

BLAME THE DOGS

ADVANCED READING COPY

by Laura Martin

PART 1 :

COME OUT AND PLAY

The French words "les chiennes" translates to "the female dogs" in English.

They can also refer to the meaning "the bitches", a translation that applies to the proper term for female dogs as well as vulgar slang for 'the bitches', the objectionable women.

Chapter One:

When Elvis met Janey

Have you ever met someone and instantly knew you were going to be friends? This happened to Janey and me.

She walked in at Restaurant Breathe on that early winter's day in 1984, her dark hair tied in a bun, her white blouse ironed in a rush, and I was struck by a sense of familiarity that I hardly ever experience.

Her smile was a little shy; obviously she was petrified for her first day at Breathe—working there is a big deal for even the experienced waiter.

As the night progressed, and I comfortably looked after my usual corner, I saw her walking towards table 9 with a tray full of cocktails. The women at table 9 all wore matching pink boas and top hats for what must have been a hen's night. All eight gals hardly looked up when she reached the table. Somehow in that moment, I anticipated what was about to happen. I started walking towards her, could hear her soft voice ask: "The Moon

Dance cocktail?"

One of the women, a gal with a very short bob over dark smoky eyes, dangled her salon claws above the table.

"Eight cocktails, eight women...mmmh, let's see if she can work this out."

Janey blushed and leaned forward to place the first glass on the table.

And that is when it happened—just as I had expected.

Nobody takes a tray full of cocktails on their first day. The glasses are darn wobbly and even I hold the stems as I make my way to a table. The bar should never have sent her out there. But it was too late. As if a conductor demanded a ritardando, the glasses seemed to slide off the tray so lethargically slow that for a moment, I thought I could get to her on time; save her. Janey gasped; the women looked up as eight large glasses tumbled down towards them. Shrieks and squeals followed as the liquid poured over the top hats, creating brief waterfalls over the women's faces. Ice cubes clinked on the table. Glass shattered. The cacophony inevitably drew the attention of all other guests. My hand was already resting on Janey's tense shoulder.

"Apologies ladies, we will cover all your drycleaning expenses. I will fetch some towels, right away. Your drinks are on the house for the rest of the evening."

The hats had been the saviors, funnily enough. The women were mad, but free drinks are hard to resist. I folded my widest apologetic smile at them as I gently led a flustered Janey to the kitchen.

"You saved me," she said. I didn't think it was such a big deal. Any decent human being would (or should) do the same. But she folded her arms around my neck and gave me the tightest hug. Nobody had ever given me a hug like that.

And that's how we became friends.

Janey and Elvis.

Through thick and thin.

I may have rescued her that night, but I didn't know that she would turn out to become *my* savior in life.

I owe her so much.

And yet her downfall is entirely my fault.

Chapter Two:

Vic rules

"Help me move these sweets," Vic says as she lifts the first box off the table. Their headquarters are nestled inside the storage space of a tiny Turkish sweets store, where the store front is no more than a door. It has a back entrance too, straight onto the alley behind; the main reason why she had chosen the location. Once they have piled the boxes on the floor, the table reveals the many names scratched into its wood. Katarina. Brenda. Mandy. Alyssa. Fay. The names cover two thirds of the table. Every time when they learn of a serious assault or rape, they scratch the name of the victim into the wood.

Vic checks her watch. They should have been here by now.

She prays this girl will have some balls and will boost the group's energy. They will need it.

Vic looks across to Pam, who sits quietly on the corner of a chair. *If it's another one like her, I'll hang myself.*

Lizzy, her frizzy blond hair in a bouncy ponytail, calls

them from the desk.

"Hey, hey, listen here!" Lizzy rolls the chair closer to the screen. "The number of sexual assault cases in Vallerton, Arrowbrooke and Old Mill show a careful but clear drop of 2% relative to the previous year. Some suggest there may be a connection between this drop and the activities of Les Chiennes, the female activist group, or rebel group, that has been active for the last 1.5 years. Despite their methods being frowned upon by many, and despite the fact that they are under investigation, the majority of the public—in particular the women—seem to root for them. Their fanbase on social media is rapidly growing, with their Instagram account alone showing over 500,000 followers from across the globe."

The girls clap and howl like wild dogs and the backdoor opens with a clank. Maya and Samira walk in, with a blindfolded girl in between them. She is small and has a nose like a button.

They push her down onto one of the metal chairs and she lands with an "Oomph."

"Welcome," Vic says. "I am glad you found your way here."

"Yes, you gave excellent directions," Nicky replies to the darkness around her.

Great answer. This one could be good.

Bringing in new recruits is always a fun part of the job - especially when they are a bit lippy or cheeky. She pulls off her blindfold and Nicky blinks in the bright lights of the ceiling tubes.

"I apologize for the secretive way you were brought in. We are protective over our headquarters," Vic says.

"Nah, I love secret agent shit," Nicky says with a shrug, "I used to practice with my little brother Henry and his teddy bear, Henry Jr. My brother had to pretend to be the kidnapper, and I came to rescue Henry Jr. using my water gun. Several times a week I forced him to play this game, whether he was up for it or not. Then one day he must have decided he'd had enough. I came up to his room and there was Henry, hanging from the fan with a rope around his neck. Sorry, I mean Henry Jr. The bear. Fluff pouring out of his neck and legs. It was an ugly sight."

She returns their stares with a glint of satisfaction and Vic is reminded of just how streetwise this generation truly is. At that age she had been quiet, still searching, clinging on to the familiar—but the girls in their teens and twenties now? They clearly aren't afraid to explore, to leave their comfort zones, and she admires this.

"Ok! Sounds like you'll fit right in," she says chipper.

"My name is Vic and I lead this group of gals. As you probably already guessed by now, we call ourselves Les Chiennes."

#

Vic had initiated Les Chiennes 1.5 years prior. A group of young female activists, they share one common goal: to publicly humiliate sexual offenders. Vic considers their methods relatively harmless, yet very effective. Pictures and video material of assailants covered in egg and poop had been circulating the internet profusely, some of them receiving over 10 million views. This had not only crushed the overinflated egos of their targets, but it had also affected every aspect of their lives. They lost girlfriends, jobs and dignity as the world grew to know their faces. Some even struggled to be served in the supermarket, or the local pub. Thanks to Les Chiennes, most women had seen their faces at some stage and steered clear from them. An attack by Les Chiennes was like being branded on the forehead with a hot iron: it meant your peaceful, anonymous life was over.

#

"Before I bore you with stuff you already know, tell us why you're here," Vic continues. She has parked herself opposite the

girl on a chair and fiddles with the screwdriver they use for the table names.

"Someone showed me your underground pamphlet and suggested it may be something for me," Nicky says.

"Someone often does. And why do you think they gave you the pamphlet?" The screwdriver pokes in Nicky's direction, who shrugs. "Is it 'cause I don't take shit from nobody?"

"Eloquent," Vic says. "Can you give an example of what kind of shit you're referring to?"

The girls seem to tighten their attention, straightening their backs and leaving their phones alone to see what she has to say.

"Ya talking 'bout the incident with my PE teacher?"

"No, the one with Mother Theresa," Lizzy says, twirling a bit of her blonde afro hair around her finger while making a face.

"Tell us what happened," Vic says, her eyes daring the girl a little.

"Sure? Looks like most of you already know."

"Tell us anyway, we like juicy stories."

They all look back at her, expectingly, and Nicky chuckles.

"I should ask for a banana. Alright. So...my PE teacher Mr. Flurry had been pretty physical with some of us girls during class, putting his arms around our waist to demonstrate hockey technique, stuff like that. One day he subbed me back in a game of soccer and slapped my butt. Quite hard too, actually. But when I caught him spying on us in the changing rooms I had had enough. I was daydreaming about tying him up naked and whipping him. Then I *dreamt* that I did just that. When I woke up the next morning, I Googled 'types of whips'. It did not give the results I wanted. I don't recommend you try this. Anyhow, I figured I needed to be smart about this. Now, I knew he had a nut allergy. Do you want me to continue? The following may be too graphic for some of you young listeners." She winks.

The girls nod eagerly, some sit down on the floor like toddlers in school. Vic leans back on her chair, tapping the handle of the screwdriver on her thigh.

This girl is just what they need.

"Ok. It's not pretty. Just saying," Nicky proceeds, "So anyway, as I said, it was commonly known that he had a nut

allergy. He had once mistaken his sandwich for Miss Crunchwell's peanut butter and jam one and stayed home for a week. I also knew that every morning, before the start of the first PE class, Flurry would fill his mug with black coffee and grab one of the biscuits in the staff room. He always parked the mug on a stone bench by the sports field, with the biscuit on top. He'd then instruct us on our way for a warm-up, while he sat down on the bench to dip his biscuit in his coffee before sticking the entire thing in his huge mouth. I saw it once - seriously, it was disgusting."

Nicky twists her face in a knot, and they all laugh.

"So now, all I had to do was bake biscuits that looked exactly like the ones in the staff room. But with one different ingredient, of course."

"Sultanas?" Samira asks. Her dark eyes, framed by her hijab, twinkle with mischief.

"I replaced regular flour with almond flour and crushed an additional variety of nuts very finely for extra drama."

"What happened?" echo several of the girls.

She smiles, visibly enjoying the attention.

"Well, I told you about his massive mouth? It turns out that when your face swells enough, your mouth will always end up looking tiny." Laughter echoes through the storage space.

"He clearly had been impatient that morning, because he walked up to the field and I could tell he was chewing and flicking crumbs off his polo shirt. He says: 'Today, I want an early start because we have the Interschool Athletics day coming up in 6 weeks. Your performance of late has been...bla bla bla...' ...he goes on about how average we are and how we stand no chance against Hubbard's - the major competing school. We are looking at him in horror, because as he talks, his neck starts to swell up, then his face. He gets more and more puffy and gets these red bumps and starts to sweat."

She pretends to gag.

"He wipes the sweat off his forehead and realizes something isn't right. He rubs his belly, he is surprisingly unfit for a PE teacher, then pushes against his stomach. He tries to continue, as he was clearly in the middle of something he considered important: 'You are all to double your warm-up drills today. Then, we'll kick off by..', but he stops again and we can see him clench his butt. This is where I'm seriously struggling to keep a straight face, but I can't give anything away. He has

clearly decided he has to address the issue now and sends us off on our warmup. I see him doing this funny, arse-clenched run back to the dressing rooms - it was a beautiful thing. Fifteen minutes later, we see an ambulance turn up. Turned out he had gone to the toilet, shat himself and had gone into an anaphylactic shock."

"Holy shit," Lizzy says. They all laugh at the double innuendo.

"But how will he link the incident with his behavior?" Maeve says as she folds her very lanky right leg over her left.

"I left a note in his staff room drawer - every teacher has one. And he was obviously in hospital for some time, so I just had to make sure none of the other teachers were in the room when I left the note. It said:

Next time you touch ANY of us girls, nuts will be the least of your concern. Destroy this message and keep your hands to yourself. If you tell anyone about this, we will report you as a sex offender. That's a minimum of two years in jail."

The group cheers and some even clap. Vic can tell that they already like the girl.

There is a knock on the backdoor before it opens uninvited.

"That must be The Artist," Vic says.

They all turn silent as a man hunches down to fit through the door opening. When he looks up, his dark skin shines and his teeth shine and his hair too.

"Hey," Vic says. She points at the table and The Artist starts to set up his tools.

"Hey," he says.

"Heeey," Lizzy says out of nowhere, sending Samira cackling. The Artist is certainly a good-looking man. Especially Lizzy has had her eye on him for some time.

"Why is *he* here?"—Nicky says softly to Maya, who is closest to her.

Maya rolls up her shirt and turns around. She points at something on her right hip.

A tattoo. A female symbol with wings on either side.

Nicky's eyes grow large.

"Groovy..."

Vic studies the girl, who must be barely eighteen. Fearless, welcoming adventure. She loves her vibe; isn't this what she asked for? Yet something inside her itches—doesn't feel quite right.

She slams her hand on the table to wake herself more than everyone else.

"Make yourself comfortable. Oh, and sign this." She hands Nicky a small form outlining the responsibilities that come with being a member of Les Chiennes—including the parts no-one enjoys. Nicky scribbles her signature without taking much note of the words and lies down on the table, forehead resting on her hands.

"While you are being sworn in with ink, I will introduce everyone." Vic walks behind the group of girls that have encircled the table as they watch The Artist set the first mark. Nicky flinches slightly, then mans up and adopts somewhat of a poker face.

Vic points at the blonde afro.

"This is Lizzy. She looks like a bit of a hippy but trust me: she eats burgers and watches porn for women, so she is perfectly normal. She is also our social media manager and

ensures all videos of our actions are posted on multiple platforms. No doubt you will be familiar with her work."

Lizzy does a little jiggle on the spot.

Vic points at the shorthaired girl. "Next to her is Pam. Pam is serious and loves asking questions." Pam throws a deadly look towards Vic, which she ignores. Truth be told, Vic has never quite understood why Pam decided to join their group. The girl is a walking question mark; never able to make up her mind, never sure of anything. When they order in food, she takes ages to decide. She can never decide which side of the van to sit on... honestly, who cares?!

"This lady here with the sparkling hijab is Samira," Vic continues. "Don't be mistaken by the innocent facade. This girl can be brutal.

Samira laughs and winks.

"So nice to have you join us", she says amicably to Nicky, her subtle accent wrapping itself around the consonants like honey.

Nicky smiles back when The Artist gives her a moment to catch her breath. The main symbol is nearly complete. The girl is staunch.

"This insanely tall amazon is Maeve," Vic says, her hand resting on the girl's shoulder. "I don't know anyone who isn't more dedicated to changing the world."

Maeve salutes with an open grin.

"Next up—this sister here with the gorgeous bob cut and checkered Spencer. The one and only Maya. She has been with the group the longest. After me, that is."

Maya places her flat hands together and bows her head as a way of greeting Nicky.

"Maya is a fanatic yogi, is deeply spiritual but not religious and is wiser than all of us put together."

Vic smiles at the young woman, who had been the first one to join. Neither of them knew at the time how a single attack would grow into an organized group like this. It just happened. Evolved.

#

Once The Artist has departed, Vic takes a face mask from the drawer and hands it to Nicky. The Chihuahua face is ridiculously lifelike and has a perpetual grin that makes it look like it has gone insane.

"Great, I get the rat," Nicky jokes and holds the mask in front of her face. "Look, I'm Demi Moore's pet."

"Rather be Ashton Kutcher's," Samira says, and the group releases a unified grunt.

Vic steps closer to the girl. "Each time we go out on one of our actions, we wear our masks. This is now yours. It is imperative that you always wear it when we strike."

The others grab theirs from their bags and suddenly she is surrounded by a poodle, a bulldog, a brown golden retriever, a cream golden retriever, a great Dane and a husky. They all start yelping, howling and growling at each other, reminding Vic of how young they really are.

"Ok," Nicky says, "But why dogs? Why not masks of the Muppets? I would have been a great Kermit."

Vic removes her mask and bends through her knees, her face only inches away from Nicky.

"Out there, we come across dogs every day. I mean the ones that walk on two legs rather than four. Now, in a real dog pack, behavior is corrected within the group, usually by more dominant dogs." She gets back up and scans the room, as this message is critical for them all—even if they've heard it before.

"This is the same for many species in nature. If you step out of line, you are punished. These punishments are usually swift and effective. A snarl, a bite. Now with us humans, things have gotten a bit more complicated. The legal justice system is trying hard to keep up with the flow of misconduct in our society, but they're failing frequently. That is why we are Les Chiennes: the dogs showing other dogs they've stepped out of line."

Nicky slides off the table, careful to avoid knocking the tender spot on her hip. "You're all pretty crazy, you know that right?"

"I hope so," Vic answers.

Chapter Three:

Herbert imagines

Herbert's chef's knife slides through the cherry tomato with ease - a strangely satisfying thing. *Your car may be on fire, your business may crumble to pieces, but as long as your knife set is sharpened, there remains this sense of control.*

It is nearly 12 pm, so Herbert's left hand reaches for the remote control on the corner of the bar and turns on the news. The news reporter's face gravely rounds up an item on the ongoing forest fires before the screen shows a large building, and the headline reads:

"Grapital scandal: millions embezzled from trusting investors."

The on-site reporter, a pretty woman with part-oriental features, gestures at the building behind her. Herbert turns up the volume.

"...further than initially anticipated. The report found that not only were there several individuals involved at the executive level, but multiple references were made to mid- to

higher level management as well. The full extent of the case is yet to be revealed. However, at the moment we can say with some certainty that heads are going to roll at Grapital. Back to you Jason."

Herbert mutes the tv and sighs. Is it truly impossible to expect a world where money can be made while upholding at least the basic rules of decency?

The cherry tomato cores glisten in the sun. Long shadows are cast along the kitchen floor. Pausing his rhythmic slicing, Herbert's eye drifts out into the garden, the expansive lawn and three-meter-high hedges providing that exclusive privacy he treasures. The neighbors may be excellently trained at seeming uninterested in everyone's lives but their own, but he knows the next-door dragon would gladly interrupt her tax evasion scams to learn about other people's sad lives. What a despicable woman, with her tightly knotted scarves, her lips painted like strawberry-glazed pretzels. He hates how she addresses him, too:

"Hey, Alewine, next time you prune those bushes, would you be a darling and include my side of the hedge as well? My osteoarthritis is just relentless, you know, but you know, what can I do?"

Funny how he loves helping people and would have happily

trimmed her bushes - no doubt, Jack would have a crack-up about the 'trimming of the old drags' bushes' - but her tone made him feel like she *expected* it. It was an order wrapped up in a question and he hates orders wrapped up in questions. In fact, he rather has orders wrapped up in orders - even if the person giving the orders has no authority over him. He resumes his chopping with a sigh. The onyx kitchen bar is so shiny he can see his bald head in the reflection. Two shiny surfaces reflecting off each other. He doesn't miss his hair, or the youthfulness that some may associate with it. In fact, this brings out his eyes better, according to some ladies who had no interest in his approval whatsoever. What would *she* now look like? More plumb around the hips? Would her soft voice have a husky edge now?

He has divided his countertop into invisible squares, each with its own ingredient carefully presented like exhibits at a court case: a bowl with freshly washed lettuce (after having been spinned dry for exactly one minute), Golden Sweet cherry tomatoes in three rows of three (except for the one now in his hand), two small carrots of equal size and shape, a small bowl of kalamata olives soaked in garlic-infused, extra virgin olive oil, an egg that was boiled for exactly 6.5 minutes, three tiny anchovies, twelve capers, and a piece of the finest buffalo

mozzarella - spread out like a fluffy pillow.

"Of course, how could I forget?" Herbert says and taps to his favorite music to find The Beatles song 'Yesterday'. Softly humming along with the music, he spends the next ten minutes cutting, slicing and dicing everything in front of him. The cherry tomatoes in two equal parts, the carrots the size of fairy dice, the olives uncut - because you don't touch something that good, but instead you let the oily bitterness explode in your mouth - the egg halved, the anchovies chopped into minuscule slithers, the capers are good as they are. His hands are large, fingers thick, and they remind him of his age: the veins bulging up, pushing lightly hairy, lightly wrinkly skin up in blue-green ridges, finding their path to his arms.

He wonders what her hands now look like. Would he still recognize her if he'd see her on the street? Would she recognize him, now having lost all his hair, his face slowly accepting time's defeat? Would she walk by, perhaps with a friend, or on the phone with someone, and then suddenly stop, call out? Would she keep her distance, shy or reserved, or would she show emotion, maybe even briefly touch his hand? Maybe she'd say his name, very softly, and smile at him - happy to see him after all those years. He could softly touch her cheek, glowing from the exiting encounter, and suggest they go for a coffee together.

They would end up at a tiny café, a local little place, with a fireplace—

yes, a fireplace!

They'd sit close to the fire, letting the heat seep into their bodies, letting their minds reconnect, again. By the end, he would hold her hand and tell her this time, this time truly, he wouldn't let anything get in the way. He belonged to her, that is what he would say. And she? She would smile, maybe a little tearful, maybe shy.

Or maybe, *maybe* he is just an idiot. He lets out a quick puff of air, scoffing at his own preposterous and romanticized ideas. It would be far more likely that she would ignore him on the street or slap him hard if he'd insist on conversing. He would respect her for doing that, too.

"Ah," he softly exclaims as the knife pierces his fingertip and blood builds up underneath the cut before forcing a way out.

Who is he kidding? He hardly recognizes himself in the mirror, let alone a woman who hadn't seen him in 38 years. And even if she did, that'd only make her walk past him even faster, pretending to be too busy to notice anyone around her. His uninjured hand has found the box of plasters, and his teeth rip

off the plastic coating before carefully fiddling it around his finger. It sits rather tight, showing his fingertip slightly white, but the pressurized sensation is bizarrely comforting - as if at least one small part of him is secure, supported.

Once all other ingredients have been carefully layered to optimize the color festival in his bowl, he drapes the squishy mozzarella slices and finishes off with the egg halves. A drizzle of vinaigrette for taste and he sighs with bland satisfaction.

The track mix starts playing Lou Reed's Take a Walk on the Wild Side and, while holding the bowl as though it were a dance partner, he starts rocking along to its slow rhythm. His shoulders pulse up and down to the tunes of the chorus as he takes tiny, bouncy steps around his kitchen - three steps forward, one step back. "Tu tudu, tudu, tu tu tu tutu tudu tudu," he hums along with his eyes shut. His feet are light, but his heart remains heavy as he shuffles through the kitchen. He can almost smell her scent: Mexican vanilla, cloves and roses after rainfall. As he dances, he rubs the fingers of his free hand together, vividly recalling her hair - chocolate-colored and a little wavy. Her curves as she walked—sweet, heavenly curves swaying from side to side, making a man dizzy with desire.

His phone rings and when he sees it's his business partner Jack, he briefly hesitates before picking up.

"You miss me, that's sweet. How's things going?" he says, trying to sound his usual self.

"Hey sex bird, pretty good, pretty good. You at home?" Jack replies.

"Mh," Herbert says, studying the salad bowl.

"Good, good. I was going over some old records this morning. Berta mentioned something about an unauthorized account, by the name of FHE, or Future Husk Enterprises. You haven't heard about them, have you?" Jack sounds genuinely confused.

Herbert thinks about this.

"Mmh...nope. Doesn't ring a bell. Have you checked the old database, before the transition? Maybe they're in there and weren't imported properly."

It had happened with his first business - transferring data can sometimes result in data incorrectly being loaded into the new system. Suddenly, a contact person shows up as a business name or vice versa.

"Of course!" Jack says, probably slapping himself on the forehead. "See, that's why I call you. Because I wouldn't find my own arse if it were staring me in the face."

"I'd love to see you try," Herbert says.

Jack breaks into his snorty laughter on the other end.

"You legend. You're a legend, Herbert."

They hang up and Herbert carefully wipes the edges of his bowl with a napkin until it shines, when his phone rings again.

"Smerklord"—Jack picks up as if he never hung up—"Did you see my email on Robbie's pending promotion?"

"Yes, I saw. How has he been doing?" Herbert replies. Despite his absence, he likes the thought of employees still growing their professional skills, and their careers, under his roof.

"Not bad, really," Jack says. "He was responsible for a good ten percent of new clients over the last year, he goes from strength to strength. He—"

"Yep, granted. Go for it. Promotion is his."

"Oh wow, that's all you need to know? I have been doing

pretty well myself too, in case you hadn't noticed."

"When do I ever?" Herbert says. There is hardly space to grow Jack's salary any further, but he keeps that to himself.

Jack snorts.

"Alright Blerbshirt, I will tell him."

"Great. Speak later."

They hang up. Herbert places the phone on the corner of the bar, facing down as if to tell it to be quiet now. He wipes down the countertop with a clean cloth and some boiling water. Something stirs in the corner of his eye, but when he looks out the window, it's a Mourning Dove pausing her foraging in the grass to look back at him with dark, blue-ringed eyes.

"Hello," he says, feeling stupid for talking to a bird. But the dove turns her head more into his direction, as if she is listening. He has nothing to say to her, so they just look at each other for a while, Herbert feeling inferior as the dove seems to assess what kind of person he is.

"Tell me when you've worked it out", he tells her before his phone rings for a third time - vibrating itself sideways on the countertop.

"I love you man," Jack gets to the point. "Miss you, I really do. When are you coming in?"

Herbert has managed to dodge this question from Jack numerous times. Sometimes he answers with a vague reply ("Soon"), other times he just changes the subject to one that he knows will get Jack excited. Asking about his victories over the weekend is always a winner. Or checking in on a couple of their biggest clients. Jack loves to brag about his 'close relation' with the executives at all these companies. He will break into a rant about playing squash with So-and-So. Going to the Happy Hour with Hotshot CEO and Mega-wealthy Dingus. And talking stock market in the steam room with The Giant, a nickname the guy probably attributed to himself to feel better about his height of five foot four.

"Actually," Herbert says, "I was thinking of coming in next week Wednesday - work for you?"

Herbert can hear Jack gulp for air before replying.

"Work for me? Are you kidding? I'll throw a fucking party! You're serious, right?"

"Nah, I'm pulling your leg, idiot. Of course I'm serious," Herbert says.

"Can we have lunch at Il Dulce?" Jack tries.

"Sure."

"Oh man, that's gonna be sweet! So sweet!"

'Well, if they live up to their name, then yes. I will allow you a desert, if you're good."

Jack cheers, a little removed from the phone, and calls out "Herbert is coming!".

Herbert suspects this is to Pinky at reception. As he comes back to the phone, Jack does his snorty thing again, but even louder, and Herbert holds the phone a little away from his ear.

"Right, we'll see you then. Shit, that has been a while! You probably won't recognize the place!"

"Did you do some redecorating?" Herbert imagines his office in thick velour - shades of deep blue and oceanic green, with touches of gold. A color theme he recently spotted on the cover of an interior magazine. He surprises himself with the notion that he doesn't care about what has been done to his office. If it were used as a copy room, a fitness room even, he would consider that a much better, cost-effective use of that great space than what it had been.

"Hehe," Jack snorts, "a little. You'll see. You'll love it. Ah, I'm stoked man, absolutely stoked. See you next week my friend."

"See you then."

Herbert hangs up and stares at the device, as if the screen will suddenly light up with words of wisdom, words that will define the feeling inside his chest. It would probably say 'YOU'RE AN ARSEHOLE', or 'YOU CHICKEN SHIT', and make actual clucking sounds. He should really be there more, support his business partner, but he hasn't felt motivated to come to the office for years. He still makes most critical decisions, the ones Jack wants his opinion for, but for some reason he can't get himself to get into his car in the morning and drive the twenty-two minutes to Old Mill. It's not that he is tired; on the contrary. He just doesn't want to - it's that simple. But why not, he hasn't figured out. In the first year, workers would sometimes call to have a chat with him, see if he needed anything. At some point during the conversation they'd ask him this very question, every time: "Why are you not coming anymore Herbert? You are missed."

Herbert would make up a lame excuse about getting more work done at home, of allowing Jack to step into a more active

leadership role, growing his all-round commercial skills.

But the truth is, he never knew why he stayed away. He just did one day - woke up and decided he'd work from home. Then the next, and the day after.

Perhaps he just had enough of the concept of always striving to make a profit, to grow the business. Be smarter about where money is spent, so that the space between what comes in and what goes out grows bigger and bigger. Make shareholders happy. Make Jack happy. Promote people. It's the same goddamn thing every day, every week, every year. Any attempt at turning the business into a more social, sustainable business model was laughed at by the board while Jack was more subtle with a shrug of the shoulders before tactfully diverting the subject to something that he felt more comfortable with.

Herbert finds himself standing in front of the Lojas painting in the hall: *Woman In Garden*.

Semi-abstract, and yet clearly a woman surrounded by lush vegetation. It was his little secret that sometimes when he looked at the painting, he could see the outlines of Janey. The way she curved, the way her lip slanted. The soft wavy nature of her chocolate hair, the way it dropped over her shoulder. Despite the painting hardly defining details, in Herbert's mind

it was Janey looking at him from up close. He had never experienced such a personal connection to any art, and he would never admit this one was different to him.

The music has stopped, the speaker must have lost signal, but he doesn't fix it. Instead, he lifts the salad bowl off the bar and walks out onto the trim lawns. He halts about six meters away from the retaining wall, one built with various pretty rocks. Like a professional cricketer, his right leg steps back while his right arm stretches out behind him, delicately balancing the bowl. With a single, perfect swing the bowl shatters against the nature stones.

White splinters, green olives and cherry tomatoes are scattered at the foot of the wall, adding to the heap of broken dishes, carrots, peas and even a corn on the cob already overgrown with grass and moss. Herbert rubs his head while taking in the growing heap of chaos in front of him.

Looks like it's time for a new pupil.

He turns and walks back inside.

Chapter Four:

Amelia in the dark

Amelia interrupts her stare when she notices her screen is about to fall asleep like all other screens around her. She quickly shuffles her mouse to keep it alive and sighs. What's the point of staying late at the office if all she does is stare into the abyss?

She saves the unfinished research document when an email pops up in the corner of her screen. It's from a lady called Minnie and is titled "For you to know."

Hello Amelia, I think you write good things. Some bad things happen here at our office that I think could be of interest to your paper. I'd like to see you at Café Pìob Mhòr this Saturday at 10am. Please come by yourself, thank you. Bye Amelia, I see you then. Bye. Minnie Fish. PS: Will you let me know?

"Café...how the hell do you pronounce that?" she mumbles. She types the words *Pìob Mhòr* in the search bar. After a bit of scrolling and reading, she concludes the words refer to the Scottish bagpipes. Next, she looks up Minnie Fish and works out Minnie works for a company called Technables, a major tech incubator.

Amelia sits more upright while she bites her nail.

This could be good.

She has done a lot of small-time stories of late. And even though she used to find joy in the social, the cultural or the bigger ongoing subjects, she has grown bored of them of late.

It is the new, the yet-to-be-discovered, where she feels that inner drive.

Corporate fraud.

Corruption.

Whistleblowers.

It sounds like Minnie's story ticks several of those boxes. Amelia hits reply and types a quick message back confirming the meeting before closing her pc and turning off the desk light. She drops her phone in her backpack and rushes off.

The heavy door virtually pushes Amelia out into the hall. She peers down into the dark stairway.

Why have they still not fixed the lights in here?

"Fuck," she says, and starts descending, one searching foot at a time. Working in an old cotton factory has its charms, but not tonight when all she wants is to get home safely.

A few steps down, she hears another set of footsteps descending from above. The newspaper shares the building with numerous other companies, so it is plausible that someone else worked late like she has. She quickens her tread nevertheless, her intuition spurring her forward.

The steps above her quicken too.

Amelia looks up, but it is impossible to discern anything beyond a meter. Her feet have now grown accustomed to the distance of each step, and she breaks into a run.

She reaches the lobby and throws herself at the door, which she knows to be equally heavy. Tumbling through the door opening, she collects herself and runs to her car across the other side of the parking lot. A distance she normally enjoys in

the morning now seems a grueling gap to bridge. She paces herself, looking back only once.

Her follower hasn't reached the door yet.

She gets to her rusty car. Her trembling hand finds her car keys in the side pocket of her little backpack. The *Bleep Bleep* of the unlocking mechanism makes her sigh with relief, and she gets in.

The engine coughs a bit before igniting, and just then she sees the front door of the office open. A man with black pants, a black jacket and a black beanie walks out. He is slender. Tall. But he is too far to make out anything more than his profile.

She isn't waiting around. With a crunch of the gear stick and a rumble of the wheels, she rushes off in the opposite direction.

She glances in the rearview mirror. The man stands motionless by the exit, looking at her, until she loses sight of him.

#

The apartment has never felt more like home than tonight. Amelia drops her bag on the floor, a pile of mail on the kitchen bar. Her mum's dog Dewey jumps up against her leg in ecstasy, barking his little heart out.

Amelia flicks through the mail.

"What do you want?"—she can't keep the irritation from her voice.

Dewey trips over his own feet jumping even higher at the sound of her voice. Duffus.

The mail contains a couple of bills, which she intends to place on her desk to remind her. There are the usual flyers as well: one of a new pizza place around the corner, one for real estate managers and the last one of Kobayashi karate school. A post-it has been stuck to the flyer, with a message that reads:

"Give it a go. Love, E."

E? Who the hell is E?

In her mind she skims through the names of her

colleagues, or the few acquaintances who once may have been friends. Nobody's name starts with E. Dewey's yaps are now interchanged with playful growls as the little Affenpinscher stretches into a downward dog.

"No, I'm not playing."

Amelia drops the mail and walks into her tiny bathroom. A warm shower will help her relax. She shuts the door, leaving a sulky Dewey outside the door. She ties her brown hair into a high bun. "You fucking coward," she says to her reflection. "Letting a stranger wind you up like that. Real nice."

Her hand briefly rests on her forehead—she hopes that the warm water will take care of the headache looming behind her eyes.

Twenty minutes later, Amelia steps out into the living room clean and dressed in her track pants and hoodie. Dewey is lying in his fluffy basket in the corner and briefly lifts his little lion head before dropping it back on his front paws.

"Have you given up already?" Amelia waves the leash in the air.

As she slides the hook around the metal loop in his collar, she gazes at the karate flyer again. She remembers the fear she felt this evening.

"Give it a go."

Maybe she *should*? There is no denying that she has moments when she is...anxious.

"Yeah, yeah, pain in the ass" she says to Dewey. "Just around the block, ok?"

Chapter Five

That is a Mouthful

The clock tower shows it's 2:40 pm as Vic parks their van opposite the courthouse. The steps are swarming with journalists. Some are standing together, talking, others are sitting on the steps playing with their phones as if they've been there for a while. Vic bites her nails. A little nervous, but mostly looking forward to seeing Vinnie's face once the job is done.

She wonders why this guy triggers her anger so much. Perhaps it is his resemblance to the profile sketches made at the police station all those years ago. The ones based on mom's description. The same cold eyes, chin shaped the same way.

But it wasn't him.

Next to her in the passenger seat, Maya clears her throat. Vic taps a quick rhythm on the steering wheel and looks in her rearview mirror.

"Mask up please," she says to the girls and when she looks

around, six frozen dog heads look back at her.

"Lizzy, your strap."

She helps the girl straighten the poodle over her frizzy hair and then smiles at the lot of them. "You all look fantastic. Pam, you got the ammo?"

The bulldog nods, pointing at the bucket.

"Good. Everyone has plenty of eggs too?"

Bulldog, two golden retrievers, great Dane, poodle and chihuahua all nod or stick up their thumbs. Their body language tells her they are pretty nervous too, especially Nicky. Vic ties up her long, red locks and straightens her husky mask. They sit there for countless slow minutes, in silence, their heavy breathing creating little face saunas behind their masks. It is the only sound interrupting the semi-muted traffic noise outside.

Hearing her own breath bounce back at her makes Vic focus on the rhythm as she tries to slow its pace right down. Most of the time, she feels she is exactly where she should be, doing exactly what she is doing. But sometimes this feeling of unease creeps up, paired with a sudden awareness of the mad situation she finds herself in, she put herself in. What would mom have

thought of all this? Would she have understood? Considering her free-spirited character: probably. But she would never have agreed to this.

Then again, this is not just for mum. This is for all the women who got stripped off their dignity. She is not a bystander. She will fight for every one of them, no matter the cost.

Vic squints as she spots three suited men walking from the underground carpark across the street. The tallest holds a briefcase in one hand, his mobile phone in the other. This must be Vinnie's main attorney. He has thick, bushy hair and a Hawke's nose. A younger man follows in his footsteps with smaller, more hasty steps. The third man, though paler than in the photo, is without a doubt Vinnie. He carries a small laptop bag and, despite the sun dominating, an umbrella. He dabs his glistening forehead with a tissue as he talks to Hawke's nose incessantly.

"There he is, let's go," Vic says. She gets out of the van with the others in her tracks. Walking onto the road, her hands raised towards the approaching cars, she braves double-laned traffic charging from the left, then the right. She has done this before and she doesn't know whether it is her attitude or

the mask, but they all stop every time - though often honking their horns and yelling inaudibly. She lets the girls get across safely just as Vinnie and his legal consort are climbing the steps of the building. Speeding up, she gestures to the others to do the same. As they reach the curb, Vinnie is already surrounded by several journalists who weren't playing Candy Crush on their mobiles.

"...as this trial will exemplify, right?" Vic hears him say into the tape recorder of a woman with hair so blond, it's kind of white.

"Hey Vinnie!"

Vinnie turns his head, his expression solemn, ready for the next question from one of these little children in front of him. "Ye-?" He is unable to finish the word as a stinking egg hits him on the left temple, leaving a slimy trail on his left cheek and running into his neck. It takes him a second, he sees the familiar transformation from complete surprise to hot anger in his fleshy face as he tries to flick the stickiness off him. His mouth opens to yell, but he is instantly hit by multiple eggs and a handful of poop.

The journalists have now ebbed outwards, but are ensuring every word, every action, is recorded. Vinnie yells something

murky, then spits egg yolk on the ground. His arms mow around as he tries to yank Lizzy's phone out of her hand.

"Don't you film this, you whore!" He yells, nostrils dilated.

Bypassers have spotted the commotion now too and a small group of them have joined the journalists. While attempting to dodge the rain of dog poo and eggs, Vinnie chases after the girls, who have started pulling back towards the road. He tries to hit Vic with his umbrella, but Vic grabs the other end and gives it a sudden pull, jolting Vinnie forwards and making him lose his balance. Swearing and panting, he stumbles down multiple steps.

By the time the girls have crossed the road back to the van, Vinnie is hardly visible: a huge, angry crowd has gathered around him and photo and video images of him have already gone viral on official news sites as well as social media. Within minutes, they will be viewed by thousands around the world, many of whom will share these on their own pages. They can't influence whether he will be convicted of his crimes or not. But the humiliation of this moment will stay with him forever.

Laughter and cheers fill the van - the air electric with excitement. The girls look back at the drama scene until they've turned around the corner. Most have now taken off their mask, some have it rest on top of their heads - making them look like the god Brahma.

Samira kicks off in the middle of one of their favorite indie songs, Heads Will Roll by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs - and the others join in hard.

"Hey, did you see his face?" Nicky giggles. "He looked like my little brother when he first tried solid food!"

"His face made me think of Swedish meatballs," Maeve says, her cheeks pink.

"Seatbelts on please," Vic says as she looks at them through the rear-view mirror. The girls buckle up. She wonders how far she could take them. How far they'd be prepared to go in their quest. They look so young in this moment, singing their little hearts out... as if they think this is all a big joke. It seems like a school trip they *want* to be on.

Is she being responsible? What if one of them got injured?

Vic squints, the low-hanging sunrays weighing heavy on her tired eyes. The headache has returned like a parasite. She opens

the sun visor and checks the girls in the back.

The new girl, Nicky, sits in the middle. She is young; Vic estimates her to be 18 years old at best. She has a round face, and her nose is no more than a tiny button. It makes her look a little cheeky, and stubborn. Their eyes meet in the mirror and the girl smiles at her, visibly excited. But Vic quickly turns her eyes back to the road and her speedometer. The closer she will get to these girls, the more she will question the risks she exposes them to.

#

The dashboard clock jumps to 15:17 pm when they reach headquarters. The young women stream inside, chatting, welcoming the sweet scent of Turkish goodies. Pam trips over a box and grabs on to Lizzy's shoulder, who in turn loses her balance, resulting in the two of them laughing in each other's arms. Maya scrolls through her phone - winking at Vic - and Vic wonders which song she will choose this time.

A funky woman's voice starts randomly chanting, playfully, testing her voice and her band, before kicking off properly: Shonka Dukureh's soulful 'You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog' starts blasting from the speakers, grinding out sensual guitar riffs alternated by Shonka's gritty notes. The girls cheer, join

in and start dancing. They clap along to the rhythmic blues as their hips sway from left to right. Maya jumps on the table and does her air guitar, which admittedly she's got nailed. She moves with soul as her fingers find the invisible strings like she has played for many years. Turkish sweets are being stuffed in mouths and thrown around, powdery sugar spreading in the air and sticking to cheeks.

They spend the next half hour dancing their way between the rows of shelves while Vic studies the project wall she created, a seemingly chaotic formation of photos, names and newspaper articles with highlighted sentences. She grabs her marker and puts a big black cross through Vinnie's face.

"Not smiling now, are ya?" she says, picturing him again with his yolky mouth, trying to word his anger. Lizzy, next to her uploading the video on YouTube, grins wickedly.

"That was fun", the bubbly girl says.

Vic smiles. It *had* been fun seeing that uncoordinated prick make a fool of himself.

Samira lifts Nicky on to her strong shoulders. "Did you see this one? She was over him like a rash over a baby's bottom!"

The others cheer and clap for Nicky. Nicky, wide-grinned,

casts a look in Vic's direction, who responds with an almost invisible nod. She *had* done well.

They stay at headquarters until late; playing music, sharing stories, losing track of time until their tummies remind them. Around 8pm they order pizzas and watch a movie on an old tv Vic found in the cupboard a few weeks earlier. Snuggling up on beanbags and blankets, they watch Jennifer Lawrence training to become one of the most lethal, ruthless spies in Soviet history. Vic takes part in it all but can't shake the feeling that she is looking at it all from the outside. It is obvious that the girls are building a special bond, one that she facilitated. She should be happy to see them connect and enjoy each other's company. She should be excited to see a true team spirit develop, one that will only grow stronger as the girls get to know one another better. *She* put this show together; and it is all coming together nicely.

Still, she wonders if, rather than continuing to pull up the curtain, she should instead pull the plug.

Chapter Six:

Hit the road

Ice cubes clank against the metal walls of Herbert's thermos as he carefully places it in the cupholder of his car. He breathes in deeply - allowing the smell of new leather to intoxicate him. The car salesman couldn't have been less motivated for the sell a couple of months ago - it was as if he hadn't wanted to sell the car to him. It had been an unconventional, but smart marketing strategy as Herbert had only been more motivated to get the deal done.

He starts a playlist called Modern World Music and drives into daylight to the soft rhythm of Cesaria Evora. Through his open window, he hears the driveway gravel crunch lightly as the sun plays his eyes through the branches of the old oak trees. He pops his sunglasses on -aviator style- and steals a glance in the rearview mirror; wondering what Janey would say if she saw him today. Would she think he looks handsome? Would her chocolate hair be largely silver, or maybe a pepper and salt, elevating the bubbles in her green eyes? He imagines her in a

garden, like the one her parents had, digging in the dirt with her bare hands. There was a light about her, always had been, he realizes as he thinks back of the little girl that confidently had stepped onto the porch of her new home all those years ago. The same girl that had always managed to cheer him up when father had one of his moods. When he had to flee the house to avoid receiving more than a black eye. The girl that held his hand when everyone at school called him 'weirdo'.

He indulges in reliving that moment again, the instant they saw each other again in the restaurant. He repeats it, plays it over and over, partly to indulge in what has become one of the sweetest moments of his life, partly because he is terrified that if he doesn't, he may forget the small details, then the larger details, until it has become merely a hint of a memory - an anecdote someone else shared with him. His phone rings and he gratefully answers, quickly wiping his cheeks.

"Jack, scoundrel," he says. His voice is a little crackly.

"Herpes, today is the day?" Jack sounds younger in anticipation.

"Today is the day."

"Fantastic. I told them to clean your office, but they've

put a refugee in there." Jack snorts at his own joke.

"Fair enough. I'll take yours then," Herbert says, turning his car onto Fly Drive.

"Sure, sure, my friend. Just don't ask questions about the talcum powder, ya know?"

"Rather not." Herbert won't ever bring it up, but they both know that Jack is no stranger to the repertoire of illicit drugs.

"My man. I will see you...?"

"...fifteen minutes. Just left home, about to hit the N5."

"Be-au-ti-ful. I am about to pop down to the cantina for a large black pool of gunk, can I get you something?" Jack says, sounding like an excited boy.

"Nah, I'm sorted."

"Sweets, great. See you soon. Oh, Herp?"

"Mh?"

"I am about to add you to a couple meetings for the day. You know, to get you up to speed."

Herbert takes a sip of ice coffee and slides it back in the holder.

"Roger," he says, though the wary part of him stays quiet.

They hang up, and within seconds his screen starts populating meetings that Jack has lined up for him.

10am - MedAId

11am - International Technology Council

1pm - Croft Mechatronics

2:30pm - Cloudmerce

Herbert frowns as his calendar fills up fast. What on earth would he need to discuss across the table with these guys that couldn't be resolved with a quick, friendly phone call? Siri asks him for approval for every meeting before adding it to his calendar as the messages continue to pop up.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," he repeats himself while trying to swipe them off the screen.

He knocks his ice-coffee and the lid moves sideways, dripping coffee on the fresh leather lining. He swears and tries to push the lid back with his one hand, when he hears a man yelp

close by. He hits the break immediately as he spots the man frozen in front of him.

The man's feet seem pegged to the concrete. He holds the straps of his backpack, his back rigid, his eyes bulging amidst dark, unruly curls and a stubbly beard. Herbert, caught in a moment of stare and counter-stare, wonders why the man observes him so oddly. Sure, he nearly hit him—but he is only human. He meant no harm.

Herbert unbuckles his seatbelt. Best to check on him. He opens the door, but the man turns and starts walking away from him. He paces, and looks back at Herbert every now and then.

"What the—" Herbert closes his car door again. He can just drive off. The man is clearly confused or unstable. For whatever reason, the fellow is petrified. This does not need to be Herbert's problem. Herbert sighs, and his old man appears instantly, eyes hard and cruel, hand raised for the next blow. Fear makes all happiness, all motivation, all positive light inside you, shrivel up. Dissipate. *No-one* should have to feel that way.

Herbert waves apologetically at the car honking behind him and slowly drives off. About thirty yards down the road he identifies the man with the backpack and decides to follow him

at a distance, not wanting to scare him any further. But the three cars behind him are getting increasingly impatient. The first driver overtakes him while pointing at his forehead.

Herbert speeds up a little, fast bridging the gap between himself and the man, who walks with a hunch. It makes him look older than the thirty-something Herbert would give him.

The man peers over his shoulder and when he sees Herbert he starts running. He seems to try hard, yet he hops every now and then as if he is still learning *how*. Herbert slows next to the man and opens his window.

"Hello? Sir?"—it feels weird calling someone half his age a "sir" but in the end, good manners prevail. The man continues his hopper-dee-run, his face pointed at the road ahead.

"Sir? I'm so sorry I gave you a fright. My phone was... I got distracted. No excuse, of course. And I fully understand if you wish to report me."

The man won't budge. His steps don't slow down, his face doesn't soften.

"Please do tell me what I can do to make it up to you. I feel awful."

Did the man blink several times, or did he imagine this? Before he can say anything else, the man has turned into a one-way street and Herbert loses sight of him.

Herbert follows the road that will lead him to the next entrance for the N5, his mind still lingering on the odd man. Of course, the man becoming his next pupil crossed his mind. But you cannot force someone into tutelage. The idea is ridiculous, and execution would be a waste of time.

He approaches a bus stop and his attention is drawn to a single figure standing next to the glass shelter wrapped in an ad of a happy, glowing woman.

Dark curls, a backpack: it is the same guy he nearly hit! The man's shoulders are hanging in defeat, his gaze is empty. Herbert stops across the street and gets out.

"Hey, it's you again!" Herbert cringes at the vapid stupidity of his words. The man looks up at him and his face crunches in agitation.

Just then, a large truck passes and Herbert temporarily loses sight of him. The sound of heavy wheels grating across the seams in the concrete temporarily dominates everything else,

including his thoughts.

Once the B-train truck has passed, the man is standing wide-legged, wide-armed, and is soaked from head to toe. The road dips by the bus stop and last night's rain had amassed a large puddle of water in this dip. The man looks at his jacket—a darker brown from the water. He squeezes the legs of his pants, which results in the water running over his already wet sneakers. The man swears.

Herbert reaches him, unsure what to say to brighten the man's mood.

He tries a smile—"And you thought things couldn't get any worse."

The man turns away from him.

"He was aiming for you. I could tell," Herbert says. "Nah, just kidding."

Water drips from the man's sleeves, creating mini puddles on the pavers. Herbert takes off his jacket. "Here, dry yourself with this."

The man looks at the jacket as if it is contaminated, so Herbert quickly puts it back on.

"Look," he says, "I can see you are having a hard time. I mean, you were even before I nearly hit you. And before you got-splashed. Not to be weird, but I don't live too far. You could have a hot shower. A change of clothes."

"No thanks," the man says, looking away.

Herbert is excited to have the man speak at all.

"As you wish. You don't know me. I don't blame you. But I'm legit. I own a couple of businesses." He passes his business card to the man.

"Are you kidding me? Because you own a business you must be trustworthy?" A lot of words from the man who has been reluctant to speak so far. Herbert's hope grows a little more.

"You're so right," he says. "It doesn't mean shit. But either way, my personal address is on this one. I don't give this card to just anyone. You could be a lunatic too, you know."

The man's brows furrow slightly. "Well, I *am*, OK? I am fucking nuts, and you are incredibly *stupid* for giving me your private address."

Herbert starts walking back to his car, his hand in a friendly goodbye. "I will take my chances."

He gets into his Audi and drives off, avoiding further eye contact with the man.

Herbert finishes his green tea and lifts his yoga mat from the hidden cupboard in the hall. He hasn't received *the* call from Jack yet but that could happen anytime now. He isn't worried about canceling the day. Fending off Jack has become second nature. *Maybe even a way to preserve his own sanity.* Having changed his dark blue jeans for light trackpants he rolls out his mat in the hall and after a brief salutation (to the sun, the moon, mother nature?) he bends down in an Uttanasana.

There is a knock on the door. So soft that—hadn't he been in the hall—he probably would have missed it. He leaves his mat and takes his time walking to the front door. The glass panel beside the door reveals a wet sleeve and pants.

He nods. He smiles. Then opens the door.

"Hello!"—Herbert opens the door wide—"You changed your mind."

"Not really," the wet guy says. "But the bus driver wouldn't let me on the bus."

Chapter Seven:

Elvis & the Marble Runs

We often do not truly know what we're capable of until we reach a point of no return. Hardship has certainly shaped me in ways I could never have imagined. To lose someone dear to you—it doesn't end with grief. You go through this, sure. But after all the crying, the remembering, you're left rebuilding the person you were before that terrible thing happened. Turns out, I came out a little distorted, like a Picasso.

I am still the same person, but some of my values, some of my views on the world, have most definitely sharpened. I was always different, and I was fine with that. Thanks to Janey, I even learned to love myself. But since she left this world, I have felt as though I am looking at everything from the outside in.

Like Christof in The Truman Show.

I have come to understand that humans, once stripped back from their fluffy pleasantries, their praised social conduct,

are the darkest creatures on our planet. Even the ones who seem decent, normal human beings can turn around and crush another person as if by the flick of a switch.

But I have found a way around this—by creating alternative switches. Life and the events within are like a gigantic marble run; one event triggers another, which triggers the next. Once you understand the sequence and you can see through the process, you can redirect it how you please. That's what my role has become: I am a marble run master, shaping the course of the future to ensure tomorrow will look a little better than today.

I guess, in a way, that *does* make me a Christof.

Chapter Eight:

Bonding

A week after their movie night, the girls are scattered throughout their headquarters. They are growing fonder of each other each week, evidenced to Vic by their laughter, openhearted discussions and cuddles at the end of the night. They often don't notice Vic listening in on their conversations as she sits at the desk doing some research. They're a naive but entertaining bunch. Vic is pleased to see them bond, but fears they are starting to view their get-togethers more as a social hangout than a serious mission.

"He said I was great for a virgin and I told him he was not bad for a dumbass," Samira says. She has one hand on her hijab as she high-fives Lizzy next to her on the large table. Pam sits quietly on the chair beside them. Maeve laughs. She hangs back on one of the Kilim floor cushions, her tall legs stretched out in front of her. "You two are rank," she says.

Nicky, the new girl, sits next to Maeve. She fits in like an egg in its cup. "Next time you should dress up as a nun for him", she says, "maybe that sparks his fire. Then bring a whip to show him who's boss."

The others look at Nicky in silent surprise before breaking out into cheers. Their rowdy laughter is interrupted when Vic clanks a metal chair in front of the pin wall and sits with the back support between her legs. Her long, red hair curtains alongside her face.

"Great to have your attention," she says, rubbing her forehead. She wishes these headaches would disappear. She clicks the button on her laser pointer and rests the burning little dot on a picture freshly pinned on the wall. Underneath, she has written *Dave Miller* in capitals.

"Our buddy Dave has been up to no good. He raped his colleague Jenny in the toilets of a café after she declined his advances. He has denied every allegation but has been accused of predatory behavior before."

Samira tuts. "This time, he will be the prey."

Vic clanks the laser pointer against the back of the chair several times. "This is no joke, ladies. As far as predators go, Dave is as bad as they get. I need you to be prepared for whatever response we may get from him, ok? OK?"—she ensures to make eye contact with every one of them. Samira nods. Lizzy gives her a thumbs up. Nicky looks back at her as if she is her favorite celebrity. The rest silently agrees.

Vic lets Lizzy fill the rest in on Dave while she takes a seat in the desk alcove, holding the cool palm of her hand to her forehead. She searches through the drawers for painkillers while Lizzy speaks.

The sicko had denied any allegations on X-Lizzy says while waving her phone. Apparently he "didn't know the woman". He added that he would *never rape a woman that ugly anyway*.

The throbbing in Vic's temples grows more intense and she feels a little nauseous.

Breathe. Just breathe. She prays the others won't notice how unwell she is, but they are thankfully preoccupied with their plan of attack.

They intend to strike on Thursday, Dave's steady cafe coffee day. Maeve confirms that she has plenty of eggs for the occasion.

"Do we really have to throw dog poo?"—Pam asks in her pick-me voice—"It seems so extreme."

"Yeah"—Vic slowly walks towards Pam—"I did consider elephant poop, even zebra or gorilla poop. A visit to the zoo each week should be easy, I figured."—Vic now stands closely in front of Pam, leering at her— "But nothing reeks as nasty as dog

shit. It is the crown of stench - am I right?" Vic looks around at the others.

Pam stares at the ground. "I just feel it is a little weird, that's all," the girl says softly.

This eternal doubting of Pam; when is it going to stop? She really sucks the air out of the room, depletes it of positive energy where she can. Vic tucks her hair behind her ear. She needs to deal with this. She grabs her phone from her backpack and looks up the social media accounts of Jenny. It takes her less than twenty seconds to find a phone number, and she dials it without hesitation.

It rings three times before a woman's voice picks up hesitantly:

"Hello?"

"Hi Jenny, it's Vic, leader of Les Chiennes. You may have heard of our group."

The voice on the other side is quiet for a while.

"Is this a joke?"

"No, no, I'd say what has happened to you is absolutely no joke. We intend to do something about it. You're familiar with

our practices?"

A sniff on the other side. "Oh my god, is this really Les Chiennes? Vic, you are my fucking hero. YES, pay the motherfucker a visit. Tell him I sent you. He deserves everything. Throw your rotten eggs. Throw shit. Make him eat shit." Jenny's voice now breaks into tears while she tries to hold on to her anger.

"Say no more, Jenny. I will do exactly as you say."—Vic swallows through the wrench squeezing her throat.

"Thank you Vic. You are the first person who sounds fucking sane about this."—Jenny is now sobbing—"They all say I need therapy. They say that it will pass. That I won't achieve anything by being so angry. And all I can think of are all the ways I could make him suffer how he made me suffer—mentally and physically. Fuck him up good Vic. It will make my day."

Vic promises this. "Oh, and you'll want to erase your phone number of the web. And your address. I'll send you a link to a website that can help you do this."

Jenny thanks her and they hang up.

Vic looks at Pam. "That satisfy the princess?"

Chapter 9:

On defense

Amelia glances through the reception window of Kobayashi Karate school.

Who is E? Will he be here tonight?

The large, open space on the other side of the glass is lined with punchbags, and for a moment she imagines herself kicking the shit out of one of those bags. Just hammer into that shiny leather until her knuckles and her shins would turn red.

With nobody watching, it would feel really good.

Once she has signed all required forms, she enters the dojo and is met by a light odor of old sweat and rubber. Several fighters have already entered in their dashing white karate suits. Some are stretching, some are chatting, and others are practicing their kicks. Amelia looks down at her own shabby jogging pants and Greenpeace T-shirt and wishes she had rented a karate suit for the day.

"Hi, you must be new," a deep voice says behind her. A black man towers at least two heads over her. He has a neatly

trimmed stubble, wears square glasses and rocks a black belt. His broad shoulders elaborately fill his suit, which must be an XXL, and his pants stop just above the ankles. *There is a lot of him.*

"How can you tell?" she says with a grin and pulls at her slouchy pants.

"Have you ever tried martial arts before?" he asks. He has a generous dimple in his chin and when he smiles, he seems a little shy.

"Not really. Nothing that counts."

He nods, giving himself time. "Nervous?"

"No," she says. "Well, a little I guess."

He nods. "That is normal. We all felt that way at first. Just keep in mind that nobody here really wants to hurt you. We want the opposite; we want the *best* for you."

How would you know what's best for me? She wants to say—but sensei enters the dojo and everyone jogs into a formation of three rows before kneeling.

After an opening ritual involving sensei saying what sounds like Japanese magic spells, and all fighters responding in

unity, they begin the training. Starting with a warm-up, running, squatting and tigering up and down the dojo gives Amelia a sense of greater confidence. She knows she is fit, and although she feels the sweat breaking out after about twenty minutes, she can keep up.

The friendly tall man passes her a few times during the runs, breathing heavily but with a look of determination, and she wonders if he is feeling alright. After the warmup, they are paired in duos to do a series of offense / defense combinations. She looks closely at how sensei moves, trying hard not to let his gracious technique distract her from the combinations presented. As he sways his arms in slow circles, she can't help but picture him holding a paint brush in each hand and swirling liquid, runny paint around him, as though he is at the center of a living Japanese painting.

The pairs rotate, so for each combination, she faces a different opponent. Not surprisingly, most of them are men. One very sweaty fellow has long hair that hangs in wet locks around his face and sticks to his forehead and sideburns. He perspires so much that his suit, or *Gi* as she was just taught, leaves her knuckles feeling wet every time she delivers a punch.

Then there is the older man, who continues to block her

with his elbows, making her arms burn. He makes a constant rattling sound in the back of his throat, as if he is clearing his throat before an important speech.

There is a woman too, with short sporty hair and a flashy *mawashi geri*. On the next rotation, Amelia faces the friendly black guy, but sensei stops the group in their tracks.

"Now that you have done five different combinations, you are going to mix them up with your new partner. Both of you can pick and choose any of the combinations, and both of you are entitled to attack and defend. *Hajime*."

Amelia tries to remember all five combinations while defending his moves but sometimes ends up improvising.

"You're learning fast," he says. "Already showing your own style."

"Yeah, I actually just don't remember everything, sorry."

"I couldn't tell, honestly."

They continue quietly for a while. He is the gentlest fighter she has faced so far. His moves are more suggestive than anything, and she wishes he wouldn't hold back because she is new, or because she is a girl.

"What's your name?" he asks, playfully rolling his fists in the air, shoulders bobbing along. It's a bit like he is dancing.

"Amelia," she says.

"Nice to meet you, Amelia. My name is Darius."

"You don't have to be so gentle, Darius. I am here to toughen up," she says, sounding sharper than intended.

He halts for a moment—reads her body language.

"Isn't there enough out there that does that for you?" He points at the darkness outside.

While talking, they have moved through the dojo, further improvising, turning around each other to surprise the other.

"Why are you here?" she asks and deals a strong uppercut that he blocks effortlessly.

"To stay sane," he says with a smile.

"So, without karate you'd be...insane?"

He smiles, but his dark eyes linger in sadness. "A bit chipped, maybe?" he says.

She tries to think about what to say, but Kobayashi calls

them to regroup and during the rest of the class Darius does his own thing as a part of the most senior fighters. She looks his way every now and then, but he is fully focused and she notices how he doesn't hold back with the seniors - every one of his kicks on the punchbags reverberate in the dojo like canon shots.

#

After class, Amelia steps out into the hallway and spots Darius talking to a woman. He wears grey jogging pants and a matching hoodie. She can't help but think it makes him look like a large, sexy teddy bear.

She decides to casually walk past, but Darius reaches out and gently holds her lower arm.

"Amelia. Please wait," he says.

Amelia looks at the huge, dark hand which makes her lower arm pretty much disappear. It feels warm and sends pulses of pleasure to the lower end of her spine.

"Sounds good, thanks Clara. See you then," he concludes the conversation with the other woman.

They are alone now and Darius's hand is still folded around Amelia's arm.

"Your hand is humongous," she says with a chuckle. *It feels so tantalizing on my skin*, she could add. But what is she? Freakin' fourteen years old?

"Yes," he replies. "I hear that a lot. Does it scare you?" His gaze is cheeky.

"Not at all. But I do wonder how you tie your shoelaces."

"I don't."—he points at his Velcro sneakers. Amelia is surprised by how easy it is to talk to him.

He smiles as if he reads her mind. "So, Amelia...what should I know about you?"

Amelia shrugs. *What an odd question*. And yet, a perfectly logical question if he wants to get to know her better. Well, *most people think I am introvert. It makes me want to smack sense into them. I sometimes don't know if I am normal. Or if a darker side in me will take over any moment. I hate hypocrites. Hate corporate fraudsters. Capitalist pricks. Predators. The useless justice system. Corrupt cops. I sometimes lie awake at night, imagining what I'd do to them.*

"I have a dog," she says.

Darius raises his shapely eyebrows. "Ah, I would have taken

you more for a cat lady."

She laughs. "Like an old spinster?"

"No, you seem very independent. Strong-willed. You'd relate to cats more."

He's actually right, but she doesn't want to go down that rabbit hole.

"Sooo...why are you here, Amelia?", he says, softer.

She doesn't hesitate. "I think it is important for a woman to be prepared."

"Prepared? For what?"

They have started walking down the narrow stairs together.

She grins, dreading the more serious direction the conversation is heading and opting for a lighter alternative.

"For marriage."

He releases the deepest cello laugh, which echoes in the stairwell and sounds like an orchestra is about to back him.

"That's fair," he says. "Lucky guy."

She quickly clarifies that she isn't actually getting

married, that it isn't even something she had ever pictured for herself. They have stepped into the cool night air.

"Can I ask you something?" Amelia says. "During training, you said something about being broken. What did you mean?"

His grin is shy but his eyes don't unlock from hers. "You'll just have to keep coming back to find out. See you next week, Amelia."

"See ya."

He crosses the street and she unlocks her old bike.

She doesn't normally like biking in the dark, but this evening is different. Her face still glowing from the workout, she welcomes the cooling breeze. The way he said her name at the end... she doesn't like her full name very much, always felt it sounded too soft and flowery. But his voice made her name come out like a blues song. She smiles a little about her juvenile train of thoughts. By the time she turns the corner into her own street, she almost feels disappointed.

She can hardly set foot inside her apartment before Dewey demands all her attention. He starts by doing his usual bark-and-jump combo, which she has learned to completely ignore. He takes the throw blanket in his mouth and pulls it off the couch

amidst playful growls. With every bit of his strength, he pulls the blanket towards her. Next, he hides underneath the blanket.

"Are you done with all your tricks now?"—she says as she eats a bowl of muesli at the bar.

When Dewey finally calms down, he sits and looks at her.

"Don't look at me like that."—she taps the spoon in his direction. Dewey cocks his head sideways.

"Don't be cute. And no, I am not going to fall head over heels. It's not my style."

Dewey snaps a quick bark and she frowns at him.

"No, momwould have agreed. Not that I'd need her approval. I am an adult woman, ok? OK?"

Dewey drops himself and rests his little black head on his front paws.

"Thought so."

Amelia takes a long, hot shower and washes her hair twice. Curling up under her downy duvet, she hears the familiar thump as Dewey jumps on the bed. She wants to shove him off as she has

done most nights, but she is too tired to move.

"His name starts with a D. Not with an E." Then she slips into a deep sleep.

She dreams of dark hands the size of buildings playing with her, lifting her up, throwing and bouncing and sliding her naked body around. It is a confusing experience, but not an unpleasant one.

Chapter 10:

Baby Blue

Herbert follows the man, who has introduced himself as Erik, upstairs. "Third door on the right," he says once they arrive at the landing. Erik doesn't look up from his hunched tread but nods. When they've made it to the second door, Erik looks up at the pictures of Herbert's pupils on the wall.

"That's Johnny,"—Herbert raises before Erik can turn his head away—"he went from rehab to working for Noir; one of the best restaurants in town."

Herbert points at the next photo. The woman with the hesitant smile, layered ash-blond hair with a fringe. Mira had been a first-class drama queen. But underneath the personality traits as layered and complex as her hairstyle, hid an insecure alcoholic. "She's a stewardess now. Loves traveling the world—like you." Erik avoids his gaze.

"And this is Wolfie."—*My favorite*—"Wolfie came from an unfortunate foster situation. Lying, stealing and drugging was

all he knew. I detected his admiration for ocean life. He now works for the aquarium and studies marine bio—"

"I get it, you saved their lives."—Erik cuts him off—"Can I go and get out of these wet clothes now?"

Herbert clears his throat. "Course, yes." He opens the door to the guestroom. The last time he set foot in this room, with its baby blue wall decoration and matching pillows, he had changed the sheets after Wolfie's departure. He sees himself sitting on the edge of the bed, head hanging, unsure how to go back from two to one. He shakes the memory and takes a towel from the built-in wardrobe. "There you go. There are clothes in here too. They should fit you. Let me know if you need anything else, ok?"

Erik nods. "Thanks," he mumbles, taking the towel. Then he closes the bathroom door behind him. Herbert, reluctant to stand in this room any longer than he needs to, steps back into the hallway. He closes the door behind himself, his hand resting on the doorknob for a while. Wolfie's face appears in his mind. Laughing loudly while he did his crazy dances during their morning run. He looked like Gene Kelly in "Singin' in the rain." Only the umbrella was missing.

Herbert rubs his head, takes no further note of the pictures on the wall and dashes down the stairs.

#

"Thanks for the hospitality. I'm on my way now."

Herbert looks up from the article progressing the story on the Grapital scandal and quickly rises to his feet when Erik heads for the front door.

"Sure, pleasure," he says. He does a little jog to catch Erik by the door. "Hey, wait. I was wondering..."

Erik halts in the door opening. "I'm not going to be your next pupil." The words came so quick it was almost as if he had rehearsed them.

"No, no, of course not."

Erik is halfway out the door. "There is nothing wrong with me."

Herbert nods. "I concur with that."

Erik steps out onto the porch. Herbert needs to think quickly now. "I mean, in a way, there is something wrong with all of us. There is a lot wrong with *me*."

Erik doesn't stop descending the porch steps. "I concur with that."

He is a smart cookie. "You know what though?"—Herbert tries—"It is nearly one o'clock. You hungry? You can't leave with an empty stomach. How about I take you for lunch. There is a great little place not far from here. I can drop you at the bus stop afterwards."

Erik looks at him, then behind him at the street. He isn't really a sporty person: Herbert can tell in the way he has a slouchy stance. Erik's hand taps the side of the door. Tap, tap, tap. Then his hand slides off. "Could you drop me at the train station?"

#

Le Petit Oiseau is a quaint restaurant in one of the backstreets of Vallerton. Herbert suggests a table by the window, but Erik prefers a table in the back corner. A short woman with fiery eyes and bright lipstick appears next to their table.

"Bonjour Monsieur Alewine", she kirs to Herbert.

"Bonjour, Madame B. Une bouteille de votre 2023 Chardonnay, et une carafe de l'eau s'il vous plait."

"Et toi?" Madame B turns to Erik; her face chilled to near-zero.

"A sparkling water please. Si vu play."

Herbert contains the smile stirring inside of him after Erik's attempt at speaking French. Erik told him he is a tourist guide, but he clearly hasn't spent much time in France.

"I suppose Spanish will be easier for you," Herbert says, studying the menu. He is served by silence.

Herbert explains the menu concept: every dish is a mid-size meal meant to be shared. Like a Spanish tapas restaurant, but French. They discuss the options while Madame B pours them a glass of Chardonnay each.

"Santé! Cheers!" Herbert says. They clink their glasses and take a good sip of the Chardonnay. It is smooth and creamy, and Erik looks at the deep yellow liquid before taking another sip. *Good, good, keep it lighthearted. Things are going according to plan.*

Two and a half hours later, the two of them have consumed two bottles of Chardonnay and twelve different delightful

dishes. Erik no longer avoids eye contact yet struggles to keep his gaze straight. "You are a funny man."

"Yeah?" Herbert offers the last garlic mushroom, but Erik shakes his head.

"No, I'll feel sick if I take one more bite."

Herbert fills up Erik's glass. "Why am I funny?"

"You stay away from your business. Always home. Then you get lonely, so you take in random strangers off the street. Projects. You help them—so you say. I'd say they're helping you."—Erik's grin is wide, his eyes foggy as his wine glass sways in front of him like a warning flag. Herbert smiles back, though it's as if he was just kicked in the chest.

The church bells chime six times when the two of them stumble out of the restaurant.

"Too late for—for prayer now,"—Erik lisps as he leans heavily on Herbert's shoulder.

Herbert waves at the Uber driver in the black Prius across the road, grateful the driver is early. He first folds Erik into the car before jumping in on the other side.

"Oak Tree Lane?" the man behind the wheel asks via the rearview mirror. His eyes are dark and defined like a line sketch.

"Yes. Please go slow on the turns."—he points at Erik, sagged against the door, his upper lip pulled up by the window. A little saliva trail runs down the glass. As they leave *Le Petit Oiseau* behind them, Herbert studies Erik's sleeping face. His intoxicated state had been a good chance to get more insight into the man Erik truly is.

Travel guide my butt. Erik had no notion of any key sites in Barcelona, which he mentioned as his favorite city. He didn't even know who Gaudí was! Instead, Erik did reference words like QA Testing, and Blockchain, when they discussed Herbert's industry.

Erik is in tech.

When they arrive back at Oak Tree Lane, Herbert near-hauls Erik up the stairs and helps him drop himself on the bed without rolling straight off. He takes off his shoes and covers him with the blankets.

He closes the door with a smile. Day 1: 1-0 for Herbert.

Chapter Eleven:

The Fury of Furries

Vic peers through the window of their van. Café Aroma is popular this Thursday morning. A steady crowd goes in and out the door, many with takeaway cups. They have parked on the same side of the street, but a little further down. They wouldn't want to spoil Operation Dave by announcing their arrival too early. Vic wants to bite her nails, but there is nothing to bite but the stumps of her fingertips.

"We're too late. He is already inside," Lizzy says.

"How do you know?" Nicky asks.

Lizzy points across the road, to a car parked near the scaffolding of a small construction site. "That car belongs to his lawyer, which can't be a coincidence."

"How do you know that's the lawyer's car?" Nicky asks, intrigued.

"Social media," they all reply simultaneously.

"Well, even better," Vic says, and instructs them to put on

their masks, which they do with some surprise.

"Are you sure, Vic?" Maya says behind her Great Dane mask. Vic nods, grabs the bucket with her white-gloved hand and jumps out.

It is a busy time of day, and they slalom around people on the street. The by passers look somewhat astonished as the seven women stride past rocking their detailed dog masks, their hair lashed leftwards by the wind. Three construction workers outside pause their work and call out to them.

"Yeah! Some doggy style, please!" the younger one says. His safety helmet is way too big for his little head and his jeans sit snug around his skinny legs.

His senior, a tall man with a weathered face and hunched shoulders, joins in—"Look at the ass on that Poodle!"

Vic frowns at him in pity. They couldn't possibly be a greater cliché.

A boy, around four or five years old with blond curls and red cheeks, points at the girls. "Look mummy, Furries!" He makes barking sounds as he hops excitedly. To his great delight, Lizzy barks back at him and the two of them engage in a farcical bark dialogue until both the boy's mother as well as Vic pull them

away from each other.

The window leaner at Aroma is filled with mobile phone reading, chatting, drinking and working people. The back of the café is adorned with a wallpaper of coffee beans running right across, broken up by relatively private booths. Vic spots Dave talking to his lawyer in one of the booths. He is wearing a grey, long-sleeved polo shirt and a small woolen scarf, tightly hooked around his neck. He plays with his flimsy, ash-brown hair every time his lawyer says something before replying with a mouth full of artificially straight, ultra-white teeth.

Everyone is watching, this is perfect, Vic thinks as her gloved hand dips into the bucket. She is delighted to see the handful of shit land in Dave's hair. It even makes it stick up a little.

"What the fuck!" he yells, and is answered by multiple eggs, some hitting him in the face, others on the chest. One of them hits the jacket of his lawyer, who quickly crawls out of the booth. From the corner of her eye, Vic sees a café worker approach—ready to put a halt to all this. Keeping her eyes on Dave, she rotates her arm sideways. Her one finger sticking out, she stops him in his tracks. "No. Back away."

Though she has been doing this for quite some time, Vic

feels hotter, angrier than she did during previous attacks. She is aware of the advantage she has over him as he is cornered in the booth, eyes anxiously flicking between them and his potential exit.

She walks right up to Dave and grabs his business shirt, pulling him closer to her husky mask, ignoring the nauseating smell now oozing from his hair. Dave's breathes fast like a Pug dog, as if he is near a panic attack. His mouth is slightly open; she can see the build-up of saliva around his shiny teeth.

"You have chosen today's specialty, sir,"—she says, an octave lower than she normally speak—"What an excellent choice."

Before he can reply, she has dug deep into the bucket again, resting on the table in front of him.

"This is from Janey."—She pushes her hand against his pursed lips. He nods vigorously.

"No? NO? Funny thing. Didn't think you understood the meaning of that word."—She pushes and wriggles until she has several fingers inside his mouth, smearing the stinking substance along his teeth.

He bites down on her fingers and she grunts, then she slaps him hard on the cheek. "Not to your satisfaction?"

"We have to go."—The trembling voice of Maeve next to her.

Vic leans down by Dave's ear. "Listen, Dave. Things will be different now. There are consequences to everything we do. I am your consequence. No matter how hard you try and hide, I will always know where to find you. I will hunt for you and enjoy it, too. I would risk everything—Do you understand?—Everything, to make you pay for what you have done. Think about that the next time you see a mini skirt. Ask yourself, 'Is it worth it?'"

"Sirens!" It is Maya this time, her closest ally.

Vic pushes Dave back in his chair. "Sit," she says with thick disdain, and runs after the girls who are heading for the exit.

#

The drive back to headquarters is silent, but of a different kind. The girls do not look back at the scene, but sit quietly; their hands on their laps, some still holding on to their mask - fiddling with the straps. Vic knows she went further this time, and that the others are processing that, perhaps feel uncomfortable. Her speedometer has crawled up to forty, so she breaths deeply and slows the van down. She doesn't regret her actions, she simply can't, knowing what kind of

person Dave is. What does terrify her a little is how far she would have been prepared to go if their departure hadn't been pressing.

If not for the sirens...

That raging anger inside her makes her almost deaf to reason - it sizzles in her ears like a boiling kettle, something she has to answer to. She knows it's something she must watch carefully. But what happened today? Nothing happened, really. Just another great day intimidating arseholes.

As they enter their headquarters, silence is still dominating the mood. The girls whisper casual things to one another, wanting to break the awkwardness but unsure how. They all find a spot somewhere to crash and wait for the debrief. Pam is the only one who remains standing, in the middle of the space. She folds her arms and looks at Vic expectingly.

"Are you taking over?" Vic says to Pam, allowing a slight mocking tone in her voice. She knows exactly what is going to come and welcomes it.

"That was crazy, what you did," Pam says.

Vic nods. "Yes, it was."

"You endangered us all by going inside. If the cops had been a couple minutes early, we would have been trapped like rats."

Vic nods again. "Yes, I did."

"That is not right," Pam is left saying. Her glance dots between Vic and the others, trying to gauge the actual support she is getting. Vic has never liked Pam. She was only accepted because the others thought she deserved a chance when she approached them. Unfortunately, Vic's instincts had been right and since joining Les Chiennes, she had taken virtually every opportunity to be difficult and question everything they did.

"It's not right,"—Vic agrees—"but here's the thing..."

She walks up to Pam, her hands stretched out.

"'It's not right': Don't you think those would have been the exact thoughts that Jenny had when Dave followed her into the lady's toilet? And would those not have been exactly her thoughts when he grabbed her wrist like this?"

She grabs hold of Pam's wrist.

"—and what about when he caressed her cheekbone right

before she planted her knee in his coward dick? Or, when he angrily pushed her into one of the toilet cubicles, her face against the wall? Like this?"

She has Pam pushed against the brick wall, talking softly in her ear.

"Would you not think it's not right, not fair, to be pushed against a toilet wall while a colleague of yours rips off your skirt and unzips his pants? Can you feel the anger yet? If this had been you, would you not have prayed for some form of justice, whether it's in the form of a life sentence, or, maybe just as good, by making him feel as small, humiliated and hurt as you did? I don't know if we achieved that today, but we certainly came a long way - so I say thumbs up to all!"

When Vic finally lets go of Pam, the girl keeps her eyes fixed on the floor. A single tear runs along the ridge of her nose. Vic takes several steps back, almost as if rewinding the actions that just took place - and the words that had just come from her mouth. The other girls haven't moved; their bodies frozen in artificial poses of indifference. They await the outcome of this outburst, and a part of Vic wishes she could join them. She is getting tired of having to be the boogeyman. Maybe she should have done all of this solo after all - as was

the plan when she first came up with the insane idea. These girls look up to her so much, that she feels as though the admiration is choking her. Her thoughts still shaking and shuffling inside her, she knows she needs to get her shit together. She takes a deep breath.

"What we are doing here is no joke," she says to them, almost in a formal tone. "It's not about us having a bit of fun. We're the closest to justice as far as victims are concerned. Just read the paper or listen to the news. We have built a profile for ourselves, a name. There are expectations now. I say: let's exceed people's expectations. Not the courtroom, but Les Chiennes are an offender's worst nightmare. They think they are hot shots, and can't be touched, but we crush their spirit with one visit. We do this for Jenny, for all the Jennies!"

And for mum.

Her voice breaks at the end, her eyes are shot full, and she knows it is this emotion that pulls the rest right back under her wings.

"For all the Jennies!"—they echo her, before they fall into cheers and laughter. Even Pam has partly dried her tears, having accepted the drastic mood swing that just occurred. For now, the fire has been extinguished.

Later that night, while playing cards, Vic places her full house on the table—but she quickly draws her hand back before the others notice it too: the skin around her nails has been bitten off—exposing raw, bloody flesh.

Chapter Twelve:

Caught

Amelia shivers inside the cabin of her old Peugeot as her breath forms steamy clouds that quickly evaporate. Her right hand holds the steering wheel as she blows air inside her left fist, then she swaps and warms the other; but the warm sensation is short lived. The darkness outside wraps itself around her car and beam of headlights, leaving no more than about thirty, forty meters of vision ahead; a road into nothing, the odd outline of a tree passing her. She doesn't know where she is, or even where she is heading. She should be concerned about this aimlessness but feels at peace.

A small, white butterfly flutters towards the windscreen, then disappears behind her left side window. Another butterfly appears, it lilts up and down before being sucked sideways by the air vacuum. She wonders if this is a protected habitat for butterflies and slows down. Several more emerge within the field of light, their wings looking pale and fragile in the coolly illuminated night sky. Volumes continue to increase, and the butterflies are now hitting her window in the dozens, then in the hundreds at a time. Some move very little and are being

transported largely by the air currents, others fiercely clap their wings, their propulsive jolts moving them higher and over her roof.

It is a swarm now, she can't see where she is driving anymore and decides to stop her car where she guesses to find the side of the road. Turning off her engine, she marvels at the myriads of scales surrounding her, shuffling, flicking, caressing every inch of her car. There are so many that it's hard to distinguish them. She imagines this is what it would look like if you were inside a giant, goose feather pillow that someone shook around. Despite the oddity of the situation, she finds the fluttering white flakes around her strangely comforting. Relaxing, she leans her head back and sighs as her pulse slows down. Breathing in slowly, and out even slower, all the tension inside her seems to disperse - filtered out of her system by a white flurry of mini-angels.

She could dwell in this dreamy state forever, just lean on this state of utter contentment, but hears a splatter on the roof of the car. She looks out, tries to peer past the butterflies. Is it starting to rain? Another splatter, and another, this one on the front windscreen...she leans in and hangs over the dashboard, as close to the glass as she can get. There, just above the windscreen wiper, a butterfly flutters

desperately with its one free wing while the other has been sealed onto the glass by a carmine red spatter. Its companions ignorantly and freely move and pirouette through the air and seem oblivious to what is taking place when another large drop hits. Others follow, pinning butterflies down in a rain of blood, draining the pure white of their wings.

Drowning them.

The drops continue to grow in numbers but also in size. As the sky bleeds, the little creatures are engulfed - tumbling down her windows. Forced to witness a mass execution, Amelia sits quietly and cries until she is awakened by her tears.

Chapter Thirteen:

Elvis & Motivation

Human motivation continues to intrigue me. Unlike animals, who are driven by hunger, exhaustion and the desire to reproduce, the *why* of homo sapiens is complex and layered like lasagna.

I mean, *why* did the Tombstone boys always follow me after school?

Why did they call me Flaggot?

And *why* did my father always pretend he didn't see the purple bruises in my face? The way my one eye had swollen shut?

I guess I'll never know.

But just because two people have the same motivation, it doesn't necessarily mean that their ensuing actions will be the same as well.

Let's take two children growing up in separate but comparable, underprivileged environments of hunger and hardship. The first child grows into being one of the most notorious gang

leaders of the state. The second child ends up winning a scholarship to a prestigious school and becomes a successful business leader.

Despite the two turning out so differently, the root of their motivations could very well be near-identical: to survive and thrive in their respective environment. To be a leader for others, the leader they never had when they were young.

Put these two in a room together. What would the conversation look like? Would they turn into archenemies, or would they develop a friendship? Would one of them have to adjust his point of view? Who would win?

Are you rooting for the businessman? Of course you are.

What you haven't seen is the wonderful support the gang leader is providing to his community. He makes sure the young kids in his neighborhood go to school. He doesn't want them involved with the wrong crowds like he did at that age. Meanwhile, our respected businessman thinks only of himself. He drives like a maniac. He beats his wife.

I think meeting the gang leader in this room and getting a good-old butt-kicking is the best thing our businessman could hope for. I think that beating may be his only chance for some

form of redemption.

Be careful who to judge. *When* to judge. Or you may turn out being that businessman one day.

And someone like me might be coming for you.

Chapter Fourteen:

A Greater Force

Amelia stands motionless as sensei explains the meaning of *kata*, but she struggles to stay with his words. Something isn't right inside of her; a growing restlessness is consuming not only her dreams, but is starting to eat away on her during the day. She struggles to concentrate at work, taking twice as long to finish a piece. The apartment hasn't been vacuumed in nearly three weeks—which now makes even Dewey sneeze regularly. And these headaches have become an almost constant occurrence. She managed to beat it this morning by taking two pain killers, which she washed down with a near-expired orange juice—hereby ignoring Dewey regarding her judgmentally.

"It is not supposed to feel easy. If it does, you are doing it wrong," sensei says. Her mom would have disagreed. She had always been about making learning as easy and fun as possible. Learning how to tie her shoelaces. Studying for her first major exam. Cooking something other than a fried egg. If mom hadn't had

such a spark for life, would the pain of losing her been less intense?

"So I want you to make every second, every motion of your kata count," sensei says. He points at one of the co-instructors, a man with a belly and a prominent nose, to perform the first of 102 katas. The man moves slowly, gracefully, while sensei points at the arms, the swing of the leg, the position of the head and the moment where you exclaim *kiai*.

Amelia is glad to draw herself back to the present. She mentally documents each motion, determined to know this by the end of the demonstration, and plays the snippets back in her mind over and over. Before they begin, the karatekas are shuffled, so every junior has an advanced fighter to their left, right, front and back. As they move through the kata, Amelia notices it isn't as easy as it looked—a few times, she gets confused over the direction she is supposed to turn to, and her legs start to shake a little. When she is making her way along the middle axe of the Roman I-shape, she spots Darius in front of her but avoids eye contact when they turn back to where they started.

"Good, good," sensei continues. "Now, these moves seem simple, but they are the most fundamental in building your own

archive of karate techniques. You have started training your brain and muscle memory. Let's see who is adopting this quickly -Amelia? Why don't you come up here and show the others what you have just picked up."

She wants to hide, disappear between the stitches in the mats, but instead walks up to meet sensei.

"Off you go. Everyone else, make space for her," he says.

The group waves outwards, and Amelia feels hot with so many eyes on her, but she tells herself to focus on the moves alone. *Sideways, block, step, punch to the right, turn, block, step, punch left - that completes the bottom of the I. Up the middle, three steps, three punches...* her muscles are tired, sweat trickles down her temples.

I love you so much, my sweetheart.

She remembers the kiai and makes it short but powerful like her motions. Then back along the same lines, nearly there.

You live a full life, a beautiful life. Make every day count.

When she completes the final punch and retreats back into standing stance, sensei claps his hands a few times.

"Excellent, Amelia," he says. "You look like you have done this for years. You may go back to your place."

As she walks past the other karatekas, she receives a nod of respect here and there until she comes back to her spot and her gaze meets Darius. She briefly smiles at him before she turns around.

#

After a refreshing shower Amelia throws her backpack across her shoulder and waves at sensei. She is about to head into the hall when she spots Darius through the glass. His tall, full-bodied profile would draw anyone's attention, but it's the petrol blue uniform that hooks her.

He is a cop.

Darius is a cop.

She decides to hide in the restroom and wait until he is done talking to the others and leaves.

She splashes cold water down her face and neck.

Paces up and down.

She doesn't like what she sees in the mirror. Eyes wide

from adrenaline, but darkened by short, restless nights.

"Fuck that, you will not hook up with a cop," she tells her reflection.

Mom would have hated it. Amelia wishes that she would look more like mom. Her features were grand. Soft. Hers are sharper, finer. A mouse in hiding.

After several minutes she peers around the corner. The hall is deserted, so she makes her way down the stairs alone.

Maybe I will always be alone. Maybe that's how things are meant to be. Just me and my thoughts echoing back like the steps in this stairway.

But as she walks into the night's chill, Darius stands right in front of her, his face in that open grin, his badge shining off his chest.

The way he makes her feel is bad news in so many ways, and yet she can't deny that he looks dashing. She *did* always have a thing for men in uniform. Like Walker at the senior scouts. The fireman who did a class talk about safety. And, more recently, Jake Gyllenhaal in The Covenant.

"Amelia," he says, "I was hoping to catch you."

In the back of her mind, she registers how that sentence could be construed in so many ways. But her eyes are drawn to the large, gold-plated badge shining from the left side of his chest. At the top, it shows an eagle with the words "USA police" carved below in dark blue.

"I didn't know you were—with the force."—her tone comes out firmer than she intends.

Darius looks down at his uniform, hands on his chest. "Ah, yes, of course. It feels like any outfit to me by now. Don't even realize that I wear it."

"Sure," she says. It seems the grossest hogwash to her. As if she'd put on a gala dress to a football game and would call it her "kickback drip". A uniform like this, all tight and stiff around the neck? You *know* when you're wearing it.

His nod is hardly visible. "You don't like cops."

Amelia frowns, fakes a smile. "Why would you say that?" She starts rummaging in her purse, in search of her bicycle key.

"Well, you been avoiding me for starters. You look at my badge as if it is an explosive device. And your body language says you're about to run away."

Amelia stares at her backpack as he steps into her personal space. His large fingers gently hold her chin—her mind punches him in the gut while the rest of her leans the opposite way—and he forces her to look up. "Please don't."

"Don't—what?" Her cheeks ignite.

"Don't run away. I like being with you. *Near you.*"—he quickly corrects himself before stepping back. She wishes he wouldn't.

"What about you? What uniform do you change into?" he says.

"I'm a journalist."

"You *are*?"—he seems impressed—"Shjee, I never knew a real journalist."

"Yeah, we're nearly extinct. Wonder why, with such a fat pay and agreeable hours."

He releases his warm belly laugh and she can only join in.

They look up simultaneously as raindrops start tapping on their clothes.

"I better go before it buckets down." She walks to her bike and unlocks the chain as a loudening rush announces the rain is

intensifying.

"I think that is *now*," Darius says. He lifts her bike

with one arm, resting the frame on his shoulder as if it's a tiny three-wheeler.

"What are you doing?"— Amelia holds her jeans jacket over her head.

"Taking you home."

He places the bike on the back of his Ute and points at the passenger seat. "Coming princess?"

She should know better. She should fight his chivalry. Has she not learned anything over the years? If he were to try anything...she simply wouldn't have the strength. Her only option would be to run. Is it worth the risk? The rain has soaked her clothes through to her skin and she shivers. He seems trustworthy. For a cop. He is respected here at the school. He has the eyes of a decent man. A good man.

Before she can think of more excuses not to, she jumps into the seat next to him.

#

Twinkling city lights drift past. Amelia rubs her eyes as sleepiness washes over her in the obscenely comfortable chair. Darius has even turned on the seat warmer – making her feel like an embryo inside a womb. While his eyes are fixed on traffic, she takes in his features; his face is kind and open, with wide cheekbones, a broad smile and dark eyes. His hands look like they devour the steering wheel as they turn and slide along the leather. *Imagine those hands on your–*

"You all good?" he asks, his eyes soft from behind his spectacles.

"Yeah,"—she says, sitting up—"Next right."

#

Once they have stored her bike in her basement, Amelia marches straight on to the entrance of her apartment building. She doesn't know what to say. *Want to come up?* sounds so desperate. *Coffee? A nightcap?* She wasn't born in the sixties. So instead, she opens the front door and keeps it open long enough to enable Darius to walk through. But he doesn't and smiles apologetically instead.

"I'd like nothing more. Believe me. But I'd hate for you to

do something you regret."

She nods, studies his face which, even over the hated uniform, fills every inch of her soul with a longing. Her free hand reaches out for his tidy collar, and she pulls him in her embrace. The kiss starts decisively, dominated by her assertiveness. But gradually, a warmth spreads through her body and her lips soften on his as they open and invite him in.

This time, the butterflies won't be drowned by the blood of her own anxiety.

#

Amelia opens her sad singles fridge and a wilted lettuce, a virtually empty wine bottle, a bottle of soda water and a carton of milk stare back at her. Meanwhile, Darius has Dewey rolling on his back, sitting, and doing circles.

"You're better with him than I am," she says. She fills two glasses with soda water.

"Yeah, dogs always seem to like me. Not sure what it is," he says as he joins her on her tiny balcony overlooking the myriads of rooftops and the park to the right. The night sky is clear enough to showcase the stars and it is the first time Amelia is grateful for living here.

"Can I ask you something?"—she is unsure if this is a sensitive subject for him—"When we're at the dojo, you sometimes seem to...struggle a little."

Darius puts his glass down on the table that looks like a frisbee next to him.

"Yes, you're right," he says.

"It's none of my business," Amelia says, "but are you ok?"

"Oh yeah, totally. Just have this funny condition, it's to do with my heart—that's all."

He tells her he had a heart condition since birth. He cannot quite pronounce the medical term, but it essentially means his heart is enlarged. It's why he is on limited duties at the force, and why he sometimes struggles for air.

"It's no biggie," he says, "I've learned to live with it."

She nods, looks at the carbon bubbles in her glass, congregating around the slice of lemon.

"What made you join the police?"

"I ask myself that question on a regular basis."—he nods as he looks down pensively. "Would you like another drink?"

He gets up, picks up her half-empty glass and walks inside. She follows him as he fills her kitchen space while refilling the glasses. She wants to utter a few words of support, wants to take his hand, but decides against it. She sits down at the bar as he attempts to compose his thoughts.

"Some young boys consider Superman as their hero. Batman. Hell, maybe even Asterix or Obelix. My hero didn't fly. Couldn't lift logs or cars. But she saved my life, nevertheless. My grandma Shirley Jones raised me, kept me out of trouble, while my parents were too busy getting *into* trouble. She made sure I kept my school records pristine. That I got to play any sport I wished. She taught me manners. Discipline. Respect. And she taught me *love*." His eyes shimmer with sadness.

"What happened?" Amelia says softly.

"What happened? Tragedy happened. Two guys broke into her home when I was at football practice. Thrashed the place. Took what they felt like. They could have left. Take whatever worthless stuff they found. A bit of jewelry. Silver cutlery. The tv. But they had to take out the eyewitness. They couldn't just leave the sweet old lady." His arms now rest on the bar, his head hangs between his shoulders. A broken man.

"I'm so sorry."—Amelia walks around the bar. Takes his chin

in her hand as he did to her earlier; gently lifting his face up to meet hers.

Enclosing his face between her hands, her lips catch the last remaining tear in its tracks. She kisses his cheeks, his forehead, gently exploring every inch of his face, before their mouths meet.

#

In her bedroom, Darius's frame fills the mirror as he stands behind her, gathers her hair in a bundle and drapes it over her left shoulder. His fingers caress her exposed neck, pursued by his lips—they follow the protrusion of her collar bone, the dip in behind, the scar, then her shoulder. His other hand has landed under her singlet, sliding up from her belly.

"Is this ok?" he asks.

She nods, wants to turn around to return his loving touch, but he keeps her there - confronted with her own reflection in the mirror. Her blush, a mix of self-awareness and arousal, makes her look like a person she doesn't quite recognize. Soft. Willing. Exposed. Though every inch of her body calls for more, her eyes in the reflection are on high alert.

But Darius loosens the button of her jeans and drops to his

knees. His eyes continuously seeking her consent in the mirror for every move he makes, he slowly strips her jeans down to her ankles. She gasps as his hands cup around her butt cheeks. His thumb caresses her tattoo before his lips lightly shower her butt in kisses. His left hand slides along her hip and underneath her panty, before his fingers twist themselves in a knot with the strap of her undie. He pulls it softly, teasing, smiling at her as she softly groans, before repeating this with his right hand. He peels her panties down, one centimeter at a time, making her entire body glow while having hardly touched her; then pauses to admire it. He shakes his head in disbelief.

"You're so going to dump me."

"I might," she says. "Better make the most of it while it lasts."

He grins, lifts her up—"Yes ma'am."

Chapter Fifteen:

FOMO

Sitting at the kitchen bar, Herbert enjoys the morning sun shining through the sliding door—warming his back. He sips his coffee and the hot dark liquid washes down the Chardonnay still oozing from his breath. He always handled alcohol well, but yesterday had been a challenge even for him. Something stirs in the corner of his eye. The Mourning Dove has returned to his garden. She is sitting in the same spot as last time, observing him.

"Sorry to disappoint. You're wasting your time here," he tells her—and as if she listened, she flies off.

Erik walks in wearing the same clothes he wore last night. His skin is pale and a frown has fixed itself between his dark brows. "Who are you talking to?"

"Nobody," Herbert says, a little embarrassed.

"Well, we should talk. Don't you think?"

Herbert gets up and grabs the coffee pot. "Black? Milk? Sugar?"—he takes a large coffee glass from the cupboard.

"The works. Please."

Herbert busies himself with the coffee and fills the mug as full as he logically can.

"Look, Herbert...I appreciate you taking me out for lunch yesterday. It got a little out of control, which I suspect you had planned all along. But I am grateful for the meal and afternoon. It was—different. I must get going now."

Herbert feels like a small child forced to skip Christmas. "You're majorly hungover."

"The fresh air will do me good."

Herbert slams the coffee mug on the bar in front of Erik. "The train will make you feel even sicker."

"I can vomit anywhere."

"That is disgusting."

Erik sighs and scratches in his unruly curls. "Look Herbert, if you don't like being alone, why don't you find a wife?"

Herbert locks his jaws together, which doesn't go unnoticed.

"So... there is a woman?" Erik wants to know. Herbert would be excited to talk about *any* subject; just not this one. He puts the milk back and slams the fridge. "I don't see how my love life is of any relevance to you."

"There *is* a woman. Or was? Not sure... Did you break up?"

Herbert slams both flat hands on the bar. "I don't need you to prod around in my life or my head, thanks!"

Erik observes him, his calm a stark contrast to Herbert's fury. "Not a nice feeling, is it? You got me drunk for a chance to do exactly that to me yesterday. I know privacy isn't what it used to be in this interconnected world, but I for one like mine."

Herbert looks out the window. He wishes the Mourning Dove were still here.

"I did learn some interesting things," he says, studying the grass he maintains at 2 inches length. "During our chats yesterday."

"What?" Erik sounds more frustrated than interested.

"You're not a travel guide. Not even close. I know who you really are."

Erik folds his arms around his waist. He is listening.

#

That day, Herbert gets a glimpse of the real Erik. Sure, he doesn't have the full story. Such as why Erik is on the run. Because it's clear that he is. But the two of them are able to come to an understanding without spilling too many words. Erik won't be his pupil. Nobody will prod in anyone's head. Once the basics have been established, they find they have some things in common too. Their interest in technology. Their love for Bob Dylan music.

By the end, Erik promises to stay for one week. "You're right," he says, "I don't have anywhere to be in a rush."

"Precisely," Herbert says. *And nobody can track you down if you're staying here, not using any credit cards.* But he keeps that to himself. "It will be just like a short holiday before your actual holiday."

After dinner, the doorbell rings five times in short succession. Herbert instantly drops the tea towel on the bench. *That's got to be Jack.* "I'll be right back," he says. "You stay here."

He should have known that Jack would follow up their short phone call with a visit. His disappointment had been evident, maybe even more than ever when Herbert had relayed the news that he wasn't coming.

Again.

Jack had responded in understanding, but Herbert could almost feel Jack's teeth grinding through the phone line.

A chill breeze runs into the house when Herbert opens the front door. Jack grins at him, arms wide, giving him his usual cheeky face.

"Herbelicious! I thought I'd come and check up on you," Jack says.

Herbert shakes his partner's hand. "There is no need for that."

Jack walks straight through to the kitchen.

"Aren't you going to introduce me? Hey man"—Jack holds out his hand to Erik—"I'm Jack, Herb's associate."

Jack shakes Erik's hand very briefly as if he is worried he might catch a disease. Herbert rubs his head; he feels uneasy about these two meeting. Erik is a sensitive soul. Jack could

crush him with a snap of his fingers.

"How is the recovery coming along?" he asks Erik while looking at the empty wine glasses.

"Recovery?"—Erik tries to catch up. His eyes search for Herbert.

"Ah, that's right," Jack says. "Herbert never actually *hit* you with his car."

"Erik is my guest for a week," Herbert says, smiling at Erik.

"A week! Phenomenal. You two must have a lot to discuss."—Jack looks across at Herbert—"You're not pulling him as a new associate, are you?"

"What? No. No. Nothing like that."

Jack nodding agitates Herbert more than he understands.

"Ah, he must be your new colt." Jack folds over laughing at his joke.

Herbert can see Erik is triggered to respond to this, but he beats him to it. "Yes. The correct term would be novice or pupil. He isn't a young racehorse."

Jack wipes his eyes as if he laughed until he cried. "The way you make them run? I'd say it was a pretty accurate name."

Herbert swallows the rotten eggs collecting in his throat and instead gives Jack a look.

Jack jolts his shoulders up and down, brushes both hands through his slick hair—"Anyway, I'm sure you will have an interesting week, Rodrick."

"Erik,"—Erik corrects Jack.

"Precisely." Jack strategically ends the conversation here and turns to Herbert, his face business-like.

"Herb, can we talk in private for a moment?"

Forty-five minutes later, Herbert closes the front door behind Jack and locks the door latch. It wouldn't be the first time that Jack decided to march back in with some lame excuse. They just spent some time in the formal lounge, in private. Jack had made a list of items to discuss and was his usual eager self—as if the absence of a third person made him feel at ease. The threat had been dealt with.

The kitchen is clean and all the dishes have been done.

When Herbert peers through the garden doors, the kitchen lights carve the silhouette of Erik lying on his back on the lawn.

"I see you are a fan of earthing too."—Herbert says as he joins Erik, who quickly sits upright.

"No, no, stay where you are. Yeah, Jack is gone - sorry that took a while. We had a bit to catch up on, I suppose." Herbert lays down beside Erik in the grass.

"Everything ok?" Erik asks him.

"Yeah, just lots of business stuff to go over. He likes to know he has my approval, which I appreciate. But it can be time-consuming." *And a pain in the butt.*

Erik nods. "What is earthing?"

"Earthing...this is earthing, what we're doing. Connecting with the earth, with bare feet. It has lots of physiological benefits."

"It just felt really nice. Relaxing."

"I know, isn't it great? Free therapy right outside your doorstep."

Erik nods.

The two of them stay on their backs, facing the stars, and for a while neither speaks.

"Herbert?"

"Mh?"

"I don't mean to be impolite, but your partner...Jack?"

"Mh?"

"He makes me feel uncomfortable."

Herbert sighs. "You're not the only one. He can be intense. But he has been through some nasty stuff when he was young. He doesn't know how to share attention with someone. Easily feels like he will be excluded."

"Like FOMO?" Erik asks.

"You could say Jack is the Dalai Lama of FOMO—yes."

It is the first time that Herbert openly discusses his mixed feelings about Jack. Though he never likes talking behind others' backs, it feels good to say these thoughts out loud.

"Herbert?"

"Mh?"

"Why did you say I was your pupil?"

Herbert considers this. He wondered it too when he confirmed it to Jack. "Not sure. I knew it would agitate him further. Maybe that's what I wanted."

PART 2:

GO FETCH

Tear gas is a chemical compound that irritates mucous membranes, causing tears, stinging, and difficulty breathing. It is used by law enforcement and the military to disperse crowds.

Tear gas was first employed in August 1914, during World War I, by the French army combating German troops.

Chapter Sixteen:

Shaping Elvis

Our decisions and actions in the present are guided much more by our past than any of us care to admit. Many people believe themselves to be independent. Strong-willed. I think this is a little endearing and terribly naive. Of course, I can only speak from my own experience when I say I fully embrace the way the past has shaped me. The way it is shaping my actions every day.

Take the way I was forced to cook dinner most nights as my lazy folks would sit on the fraying couch watching The Addams Family. I didn't dare to tell them they reminded me of that pale-skinned family. After I'd slaved away for more than an hour my mother would prick her fork into the chicken without trying it and exclaim it was too dry. Father would add a remark about the "strange sauce" as the tip of his knife circled through the orange and honey sauce.

I made it my motto to take experiences like that and turn them into something positive. I can safely say that I have been running my restaurant for twenty-three years and haven't had a single complaint. I make sure of that.

But all those childhood events fade to a blur compared to the tragic events that befell my dear friend Janey.

They say illness of the body is purely corporal.

They say that a traumatic event cannot plant a cancer inside of you.

They say a lot.

I should have taken her home that night. Called a taxi. She had been helping me during my opening night, for Christ's sake! It is the least I could have done. But she said she was fine. Loved biking. It's only a short distance, she said. I do it all the time. I wanted to protest, but three new orders came in, two of my new employees had questions, and the phone was ringing non-stop. So, I let her go.

I let her go.

Chapter Seventeen:

Minnie Talks

Large, densely packed raindrops limit Amelia's vision as she makes her way from the bus stop to the entrance of Cafe Píob Mhòr. Her skimpy umbrella manages to keep her head largely sheltered, but her jacket feels damp, and the bottoms of her jeans are soaked and flap cold against her chilly legs.

She reaches the porch of the cafe, shivering, and shakes the excess drops off her umbrella. There is a neon-lit symbol of a giant bagpipe in the window, which must tie into the theme of the place because as she enters, she sees real bagpipes nailed to the right wall too.

The bad weather has urged many people to find shelter inside the café, leaving hardly any tables free. The partition is covered with portraits of famous Scottish people: Ewan McGregor before he had his teeth done fancy, Andy Murray, James Watt, Andrew Carnegie, Alexander Fleming and many more smile in black and white from the brick wall.

Amelia scans the faces of solo guests and rests on a young woman sitting by the window corner, reading a magazine. She wears bright pink, kaleidoscope glasses that make her look like

a bug going to a rave party. Her jeans jacket is soaked at the shoulders. *That must be Minnie.* Everything about her somehow matches the email she wrote. Sweet. A little quirky. Sensitive.

The woman has now spotted her too: she drops her magazine and waves enthusiastically, nearly knocking the man at the table next to her.

Amelia raises her hand as she makes her way to the woman. She estimates she is in her early forties, despite her dressing style fitting someone in their twenties. She has brown hair, cut in a fringe, and wears large, colored beads around her wrists and neck.

"Minnie?" she asks to make sure this is indeed the secretary turned whistleblower.

The kaleidoscope glasses turn up to her, and Minnie grins uneasily, exposing braces with a multitude of colors, just like her beads.

"Sorry about these," she says, pointing at her glasses. The fragmented lenses reflect segments of Amelia and the café environment. "I thought about it and figured it was best to keep a low profile and not be recognized."

"Sure," Amelia says. "Clever thinking."

She sits down next to Minnie, who shyly fiddles with her fringe while studying the lunch menu. Amelia feels a surge of empathy for this lady, who undoubtedly has been through a lot before speaking out about things.

"Minnie," Amelia says well-meant. "I wanted to thank you for reaching out to me. That would have been a tough decision and I think it was brave of you."

Minnie drops her hair and giggles a little.

"Oh well, thank you. It was a little scary, but not really. Something had to be done, you know. Someone has to speak. If not me..." She mostly looks at her hands as she speaks. Her fingers are long and beautiful like a hand-model, and her nails are sparkling green.

"Of course. Perhaps you can start at the beginning?" Amelia pulls her notebook from her shoulder bag and clicks up her pen.

Minnie nods, her mouth twisted as her tongue plays with the braces.

"The beginning, well, you know, for me anyways, was when I started working at Technables in the spring of 2019."

Minnie had been lucky to get the job. She explains that there had been many applications for the role of secretary as it paid well and came with nice perks. Like the occasional travel for work, discounts at associated partner hotels and a substantial bonus at the end of the year.

"Not that I had to work harder for the bonus, it's all about how the business performs, you know? And Technables did better and better and better every year. The CEO was an absolute mastermind. Very clever." She nods with a little squint - as if wanting to give her words extra fire.

"Was?" Amelia picks up.

"Oh, well, *is*, I guess," Minnie proceeds as her green nails tick a rhythm against the side of her futuristic glasses. "But we don't see Herbert anymore. Not really. He is technically still in charge, but someone else now pretty much runs the show. Jack Payne." Minnie's face turns an angry red when she says his name.

On her first day, Minnie had arrived wearing a loosely tied blouse. Though she wore a singlet underneath, she admits it showed a bit of cleavage. She had started chatting with the receptionist called Pinky, a lady in her 50s, as she waited for her new boss to show her around. Pinky had been a little cool at

first but warmed to her during the conversation.

"She loves doggies, and I used to assist my dad with dog training, so we enjoyed chatting about this and that. But then she said something a bit strange. She said that I might want to close my buttons, but in a really quiet, soft-spoken voice. She eyed up a large corner office as she said this, as if she made sure to keep an eye on whoever was in there."

Minnie had buttoned up as suggested, not thinking too much of it at the time, and work began. Her days were jam-packed, and she often had lunch at her desk. There was hardly time to pay attention to what happened around her. The first time she did notice something was about two months into the job. A young intern had started not long after her, a girl called Grace; a real classy girl from Bark Heights. Grace was very eager to impress, as she would soon graduate and was probably hoping for a job offer.

Jack normally didn't deal with interns, but as soon as he had seen her coming out of the elevator on her way out, he had told HR that he could really use an extra pair of financial eyes. Someone young and fresh. Minnie noticed how Jack started to bring Grace coffees in the mornings, sometimes a smoothie. He called her in his office several times a day and asked for her

opinion on this or that.

At first, young Grace had been visibly flattered by the attention. Then, one day, a large bunch of roses arrived for her. Grace read the card and Pinkie had seen her transform from delighted to flustered and confused. The roses had come from Jack. Grace thought it best to keep a safe distance from then on and started avoiding Jack where she could. Whenever she finished a job, she took it to the CFO rather than to Jack. She also started arriving and leaving at unpredictable times, probably to avoid him in the elevator. When Jack realized what was going on, he didn't seem to want to let go of her. He'd regularly hang around her desk, waiting for her to return, or he'd sit awkwardly close to her in the lunchroom. Poor Grace made every effort to avoid giving off any vibes that would feed his hope, but Jack just didn't seem up for that message.

One day, Grace was in a happier mood as she was picked up by a handsome fella she had met over the weekend. He was waiting for her in the downstairs lobby. Jack was in his office, on the phone, but spotted the two coming out of the building, holding hands as they crossed the road to the bus stop. He had been in a mood for the rest of that day. That following week Roger from accounts was retiring so there was a small farewell get-together in Hipperdeehop, the pub around the corner from the

office. It was a fun night, with Roger and Ben remembering hysterical moments they shared over the years. It was packed in the pub as it was their live music night, followed by karaoke. Jack had been very quiet all night, and his face had looked like a thundercloud. He had eyed up Grace from a distance for hours, who stayed clear of him and enjoyed singing karaoke with Pinkie and the others. But when sweet Grace went to the bathroom, Minnie had spotted Jack following her shortly after. Minnie hadn't been sure whether it was just a coincidence that Jack had to go at the same time as the girl or if something else was going on.

After a few minutes, maybe five, she thought she'd better have a look - just to be sure. The bathrooms were empty, but the hallway leading to the bathrooms had a small alcove at the end, hiding a staff door. The alcove was poorly lit, but enough to make out the profile of Jack's back. He had pushed Grace against the door and had his pants undone. Grace tried to scream, but his left hand was covering her mouth. Minnie had been petrified by what was unfolding in front of her, it felt as though she wasn't really there.

Then, the voice of Philip had come from the hallway.

"Is Jack there? Tell him it's our turn for karaoke. We're

doing 'Who let the dogs out?! Whoop, Whoop, Whoop, Whoop!'"

Hearing his name, Jack had looked up just long enough for Grace's teeth to grab hold of his hand. Jack yelled and stepped away from the girl, who rushed away with mascara splotched all over her cheeks.

"She was the saddest thing I had ever seen," Minnie mumbles, looking down ashamed. "I felt terrible. She passed me in disbelief, she probably thought I wasn't going to do anything to help her. I have had nightmares of girls with messy make-up chasing me ever since. It was so very, very awful."

A single tear runs from behind the disco ball that forms her left lens. Amelia pulls a napkin from the box on the table and hands it to her.

"Sorry you've had to experience that, Minnie," she tells the woman, her hand briefly on Minnie's. "This says enough about the kind of person you're working for."

"Oh, but that was only an example," Minnie goes on.

Amelia asks her what happened to Grace, and she admits that she hasn't seen Grace or any intern since then, but Jack grew more and more obsessive and controlling over the years. He had a real way of making people feel unwelcome, making them feel

stupid or incapable, often in subtle words.

"Though nobody at the office will admit it, they're all terrified of Jack," Minnie says, her eyes peeking from over her glasses to show the sincerity of her words. "He has this way of getting under your skin without you noticing. Like a tick. Feeding off your insecurities. Your vulnerability."

Minnie pulls a pile of documents from her bag.

"This is a good selection of all the nasty things he has said and done over the years. It's not all, but it will be enough to give you a good idea of the kind of monster he is."

Amelia flicks through the documents. Most are emails printed from original mail providers, with date and time. Correspondence between Minnie and Jack about the absence of a pay raise. Post-its with rude commands. An email from Jack to the entire staff about the concept of 'being on time'.

It's good stuff.

Minnie pulls out one email from the bottom of the pile and hands it to her. The email is titled "The importance of trust". It is directed at Minnie. It must have been written the week following the incident with Grace, as Jack waffles in vague language about his respect for Minnie, how he considers her such

a positive addition to the team, and how that team spirit is entirely built on trust.

"His insurance policy?" Amelia asks, and Minnie nods with shame.

Amelia closes her notebook. "Well, that policy has expired now—and we'll make sure to hit him hard with it."

Minnie's braces sparkle at her. "Thanks Amelia. You're the bestest."

Amelia pays the bill and is answered by a shy hug from Minnie as they stand in the doorway, holding up foot traffic.

"No problem," Amelia says. "Can I ask you one more thing?"

"Sure you can. Ask me anything, girl."

"What made you decide to reach out, after so many years?" Amelia lifts her umbrella from the box by the door as she waits for Minnie's answer.

Minnie smiles at her as if they're now besties.

"Gotta do what is right. Even if it's scary. A wise person once said that to me at a bus stop."

"Did they?"

"Yeah. He was handsome too."—Minnie's eyes glaze over, her braces sparkling. "He looked like a rockstar, ya know?"

They wave goodbye.

Amelia is halfway down the sidewalk when she hears Minnie call out across the street: "He mentioned you as the best journalist to contact. The guy. Bye, Amelia!"

Minnie disappears around the corner.

Chapter Eighteen:

Conserving Hope

On the third morning of Erik's stay, Herbert wakes earlier than usual. Realizing he has skipped two consecutive morning walks, he decides it is a good time to get some fresh air and clear his thoughts. By the time he has pulled the hoodie over his head and wriggled into his sneakers, it is 5:43 am and he gambles he'll be back before Erik even wakes up.

He slips through the front door, but something prevents him from shutting it behind him.

"You going for a walk?" Erik is still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Can I come?"

"Not in your pajamas you can't," Herbert says. He had meant to steal a moment to himself, but this will be a good chance to get to know Erik a little better. They've had plenty of time already. They went to see a local football game. Went for ice cream. And they even visited the pub, where they ended up in a peculiar coaster-flicking fight with the village lunatic until

the bartender threw them out. That kind of stuff brings two guys closer together.

But the sensitive subjects? They hadn't been stirred.

Erik looks down. "Course. Give me a minute."

When Erik comes back down, he is wearing army-style cargo pants, boxy hiking shoes and a brimmer hat.

"I see you fitted quite a bit in that backpack of yours," Herbert says.

"Yeah, the shoes take up a lot of space. But they are apparently the bee's knees."

#

Herbert always loved Ericson Park, and how it pretty much borders his property. The park was designed in a symmetrical shape, with arches and statues as landmarks. The center of the park is marked by a three-tiered fountain and a butterfly conservatory.

Over the last two days, Erik has explained his living conditions to him. "I'm not *homeless*," Erik had said a little offended when Herbert insinuated the possibility.

"Well, what's wrong with that? Lots of people are homeless," Herbert had replied.

Turned out Erik had only subleased his apartment as he left for his travels. He also told Herbert he quit his job, though Herbert still can't work out why. The way Erik's eyes darkened suggested he better not dig there too quickly.

And isn't it only fair that Erik keeps his troubles close to his chest? It's what Herbert has done, all those years.

But where has it gotten him?

They approach the butterfly conservatory. Herbert doesn't normally go inside, but Erik's eyes light up at the notion of butterflies—so they enter.

Passing through the double bi-fold doors, warm, humid air wraps around their faces like a hot towel at the barber. The conservatory, a double-storied, glass-domed structure surrounded by bush, is a well-kept secret. Today, a Tuesday, they are the only visitors. Herbert feels strangely sheltered here, encapsulated by shrubs and color.

Walking along the path, he slowly drops his shoulders—allowing tension to drain out of him. He pauses to look at a large monarch, landing on a massive flower.

"There was a woman," he says to Erik standing next to him. He surprises himself, but something inside him has opened and now it has to come out. "Her name was Janey. We met when we were only kids. She moved in next door from us."

Erik stands very still. His eyes are fixated on the monarch. It is the best encouragement for Herbert to continue.

"We became friends. She... helped me whenever my father had one of his moods. But then we became teenagers. And the friendship grew into something more."

Herbert sees Janey standing in front of him on the levee. As if it happened yesterday. Just before that, he'd punched his father right in the nose after enduring his abuse for years. A near knockdown. Herbert was on his way to the levee when Janey caught up with him; and tried to calm him down. As they stood on top of the levee, the breeze pulling and pushing, the water sloshing onto the embankment, his anger pivoted 360 degrees. He pulled Janey in his embrace and kissed her. After several minutes, their foreheads rested on one another.

"Never stop kissing me like that," she said.

The large yet fragile wings of the Monarch slowly open and close, blinking its feathery scales at him, and before Herbert

quite gathers what happens a tear runs down his jaw. He quickly wipes it with the bridge of his hand. Erik places his hand on his shoulder.

"Look,"—Herbert says, trying to compose himself. He points at an information sign—"The average life expectancy of butterflies is four to six weeks." He scratches his head. Four to six weeks ago he was by himself, having the same thoughts, questions and routines as he had months before that. Years before.

"Time is a funny thing," Erik says. "What happened with Janey?"

"I happened to Janey. I was an idiot. And I lost her."

#

When they finally reach the front gates on Oak Tree Lane, Erik turns to him.

"If you care that much about her, why not try and find her?"

Herbert tries a smile. "It is far too late for that. Besides, I rather live in this reality, the one where I get to have a little hope, than meet her in real life and be blown off

again."

Erik's mouth twists to one side a little as if he disagrees, but he doesn't say anything.

Chapter Nineteen:

Dogologues

Amelia refills her coffee a third time before sitting back down behind her laptop. She has hemmed and hawed about the possible title for the last twenty minutes.

Truth is, she doesn't feel ready to write the article. She would have loved to have a few more days for research. More in-depth interviews with other employees. All she has now is a couple of brief interactions with staff leaving the building. After applying a healthy dose of pressure, a few grudgingly confirmed the allegations made by Minnie. But it still feels like a story hanging together by loose threads. Nevertheless, her editor wants the piece. Today. Claim the scoop before anyone else might.

She catches herself biting her nails and quickly stops. Her stumpy fingers find the keyboard and she starts hammering away:

“Social and sexual harassment the norm at Technables”

“Staff accusations place acting CEO Jack Payne in discredit”

She looks up from a yelp. Dewey is sleeping in his dog bed, his hind paws kicking anxiously.

“You’re having nightmares too, huh?”—she wonders whether Dewey ever dreams of mom like she does. If he remembers her at all. The way her laughter was so contagious, everyone else in the room would join in. The way she loved people, including all their faults.

The way she loved Dewey. He had been like a child to mom when Amelia had left the house. Amelia had often joked about feeling jealous when she visited. About the way mom would tuck him in at night, like a child. The way she seemed to have deep, meaningful conversations with the dog.

Amelia thought this was a bit ludicrous and told Dewey from the start she wouldn’t continue with these “dogologues” he had with mom when she was still alive. He had looked back at her as if to say: “What do you call this then, bitch?”

She refocuses on her screen, but her eye is drawn to one of

the twentysomething tabs in her browser; the one with the search for "Jack Payne". She opens it again, studying the slim, polished face greeting the camera with a look of arrogance and something else.

Something more carnal.

She can see what Minnie referred to when she said: "He gets under your skin." A man like Jack is shrewder than many offenders, she suspects, and all the more dangerous.

She clicks on a photo of Jack in a bar or restaurant, his arm possessively around a woman's waist. She looks like she is saying something to him, but his face is turned to the camera — locked in a malicious grin.

"You are a fucking villain, aren't you?"

#

That night, Amelia dreams of being back in the café where she met Minnie. Minnie is wearing the same kaleidoscopic glasses, reflecting Amelia's profile in fragments. She looks at her hands, which are fragmented and are starting to fall apart. Her arms too.

She wants to say something to Minnie, who seems unaware,

but her throat is sore, her syllables cut up. People around her, the food, the tables: everything is transforming into a diffracted scene, like glass origami. She gets up before her legs completely transform and runs out onto the street, where a gigantic mole greets her. He wears a leather jacket and ripped jeans and holds an electric guitar. He plays a riff you'd hear at the start of a major sneaker advertisement, then points at her. His claw is large and looks like a human hand of someone with terrible hygiene and no nail clippers.

"You are the one, baby! You are the one!"

He drops his guitar and starts to hop towards her on all fours, his teeth showing.

Amelia wakes up with a holler, her sheets wrapped around her sweaty body. She gets up and rubs her head. The thumping at her temples is killing her. She grabs the aspirins from the bathroom drawer and washes three down by gulping the cold water straight out of the tap. Then she walks into the living room, waking a drowsy Dewey who stretches himself out. She flicks on the tv and drops herself on the couch.

It is 3 am. Sleep won't return now. Not after that bizarre dream. Dewey sits at her feet, looking up at her as if he asked a question.

"Alright then, nudnik."

She has hardly finished the sentence, or Dewey jumps on the couch beside her. He knows to keep his distance, as if he respects her boundaries, and together they watch an ironed woman sell a kitchen tool that can cook any meal from scratch. *It's the best!*—the woman exclaims, and the audience erupts in applause.

Amelia looks across at Dewey, who looks back at her with equal skepticism.

She thinks back of Minnie's words at the end, as she called across the street. "He said you're the best!"

Who had sent Minnie?

Who is this fan she supposedly has?

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Chapter Twenty:

The Jack Attack

Vic looks at her crew hiding behind the garage pillars like her. They don't look tough at all; they look like little girls playing hide and seek.

Vic's nail is on its way to her mouth, but she remembers the disgusting glue she applied on them to break her nasty habit, and stops herself. She has noticed how her anger has been growing recently. Coming from deep within her, it has been pushing itself to the surface like magma. She needs to control this for the girls' sake. Who is she doing this for? And is it really worth all the risk they take on her behalf? But each time they attack, this other voice grows stronger, the voice that tells her it's OK to go further. Hit harder.

Because the fucker had it coming.

The parking garage smells of damp and piss, but that's a small price to pay. It had been Nicky's brilliant idea to wait for Jack Payne inside the parking lot. They had parked the van

along the street to enable a quick exit. Then all they had to do was find the parking space sign with his name on it and wait.

"I don't like garages," Pam says, "They are creepy."

Samira laughs, her beautiful timbre reinforced by the concrete walls— "Today, we are the creeps darling."

"It's like we're in Baby Driver," Nicky says, "Seen it?"

"You kidding me? The music in that. Whoa!"— Maeve exclaims.

"The action!"—Maya adds.

"The guy!" Lizzy goes, "Ansel Elgort can drive me *anywhere*."

They all howl like wolves.

"Sshh, shut up guys," Vic says. She can hear the distanced vibrations of a car playing music at peak volume. It must be entering the parking garage one level above their heads. The heavy pumping grows louder as it approaches, and when the Mercedes pulls up, Vic spots Jack's head as it bobs up and down to the rap music. He turns off his engine and looks down.

"He clearly hasn't read the article yet," Maya whispers.

"Wait for it," Vic answers. She suspects he is reading it

right now on his phone, as his head has remained downturned for several minutes, and his expression is solemn.

Then, as if a beast inside of him has been awoken by an electric prod, Jack's body tenses up and he screams. He screams and screams, and it's so loud they can hear it through the closed car windows. His fists pound on his steering wheel, over and over, making the horn honk repeatedly.

"Fucking bitch! Fu-ckin-bitch!!"—they hear him yell at his phone.

"I'd say he read the article now," Samira says dryly.

"Really? What makes you say that?", Lizzy high-fives her bestie before Vic signals to keep it down.

The car door opens and Jack gets out. His face is twisted in a mix of horror and the desire to hurt someone.

Badly.

He gets on the phone. "Find me everything you can find on Amelia Moore. Yes, everything - especially dirt. She is the journalist, yeah, I know you know, don't talk about it at the office, just find me anything. Call Franz too, he can get his hands on things not so mainstream. Yes, now, for fuck's sake

Pinky!"

"NOW!", Vic calls to her crew. As one, the women emerge from behind the pillars and Jack's phone slips out of his palm. Vic and Maeve are throwing the dog shit today. Maeve is known for her exceptional hand-eye coordination. The others are hurling as many eggs as they can.

The sheer volume of the attack startles Jack initially. The words "What The Fuck?" escape his lips.

How original, Jack.

But once Jack has tried sheltering himself best he can from their attack, he peers in Vic's direction. And despite the ongoing strike, and the dog shit now covering large parts of his suit, and the egg drippings dangling from his earlobe, Jack's eyes lock into Vic's and a micro-smile emerges on his smug face. It is as if his eyes are telling her:

Is that all you got? I eat girls like you for breakfast.

But the animal keeps quiet and holds a steady gaze. Vic realizes he has momentarily thrown her off and reaches into the bucket again. The shit lands high on Jack's chest; just below his chin. He looks at it.

His hand reaches for it.

Then, under the witnessing eyes of the revolted crew, Jack wipes a patch of shit on his right cheek. He scoops some on his other hand, then wipes that on his left cheek.

He has just turned dog shit into army camouflage.

It leaves every one of the girls speechless. They have stopped throwing and just stare.

"Is he fucking mad?" Samira whispers. Vic doesn't reply.

But Jack does. "What? I just like to blend in, ladies. That *is* what predators like to do, after all. Isn't that what you consider me to be? A *predator*?"

He takes a step closer and the girls take a step back. Except for Vic. There is only about ten feet between them.

"I may as well behave like one," Jack continues. Vic watches him closely. She refuses to become a victim. *Ever*.

"Oh, what I'd do to you, Viccie-girl. You clearly need to be reminded of who is at the top of the food chain. At the top of *any* hierarchy in the animal kingdom. It's the *fucking males*, baby." He has taken another sizeable step forward. Vic quickly estimates the needed distance.

Perfect for a *Mae Geri*. Her leg swiftly pulls up and inwards before she releases it with all the force of her strong hips. The ball of her foot lands hard in his abdomen and Jack is launched backwards. He lands on his back, laughing, applauding, which makes Vic want to go over to him and hurt him some more. Hurt him until he stops laughing. But Maya grabs her hand and pulls her out and into the daylight.

Chapter Twenty-One:

Unsolicited Clicks

Herbert pulls his silk bathrobe closer around him and leaves the door ajar before wandering to his mailbox, located just past the gate. The leaves of the oak trees rustle and stir in the breeze, as if whispering words of caution. He has every reason to be cautious, though he is unsure how to act accordingly.

Ever since he read the article this morning he feels as though an ulcer is growing in his stomach - a cramp that he normally only gets on long-haul flights. Was the article the product of a major misunderstanding? He *knows* Jack.

Yes, he also knows Jack loves the ladies. But they're not dealing with some predator here, this is Jack, *his* Jack, who cried when they had their first contract signed. The Jack who does the most ridiculous yet hilarious victory dances. The same Jack who has a terrible sweet tooth and can never say no to tiramisu or a mud cake. Who once, under the influence of four or five gins, admitted that Herbert was like the father he had

never had.

And yet, there is that little voice in the back of Herbert's mind, this twang, that hisses words of a darker nature. Jack had never been able to quite control himself, so why would this be so hard to believe? He once drove his Mercedes into the rubbish bins outside the old office, because rubbish collectors continued to leave the bins partly covering Jack's parking spot. And when Pinky had her wedding anniversary, he gave that rather painful, awkward toast. He referred to Pinky as being a GILF on ice.

Herbert cringes to the memory alone.

Has he misjudged Jack or is he really just the scoundrel with a heart of gold?

Herbert reaches the mailbox: a slender black box with the number 508 in gold at the top. The lid of the mailbox opens and closes with its usual squeak but is followed by a distinct double click. Puzzled, Herbert opens and closes the empty mailbox again, listening intently - the same squeak is followed by the same clicking sounds. He peers inside, wondering if a click beetle has crawled in. But as he leans forward, the clickety-clicks repeat. They don't seem to come from the mailbox at all, but from the shrubbery behind. Holding a furniture sales

leaflet and a county letter in his left hand, his other hand pushes some branches aside, just far enough to reveal a 35mm camera lens, now clicking hungrily as if feeding off Herbert's face. Herbert steps back as a woman's face appears from behind the camera - her grey-streaked hair is tied in a ponytail; her skin is weathered like old leather, and she chews gum as if she has something to prove.

"Hi there darling, having a good morning?" The woman remains where she is seated, continuing to take photos at a dizzying rate.

"Stop with that. What the hell are you doing on my property?"

"Ah well, technically, this isn't your property. See? These bushes are managed by the county, the same county that has just sent you a bill, from what I gather."—She points at his letter.

Herbert dives forward, mowing his arms in the air to get hold of the camera or at least damage it beyond repair, but the woman is prepared, clearly experienced at dodging infuriated men outside their house.

"Mind your step now honey, wouldn't want you to get injured." As she speaks, she quickly closes her lens and grabs

her tripod stand.

"Is that a threat? I can't believe this. You can't do this." Herbert looks around to see if anyone else can jump in and aid his argument. But Oak Tree Lane breathes its anonymous, lifeless air like any other day.

"It's my job, darling. Although it looks like I went for the wrong career."

The woman, now backing away from him, points at Herbert's house.

"You will hear from my lawyer if you use those photos anywhere!" he calls out, feeling like that's such a classically dumb thing to say to someone who makes her living off photos like this.

"I don't think I'm your biggest problem, hon,"—she says in between chewing—"Sounds to me as though you might want to check a different mailbox more regularly. Before it's overflowing from all that junk mail."

She gets into her old Mini and drives off very slowly, winking at him from behind the car window while fanatically chewing her gum.

#

Two hours after the mailbox incident, Herbert peeks between the curtains he just pulled shut. Behind the gate spires, at least five journalists plus a TV crew are hanging around. The TV journalist, a tall, skinny man with ginger hair and a stubble, has been on the phone since their van parked up across the street. Every now and then he glances through the fence to see if there is any movement.

Herbert startles when his own phone rings. It's another unknown number, so he blocks the caller. Walking away from the windows, he rubs his head, his face. He suddenly feels so tired, so heavy. He leans against the wall in the hall and lets himself slide down on the ground. Quietly, in the back of his mind, Janey dances her jolly bunny-hopping dance to the song 'Dance, Bunny Honey, Dance' as she tries to cheer him up. Holding her hands up behind her head like ears, she dances through the room in a series of moves and steps as if well-rehearsed. She was a great dancer and could make something crazy look awesome. When they had first heard the song play on the radio that year, she had jumped up after the first verse and had started moving. The way she had wiggled her shapely butt was both endearing and a little arousing.

He lets go of his legs and opens his phone to read the short article again.

Reports include sexually tinted comments, intimidation and the systematic creation of a culture of 'absolute fear' according to one of the accusers.

His mind swerves back to an interview he took when he and Jack were looking for a CFO in the early days. The man in question had been very senior, probably near retirement, and Jack had made no secret of his disapproval of the man's age:

"So, it says here, Robert, that you play squash." Jack had looked up from the resume, and laughed with obvious disdain, as if he pictured the man chasing the little ball while supporting himself with a walking stick. Herbert hadn't approved of the way Jack had treated this man, but he realizes now that he hadn't done much, if anything, to stop this abuse from taking place. They hadn't hired the man, even though he had an impressive resume and seemed very kind. Instead, a thirty-something year old single mom had been hired. Herbert would like to believe that her generous cup size had little to do with Jack pushing for her employment. But who is he fooling?

He drops the phone beside him. How did this happen? How to proceed from here? He desperately wishes none of it is true, but

the more he thinks about it, the less certain he is of Jack's innocence. He had always seen the edginess in Jack, the pull towards trouble, or maybe trouble pulled towards him. Jack's way with the ladies had always left question marks, but Herbert had brushed it off as social clumsiness. Such as the times when he got thrown out of The Club for stepping behind the bar to ride up against the bargirl's leg like a horny Dalmatian. Or the time when Herbert had to grease up the golf club president, to allow Jack back on the range.

"He was poking the ladies with his club, Herbert, in their - hoo ha, you know? What was I supposed to do?" The president had explained his decision to kick Jack out.

To convince him, Herbert had promised to be Jack's personal chaperon from then on. Luckily, Jack was a poor loser and after Herbert won the match between them convincingly two months later and Jack hit his club into the putting green until the area looked like an exploded minefield, they were both asked to never, ever, return please. Herbert realizes he had turned a blind eye to the unpleasant traits of his partner, but as he had been doing a fine job running Technables, it had been an agreeable deal for both.

"Are you alright?" Erik stands in front of him, hands

hanging limp - jacket wrapped around his waist, backpack strapped up high.

"Where are you going?" Herbert asks, knowing the answer but desperately hoping that he is wrong.

"Today is the day, remember? We agreed I would leave." Erik says it very matter-of-factly, as if the fact that Herbert is folded in a corner and there is an army of journalists outside is a day like any other. Erik had *told* him he was going to leave after one week.

"But look..., " Herbert points at the windows. Surely, Erik will see that now is not the time to leave? The thought of being left alone in his house, prisoned in by pen-licking leeches, terrifies him.

"Yeah," Erik says with a shrug. "I saw them from upstairs. They have no business with me. I won't say a thing, not even about my stay here, of course."

The fact that Herbert's life is upside down seems to mean little to Erik. "I don't give a shit about what you would or wouldn't say, man. Not a single shit." *As long as I don't have to face the next few days by myself.*

"Oh. Sorry." Erik has taken a tiny step back as Herbert's

tone grew more agitated.

"It was nice meeting you. A real pleasure," Herbert dismisses him. He crawls up and starts walking away from Erik, towards the library.

"I wish you all the best for your trip. I'm sure it will be a... life-changing experience. It's great when you can just walk away whenever you feel like."

Herbert has turned around and heads for the library, half expecting Erik to follow him. He might question him on that comment. Herbert knows he is being unreasonable and feels confident that this will trigger a little anger. Even though it is hard to imagine Erik angry. He stops to look at the books on his shelf, brushes his finger past some spines to clear the dust, waiting for Erik to catch up. But to his astonishment, and slight trepidation, all he hears is the door latch sliding softly into its frame. He doesn't need to look to know he is now alone. Again with nothing but ear-deafening silence to direct his state of mind.

Herbert walks around in his house as if he no longer owns it. His formal living room, the hall with eclectic sideboard, the art: it is all part of a mise-en-scène, staged to look like a home. His home has become a prison now. With that many people

at the gate, there is no way he can escape for even a walk in the park, or to go and get his weekly ice cream. For someone who has voluntarily chosen to spend this much time at home for years, he is dumbfounded at the suffocating effect this loss of freedom has on him.

By way of escaping, his troubled mind falls back on the only agreeable picture he can think of: Janey, turning around, cocktail tray in her hand, while her eyes come to reflect the recognition of someone she probably thought she would never meet again. The pull towards her had always been so, so strong - so overpowering - it took his breath away just thinking of her. She would have known what to do, she would have guided him, assured him that things were going to be ok.

"But it's not ok," he says to himself. "It is not okay at all."

He slowly makes it to the kitchen where he opens the fridge. Appreciating the cool fog on his face, he stares at the leftover grilled chicken, the container with sprouts and beans, the near-empty bottle of Chardonnay and the countless pickles and sauce and cheeses and grapes. The fridge alarm has been going for a while - two minutes? Maybe four? He shuts the door - then shrieks as a figure is standing pushed against the kitchen

sliding door, looking in at him. The figure is Erik. Herbert lets him in with more relief than he wishes to convey.

"I came the back way," Erik says, a little out of breath.

"There is a back way?" Herbert asks, surprised.

Erik holds up his hand, catching his breath. His hair has come loose and hangs in wild strands around his red cheeks.

"I was wrong," he says, panting. "Those journalists were - interested."

"Is that a leaf in your hair?"

"Yeah, I climbed," Erik says, almost irritably. "Can I ask you something?"

"I suppose," Herbert says.

"Do you want to know?"

"Do I want to know what?" Herbert wonders if he has missed something Erik may have said prior.

"About the whole thing with your partner. Do you want to know what he really did and didn't do?"

Herbert thinks about this. It's not that he needs to

consider the answer to his question, but if - hypothetically - Herbert would find out the truth about Jack, the undeniable truth, what would he do next?

What *could* he do?

He thinks about the young lady who interned at their company all those years ago, the one that was presumably attacked by Jack in the bar. Herbert had never met her but understands that she was a hardworking girl. He imagines her telling her mom or dad what happened in the bar. The shock on the parents' faces. The pain and anger. *Why has she never reported him?* Somehow he knows why. Jack would have been so intimidating that she probably told no one, not even her own parents. Herbert rubs his head. Some major knots needed untwisting, so he may as well get the answers sooner.

"Yes," he says to Erik. "I want to know."

#

Herbert and Erik are in the kitchen, where they have spent most of their time over the last week.

"I used to work at Grapital, I was their Head of IT," Erik says.

Grapital...the second largest investment firm of the country. "Those guys were all over the news recently," Herbert remembers, "They embezzled billions from their clients." The CEO and entire top-level management had been brought in for interrogation. The reporter had mentioned the way that the company's systems had some custom code written inside of them, which gradually creamed off the returns of over four hundred clients. None of the arrested managers would have had the skillset to write code like that.

"You're a hacker." Herbert fails to hide the disapproval in his tone. In his mind, hackers are the most cowardly type of criminal, hiding behind the safety of their firewalls and anonymity. He would rather learn that Erik used to be a bank robber than a hacker, but he keeps that to himself.

"I was a hacker, of sorts. They pressured me. Anyway, I left. That's behind me now."

Erik sounds as if Herbert's opinion means a lot to him, which pleases him a little. But that doesn't change the fact that Erik is a criminal. He should turn himself in.

"And now you're about to offer me to hack into my own business?" Herbert folds his arms. The idea seems rather ludicrous and could jeopardize his credibility with authorities

when things really turned pear-shaped.

"Well, technically it isn't hacking when you own the business and approve."

Erik will know every legal boundary and loophole around this subject, Herbert has no doubt. His slipper softly knocks against the base of Erik's stool as he considers this. He hasn't shown his face at the office for years and left all the hard work to Jack; isn't he to be blamed as much as Jack for things going awry? It doesn't feel right to infringe upon anyone's privacy, let alone his partner's.

But the accusations are severe and supposedly from multiple staff members. If they proceed and take this to court, the business could be in all sorts of trouble. More importantly, if Jack truly did those things to that girl, Herbert will look to personally settle the score with him.

"Ok," he says firmly.

Erik looks sideways at him in surprise. "Yeah?"

"Yes. Let's find out how deep this can of worms really is."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Uncle Elvis

Did I tell you that Janey had a daughter? Golly gosh—that girl may have had very different facial features, her character was all her mother's—eager to learn, eager to connect with people around her and sharper than my santoku knife.

For her twelfth birthday, I gave her a special edition of Jane Eyre. As soon as she had carefully removed the silky wrapping paper I had found in a specialty shop across town, her eyes had this gleam as she looked up at me. I would have traveled across the entire country for that look. "Thank you Uncle Elvis," she said.

It has been many years since she and I met face to face. As far as she is concerned, our contact has ceased; evaporated as a byproduct of the test of time. But I made my promises to her mother. And I will live up to that promise until the day I am gone. She doesn't need to know me anymore; that's fine with me. But I will protect her, will care for her, will shield her from anything or anyone. I will care for her as though she were my

own. Because she is the last family I have left. And the last connection to the best friend I have ever had.

Chapter Twenty-Three

123*

Herbert and Erik hunker down in the formal living-out of sight from the prying journalists. The curtains are closed, allowing no more but a narrow slice of sunlight where the fabric's edges meet. The large, peachy lamp shade in the corner casts a glow across their faces and Herbert would relax a little in this cocoon of secrecy if he weren't on edge about what they're about to undertake.

He is about to give a highly skilled hacker, who he has known for only one week, full access to his entire company.

Is he out of his mind?

Do circumstances truly justify what they're about to do?

Could they face a prison sentence for this?

Erik is already on the run—he may feel he has little to lose. But Herbert? There is a lot amiss with him, but so far in his miserable life, he has been able to avoid a criminal record.

He studies Erik while he works. He sits on his knees at the coffee table, the fingers of each hand moving as though they're spinning a large web on the keyboard. Despite their brief acquaintance, Herbert's gut tells him Erik can be trusted. Heck, he has trusted people with a far more questionable past than Erik. He should be grateful for having Erik by his side. Herbert hadn't been great at making close friends. Jack had been the closest he had gotten to friendship, but even before the article was published, he had known Jack had a shady side.

He just hadn't anticipated how shady this potentially was. But real friendship?

He pictures himself on the levee, Janey's arms around his neck, her soft body pressed against him. She had been his best friend and the love of his life in one package. Why do humans always let the most important people slip through their fingers, to only realize how valuable they are when it is too late?

"Did you not need my password?" Herbert leans over Erik's shoulder.

"You mean '123*'? ", Erik shakes his head while typing without interruption.

"Good guess," Herbert says. "What's that in, JavaScript?"

He knows the coding basics thanks to the paper he did at uni many years ago.

"Python."

"Of course. What do you think you'll be able to find?", he asks.

"Anything he doesn't want us to find."

Erik looks different when he is working: highly concentrated, but with a glint of pleasure in his eyes. He enjoys what he is doing, Herbert realizes. It is something Herbert hadn't ever thought about: you could be very good at something that is considered illegal yet really enjoy the work. Though he doesn't consider this a justification for the illegal act, Herbert can see how you could get yourself in a delicate position with these skills.

He must be able to flip it.

Do something more positive and preferably legal with these skills that are surely highly sought after.

"You know, I work better alone." Erik doesn't look back at him.

"Sure, sure, I will make us some coffee."

Herbert heads to the kitchen and sets himself to creating two coffees. It is a process he enjoys: the humming sound of the beans crushing, the frothing of the milk—it makes him feel useful. He looks out and is not surprised when the Mourning Dove stares back at him again.

"You like to stick around, do ya? Well, you're the only one."

He rubs his head. What if Jack is indeed the predator and narcissist that people claim he is?

Herbert pictures Jack in jail and knows that Jack would rather kill himself than to end up behind bars. Jack had always made a point about the importance of freedom. He was once caught in an elevator for three hours, stuck between the third and fourth floor, and they had to plead to prevent him from climbing out on his own. Jack had sued the elevator manufacturer the following week, and had won the case. Despite what many thought, it hadn't been about money for Jack. He was genuinely pissed that he had lost three hours of his life in an elevator. No way Jack could last three years, or more, in a cell.

But freedom isn't something Jack knows how to deal with too well either. Herbert had given him exactly that: absolute freedom to take the business forward how he saw fit. Yes,

Herbert had been providing the odd consultative feedback, but the day-to-day operation of Technables had been entirely Jack. Herbert had entrusted Jack with all that freedom and responsibility.

What if this had been the greatest mistake in his career?

By the time he walks back into the living, holding a tray with two coffee cups and some chocolate truffles, Erik looks up. "You might want to sit down for this," Erik says.

Erik has used an AI program to scan the company financials of the last ten years. It picked up a lot of payments to strange accounts, such as an amount of \$300 to a company called YPMP inc. There have been a good eighty or ninety payments to them over the years. When Erik did a search on the internet, YPMP showed the result for 'Your Pleasure My Pleasure'.

"I think you can fill in the blanks from there," Erik says, eyebrows raised. "But there are other weird transactions too. Look at these guys; on the face of things they look like they're a legit business."

Erik points at a new tab, a site called eaglecrown.com. Although the company presents itself as an import-export

business, there aren't any products shown on the website. A physical address or any way of contacting them is also missing. Erik figured it was probably a shell company, and he was right.

"I dug a little deeper and it turns out it is owned, via multiple other parties, by Russians."

Herbert swallows as he remembers a period, it must have been about ten years ago, when Jack had suddenly been sitting in the corner at lunchtime. This was highly unusual for social Jack, who didn't just like to be around people, especially Herbert, but who liked to be at the center of attention. When Herbert went over to his partner to see if he was alright, Jack had been mumbling Russian sentences, repeating the Lingrow app. Herbert had asked him why he was suddenly keen to learn Russian. "Herpes, have you seen the legs of those Russian girls? Not everything needs to be about business, you know," Jack had answered with a wink. For more than two months, Jack would isolate himself at lunchtime, practicing his Russian. When he came out of the elevator, he was practicing his Russian. When his appointment was late and he was waiting in the meeting room, he was practicing Russian. Though it had seemed like an astonishing level of dedication by Jack, Herbert had accepted that he was passionately learning a new skill and that this could only be a positive sign. Not everything needs to be about

business, Jack had reminded him. But in the end, it turned out to be exactly that.

"Want me to continue?" Erik says, seeing Herbert's pensive stare.

Herbert nods. "Please do."

"Ok," Erik says, speeding up. "I extracted all the transactions from and to this party over the last ten years and made a list, and although the numbers vary each time, they have a very clear pattern. It seems about every two or three months, a large sum went into the business account. See - October last year, \$20,000, and a week later, \$15,000 went back to Eagle Crown. That was a fairly small sum, but in January it was an amount of \$80,000 coming in, and \$60,000 went back a week later. The money coming in is from a different account, and the money going back is titled 'consultancy fees', but they end up at the same party. You're lucky the IRS hasn't picked up on this yet - but I'd say that'd be a matter of time."

Herbert sits down on the sofa, arms leaning on his thighs.

"He has been whitewashing for the Russians. Holy crap." Herbert looks at his folded hands, as if in some pointless prayer. How much of the year-on-year growth had been

overinflated due to these practices? How well is the company truly doing? Are they even making a profit?

Erik clears his throat.

"There is more. I also ran a few searches in Jack's email account and I'm afraid all the accusations are true. Have a look for yourself."

Herbert takes the laptop from Erik and goes over the emails Erik has placed in a dedicated folder called 'evidence'. There are dozens of messages that confirm Jack had been a very, very naughty boy. In one email he brags to a mate about how he 'fried that hot little chicken' good last night. It was sent the day after he allegedly had assaulted the intern girl.

Herbert's longtime friend, who owed his career to him, the friend who could eat three donuts and still ask for more, the friend who he covered for so many times, the friend who he thought would always, *always* be upfront with him about the good, the bad and the ugly. That friend forced a young woman, a *girl* for Christ's sake, into intimacy. Pushed her into a dark corner. If he hadn't been discovered, who knows what would have happened. Herbert rubs his head.

Whitewashing.

Sexual intimidation.

Assault.

If they found all this in a matter of two hours, who knows what else Jack has had up his sleeve over the years?

Herbert rests his hand on Erik's shoulder. He gently rocks Erik, as if he can sway more answers out of him, keeping his hand firmly on the shoulder. Erik lets this unusual physicality happen, still leaning on his knees. When Herbert finally lets go of Erik, his many emotions have subsided to make space for raw anger, and he speaks softly.

"Great work. You continue digging. I will pay you whatever your rate is, and I do not care what laws you have to break to get everything."

Erik wants to say something, but Herbert doesn't let him.

"Go dig to when Jack first joined the business. I want you to find every bit of dirt and build a massive file that we'll take to court."

"You realize you'd take your own company to court, in a way?"

Herbert knows and doesn't care. "I owe that much to my

staff. Can you do that for me?"

Erik looks at his backpack, parked against the sofa. "That would take days."

"I don't care if you stay for weeks, months, just find it all. Will you do that?"

Erik nods.

Chapter Twenty-Four:

Get out

"You're taking me on a date today," Amelia says as soon as Darius opens his eyes. She plants a big kiss on his lips, then gets up and—while standing on the bed—pulls the blanket and sheets off him.

"Why would I do that?"—he laughs while pulling back on the sheets—"You have already slept with me."

She jumps on top of him.

"Ok, ok!" he laughs. "Let me wake up first."

Amelia grabs the coffee she's placed on the bedside table.

"Taken care of," she says. She is acting more cheerful than she feels but is desperate to get out of the house. Her phone has been red-hot for the last 48 hours, with journalists from other papers and channels trying to get hold of her. Her social media accounts have been overrun by complete strangers. She isn't worried about the crude comments made by Jack's tech-buddies but is dying to find a distraction.

"Where're you taking me today?" Amelia says later at the breakfast table.

Darius takes a bite of toast with chocolate and strawberries. A little chocolate is left on his lip and she ignores the urge to lick it off.

"I may have the perfect place," he says.

#

Darius covers her eyes with his soft, large hand as they enter a building. It is warm inside and once tickets have been purchased, they go through some doors where the temperature is even higher. The air smells musty and humid, how she'd imagine a tropical rainforest would smell.

"Mind your steps right there," Darius says. "Just a little further."

When he removes his hand, they are standing in a tearoom shaped like a dome and entirely made of glass. On the other side of the glass an underwater world is minding its own business: an impressive array of fish in cobalt-blue, lime and bright pink swim casually amongst sharks and stingrays. The corners of the aquarium have been designed with elevated, sheltered spaces like a coral reef and the back walls are a feast of climbing shrubs.

"Do you like it?" Darius asks.

She looks at him. "You kidding?"

"I know this week has been a little intense for you. So I thought I'd take you somewhere you could relax."

"It is beautiful."

And for a moment, she is *just* happy. She is in a wonderful place with a wonderful man and that's all she wants.

They sit at a small round table and enjoy the finger sandwiches and scones as a young woman fills their teacup.

"So, your phone hasn't been going as crazy anymore like yesterday. That's a relief," Darius says. His finger strokes the back of her hand.

"That's because I have notifications silenced." Amelia shows him her screen, where her mail app and several social media apps are showing incoming notifications in the hundreds.

"Shit, that's crazy. Who are all these people?" He shuffles in his chair and toys with his grandma's ring.

Amelia shrugs.

"Journalists. Jack's buddies. But mostly complete strangers. They've all been very flattering. One called me a 'gossipmonger'. Another 'Karen'. Someone even said I was 'a cunt who needs some ass herself'. People get very creative."

Darius looks around, as if some of those people calling her names could be right next to them. "I don't get that you remain so calm. It makes my blood boil hearing that shit." His fingers are now tightly woven through hers.

"Really? Don't you see and hear shit like that every day at work?" She frees her hand and spreads some cream on her scone before taking a large bite.

"Yes, but that's purely work-related. None of that is about the girl that I..."—he swallows—"like. Like very much."

"Well, the girl you like very much has seen worse. I can handle it."

"I know you will. But it's still concerning."

She could get annoyed with his overprotective views. But here is this gorgeous guy, a good guy who hardly knows her, fussing over her wellbeing.

"Last night was fun," she says to change the subject.

He grins and nods. "Fun? Girl, that's an understatement."

Chapter Twenty-Five:

Bystanders

The air is still on Monday evening—a stark contrast to the turbulence inside Vic. She looks at her watch and swears; she is ten minutes late. Her hand searches for the doorknob in the dark, further complicated by the strange spots that have been slipping into her vision of late. She should probably eat a little better. Sleep a little more.

Don't worry. It will pass.

If only this Jack scum hadn't crept into her head so much. She has always kept a distance between her own mind and the assailants they target. An almost businesslike approach. But something is different about Jack. During the attack, he quickly managed to switch roles and transform back into an alpha, and she almost let him.

"Oh, what I'd do to you, Viccie-girl."

Despite her very successful karate move, which had grown their online following by 23% in one weekend, Jack's words had

left her feeling... uneasy.

You clearly need to be reminded of who is at the top of the food chain.

She wants to take this guy down, and anyone who is on his side. Neither Jack nor the company CEO Herbert Alewine have provided any comment or explanation.

Which is why it is time to extend their operations.

She walks through the little hall and into their secret space, where the lights instantly turn on and the entire crew cheers aloud: "Happy Birthday Vic!"

The bright lights, the girl's shimmering dresses and her optic blurs gravitate towards each other. Their singing screeches in her ear drums. Cold sweat runs down her spine. She tries to make out the girl's faces, but there are too many blind spots surrounded by colors of the rainbow.

"I forgot my own birthday," Vic mumbles. Then her head hits something hard, and everything turns black and still.

#

Hushed whispers right by her ear. She is lying on a hard surface. Scratches in the wood by her hand. All those names.

All those women. So powerless.

They are all so powerless, mum. Can we turn back time, just for this once? I miss you more than life itself. Please, mum? Can you come back? This world is so cold without you. I'm so cold without you.

Vic squints; her eyelids ajar as they adjust, reducing the inky lights back to stars on the ceiling.

"Hey. You alright?" It is Maya above her.

What the hell is she doing here on this table?

Vic jerks up, ignoring the hot rush of nausea nearly knocking her back down.

"Shit. Sorry, guys. I forgot to have lunch today."

Vic stares at a cake waiting at the end of her feet. It is shaped like a dog's bone and loaded with candles, which have burned down a good two-thirds and have started leaking onto the fondant.

"Whoa, slow down," Lizzy says. Her eyes are pure as a

summer's sky.

Vic brushes Lizzy's hand off her chest.

"We have work to do!"—her voice is louder than is necessary, but the girls congregate around her as she steps in front of the whiteboard. Her steps still uneven, she moves as little as she must. "I have thought about things and realized something."

The girls look at each other, confused by her swift metamorphosis.

"I'm fine guys, seriously. Turns out my superpowers do need some nourishment every now and then. I'm good."

The girls nod, though Vic can see they aren't entirely convinced. She'd better keep her shit together from now on.

"We always focus on the offender, which makes sense," Vic says, "but in many cases, there are bystanders, people who have witnessed the abuse and did absolutely nothing to help. I feel these people need to be reminded of their roles as citizens just as much. We need to show them that it is unacceptable to allow for any form of abuse to happen."

"Shit yeah!" Nicky says, and they all laugh.

Vic raises her index finger—"Which brings me to Technables. We gave Jack Payne what he deserved, but the CEO of the company has offered no comment whatsoever since the article came out. He refuses to get involved. I say if he doesn't care, we'll make him."

On the table, she unrolls the map of his property and house. She has drawn it herself with the help of Google Maps and some property records she was able to pull from the county database. It had been surprisingly satisfying.

"We're going to his *house*?" Pam says, hesitant.

Vic nods. "The guy hardly leaves his place. We'll do it at night." Her research had shown that Herbert is a rich guy who only cares about the dollars coming in while he kicks back at his mansion. Meanwhile, his staff is bullied and assaulted.

"He hired Jack many years ago. Coached him into being his righthand man. Then he stepped back and let Jack take full control. And Jack got out of fucking control." Vic pauses to let her crew process this information.

Samira plants her hands in her sides. "Herbert would have known the kind of person Jack truly is, after having worked with him for so many years. And now he hides in his big house, like a

coward."

"Exactly," Vic says.

She points out on the map where they will climb over the wall and where they will enter the grounds.

"The gates have been locked since the article was published, but the wall has thick creepers here and here. Climbing over will be a breeze," she says, hiding her nerves. They have always kept their attacks within the public domain and never gone to anyone's private property like this. She needs to consider the risks for the girls more than for herself.

"What is your plan?" Maya asks. This lady would follow her through hellfire if she needed her to, Vic knows.

Way more loyalty than she deserves.

Vic holds up a smoke cannon in her left, a canister in her right.

"Is that teargas?" Samira says, dark eyes large with excitement as if it is confetti.

Vic nods. "My exit strategy."

She looks at the girls, one at a time. Takes in their

young, pretty faces. A mix of apprehension and pure thrill in their eyes.

And in that moment, she decides. She will not allow them to follow her inside that house. She will go alone. But she doesn't tell them. Not just yet.

Lizzy fist bumps the air several times. "Bad ass."

"Can I have some for my ex, please?" Nicky says.

Vic isn't sure if that's a good idea. "But you can have some cake?"

They cheer and gather around the table to claim their piece of bone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Entering the Night

Les Chiennes arrive at Oak Tree Lane shortly after 11 pm. Vic lets the girls jump out of the van before softly pushing the door shut. Adjusting to their eerie surroundings the girls only dare to whisper.

Vic rests her hand on the old-fashioned streetlamp and looks up. By night, the street seems to transform. Its oak trees turn into wiry, capricious creatures. The hazy fog mingles with the golden radiance from the streetlights, creating a gloomy picture. *Gloomy and yet beautiful.*

"This must be what loneliness looks like," Maeve says *softly* as she puts her arm around Vic.

Vic nods, struggling to peel her eyes away from the trees.

"What was the number again, Vic?', Maya asks.

"508"— Vic starts walking—There.". Her muscles are tight. Perhaps they're ready for the upcoming action. Or perhaps she is

still sore from her fall earlier that day. She rubs the bump on her head. It is tender, reminding her that she's only human.

But what human being forgets her own birthday?

They huddle closer to each other as the breeze picks up: it surrounds them by a whirlwind of leaves being swept in cone-shaped twisters. Clusters of them are getting caught in between the base of the gate spires that shield Herbert's property from trespassers.

"This street is freaking me out," Samira whispers. She plucks at the rim of her hijab and scans both sides of the lane to make sure nobody can witness what they're about to do.

"Have people vanished?" Nicky says.

"They have been taken by Aisha Qandicha, I'm telling you," Samira replies.

"Aisha who?" Nicky asks.

"Aisha Qandicha. She is a beautiful young woman, with legs like a goat. They say she lives near water and seduces local men, drives them mad. Then kills them."

"I like her already," Maya says.

Vic holds her hands up straight on either side of her face; the sign to grab their dog masks, then they cross the street. Vic assesses the high fence. She has been scouting the street a couple times already but must admit it does look like a bigger challenge at night. Most of the estates they manage to spot behind their wrought iron fences have the lights out or shutters closed. Somewhere from within one of the neighboring houses, a dog barks once—as if by mistake. She imagines most people are in bed by 9 pm. Rich old people are predictable.

They peer through the fence of 508. Downstairs, a faint light glows from the back of the house somewhere, upstairs is nothing but darkness.

"They say it's an architectural masterpiece," Samira says.

"It's a box," Maeve says.

"A very large, expensive box," Lizzy adds.

"They say he hardly ever leaves," Samira continues.

"What to do all day? It'd drive me mad," Lizzy says. The others beside her stare at her before erupting in a soft chortle.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" It's Pam, overthinking

and questioning as usual.

"Shit yeah, this is pure adrenalin!" Lizzy bounces.

"If adrenalin is what you're after, go bungee jump," Pam says, sulky. Her head rests against the iron fence spire.

"This is better. Nobody has experiences like us," Lizzy whispers mysteriously.

"Maybe go and interrogate a few figures in prison. They'll have—"

"Pam, that's enough," Vic cuts her short. "You're here, aren't you? And anyway, I'm the only one going inside. You all stay on the fence pillars, don't follow me."

The girls all look at her in utter disbelief, then erupt in protest.

"You can't go in all alone, that's nuts!" Nicky points at her forehead.

"Wanting all the action for yourself, Mh, sadiqa?" Samira folds her arms.

The voices rise to frustrated whispers, being carried in the wind.

"Shush! Enough," says Vic. "Look, I have decided. Take your positions."

The girls murmur some more, but do as she asked.

Maya, Nicky, Lizzy and Pam group at the first creeper, the rest gathers around the second, close to the corner of the property. Vic rotates her thumb in the air, her question whether everyone is ready, and they all bounce their thumbs at her in reply. One by one, they climb the creepers and pull themselves on top of the stone pillars connecting the fence.

"Ya Allah, this lawn is like a football field!" Samira says.

"I just want to roll around on it," Nicky says.

"You truly are a dog," whispers Maeve.

"Alright, I'm off girls - see you in a while," Vic says. She carefully positions the respirator mask and safety glasses on her face and climbs down onto the property. Her red hair briefly flames as the lights along the grass edges illuminate her from below, but she quickly moves back into the shadows as she crosses the lawn. The rain pipes are no game for her and she enjoys climbing up, like a nimble goat, before slipping through an open window.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Burn

The sound of distant metal clanks jolts Herbert upright in bed. The clanking bounces until it rolls, and is followed by a soft whizz.

"Erik?"

Not an ounce of light sneaks through the gap between the curtains. Perhaps his friend has gone downstairs feeling thirsty and wanting a Dr Pepper from the fridge.

Except, they don't have Dr Pepper. Or Fanta. Or any fizzy drinks for that matter.

His door opens a tad, and Herbert's fingers dig into the sheets. A gloved hand appears in the rim of hallway light. A bizarre sight. The doorpost. The door. And then this black gloved hand. Like a puppeteer who has lost his puppet. A terrifying puppeteer.

The hand throws a silvery can into his room. The can rolls in an arch towards his bed, releasing a smoke that instantly attacks his skin. His eyes.

His eyes!

The burn makes him want to scratch them out. He drops himself off the bed, detects his phone in the dark, and stumbles to his feet. Blinded by the charring pain, he feels his way along the edge of his bed.

"Erik! Intruder!"

He should have taken the security guy more seriously. *This system can monitor your home 24/7. You can sleep in peace at night, knowing the alarm will sound before an intruder has even had a chance to make it inside.*

Herbert had answered he slept fine already and wished the guy a good day.

Not such a good day today.

His breath wheezes—the chemicals in the air have already attacked his lungs. He makes it through the doorway. Faint light filters through the slivered openings of his eyes. Tears are flowing like he has never experienced before.

I need to get outside. Need air.

He doesn't care what this intruder wants. He can take it all. And if the intruder wanted to attack him physically, Herbert would already be dead by now.

His hand drifts along the railing and rushes when he identifies another figure emerging from the smoke. "Erik!"

His friend is coughing incessantly—his hand rubbing his eyes.

"Herbert, you alright? What in the hell is happening?"

"Not sure. Let's get out of here."—Herbert sneezes three times—"Or my eyes will liquify."

Supporting each other as well as they can, they start descending the winding stairway. The ache largely forces Herbert to keep his eyes shut. When he does open them for a brief moment, a person is standing at the bottom of the stairway, by the open door.

It's a woman. The cool moonlight reveals bright red hair.
That will help the police investigation.

Her face is covered by a gas mask contraption. But her posture seems hesitant. She looks up at the two men, then at the last canister, spinning through the hall as it releases its chemical compounds in a toxic mist. Then, the woman picks up the large Chinese vase on the sideboard and plants it facedown over the teargas canister. The gas instantly stops spreading.

Why would she do that? Did she regret attacking them?

"Rinse your eyes with water for a good fifteen minutes," the woman says to him. Then she runs out, leaving them to fend for themselves. Both in agony, the only place they wish to be is outside. Erik is now hanging heavily in Herbert's arms, his head hung sideways as he vomits.

"Nearly there, come on," Herbert says. He can't help but feel responsible for the atrocities Erik is faced with. It fills him with shame that his guest is hanging on his arm like a dying bird.

They stagger down the porch steps and onto the lawn, where they drop themselves.

"Are those-dogs?" Erik says in between the gurgles coming from the back of his throat.

Herbert ignores the blinding pain and peers through his tears. Several women are sitting on the fence pillars surrounding his property. They wear masks shaped like dog heads.

And then he remembers. The news—sometime last year. How this group of activists had attacked a government official accused of assaulting his secretary. But the women aren't attacking. They are just looking at them, joined by the redhead. Then, upon her signal, they jump back onto the street and vanish.

Chapter Twenty-Eight:

Many Faces

The shrill ring of the doorbell draws Amelia from her deep sleep. She jumps out of bed and pops on an oversized T-shirt and shorts that she pulls from the washing basket before rushing to the front door. The bell continues to shriek in her ears as she approaches.

"Yeah, on my way!" she calls out.

She peers through the peek hole, looking straight at the amplified oval chubbiness of the Otter from next door. Of all people, that woman is at the bottom of the list of people she'd want to see. She always tends to stick her stubby nose where it shouldn't go.

Amelia opens the door, keeping her face neutral at best.

"Yes?"—She knows there will be no exchanging pleasantries.

"Are you...having company?" The Otter looks over Amelia's shoulder and Amelia closes the door further, leaving just enough

space to interact.

"Can I help you with anything? Any news from your husband?"
The woman's husband had disappeared about four months ago. The entire apartment block knew that same week. A great way to shorten the conversation.

The woman straightens her back, now an Angry Otter.

"I wanted to ask you about last night," she bites.

"Yes?" Amelia's head rests against the doorframe, already tired of her. Otter fatigue.

"Did you happen to hear anything? It was at 11:37 pm."

"11:37?" Amelia asks with a sigh. Who in their right mind keeps track of time in such detail?

"Yes, I know because I wrote it down on my notepad." Mrs Stout almost looks proud. She has done her homework. "I keep it beside my bed, you see, just in case."

"In case you hear strange noises?"

"Well, yes, no.."

"I haven't heard anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Oh, right then." The Otter stays where she is.

"Anything else?" Amelia asks. She further reduces the space the door leaves for them to talk.

The woman twiddles her thumbs. "I guess not. So you haven't heard anything? Did you see anything?"

Yes, she saw a giant turtle crawl up the stairs last night. Or it may have been an army of Chinese warriors. Or was it an oversized evil bunny holding a golden carrot?

"Nope," Amelia says, knowing better than to stir the pot.

"May I ask, Miss Amelia, just to be certain, at what time you came home last night?"

"You shouldn't really, and I am most certainly not obliged to answer," Amelia answers with the last bit of patience she has left, "however, I came home a little after 5:30 pm. I had an omelet for dinner, then did another half hour of work, right at my little coffee table, while I replayed an episode of Dr. Strange, fed my dog,"—she points at Dewey at her feet—"and went to bed. That would have been just on 10 pm. Do forgive me, I am

a very deep sleeper. As you would have noticed when you were ringing my doorbell as if your life depended on it."

The Otter blinks her eyes in quick succession and takes a tiny step back.

"Ok, yes, of course,"—she attempts to collect herself.
"Well then. I will go."

'You do that.'

Amelia doesn't wait for the woman to turn around and slams the door shut. She rubs her head and looks at the bottle of Paracetamol on the kitchen bar. *Let's wait a little, it may fade.*

To her frustration, the doorbell rings again. She gets up and yanks the door open, knowing the Otter has thought of another way to drive her bananas.

But to Amelia's horror, the slick face of Jack Payne looks back at her. She quickly wants to slam the door, but he has come prepared and sticks a long crowbar between the door and its frame—releasing a crunch of wood.

"Hi Amelia, I thought I'd drop by," he says with a false grin.

"What do you want?"

"Ain't it trippin' how you and I never really met, and yet it feels like I know you. Or you seem to think you know me."

She doesn't answer.

"I won't be long. *Trust me.*"

His eyes tell her the opposite.

"I figured an ambitious woman like you, with a shining journalistic career ahead of you, would make time for a little *tête-à-tête* with a driven businessman like myself."

"Not interested," she says, and tries to jerk the door out of his grip. Her mind frenzies through questions of survival. Where is her phone? How quickly could someone reach her if she'd call for help? Can the Otter hear her?

"You may want to listen first," Jack says, seemingly calm. "Isn't that what journalism is about? Listening to *all* sides of the story? You see, I care about one thing only: the business. Every second of every minute I spend thinking of ways to make it better, bigger, more profitable. It's a big responsibility, you know. Day and night, I carry that burden in my backpack."—He pumps his fist down in the air—"And here comes this *shitty*

little bitch with a pen and a mouth and throws a few more bricks into that backpack. It's not your business to stick your nose in my backpack, you know? It's *my* business."

He is leaning so far forward that his rank coffee breath wafts in her face, flying up the loose hairs on her forehead.

"Seems to me your backpack holds a lot of items that don't belong to you in the first place," she says, firmly holding on to the doorframe. She braces herself for the possibility that he will, at some point, get physical.

But he looks over her head, into the living room, and his face brightens up - even looks a little excited. Keeping all her weight against the door, Amelia looks over her shoulder to whatever Jack has spotted and her chest tightens.

There, about thirteen feet from them by the desk.

On the desk chair.

Her alterego.

Her escape and vengeance in one.

Her red wig.

She turns, considering to headbutt him away from her door.

But a familiar voice resounds to them from the hall.

"What's going on here?"

Relief washes over her as Darius reaches the top of the stairs and walks up to Jack. He seems calm, but his eyes quickly dart between her and Jack, assessing the situation.

Never has she been happier to see someone.

"This is Jack Payne." She knows that's all she needs to say. Darius now stands next to Jack and spots the crowbar between the door. His gaze crosses Jack's, who instantly removes the crowbar.

"You troubling this amazing woman?"

Jack's Adam's apple travels up and down. "No way, my man," he says with a slick smile. He steps back from the door—hands up in the air. "I got what I needed. *More*, actually."

Jack returns his focus to Amelia. "Amazing she is, alright. A woman with so much potential. So many *faces*." He grins, winks at her, and skitters down the stairs while whistling a happy tune.

"I should have kicked his ass."

Darius holds Amelia as they're standing closely together in her apartment. His musky scent and his strong arms would console anyone. But not her.

Not today.

Because where they head, what will happen with them next, all depends on how efficiently she can eliminate the one item in the room that excited Jack so much.

"Your timing was fantastic," she mumbles against his warm chest.

"For sure. I was just dying to see you. Luckily, I acted upon that urge. We need to sort a restraining order. That man is dangerous. You can see it in his cooky eyes."

Amelia wriggles loose. "No, no need for that. I can take him."

His frown is only brief but tells all. "Are you kidding? He was practically *inside* your apartment."

"He was at the door."

"I'm not going there, Amelia. This is not up for debate."

"Don't treat me like a child."

"Then don't act like one." They both take a breather, realizing things are getting too heated.

"What was he talking about anyway?"

Amelia sits down on her couch, massaging her temples.

"Hey, you ok? Headache again?" Darius sits down next to her, his hand on her back.

She nods. "Could you please grab me some painkillers? The aspirins? The ones on the counter don't seem to work."

He nods and walks into the kitchen, where he opens the pantry. While Darius is facing away from her, Amelia gets up and grabs the red wig off her desk chair. She fumbles it into a bundle and heads for her bedroom.

"Is this the one you wanted?" Darius sticks his head around the corner just as she is stuffing the wig into a sports bag on the ground.

"What's that?", he asks.

"Nothing. Just my mess. Yeah, that's the aspirin." She gets up and takes the bottle from him. "Thanks."

Amelia walks back into the living room where she intends to fill a glass of water, but Darius hasn't followed her back.

"You coming?"—huge thuds in her chest that reverberate in her temples. *Please. Please don't let him look.*

It seems forever before Darius returns. "So *this* is why Jack pissed off in such a good mood?" He looks at the red wig in his hand as if he doesn't know what he is looking at. Then he throws it on the bar in front of her. "Please tell me I'm making the wrong assumptions."

"You're making the wrong assumptions."

"Right. So, you are not leading a small terrorist cell attacking men who are accused of assaulting women? What a relief"—he gestures in the air, as if to an audience.

"It's not a terrorist cell. *They're* the fucking terrorists." She points at the door as if the terrorists are huddled up on the other side.

Darius bends his large torso in frustration. "So sorry I was off on the terminology. You call yourselves activists. How could I forget? I knew I had seen that tattoo of yours somewhere."

Amelia feels herself further and further removed from this man, whom she liked-loved, maybe even-until this moment.

"Extreme shitheads require extreme measures."

Darius approaches her and she'd wish he wouldn't. "Look, I know. But you've got to leave it up to the police. It is *our* job."

"Well, you guys are failing your job. Every day."

"Fuck you, Amelia. As if throwing shit is going to change the world."

"YES! YES, IT WILL!"

All the anger, all the sorrow, wants out.

Needs out.

"My own mother was raped by a fucking cop! OK! A COP! So don't tell me anything about who should enforce the law."

Darius drops his hands, and she can't bear to look at him for another second. She turns and walks to the window, where she stares across the rust and grey rooftops, the trees, and the people in the streets on their way to their meaningless lives.

"They found a tiny piece of ripped fabric at the crime

scene." She doesn't bother to control her quivering voice.

"You'd think that would have sealed the deal, that they would have been able to arrest the guy promptly. Just look for the cop with a rip in his uniform, right? Well, NO. That never fucking happened." Her hand rests on the window, as if her mother is *just* there, on the other side, and she can almost touch her.

"Meanwhile, my mother slowly crumbled away inside herself. Became less and less accessible, even to me. Until the cancer took the last bit of her. Now you're telling me I can't throw shit at guys like that?"

"No, I do—"

"Guys who think they can just rip the essence of a strong woman from her soul?"—her flat hand slams against the window—
"What I do is only a fraction of what I *want* to do to them. And maybe that is exactly it. Maybe I have only just started. No fucking man—or woman—will stand in my way. Especially not some fucking cop."

They look at each other. The words cannot be unsaid. The air cannot be cleared between them. But she doesn't give a fuck.

She turns swiftly and walks over to the bar. Places the wig

over her own hair in an act of defiance.

"I'm not ashamed. For anyone. Let the fucking world know.
Amelia is Vic. I'm Vic."

Darius sits down at the bar, studying her. After a long silence, he folds his hands together. "I could lose my job over this. They're looking for you. And know it is a matter of time. But they won't hear it from me. Because no matter how screwed up you are, I love you like crazy."

And just like that, he has cleared the air. He doesn't just compromise; he sacrifices. Because she simply won't.

Chapter Twenty-Nine:

Elvis and Colors

Janey tried to teach me about good and evil—and all the shades in between. Especially when we discussed my parents. My dad had ignored the fact that I'm gay for all those years. And I guess I let him. So when I appeared at his doorstep that Sunday morning, a twenty-two-year-old lanky dude holding the hand of a stunning thirty-something-year-old man with hair black as coal and eyes blue as larimar gemstones, he didn't drop his act. He mumbled something about an "unexpected visit" and "your mother wasn't prepared".

"But Dad, I rang over a week ago," I said. I *had* called him and said I'd bring someone. That was the only information I had provided. I guess a small part of me had decided to play along with my father's "game" and ignore the fact that I was bringing a male and that he was my date.

But my dad would not budge.

We had no other option but to turn around and make our way

back past the Dahlias to my secondhand Ford Pinto. A walk of shame.

Dad surprised me with a phone call that following week. I remember picking up with a sense of relief—surely he was ringing to apologize. To explain that he had been a little surprised to see me with a guy. But that he loved me as I was, and that the two of us were warmly invited to Sunday tea.

What a dreamer I was.

"Your mother and I think it is best if you don't visit for a while. Until some of that silly business you got yourself into has blown over. I mean, until you have found a friend of a better...age."

It is hard enough to come out yourself. But when your parents try—with all their might—to force you back into that bloody closet? It sucks all colors out of your world.

But Janey was there to blow new colors back into it, like a genie from my own happiness bottle. She held me tight, squeezing me so firmly that the broiling tears simply dissipated. Once she'd calmed me down like that we spoke. I remember saying that my dad was a bad man like all the others, the more outspoken ones.

She had shaken her head, squeezing my hand. "No sweetheart, none of us are all good or all bad, all we can do is try to be the best we can be."

"Well, he isn't even trying," I replied.

"You might be wrong," she said. "He probably just has a very different definition of good and bad. He will need time to adjust his definition. Give it time."

She was incredible like that. At that moment, I *wanted* to believe her. So I did. And I felt so much lighter afterwards.

But this was all before the event that ripped my beautiful princess in half. Before the day that was the beginning of her end. I respected her so much for her optimism, loved her for it. But it turned out I had been right: my father never spoke to me again. My mother only spoke to me occasionally, behind my father's back. As far as he was concerned, I had lost my humanity—turned into something else. But he was the one who abolished his own son, and in doing so, abolished his own humanity.

People don't change, do they?

Unless they're forced to do so.

Chapter Thirty:

The Scheme

Herbert slops the mop back into the soapy water. The oily residue stays on top, drawing into little droplets in between foamy icebergs.

The bizarre events of last night replay in his mind. Les Chiennes are known to attack men accused of sexual assault, so why attack Herbert and Erik? It seems Herbert isn't the only one who feels he is equally responsible for what has happened.

He adjusts the ski mask he is wearing to protect his eyes from further eye irritation and as he does, his eye is drawn to the Lojas painting. It is tilted leftwards—they must have knocked it in the dark last night. He straightens the painting with care and precision, then steals a look.

She'd only been a girl when he met Janey, and he'd only been a boy. But he knew it would be a good year when she moved in next door. One day he followed her to the corner store, and she called him a creep. Then she pissed off the grumpy store

owner and they both ran home, laughing all the way. She was the first and last person who had been able to outrun him. *She had outrun him in every way.*

A breeze rushes through the hall: they have opened every door, every window, in an attempt to get rid of the peppery stench. The mop yarn sloshes left to right and despite the mess, the sleep deprivation and the pain, Herbert doesn't mind the cleanup. He has always enjoyed physical tasks as they draw the mind away from complicated matters. Although right now, he has a lot to think through. The methods of Les Chiennes are unconventional, but at least these women are doing *something*. They are acting against an injustice, and he can only respect that. What has *he* done so far?

A gust of wind sucks through the hall, lifting a pile of papers from the sideboard. They flick up in the air, spreading like feathers from a pillow, before sliding across the floor. Herbert lifts his ski mask to his forehead and starts picking up the papers when Erik returns from the kitchen with a cloth. He drops this as soon as he sees the sheets spread across the floor.

"Oops. I got this," Erik says and reaches out to take the remaining sheets from Herbert.

"What are these?" Herbert asks, looking at the documents in his hand.

Erik brushes it off. "Oh, just a couple of printouts I made of my research."

Herbert studies the top sheet and instantly spots his name. *Why has he not seen these before?*

"Of emails?" he asks, unsettled. He has asked Erik to do the research for him and dig up anything he could. So why would Erik withhold information? Somewhere deep inside of him, something warns him to brace himself.

Erik hops from his left to his right foot, then back to the left. "Yeah, I was going to discuss them further with you. But it can wait. We have a lot on our mind." Erik points at the mop as if it is a physical obstacle to overcome. His fingers have closed around the pile of documents and gently pull, but Herbert doesn't let go. He has no intention of letting go of the puzzle pieces that make up his past. The pieces that can help him solve the present.

His eyes catch Jack's name, as well as their Chairman August, on the top sheet. He had always known those two got on well. But then why are the acids in his stomach starting to

churn?

"Give me that!" Herbert says and yanks the papers from Erik.

"Hey—" Erik points behind him. "—shall I do the rest of the mopping? We really should get the place cleaned up."

Herbert doesn't reply.

Herbert is reading.

The email is dated April 17, 1985.

A month after he and Janey met again.

Erik's voice has shifted to the background. Nothing he says will stop Herbert from processing the words he reads:

August,

Great to hear from you and man, St. Tropez, you lucky punk! Always wanted to go there. Better get this business humming pronto so I can take a well-deserved break myself.

Anyhow, quick update for ya. Our scheme worked wonders, better than anticipated! The escort we hired did a

*marvelous job (I may have to invite her again sometime;-))
and the photos of H and her were sent to the girl. I take
it she wasn't impressed.*

*I intercepted her letter on said news; it went
straight to the paper shredder; I even wrote her an answer
myself. Remind me to read it to you once, it's a work of
literature!*

*You dealt the final blow by having her evicted from
the apartment. Connections are key! He'd have to try very
hard to track her down now. Knowing Herbert, he will accept
his losses and move on.*

All the best,

J

Herbert reads it again. And again. Nothing in the message
makes sense to him. *I intercepted her letter on said news.* What
letter? What news?

He remembers a lady who was accompanying Jack when they had
his employment party at the bar. She had been incredibly
flirtatious with Herbert the entire night. Eventually, he asked

Jack if he could keep his date on a leash. It wasn't a surprising event. Jack was often surrounded by ladies of all walks of life, with a variety of intentions. Had someone taken photos that night? Sent them to Janey?

The papers drop to the floor.

Erik is close to him. "Hey, are you alright?"

Of course I'm not alright.

Herbert rubs his head and starts making his way to the bathroom. Jack's words are now punching into his skull. *You dealt the final blow by having her evicted from the apartment.* Suddenly, he finds himself back at her doorstep. As if it happened yesterday. The man with long hair and a parrot on his shoulder who opened the door. No, he hadn't seen any girl named Janey. He had moved in the week prior. It had all happened real fast, the guy said, "Real fast," the parrot repeated.

Herbert tries to focus as the concrete floor blobs and bulges uncontrollably. The toilet is only steps away; he can make it.

He will accept his losses and move on. That's exactly what he had done. Meanwhile, Janey hadn't rejected him at all. She may have wanted to be with him. She may even want to be with him

today!

His forehead and his back - they're so sweaty yet so cold. Erik says something, but a high-pitched ringing in his ears overrules everything else. He speeds up his shuffle now and reaches the toilet just in time.

Leaving the door open, he collapses over the seat as his body takes over and offloads a broth of banana, cereal, yogurt, coffee, and dried cranberries. Primitive, gurgling sounds escape his throat and he isn't sure if these are the result of his physical state alone. Sweat squeezes out of his pores, mixing with the tears that follow the path of his nose. He rasps and spits a few more times, despising the acid burn in his throat and chest. Sinking onto the tiles, his mind focuses on the cold, solid foundation beneath him. He is empty, left with nothing but the notion of utter betrayal.

"You ok?" Erik has been standing outside the toilet throughout this ordeal, and eventually sticks out his hand, helping him back up.

Herbert shakes his head. "My throat feels like a science lab." -then he remembers Erik's involvement-"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Erik's shoulders and chest rise defensively. "I wanted to. But then we got attacked by a redhead with teargas. And then I thought you had enough on your plate."

Herbert slams the toilet door behind himself. "Not your choice to make."

Erik plants his fists in his sides. "Hang on a minute. I never chose for ANY of this. I stayed here because you wanted me to. I broke my one rule about never ever hacking again—because of you. Oh, AND I got attacked by teargas because of YOU, or your partner anyway."

Herbert nods.

Of course it isn't fair to blame any of this on Erik. He wouldn't know how to deal with the situation if it weren't for him. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Erik blinks a few times. "Oh. It's ok."

Neither of them knows what to say for a moment.

"What now?" Erik asks.

Herbert rubs his head. "Time to make some decisions I should have made a long time ago."

Chapter 31:

Not So Secret

At headquarters, Vic chews on the skin on either side of her nails, which is still red and stubby; with little crusts where the skin is trying to heal. The light, the chatter of the girls—it all seems more intense today. Do they *have* to be so loud in discussing their attack on Herbert three days ago?

"Samira, you climb like a cat, I don't know how you got up that wall so quickly!" Lizzy says.

Samira shakes her head—dangling the decoration on her hijab pin. "Me? Did you see Vic? I blinked and she'd disappeared through that window. Serious spy shit!"

Nicky grins. "She looked terrifying too with that gas mask. Fucking Hannibal Lecter's niece. I nearly shat myself."

"Glad you didn't," says Maya.

Vic, partly shielded from the girls' vision in the desk alcove, searches for her aspirins in her bag. She pops three out of their casing. *Had she taken three this morning?* She can't remember and swallows the grainy things dry.

That morning hadn't been off to a great start. Now that Darius knows who she is, he continues to look at her with these searching eyes. And this morning, when she walked out the door to go to work and told him she'd be home late, that he shouldn't come by tonight, he seemed near tears. But all he said was: "Please, be careful."

But the biggest problem is Jack—him now knowing she is Amelia. What will he do with this knowledge? Somehow, she doesn't expect him to take it to the police. He isn't the type to take the path of the law, and besides, he is under investigation himself. She gazes across to the girls joking around. Best not to tell them. It would just cause unnecessary worries.

"Hey Vic, who's next?" Lizzy wants to know.

"Mh? Next?"

"Yeah," Lizzy goes on. "Our next target."

Vic rubs her tired eyes. She hasn't given any thought to a next target. Truth is, she is barely keeping her head above water as it stands.

"You must be thinking of your secret admirer, mh?" Samira winks at her in that playful way.

"What secret admirer?" Vic asks. *Do they know she is seeing a cop? How could they?*

Samira points at a bunch of roses in the corner. She thought Vic had already seen it. "I didn't open the little envelope," she says. "It has your name."

The girls exchange glances. Vic walks over to the corner, where the huge bunch of red roses in cellophane rests in a bucket of water. There must be at least fifty of them. Their velvety leaves have partly unfolded—they're stunning.

Vic crunches down. Her name has been scribbled on the tiny envelope. A messy, hasty handwriting—not the swirly curls she knows the hand of Darius produces. She pulls out the small note.

They always rave about red roses - them being a symbol of romance and all. I never quite understood this. As far as mother nature is concerned, red is a color of warning. Of danger. If ignored, red can injure—or even kill. So, perhaps this is something you'll take note of. You seem like a clever girl. J.

Vic's eyes hover over the "J" for a while. She fights the urge to place her hand on the wall for support. "Who delivered these flowers? Did any of you get a look at him?"

They're all silent, then mumble they didn't.

Vic gets up, takes the bunch of roses—which she carelessly drags along the floor—and heads for the empty oil barrel that functions as their trash can. Maeve stops her in her tracks and just catches the roses.

"Those are gorgeous—surely you're not throwing them out?"

"Clearly the feelings are not mutual," says Nicky.

Vic is staring at the wall, trying to compose herself. If Jack knows who she is *and* where to find them, it means not only she is in danger, but so are the girls. She rushes to the backdoor, peers into the alley with its piss stains and dumpster, then closes the door and locks it behind herself.

When she returns, Pam is reading the note to the others. Their eyes are expanding. Worried glances in her direction. She lets Pam finish; the cat is out of the bag now. When she has, the only sound is the humming of the overhead ventilator system.

Then they all erupt.

"Who is this? Is this Jack, Vic?" Pam says.

"Obviously, genius. Who else did we attack recently whose name starts with J?" Lizzy says.

"He seems to have an appetite for us now," says Samira—but her face is serious.

"We need to stay calm."—Maya looks at Vic for backup—"He is trying to scare us." Vic *wants* to back her up. Support the one who was there from the get-go. But she struggles to focus. She wants to see their faces, but the weird color blobs seem determined to obscure their expressions.

"What if he rats us out? Goes to the cops?" Pam twiddles her thumbs.

"Do you think he will know all our names too?" Nicky says.

Vic bends over. Her hands cover her ears. She can't take this anymore, this quacking like fucking ducks.

"STOP!", she yells. "Too much. You're all talking too much. Give me a fucking second, ok?" Her hands rest on her knees as her breaths jolt in a pattern of their own.

She pictures mom, all dressed up, walking over to her on the couch. She pulls her heels off and plonks next to her. "Let's watch a movie together," she says, and wraps her arm around her shoulders.

"But your date...?" she says to mum.

"What date?" Mom plants a big kiss on her forehead and takes the remote control from her.

Those were the happy days of a different life.

Carefully, Vic rises back up. "We will have to find a different location for our headquarters. We'll cease coming here until we have." She says it as if it's a minor deviation. "That sinister little fuck isn't going to put a halt to Les Chiennes. But he *is* inviting us to get real—so *let's*. Time I have a *serious chat* to Jack Payne."

Her head goes *Thud, Thud, Thud*, like a pile driver at a construction site. Colors float around the room as if she has taken LSD.

But she ignores it.

Because that is what you do in times of war.

PART 3:

KILLER INSTINCTS

In 2018, Banksy's "Girl with Balloon" sold for \$1.4M before
the painting part-shredded itself.

In 2021, the same painting sold for \$25.4M.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Press Conference

Herbert wipes the condensation off the mirror and looks back at himself. Clean, but tired. Nervous, but determined. Or is he fooling himself? Determined for what, exactly?

He foams up his cheeks and pulls the razor in long, constant strokes across his face. The blades are new and slide effortlessly along his cheeks. His eyes follow the path of the razor as he remembers Jack's voice all those years ago, at 3 am.

"Herb," Jack had suppressed a sob on the other end, "My mom has just passed." He had hardly ever spoken about her. About anything from his past. But Herbert had jumped out of the bed, Janey's bed. He'd whispered in her ear that he'd come back soon. She had half-whispered something back.

Did she even remember this when she woke hours later?

That was the day after he had met Janey again.

After so many years.

If only he had known. He would have crawled back into bed; held her tight. But he had to go and be a good friend. To the greatest traitor he'd ever met.

It was the last time he would see Janey that way, sleeping while surrounded by her white sheets and messy hair.

He halts for a moment, witnessing the razor trembling. His eyes look darker, emphasized by the rings beneath. He must keep composure today—it is all that matters. Get through the day. Stay on top by staying in control of his emotions.

But all he wants to do is twist Jack's neck. The anger is so fierce he scares himself.

He rinses off with cold water, dabs with the towelette and applies his aftershave. He wipes down the sink and steps into his wardrobe, looking for the suit he hasn't worn for a good five or six years. The stylish black wool-silk blend always made him feel dapper. The suit still fits as though it was tailored yesterday. *My weight must be the only thing left unchanged.* He opts for a black-and-blue tie.

Erik knocks on the door and Herbert lets him in.

"Just putting on my tie," Herbert says. His fingers toy with the fabric but they're unsteady, as if he has had too much

coffee.

"Over, under..." he starts, unsure as he flaps the wider and more narrow sides past each other. "Surely I still know how to do this."

"Of course," Erik says. "It is tricky though...the fat side should be longer than the skinny side, about twice as long."

Erik steps in to help him while Herbert stands still, arms limb. It is an alienating feeling, him receiving help. He had grown into helping others for many years. He doesn't remember anyone offering him any help throughout his early career days. He had to do everything by himself.

Janey was the last person to help him, stand by him when he felt completely lost. She had been his savior, every time. It is nice to have Erik here. To not be alone while his life is being turned inside out.

"Pull here, dimple here, and voilà!" Erik steps back and admires his work, and for whatever reason Herbert's throat tightens, making him swallow with difficulty.

"Thank you. For everything."

Erik gently taps the sleeve of Herbert's suit.

Herbert turns and stares out the window. The trees have started to lose their leaves, their branches jaggedly engraving the bleak sky. How wrong had he been about friendship, though. He feels like an idiot for not detecting, or maybe acknowledging, the telltale signs that had been there from the start. He had seen in Jack what he wanted to see, and Jack had happily played along.

Erik joins him by the window. "Look," he says, hands in his pockets, "I know where your head is at. But today is not about your sorrow. There are witnesses, victims even, of countless incriminating acts. That, plus the numbers we can provide to the court, is going to bring him down hard. Your personal revenge will have to wait."

They both look up at the piercing sound of the doorbell.

"There he is."

#

"Herbatron! Great to see you, though you look like shit." Just like Herbert, Jack has suited up. He has greased his hair back with some coconutty product, reeking like a cheap Caribbean hotel, and it even looks like he has bleached his teeth.

"We should go," Herbert says and promptly closes the door

behind him.

They get into Jack's Mercedes, musty with the smell of coconut, cigarette smoke and RL Polo, and Jack starts his playlist called 'Rappadelic'.

"Big day man," Jack says as the steering wheel slides through his hands at the turn. "Thought this will get us in the right fighting spirit." Jack has to raise his voice over Dr Dre's.

Herbert opens his window to let in fresh air. He looks out at the oaks hugging the lane. Held up by the rubbish truck, Jack's car runs stationary for a minute. Herbert's eye falls on a beautiful Mourning Dove, perhaps the same one as the other day. She picks at something on the ground a few times, then flies up and sits down on a neighbor's fence, looking down at him. The dove's eyes are understanding, and it fills him with a profound sadness. He keeps his gaze on her as long as he reasonably can.

"I have made a few notes to remember," Jack says, "it's in the glove box." Jack points but Herbert doesn't open the glove box. He keeps his eyes on a static point ahead of him.

"Also—" Jack fawns ignorance. "—I had Pinky compile a list

of the journalists that are welcome; if they haven't been invited, they shouldn't be allowed into the conference room - what do you say?"

'Every journalist is welcome', Herbert answers. He welcomes not only the journalists, but their most critical questions too. Today, they will have to ask the questions for him.

"Sure, sure," Jack says, looking at him from behind the wheel.

"Oh, and if that girl starts to cause a drama, leave her with me if you don't mind," Jack continues.

Herbert casts a glance in Jack's way. What girl is he talking about?

"The one who wrote those lies," Jack goes on.

Jack means *the journalist*.

"Are you saying nothing was true of what she wrote?" Herbert asks with a cool tone.

"Nah, not everything," Jack replies, "but it was very one-sided."

Herbert allows for silence to increase the discomfort

building with Jack. He looks at Jack's dashboard.

"Nice car," he says, remembering something he had seen in the numbers he went over with Erik.

Jack sits up more straight. "Yeah, yeah, got it six months ago, felt like treating myself—you know—for all the hard work."

"Mercedes-Maybach S 680, is it?" Herbert isn't guessing.

Jack snorts, pleased that Herbert is engaging. "Still a gearhead, you! That's right. It goes like wow - feel this..."

Jack accelerates and the car shoots forward on the highway, jumping up to eighty miles.

Herbert nods. "Let me guess...\$230,000?"

"Shit, you're good! 229." Beneath Jack's extolment lurks a nervy creature. Herbert can hear it in the way Jack's intonation has flattened.

"Yeah," Herbert continues, "I think there was a sum like that on the books. Did you notice?"

"Books?" Jack steels a look away from the road to address Herbert. He looks utterly confused. Herbert wants to punch that artificial face so badly. "Yes, *books!*" he wants to yell at him,

"Not your filthy porn magazines, not Sesame Street books or romance novels, but the fucking finances you bastard!"

"Yes, you know, the accounts?" Herbert keeps himself steady. "You should check with Fred; he may have mistaken this for a business expense."

Jack grinds his teeth and remains silent for the remainder of the drive to Westgate Hotels & Conferences.

#

The conference room at Westgate proves far too small for the occasion. Around forty journalists have gathered in the compact space with its low, paneled ceiling, cold lighting and a carpet fit for an eighties film. Herbert sits down at the elevated table, his vision blurred by the bright lights of the camera crew, while Jack has started an off-the-record conversation with a pretty journalist in the front row; the two of them standing far too close to categorize things as professional. When Jack grins at him, Herbert's flat hand chops the air in front of his throat. *Cut. It. out.*

Jack quickly turns back to the woman and shakes her hand, his other amicably on her arm, before joining Herbert at the table. When everyone in the room has followed their example and

has taken a seat, Jack stands back up, reading from a piece of paper.

"Thank you all for coming to this press conference today. We thought it best to address recent rumors around our company practices properly, so we appreciate you're here to witness us clarifying any confusion. Though I consider it somewhat unnecessary, I will say a few words in response to the article that sparked all this brouhaha." Jack grins as if it's all a big joke.

"Those who know me, and quite a few here today know me quite well, also know my nature. I am a hunter, a ladies' man, a bit of a *playa*."

From his seat, Herbert watches in astonishment as Jack moves as though he plays a turntable.

Jack continues what he must see as a charm offense. "Despite my conquests over the years, and trust me, there were a few if you know what I'm sayin', I have always respected the women I engaged with—both professionally as well as sexually. Now, I've suddenly been accused of some pretty serious stuff, and I am left having to deal with all this negative attention... all because a few staff members didn't get a pay rise. You know? So, yeah, ask away; I have nothing to hide."

Herbert rubs his head at the absurdity of those words while the room erupts.

"Were you romantically involved with any of your so-called *conquests*?" asks an older woman with her near-white hair in a tight, high bun and fine, golden spectacles.

"When you run a business, there isn't really the space for any romance—despite what some might say. I made the choice a long time ago to focus on the business rather than to try and comply with the traditional model of the perfect husband, the perfect father. It has worked very well as I have been able to triple turnover year-on-year. That meant many late nights, greasy fried chicken or Chinese takeaways and nobody at home waiting, not even a dog."

Herbert watches in disbelief as the journalist who spoke to Jack minutes earlier sighs and moves her head in empathy.

"Can you provide more detail on the company culture?" says a woman with a black bob and a tiny nose.

Jack points at her in excitement. "Excellent question, Mrs..?"

"Roberts."

"Excellent question Mrs Roberts. Company culture has always been a top priority at our business. It is what has separated us from any faint competitors out there. We hire people based on their skill set, but even more on the right attitude. We also have a thorough induction for every new staff member, and we don't hold back on bonuses and end-of-year get-togethers. Just this last year we all went skiing for a week, in Colorado. Every staff member was there and no-one said anything about being miserable, you know?" Jack stretches his arms sideways, as if he is Mozes who has led his people to the promised land.

"Mr Payne, what is your reaction to the accusation that you sexually assaulted Grace Hoffmann, who was an intern at Technables in 2019?" The stocky, chinless man asking this question holds a tiny audio recorder in the air. He looks pleased with himself, knowing he is the first to use the intern's name.

Jack rubs his chin between his index finger and thumb.

"I had to think long and hard to remember this Grace woman as it is many years ago," Jack says with a squint. "We worked together amicably, and I do not remember ever having any issues between us. I mean, should it not be this *girl* accusing me? If I really did such terrible things to her, would she not have gone

to the police the very next day? As far as I know, she has not come forward. I will leave it with you all to fill in the possible reasons why."

"Mr Alewine, Mr Payne, my name is Amelia Moore," a voice resonates from the back of the room.

Every single head turns to see the young woman who first stirred the sand. She stands upright, her notebook ready. She is pretty in a delicate way. She reminds Herbert of a doe; light on her feet, alert, and tuned in to even the smallest details.

"I work for the Daily Current," Amelia says unnecessarily, "and in case you hadn't guessed already, I was the one writing the initial article about your practices."

Jack smiles. "Yeah, we—"

"I have a question for your *actual* CEO," Amelia continues. "Mr. Alewine, when were you first aware of the abusive and incriminating acts that have been taking place at your company?"

Herbert slowly leans forward to speak in the microphone: "When your article was published."

Jack jumps in. "He means to say when you mustered up a few rumors and tickled the ego of some of our staff so you could

shine on the front page of your worthless Daily Arse Wipe paper."

Herbert leans in again. "That was not what I meant to say. I said exactly what I meant, no need to twist my words."

Amelia seems encouraged. "Mr. Alewine, how do you, as the CEO of Technables, intend to handle the case from here on? What is your plan?"

Herbert studies the young woman; her fine facial structure, her dark brown hair in a messy ponytail, her eyes sharp and determined. She has folded her arms, as if to say: "*I'm not accepting any nonsense.*" Fair enough too, he thinks. She had just posed the essence of this entire situation: what next? How to deal with the mess that they'd found themselves in? The woman awaits his response, eyebrows slightly raised. Herbert hooks the mic off the table stand, holds the wire with his other hand as he slowly gets up. He breathes in, clears his throat, and nods, his eyes still getting used to the bright lights focused in on him.

"I think it is time I share my narrative about the matters at hand, as they differ drastically from my business partner. To paint an accurate account of the status quo, I feel it is paramount that I tell you about the beginning. When I started

Technables in '85, I had sold my first business six months prior. It had been a steep learning curve." He shakes his head.

"They always say that-'a steep learning curve'-but it is not until you experience this for yourself that you understand the understatement hiding in that expression. So, I was convinced my next business venture was going to address that curve, and hand new entrepreneurs a toolkit, a wealth of resources, contacts, access to knowledge and funds; anything that I had to figure out for myself, the toughest bottle necks I had to squeeze myself through... these were the things I wanted to help other entrepreneurs with." Herbert pauses, glances over the attentive heads, his eyes hooking back on Amelia.

"Starting a business is such an exciting endeavor, it is an adventure, but reality can catch up with you and if you have too many challenges, you may find you start to lose some of that energy that gets you out of bed at 5 am every morning. That same energy that enables you to hold three interviews in a day, give two presentations to prospects, cold call twenty other prospects and still manage to keep your books in order. That sort of energy, it's finite, it doesn't last forever. And I wanted to help these young eager dogs to learn the tricks of the trade, help them achieve their key milestones, when they still had the energy to push on."

He sees himself as the eager young dog as if it were yesterday, standing in front of a boardroom full of investors and being laughed at when introducing his business plan and announcing his \$500,000 cap raise. He could have used advice on pretty much everything at that point, from the large presentation sheets he brought to the floppy corduroy pants he wore.

"This full-service incubator was the first of its kind. We didn't really have direct competitors in the tech space - business is all about timing. I knew Jack Payne for about a year when I offered him the role of Chief Commercial Officer. Admittedly, it was a little over his head at first. He needed guidance, patient mentoring, to get to where he needed to be for the role. We always got along well; I appreciate the good and the bad in people. Nobody is perfect." The crowd murmurs in soft appreciation. Herbert briefly looks behind him at Jack, who smiles. But his eye twitches.

"During those early years, we were both completely consumed with everything that would help the business forward. Achieving that upward curve in our turnover was crucial and it's never easy. We did the most outrageous things to gain customers. We once sent a spa voucher to our top ten executives with the slogan 'Go and have a well-earned break, then give us a call.'

We advertised with daring ads on massive billboards showing old grandpas who couldn't get out of their Maserati (they had to wait too long for their businesses to fly, you see)."

The room chuckles along with him.

"These were busy, but fun years. When we had achieved some traction and not everything was a struggle anymore, I started wondering if it really was the place for me. I don't know, maybe I didn't feel the appreciation from our clients that I had hoped for, perhaps I didn't like that most of the tech we helped to kickstart, wasn't exactly saving the world; or addressing some serious issues. The world really is driven by capital, by making as many dollars as quickly as possible, and at some stage I suppose I had had enough. So I started to work from home, first one day a week, then two... until eventually I let Jack here run the entire business from an operational and commercial point of view. He never chose to carry that much responsibility and I regret putting him in that position. I regret even more how this enabled his twisted identity to infuse fear and cause pain among people working under our roof. Jack and I aren't that different, really."

And yet, we are opposites. But he has the room.

"He struggles with a deeply rooted fear of desertion and

for good reason: his parents were alcoholics and he ended up in foster care at the age of nine."

Jack rests his hand on his shoulder. "Nobody here wants to hear us rehash old stories. They're here for fresh information."

Herbert turns and walks away from his partner, hereby removing Jack's hand.

"His young life wasn't exactly a picnic," Herbert picks up. "This is not a justification for his behavior, but perhaps an explanation. While he worked hard pulling in high-profile customers, I was at home finding a new passion. Helping people can happen in many ways, I realized, and I started helping those who seemed most lost to me. Rather than focusing on those who were looking to raise 3 million, I looked for people who were emotionally, financially, socially, completely derailed. Who didn't have anyone to tell them things were going to be alright. Looking back now, I realize that, despite many successes with my pupils, in a way I failed miserably on my first. I thought I had helped Jack by offering that role, giving him a sense of purpose. But I left him hanging. So whatever has happened, whatever will surface, I take full responsibility on how things are handled and intend to step back into the role of CEO to resolve things. You can count on that."

Herbert nods to indicate that's the end of his speech and the room exhales before erupting. Forty journalists shout their questions as if they're market salesmen and Herbert points at Amelia.

"How will you deal with the accusations? Staff is taking legal action," she says.

"That is their right," Herbert says, "and I will share *any* documentation that they may like to consult."

"What about Mr. Payne? What will his role be?" Amelia continues as everyone takes notes.

"We are launching an internal investigation into this ourselves as well, and Mr. Payne will be suspended until we have clarified what exactly has taken place over the years."

Jack, who has joined Herbert, smiles with a glint of despair. "There, you see? We do everything right."

But Herbert hasn't finished: "If Mr. Jack Payne is proven guilty of sexual assault, he will be asked to resign on the spot or be fired. He will also lose his position on the board, and he will be stripped of any voting rights he has left."

Jack coughs. "The details of this are yet to be knotted

out, as these are decisions that include the board. Mr. Alewine obviously wouldn't make such bold decisions on his own account."

"Try me." Herbert looks at his partner next to him, his little forehead now shining with perspiration, his slick hair a little less slick from the heat of the lighting.

About eight journalists in the room raise their hands and start speaking as loudly as they can, firing questions at both of them, but Herbert grabs his suit jacket off the chair and starts heading for the door. Jack, not quite quick enough, is enclosed by the group of reporters. Reaching the door at the same time as Amelia Moore, Herbert lets her pass first before leaving the room.

"Not staying around to hear what else he has to say?" Herbert asks after a brief uncomfortable silence as they walk through the hall.

"Do you blame me?" Amelia replies. "Can I ask you one more thing though?"

"Sure," he replies.

"This internal investigation; how can you guarantee the legitimacy of its outcome?"

"I will oversee it myself."

"Exactly," she says. "Even though you seem genuine enough about condemning some of the things Jack has done—and trust me, he has—it still doesn't guarantee the public that you'd do what is right."

"What is right in your mind?"

She doesn't need to think about her answer. "An independent investigation by an accredited party. External."

Herbert considers this. "That's fair."

She looks sideways at him, a little perplexed. "Yeah?"

"Yes. I agree, it should be done by an external party. I will look into that."

"You will look into that?" Sarcasm now drips off her words. "That is a very clever way of sending a sleepy journalist off to write some positive bullshit, while you can turn around and take care of the entire thing yourself."

Herbert doesn't consider himself that clever. He *will* investigate external parties and most likely go ahead with her suggestion.

"You see straight through me," he jokes instead.

She halts, confident enough that he will do the same. Her face has turned hostile, enraged even.

"A woman has been assaulted, possibly more cases may be expected, Mr. Alewine. Not something to make a fucking joke about."

Herbert sighs. Of course she is right. If he lets the full magnitude of the situation seep into his core, it frightens him more than he can comprehend. He just wants her to see he is on her side, see that he can be trusted.

"Look, why don't you come to my house for an exclusive? You were the brave one to open this can of worms. May as well see it through."

She folds her arms. "Are you going to give me some real answers?"

Herbert folds his arms as well. "If you ask the right questions."

Amelia shrugs. "Ok, I'll come. When?"

"Now?" he says. It's not like he has such a busy agenda.

"Now?"

"Yes, why not? Unless you have more important things to do?"

She hesitates for only a moment. "I do not. I'll come."

"Good. 508 Oak Tree Lane, see you there in half an hour or so."

Herbert leaves her in the lobby as he pulls out his mobile phone to schedule a *fast* Uber. It would be a bit awkward if she'd arrive at his house before he does. And there is *no way in hell* he is driving back with Jack.

Chapter Thirty-Three:

Theories

Oak Tree Lane is a sleeping giant during the day. Bronze and auburn leaves fiddle with Amelia's trousers before swirling along the path. The birds chirp as if they have made it through a strict selection committee.

When something looks too good to be true, it almost always is. Amelia has been thinking of her mum's words a lot of late. She has been so strong, so determined, for so long now. Now that Jack knows about her double identity, she can feel the cracks in her confidence. And here she is facing the coward of a CEO who hides away in a vacuum. *Don't we all want to hide under the pillow sometimes? Why does he have the right to hide permanently? Who does that?*

Nature stones line the path that leads to his house, and the rebel in her nudges one with her shoe, undoing the perfection. What if Herbert knows about her alter-ego as well?

What if Jack has told him? Their relationship seemed tense during the press conference, but the two men have known each other for a long time. That kind of friendship isn't shoved aside just like that. *What if Vic is the real reason he invited her here today? He may even want revenge for the way she attacked his house last week.*

Amelia massages her temples in small circles, briefly closing her eyes. *Pull yourself together; it's just an interview. You've done hundreds like it.*

She reaches for the bell when the door swings open.

"Amelia. Come in," Herbert says in the door opening. He still wears the suit he wore earlier at the press conference but has taken off the jacket and tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

"Homemade lemonade, I hope you like it.," he says—but his tone is dull. He has dark moons under his eyes. Amelia follows him, taking in the house for a second time—but it feels like the first. Last time she was here she wore a gas mask. It was night. Smoke of tear gas clouded her vision. Today, the tall hallway is bright and she can have a good look at the polished concrete floors and art on every bit of wall space. She stops by a semi-abstract painting of a curvy lady and sips her lemonade. The

sting of the lemons is strong, but refreshing.

"Lojas?" she points.

Herbert nods. "You know him?" Herbert looks at the vibrant composition and his eyes seem to soften for a moment, as if the painting is filling him with a joy. But he sobers back to his exhausted self in an instant.

"Did an item on him for the culture edition three years ago. Interesting dude," Amelia says.

Herbert nods. "Sure, sure. It was a good investment."

Amelia frowns. "Investment? You seem to view it as more than an investment."

"Why is that?"

"The way you just looked at it. That was not the look of an investor."

Herbert's smile is measured, and he takes her glass from her even though she hasn't finished her lemonade. "Shall we get started?"

They sit in the formal living, in the alcove overlooking the garden.

Amelia pushes the record button, opens her notebook, and pushes the back of her ballpoint pen down on the table repeatedly: tip in, tip out, tip in, tip out—

"Whenever you're ready," Herbert says with a glint of irritation, but she stretches the wait by reviewing the notes she made during the press conference before finally looking up at him.

"So, you met Jack in 1984 and involved him in the business the following year?"

Herbert clears his throat. "That sounds right."

"Then you started distancing yourself from the day-to-day operations around...2012?" She speaks fast while keeping a close eye on his facial expressions.

Herbert's nod is almost imperceptible, and she realizes he must really hate talking about this.

"Can you see how one might wonder about your awareness of the kind of person Jack really is? You spent *twenty-seven years* actively building the business together. That is a lot of lunches, a lot of meetings together."

"I suppose." Herbert has folded his hands, and his thumbs

are tapping against one another as if communicating in Morse.
Tap, tap, tap-tap.

"Did you never, during those twenty-seven years, see at least the signs of the narcissist he was becoming?" She doesn't attempt to hide her skepticism.

Herbert rubs his palms on his bald head, then on his trousers. She imagines it is perspiration he is moving from skull to pants.

"Maybe I did," Herbert says, thumbs opening outwards. "Jack needed guidance, that was clear to me from the get-go. And he always showed a lot of appreciation for the fact that I had given this guidance for many years."

Amelia scribbles on her notepad. "That is not a proper answer to my question. Would you like to try again?"

Herbert raises his furry eyebrows. Salt strands on a pepper background. "No."

His answer is short and unexpected, leaving her with no other choice but to continue to the next question.

She punches her pen on the notebook, in-out-in-out. "You saw him daily, witnessed his interaction with the rest of staff.

Your people."

Herbert repositions himself on his chair, his discomfort emphasized by the creaking of the woven cane. "I may have occasionally noticed his short fuse, or his attitude towards women, but I always gave him the benefit of the doubt. I believe nobody is perfect, and figured he is just a little more open about his imperfections - as if he has embraced them."

"Right," she says, hardly believing what she is hearing. "So, a criminal who has accepted the fact that he is a bad person earns your respect?"

"That's not quite..."

"And why hold on to a business for that long? Most businesses in your industry seem to sell after five to ten years."

"I don't sell this one."

"You don't sell this one. That's not really an answer."

"Nothing seems a good enough answer to you."

"Not if they're bullshit."

Herbert's nostrils dilate.

"Look, I have always been clear to everyone, including investors, that I had no intention to sell. The business model is such that it generates a very satisfactory return annually. They have nothing to complain about. They can always sell their shares individually if they want out."

"So, you lost interest in a business, handed it to a predator but are pertinently not selling either." She refuses to make things easy for him. That's the job of a psychologist.

Herbert purses his lips together before he speaks. "You really are a dog with a bone, aren't you?"

Her notebook drops on the ground, her pen follows. *What did he just ask her?*

"I'm sorry?" She picks up her items off the floor, her eyes on Herbert.

"I think you heard what I said. You have this stereotypical reporter's mindset. You make up your mind. Someone is guilty and should pay for it. Are you hoping for me to crack today? To break down in front of you, admit I knew all along, and covered up whatever shit my partner has been up to? Is that what we're doing?"

Amelia releases the air inside her chest—he doesn't know—

and leans forward; her hands flat on the table between them.

"Quite likely, Mr. Alewine. As you say, I have a reporter's mindset. So whatever dirt you're hiding will come out. One way or another."

Herbert leans back as the chair creaks in protest. "Good luck with that"—his index fingers tap on the table as he eyes her up—"Why don't you tell the story? What's your ingenious theory?"

Amelia smiles. *Glad you ask...*

"OK," she says calmly. "I say you stepped aside all those years ago because you weren't sure how to handle Jack Payne."

"That is..."

"You witnessed his conduct and you simply couldn't stand him any longer."

"...an absolutely preposterous..."

"Perhaps you were even a little afraid of what else he may do, and you decided to distance yourself; not from the business, but from Jack."

"...concept and you are really—"Herbert slams the table"—stepping out of line!"

Amelia presses the pause button on her recorder. "That's what every guilty person would say," she says. She picks up her bag and drops her notebook and recorder inside. But when she looks up, Herbert's face is turned down, his head resting in his hands. He suddenly looks so...lost. Had she been too harsh?

Herbert mumbles something, but she can't pick up the words.

"What?"

"I like your surname," he says. "Once knew a very nice person with the same surname."

Amelia hovers between the lounge and the hall, her bag over her shoulders. What is he going on about?

"Her name was Janey Moore. Though you're probably complete strangers to each other. Moore is such a common surname."

Amelia's heart thumps so hard, she can feel it in her throat.

Had he known mom? Unthinkable. This man, with his big-ass sterile house, this recluse who thinks that if you just lock yourself away, all the problems will dissolve...he defies everything mom stood for. Had fought for.

She props her bag further onto her shoulder and heads for

the door.

"Thanks for the interview."

Amelia pulls the door of her Peugeot three times, knowing it will give on the third, and accelerates with haste - nearly shaving the oak tree in front of her. Heading straight home, her mind drifts back to those final moments with mum. Her hand, cool and clammy, in hers. All words spoken, everything said. Nothing more had been left but to smile, hold each other, take in every detail of her soft lips, her kind eyes with the little crow's feet adding to the twinkle that had still been there, a little, right until her last breath.

She pushes the audio button and the crackling radio spits out broken chunks of the Spice Girls. She changes the channel to Classic FM and for once, she leaves it there. Rushing along SH23, dark clouds rapidly gathering overhead, the delicate voice of Renee Fleming cuts her heart in two. And for the first time in two years, she weeps properly.

The tears come and keep coming, running freely down her cheeks, trickling down her throat - sore from bundled pain bursting to get out. Her mum's image fills her mind, her profile

at the kitchen bench as she eats a peach over the sink, talking to her about the book Amelia had just finished for English.

"What was it about that character that you loved so much?"

Chewing, peach juices dripping down her chin. Sunlight floods in through the kitchen window, casting a maroon glow over her locks, like burnt African soil. *"Any good story needs at least one dysfunctional character."* She wipes her chin and winks.

That's where Amelia's memory of that moment ends. It just fades after that, as if the moment itself could have been fictional, a concoction of her grieving brain - a way to hold on to the little details even pictures cannot capture.

By the time she parks outside her house, her body is heavy from exhaustion and her face in the rear-view mirror is blotchy pink. Rain has started, quite abruptly, to pour down on the thin aluminum roof of her car with the force of a monsoon. The noise is overwhelming as it beats down above and around her, making her feel strangely safe inside. Remaining there for a while, the sharp edges of her sadness ebb to the background - carried away by a symphony of precipitation.

How did Herbert and mom know each other? His tone had been one of—sadness. Regret, perhaps. Were they friends? *Lovers?*

Ten minutes later her lethargic steps rustle up the steps

to her apartment.

She ignores Dewey's cheerful yelps and walks straight into her bedroom, where she opens the wardrobe.

There, on the mannequin head on the top shelf, rests the wig that has facilitated a gateway to a life regular Amelia would never have imagined for herself. Her hand reaches the end of the red locks, and she circles one around her finger, playing with the soft strands. Sure, this thing has been interesting, it is quite a joy to put it on and transform into a different person. Someone who isn't afraid to chase after scumbags and publicly humiliate them. But this can't go on forever - and where will things end?

What if Jack goes to the police? Will they end up with a prison sentence? What about the girls, who have done nothing but follow her—supporting her activism, her ideals? She doesn't mind doing time herself, but never could she forgive herself if they ended up in trouble.

She lets go of the locks and slams the wardrobe shut. She turns to look for Dewey, but he has already returned to his little bed, his head turned away from her.

Chapter Thirty-Four:

Elvis Shows the Way

Do I ever regret the directions I have taken? Or the directions I have given Amelia? Of course not. She is exactly where she ought to be. Of course, in her mind, she has orchestrated her life all on her own. But remember the marble run I told you about? Well, Amelia is my precious marble. And my asset.

I can't just go over to her and tell her what to do, it doesn't work that way. Forces of desire must come from within—and I should know. But there are lots of ways you can help those forces; lead them to the areas you wish for them to go.

For example, when Amelia had her dentist appointment, I had a fellow patient pass her the magazine TimeNow; folded at the article about the Suffragettes. This was three months after her mother had passed. As I knew she would, she read it with great interest. She launched Les Chiennes a month later.

I placed a flyer in her mail, which led her to start karate lessons. It also led her to fall in love with Darius, but that wasn't quite part of my master plan. However, I have allowed it— for the time being.

And once, at a bus stop, I explained the importance of accountability to a now ex-employee of Technables. I made sure she'd feel angry about all the shit that had been going on at her work. Of course, I didn't fail to mention the one reporter who is the best when it comes to drilling into these types of stories.

My special girl. My Amelia.

Chapter Thirty-Five:

Find the Gap

The basement of Amelia's apartment block holds individual storage units for its residents. It is where they keep their Christmas trees. Where they store their oversized comic book collections. Their dusty LPs. Camping gear. Once Amelia saw a man, he had a pink and puffy face like a blobfish, store an entire canoe. She can't think of anywhere nearby with enough water to benefit from the ownership of a canoe, but that isn't her business.

Amelia unlocks the door to her space. She pulls the cord switch and the overhead LED lights flicker on lazily. She sticks a stool against the door to prevent it from shutting—not wanting to feel trapped in this cold, windowless block—and looks around. The last time she was here must have been when she moved in, just over three years ago.

She excludes the moment when her mom had passed. Amelia had given the key to the transporters and begged them to drop the boxes in storage 311, wanting nothing to do with the entire

process.

The room smells of damp cardboard, artificial lemon and underground caves. Boxes are randomly stacked on top of each other, some leveling up to five boxes high. One box says 'Boardgames', then there is 'Tax filings', 'Diplomas', 'Toys'. She opens the latter box, and finds Bad Boy, her purple duck, as well as Bear-Bear with one ear and Ferdinand the scruffy dog with a patch around the eye. There is a smaller box inside too, with at least thirty of her troll figurines collection. Every one of them has its own outfit, if any, and their hair colors stretch along the entire Resene color chart. She fondles with the bright red hair of one of her favorite trolls, Mandy Sparkledust. A real sassy thing, her face permanently expresses that she wouldn't easily be bamboozled.

Amelia opens some boxes labeled 'Pics' and is treated with images of her and mom in grandpas garden, planting a row of fruit trees, as well as some of Amelia at her first job at the local library, and a series of photos of mom and her traveling through South America. Her thumb caresses the edges of one picture showing the two of them at a food stall in São Paulo, eating delicious Coxinha from a little paper dish. They are both tanned, faces gleaming in the sun, their hair wild and carefree. She remembers the rich flavors and smells at the food market

that day, and how they had arrived exceptionally hungry. The sweet little woman who operated the food stall, her skin resembling used sandpaper, had been determined to take their picture as best she could. She had taken several minutes: her small, weathered hands ushering them a little left, a little right, a little closer.

Amelia slides the pictures back inside their sleeve, and opens a different box labeled 'Music'. She recollects the moment when she bought every one of the CDs inside; they all came from the little store on Fry Rd, *Amplify on Fry*, where Chilly worked 9-to-5. Nobody knew how he got that name, or if it had been his real name, but he was definitely the chilliest dude she had ever met. Chilly didn't believe in shaving, nor hairdressers, and wore a different music T-shirt and jeans every day. People would come in and listen to the music in-store, sometimes for hours, and he would continue to run around, give them more tips on new releases, and infuse them with new levels of appreciation for artists outside the mainstream. Some of the CD's here she'd love to listen to again: Blondie, Alanis Morissette, Bikini Kill, Sinead O'Connor, Garbage. She takes her phone out of her back pocket and takes a photo of the many titles; it would be great to add these to her playlist. It would feel like a road trip back in time.

A pile of Christmas cards has found their way into this box as well, mostly cards from mom, who had given her a card for every Christmas as soon as Amelia had moved out. Though she had handed Amelia the cards in person every Christmas day, she would always write something fun on them. She opens a card that is plain white, with the single word 'Ho' in a Christmassy font.

Amelia,

Brush your teeth, at least twice a day. Don't forget the ones in the back.

Love you my darling. Merry Christmas.

Mom.

Her fingers trace the elaborate loops of mom's handwriting.

Love you too, mom.

She carefully slides the cards in between two piles of CDs. Time to focus, she thinks as she spots the boxes labeled 'mom' in the left corner. She gasps as the light abruptly turns off, leaving her with only the faint ray of light coming in from the hallway.

"Shit," she curses as she finds the torch on her cell phone and makes her way to the pull-chord. The LEDs take even longer

to flicker on this time, as if to warn her that they will just do whatever the hell they want.

There must be about six or seven boxes that belonged to mom, some of which she didn't pack herself, but mom would have before she passed. They haven't been opened since then. She pulls the tape off the first one, that says 'Mom-Breakable' and discovers the beautiful tea set that they'd only used for very special occasions. It is white with a dark blue spiral pattern and golden accents. It was pulled out of the fancy cupboard for Christmas, her graduation, her birthdays... mom would go out and purchase some really fine loose leaf tea, and pick up fresh scones or lemon tarts from the baker. On a nice day, they'd sit on the tiny balcony, looking at the pigeons and sparrows who'd look back at them from the street lanterns and balcony railing, waiting for their chance to snatch the first crumbs.

She browses through other boxes - one holds pretty storage boxes, some with jewelry... mom had really loved chunky, gold-plated items and it had always made her look a little like a gypsy. There is one pretty set of black pearls; large dangle earrings and a multi-layered necklace that she particularly likes. A black woolly beret, a few silk scarves, a large brooch in the shape of a dragonfly, lots of books about spirituality, Buddhism, women, gardening, and an ornament of a small elephant.

She also finds a bicycle bell, in a lavender color with bees—though the bees are largely faded. She rings it a couple of times, the ring repeating itself in a fading echo.

The box pushed right into the corner, behind more books and gardening tools, says 'Mom-pics' and she sighs having finally found what she came for. Mom's disorganized nature is reaffirmed as she pushes the flaps of the box sideways and inspects its contents. No photo albums or photo sleeves; the pictures have all been stacked loosely inside the box and fill it 'til about halfway. Many have curled or folded over corners, and most of them have yellow clouds on the back; charred by the years. Mom did write a little note on the back of many, such as one of her at the age of eight or nine, playing badminton with grandpa on the grass with bare feet. It says 'Dad, summer 1971'. Other photos include Amelia's grandparents at the dining table, candles lit, one of mom in front of a little shop, her face close to the camera, a popsicle stick sticking out of her mouth, several of mom biking. Pictures of mom at the age of around thirteen, volunteering at the local animal shelter. Heaps of photos of her student years - most with a girl with very short hair who must have been her roommate. Sunbathing on a roof terrace, pictures of them studying, but mostly party pictures.

In the bottom of the box, a bundle of pictures has been

tied together with a green satin ribbon. Why would mom have tied these together like that? Considering her untidy nature, these must have been somehow different, special.

Amelia carefully pulls one end of the ribbon as she pictures mom tying the silky fabric. She sits down on the floor—ignoring the cold concrete through her jeans. The photos depict mom's younger years, when she still lived with grandma and grandpa. But *they* are hardly in any of them. Almost every picture shows mom with a boy around the same age. His hair is too long and bushy, the kind of hair boys get when they spend most of their time outside. There are so many of them. Mom and the boy on her bike together, she on the saddle, he holding on to her waist.

Amelia frowns.

Mom and the boy in the front yard, looking like they were caught by the person who took the photo.

Mom and the boy holding hands, walking at the end of the street.

Then there is one, a close-up of the boy's face as he squints in the sun. His smile is friendly, with a little gap between his front teeth.

Amelia grabs her phone and searches for images online: "Herbert Alewine". She enlarges the most recent picture taken at some gala dinner where Herbert wears a tuxedo and holds a glass of champagne. She zooms in and holds the image next to the photo of the boy.

"No way...." she whispers. His cheekbones must have hardened out over the years, and of course he lost his hair. The mature Herbert looks less friendly and more calculating, but she is almost certain this is the same person. Herbert and mom weren't just close friends. *It seems they were childhood sweethearts.*

Why has mom never told her about this boy? Based on the timespan the pictures cover, they hung out for a large chunk of their childhood. Mom had always told her everything. Was she embarrassed, because of the kind of man he had become? Is that why the friendship died?

Despite mom always having been transparent with her, never treating her like a child, it is hard for Amelia to imagine her mother with a man. Any man. There were a few dates throughout the years, but it had never gone past that first coffee. Her mom usually opted for coffee if a man asked her out. That way, if the man bored her, which typically happened within the first ten

minutes, it was easier to excuse herself and leave promptly. No time and money wasted on meals that were left untouched. Each time, her mother would come home and tell Amelia about the ridiculous trousers a man had worn, ballooning as if he planned on taking off any moment. Or the way a man had agreed with literally every word that had come out of her mouth, which he had been trying to emphasize by finishing her sentences for her. As if these were his own thoughts and not merely a copy of hers. Or the way a man refused to tip the inexperienced but friendly waitress yet flashed a Rolex on his wrist.

The two of them had many laughs about these disaster dates, and even though Amelia would often make a kind remark—"Maybe next time you'll meet a prince with a normal nose"—she had always been pleased that her mom wasn't meeting anyone worthy of even a second date. She loved the way the two of them lived, their bond was stronger than any. Introducing a man into the equation could really shake what that looked like. She had never considered that her mom had dated, perhaps loved, before she arrived on the earth.

Amelia shoves the box back in the corner but takes the picture bundle with her as she lets the heavy door shut itself behind her. She crosses the small courtyard back to the entrance of her apartment building. Dusk has settled in, and the

courtyard is deserted but for one—the reducing shadow of a tall man exiting in the opposite direction, towards the road. Amelia slips back inside her apartment building—her eyes transfixed on a picture of a boy with a little gap between his teeth.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Dewey Flies

Amelia's tired steps echo in the entryway of her apartment building as she passes the cluster of letterboxes to her left. She slows her tread and takes a moment to glance over the dozens of apartment numbers. It is somewhat embarrassing that she doesn't know any of her neighbors, other than the Otter. Has she become disconnected from the rest of the world? While either hammering out stories about crime and corruption or chasing predators with dog shit, what life does she have outside of that? Everything she does derives from people behaving badly, one way or another. Outside of this, she doesn't have a social life. She always declines invitations from coworkers to meet at the pub. Never catches up with friends. Is that why she fell for Darius so quickly? Because she needed something, *someone*, positive in her life? Someone to look after her?

Maybe she isn't all that different to Herbert, who seems to have chosen the life of a recluse and hides in his white oasis.

She opens her letterbox, number thirteen, but is met with nothing but accumulating dust on the base of the box. The

lightbulb above the stairwell flickers in a nervous rhythm, aligned with the cha-cha: Raaa-taaa-ta-ta-ta. Raaa-taaa-ta-ta-ta. It seems all lighting around her is aggravated by her presence this evening.

It has been a long day and she is tired of looking for answers, fed up with the answers she found so far. All she wants is the fluffiness of her duvet wrapped around her - to turn herself into a cocoon. She has a sudden and bizarre envy of Grizzly bears, and their ability to hibernate for five to seven months each winter - just make your bed, roll up, close your eyes and let it all be. She reaches her landing and spots something in front of her door. A dark bundle.

A fluffy bundle.

She approaches with caution, one hand sliding along the cracked railing, flaking fragments of paint, until what she makes out roils her stomach:

No, no no-this cannot be. "Dewey," she whispers.

The small black dog lies on the middle of her doormat-carefully, almost lovingly, placed there. His feet are in alternating order, as if he is running in the air, and a large kitchen knife - *her* knife with the red and white handle - sticks

up straight from his belly.

Amelia drops to her knees, hands held out as if he will jump into her arms any minute. "Oh Dewey, what happened? You're all bloody, sweet boy. Come on, I'll take you to the vet. I'll take you. Come on then, lazy."

Tears are blurring her vision, and she wipes her eyes angrily. "Come on now boy. I-I promise we'll go to the park afterwards. You always loved the park. Mum..."

Her head drops onto the lifeless body of her dog.

Mom's dog. Even after mom's death, Amelia had failed her; couldn't keep her beloved dog safe. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry. So sorry. I was so mean to you. You just wanted to be loved. And I couldn't even give you that. I am so sorry, Dewey." His body is so still against her trembling one. The sobs heave from deep inside her chest—they last and last. She cries for Dewey, for mom, for her own fucked up identity. She weeps like she has never done before.

When her sobs have dried up, she sits back, leaning against the wall next to Dewey's body. "Don't worry,"—she says, avoiding her glance to drift in his direction—"I will *make* him care."

Amelia isn't sure how long she sat on the hardwood floor. Half an hour? More? Something pulls on her forehead and when she scratches, dried up blood has crusted her stumpy fingers.

Dewey's blood.

Exhausted and numb, she pulls her phone from her pocket. Despite their recent tensions, Darius is the only person she wants here right now. Her finger lingers over his name while her mind weighs up the possible scenarios. Her own identity, Vic—they are tightly interwoven with all this.

She hits his name regardless.

The phone rings once, twice, and Darius's full-toned voice washes into her: "Amelia, I was *just* thinking of you."

"Hey." She attempts to sound casual, not wanting to freak him out, but her pitch is nevertheless higher than usual. "Would you be able to come here?"

"Sure. Is everything alright?"

"Mh, no, not really." She rubs her eyes, her pounding head.

"You home?" He speaks fast now, by the acceleration of his

breath she can hear he is already on the move.

"Mh-mm."

"Ok, don't hang up, I am on my way."

She pulls her legs close to her chest.

"You still there? Are you in danger?" Darius says, sounding tense, his words drawn out by big, heavy breaths.

"I'm here. I'm not in danger *now*, I don't think." She looks around, more aware of her surroundings.

She hears his car door slam, engines starting. "Be there in five and a half."

"Don't get a speeding ticket," she says softly.

"I'm a cop, beautiful, I don't get speeding tickets."

About five minutes later, a police siren charges into the street, followed by Darius's quick steps and heavy breathing. Even under these circumstances, her heart jolts when she sees his face.

His eyes quickly skim the situation as he pulls her up on

her feet and holds her so tight in his massive arms that she changes her mind on the Grizzly bears. *This* is the best place to hide away. He smells of coconut, spice and a wet forest and these scents alone make her feel a little better. His warm breath surges in and out of the crown of her head, a warm current of comfort.

"You can't stay here, sweetheart. It isn't safe," he says.

She is too tired to argue. "OK." *But her mind is already scheming a comeback that even Jack won't see coming.*

Chapter Thirty-Seven:

Knockdown

Herbert sips his Ashwagandha tea—hoping it will relax him a little—and leans into the soft leather of his office chair, his hands behind his head. What is the best way to start this email? Members of the EEOC surely read the papers too. He just wants to present himself as a cooperative source. He turns back to his screen and starts typing:

Dear Mr. Hudson,

Though the case is undoubtedly on your radar and your Equal Employment Opportunity Commission may be conducting preliminary investigations at this very moment, I wished to reach out to you directly to ensure you are fully aware of the possibility of fraud, false business practices and/or the indecent treatment of staff at my company Technables.

He rereads his words. Is he saying this right? *The possibility?* He supposes that, officially, Jack is guilty once this has been proven in court. But he can't help but lean into the knowledge that Jack is, on so many levels, guilty as hell.

Yet, how do these assumptions make Herbert any better than Amelia Moore, who labeled *him* guilty, no matter what he said?

He thought they both wanted the same thing, but she clearly has little to no trust in him or his intentions. He would have expected that inviting her to his residence would have counted for *something*, but it was almost as if she had become even more aggressive.

Then again, her final words about Jack, and Herbert's reason for staying home for all those years, cling to him like spider webs:

Perhaps you were even a little afraid of what else he may do, and you decided to distance yourself; not from the business, but from Jack.

Those words had triggered an anger inside him that he was unfamiliar with. It isn't in his nature to get so...enraged. He could feel it pumping through his veins when he slammed the table—behavior not only foreign to him, but that he despises. It

would have been the kind of thing his father would have done; his bulldoggish face bloated from too much alcohol and too little accountability. His dad had worn the label *Bully* like it was a trophy. Had Herbert replaced one bully with another by allowing Jack into his life? What if Amelia is right after all, and he had indulged in the ultimate ostrich effect by staying away, by ignoring the kind of man Jack truly is? If that is the case, she had every reason to push him for that.

Nevertheless, he had shown goodwill by inviting her to his home, which in itself is a big deal for him. He had agreed to the independent investigation. She just seems to take the case so damn... *personal*.

His screen goes to sleep, and he shifts his mouse to reawaken it before he types on:

I am deeply saddened by the current accusations reflected in the media and offer my full and unobtrusive collaboration. I intend to provide you with complete access to any critical files and you may call upon me anytime to discuss the details you discover during your formal investigation.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

Herbert Alewine

CEO Technables Inc.

Ph: 555-0105

Herbert knows this is a small gesture, but an important first step in exposing the wasp's nest.

Despite never wishing harm to anyone, he secretly wishes Jack will be found guilty. If he won't, and ends up remaining a free man, Herbert isn't sure how well he will be able to control himself. A part of him is desperate to ask Jack outright...

What did you do?

How did you keep Janey and me apart?

Another part of him wants to stay away from answers to those questions as far as he can. Knowing the answers would undoubtedly only germinate the anger he feels, a dark seed currently lurking in his heart. He'd rather let the legal course of actions take place. Even if that means his own privacy, his

business and livelihood, will suffer in the process.

He peers out the window just as the Mourning Dove lands on the rail of his office balcony.

"You again," he says. "Coming to check whether I'm doing the right thing?"

The dove looks back at him in wise little tips with its head—always keeping one eye on him.

"I don't know how *good* I am anymore, Janey," he sighs. Then he realizes what he has just said, and his head drops in his hands. He rubs the bare skin of his skull, drawing grains of comfort from the smooth skin.

They never tell you how physical the pain of love can be.

His eyes closed, he replays his memory of the levee. Only fifteen years old. She had been fourteen. He was pacing in the wind after yet another collision with his dad. Herbert had punched back that time. *Knockdown, old man.*

Janey caught up with him—noticing something was off. He had always preferred being alone, but she had somehow squeezed her way past those barriers. And this became evident that day; the day his anger swung to passion as he pulled her into his arms

and kissed her with a hunger that surprised them both.

"Can you promise me something?" she said when their foreheads finally rested against each other. He could only nod.

"Never stop kissing me like that."

Herbert looks up again.

The Mourning Dove is gone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Breaking a Promise

Amelia runs her finger over the gold studs on Dewey's collar. The leather strap, once crisp white, has turned grey-brown and wrinkled, like the bark of a tree.

"It's a dog." It's what she said with a bemused smile when mom had introduced Dewey to her as a puppy. Mom had been upbeat about her new four-legged friend, but Amelia had made it clear she wasn't very good with animals.

"You will be, trust me," mom had replied.

Amelia smells the collar, taking in the musty dog scent while it is still attached to the strap. It will disappear the way everything disappears around her.

You're a good boy, Dewey. It was all she could whisper before she'd said goodbye at the vet. It sounded meaningless. A good boy that she had ignored. That she had treated like he wasn't important to her. Good boys don't seem to get her attention these days. The bad boys, on the other hand...

She looks up when the kettle starts its whistle. Both she

and Darius walk over to the kitchen to remove it from the stove.

"I got this," she says to him.

"No, you sit down, I'll—"

"I said *I got this*. I can make a fucking cup of tea, you know."

Darius steps back, hands raised apologetically. "You got this, huh."

"Yes," she says. She feels bad about lashing out at him but can't shake the irritable itch under her skin.

Darius leans against the bench. "You keep saying that. 'I got this'."

She throws him a look of warning. If he thinks he can tell her off...

But Darius ignores her and—with a quick push—slides a tin of teabags her way.

"Good luck. Hope you don't burn yourself. I'm going to have a shower now." He marches off as she stands, looking at the tin in her hand.

Darius is right, of course. She has lost control over a

precarious situation. He is just worried about her; his glances at her the entire evening haven't gone unnoticed. Not only that, he is risking his career for her—by keeping her identity as Vic a secret. That is a huge ask.

She puts the tin down and walks over to the bathroom. Darius is already in the shower; most of him shrouded in steam. Without a word, she starts to undress, dropping her jeans, her cardigan, top, and undies on the tiles. It is not until she stands on the other side of the glass shower door that he notices her. She places a hand on the glass, and he does the same. Then she opens the door and joins him. She embraces him first, showing him her love while pressing her body against his.

"I'm sorry," she says.

Darius wipes the drops off his face and looks into her eyes. "I care so goddamn much about you, girl. Can't you see that?"

She replies with a long, sensual kiss. When she leans back again a smile curls in the corners of his mouth. "Am I kissing Amelia or Vic right now?"

"Take your pick," she says. She turns around and pushes herself into him.

Again, Amelia dreams. She arrives at a snow-blanketed field that stretches as far as she can see. She takes slow steps, enjoying the fluffy crunch of the snow compacting down under her boots. The wind blows in little gusts, pulls strings of her hair and whips them in her face, whistles in her ear. Condensation clouds from her mouth and she touches her cheeks - they are tight and a little numb.

Turning to look behind her, she assesses the distance she has covered and stares at a trail of blood mixed in with her footsteps. She doesn't find any blood on her boots, or her legs, but the palms of her hands look like they've been cut up in dozens of places; short, angry jabs and stabs where blood is liberally flooding out. It weeps on the crisp snow, quickly spreading into curious shapes, like Rorschach inkblot tests. A dragon under her left hand. An old man under her right hand.

She feels no pain. She *should* feel pain. Her breathing rapidly exudes vapor clouds in the crisp air. She starts to run, first in slow-motion, held back by the density of the snow, then faster - lifting herself higher and higher out of the white mass. She gains confidence, feeling as though she could take

control of this situation somehow - then her head bangs hard into an invisible force and she is swung backwards, her body imprinting itself in the snow with a thud.

She crawls up and squints, trying to distinguish what just hit her. Was it a bird? She holds her hands out in front, searching the air ahead, until they land on an invisible surface she can't see even now she is standing right in front of it. She shuffles left, her hands sliding along the thick glass-like façade, but it seems to be never-ending. She shuffles right and establishes the same notion. She knocks its' surface, listens, seeing if she can work out how thick the glass is, and a hollow knock reverberates back at her with a delay.

"What is this?" she asks the crisp air, but her words are carried away by the wind.

"What is this?!" she repeats, her core tensing up with each word. "What do you want?!"

But only the wind rushes past her ears, words she can't pick up, as though she is played with by naughty children. She forms fists and bangs against the glass, over and over and over, and her bangs are joined by their own echo, creating a drumbeat powerful like a marching band - yet nothing changes. She screams at the glass, but her voice is reduced to a weak yelp, so she

rests her forehead against the transparent surface, slowing her breathing, eyes closed.

When she opens her eyes again, her heart misses a beat.

A figure is standing right in front of her; it's her as Vic, but it's not really her. Some details of her face look slightly different—as if they found a good, but not perfect, Doppelgänger for her. Vic's eyes are very dark, almost black, and the long red hair looks darker, more lifelike, as if it isn't a wig at all. She is standing on the other side of the glass, in the same pose as Amelia, her head resting forward. If not for the glass, their hands would be touching.

Amelia turns her head in the direction of her left hand, her eyes staying steady on Vic - and Vic's motions are an exact replica of hers. She moves her hand in a wave but everything about Vic suggests she is merely a reflection of herself.

"Who are you?" they ask each other.

Their hands slam into the glass. Vic's eyes are so black it seems to darken even the area around her eyes, hollow them out, giving them a cold, haunting look.

"You're not real," Amelia whispers, more an effort to comfort herself, but her words seem to wake up the person on the

other side.

Vic blinks a few times, smiles, and takes several steps backwards, her hands behind her back. The smile remains frosted on her face as she reveals a small, black dog, which she holds by its collar. Her other hand holds the white-and-red handled knife.

"Dewey. No." Amelia pushes into the glass, desperate to try and save him, but empathy has vacated the black eyes of Vic; her face expresses a hunger, a necessity—as if she feeds off pain. Amelia can only turn her head as the abominable horror unfolds.

"I'm so sorry Dewey," she says, mostly to herself. There is something else she meant to remind herself of, but it has slipped her mind as the events she faces take up her every thought, her every breath. When she looks back up, Vic is back where she was, only inches from Amelia, and her bloody hands wipe along the glass, leaving surreal blood smears mid-air.

"Go away. Leave me alone," Amelia says, but her voice lacks fortitude, sounding more like an adjuration than an order.

Vic smiles again, loosely, a smile full of shadows. *You don't like me now that I am truly out?* her face seems to ask. Amelia doesn't. She would never hurt an innocent animal, or an

innocent human being. Vic is out of control, and she wishes she could tuck her back inside her chest.

As if Amelia's thoughts had been spoken aloud, Vic turns her head to look up towards the glass divider, moves her head and shoulders as if to loosen the muscles, then places her left hand above her head on the transparent surface.

Come and play, Amelia, her eyes seem to say - but Amelia feels a strange kind of sick, as if her stomach itself wants to escape her. Vic lifts her right leg, and her body follows in an impossible direction, which reminds Amelia of what she meant to tell herself: that these are merely fragments of her sub-conscience. That none of this is real, because it can't be. As Vic starts to climb the glass wall like an insect, a screeching, near-deafening noise is followed by the glass shifting, tilting, towards Amelia.

"Stop! Stop, please!" Amelia pleads as she notices how the glass swivels to being horizontal, just above her head.

"Don't do this," she hears her own meaningless words. The air around her feels heavier, her hair floats around her head as she realizes she is now surrounded by cold water, and the glass has turned into ice, unyielding above her. Vic wipes the condensation off the frozen surface and observes her in false

pity. Holding her breath, Amelia wants to slam her fists into the ice, but the cold water slows her movements down, turning her punches into pathetic knocks. Her lips form the words...*Help me*. Now beyond anger, every molecule of her body, every neuron in her brain is focused on survival.

Help me.

Vic cocks her head slightly to one side, as if looking at an incongruous, otherworldly being she is trying to understand. Then her lips form an answer. "Why?"

Amelia tries to think about an answer but her slowly diminishing conscience fails. Instead she just looks back, giving in to the force of the water, its iciness stripping her thoughts into one-word fragments. Vic's face starts to blur, her hair reducing to liquid red, and Amelia closes her eyes to be met with her mum's smiling face before she takes an indulgent bite of her fresh almond croissant.

Soooo good, her lips seem to say as she ignores the crumbs on her chin. Her favorite coffee mug stands in front of her, the words '*Stop Asking Why I'm Still Single... I don't Ask Why You're Still Married*' once gold, now nearly faded. She wears her paint blouse open on top of a white singlet and her dark locks are tied in a small ponytail that has already started sagging.

Mom takes a sip of her coffee and puts her mug back with a startling thump which swings Amelia back to darkness - the cold still having its grip on her.

The thump sounds again, louder, closer, and through her blurry vision she distinguishes Vic's fist hitting the ice hard; creating tiny cracks in the shape of starfish. She hits it again, and again, repeating until her fist breaks through the ice. Fingers wrap around Amelia's collar and pull her through. A fabric is wrapped around her shivering body while she is held close like an infant, and rocked back-and-forth. She cries warm tears on her frozen face, grateful to still be there, and the tears slowly start bringing back her senses. Wiping her eyes, her cheeks, she whimpers in shaky gasps before waking in Darius's bed.

On his side, facing away from her, his back slowly rises and falls, reminding her of nature documentaries showing a time lapse of the tides. She turns on her side herself and stares at the shades of darkness in front of her until the morning reveals their true shape.

"How did you sleep, beautiful?", Darius kisses the crown of her head before filling his coffee mug and plonking on the chair opposite her.

"Mh, pretty good," she said. *I survived, so that's positive.* She needs to keep up appearances this morning. She needs him out of the house.

"Shall we watch a movie later?", he says, spooning sugar in his mug. Three. Four. Five.

"You have such a sweet tooth," she says with a smile.

"Nothing you ain't gonna work off me." He winks. He is in a good mood.

"Seriously though, don't stay home for me," she says.

"Why? Don't you want to swoon over some chick lit with me?"

"Who ever said I'm into chick lits?" she laughs.

"Who ever said I'm not?" he bounces back.

"Alright, fair. Just-go to work. You'll just be a distraction. I got this art theft piece I've been working on. Look." She turns her laptop screen his way to show a thirty-page document of research. His eyes glide over the words.

"Art theft huh? No sexual assailants today then?"

She shakes her head.

"You sure?"

"Yup. In fact, I probably want to get started pronto.
Deadlines don't stretch."

He studies her expression; she can tell from the corner of her eye. Then he sighs. "Ok. But you've got to promise to stay inside."

She promises.

When Darius has left, she closes the art theft document—which she put together for a piece over five years ago—and grabs her phone to open her chat group. No new messages in "My Pack". She starts typing:

Get ready for a sequel to the JP case, gals. This afternoon. 5 pm, outside Micky's pub. Bring several canisters of epoxy spray paint in bold, crazy colors. Something that really pops. V

As soon as she has sent the message to her crew, she feels a little better. Now all she has to do is make sure Jack will be at the pub when she needs him there. Les Chiennes have multiple fake social media accounts to help them pry on assailants. This morning, she logs in as Bella Genova. The profile image of a dark-haired Italian woman will surely grab his attention.

Chapter Thirty-Nine:

A Bloody Mess

On her way to Micky's Pub, Vic is so deep in thought that she bumps into pedestrians multiple times. Her emotions are starting to take their toll: anger over Dewey, concern for the girls, concern for her own life, have kept her spinning in circles. But lately, it's the worry that she will take things too far that is at the front of her mind.

Could she kill a man? Does she have it in her to be responsible for that final blow, or shot, and see the life drain from someone's face? Hear him let out his final breath? She is glad she chose to meet Jack somewhere public—not for her safety, but for his.

She crosses the road and nearly gets hit by a car. She rubs her temples. They go thud, thud, thud as she tries to see past the colors swirling in her vision.

She enters Micky's Pub in a daze, but her head becomes clear when she spots Jack at the bar. He has a bourbon in front of him and is typing on his phone. There is a bunch of red roses next to him on the barstool.

Only once she is right in front of him does he spot her, his demeanor turning from neutral interest to brief shock, to an in-the-know grin.

She sits down on the stool next to him. "I thought red was a color of warning," she says, pointing at the roses.

He looks at the bouquet. "Yeah, go figure. It was meant to be."

She faces the bar but can witness his every move in the mirror wall on the other side. Jack swirls the ice cubes in his glass, seemingly calm. The bartender pushes his tiny Harry Potter glasses back on his nose and takes her order for a double whiskey.

"I take it Bella couldn't make it?", Jack says. His gaze briefly meets hers in the mirror.

"No. I told her what kind of man you are. She didn't like the sound of that."

He smirks and takes an obnoxiously loud sip of his drink.
"That's ok. I much rather see you anyway. You know—you're the first woman who isn't boring me within a couple of weeks."

Her glass clanks on the bar. "I'm fucking flattered."

Jack nods. "You should be. I am a very powerful man. I have six figures in the bank. I am well-connected. And look at me..." His free hand gestures at his body.

"I rather not."

"No? I understand. You wouldn't be able to control yourself. You're all the same in the end, all you chicks. Playing hard to get but when it comes to it, you're aching for it."—He glances at her—"Bet ya your black man keeps you well satisfied, huh? No judgment, ya know. I like to get a little adventurous now and then. Tap some black booty." His hand sways left and right as he sucks in his lower lip. Amelia forces herself to look ahead or she swears she will break that glass in his face.

"You're a pig."

He sniggers, producing a weird snorting sound. "How's your dog?"

"Fuck you"—she slams his thick-bottomed glass off the bar. It shatters against the low fridges lined against the back wall. The commotion alerts the bartender, who drops a tea towel and walks in their direction, but Jack raises his hand and the bartender stops in his tracks.

"So much passion. So much anger. I get it Viccibooh. It's been a dog's life for you too."

"You know nothing about me."

Jack snorts again, his finger in the air. "Ha. You'd be surprised, Amelia Moore. See, I thought you'd be grateful. After all, it was I—the grand *moi*—who enabled your doggy to join mummy in heaven. Or hell. Who knows where everyone ends up these days."

Amelia's muscles tighten so much it almost hurts. "What do you know about my mother?"

"Oh Janey and I?"—he looks sideways at her as if he shouldn't be telling her this—"We go back a *long* way. She was a real looker in the d—"

His speech is broken off as Amelia has grabbed him by the back of the head, really dug her fingers in the hardened locks at the back of his head, and slammed his head hard on the bar.

"Try and finish that sentence." Her tone trembles as Jack's blood drips on the shiny oak of the bar.

"She was a real..." he tries again. She bashes his head even harder.

Could I kill a man? She had asked herself. This moment, right now, is giving her the answer, clear as an hourglass.

Yes, she could.

She knows she shouldn't, but the blood now weeping from his swollen nose, staining the white business shirt under the pinstriped suit—it is filling her with a strange sensation. A dark satisfaction, or pleasure.

Where would it stop?

Where will you stop?

The question is sudden, terrifying, and she jumps off her barstool.

"Ameeeeeliiaaaaa! Ameeeeeliiaaaaa!"

As Jack calls after her, spluttering through the clots in his nose, she rushes out to the beat of her own heart pulsing in her temples. The world dances around her in a mirage of purples, greens, blues, oranges and pinks as she stumbles onto the street. She isn't a killer. No matter how cruel they get, she always knew her boundaries. But now, she sees that you can cross those boundaries in the blink of an eye.

Vic is first to make it to the ally. She staggers and slips along the damp cobblestones while trying to rub the blood off her hands, but it has dried too much from her run.

The narrow ally allows for a mere strip of light—a book that has nearly shut itself. She stops by an old chair next to a dumpster and rests her hand on its back. The stitches feel stained, and hardened, under her hand from years of exposure to the elements, but she doesn't care. As long as she can breathe. Breathe until the headache eases to the background. Breathe until the colors release her from their carousal.

"Vic!" she hears regretfully. Lizzy bounces at her joyfully, the others closely behind her. "Look at these videos, they're classic!"

Lizzy presses her phone in front of her face. On the screen, a battered Jack arrives at his car—covered from hood to rear in huge rainbow-colored slogans.

Man-whore, in blue across the window.

Rapist, angry red paint on the driver's door.

We're watching you, in yellow along the bumper.

The girls have made sure that not a single angle of Jack's Mercedes has been left untouched. They have turned a luxury car into a shame parade.

"Nicely done", Vic says, acutely aware of the flatness in her voice.

Lizzy doesn't pick up on her frail state. "Hey, did you use paint too?" the girl points at Vic's face and hands.

"That's not paint, Liz," Maya says. She ushers the others to break up and make it home safely. They will connect over text again. But Maya stays behind.

Vic forces herself to answer her inquisitive look.

"You beat him up good?" Maya says, arms folded.

Vic shrugs.

"What the fuck are you doing that for?"—Maya mimics her shrug—"Did this guy steal your tongue?"

"No Maya. I'm just exhausted. Let's go. It stinks here."

Maya blocks her way. "Something stinks indeed. You've been acting super weird lately."

Vic doesn't know how to respond. She has been acting weird, and there was no way the others wouldn't notice.

"And I hear you are in cahoots."

Vis raises her eyebrows. "Cahoots? Where did you get that from? Pippi Longstocking?"

"You know what the fuck I mean, Vic. Should we be worried? They say you're talking to a cop. Or is it more than talking?"

How the hell does Maya know about Darius?

"You became sloppy"—Maya says as if she read her mind—"I saw his texts pop up on your phone on the desk the other day. Darius. Karate. Didn't have to be Sherlock to track him down."

"Well done Maya," Vic says with a sigh. She has had enough of the interrogation. That is *her* fucking role.

Maya tucks her bob cut behind her ear. "Look, I get it. You are not just-this person. Turns out even you have a life. That's cool. But you need to get your shit together. And you better keep the crew out of the mess you make when you're not wearing that wig.

Maya knows this isn't her real hair. She is not sure if she should be shocked or offended.

"What? You thought I wouldn't know?" Maya gives her a patronizing smile and Vic decides she is indeed offended. She turns away from that accusing face. She needs space.

"He killed Dewey." Her voice breaks as the words spill from her dry lips.

"He *what?*"

"He killed my dog. With my own kitchen knife. And he knows shit about my mother."

"Your dead mother?"

"Yes Maya, THE DEAD ONE!"

Maya observes her. "I don't know what the heck is going on with this one, but it smells fishy. Worse than this ally. You better stay away from him. I mean, look at you. You never used to get physical like that. That was the whole point of the eggs and dog shit, remember?"

Vic stares at her hands—the blood now having turned a dark brown. "I know."

"Maybe it is time we all have a break. That you have a break, from all this." Maya makes circles in the air. Her eyes are large. "Les Chiennes needs a strong leader. Not a blubbering mess or a bloodthirsty maniac."

Vic wants to protest but isn't sure which definition she should dispute: the blubbering mess or the bloodthirsty maniac. Both seem to fit her quite well at the moment. When she looks up, Maya is already halfway towards the main street.

"Don't have us clean up your mess, Vic. I'm warning you."

Chapter Forty:

Elvis about Herbert

I didn't like him much. Herbert, that is. He walked into the restaurant that evening in 1985, with his suede *loafers* and his Rolex, and just had this air about him. Not like the young dogs did at the time, the noisy, obnoxious ones. No, Herbert was more subtle about his success. Nonchalant; as if it didn't mean much to him.

But the moment he laid eyes on Jenny next to me, he snapped out of that—it was as if she woke him up and revealed his deepest secrets with a single turn of the head. Janey was gorgeous—you don't need to be a straight guy to tell. But there was more to the tension between them. Perhaps I am particularly attuned to that sort of thing, but it was as if the distance between them that night thickened the air inside the restaurant. As if the humidity suddenly doubled and turned the plant-dense environment into a tropical rainforest.

I wanted what was best for my Janey and could tell that they cared for each other—a lot. So, what did I do when Herbert came to ask me—beg me—where he could find her? I pointed him to the back of the restaurant, of course. Janey always liked to chat to the guys out back after her shift, but if he was prepared to wait, he could catch her as she'd head for her bike.

Remember, I am the marble run master. I hadn't realized it that night, but that evening turned out to be the first step in building my master plan. Planning would become my safety net. And improvisation my second nature.

Chapter Forty-One:

Erik's Theory

It is late afternoon when Amelia pauses on the steps to Herbert's porch, attempting to calm her racing heart. The sun hangs low, coating the world in a golden glaze that is both beautiful and saddening; as if it represents a melancholy to times or memories that aren't hers and that are now forever out of reach. Her sensitive fingers—scrubbed free of Jack's blood—are fiddling, folding in and out of her sticky palms. She isn't quite sure why revisiting Herbert is making her so nervous.

So he had known mom. Surely that shouldn't give her clammy hands? Then again, the last time she was on Oak Tree Lane her behavior hadn't exactly been exemplary. She can't imagine Herbert will be overjoyed to see the 'guilty-until-proven-otherwise' reporter again.

But she wants answers.

Deserves them.

And she is trained to obtain them, one way or another. The

difference is: the answers she seeks are of a far more personal nature than usual.

Amelia wipes her hands on her pants and smoothens her hair behind her ears before pushing the doorbell twice in short succession. Then she waits. To distract herself, her right boot taps gently on the porch tiles as she softly sings an oldie that played on the radio that morning: *All That She Wants* by Ace of Base.

For the second time that morning, the song reminds her of the cabin at the campground in Belville she and mom booked several years in a row. They renamed it The Cookie Jar: a little tin unit with a mini porch and a tiny clothesline. Each Saturday at dusk, she'd dance at the kids' disco to that song.

She was so different then; a shy, but worry-free version of herself. Ignorant, terribly naive, but also capable of an unobstructed sense of happiness. Her memory can only scratch the surface of that happy feeling, yet it is enough to know she has been drifting off for too long to find her way back there.

She pushes the doorbell again, longer this time, and can clearly distinguish its shrill sound wave through the house. She tries the door—it is unlocked, so she enters.

The curtains in the lounge and library are all shut as if nobody is home.

She pauses in front of the Lojas; even in the dim space its bright composition draws her in like ink to parchment. The painting, its larger, flowing shapes on the right contrasting with sharp, tiny details on the left, makes her feel as if she could step into that world and vanish from this one.

A welcome fantasy.

The only distant light pouring into the house comes from the kitchen, so Amelia walks straight ahead.

"Hi! You're the reporter, right?" She startles as a guy of around her age appears from the hall. Large eyes, dark curls... he was here when she—well, Vic—attacked the house.

"Who are you?" she says, her voice thick with agitation. "I didn't know Herbert had a son." In fact, she is positive he doesn't, because her research has always been thorough.

"Son? No..", he laughs, a wide grin that gives him a boyish look. "Herbert does this mentorship thing with people he meets. People who need help. But I'm not one of them. I am just helping."

"You're fucking confusing. Helping with what?"

Erik thinks for a moment, then his eyebrows bounce up and down a few times. "Intelligence."

"Ok, great. Now get out of my way."

She makes her way to the kitchen door.

"You're very talented. Scarily so," he says after her.

"You're very strange. Annoyingly so." She walks out onto the patio.

Herbert is standing on his yoga mat in the middle of the lawn. Typical of this man to do his Zen thing while his partner is accused of sexual abuse, bullying and God knows what else. The perfect time to do a downward-fucking-dog.

Herbert stands on his right foot, while his left foot is pointing back, and his arms are pointing forward. His body makes the letter T. She's got to give him credit—he makes it look effortless.

"Hello?" Amelia says. "Sorry to interrupt. The door was left open."

Herbert doesn't respond or turn to her, but his still T is

a little less still.

"Hello," she opens, slightly annoyed that he isn't paying attention to her.

Herbert transitions from his wobbly T to a warrior pose, arms and legs wide and bent like a frozen sumo wrestler. He is facing away from her.

"Amelia," he says, remaining rigid in his pose.

"I wanted to talk to you about my mom. Janey." As soon as she has blurted out those words she feels a little better.

Herbert's head turns sideways slightly; she can *just* see the hard line of his unshaven jawline. Did his shoulders jolt up a little, or did she imagine it?

"Your mom. Janey is your mom." Herbert's voice sounds flaky, broken up.

"Yes," Amelia admits, "I felt a bit overwhelmed last time. So I shut down, I suppose. But I'd love to know how you knew her."

Herbert remains silent for a long time. He continues his practice; transitioning through an entire vinyasa.

"Why don't you ask her?" he finally says.

Of course. He doesn't know. How would he know?

"Because she passed away. Two years ago." Amelia tries to focus on the simplicity of the individual words rather than their unbearable collective meaning.

Herbert's legs tremble. His fingers curl into fists. But he doesn't move into a different pose.

"Herbert?" she repeats impatiently. "I said she—"

"I heard what you said," he interrupts brusquely. "That's too bad."

He drops his arms and starts rolling up his yoga mat with swift, irked motions.

"*That's too bad?*"—she steps on top of his mat—"That's it? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Get off my mat."

"Make me."

Herbert, crouched down and holding one end of his mat, looks up in silence. Cold determination is edged in the grooves of his face, in the hard line of his lips—and she steps back.

"How can you be so impossibly cruel?", she says, and hates the way her voice peaks at the question mark. Her mother had been the most incredible woman she'd ever known, something she had become even more painfully aware of after she died.

He should care. He should show some fucking grief too. But instead, he just wanders off to the kitchen, where Erik stands in the doorway like a lost toddler.

"Ever lost a parent?", she calls after Herbert. "Someone you care about deeply? I guess not. You just hide away in your white asylum. Surround yourself with objects. And random strangers you can throw back out on the streets when you've had your social fix. You're a sad, sad, man!" Her fists shoot heavy pain through her fingertips.

Herbert turns and walks back to her, making her take an involuntary step back.

"You're right," Herbert says, only inches away from her, "I am a sad man. Those who were supposed to care about me left me to fend for myself. And yes, I help strangers every now and then. Turns out they are often more decent than my own family ever was. Happy now? Is that a juicy story for your gossip paper?"

His breath in her face. The white in his eyes overtaken by red spider veins.

"This was *not* a story for my paper," she says. "This is the story of my life. I have the right to put together a few strands of my past."

"She never told you anything," Herbert guesses.

Amelia's silence confirms this.

He leans back. "That's probably because there was nothing to tell." Though his face remains unrelenting, his eyes gleam.

"That's a lie. You two had a-thing. I know. There were pictures..."

"She lived next door. It was convenient. Nothing more."

"Convenient?"—Amelia grabs the fabric of his T shirt, pleased to feel some chest hair caught in between her fingers too, and starts pushing Herbert back along the grass. "My mother was not a fucking convenience, you sick fuck! She was..."

They have reached the edge of the lawn.

What is she doing?

Is violence her go-to answer now, every time people don't

collaborate? Her eye is drawn to a pile of broken dishes and food, overgrown by moss and grass. She lets go of Herbert and steps back, ensuring he is out of her reach. She tries to compose herself.

"All I am asking for is a grain of humanity. But you are detached from life. From everything and everyone. What was I thinking?" She fights the sting of tears, and Herbert turns away from her.

"I see her *everywhere*,"—her voice is not much more but a whisper, but the words just spill out of her; an uncontrollable urge—"In the street, on the walls of a cafe, in the back of a bus, in the back of my mind. Every day. It is exhausting."

Herbert refuses to meet her gaze. His hand rubs his head as his eyes dart from one random point to another.

"Losing a parent too early can really fuck you up, you know," she says, tears now liberally welling in her eyes. She doesn't mention that she lost her mother not once, but twice.

"It's a weakness to blame your fuckups on your parents," Herbert says.

Amelia's anger is running exhausted. This man, cold as metal, has nothing to add.

"I can see how you ended up all alone in this concrete block, feeling sorry for yourself." Her tone is soft and jittery. "No wonder she dropped you like a brick. You are so self-absorbed."

Herbert's left eye twitches briefly; the only sign of emotion in his unbudging stance. Amelia has heard enough, her body and emotions worn.

She leaves, afraid that if she stays, darker thoughts will queue up, wanting to propel, wanting to express. She slides the door shut behind her, ensuring to keep her gaze away from that impossibly cruel man in the garden.

As she makes her way towards the front door, a voice calls from the lounge.

"That went well," Erik says. He is standing next to the sofa, his face an apologetic smile. Amelia ignores him and trudges to the front door.

"Do you have a minute?" Erik calls after her as she opens the heavy door.

"No, not really."

"I'd like to run something by you."

Amelia leans her head against the side of the door. She is so hurt, so eager to leave. But there is something urgent to his voice. "Why? I don't know you. You could be crazier than him." She points in the direction of the garden.

Erik gazes in the same direction. "Yeah, he is unique for sure. But I just have a quick question. Takes two seconds."

She turns and waits.

"I may have been eavesdropping before. Sorry about that. I understand Janey is your mother. And she... is no longer with us."

"You can just say she died. Don't try and turn my mother's death into fucking poetry. Please."

"Right, yes. Sorry. Thing is... can you tell me how old you are?"

"I don't see how that is relevant."

"Humor me. Kindly."

Amelia sighs. "I'm 37." After turning 25, she had felt further and further estranged from her own age, as if time

progressed forward faster than she could keep up with.

"So you were born in—"

"1986."

Erik seems to undergo some strange revelation. "Oh shit. Oh shit. Can this be true?" He looks around him, as if the air holds the answer, while scratching his unruly curls.

"What?" she says. She doesn't like this new energy he is brimming with. "Look, I don't know what you're on about. Or what you're on. But I've got to go. Your friend has exhausted my energy completely."

Erik swiftly takes her hand and pulls her into the living. He parks her right by the window.

"Look," he says softly, and points.

On the lawn, Herbert still stands in the same spot as where she left him. His shoulders are drooping. His feet are close together. He looks at an undefined spot in front of him, as if Amelia is still standing there talking to him.

"Is he ok?" she says with a glint of concern.

Erik leans against the glass next to her, observing his

friend in pity. "He is mourning."

They both observe Herbert in silence for a while.

"Look, I have a theory," Erik says eventually. "You may want to sit down for this."

"You may want to tell me what the hell you're on about." She has had enough of his bizarre behavior.

"Ok then. So, your mom and Herbert were childhood lovers. They were close."

She nods. *Tell me something I don't know.*

"But they met each other again," Erik proceeds. "Later, much later. This happened in 1985. The year before you were born."

Amelia nods and swallows, suddenly feeling hot. She was born purple-skinned from the umbilical cord, which was wrapped around her neck four times. Mom said she had never stopped being a busybody.

Erik pauses, gauges her response. She manages a nod, yet every particle inside her prays he won't say what she suspects he is about to say.

"It was a chance reunion, but a very passionate one. Very happy. Then someone stepped in and managed to cut them loose again. Purposefully."

"Jack," she whispers. Suddenly, Jack's attitude towards her, the personal attacks, the way he had looked at her and referred to her mother... everything makes sense to her now.

Fucking Jack.

"Ok," Erik says, leaning back, "you're doing a scary thing with your eyes."

"Keep going"—she leaves no space for deviation—"What else do you know?"

"Well, these are just theories of mine, but I think when Jack... compromised things between your mom and Herbert, I think that she may have been pregnant. With Herbert. I mean, with you. I think he is your biological father. Herbert." Erik stands very still, awaiting the cataclysmic effect of his words.

Amelia witnesses his Adams apple hoist up and down. He looks as if he has just eaten something that was a little expired and he is waiting to see if his stomach will respond badly.

She sits down in the alcove chair. There is a clock ticking somewhere and it is the first time that she notices this. Its ticktock hammers into her head, which pulses with loose, unfinished phrases.

Questions.

She has no many questions yet cannot seem to formulate any. The creaking cane of the chair she sits in is her only evidence that she is still breathing. She looks at Erik, who has turned paler than he was a minute ago.

"Are you ok?" she asks him. It is easier to focus on someone else's pain than your own.

"Am *I* ok? Yeah, yeah, fine. Are you? Sorry for hitting you with this."

She wants to say something lighthearted. *You must be getting back to me for being a bitch earlier.* But words don't make it past her mind. They mean nothing.

She looks out; Herbert has started moving again. He has pulled a ride-on lawn mower from the shed and is mowing strange, circular shapes on the lawn. His face is looking a bit gaunt now. She isn't sure if he is totally stable.

"Why would she keep such a secret?" she says, her eyes still following Herbert's circles. "Mom and I shared everything." It isn't so much a question for Erik, but it helps to articulate her questions out loud.

"Maybe she thought it'd be better this way," Erik says. Amelia is a little shocked when she feels anger. Not that the emotion is a stranger to her, but she does not remember feeling anger towards her mother in... forever. If this is even real, would mom truly have kept her biological father away from her? Make up a bullshit story about a sperm donor? Herbert is hardly a catch, as a husband or a father, but that should still have been *her* conclusion. Not her mother's.

They both look out as Herbert chases past the window on the mower; his lips pursed together; his nostrils dilated.

"Maybe," Amelia says. "But that wasn't her choice to make. If this is even true."

She gets up in a hurry.

"You off?" Erik asks.

She stops and pats his shoulder.

"Thanks," she says.

"Just theories, right?" he reminds her. "You'd need to do a DNA test."

"Course," she replies. She closes the door behind her, somehow knowing he is right about everything. She isn't overjoyed but mostly just confused. She had just attacked the man who now may be her father. Even wanted to slap some sense into him. Their meager relationship has barely started and yet is already far too complicated. But one thing she does know with crystal clarity. One person has wormed his manipulative ways into not just *her* life but mum's life as well. One person is responsible for this entire situation.

Fucking Jack.

Chapter Forty-Two:

Wreck

Janey is gone. She isn't somewhere else in the world at all, living a happily married life with a man that isn't him. She doesn't have a fulfilling charity job at all. She doesn't come home at night to cook a hearty meal for a large family. She doesn't lie awake every now and then, wondering where Herbert is. What became of him. None of that. Because Janey is gone.

Herbert has left the mower on the middle of the lawn, which has turned into an abstract painting of geometric moons and lines, and has moved on to his electric hedge trimmer.

With purpose, he runs the blade extension up and down the hedge - chopping and slashing into the perfectly groomed bush as if it's threatening to devour him.

Someone may be calling his name in the distance—he can't be sure. None of it matters. He has lived alone for all those years and only *now* does he feel utterly alone in the world. It grips him by the neck. It rips through his gut. All those years, he

has been waiting. For what? A sign?

The hedge is turning into a chaos of angry zigzags and strangely, it is bleakly satisfying. At least he no longer has to uphold pretence that he has his things in order. That he is in control. Control is the biggest lie to yourself. It turns your life into a hollow shell and captures you inside, in the dark.

Herbert drops the hedge trimmer, engine still roaring, and runs straight to the shed.

"Watch out," he says casually to Erik, he stands next to the shed as Herbert stumbles out with the ladder. He positions the ladder at the foot of the old oak tree, then goes back to fetch his chainsaw.

Erik wants to know what he is up to now, but Herbert is too focused to reply. He has a job to do. He is turning this into his truth garden. A true reflection of him.

And boy, he is a mess...

Herbert starts climbing the ladder, ignoring its unstable wobble while holding the chainsaw in one hand.

"You're really getting into this gardening, aren't you?"

Erik calls up to him.

At the second attempt, Herbert gets the chainsaw going. He leads the blades straight to the thickest branch in front of him and pushes them into the bark, which gives like soft butter.

He cuts through the bark of his mom leaving when he was ten years old.

He cuts through his dad's beatings.

He cuts through Jack's betrayal.

And he cuts through Janey dying.

How did she die? Was she with loved ones? With her daughter? Was she in pain? Was it quick?

"Oh, wooh, that's hardly a trim. Herbert? This tree is over two hundred years old. You sure you—"

A violent creaking and snapping, paired with the rustling of leaves, announce the drop of a branch the size of a man's biceps.

"Watch out," Herbert says over his shoulder once it has thwacked amongst the dead leaves. It seems Erik was able to jump aside in time.

"Herbert!" Erik pleads. "Please stop this madness!"

But Herbert doesn't know how to stop. He doesn't want to. He wants to see more branches fall. He wants to turn this perfectly sculpted canopy into a sad, amputated being.

"Herbert, this is heartbreaking, please come down!"

Heartbreaking. Now there was an adequate word for this feeling in his core. He pauses, rests the handle of the roaring chainsaw on the ladder. Sweat has built on his forehead. He had been given a second chance. Life had thrown him, who most definitely didn't deserve it, a second chance. One evening. A pin drop in his life. All he had to do was not disappoint her again. Be the man she wanted him to be.

He drops the chainsaw on the ground and descends from the ladder - leaving the tree looking like a severely wounded war veteran.

"Are you alright?" Erik asks him, but Herbert walks straight past him and starts to collect the branches that have fallen. He drags them to the middle of the lawn and drops them

on top of one another.

He wants to burn down his past. Wipe out any memory of her. Erase the hope that held him together for all those years.

"Let me help you" Erik says. They spend the next fifteen minutes collecting and dropping branches and twigs, building a pile nearly twice as high as the average human.

That will make for one heck of a bonfire.

Herbert jogs inside and grabs the matches from the kitchen drawer.

"Burn!" he calls to the woodpile as he throws a lid matchstick. The tiny flame bounces on a thick branch, and then dies. Herbert tries again, but fails.

"Dammit," he mumbles, then walks back inside and comes out with a newspaper. He shreds dozens of tiny bits of paper and creates a little nest within the woodpile. Three matches later, the flame catches sufficiently to start eating away on the leaves, then the twigs.

Both almost getting a little excited, they step closer to watch the fire grow. But as quickly as it expanded, it disappears again. Herbert curbs his back and releases a fisted,

primal scream at the pile, kicking at the branches.

Even destruction, which should be easy for the simplest of individuals, is too great a challenge for him.

Then he falls silent. *You've got to think big.* It had always been the catalyst for every one of his successes.

Herbert digs around in the shed until he finds what he is after: a petrol can.

"Not a quitter, are ya?" Erik says. "Is that legal though?"

"Probably not," Herbert answers, proceeding to liberally sprinkle the petrol on and around the fire pile. "Makes it extra fun, doesn't it?"

He throws a burning match onto the foliage and both men jump back as a meter-high flame pierces the air. In a matter of seconds, the garden is lit by sky-high, scorching flames. It is a high-moisture, dirty fire—with thick smoke being whipped into the dimming sky. Erik coughs. "Herb, not so close!" He has pushed himself against the house.

Herbert stands only meters away from the heat of the flames that lash and lick the air in front of him. He stares through the blaze, at a point he can never return to. He embraces the

urge to destroy this moment that is destroying him while trying to mark it simultaneously, like putting a pin into a place on the map when you get there.

His face already feels consumed by the heat. He will become one with the flames. His charring skin is a thin distraction from his bleeding heart. The heart that will now forever belong to her. The heart that he has just given up on.

He turns his head to look at the house as its white limestone is saturated in fiery orange light.

Bright colors.

There is one thing that reminds him of her more than anything else. *It is time to say goodbye.*

He walks back inside, to the hall, and lifts the Lojas off the hook. "We had good times," he says to the artwork. He takes it back outside, ignoring Erik's widening eyes.

"Herbert, don't you dare!" Erik now threatens.

But what can Erik threaten him with? How do you threaten a man who has lost everything already?

"Herbert, no, please no!"

Herbert casts a malicious grin to his friend, then holds up the frame with both hands and tosses it high up into the blaze.

The deep reds, indigo and yellow are rapidly eaten from the center of the painting, then the frame catches fire, turning slowly into a charcoal, brittle pane.

Herbert drops to his knees and allows himself to picture Janey once more—laughing and waving—on her purple bike. Ringing her bell at him; the one he gave her.

"Ring Ring," he says softly into the flames.

Next, Erik's solid body throws him aside, away from the flames. When he looks up, a thick burning branch has covered the space where he just sat.

#

Herbert sits on the cool steps of the patio and tries to clear his throat, but it is too raw. On the lawn, Erik is dealing with the policemen and firemen as good as he can. The law enforcers look back at Herbert now and then, nodding. Of course, they are agreeing that he is crazy. You can't blame a crazy person for doing crazy shit.

You would all have gone crazy too.

He doesn't care what they say or think. He cares about nothing anymore.

When the uniforms have finally left, Erik sits down next him. He hands him a bottle of water and an icepack.

"I don't—"

"Put it on your face, Herbert."

Herbert rests the ice pack on his left cheek. It is the first time Erik tells him what to do, and he is strangely grateful for it. He pulls the blanket closer around his shoulders. The shivering hasn't settled yet.

The crater in the garden still smolders here and there, and one patch is sparking again. Erik gets up to stamp it out, but Herbert takes his arm in a grip. "Just sit with me. Please." His voice crackles like an old LP. He looks down at his hands. They are blazed with soot, redness and shiny blisters.

"You scared me today," Erik says.

Herbert nods. He had scared himself too. "Have you ever been alone?"

"Alone? Yes, I guess.."

"No, not by yourself," Herbert says, "we're all by ourselves at some point in life. I mean truly, utterly alone. The kind of alone that requires knowing what the other end of the spectrum looks like."

"The other end?"

"Yes, the end that we all seek. Belonging, love, union—a deep sense of happiness that nothing, *nothing*, can compare to. Not all the money, success, fame or other bullshit in the world."

The other end he would never reach. He rubs his head but stops instantly as the skin is painfully blistered.

"I'm not sure—"

"Ever been alone for so long that you got used to the feeling of your soul feeling empty?" Herbert continues. He seems to be caught in a dialogue not so much with Erik, but with himself. "And yet at the same time, every second of life is somewhat terrifying, because you are bathing in the knowledge that you will have to live through so many more seconds just like that one. The one where your insides are so dark, you don't know if you'll ever find yourself again. You hide in this darkness for so long, you even struggle to have normal

conversations with other human beings. You can't remember how to start. Or you feel like you're not worthy of anyone's time."

"But I love—"

"I was once in Blue Creek, by the new industrial area, to meet some clients"—Herbert moves the icepack to his other cheek. "After the meeting, I was hungry, so I bought a coffee and sandwich from a stall by the local park. There was a large skatepark, and I sat on a bench eating my sandwich while watching teenage boys do some crazy tricks. There was one boy, he must have been fifteen, or sixteen, who trumped them all. He would slide and grind any object within his vision, jump higher than anyone, go faster than anyone"—his voice drops out at the high intonations—"A few times he fell hard, evoking lots of 'Ooouuhs' from his mates, but he just kept doing crazier shit. I watched this boy with his skateboard being so fearless, embracing life with such open, eager arms that he was prepared to go down hard time and time again. He loved it, you could see his blue eyes light up every time he jumped and landed right. You know what I realized there and then? I am nothing like that kid, and I never will be."

Erik disagrees; wants to give him examples why.

"No, truly. I know what you're about to say," Herbert

continues, his voice going from croaky to mostly air. "I take risks, like with the businesses. They're all calculated risks though. I carefully assessed how great the risk of failure was, reviewed the implications of both success and failure, eliminated as many risks as I possibly could, then took action. That is just being a sound businessman. That's not living life to the fullest."

"You are comparing yourself with a reckless teenager though," Erik says. "Calculating risks is totally human."

"Is it? Is it human to have as many opportunities as I did, opportunities for true love, and mess it up every time?" Herbert emphasizes the end of that sentence. "Simply because things aren't smooth sailing?"

"What happened wasn't your fault," Erik reminds him.

"No, I know. Jack. But *I* let him ruin things," Herbert says. "*I* was the one who, when she had moved and quit her job, left things. I could have hunted her down. But I didn't. I went on with my pathetic little life, pretending like it wasn't a big deal."

"But it was," Erik states the obvious.

Herbert looks at the amputated oak tree. "She made me the

man I wanted to be."

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Neglected

Amelia follows the West Freeway without a destination, her mind swaying like driftwood in the ocean.

I'd imagine your biological father is a very generous man.

Amelia had frowned at her mum, who proceeded to peel the potatoes as if they were having a conversation about the weather. Amelia asked her if there was any way of finding out more. Didn't she have the right to know who he was?

Sure, I guess, though it would defeat the purpose of anonymity.

She remembers she used to imagine what her surrogate father might look like. A lanky man with dark hair, a broad smile and a killer sense of humor. She may now end up with a father who is the exact opposite of that.

The next exit is Ambush Lane. She has never been around the neighborhood but takes the exit regardless.

Anonymity my ass. How had mom lied to her all those years?
And with such ease? What happened between her and Herbert?

Just drive.

Had he betrayed her? Had he been aggressive? She exchanges a glance with herself in the rearview mirror. Did she inherit her hotheaded genes from that man? His impatient attitude during the interview. Her questions about mom. No, it is unfair to call him hotheaded. *She* had been pushing his buttons intentionally. If anything, he kept his cool while she acted like a maniac.

So, was it truly all Jack's doing? Could one man ruin a relationship like that? His motivation isn't clear, but she has dealt with him enough to know the answer. Jack Payne is a dangerous narcissist wrapped in a package of sly wit and a golden boy look. If he saw a reason to keep mom and Herbert apart, he would have moved heaven and earth to make that happen.

She peers around, taking in the quiet neighborhood she has ended up in. Though each is different, they all look the same. A front yard, a mailbox, bricks, some with a little porch, some with a veranda. A boy might live in one of these houses. A girl might move in next door. And their story could begin.

She has been harsh on Herbert, perhaps too harsh. But that

doesn't mean she is delighted with the possibility of them sharing the same genes. There is the possibility of *not* doing a DNA test, of course.

Is it better to know something when the answer is underwhelming, or would she rather not find out? Would it change the way she views him? Would it change the way he sees her?

Dammit, she is 37. What the hell does it matter now who her father is? The potential role of parent evaporated a long time ago.

Mom did the best she could as a single parent. She would have had her reasons. She had been an amazing mother and her best friend. If only she could ask her—

She stops as a girl with braided red hair, she must be six or seven years old, waits to cross with her scooter. The girl drops her little front wheel onto the road, scraping the deck of the scooter across the curb, then hops on and pushes off. But after a few meters, she stops and stands still in the middle of the road. Her head is turned to Amelia, but her eyes do not quite meet Amelia's eyes; they look past her. It is as if the girl looks at something in the distance, behind Amelia. The girl has a tiny nose and a tiny mouth, but large eyes and a large forehead—like an anime character. Amelia looks behind her, but

doesn't see anything or anyone. When she turns her head back, the girl is gone.

"What? How can she...?" Amelia scans the edges of the road, the dark shadows cast by overhanging trees, the corners, a little playground, but can't find the girl anywhere. Giving up, she turns back onto the main road.

After several miles she spots a little sign that says 'Dog Shelter - next right.'

A force greater than herself makes the turn and pulls up by an uninspiring, single-story building with small, dirty windows and a yellow door.

She walks in and is met by a smell of bad dog breath, a pungent, toxic-smelling cleaning product and traces of urine. Behind a reception counter sits a stocky woman with lipstick in the color *80-ies Barbie*. She must be in her late fifties, early sixties, and has her dyed hair with grey roots in a tight ponytail at the back of her head. She is sucking a hard lolly or a mint, flicking the thing vigorously from side to side. Her cheeks are somewhat flabby, making them wobble like custard pudding when she speaks.

"Yeah?" she says, as if responding to something Amelia may

have said.

"Hi, I am here to visit the dogs," Amelia states.

The woman blinks a few times in confusion. "Visit the dogs?"

"Yeah. I am thinking of buying one." *What the hell is she saying? She isn't ready for a new dog.*

Flabby cheeks looks her up and down, her mint flicking left, right, left.

"Shuah," she points at a door with a tiny, round window at eye-height. Amelia goes through the door, leading into a long hallway with individual kennels on either side. The smell is more intense here, and ear-splitting barks echo through the hall. She passes an old German shepherd, who wants to get up but has trouble with his hind legs. There is a poodle, looking scruffy and dirty like a metal band member. She sees a couple of mixed breeds too, one with a cheeky patch on the eye, another with specks all over its fur like confetti. At the end, she spots a bulldog, its oversized tongue festively bouncing off his protruded jaw with every quick breath. His left eye is shut with some pussy substance, his right eye looks at her in awe. He takes a few steps towards her, then sits and waits. Amelia takes

a step forward too, then sits down in front of him.

"Hey buddy," she says softly. The bulldog's bum shakes with excitement as his one good eye blinks affectionately. Amelia lets out a deep breath, one full of sorrow, of missed opportunities, of loss. Loss of one parent, or perhaps two. Loss of so much love. And above all, loss of a large part of herself.

Who has she become? This whole situation has left her feeling so incredibly exposed. She suddenly feels shame for how she allowed Vic, allowed herself, to treat the girls in her group. She has been brutal. And what for? How naïve to think you can change the world by throwing some dog shit at the bad guys.

"What a sweet boy you are," she says as the bulldog licks her hand. Through the bars, she scratches his head, and he leans in with endearing grunts of affection.

She takes the animal in more closely and notices bare spots on his coat. He doesn't look like a typical bulldog either, he actually looks on the slim side. She turns and looks at some of the other dogs with a sharper eye. Their kennels are filthy, not one dog seems to have any food, or enough water, and they all look malnourished. Sitting at the end of the hallway, the door at the very end, right next to her, has a sign that says 'Staff Only'. She scratches the dog again.

"Are you hungry?" Amelia asks him with a tone of excitement.

The bulldog shakes his bum so passionately that his entire body twists and turns with it.

"Thought so."

She opens the staff door and finds what she was hoping for: stacked along the walls of the storage room are large, forty pound bags of 'Pawlicious dog food'. Amelia has that familiar thing, where her heart beats fast and she feels hot on the inside. It happens every time she puts on her wig and transforms into Vic. She rips the seal off the first bag and yanks the closure strip apart. Holding the bag at one of the bottom tips, she drags it along the floor on an angle, pouring the dog food in a thick ridge along the hallway floor. The dogs are barking at the tops of their lungs, and those who have the energy jump up and down against the bars. Amelia only stops once she has reached the other end of the hallway. She drops the bag and turns to the kennel door on her left. The dog, a little mixed breed with curious ears, looks at her expectingly.

"Are you ready?"

She flicks the lock and opens the door. The dog waits for

only a second, gauging the situation, her; then he bursts out of his cell and attacks the food. Amelia turns and opens the door of the cell opposite the little scruffy thing, then the one of his neighbor, and on and on. She zigzags her way through the hall, freeing every dog so they can join the feast.

"What the hell are you doin'?"

Wobble Barbie stands in the door opening, her shoulders pulled so high you can hardly see her neck.

"This is a private party and you were most definitely *not* invited," Amelia says. "Get your lazy ass back to your fluffy chair."

Wobbles rushes back to her chair at a near-running pace. Meanwhile, Amelia fills a large bucket with fresh water and props this against the hallway door. Some dogs, having by now filled their hungry bellies, make their way to the water, while others keep on walking straight into the reception. Amelia bounces a rubber ball and several of the dogs chase it in a state of utter rapture. Out of all the things she's done, she feels best about this one.

She plants her elbows on the counter. The woman trembles and pretends to read something on her computer screen.

Amelia turns off the computer and reluctantly, the woman's little, charcoaled eyes meet hers.

"Listen carefully," Amelia says. "From now on, you will give every dog here, and any new dog that walks through that door, the treatment worthy of a king. They will be fed well, twice a day, you will let them out of their kennel, at least twice a day. They will always have a large bowl of fresh water at their disposal. When I return in the future, and I will, I wish to see zero ribs. I wish to see well-nourished, happy dogs. I wish to see shiny coats. Clean, shiny eyes. I wish to see their health issues attended to by a professional vet immediately. You will love them, groom them, wash them, and keep their kennels spic-and-span. If these wishes of mine aren't granted, well... let's just say losing your job will be the very least of your concerns. You don't know me, and that is for the best. Now you work hard to keep it that way. Does that make sense to you? Nod your head." The woman nods; or it's more of a quiver.

Leaving her in complete chaos, surrounded by dogs who do not listen, do not care about her, Amelia grabs one of the dog leads off a hook on the wall and walks out cherishing an invigorating sense of relentlessness.

It's about time Jack is met with a response that will taint him the way he has tainted so many people.

Chapter Sixty-One

Soaking Sorrow

Holler Heights industrial park was built three years ago. Amelia had been there shortly after it opened, for an interview. The developer had explained how the strategy, attracting companies in the tech space, was going to be a key drawcard of the development. 'An ecosystem of innovation', he had called it. Despite the positivity of that article, Amelia had known then—and knows even more now—that truly groundbreaking journalism shouldn't forge friendships. It should produce enemies.

She bumps her car onto the broad pavement outside the Technables building—the plush terrier hanging on her rearview mirror jiggling ecstatically—and parks close to the entrance, forcing people to veer around her car. The car door groans when she slams it shut. She is done with delicate Amelia. It is time to give ruthless Vic some more breathing space. She places her

wig on her head—straightens it in the reflection of the car window. The face staring back doesn't flinch, doesn't twitch. A first-class poker-face. It brings back a shred of the nightmare several nights ago. Her drowning. A gothic Vic saving her at the last minute.

She quickly shakes the memory. "We don't need a mask," she says to this new face.

She makes her way to the Technables entrance. Free of her dog mask, it feels liberating to show her true face. She has nothing to hide. She has nothing to lose. The young man at the reception, immaculately dressed in a business shirt and skinny tie, smiles at her.

"Good afternoon ma'am, can I help you?"

"Hi there, nice tie," Amelia says. She whacks her metal keychain into the fire alarm glass and pulls the lever down.

"Thank you," the boy responds, his words swallowed by the deafening noise of the fire alarm.

Amelia winks, thrilled to notice that the fire alarm is connected to the sprinkler system. As the sprinkler heads create a dense downpour throughout the vast space, Amelia finds the directory board. Wiping the fringe of her draining wig out of

her eyes, she finds Jack is at level 9, the top floor of the building, in office 911. She passes the elevator and starts climbing up the stairs; a spiraling shaft in the center of the lobby. On the internal verandas above her, men in suits and women in high heels run up and down with papers, bags, coats. Some are shouting at each other, others say nothing, but their faces are folded into stress mode. More and more people are now rushing past her on the stairs; everyone going down while she is climbing higher and higher, enjoying the water gushing in her face and her mother's words in her mind.

You can only take responsibility for yourself, Amelia.

Most people unknowingly live like sheep.

They repeat what everyone else says.

Wear what everyone else wears.

Act how everyone else acts.

*All I ask of you is that you stay true to you, and
only you.*

Never apologize for your body, for your mind.

Never apologize for being you.

Finally, she truly embodies her mother's words. She is Amelia, yet carries Vic like a queen—giving her all the space she needs to strike hard.

An older man throws a leather briefcase from the fourth floor down into the lobby, but the bag hasn't been closed and papers fly through the vertical space like birds playing before landing heavily on the floor. A woman with long, blonde hair in a ponytail runs down the stairs so fast that she slips and breaks one of the heels of her shoe. She swears and hobbles on like a pretty Quasimodo. The carpet fitted on each step is now so wet that Amelia sinks in deep as if she is walking on sponges. A man with greying hair and a square jawline approaches as he descends the steps.

"You're going the wrong way miss," he says, holding out his hand as if he is ready to grab her by the elbow and take her downstairs. But then his slow brain processes the look on her wet face, the roaring fire in her eyes, he steps aside on the landing and lets her pass.

Amelia has nearly reached the ninth floor, when she is passed by a woman that she suspects is Pinky, the receptionist, who mutters softly to herself as she zips past holding a huge plastic bag. The floor has a hallway that runs in a circle in

the top of the building's cone, with a few offices leading off this. Everyone has left.

Everyone but one.

The door of office 911 is partly open and she picks up heavy swearing from a familiar voice. Cupboards and drawers are being jammed open and shut, glass breaks, and as she walks into the space holding the dog leash tightly in her right jacket pocket, Jack looks up from stashing piles of documents into boxes, wiping water off his face.

"Ah," he says with delight, "the redheaded illusion pays me another visit. Seems you like playing games as much as I do."

His nose is packed in thick white dressing. Splinted. Meaning she had succeeded and broken his nose.

Peanuts to what's he got coming next.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Rubbernecking

Amelia watches Jack closely as he takes a signed basketball off the open shelves, shielding the signature with his free hand before carefully placing the ball in the box. A cap with Snoop Dogg's swirly signature follows.

"People often say that *stuff* doesn't matter," he says as he reaches for a miniature sportscar on the shelf. "They're wrong. Now *people*—they come, and they go. They don't stay around. No matter how hard you try. *Stuff* on the other hand? One hundred percent reliable." He places the car in the box as if it is a dinosaur's egg.

"Maybe you're not giving people a reason to stay." Amelia wipes the red bangs from her eyes.

Jack keeps his gaze at his *stuff*, but his jaw hardens to her delight.

"I'd say you have become an expert at giving people reasons to leave," she adds.

There is a water puddle on Jack's cherry wooden desk. A Newton's Cradle softly swings as the water continues to gush down onto the little metal balls. Other than the sprinklers, the *Click, Click, Click* of the device is the only sound.

Click, click, click.

It drills itself into Amelia's skull like a mechanic heartbeat, its volume overbearing her thoughts. Jack watches her like an untrustworthy dog as she walks over to the desk and silences the cradle.

"Are you taking me for a walk?" he says, spotting the dog collar in her hand.

"Not quite. I'd call it corrective dog training. Surely, we can both agree that positive reinforcement is wasted on you."

He kicks the box under his desk, forcing her to jump aside, and in response she whips the collar across his face—adding a reddening mark to his already bruised face. He spits blood before he turns his gaze back at her.

His look is bestial.

She whips him again, wanting to keep on whipping until he is a good boy. *But you will never be a good boy.*

"You have destroyed so many lives. For so long." Her voice is foreign to her as anger, grief and sorrow battle inside her. "Why would you want to tear people apart like that?" None of his answers would change his fate in this moment, but she wants to know nevertheless. More than she'd like to admit.

Jack's thin lips break into a grin.

"Ah, so you know. Finally. I did you a favor, really. Herbert was never husband material. The guy's a mess. And a father?"—he scoffs—"You would have turned out just as fucked up as he is."

"I AM FUCKED UP NOW!"

She leaps passed him, flicks the leash around his neck and pulls hard.

"Do you know that I have such a low self-esteem by now," she hisses in his ear, "I truly believe I'm not a very good person at all."

She pulls a little harder at the end of her sentence, enjoying the gurgling noise produced by Jack's throat.

"Do you know that this makes me someone who feels as though she has nothing to lose? Not ideal for you in your current

situation."

Jack makes little gagging noises, as if he is trying to say something, but she only tightens the lead a little more.

"Ever had to weed a garden, Jack?" Amelia says in his ear. She can smell his coffee breath and cologne, which reeks like over-compensation for an absence of character.

"Amateurs start ripping away at the little fuckers, breaking the weeds at the stem. This leaves the root entirely intact; the weed is actually designed to let go of its stem and leaves quickly if required, like collateral damage. It knows that as long as its roots are intact, it can come back even quicker and stronger. Guys like you are a weed," she says.

Her mom had taught her well.

"Can't just get rid of you by throwing shit at you, or giving you a couple of scratches"—she headbutts his bandaged nose and he squawks in pain—"it just won't do. You need to be pulled out with your roots and all, slowly, controlled. That's what I'm here to do for you today. I am here to extract all traces of you. Rid you for the sake of everyone else."

Both are now drenched, eyes squeezing to maintain vision. Even though Jack has repeatedly whacked her face and shoulders

with his clenched fists, she can feel his power subside. He tries to speak but produces more sputters and gargles.

"Amelia?"

A shockwave surges through Amelia's body when she looks up and sees Darius in the door opening, pointing his gun, chest heaving up and down from the climb.

How did he find her?

"I told you I'd look after myself," she says, fighting tears. "I know what I'm doing."

Darius looks amused.

"Yeah? So, what's next? Are you killing him?" Darius sits down in the door opening, back leaning against the frame, wiping the water off his face. "You'll have to pull the leash considerably harder if you want to kill him."

Amelia cannot believe Darius is mocking her. "This is not a joke!"

"Of course not," he says. "I'm just working out what you're after. As you've planned things and all."

She remains quiet.

"I'm sure you thought about the consequences for you, for us, if you do kill him?" Darius says. "I love you no matter what, because that's how I'm programmed. But spending time together in the years to come, that would become a bit more tricky when you're behind bars. Which would be a bummer, as I had this thing up my sleeve."

Darius seems so *laissez faire*, so relaxed, that it throws her off. "Thing?"

"A surprise trip," he says, "not really keen to give it all away. Not even under these... romantic circumstances."

Amelia's grip on Jack softens and Jack uses the opportunity to roll over and topple her. Her vision obstructed by the water pouring into her eyes, she is knocked on the head with a small, hard object. Jack is holding the Newton's Cradle as he smashes it on her head a second time.

The pain is hot. Colors are familiar and everywhere, yet tumbling over each other. Her shriek fuses with a piercing blast as Darius fires his gun.

Jack rolls on the floor, his hand covering his left arm. Blood is quickly spreading in his already-soaked shirt as he howls, his face pointed at the wall. The bullet has skimmed

Jack's flesh before digging into the concrete behind him.

Amelia, shivering and energy-depleted, crawls over to Darius and drops herself into his arms.

"Crazy girl," he whispers in her hair. "I'm gonna have to arrest you now."

PART 4 :

WHO'S A GOOD BOY?

An estimated 2.3 million dogs live in shelters in the United States. Around 5.9 million dogs live on the streets.

In 2023, approximately 359,000 dogs were euthanized in shelters nationwide, marking a five-year peak.

Chapter Forty-Six:

A Friendly Catch

Salty ocean air tickles Herbert's nose. He hasn't been at Westshore Beach for several years. Now that he thinks of it, the last time he came to let off steam was during the period of Jack's addiction. Not only had Jack done serious damage to his own health, but he had jeopardized relationships with their top customers.

Herbert rubs his head.

How had he forgotten about that time? Jack kicking and screaming. Jack's gaunt face as Herbert drove him to rehab. Had he repressed the memories because it was more convenient?

If that's true, what else has he repressed?

He halts at the shoreline. The ocean is calm—waves softly fizz as their foamy edges wash out across the sand. The sky is a flat, dull grey and seagulls mew in the distance. There are people down by the beach bar, several hundred meters in the other direction, but here, close to the pier, he doesn't see

anyone except for a sole fisherman to his right. Herbert gazes along the horizon—a straight line interrupted only by a vessel in the distance, no more than a Lego brick.

Since he learned Janey was gone, since his garden meltdown, he had collapsed and slept for two days straight while Erik kept an eye on him. On day three, when he finally sat up with a coffee in bed, Erik brought up his theory as if it was good news:

He may be Amelia's biological father.

Unknowingly being a father is enough of a shock, but to a grown woman? What does that mean? What could he still do for her?

He pictures her sharply defined features again, and although blood tests will be the only way to know for sure, he can clearly see the resemblance. Unsurprisingly, his genes had been the dominant ones: Amelia has the same pronounced nose, sharp eyebrows, and slender cheekbones. Except she makes it look different; she makes it look good.

A school of tiny fish cut through a wave and briefly lift out of the water, shining silvery.

What would Janey say?

She clearly hadn't been convinced he was cut out to be a father either, otherwise she would have involved him from the get-go.

But what Janey thought doesn't matter now. *Janey is gone.*

He takes a few steps back as the water creeps closer, then takes off his shoes and socks. He leaves them on a washed-up tree trunk, rolls up his trouser legs and wades into the water. It is chilling to the point that it hurts, but it is invigorating at the same time and takes his mind off things. He slows his breathing right down and, for a moment, closes his eyes. He knows this instance of peace won't last, so he makes the most of it.

His next step hovers instead of finding solid ground, then sinks into an endless depth.

Here I go, his brain flashes in surprise as he is swallowed by a black hole. The cold water is paralyzing.

Get up.

Get out.

A closed scream.

The water is so heavy. Pushing him down.

His muscles act as if they are learning how to move for the first time.

He feels something move, search, above him.

A hand!

Someone grips him by his collar, and he is pulled out of the water like a newborn. Spurting and coughing, he leans on the fisherman's shoulder for support as they make it back to the sand.

"Have a death wish, do ya?" the man says as Herbert drops himself on the beach, coughing water.

"It dropped down so suddenly," Herbert pants in between fast breaths.

"Yeah, that's a deep sinkhole alright," the fisherman says. "I should have warned you, but you didn't look like you were going in. Then suddenly you were gone."

Suddenly you were gone, my sweet Janey. No more wishing, hoping, anticipating that maybe one day... He isn't sure what would be worse. For her to be alive, meet him, and reject him—or this.

Herbert sighs. "Yeah, that was pretty stupid."

"Nah, happened to all of us," the fisherman says. "I once got myself with my own line."

The old man points at a sizeable, curved scar on his densely wrinkled cheek, then grins, exposing the most beautiful, white teeth Herbert has ever seen.

"Big catch then," Herbert says, which earns him a big slap on the shoulder as the man chortles away, repositioning his loose beanie on the back of his scruffy white hair.

"Let me help you on your feet, my boy," the man says, and pulls him up as if Herbert weighs as much as a decent-sized fish.

My boy. Herbert isn't sure why, but those two words move him deeply. Nobody has ever called him that, or any comparably endearing term. The kind of thing a father would say.

A good father.

Herbert folds his arms tight around his core, unable to stop shivering.

"Wait," the fisherman says, and runs off to his fishing gear, returning with a thick blanket and a thermos. He wraps the blanket around Herbert's shoulders, who gratefully accepts. As

Herbert sips the steaming hot liquid, he detects cinnamon, cloves and red wine.

"Is this—"

"Gluhwein. Or spiced wine, they call it here. My wife doesn't know. She wants me to take care of my heart and all. Here, have some more."

The hot drink makes its way down smoothly and warms Herbert quickly from within.

"Magic. Thank you," he says, and hands the thermos back. They talk about fishing for a while. The fisherman shows him the various types of bait he has. Crankbaits. Rattle Traps. Jerk Baits, particularly good for those shallow waters. But he isn't catching much today.

"The tide has just turned though, so things could change quickly," he says. "It can go from zilch in the morning to a gazillion by lunch. Life's like that"—his hand shuffles his beanie as he grins.

Herbert wouldn't know the tides if they slapped him in the face (which they *did* just do, in a way). His entire life he had waited for the tides to turn in his favor. To only end up in a storm he had never anticipated.

There is a kind of simple serenity to the fisherman. When he speaks, his eyes, framed by dark, bushy eyebrows and dozens of fine pleasure lines, light up in a warmth that feels like coming home to a warm meal and a fireplace. Herbert envies him a little. How wonderful would it be to come to a place like this daily and just cast your bait in the waves? Then look at the horizon and wait.

Could he ever find the peace inside himself to live that way? He always talked to his pupils about the importance of good habits. Good habits cultivate a happy, fulfilled life. But what does fulfillment look like for him? Yes, he had done his exercises. Yoga. Meditation. Walks. But had he ever truly done a review? Asked himself in all honesty whether he was *happy*?

The fisherman tells him about the Book&Bake club of his wife. And his daughter, who is studying law.

"Have any kids, Herbert?"

Herbert drops his head, unsure how to answer.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't realize that was a sensitive topic," the fisherman says. "My wife is much better at picking up those vibes. I apologize my boy."

Herbert tries to smile and brush it off, but whether it's

the fisherman's kindness or his fatherly tone, it burns behind his eyes, and he suddenly wants to tell this man everything.

"I just learned that I may have a daughter."

The fisherman waits patiently for him to clarify.

"I mean—it turns out I have a daughter, who is a grown-up."

The fisherman nods. "Well, you two will have a lot to discuss."

Herbert isn't too sure about that.

"Of course! Don't you want to know everything about her past?"

Herbert doesn't know what he does and doesn't hope for. The fear of screwing up rings far louder in his mind than any other thought. "Not sure if she wants me to. Not sure if she wants to know me at all. I have been a real jerk, and her life is complicated enough—"

"Excuses! Of course, it is a scary thing for both of you. But that scary thing will pass. And then it will be just...familiar."

Herbert nuzzles the wet sand with his shoe.

"Family," the fisherman continues, "especially a parent and a child...their emotive tentacles meet at a different level. It's not easy to explain, but it is so evident."

"I'm not sure my tentacles work all that grand. I messed up with her mother time and time again. She will undoubtedly hold that against me," Herbert mumbles.

"Why? Nobody is perfect," the fisherman says, refilling Herbert's spiced wine. "You know, my dad was always away, about seventy or eighty percent of my childhood he was gone. Out there." Mark points at the vast ocean. "When he came home, he always brought bags of sweets, presents, books... and he would spend days trying to be the perfect father. Take me to any sports game. The park, movies...he allowed me to eat what I wanted—to the horror of my mother—and played any game I wanted to play. He was as close to perfect as any person could have been, and we loved him very much. But if I could have chosen? I would have gone for a dad half as amazing as he was, hell, I would have taken twenty-five percent of his awesomeness, if he would have been around more."

Herbert nods. "I haven't been around for thirty-eight years," he says, regretting having to crush his uplifting story. But the fisherman just slaps him on the shoulder. "But you're

here now. That's all that matters."

Herbert considers this. He hadn't been there for a very long time. But he hadn't *known* about her existence, which surely counts for something? Now that he does, he still has time to show her. That he is a good man. That he isn't like *his* father. The fishing rod in front of them is angling down with pressure.

"Looks like you got something," Herbert points.

The two of them run to the rod and take turns reeling in the fish. "It's a yellowtail!" the fisherman calls. "A good ninety centimeters, I reckon. Your dinner is served, my boy."

Herbert drives away from the parking lot, a little sealed bucket tucked between the seats. The grey sky has cleared just before the sun dips behind the horizon and the dunes are cast in marigold and sandstone hues. He turns on the radio and heads home, bringing a slice of peace given to him by a generous stranger.

When the two-mile sign for his exit comes up, a text message appears on his car display:

Amelia needs you urgently. 2230 Avenida Justicia. E

Chapter Forty-Seven:

Exposing Cavities

Amelia coughs and the sound echoes in the holding cell. The space—it must be about sixty square feet—doesn't look that different from the dog pound she visited this morning.

She can't help but smile when thinking of the bulldog as she opened his kennel, his brief look of bewilderment as his clumpy head cocked down, and up, before he hobbled out. If she gets out of here—no, *when* she gets out—she will visit him and the other dogs again. Make sure Wobbles has followed her strict orders.

There is a chair in her cell - she used to have one just like it in miniature, for the doll's house she was given for her 5th birthday. She pushes down on the stretcher, or bench, and imagines it would make you age ten years overnight.

She fondles the fluffy merino of her oversized green sweater. Darius had instructed his colleague to take her here and treat her kindly, then he had headed straight for her house

to pick up dry clothes. He'd added a toothbrush too.

A toothbrush.

Should she brace herself for an overnight stay? Her fingers stroke past the prison bars; making a rattling sound. They're finer than she expected, but then again, this is only a holding cell. A temporary place.

Sick of looking at the yellow mustard floor, she turns around; the walls are made of a white limestone brick with broad mortar lines, which have been scratched away here and there. She leans up close to one of the cavities. A message has been written in tiny scribbles:

BETTAH IN HERE THAN OUT THEIR.

What would have happened to a person that'd make them choose imprisonment over freedom? She rubs her index finger along the mortar below the message. It crumbles easily, and she can't help but rub some more. When her index finger gets tired, she uses her middle finger. The cavity is growing into a deep groove as she rubs with such fervor that her fingertips feel tingly yet semi-numb.

You're going to dig yourself out of here.

She smiles at her own absurdity.

She is startled by abrupt clanking. A tall officer with dark hair and an extended goatee taps his baton against a bar of her cell.

"Moore, you're off."

"Off?" she says in confusion. "Where am I going?"

She isn't all too familiar with the correctional system but hadn't expected to be transferred elsewhere so quickly.

"How do I know?" the officer says with a shrug. "Your bail has been paid. You're free to go until your trial."

Her bail has been paid. She smiles, knowing Darius is there for her even though she put him in an awkward situation professionally.

"How much was the bail?"

The officer looks at a piece of paper in his hands.

"Eight thousand."

Her head drops at that amount. Not only had she put him in an awkward position, but she had cost him a small fortune too.

#

Amelia squints, her hand over her eyes, as her eyes adjust to the bright midafternoon sun. She scans the street looking for Darius.

A girl walks past wearing sandals, wide-legged jeans and a canvas backpack. She holds a map of the area and asks a suited woman for directions. Several sparrows are fighting over the remnants of a sandwich. An older man takes a seat on a bench across the street and opens his newspaper with a flick of the wrist.

"Amelia!" About fifty feet down the road she sees a bald man wearing a bone-colored windbreaker and jeans standing next to his car.

Herbert.

He waves as if he is embarrassed and signals for her to come over.

"You got me out?"

Herbert's mouth scrunches apologetically and Amelia feels a sting of empathy that she hasn't felt for him yet.

"I will pay you back the money," she says in an attempt to

make amends.

"Pay me back?" Herbert laughs. "These eight K are nothing compared to the water damage at the office."

She casts her eyes on the shiny car. "Yeah, about that..."

"No, I am not mad," Herbert says. "It's kind of cool, what you did. I would have enjoyed it."

She *had* enjoyed it.

"Where is he now?" she asks, lowering her voice. While in the holding cell, she'd hoped Jack would be led into the cell next to her.

"They had no grounds to arrest him there and then, so he walked off," Herbert says as he looks down. The dark rings under his eyes have turned to pockets. His skin has a tint of grey. He suddenly looks his age.

"Well, with everything hanging over his head, I'd say he is on his way to a country that has no extradition treaty with the US. Russia, probably."

She nods.

"So... what's next?" she asks, and they both feel the

volume of that question hang in the air like thick fog.

"Did you speak to Erik?" she says, unsure how to address the subject.

"I have," Herbert says, rubbing his head. "We'll have a test done, but his theories make sense. I mean, look at you. Look at me. Poor you. I mean, if you never want to see me again, that would be entirely reasonable, and probably the best for your self-protection. When I get stressed, I get this need to destroy everything. It's weird."

He has spoken with a nervous urge, his face contorting as if he can't bear the sound of his own voice. He finishes up just smiling at her, and nodding. He has no clue what to say, Amelia realizes. But at least he is trying.

Chapter Forty-Eight:

Directions for Goodbye

A soft, distant click snaps Herbert out of his sleep.

That was the front door latch sliding shut.

He rolls the blankets off him, listening intently as he stands next to his bed. But there is no further sound downstairs but the soft hum of the air-conditioning. If somebody has just entered the house, they're standing quietly in the hall. There is movement in the corner of his eye. He peers through the window, just in time to see Erik close the gate behind him. He wears the same outfit as when they first met, and his backpack is strapped to his back. No need to question his plans.

You are not coming back.

Herbert finds the note on the kitchen bar, where they'd spent most days during the last month. Except for the letter O, Erik's handwriting has no curves—only straight lines. A true

coder.

My friend,

*This is not a goodbye note. See it as a 'see you soon'.
It's funny. I never wanted to be your pupil--no prodding in my
head! ;-)*

--Herbert smiles--

*But I walked away from Oak Tree Lane having learned a few
things, nevertheless. Which is why I will turn myself in to the
police. Yes, I knew you wouldn't agree with that, so I snuck
out. It is what a good adult does. I want to see myself as a
good person again. I now see that will take some time.*

*I know that you will do great in your new role as a father.
In a way, every pupil was your chance to practice that role. The
important thing is that you care, something that comes more
naturally to you than you realize. If you struggle, call me. Or
find me at Old Mill Penitentiary. ;-)*

*Thanks for showing me the way, Herbert. Thanks for being my
friend.*

Erik.

#

An hour later the bell rings, and Herbert quickly grabs his keys, phone and jacket before heading for the door.

"Ready?" Amelia says on the porch. "We better take your car. Mine has a few red alerts blinking on the dash."

Herbert makes a mental note to organize for her car to go straight to the repair shop when they return. He turns and looks back into the house once more.

Goodbye, my friend.

They walk over to the Audi he'd left out front and Herbert glances back at the white square volumes that make up his house. Maybe it is time to sell. What does the house mean to him now? He gets into his car and closes his eyes, and for just a moment, Janey smiles back at him from the bike seat as they sway in the sun.

How do I do this? he wants to ask her more than anything. How do I not fail at this, like I did so many times? How are we so capable of solving complex matters in life, in science or tech, yet we struggle to maintain healthy relations with those

who are most important to us, more important than anything?

"Herbert?" Amelia says.

"Yes?"

"This doesn't have to be awkward. You're my biological father. It doesn't mean I expect anything. It's just... biology. Don't feel like you suddenly need to... you know. Be there."

He very much wants to be there. He is terrified that he won't be there *enough*. Or that he will be there but get it all wrong. That she will be embarrassed by him. Or can't stand him.

"Sure, sure," he says, trying to keep it light. "I'd be hopeless at it anyway. Good thing you're grown up. Not much I can ruin now."

#

They park at the bottom of the levee and climb the steps as Herbert did with Janey all those years ago. The steps have crumbled a little in some places, but the railing has been painted a bright yellow. With three or four steps to go Herbert halts, overwhelmed by the absurd familiarity of the place. Memories, now thick with grief, are compressed to the flat reality before him. For years, Janey's absence had grown to be a

part of himself. A part of his soul. There had been a peculiar comfort in him *not* holding her hand, not smelling her vanilla spice. Never feeling her dark hair tickle his nose. Her lips pressed tightly against his, as if nothing else mattered.

He *had* seen her throughout the years. Walking out of a shop, a little bag in her hands. In the supermarket, reaching for the organic flour. In the park, feeding the ducks. He had stared at her profile, his heart jolting in anticipation. Then she passed him, or turned, and he realized it wasn't Janey's face. It was merely a weak resemblance of the profile that haunted his dreams.

But the *maybe* has flown.

The illusion of her would never materialize for him again. Never again would he see her face in the crowd. No matter how hard he looked.

"You ok?" Amelia says softly behind him.

Herbert nods and proceeds to climb to the top. Being elevated and exposed, it is not surprising that it blows a gale on the levee. Amelia embraces the bag with both arms, taking careful steps to make sure she doesn't trip.

"She is surprisingly heavy," she jokes when their eyes

meet.

He doesn't offer to carry the bag for her. He simply can't.

Herbert's eyes drift across the channel, where an inland barge is slashing through the water. He spots more barges, as well as a few pleasure boats, in the distance. The channel has grown a lot busier over the years. He stops midway the levee, close to a bush that he remembers was only a seedling when he was here last. Though swaying in the wind, it stands strong.

"This should be good," he says.

This is where we first kissed.

Never stop kissing me like that.

The wind brushes his face and Herbert closes his eyes. For a moment, he can sense Janey's breath fondling his skin. What a woman she had grown into. What an incredible human being.

Amelia proceeds to take the urn from the bag.

"This is it," she says, almost apologetically.

Herbert nods, not sure what to say. The urn is a simple, grainy brown.

"It suits her, I guess," he says. He doesn't want to sound

too familiar. Not he, but Amelia had spent her entire life in the proximity of Janey. Something that he doesn't hold against her but certainly envies her for.

"Yeah," Amelia says, "it is an ecological sand urn. If you put it in water, it will dissolve in three days."

Herbert can see that is what Janey would have wanted, and yet he cannot bear the thought that even the last place where her ashes were kept could be gone next week.

Amelia pulls the lid off the urn when a man passes with his dog. He looks at them suspiciously while his dog sniffs Herbert's shoe.

"What are you two doing, if I may ask?" the man asks, his Ascot cap lifting with his question mark. "You know you're not allowed to spread ashes in public, right? Did you get a consent for this?" The man's heated tone triggers the dog, who starts barking—its spotted head bouncing between them and its owner.

"Consent? Are you kidding me?" Amelia says. Herbert looks sideways at *his daughter*. She doesn't need that red wig to show the rebel in her.

"Absolutely not," the man says, inflating his skimpy chest. "This is a respectable neighborhood, and I as a citizen hereby

object to you—your—contaminating our natural habitat." As he says this, the dog has wandered off to the bush and arches its rear end while looking like he is undergoing a facelift.

"Your dog seems to have no problem with a bit of contamination," Amelia says, and Herbert feels like he is watching a Guy Ritchie movie.

"That is a very different thing," the man persists. "If you do not cease your...activities, I am afraid I will have to report you to the governing authorities."

He stands very upright; as if trying to make himself look taller. Amelia walks up to the man and stops only inches away from him.

She is fearless. Not like me.

"I suggest you proceed to walk your dog and worry about the quality of his feed," Amelia says. "Those droppings are far too runny for a healthy dog, and it smells like you're buying cheap, nasty feed for the animal and its gut is suffering. That is animal abuse."

If Ascott hat would lean back any further, he'd topple.

Amelia is around the same height yet manages to look down at him. "Do you know what happens to people who abuse animals?

You could face staggering fines and three to five years in prison. I have some friends with the ASPCA, they could get the ball rolling quickly for us." Amelia nods back at Herbert, who quickly nods in agreement.

"Oh, absolutely," Herbert affirms, having no idea.

Amelia holds up her phone with her free hand, as if ready to make a phone call, and the man nervously studies her face before deciding to walk on.

"Galileo, come now," he says with a tremor in his voice.

The crossbred playfully gallops after its owner.

Herbert rubs his head. "You are probably the most vociferous person I know," he says.

"Yeah, well, I wasn't going to let some uptight Sherlock blow this for us," Amelia says.

Herbert chuckles. "He did look a bit like Sherlock."

They both smile in relief and Amelia proceeds to open the urn. She passes the lid to Herbert, who stares at the light, fine powder inside. The sight of Janey's dust promptly sobers him.

*For you are dust, And to dust you shall return. Genesis
3:19.*

Herbert thinks of the piles of wasted food, smashed against his garden wall back home. How the grass, the weed, and the moss covered evidence of his unstable mind in less than a week. If only the heart could heal as quickly as the earth.

"Did you know that they don't give you the *ashes*?" he says, leaning back on the sense of security he had always derived from facts. "After the cremation they gather the bones. Those bones go in a machine, like a grinder, and this crunches up the bones to dust. That's what they give you."

Amelia nods, lips pursed. "You really know how to appeal to my stomach," she mumbles.

"Sorry," he says. "I like knowing the technicalities. You know, there is even a company that will incorporate your beloved ashes into fireworks and throw a fireworks show for you."

"Maybe we should have done that for her instead."

They both look down at the urn and Herbert wonders if Amelia regrets inviting him along today. If he is turning the experience into an underwhelming, unsatisfactory ceremony for her.

"Any words?" Amelia asks.

Herbert looks at her in confusion.

Amelia holds up the urn. "Want to, I don't know, say something to her before she goes?"

Herbert cannot help but back away slightly. He hopes it isn't noticeable that her question petrified him. It's not that he doesn't know how to talk to Janey, or the *image* of her anyway. He has spoken to her for the last thirty-eight years. In his *mind*.

"Oh, right. Yes. I probably should," he says, fiddling with the urn lid. "I did not prepare anything. Not great talking about emotions."

"Anything that pops in your head," Amelia encourages him.

"Ok. Sure," he says, breathing in while gathering his thoughts.

"Janey, hi. Haven't spoken to you in a while. How've you been?" His face twists in embarrassment as he desperately seeks the words that had always come so naturally inside. "Silly question of course. You know I really suck at this stuff. But if this were my last chance to talk to you, as if you were standing

in front of me at this very moment?" Herbert swallows. His palms are sweaty, but he is getting to it. He needs to. For the sake of Amelia. For his own. A shortage of words isn't his problem. Janey evokes images, an entire world, in his mind in a heartbeat. There are simply too many words that come to mind that describe her, his feelings for her, his feelings in this moment.

"I'd tell you that you have no idea how loving you, without *being* with you, has shaped me." His words quiver, but his thoughts are starting to flow steadily. "It made me—well—a little odd perhaps, but it also made me empathic, able to see through people's faults. Except my own, perhaps." His smile is but a hint.

"I would tell you that, no matter how hard I tried to forget you, your love had seeped into every corner of me. I was a better man at the *thought* of being with you. And I want to thank you for giving me that. You were the best thing that could have stumbled upon my path. I know our times together were brief, but they were so *real* my love. So very *real*."

The barges in the channel are blurring in his vision as he tries to compose himself.

"Anyway," he says, brusquely wiping his cheeks, "it turns

out you had a surprise up your sleeve and she is standing next to me right now. You have done so well in raising her. She is everything you were plus everything I have always wanted to be. I hope to be able to make you proud, just for once. Goodbye my love." Herbert doesn't bother wiping his face anymore, feeling Amelia's eyes on him.

He clears his throat. "Your turn."

Amelia stands very still, the urn in front of her, her eyes blinking in his direction in a state of—he isn't sure—bewilderment? Shock?

"Right," Amelia says at last. She clears her throat. "That was really nice, Herbert." Her smile is careful but sincere, and Herbert allows himself to believe she doesn't mind him being here after all.

"So, mum," Amelia says, "I will keep this brief because you'd prefer it, and Herbert sort of said it all. I wish I could bake those brandy snaps with you once more. Have them after dinner, on the balcony, with some vanilla ice cream. I wish we could go to one of the French Film Festivals again together and laugh until we cry. Most of all, I wish I could just - you know - feel your strong arms around me once more. Really just dig my face in your soft neck, while you tell me things are going to be

not just fine - they will be awesome. *You* are awesome mum, and wherever you are, they are so lucky to have you."

As soon as Amelia tilts the urn, the ashes are picked up in the wind. Initially, they are carried a little inland, hesitantly, before being swooped towards the channel with great force. There, they dissolve and become one with the atmosphere.

Chapter Forty-Nine:

Elvis & a Room to Kill

Spring is upon us. A busy period for restaurants. A time when even that sneaky bastard will be tempted to crawl out of his hiding place for a delectable meal with the right person. A woman with an hourglass figure and lips like juicy cherries, for example.

Of course, she has been hearing such praise for this one place off Chestnut Lane. "We really should go and check it out!"

"Of course, baby, I'll make the reservations," the guy will say.

On date night, they arrive at an intimate room that looks like an inverted wedding cake, with ceiling skirting making them feel like they're stepping back in time. He is charming like a fox, she is oh-so pleasant and laughs at even his feeble jokes. They chat about this and that.

The carefully selected waiter will come and take their order as they sip their cocktails. *He* may opt for the Filet Mignon. The waiter compliments him on this choice, and leans in: "May I suggest you pair that with the truffle and porcini risotto, sir? It is a marriage meant to be."

The waiter will wink at the lady.

Of course, the guy follows such excellent advice. He isn't going to spoil the romance, is he?

In the kitchen, I will receive the order like any other. My broth is ready—it has slow-cooked overnight. My mise-en-place, my ingredients; they're all lined up.

All except for one.

See, I won't prepare this dish with porcini. Don't get me wrong, it is a delightful mushroom. Very flavorful in a nutty way. No, this time, I disappear in my office and pull a small jar of different mushrooms from my private fridge.

Those who have eaten the Amanita Phalloides admitted it tasted delightful.

Those who lived to tell.

Not many did, I'm afraid.

When consumed, the Amanita Phalloides, better known as the Death Cap mushroom, is the deadliest mushroom known to humans. It looks innocent, rather similar to many eatable mushroom species.

Amatoxins, the toxins found inside this mushroom, are thermostable, so they resist changes due to heat. This means their toxic effects are not influenced by cooking. Half a mushroom contains enough toxin to kill an adult.

I will make sure there are multiple of these beauties in his risotto. The truffle will easily conceal any taste differences.

It takes eight to twelve hours for him to start feeling unwell. By now, his liver and kidney will have incurred too much damage. They will start to shut down.

He will shut down.

This is how justice is served by the Marble Master. And it never tasted better.

Chapter Fifty:

Bjorn Again

Amelia gets out of her car and briefly lets the spring sun warm her face. Things could be worse. She doesn't have to serve time (but will fulfill community work for the next three years, something she is strangely looking forward to), Darius is still in her life and she has a father who now rings every day. That last thing is a bit much, but she'll have to have that talk another time.

She follows the uneven path leading up to the dog shelter. Does the building look different? Have those windows been washed? She reaches for the doorknob, but the door swings open. Wobbly cheeks from last time flashes a smile at her, exposing two rows of tiny teeth that look like you could park multiple bikes in between them.

Ok, don't be mean now.

It is something she has been trying. To be a nicer person. To not judge too quickly. An attempt to sand down the sharp

edges of Vic without suffocating her altogether.

So she smiles back at the woman. "Hi," she says to her as she walks straight past her. The reception has undergone a transformation: it no longer smells of urine and wet dog. The floor is shiny. A coffee table and small sofa have been placed in the corner. There is even a pile of animal-related magazines on the table. The woman stays close to her, wringing her hands with hunched shoulders.

"I tidied up," she says.

Amelia nods. "I'd like to see the dogs now."

They step into the hall, the patter of their steps rousing the excitement of the dogs.

Amelia stops at every kennel, inspecting the dog and its space. Is it clean? Is there enough water? Of course, several dogs still look skinny. That change will take longer than a week. She notices that each kennel now has a name tag too. Ruffles. Bo. Wyatt. Lulu. Porky. Elmo. Simon. Theodore. Alvin.

"They now eat three times a day. And we changed to a better feed. We mailed our supporters and they all chip in every month. It has helped a lot, actually. They—"

Amelia holds her hand up. She has heard enough.

She stops at the last kennel. The bulldog blinks his eyes as if he has just woken up.

"Hey Bjorn," Amelia reads off the name tag. She kneels to greet him, and he instantly waddles her way. His fur is already looking better than last week. She notices that Bjorn has one protruding tooth, sticking out on the left of his jaw, giving him a gullible expression. She scratches his head.

And without being prepared for what she says next, she is glad she does: "I'll take him."

"Excuse me ma'am?"

Amelia looks up at her. "I'd like to adopt Bjorn, please."

"Oh, sure, sure, ma'am." The woman opens the kennel immediately.

"Don't we need to sort out some paperwork first?" Amelia says as she cuddles Bjorn on the ground.

"That can come after, ma'am. You two have some bonding time first."

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With Bjorn on a lead just like the one she strangled Jack with, Amelia and her new dog walk back out into the sun. She digs around in her bag and when they pass a trash can, she drops the red wig into it without a second look. She opens the passenger door of her car and lifts Bjorn on the seat.

"We'll have to keep you safe, buddy," she says as she carefully straps the seatbelt around him. She'll have to buy a special harness for him, but this will do for the trip home.

Bjorn looks up at her, his eyes gleaming, then he drops his forehead onto her arm.

"I know sweet boy. Things will be better now."

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