, that settle into her skin rather, preferring to stick to her than to drop.

Richard goes to her side, gets on one knee. She leans into him, lodging her head under his chin. “You, you stop worrying about all of that,” he whispers, gently rocking her, ignoring the tears that stain his shirt. “Listen, listen to me. I will take care of all of

that. Right now, I ask only that you simply pretend to enjoy the liver and you do not even have to do that.”

She pulls back so that they are face to face. Sniffing, she says, “I don’t want any charity.”

Richard snaps his fingers and smiles. “Then don’t think of it as charity. Problem solved.” He claps his hands together like the problem has been resolved.

Melea returns the napkin to her lap, returning her attention to the plate. With her knife and fork, she cuts the smallest piece of liver she can muster.

Through the screens, Operative Mint keeps a record, tracking in the comfort of a home. The display lights her face. Outside, the city lights stretch and expand, connected in the grid, square blocks hard-wired into earth, the underlines beneath the surface providing power situated next to the tunnels carved into rock, transporting passengers traversing above and below, the air trapped to stew on the platforms while they wait for the air-conditioned cars, traveling until destination, to rise aboveground only to meet the infernal atmosphere, perspiration collecting on the skin of all those collective faces, each with a name, a profile, each operating unaware, going about their life, their lives, these individuals filling the streets, rows upon rows staggering in and out of spaces, square boxes they call homes, offices, bars, gyms, shops, trapped inside, then out, above and below, fulfilling the obligations, habituated by their surroundings, within the city.

James Steadman dances with his arms just slightly above his waist, never higher than his shoulders. In front of him, Odessa sways with the music, dressed in a sequined ivory halter-top, back exposed.



*When the sun shines, we'll shine together  
Told you I'd be here forever  
Said I'll always be a friend  
Took an oath I'ma stick it out 'til the end  
Now that it's raining more than ever  
Know that we'll still have each other  
You can stand under my umbrella  
You can stand under my umbrella  
(Ella ella eh eh eh)*

The Rhianna/Jay-Z collaboration is fast proving to be the song of the summer. The Lit Lounge goers rise to their feet in recognition of the tune's initial beats, which include a vivid introduction of the singer by her male counterpart.

Odessa, hand on hip, looks back toward James, who's nursing a Jack and Coke, hypnotized by the spectacle before him. She grabs his drink and sets it down at the nearest bar. Using her arms, she forms the shape of an umbrella over her head and curtseys. James tips his head in response. She inches closer so they nearly touch. He hesitates, as he does, but soon finds the courage to place his hands on her hips. Twirling, she grinds against him with her backside, while he tries his best to keep his cool, a task that grows harder with each successive thrust.

A few blocks away, Monk Chu resides in a swell of marijuana smoke, staring at his phone, paralyzed by the decision, to meet them or to stay, the discomfort of being the third wheel factoring into the choice, the indecision. *Where you at?* The text carries the expectation of arrival and Monk weights it against the bong by his feet that has at least one, maybe two solid hits left. The projector screen plays a screensaver based on images captured from the *Planet Earth* BBC miniseries. Monk laughs when a picture of Emperor Penguins huddled together in the Arctic winter flashes by. He rubs the skin of his arms like he can feel the cold, like the image on the screen has transported him.

He prepares the text in advance. Edging forward, he picks up the black lighter along with the device, staring at the flame before putting it to the remaining ground marijuana, paying particular attention to the remaining green. The bong water bubbles as smoke fills the chamber and flows into him, flooding what feels like every open vessel, till he blows it out in a continuous puff that settles into the haze, adding to the cloud of smoke trapped between floor and ceiling. A tree frog, eyes red like paint with a small slit of black running vertically, webbed orange toes, rests, perched on a rainforest leaf.

His muscles relaxed, he reclines deeper and deeper into the sofa, glancing every few seconds at the pre-typed message on his phone. *Sorry, can't make it bro, not feeling too great.* He deletes the message and yells to himself, "Lame." A horde of cockroaches gathered, thousands piled in a cave, building toward some goal, searching for something. The image proves too much. Monk jumps to his feet and flees his apartment, buttoning his shirt as he runs down the steps. Once outside, he takes a step back, overwhelmed by the sound, the lights, the people flooding the streets. He looks right and then left, confused. An old man, dressed in layers, despite the summer heat approaches him. When he begins to speak, Monk turns, startled, but quickly recovers. "Excuse me?" he says.

"Can you help me out, man? Anything, anything at all," the layered man says, holding his palm out, shaking it like there's already change inside.

"How about a slice?"

"Sure, sure thing, young blood."

"What, what did you just say?"

"Sure—"

"No, not that."

“Young blood.”

Monk laughs. “That’s it,” he says. They walk side by side to the pizza joint near the end of the street that sells two dollar slices. While they eat, a smile persists on Monk’s face, perhaps in part to the act of charity, perhaps owing to the expression, which seems to answer a vague question that has weighed on his mind, a question that has been troubling him, forcing the man to ask, “What you smiling about?”

“Young blood, it means I still got time,” Monk says, tearing at the crust.

A time to watch, a watchful time, Mint watches through the feed at all times, scanning the faces, the exchanges. She does. It’s all she does. Pretending to be in the room with them, even when she’s far away, elevated in the sky above.

Shammi Malakar sits on a stool, legs crossed under her sari, after a night at the temple praying to gods she never believed in. She reaches out, touching the sheet, under the sheet the machine that held the man she presided over. Alone in the house, she’ll wait for them to return before sleeping. When she knows they’re safe, when she can hear their quiet voices as they creak upstairs, trying not to disturb her, she’ll sleep. “I will be needing to get rid of you,” she says. “You take up too much space, plus,” she says, lowering her voice, “you scare *her* and who is she for us to blame her? I’m doing this not just for her, but for him. I want this to work.”

She dismisses an imagined response, waving it off. “I don’t care where she’s from or how she got here. I see her. I talk to her. I know her.” Shammi wrings the end of her chunni, twisting the dark red scarf. “I’ll tell him, I promise, but not yet. First, let him get settled,” she says, peering at the small opening where his face used to be.

“Goodnight,” she says, slowly standing, grimacing at the ache in her knees. She shuts off the light, leaving it in darkness, latching the sliding door shut.

Using the rail as support, she climbs upstairs and enters her room, waiting on the end of the bed, waiting for the sound of their return.

Operative Mint’s eyelids close and open, close and open, as she struggles to remain awake.

After the failure of the initial operation to subdue the subject based on his predisposed habit, she has chosen not to venture another attempt. Instead, she watches, taking breaks during the more mundane hours to step outside. She walks alone in Central Park, wearing confiscated sunglasses, following the path of the reservoir, hoping that the action can provide her with insight or perhaps even solace. People run by and she seems to hardly notice them, like she’s somewhere else.

With her neck slumped, she falls asleep, exhaling loudly through her mouth, while the images on the screen continue to illuminate her. “Mint, Mint,” but she does not respond.

They return home arm in arm, locked together, knowing that this is what it means to be happy, that this is what it means to be normal. What they’ve spent their entire lives driving toward, it’s here, it’s now.

In James’s room, they remove their clothes. “Quiet, quiet,” Odessa whispers, covering his mouth.

They kiss and kiss, rolling in the bed, until they get to doing what's been building all these weeks, taking a traditional approach with protection, their eyes adjusting in the darkness until finally they see the other, face to face, and as they reach the end he says with a hushed force the name that's been loving him, "Odessa." He speaks it, surveying her face. Is it the only face he sees?

While Odessa snores, James stays awake, tossing and turning, flipping his pillow over. Each effort proves futile. Eventually, he gets up to relieve himself.

After flushing, he washes his hands with a mixture of warm water and creamy lavender soap, making sure that the cracks between his fingers are clean.

Slowly, he begins to look up to face the mirror, the action he's been avoiding since he entered.

He stares with his mouth closed. He breathes, faster, the air sounding through his nostrils, as if he's exerting himself, yet he remains still, gazing down the reflection as if it holds some answers, as if it's a gateway to another world. But he does not speak. Does not ask a question. Simply stares at the face staring him back.

Steadman's breathing returns to normal. He flips the switch and walks ways without saying a word, returning to the bedroom to lie next to the woman, to try again.

Eventually, in the quiet left in the wake of darkness, they all sleep, they all sleep, they all sleep.