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The Yellow City

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A THESIS

by

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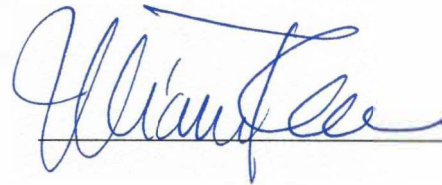
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The Yellow City

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Chapter One

The L

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

One missing. Nobody knows where he has gone. To search the car, of course, but he hasn't returned. The last we heard of him were his shoddy, untied work boots as he crossed the corridor, their loose, leather tops flapping against his jeans like windy sails hitting a mast.

Another one sits at the end, a bit of distance between him and the rest. He holds a goldfish in a plastic bag sealed with a zip tie. The fish's bulging eyes emulate the fear of the rest of the passengers, but ironically, not the man clutching the thing.

One mangled cricket near the subway door, a grim, unsettling little black peasant.

One overhead light attempting survival, fidgeting as its fluorescent bulbs flicker pervasively, casting ill shadows around the train car whose seats are an off-putting rust color.

Two. Two guns. One concealed in a trouser pocket, a cumbersome secret of deliverance or death. The second gun is no secret. It is still pointed at the boy on the floor, the one clenching his abdomen as blood percolates his cotton dress shirt.

Three. Three shoes, the number of shoes in her possession, two on her feet and one in her handbag. There are many secrets in her handbag. She imagines throwing the spare at him, the weighty heel hitting him square in the head. But it would do no good. He would surely shoot her dead, then.

Four. The time. Four a.m. Four jewel-cased CDs strewn about the car floor. He wants so badly to reach down and scoop them up, to save them, and himself.

Five. Five aluminum poles that nobody clings to. The car is unmoving, after all, and there are plenty of empty seats. One pole has a sticker of an anime character slapped onto it, a cat with squinty eyes, another anointed with a recycled wad of chewing gum. Neon green.

Six. Six passengers. And the man, muttering something about Orwell and “Nineteen Eighty-Four.”

“Two plus two equals five,” he sneers.

Chapter 2

Katriona

Light is vital for life. Katriona Kerry never appreciated its influence until living in this apartment. Hers was the interior bedroom, and there were no windows to decipher day from night. The only clue sat on her dresser, a red siren that blinked 12 a.m., indicative of a power glitch at some point while she rested. Rested, but not slept. She rarely slept. On the worst nights, ones where she felt particularly edgy, she would creep down the stairs of her loft and quietly lift a bottle of merlot from her roommate's cupboard. She'd turn on the bathroom light, subtly latching the door behind her and sit with her bare legs on the cold, porcelain tile. She'd push in her headphones, draining the bottle while listening to various, droning Radiohead tunes, songs with repetitive lyrics that must have been written with intent to induce drowsiness. Instead of sleep, though, the merlot, the infuriating lyrics behind the crooning,

Everything

Everything

In it's right place

In it's right place

they only provoked her thoughts more.

However, last night, after the merlot and the music, she had gone back upstairs and closed her eyes for a time, going someplace—weaving in and out of that strange existence between dreams and consciousness. Was it sleep? She wasn't sure. But she recalled shapes, and sweeping shades of deep blue with white fireworks that hovered like satellites. She thought of

the shapes and let them float out of her mind and into the air, swirling above her head to intermingle with the darkness.

Her eyes were wide and open now, but still, she lay flat on her back, palms up, like a corpse peering up at the dead space—a sensory deprivation chamber of her own making. It was pleasant, for a time, but she was too aware now, and the darkness, palpable, began to swallow her up.

Photosynthesis. There was a science experiment she'd done in fourth grade where they observed two growing plants. One was kept near the window and the other in the art supply closet. The one in the window bloomed into a lovely little flower, almost overnight it seemed, while the other one, cramped next to the poster paint and scissors, became only half the size and and turned a sickly yellow color. Photosynthesis. Light. They were important for most living beings, her particularly. She was more complex than a flower, sure, although they did share some common traits. If crossed, she was as prickly as a rose, when in love, as frail as a lily, and sometimes wild, like a purple violet, picked fresh from a bank near a road. But it was time to face the light. It was time to get ready for work. Even flowers have to earn their keep.

Downstairs, she found a working clock, a reliable one that ran off of a AA battery, one untied to the poor electrical of the old building. She had worked until 10 p.m. the night prior, and then gone out after her shift with several of her coworkers for drinks. Together, they complained about the various bodies they'd fed that day—the poor tipping foreigners, the strange man in the Boston Red Sox cap who requested Sriracha in his Dr Pepper. “And, oh! Did you see that woman who whipped out her tits and started feeding that wailing little creature at table 2? I think the busboy, Edgar, must have never seen a boob before! Ha! His cheeks were as red as the sangria he spilled, then had to mop up at her feet!”

Apparently she'd slept long enough that there were no evident signs of a hangover, no major consequences, nothing except the minor fatigue of being young and busy. This was a happy relief, since dealing with fickle customers required patience enough, patience that became as frail as a wishbone, ready to snap when accompanied by a blaring headache and a gurgling stomach. Nobody ever got the lucky half in that scenario.

This was her ritual. After work cocktails, a long nap in-between, a new shift, and then more of the same. It wasn't necessarily fulfilling, but it was too constant to be boring, and boredom, well, Katriona knew that boredom was her gateway drug to worse things.

She shuffled down the cheaply carpeted stairs. Her apartment was better than most for the price. Six-hundred dollars a month in the up-and-coming Brooklyn neighborhood was a deal that didn't happen too often, at least her Jewish realtor, a fussy woman who wore fur coats and spoke with a staccato voice had assured her. Bushwick. "The new Williamsburg," the woman had coined the neighborhood. Katriona knew this was really just code for "not technically Williamsburg, and you probably won't get stabbed, but maybe hail a cab after 11pm, just in case."

Either way, Manhattan was too expensive. She had a friend on the Lower East Side that was paying almost eleven-hundred dollars a month for her own room in a shared apartment, and hers was even smaller than Katrionas. Katriona herself shared her flat with three other roommates, none of them American but herself. They hadn't known each other before they signed a lease, finding each other online, fingers crossed that everyone else was less crazy and had less dire problems than their own. So far, there had been no major fallings out, but they were all human, and slowly their normal quirks began to spill out of their bedrooms, little clues, microcosms of their own, great catastrophes. Several days ago Katriona was looking for the

remote, and instead, found a small syringe underneath the sofa. She picked it up with tissue, carefully wrapped it in toilet paper and tossed it in the bottom of the bin—never asking who it belonged to. Why would she? Humans. Just people with their own, unique vices that cluttered their lives and Katriona had her own, ones that only herself, and her best friend Eamon really knew about. But hers weren't liquid or powder or pills, her desires. They couldn't be chewed or injected or swallowed. Still, they coursed through her veins in their own way, making her weak.

In the apartment with Katriona lived two Turkish sisters, an Irish woman with thick, red curls and a Parisian named Sebastian. They were all friendly strangers, mainly roommates. Everyone was always in and out of the space, rarely sharing it, tip-toing in at different hours of the night with 4 a.m. lovers. Those were the secrets that couldn't be kept, though, the lovers, as lovemaking was unavoidably heard through the thin, plaster walls. On the odd night they would climb the seven-flight walk-up together to share a beer on the rooftop, which overlooked the Brooklyn skyline. Those were good nights. Brooklyn, with its flat sprawling rooftops plagued by wiry antennae, whose purposes were unknown, but their unsightly, tangled arms reached toward the smoggy sky, shouting praise. On the building next door there were always some clothes hung out on a line, cottony sheets and blouses that swayed and hovered in the breeze like midnight ghosts. There were gardens on some of the adjacent buildings, herbs hanging from homemade wooden trusses and tomato plants that sat in black, plastic buckets. And far off in the distance, across the reflections of the twin bridges that took over the east river, were the staggering, lit up buildings, a Lite Brite pegged with luminescent bulbs. And the Empire State, which could be seen above it all, the glowing signal, the lighthouse that had beckoned them all there.

In the afternoons the apartment, a shell of exposed brick, was a quiet space, filled only by Sebastian, the flat fixture. An aspiring artist with no real employment, at least it seemed.

Katriona wondered how he managed to pay his rent each month. Walking into the living room she saw him, standing on the sofa, furiously painting a makeshift mural on the wall before him. It was a massive mural, and one that wasn't there yesterday—a naked woman with a unicorn head.

The body of the woman, if you could call her a woman, was voluptuous and full, like in Renaissance paintings. Katriona noted that on the night stand sat a small dime bag of cocaine, one that was nearly empty. Judging by the new decoration on the wall and the dime-bag, Sebastian had probably been up all night.

“Nice,” said Katriona. “Why don't you paint our kitchen cabinets next, make yourself handy. They could use it, you know?”

“If I painted just to make myself useful, that would take the fun out of painting, wouldn't it?”

Sebastian might have been handsome once, when he was ten pounds heavier, before sleepless nights and a powdery diet left him sunken and dead looking. His cheeks were gaunt and nose, pointy. He had thick brows, three shades darker than his hair, which was a sandy blond, and his arms and white tee shirt were covered in various shades of blue paint. A drug addicted Smurf. He seemed about thirty-five, but Katriona couldn't really tell. She thought he might be one of the lucky ones that looked years younger than their age, maybe by quite a bit.

“Coffee?”

“No,” he said, leaning back to admire his work and grant himself a new perspective. He studied it, squinting his eyes. Katriona did the same, noting the unicorn woman's hair, which was a gray so soft that it was a barely a audible whisper above the white wall, but somehow each tendril amounted to immense detail.

She could feel his annoyance for her presence floating in the air, like the unicorn hair. She was interrupting him. She turned and poured her coffee. She'd get ready for work quickly and grab a bite before her shift. Nobody ever cooked in the apartment. Maybe nobody ever cooked in Manhattan, at least as far as she knew.

She showered and dressed hastily, applying only a scant amount of makeup that consisted of a bit of mascara and a flattering shade of lipstick, something called Berry Bliss. On her way out, she checked herself in the dusty mirror that hung by the doorway, addressing her bangs that hung very long and very bluntly above her soft brows. Her hair was strawberry blond and cut into a short bob. She was tall, for a woman, around 5' 7'', and slender, with slight hips and full breasts. She was considered a redhead by most, but without the corresponding feature of freckles. In fact, her skin was slightly tanned, an olive tone, and was a striking backdrop for her large, hazel eyes, the mystery of which were accented by her shaggy bangs, which hid them slightly. Womanly by any definition, she caught the gaze and thoughts of men, and some women, wherever she went.

By the door, a plaster unicorn head was screwed to the wall, her key ring hung around the large, erect spike on its head, a phallic key-hook.

“Bye, Seb!” she yelled.

“Yeah, yeah. Have a good day,” he muttered, still working.

Outside, Katriona's yellow shoes hit the pavement with a loud clunk. The soles were wooden, a style made popular only in Holland and as a faux pas in the year of 1975. She had found them at a flea market in Brooklyn, where she bought most of her clothes. Recycled clothing was on trend, at least anything made before the year 1980—everyone knew that the styles of the 80s and 90s were two decades of fashion misfortune that ought not to be revisited.

Seven blocks ahead lay the maze of Metropolitan Avenue. Some days she felt capable of greeting the sights and sounds with an openness, her senses keen to dance among the bustle of it all. Other days, the pungent scents from street vendors, the unappetizing combination of candied nuts and falafel permeated the air, a sordid mixture. There were the constant sirens, crying out for attention over the noise of the trains beneath her feet, and sidewalk passerby chattering on their mobile phones. It all felt a bit suffocating, like jungle vines, and the urge to retreat back to her apartment cave felt overwhelming. Today, however, was a capable day, and she walked, bounced almost to her job at the restaurant, but first the diner next to the subway stop where she would order her usual—an everything bagel and a green, blended smoothie.

The sun was brilliant and cast harsh shadows on the buildings below. The neighborhood was full of old walk-ups and mature trees hung over the sidewalk, shading it so it seemed much later than mid-afternoon. Katriona was recently given the promotion of manager. It was a hip joint, one that attracted not only tourists, but occasional celebrities. The place, called, “The Highliner,” was an old railway car that had been abandoned on the outskirts of the island, until someone ambitious decided to plop it into the middle of the quaint, Westside neighborhood and transform it into a restaurant. It looked strange there, among the apartments and other modern establishments with shiny glass windows, like a redneck at a Parisian café, a man in plaid and overalls amongst chic patrons dressed in black. It hadn’t been successful initially. It was too rustic for Chelsea, which preferred the polished to the past, but the latest owners had just remolded the time capsule, refurbishing the space with a sleek, contemporary design, one more suited for the location’s upper class clientele.

Her aspirations weren’t to be a restaurant manager, and she often told this to those she encountered in everyday conversation. The problem, however, was that her aspirations weren’t

clear, even to herself, and this was sometimes difficult in a city where people were defined by their occupations, where many conversations began with, “What is it that you do here in New York?”

Born in Oklahoma, she was a firm expatriate of the south. That much she knew. The city of New York was loud: a chaotic frenzy of movement, but somehow, New Yorkers were quieter than the people she’d grown up around. They were happy to coexist with one another, even in a place where they were constantly physically touching, constantly rubbing shoulders on buses and subways and crowded restaurants. Contrast made everyone uncomfortable back home, but it was the contrast in people that had drawn her to New York in the first place. Manhattan was a bright canvas awash with different colors, some shades so unusual they had no name. An intoxicated Jackson Pollock. She thrived off it.

The walk to the subway was long. Apartments nearer to the train were pricier; further away, they became less expensive, but also a bit seedier. In her purse, she carried a small can of pepper spray. She had bought it after an odd, and somewhat traumatic experience that had taken place several weeks prior. She’d met a guy on one of those dating apps, and they spent a few weeks messaging back and forth. They talked of music and films, agreeing that “The White Album” was the Beatles best and that Stanley Kubrik was brilliant. He came from a big family, liked animals, and how funny, they’d both been on the Bryant Park lawn last Wednesday to watch “Airplane” on the giant, outdoor movie projector. “Yes, what a small world we live in.”

Eventually they agreed to meet up at a local wine bar, a shadowy place with dim lights and walls adorned with amber bottles that captured what light was in the room. He was attractive, with full hair, meticulously styled in a wavy, Bradley Cooper-like fashion, with squinty, but marvelous blue eyes. He worked at a marketing firm in Midtown, and seemed nice

and clever enough. She inhaled the three or four glasses of chardonnay he bought her at the bar, and eventually, as was his intent (less hers, but the wine had spoke for her), he took her back to his flat where they began having sex on his couch, a terrible pleather futon from IKEA. Five minutes in, he paused,

“What are you doing?”

“Can you wait here a second?”

“Uh, sure?” She lay there on the crinkly futon, staring at the outdated popcorn ceiling. She knew very well that a man’s interruption in sex, in general, is never with pleasant outcome, but she did wait, waited and speculated about what the grand finale would be? What animal would the magician pull from his hat? Would he return with some S&M garbage, a laptop blaring lesbian porn, or perhaps just a limp penis and an apology? None were favorable options, and she immediately regretted drinking the final glass of wine that had made leaving with him seem a grand idea.

But it was much worse than all that. When he returned he *was* holding something in his hand—not handcuffs or bed-ties, though, or two foreign woman kissing on a MacBook screen; a glistening metal object. Heavy looking. Foreboding. A gun.

Katriona shot upright into a sitting position.

“Don’t worry,” he chuckled. “I just want you to hold it.”

She looked at him, her face as hard as the object, eyes so wide her lashes brushed the top of her brows. There was a slight curve in the corners of his mouth, a subtle smile that made the weapon smile, also. Her throat tightened.

She was stupid, reckless. She hated herself for drinking the wine, for leaving the bar with the stranger. Who knew she was here? Not her flatmates, not Eamon? A terrifying prospect if

this went badly. Normally she was confident Katriona. Always confident. Always up for a bit of fun, but that was all gone now, replaced by horror. But she wouldn't show it. She couldn't. She had to channel confident Katriona—summon her somehow. This Katriona would keep her safe. She would be cool. She would know what to do.

He passed her the gun. It was heavier than she had imagined it to be. It had a white handle, made out of ivory, or something like it. She held it firmly, turning it over in her hand, masking her own fear with a contrived, wicked looking smile as she climbed on top of him.

His eyes were closed and he whispered, "Put it to my head."

She slowly moved the barrel to his temple. It was such a strange feeling, pointing a gun to a man's head. She could feel it, that cold burn of metal against flesh. She wasn't sure if it was loaded, but just there—the trigger. To think all she had to do was tense her finger, and there would be a ferocious rupture and he would puddle over the black sofa and spill onto the parquet floor.

He began to climax. At first whimpering, followed by a guttural sound; both weak, pitiful noises, she thought. When he was finished, she lay the gun down on the bedside table, and went straight to the loo to get dressed. When she returned he had passed out. *Thank god*. She slipped out the front door and deleted the dating app in the taxi cab.

As she thought of that night the air grew colder, somehow—a shiver of shame. Regretful, even of the memory. She had tried releasing it over and over again, liberating it from her mind, but it wouldn't leave her. There was a sense of guilt that the entire incident, the man's disturbing quirk, the fucked-up-ness of it, that the whole thing was her fault. And I guess it was. The choices we make and the instances that follow are, essentially, only ours to hold. Sometimes our choices have virtue, they grow wings and we watch them soar, like garden butterflies, but other

choices, the bitter ones, they linger on our tongues, that acrid aftertaste, or they plant themselves in our hearts growing deep, tangled roots, leaving us less soft on the inside.

In truth, she hadn't met a steady guy since she had moved to New York. There had been several, hasty affairs, of course, but in every case they had never taken on any form of true affection—never graduated past sex. It seemed her only solid relationship with a man came from her best friend, Eamon. He was desperately in love with her, and of course she knew it, but Eamon was safe, and all of the self-destructive parts of her were unwilling to see that she might be madly in love with him, as well, if she'd only let herself.

It was a brisk day. November 6th. While no snow had fallen yet, the air still required a thick jacket. She chose a mustard yellow peacoat that matched her shoes. She retrieved her headphones from the pocket so she could drown out the impending avenue bustle, but before she could push them into her ears, she heard a sound, a faint sound, the cry of a cat, a kitten, maybe?

Katriona stopped, glancing around, turning her eyes low to the ground. There was no cat, only a man in the street, standing over a rusted sewer grate. He peered inside.

She heard it again.

“Meow.”

Katriona approached the grate and spoke to the man. “Is there a cat in there?”

He was clearly homeless. His clothing, worn. Every part of him, his sun-beaten skin, his crinkly jacket, looked like a weathered, leather boot. He had dark eyes but no other distinguishable features. He wore a ragged ball cap and oversized black pants, and as Katriona walked toward him she caught his scent, a pungent mixture of urine and body odor.

“It’s in there,” the man said gruffly, pointing toward the storm drain. Katriona felt alarm for the creature. She had always loved animals. She and her friends volunteered at a local shelter occasionally, and sometimes her roommates would allow her to foster a stray.

She crouched down, peering into the grate, searching for a glimpse of twinkling eyes or a puff of fur.

“How did it get in there?” she asked, finally standing back up.

The man looked at her and grinned widely, exhibiting no teeth, excepting his two, bottom incisors. Her eyes met his, lumps of coal pressed into clay, and at that very moment, he let out another soft, but audible meow.

“Wait a second...”

He lifted his arm and stretched it toward her, grabbing her jacket. “Don’t touch me!” she yelled, yanking away her coat as she attempted to back up, but one of her yellow clogs came off her foot and she stumbled over the curb. With a Cinderella urgency, she left it behind and began running down the sidewalk. It wasn’t until she reached the busy avenue that she stopped. The man’s decaying teeth, his whisper of a meow, his foul smell and black eyes turned her stomach, filling her up inside, giving her the sudden urge to vomit. She stopped, leaning against some graffiti covered wall, composing herself for a moment. *What the fuck was that?*

Next door was a deli—the kind that sold single use medicine packets, candy, cigarettes and umbrellas. She walked inside and found a pair of flip flops in a souvenir section, grabbing the first pair that looked remotely close to her size. She put her remaining, yellow clog in her purse, ripped the tag off the sandals, handing it to the cashier to scan, then put the sandals on her feet. She glanced down at her new shoes, which read “I love New York,” the word “love”

replaced by an apple shaped like a heart across the straps. "Love." She had never hated New York more than in that moment.

It was too late now for the train. She'd have to hail a cab and hope that the morning commute was forgiving. Luckily Williamsburg had become hip enough that taxis had started inhabiting the area with some frequency. She stood at the curb on Metropolitan, arm raised, while a fleet of yellow zoomed by, a mad swarm of bumblebees, but their signals were off. All taken. "Dammit." She spotted a black, gypsy car parked at the corner across the street. It would be more expensive, probably by about \$20, but her shift was approaching and she'd have to splurge.

She rushed over and tapped on the window. The cabbie rolled it down.

"Twenty-second and tenth?"

He nodded in agreement. She climbed into the luxury car which smelled like new leather and spearmint. The cabbie attempted to discreetly peer at her in the rear-view as she settled in, but Katriona caught him.

"Hello," she said. "Chilly out, right?"

"Indeed."

The man was older, maybe sixty. He was of Middle-Eastern decent, sporting a Yankees ball cap and a poorly manicured beard which grew more thoroughly on his neck than his face.

Katriona opened her purse and rummaged through, producing a carton of American Spirits. She fished again for a lighter, cigarette wobbly in an unsteady hand as she attempted to light it. Perhaps the morning had rattled her more than she thought.

The cabbie opened his mouth, paused a second, then finally spoke.

“I’m sorry, no smoking in here, missus.” His Middle-Eastern accent was very slight, there was more of a Brooklyn ring to it.

Katriona said nothing. Only looked at him. The cabbie studied her face again. She was beautiful, with large doe eyes and cheeks flushed by the autumn air, and that hair—nymph-like.

“You know what, I’ll let it go this time, just roll down the window a bit, okay?”

“Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Abdul.”

“Abdul, can you tell me something?”

“I’ll try my best.”

“You men. Why? Why are you the way you are?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I know what you mean?”

She inhaled, long and deep, closing her eyes while she blew a thin trail of smoke out the sliver at the top of the window.

“You find me attractive, right?”

Abdul didn’t respond.

“Would you let an unattractive woman smoke in your cab? I mean, let’s just be honest.”

“Maybe.” said Abdul.

Katriona mused, smiling a bit, continuing to exhale. Again, long and deep, but this time she breathed the smoke out her nose, and it filled the car.

“Where I come from, do you know why women wear the hijab?” Abdul asked, breaking the silence? “The hijab is modesty. It hides many of a woman’s desirable features. Her hair. Her flesh. The things that make man weak. It is not her fault, but, men—the hijab is a way for us to see only the eyes, the window to the soul, and that is the important part, you know.”

They began crossing over the Williamsburg bridge and the traffic got noisier. Abdul continued, speaking up so she could hear him over it.

“My daughter is about your age. She doesn’t wear one, a hijab. She is the new Muslim. If a boy did to her what I suspect many have done to you, though, well . . .” he trailed off.

“You sound like a good dad.”

“I try.”

Work was slow. The grueling New York winter, which tended to unpleasantly linger, turned to spring more quickly. Katriona cut several servers early, and the ones that were left on shift complained of their scant tables and even skimpier tips. Two enduring patrons, kitschy older women, kept her there late and she glared at them irritatingly from behind the bar, annoyed by their freshly blown-out hairstyles and the lipstick stained rims of their wine glasses which they sipped on languidly. Finally, she found the nerve to begin mopping near their table, their trance broken by the filthy, slopping of the mop, causing them to request their checks and finally gather up their Burberry scarves and Kate Spade handbags. As she was locking up the double doors, her phone rang; it was Eamon, her Irishman. He wanted to have an after work drink. It sounded like a fine way to combat the chill.

Eamon was funny without trying, a true characteristic of Irish charm. He had masses of unruly, dark hair, which stuck upward despite any efforts to be tamed, and blue eyes, a shade that was harsh and wild, much like the Irish sea-side in county Claire, where he was from. He adored Kattriona, and he knew she knew it. It was humiliating, actually, the way his mouth fell into a large grin whenever they spoke, like a golden retriever, a breed whose affections were always annoyingly obvious and even overbearing at times. He carried a case of Altoids in his pocket, which he consumed so furiously around her that he sometimes got a stomachache. A nervous habit wrought on by a fantasy he'd replayed in his mind, over and over: them together on a bench on a spring afternoon, where pink blossoms kissed the trees in Madison Square Park, or, they'd be sharing riveting conversation under an umbrella shaded table at Pastis in meatpacking, and right then she would lean in and kiss him, and when she did kiss him, his breath would be as fresh as a teenage girl at a pep rally. Of course, she had never really given him any indication to believe that she thought about kissing him. It was only last week when they watched "The Notebook" at her flat during weekly movie night (her choice of film, not his), and she remarked, "God, I wouldn't mind if he touched me like that," acknowledging Ryan Gosling's authoritative grip on the heroine's body. No. You don't say that kind of thing to boys you imagine yourself kissing.

Eamon played the guitar and sang at local, Irish pubs around midtown. Old, traditional tunes like "Galway Girl" and "Back Home in Derry," some in Gaelic, even. He also tended bar at a joint on 29th and 2nd called Fáilte, which translated to "welcome," in Irish. It was a bar that attracted real Irishman, the kind that worked the ferries on the East River. They would walk in and immediately order three shots of Tullemore Dew and one pint of Guinness as a chaser. "Old langers," he called them. There was a sign above the bar, a quote by Ed McMahon, "God

invented whiskey to keep the Irish from ruling the world.” He doubted it to be true. Whiskey or no, Ireland, with its year-round dank weather and thrashing, rocky beaches. A miserable place, really. America had four seasons and ample sunshine.

He had come to New York several years ago with some of his school heads, a “gap year,” they called it, a free time to enjoy a new place in-between secondary school and college. But he got the job at the bar, and his academic marks had always been on the verge of pitiful. So, one day he just decided to stay. Unable to return to Ireland now, since he had no visa and would not be let back in to the US, he was truly an adopted New Yorker. He couldn’t fly, but occasionally his mom and sister would come and visit from Clonlara. He would take them shopping in Herald Square. Their eyes would dazzle and his would roll as they snapped pictures of touristy things he saw every day and didn’t care about.

“How are you and the lads gettin’ on, Kat?”

Kat. His nickname for her. As far as he knew, he was the only one called her that, everyone else used her given name. He liked that there was a piece of her that was only his, not to be shared.

“‘The lads.’ Ugh. Don’t ask,” Katriona responded, taking a violent swig of her beer.

“Feck. That bad, eh?”

“Let’s just say that I haven’t exactly met prince charming.”

“Maybe that fella is prince charming?” Eamon said, pointing to a guy with his back to them who was sitting at the bar. He was wearing a Rastafarian hat and had dreads that hung down to the floor.

They both laughed. Eamon thought Katriona’s dating life to be quite Shakespearean by classification. Part comedy, part tragedy. He knew New York wasn’t exactly the easiest place for

an attractive young woman like her. He had been down a city block with Katriona—cat calls of all kinds reverberated off the buildings as she walked past. He wanted to slug every one of the bastards.

“Hey, mama, ya’ wanna come over here and give me a kiss?”

“Bugger off, you loon!” he’d yell, and Katriona would giggle at his obvious rage.

He knew that occasionally, frequently, even, she would end up with some stranger she’d met at the bar, and in these instances he felt a jealousy so fierce that he could nearly douse himself in kerosene and strike a match to ease the burn. She’d also confided in him about the guy who asked her to hold the gun. He wanted to travel back in time, inhabit her body and pull the trigger himself. The feckin’ prick.

Tonight they were at a terrible, midtown Irish bar, another one that Eamon was occasionally asked to play at. Irish flags were tacked to the walls along with framed black and white portraits of draft horses hauling barrels of whiskey and antique bottles of Jameson that were peppered in dust. It was karaoke night. A six foot, broad shouldered man in a business suit took the stage and selected the song, “Come What May,” an odd choice for his character. In-between verses he drunkenly mumbled, “My wife’s a fucking lunatic,” into the mic. Katriona and Eamon remarked on the obvious cliché behind this man’s life, assumedly another forty-year-old finance banker, married with three kids and a mortgage in Connecticut. The perfect recipe for a midlife crisis.

But during the pauses of their laughter, Eamon’s eyes wandered about the space, his expression serious. Something tugged at his mind. Katriona was sensitive, especially of Eamon’s moods, which sometimes took on a sour note after too many cocktails—another Irish trait.

“You are kind of quiet tonight.”

Eamon looked at Katriona, her strawberry hair was also a bit tussled by the three vodkas she'd had herself. He had seen plenty of redheads—they were everywhere in Ireland, but none that had large, hazel eyes and olive skin, like she did. And certainly no women that were as mysterious and cliché at the same time, like she was. He felt some nerve from the vodkas, too. He was buzzed. Buzzed and brave. He looked at her squarely.

“Kat, you're dumb.” She raised a brow at his unexpected, frank statement.

“You're beautiful, and smart, and perfect and I don't get it, Kat. I'm so crazy about you.”

His eyes pierced her own, reaching through her pupils, attempting to grab something, a pleading, desperate manner behind them.

The bar was closing down. The local nook didn't have the 4 a.m. call time like other Manhattan pubs in the area. Her hand cradled her beer she'd been nursing the past half hour. It was warm now. She sighed, then smiled.

“Let's go home, Eamon. I think you're drunk.”

Outside, the streets and parked cars and sidewalks were white, smothered in a fresh coat of glowing dust. The snow had started falling while they were inside. They hadn't noticed, and when they stepped out, they paused to admire the pristine cleanliness of it. There was something wonderful and terrible about the first snowfall in New York. The city was transformed, of course, a glittering diamond, polished from an old piece of coal, but it was also daunting. It meant four long months of chilled fingers and shivery toes that never warmed in their boots, desperate looking bums huddled under scaffolding, wrapped in blankets and coated in snow, such a wretched thing, really, and of course, no taxis. Never any taxis.

The oddity of the scene struck them both. The city was always alive, always exuding energy. By 7 a.m., maybe earlier, the street block would be bursting with early morning

commuters, delivery men on their bicycles carrying laundry and groceries and bagels with lox from EJ's Luncheonette, and busses, letting out heavy sighs as they stopped, allowing passengers on and off. But still they stood there, as frozen as the as silvery lampposts and fire hydrants and postboxes, sharp fixtures made soft by their winter coverlets. They savored the silence. All of the streets—dead, the smooth asphalt, still a virgin to footprints or car tires or any sign of the living.

“This is so strange, isn't it?”

“It really is. Kind of eerie, though, don't you think?”

Katriona grabbed Eamon's his hand and pulled him into the middle of the road.

“Where are we going?”

“Just come on.”

She tugged him down into the center of the pavement and they lay there in silence with no fear, just two human beings comfortable with the moment, focused on stealing oxygen from the city that breathed along with them. The magnitude of the moment hung there for a while, until Katriona could no longer stand it, retrieving a handful of snow which she crushed in Eamon's face. They both laughed, and followed it up by making snow angels in the street.

Afterward, both soaked and shivering from the melted slush that had bled through their coats, Eamon and Katriona walked to the subway. They took the F to the 14th street stop, then boarded the L until they hit Union Square and it was time to part ways, Eamon was to transfer

onto the six and she had to continue downtown, into Brooklyn. But there, in the train car, before he left, he played it out, his Altoid laden fantasy. He kissed her. She let him, maybe even kissing him back. Her lips tasted of vodka and cherry lip balm.

But there was a rude interruption. “Stand clear of the closing doors please,” blared a robotic, overhead narrator.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Eamon said, dashing toward the exit, somehow contorting his body enough to pinch through the tight space of the two doors, narrowly missing being crushed.

Katriona sat down, her lips buzzing and mind whirling and humming, mimicking the sound of the overhead fluorescents. She was the only one on the train car now. Alone. She thought of Eamon. She thought of that kiss. Could it be Eamon? Reliable, sweet, comfortable, goofy, steady Eamon? So uncomplicated. Too uncomplicated. But did love have to be that way? Was she so emotionally charged, so needlessly passionate that she had refused to accept that real love could be simple. Did it have to be sought out, fought for, stolen, a soul sucking process of stinging misery that ground her bones to bits, until someone came along willing to wrap to her up like a cocoon, repair her, until she could find her wings again.

There was that line from the movie she liked, “Vanilla Sky.” “Just remember, the sweet is never as sweet without the sour . . .” But was it true? Did there have to be sour, or was that just the bitter taste of masochism? Something we did to ourselves? Could it simply be sweet? It felt unfair, unearned, like lazily walking through a field of tall, sprawling, grass, laden with wildflowers and weeds and vegetation of all kinds and somehow, unexpectedly, bending down plucking up a four-leaf clover.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard a tapping sound, fingernails rhythmically drumming on glass. She peered to to her right where saw a man in a blue uniform, an MTA

worker, perhaps, peering at her through the window, the one that connected her car to the adjoining one. He wore a brimmed, official-looking cap, a faded blue thing that hung low over his eyes. She could tell that his face was slender, but the rest of him was indiscernible, all except his mouth, which was pressed closer to the glass, a sharp line of discontent with a twinge of amusement, if the combination were possible. With each exhale came a dispersal of hot air that grew, then shrank back down again. There was a sudden jerk as he pulled apart the car doors and stepped into the train, approaching her. The car was empty, still, he sat in the seat next to hers, so close their hips were touching. She finally caught a glimpse of his eyes. There was nothing behind them, no color. Pitted olives. Soulless. Black.

He spoke. "I'm happy that you are here, yet sad, all at once." His voice, peculiar, a wobbly high-pitched cantor, pubescent sounding almost, even though he had to be about sixty-five. "You are a beautiful thing," he almost whispered, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. His skin felt papery and thin, hands like the wings of a moth. Katriona made no attempt to retreat, sensing something threatening behind his overwrought eyes. He handed her a slip of paper, a folded sheet of parchment torn from a notebook.

"Read it," he said, as he stood and tottered back toward the car doors, an odd gait in his step. He pulled apart the doors with ease this time, stepping over the coupler and crossing into the next car.

Katriona waited until he was out of sight. The parchment felt heavy in her hand, and she considered stuffing it into her bag without reading it, until she was off the train where she would toss it into the nearest garbage can. It was New York, after all, a city full of peculiar people that often did peculiar things for inexplicable reasons. Just another creep, probably. But then she thought again of his frenzied eyes underneath his cornflower blue cap, and she opened it, instead.

She unfolded the ruled piece of paper, words handwritten in pencil, tiny script meticulously spelled out in all caps. It read:

You are on this train now, and you may be forever. Your only salvations are obedience and honesty. The two most fallible parts of man. Do not get off this car. Do not show this to anyone. I am watching.

Chapter 3

Edward “E”

E grew up in East Harlem, just east of 5th Avenue and 127th Street on the African American side of the block. Each morning he would wake up and the apartment was still, all except the yellowing lace curtains that wafted about, the scent of the dirty, polluted breeze crawling through the open window. His mom was already off to work. She left at 5 a.m., and he knew it because they shared a bed, and the shrieking of her alarm clock went off every morning at 4 a.m.. She would always hit snooze three times. It erupted in five minute intervals. Three sets of deafening, rhythmic squawks. That red devil in the dark, with its pixelated eyes, taunting him. He wanted to get out of bed and tear the plug from the wall, smash it with the bat his mom kept under her dresser. But he knew she was overworked, with feet still swollen from the day before, so instead, he would lie face down and hold his pillow over his head, smashing himself into the mattress. Before school he would make himself cold cereal. Always Raisin Bran. That’s the only type she would buy, even though he would beg for something more sugary and more colorful on their rare trips to the bodega. “No. It’ll rot your teeth out,” she’d say. “We ain’t got money to fix them cavities.” Sometimes there was no milk in the fridge, and he would eat it dry. At least the raisins still tasted alright that way. And it was his responsibility to get to school, PS 133, just a few blocks north of their apartment. He walked; it was too close for a bus route.

His mom worked as a toll booth operator at the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the twinkling thing that connected Staten Island to Brooklyn. Long hours, and the rest of her time spent commuting to and from on the bus, since the trek took her to the southern tip of Manhattan, over to Brooklyn and finally to Bay Ridge. E’s mom had mostly raised him on her own. E was a

nickname, actually, short for Edward, the name of his father. Sometimes a long-time neighbor would bump into him at the bodega or at the Harlem River park and say the dreaded words.

“Wow, boy, you’ve grown. You look so much like Edward Senior! You got his height, that’s for sure, same almond eyes, and those freckles. Them are rare on people our shade. Them are lucky spots, that’s what they are. But, really, it’s as if I am staring right at him! I’m sure you miss him something fierce. How’s your mama doin’?”

He hated these conversations. Hated any reminder of a link between him and his dad, who passed when he was young, leaving him with his freckles and vivid, harrowing memories that made him loathe him even as his bones lie in the ground of his unvisited burial plot. He had tried to forget, for conscious disruption of memory, not to let himself go there; but the technique only made them more vivid, made him think of them more, some type of fucked up, reverse psychology of the mind.

Before he died, his dad would barge in to the apartment drunk, speech slurring as he cursed, violently bumping into the end table and knocking down the lamp as he attempted the walk from the front door to the sofa where he could pass out. The frequent abuse. E in his bed, the sound of coffee mugs and beer bottles shattering against walls, sometimes the sound of his mother’s body hitting the plaster, hard. She wore a cobalt blue scarf for a week after he nearly choked her to death, he released his hands in time but there were bruises to hide. When she could sense these types of events were approaching, something more serious than the usual outburst between them, she would find E. “Edward, go get in the closet.”

One particular night, his dad came home with an extraordinary, maniacal sense of rage that sometimes alcoholics possess for no reason. The code word was uttered: closet. He sat in the shadowy cave that smelled of moth balls, uncomfortable on top of his mother’s pastel colored

loafers, wedged between winter jackets and her dressing gowns, but suddenly, his mom's usual yelling replaced by screams, screams with a frantic and distressed tone. He leapt from the closet, following the noise and found them just outside the front door, his dad with a fierce look in his bloodshot eyes. He watched as his father grabbed a fistful of his mom's hair and began dragging her down the stair well. They lived on the third floor of the walk-up. Three flights of concrete steps. His mom, her voice frightful and begging him to stop while her head and back plowed forcefully against each step, her legs flailing about in resistance, like a string-pulled marionette. When they reached the bottom he stopped. Just leaving her as he nonchalantly walked through the front door and into the street. She lay there in the entryway, like a trampled on, broken bird, limbs contorted and unmoving, head bleeding some, breathing heavily. E rushed down the steps and sat on the floor next to her, his tears landing on her back where he gingerly placed his tiny palm, a tender and childlike form of comfort. All he knew to do, really. Time passed, and finally she found enough strength to crawl back up the flight of stairs, E steadying her along she way until she made it to her bed, where E tucked her in.

E didn't cry when they told him his dad was dead, found shot in an alleyway for some unknown reason. His mom cried, though. Something he never understood. How could someone mourn the death of their personal tormentor? She was free now, yet she wept over him, like a bird that chose to stay in a cage, even when the door was left ajar. For E, when this happened, when his dad was finally gone, his cruel presence lifted from their home and from the earth, he could no longer be called Edward. He was not his father. He demanded to be called E.

As a child E wore the key to his apartment tied around his neck by a sturdy shoelace. A latchkey kid. That's what they were called. No doorman to buzz them in. No parent awaiting the knocks of their scrawny, prepubescent knuckles. Instead, he would see himself home from

school, ditch his bag, and take the bus to the Wards Island Bridge, where they all liked to meet. It was a slender, emerald colored thing, the bridge, pedestrians only, and they'd walk across to Randall's Island where they would go to the park and drink cans of Coors Light or on lucky days, smoke pot that someone had lifted from the night table of a parent or older brother. They traveled around the city in groups of ten to twelve, varying shades of brown, mostly Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, a few African-Americans, like E. Sometimes they would jump the subway turnstiles and take the six train all the way down to Bowling Green, staging fake fights in the cars to scare other riders.

But he was no longer a latchkey kid, he was twenty-one now. He still lived with his mom in East Harlem, a smaller apartment just down the street from where they had lived before. It was his mother's first day off in some time, and she had asked him to have lunch with her cross-town at a Chinese place on the west side, The Cottage, a dumpy joint full of bronze-plated statues of Siamese cats and fake orchids. She attempted to entice him. "They serve free boxed wine with your meal!" But he had plans of his own, and an important job to do. "Fine, I'll call Sherise to go with me," she said, exaggerating her disappointment in an attempt to inspire some guilt in him.

He grabbed his backpack, the contents of which included a decent amount of weed, which wasn't his, a large stash of unlabeled jewel cased CDs, and his notebook. He stepped out the front door and locked the apartment, placing the key in the side zip pocket of his pack and not around his neck. The CDs were his own creations, rap songs he had recorded and burned at his friend's place on his shitty, Windows laptop, seemingly simple words when heard by an outsider, but to him, they were something different, they were him. Self expression that he aggressively tossed out into the world. Most kids his age were doing the same thing in some form or another. Some got tattoos that couldn't be erased, pierced their noses. Some came out.

Others found a tight group of friends and they all became each other. Some found drugs. Some found lovers. They all needed it, though, an identity. It was the way people survived their early twenties, and music was his, his identity. He shouted some of his lyrics as he trounced down the stairwell, “Boy, I’m stable, through myth and fable, truth lies, whatever, just make it clever, I’ll catch onto you, I always do.”

He hadn’t dropped out of high-school, mostly due to the persistence of his mother who dug through his backpack, retrieving crumpled homework assignments, which she made him complete at the kitchen table, hovering over him the entire time. Sometimes she would call on his teachers to see how he was doing in class, much to the surprise of the instructors. Most parents they knew didn’t care. After graduation, the plan was for him to attend a local community college, a trade school, maybe. E’s mom had been saving. But she started dating someone, a Puerto Rican guy named Angel who always wore shapeless, white drawstring pants with matching cotton button-downs as if he were just about to board a Bahamian cruise. He smiled a lot, a flashy gold cap on his front tooth. He would take E’s mom to the cinema and buy her knock off handbags and perfume from Canal street. He delighted her, finally moving into the apartment, relegating E to the settee which was far too small for his long frame.

One morning E walked into the kitchen and found his mom weeping in her pink bathrobe, face buried in hands, quiet sobs filling the room.

“What is it?”

“Angel.”

For years she’d been stashing money for E’s school in shoeboxes in the back of her bedroom closet, assorted packages stacked neatly, the actual contents concealed by cheap brand names and her shoe size, 8 ½. Angel had found it somehow. He’d taken it all; gone before she

walked off the steps of the bus that ran up 5th to retreat to their apartment. E's mom, one woman destroyed by two men, one stealing her own future and the other the future of her child.

He walked out the front door. Outside, Harlem was an entirely different creature than other Manhattan neighborhoods. It was less gray and more colorful, both in the nature of the pedestrians and the streets and shops themselves. Flags hung over the yellow scaffoldings of businesses, signifying every store owner's nationality. People walked in the streets like they were sidewalks. Most people with low income jobs, taxi drivers, deli owners, public workers, and "sitters," at least that's what he called them, the older people who literally just sat on aluminum chairs all day, outside of the storefronts or their walk-ups observing the happenings of everyone else. He walked a few blocks, spotting a bodega. He approached the counter and grabbed a bag of Skittles off of the shelf.

"These and a Lotto scratcher."

"Seven dollars."

He walked over to 5th Avenue where he could catch the train to Grand Central, then take the underground shuttle to Times Square. He planned to stand on the sidewalk in front of the TKTS booth and hold out his CDs. He'd say something like, "You look like a guy who could use some beats in your life." They'd take the CD from his hand. "That's five dollars," he'd grin. Some handed them back, "Not interested." But if he appealed to someone's compulsory senses in just the right way, it was like they had walked up and asked for it themselves, and they might hand him a few bills. His general targets were the European tourists, obvious to spot with their long black parkas and men with jeans that clung too tightly to their buttocks. Confused by his proposition, and perhaps overwhelmed by the lights and bustle on the sidewalk, they were the most likely to take him up on it. Everyone knew that Times Square wasn't for real New Yorkers,

but, he needed people, people who would happily give him five dollars. Nobody who actually lived in New York had five dollars to spare, rent was steep, and cigarettes cost fifteen bucks a pack.

He walked catty-corner across the street and down the steps of the six train into the subway. It was quiet in the tunnel. Only three or four people stood near the platform edge, all looking indifferent, getting ready to head downtown to work at their various, mundane places of employment. A little Asian man was setting up a strange instrument at the foot of the stairs—some weird looking bow thing made of a bamboo stick with a large string. E was glad he wasn't playing it yet. He wasn't in the mood for that shit.

He heard the train in the distance, felt the soft whoosh of it as the air shifted through the tunnel. He grabbed his flat brim cap and held it to his head as the gust from the train grew stronger. The cap bore the emblem of his favorite basketball team, the Knicks. It wasn't a replica and he had to hustle a lot off CDs to pay for it. He wasn't about to lose it to the subway.

The train grew loud. Its horn roared, an ungracious hello, warning of its impending arrival. One person on the platform stepped nearer to the edge. It was a game passengers often played, see how close they could stand to the edge without falling onto the track, toes encroaching the painted yellow stripe, and all in an effort to board first. E didn't give a shit about that. When the train finally stopped at the platform he waited for everyone else to get on, then sat in the corner, plopping his backpack down, unzipping the front pocket, pulling out the scratcher he bought from the bodega. At first he used his thumbnail, neatly scratching off the numbers to "Bingo Mania" in tidy, perfect squares. But he became impatient quickly, and pulled a quarter from his pocket, hastily wearing away at the metallic wax."

Beneath his efforts: \$50,000.

Wait. He froze. He'd won fifty-thousand dollars? It couldn't be true, could it? He held it closer to his face, studying it. Sure enough, a fifty with three zeroes behind it, tacky, gold coins with dollar signs dancing under the gray wax.

He stood up and out of the seat. He shouted, "Fuck yeah!" A homeless man on the opposite side of the train car opened his eyes and looked at E, then fell back asleep. This was it. A euphoric moment, one where the chokehold of struggle and the mundane subsided. Maybe his mom and him could get an apartment in lower Manhattan. He'd heard there were some decent flats in the Lower East on the brim of Chinatown—not too fancy, but reasonable, and certainly better than Harlem. Maybe he would enroll in school after all. Still write music, of course. Maybe he could see LA. Maybe he'd be at a club one night and brush shoulders with Jay-Z and he would pass along his CD. They were both from Harlem.

He sat down, grinning like a child on Halloween night. He looked at the card again, acknowledging some tiny white print at the bottom that he had just spotted for the first time, script so small it was barely visible. His smile faded as he read it: "All symbols must be matching." He pulled it closer and read again. In one devastating moment he realized something—he had been mistaken. His thrill, a short-lived prank. Like a bundle of string tied balloons, he watched his fifty-thousand dollars float in the air, pass through the top of train car and into the polluted, Manhattan sky. It felt like armed robbery. He wanted to punch something. What a grand prospect the fleeting thought had been, one that had given him a hope he had only felt one other time—the day of his father's death. He put in his earbuds and closed his eyes, using the music to drown out the thoughts of his short-lived, but nullified fantasy.

He'd already caught the shuttle, the train brakes groaned to the 42nd Street stop. Stepping off he entered the crowded and overbearing maze of the Times Square station. "Stand clear of the closing doors, please," the booming voice demanded. Just down the way a few doomsday preachers holding cardboard signs that read: Rapture is Approaching. The tunnel, littered with bodies and loose fliers that blew around, catching the airstream from the trains that whooshed by, the herd of pedestrians, some sauntering and others, nearly jogging, racing to catch another train or just because they were part of the frenzy. Everyone seemed to be carrying something, satchels and parcels—one man with a keytar. There was an overhead speaker making an indecipherable announcement, street performers, a man painted completely bronze who stood still like a copper statue, a woman with an acoustic guitar hooked up to an amp, her voice, distinctive, vulnerable, suspended above the commotion. Further down, a band that played with a xylophone and harp. All this music, all this noise echoing off the stark, white tiles. He walked through a passage that took him to the west end where he could exit near 44th and Broadway. An underground convenience store that sold umbrellas and snacks caught his eye, he walked over, placing his backpack on the counter.

"Do you guys sell scratchers?" He was already thinking about the commute home.

"No, man," said a tatted up Hispanic guy with a buzzed head. "You can't buy them down here in hell. Gotta go to heaven for that."

"Huh?" E was confused.

"UP-stairs," he said, heavily emphasizing the first syllable, his index finger pointing toward the sky.

“Thanks.” E slid his pack off the counter.

He was walking toward the escalator when he felt a tug on his black hoodie.

“Mister, can you help me?”

E spun backward and looked down to find the small voice, a young black kid with cornrows. He looked to be about nine or ten.

“Are you lost, or something,” asked E?

“I don’t know where my mom and dad are.”

“Okay, so you’re lost, then.”

The kid nodded. He wore a striped sweatshirt, it was a couple sizes too large, and worn-down trainers, one unlaced. E sighed. He wanted to help, but he felt a slight twinge of irritation, too. Again, he had plans. Responsibilities.

“Well, where did you see them last?”

“Up there?” The boy pointed toward the escalator.

“Oh, you mean in heaven?” The boy looked confused.

E glanced around for cops. Maybe he could find one and turn the boy over. Let them help him. But he wreaked of weed, and had an entire ounce on him. The last thing he needed was to get busted.

“Never mind. I’ll help you look for them. Let’s go.”

Together, they rode the escalator up toward heaven, entering the energetic masses of people that took up the entirety of the sidewalks, tourists walking at lackadaisical paces, turned into zombies by the skyscrapers and magnificent electronic billboards sporting perfume ads.

“I think they were this way,” said the boy, and he started walking in a direction.

E followed him. A man in a big bird costume approached. The character looked off, the costume, homemade. He held a sign that read: “Photos, \$4.”

“Not now, man.”

E kept following the boy. “How much further?”

“Just a little, I think,” taking a left down 47th street. They walked a couple more blocks. The street became less crowded—in fact, it was empty. There were no theaters or restaurants on this block, only some old, private buildings with underground grates.

E felt someone grab hold of his backpack from behind, causing him to stumble backward.

“Good work, kid,” said a voice, gruff and stentorian. E turned to face him, a dark guy, probably thirty, with a narrow face and angular nose, his eyes, piercing, like bullets. A black hawk. The man gave the kid a ten-dollar bill, and the kid took off running down the alleyway.

“You look like a guy who’s got some stuff on you,” said the hawk, who was now holding the front of E’s sweatshirt by a handful. He let go with a push. Next to the hawk, two more birds, one was skinny and also wore a Knicks cap, same design as his E’s, and the other, interestingly enough, had only one arm.

E couldn’t help it. “What are you, captain hook or something?”

“You might want to watch your mouth,” he said, lifting his shirt so E could see the shining thing tucked into his jeans.

“I ain’t got nothing, man,” said E. “I’m clean.”

“Yeah, whatever. Quit lying. You reek of it. Give us what you got and we’ll leave you straight.”

E stared at him a minute. It was true, he had the ounce of weed, but it wasn’t his. He was carrying it for his buddy who promised a couple bucks if he delivered. If he lost it, he’d be

fucked. But he had no choice. E reached into his pack, and produced a plastic bag, inside was the ounce, a tightly packed Ziploc of nugs, hairy and treelike in varying shades of green, an entire forest of it. It was good stuff, too, dried and cured by a little Chinese guy that knew what he was doing. Ray only sold the best.

“Just take it and leave me alone.”

“Gracias. You just made my day. You got a name?”

“E.”

“E? That ain’t a name, that’s a fuckin’ letter of the alphabet,” he snorted. The others laughed along.

“The guy with one arm took E’s pack and looked inside; he then turned it over and dumped its contents on the ground, his CDs hitting the pavement, falling onto the sidewalk, some off the curb and into the street.

“I’m gonna go now,” said E calmly, palms up as he started backing off. More words, though, from the hawk.

“Not so fast.” And in one swift motion he punched E in the nose. There was an audible crack, and E felt the blood begin to pour from his nostrils, running over his mouth. He punched him in the stomach next. E doubled over, clutching his abdomen, falling to his knees.

“Thanks for the little gift, E. I’ll be babysitting these trees all night. Oh, and that was for insulting my friend.”

They walked off, the hawk cracked another joke, but E didn’t hear it, only their roaring laughter fading into the alleyway.

E sat there another minute, the coppery taste of blood on his tongue, between his teeth. He felt a sharp pain in his ribs. He stood up, and it hurt worse, so he crouched down again. He

looked down at the CDs on the pavement. He fought through it, doing his best to gather them up and put them back in his pack, finally standing, walking toward the square.

He reached a Starbucks on the corner. Patrons staring at him as he hobbled to the back of the establishment, toward the restrooms—there was a line. New York. A city full of people and nowhere for them to piss. The door opened and someone exited. The man at the front of the line looked at E's face, which was covered in blood.

“Hey, man, why don't you go first.” The rest of the people in line grumbled.

Once inside he looked in the mirror and confirmed how he was feeling. He turned on the sink and grabbed every last paper towel out the dispenser, wadding them up and letting them absorb water first, then the blood on his face.

The weed was Roy's, a local, Harlem dealer. He owned several barber shops and was talking of opening another, too much cash coming in. E had known Roy since he was a kid. He used to be friends with his father and lived just down the street. There was gossip that Roy had once killed a woman, a prostitute that tried to steal drugs from his apartment; rumors that he'd put her body in a suitcase and left it in a dumpster. He really didn't have any interest in getting mixed up with him in the first place, but Roy approached him at the barber shop, asked if he'd pick up the stuff for him, deliver it to another guy downtown. “You'll get a generous cut; it's easy money.” But now, the entire ounce—gone. High quality, about five-hundred dollars worth with New York prices. He had about fifty bucks on him right now, but that was all he had, not enough to pacify Roy.

He left the bathroom and retrieved his cell phone out of his pocket. Maybe Adonis would have some ideas. Adonis was E's childhood friend, also a dealer. E got his weed from him. It was cheap. He didn't sell good stuff, though—dirt weed, mainly. Whoever Ray's buyer was,

perhaps he wouldn't notice the difference? It was unlikely—the difference between shwag and good stuff was apparent, even with a novice smoker, but it was his only option.

“Yo, man.” Adonis picked up.

“Adonis, where you at?”

“BK, man. What's up?”

“Dude, I need to score.”

“What you want.”

“An ounce.”

“A fucking ounce? Dude, what do you need an ounce for?”

“I just need it, okay!” He said snappily.

“E, calm down, brother. You alright? You sound . . . tweaked or something.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.”

“O.K. If you say so, but like I said, I'm in Brooklyn right now.”

“Can you come uptown?”

Adonis laughed, “That's not how this works, man, if you want to score, you gotta come to me.”

“Fine. Where exactly are you at?”

“I'm at some joint off Metropolitan. Macri Park. Take the L to Lorimer.”

“You're in fuckin' hipsterville.”

“Yeah, I know, but these hipsters love their shit, weed and bicycles, man. That's what's cool around here, so here I am. How soon can you get here?”

“I'm in midtown; be there in forty-five. I'll call you when I'm there.” E hung up.

The bar was hip alright. Not the sort of joint a black kid from East Harlem was used to, anyway. With sultry, red brocade wallpaper and tufted velvet booths, mirrors of all shapes and sizes, white bobble lights dangling from the ceiling. It looked like some type of exotic funhouse. brothel-esque, almost. He didn't mind the girls, though. A slew of young, hipster chicks with stylish hats and and high waisted jeans walked by carrying half-empty pints.

There was a back patio where Adonis was waiting for him.

"E, my friend! This is Blaize. Have a drink."

"I actually just want to score and bounce."

"Well, my shit is at Blaize's place down the block, and we aren't leaving here for a bit, so you might as well sit and order something." E reluctantly asked for a Crown and coke, and sat back. The breath of the night air was cold, so he drank his Crown slowly, the icy sweat on the glass making him not want to touch it. Why couldn't they sit inside, where they could be warm and stare at all the girls whose outfits were to skimpy to lull them onto the back patio? Adonis ordered them a round of shots, which warmed him up a bit.

But finally.

"Why don't you pay up now, and then we'll go get your shit."

"How much?"

"For an ounce? The usual. Three-hundred."

"No friendly discount?"

"Sorry, man, if I gave a discount to every nigga' who wanted to score, I'd be broke."

“The thing is, Adonis, I’m kind of in a real bind. I got an ounce ripped off me today. It wasn’t mine. I can’t pay up now, but I will. You know I am good for it, man.” His eyes were troubled, calling on the friendly mercy of his childhood friend, but Adonis just stared at him vacantly.

“Robbed, huh? Is that why your nose looks so fucked up? Well, sorry dude, taken or not, no dough, no blow.”

“Come on, man, I was carrying some stuff for Roy, and I swear, I’ll get you back . . .”

“You owe Roy?” Adonis’s eyes widened at the news. He knew what it meant to owe Roy.

E said nothing, just sat there with a frightful look, his face made more ghastly by the illumination of the overhead bobble lights, which hollowed out his eye sockets.

Adonis absorbed the information while finishing off another shot. E assessed his face, and for a moment thought he might have found grace, but then he spoke.

“That sucks, man. I really feel for you, I really do, but, I still can’t help you.”

E stood up from the table without saying a word. Adonis was such a piece of shit. This guy, they grew up together, latchkey kids, the Wards Island Bridge.

“What, no goodbye?” Adonis yelled?”

He stepped out of the establishment and onto Metropolitan. At least the subway was right there. He’d go home, write some music and make new jewel cases for the CDs those thugs had cracked. He didn’t want to think about Roy right now. He’d have to figure something out. But what?

He walked down the steps to the L train and over to a machine in the corner where he inserted his MetroCard. It only had seventy-five cents on it, so he rooted around in his bag for a

couple of rumpled one dollar bills. He would load it with the minimum, just enough to get him home. He was in no place to be spending money right now, not with what he owed Roy. He probably shouldn't have bought another scratcher after leaving Adonis, but he couldn't help it. The machine spat the bills back out. Too wrinkled. One at a time, he held them so they were taut, rubbing them against the metal edge of the machine to iron them out a bit. This time they took. He swiped his card at the turnstile, and considered walking down the platform, past a few cars where he was more likely to find one that was empty, but he peered inside the window of the car just in front of him and spotted the most picturesque being he'd ever seen, a woman in a yellow coat, with short, red hair and radiant, bronze colored skin. He stayed put, and retrieved his iPod from his hoodie pocket.

Chapter 4

The Goldfish

Curse this place. When he stood on the bank of the road a decade ago, raising his thumb, he should have asked the driver to take him west. The leaves were turning now, shades of golden yellow propped behind the fiery delights of oranges and reds, which scattered and blazed, setting the park on fire. It was beautiful, but an austere sign of the chilly months ahead. Because it was morning, and because he was cold, he walked through the park at a sluggish pace. Dewy beads of water had formed on his clothing while he slept on a bench near the Great Lawn, but now that he was up and moving, they had conglomerated together, finally becoming too plump and running down his back and his breast pockets. His hair was long and wiry, his face bore a full beard and a mustache that grew over his top lip. He wore a green, military-style jacket that had holes in several places. It was covered in insignia, fabric patches with crossbones and the names of bands he'd never heard of—someone had given it to him on a subway platform several years ago. He must have looked cold that day. He wore several medals around his neck, clamorous objects that slapped each other with a raucous, metal ring. There were exactly seven. He brought them with him when he left. That was at least ten years ago, at least. But he still held onto them, a reminder of a time when he could carry conversations and relationships and jobs and not just objects. They were gaudy things, with red white and blue ribbons, none Olympic, you might guess, but trophies from the science fair, a gold pendulum with an imprint of a molecular atom—he'd got it in middle school. Several others were from soccer leagues he'd played on in as a kid, various prizes in the shapes of balls, one inscribed with the word, "Winner." They'd given them to everyone, of course. There was one in particular, though, which he carried with more pride than

the others, one he had won in a poetry contest for a haiku written in his High School English class. He'd scribbled the seventeen syllables on the back of the cheap nickel medal with a Sharpie.

When he first felt the weather change, he took to sleeping in Penn station at night, but not anymore—too many cracked out bums and meaningless chattering and no space for bedrolls. He needed quiet, and Penn was full of drugs. He hadn't done drugs since he was college aged. He hated the thought of defiling his body like that now—he treated each function with respect. Every morning he woke at sunrise and did exactly twenty pushups, twenty crunches, and fifty jumping jacks. He'd take a small, fine-tooth comb out of his pack and groom his beard, attempt comb his hair, which was tricky, since it had natural wave and had grown to be long and stubborn, like an English sheepdog. Then he would write out his to-do list for the day. Today's was simple:

1. Journal
2. Library: "P"
3. Buy new socks

Though frigid, Central Park was still a nice place to sleep. No snow had fallen, yet. He could climb onto the bouldering rocks past Wolman Rink, just near Sheep Meadow, adjust his bedroll and peer up at the stars. He loved the vastness of it. It made him feel like he was someplace else, rather than the city, like he was back home in Utah, where there was actual sweeping landscape and greenery. Sometimes he would squint his eyes and look up at the ogre-shaped rocks and pretend to be sleeping in the Shire. He'd read the "The Lord of the Rings" at least fifteen times. The rocks were also a friendly place during the daytime—occasionally a mob of joggers would fleet past at a rapid pace, and one or two would cast him a friendly smile.

In his large camo pack was another pair of shoes and change of clothes, seven journals, one for each day of the week, a can of pork and beans, unopened, plastic eating utensils and a pocket knife. He had always been a very meticulous packer, and took great care in his things. He found Wednesday's journal, a brown, leather Moleskine and his favorite. He pulled out a cheap Bic pen and began to write.

"Wisdoms" he underlined at the top of the page, words flowing like sand from a crumbling dune. Everything made sense, and he had to get it down. So he did. He wrote it all—all the things he had done the day prior, everything in numerical order, all of his observations and encounters with humanity, advice for persons he had come across, and his general philosophies on life, like "To grieve is to give into the fear; we must be devoid of fear to live a full and hearty life." He thought it quite profound.

When he was done, he felt his stomach rumble. He pulled a couple of stale biscuits from his pocket that he'd snatched from a local coffee shop yesterday, free to the shop's patrons, and he was one. He'd paid ten cents for a cup of water, with which he requested a lemon wedge. He never stole. That was against his strict moral code. But he was feeling bad about something. Just yesterday there was a nest near a slightly wooded pathway on a low branch of a tree. The mother bird was not in sight, and he knew the freckled egg, though small, would provide a certain sustenance to carry him through the morning. He was so hungry, and couldn't resist reaching in and scooping up the thing, rustling around the fragile twigs it sat upon. It felt so insignificant in his palm, like his hand was the universe and the egg was the world. He wasn't particularly religious, although, he did have his own complex philosophies on life and nature and man; still, he felt a twinge of guilt as he contemplated what he was about to do. Out of respect, and to

justify his actions in some way, he thought it might be best to say a short dedication. He closed his eyes, and folded his arms, like he'd seen people do at dinner tables.

“I'm very sorry for eating this egg, heavenly father. Please know that I am full of gratitude for this offering that you have granted me today. Uh—amen.” He then cracked the egg and dumped the puny yoke into his mouth, and went on with his day.

Today he required more than an egg, though. He needed it. He would walk to 5th Avenue and spend a bit of money he'd been saving after several days of panhandling. He'd find a street vendor. An egg on a roll and a banana, maybe?

At the mouth of the park he spotted several landmarks he knew, mainly tourist attractions. The Plaza Hotel, the gleaming glass dome of the Apple store, and the other, a toy store he loved to visit, FAO Schwartz. He particularly enjoyed the section with science kits for young kids, ones that said, “Make your own volcano!” or “Grow your own rock crystals!” He decided to go inside for a peek, immediately taking the escalator upstairs to the portion of the store with the sign that read, “Young Explorers.” Off the shelf, he pulled down a box kit on how to craft paper airplanes, one equipped with a detailed instruction manual and an assortment of colorful paper to fold. He held it in his hands, close to his face. It was a medium-sized orange box with two kids on the front, both with bowl cuts, wearing ecstatic looking grins and Jupiter eyes as they marveled at the intricately folded paper planes, which zoomed around their heads. He was sure he had gotten the exact same gift for Christmas one year at age nine. A wistfulness swept over him, a memory, his dad in a plaid shirt folding heavy red paper with such precision and detail that when the flew, it zoomed clear across the large living area in a perfectly straight line, wedging itself into the brambles of that year's Christmas tree. FAO Schwartz was like that, carrying old, nostalgic brands whose packaging hadn't changed since the mid 70s. Real toys, not

piles of cheap plastic and noisy things that lit up too much. If he bought it, he could sit on the tall rock near Sheep's Meadow and fly them around all day, whiz them past the heads of children in prams pushed by fit moms in tight yoga pants. The kids, their faces would light up and they'd squeal with joy. He would take such delight in it. He rummaged through his pockets and felt a wad of crumpled up bills and some loose change. He might have enough if he only bought the banana and skipped out on the socks.

A woman approached him. "Sir, are you planning on buying that?"

He hesitated, quickly stuffing the kit back on the shelf, in the incorrect place, even.

She looked at him disparagingly. He had seen the look before, mostly when he entered public places. Sometimes on the sidewalk, even, when the pathways were full and he couldn't avoid the straight gaze of a passerby, no matter how hard they tried to avert their eyes. He took the escalator down, passing the oversized stuffed animals, some as big as cars, and left the store.

There was a deli on the corner.

"Egg on a roll, a banana and a plain bagel. Please and thank you."

"That's three dollars."

He gave the man three dollars, mostly in change, painfully counting it out as he slid quarters and dimes on the counter.

From there he took his breakfast to a nearby bench and sat, enjoying the solitude. He admired the avenue; it was only just before Thanksgiving, but some of the window shops were already dressed for the holidays. Men were hoisting a giant snowflake on wire above the street, it would dangle there until January, a glimmering beacon of exuberance that would cause pedestrians to stop and pause a moment, a bit of brightness amongst the snow which would turn gray and dirty from the pavement and the trudging of winter boots.

Where would he go when the snow began to fall? He hated shelters, but lacked many other feasible options. Last time he stayed in one he tried to make conversation with another man they'd assigned to his room.

“Have you read ‘Where the Red Fern Grows?’” He produced the tattered paperback from his pack. “You really should think of reading it. Perhaps you would like to borrow it? It’s a great metaphor for the way the world works. You see, on the surface, it’s about a boy and his two dogs, and their various adventures and such, but under all that, it’s really about mortality and . . .”

The other homeless man grunted and wandered off. He put the book bag and zipped it up.

He wasn’t always homeless. At age twenty-seven he left his parents after they had threatened to check him in to another mental health facility. It wasn’t one of those places for people in straight jackets, where they hold you down and inject some mind-numbing substance into your veins; although, he had been to one of those, too, but this, it was one of those nice places in the mountains, where they give you a robe and assign you a counselor and you eat healthy and then they slip you the drugs, which you take on your own “free will.”

But he wasn’t crazy. He knew it, and for some reason nobody understood. One morning his mom came downstairs and into his bedroom, and rudely, she didn’t knock before she entered.

“What in the . . .” she exclaimed, noting that he had spent the entire evening tacking up all of his jeans and underpants to the walls, every last pair of them, until it looked like some sort cavernous, fabric cocoon. Windows were covered in Hanes underwear, the ceiling, a tent made of denim and track pants. All of the light shut out. It prompted a conversation, one of the serious kinds where everyone sits across from each other in the formal living room, uncomfortably clearing their throats to avoid speech, but eventually they said it.

“You’re spending too much time in your room,” said his mom. “You’ve become a recluse.”

“I know you aren’t seeing things clearly right now. And it’s okay to ask for help,” said his dad.

He agreed to see a psychiatrist, but only because they reminded him that they were his livelihood, and he still lived in their home. He would do it out of respect.

The shrink diagnosed him with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder. They prescribed him Lithium and Serequel. He took it for a few weeks, but only because his parents intently watched while he sat on his bed and swallowed them down. They even made him open his mouth wide, “Aaaaah, see?” A humiliating act. The drugs made him feel tired and numb. One day he got online and read a long a list of side-effects: increased frequency of urination, increased thirst, nausea, trembling of hands, acne or skin rash, bloated feeling or pressure in the stomach, muscle twitching, blue color and pain in fingers and toes, coldness of arms and legs, dizziness, eye pain, headaches, noises in the ears, vision problems, etc. etc. etc. That night when his mom brought him down the pills, he skillfully hid them under his tongue, pretending to swallow them into the depths of his stomach, even subconsciously expanding his Adam’s apple to sell the act. Later he spat them into a cup and stashed them in his armoire. He continued this routine for weeks.

One morning his mom found the cup while innocently replacing some folded socks into one of his drawers, the masticated heap of pills and the routine of deception all in one dilapidated, sickening heap. His parents begged him. More counseling, the mental facility in Park City with a glossy brochure. “Look, you can go zip lining and hike Lamb’s Canyon!” But

he left in the night, furiously stashing clothes and his medals, some books and journals into the backpack his dad used for camping.

As he ate his roll he thought about home. About Lamb's Canyon, a treacherous climb but one with a rewarding payoff of wildflowers, Indian paintbrush and snapdragons and a glassy, sprawling lake. The roll was stale. He had to grip down with his teeth and rip off chunks, which he barely chewed before swallowing.

He left the bench and walked to the bank of a pond near the middle of the park, and pulled out the other bagel from his backpack. He searched for them, and saw that they were under the bridge. He beckoned them over, tore a piece off the bagel and they swam toward him, quacking with a friendly hello.

"How are you today, my friends?" A school of ducks, four of them, waded through the shallow water. He broke off several more pieces of bagel and tossed them over. One darted forward and plunked its head down over the bread. The others swam closer, faster, in a jealous frenzy.

"Good, right? But a 'thank you' would be nice. Where are your manners?" He came here a few times a week to share with them. They were helpless creatures, somehow they had ended up here in their unnatural habitat, like him, a slave to the sweltering heat of the summer and the equally grueling winters. They didn't look for food, like other ducks, or even migrate, instead, they relied on other people to provide. They couldn't do it themselves. He pitied them, but not himself, maybe because in some way he respected himself, other people who saw him on the street spurned him, he knew. "Get a job," they would mutter, as he stood on the sidewalk, homemade sign in hand. But it wasn't as easy as just "getting a job." He had held various jobs before. A pizza shop, a liquor store, but he always seemed to do or say something odd, and

someone would take grievance or discomfort in him. Once he got frustrated, angry almost, with his store manager for not lining up the liquor bottles straight, “You’re doing it wrong!” He yelled in a panicky tone, hurrying to him so he could take over, nudging his manager to the side, adjusting the bottles himself so the edges of the labels touched, just so. He was fired shortly after that. His was to be a life of solitude. Surrounded by humanity, but still isolated.

“Hey,” shouted a voice from above, a woman who stood overhead on the bridge. She was young, maybe about nineteen. She wore a plaid, oversized shirt and tight black pants. Her hair was pulled in a bun high above her head. She was attractive, but tired looking. She had an accent he had heard before. She was French.

“Hello,” he responded.

“I like your friends.”

“They’re alright,” he said.

“What are their names?” She asked, walking off the bridge and down toward the bank where he sat. “Huey, Duey, and Louie?”

“They don’t have any.”

“Oh, well, how can you be friends if you don’t even know each other’s names?”

He didn’t respond. He was slightly irritated by the girl. She was interrupting his ritual, still, he understood normal, social etiquette, and would entertain her some, but only for just a bit.

“You can name them, if you want.”

“You would give me the honor?” she asked him genuinely, her hand across her chest, as if he had given her permission to dub a great knight.

“Sure.” He shrugged.

“Okay. This one is Frank, his mate there, that’s Natalie, oh and the small one with the bright feathers, that’s Pierre. He, like me, is a French transplant.”

“What is Pierre doing in New York?” he asked.

“He came here for some excitement, an adventure, and to be with a lover. The city got dull, though, and his lover left him, but still, he remains in New York.”

“He should leave,” he said.

“Maybe. But he can’t.”

“Why?” he asked, fully interested now that he’d realized he was watching her Pierre, her feathery ex-lover float around on the chilly banks of the New York pond.

She didn’t respond. Instead she sat down on the shore and crossed her legs.

“Do you want a sweet?” she asked, pulling a package of unopened Nabisco cookies from her own backpack.

“I don’t eat sweets,” he said. “Bad for the body and bad for the mouth.” He opened his mouth, hammering at his two front teeth with his index finger.

She laughed. She had a laugh that rang loud and true, like a clear bell that filled a hall.

“How about some sandwich, then?” And she produced another item from her pack, a Saran wrapped croissant with a plethora of tasty looking vegetables stuffed inside. She handed it to him before he could even say no. I guess he was still a bit hungry. He took a bite, she watched him closely. It made him uncomfortable, the way she studied him as he chewed.

“What kind of sandwich is this?” He bit into it.

“My favorite kind of sandwich. All of the best things are on it.”

They sat there next to each other for a bit, breathing simultaneously but not speaking while he ate, watching the smooth, glassy trails made by the ducks, whose ripples started small, then grew, eventually hitting the bank where they rested.

She stood abruptly, unexpectedly. “Well, got to run,” she said. “Nice to meet you.” She brushed the remnants of the dirty bank off her black pants. “What was your name again?”

“I didn’t say. Anyway, I don’t give out my name to strangers.” And he didn’t, not to strangers, not to anyone. He had shredded his state ID and all of his other identification before he had left home, even. He only carried cash, well, change, mostly, and never spoke his given name out loud. His privacy was of the upmost importance to him. Giving out that information was to give away a piece of him, and he didn’t owe that to anyone.

“Well I am not a stranger anymore, but as you wish. Je m'appelle Monica. I’m leaving now. Au revoir.”

He waved without looking at her and she capered off.

About thirty minutes passed. He continued feeding the ducks, but after a while his legs began to feel a bit light, but soon it wasn’t just his legs, his head felt light, too, a subtle dizziness, followed by a helium feeling. Floating.

Could it have been the sandwich? He thought on his palate, and what leftover flavors remained. The buttery croissant, of course. That had been the best part. He also found tomato, avocado, and mushroom, the chewy things with that notable, dirty aftertaste. It was the sandwich. The mushrooms. He knew it. He was good and high. He had experimented a bit in college, which he had only attended for two semesters before flunking out—the drugs hadn’t helped his compulsions and paranoia. A couple of guys he’d lived with were big into it. They

grew their own shrooms in their house, even extracted THC into different things, weird stuff like peanut butter and Jello.

It did feel kind of nice, though. All of his tension, his inherent rigidness dissipated, detached from his body, ascending toward the clouds that he was looking up at now as he lay down, stretching his back on the banks of pond. Only for a moment, though. He had the sudden urge to explore; his senses felt more depth, the crisp air crisper, the dank smell of the pond muddier.

He got up. He had an old MetroCard with a few dollars on it—occasionally he'd ride the train to Coney Island, a long ride where he could sit and people watch for an entire fare. Today he rode the train for an hour, first south, then east—a mellow daze, his body tingling from the drugs and the vibrations of the subway car. Swirling colors. All walks of life, whirring past him, getting on and off—dark skinned men that worked as cabbies and street vendors, women, young and old, some beautiful, some plain, men that were slaves to their devices, tuning out the world, faces lit up by the absorption of their smart phones or kindles.

His ears popped; they were headed through the underground tunnel, strong enough to keep out the water of the east river, but the pressure and speed still hurt his head. He decided he was tired of the train. He would get off at the next stop.

Off of the subway was Brooklyn. He never went to Brooklyn. It was uncharted terrain. He knew Manhattan, but people weren't as generous here, and there were less landmarks for shelter. He would only stay a bit. He spotted a store that looked interesting, a handmade sign in the window read "Pet Shop." He had a deep affection for animals ever since he was a boy. He found them to be more disciplined than people. People were foolish and unpredictable, but animals were creatures of habit and instinct. Animals lived their lives how they ought.

He walked in. "I'm looking for a fish," he said. This surprised him. Prior to the words leaving his mouth, he had no intention of buying a fish. He had no place to put a fish. No shelf, no end table, no kitchen sink to clean its tank, still, he said the words.

"What kind?" asked the clerk. "We have school fish, saltwater fish, exotic fish, coral fish . . ." he trailed off.

"Goldfish," he muttered, again surprising himself.

"This way."

The man guided him through the isles of tanks filled with creatures snatched from the sea. The light reflected through the glass and blue and green ripples danced on the floor and ceiling. He felt philosophical. He thought about how the world is like a tank and we're all just different schools of fish. But he was a lone fish. A shark, maybe? They're loners. Nah, too ferocious.

His thoughts were interrupted when the clerk stopped and pointed to a large, overlooked tank in the back of the store. It was forgotten. Green moss crowded the sides, making its contents unclear. He couldn't see anything.

"This tank is empty."

"It ain't. Look closer," the store clerk said, smacking his gum.

He squatted down and pressed his face across the glass until he finally spotted something. Over the last decade everything had gotten smaller. TVs, cell phones, and NY apartments, but, apparently, the only thing increasing in size were goldfish, large, blundering-looking goldfish with worn scales and gaping mouths. They were as big as his fist. They didn't swim in a school; one in the corner, and several near the surface, trying to snatch up unappetizing bits of flakey bait. Their eyes were big and bulging, making them seem absentminded, as if they were

brainless, nothing but puffed up balloons. Their bellies were round and looked too big for their fins, and consequently they just sort of hovered there in an anti-gravity kind of fashion.

"These are a large breed of goldfish. They're all I've got. I sold out of my smaller ones."

He'd seen goldfish like this before. One spring, when he was a kid, they'd put some small, regular sized goldfish in a horse trough at his grandpa's farm. They'd forgotten about them a few months. They were too busy catching crawfish and running through the fields of alfalfa with jars full of fireflies, but later that year they rediscovered the trough. The fish were still inside. They'd lived off of moss and mosquitoes, and because of the size of their tank, they'd become enormous. Monster looking, even. These weren't a different breed of goldfish, they'd just been in a different environment.

"If I buy one of these, could I keep it in a bowl?"

"Yeah but it will have to hold eight gallons, and you'll need a filter."

"I'll take one," he said.

The shop keeper looked at him blankly, then shrugged, then went and fetched a bag and net.

He noticed that his high had faded drastically, and only a mellow hum remained. It had been quite a few hours since the mushroom sandwich. He found a clock on the wall. It was 9 p.m.. He hadn't even begun to scratch the surface of his to-do list. He had planned to go to the Manhattan library and check-out the encyclopedia. He studied one letter a day. Today was supposed to be the letter "P." But now, brain cells regrouping, anxiety creeping in, and he was in Brooklyn. That French girl, that little sprite of a thing, she had really fucked up everything.

The storeowner had already caught the fish. It was drifting around in a bulbous plastic bag with a red, twist tie at the top, barely containing it. The fish, clueless. It didn't seem to mind its change of habitat. It continued to float there like an object inside a Jello mold.

Fish in tow, he left the shop and walked down the sidewalk. He would take his new fish to Manhattan and try to salvage the evening—bum some more change in Herald Square and then buy some socks. His feet had been cold the night before.

He walked down the steps of the Williamsburg L train to swipe his MetroCard at the turnstile. The machine griped with a menacing note of protest. His card was empty. He glanced around. There were no officers. He held the fish in one hand and hoisted himself up over the gate with the other, then walked to the platform. On his right was a young, black kid, whose head bobbed up and down to his music, a rap song turned up so loud that it could be heard through his ear buds. And inside the car, through the glass window, sat a forlorn looking redhead in a yellow peacoat.

Chapter 5

Scott

Scott Frisby sat at his computer desk and plopped the two of clubs over the three of hearts. “Solitaire!” The screen flashed, and a fountain of cards bounced across the monitor, a jovial masquerade of outdated graphics. He sat on the arm of his desk chair, which felt more comfortable to him than the actual seat. He didn’t like to sit. Much of the time he would stand at his desk, hunched over his keyboard, face too near to the screen, or pace about the room while he made business calls on his cordless, office phone. On occasions when he had to be still for a client meeting or be present at the lengthy glass table in the boardroom, he’d cross his legs, tapping one foot against the floor at the rapid pace of a mouse’s heartbeat, urgent and irritated, thoughts in his brain bouncing around like the solitaire celebration. He had trouble concentrating. Really, it had been this way since he was a kid, but Adderall and Ritalin, drugs prescribed to him in childhood, only made him feel more disquieted and waspish. Recently, he’d taken to standing on his head. He’d go to the corner of the room where there was a blind spot, one that couldn’t be caught in the window of the office door, crouch down into a tripod type of yoga pose, then fling his crane-like legs up against the beige walls, trousers sliding down his calves. He would remain upside down for sometime, counting to himself. Seventeen . . . eighteen . . . nineteen, by twenty a large vein on the left side of his forehead would begin to protrude slightly, sixty . . . sixty-one . . . sixty-two, face as purple as an eggplant, ninety-eight . . . ninety-nine . . . one-hundred, finally he’d collapse to the floor. A loud thud and an unsteady walk to his desk chair would follow, ears filled with an audible pulse from the excess blood to his cranium. After this, he could sit, doze almost, a dizzy type of euphoria encompassing him. Then, and only then, he felt relaxed.

He never bothered to latch the door. Nobody would give a fuck if he were playing solitaire or standing on his head, although, they certainly might find that last part odd; still, doubtful they'd give a fuck. Outside of his office walls people were doing worse at their desks. More nefarious activities than playing card games and self induced oxygen deprivation. Some were working, that was true, making calls to other important hedge fund representatives, researching properties and businesses, but much of the time his colleagues were only appearing busy in their three-thousand dollar leather office chairs, which they lazed back in, swiveling from side to side as they peered out the pristine, seamless glass windows of Marathon Asset Management, a towering skyscraper that overlooked the impeccably landscaped lawn of Bryant Park.

The money was rolling in. Black Amex cards rested in the pockets of every employee's Bergdorf trousers, wedged behind monogrammed money clips and crisp, green paper that still carried that musky, newly minted smell, bills so fresh they were hard to pull apart. But all of that extra money in their hands, it gave them that feeling of indestructability, a reckless disregard for anything outside of indulgence, so, as they worked, as they crunched numbers and made calls, they also bought sailboats, made equivocally immoral business deals and dinner reservations for fancy restaurants in the meatpacking district, quiet tables where they could spoil their mistresses on two-hundred dollar bottles of Dom Perignon. One particular coworker, Griffin, was rumored to have selected a bride from Russia online last week, right from the comfort of his mid-century cherry wood desk, a blond haired beauty named Kristina who liked, "traveling and American Football," at least according to her online profile. The thought made Scott chuckle, since he knew Griffin was a bore and an old man with saggy balls. The young lady would feel both

liberated and imprisoned when she stepped off the plane from Russia and into the black limo he'd send for her from the airport.

Scott wasn't interested in mail order brides, though. Truth was, he didn't have to make a steady attempt to find a woman. A night out at any watering hole in Tribeca could easily end with a shared cab ride back to his apartment in midtown and a decent fuck on the sofa. The sofa, but not the bed. He never let a woman in his bed, which he found less comfortable after they'd rumped the sheets around, never retaining that cool, uncontaminated feeling again until they were retrieved by the cleaning service and reincarnated. He adored his sheets. He habitually ordered new bed sets online, Egyptian cotton sateen sheets with a one-thousand twenty thread count, imported from Italy, and with a six-hundred dollar price tag. No. There would be no woman entangled in his imported bed sheets.

But again, to revisit the Tribeca bars, they were a vast, thirty-page long wine catalog of women with something for every taste and pallet. There were the intense. The bubbly. Angular. Soft. Elegant. Fragrant. Fleshy. Refined. Light-bodied. Full-bodied. All there.

Dainty, fit blondes who spent hours at the gym with pencil skirts and cropped hair, golden skinned women with dark brows and full lips that looked exotic, and cougars, but the eye-catching ones who knew how to dress and whose tits still had some bounce, the kind even some younger men liked. There were girls, too. Presumably they'd gotten in with fake ID's, decidedly leaving Idaho or Ohio or wherever the fuck to disavow farm life and claim a sense of freedom through newfound promiscuity. Sirens of the watering hole, luring and fishing, reeling in, catching glimpses of a finely tailored suit and shoes from Saks. No flirtation. No lines, only,

“Where do you work?”

“Investment banking.” Dumb questions. Rhetorical questions. Only bankers, and the sirens had drinks in those oak laden, Tribeca bars at 5:30 p.m..

And Scott was handsome, or on the better side of average looking, at least, with wavy, Fitzgerald-blond locks and bronze colored eyes. He was forty-five, but middle age hadn't claimed much of his hair, yet. He owned several pieces of high-end home exercise equipment and would sometimes ride his bike along the Hudson. He was short, however, a family trait that pained him greatly. He envied other men who were taller—not because he was particularly vain, or because he thought it unattractive to women, but because that meant he sometimes had to look up at others when he spoke. It was degrading, a breach in authority that might be reclaimed if only he were one foot and a half taller. He also drank too much scotch, and lately his cheeks had begun to faintly puff out some, his skin taking on an understated pink tone.

One of the firm's secretaries poked her head in his office door. Luckily he hadn't been standing on his head at the time.

She made sure to meet his eyes, smiling a kittenish smile. “Scott, you have a call on the line.”

“Thanks, Tonya.” He noted how she was wearing a particularly tight blouse, unbuttoned low enough to get a fairly hearty glimpse of her cleavage. He imagined this was thought out. She was attractive, he guessed, in a very generic kind of manner—stained lips, a slim waste with curvaceous hips—the firm only hired women that looked this way. She wanted Scott, and how Scott knew it. For weeks she had been finding excuses to come into his office.

“Hey, Scott, thought you could use a coffee.”

“Hey, Scott, do you want those figures sent up?”

“Hey, Scott, thought I'd bring you a copy of The Times.

The blouse, the heavy scent of Chanel Mademoiselle, which she had generously bathed herself in now wafting through the air. He had a feeling she was getting more brave, or desperate, or maybe both. She spoke, and he was right.

“Hey, Scott, before you take that call, can I ask, would you maybe like to get a drink tonight? It’s just, we work together everyday, but I feel like we still don’t really know each other very well, you know?”

“You’re right, Tonya,” he said, slapping his right hand on his desk in a feigned attempt at disbelief. “We could use a little get to know you session. What if we do dinner, though? There is a great place by my house. It’s called Bricola, I think? Little Italian place. Let’s chat more about it when I am off this call.”

“Great.” She smiled, showing off her perfectly bleached teeth and supple ass as she turned and closed the door.

Truth was, Scott wasn’t much interested at all. Actually, not in the least, but Tonya was young and seemingly unsullied by any other men in the office. And they all wanted her. If he fucked her, he would tell everyone. Respect meant everything in his line of work. Always bragging about their bigger boats, better women, outrageous West Side apartments. It would be worth the one-hundred dollars he would spend on dinner.

He picked up phone. “This is Scott.”

“Scott, it’s Roger.”

“Roger! Hey, pal, how’s the golf swing going?”

“I don’t have time for that shit right now, Scott.”

“Oka—”

“Look, I think we may be in a shit-load of shit. The investment we made with Vince’s nephew? Something’s gone sour.”

“I thought that was solid.”

“I don’t know, but Vince called me in a panic—said something about his idiotic nephew, Taryn. It’s got me all jumpy. There may be a lot to lose here.”

“How much?”

Roger paused for a brief moment. “Look, can you just meet him? See what the fuck’s going on and get to the bottom of this?”

“Yeah. Fuck. Where?”

“Grimaldis.”

“Grimaldis? In Brooklyn! The tourist trap? Why the hell are we meeting in Brooklyn?”

“The nephew. He lives there. He suggested it. Look, I got to go, but can you be there by two p.m.?”

“Sure,” said Scott, irritated as he hung up. A sense of dread hovered in the air, made more putrid by the leftover scent of Tonya’s lingering perfume.

Scott had Tonya hire a car to Grimaldis where he arrived at promptly 2 p.m. He was right. The joint was swarming with tourists. Every table was adorned with checkerboard style, plastic tablecloths and fake red carnations in cheap glass vases. The air was warm from the dense

amount of bodies, and the abundant whirling of overhead fans did nothing to combat it, they only wafted the heat around in different directions, a burning breeze. There were hardly any tables, only cramped vinyl chairs taken by couples on holiday, Asians with Nikons and southern-looking families with boisterous, marinara-stained children. Grimaldis had great pizza. That was a New York fact, but it was no longer a local joint. Their skillful placement of adverts in those “Tour the City” pamphlets, the kind available at hotels kiosks and double decker busses had made it so.

Scott and Taryn Gallo had only ever spoke over the phone and through e-mail, but Scott immediately spotted a dark haired, boyish looking thirty-year-old in the far corner of the restaurant. Alone. It had to be him. The boy stood and animatedly waived him over.

“Hey, Scott, nice to meet you,” he reached out his hand for a shake. Scott noticed his commanding grip.

Taryn looked far younger than his age, round, brown eyes with noticeable honey colored specks. He had thin lips that were made up for by his chiseled jaw which he accented with a chinstrap. Italian by heritage, Taryn was the nephew of Vince Gallo, who had ties to the “new mob.” The days of Lucky Luciano and Masseria were long over, seemingly fictional tales read in books and in films, almost; however, the mob did still exist, only as a well-oiled business machine that functioned under the radar, instead of a commanding stronghold that once tormented the New York Police and its citizens. These days, the organization was no longer driven by drugs or booze, but still money, making shady investments here and there, buying up properties to cover nefarious activity, mainly profits made by offshore internet gambling and sometimes the sales of illegal firearms. It was in Scott’s interest to keep them happy.

“Hello, Scott.”

Scott didn't reply. The boy's opulent eyes and coppery skin grabbed him, and he felt a strange, gravitational pull. His demeanor. There was something interesting about the way his hands relaxed on the table, folded over each other. The coolness in his tone. Scott stirred in his chair while Taryn continued to speak without Scott's formal introduction.

"The property flopped. Nobody bought in. We renovated, promoted, and nothing. Jersey is booming right now, so we thought it would be a home-run, but the market—you know—everyone is buying in Manhattan. It should have been fish in a barrel, but now it's pretty much just . . ."

"Dead fish," Scott interjected. Still rattled by the boy, he did his best to assert himself. "Look, we took a chance on this deal. I have been a friend of your uncle Vince for a very long time. We bought in on his word. Made it happen, but I checked the numbers before I left the office. So far we are out six mil on this. Six!"

"I get that. What I am asking for is just a little more time and a little more for marketing. We can get this up. We can. Worse case scenario is we come out even. It's not impossible, Scott."

Taryn then stood up from the table, nudging his chair backward. It screeched against the tile, a rude honk. He strolled over to a gumball machine adjacent to their counter, one of old-fashioned, oversized ones that stood on the floor. He stuck a quarter in the slot and cranked, coin grating against metal, wearing a look of total amusement as a bright blue gumball spiraled down the colorful carousel. He retrieved it to his palm then turned to Scott. "Want one?"

"No," Scott said curtly, while Taryn reclaimed his seat.

"Look. It's just not going to happen." Scott let out a sigh, then continued. "There is no way we'll get approval to hand over anymore for marketing. We are going to have to cut our

losses on this one, and you, or your people will owe on the loan and a percentage for the loss, like the contract stated.

Scott watched as Taryn popped the gumball into his mouth, and began to chew energetically. He seemed unfazed.

Scott continued. “There’s paperwork.” Lifting a hefty ream of paper from his briefcase, sliding it to the center of the table along with a fountain pen he produced from his vest pocket. Taryn didn’t reach for the pen, and an awkward silence swept over the counter. Scott began impatiently tapping his toes. He might have felt some sympathy for the kid if it wasn’t for his demeanor of detached nonchalance. And after all, it could be his own ass on the line. He was the one who had vouched for Vince. A bad investment was a bad investment, and the mortal sin in his line of work was losing money. Six mil was a lot. Someone would be held responsible.

A waiter approached, a stout Italian man who was sweating heavily through his work shirt. He spoke rapidly.

“I’m Christopher. What can I get you?”

Taryn responded before Scott had a chance. “Can you bring my friend and I two shots of whiskey and a couple beers?”

“What kind of whiskey?”

“I don’t care—well is fine.”

“How about the beers?”

“Don’t care about that either.”

“We have a special Brooklyn lager, it’s—”

“Yeah, fine, fine, bring it out.” The waiter dashed away, nearly sprinting to another nearby table whose patron was beckoning him over with a look of fervor.

“So,” said Scott, “you fucked up, kid.”

“Yeah, it looks like it.”

They stared off a while longer, both discreetly studying each other when eyes were off course, settled on something mundane, a poster of a gondola and another of an old, Italian woman baking bread in an old-fashioned brick oven, artifacts only made interesting to avoid eye contact. But when Scott was able, he did revisit Taryn’s features, which were soft, but striking all at once. He had a slight upturn to his nose and dark hair that was almost black, but not quite. An anxiety ridden expression was just now beginning to present itself, one probably induced by the heavy stack of parchment and grimacing fountain pen that sat between them. They both hoped the whiskeys would arrive quickly.

It was at that moment that Scott felt something against his trouser leg, tracing the bottom of his ankle. Was it a sturdy leather shoe?

“Oops,” said Scott, out of shock, or embarrassment, or something like it. He recoiled.

Taryn said nothing, only slowly retracted his foot and then bravely met Scott’s eyes with some form of ambiguous intent.

The waiter, Christopher, returned and plopped the drinks on the vinyl tablecloth.

“Whiskeys and beers, here you go.” He slapped a few recycled coasters down on the table, their edges water stained and peeling back, then rushed off, once again.

“So, Scott, tell me how you got to be such a big shot?”

“A big shot? I don’t know about that.”

“Well, it seems you do well enough for yourself. Office on One Bryant place, probably an equally comfortable apartment with a swimming pool and a doorman, am I right? So tell me. How did you manage it?”

Scott shot back his whiskey and Taryn did the same.

“Nothing is free, kid. You earn everything. You pay for everything, even your mistakes, as you are about to find out.”

“Pft, ‘earn everything,’” Taryn propped back in his chair. He loosened his tie around his neck, a makeshift noose, unbuttoning his shirt, the top button first and then the one just below, under which were two, very well defined collar-bones. “You know where I come from. I’m a Gallo. I haven’t had to earn anything. This was supposed to be my chance, you know? Show them that I am a businessman—got a good head on my shoulders, that I can be trusted, all that shit. The money we’ll owe, a little bump in the road, and sure, my uncle will be pissed, but money can always be found. You know my family. Me, however, I’m done. From here on out I’ll be a chump they stash in at a family travel agency on the shore, not even a real business, just one that exists to clear the cash flow.

Taryn sighed. His eyes looked heavier. Scott could tell the whiskey was taking effect.

“So come on, tell me. How’d you get here?” he pressed Scott again.

“I took my risks, and they paid off.” He took a long swig of his his beer.

“That’s it. That’s all I get? I’m about to sign these funeral papers,” Taryn said, glancing down at the heap of parchment on the table. “The least you could do is humor me with a bedtime story.”

The hurried waiter was passing their table again and Taryn gestured at him, making a number two with his middle and index finger to signal another round. The waiter nodded.

“You know what I said before about earning my keep? Paying for sins?” said Scott, “Well, I haven’t exactly paid, yet, unless the occasional guilt counts, but I have sinned plenty. When I was twenty-four and new to the city, I had a business partner. My best buddy. He

married young, shortly after we'd moved to Manhattan. I was best man at his wedding, godfather to his baby girl, etc. Anyway, he was a trust baby, so money to burn, basically. We opened up a fund together, started acquiring investments. Money was pouring in. I bought a lake house in Connecticut. He had homes in LA, Aspen and was looking into a flat in Paris. But, it wasn't a fifty-fifty deal. It was his money that was getting us there, his investments, and mostly his returns. I still had a piece, sure, hence the lake house, but, I felt that tug, that gluttonous craving we all have. We always want more. At dinner one night his girl told me a way they'd been evading taxes—some sketchy loophole and offshore accounts that made it easy to hang on to nearly everything. One day we had a nasty fight in his office, mostly about how my share of work wasn't amounting to an equal amount of payoff. It didn't end well. The greed took over. I telephoned Uncle Sam, so, he got locked up and I got the flat in Paris. Shortly after I sold off the firm and was hired at Marathon.”

“God damn,” said Taryn, slapping his beer on the table with a pronounced thud. “I can't believe you just told me that.”

“Yes you can. Guarantee the Gallos have done worse.”

They chatted a bit longer over several more rounds. Scott found out more about Taryn. He grew up in Jersey, was raised mostly by nannies, private school, but no MBA. He didn't finish. There was something charming about him, though, the way he dared to ask Scott questions like, “So, who is Scott Frisby, really?” It made Scott blush.

After about an hour the table was covered in empty shot glasses.

“What do you say we get out of here?” suggested Taryn. There's a club near my apartment in Williamsburg with some really high-end girls.”

Scott knew the place he was talking about. He had been there one other time with another Italian client. Seems they were never doing business in Manhattan anymore.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I probably just need you to sign these and get home.”

He slid the stack of papers nearer to Taryn.

“Ah, come on. I need a pick-me-up. My life is pretty much over, and you’re the only other person who knows anything about it, so, what do you say, dance at my funeral?”

Scott paused a minute and then glanced at his watch. It was 4 pm. They had already been talking for a couple hours. He thought about going home, what he would do. Shower and change his shirt, then walk over to Hell’s Kitchen. He was supposed to meet Tonya at eight. He could cancel, though. Send a short, convincing text that read:

“Late business meeting.”

A night out with Taryn sounded far more appealing than a mediocre fuck on his leather sofa.

“Alright,” he said, “but first, sign.” And he drew a big “x” at the bottom of the page.

Taryn scribbled something at the bottom of the page, not really signature, an illegible squiggle, really, but it was all he needed.

“Done. Now can we get some ass?”

Scott woke slowly. His vision blurred and head pounding, a pulsating foot pedal beating against a base drum. He looked around. He was used to waking up feeling this way, but generally

it was in his own apartment. Though his eyes weren't quite open yet, only sharp squints fearful of light, he could tell by the unfamiliar rug under his toes that he wasn't at home. When his vision finally returned, a bit hazy, but there, he glanced about the room. It was a simple studio with modern furnishings. Sleek looking, though. A dark, cherry wood nightstand, a tufted leather Ottoman, and everything else decorated in a stone blue hue. He stood up and realized he was naked, not so much as a sock on his foot. It came back to him then, the night before. Him and Taryn at the club—first touching and groping strippers, drinking shots of Patron, and then finally snorting cocaine in the oversized bathroom. It was there that Taryn grabbed him and pulled him into a stall, coming onto him, kissing him ferociously. He let him do it, too. He liked it. Wanted it. Wanted to feel Taryn's rough cheeks rubbing against his own, his firm hands pulling at his hair.

Together they went back to his apartment, only a short cab ride away. Scott had never been with a man before. But now and again an attractive man would catch his eye, and he would push the thought from his mind, a conscious suppression of energy that perhaps contributed to his naturally pent-up state. He wasn't gay. Couldn't be gay. Women wanted him. But did he want them? Not in the same way. He wanted them because the smart ones, beautiful ones, the sophisticated ones, the ones the other men pined after gave him a sense of being that made him feel significant. But last night was something else. It was natural. He let the thought rest there, though, it was too much to take in with his head still aching, throbbing, really, like a hand just slammed in a car door.

He instinctively rubbed his left wrist in search of his watch, but it wasn't there. What time was it? They'd met at two, were probably drunk by four, at the strip joint around five, maybe? He spotted a window on the opposite wall and sauntered over, he felt sore and decrepit

like an old man wearing stilts. He pulled apart the window shades, heavy gray panels with a tasteful trellis print. Darkness. It was still evening. There were no crickets, but lit-up nearby delis, light posts surrounded by moths and the headlights of passing cars.

He heard water shut off from the adjoining room, and then Taryn walked into the room, rubbing a towel over his freshly christened head. Apparently Scott had been passed out long enough that he'd had time for a shower.

"Well, that was something," he said, walking over to Scott, attempting a deep kiss. Scott withdrew, taking a step back, even.

"What? You didn't put up a fight a few hours ago," he teased.

"I think you might have the wrong idea about me, kid. It was just a wild time. That's it."

"Whatever you say," exclaimed Taryn, an amused look on his face.

"I need to get going. I have work in the morning."

Scott gathered up his clothes, which were strewn about the apartment in a way that only seemed possible in murder scenes and hasty romances.

"I can't find my fucking pants anywhere."

Taryn picked them off a nearby armchair and chucked them across the room, somewhat aggressively. Scott caught them.

"There is something I want to talk to you about," said Taryn. "Put those on and sit down."

It was an order, and the strange, sergeant-like tone that commanded it made Scott obey.

Scott looked at Taryn inquisitively, hoping this wasn't going to be one of those 'you need to come out of the closet,' things. He was in no mood for that.

"The papers," said Taryn, "they're gone."

Scott closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, trying to alleviate the invisible shard of glass that he could almost tangibly feel wedged behind his left eye. He tried to comprehend the words. “What do you mean, ‘gone’?”

“I got rid of them.”

“Okay,” said Scott, unclear where the conversation was going.

Taryn reached into the nearby drawer of the end table where he was standing. Scott finally looked up, then gawked in confusion as Taryn produced a gun.

He pointed it at Scott.

“Whoa!” Scott shouted, scrambling to his feet in a mad fury while raising his arms in an instinctive, defensive position.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“No,” said Taryn. “But I have a plan. And you are going to help me. It’s going to be really easy. Are you ready to hear my plan and help me, Scott?”

Scott didn’t speak, just nodded slowly. He had never had a gun pointed at him before, never felt the all-encompassing weight of a steely-eyed target on his body. It was like standing on a train track, feet tethered to the steel rails. A mad horn blowing in the distance, a warning sign to move or be quashed. But he could do neither thing.

“I already told you that I got rid of the papers, the ones I signed. Now for the next part. Do as I say, and I won’t have to hurt you. You’re going to finish getting dressed and take me to your office. When we get there, you’re going to unlock the doors, log onto your computer and change the numbers in the account section to show that our deal is on the upswing.”

Scott felt like he was choking. The powerlessness of the weapon on him and the dizziness of the hangover climaxed all at once. He closed his eyes and breathed heavily. He felt like he was going to get sick.

He closed his eyes again. "It's not going to work," he said softly, too softly for Taryn to hear.

"What?"

"It's not going to work!" He shouted this time, still with his eyes closed. "Even if I do go there and change around the figures, the quartlerlies, they won't come out right. They'll sniff it out. If things don't add up, I'll be toast."

"Exactly," said Taryn. "Your deal, your mistake."

"I see," said Scott, fixing his eyes on him. "You're a big boy now. Just remember, we all have to pay for our sins eventually."

"Isn't that what is happening right now? Karma for the first offender. Now let's get a move on. Get dressed so we can catch the train."

Scott reached for his cotton dress shirt and threw it around his body, trying to speedily do up his buttons, but his hands were shaking. The gun was still on him.

"Look, promise me that you'll mind your Ps and Qs and I'll take this thing off you?"

Scott looked him steadfastly in the eye, a seriousness embodied him. "You have my word."

And with that Taryn lowered the gun.

They took the elevator to the lobby of Taryn's complex. Scott could see the bulge of the weapon in his pocket as they rode. Couldn't everyone else see it? Did they care? He was lost

about how he had ended up here, a cocaine induced fling with another man, bank fraud, a gun on him.

They stepped outside the revolving doors as a twenty-something on a bike wearing tight, salmon colored pants rode past, nearly hitting Taryn.

“Fuckin hipster,” Taryn barked.

Scott’s head continued to pound in sync with their footsteps as they crossed the street toward the subway platform. They’d take the L train to Union square, where they’d transfer to the B or the D train from there. Scott never took the subway—always a luxury car, but he was following Taryn’s lead. Taryn held the weapon, and he was in charge as they walked down the steps and onto the dimly lit platform of the Manhattan bound L. Scott didn’t have a MetroCard so Taryn swiped first, ordering Scott through then swiped again for himself. As they stood in the tunnel waiting for the train, Scott’s cell phone rang. He was surprised he had reception. He reached into his pant pocket and peered at the screen. it read “Roger.”

Taryn looked over Scott’s shoulder at the phone. “Don’t answer that,” he said, pressing the gun against Scott’s side through the pocket of his suit jacket.

Next to Scott on the platform was a young black kid with ear buds shoved deep into his lobes and an oversized backpack, and on a nearby bench, a homeless man clutching a plastic bag containing a weird looking fish. The train doors gave off a friendly chime as they opened. Inside was a beautiful redhead in a yellow pea coat. She looked at Scott, and then Taryn. Scott could sense that the woman was visibly repulsed by him, although he had no idea why.

Chapter 6

Sylvie

Sylvie Amos held the bronze chip in her fingers and rubbed her thumb over the surface, turning it over. Inscribed on it was a Roman numeral III, and the words, “To thine own self be true,” mocking her. It marked three years. And she had earned it at last night’s meeting which was held at the nondenominational chapel near her apartment on 2nd and 89th Street. Three years, hundreds of meetings with Alex, stories that she’d conjured up, ones mostly based off of characters she’d observed in films. The obvious clichés and her only experiences with addiction and alcoholism. There was the ex-cop, the one who spent his evening in dumpy bars, he knew by the bartender by name. “Yeah, I’ll take the usual.” His habit hatched by his need for all encompassing numbness and his choking feeling of loneliness. A bored housewife. She swallowed down prescription pills at an alarming rate, her life, an opiated dream turned nightmare the day she ran off the road with her kids buckled in their cars seats. They survived unscathed, but she would not if she didn’t seek help.

She felt pity for everyone at meetings, their aluminum chairs in a tight circle, required by the makeshift sphere to face their darkest selves and each other. And the room, so uninviting, with its undecorated, eggshell colored walls and Goodwill curtains, a sterile environment that wasn’t conducive to speaking with such graphic detail and on such delicate subjects, but they did, painfully, in disjointed sentences plagued with nervous pauses. The new members were always distinguishable from the veterans. They crept in, rag dolls with miserable faces. Rag dolls because it seemed too much for them to lift each leg and even find their chairs. But the energetic and firm handshakes of the veterans, the ones who had been through it, their words, “It gets

better, I promise,” propped the dolls up, some. But it wasn’t easy, and every week someone had a lapse. New York. Possibly the worst place for addicts of all kinds. They lived in a city that poured until 4 a.m., rarely requiring a person to get behind the wheel. Public transit on every corner. And the drugs, they were alive on the trains and in apartment stairwells and restaurants and clubs and uptown high-rises and downtown alleys and everywhere else. She knew. Once an outwardly normal looking black man in a khaki overcoat had offered her a gram of cocaine as she walked to her apartment. She was only passing him on the sidewalk. “Psst, interested?” He glanced around for observers, then wagged around the dime bag in an act of enticement. “No thanks,” she said, and she hastily strode toward her building, fumbling through her purse for her loose key. It surprised her. She hadn’t even made eye contact with him prior, given him a signal or sign that she was interested. And it was midday and on the active block of 32nd and 2nd. How easy must it be if someone were actually looking?

When she first met Alex, they were at the Starbucks, sitting at the same table with twin MacBooks. He was astoundingly attractive, far more attractive than she. Sylvie had thin lips and a sharp nose and short lashes that stuck out straight. Her one redeeming trait was her hair, which was dark and exceptionally curly. Its gloss and full-bodied coils helped subtract from her plain lashes and lips—some. It was the one feature she received compliments on. Her Starbucks interest, though, her laptop twin, he had high cheekbones and large, owlish eyes. He wore a gray scarf with a fedora, his face glowing from whatever he was studying intently, eyebrows furled. She imagined what it might be. He was looking for jobs, maybe? Everyone in New York was always looking for a job.

Each time Sylvie reached for her soy latte she would stretch her eyes to catch a glimpse of him. She thought of how she might strike up a conversation, but what would she say? “I like

your hat?” No. That would only produce a swift, “Thank you.” And she wasn’t the type to strike up a conversation with a stranger, anyway. Fortuitously, it was him that spoke to her, though out of necessity.

“What’s the wi-fi password?”

“Um, actually you don’t need one,” she said anxiously, her voice feeble and timid. “You just have to go to the homepage thing. Can I . . . ?” she stood up too abruptly, ungracefully rattling her own chair, pointing to his computer track pad.

“Be my guest.”

“There.” She clicked on the bright green “Accept Terms” icon on the homepage. She could see him better now. Still a handsome owl, but behind oval eyes his skin was pallid, feathery. She hadn’t noticed before, hidden underneath his fedora and scarf. And resting on the mouse pad were his hands, his real truth, as hands often are. Fingers thin and spindly, fatless knuckles, long and talon-like, unhealthy yellow nails with dirt underneath. He seemed a handsome, damaged, dirty owl.

He immediately typed in a web address, even as she stood there,
alladdictsanonymous.org.

“I . . . um,” she stammered. Why was she still standing there and not back in her chair? Instead, she remained frozen in nervousness, like a gull hovering in flight unable to catch a gust of wind.

He sensed her embarrassment. “I’m not ashamed. Today is the day I am finding help. Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Nobody else does. But why do you believe me? You don’t know me.”

That was the moment she spoke her first lie. It fell from her mouth, like a stone in a river, a ripple effect. First, a small lie, then growing into bigger, fatter ones over the years, until finally her life was a swift river of lies.

“Because I drink.” Sylvie rarely drank. A glass of wine at dinner, if that, and only on special occasions.

His eyes widened, his need for solidarity instantly gratified. He pulled her chair closer to his, flush almost, and began to confess. Sinner to priest, only there were no walls or barriers, between them, just his story merged with the dreary coffee shop playlist. The darkest bits of him. He told her all of it. She barely spoke, only nodded when it seemed appropriate. He’d been evicted from his apartment, first spending all his rent money on oxys and percocets, finally graduating to heroine. It was cheaper, and easier to get his hands on. Before all of this, though, he had moved to the city to become a Broadway actor, had landed enough off Broadway plays to pay his bills, but the heroine, once discovered, it was a hollow cell, no windows or exits, just a blacked out room where it was always two a.m. He was its prisoner. He stopped showing up for auditions, dropped out of the plays he’d already been cast for. One particular night a buddy came around, the kind that only comes around to get high. “It’s cocaine and heroine, a speedball,” said his mate, producing two syringes, one for each of their arms. They injected simultaneously, and the enraptured, euphoric rush of collectedness, like he was swimming underwater, propelling himself forward at speed of ten-thousand miles per hour, but also able to slow down time, freeze it even, just by consciously blinking the lids of his eyes. It didn’t last long, though. He fell asleep, the heroine wearing off much slower than the cocaine. When he woke, his friend was passed out on the sofa. He went to him. Said his name aloud. But he didn’t wake. Something was wrong. Alex shook him with such fervor, a desperate attempt at rebirth,

but, “Fatal respiratory depression. Delayed opioid overdose.” Medical terms used by the paramedics which he quoted to her verbatim.

“I am still using. But I have to stop. I can’t go on like this anymore. I have nothing left.” His eyes filling up, a glistening pool about to spill over. “What about you, though? Tell me about you.”

Her next lie. The bigger ripple. A generic story. She was lonely. Depressed. Just out of a relationship. It used to be a glass or two in the evening, then she adjusted to an entire bottle. Soon it was nine a.m. liquid breakfasts, starving herself so she would get drunk faster. She’d showed up to work drunk and almost lost her job.

He looked at her, owl eyes pleading. “Will you go to the meeting with me? It’s tomorrow. I don’t want to go alone.” She bobbed her head in a compassionate nod.

After the first meeting Alex and she agreed to denounce their vices, hers artificial, and his made real by the tormenting withdrawals that began just forty-eight hours afterward. He called her when they started. “Please come over,” he said, rambling off his Flatbush address. When she found him, she wasn’t sure how he’d even mustered the strength to buzz her in. He was on a bare mattress in the middle of the room, thrashing around cruelly, his brown hair damp with sweat. He asked her to stay at his apartment. A guy had never asked her to stay over before. She called in sick to her secretarial job four days in a row, grounds for getting canned; luckily she wasn’t. She was continuously bringing him water and blankets, then ripping them off when he broke out into ferocious sweats, and steadying the back of his neck as he threw up into plastic bowls. Finally, after about a week, the fog cleared, the apples of his cheeks began to flush again. He started to smile a bit, to laugh. He said “thank you,” when she brought him things, no more

irrational demands or pleading for relief, or, “Please, can you call this guy for me? I need just one hit.”

It was day eight. She came over after work and they lay there together with the intention of watching something terrible on Netflix, but instead, they made love on the mattress. The same one he’d become completely natural on, he connected by her kindness and she by his outward manifestation of vulnerability. She had saved him. And at the time he had loved her for it.

Three years. Since then, he had gotten a job as a server and eventually started auditioning again, then last season he finally landed a big break, a chorus part in “The Book of Mormon.” They got an apartment together, a walk-up on the Upper East Side, 87th and York. A dog. A mutt from a shelter, a docile and shy little creature they called Coy.

They spent most nights in. Alex would come home exhausted after a long day of rehearsal, fling his duffel bag onto the hall tree and gobble down cold, leftover lo-mein. On his nights off they ate out at local UES joints, little Italian places on 2nd or some other trendy thing that had just cropped up. They barely spoke while they cleaned their plates, but then again, their relationship had always been quiet. Alex did the talking, and Sylvie was his devoted companion, his “Coy.” Sylvie hated the way other people looked at them when they were together. She knew what they were thinking. There he was, refined jaw, sculpted build, stylishly dressed, always tanned (the chorus director made them get spray tans; it made them “glow” on stage). And her. Fiercely Jewish looking, naturally average. And the way other women ogled him. That was what she despised most. Their lusty eyes on his unbuttoned collar, sometimes they were daring enough to stare right at him, right past her own gaze, through her, as if she didn’t exist. There was one acquaintance Alex had, another cast member named Priscilla, that made Sylvie particularly uneasy. Priscilla was beautiful, of course, with caramel colored skin, a stylish afro, the kind only

high fashion models or Beyonce could pull off, and buxom lips. She always wore them in a dark shade.

And then there was the moment she'd caught between them. One early afternoon, she took the train downtown to meet Alex after rehearsal. It was Saint Patrick's day, and they'd planned on a heading to Times Square to catch the tail end of the parade. She walked into the Eugene O'Neill Theatre and down the steps to the dressing area, and that's where she saw them, Priscilla, with her back pressed up against a locker, and Alex leaning over her, his right arm steadying his semi-vertical position, his left hanging at his side. A scene out of a high-school sitcom, really. They weren't kissing, but their faces were close. And Alex must have said something funny, because Priscilla laughed loudly, the way confident girls do, unafraid of being heard, wanting to be heard. It was then that they spotted her in the doorway. Alex moved his arm and stood up straight, an expression of guilt on his face. But Priscilla. The nerve on her, she held her smile.

"Hey, Sylv," she said, dropping the "ie," as if they were friends. She then nonchalantly walked to her brown leather jacket, which was hanging on a nearby rack. "Have a fun night out, guys. Happy Paddy's Day."

Sylvie didn't say anything to Alex about it. She would only come off as jealous and possessive, and she was already fearing that something was amiss in their relationship. It had been six weeks since the last time they'd had sex, and even during that exchange Alex had seemed distant. Perhaps she knew deep down that an affair was most likely already underway. She had feared this day since they had begun their relationship, actually. Sooner or later the indebtedness he felt toward her would wear off. She had a feeling that three years was his limit for restitution.

That was several days ago. Tonight she was leaving dinner at the Upper East Side Shake Shack with Zoey, her coworker and sort-of friend who reminded her of an angry pixie. She was 4'11", with short, box dyed hair, a daring vermillion color. She bounced around every room with as much energy as a toddler on a sugar high, and had an attention span to match, always talking more than listening and drinking too many glasses of wine at dinner, which only enhanced the talking both in amount and in volume. Her words, mostly complaints. Everyone knows someone like that. "The music in here is too loud." "I hate my hair today." "Our boss is *such* a bitch." But Sylvie didn't really have many friends in Manhattan, and she felt like she needed to at least maintain the appearance of a social life, if only to fool Alex from the truth, which was that he was it, her life force, the only definition that she had of herself. If he knew that truth, that her soul had been hollowed out and replaced by his at some point it would scare the living shit out of him. Before she had met Alex, she was ready to abandon New York. Go someplace else. Home, even. Isolated in a sea full of people, like a plain and empty shell on a beach that nobody bothered to appreciate or collect.

She was raised in a suburb of Chicago, an area on the shore of Lake Michigan whose upper class citizens had pretentiously dubbed, the "Village" of Winnetka. But at the end of secondary school she didn't get accepted into DePaul or Northwestern, like most of her schoolmates had. Her marks were only mediocre, and she wasn't involved in any extracurriculars. She didn't stand out on paper. This colossal letdown wasn't openly acknowledged in her home; still, the disappointment rested behind the eyes of her ostentatious parents, and in the statements they made to their ostentatious friends, like, "Well, she didn't get in, but I heard the new president is trying for a more diverse campus—more exchange students and out of state students. They pay higher tuitions. Politics."

Initially, she had decided to move to New York to prove a point. She could do something adventurous and bold and she could do it on her own. She took pleasure in discussing her plans to leave that September with her friends. “Wow! New York, that’s so cool!” Yes. She was “cool.” She had a job all lined up. Her friend’s uncle owned a funeral home on Bleeker street in Greenwich Village and he would hire her, an administrative assistant position. The pay was decent enough. Enough to afford rent.

On her first day at the funeral home job she stepped out of the cab, walking past a bright shop that sold old antiques and a dingy looking record store, one with a morbidly obese tabby cat sleeping in the she shop window. She finally spotted the embossed plaque, “Greenwich Village Funeral Home, Inc.” Inside she was greeted by a plethora of fake houseplants and silk flowers in gaudy gold vases, and to her right, a room with caskets. All empty, of course, just various wooden boxes, generally all the same size—some plain, pine ones that looked like they had come straight from the Brooklyn IKEA, assembled that morning with a basic toolkit, but others, ornate, ivory, gold leafing, hand painted floral patterns on rich looking mahogany. And they all bore obvious price-tags, square, yellow parchment dangling on white strings with figures written in Sharpie marker. *So odd*, thought Sylvie, *to put a price on death*, which was perhaps the only thing in life that had equality about it. We all die. We all rot in the ground. But even so, even after all that, some of us rot in gold leafed boxes inlaid with plush red velvet, and the rest of us . . . IKEA. And then there was the smell. A potent, tropical aroma, an air freshener plugged in somewhere, conceivably named “Bahama Breeze.” An attempt to placate morose patrons that would walk through the door. A lift to their senses, which were most likely numb with grief. Immediately she knew she would hate it there. The outdated brocade wallpaper. The poster print of Georges Braque’s, *Violin and Candlestick* in a cheap frame, and not to mention her boss, who

she was yet to encounter, a car salesman of caskets, a short goblin with with dental veneers and a balding head.

She was still at Shake Shack with Zoey. “I ate too much,” Zoey said, grabbing her stomach. Sylvie was barely listening, already checked out, ready to be home in her apartment, nestled on the sofa next to Coy and Alex. While the pixie was rambling about some guy she’d met on Tinder, she was daydreaming, imagining herself going home, slipping on the only piece of lingerie she owned, waiting for him on the bed and maybe putting an end to their six week funk.

Finally, she hugged her pixie coworker goodbye, and though their apartment was only a few avenue blocks east, a breeze swept some cold air in. The air felt heavy, humid, especially for November. It felt like snow. She was cold and she didn’t want to walk. She stood on the edge of the sidewalk and waited for a Taxi. She dialed Alex’s phone. His voicemail picked up.

“Hey Alex, it’s me. I am just leaving dinner with Zoey. I can’t wait to see you. Call me when you get this.”

The stoplight ahead turned green, and a sea of yellow cabs came bursting forward, like a slew of runners that just heard a starting pistol. She held out her arm and one pulled over.

“Can you take me to 86th & York, please?”

After she climbed in her cell buzzed with a text:

“At Milo’s. Ashley dumped him again. Be home when I can.”

Milo was Alex’s best friend who had been involved in a revolving-door-relationship for the past several years. Some weeks they were on, and some weeks they were off, but it was always hard on Milo, and Alex was his go-to during the knock-down, drag out break-ups. If he was taking this one hard, it could be a long night for Alex. She felt a selfish twinge of irritation

toward Milo. She would likely be on her own tonight, and she didn't want to be. She needed Alex's firm body in the bed next to hers.

She called Alex. No answer. An idea caught hold of her. She would go down to them, Milo and Alex. Neither would mind. She would stop at the bodega for a bottle of wine. She wouldn't drink it, but she would gift it to Milo. He could mix it with his tears and drown his sorrows, a sorrow spritzer. If they got him drunk enough, she and Alex could crash in Milo's bed and they'd tuck Milo in on the sofa.

"Change of plans," she told the cabbie through the Plexiglas window. "I'm going to Brooklyn. Metropolitan and Manhattan, please."

Ugh, why does anyone live down here? She thought, stepping onto the curb. Brooklyn was a totally different beast from the Upper East Side. In the Upper East Side people walked their dogs and at 3 p.m. packs of kids ran home from public school in large flocks, carrying artwork drenched in fresh paint. But not here. She peered down and saw a used condom in the street.

She spotted a bodega where she could nab some wine. As she was walking out a man approached. He was wearing a blue leisure suit.

"Miss, can I get a couple dollars, I don't have no money to pay my rent." She could smell the booze on him.

“I don’t have any cash, sorry.”

“Thanks for your kindness, anyway,” he grinned, flashing a large, sincere smile. As he walked away he started singing at the top of his lungs, a made up song, a lively, boisterous tune with a monotone melody.

“Backfire! Backfire and brimstones . . . !” He cackled wildly between makeshift verses, then carried on into the distance. “Backfire, backfire . . .”

She had been to Milo’s apartment once before, but it was in a memorable spot, just north of Graham. She found it easily enough—a nice looking building with a steel door. She searched for his name on the call sheet “Aha! Leonard, R.” She buzzed. Waited. It was a Wednesday evening, but the avenue was full of people passing buy, young and drunk hipsters, mainly, a woman with dreads and a cropped shirt holding the hand of a more plain looking woman.

She stood there. Buzzed again. No crackly voice appeared on the other end of the speaker. She would have to let the jig up. She was tired of waiting. A text. Short:

“At Milo’s. Call me.”

Next door was one of those all night diners, the kind that attracted drunk kids at 4 a.m. after the bars and clubs were closing down. “Moonstruck,” read the neon sign above the establishment. Sylvie entered. Inside an obvious, outer space theme took hold of the place. She would go sit and wait to hear from Alex or Milo, maybe have a cup of decaf coffee. There were not many patrons inside, it was too early, still. In fact, only one man sat at the bar. He had dark, greased up hair, a thick gold chain, jeans covered in grime. A jacket hung on his chair that said NYC public workforce, reflective patches on the arms and chest. A construction worker wrapping up a night shift.

“Sit wherever you want,” yelled a loud voice from behind the bar.

Sylvie chose a booth in the far corner from the window, a spot where she would be able to sit in privacy, yet still observe the happenings on the avenue sidewalk. The booth was a plush, velvet orange, and the table, modern white. Posters of planets adorned the walls and an astronaut suit sat behind a glass case. A real astronaut suit? Doubtful.

The waitress came over and Sylvie could tell by her tight lips that matched her tight hair bun that she was in the mood to exchange as few words as possible.

“What can I get you?”

“Do you guys have espresso?”

“Just coffee.”

“Decaf?”

“No.”

“Regular, then.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s it for now, thanks.”

The waitress tottered off, a husky, punk rock girl with dyed black hair. She had a nose ring and full sleeves of tattoos. Sylvie noted her shoes, which had to be at least four inches tall. She didn’t need them. She was already tall and they looked uncomfortable. One of those roller derby girls, maybe? A styrofoam solar system hung above her table, and she watched neon colored planets twist and dangle on string tacked to the ceiling. The air vent blew it around, spinning the planets in a way that mimicked reality. But this place felt so unreal. So peculiar, made more peculiar, even, by its emptiness, a space station where everyone had been seized by a foreign alien tribe, everyone except her and the construction worker. And she was starting to feel a bit foolish for coming all this way without talking to Alex first. It was unlike her, actually, to

be spontaneous. After the coffee she would leave, retreat home to Coy. Perhaps Alex was trying to drag Milo out of some pub, or maybe he was so inconsolable that Alex couldn't answer his phone.

She peered out the large, bay window at the front of the diner and noticed that it had begun to snow. Flickering flurries, only faintly visible when their tumbling silhouettes caught just the right light. She could barely make them out. It was at that moment that she noticed a familiar face out on the sidewalk—Milo. It was Milo! He wore a smile and a black, leather jacket, and he looked . . . happy. On his arm was Ashley. His girlfriend. But hadn't they had broken up? Had they already made amends? Perhaps with the help of Alex, the great mediator? She stood up from the table to rush outside, but then she saw him, too, through the window. Alex, standing next to Milo and Ashley. And at his side, another woman. It was Priscilla. Sylvie felt her cheeks grow cold as the blood left her face, pumping to her heart, which began to pound and wrench with tangible, physical injury. Motionless, she kept her gaze fixed on them. Alex bent down and kissed Priscilla on the nose, then took his hands from his pockets to brush the snowfall out of her beautiful, wild hair.

But there was an interruption, and a harsh jingling noise from bells connected to the door rattled as it burst open. Sylvie's trance momentarily broken. A drunk kid, probably no older than twenty-three, was stumbling into the restaurant. He could barely walk. Sylvie guessed that he had ventured over from one of the several neighborhood bars just down the street. He staggered over to a table near the entrance of the café, and laid down on one of the orange, plush booths. The punk rock waitress noticed immediately and got up from behind the bar.

“Hey! Hey, you! You can't do that. This isn't a hotel.” The kid groaned, his eyes were already closed.

She stood over him, she was bigger than he, and would have been an intimidating presence, were he conscious.

“Dude, you can’t just come in here and pass out. Get up and get the fuck out!”

But there was no mumble or groan this time. He lay there motionless, like one of the corpses that she saw every Monday on funeral day, only he wasn’t flat on his back with his hands deliberately clasped together over his abdomen, which was how they positioned them all. Instead, he lay stretched out like a toddler in a crib, his right arm under his head, a makeshift pillow, with his feet hanging off the edge of the ugly plush booth that was too small for him.

“I’m going to have to call the cops if you don’t get out of here.”

But Sylvie didn’t care about any of this right now. She felt a resurgence of panic. Alex, her Alex was somewhere on the street brushing snowflakes out of another woman’s hair. Kissing her nose. She looked back out the window, eyes reaching for another glimpse of torture, but she could see them no longer. She thought about texting him again:

“You lied. You’re having an affair.”

But she knew that would be it, then. His grounds for exit. Even if she told him she’d stay with him despite his transgression he’d say something clever, something with a thoughtful exterior but a selfish core, something like, “You deserve better, Sylvie. And you’ll resent me forever, never trust me again. Maybe it’s time we just move on?” It would be his out. Was she really that pathetic? So codependent on him that she might be willing to ignore what she’d just witnessed to keep it all up? To maintain her only comfort? She felt weak. She would have to think on it. Tonight she would finish her coffee and go back uptown, curl up next to Coy and lie awake, broken and full of self loathing, no dreams, just wishes that she could somehow erase what she’d seen.

More interruptions, more jingling as two cops called by the bartender entered the diner, both looking perturbed and overtired. There was a skinny one with with a patchy gray beard that could use a shave, and another, a younger looking guy sporting horn rimmed glasses that didn't suit his profession. Both possessed thick Brooklyn accents. The one with the glasses turned to Sylvie. "What's going on here?"

The derby queen stepped forward and answered for her. "This guy—he came in here and passed out," she said, gesturing to the oversized toddler.

The gray bearded cop walked over and kicked the underside of the kid's black Converse sneaker with a startling amount of force. The kid's leg bounced around as if a doctor had just taken his reflexes, but he still didn't budge. Gray beard spoke. "Sir, you can't do that in here. You're going to have to get out or we're going to have to take you in."

The construction worker at the bar got off his stool and came over.

"What's this?" He was intimidating up close, with a bowling ball of a head set upon broad shoulders, giving off the appearance of no neck. His slick hair, generously flecked with gray, not oily from lack of hygiene but too generous amount of styling product. He looked to be in his late forties. His eyes were kind, though, a sort of contradiction to the rest of him, with a charitable amount of crow's feet, the kind that people earned from smiling.

The cop wearing glasses responded, "This kid came in here and passed out. He's completely tanked, obviously. He's gonna have to get his ass outta here, though, or he we'll have to take him in."

"Yo, kid," said the construction worker, lowering himself so his face was level with the boy's ear, nearly shouting. "You hear that? You gotta get up!"

The boy whimpered something, more of a “leave me alone” hum than an effort to respond.

“We don’t have time for this shit,” said Glasses. “Let’s just check him in and charge him with public intox.”

“You do that and you’re gonna really ruin this boy’s night,” said the construction worker, a concerned look on his face. “He’s just a kid, probably had too much fun with his buddies.”

Gray beard: “What the hell do you want us to do about it?”

Glasses: “We ain’t a babysitter’s club.”

Roller derby chick: “And he really needs to leave.”

Sylvie felt sorry for the boy, too. She recalled tales from the pale faced addicts at the meetings she’d attended with Alex, their worst days, waking up in strange apartments or on park benches, sometimes in the street, even, with no recollection of how they’d got there. Ashamed. This kid would have similar regrets, only, he’d wake in a holding cell.

Sylvie spoke up for the first time, “Officer, it’s okay, I’ll get him out of here.”

“What?”

“It’s fine, he’s with me.”

“You came here with this guy?”

“Well, no, but I’ll look after him for a bit, make sure he gets home. He seems harmless. Like this guy said, probably just too much fun.”

“With all do respect, miss, I don’t feel comfortable leaving you with a drunk man. What are you, like one-ten? You ain’t exactly gonna be carryin’ him outta here?”

“I’ll help her,” said the beefy construction worker.

The cop paused, taking in their plea, mumbling out loud. “It would save us a trip to the station and some paperwork.” Then he openly addressed them. “I don’t see why you two would trouble yourselves with this. This dumb kid did it to himself.”

“It isn’t any trouble,” said Sylvie.” “Like we said, we’ll make sure he gets out of here. No harm done.”

“O.K. If you’re sure. Your problem now.”

The derby chick looked at the cop in protest, her eyes in disbelief, an expression of, “You have got to be kidding me on her lips.” But she didn’t speak, her only tantrum was the cavernous sigh she let out as she retreated to the bar. The cops exited the spaceship and took to the Brooklyn sidewalk where there were more serious aliens to be found.

Sylvie and the construction worker approached the booth with the kid, coiled up now in a makeshift fetal position, looking even more helpless and childlike. Together, they propped him up and leaned him against the back of the booth. He opened his eyes some, but only slivers of white, like a patient coming out of anesthesia.

“Can we get some water?” asked Sylvie.

The bartender filled up a pint glass from the tap, hurried over and plopped it on the table with such vigor that water spilled over the edges.

The construction worker steadied him while Sylvie held the cup to his mouth. His reflexes took over, that feeling of a cool glass pressed against lips, I suppose, and he parted his mouth a bit, taking in a small sip. She was careful not to give him too much, waiting before she did it again. The whole ritual reminded her of those beginning nights at Alex’s flat when he was going through withdrawals, the tenderness of her actions, the caring for another grown man turned infant. It was hard to think about.

Suddenly the construction worker began to laugh, a robust, but friendly chortle that suited his wrinkled eyes.

The random outburst confused Sylvie. “What is it?”

“Here we are in this crappy diner, taking care of this dumbass kid together . . .” he trailed off, unable to contain himself. He was producing actual laughter, the same type that people let off when they are delivering a punch line to a joke they know to be great, barely able to get the sentence out. “I mean don’t you think it’s funny?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure about funny. Maybe odd?”

“And that waitress. Man. She’s a real bitch, eh? Hah! Anyway, I’m Robbie.” He stretched out the arm he wasn’t using to hold up the drunken kid so he could shake her hand. “I can’t believe I haven’t asked your name yet.”

“Sylvie.”

“Sylvie. Good name. I’m a recovering alcoholic, you know. That’s why I even give a damn about this damn kid. Passed out in a taxi once, and that didn’t end too nicely. Why do you give a damn?”

She was so used to the lie that there wasn’t even a thought before it exited her mouth.

“I used to drink, too.”

“Well, I’ll be. Never would have taken you for a drunk. You seem too innocent for that sort of thing; then again, nobody is impervious to that poison, I guess. I still miss it, some days.”

“What were you doing at the bar, then? If you don’t drink?” asked Sylvie.

“I just got off shift and had an overwhelming craving for onion rings. Love those things. I only sat at the bar because I have a phobia—have to be facing the door when I sit in a restaurant. Weird as shit, I know. Anyway, I’d just ordered them when those cops came in. A massive plate

of Saturn's Rings. But I doubt she'll be bringing them to me now, either she's forgotten or she'll bring them out cold and laced with poison."

There was an electronic ding, the same sound her phone made sometimes, a text message chirping from inside the boy's pocket. She and Robbie glanced at each other.

"Only one way to find out," he said. "Not an invasion of privacy if we're doing it to help out the bastard."

Luckily there was no passcode on his phone. She read the text, it was from someone named Aaron. It read:

"Worried. Call me."

She read his other unopened messages, all from this Aaron person:

"Where the fuck r you? We r leaving."

"Call his friend," Robbie instructed Sylvie.

She hesitated. "I . . ." Robbie picked up on her nervousness.

"No worries. I can do it." He took the phone. It only rang a few times before someone answered.

Not a greeting of a "hello," just, "Dude, what the fuck? We turned around and you were gone? Where are you? Are you O.K.?"

"Man, this ain't your friend, but I'm with him. He's drunk off his ass. He's at a diner in Williamsburg. I'll get him home, though. Can you tell me where to take him?" The conversation carried on another minute, Robbie nodded his head, typing an address into his own phone, then hung up.

"Manhattan." He said, "Stuy Town."

"Stuy what?"

This idiot lives in Manhattan. Stuyvesant town. That weird, sprawling complex thing near alphabet city. You know, the creepy, wannabe East Village. At least it's a straight shot on the L."

Sylvie hated the subway. She always took cabs, never the train. She spent an outrageous amount of money on taxi fares each month. At first it was the map. She just didn't get it, with its sprawling, colored lines that looked more like a complicated scientific graph rather than any sort of compass or guide. But now, in general, the subway just frightened her—the masses of people pushing against each other as they marched up the platform stairs in a mad pack, the groaning that was always under her feet, always running furiously, humid steam rising from grates, and the screeching sound it made when it came to an obvious halt, like a spirit from the underworld.

"I'll come," said Sylvie softly.

"You really don't have to."

"No," said Sylvie. "I want to."

The way she said the words, they made Robbie understand something about her. He was like that, perceptive about other people. He saw the way she was gripping onto her empty coffee mug, clinging to it like it was a live animal that might escape if she loosened her grip.

"Okay. I'll make sure you both get home safe." And he would try.

They made their way down the steps of the L. Robbie was strong and did most of the work, but Sylvie still had to steady the drunk kid to keep him from falling to one side. When

they got to the platform, they all sat on a lone, wooden bench and waited. Sylvie saw two business men standing close to the tracks. One gave the other a poisonous glare, and then rubbed up against him with his coat pocket.

Chapter 7

The Passengers

It was his short stint in the military that had done it to him, made Robbie so keenly aware of his surroundings, the people he was among. In truth, it was the reason behind his strange quirk, the one that he had mentioned to Sylvie at the diner. In every room he he had to be facing the door, had to acknowledge the faces he was exchanging oxygen with, determine their trustworthiness. He scanned the other passengers on the car. A normal amount of riders, even for this time of night. Six, not including himself.

The subway car was one of the older ones that hadn't recently been updated by the MTA, a 1970s time capsule with both yellow and rust orange seats, and the overbearing florescent lights which only added to its unattractiveness. Posters hung on the walls: ads for law firms, some ads paid for by the MTA, one in the corner placed there by Bloomberg—a humorously unsubtle thing. "Don't drink yourself fat," it read, a photo of a red soda bottle being poured into a glass full of blubber.

Robbie noted the woman across from him. Not more than twenty-four, with strawberry blond hair and a yellow peacoat. Her nails were a brave, red shade, but were unkempt, with worn down polish, worse on her right hand. She must have been right-handed. Though it was late, she didn't seem tired, no, to the contrary, she exhibited a nervous energy, and she glanced around the car, a certain edginess about her. She took a special interest in the door to her right, which she often fixed her gaze on, clutching her red purse like a life preserver, a retro looking thing with gold buttons. She looked right at Robbie. Afraid. He knew he was large and could come across as menacing, even in company. He attempted a polite smile at her, but she hastily looked away.

Though most of her body was completely still, rooted like a frozen tree, he couldn't help but notice her foot, which bobbed around anxiously. And there were her shoes, which didn't match the likeness of the rest of her stylish ensemble, or the weather. Black, rubber flip flops. She dangled one by the strap from her big toe, swinging it around like an out of control yo-yo.

A few seats to the left of the strawberry was a black kid sporting a Knicks cap, the silver, foil sticker still lay flat on the brim, signifying its authenticity. Between his legs, an oversized backpack. He held a lotto scratcher which he labored at furiously, working away at the metallic wax, eyes thick with concentration. "Damn," he said out loud, and the other passengers turned to him. He tore the scratcher in half and stuffed it in the front pocket of his pack. He leaned back into his seat, pulling his cap down over his eyes and folded his arms, placing his feet far apart on the floor.

And next to Robbie, Sylvie. Her sporadic, dark curls made even more wild by the night's events and the exertion it had taken to get the drunk kid on the car, even with Robbie's help. The train car shifted some, a sharp turn, the kid wobbled around, like a soldier on a convoy. Eventually he slumped over into Sylvie's lap. She glanced up at Robbie with a look of discomfort. He shrugged. There was not much to be done about it. The three of them looked quite mismatched together, even from a New York perspective.

Two business men on one end. A young-ish more attractive one with a chinstrap, and another, stockier, with sandy hair, a 5'o clock shadow and an unamused grimace. The younger one pulled something from his pocket, an object mummified in aluminum foil. The other business man looked at him wearing a scowl.

"All of this and you packed a lunch?"

He tore away the last shred of foil and took a bite, speaking with his mouth full.

“What? Midnight snack!” A grotesque scent filled the car, indistinguishable, a tuna sandwich. A certain hostility hovered between to two, and the other passengers could easily note that while they were certainly acquainted, they weren’t particularly fond of each other, although, they still sat remarkably close, shoulders pressed up against each other.

In the middle of the floor, a large, black cricket crawled across the center of the car at a sluggish pace. Unusual for this time of year, since they generally went away in late September. Robbie stretched out his leg, coming down on the thing, revealing a mangled, horrific scene after he lifted his muddied work boot.

“Hey, there was no need for that. It was minding its own business.”

“Huh?” said Robbie.

It was the homeless man that spoke; he sat in the far corner bench, as much distance from the other passengers as there was to be had. In his grip was something odd, a goldfish, impossible to miss. It floated around in a swollen plastic bag held together by a red twist tie, the same type used to contain Wonder bread.

“There was no reason to kill it. Imagine you were a cricket, moving along, not harming anyone, and someone squashed you with their shoe for no apparent reason?”

Robbie felt a pang of guilt. The act had been an instinctual one for him—you see a bug and you squash it. New York was full of pests, he dealt with them everyday during construction. Rodents, pigeons and roaches, living on concrete, inhabiting what was once an unpaved, tree filled island. It had probably come in to escape the first snow, drawn in by the heat of the car.

“I’m sorry—instinct,” he said, genuinely feeling sorry.

The homeless man shrugged, but spoke no further on the subject. Robbie turned to face Sylvie.

“What stop are you at?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Robbie was both confused and concerned by her answer. He’d taken to her over the course of the last few hours.

“I know you don’t know me very well, but if something is wrong, if you’re in trouble or something, you can talk to me.” He immediately began to follow this up with another question, but the kid between them suddenly jolted upward, some invisible shot of adrenaline surging through his veins. His eyes widened, and he stared straight ahead.

“I think I am going to be sick.” The first real words he had spoken in hours.

Sylvie scooted over, distancing herself from the impending, and surely dreadful scene about to take place. Robbie stayed calm, touching the kids back.

“Can you hold off a bit longer until we can get you off of here?” the kid shook his head no, hanging it low. E had apparently woken up from his nap; he chimed in.

“Not in here, man, c’mon. Don’t nobody wanna see that.”

The drunken frat boy let out a sudden gag, a dry heave, a false alarm with nothing to show for it, luckily; still, E pulled back his shoes, tucking them under the bench to save them, they were fresh kicks he’d boosted from the Nike store just two days ago.

“Come with me, kid.” said Robbie standing up.

“Where are you going?” asked Sylvie.

Robbie craned his head to the right, gesturing to the adjoining train car. The kid let out another grotesque sound. Robbie tried to hurry him along, but like a frail old man, the kid held onto Robbie’s arm, shuffling slowly as they passed through the walkway and into the next car. Sylvie looked through the glass and watched him wretch onto the floor, Robbie at his side.

E looked to his left and noticed Katriona again. She was tall, with hazel eyes and long, horse-like lashes, the type of Williamsburg girl he'd seen at the bar with Adonis, the type he would never chase, and would certainly never go for him, but he still observed, not lustfully, but admiringly. She was entrancing, fictional, almost. Katriona noticed he was looking at her. E felt embarrassed and took a sudden interest in the laces of his shoes.

The train was moving at a high speed through shadowy tunnels. Scott glanced out the window of the train car, it was just a black whirl, a few white, whizzing lines from the tunnel brick—as if they were flying through outer space. The lights of the train car flickered. Sometimes a short from the ceiling cable would cause this eerie effect; however, suddenly the train began to slow, creeping along at about ten miles per hour, finally, it came to a complete stop. This wasn't always unheard of, either. Occasionally delays in trains occurred due to technical problems or the sudden catch up to the train ahead. Once E had sat on the N train for nearly two hours. Later he had heard that someone had leapt off the platform and onto the tracks, been crushed by the oncoming vehicle. Suicide. They could be moving again in thirty seconds, thirty minutes or three hours, there was no way to tell.

The young businessman spoke, standing up and gripping a standing pole.

“These fucking Brooklyn trains. Every time I take the L there is a delay.” he said the words with his mouth still full of sandwich. A piece escaped, projecting itself onto the floor. Scott looked down at it in disgust.

Katriona was in a total panic now. What did it mean that the train had stopped? Would the eerie man with the soulless eyes who passed her the note be returning soon? It rested in her bag, her unsettling secret, hidden, but still alive, whispering to her. There was some hope in its words, though. The phrase “salvation.” Could she be saved, somehow? So far she had followed

its instructions. She had told no one, been obedient, like it had asked. It had also requested honesty, which was a strange command. How do you exude honesty? Or would that come later? She thought again of Eamon. The kiss. Just a friend, until tonight. Unexpected though it was, it stirred something in her, the buzz she'd gotten from the kiss, a real spark. What if she never saw Eamon again? The prospect frightened her. Could this be it? She watched the news. Mass shootings, lunatics slashing people with machetes on 7th Avenue for no reason. If he came back, the man with pitted olive eyes, what would he do? What would she do? Would she struggle? Fight? Which Katriona would she be? Confident or cowering. She thought of that sick guy, the one who asked her to hold the gun to his head, the way she pacified him until it was over. The answer became more clear. The train still sat idling on the tracks.

Robbie walked back into the car.

“He’s totally passed out. Looks like we are stopped, anyway. I’ll let him sleep it off a bit.”

He reclaimed his chair by Sylvie, who wore a glazed over expression. Her mouth, a vertical line of indifference. They all sat there a while. There was no clock in the train car, but occasionally someone would pull out their phone or look at their wrist. Twenty minutes. Forty-five minutes.

E had started scribbling away at a notepad in his backpack—he seemed to mind the least out of anyone. The sooner he got back to Harlem, the sooner he had things to worry about. He owed Roy money or weed, and he had neither. He wrote inky words onto the lines—his words, rap lyrics.

Finally, Katriona spoke, “Why do you think we are stopped?” She had a morbid, and fairly solid suspicion behind the question, but she wanted to hear the speculations from the other

passengers, see if she could sense if anyone else was aware that something was amiss. Perhaps there was a confidant among her? Maybe the man had approached someone else?

Robbie spoke from across the aisle. "Probably bad wiring. We see it all the time."

"Are you with the MTA?" said Scott, joining in now.

"No, road work, but I got friends who run MTA, and occasionally we do some corresponding stuff. We're just lucky this didn't happen in the middle of rush hour, or we'd be jammed back so bad we'd be in here seven, eight hours."

"Seven or eight hours!" exclaimed Taryn. He didn't have that kind of time. He had to get Scott back to the office in midtown and get him to his desk before the day began and the office cronies started booting up their computers.

"Yeah," Robbie replied, "but luckily for us it's the middle of the night and I'd bet anything we'll be out of here any minute."

Taryn hoped he was right. Everything depended on it. He had told Scott that he needed the deal to work out to keep his name in tact, to restore his families' faith in his capabilities, but it was more than that. He'd made several bets on a fight in Vegas. It was stupid, he knew, but he was in deep. Out ten mill. He couldn't go to his uncle. Blowing that kind of money on a boxing match? His uncl would kill him himself. He needed the deal on the complex to start looking up so he could get his hands on some cash and pay off his debts.

Sylvie put her hands over her eyes, she began to cry.

"Hey, doll, you alright?" Robbie said, concerned.

She tried to conceal the soft tears running down her pale cheeks, but then the burst. A water pipe with a bad leak. She was sobbing now.

“Hey, like I said, we’ll get out of here, get you home,” his hand rubbing her back in an effort to comfort her.

“I already told you that I don’t want to go home.”

Katriona interjected from across the way. “Guy?” She looked at Sylvie empathetically, pulling a pack of travel size tissues from her red purse, careful not to let the note slip out.

Sylvie took one and blew, a trumpet sound, “Thank you.”

“Look, I’ve been there, girl,” Katriona said, getting up and walking across the car to sit next to Sylvie. “Actually, I am there, and have been pretty much every damn day since I got to New York.”

From the far end of the car the homeless man watched them interacting, Sylvie and Katriona, two strangers, solidarity between them, their sincerity, divided cells conjoining, two fallen soldiers sharing war stories and scars. Sincere, human interaction. He envied it, the genuine exchange. Sylvie’s wretched vulnerability, Katriona’s empathy, their eyes, trading glances of pity and hope for one another. He wondered if he had ever felt that for another person. If he had, it had been a very long time. Since he was a boy.

E watched, too, but he felt something different. Anger. Katriona was beautiful and Sylvie, so fragile, like porcelain china. They both seemed smart and undeserving, like his mother. But what woman was? Deserving of that type of thing? Although he didn’t know their stories, whether they’d been drug down the stairs or just mistreated, he had grown up watching women suffer. Women threatened to be beaten with hammers by their boyfriends unless “they kept in line,” exhausted and bruised, molested at parties. He knew what men were to women. Greedy. Selfish. They lacked self-control. He distanced himself from women for this reason, refused to become to them what he saw other men become. In fact, he had only been with a woman one

time. He was in high school, and a friend's older sister had scored a bottle of cheap vodka. At their parent's apartment they all sat and drank. He had never had alcohol before. He slunk back in an old, salmon colored chair that had the same texture as carpet. The booze made him tired. That was all he had been doing, sitting there, when his friend's older sister came onto him, took off his pants and fucked him right there in the chair. The truth was, the whole thing scared him. He never told anyone, but he cried that night.

Taryn was getting more antsy by the minute. He stood up, pacing up and down the car, a waded ball of tin foil leftover from his tuna sandwich. He was tossing it up and catching it, occasionally hitting the ceiling of the car. He threw it at Scott.

"Think fast!" it hit Scott in the head.

Scott looked up at him. "You might be the most annoying person I have ever met."

Taryn laughed. "Ah, you're no fun."

It was amazing how quickly Taryn had been demoted from a daring, attractive mystery to an outright nuisance. Scott was appalled at the kid's brevity—the strip club, the gun, the threat. And there was the phone call right before they stepped on the train car. "Roger." Maybe Roger already knew that Taryn had fucked up, and Taryn would kill them both. But did he have that in him? He seemed too playful, unthreatening. Or was Roger in on it? Was he paranoid? Either way, it didn't really matter. Taryn did have a gun, and even idiots had to be respected when they held steel objects that projected deadly, whizzing, lead that could lodge into brains or guts. And if Taryn did follow through with his plan, if Scott shifted the figures, moved money around, Scott could be left with nothing. Likely caught. Convicted of fraud. And nobody would care. Money, his job, his high-rise apartment. That was all he was. No family, no real friends. Once all

that grandiosity was stripped away, he would be a ghost—one that floated inconspicuously from room to room, haunting spaces, not really noticed or missed by the living.

At least another thirty minutes passed, and with it, another lull in conversation. They were all taking up more space now, and were sprawled about in various positions, their possessions scattered around. Some slept. Some looked through their phones. The homeless man stared at his goldfish, identifying with the creature, feeling a bit like the goldfish himself, stuck in the car. He wondered if the thing might suffocate if it didn't get into a bowl soon? That made him worry some. But where would he get a bowl? He would have to take it to the pond. Put it with the ducks. Katriona had moved back to her spot near E. Her head bobbed forward a few times and as she kept catching herself from dosing off, finally she lay it against E's shoulder. E felt both discomfort and euphoria with her there, her hair rubbing against his neck. It smelled like apple shampoo. Sylvie had stopped crying, finally.

“This is getting ridiculous. I'm going to check things out.” Robbie stood up. He had assumed a very obvious leadership position, with his insignia laden jacket. He was the closest thing they had to law enforcement.

“How?” asked Taryn, and the other passengers stirred by the conversation, slowly resurfacing from their sleepy hazes.

“Not exactly sure how far up the line we are, but I might pass through a few cars and see if I can find the conductor's car, see what the fuck is going on.”

“How's that going to help?” asked Scott

Robbie was clearly annoyed by the question. “Not sure, but it ain't doing us any good just sitting here. You got a better idea?”

He walked to the south end of the car and peered through the glass where he'd put the drunk kid.

"He's still out." he directed this remark to Sylvie, then walked back to the other side and used both hands to pull apart the adjoining doors, stepping over a large, rusted hitch, into the open air and into the next car. It took a while for the doors to close behind him, and you could hear the heavy clank of his work boots and their attached, metal buckles, sound fading into the distance.

Chapter 8

“She was breaking her rules. They weren't stone after all, only small and fragile as paper cranes.... I understood why she held to them so hard. Once you break the first one, they all broke, one by one, like firecrackers exploding in your face in a parking lot on the Fourth of July.” — Janet Fitch, White Oleander

Taryn also had Tic-Tacs. He pulled them out and popped a couple into his mouth. “Anyone want one?” E held out his hand, and Taryn walked over, shaking a few loose into his palm.

Robbie had been gone for some time now. Katriona was worried for him, jittery, a million thoughts and questions entering and exiting, like mice stealing in and out of a bright room. Maybe he had encountered the soulless eyed man. Robbie was big and seemed smart and capable, was it possible that he would find him? Stop whatever impending action he was about to take? And what was the action, anyway? All she had, the note. Should she break the rules, share it with someone? If so, who? Who could she trust? “Show this to no one.” The words were clear. But she had already made the conscious decision that she would fight. If, and when he came wouldn't it be better if she had support? Someone else expecting it? E was closest to her, doodling in his notepad now, a large, “E” in block letters, a sketch of a marijuana leaf. Was the man watching, like he said? She reached into her purse and felt around for the folded piece of parchment, somewhat creased and crumpled now from resting in her handbag amongst her cigarettes, lipstick and her yellow clog. She looked toward the door of the car. There was no movement. As discreetly as she could, she unfolded it in her bag. She didn't want to give it to E

folded. The others would be more likely to notice if he was rustling around with a folded piece of paper. She turned her neck toward him, putting her eyes on his, beckoning his attention. He detected her body language and waited for her to speak. She didn't, instead, she held her pointer finger to her lip, the universal sign for, "sh, say nothing." And that's when she did it, broke the man's first rule. She discreetly slid the note onto E's notebook, and surveyed him as he read the words, his expressions morphing as he took them in. First, his eyes, squinting, then a raised brow, followed by an understanding—the unmoving car they all sat on—the hours, passing. And lastly, a look of trepidation.

The time on the train had given Sylvie a chance to think. And Katriona's comforting words had helped, too. "We all deserve the best," she had said. She knew what she would do. When she got home she would pack up her things. She would not wait for Alex to come home or confront him. It wouldn't be too hard to get out quickly, before he got home, which would be the following morning, probably. The lease was in his name. Her only possessions, her clothing and the sofa, but it'd come from IKEA, a cheap uncomfortable thing with an ugly, microsuede slipcover. He could keep it. She wouldn't go home, but somewhere else. Somewhere with clean air where she could have a clean conscience, also. No more stones in the river. No more lies. Somewhere where she could be herself and feel less afraid. She had a good amount of savings, and she had always wanted to travel to Europe. Maybe she'd go there.

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye from the side of the car. The drunk kid. He was sitting up now, eyes open, alert. The stupor which had him completely entangled before must have phased out some. He had his cell phone in his hand. She decided against going in and checking on him. He would know nothing of their connection, only that he was on the L Train headed in to Manhattan, puddle of vomit at his feet. A rough night, indeed. He could make it home from here. If only we were all so lucky to be granted no memory of our most horrific mistakes, she thought to herself.

The lights flickered a bit more, then went out completely.

“You have got to be kidding me?” said Taryn, his nervousness now completely apparent to everyone in the car, voice frantic with anxiety and rage, even.

Without warning came some swift, loud cracks. Thundering sounds from down the way, echoing through the connected cars in the distance. Gunshots? An explosion? A malfunction with the electrical, like Robbie suggested before?

All was black for a minute or two, until their eyes adjusted to the dark cavity of the train car, finally they could at least make out each others silhouettes. The car lights came back on, but dimmer than before, mimicking the same subtle exuberance given off by lampposts on midnight sidewalks.

A flashlight shined through the window of the north doors. Someone approaching the car. An MTA worker? The Conductor? Robbie? Nobody remembered him carrying a flashlight, though. Katriona had been waiting for this moment. She felt fear, and while the others didn't, yet, they would soon. She put her hand on E's leg and gripped tightly.

Chapter 9

Martin

A man stood in the doorway of the train car a while, looking dreadful, like a gathering storm. His face pale, freckles on his arms, those pitted olive eyes that Katriona knew. Neither tall, or short, completely average, and wearing an MTA uniform. Over one shoulder he carried a satchel, the type used to tow around tools and such, and in the other hand something more ominous. A gun.

Taryn stood. “Oh my god, thank you! Finally the MTA shows up! What the hell is going on? We’ve been in here forever!”

The man raised the gun to Taryn, who was sitting nearest to him, pointing the black, semi-automatic pistol directly at him.

“Sit. Down.”

The intruder’s voice quivered with his instructions, his arm unsteady.

“Taryn held up his arms.”

“Alright, I’m sorry! Just wondering what is going on here.”

Taryn took his seat next to Scott, a confused expression on his face.

The man spoke. “I’m Martin. Who are all of you?” He asked, his high pitched voice crackling like a record with a bad needle.

“What are your names!” He raised his voice this time, a demanding squawk.

E cleared his throat, and the man followed the noise, pointing the gun at E.

“What’s your name?”

Now it was E with his hands up.

“Hey man, why you pointing that thing at me? What’s everyone doing flashing pieces at me today for no reason; this is fucked up!”

“What’s your name,” he asked calmly now, monotone, caulking back the trigger.

“E!” He shouted. “I’m E!”

“Where are you from, E?”

“I live in Harlem.”

The confusion of the scene, the dim lights and the peevish man with the gun, clearly not there to help, but with a different purpose, an unknown one, which made it all worse. Slowly, like a fog taking over a meadow, fear filled the car, seeping into their bodies, filling them up.

“Now, you.” he shifted the gun over to Sylvie, her voice quivered, “Sylvie. Chicago.”

“Humph.”

Scott didn’t wait for the weapon to land on him. The game they were playing was apparent now. Perhaps if he went along with it things would be less hostile.

“I’m Scott. I live in Manhattan.” Taryn followed suit, he was panting, probably because he was still distraught from having the weapon on him before. “Taryn. Brooklyn.”

The homeless man was the furthest away from the man called Martin. Barely able to see one another under the ethereal lights, Martin walked through the train car, squinting so he could get a better look at him.

“And you. Who are you?”

“That’s none of your business.” said the homeless man, coolly. Martin laughed, a deafening, feminine cackle that filled the car, but suddenly, an abrupt end to his laughter.

“It is my business. I am making it my business, now.”

“Well, if you must know, I’m Clark Kent,” said the homeless man. “I hail from Krypton.”

“You think this is funny?” said Martin, standing directly over him now, taking the metal barrel, pressing it to the front of his skull. The homeless man didn’t move, only looked up at him, his eyes serious and penetrating and lacking any trace of fear, hands still cradling the goldfish.

“What’s going on in here?” said a familiar face. The drunk kid had opened the conjoining car doors and was stepping inside. He scanned the coach, eyes widening as he noticed Martin, his gun on the other man’s head. And that’s when he did it. Martin swiftly shifted the weapon from the homeless man and pointed it at the boy, shooting him directly in the stomach. The boy fell to the floor. Sylvie stood up, her hand over her mouth, but she didn’t move, didn’t cry out. She was too afraid to go to him.

It was the first time any of them had ever seen another person shot. Even E, who lived in a neighborhood plagued by violence had only ever seen weapons and heard stories. It was much more graphic in movies. This was less bloody, perhaps because the boy had been shot in the abdomen, but his cries, the whimpering exclamations of pain, the short gasps and writhing motion, that was the worst part of it all.

Why was this happening? Who was this diabolical shadow with this timorous voice and hands? Why? He began to speak, began answering their questions.

“None of you will live through the night, I am sad to say.” The candid statement made their adrenaline pace, their bodies twinge.

“It’s really a shame, I guess. But, the world is cruel. I’ll bet you already know that much, and it isn’t fair. Things happen. People die every day. Most of them deserving. I truly believe that, you know. None of us are any better than any other, but you know that not everyone feels this way. There are a lot of people in this world that think they are better. He repeated the line again. *They think they are better.* He said it with such vehemence, almost spitting while he

spoke. But everyone, everyone, selfish, greedy, a gluttonous plague, that's what most humans are, really.

"You." He pointed the gun at Scott. "You." turning the gun toward Sylvie.

The bum considered these words for a moment, even amidst the critical nature of the situation. He was too philosophical not to think on it. He didn't totally disagree with everything the man said. It was true, many people were fuelled by hatred and greed. They lied. Rich got richer, poor got poorer. But, some people were good. The way Katriona offered Sylvie that tissue. And besides, it really wasn't anyone else's business what other people did. Some people did bad things. And some people, like him, just went about their lives.

Someone spoke out unexpectedly. It was Katriona.

"I followed your instructions. I still have your letter in my purse. I've been a very good girl."

Instructions? A letter? What was she talking about? Everyone was confused, everyone except E, who tucked his notepad closer to his body, the letter that Katriona spoke of rested between its pages, no longer in her possession but his. It was his duty to conceal it, not to incriminate her.

"You don't have to do this, you know. It won't accomplish anything. You're right. People are bad. We're all beasts, really, but what good will killing us all do? Will it change anything?"

His eyes froze on her, scanning her body lustfully in a way that made everyone feel uncomfortable.

"You're really pretty," he said. "I'll bet a lot of people think so, and I'll bet that works in your favor, most of the time. You probably get whatever you want."

“Not in the way that I’d like it to,” she said.

The man snorted. “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“Have you ever been with a woman, Martin?” Katriona asked.

He didn’t respond, but the answer was an outward and perceivable no, judging by the way he was blushing. You could feel it radiating off him. He was growing hot, feverish, cheeks blossoming like red, garden roses.

Her purse was on her lap, Katriona felt the can of pepper spray inside. If she could somehow entertain him enough, distract him enough, perhaps she could use it. Robbie was still missing, the biggest guy in the car, he would have been a useful ally to her plan, but there were still the two businessmen, and E, and their predator looked frail. With the intense burn of pepper spray in his eyes they might be able to wrestle him down, stop him before he killed them all. Carefully, she took the cold cylinder out of her purse, keeping her eyes fixed on Martin all the while, a smoldering gaze, so he wouldn’t notice the movement of her hands, a magicians trick. She placed the pepper spray in the pocket of her coat.

She stood up and began walking toward him. “I Like you, Martin. You’re smart. And I agree with you. There are a lot of pitiful people in this world, but I think you’ve been jipped. Perhaps that’s why you’re so bitter. You haven’t really lived until you have been with a woman, and I don’t think you should leave this earth without having that experience, first.”

E knew exactly what Katriona was doing, not of the pepper spray, but of her attempt to catch him off guard somehow. It was why she had showed him the note, so he could step in when she called on him. This was it. He felt his body tense. He would be ready to act if she could someone manage to make Martin vulnerable enough.

Martin stood there, still gripping the gun, but it was slack in his arm and hanging down at his side. He was motionless, a frightened cat. His lips tightened, obviously contemplating her appeal, her desirable body, but weighing it against something else. She took a step closer him.

But the scales he had been weighing, the balance rapidly shifted to one side, his trance violently broken like a glass vase knocked off a table. “You’re worse than them all!” He yelled. “You think I’m such a fool that I’d give into your whorish little distraction?” He took a step forward and shoved her, a forceful push, full of rancor and fury and she went soaring back, hitting her head on the edge of the bench seat with a powerful smack, the cylindrical can of pepper spray rolling out of her pocket and across the train car floor to Martin’s feet. He picked it up and reviewed it.

“You evil little cunt. I might kill you first.”

Taryn was making plans of his own. He felt the gun in his vest pocket. Its cool handle resting against his side. He had never used it before. Earlier that year, in Vegas, him and his friends had gone to the shooting range, a real shoot-em-up place where you could rent oozies and elephant guns. Pimpled face teens, men in ten gallon hats, ex-cops, even kids, they littered the joint. They shot paper targets at close range with their semi-automatic handguns. He didn’t care for them, guns, and had bought this piece specifically to threaten Scott, with no intention of ever using it. He wasn’t sure if he’d even loaded it properly. It felt heavier now than ever, though, as he waited for an opportunity to see if he could get a shot.

Chapter 10

Guilt for being rich, and guilt thinking that perhaps love and peace isn't enough and you have to go and get shot or something. – John Lennon

“Here’s how this is going to work,” said Martin. “Now that we’ve been formally introduced, I’m going to go around our little circle, and you’re each going to tell me a story. Your great mistake. Why you are ugly. Tell me why you deserve to die, and if it’s honest, and you know you deserve it, maybe, maybe I will let you live.”

Honesty, thought Katriona. That’s what he meant in his note. Salvation from honesty. Her head had hit the bench seat hard, split it open. She could feel the blood matting the back of her hair, some trickling down the nape her neck. She lay there on the floor—a throbbing headache was starting to develop beneath her temples. Her plan had backfired, and his words, “I might kill you first.” She knew he meant it.

E hung his head down. He hated talking to people he didn’t know. He was quiet, even amongst friends. If the crazy man was giving out life, or death sentences based off public speaking abilities, he would never make it out alive. He looked down at Katriona, saw a bit of blood making its way onto the floor from her head wound. She had been brave, but her plan had failed her. E thought of his mom at the bottom of the stairwell that night. He wanted so badly to reach down and take Katriona’s hand, stroke her hair, like he had with his mom at age seven.

Martin pointed the gun to Scott, signaling that he was to go first,

“Um, Scott sat up more straightly. A mistake I made?”

“No,” said Martin, “not just a mistake, your evil. Who you really are.”

Scott cleared his throat. He had been plenty selfish in his lifetime—knocked many down to prop himself up. He could tell the story he told to Taryn, about turning in his buddy for tax evasion, but he suspected that Martin was after something else, something more wrenching. A story about greed would be a given, and this guy, this sadist ran off emotion. Scott would give him emotion.

“When I was a boy,” Scott began, “my sister wanted a pet. She begged my parents. They said no at first, actually, the first ten times she asked, then finally one day they bought her a rabbit. My sister was a year older than me. I was nine at the time. But my sister, she’d never let me play with it. She loved that fucking rabbit. She’d take it for walks in a little baby carriage, dress it up, keep it in her room. One day, when she was out, I decided I’d take it from its pen. I hated how much she loved that thing. I don’t know why. I wanted to steal that joy away from her, for no reason, really. We lived in Connecticut on a few acres. I walked into the woods and let it go. It hopped off through the trees, no fucking clue what it was doing. Just being a dumb rabbit. I didn’t feel bad. I took some strange pleasure in it. But she cried for days, mourned the loss of the thing, until one day she stopped, slowly forgot about him, I guess. Anyway, my sister died two years later. She was just a child. Brain cancer. I often think about robbing her of something that gave her joy, simply out of jealousy, or spite. She was a good person with a good heart. I have always been selfish. It should have been me that left this earth as a child, not her.”

The homeless man flinched. The poor rabbit.

I guess Scott’s story was good enough, for now, because Martin took the weapon off him. But would it really make a difference in the end? Their stories? Or was this all just a sadistic game, a Russian roulette where there would be no liberation, no blank shots in his gun, only death. Either way, they’d all take their turns, and they all sat there, rehearsing, reaching into the

corners of their minds for sins that might appease him when the barrel was finally pointed at them.

Martin turned, aiming the weapon at Sylvie now. Scott exhaled sharply, relief in his breath.

“You, now. Miss uptown.”

Sylvie was visibly trembling, a flame caught in the wind. Did she even possess the courage to speak? Scott’s childhood memory prompted one of her own, and it was really the only thing she could come up with.

“Come on; don’t have all day.”

“There was a boy in school,” her voice matched her body, a squeaky violin with a heavy vibrato. “His name was Amory. Even as children we are ruthless creatures, we establish a pecking order, a way of deciphering who is less and who is more. Amory wasn’t liked in school; he came from a lower income family. Everyday he wore the same brown shirt, probably the only one he had. He smelled badly, clearly wasn’t taken care of at home. We’d make fun of him for it. He’d never say anything to defend himself, only sat there at his desk, looking sad.”

Sylvie was outwardly nervous and terrified—crossing and uncrossing her legs, rubbing her hands around like she was trying to warm them by a fire. “Anyway, one particular day I got an idea, a way to amuse my classmates. I approached the teacher out of nowhere and said, ‘Amory pushed me at recess. He pushed me, and then he spat on me.’ It wasn’t true, any of it. At recess Amory had sat by himself near the playground the whole time, at least as far as I knew. I’m not sure why, but he didn’t deny it. Announced no defense. The teacher took him to the principal’s office and they called his mom.” She paused for a moment and closed her eyes, taking a deep, shaky breath to gain some composure. When she continued she spoke a little less

timidly, but she began to cry, silent tears running down her face like raindrops on glass, “After school that day, John’s mom picked him up. She was always late. I’d stayed after for choir rehearsal. I saw them out of the corner of my eye, him and his mom. I saw her hit him. First she smacked him across the face, then worse, she pounded her fist across his shoulder, and he fell to the ground. Then she picked him up by the shirt, and threw him in the car. I could tell by the way he did it that it wasn’t the first time he’d bit hit. Maybe he got hit everyday. She yelled, ‘What were you thinking, pushing that girl. Get the fuck in the car.’ I hid behind a brick column near the front doors of the so nobody would see me, then after their car was out of sight, I walked home. I never told anyone what I had done, what I saw. Never confessed, until now. If I had, I might have saved him from a lifetime of beatings, like the one I witnessed, but I was more concerned about myself and being caught in a lie. Selfish, like you said.”

But before Martin had a chance to speak on Sylvie’s anecdote, to establish her fate, Taryn stood, and everyone’s eyes grew wide as he produced a gun from his coat pocket and pointed it at Martin.

“Now where did you get that?” Martin asked, almost amused.

Taryn cocked the trigger, steadfastly aiming the thing at Martin’s head. He weighed his options. He could shoot Martin right now. Point blank. He was in close enough range that he was sure not to miss. The cops would come. They’d all be free. But, there would be no time to head in to the office. No time to straighten out his fuck up. The police would drag him down to the station, where he and everyone else would be questioned, and Scott would surely rat him out, “blackmail,” “extortion,” “criminal threat,” and in the meantime, while they were all sitting in a white room with no windows, Scott’s firm would be looking at the day’s numbers. He’d be

fucked. He wouldn't be able to pay his gambling debts. The guys in Vegas he owed, they'd find him, and they weren't jokers. He'd end up in jail or end up dead.

In one jerky movement he took the gun off of Martin, and put it in his mouth, angling up.

“What the fuck, man! What are you doing?” yelled Scott.

But Taryn pulled the trigger. It was just as anyone would imagine it to look, red spatter hitting the back wall, a merlot colored Rorschach with spider legs. A few chunks of scalp. Some had even gotten on Scott's shirt. Taryn collapsed to the floor at Scott's feet.

Sylvie screamed. E gawked in horror. And Scott, he couldn't fucking believe it. Taryn's body lying there all bent, his eyes still semi-open, the bits of him on his shirt. He jumped up, walking to the corner of the car, doubling over, hands on knees.

That selfish bastard, he thought. He could have saved them all.

Martin was unable to comprehend his luck. Just thirty seconds prior he thought it had been all over, his plan totally foiled. He didn't know why the guy had done it, turned the gun on himself, but given the circumstance, it struck him as funny, and he began to laugh hysterically. “This is too much,” which he followed up with another fit of high pitched squeals. “I guess there's one less of you to worry about. Ha!” Finally, he settled down some, “We really should keep going, though, unless another one of you wants to volunteer to blow your own brains out so I don't have to?”

Nobody spoke.

“No. No volunteers? Okay. Next then. You.” He pointed to Katriona, using the gun in place of his index finger. She was still on the floor. “You're up.”

“May I sit, at least?” The way she asked, possessing just as much brazen confidence as she had when she'd approached him before.

Martin rolled his eyes and waved his arm, motioning for her to get up. “By all means, my queen.”

She pushed herself into a sitting position with her palms. She felt dizzy. She was certainly concussed, and the blood, it had soaked through the back of her shirt and jacket. More to do with the placement of the wound than the actual gravity of it, probably. She knew head wounds tended to bleed a lot. She tried pulling herself onto the bench, but she was woozy and it was difficult. E put a hand under her arm, and helped pull her onto the seat. She lounged back in the chair, her head craned upward toward the top of the car as she spoke so the gash wasn't rubbing against the back of it. She told her story to the ceiling.

“Well, I wasn't an innocent little kid, like these two, when what I am about to tell you happened. In fact, it wasn't that long ago. I had a new boyfriend. He'd come onto me at work, as they often do, and this guy was interesting. When I meet them out at night, they don't have to be interesting, maybe just attractive, or funny, but if I am sober they have to be interesting, and smart. Zephyr was both, and eccentric to boot. He didn't really talk in full sentences. He would spout off one thing, then before he had finished a thought, he would flit onto the next. Some form of ADD, definitely, but it was unique, and enjoyed the irrationality behind it. He had money, was some kind of music producer with connections around the city, so with him, New York was a rowdy carnival ride. Fancy dinners. Swanky parties. We took it slow, though. It was different than what I was used to. Most of the guys after me were only interested in sex, but this guy wasn't. To be honest, I felt almost insecure about it. Was he gay? Did he even find me attractive? It fucked with my confidence a bit. I began to realize what a slave I had become to that notion—that sex was my only draw, and nothing more. ‘When are you going to take me

home?’ I finally asked one night after a fancy dinner at my favorite, downtown restaurant, Beauty and Essex.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that.” he said.

“What?” I exclaimed, exasperated. It had been nearly two months since we’d been seeing each other, not exclusively, or officially, but I wanted to be with him, if only so I could know that he found me beautiful.

Reluctantly, he agreed to take me back to his apartment, but only on two conditions: 1) I wear a blind fold on our way there, so he could keep its location a secret, and 2), I do heroine with him along the way. I had never done heroine before. I’m not into that. I like to drink, sure, but drugs, nah—not me. I found it a bit ridiculous, said, ‘You can’t be serious?’ But those were his conditions. ‘It’s not “Pulp Fiction”,’ he retorted. ‘Heroine is really just like any other drug, highly stigmatized by Hollywood, made out to be some evil, terrible thing that it really isn’t.’ We called a car, and right there, in the back, we did it. Snorted the golden brown powder off of his Amex. I have to admit that it felt nice. I didn’t pass out or anything, like I had seen people do in films. I just sat there in the back of the cab, completely tranquil, absorbing the atmosphere until we got to his walk-up. Inside, he took off my blindfold, and cut me a few lines of coke. I started feeling pretty good. I approached him while he sat in a chair, a notepad in his hand, he was scribbling away and rambling some. I climbed on his lap, put my hand on his dick over his pants. ‘Don’t you want me?’ He looked up at me with tender eyes and stroked my face, then returned to his notepad. Suddenly I started to feel sick. My stomach racing like a hamster wheel. I ran to the bathroom and wretched in the bathtub. I spent the next few hours in that bathroom, lying on the rug as the room twirled above me like a helium ballerina. Zephyr didn’t come inside to check on me. Not once. He was too high, I guess.

When I finally gathered myself enough to stand, I walked out the door and saw him, still in the same chair, passed out, notepad on his lap. His apartment was nice, but bleak. Not much furniture inside, a barren wasteland of exposed brick walls with a few expensive looking chairs. It was hard to miss his wallet on the counter, a fat, black thing. I opened it up. Inside, a clip with one-hundred dollar bills. I didn't even count it until I got home, but it was a lot, about three-thousand dollars. I also took the rest of the drugs and sold them at work. They were worth a lot, too—it seems everyone but me is into that shit. We never spoke again, never faced one another. He never called to demand his money or drugs back, and I never demanded an apology for his abandonment, for leaving me hapless. The worst part? I wasn't even really mad at him for that. I was mad that he wouldn't have me, that he never did. You see, I'm disgusted if they want me, and I'm disgusted if they don't."

A short pause, then Martin started shaking his head. "You are so fucking self-absorbed." His astonishment was unmistakable. "You're telling me that you robbed a guy because he wouldn't screw you, and that your greatest mistake is that you're a slut?" He drew his face near to hers, nose to nose, almost. She could feel his hot breath on her lips as he spoke. "You blame everyone else, don't you? Think men are the problem, the great evil. But it's all you. I asked you to be honest, to be deserving, but you don't think you deserve it at all, do you?" Katriona stared right into him as he spoke, her chest rising and falling with vigor, a challenging look of spite on her face. *This was it*, she thought. She prepared for a violent sting or rupture of some kind, maybe she would be lucky and feel nothing at all. She imagined her gray matter on the walls of the subway, like Taryn's. She thought of Eamon, his stormy, Irish eyes. Martin put the gun to her temple, but an unexpected slap, a bag hitting the ground, bursting open. Martin turned and saw fireworks of splashing water and the fat, seizing goldfish, flopping about like a rubber ball

with fins, all the precursor to the homeless man's actions, who came charging forward, head down like a linebacker, bolting toward Martin and the gun. He attempted to grab it, the weapon, but it shifted, went off, a bullet misfiring through the wall next to Katriona's head.

The homeless man tore Martin to the floor where they struggled. Rolling around, clamoring for control of the gun. They raised their arms, both grappling for the object which misfired again, this time through the top of the car. Martin gained control for an instant, and then there was another shot, one that hit the homeless man in the chest, but somehow, in some last effort, he stood up straight, hammering Martin in the face, a punch so great that it caused the gun to eject onto the floor. E leapt forward and retrieved it and pointed it at Martin now, who lay on his back, panting, arms raised in submission. The homeless man was also on the ground, clutching his chest wound. Sylvie got up and went to the him. "It'll be okay," she said, her hand clasped around his, she stroked his face. She felt his forehead become dewy, his eyes, wide, round orbs, full of shock. E looked at Katriona, her hands on the back of her head, her agony was obvious, her fight for consciousness, too, her eyes opening and closing like a camera shutter. He wanted so badly to go to her, but he had to keep the gun on Martin.

Chapter 11

Too many guns for one day

There E stood, a gun on a man who had previously had a gun on him. He couldn't believe it. Those niggers this afternoon and then this Gollum looking dude. Too many guns for one day. He felt the surge of power behind the weapon, finger instinctively on trigger. Martin lay there. Still expressionless, somewhat smug. Oh! How E desired for him to look frantic and fearful, the sick fuck. He was tempted to shoot. Instead he spoke, "Don't. Move."

They heard the train doors slide open again, but were relieved that it was only Robbie, their long lost chief finally resurfacing.

Sylvie got to her feet. "Where the hell have you been?"

Robbie was appalled at the scene. To the left of him was Taryn's body. His head half blown off, all over the wall. The young kid in the corner, clutching his stomach. Katriona laying across two seats, blood pooling around her head. The homeless man on the floor, shot, and in the middle, E, with a gun pointed steadily on a man he'd already encountered.

He explained that he had wandered to the front of the train to investigate. The maniac they called Martin, had stepped out from behind a bench and hit him on the head with something, a wrench, maybe? He wasn't really sure, but it had knocked him out. Martin must have thought him dead. Anyway, when he found consciousness, he went back to check on the others. He felt terrible saying it out loud, but there were more casualties. He'd seen them as he passed through the cars, bodies slumped over in their seats, shot dead. Luckily, their car had been the most populated, but there were at least five other victims that he knew of.

He told E to keep the gun steady, and went to the homeless man first, who was breathing softly, a waspy rasp with each exhale.

He examined his chest wound, just below his left pectoral, near to his heart. “He probably won’t make it,” said Robbie. He then approached Katriona, whose eyes were still open, but barely. He noted the gash in her head. It was hard to tell how bad it was because she was bleeding so profusely. “The boy, he’ll probably be fine. Stomach wounds can usually be treated if we get him out of here quick.”

Sylvie found a pair of nylons in her purse, some that she sometimes put on at work. They stretched them out, using them to tie Martin’s hands behind his back while E remained vigilant with the gun.

The plan was this, Robbie and Sylvie would leave the train and head through the tunnel until they could exit and find help. Robbie would be able to guide them out the quickest, and they’d bring Katriona. She was small enough, and Robbie felt he could carry her. Nobody had cell service. Everyone else would have to stay behind. They all agreed that they couldn’t safely transport the other wounded and guide Martin through the tunnel simultaneously. It was too risky. They hated to leave them there, though, especially the homeless man, with the color in his cheeks draining away so quickly. Robbie asked E if he was cool, and E reassured him that he felt confident keeping the gun on Martin.

“If he tries anything, shoot him,” Robbie instructed. “He deserves it anyway.”

Eventually, the ones that stayed behind weren’t greeted by Sylvie or Robbie, but by the NYPD, FBI, Bomb Squad, and a slew of other persons in uniform whose company they didn’t know. While Robbie and Sylvie were getting help Scott saw the homeless man’s chest rise and fall for the last time.

When they all got to the station, they gave their statements, answered questions, and then they were finally able to ask some of their own. The man who had held them hostage worked for the MTA. They had already searched his apartment. Apparently, he had been planning this for weeks. He had manually stopped the train, then contacted the control center, telling them that there was a mechanical error, that the train needed to cool a bit. It was no secret that the MTA control center was running on archaic equipment, some leftover from the 1930s, switchboard panels that looked like the insides of spaceships from movies shot in the 60s. This sort of thing was possible—there was no reason to believe an act of terror was being committed. But when they didn't hear back from the conductor for several hours, they did send someone to check it out, that's where they encountered Robbie, Sylvie and Katriona, Robbie speaking in quick and jumbled phrases.

“Hurry!”

“Maniac on the L.”

“People shot.”

“Some dead”

On Martin's computer, they found a manifesto, the type that the unstable generally leave behind, justifying their horrible acts. It was published online after a few days, and Sylvie decided she'd read it. She couldn't live her life without an attempt at understanding the mind of the evil being that would haunt her forever. It was ramblings, mostly,

To the fallible, unjust people of the world, who both gently and violently disgrace each other. A hundred years ago, today, or on another day, you will lie to yourselves. Is doing what feels right, always what is right? For I can write, but in writing, do I write what's right?

Your weakness—astounding. Your capacity to forget what you know to be true, only moments after uttering words, is unsurpassed by any other species on this earth.

Such greediness. Disgusting, deplorable, like locusts that plague an orchard, devouring the crops of the fleshy fruit until there is nothing left, until you are fat and full.

I know of some pain, which causes loss, and reward. The pain of justice, the recompense for evil. This pain, forward moving, toward growth. For I can reject my instincts, and follow the masses of your malicious souls, but at what point does instinct lead me away from virtue, and into corruption? Why do I act on certain feelings, and certain thoughts, and cut others from the act itself, no longer being in play, no longer part of the scene, a word, not heard? I have good reason.

Oh god! What is god? And does god preside? And if so, where? Such is just philosophy. Cursed wisdom, cursed knowledge, a plane in perpetual limbo, knowing all, but in knowledge of everything, I feel nothing, yet I know nothing, and in knowing nothing, I see everything. I see your souls, damaging each other, killing each other over false gods, or because you think you are god, stealing, lying, fucking each other because of your beastly natures that cannot be contained. I see how it is, but I wish I didn't, yet it holds me. I am indebted to it. Cursed mortality, giving me death rather than life, which is the greatest lie, for I ride within the vehicle, yet at what point am I the vehicle, and who is really spinning who?

It's only because they deserved it. Justice. But how many of you do not receive justice? You'll go about your day. Living your life, hurting others, sometimes without thinking. You want and need and want and need. Needing nothing, really, but taking anyway. Lying. You haunt each other, and so it is that we become ghosts. After all, the only fair thing in life is that we all die. And one day soon, some of you will.

It was in every paper, even ones overseas, headlines that read "Mentally-Ill Man Hijacks New York Subway Train, 5 dead." His picture plastered on every television, his pitted olive eyes and papery skin. The story behind him, typical. His family, speaking out with shock and grief and compassion for the families of the victims. He had been plagued by years of mental illness, they tried helping him, but he was not a child. It isn't easy to force a sick adult to get help. The gun, bought legally, despite the fact that he had actually been checked into a health facility once before. The words of his neighbor in Queens caught on a nightly news interview. "He seemed like a normal enough guy. Quiet, a bit of a recluse, maybe, but not dangerous. We are all shocked."

Chapter 12

Eamon

He took a bouquet to the hospital. Gerbera daisies. He didn't know her favorite flower, but when he went to the florist to pick them out, they were what reminded him of her most, their whimsy, their vibrant, colorful petals in playful shades of tangerine and pink, like something out of a Dr. Seuss book.

Her family was already there. They'd flown in from Oklahoma. Apparently they hadn't spoken to Katriona for some time. They were devout, southern Baptists and Katriona had forged her own path, one they hadn't necessarily approved of. They had never been to visit her in New York. He met them outside her room for the first time. Despite the way she sometimes spoke about them, they seemed nice enough.

"You must be Kat's boyfriend?" Her dad spoke with a heavy drawl.

So someone else called her Kat.

"No, just a good friend."

"Lovely flowers. I'm sure she'd like them."

"Yeah, I thought so."

He saw where Katriona got her hazel eyes and tanned skin. The eyes came from her mother, a petite woman with shoulder length, blond hair and feathery eyelashes. Doll-like. Her dad was obviously Native American. Katriona had never mentioned that part of her heritage, but it explained her olive skin, which held its color even in the palest days of January.

The red hair, though, neither of them possessed it. That was Katrionas. Maybe she hadn't even inherited it. Maybe it wasn't even in her gene pool. She was stubborn and unique like that. She'd probably found it herself, stolen it in heaven.

When they finally got her to the hospital she was already unconscious. The wound to her head had caused her brain to swell and bleed, the swelling and excess blood eventually pushing down on her brain stem, making it shift in her skull entirely. She was in a deep coma.

"They're saying it's unlikely she will come out of it, and if she does, there will be immense brain damage," said Katriona's dad, words he spoke so soft and with such fragility that Eamon could barely make them out.

But when he did, as it all sunk in, heavy stones found his chest, pressing up against his heart. Eamon couldn't help it. He began to cry. Katriona's mom reached out, tearing up a bit herself. She rubbed his shoulder in a maternal, kind gesture.

"Sweetie, why don't you go in and see her. We are headed to the cafeteria. Those flowers you brought, they'll look lovely by the window."

The inside of the room was already blooming. At least a dozen vases of different arrangements, lilies and yellow roses and some more exotic things scattered about. It looked like a botanical garden. Each one stuffed with a printed note: Get well soon. He set his flowers next to another vase of gerbera daisies. Katriona was well liked and a colorful individual. Apparently he hadn't been the only one that thought the variety to be a perfect fit.

She lay there in her gown, a light blue dress that was much too big, and it draped over her body like a sheet. Down her throat and in her nose, a breathing tube, a large and intrusive thing that made her mouth gape open widely. It was connected to a ventilator, which also showed her other vitals. Her steady heart rate, her oxygen levels, 98%. The machine breathed deeply,

rhythmic, heavy sighs followed by some puffing and then raspy inhales. Periodically there was a sharp beep, but it meant nothing ominous, as far as Eamon could discern, anyway, only that it was mechanically alive.

He could tell that her mother had been looking after her. Her hair was clean and nails freshly polished. Under her eyelids, he could see twitching, a reflex, sure. He had read once that coma patients didn't experience normal REM states, didn't dream. But still, he imagined her thinking of him beneath her eyelids. Of the kiss on the train. Of what might have been had her life not been so cruelly interrupted. He wondered if she'd experienced the same high afterward. He thought she might have, thought he felt an electric pulse behind her lips when they touched that night. He wanted to believe it, anyway.

The ironic thing, the man who did it, the hideous parasite called Martin, his point made no sense. The world was sick, full of ugly people that didn't deserve life. So he took them from the earth, and by doing so participated in its ugliness. He was the only ugly thing left, now, and the beauty was everyone that had survived, how they'd rescued each other. And Katriona, the most beautiful of them all, who was still alive, but very much dead, too. He heard about what she had done that night. How brave she'd been. They had interviewed the survivors on several morning shows—they told everyone about the letter she showed to a man named E, and her outrageous plot to seduce him with the intent of dousing him in pepper spray. It was so like her that almost made him laugh, actually. Katriona. So idealistic. So courageous in life.

He sat on a chair near her bed and held her hand. He thought of them making snow angels in the street, her yellow peacoat. He touched her hair and stroked her earlobe. Then, he stood up and left the room.

Chapter 12

My version of Superman is essentially of a guy who has spent his whole life alone. –Henry Cavill

“Sorry I’m late.” Robbie walked up to the graveyard wearing his uniform, obviously having just gotten off his shift. The rest were in Black.

Scott was in a fine, custom suit. He wore sunglasses and polished shoes. After the incident he quit the firm. He was working on some private investments, funding small, but promising business ventures. He had come out, sort of. He was still frequently hit on by women, and sometimes he would take one home, out of habit, I guess, but he had begun frequenting a few gay bars, and was getting more comfortable with the idea. The day after the incident he had been down at the precinct for an interview. E was there, sitting next to him while they waited. They started talking about that night. What they had been doing. How it had been such an unusual cluster of hours, even before the train ride. Both were surprised to find the other had been threatened earlier that day by other guns, ones that didn’t belong to Martin. E seemed like a nice kid with shitty circumstances, and Scott felt compelled to do the only selfless thing he had ever done. Before they parted ways, he wrote a hefty check to Edward Solomon Jr., not leaving until the boy had agreed to take it and do something with his life. “Get yourself in school, kid.”

Sylvie stood alone, but looked at peace. She had dumped Alex, and had bought a round trip ticket to Europe. First she would see Italy, then Spain, and finally Paris, where Robbie would meet her. He had never been anywhere outside of New York excepting his tour in Afghanistan. She envisioned Robbie in Paris, his massive legs poking out from under a tiny, umbrella clad café table, and the way he’d scratch his head as he read foreign menu. She’d order a drink, a

glass of lovely, white wine. She had told Robbie about her relationship with Alex—her lie. The two had no romantic connection, she and Robbie, but they had formed a rare link on that night, and she knew they'd hold a fierce friendship, one formed by the bond of mutual adversity, iron made stronger by a searing hot flame.

E had borrowed a suit from Adonis for the service on the condition that he return it without a single spec of dirt. That asshole. He'd also enrolled in college at a local place, was still writing music, but also studying. The amount Scott had given him was enough to pay back Roy, and then some. His mom was convinced that he'd stolen money from someone, and demanded he return it. She didn't believe him that some investment banker had just been feeling generous.

They all stood around the gravestone. Scott had paid for that, too. They didn't end up actually holding a service. After all, they didn't know if the man had a family. He had no ID on him, had refused to give anyone his name. They were an odd looking bunch together, the businessman in a sharp suit, Sylvie, Robbie, E, but there they stood around the grave of the man, who really, they knew nothing about, only that he had saved them all.

"Maybe we could sing a hymn, or something?" Suggested Sylvie. A nice idea, but nobody was religious, really, and even so, would they all know the words? Instead they took turns placing flowers on the casket, all except Sylvie who laid down 7, glimmering medals, which she had found around his neck. She figured they must have been important to him.

One by one they walked away, saying goodbye to each other, feeling indebted to a man who would probably be offended if he knew they felt like they owed him anything.

On his gravestone were the dates of his passing, and the only name they could come up with—Clark Kent.