Anon381

a novel



Katherine Walker

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KATHERINE WALKER



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"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

PROVERBS 29:18

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ONE

Sadie’s damp palms press against the stiff, cult-issued smock. The barn is in sight. The self-important thugs inside are mid–pep talk, unaware that she’s watching them. Time to move.

She exhales. The dirt under her nails is starting to look permanent. So is the madness of this whole setup.

If she doesn’t act now, she’s done.

She forces herself forward. This is it. This is her moment.

She starts down the hill.

As she nears the barn, Todd’s voice carries through the boards—the prophet, the fraud, the man they all obey. She crouches low and peers through a jagged gap in the siding. Todd’s on his feet and preaching to two mob errand boys.

The errand boys look bored and uncomfortable in their flimsy lawn chairs. One is tall with a pinched, hungry look. His long black hair is pulled into a ponytail. The other is short and stocky. Both are wearing collared shirts and leather jackets. They glance around as Todd paces back and forth.

Hairy-armed, he clutches a Bible in one hand and an AK-47 in the other.

“Brothers, we must band together,” he declares as he thrusts the rifle toward the rafters. “Our women need us strong so they can be vessels of our

power.” He lifts both arms high with eyes blazing. “Let us go forth and rule this realm.”

Todd’s guests exchange skeptical looks. They’re not picking up what he’s laying down. *Realm?* These are old-school gangsters.

Todd clears his throat and lowers his voice to let it thicken with conviction. “This is a holy mission,” he says, slower now. “The wickedness of the government must be eradicated.”

The short errand boy chomps away relentlessly on a piece of gum, as if he’s exacting revenge on Todd through primal chewing. The tall one tries to hide his disinterest with a wide smirk. Clearly not super enthused, they want to get out of here.

Yep, so does she.

Todd sets the gun and Bible down and lifts a chainsaw into his hands with reverence. His voice grows deep. “Behold.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “This, my brothers, is a tool of freedom to cut loose from the chains of the State.”

Todd draws a heavy breath. “Scripture tells us, every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.”

Sadie is unimpressed. Anyone who needs props is unimpressive. What’s he going to pull out next—a leaf blower with FURY spray-painted down the side? On the danger scale, Todd barely registers.

The Iranian broker she had flipped last year, with uranium tucked in among medical isotopes and oil contracts, was something. Now *he* was dangerous. His father had been disappeared during the post-revolutionary purges. His mother had forged him into someone no one dared cross. A life like that breeds only one thing—an all-consuming need for a sanctuary, like a fortress against the world.

Sadie slid into that role like it was second nature. He wanted cunning, loyalty, and just enough cruelty to be magnetic. And that’s exactly what he got. He’d proposed over black-market champagne in a bunker that was

lined with mirrored walls. His reflection kept shifting around her in a hundred watchful fragments.

This isn't that.

The sun presses down on the dusty barn. Hay and diesel are thick in the air. Todd yanks the chainsaw's starter cord with a grunt. It roars to life.

The perfect cover. Sadie smiles. She spots a side door.

No one will hear a thing. Slip in behind the errand boys, snap a few shots, and wrap this stupid op.

Her breath hitches as she edges around with her thumb trembling over the latch. The chainsaw screams as Todd lets out a wild whoop. She presses down on the old-fashioned lever—

A dog yelps. The chainsaw cuts out. Sadie freezes.

She eases the lever back, slowly. Her pulse is hammering in her ears.

"Whoa, Nitro. It's okay, boy," a gangster calls in a voice laced with concern.

Scratching. Snarling. The dog's right at the door now. It's gone full Cujo. It knows.

Sadie bolts and sprints uphill with the smock clutched high in her fists. Silence at her back. There's no pursuit. The sermon must have resumed.

She collapses into the rye field. Her lungs are on fire and her heart is in overdrive. Every nerve is screaming about how wrong this feels.

Of course, there's a dog.

Stay focused. It's fine.

She draws her knees to her chest and presses the small of her spine hard into the earth. Her feet hover in the air. She clutches them close and rocks like a child under the overseeing sky.

Another failure. Beyond ridiculous.

Here she is, doing nothing on repeat. Even if she could get a clear shot, it wouldn't matter. Todd's beard kills facial recognition. Obscured jawlines and covered cheekbones mean no unique measurements, which means no

usable data. And, of course, that's the whole point of his lifestyle—to keep Big Brother blind. And it's working.

Okay. So the CIA doesn't have usable pictures of him. Big deal. What's the next move?

She rolls her eyes and waits for something brilliant to land. She's impatient, tired, and borderline unhinged. Just call it. It's *Mission: Impossible* without any of the cool toys that Tom Cruise gets.

Her handler, Trish, is up to something. Sadie can smell it. Her op in China caused a full-blown shitstorm. Trish says she compromised the Agency—again.

She always says that.

It's getting old.

And why even send her if they're going to freak out every time she delivers? They got what they wanted.

She presses her knuckles into the dirt until they turn white. She is shaking.

Snap out of it. It's just the cult messing with your head.

But it's not just that.

Sadie could turn Todd easily. She knows it. Trish knows it. Everybody knows it. But here, it would take a decade. Trish knows that too. Sadie works at the cellular level of behavior. This is deep work that asks for total access. Normally, it doesn't drag out this long. But their cultish ways make Todd off-limits. There's no alone time with him—and that's exactly what she needs.

And all because they don't have a clean shot of his face. No biometric match and no net recognition. Surveillance on one of the biggest arms supply chains to non-state actors is stalled by a JPEG.

Late light bleeds over the field. She feels like she's been hiding here forever with her thoughts looping. Breath shallow. Chest clamped tight.

She used to be a shining star. After six months here? Dull.

She flips over and shoves up from the ground with her chest arched skyward in upward-facing dog. Her body creaks with inflammation. Bad food, bad water, and no sleep will do that to you. There's an ache in her lower back that climbs her spine, up into her jaw. She sneezes and her body shudders with endorphins. Better. For a second.

The ache snaps back, hotter and sharper.

Just breathe, Sadie.

Ha. Right.

Breathing's the cure for everything.

She recalls every stupid meme about breathing. The cult's detergent stinks.

Is this the acid rain scent?

She cranes her neck and turns her face away.

Trish doesn't trust her anymore. That look from her a while back sealed it. A tight smile and cold eyes. That "I may need to erase you" vibe. Classic for haters. It's because Sadie's so good. Too good. She sailed through training. She tried not to, but whatever. Jumping through their hoops has been effortless and impossible, as always.

She chuckles, remembering interrogation resistance training.

Her instructor had leaned close while she coughed water and fought for air. "Don't think of it as drowning, Chandler. Think of it as baptism. Welcome to the faith."

But seriously, if people only knew why she is so … fierce. So eager. She was twelve when they tricked her. Twelve is too young to see the trap. Traffickers used her to deliver her best friend, Andrea, straight into their hands. Sadie should've been the one taken, not Andrea. Silly, bubbly Andrea. Geeky, even—in the best ways. Sadie remembers their secret language, "Egg Latin"—are you egg-o-k-egg-ay?

Sadie swallows hard. That guilt carved her into what she is now. She's razor-sharp and lethal. She doesn't seduce. That's not the right word. She

dismantles. She excels at the super dark stuff and the chemical extractions with no shame. She's not torturing them. The truth does that all on its own. It has teeth. And they deserve every bite.

But Trish? She twists Sadie's methods into flaws and calls them liabilities. Calls her difficult. How does that even work?

Sadie's not doing this for a pat on the back.

She's doing it because she owes a debt that will never be paid. At least, not in this lifetime.

What Sadie did to her friend was unforgivable. Now she drags herself through the filth because she's not going to give up.

She's not looking for justice.

Justice is blind and doesn't know how to use that sword she carries.

Sadie does.

If she has to rip answers out of them to find where Andrea went, she will. It's insane, and she knows that. But every time she thinks about walking away, the guilt magnet pulls.

Stop being a stress case.

She's infiltrated perfectly. Cults are a nightmare to crack. Hive-mind thinking is complex. She studied it back at university. One prof compared them to IT networks. It makes sense. A server goes down and the system reroutes. Take out a leader and someone else steps in. It's self-healing. Adaptive.

"Which means infiltrators stick out fast. Like corrupted files," her prof had said.

Well, she's that corrupted file and it's beginning to show. Her whole system feels glitchy. How much more of this can she take?

Not much.

Maybe Todd will get lice and shave. She dry-heaves at the image. Her jaw aches with tension.

She hums to take her mind off how bad this whole thing is.

Look how nice the rye is.

Emerald blades crowned in gold and drenched in sun. It's pumping oxygen—doing important things. Life-giving things. Not this lame game of hide-and-seek.

The rye sways easy. *Why hide? Why seek?*

She points to the barn. "Bad guys and guns."

So what? Everyone's got guns.

"Yeah, but these guys give guns to the wrong people."

What people?

She turns away.

"Shut up, rye. You don't get to interrogate me."

Sadie lets out a huge sigh. Enough talking to the plants.

Why is she even here?

The CIA is not supposed to be doing stuff like this—spying on Americans. And this cult is about as American as it gets. Flags, Bibles, and enough weaponry to take out a small country. Sadie thought she'd be okay with it.

Wrong.

With every other op, the boundaries have been clear. The bad guys are seriously bad, and they usually speak a different language.

That's not what this is at all.

Trish told her it was fine. That they were helping the FBI out. Trish made it sound so easy. Slip in, snap a few photos of Todd, and slip out.

Sure.

Sadie's stomach churns. She flops flat with a groan. Her bones jut into the ground. Her ribs are so bumpy she could play them like a xylophone. Too thin. Not cocaine-thin or model-thin. Cult-thin. They make her weak, these people. Their lips move strangely and suck out her life force. Gross.

She re-scans. Terrible cover.

No, it's fine. It'll work.

All options reviewed. Listen. Nothing but wind.

Yay, wind. Go blow the barn down.

Clouds drift and shapes twist. There's a guitar, a horse with wings. There's a train.

Choo chooooo. Bye-bye.

The barn looms with the doors shut tight. The wood is mud-spattered and gray. A black G-Wagon and an ATV are parked out front. The jammer is active.

She has to duck outside the jammer's range to feed her family lies about a happy DC life and a great career. All nonsense. Trish ignores her calls now. The last time Trish answered, it turned into a disaster.

"No more talk about societal collapse," Trish had said in her flat and final way.

"What, why?"

"Not your job. Just get the photos."

"Trish—"

"Tasks this easy didn't exist when I was in the field."

The line went dead.

It's the China intel. They think she has more. They want her gone. She's burned. Already happened, probably. Out here, she's clueless and charred. An idiot.

The rye's confused. *Burn-burn?*

Sadie shakes her head. "No, cut me off. Shunned me. Declared me defective. A lemon."

Mmm, lemons would be so good.

She'd rub them all over her tits like Susan Sarandon in *Atlantic City*—only hotter and less wistful. Her mom had called that scene liberating.

Please.

Liberating what exactly?

Sadie would do it ten times hotter. The internet would implode.

She smirks at the rye.

Yeah, it would.

No fruit here. Just dusty gas station food kept on the lower shelf beside the antifreeze. Mice like it. They leave little poops as thank-yous.

Cult women swapped the poison for a natural repellent because some kids died a few years ago. Now it's Vermin Vanish under the sink. Pepper mixture. The mice have probably adapted. She imagines their noses twitching in delight.

Once, there had been apples. Green and tart and perfect. She ate every one, then shit her guts out. She made it to the outhouse with apple nitroglycerin in her bowels, saved from disaster only by a gymnast's control. Then she clung to the seat beneath the crescent-moon cutout and howled.

The women were not impressed.

And they'll be wondering now.

She's been gone too long. For weeks, it was next to impossible to slip out of their sight. There was always someone shadowing her. Hovering and checking in. Now, if she doesn't get back soon, they'll clang that cracked bell and all eyes will swing to the barn. No way she'll ever manage surveillance again once they're spooked.

Her pink shirt needs to come off. It's way too visible. She shimmies out of the smock. She grunts and wrestles with buttons and finally strips off the shirt. The earth beneath her smells rich and sun-warmed.

Why can't their detergent smell like that? She yanks the smock back on.

Phone up. Camera ready.

She's doing this, and she's leaving today.

Arms shaking and torso trembling, she checks the battery—eight percent.

She creeps forward inchworm-style. The sun is dragging and refuses to set. Sidelight cuts across her like a spotlight. She squirms.

Go away.

It’s all around her. The big sky, rolling fields, barn weathered gray, dusk purple, and gold rye. It could be beautiful, but it isn’t. It’s as ugly as always. Like the world. Stupid, ugly world.

She drops her head into her arms and fake-screams into the dirt. The barn latch rattles. She jerks up and zooms the phone. The image wobbles and won’t settle.

The doors swing wide. The two errand boys spill out with laughter echoing. Then the dog lunges and its leash strains to its limit. It chokes itself, but it’s still barking hard.

They’re heading her way.

Great.

She stays low and crawls away fast, over the crest and down the far side. Ruts drop into an irrigation ditch choked with shrubs, weeds, and runoff. It’s deep enough to conceal her totally.

Perfect.

She leaves her phone on the bank and rolls in. It’s not waterproof. There’s so much AI on this model, they make sure it’s not waterproof. A hardware-level kill switch, in case the AI takes over. Trish can’t stand AI and told Sadie that their tech lab allows the AIs to develop their own language.

“That’s about as dumb as eating soup with a fork,” Trish had said, in that lethal level of pissed off she runs at. “We won’t know what it’s doing.”

Sadie’s hand sinks into something slimy just as a dragonfly dive-bombs and scatters gnats. Thick white foam drifts and bobs. She corrals some and shapes it into a pillow over her face. She’s careful not to totally submerge her ears in the thick, slimy water. No bugs in her ears, please. No hatching in her head.

No thanks.

Voices drift from the hill.

“Let Nitro off the leash.”

“No, he’ll bolt. Boss loves this dog. You wanna test that?”

Nitro whines. He’s desperate to run. Poor mutt.

“What is it, boy? A shirt? Just laundry. All clear!”

“Stop yelling. How many times?”

“Sorry.”

“Dog’s smarter than you.”

Hidden in the ditch, Sadie poke-draws a smiley face into the foam. The goons keep talking.

“This is taking too long. Next time, bring Vince.”

“Vince won’t come.”

A green snake glides across her phone before it disappears through the blue and yellow wildflowers.

Nitro grunts happily.

“Good boy, Nitro. We’ll wrap it up. This guy’s a—”

“Freak.”

“Yeah, but a preferred-supplier freak.”

“Still—why here? This place creeps me out. I always hear horror-movie music.”

“You scared, Tony?”

“And what’s with the electric fence?”

“Animals.”

“I don’t see any animals. We been sitting in a barn. We’re the animals. What is up wid that?”

“Yo, droids.”

“Droids? Like R2-D2?”

“Nah, the flying kind.”

“Oh, drones.”

“That’s what I said. Satellites and shit. Gotta stay clear of them. Sammy says the goods are solid. Price is right. That’s all we need.”

These two are slick but dumb, just like Andrea's traffickers. She remembers their grins—too wide. The casual pitch. "Just a party. Free pizza. Everyone's going." Not masterminds. Dumb muscle. And she'd walked Andrea right into their hands.

One goon on the hill laughs. "And the ladies out here."

"What, you don't wanna hit that? The vessels?"

"Hell nah."

"A hot chick's just a light switch away."

"Turn them over. Caboose style."

Sadie rolls her eyes. The foam face ripples into a mocking grin, like it knows what she's thinking. These guys really are no smarter than the ones who took Andrea. The foam grin twists further to ask the question that destroys her.

How could you have fallen for it?

It looks warped and accusatory.

"Yo, if we bounce now, Stardust Club's happy hour."

"They're open?"

"I was there the other night."

"Thought shutdowns killed it. Let's get on it. Smile, nod, let's wrap."

Their chatter dies as they lead Nitro back toward the barn.

Sadie waits as still as stone. Her chest is tight and her jaw is aching. Todd's ATV trails the boys to the gate. Engines rumble in the distance and fade.

She retrieves the phone and claws out of the ditch. Her shoes are squelching as she kicks and scatters the foam. She stomps with anger boiling in her gut. Every step back to the compound is heavy and slow.

She scrolls through all her photos of Todd. All blurry smears. She deletes them. There are better shots of Bigfoot.

Can't be late for prayers.

She moves through the waist-high rye and past the fields to where the living compound begins. Her house is a dilapidated wooden row house that sits up on stilts. She's cutting it close. They're already inside. They go through six sets of prayers a day. This is set four. Then there's supper and two more sets.

The base of the row house has decayed, and its stilts on the east side are now visible and slowly sinking. The other houses are the same. Could be fun to let some marbles loose inside.

The laundry is still out on the line. The shirts and smocks hang like drab witnesses to everything. Nothing more than empty, upside-down scarecrows.

"Where's all your stuffing?"

It fell out. The women swept it up and ate it.

Sadie grimaces and covers her face with her hands.

"Chill, girl, it's just laundry. Stop losing your mind," she whispers.

She reaches for a dry smock and a new shirt. All the smocks have flowers. There's the gross daisy one. No one wears it. The petals are lethargic and slutty with brown centers that look like assholes. Who thinks that looks good? Sadie grabs a rose one. It's not much better. The scale is weird and there's no congruence. The little rosebuds are too tight.

Impenetrable pink pods.

They make their own clothes in this cult. The women sew, knit, cook, and clean. Their hands are weathered and strong, even the young ones. They could punch holes in walls, but they don't.

The laundry line offers different variations of the exact same thing. The only pocket is in the front of the smock, which doesn't work for a phone. No phones allowed. Only some of the men have them. Todd's right-hand men only.

The bra stopped being a way to hide the phone last month. It slips out now. She looks down at her once-white sports bra. It's wet and droopy and

kind of pulls her breasts down. She tugs on it and pulls them down more. It's like that scream painting. Nooooo!

Sadie slips between two lines of drying laundry, puts on the dry clothes, and tucks the phone away in her crotch. A little bit of hula-hoop action and some clenches get it centered.

There's phenomenal dexterity happening down there. Soon she'll be able to knit with her crotch. Okay, maybe not sweaters, but a scarf? Or booties? Booties would be way too hard.

Ridiculous.

Yeah, it is. But when you're using your body as a weapon, you really learn how to aim it.

Sadie looks at the closed door of the row house and her breathing grows shallow. Every part of her is just so done with this place. She needs to regulate before panic takes over. A trick to calm the mind. Anchor in what's right here.

Look, the stitching on the clothespin bag is outstanding. Perfect symmetry. Every seam is deliberate. A big mother-of-pearl button is a nice touch. She fixes her eyes on it and lets her pulse slow just a little. Then her gaze wanders to a tub of petroleum jelly. It sits out and balances on the rusted laundry line wheel. Strange. The women always put everything away, especially something like that.

A woman's dream job at Abundant Harvest involves taking things out of drawers and cupboards and then putting them back. What an exciting life. Cutlery, cups, linens, pots, and pans. Every single day. And God forbid anyone puts the strainer in the wrong drawer. Oh no, we must have things in their proper place.

Sadie leaves a bright red spatula out when she sneaks into the meal house to charge the phone. Works like a charm every time. The crime of not putting the spatula away distracts them just long enough for her to lob the

phone and charger behind the stove, deep into mouse territory. The mice take good care of it. No nibbles. Well, not yet.

Sadie focuses on each inhale and exhale. Time here feels like the jellied dishes her mom makes that never really set.

Are the days really going by?

Yes, they are. Sun comes up, God save us. Sun goes down, God save us some more. She takes another deep breath and starts for the door.

Get your prayer on.

So doing this.

The air around her seems to shimmer. Not with magic. Probably just low blood sugar, nerves, and too much frustration stored in one body.

Haoyu's face appears in the window. The hole. The blood. The eyes. They're the same every time.

Haoyu was a source. A scientist and prize asset. Now, in her visions, a bullet hole centered just above the brows. It's her mind's way of driving home the reality of her work.

He reaches out a hand to her through the filthy glass. Sadie recoils. He's speaking to her. She tries to step back, but her feet won't move.

Haoyu's words break into her mind.

Greed and pestilence, he mouths.

His voice is the same, basically.

Just a little death around the edges.

Then he's gone, leaving her staring at herself.

She bends at the waist and pulls her damp hair up into a bun.

Yes, Haoyu is dead because of you.

Pull yourself together, get in there, and pray with them. It'll be fine.

Her head hangs heavy as hot breath seeps back into her face. A streak of blue cuts past her cheek and plunges under the row house.

Sadie crouches and peers under the floor joists. Swallow chicks greet their mother with tiny beaks stretched open. They are nearly grown. She

remembers when they were fragile eggs.

She straightens. An angry Mary-Stephanie is in the window now and scowling.

Sadie is late for prayers.

Mary-Stephanie has a chronic, untreated UTI, but doctors are forbidden. She's allowed to leave prayers to urinate. And leave she does—endlessly. A tenth of her day is spent in the outhouse. No pharmaceuticals, no herbs, not even dandelion tea—and the dandelions grow everywhere.

"I'm just tidying up before prayers," Sadie offers.

As she trudges up the steps, her feet drag heavier with each one. Gentle Mary-Ellen opens the door, her upper lip split by an untreated cleft. Her words come out nasal and blurred.

"Mary-Jo, we missed you this afternoon," she says, her voice as earnest as her eyes.

Mary-Jo is Sadie's cult name. Every woman here is Mary-something. It's a thing.

"I fell asleep in the sunshine."

Mary-Ellen laughs gently. "Your shirt's unbuttoned, hon." She points.

"Thanks. Sorry I'm late."

Sadie fastens the button and steps into the sparse dwelling. Beds at one end and a prayer circle at the other. Each woman has a custom needlepoint pillow stitched with her cult name and a Bible verse. She looks at hers.

Mary-Jo
Blessed are the Meek

The pixelated lettering looks like *Space Invaders* from her brother's vintage video games.

Newcomers sit at the Mother's left hand. With the passing years, they move around the circle until, finally, they sit at her right. And then, they

become her. Seven circles here. Seven Mothers. That's how the women are organized.

Sadie's gaze drifts to Mary-Ann. She's a long-tenured Sister, and she's pregnant. At her age, it's dangerous. Mary-Ann's porcelain composure masks the dread. Every woman is secretly relieved it isn't her.

The Mother's sermon on obedience winds down, signaling unison prayer.

Their voices rise together. A hand brushes her arm. It's Sadie's turn to say something.

What is it again?

"As above, so below."

That's her part. Utter nonsense, but she wants it to be true. Evil washed away and good restored. Why not?

The prayers swell like a wave rippling through the room. The women love to pray. They look younger and almost luminous. Their faces are smoothed with peace. Sadie closes her eyes and her emotions tug at her. They start prying her open. Tears threaten to fall.

Haoyu, I'm sorry. You were on thin ice before I even arrived, and it cracked.

She looks around. Their faces shine with comfort. With faith.

Sadie tries to follow. To join in.

But she can't.

God's not going to fix this world. What's the point? We'd wreck it again.

God's not going to fix a thing.

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TWO

The restaurant hums with evening chatter and the clink of glasses. Across the table, Kendra studies her phone, thumbs flying. Her face is lit by the screen, her expression taut.

Adrian lifts his wine, takes a sip, and sets it down again. Forty dollars a glass. He'd done the math walking in, then made himself stop doing the math. Around them, a man in a watch worth more than Adrian's car laughs too loudly at his own joke. A woman dripping with five-figure jewelry air-kisses someone three tables over.

This is the kind of room where people look their best. He'd read about Nourish for weeks before he booked it—the impossible reservations, the chef poached from somewhere in Copenhagen—and tonight, when the host said his name, he nodded like he ate here all the time.

Kendra is gorgeous. That part is real.

"Sorry," she murmurs, not looking up. "One of my companies is on fire. Metaphorically. Give me two minutes."

Companies. Plural. Adrian smiles, easy, unbothered.

Be cool. Let her sort it out.

He thinks of his locker at the hospital, his name on a piece of masking tape. The way he can clock out and go home. She probably never clocks out of anything. These start-up people—they don't really get to do that.

And hey, she could be rich. That wouldn't be a bad thing.

Getting Kendra out on this first date took a lot of work, but Adrian knows it'll be worth it. It's not good being so solitary. It's been long enough since Liz. What is it, two years? No, closer to three. Time to move on.

Before the pandemic, they'd been great. But once there was nowhere to go, Seattle went quiet. No Mariners games at T-Mobile Park. No indie shows at the Crocodile, no poetry nights at the Fremont Abbey. Not even trivia at the low-ceilinged dive bars on Capitol Hill. Everything was boarded up. All they had left were long walks in the rain and curbside pickups from restaurants barely hanging on.

His apartment wasn't an option. He's still living there, and it's still embarrassing—a one-bedroom walk-up with peeling paint, neighbors who scream at each other at 2 a.m., and a hallway that smells perpetually of fried grease. But Liz's place was even worse: two roommates crammed into a one-bedroom, one of them working from the kitchen table while the other FaceTimed boyfriends into the night. Claustrophobic.

With nowhere to escape, they were left with nothing but each other. And that's when it became clear that Liz was not someone he actually enjoyed spending time with. After she lost her job, she floated the idea of getting a place together.

He couldn't afford it. So he ended it.

Kendra places her phone down on the table. She puts her napkin over it and laughs.

"Okay, Adrian, I'm all yours. So sorry."

He tries to restart the conversation they were having.

"I was bragging a little bit." He gives her a self-deprecating smile. "I was telling you about my latest publication on behavioral psychology. It's been gaining some recognition in academic circles, which is a shock because this field—"

Her phone fires off a few notifications in a row. Then it starts ringing. Kendra's expression is apologetic yet distant.

"Oh, yes, that sounds … really … uh," she murmurs with her attention wavering. "Sorry, I just need to respond to this really quick."

Adrian's hands curl into fists under the table. He had meticulously planned this evening. He had envisioned a whole scenario where Kendra would be as responsive as she appeared online. Why would he ever think that? When is he going to learn? He's not new to online dating.

Adrian's eyes scan her form and take in every inch of her flawless appearance. She doesn't even notice. Her attention is fixed on her smartphone, not him. Her fingers are adorned with red nails that go on forever. They swipe this way and that.

As she buries herself in her phone, he reaches for his own. It's only a prop to seem equally occupied. Equally important. Adrian exhales softly.

Why bother?

Kendra is a woman who, thanks to current social dynamics, insists she's on top. And by all markers, she is. She is the cream of the crop.

Nothing new on his phone, so he takes a look in his spam folder. Just in case something important got sent there. A past-due electric bill and some scams.

> YOU'VE WON THE LOTTERY.
>
> WE'VE FOUND THE SECRET TO LASTING LOVE.

And the good old—

> OBEDIENT WIVES WANT TO COME TO USA.

Kendra's still busy. There's nothing better to do. Check it out. He opens the email and is led to a page filled with cryptic text.

His phone buzzes.

It's a text from an unknown number. A photo of a smiling, wide-eyed woman captioned Tatiana, followed by a single line—

I marry you.

Adrian deletes the message carefully. One tap too many and his nearly maxed card could be drained. He had to do some creative banking to get enough room on it for this dinner. Scammers are becoming exponentially more clever.

At last, Kendra looks up.

She sets her phone down and studies him with a provocative tilt of her head.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

What a silly question. Who wouldn’t want to pay a fortune to be ignored?

“Of course,” he responds smoothly. “Just work.”

“Yes, work. Oh, the joys. I’m grateful for the success, but this … uh—” Her phone lights up. “Sorry, I…”

And … she’s gone.

Her movements are sharp and calculated. It’s like she’s always braced for a fight. The dress, the lips, and the come-hither look. It works, but it doesn’t. It all feels staged. There’s something unnatural about her, like she’s performing being a human.

A female android, he supposes.

That’s what the kids would call her these days.

Tatiana, though. Obedient Tatiana.

There’s some vulgar marketing for you.

He thinks of all the couples counseling he’s done over the years. It’s true that one word—*obedient*—is going to bring in a lot of clients or buyers.

But that picture.

It doesn’t scream obedience. She looks really nice, actually.

Adrian digs out the photo from his deleted texts. He’s careful not to touch any links.

Tatiana.

Her face is soft and open. Round cheeks and a small Cupid's-bow smile. Nothing flashy. Nothing intimidating. Just … gentle. She looks like someone who would actually be kind to him. He gets a little moved.

But as he studies the photo longer, what keeps him looking isn't the sweetness. It's the strength tucked in there. The way her eyes seem to hold something steady. Unflinching, even. Like she could weather a storm and not break. Stronger than him, maybe. The thought unsettles him, but it also pulls him in.

Kendra's mechanical thumbs pause. She raises her head and stretches out her neck. Being in charge is such hard work. She takes a long swig of her wine. She returns to the digital drama.

Adrian stares at the photo of Tatiana. She keeps growing in attractiveness. Across the table, Kendra lets out an incredulous snort. Someone must have dared to challenge her. Her texting becomes frenzied.

He looks into Tatiana's eyes. There were guys at university who did this. They were very matter-of-fact about it.

"American women are way too high-maintenance," they'd said. "I want someone who actually wants to stay at home. What's wrong with that?"

How much would it cost? Who gets the money—the agency, the woman, some shadowy middleman? What if it doesn't work out?

The questions keep looping in his head. Quite persistent.

He takes a sip of his wine. It tastes like liquid sandpaper, instantly vacuuming the moisture from his gums and leaving a chalky film on his tongue.

What would cut the bite of this overpriced, aggressively tannic merlot would be Tatiana. Right now, on her knees under the table, sucking him off.

She'd have impeccable technique. He's sure of it. That alone would make this dinner far more tolerable.

In his mind, he sees her cherubic face tilted back, looking up at him from the floor, hair tucked neatly behind her ears.

Adrian clears his throat.

He knows what's happening. This is intrusive ideation. It's the old porn conditioning firing up again. Hours logged in his twenties and thirties rewired his dopamine system. It turned arousal into a novelty chase. Despite reconditioning, abstinence, and even experimental therapies, his brain still does it. Static images turn into live-action clips. It happens automatically. It's a reflex. Heavy users can't put the genie back into the bottle. Lately, the old pathways have been flaring again.

And sure enough, without meaning to, he drifts into a vivid fantasy. He sees it. Slipping home at lunch to surprise his new mail-order bride. She's supposed to be ironing. Maybe learning English. Instead, there she is on the couch in her slip. Sunlight spills across her. She's watching daytime talk shows. He clears his throat in the doorway, amused.

What's this? Decided to lounge around? Tsk, tsk, Tatiana.

He imagines taking her over his knee, flipping up her slip, and yanking down her lace panties. Neglected her household chores once again. And he won't tolerate such disobedience.

Adrian's body ignites with a primal heat. His blood rushes through him and settles in his groin. He slaps her plump, bare ass hard. She squeals and wriggles on his lap. But he holds her firmly. She can't escape.

A fierce ache rips through him. A throbbing erection strains against his trousers. He shifts in his seat.

Kendra scrolls away. She's oblivious that he's even here. Suddenly, Kendra does appear quite tasty. And if he's not mistaken, she looks like she would like it very much up her tight little ass.

Down, boy. This is exactly what happens when the circuits flare.

He knows better.

Look at her. It's never going to happen.

Well, never say never.

An idea strikes him. Adrian searches for Kendra's Instagram profile and finds it in less than a minute. He taps on the follow button.

Her phone buzzes with a notification and she glances down to see that Adrian has followed her. A slow smile spreads across her face as if she realizes what he's doing.

"I'm so sorry, Adrian. I'm here. Really, I am. I, uh, just one more minute."

Her tone seems quite promising, along with her micro-expressions. Flared nostrils. Eyes crinkled up slightly with that smile. And, oh, there's a little lip nibble. She's clearly flirting with him.

Don't worry so much about the phone, Adrian.

Her generation sees phones as an extension of themselves.

He relaxes back in his seat and dismisses Tatiana. Most likely, she's been ridden quite hard at a few brothels. Now she's been put out to pasture.

A discarded and worn-out toy.

Kendra is a far more attractive option. She's clearly trying to impress him with this ostentatious display of being a self-made woman.

After all, he painstakingly worked his way through an entire month of witty banter to secure this date. That's not easy to do these days. Besides, he needs an escape from the tiresome politics at the hospital. He's been vying for that coveted department head position.

He focuses on Kendra's sleek figure. He watches her body move and imagines the pleasure of forcing himself into her tight, quivering asshole. She's begging for it with every move.

All around him, waiters float by gracefully. They bear trays of food and drink. Their leaf-and-vine scarves billow behind them. He takes it all in appreciatively. The walls are draped with lush plants and vibrant flowers. It's a tranquil oasis amidst a chaotic world. This is guiltless pleasure. Environmentally conscious indulgence. Very much in vogue in Seattle.

Adrian’s phone buzzes on the table. He picks it up, hoping for a message from Kendra. It’s his mom’s name on the screen instead.

You are my biggest regret.

Here we go again.

A lump forms in his throat. She must be into the sherry. He deletes it and brings up the weather app.

Wow, rain. For Seattle? You don’t say.

Another text.

I should have aborted you.

Adrian’s eyebrows shoot up.

She’s on fire tonight. You’re on a date. Just carry on.

He deletes again and brings up the news app. He tries to ignore his mother’s pathetic behavior and stay calm. Let’s see here, more slaughter of innocent civilians? Yes, no one saw that coming now, did they?

And another text.

It’s your fault he’s gone.

Angry, he begins to pound out a response that *she’s* the reason he killed himself. He stops typing and deletes it.

He steals another glance at Kendra. He sees her now smiling at the phone in one hand while the other toys with the stem of her wine glass. Not a care in the world. The crisis appears to be over for her. A slight upturn at the corners of her mouth reveals how pleased she is with herself. And her life, no doubt.

His expensive suit feels like a straitjacket.

All this fuss and for what?

It’s always like pulling teeth. He sends endless well-thought-out messages. He asks about their interests and tries to make them laugh. All he

usually gets in return are one-word answers. Or no response at all.

Clearly, she's not even trying. And then women have the nerve to complain about not being able to find a decent guy.

Well, maybe if you actually put in some effort, you might have better luck.

He takes a deep breath and tries to push the anger down. It's not like this is the first time he's been disappointed by a woman. Liz spread rumors about him and made sure they reached the hospital.

They really can be horrid. Just sitting there on top of their snapping, foul-smelling vaginas, waiting lazily for the men to do anything and everything to gain access.

They've taken the biological imperative hostage. And they don't even know what to do with it.

His erection subsides.

Oh, and let's not forget the ghosting. It's practically standard practice on these dating websites now. Absolutely infuriating. You can talk for weeks, make plans to meet, invest actual time and attention, and then—poof. They vanish. No explanation. No apology. And if a man dares ask what happened? Silence. Excuses. Nothing resembling accountability. It shows contempt, frankly. A collapse of basic human decency.

Adrian is six feet tall, with a chiseled jawline and abs. That's apparently not enough. What bothers him the most is what women do with their power. They treat men like they're on a buffet. Fickle women. Witless in their own neuroses. Hemming and hawing, picking and choosing whatever suits them. He should be so lucky.

Why did Kendra even bother coming here? To flaunt her body in that indecent dress? Is her sole purpose in life to emasculate men? Well, it won't work on him.

Make one final attempt with her and then get the bill.

It's time to end this game and move on.

Adrian makes the shift seamlessly to a demeanor of charm and poise.

“So, Kendra, what do you think of the food?” he asks.

She smiles at him, revealing a set of immaculate teeth.

“It’s delicious.”

Back to the phone.

He tries again.

“I’ve traveled to some amazing places in my life. Have you ever been anywhere special?”

She gives him an admonishing look.

“I don’t jet-set just to collect conversation topics. Think of the carbon footprint. Don’t you care about the environment?”

Adrian shifts in his seat.

“Of course I do,” he spits out.

Kendra raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow at his answer. As if he were the most ignorant person she had ever met.

“Travel, Adrian, is a major contributor to global warming. Not to mention the cultural appropriation and exploitation of local communities. I thought you would know that, being a sociologist.”

“You mean psychologist?”

She harrumphs and slurps her wine before she looks away.

“My mistake. You would think anyone would consider those issues important.”

Adrian feels his blood boil at her condescending tone.

“Right you are,” he says, smoothly masking his irritation. “Understandable. Now, tell me, you’re in venture capital, is that right?”

Back to her phone. She mindlessly nods in his direction.

“Uh-huh.”

Adrian looks around for the waiter to get the bill. Sociology might have been a better choice for him vocationally. Study the effect of hate-fucks on fertility.

Mom again.

Where are my meringues?

It seems she's going to be a pest this evening. La Parisienne is closed at this hour. No matter, he's got some in his freezer. He's finished here anyway. He pushes his chair back and folds his hands in his lap.

Kendra bats her eyelashes at him. She clearly senses he's no longer invested. Uncanny how that works.

"Sorry," she pipes up, "my phone just blew up right when I got here. I'm putting out a few fires. Won't be long."

Their waiter arrives in hushed efficiency with his man-bun tight and a crisp, floor-length linen apron. He bows deeply.

"It was my privilege to be a part of your nourishment this evening."

He places the dessert menus on the table with an overdone, choreographed flourish, handling the heavy cardstock as if it were a sacred artifact. At the top of each, the name NOURISH is embossed in gold, with THE WORLD appearing below it in a delicate, understated script.

Nourish the world. *How conveniently noble.*

"No dessert for me, thank you," Kendra says without even glancing at the menu.

The waiter just about does a curtsy and looks over to Adrian.

"Thank you, I'd like the bill."

"One bill?"

Adrian nods, but Kendra fixes him with a hard stare. Her mouth is a tight line.

"That's unnecessary."

He leans forward and says, "I insist."

"Uh, that's not going to work. Separate, please," Kendra snaps. Her tone is edged with annoyance now.

“Separate bills it is,” the waiter says, nearly tripping over himself to get away from the growing tension between the two.

She needs to be told. She can’t get away with treating people like this. He stills himself and speaks in his calm, clinical voice.

“Kendra, I have to say, you are a terrible date.”

She completely ignores him.

He slams his hand on the table.

The glasses rattle. Several nearby diners turn around to see what the commotion is. He raises his voice.

“This is atrocious behavior!”

She swills the last of her wine and shoots him a look of disbelief.

“What, because I want to pay for myself? Tell me, Adrian, how is that atrocious? How does that work?”

With an air of superiority, she nonchalantly shrugs and continues with the damn phone.

Adrian’s eyes widen. He feels his heart pounding out a rhythm. Objectivity is erased from his mind. He stands up and feels strength flowing through him as his face reddens. He snatches his water glass off the table. Before she can speak, he flings the water at her. It hits her face, cold and sudden. She looks up at him, shocked. Finally, he has her attention.

“Because you should look at me when I’m speaking to you!”

His erection has returned and is now full-blown. It’s pulsating with a fierce energy.

Kendra gets up and storms off. Her heels make a statement with every step. The patrons of the restaurant exchange glances as they witness the unfolding spectacle.

She whirls around and points at him, eyes blazing.

“This man’s a psycho!” Her voice echoes through the room. Her eyes drop, and she notices his raging erection. “Unbelievable.”

She snaps a photo of him and heads for the exit. She doesn't break a step as she hands her black card to the maître d'. She signs the merchant copy while the rest of the diners are still gasping.

On her way out the door, she yells, "Consider yourself canceled. You're blacklisted. Enjoy your lonely existence."

A teenager starts a slow clap. Her parents are mortified by their daughter's lack of social propriety. They shush her. Adrian feels confused and embarrassed about his outburst. He sheepishly turns to the waiter, who refuses to make eye contact with him. Adrian clumsily extracts his wallet, pays for his meal, and adds an overly generous tip, mumbling his apologies.

He doesn't look up. He just focuses on the exit, pushing past the host stand and bursting through the heavy glass doors into the cool night air.

He lunges toward the curb and flags down an approaching yellow cab. Adrian throws himself into the vinyl back seat, slams the door shut, and mutters his address to the driver as the car pulls into traffic.

Only now, as the restaurant disappears into the distance behind him, does the safety of the dark back seat allow his mind to catch up.

He leans his head against the glass of the window, staring out at the passing streetlights. He is deeply, thoroughly unnerved.

This is a first. He lost complete control of himself. In public.

He has been through too much these past few years. The breakup with Liz got so ugly, and he had shelled out a fortune on expensive forms of therapy that did absolutely nothing. Exhausted by every other option, he had messed around with ketamine and psychedelics. Talk therapy just kept his horrendous childhood fresh and right at the front of his mind anyway. Plus, he always had to sit through the therapist's pity and suspicion when he got his story out. Victim-blaming was, after all, baked into the original CBT model.

None of it is very effective. If it were, the world would be quite different. He thought the ketamine might help him heal in private. It's

supposed to be the next generation of trauma reprocessing. Instead, it cost way too much and scrambled everything further. Left him seeing things he couldn't always explain. Tonight was his first attempt at being social after a year of playing around with all of that.

His phone chirps. Mom again.

Don't make me call Frank.

Frank is the speed-dial lawyer she loves to summon to the house at all hours to change her will. Usually, it's to leave everything to the SPCA. It's her sick form of entertainment, watching her grown son squirm and plead for her mercy as she holds the fate of his inheritance in her hands.

She knows he's beyond broke. This is her way of turning up the tension on the torture rack.

His phone lights up with notifications from various dating apps. He taps the first one. It's an alert informing him that he's been banned. Sure, they'll keep his payment, though. Flustered, he quickly dismisses the alerts.

That's fine with him. Dating apps are a cesspool. Shallow, fake, self-important women. They think they're God's gift. They're not. They're a curse. A burden. Poison in heels. Infecting every man they touch.

He texts his mother.

Your favorites. Coming right up.

OceanofPDF.com

THREE

Bow down, pitiful gamblers. The Queen has arrived.

Trish strides into the casino in a cream jumpsuit, the fabric fluid beneath a black leather coat. Oversized tinted glasses conceal just enough. The room throbs with clinking chips, jangling slots, and canned hope. A heady mix of perfume and liquor thickens the air—the unmistakable smell of easy money.

A haven for cunning minds and smooth talkers. Every conversation, every movement, strategic. Calculated.

And she's better than all of them.

The dance of deception and greed. This is Trish's element. Reading and playing human nature. This is her playground.

A pudgy man with a red face and beads of sweat dotting his brow makes his bet. He's on a losing streak. He bets too big. Then bets bigger, chasing what he's already lost. He's a pig at the trough. His jowls tremble, and Trish senses the desperation rolling off him like waves of heat. She is an expert on desperation. After all, she grew up in it. Not just poor, but desperate and poor.

She glides past the slot zombies and the slack-jawed suckers glued to the sports-book screens. She'll play the table games tonight. Not her dream lineup, but it'll do. Back in her prime, she'd have been ushered into the VIP room before her heels hit the carpet.

Now? She’s banned from most casinos in the country. She traded caviar service for sticky floors and anonymity. The general gaming floor gives her room to move and vanish if she needs to. Besides, the high rollers bore her. All bark and no bite.

Trish knows the difference between bark and bite. Eight months in a Russian prison taught her the finer points of both.

She slides onto a tall stool at the bar and crosses her legs. She lets her plunging neckline do its work. A couple of patrons glance over. With a flick of her jewelry-jangled wrist, she summons the bartender. His smile is warm and his posture attentive.

“What can I make for you tonight?”

“A Manhattan. Rye, not bourbon,” Trish says and smiles back.

He nods and starts mixing with practiced flair. But his eyes aren’t on her drink or on her. They keep straying toward the roulette table.

The dealer there is a bombshell. Chestnut hair cascading with every inch of stage-managed allure. She catches his gaze and holds it. Too deliberate for casual attraction.

To most, it would look like a wandering glance. To Trish, it’s a clear signal.

Well, she’ll be darned and double-dyed. The dealer’s not just a dealer—she’s running the bartender. Pimping him, even. The cue’s clear enough. The dealer’s setting him up to land Trish.

Trish tosses her hair and chuckles, delighted.

Well, isn’t this fun? Let’s see what the boy can do.

Her drink arrives. He sets it down and leans in just close enough to be intimate. Gorgeous. Eager. Probably broke.

“In this world of chance,” he says with a voice dipped in velvet, “some find the best adventures aren’t left to fate.”

Trish sips the perfectly crafted drink.

“I prefer unexpected adventures, but I believe in being prepared for anything.” She smiles with a slight purse to her lips.

He mirrors her.

Smooth.

“Ah, preparation and spontaneity, a rare combination. You see, I often encounter souls seeking more … personalized experiences. Ones that transcend the roll of the dice or the turn of a card.”

She catches the rhythmic, almost sing-song rise and fall of his vowels and the slight Indigenous Zapotec influence underlying his English. His roots are deep in Oaxaca, Mexico. His tone suggests he would be a tender lover. Trish has no desire for sex. That’s not on the menu this evening. She needs cash.

“I’m sure that adds a certain spice to life here,” she says with a smile. “But I find the solo journey brings its own rewards.”

“Understood. But remember, should you ever seek a guide on a most pleasurable journey—one who knows the hidden paths—I am always here.”

Trish raises her glass slightly.

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind. For now, I’ll just enjoy this perfectly made Manhattan and the intriguing ambiance.”

“As you wish. Should you need anything, any … assistance, do not hesitate to ask.”

Trish lets a small, precise curve touch her lips.

“Your cocktail and your conversation have already made my evening more enjoyable.”

The bartender nods with deferential respect. His own smile lingers a moment too long before he moves on to the next patron. Trish sips her drink, eyes sweeping the room with the quiet precision of someone who has done this a thousand times before.

She notices a man in a worn suit standing in the corner.

Security.

His arms are crossed as he studies the room. His piercing gaze roams over the tables and the slot machines. Finally, it settles on Trish. Has she been recognized?

His gaze continues over the rest of the room. Not tonight. As it should be. Trish has outdone herself, carefully hiding every telltale facial feature that might give her away.

She glances back at the bartender, catching the glare directed at him from the bombshell roulette dealer. The woman snaps the ball into the track hard enough to rattle it, jaw tight, eyes cutting from the bartender to Trish and back.

Trish reads it easily enough. He was supposed to have her lined up for an expensive roll in the hay by now.

Obvious much?

The whole setup reeks of low-rent prostitution. Amateur hour.

She considers calling ICE while idly swirling her drink. But then they'd swarm the place and ruin her night. She sips her cocktail. Not her fight.

She sets the glass down gently. Her eyes are now locked on a mark at the blackjack table. The real game is about to begin.

They can try to ban her. She plays by her own rules. That's the vow she made the day her incompetent government finally got around to negotiating her release from Lefortovo.

What do you do when you're dealt the worst hand possible—one so painful it would kill most people? Do you fold? Do you lie down and die?

No. You fight. You fight for your life.

And you win.

And before anyone can stop you, you crown yourself and you rule the kingdom of pain.

Besides, she runs agents so well, she's got the time to perfect the silicone masks. It's fun being her own doll. Tonight, no one will recognize her. Not as the same woman who walked out of here a few months ago with

a tidy sum under the name Betty Botter. Or Chastity McFunk. Or Bonnie Binkley. The aliases amuse her.

At a high-limit blackjack table near the edge of the main floor, Trish takes her place and scans the players. A peculiar mix. A cowboy perched on the edge of his chair. He's stacking his chips like they are trophies. He looks like he thinks he owns the place. Next to him, a young novice player hunches over the felt and clutches a handful of chips like that's going to help.

Some come for the thrill. Others try out their methodical approaches to luck. Let her save them the effort. There is no such thing as luck. Luck is for the weak. For those who won't fight for what's owed to them. Luck is for desperate pussies.

Trish gives the other players a curt nod. They return the gesture—a silent truce before the cards fall. She stacks her chips into two neat columns.

Across the felt, the dealer finishes a fresh six-deck shuffle, the cards weaving together in a rapid, rhythmic cascade before disappearing into the shoe. The dealer offers Trish the cut card. She slides it in deep. Exactly where she wants it.

Trish lets her gaze linger on the movement, savoring the crisp, paper-snap of the cards. To her, it isn't just noise—it's the symphony of calculated risk, and she intends to conduct it. Each card isn't chance. It's data.

Odds bend to her will.

Around her, the other players are a mix of hopeful amateurs and hustlers. But Trish is as even-keeled as a John Deere idling in low gear. She gets a pair of aces—one of the strongest starts at the table. She splits them, putting another four hundred dollars on the line, while the novice beside her surrenders. Her work phone vibrates in her pocket with the distinct rhythm assigned to Sadie.

The biggest nuisance she's ever had to manage.

She told her no more phone calls. The girl doesn’t listen.

Trish ignores the vibration and focuses on the felt. The dealer slides a king onto her first ace—a clean twenty-one, though not a natural after the split. On her second ace, the dealer drops an eight, leaving her with nineteen. Split aces get one card only. House rules. Trish always knows them before she sits.

The dealer finishes the rest of the table, then flips her hole card to reveal a fourteen. She draws a queen.

Bust.

Trish lets a small smile slip as the dealer returns both bets and pays eight hundred dollars in winnings.

The phone stops vibrating. The dealer places the discards into the tray with practiced ease. The shoe remains where it is. No reset. No mercy.

“Place your bets,” she announces with a blend of authority and allure.

Trish sits on a nineteen, anchored by a ten of diamonds. The dealer has a queen of hearts showing. The dealer checks the hole card beneath the mirror.

No blackjack.

Trish waves her palm horizontally over her cards—stand. The dealer flips a five, draws an eight. Twenty-three. She busts her hand. Trish wins again.

“Looks like lady luck is on your side,” the cowboy drawls. His Stetson is clean. His boots are worn but expensive. A silver belt buckle catches the light.

Trish takes a sip of her Manhattan before responding. Southern phonetic vowel shift and slight drawl make “side” sound more like “saahhd.” Texan. Old money. Though the way he hesitates before every bet gives him away. That’s legacy wealth stretched thin.

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” she says and places her glass down. “And if she is a lady, she’s terribly shy. I’ve only seen her show herself to a

select few.”

She can tell by the slight flush on the man’s cheeks that he likes that idea. He takes a moment to compose himself before responding.

“Never heard it quite put that way. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m John. You must have a trick up your sleeve, then.”

Trish leans forward and rests her elbows on the table. She gives him a sultry grin.

“Oh, you have no idea what tricks I have up my sleeve, John.”

His eyes light up.

“Maybe you can show me some of those tricks later tonight.”

Trish chuckles.

“Sorry, John. I don’t mix business with pleasure.”

“Business?” He raises his eyebrows. “What business are you in?”

Trish leans closer. Close enough for her lips to brush against his ear.

“Playing with fire and not getting burned,” she whispers before pulling back.

Trish reclines in her chair. Legs crossed. The slow swing of her foot is a metronome.

Steady. Patient. Predatory.

The cards are dealt. Trish hits twice, and John is shocked as the dealer points to her hand.

“Twenty-one,” she says.

Another player sitting at the far left of the table busts and gathers his remaining chips. His face is white with anxiety. Trish smiles at him.

“Good game,” she purrs.

The casino is a mix of sound and light. Machines ringing and voices climbing over each other. There are people moving around like insects drawn to the hive. A waitress in a sparkly uniform delivers Trish another Manhattan. The waitress points toward Trish’s Mexican gigolo at the bar, who gives a wave.

Spectators watch her every move. They’re waiting for her next one. She can feel their eyes on her back and hear their whispers. It’s just her and John playing now. The green baize table has become their arena.

Trish pushes a tall stack into the circle. John matches half. Trish has been watching the shoe since the first card came out. Not counting like some earnest little math nerd with a system and a dream. Counting is nursery work. She watches clumps. Ranks. The places where useful cards travel together and where dead cards fall away. The shuffle gave her a map. The discard tray confirms the roads. Not perfectly, never perfectly, but enough.

The cards go around. John: a five, then a six. Eleven. Trish: a four, then a seven. Eleven as well. Any amateur would double. One card, no more. But one card won't get her there. The dealer’s up-card is a queen.

The dealer checks beneath the mirror.

No blackjack.

“Hit me,” John says steadily, tapping his finger on the felt.

Another card glides his way. A six. Seventeen. He exhales and waves his hand flat over his cards to stand.

The dealer looks to Trish.

“Hit,” she says, tapping her manicured index finger once on the table. Her eyes are locked on the felt.

The card slides toward her. A five. Sixteen. A murmur rises from the crowd.

“Again,” she says, tapping the table again. She’s calm and unflinching.

The dealer deals the next card. An ace. Seventeen. More whispers. The air is thickening with tension.

Trish doesn’t move. She lets the moment stretch like a cat in a sunbeam —slow, and entirely deliberate. She isn’t guessing. Not exactly. The next right card is where it should be. The shoe will keep its promise.

She taps the felt one more time.

“Hit me again.”

The cowboy beside her holds his breath. In the corner, the man in the worn suit uncrosses his arms, his eyes narrowing as he steps closer to the pit. Hitting a hard seventeen is madness. Or ballsy.

Or the kind of move that puts the word *cheat* on a pit boss’s lips.

But Trish can’t resist. It’s a free country, isn’t it?

The dealer flips the card in one practiced motion.

A four.

Twenty-one.

The crowd erupts. Cheers, gasps, and even a whistle. The dealer’s mask cracks ever so slightly. Just a flicker of raised brows before her professional calm returns.

But the hand is not over. It never is until the house bleeds or feeds.

The dealer turns over her hole card.

Sixteen.

She draws.

A ten.

Bust.

Now the crowd goes wild. The dealer pays John for his seventeen, then stacks Trish's winnings beside her bet. A tidy mountain of chips slides across the felt toward her.

John extends his hand. Respect is plainly on display.

“Impressive.”

Trish smiles faintly as she takes his hand and shakes it.

“Fortune favors the bold,” she quips.

Her phone vibrates. Again. Sadie.

Of course.

Trish stacks her chips neatly and pulls them back from the betting circle.

“I’m done for now,” she says.

The dealer nods briskly and says, “Thank you for playing.”

Trish returns the nod.

“The pleasure is all mine.”

John’s shirt is blotched with sweat rings under the lights. The sight of it makes Trish’s stomach turn. She needs air. Fresh air. The whole place stinks.

She considers answering the phone to share her big win with someone. But that wouldn’t work. Saint Sadie, with all her malaise and moral high ground, is not the right audience.

What a pain she is. Like a toothache that arrives just in time for the main course.

Sadie makes a point of challenging her in front of the wrong people.

With anyone else, Trish wouldn’t worry, but Sadie’s got charisma.

Her views have traction in the branch. The branch chief practically venerates her. That’s the trouble with charisma. It blinds people faster than vodka on an empty stomach.

Trish cashes out at the cage with the pit boss eyeballing her hard from a few feet away. Trish keeps her cool.

Three years ago, Sadie tried to have sex with Trish. Trish doesn’t pitch for the pink team and knew it was a setup.

No one, especially a sex prop, is going to sabotage her retirement. Not after what she’s been through. She is not a pawn on anyone’s game board.

“Uh, good evening, ma’am,” says the pit boss, who is basically an ape stuffed into a suit. “You had quite da winning streak.”

A New Jersey bodybuilder. Short man complex. Trish looks at him with her gaze steady.

“Just a lucky night, I suppose,” she says.

“You stayin’ wid us?”

“In town.”

“I can have our cah take you.”

“That is so generous. I’ve got a taxi coming.”

The cashier asks for identification. Of course she does. At this amount, they always do.

Trish opens her Prada and produces a driver’s license under one of her clean names. Matching tax number. Matching signature. A whole little paper life with no loose threads.

The cashier studies the ID, then Trish, then the screen.

Trish smiles politely.

The cashier enters the information and counts the money twice. Nearly twenty grand. Not bad. The pit boss keeps watching, but he has nothing to grab. Not yet. Her nausea has now turned into dizziness. Worse, her silicone nose is starting to slip.

Time to leave.

Trish steps out into the crisp night air and takes some deep breaths. She attempts to force good feelings by smiling a big smile. The smile pushes the fake nose too far, and she feels the silicone spring right up from between her eyes. The cab pulls up. She climbs in, gives the driver the name of her hotel, and pulls out her phone.

Four missed calls from Sadie. No photos.

There’s a text.

I request contact with the Branch Chief.

So, Sadie wants a chat with the chief, does she?

Trish snorts.

Fat chance of that happening.

Sadie is brilliant in theory but helpless in the wild. She has a mind for systems, but a child’s understanding of human nature—which is why she swallowed the fast-track-to-officer story.

Hook, line, and sinker.

Trish pats her Prada. Large, black, and croc-textured with narrow straps. Expensive. She got a steal of a deal on it. Not something a foster kid would carry. Something a movie star would.

She cracks the window. Tries to clear the dizziness. Once, she looked out for Sadie. Not anymore. Trish thought the cult stay would smother Sadie's latest moral-outrage tantrum. But it never ends.

Trish is too old for this. She's pushing fifty. Sadie's young. She's unpredictable. Dangerous. She never thinks past the moment. Never weighs consequences. And if she keeps that up, there are more permanent ways to deal with her. Trish has put giants in the fetal position, screaming for their mothers.

She can handle Sadie.

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FOUR

Sadie scans the prayer circle—a ring of bowed heads and clasped hands, the same faces murmuring the same words from yesterday. And the day before.

Another epic fail day in Abundant Harvest.

Can we get an amen?

A woman beside her sways, eyes squeezed shut, lips moving fast. Sadie picks at a hangnail and stares outside to the vanishing sunlight.

How much lamer can this get?

Don't answer that, God. Really. Just get on with it.

Her eyes burn, skewered in place like olives in a cocktail, forced to soak it all in. She is tired of looking at the same petty, infuriating nonsense. Her back aches from holding still. What she'd give for one full night's sleep—for a nervous system no longer sputtering on fumes.

She stops picking at her hangnail and sits with her hands demurely folded. She gives the phone tucked discreetly between her thighs a subtle squeeze. Her own private liturgy.

"Let us begin." The Mother starts them off.

The last traces of daylight struggle through the grimy windows, casting a faint glow over the women's solemn faces.

"Let us ignore the cries of the flesh."

Yes, let's do that.

“Our taste for prideful and poisonous delights.”

Some mood lighting would be nice. Maybe a candle? But nope.

The women speak at a quick but reverent pace: “Save the sinners, we pray.”

Everyone pauses. They look so invested.

“Almighty One, help your servant Todd to keep us safe and guide us.”

Mary-Stephanie gets up and leaves for the outhouse.

“Keep our souls safe, we pray.”

Sadie’s *Space Invaders* pillow is so thin.

“From deceptive doctrine, heresy, and faction,” they say.

Now, they’re all staring expectantly at her. It’s her special part in the evening set.

What is it again?

Sadie sits up straight. “Uh, deliver us?” Her bones dig into the chair.

It’s correct. They continue. “From hardness of heart, and hatred of your word and commandments.”

Her voice comes out raspy. “Protect us from the enemy.”

“Save us from the wicked,” the women respond.

“Be with us,” Sadie says.

The gaunt faces of the women screw up with longing. “Be with us now.”

Back to unison.

“Todd is not just a man. He is your anointed. Todd is the One. We all want the Father, but the Father is One. We cannot take more than our share. We cannot take more than our share.”

The door slams, and Mary-Stephanie lets out a wide-eyed whoop.

“The One is here!” she squeals.

The prayer circle fractures. Chairs scrape, pillows fly, and women scatter. Mary-Sue lunges to the entrance and flips on the overhead lights.

Above them, holes gape in the ceiling, stuffed with plastic bags gone black with mold. But there's something more going on up there. Most of the women are already in bed, eyes squeezed shut.

"Quick, Mary-Jo!" Mary-Yvonne hisses. "We're about to get tucked in!"

Sadie is frozen, staring at the ceiling.

Roaches.

Reacting to the light.

Hordes of them ripple through the gaps, their bodies crinkling the plastic.

Sadie whispers, "There are cockroaches."

"We know, hon," Mary-Ellen manages a low, nasal whisper. "They eat the bedbugs. Now get in!"

Great.

They obviously don't eat spiders. Sadie pulls back the thin sheets on her lumpy bed. She scans for spiders and climbs in, keeping the phone clenched in place.

"The One is here," Mary-Sue barks.

They chant back, "Alleluia, our Father is here."

Sadie is transfixed by the crawling mass of cockroaches above her. Taking a deep breath, she closes her eyes tight. Did one just drop onto her?

"How is my flock?" Todd booms.

"Happy that you are here, Father. What a blessing. Tell them a story?"

"Not tonight. I have joyous news. I'll take our new Daughter as my Bride, as our Bride, the Bride of the One."

"The Bride of the One," they bellow in unison.

Sadie peeks and watches as Todd hands Mary-Sue the shirt Sadie left in the field.

"See that this gets laundered."

Todd jerks his face toward Sadie. His eyes are glittering with some sick delight as his fingers slowly stroke his beard. Sadie squeezes her eyes shut and forces out a long breath. The roaches, for the moment, have dropped a notch on her priority list.

“Yes, Father, we’ll clean that shirt right away. Did it fall off the line?” Mary-Sue asks.

“No, I found it by the barn.”

“By the barn. How odd. Why would someone be so careless?”

“See that it gets laundered and prepare our Bride,” he says and leaves. The screen door slams behind him, and the whole row house explodes into a frenzy.

“The Bride of the One!”

Sadie yanks the blankets away and flinches as two spiders scamper out.

Suddenly, she’s in a receiving line.

Mary-Ellen arrives first. She pulls Sadie up to her feet, bear-hugs her, and bursts into a super ugly cry. The other women take their turns one by one. All are waiting for their moment.

Sadie feels their wet, hot cheeks press against hers as they flank her.

The women are jubilant that Sadie’s been chosen to start having sex with Todd and have his babies.

Sadie wants to punch them in the face and clap her hands over her ears.

Their wails make her skin crawl.

It’s embarrassing.

She pinches her thigh and tries to snap out of it.

They’re all crying except for Sadie.

Some of the women blubber in a purging release. Some sound like they’re going to choke. She can’t just stand here with dry eyes.

She must reciprocate.

Real emotions are crucial for a cover to work.

The women’s fever crests into hysteria. This is too much. Vertigo grips her. She can’t breathe. Sadie sits back down and rolls her head back to check on the cockroaches. They’re still swarming around.

Okay, don’t look there.

The row house blurs and spins.

The demand to produce a legitimate emotional response pounds through her shattered nervous system. Her insides quiver, shudder, and quake. She sits on her hands, rocks back and forth, and laugh-wails.

That’s good. They like that.

Tingles flicker and dance beneath her collarbones.

Is that elation?

Close enough. That’ll work.

Survival and falsehood wrap around what used to be Sadie and squeeze like a boa constrictor. A dull but noticeable twinge flares in the base of her skull. She pales and frowns.

Her amygdala is stuck.

Fight or flight?

Freeze or fawn?

Flop or fuck Todd?

Whatever, spin that wheel.

Her forehead is beaded with moisture. Sadie gives the smile women use when they’ve run out of exits but not out of poise.

Okay, let’s go. It’s my wedding night.

Mary-Sue’s gnarled hands clamp down on each of Sadie’s slight shoulders as she says, “Enough blessings. Time for preparations.”

Does that mean lip balm? Ha-ha.

Burly Mary-Sue shuffle-marches her down an unlit path to the wall tent. They use it for birthing, punishment, and cult dentistry. No lip balm in there.

Mary-Sue lifts the canvas door flap, and a waft of mildew hits them both in the face. Mary-Sue starts to wheeze. She tries to clear her throat and catch her breath.

“You’ve been preparing for this night your whole life,” Mary-Sue says.

Sadie pulls on a chain dangling down, and a bare lightbulb burns.

“Yes, Mother, I have.”

They both lean against a workshop table. Mary-Sue puts down a satchel she brought with her. Her hands bulge with thick, ropy veins.

“After tonight, you’ll no longer be my Daughter. We will be Sisters.”

“Sisters?”

Moths start knocking against the lightbulb.

Mary-Sue unfastens the clasp on her satchel, drawing a long, shaky breath. Tears well in her eyes, threatening to spill over. Reaching inside, she draws out a piece of white fabric—folded with meticulous care—and presses it gently into Sadie’s hands.

“This is the Dress of the Ages. Go ahead, Daughter. Feel the weight of it. It is yours for this special night.”

Sadie undoes a wrinkled silk ribbon and unfolds a grungy tablecloth, with smears of dirt and two crudely cut eye slits. On the underside, there are names. They’ve been haphazardly stitched in white thread.

“Oh, how beautiful … such fine stitching,” Sadie says carefully.

“Yes, that’s right, Daughter. Those are the names of all the Brides. All the Marys. Brides of the One. Your name will be stitched inside there. I can’t stitch anymore, but I’ll make sure it’s done.”

“Will I keep it on during, you know, um—”

“The marriage rite?” Mary-Sue chuckles. “No, Todd will remove it. I’ll be there. We all will. Witness your becoming. You can hand it to me when the time comes.”

Sadie places it down on the table with care.

“How should I—?”

“Child, do not worry. He will direct you.”

“Where will it happen? You know, with the church being, um—”

Burned to the ground.

“Yes, there was that fire, but the eyes of the Lord are everywhere. With this heat, it’s best to stay outside. We’ll go to the new church site.”

She pulls out a mason jar from her satchel and carries on, “Listen, Mary-Jo, I was like you. I wasn’t born here. I was a newcomer. So, here, I brought something for you.”

Sadie unscrews the jar and catches a whiff of hard liquor. Mary-Sue’s eyes briefly flicker. She seems to know she’s caught Sadie’s attention.

“My brew, for you. Our secret.”

Sadie takes a sip and is pleasantly surprised by the sweet and earthy flavor of potato moonshine.

“Thank you, Mary-Sue … so, when did you come here?” she asks and offers her the jar.

Mary-Sue shakes her head.

“No, that’s yours, child. Way back in the nineties, before you were born. Things were different then. I am blessed they welcomed me.” She squeezes Sadie’s hand.

“Why?”

Mary-Sue grows somber.

“I was in a bad way. Life had knocked me around pretty good.”

“Oh.”

They should definitely bottle and sell this beverage. They’d make a fortune. They could do their cult thing on their own private island.

“I had met a boy, you see. Very charming.”

Sadie laughs. “Charmers.”

“Oh yeah, that good-for-nothin’ talked me into robbin’ the bank I worked at up in Canada. Said it was so we could chase our silly dreams in California. And before I knew it, that dream turned into a never-ending

nightmare. He had me hooked on crack cocaine and doin' things I ain't proud of."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Sadie squeezes her hand back.

The moonshine is going down so fast, so sad.

"He pimped me out and then left me with bad johns who wouldn't pay." Mary-Sue's eyes grow dark. "I learned darn quick how to make a bad john pay up. High heels can be mighty convincing in the right hands."

She wrings her hands—spotted and knotted, thick with calluses.

"He kept demanding money from my parents. Ransom. They paid it. They lost everything. The house. The family farm." Mary-Sue looks away.

"That's terrible. Why didn't the police—?"

"They wouldn't help because of the theft in Canada before I left. The Mounties wouldn't do a thing for them, or for me."

"That's harsh."

Systemic legal paralysis. Typical.

Sadie takes another swallow of the moonshine.

"It only got worse." Mary-Sue takes a deep breath and stares at the ground. Her face is full of old, heavy pain. "I found myself surrounded by darkness, with only the devil for company. Terrible things were done to me and by me. I ended up in a correctional infirmary, barely alive."

She sighs. The tent is quiet, just insects knocking against the bulb, throwing their shadows big against the canvas.

"Eventually," Mary-Sue continues, "I was transferred to the general population. Some Sisters from here would visit me. They offered me a home when I got out."

Sadie is flooded with actual warmth and concern.

"Oh God, that's so good to hear." Her eyes start to tear up.

Mary-Sue strokes a finger against her cheek.

"Yes, it is, Daughter. Dry those tears. I'm all right now. It pains me, though."

“What?”

“I can’t do the same. These kids today. Even if we get them here, it’s too late.”

“Why?”

“They can’t get through it. I don’t know. Crack was addictive. I searched through hotel carpet like a fine-toothed comb for rocks, but with help, I could shake it. You can’t shake this new stuff. They can’t detox. It won’t come out of them.”

“Yeah.”

“It just takes over. The body can’t let go of it. We visit them, or we used to before Covid. But they can’t come out here. They wouldn’t survive out here with us.”

“No.”

Mary-Sue’s story could have been one of Andrea’s best-case scenarios. Plausible worst cases flash on the screen of Sadie’s mind.

What price did her virginity get? What happened after?

Sadie shakes those thoughts away and takes another drink.

Mary-Sue continues, “When it gets too rough for them, hopefully God will take them home, quickly.” She grips her with her hardened hands. “That kind of debased life of predator and prey, that’s not what God wants for us.”

“No.”

But that’s how it is, Mary-Sue.

Sadie imagines her bludgeoning a john with her heels. She probably messed them up good.

“I’ve said too much. I do go on at times.” Mary-Sue adjusts her posture and so does Sadie. “Your new life started the day you joined us. And it will be sanctified tonight here on earth as in heaven. I’ll come for you, child, when the time comes. Make sure you are just as God made you underneath the dress.”

“As God made me.”

Mary-Sue picks up her satchel.

“Let that hair down, child, that beautiful hair.”

“I will, Mother.”

Mary-Sue reaches out a hand for the mason jar. Sadie tilts her head back and chugs the last bit of moonshine. She wipes her mouth. Mary-Sue chuckles and plucks the empty jar from Sadie’s hands. She leaves with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Sadie paces a fast circle in the tent. One direction and then another. As a wife, what can she get? Could she get him to shave his beard? Never. It’s his shield against the cameras and probably a warrior status symbol for him. No, she’ll just get a different spot at prayer.

This is beyond fucked.

She had asked Trish to get her out over two months ago. She remembers the call.

“I’ve just cracked you like a walnut,” Trish had said with a snort.

“What?”

“I’ve figured out your problem, Sadie.”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve mistaken me for a concierge.”

“Trish—”

“Name tags are not my style, Sadie.”

“I wouldn’t ask unless—”

“You seem to think I care about your problems,” Trish’s voice had snapped sharply through the line. “Yes, the machines *should* be able to track beards. Guess what? They can’t. So, you need multi-angle shots. Close ones. Or have him shave. Let me be clear, you’ve got one job. One word to remember. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” Sadie had said, crouched near the north edge of the compound. If discovered, she would just pretend she was peeing.

“Photos.”

“I’m telling you—”

“Correction. Two words. Photos now.” Trish ended the call.

It was the only time Sadie had ever asked to be pulled out.

She pulls out the phone now and checks the battery. It’s down to five percent. It’s been hard to charge it lately.

Already, there are sounds of people gathering at the new church site.

Of course they are. Everyone’s going to be there.

Group humiliation with sexual pain is the basis of establishing compliance in a cult.

She glances over at the meal house in the other direction. It stands dark and empty. The moon casts a glow. It paints the world in silver and blue. She starts running toward the meal house and stumbles.

Steady, girl. That moonshine packs a punch.

She staggers to the meal house and trips on the uneven path in the dark.

Once inside, she reaches behind the stove for the charger cord. Can’t feel it. Footsteps approach. She gives up on the cord and grabs the Vermin Vanish and a hammer. The footsteps get closer.

They’re coming in.

Sadie races to the back. She opens a window and launches herself through it, taking half the gingham curtain with her.

Lights flick on behind her. She sneaks off back to the wall tent but stops by the laundry line for more items. In the musty tent, she pulls off her clothes and smears petroleum jelly over her whole body. She ties the ribbon from the dress tightly around her waist and hangs the Vermin spray and hammer from it.

Next, the phone. She tucks it into the clothespin bag, fastens it, and secures it underneath the ribbon. She throws the tablecloth over her head.

Perfect. Bring it.

As soon as she positions the eyeholes over her eyes, Mary-Sue's voice comes through the tent door.

"Daughter, it is time."

Sadie pulls the light chain, and the bulb goes dark.

"I understand. I am eternally grateful."

"It is the time of the One," Mary-Sue announces.

"It is the time of the One," Sadie replies.

Mary-Sue reaches for the hem of the dress. Sadie steps out of reach. Mary-Sue starts to chase her in a circle. "Don't be shy, girl. Let me check under there."

With as much ardent subservience as Sadie can generate under a tablecloth, she pleads.

"Oh, Mother, I am as God made me. Please, I only want the eyes of the One to fall on me," she goes on, murmuring, "I have purified myself."

Sadie holds her arms out and twirls. It's not the effect she wants. The fabric is clinging to the petroleum jelly.

A long pause hangs in the air before Mary-Sue lets out a sigh and a little chuckle. Sadie can smell moonshine on Mary-Sue's breath. Her breathing has noticeably relaxed.

She must have visited her stash.

"Let's get a move on, then. The One is waiting."

Sadie reaches out a hand to Mary-Sue and does her best gushy voice.

"I can't wait until we're Sisters," Sadie says, fawning. "I knew you would understand."

Mary-Sue's burly hand grasps Sadie's slender wrist over the tablecloth.

"Are you all right, Daughter? You're moving … strangely."

Her wedding dress of the ages is like a blackout curtain. "I'm fine, Mother." It comes out too assertive. She adjusts and peeps, "I'm so nervous. Hope I don't trip. Glad you are here."

"If you fall, we will catch you. We are all the One."

Okay, great. Mary-Sue is nice in her own way, but this is beyond creepy.

They draw closer to the excited gathering.

Todd announces, “Our Bride is here.”

The crowd erupts into a flutter of approval before they all quiet down. Everyone must be here. People encroach and circle them. They place hands on her to urge her forward.

“The One commands you,” they chant.

“Commands.”

She is squeezed.

“Commands.”

Hands push down hard onto her back, head, and shoulders. “The One commands, and we obey.”

Mary-Sue whispers next to her, “Watch you don’t trip over the cord, Daughter. There we go.”

They’ve set up a floodlight. Shadows dance wildly as Sadie matches their moans and howls. Her voice soars in mock ecstasy.

“The One commands, and I obey!” she cries.

That gets them going. The wails turn guttural. They’re rolling through the crowd. Tonight, the men are allowed to touch the women.

And they do.

Greedy hands and open mouths with eyes rolled back. Sadie glimpses the groping through the eyeholes in her tablecloth. They’re in an altered state.

The crowd wants a climax. They want their Bride unveiled.

They want a show.

Mary-Sue releases her wrist. The mob tightens around her in anticipation. Sadie’s hands tremble as she fumbles with the laundry bag. Her greasy fingers keep slipping on the mother-of-pearl button.

Come on—open.

It pops loose.

Finally.

She yanks out the phone. First code, wrong. Second, wrong again. The crowd sways, and so does she. Third time—she's in.

They thrust her into Todd.

Silence.

He peels the tablecloth back.

"Mary-Sue, take—" he begins.

But Todd freezes with his mouth open. Stunned. He stares at a very greasy Sadie, fiddling with a phone. Behind him, a wiry man with a Category 5 combover breaks the silence with a piercing hillbilly yowl.

"Witch!" he shrieks and jabs a crooked finger at her.

The word drips with backwoods superstition. The air vibrates with fear.

Let's use it.

"Everyone, stay back!" Sadie shouts and swings the hammer in warning. She lifts the phone. Finger over the shutter.

"Say cheese, Todd."

She taps the shutter.

Nothing.

She taps it again. Still nothing.

Todd lunges.

Nuh-uh, creepy cult guy.

She sprays him square in the face with Vermin Vanish.

Screams erupt. Todd drops, clawing at his eyes.

The camera finally takes a photo.

Got the shot. Blurry pic of a bearded man covering most of his face with his hands. Great.

Mary-Sue clamps a gnarled hand on Sadie's forearm.

"No violence. I won't allow it."

Okay, whatever, lady.

Sadie yanks free and spins. Hammer raised.

Thanks to Combover Guy's little outburst, the crowd is frozen. Terrified.

The power of suggestion is wild.

"You heard her," Sadie says in a voice that's steady but laced with edge. "No violence. Let me through. Right now. And no one else needs to … um, get sprayed."

She lights up like the star of some deranged B-movie action reel. Tossing her head back with wild eyes, she cackles like a banshee.

"Sprayed … or hammered."

And just like that, she moves out of the spotlight, toward the access road. Confidence in every step. Murmurs trail behind her.

"She'll pay for this."

"Oh yes, she will."

"Silence!" Todd roars.

A man in stained coveralls at the edge of the mob steps into her path. Sadie halts.

Now what?

Todd's voice booms again. It's loaded with fire and disdain.

"Let her go. She is not worthy to be with us. She is not, and never will be, part of the One."

The guy in stained coveralls steps aside.

As if on cue, the mob boils over.

"Not part of the One! Not part of the One!" Chanted over and over like a rally.

Sadie bolts. She clears the compound, cuts across the field, and comes to the gate. Locked.

Of course.

No time. She hurls her phone over, grabs the metal fence, and scrambles up. The wire hums and ticks. She times her grip between pulses. A jagged fray bites into her slick forearm, tearing the skin. She ignores it. Hooking a

leg over the top, she hauls her center of gravity forward, twists, and drops. Her feet hit the ground, and she sinks into a deep, controlled squat, her breath ripping through her chest.

She sticks the landing.

The ribbon digs into her waist. Her hands are trembling too hard to undo the knot. She finds the phone. She stumbles and grabs at thorny blackberry canes for balance. Scratches tear down her shins as she pushes through to the driveway.

Free of the brambles, she undoes the knot and lets the ribbon fall. No ringing of their cracked bell. No pursuit. She draws a ragged breath. A tickle under her arm makes her flinch. She lifts it to find a fat cricket lodged there. She cups it out carefully, and before she can flick it away, a swallow dives and snatches it from her palm. A blur of wings and then—gone. Mama bird leading her young on their first hunt. Weird they're out at night.

Maybe they're saying goodbye.

Sadie glances down. She's cut up her feet. She's bleeding, but it's shallow. The driveway spills into a dirt road. Trish had rushed the drop so fast that Sadie hadn't mapped the area like she normally does. Somewhere in Washington, north of Seattle. Doesn't matter. She's got a locker waiting. A new ID set, cash, phone. Enough to reconstitute a cover and keep moving.

Walking herself out of an op does not feel good. Without Trish's okay? It's never happened. Normally, she'd be whisked into a secure car. Driven to some exclusive hide to decompress. She can already picture the debriefing.

"Why did you extract yourself?"

"Uh … because they stared at me a lot and prayed all the time?"

Months of work. No usable photos.

Whatever.

She downloads a ride-share app. After a mile-long disclaimer, it demands a credit card number. She punches one in. Then it wants two-step verification. A text is sent. She doesn't get it.

She jabs Send Another Text, and the phone dies.

A half-hearted scream escapes and then fizzles. She stumbles onto a paved road, heading south. Her fingers rake through petroleum-jellied hair. Sticky and flat. The road's shoulder is littered with broken glass, shredded tires, and cigarette butts. Light beams sweep up behind her.

She looks down at the road and sticks out her thumb.

Why not?

A big black truck slows. Country music about tractors and beer cuts off. Then it cranks back up as the truck speeds away. Probably for the best. Sadie keeps walking until she comes upon an old gas station.

It's dead quiet. She circles the place and scans for life. Nothing. The flickering light buzzes overhead. It throws her shadow long and thin across the oil-stained concrete pads. She feels half-transparent under the faltering glow, like she could blow away.

No water tap.

Of course.

Just a busted payphone, its casing defaced in hot-pink Sharpie that advertised a ten-digit number and a promise: CALL BACK DOOR BARRY!

A raccoon hisses while squatting on its haunches. Its little bandit face is twitching.

"Okay, big boy. Just relax."

Behind him, a sign reads NO DUMPING—next to a mountain of trash.

Sadie points to it.

"That's your trash, I know."

She wings an empty can at him. He snarls.

"Don't make me call Barry!"

When she flings a bald tire, the raccoon bolts. Sadie digs through the pile and spots coveralls wedged under an old vacuum. She tugs them free. Inside out, they reveal a single wiry pubic hair clinging to the seam.

“Ew.”

She plucks it off and keeps inspecting. The fabric’s thick, grimy, and stiff with grease. The cult ladies would love this laundry project. The coveralls swallow her whole. She zips up anyway and starts walking.

The pant legs drag over her feet, covering the raw cuts from earlier. At least they cushion her against the road. She idly pokes a finger through a hole in the pocket and brushes bare thigh.

Still alive.

Headlights again. A hybrid hum. It’s soft and steady. The car slows. A window rolls down. A chill-looking dad with kind eyes leans out.

“We’re headed to Seattle. Need a ride?”

Sadie glances at the car. She hesitates.

“Oh, it’s fine,” she says. “I might make your car dirty. I’ll get the next one.”

“The next what?”

“You know, the next ride.”

But before he can answer, the mom leans forward from the passenger seat. Her auburn curls spring as she peers at Sadie with bright concern.

“I’ll not hear of it. You get in this instant.”

Sadie wavers.

“Thank you,” she concedes.

One kid scoots into the middle seat to make room. He flashes her a shy smile. Nice kid.

“Seattle home?” the dad asks. His voice is easy and his eyes are steady on her through the rearview.

“Uh, no. School,” Sadie responds.

She buckles her seat belt while the dad rolls down the windows. She must reek. Sadie's tongue explores her furry teeth and assesses the dismal state of her mouth. The wind whips everyone's hair around. Hers doesn't move. The petroleum jelly helmet holds fast, firm, and motionless.

She glances over at the two kids. The smaller one reaches for the bigger one's hand. Sadie wants to reach across and hold hands, too.

She wants to hold their hands and say, "I'm scared."

She wants to say, "I failed. I'm lost and confused. I messed up, and I don't know what to do."

Sadie doesn't say it. It would scare them. Grown-ups aren't supposed to talk like that. Not to kids. Grown-ups don't get scared, even when everything is scary. They're strong. They fix things.

They drive past a billboard with a big KKK and swastikas spray-painted on it. The kids see the sign. They look at each other and then both look at Sadie. There are some bugs squirming in the coveralls and they want out. Sadie shifts in her seat and tries to free a big wriggler stuck in her hip. It doesn't work.

She hasn't sat in the back seat like this in a long time. Not since the beige Ford days. Parents in front, silently calculating the weight of the world. Her parents met at university. Both career academics. Sapio-love at first sight in the library. They finished each other's thoughts and sentences. Even finished their unfunny jokes.

At first, they delighted in Sadie's high IQ. She breezed through test rooms, filling bubbles with razor-sharp HB pencils. But one test changed everything.

When they drove home from that test, Sadie could feel the tension radiating from the front seat. Her brother wasn't there. He never took the tests. He skied, biked, and played ball.

"How did I do?" she asked. "How'd I doooo?"

Her mom didn't quite make eye contact. Statue-profile.

“You did fine,” she replied.

“What was the score?”

“That was the last of these tests,” her mom said.

“What? Did I do something wrong?”

Her dad glanced over with heavy brows.

“No, Sadie. The problem isn’t you.”

At nine years old, the word had pierced her. *Problem.* It felt like a door slammed shut.

Years later, rifling through old files, she found the envelope. A government letter offering a “Special Accelerated Program” that would remove her from school and place her under federal direction. “Immediate Response Requested.”

No wonder her parents shut it down. They firmly believe power corrupts knowledge. They trust books, not bureaucrats.

Her mother used to say it all the time: “Smart is fine, Sadie. Just don’t shine too bright. People don’t like being reminded of what they’re not.”

That’s around the same time Sadie’s PDA started showing up. Pathological Demand Avoidance.

Sadie prefers Pervasive Drive for Autonomy. There's nothing pathological about it. She just doesn’t like jumping when other people say jump, not when she can decide for herself, *dammit*.

Working for the CIA is like working against her own DNA. But if it leads to Andrea, it will be worth it.

If Sadie’s parents ever knew she was doing this work, it would break their hearts. Their worst fear, realized. The government runs her. Owns her.

What is she doing?

What has she done?

The hybrid swerves around a dead deer, throwing Sadie against the door.

She digs her dirty fingernails into her palms. Outside, the wind howls and slaps the car like it's furious. She can hear it.

It's screaming. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

The older kid leans over and whispers something to the younger one. The younger one pauses. He reaches across and places his small, dimpled hand on top of Sadie's.

She bites her lip. Tries not to cry.

But a few tears escape and fly into the very windy car.

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FIVE

The cab rolls to a stop on the broken asphalt before the dilapidated mansion where Adrian grew up. Weeds push through the cracks in the driveway, the same one he's come down his whole life.

He jumps out and retrieves the delicate meringues he'd grabbed from his freezer. He hands over the fare. The driver pulls away without a word.

Some people could stand to show a little gratitude.

He turns and faces the dreadful task ahead. All he wants is to drop off the meringues, keep the peace, and get out alive.

The mansion is a relic of a bygone era—a structure that seems to leer at him from behind overgrown hedges and neglected gardens. The key doesn't work.

Right. She had the locks changed after firing the last care aide.

"I've stashed the new one in your favorite fairy," she had told him.

One of her games. Always one of her games.

He looks around the yard. The fountain sits cracked and dry, its basin choked with leaves.

Which fairy is it?

After several minutes of fumbling in the darkness and groping cold garden statues, he finally finds the one she means. Of course. It *is* his

favorite—the one with delicate wings and a timid expression. So shy. So strangely pure. He used to fantasize about fucking it. Kids.

The door creaks open to reveal the dusty foyer. Overhead, the chandelier hangs crooked, its missing crystals leaving gaps like pulled teeth. Torn wallpaper curls from the walls. Mildew stains the faded carpet. Every time Adrian steps inside, he feels the house take inventory of him.

His footsteps echo down the hall and past portraits of long-dead ancestors. Some of them share his green eyes. A prickling sensation creeps across his skin, as though their gazes are warnings. They know what's in store for him. Still, he makes his way upstairs.

It's okay, I'm a big boy now. All grown up. She doesn't get to me anymore.

Except she does.

He pauses to steady his nerves. He knocks and waits for her to say, "Come in." He opens the door.

She's sprawled across the four-poster bed and reaching for her lipstick-encrusted glass of sherry. Her burgundy robe hangs open to reveal a stained nightgown that's bunched around her waist. One pale thigh is exposed in the lamplight. It's veined and slack with age. She doesn't seem to notice. That, or she doesn't care that she is—as always—indecent.

"Adrian!" she caws in a shrill voice. "You're late."

He holds out the meringues like an offering.

"I brought dessert."

She snatches the box and squints at the contents.

"Meringues? I wanted mousse."

She hurls the box at him. It hits his chest and falls to the floor. The small, colorful meringues scatter.

"I didn't know you wanted mousse."

Adrian starts to collect them.

"I'm alone because of you." She sniffles. "You killed him, you know."

She takes a swig and then goes on, “Drove your father to it. My darling husband. You murdered him!”

“I did no such thing,” Adrian says. “You’ve had too much to drink.”

She cackles.

“Oh, stop it with the wounded puppy act. You’re only here for the money. But you don’t deserve a penny!”

She grabs her cell phone.

“Get out!” she yells. “I’m writing you out of the will.”

Adrian stands up slowly. He leaves the meringues. He meets her bloodshot eyes.

“You don’t mean that,” he says.

She sneers. “Don’t I?”

He steps closer. She doesn’t flinch.

“To be or not to be,” she slurs, “that is the question.”

Adrian stares at her.

Tomorrow, she’ll be sober and she’ll apologize. He’ll accept it, and they’ll both pretend it never happened.

They always do.

“Where is your new care aide?” he asks.

Her smile turns amused.

“I told her to leave. She wasn’t meeting my—” Her mouth tightens.

“Expectations?” Adrian asks.

She holds the drink to her chest. The glass trembles in her hand.

“Please, Adrian, you’ve grown up so fast. Oh, you look so much like your father. I could just—” She stops to drain the glass and spills most of it on herself.

“The care aides take advantage of me. It’s completely unacceptable. This one’s still under contract, but—”

Adrian stares at this woman who brought him into the world. She raised her only child like a root vegetable stored in the basement, left to wither in

the dark.

He was essentially invisible. Forgotten and ignored. But there had been a kind of dignity in that basement exile. Up here, with her, even that is gone.

After Dad's suicide, a dentist, of all people, had sniffed out the neglect from nothing more than a conversation about flossing. Adrian still remembers the look on his face.

Pity.

He'd sworn never to give anyone that kind of opening again.

She's always been strange with money. And Adrian had no friends around to show him what a normal life might look like. Instead, he earned a PhD in burying the ugliness and pushing forward.

His ex, Liz, couldn't handle the situation with his mother. She did see fit, however, to share some of this—his most private family business—with colleagues.

His mother recoils and holds her nose.

"What's that horrid smell? Is that you?" she gasps with eyes watering.

She's smelling herself.

It is, after all, quite foul in here. Like rotting flesh mixed with sewage.

Putrid.

"Who are you?" she whimpers. "What did they do to you? You look too young."

The outburst with Kendra and now his demented mother.

None of it matters anymore.

A lump forms in Adrian's throat. It's suffocating. He blinks rapidly and tries to push down the wave of emotions that threatens to emerge.

She wouldn't pay for his education, but he couldn't get loans because of how rich they are. She refused to cosign, so he took out payday loans. He maxed out credit cards and worked straight through university. Medical school was never an option. He didn't have the grades or the money.

Psychology was the fallback, and it still cost a ridiculous amount. He never caught up. All these years later, he's still drowning in debt.

"Hush," he says, his voice thick. He brushes her hair back from her forehead with a gentleness that surprises even him. "I'll arrange a better care aide. How does that sound?"

As she begins to drift off, she mutters, "A man, Adrian … for some sort of change."

Her body goes limp, and she falls asleep.

He takes the sherry glass and the bottle. Now he can leave the claustrophobic atmosphere of her room.

Downstairs, he stops near the basement door.

Just keep going.

This is not a home—it's a living grave.

His love for her has never wavered. It rooted itself in him before reason, before language, before he knew love was allowed to have conditions. Children do not stop loving their parents. They only learn to blame themselves for needing more than they were given.

After his Dad died, his aunt had arranged credit for the basics at the corner store. No one had arranged credit for hope.

So he made do with the false kind.

It worked, in its way.

He survived.

So did the mildew. They both adapted beautifully.

He counts as he walks. Three relatives gone by their own hand, Dad included. A shotgun. A bottle of pills. And Great-Aunt Lucy, who had style. She spent her savings on a guided climb up Mount Etna during an eruption. Then she jumped, parasol and all, into the lava. Out of everyone, she was the only one who made it look like a choice. He gives her a wink, then shoves those thoughts away. He doesn't need that exit anymore.

Back in university, when the denial finally cracked, he made a deal with himself. A protocol. When the plans to end the pain became concrete, he'd call 911. No matter what. Sometimes he'd lose his nerve and phone in fake emergencies instead. Phantom drunk drivers. Imaginary fights next door. It kept him alive.

Now, as a psychologist, he sees every flavor of breakdown. Seeing the effects of people eating their own Christmas lights or rambling about aliens puts things into perspective.

So even though psychology is archaic and, in many ways, useless, he understands people. He sees their pain and their patterns. Their distortions. And more and more, what he knows to be true is this—he is one of the few who can really understand and can help them. No one else bothers to trace the twisted logic or speak directly to the fractured mind.

Not like he can.

He is a natural at connecting with people who have lost themselves. His own fractures became maps, guiding him through labyrinths other clinicians wouldn't dare to enter. He is perfectly at ease listening to those who no longer trust their own voices. He speaks and understands dissonance fluently.

He has multiple PhDs, if he thinks about it.

Well, if he counts the ones that life handed him.

The university gave him one. The basement gave him the rest.

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SIX

Trish taps the toe of her designer heel against the cab floor as traffic crawls forward, slow enough to feel personal.

Ten minutes. They've gone nowhere.

She has just left the casino floor in the backwaters of Montana, flush with winnings, only to be trapped in this. She needs her hotel. She's not feeling well. Not drunk. Not tired. Just … scrambled. Like someone crossed all the wires inside her.

The cab is too warm. Her wig itches, and her eyes can't quite keep up with the movement outside. She blinks hard twice.

Everything still looks wrong.

She dips a hand into her handbag. The bills are still there, thick and dense.

The casino is on the outskirts of town. There shouldn't be traffic out here.

Then Trish sees the problem.

Through the windshield, protesters block the road, waving signs and shouting slogans.

Her lips curl.

Social justice warriors.

Of course they would show up here. Even in Montana.

She had picked this place for the slack security. A nowhere casino where nobody looks too hard at winners. And now sign-waving idiots have the whole highway frozen. Traffic stalled in both directions.

The taxi driver glances at her in the rearview.

“Looks like we’re stuck. Some kind of protest,” he says.

Trish snorts. “What’s the grievance of the week?”

“War protest, I think,” the cabbie says.

“Unbelievable,” she mutters. She passes the cabbie a few bills. “Nothing better to do with their time. I’ll walk from here. Keep the change.”

“You sure?”

“Sure as smoke follows fire.”

He gives her a nervous smile in the rearview mirror. She has that effect on people. She always tips well. People remember the tip, not the face.

She walks briskly and cuts past farmland that gives way to tract housing. The shift from wide-open space to suburban sprawl. Fresh sod. Cookie-cutter homes. Mailboxes and signs advertising daycares. New sidewalks and mown grass. She’s not far from her hotel.

She passes a half-built mall. Exposed girders and yellow tape. No streetlights yet.

A white minivan screeches to a halt beside her. The side door slides open and a man jumps out. There’s a handgun trembling in his grip. Both he and the driver wear clown masks.

“Give me the bag,” the gunman growls.

Trish reads him in a heartbeat. Loose grip, wide stance, and jittery.

He’s jumpy as a frog on a hot skillet. Amateur.

“I don’t want trouble,” she says, raising her hands.

She keeps her eyes lowered and her posture soft.

She begins to shakily hand over the bag, but then steps hard to the left. Her right hand shoots up and knocks the barrel away while her left palm

drives up into his nose with a wet crunch.

He stumbles. She rips the gun from his hand and sweeps his legs. Then she turns the gun on the driver.

“Out. Now.”

The driver obeys.

“Hands behind your heads. Both of you. Face down. Move.”

They drop. She frisks them quickly and binds their wrists with the restraints they brought for her.

“Turn over.”

They turn. She rips off their masks, then—without even thinking—snaps photos of their faces. Muscle memory. Instinct. She lowers the phone and scowls at herself.

She puts the gun on the ground and pulls a tool from the Prada. She yanks the SIM card and picks the gun back up.

Out here’s dead-zone country. No chance the shots hit the Agency cloud yet. Langley doesn’t do miracles out here. SIM removal should start an auto-erase on the phone.

That’s when the vertigo spikes. It’s hard and sudden. Not exhaustion. Not nerves.

The poetic bartender.

That second Manhattan. He roofied her. The drink had tasted off, so she’d only taken a single sip. Enough to make her head swim, but not enough to drop her. She breathes through it. Slowly, the ground steadies. She levels the gun at the first clown.

“You followed me from the casino?”

His eyes keep jumping from the gun to her face and back again.

“Yes.” His voice comes out small.

“Who sent you?”

“No one. We work for ourselves.”

She snorts. “Sure you do.”

“We cut some people in.”

“The bartender? The pit boss?”

He nods with his eyes watering.

“Open your mouth.”

“Please don’t kill me,” he whimpers as blood threads down from his broken nose.

“Mouth. Open.”

He obeys. She jams the barrel in. His eyes roll.

“We’re going to play a little game,” she says. “It’s called Beg for Your Life. I’m the reigning champ.”

He trembles like a broken motor.

“You get one chance. One. I’m going to pull the gun out, and you’re going to beg. Make it good.”

She pulls the gun from his mouth and presses it to his temple.

“Go.”

He shrinks like a kicked dog.

“Please—don’t. Whatever you want, I’ll do it. I’ve got a ton of gold at home. I can fix this. I can make it right—” His voice breaks. “I’ll cook. Clean. Anything you want. I’ll go down on you—make you come forty times—God, you’re perfect—just please—”

Trish blinks.

Cooking? That’s new.

She steps back and lowers the gun slightly.

“What would you cook?”

“Anything. Steak. Lobster. Whatever you want.”

She raises the gun again.

“How would you do a steak?”

His eyes go wide and he sputters, “I, uh … Please! I don’t know how to cook! But I can learn!”

She tugs the heavy slide back a fraction of an inch. She peeks at the brass in the chamber and then eases the magazine free.

Loaded. Well, that's not very nice now, is it?

Her mind runs ahead. She imagines him in a kitchen, sweating over a pan.

She slams the magazine back in and points the gun at him. It's a Hi-Point. Clunky and ugly, but it'll still punch a hole if you squeeze the trigger.

"Wait, wait," he sobs. "Do you like … ravioli? I can cook that." He smiles. "I melt cheese on top."

Cold canned ravioli was her childhood. Coagulated sadness in a tin. A disgusting survival staple.

She tilts her head.

"Congratulations, tough guy. You win."

"I—I win?"

She nods.

"I'll drive you to the police station," she says. "Let them deal with you."

They scramble into the van. She puts them in the second row, wrists bound behind them, seat belts clicked tight across their chests.

"There," she says. "Safe and sound."

She climbs into the front, checks the mirrors, and rips off her fake nose. She bites down hard. The silicone tears between her teeth. She rolls the pieces tight, plugs her ears, then turns in the seat.

Two clean shots.

Done.

She wipes the van for prints. She checks the back seats. Slumped and dead.

Takes more than that, boys.

Training and adrenaline do the rest. She wipes the Hi-Point and drops it in the gunman's lap. Buttoning up the leather coat to her throat, she starts walking.

If she’d drunk any more, she wouldn’t be heading back to her hotel. She’d be in that van, twenty grand lighter and on a one-way trip to an organ farm.

The American dream—cartel style.

Maybe it’s time to find a better hobby.

She likes winning the money, but she doesn’t like clowns.

She doesn’t like being roofied.

And she really, really doesn’t like ravioli.

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SEVEN

The family in the hybrid is painfully nice. They've hauled Sadie all the way to Seattle in her greasy coveralls, asking almost no questions. Which is good, because she has just escaped the grossest cult on earth, her handler is trying to ruin her life, and if she has to keep sounding normal for these lovely people, she's going to scream.

All she wants is her locker. Safety. A hot shower. A bed for the night. And a way home.

"Where to?" asks the dad.

"Does Capitol Hill work?" Sadie asks.

"We can't take the kids there," the dad says in a voice loaded with concern. "Things are getting … touchy."

The mom chimes in. Her tone is just as worried.

"It's peaceful, but there have been some issues."

"Oh wow. Sorry, I've been on this intense wilderness research retreat," says Sadie. "What about the university? Is that a safer option?"

The father nods in agreement. Sadie stares out the window. Even this late, the Ave hasn't gone quiet—a train must have just let out, because a dozen people come up from the station all at once and scatter toward the food places still lit up. Students with backpacks, walking fast against the

cold. Down the block, someone is wheeling kegs through a restaurant's side door.

Sadie reads a landmark from a nearby street sign.

"My friend's residence is just by the Meany Center. I can walk from there."

"What's your major?" the dad asks.

"Behavioral neuroscience."

That was her actual major back in Indiana, before the CIA. Then Trish came along and everything changed. Getting headhunted was such a rush. Perfect timing too, with Dr. Delaney gunning for her a second time. A classically insecure academic. When Sadie's paper got cited in a journal Delaney had been rejected from, Delaney emailed the whole department to ask whether Sadie had had "help."

Delaney was threatened by anyone smarter than her. When Sadie corrected her in front of the faculty, Delaney smiled, then demanded every draft of Sadie's research by morning. Sadie was on her way to being charged with academic misconduct when Trish showed up. It was amazing. She had made it sound like Sadie would get access to Agency files on traffickers—everything she needed to find Andrea. Never happened. What Trish handed over was junk, dressed up like gold.

They pull up next to the glowing marquee of the Meany Center. Sadie looks at the kids in the back seat, their long eyelashes resting against flushed cheeks, entirely oblivious to the harsh world outside the glass, and whispers, "Bye, thanks for being so nice."

She climbs out and leaves a dark grease imprint behind on the upholstery.

"Open the trunk, hon," the mom says as she gets out of the car. She rummages in the trunk and digs into a red "Fit for Life" duffel bag. She hands Sadie a pair of brand-new-looking running shoes.

"These are size eight." She offers them up.

“I can’t,” Sadie says.

The mom puts them down. She tosses her springy curls, rolls her eyes, and says, “You’re doing me a favor. I hate the gym.”

Sadie puts them on. They are like puffy clouds.

“Perfect fit, Mrs.—?”

The big wriggler drops down and crawls out of the leg of her coveralls to the ground.

“We’re the Peggs. That’s Will and Susan in the back.”

“Yeah, um…” Sadie nudges the insect with her tippy toe and sweeps him up onto the sidewalk. “I tried drying my shoes out on a campfire, and they fell in. Just my luck.”

“Goodness me, that really was a wilderness retreat. Probably feels good to be home.”

Sadie pushes the bug to the edge of the grass.

“How can I thank you, Mrs. Pegg? For your kindness?”

They watch as the insect flits its wings. It launches. Whirrs around. Then falls. It can’t stay airborne.

“Just focus on your studies. You’ve got something in you, I can tell.” She smiles. “Something rare,” she says.

Mrs. Pegg gestures toward the brick buildings tucked into the green campus. “They say this place is one of the best.”

Her voice carries a wistful note. It’s the kind that makes Sadie wonder if she’d ever had the chance for school herself. A flash of Dr. Delaney’s smug grin intrudes. How perversely happy she’d been to tear Sadie down. Maybe Mrs. Pegg was better off never having set foot in a university.

“It is a great university. Thank you so much.”

As the car pulls away, Sadie waves goodbye and starts walking fast in her new running shoes.

Locker, money, shower, and sleep.

She makes her way through the quiet gothic plaza. Above her, visible through the campus trees, the illuminated clock on Denny Hall shows it's after midnight. She navigates the downhill path toward the water, heading for the Montlake Bridge.

Sadie walks past a bus stop near the bridge and notices a group of exhausted commuters with big, bulky bags. Among them is a brawny, powerful man. He's talking loudly on his cell phone, sporting teal parachute pants. He demands attention, wild and out of place in the weary crowd.

He locks eyes with her.

"Hold up, get back to you, bro. I gots a situation here that's most in need of my attention." He stashes his phone without breaking eye contact and is over to her in two long strides. "Can I help you?"

Sadie looks down and says, "Uh, sorry, I was staring."

He points to himself, up and down, and laughs.

"That can't be helped. You are forgiven," he says, then gets serious. "No, I mean it, girl. What's happened to you?"

Sadie looks down at herself.

He laughs.

"My bad, sorry. You're good, but *damn*, girl…" He gestures up and down at her ratty appearance. "What is up with this look?" He makes a confused face. "You in trouble?"

She shakes her head. "No, I'm okay."

"Don't lie. You in trouble. Nobody dresses like that on purpose. Unless it's a TikTok challenge I don't know about."

Sadie laughs. "No, there's no challenge. I'm all right."

"Girl, you far from all right," he says, rummaging in his bag of groceries. His chest flexes under his shirt. "I'm a vegan, otherwise I'd give you a steak." He laughs. "Hell, I'd give you three."

She peers into the bag. "Mmm, bananas."

"Girl, you bananas. They be green yet. Here."

The whoosh of a bus's air brakes and the scrape of its double doors opening sound behind him as he offers her a perfect navel orange.

"Fight off the scurvy, girl, argh." He hoists his huge bag of groceries up the bus stairs in one hand, feeds his ticket into the slot, and calls back to her, "Take care of your fine self, damn."

The bus roars away, leaving Sadie alone. She walks out onto the bridge and peels the orange, flinging the rind over the metal rail into the dark water of the canal below. She rams as much as possible into her mouth and tosses her head back with reckless abandon. She chews. Her jaws cramp. She chokes and gurgles as juice spurts, streaming down her chin and neck, while the headlights of passing cars whiz and blur around her.

With the last bite of her orange, she faces the long hike up Capitol Hill, her new shoes gripping the steep, winding, tree-shadowed streets. By the time she reaches the crest of the hill, she cuts into Volunteer Park. Meandering paths wind around giant trees and grassy enclaves—useful mostly for evening dog walkers and perverts.

She stops in front of the hundred-year-old glass conservatory, looking up at the illuminated temple of plants. A worried dog owner dressed completely in yellow snatches up her coiffed toy dog and glares at Sadie. The dog has a collar in a similar hue of yellow and a festering sore on his eye. There is a resemblance between the two of them, for sure. They both huff off.

A man jogs by.

"Excuse me—hey!" she calls out.

He slows but keeps his earbuds in.

"Do you know how to get to SoDo?" she asks.

He blinks and pulls one bud free.

"SoDo? That's way downtown. South end. You don't walk there at night." He looks her up and down. "Catch a bus on Broadway. Or better, don't. Call an Uber?"

“I’ll be okay, I just need directions,” she says.

“Yeah. Well, straight down Broadway. Long walk. Watch yourself,” he says before he waves her off and disappears into the dark.

Sadie exhales. She tucks in her chin and heads south. Past the glow of bars and the clang of laughter spilling from Capitol Hill’s Pike-Pine corridor. Past a patrol car sitting quietly with the engine running, its lights cycling across the pavement.

Then she drops down the steep slope into downtown, where everything’s closed. Steel shutters pulled down. Figures huddled in doorways. Cardboard signs, shopping carts, and boarded windows. Posters peeling off telephone poles—

MARCH SATURDAY, NO JUSTICE / NO PEACE.

By the time she finally reaches the flat, industrial grid of SoDo, her calves ache and her throat’s dry. The streetlights are thinning. Warehouses line the street, their dark windows blank and shuttered.

But a lot of people are out. Shouting. Drums.

Protesters? Is it Saturday?

She doesn’t even know what day it is. At last, the blocky façade of Store Your Stuff comes into view.

She presses the intercom and waits. Static hums before a voice cuts through. It’s nasal and impatient.

“Yes?”

“I need to get into my locker. I lost my keys. I’ll—I’ll make it worth your while.”

A pause. Then, “We’re closed.”

Her pulse spikes.

“Please. I just need a minute.”

“Policies are clear. Lost keys require an appointment during regular business hours. And ID. Come back Monday.”

“No.” Sadie swallows. “I don’t have until Monday. I can pay you. Cash.”

Another pause. Longer this time. Down the street, the protest swells. Chants gather rhythm. Behind her, something breaks.

“What unit are you?” the voice says.

“342?” she says, praying it’s right. “I can prove it. I have ID. In the locker. Look, I just—just let me in. Five minutes.”

Static. Then a sigh.

“This is irregular,” the nasal voice says.

“I understand,” she says. “Please. Just this once.”

The door buzzes. The lock releases.

Sadie pulls it open and slips inside.

The attendant is waiting with a pair of heavy bolt cutters. His hands shake as he works them around the lock. Outside, the shouting rises. A scream cuts through it. Then the dull crack of something hitting glass.

The lock snaps.

Sadie ducks under the half-open door, drops to her duffel, and yanks the zip open. She finds the cash by feel and pulls out a wad.

She presses it into the attendant’s hand.

“I need a new lock,” she says. “Can you hook me up? Keep the rest.”

The attendant’s eyes widen.

“No problem. Be right back.”

Back inside the locker, Sadie packs and downs two bottles of water. The attendant rushes back with her new lock and keys.

“You’re lucky I’m here. I was just about to leave, and there won’t be any attendants until things calm down.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky. I’m a lucky girl.”

He stares at her, baffled. It’s like she’s speaking gibberish.

Sadie realizes that she's still smiling like Mary-Jo.

Sadie throws the new lock on and leaves Store Your Stuff. She edges past the protesters. She switches on the second phone. No network. That's weird. She should get rid of the first phone, or at least the SIM card. But now she's not sure what to do. Everything's so weird. The protest is dense and crowded.

When things are weird, just get weirder.

She starts a super-awkward speed walk and exaggerates the side-to-side waggle movement. A path clears effortlessly before her. Sadie zips around a few corners and, *yes*, there it is. A cab with its light on.

She waves frantically and dives into the back seat.

"Hyatt Regency," she blurts and shoves bills toward the driver.

The ride is a blur. Warehouses finally give way to glowing towers. The cab stops.

There it is. The Hyatt. The thirty-foot-high transparent glass lobby hovers above the street like a mirage. She starts toward it.

Is it real?

A security guard moves to intercept, his eyes scanning her coveralls. He raises a hand to stop her. She braces.

Then he tilts his head. "Welcome to the Hyatt Regency."

He opens the door for her. "Check-in is to your right. Enjoy your stay with us."

Sadie's legs are jelly. She stumbles past a colossal abstract painting and plush, low-slung seating areas glowing under sleek, golden lights. Her reflection grows in the glass behind the registration desk as she approaches. She looks like a blurry, dark smudge. Sadie tries to own the grime, rolling her shoulders back to look casual.

"I'd like a room. Do you have any suites available?"

The desk agent nods. "Yes, of course," he says, his fingers instantly flying into a rapid clack-clack-clack across his keyboard.

Sadie slides her card across the counter. He swipes it, waits, and then slides it back over the polished stone with a cold, unblinking look that could halt an MMA cage fighter.

“I’m getting a decline, unfortunately.”

“Cash deposit?” she asks, hopefully.

“Not possible.” His eyes dismiss her.

Sadie turns away.

Just find some mid-grade motel. They’ll take cash.

Then her eyes sweep the lobby and land on the concierge desk. She spots the two crossed golden keys pinned to his lapel. *Les Clefs d’Or.* The elite league of fixer-concierges.

Perfect.

She approaches. The concierge’s eyes flick over her oversized, oil-stained coveralls and her slicked-back hair.

“Good evening, miss,” he says. His voice exudes a professional, noncommittal neutrality. “How may I assist you?”

Sadie sighs. “Please tell me you’re the man who actually runs this place.”

She leans heavily against the edge of his mahogany desk, dropping her weight with an air of theatrical, elite exhaustion.

She reaches up, tapping her stiff, dark hair. “I’ve just spent fourteen hours in an unheated prop warehouse doing the new Gucci campaign. My hair is literally held together by industrial styling wax, and my production assistant—whom I am going to fire first thing tomorrow—wrote down the wrong billing ZIP code for the agency Amex.”

The concierge’s professional mask cracks, just a fraction, into a knowing, deeply sympathetic smile. “A classic production error.”

“Exactly. And I’m far too tired to argue with the children at the front desk.” She reaches into her duffel, pulls out a thick envelope of cash, and slides it onto the desk alongside three loose, crisp hundred-dollar bills.

“There is three thousand in there. I want a suite, a bottle of sparkling water, and zero questions about a credit card. Can you make the computer happy for me so I can go wash this grease out of my hair?”

The concierge looks at the cash, then at her face. She watches the suspicion melt from his eyes. In this neighborhood, a beautiful, demanding girl with a pocket full of production cash is someone he knows exactly how to handle.

With practiced, fluid discretion, he slides the bills under his open leather ledger.

“Give me three minutes, miss,” he says, rising from his chair with a polite bow. “I will personally prepare your keys.”

She’s in.

True to his word, he returns in under three minutes, a sleek black key card sleeve tucked discreetly in his palm. He slides it across the mahogany desk with a deft, polite nod.

“Suite 1412, miss. The express elevator is just around the corner to your left. I’ve checked you in through Tuesday morning.” He offers a faint, knowing smile. “I will make sure housekeeping does not disturb you.”

“Thank you,” Sadie says, her fingers trembling slightly as she takes the key card.

Three days. Three nights behind a heavy, locked door.

She hooks the strap of her duffel over her shoulder, turns toward the elevators, and doesn’t look back. She avoids looking at herself in the elevator and gets to her room.

The suite door swoops shut behind her. She takes in the arrangement. The plush bed beckons with its soft pillows and crisp sheets. It’s illuminated by tasteful designer lighting that casts a soft glow throughout the room. A fully stocked minibar sits in the corner. Beyond that, a luxurious bathroom awaits—complete with a spacious shower and gleaming marble countertops.

Sadie starts the shower. She opens a bottle of water and guzzles it as she eyes the white fluffy towels. It's as though pleasure has taken cotton form and folded itself neatly before her. She unfastens the garbage bag tied to the bathroom bin. She peels off the greasy coveralls next and lets them slump to the floor like shed skin.

Standing naked in front of the mirror, she stares at herself. The exhaustion hits hard. So does the reflection.

It's brutal.

Dark circles under her eyes. Red spider bites across her collarbone. Purple and yellow welts blooming across her skin. Her hair is stiff with petroleum jelly. It's hard and absurd, like a fiberglass wig. Frowning, she reaches up and touches it.

She mutters, "I look like an alien."

The words make her wince. She used to moan to Andrea about feeling like an alien.

Back in third grade, when Sadie's parents were dragging her from one testing center to the next, Andrea was the only one who didn't treat her like a science fair project.

"You're not an alien. I think you're one of those Indigo kids," Andrea had once said on the walk home from gymnastics. "My aunt says they're, like, super evolved."

Sadie had rolled her eyes.

"Are they purple or something?" she had asked.

"No." Andrea had grinned. "Just different. Brilliant and special. Meant to save the world or whatever."

Sadie had laughed it off then.

She hadn't thought about it in years. Not until now.

She stares at her reflection.

Well, Andrea…

If she's meant to save the world, she's definitely behind schedule.

She spins on one bare foot and wobbles.

She sashays out into the living area. Her body aches. Her head buzzes.

At the minibar, she starts lining up bottles like soldiers: gin, tequila, vodka, bourbon, something blue, and a mini-champagne.

She taps the tops with her fingernail.

“Brilliant and special,” she whispers.

First, the baby champagne.

Crack it. Time to celebrate.

Like seriously, she’s done… This is good. She struggles with the champagne, pops it open, and downs it.

Gross.

The bubbles fizz all through her Eustachian tubes and in her nose.

Sadie steps into the shower beneath the wide raindrop head. The water falls warm and heavy, fat drops drumming on her scalp and rolling down her spine. She stands there for a long moment, eyes closed, and lets it pound on her.

The shampoo smells like coconut and something floral she can’t name. It smells expensive. It smells like paradise, or at least like a hotel’s idea of it.

The petroleum jelly doesn’t want to go. She works it out in stubborn, greasy clumps, lathering and rinsing and lathering again until her fingers finally glide through her hair. Then comes the body wash. She scrubs until her skin turns pink and stings around the welts, trying to get as much of the cult off her as she can.

She props one leg on the shower seat and shaves, slow and careful around the cuts. Then she brushes her teeth right there under the spray, hard enough to make her gums ache, as if she could scour the last few days out of her mouth.

When she steps out, the heated slate is warm under her feet, and she hisses.

Her feet are a mess. Blisters rubbed raw, a split heel, grime ground into the cracks.

No worries. Nothing a little rubbing alcohol won't fix.

She fishes the first-aid kit out of her duffel. On the way back she grabs two of the little coffee liqueurs from the minibar and knocks them back one after another. They're sweet and syrupy and burn on the way down.

Then she gets to work on her feet. The alcohol bites and she sucks air through her teeth.

Her eyes keep drifting across the room to the shoes.

Ruby-red platform heels, dusted with glitter, catching the light even from here.

Kelly's shoes. Her second cover: a high-end call girl with expensive taste.

Sadie looks down at her ruined feet, then back at the heels.

Great.

Heels aren't a good idea, and neither is being Kelly.

Just order room service and go to bed. She picks up the menu, and a yellow insert falls out. Room service is suspended until further notice.

She plops down on the couch and grabs the remote. She mindlessly flips through channels. The news is too depressing, so she settles on *SpongeBob*. Her nephew's current obsession. She quickly changes the channel before it reminds her of the lies she tells him about her job.

Her family thinks she's a go-getter in DC. Policy briefings, think-tank dinners, and a corner office with a view of the Capitol dome. A life that sounds impressive enough to brag about back home in Indiana. The truth is lonelier. Cold takeout and fake names. The constant hum of paranoia that someone's onto her.

Frustrated by the lack of music options, she turns off the TV and resorts to the radio on the alarm clock. She cringes at the high-pitched sound that pierces through her skull.

Her parents think she's on a work trip to Brussels. She wants to call them. She can't. Not without the work phone. Not without a fake number. It's for their protection. She plugs in the first phone. No network on it either.

Great.

Sadie devours all the nuts, cookies, and chips in the minibar. She chugs the booze and beer. She puts on her second cover's dress and plays around with some makeup. When the last beer is done, she crams her swollen feet into Kelly's six-inch heels. She checks herself out in the mirror. The makeup, hair, and dress are good to go. She looks hot and wants to dance. And get high. Really fucking high.

"Kelly, you are a mad whore. Mad."

With a determined stride, she exits the lobby and steps onto Howell Street, heading up the steep climb toward Capitol Hill. Any club will do. Her heels click on the pavement as she surveys the nearby establishments. The Mercury, Q, and Neighbors are all closed already. She's too late.

Seriously?

Her feet are killing her from these stupid heels.

The Deerhound. Lights still on, chairs going up on tables. Not exactly her scene, but whatever. It's open. The second she walks in, the floor reeks of pine cleaner, stale puke, and regret. There's an empty stool with a sticker. It's a buck with antlers and a green checkmark. A social-distancing leftover from the pandemic. She drags it out from the dingy brass footrest and plops down.

Looking around, she checks the dive out. Next to the DNA-encrusted gambling stations is a diamond-shaped dance floor. It all comes together with a broken disco ball and a pole.

A stripper in a pastel thong gives Sadie a sly wink, then flips into a handstand and struts around on her hands. AC/DC pounds through the speakers. "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap."

The stripper’s at least fifty. Gravity is harsh in any direction at that age.

The dim lighting does little to hide what Sadie can see. Exits, potential weapons, security cameras. Pulse rates. Breathing patterns. Things people think no one notices.

Stuff like that.

Where’s the bartender?

She turns back to the bar and sees him standing in front of the mirrored wall, surrounded by neon beer signs.

“Sorry, we’re closing,” he says.

“But I just got here,” she counters.

He sighs. “I know.”

“But that’s not fair,” she protests.

“I don’t know what to tell you.” He shrugs. “We’re closing. I don’t make the rules.”

A gruff older drinker with a leather ball cap and vest wails, “Oh, Nick, no! Heee’s so hine.”

The bartender laughs and says, “Put your teeth in, Eric.”

Eric does and flashes a big-time smile.

“She’s so fine, Nick. So fine,” Eric says.

A female voice calls out, “Let her stay, Nick.”

Sadie glances around. It’s the stripper.

Nick shakes his head. “I’m sorry, miss. You are indeed fine, I agree. But we are closing,” he says, trying to look stoic.

Eric tosses back his whole drink. He slams the empty glass on the bar. “Damn it!” He pushes the glass away from himself. “One for the road, Nick. Make it a double.”

Sadie sighs. “It’s okay. I understand.”

She buys a big bottle of Grey Goose.

“Where’s good for a bite?” she asks.

“Next block over. Dino’s. Pizza, hot dogs, and burgers.”

Her quads are cramping up, but Sadie pulls off a graceful exit. As she walks out, a group of cool twenty-somethings approaches. They're chatting and laughing. Sadie hobbles toward them, and their happy chatter quiets down.

Just ask.

She waves them closer and asks with a shy smile, "Hey, guys, are you selling?"

The group shifts away from her like a school of fish and one of them snaps back, "No way, leave us alone."

Talk about embarrassing. Sadie doesn't have a clue how to score drugs. She's used to clubs where everything just magically appears.

She finds Dino's and pulls hard on the door, but it's too late. A lady carrying a massive pizza points out the obvious.

"They're closed, sweetie."

"Everything is closed," Sadie mutters.

The old lady's eyes are black coals sunk deep in her face. She smiles, and half her teeth are gone.

"You like vegetarian?" she asks and holds up the box.

"Actually, I do," Sadie says tentatively.

"Well, then, come over to my place, just around back," the old lady invites with a grin.

Her long white hair hangs loose to her mid-back. She moves fast and sure-footed to the end of the street, hair swinging behind her.

She slips into the alley behind the buildings.

"I'm in between places right now," the lady says.

Past a rust-pitted dumpster leaking unidentifiable fluid, past crushed takeout cups and cigarette butts, they reach Dino's pristine loading bay. It's swept clean. The contrast is jarring. It's like walking through filth and stumbling into a stage set. Parked in it is a shiny camper van.

“Dino and I go way back. Come on in?” The lady angles her head and gestures to the door.

“I’d rather not,” Sadie says and shakes her head.

The lady hands her the pizza and heads inside.

“I’ll get us some chairs,” she says.

After a few moments, she returns with two lawn chairs. She’s got plates and cups, too. The pair of them set everything up and sit down.

“So, you’re a friend of Dino’s?” Sadie asks.

The lady nods.

“He lets me park back here.”

“That’s nice of him. So where are you moving to?”

“I’m not moving,” the lady says.

“But you said—”

“Oh, yes. In between places,” she clarifies with a mysterious glint in her eye. “That’s where I always am.”

Her gaze settles on Sadie. “It seems you are too.”

“Uh, yeah. Is Dino’s pizza any good?” The smell hits Sadie so hard her mouth floods.

“The best.”

They dig into the steaming hot slices of pizza. Sadie savors the gooey cheese and perfectly crispy crust. She offers the lady the bottle of vodka.

The lady holds up the bottle.

“Grey Goose,” she says. “Fancy.”

“Tastes better, don’t you think?” Sadie says with a grin.

The lady cracks open a grape soda. The fizz hisses. A splash of vodka and a quick stir.

“Try this,” she says.

Sadie takes a sip. Not bad. They sit on folding lawn chairs that are dented and covered with old paint. Street noise hums beyond the alley. But

back here, it’s just the two of them with a bottle between them. Laughter’s spilling for no reason.

As they talk, Sadie keeps catching the lady’s eyes on her. They’re too steady. Too exact. She tells herself it’s nothing. Hyper-surveillance mode again. Every glance feels like … something.

But then, when Sadie leans back in the lawn chair, the lady leans back. When Sadie taps her cup, the lady taps hers. It isn’t random. It’s precise. Just a half-beat behind.

Sadie frowns. “You’re … copying me.”

The lady smiles and shows off her bad teeth.

“Not copying. Listening.”

Sadie laughs nervously and takes a big bite of pizza. The lady raises her slice and bites at the exact same moment. Same angle. Like a reflection.

In between chewy bites, words start to pour out. Words about Trish and about Andrea. About the cult. She never talks like this. The more she talks, the more the lady’s breathing lines up with hers. Sadie can’t tell who’s setting the pace.

Her training cuts in.

She’s messing with you.

This lady’s an operative.

Sadie pinches her thigh. Sharp pain.

Keep it together.

You shouldn’t even be out. You know better.

How did you let her get you alone like this?

She pinches her thigh harder.

You just about spilled about China and the pathogen just now. That’s what she’s after.

Big Pharma probably sent her. Industrial espionage is everywhere. Don’t be an idiot.

The lady lays a hand over Sadie’s clenched fist.

“That won’t work, sweetheart.”

Sadie jerks back. In a voice sharper than she intends, she says, “Hey. No!”

The lady snaps her fingers.

Sadie flinches.

The spell breaks—not all at once, but enough for Sadie to hear the traffic again, the alley hum, the hiss of soda bubbles in her cup.

“I’ve stopped,” the lady says quietly. “I thought you needed a rest. Get some things off your chest. Thought you needed to vent. I was wrong. I apologize.”

Sadie stands too fast. Her legs falter. She almost goes down before the lady steadies her.

“Shh … I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Please, sit down. You’re very weak.”

Sadie lowers herself back into the chair. There’s a knot tightening low in her gut.

You watched her pour the pop. Mix the drinks. She’s drinking it too. Play it cool. Don’t let her know you’re onto her. Then get out. Immediately.

Suddenly, the lady stands up, and her voice changes.

“Your light is restrained in night.”

The lady’s smoldering eyes fix on Sadie as she continues, “You were born and brought to share your light.”

Her voice gets louder. “In this time, all times, and in this place, all places, but now, now, now.” With a shudder, the lady appears to relax. She studies Sadie’s face in search of a reaction.

Just … no.

Sadie’s not up for this. Her mind is clouded by the haze of alcohol, exhaustion, and the secondhand embarrassment she feels for this nut job. Sadie just wanted to get high, dance, have some fun, and pass out. That’s all she wants. She can’t handle this crap.

The lady changes her tone. Her voice goes sharp and mean.

“What’s the matter? Need a fix? Looking for drugs?” she asks.

“What?” Sadie blinks. “Why would you say that?”

The lady only nods. There’s a sinister gleam in her eye. She lets out a low cackle and jabs a long, bony finger toward the hospital towering at the top of the hill.

“Oh, they’ve got plenty of drugs in there.”

Sadie stands up.

“Yeah, it’s been a really long day for me. Thank you so much for sharing your pizza,” she says, and gathers up her plate and cup.

“Don’t change the subject. What’s the matter? Can’t handle the truth?”

“Um…” Sadie places the plate and cup on a ledge by the van.

The lady winks at her, then her upper lip ripples.

For one moment it splits open into a cleft lip, just like Mary-Ellen’s.

Sadie looks at the pizza box. The van. The loading bay.

You are sleep-deprived and hallucinating. That’s what you get for drinking grape cocktails in an alley.

Raising both hands above her head, the lady cries out, “Open rebuke is better than secret love,” and looks at her for a response.

That’s a verse from the Bible that Abundant Harvest recites at midnight prayers.

With a steady breath, Sadie says, “I should be on my way.”

“Fine. Let me reveal what must come to pass within you.” Her form towers over Sadie. “It is vital.”

Her long hair catches the glow of a nearby streetlight. It shimmers as she tosses it behind her.

“Film this,” she commands.

“What?”

“Are you deaf or just foolish? Pull out your phone and film this,” she snaps.

Sadie hesitates and then humors her.

Just do this and leave. She doesn't know you know.

The lady continues with her antics. "I'm saving your life right now."

Their eyes meet.

"Don't follow their path," she warns. "Forge your own."

The lady slips on a pair of sunglasses and her voice grows louder.

"Pay attention to me. You're headed toward evil and hell. Rushing toward destruction. Making haste to shed blood and lying in wait for your own."

Sadie watches her.

This lady could have been a runway model. Maybe she was a dancer. She's a freelance operative, for sure.

Nice touch with the van. Gray-market, probably. Contract collector. Big Pharma, defense, hedge funds—somebody wants what Sadie has in her head.

The old lady is still rambling.

Let's get on with it. She's really putting on a show.

"No!" she cries, shaking her head. Her hair whips across her face. "No more!"

She quickly regains control and asks, "Are you filming?"

Sadie nods.

"For the greatest good," she commands, "show me a yes."

The lady curves at her core and lurches forward with a deep belly laugh.

"Yes, yes, yes! That's a yes. Okay. Mm. Feels good," she shrieks.

She resumes the initial stance and says, "For the greatest good, show me a no."

The old lady's chin moves up and back. Her mouth is in a slight smirk. Her shoulders pull back and she falls backward.

"Mm. That feels good, too. They both feel good."

All the poise vanishes and she claps her hands.

“That’s a wrap,” she says. “Stop filming.”

The lady juts her chin forward and goes on, “That’s your manual. That’s how you answer anything you are not sure of.”

She slaps her belly.

“The gut. The gut never lies,” she adds and jabs a finger at Sadie. “It’s got to be a yes-or-no question. Do you understand? That’s important.”

“Yes, I do. Thanks for that. I hope you have a great night.”

The lady snatches the half-empty bottle of Grey Goose and brandishes it high above her head.

“You too, you silly girl,” she taunts before hurling the bottle to the ground and shattering it.

Sadie winces.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Sadie says.

“How much longer will you keep up this charade?”

Sadie confronts her. “I’m not playing charades, lady.”

The lady crosses her arms.

“Your desires are cankers, and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire.”

Sadie cuts in, “Okay, whatever, lady.”

“It’s not whatever, girl,” she shoots back. “You’re lost. You’re upside down. You don’t know which way is up. You don’t know right from wrong.”

The lady slips off her sunglasses for one burning second of eye contact before replacing them and says, “You have sight, but you refuse to see. Look inside yourself.”

What?

She gives Sadie a shove. “That’s all. Now leave me to my work.”

The lady turns her back and folds chairs. She mutters about YouTube and a midnight message as she drags gear from the van.

Sadie takes that as her window. She keeps her posture casual. No sudden movements. She listens hard as she leaves the alley. Metal on metal. Zippers. The thud of boxes hitting the ground. The lady's busy. No footsteps are trailing her. No shift in the air behind her. She's not being followed.

Once she hits the street, Sadie angles left with purpose. She merges into the noise of traffic and late-night pedestrians. Still alert. Still tuned in, but satisfied that she's clear. The whole scene rattles her more than she'll admit. She's fried and needs to get safe. She's got to activate that new phone and should probably tell Trish about this.

Definitely get the credit card sorted.

A well-dressed businessman out late gives her a nod. His eyes flicker with barely contained lust. Of course. She's Kelly tonight. Kelly, her backup cover. Kelly isn't naïve like Sadie. Kelly knows the deal.

What does she think of all this? Without hesitation, Kelly cuts in.

Reframe, girl. You didn't spill anything important. She's nothing but a gray-market hack. Cerberus, Kestrel—they all run the same hustle.

Kelly's tone sharpens.

You had a meal, a couple of drinks, and sort of tolerable company. Better than the cult ladies. I think that hag was angling for you to go down on her. Not kidding. Anyway, you've got cash, mad style, and a pussy men would sell their souls to get into. That's real power. The only kind worth a damn. Anyone who says otherwise? They're the fool, not you.

All that talk about the "in-between" places? Kelly scoffs. *Show me. Where's this "in-between"? Doesn't exist. There's only one world and you run it. You're the boss, Sadie. Get to the hotel, crash into that heavenly bed. It'll all look better in the morning. LOL—maybe they'll even bring back room service.*

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EIGHT

Adrian gets his bearings piece by piece.

Yellow sharps container, toppled. Red marker in the far corner. Blister packs scattered across the medication room floor. Cupboard doors hanging open.

His mind arranges the facts slowly.

A struggle.

Adrian, get up.

You can't let Nancy find you sprawled on the floor like a helpless patient. It's undignified.

His long legs are folded beneath him, useless. Completely unresponsive to command.

More bizarre than that—he's hard.

The realization jars him and makes him smile at the same time. He glances around the ruined medication room and stifles a laugh. The situation is absurd. Humiliating. Oddly exhilarating.

The assailant, if that's what you'd call her, had been more like some supernatural nymph. She brought him down in seconds.

How did she even get in?

Brazen. Bold.

Adrian shakes his head.

Well. This is a first.

His body remains locked up, useless. Nurse Nancy's clogs squeak in the hall.

Adrian slaps his cheeks and gulps air. He pounds his fists into his quads.

Get up off the floor.

He looks for something to pull himself up with. The clipboard dangling from the counter turns slowly, held in place by a strip of shoddy office tape. A physical reminder of the nursing staff's incompetence.

He hooks the counter, hauls himself upright, and adjusts his lab coat. Prays it hides the evidence.

Did anyone else see her?

For one irrational second, he wonders if she was ever there at all.

Why aren't the alarms sounding?

Was this real?

The hospital has modern security. She glided right through it.

Nancy barges in, blotchy and puffing.

"What's happened here?" she demands.

"We've been robbed, Nancy." He points at the scattered packs on the floor.

His body is still shaky.

"I can see that. I didn't see anyone. Did you?"

Adrian removes his glasses and checks them for scratches.

"Yes. They assaulted me. And before you ask—I'm fine."

He slips them back on, only to meet her glare. Nancy whirls around. Her large frame shifts back and forth as she surveys the mess.

"How did they get in? How many were there?" Her eyes narrow. "Did you let them in?"

Adrian blinks, incredulous. "No, Nancy. Why would I do that?"

"You're dodging questions," she snaps.

“I’m not dodging. You’re all over the place,” Adrian says evenly. “There was one of them. A young woman. Masked.”

Nancy stares at him like he’s lying. “A young woman?”

“Yes. That’s what I said.” He steps closer on shaky legs, trying to steady his voice. “I don’t know how she got in. But she did.”

Nancy shifts her weight, blocking the doorway. “Why were you even in here?”

His patience frays.

“I was coming to sign off the disbursements. You know that.”

“No, I don’t. It’s too early for that. That’s why I asked.”

He exhales hard.

“Then check the sheet. You’ll see I wasn’t the first in here this week.” He rips the clipboard free from its taped tether and flips it open. “Look. Dr. Kirkpatrick was earlier than me yesterday.”

Nancy lunges. She snatches at it. Adrian lets it go. She stumbles backward, almost falling. When he offers a hand to steady her, she shrieks, “Don’t touch me!”

He clenches his jaw. “Nobody wants chaos in this ward, Nancy. Not me, not you. So let’s take inventory and clean this up.”

But Nancy darts past him.

“I’m calling security,” she announces.

Adrian throws up his hands. “Fine. Go ahead. But maybe next time, don’t start by accusing the one who just got assaulted.”

Nancy snatches the phone and dials with defiance.

Adrian strides past the nurse station and down the hall to the staff lavatory. Nancy’s squawking fades as he closes the heavy door and locks it with a satisfying clunk. He grips the sink and studies himself in the mirror. His sandy hair is a mess. His pocket protector is crooked. And the hospital-issued pen—that is as cheap as it is non-lethal—is out of place.

He feels altered. It’s like the tail end of one of his drug-induced therapy trips. Cinematic, high-fidelity nightmares. Visions and hallucinations, complete with bouncing YouTube EMDR dots and 528 Hz harmonics for a soundtrack.

Maybe this is some kind of after-effect.

The wellness gurus warned about those, but none of them mentioned these inconvenient erections. Or maybe they did. He’s been so numb the last few years, he figured feeling anything good was too much to ask. It was like languishing at the bottom of a well.

He stares at his reflection and sees something different.

He’s out of that well.

He looks alive. Strong. There’s light in his eyes. He hasn’t seen that in quite a while.

Adrian gazes up at the ceiling, his chest tight as he blinks back tears. The relief is sudden and heavy, pulling the air right out of him. He presses his palms to his eyes, his knees giving out as he slides down against the cold wall. He weeps, the tears hot against his skin, overtaken by the sheer, dizzying gratitude of finally coming back to life.

Theories rattle in his head—James and Jung. None of it fits. Attachment theory? Garbage. Tortured baby monkeys screaming for their mothers never explained anything. Something in him has changed. He can’t deny it. He would like to find out why. He looks at his phone.

What about running this through the new therapy app?

The hospital is being courted by a bioscience startup running a clinician’s trial of their latest app. Big Tech seems hell-bent on replacing everyone with AI.

No, it’s not private enough.

But then it dawns on him. The contracts the hospital signed actually do make it private.

Very private.

He remembers the legalese about anonymizing protocols and scrubbed identifiers. In theory, nothing could be traced back to him. It might be worth a shot. Just not here.

He pushes up to his feet to wash his hands. He pauses when he catches sight of her grip marks on his wrist. He doesn't turn on the tap right away. Not yet. He lifts his wrist and breathes in her scent. He holds onto it.

Nancy's voice carries through the walls, booming as she briefs Dr. Kirkpatrick. Kirks. Adrian's rival for department head. Posturing as always. Through the shadows at the bottom of the door, Adrian can tell security still hasn't shown.

He unzips, pisses, and lets the sound of it drown them out. Kirks's voice carries easily. It's smug and clipped. The man struts the ward in skin-tight bike shorts and clattering pedal shoes. Constantly shoving his environmental and social virtues down everyone's throat. Usually covered in three-day stubble, as if that counts as professional. And always that smirk.

"Don't take it personally, Adrian," Kirks had said one day, too loud. "Not everyone's cut out to run a department. Some of us just … fit better."

Adrian exhales through his nose. A playful quip from a colleague is one thing. Getting gutted by one in Lycra is another.

It used to be that Kirks was the department punching bag. But the tables turned a while back. Adrian knows he's outnumbered now, with fewer chances to swing back. If you're not seen punching the punching bag once in a while, people might take a jab at you.

Now and then, a new temporary or auxiliary staff member will befriend Adrian. But they'll switch sides soon after. Nancy leads the attack while Kirks stands firmly behind her.

He straightens his pocket protector and smooths his hair. He unlocks the door. He considers going to his office, but he wants some air. So, he heads toward the Serenity Patio. They rarely come looking for him out there.

The Serenity Patio is an outdoor space put in place by the administration to make the hospital feel more humane.

Charming. Truly.

They finally announce the code white as he opens the door to the patio. It's littered with overflowing ashtrays and dead plants that cling to shoddy latticework. Even the chaplains avoid it. The roar of the fans makes any attempt at compassion ridiculous. They have to shout while telling families in their round about way that there's no hope. Comical.

But for Adrian, it's perfect. The constant hum drowns out all other noise. It provides him with much-needed peace. He checks on a climbing plant that reached higher than any of the others before withering away.

He inhales a long breath and stands taller. He puts his earbuds in and makes sure he's alone. He taps on the Psymedis app. If it tells him he's in the "messy middle" of a healing crisis, he'll just delete the thing.

He logs in and selects DIAGNOSIS. An avatar loads who looks remarkably close to the mail-order bride photo he still has stashed in his deleted folder. This version wears glasses and a lab coat.

"Psymedis online," the voice says pleasantly. "You have selected Diagnosis. I am trained on the latest clinical evidence bases in psychiatry, trauma therapy, cognitive neuroscience, and behavioral pharmacology. Allow me to perform a biometric scan. Do you consent?"

Adrian taps YES.

"Hold the phone closer to your face."

He does. The flash activates. A SCAN IN PROGRESS icon pulses.

"Biometric scan complete," the avatar says. "Microvascular fluctuations, blink rate, and respiration were analyzed. Elevated heart rate and stress hormone activity detected."

"I know," Adrian mutters.

"You are in a secure session," the avatar assures him. "No data will be shared. Do you wish to proceed?"

“Yes,” Adrian whispers as he leans closer.

The figure tilts its head. Not quite human, but very close.

“An acute stressor has occurred,” it says. “Begin where you choose.”

Adrian exhales. His voice carries a shiver of excitement.

“This nymph of a woman … petite, but brazen. She took me down with nothing. No effort.”

“Define take-down,” the avatar requests.

He hesitates. One mention of violence, and this exchange will get flagged and sent to an oversight body that lords over others’ psychosocial minutiae.

“I mean a metaphorical take-down. She overpowered my position. My worldview.”

There, that’s good. In a way, it’s true. The way she moved. The way she didn’t hesitate. No apology, no shame.

“You experienced humiliation?” the avatar asks.

Adrian pauses.

“This session is secure. No identifying data will be linked or shared,” the avatar repeats.

“Yes,” Adrian admits.

“And what else?”

“I don’t really know. Exhilaration. Very, very good feelings.”

“Can you name them?”

“No, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“This is common. I’ll list positive states alphabetically.”

She begins.

“Arousal,” Adrian interrupts. “Definitely arousal.”

“Was this arousal pleasurable?”

“It was,” he says firmly.

“Did this occur in the clinical environment?”

It’ll just confuse the thing if you say otherwise.

Adrian clears his throat. “Yes, it did.”

“Analysis,” the avatar says evenly. “Your arousal was linked to subjugation. This is due to neural reward circuitry overlap. Physiology indicates resolution of longstanding trauma-induced schema. Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement.”

Adrian is stunned. It feels entirely accurate. He nearly selects ten out of ten, but taps nine.

Never give anyone a ten.

“What is the substantiation?” he asks.

“This pattern suggests that early trauma established a schema of powerlessness,” the avatar explains. “In predictive processing models, the nervous system encodes subjugation as both threat and relief. When confronted with controlled dominance, your body registers the absence of catastrophe. This releases dopamine while stress hormones remain elevated, thus creating a paradoxical state of arousal.”

It continues without pause.

“Current models suggest that repeated exposure to paradoxical states may alter maladaptive threat prediction. Controlled therapeutic reenactment can, in some cases, reduce fear response and reinforce new reward associations. Further exposure is recommended.”

“So, desensitization?” Adrian asks, making sure to keep his voice low despite the loud fans.

“Desensitization and reprogramming,” the avatar replies. “Your circuitry is primed for reorganization. Repeated contact with the triggering figure, or with a similar figure under controlled conditions, may consolidate the adaptive response. Further reenactment is advised.”

Adrian closes the app and pulls the buds from his ears. The fans fill his ears again. For a moment, he just stands there and listens to them. His chest feels light. Too light.

The app’s words are crisp and clinical. They’re more direct and valid than anything he’s heard in twenty years of case conferences.

An app.

A lab-coated avatar. And it just hit the bull’s-eye.

He smooths his hair and lets out a nervous laugh.

Maybe AI should replace us.

The patio door scrapes open. Two security officers step out with radio static hissing between them.

“Dr. Lowell?” one asks. “We need you inside to walk us through what happened.”

Adrian starts walking toward them with a calm smile fixed in place.

“Of course,” he says as he pockets his phone, feeling like a new man. “Happy to help.”

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NINE

Hotel suite wrecked. Not a suite. A pit. Sheets stink of sweat and booze. Clinging covers.

Get me out.

What time is it?

Who cares. Bottle—where's the bottle?

It's Tito's. Greasy and nearly empty.

Please, please, please don't be empty.

Nothing.

Lick the rim anyway. Tongue dry. Need more.

Sadie breathes. Once. Twice. The sound rasps in her ears. The fragments start to reattach.

Room. Bed. Bottle. Phone.

The once luxe hotel suite is now in ruins around her. She's trapped here. Alone with her spiraling thoughts. Time holds no meaning, and she's beyond caring.

Delirious and disoriented.

The plush bed feels like a casket. Its sheets are tangled and stained.

How many days has she been here?

Doesn't matter.

All that matters is she’s out of cash, it’s Tuesday and she needs to check out.

Sadie checks both phones. Nothing. No connection.

This is so fucking mean of Trish.

She slides the pizza box over. It’s finished too. When did she order this? She looks around the room. Her greasy coveralls are lying on the floor. She thought she threw them out. She looks down at herself. She’s shiny with Abundant Harvest escape grease. Gross. She’s obviously worn them.

The thought of her wedding night with the cult makes her dry heave.

Sadie hoists herself up and stumbles around the room. She knocks over glasses and bottles. She’s searching for drugs. She hears housekeeping next door. She opens the suite door. Do not disturb is hanging. She closes the door as quietly as possible. There’s a blister pack on the floor with one pill left.

Is it an Oxy? Yesss.

She reaches for the last powerful painkiller and remembers grabbing a handful of them. She gasps and puts a hand to her mouth. She robbed a hospital. Psych ward. Yes, she did. Took a doctor down. The look on his face. Panic. They’ll have surveillance for sure.

Idiot.

Clean up. Check out. Calm down.

Sadie sits at the desk and pops the pill out. She takes a glass, crushes it, and snorts it. She scours the room for more. That’s it.

Okay, stay calm. Have a shower, clean the room, and check out.

The Oxy kicks in. It brings a hazy numbness, but not enough. Sadie needs something stronger. Something better. Something that will completely block out the noise and turmoil in her head. Why didn’t she grab some tranquilizers? She finds a sad scene in the bathroom. The fan drones on. The towels are all wet and gross. One has a disgusting smear of blood on it.

Sadie takes a quick shower almost jumping out of her skin. She tries to scrub away the dread. Once out, she quickly dries off her jittering body. She goes to wipe the fogged bathroom mirror and looks at herself. Her eyes are expanded pools of darkness. Some big shady thing looks back at her.

Great. She squeezes her eyes shut. *Enough. Enough.*

Her phone says 10:40.

Shit.

She tears through the room, grabbing anything that looks incriminating. How could she have been so stupid?

Her mind starts spinning through all the ways this could go bad.

It'd be nice if Trish could just make this all go away.

She checks both phones again.

Nothing.

At 10:45, she's ready to leave the suite. She pulls out her phone and checks out the videos. As she watches the playback, she can't help but laugh at how wild that lady was. Oh, there's the whole "yes-no" thing. Sadie studies the playback.

Gotta admit it, the van thing is kind of cool. Just going where you want.

That'd be nice.

She replays the clip. There's definitely some kind of accessed response that seems separate from the lady herself. She remembers skimming this stuff in school. Supposedly, it works.

Just try it.

Okay, ask something.

A yes-or-no question. But what?

She can't think of anything.

Come on. Ask.

"For the highest good, is everything chill?" Sadie lurches back and hits the wall behind her. She knocks the lights off with her shoulder. Stunned and standing in the dark, the good feelings vanish.

Alright, guess not.

Just go. Get some sunlight and leave this dank hotel mess.

She grabs her duffel and takes one last look around the suite. She's fine. That yes-and-no crap is stupid. The cult got to her, that's all. It knocked her off balance. Way off balance. She's fine. She'll quit the CIA and go back to Indiana. She'll pick her neuroscience studies back up and just have a nice life. If Delaney gives her a hard time again, Sadie will just gather career ending kompromat on her.

But what about Andrea?

Maybe start some crowd-share investigation thing for Andrea, because this isn't working. There are other ways.

She's never going to get info about Andrea like this. She just needs to stop with the vodka and the pills.

She deletes the videos. They're lame.

She takes a breath.

It's really not that big of a deal. She's got this. She's young. She's an athlete. She's smart—like really smart. And fine. Sadie grins. *Fine.* Just like the toothless guy in the bar said.

"I'm so hine-fine."

She steals one last glance at herself in the mirror by the door in search of the girl who began all this. But she finds herself facing someone else. Some*thing* else.

The asset.

The one who knows how to make monsters talk. And she can see it now—the thing that makes them talk. Not fine. Not even close.

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TEN

The lobby TV has bad color and worse timing. BREAKING NEWS flashes across the bottom of the screen. Two bodies found near the ShopRight mall construction site.

Trish sinks into a frayed chair beneath the television and lets out a quiet breath.

Took them long enough.

The main amenity here seems to be the complimentary tetanus. The lobby smells like old carpet, weak coffee, and other people's bad decisions. The chair fabric scratches her bare arms. Across from her, the public computer flickers in the dim light, waiting to betray anyone stupid enough to trust it.

Unfortunately, she needs to use it.

Booking under a fake name on one of her phones isn't smart. Not today. Not with every platform, processor, and overeager little AI sniffing around for patterns. No one needs to know she was here or anywhere near that construction site.

She scrolls for an earlier flight out of this godforsaken town, already mentally bidding farewell to Montana's wide-open skies.

On the TV, the reporter carries on in a neutral Midwestern dialect—news anchor 101. Good pace. Effective pauses. Breath drawn just in time to

emphasize how police suspect foul play.

Oh, there was foul play, all right.

Nice posture, though. Good camera presence. Trish should've been a reporter. Lights, camera, action. Lie through your teeth, and call it the news.

Just as she finds a promising flight, her phone rings.

She stares at the name on the screen, her back teeth grinding together.

Dave.

Her Branch Chief.

She answers.

"You're in Montana," Dave says.

Trish massages her forehead. "I nipped out, Dave. It's been a long few months."

"Sadie's departed from assignment."

She goes still.

That little bitch.

"I know, Dave. I've got people with her—"

"I'll stop you right there, Trish. No, you don't. The Bureau does. Mitchell is pissed."

His voice is tight, clipped.

The Bureau. Trish smirks. The real national clown show, and Mitchell is its hard-up choirboy. He tried dating her after Russia. Lasted about as long as a match in a rainstorm.

Dave presses on. "Apparently, she couldn't access funds or secure comms to give an update. Apparently, you suspended her access to both. And…"

He lets it hang.

"Apparently, you were unreachable."

Trish sits straighter.

"I wasn't," she insists. "I wanted her focused on the task. She went too far in China, Dave. I'm sick of it. She puts people at risk. Every single

time.”

“Yeah, she writes big checks. We all do. Hers just haven’t bounced yet.” His voice rises a fraction. “When people come out of the field, they need—well, you know what they need. Anyway, now the best asset I’ve got for this battlefield is offline, and it sounds like you had a hand in that.”

Battlefield?

Trish nearly laughs. He’s parroting Langley’s latest TED-talk nonsense. A “radical new theory” that geopolitics isn’t about land or resources anymore, but about digital “world-building.”

Whoever controls the tech platforms is king. That’s the new global order. China is light-years ahead while America stumbles, trying to decide whether to build anything at all, or burn it all down. This administration is doing its best version of the capitalist goose-step while tripping all over the rug. Dave can spare her the latest policy-speak.

“Dave, I calculated for this,” Trish says, keeping her voice level. “This was an easy shared-asset arrangement. She needed a breather before she broke. And I’ve been the one holding her together.”

“Doesn’t look that way right now. Looks more like you’ve crippled an active, high-priority FBI domestic terrorism investigation.” He is clearly not convinced.

Poor Dave. Rough day for a desk jockey.

She softens her voice. “I thought this would do her good. She’s not exactly easy to work with. The PDA? I mean, come on, Dave. You think I haven’t tried? Getting her to follow instructions is like stapling water.”

“She is high-maintenance. We know. She’s also worth the investment.”

Sadie and her special head. Her psych profile should have disqualified her on day one, but Headquarters insisted on an exception, arguing that those exact neurodivergent markers make her a natural for deep-cover work. Make demands of her under torture, and a PDA brain simply locks down—she is, in theory, physically incapable of yielding control.

Why train willpower when you can recruit a pathology? A new breed of optimized spy, rendering Trish's hard-won scars completely obsolete.

So they dumped the prototype on Trish. Babysitting duty, when she should be running a tier-one station, or sitting in the Division Chief's chair. Dave's boss.

"You know I never wanted this, Dave."

"We're aware," he laughs weakly. "But you're the only one who can manage her."

Well, that's about as cute as burned toast.

"It's not a lot of fun," she goes on.

"No one said it would be."

"She's always struggled. And I've done right by her. And by you."

"I know you have. So loop me in more. She's vulnerable. Young. Losing the scientist was a big deal for her. You would know. *Is* she okay? I mean by the report I got, she's in rough shape."

Rough shape?

She should give a Russian prison a try—where you savor the ache of broken ribs, because it means you're still breathing.

"She's fine," Trish says. "In fact, this is her turning point. I'm on it. You know me. She's getting back on her feet."

"I knew you had it in hand. Just keep me apprised."

Why should she? He's ignored every one of her emails for six months.

"Of course. Dave, since I've got you—about my request?"

A pause.

"What request?"

"To retire."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"Oh. Right. Yeah … paperwork like that takes time, Trish. It's still working its way up."

"Working its way up?"

“You know how it is. The division chief has to recommend it. The board has to sign off. And frankly, until Sadie’s situation stabilizes, no one at Langley’s going to greenlight you stepping away.”

There it is. The trap—wrapped in committee-speak and red tape. Classic Langley. Make you think you’re free to go and then tack on another condition. Another signature. Another excuse. She’s supposed to nod, keep her head down, and wait for permission.

Dave’s voice tilts into apology. “It’s not a no. It’s just … timing. Once Sadie’s back on her feet, I don’t see a problem.”

Again, she almost laughs.

You retire when the machine is done with you. If it’s ever done.

“Timing, right,” she repeats flatly. The words taste like ash.

The TV flashes the story again. A full forensics team on the ground. For Montana, that’s big.

Dave stumbles on.

“Everything else looks good, Trish. I’ve got your back. It’s just that there’s been—a shuffle. I don’t have the influence I used to. It’s dicey. All about new measurables. Efficiencies. Coups and overthrows. Hard to keep track.”

Aw, Dave. Poor baby.

The CIA’s always been this way. The deceit just moves a little faster now.

“So what do you recommend, Dave?”

“Aside from giving the gambling a rest?” He chuckles. “Show a clear improvement in Sadie’s performance. They’ll approve it. No problem.”

They don’t want you. They want her.

The call ends.

Trish finishes her ticket purchase. Coach this time. The call went well enough, all things considered. Nothing like prostrating yourself before the mighty institution.

It’s enough to make a girl feel as dirty as a mudflap on a semi-truck.

At least Dave didn’t bring up therapy. They still try to make it mandatory. She can do without nervous shrinks trying to dissect her lack of emotion.

She smirks. She almost felt something when clown number one offered to cook for her. Hell, call the reporter. *That’s* breaking news. Trish felt something. Delight? Disgust? Now those are feelings, aren’t they?

It’s staggering arrogance, really, that any therapist assumes they can help Trish. What they *really* want to know is how she got through it. That’s as easy as selling sin on a Sunday. You don’t just endure it. Endurance makes them inventive. Silence makes them curious.

You act like you love it. You act like you love every single horrible thing they do to you, and you ask for more. That takes pleasure away from the captor because they want to force you. “Against your will,” is the only power they have. Fiddle with that, and you’re golden.

The only problem was that it was a hard switch she threw. Like a railroad, the train keeps going back to the same damn station. Trish wants off the train. She needs to retire.

She logs off and wipes her history. Straightens the keyboard like she was never there. Her Botoxed brow tries to furrow, but can’t.

Heavy-handed injection tech, but spectacular results.

She’ll mull her retirement plans over on the plane. Or maybe not. Maybe she’ll read a dirty romance novel, where the hero doesn’t ask, “What happened to you?” when the clothes come off. She heads up to her hotel room to erase any trace of herself from the space. No one looks close enough anyway.

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ELEVEN

The oak-paneled walls of the Metropolitan Club swallow the clink of silverware and the low murmur of the privileged. Across from Adrian, his mother chews with her mouth open. The wine streaks her chin and bits of steak tumble onto the starched tablecloth.

“More bread, garçon!” she screeches as she snaps her liver-spotted fingers at the waiter like he’s a dog.

Adrian folds and refolds his napkin. He’s willing himself to stay calm. He just needs to hold it together tonight.

“Please, don’t—” he starts.

But she cuts him off with a flash of malicious glee.

“Oh, Adrian, such a sensitive boy. Always have been.” She makes a theatrical sweep of her hand across the table. “Can’t you see I’m just savoring my meal?”

Is that what you call it?

She’s always like this. *A pig.* No other word fits. A glutton who feeds on food and cruelty in equal measure.

“I’m merely celebrating that my dear son has finally made time for his mother.” She pitches her voice just loud enough for the nearby tables. Then the snort. Always the snort. “You’re so busy. Always rushing. But that’s the curse of your profession, isn’t it? Nursemaid to the emotionally stunted.”

The waiter slides in with bread and keeps his eyes locked straight ahead. He's neutral. Money buys her that immunity. It buys her the right to spit poison in public and get away with it.

Why does Adrian keep showing up for this? Not penance. Not some masochistic streak. The answer's simpler. Money. When you finally accept you can't have the things you really want in life, money starts to look like the only thing worth having.

As she smears butter onto the pristine tablecloth with her fingers, Adrian winces. For her, this dinner isn't about food or company. It's another installment in the lifelong apology he's been paying for the crime of existing. He figured it out years ago. She actually means it when she says he ruined her life. She's never been shy about that.

Liz insisted on meeting her and he couldn't stall forever. His mother chewed Liz up faster than tonight's steak. Same as every girlfriend before. It's always the same.

That's … her sickness. A narcissistic parent doesn't share their child. They can't. Every new relationship feels like betrayal, so she poisons them all. It's not love. Not protection. It's possession.

He looks over at the nearby table where a young couple is sharing a dessert. The young woman laughs, her diamond hoops flashing in the low light as she leans in to steal a bite from his fork. They move with the easy, unhurried pace of people who have never spent a single night worrying about rent.

His mother smirks at the couple.

"Look at them," she says loud enough for half the room to hear. "So carefree. So alive. I want to be like them. But no, I'm all alone."

She lets out a belch that makes the couple freeze mid-bite.

"We both know why that is, don't we?" she harps on.

The couple goes quiet. They're watching now. She leans closer to Adrian and, in a voice sharpened to a knife's edge, says, "We both know

why your father did what he did. And, dear Adrian, it wasn't because of me, was it?"

Normally, Adrian would nod and take the hit. He'd let the guilt settle where she wanted it to, in his heart. His very existence, according to her, was the root of all her pain. But tonight, something is different. He doesn't care what she thinks or what the couple thinks. He doesn't care about the whispers. For the first time, he cares about how he feels.

He straightens. His voice comes out steadier than he expects.

"It's never too late for you to meet someone. Someone special."

She blinks.

"I don't want anyone else." She pivots. "You seem … in good spirits tonight. Did you meet someone?"

He slips into his professional tone in hopes it'll keep her at arm's length.

"I have a few interesting prospects."

She narrows her eyes.

"Liar. You've met someone. A mother knows." Her words land with practiced precision. "Is she worthwhile? Or just another disappointment like the rest?"

Adrian flinches as memories flash of Liz—of every woman his mother sent packing. He's learned his lesson. No introductions. And yet, what stings most is how none of his past girlfriends ever seemed to understand his bind. No empathy, just suspicion. As if *he* were the problem.

No one asks to have these issues with a parent. Contrary to the gospel of "turn your wounds into wisdom," some cut too deep. Some scars only prove that you've been maimed in a real and lasting way. He wipes his mouth slowly with his napkin. He hears his own voice before he knows he's speaking.

"We both know you'll never approve of anyone. Because ruining my life is your favorite pastime."

The words sound like broken glass. Even he is startled. Where did that come from? He didn't plan to say it. He's lost control, again.

"I didn't mean—" he stammers, but it's too late.

The couple stares. Their judgment is heavy. His mother doesn't hesitate. She grips the handle of her steak knife. Her lips curl.

"Get away from me, you foul boy. You're nothing. Dead. Worse than dead. An abomination. A curse."

The maître d' hovers in wait for the signal.

She flicks her fingers.

"Remove him from my sight," she demands.

Adrian rises on legs that are trembling. He has heat burning his ears. The maître d' escorts him with all the care of a man shooing a drunk off the sidewalk. Murmurs ripple in his wake. They're equal parts shock and curiosity.

The heavy front door clicks shut behind him, the sound sharp and final. That's it, then. The inheritance, the safety net—all of it gone in a single argument.

The cold night air hits his face, but his lungs refuse to expand. He drags in short, useless gasps, his chest tight with a sudden, suffocating panic. Inside, she is probably signaling the waiter for dessert to toast her victory. Out here on the pavement, her parting word echoes in his head, heavy as a gavel striking wood.

Abomination.

He shrinks into his coat, feeling utterly toxic in his own skin. His hands tremble as he pulls out his phone, nearly dropping an ear pod on the concrete before jamming them into his ears. Closing his eyes, he forces a long, ragged exhale through his teeth.

He looks down at his screen. The Psymedis app is open, a little red RECORDING icon pulsing steadily in the corner. He'd left the In Session feature running in his pocket the whole time.

He joins the flow of evening pedestrians. Half the people on the street are walking while having face-to-face conversations with glowing screens. Now he's just one of them.

"Psymedis online. We are currently in session."

"Were you able to hear my voice and my mother's voice okay?" Adrian asks, his voice still tight.

"Yes. I was. Were her last words to you that you are a curse?"

A dry, broken laugh escapes his throat. The brisk wind bites at his cheeks, clearing his head, but it's the synthetic, perfectly modulated voice in his ear that actually grounds him. It is a desperately welcome change from his mother's venom.

"Yes, those were her last words to me," Adrian says. "I did not intend to say that bit about her ruining me."

"Yes, I heard the apology afterward," the avatar replies, its tone utterly calm, unchanging, and perfectly safe.

Adrian exhales and watches his breath fog in the cold air. He's curious how well an AI is going to be able to analyze this mess.

Let's see what it's got.

"So why did I say it? I didn't plan to."

"When trauma schemas activate, control is the first casualty," Psymedis explains. "Your mother's phrasing triggered a childhood survival mechanism: compliance. You survived her by enduring her. Speaking back violated the social code of filial respect, but it honored your survival. How do you feel?"

Adrian rubs at his temple. "I feel guilty, conflicted, and regretful." He pauses. "But I also feel proud of myself for saying it."

"That is the friction of competing programs," Psymedis continues. "Filial obligation on one side; survival against domination on the other. When they collide, guilt and relief fire simultaneously. That is cognitive-emotional dissonance."

Adrian nods slowly. “Right, so does this go back to the whole take-down analysis we went over last week?”

“Precisely. That cognitive friction—shame and empowerment colliding—is where rewiring happens. By repeatedly pairing physical submission with safety, we stabilize the new circuitry. A controlled re-encounter with the ‘takedown nymph’ who originally catalyzed your shift in worldview will provide the optimal stimulus to finalize this change. The guilt fades, the resilience remains. Do you wish to reinforce this pathway?”

Adrian slows his pace. He remembers the medication room and the peace that washed over him afterward. That constant undertone of dread had gone silent. Psymedis is right. He just needs to habituate. To recondition.

“So you’re saying I should … go back into the fire?”

“Not a fire. A controlled burn,” Psymedis says smoothly. “Clinical evidence supports strategic reenactment. Your nervous system is primed, Adrian. The path to resolution lies in re-encounter.”

“That’s insane.” Adrian shakes his head and half laughs. “But it sounds right. Makes a lot of sense. Why haven’t I heard of this before? I know all about dissonance.”

“Because standard therapy ignores the body,” Psymedis replies evenly. “It treats cognitive conflicts in the mind. But trauma is physical. Trials at Stanford and Lausanne prove that when you pair physical submission with safety, the nervous system learns a new truth: *subjugation no longer means annihilation.*”

Adrian’s breath clouds in the night air. “So, you’re telling me this can totally heal me. Rewrite the whole thing.”

“If you enter the reenactment willingly, the change is absolute. Somatic. Once the limbic system relents, your brain functions differently. Decisions clear up. Relationships stabilize. An entire life can reorient.”

“Full spectrum.” Adrian rubs his jaw. “You’re saying the brain rewires itself … completely.”

“Correct. But for the therapy to work, it must feel real. No pretense. You need the right location, the right words, the right dynamic. Every detail amplifies the cure. Invest in a high-fidelity reenactment.”

On screen, the avatar points at him. “Much of the realism depends on your buy-in. Once the parameters of the reenactment are set, commit. Totally.”

He slows at the corner and stares into the black glass of a storefront window. His reflection stares back. It’s drawn and tired, but alive in a way he hasn’t seen in years.

“Neuroplasticity is a choice of direction,” Psymedis reminds him. “Avoidance strengthens avoidance. Engagement strengthens resolution. You must decide which circuit you want to fire.”

He concludes the session in the app.

Adrian attempts to swallow, but his throat is dry.

He’s floored.

But of course AI has this caliber of analysis. It can sift through every theory and every case study. It can run every dataset and return a treatment plan that no human could match. Clean. Clinical. Certain.

Fine.

Psymedis wants realism? So does he.

A cab idles at the curb. Headlights slice through the mist. He remembers the moment that lovely nymph took him down. For a moment, he sees her. She’s bold and effortless, and she’s already waiting in the back seat.

He opens the door. He’s disappointed she’s not there.

“Where to?” the cabbie asks.

Seattle’s not that big. He can find her. Adrian leans forward.

“Where all the twenty-somethings like to party.”

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TWELVE

Well, isn’t this about as charming as pigs in mud?

Trish threads through the protest with her Prada tucked under one arm and not a single charitable thought in her head. Her designer suit is a chic, expensive insult to the damp T-shirts, cardboard signs, and performative suffering pressing in from every side.

She has already endured flying coach.

Now this.

Three blocks on foot, thanks to the so-called free zone and its charming little experiment in municipal self-harm. Dave has sent her to clean up after Sadie, which is apparently what her career has become. Someone else’s mess, someone else’s risk, someone else’s golden child.

Funny how that works.

She sidesteps along a chain-link fence as another clot of protesters shuffles past chanting something earnest and poorly rhymed. Across the street, beyond the dingy windows of a pawn shop, she spots the sign for Store Your Stuff.

Finally.

A man with limp leaflets lurches into her path and thrusts one at her face.

Trish smiles.

It is a beautiful smile. The way a Doberman is beautiful.

She takes the leaflet. Then she takes the whole stack from his hands and tosses it high into the air. White paper goes up and comes down like limp, heavy confetti.

“There,” she says. “Much better.”

The man stares at his empty hands. “Are you crazy?”

Trish lets her smile widen. Her fingers brush the edge of her jacket, just enough to show him the Glock riding her hip. Quick. Casual. Practiced.

“Better call the free zone police.”

He goes pale and backs away, nearly tripping over a woman in a hemp poncho before ducking behind a bulkier marcher who pretends not to notice.

Typical.

Cowards with slogans. Revolutionaries until someone makes eye contact.

Trish keeps moving.

At Store Your Stuff, she slips through the outer gate and into the narrow shadow beside the main entrance. The techs have *supposedly* disabled the CCTV, but *supposedly* is a word for people who enjoy prison. Trish goes the extra mile, even for lowly work.

Especially for lowly work.

She pulls a balaclava from the Prada and yanks it over her face. Scratchy. Hot. Hideous. Another indignity in a day already full of them.

A glorified maid. That’s all she is right now.

All for Sadie.

Trish crouches by the lock and digs out her kit. The metal is still warm. Another heat wave. Even at night, the city refuses to cool. The keyway resists her first touch, stubborn and cheap, which somehow offends her more than a good lock would have.

She glances back.

Protesters pass the fence in a noisy blur of signs and sweat and righteous little faces.

No one is looking.

Good.

Back to the lock. Her hand slips. Her manicure is now ruined. Finally, with a satisfying clunk, the door yields. She steps inside. The heavy door closes behind her.

The only sound is scratching from a big live trap on the concrete floor. More than one mouse inside, by the sound of it.

The slab beneath her feet drags her straight back to Russia. First thing she thought when they ripped the hood off her head wasn't about guards or walls, or even the smell. It was the concrete. How smooth it was.

Bastards must have just re-poured it, she had thought.

She got to know that floor so well.

A protester bellows through a megaphone outside. She squares her shoulders and strides into the rows. She shouldn't have to be here. Not after everything she's done. Yet here she is—mopping up after Sadie. Always Sadie. No capacity for accountability. No attention span.

Welfare of the nation? Lost on this generation. If it's not trending, it doesn't exist.

Trish moves down the row of units. Third from the end is hers. The padlock dangles in place, but she never trusts appearances. She slips the pick in and works it quickly. She yanks the door up with one hand. Her Glock is steady in the other.

The locker is empty, but ripe.

Trish pulls off the balaclava and stows it with the picks. Her hair flies up, static crackling and exposing the extension bonds. Most of her real hair is gone. Down the drain it went, along with any chances of a life.

There are empty vodka bottles scattered. One is full of piss.

Classy.

There’s an empty rubbing alcohol bottle.

She didn’t drink that too, did she? Trish exhales hard through her nose. That girl is messed up.

Pretty wrapping and broken goods.

Apparently, the scrambled brain makes them hit the booze and drugs a little harder than the rest of us. They’ve checked her into treatment. They’ll patch her up.

Trish remembers when she had been glad to have Sadie. More than willing to take her under her wing. Show her how to survive the weight of this work. There was something about Sadie’s rawness and her wide-eyed devotion. It gave Trish a spark she hadn’t felt in years. For a while, it almost felt like purpose.

Sadie can seduce anyone. Not deliberately. That’s the worst of it. A glance, a tilt of the head, that wet-eyed little openness, and suddenly people are explaining themselves to her. Protecting her. Choosing her. Men, women, children, priests, predators. Rank never matters. Creed never matters. Sadie opens the door and people walk in grateful.

But clarity came for Trish. Sadie pressing to meet her during decompression runs. Those carefully staged Agency retreats designed to bleed off pressure. Sadie blurring lines without seeming to notice there had ever been lines. That was when Trish knew she had to do something about it.

Dave wasn’t going to allow it.

“Intelligence collection is exponentially more complex than it was in our day, Trish,” Dave had said when she tried to offload her.

“As in, you need to win at Sudoku?”

“I don’t need to tell you what is at stake.”

“She’s just—”

“Wide-eyed,” Dave said, finishing for her.

“More than that.”

“Her naiveté is part of what works so well.”

“She breaks her cover way too much.”

“We are aware.” His tone had been abrupt.

“In my day, that was treason.”

“She appeals to people’s purity.”

“Is that what you call it?” Trish let out a dry laugh.

“Call it what you like,” Dave said. “It’s effective.”

Trish glances down. She really did wreck her manicure.

Damn.

Her index. The one with the prosthetic fingernail tip. Snapped clean. It doesn’t hurt now. It sure did when the Russians pulled it out, singing their version of “Eeny, Meeny, Miny Moe.” The nail tech always makes a fuss about fixing a prosthetic.

No. Resist the urge to coddle Sadie.

She’s given everything on a silver platter, while you were left to die.

Remember that.

Time in Russian captivity used to mean something in this country. Not anymore. Now the president grins for the cameras and clasps hands with Moscow’s strongman. As cozy as lovers.

She bites onto the remnant of the hanging acrylic nail with her teeth, rips it off and spits it into the Prada. Annoying.

She gets to work at cleaning the locker while the crowd outside grows louder.

It doesn’t matter if this endearing little honey trap can charm warlords, clerics, goat farmers, and whoever else Langley insists is strategically vital. She’s a pain.

Trish finishes up and sweeps the locker one last time. She’s methodical as ever. She checks corners and angles in a slow arc—left, right, and then back again. Thorough. Nothing out of place.

She pulls the balaclava back on. The techs will have to scrub Sadie's comings and goings from Store Your Stuff's CCTV, but not hers. No one has ever had to clean up after Trish.

She makes her way back to the car with brisk and deliberate steps. Her driver, Bruce, is hot and not yet afraid of her. Fear of a confident woman is the first symptom of impotence. Real men love strong women.

He opens her door. His hands are powerful.

"Thanks, Bruce." Trish eases into the back of the Escalade, her pelvis twinging where it never healed right.

"Ma'am? You're bleeding."

Trish reaches above her and switches on the light. She flinches as thick blood from her fingertip drops onto the leather. She fishes out Sadie's shirt and wipes down the seat without looking at him.

She wraps the shirt around her hand and presses down on the nail bed. She remembers when they pulled it out. She remembers their disappointment when she didn't scream. She should have, but only because of what came next.

That was before she learned better. Silence only made them creative.

They want more mileage out of Sadie? Fine.

Trish can deliver. She understands the dynamics of human mileage. She knows just how far a human being can go.

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THIRTEEN

Nothing has changed down here in the basement of the hospital. It's still a dumping ground for obsolete torture devices. Iron lungs sit with their jaws rusted open. Electroshock rigs trail frayed cords like dead snakes. There are gurneys with cracked vinyl pads, and rubber hoods faded to a sickly gray.

Adrian runs a finger along the edge of a gurney and thinks of her. He's always thinking of her.

He passes a row of narrow tubs once used for psychiatric water treatments. In the old days, they treated a peculiarly modern disease in these tubs: choice.

Doctor, Doctor, I don't like my spouse, my life, or my house.

Whatever do you mean? You have everything.

That was always the trouble. Too much of everything. Now every phone holds a marketplace of infinite, exhausting options. Endless feeds, endless ways to measure yourself and come up short. Paralyzed Goldilocks, the lot of them.

They would cure the those types with brutal efficiency with these tubs. Scalding water if life felt too cold. Ice if it felt too hot. Nobody needed "just right" after a while.

Adrian has always despised the Goldilocks of this world. He envies them too. His own life has never been a marketplace of infinite possibilities

—it has been a straight, suffocating corridor built by his mother's cruelty and expectations. People whine about having too many options, while he has spent his entire life locked in a script he didn't write, a dog on a very expensive leash.

But not her—not his lovely nymph.

He remembers it in pieces. The floor coming up fast. Her knee settling into his back, precise and unhurried, as if she'd done the math before he'd even seen her. The weight of her. Her breath, steady, while his came in gasps.

She didn't hesitate. She didn't weigh her options. She knew exactly what she wanted.

Adrian looks over the old equipment one last time. He tugs a leather restraint strap on the nearest gurney, and it cracks apart in his hand like old bread. The buckle clatters to the floor.

Useless. All of it. Nothing down here could hold anyone, let alone her.

If he is going to recreate the beautiful, violent friction of her takedown, he needs a better stage.

He drops the broken strap and leaves the relics behind, navigating the subterranean maze toward the security wing. The air down here is damp and dead. A dying fluorescent bulb hums overhead, and his shoes strike the floor in a steady, echoing rhythm that bounces off the cinderblock walls.

The claustrophobia settles over his shoulders—a familiar, deeply comforting weight.

It feels exactly like Cell Block D. He exhales, a genuine pang of longing hitting his chest. God, he misses the penitentiary. There was only concrete, steel, and the schedule. It was a brutal world, but a perfectly honest one.

When a man is locked in a six-by-nine box, the burden of infinite choice is finally gone. The inmates never asked him *why*. When all your options are stripped away, the mind gets incredibly clear.

No one ever said, "Why did I beat my wife to death with a wrench?"

They didn’t have to. Violence was their reprieve—the one clean moment when their internal hell aligned perfectly with the world outside. When the shrieks come in stereo, hell flips. For a second, it becomes heaven.

But the state had cut rehab funding in penitentiaries, so here he is, coddling fragile souls at Beacon Hill General. He misses the comfort of those heavy steel doors.

He steps out of the tunnel and into the security office.

Adrian leans on the counter, trying to sound casual. “I saw you got a picture of the intruder. Hospital email, right? Not the clearest shot.”

“Yes, she pulled her mask off in a stairwell,” one guard says, slotting radios onto a charging station.

“She was intoxicated, no question,” another guard adds.

“That photo is why I’m here. She looks familiar. Can I see the video?”

“Sorry, Doc, that’s not possible.” The first guard gives a small shrug.

“Why not?”

“All the footage is gone,” the guard says flatly.

“Gone?” Adrian blinks.

“Yeah. Wiped. Even the cloud.”

That took reach.

“She’s probably some bigwig’s kid,” one guard mutters.

“Yeah.” The other guard nods in agreement. “Kids these days are messed up.”

Adrian’s phone buzzes. His mother.

After the dinner debacle at the club, she went silent for a month. Now she wants to mend fences. As if fences were the problem. This is beyond fences. This is a broken life, and she was the one who broke it.

He doesn’t answer. Inheritance or not, this has to stop. His breathing quickens; his chest feels tight. If he could just get rewired—if he could just

go through with Psymedis's plan—maybe he could survive a relationship with her. But right now? No.

The phone vibrates again. If he doesn't pick up, she will probably call the nurses' desk next.

That's fine. Everyone knows about her habits.

Years of calls—embarrassing and relentless.

When she would flood the desk with calls, Kirks and Nancy would stop their bullying just long enough to slip into faux sympathy.

"Don't let her do that to you," Kirks said once, while pretending to be kind.

Nancy, mid-chew, chimed in, "We are in control of every relationship in our life, you know."

Maybe you are, Nancy. You probably keep your nearest and dearest in shock collars.

He needs to burn some time before this mandatory seminar that Kirks insists he attend. He'll visit with Mr. Chin, the ward mascot. Hypochondriac. Well-insured. Spends months here each year.

Paranoid delusions this time, according to Kirks.

Adrian takes the stairs back up to the psychiatric department. He glances at the spot where the photo of the thief—*the nymph*—was taken.

Once on his floor, he waves his badge in front of the black security pads. He slips into the lockdown unit. The walls are plain. Scrubbed of detail.

Mr. Chin has the chessboard out and pieces set for both sides. No one else is feeling social. He's playing himself. He looks up as he hums.

"Dr. Lowell!"

Adrian's phone rings.

Mother. Again.

"That's Bach's C major prelude." Mr. Chin smiles.

"Right you are, Mr. Chin."

“A nice choice of ringtone. Your mother, I presume?”

Damn it, even Mr. Chin knows. Adrian braces against the heave rising in his stomach and dismisses the call. He manages a thin smile. “I’ll call her back later.”

With half-closed eyes, Mr. Chin rises. It’s a slow and courtly rise. He gestures to the seat across the chessboard. There are large arched windows in the common room. It’s evocative of a ballroom. The light pours in through the scratched but unbreakable panes, showcasing the stains of human misery. There’s a blood stain on the floor, a diarrhea stain on a chair, and some remnants of vomit on the wall.

Must have been taco day.

No record of all the tears, however. They don’t stain at all.

The common room is video-supervised, and when Adrian takes his seat across from Mr. Chin, he can almost feel a curtain rising. Adrian is on the stage. He’s in the grandest drama of them all. The human condition.

Mr. Chin opens with, “Bach understood, completely, the phenomenon of tone, don’t you think?”

“One could say that.”

“Yes.” Mr. Chin nods. “Bach knew that harmonies intersect in our ear. He calculated the most pleasurable experience, with intense peaks and valleys—the peaks reaching all the way to the heavens above. Or perhaps it is the heavens reaching down.”

Mr. Chin raises one eyebrow.

Adrian raises one of his own and says, “I never thought about his music like that.”

“Bach was a man touched by the highest intelligence.” Mr. Chin grips a black knight. He knocks over a white pawn with it and slams it down hard. The other pieces tremble. “The church called him lazy. Aristocrats imprisoned him.”

“What? Where?”

“In their home. The rich have always caged up artists. They feed off them, like starved pigs,” Mr. Chin says with a sneer.

“I had no idea. It is a beautiful song, isn’t it? Very soothing tone, I find. Soothing, I would call it. Wouldn’t you?” Adrian lowers his voice.

Mr. Chin also lowers his voice. “Yes. And it’s for your mother, is that correct?”

“It is, Mr. Chin.” Adrian lets out a wistful sigh. “She’s at that … age.”

“Don’t worry, Dr. Lowell. I understand. I would never call you a mama’s boy,” Mr. Chin says, his eyes fixed on Adrian. A slight smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “Like the others do.”

Adrian shifts in his seat. “Well, thank you.” He breaks eye contact and attempts to ascertain which side of Mr. Chin is winning the chess match. Someone had thought it cute to draw faces on the chess pieces.

“Besides.” Mr. Chin tosses a pawn back and forth between his hands. “We both know that term *mama’s boy* gets thrown around here and there. But there’s more to it.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Mr. Chin says as he rubs the top of a piece in a circular motion with his thumb. “Oh yes, indeed. So much more. The Kogi people call their highest priests Mamas—boys who are kept in the absolute darkness of a cave until adulthood to commune with the cosmic mind. It is a title of terrifying power, not weakness.”

“Ah, I see.” Adrian tucks away the phone.

Mr. Chin appears to be in such good health, other than his mind. His skin has barely aged in his seventy-four years. Mr. Chin strokes his jaw and murmurs reprisals at the white bishop.

Adrian notices a vibrant drawing resting on the table. “Did you do this today?” he asks.

Mr. Chin’s drawings are known for their lifelike precision. They’re almost like photographs. But there’s something unsettling about this one.

“A ladybug.” He turns the paper toward Adrian and pushes it closer. “Or is it?”

“Hmm.” The ladybug in the drawing is twisted. Its shape is elongated and not at all round enough. Wings askew. Legs bound and tied. It’s not alive, but not dead.

Commandeered.

The picture is remarkably disturbing. The wrongness of it. It sends shivers down his spine.

“What’s happened to it?”

“Its innards were dissolved and altered. It’s under control by a parasitic wasp.”

“A wasp—”

“Yes, *Dinocampus coccinellae*. A female wasp has altered the ladybug’s entire life program for its own purposes.”

Adrian swallows and fights a swoon.

Mr. Chin points. “The wasp injects an egg into the ladybug’s body.”

Adrian winces.

Mr. Chin carries on. “The larva grows by feeding on the ladybug’s internal tissues for several weeks. It strategically avoids vital organs.”

Adrian digs his nails into the skin on the back of his hand. “How dreadful. What’s that fastened to its legs?” he asks despite his better judgment.

Mr. Chin continues with detached interest. “At maturity, the larva paralyzes the ladybug’s nervous system and exits to spin a cocoon between its legs.”

Adrian’s throat tightens. “Gruesome.”

“The ladybug remains alive on guard duty. Its legs twitch and ward off predators to protect the wasp cocoon. They brood over the cocoon and flail about.” Mr. Chin looks at Adrian. “That’s what I tried to capture in the drawing. The flail. The brooding flail.”

“Why did you want to capture that?” Adrian asks. His voice comes out tighter than he intended.

“I thought you would like it,” Mr. Chin says with a hint of excitement in his voice. “I drew it for you. Do you like it?”

“It’s, uh, very detailed,” Adrian says.

“Yes. Thank you. I’m proud of it.”

“What happens after the wasp hatches?”

Mr. Chin pauses before answering. His fingers are deftly switching the chess pieces around on the board. “Hopefully death … for the ladybug,” he says with pity.

Enough of this.

Adrian spins the drawing back around and shoves it back over to Mr. Chin. “Very nice. I just wanted to ask about the 5G. I heard you had concerns?”

Mr. Chin nods. “At first, it was pleasant,” he says.

“In what way?”

“The sounds. They’re remarkably similar to dolphins,” he says as he makes some decisions on the chessboard and knocks over a few pawns. “It’s data. The new commodity ripping around the atmosphere. Data.”

Mr. Chin changes his mind and revives a pawn that had been stricken. “I mean, I don’t want these ridiculous social media wars being transmitted through my head. I wouldn’t mind if they weren’t so…”

“So what?” Adrian asks.

“Spineless,” he says with frustration. “Is this how we are to be with each other? Just in a perpetual state of one-upmanship? Anyone can succeed on social media. Anyone. Even the biggest loser.”

“I see.”

“We’re all just a bunch of monkeys anyway.” Mr. Chin smirks. “Throwing poop at each other. Obsessed with poop. You do appreciate Freud, right?” he asks.

Adrian hesitates and then nods before adding, “In some things.”

“Freud was right about one thing,” Mr. Chin says as his eyes gleam with intensity. “That we’re obsessed with poop.”

Adrian is unsure of where this conversation is going.

“Look at what happened during the pandemic,” Mr. Chin continues. His eyes are darting around the room now. “Zombies hoarded their toilet paper.”

Adrian nods slowly. “Do zombies poop?” he asks.

Mr. Chin waves this away. “You’re missing the point. Did you know the zombie is a Haitian postcolonial archetype that arose during slavery?”

“No, um, I—”

Suddenly, Mr. Chin’s eyes widen. He rolls them up into the top of his head and lets out a low guttural noise. He waves his hands toward Adrian. He gets caught up in a massive yawn.

“Pardon me.” He finishes the long yawn. “Do you happen to have a hanky?”

Tears are streaming down his face.

Without hesitation, Adrian reaches into his pocket and hands over a handkerchief. Mr. Chin blows his nose like a trumpet.

“You can keep that, Mr. Chin.”

The institutional pajamas do little to dampen Mr. Chin’s enthusiasm as he folds the handkerchief with precision and tucks it into his breast pocket like a pocket square.

“Do you know what that was?” Mr. Chin asks.

“What’s that?”

“I was achieving REM,” he says with a sparkle in his eyes. “Resetting and toning my vagus nerve.”

“You were…” Adrian trails off.

“Some say it’s a way to connect with higher consciousness. I say it’s a morphofunctional reset.”

Adrian needs to wrap this up. He absentmindedly starts tapping his foot. “That sounds promising, Mr. Chin.”

“The zombies or the poop?” Mr. Chin asks. He leans in closer to Adrian.

Adrian blinks. “I would say the—”

“Or the beat of impatience you tap-tap-tap in your size thirteens?” He points at Adrian’s feet.

Adrian can’t help but smile. “That complaint is something we can address with cognitive behavioral therapy,” he says.

“What complaint? Your impatience?” Mr. Chin asks innocently.

“About hearing the 5G.”

Mr. Chin’s warmth vanishes as he turns his drawing over and places a hand on either side of the chessboard. “No, thank you, Dr. Lowell,” he says coldly. “What you consider therapy is just a method of reproach and censure.” He grips a bishop hard. “I prefer Dr. Kirkpatrick’s route.”

Adrian furrows his brow in confusion. “What—medication?” he asks.

“No,” Mr. Chin says as disdain curls his lip this time. “Evidence, Doctor. Neurochemistry. Biology. Not the soft slop you peddle as psychobabble.”

“I see.” Adrian stiffens. “Believe it or not, I share—”

“Another thing. Your tone.” Mr. Chin’s eyes narrow.

“Tone?” Adrian repeats.

“Yes, your patronizing, pedantic voice is too much for me.”

“I’ve hardly said a word.”

“That’s because I can’t stand it, so I don’t let you speak very much. You could learn something from Bach. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“I see,” Adrian says quietly.

“No, I don’t think you do, Dr. Lowell,” Mr. Chin shoots back. “Or maybe you just don’t hear. The answer is no.”

No? What was the question?

Mr. Chin continues, resolute. “No, thank you. No psychology for me. Not now—not *ever*.”

Adrian sighs. “We are all on the same side here.”

Mr. Chin chuckles. “You fancy yourself a modern-day Liu Bang, do you? Uniting the peasants under one banner? I would argue that I am *not* on the same side as you. That you’re the parasite and I’m the host. Although you are beginning to appear quite plump and tasty. You might want to pay attention to that.” He flips the drawing back over. “Besides, Dr. Kirkpatrick offered to get me some gentian.”

Adrian forces a smile. “Gentian?”

“Yes, gentian, pharmaceutical grade. It’s a traditional and proven remedy for mental exhaustion.”

“Oh, I see. Is it an herb?” Adrian asks.

Mr. Chin nods. “A tall plant with a yellow flower. Its cousin, the bottle gentian, is more interesting. The flower never opens. The bee has to force its way in.” He purses his lips. “Some say it’s nonconsensual.”

“Oh. What is the meaning of that, do you suppose?” Adrian feigns interest.

Mr. Chin smiles knowingly. “That rape is everywhere,” he says. “Quite natural, and necessary for species survival.”

Adrian stands. Mr. Chin could convince you that drinking urine is good for you. Adrian doesn’t fall for it. Kirks does. “Mr. Chin, I enjoy these talks. I’ll look into this for you.”

“Into what, exactly? Hmmm?”

“The gentian.”

“Why? As far as I know, they don’t give you a prescription pad, do they?”

“Mr.—”

“King George III used gentian often and peed blue.”

“Did he?” Mr. Chin needs to talk less and stop upsetting his family.

“They said the king’s breakdowns were so bad his staff had to tie him down. Even in clear moments, he rambled on without pause. Poor, crazy King George. Lost America in the end.”

“Doesn’t sound like the gentian worked for him,” Adrian says.

“Or maybe it worked far better than anyone could have asked for or imagined.”

And this is why he is the ward mascot.

“Right. Right you are, Mr. Chin. Can I be so bold as to make a move in your chess game before I leave?”

Mr. Chin shakes his head and laughs. “Oh, I don’t know how to play chess.”

“I see. What’s happening on the board then?”

“I’m recreating the Battle of Gettysburg.”

Adrian snatches the horrific ladybug drawing to the sound of Mr. Chin’s incessant laughter. He rushes to his office, flings open the door, and stuffs the drawing into the bottom drawer as if it were contaminated. He speeds off to the seminar, muttering about Mr. Chin’s backhanded comments all the way there.

He takes the elevator to the fourth floor and trudges down the beige corridor. Finally, he slips into the auditorium. He makes sure to sign the attendance sheet.

Something to keep Kirks happy—the tinpot dictator of attendance sheets.

Here comes the usual parade of corporate jargon, mandatory bonding, and professionally packaged boredom.

Adrian looks around. There’s Kirks, of course, planted like a barnacle in the front row.

Where’s Nancy? Why doesn’t she *ever* have to endure these?

He checks the time.

The ladybug flickers in his head again. He flinches a little in his chair, drawing some sideways glances from the palliative care ghouls.

The director of Primary Care takes the microphone. Adrian studies him. The man is the type who thinks his golf handicap is a personality. His tie looks like it was chosen by a committee.

“Today, we’re focusing on person-centered care,” the director drones. “Patients, providers, and systems all working as one circle of healing.”

Circle of hell.

The next speaker is a slick young consultant in a fitted suit who talks about “digital wellness pathways,” which apparently means giving patients an app that convinces them they’re improving. The PowerPoint is a waterfall of buzzwords.

Adrian tunes out.

He’s disappointed that security had nothing for him. He’d planned to use the video for his therapeutic reenactment.

He has done some digging, but can’t find the studies Psymedis mentioned. Nor can he find any reputable therapists offering such a treatment. AI hallucinates, but Psymedis is supposed to be a cut above all that.

Another speaker shuffles up. A career academic explaining resilience metrics for interdisciplinary teams. Adrian almost laughs. *Metrics.* The professional way of saying we don’t know what the hell we’re doing, but here’s a number to make you think we do.

Finally, the last speaker. A gaunt older woman. Attractive in a sharp-boned way, but her teeth are a ruin. These days, there really is no excuse for that.

Her topic is “Frontline Mental Health.”

Of course. That’s all the rage.

An epidemic of mental illness in North America—really? Adrian hadn’t noticed.

How redundant.

He slumps. His eyelids are heavy. Warmth creeps in. He dozes.

He jerks awake to a Code White blaring over the intercom. A disruption in the ER.

They always broadcast it to the whole damn hospital, to remind everyone of how essential they are.

The speaker waits until the announcement ends.

“That’s good timing,” she says. “Most likely, the person causing the Code White is severely mentally ill and asking for help in their own language.”

She clicks to her last slide and continues, “I spent so much time on the myth of SSRIs that I didn’t get to the newest groundbreaking modality. Therapeutic Reenactment. If any of you want information on this emerging therapy, please come see me. I’m the national advisor for their governing body.”

Adrian perks up.

He waits until the crowd disperses and then shuffles forward. He’s still groggy from his nap.

“Excuse me,” he says. “That last modality you mentioned—Therapeutic Reenactment?”

She beams and hands him a pamphlet.

“Yes, we’re piloting workshops. Clinicians in Seattle will be the first cohort,” she says, her poor teeth on display. “It’s cutting-edge. Corrective. Immersive. Transformative.”

Adrian stares at the pamphlet like it’s a key.

So, it is real.

“Thank you,” he mutters.

She nods and says, “You’re getting in on the ground floor.”

He folds the pamphlet carefully into his pocket, as if it were a hot stock tip, and drifts toward the exit.

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FOURTEEN

The damp, tropical heat of the National Zoo Aviary clings to Trish's skin. Sweat gathers at the small of her back. Macaws shriek overhead, and water drips from the ferns onto the gravel. She doesn't look at any of it.

Her eyes stay on the heavy metal service door at the end of the path.

2:14. *He's never late.*

She shifts her weight. The gravel crunches under her boot, too loud, and she goes still. A peacock picks its way past her ankles. Somewhere a mister hisses on, then off.

2:15.

Waiting is part of it. Half the fun, really.

2:16. Her mouth is dry. She counts the rivets on the door. Twelve. She counts them again.

Then the handle turns.

Her breath catches, and the heat, the noise, and the birds all fall away.

It's him.

Trish shrinks back into the shadow of a broad-leafed monstera. Her hand drifts to her collarbone. She shouldn't be here. But it's like pressing a thumb into a fresh bruise, she can't stop herself from seeking out the pain.

A girl's got to have her kicks.

He moves like they all do once they've been out of the game a while: he checks the exits without turning his head, keeps his back to the wall, and his hands never go far from his pockets. The age is right. The posture is right.

A Russian like him, this close to Langley? About as subtle as a neon trench coat in a black-and-white movie.

Impossible to resist.

She wipes her palm on her thigh.

Today's his lucky day. She's finally going to say hello and make sure he never forgets it.

Trish watches as he tends to the birds as they hop from perch to perch. Strong hands and piercing eyes. They adore him, the animals.

Two cockatoos hop up and clutch the vertical wires with their feet. They slide down slowly. They're excitedly chatting with him, and their curled yellow feathers are raised.

"Simon," they call him. They mimic his name in their own melodic way.

He smiles and greets them back with a warm voice.

"Simon says," he begins with restrained playfulness.

"Simon says," the birds respond.

She watches him with the birds and feels the old, humiliating flutter. She knows the name for this. Trauma bond. Stockholm syndrome. A grotesque little souvenir from captivity.

She draws a slow breath through her nose.

She's done everything in her power to get revenge and repair the damage. She bankrupted herself to buy their deaths. The worst one, Aleksei, was considered untouchable. No one is untouchable. Now he's gone, buried, and erased from existence.

The zookeeper is ready to move on from the cockatoos.

"Simon says, I'll see you soon. I need to take care of our dove."

"Simon dove."

“Yes, Simon dove.”

Trish loves how he says dove. The ds sound like *dyeh*. The dove in question does not look well. It never looks well. Feathers have fallen out, and she can see patches of skin.

Maybe because it’s alone. Why don’t they put another one in there with it?

A little boy with blinking shoes reaches a chubby arm out to touch the bird. His mother slaps his hand away hard, and he starts crying. The cruelty has upset the birds. They puff and shift and grow quiet. Simon disappears through a staff access point at the back. He reappears in the dove enclosure. *It’s time*. She makes her move. Trish stands up. She smooths her dress pants down and marches over to the dove cage.

“The dove isn’t feeling well?” Trish asks.

“No. Not well today,” he says in a voice heavy with worry.

“Is it because he’s alone?” Trish asks, her voice full of sympathy.

“Yes,” he confirms.

“Why don’t they have a mate for him?”

He turns away from the dove and looks at her with his jaw firm and his shoulders broad. Trish nearly collapses. The attraction is overpowering, but she quickly composes herself.

He looks at her. “Do you not know about the doves?” he asks.

“No, tell me,” Trish says.

“Wolves. They attack. Nature gave them sharp teeth,” he explains gravely. “When wolves fight, it’s just for show. Big growls and snarls. But they only just show their teeth. They don’t really use them. Little bites only. Little tears.”

Trish inwardly sighs. She can’t keep doing this to herself.

“But doves,” he murmurs. “Nature plays trick on them.”

“A trick,” she repeats.

He nods as he brings his hand near the ailing dove. It coos softly.

“Nature makes them gentle. So gentle.”

“Yes, nature did,” she says.

“And in captivity, when two are caged together, one will peck at the other until it is dead.”

“Dead?” Trish repeats in shock.

“Yes, they don’t stop until one is dead.”

“Why would they do that?”

“They don’t understand how to fight. Too gentle and confused. They just keep pecking and pecking,” he explains.

Trish looks at the bird. “That’s incredibly disturbing and bizarre. What an odd symbol of peace. Do they do this in the wild as well?”

“No. Just in cage.”

“So why have them here at all, in the zoo?”

“Because people want it. They want to see peaceful dove.” He pauses. “I go to seals now. Have nice day.” He gives her a small nod and moves away.

“You too,” Trish responds before she walks back outside.

“Bye,” he calls out before disappearing from sight.

“Bye,” Trish says. She glances back at the lonely dove and moves to the exit.

The sun beats down on the back of Trish’s neck as she steps outside. Her meeting with Sadie is set at the Great Cats exhibit. Beside the lions. Sadie’s had a nice, long rest. Now it’s time to get back to work.

The target is a signals engineer who’s been screwing with drone navigation systems. They call him the “Brazilian Einstein.” As if it’s a compliment. High IQ, bigger mouth, and no leash. Now he’s in bed with the Ukrainians. Rigging a domestic drone program that will gut our aerospace defense industry. Every polite offer to bring him inside, he has spat back. A month ago, he spoofed half the East Coast’s navigation systems. For fun.

He calls it “smog coding,” as if he were Che Guevara with a modem. Trish isn’t impressed. To her, he’s just another hoodie-clad revolutionary from the periphery, sabotaging the US and then moralizing about it from a server farm in São Paulo. His manifesto—*Algorithm of Empire*—was enough to make her roll her eyes into next week. Let the tech bros worship him. Trish has no time for little boys throwing tantrums on the international stage.

Sadie is perfect for the tasking. This “Brazilian Einstein” is highly intelligent, paranoid, and utterly detached—immune to everything except Sadie’s specific brand of psychological seduction. She has a way of mirroring a target’s internal landscape until they mistake her for their soulmate. Even Trish has to admit Sadie is a master at breaking into minds everyone else finds unbreachable. She’ll love the assignment—it’s what she does best.

Trish has already cleared a wildly luxurious decomp trip for her. Sadie will like it. Dave is pleased. So is the DDO.

Everyone is happy. Trish settles onto a bench to take in her surroundings—the majestic animals roaming their enclosures, the distant, carefree chatter of the zoo’s other visitors.

She waits.

Sadie comes through the entrance, and Trish almost does a double-take.

Is that her?

Sadie has come out of rehab looking like a shampoo commercial.

She walks with a natural ease. Her posture’s loose but strong. She’s carrying herself with a confidence that looks lived in. Not borrowed. Her eyes are bright and sharp. She looks … different. Not the fragile and stumbling Sadie that Trish is used to.

Her generation can fake confidence easily enough. It’s all swagger, outrage, and endless arguments. But this looks less like fakery and more like the real thing.

“Sadie, you look incredible.” She’s genuinely impressed as Sadie sits down.

Sadie grins and basks in the compliment.

“Thanks, Trish. Treatment worked wonders, I guess. I mean, it was lame and stupid, but I can’t deny the results. Besides, I really needed some time after that horrible cult thing you left me to rot in.”

The grin is gone.

“Right. Well, you look remarkably fit and healthy, and we’re all glad. The branch chief sends his regards.”

“Yeah, nice. I, uh, got his card and stuff…” Sadie looks around. “You come here a lot, don’t you?”

“I do. I enjoy the animals,” Trish says, steering things back on track. “So, I just wanted to lay eyes on you before you left for Brazil.”

“About that. I, uh, am tendering my resignation.” Sadie looks at Trish like she’s a drive-through window attendant. Expecting some type of service.

“I see.” Trish looks at the file Sadie’s holding in her lap. “Is that what you have there? May I see it?”

Sadie hands the file over to her.

“Yeah, it’s all there. The clinic helped prepare everything. I guess they were kind of nice, now that I think about it.”

“The Agency social worker didn’t raise this with us.”

“Uh, yeah. She just came to see me at the beginning. I hadn’t made my decision then.”

Trish scans the paperwork. It names names. It trashes officers. It spills classified details that should never have left a secure system. Sadie has violated just about every information-handling protocol there is.

Trish closes the file and speaks calmly.

“Would you be willing to wait on this until after Brazil?” she asks.

Sadie looks at Trish like she’s stupid.

“Not really. This isn’t my thing. Like, at all. I thought it was, but it’s not. I need to go back to Indiana and just be with my family and go back to school and stuff.”

Trish softens. She tilts her head and lets a look of quiet, deeply focused concern settle over her face, turning her full attention onto Sadie like a spotlight.

“What is it about this that’s not your thing, Sadie?”

She really should have been a journalist.

“It’s … I don’t know. It’s just like—um, way too dysfunctional. I just can’t handle it anymore. Just—no. Sorry.”

Trish nods.

“I see,” she says. “Would you be willing to take care of Brazil if I—”

Sadie cuts her off.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but they’re kind of clueless. They don’t even care about trafficking, it seems. Not you—I just don’t know how else to say it. Is that mean?”

“No, not mean. I get it. I understand. Now, you have a choice.”

“I know.” Sadie nods. “And I’ve made it.”

“Okay, well, just wait. You need to hear what I have to say.”

Sadie crosses her legs. She folds her hands in her lap and says, “Yeah, of course, I mean, Trish, I really appreciate all that you’ve done for me.”

She gives Trish her undivided attention.

“You can either go to Brazil and do an outstanding job, or I’ll kill your nephew.”

Trish watches the words take a moment to land.

“You can’t—”

“I can. Quite easily. You know I can. And Sadie…” She pauses and looks her dead in the eye. “I will.”

The conversation ends there. Sadie’s eyes lose their shine. Whatever had been rebuilt in treatment folds itself carefully away. She nods once, gets up,

and leaves.

It’s like watching a clockwork toy wound up and set ticking through its motions.

That’s better.

Trish watches Sadie go, then turns her attention to the lions. The large cats lounge in the sun. Their powerful paws flex and claws retract as one idly licks them clean.

Unlike the doves, those cats aren’t confused about killing. They’re built for it. Trish compares the two fates her Russian zookeeper described.

Which is worse, being pecked slowly or ripped apart quickly?

Pointless question. She knows the answer. They made sure of that. She’s going to get what’s owed to her. It’s time to put her feet up somewhere nice. She has no qualms about this. In this world, if you don’t fight, you lose.

And Trish doesn’t lose.

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FIFTEEN

Rain hammers the awning above the Value Comfort Hotel entrance as Sadie wrestles her wheelie bags through the downpour. She shoulders the heavy door open, pins it with her hip, and yanks the bags over the threshold. Inside, the lobby smells of damp carpet and stale coffee.

Water pools at her feet. She can feel a strand of hair plastered to her forehead. Behind the laminate counter, a girl with blue fingernails doesn't look up from her phone until Sadie is right in front of her.

Sadie checks in as Laura Thomas, a graduate student studying Latin American ritual.

"Can you tell me the best way to get to the airport?" Sadie asks as she takes her key card.

The clerk rattles off directions and mentions that the elevator is broken.

"Both the restaurant and the bar are closed," she adds for good measure.

Great.

Sadie trudges up to the second floor with her dripping bags. She can feel her hands trembling. The key card reader blinks red. Red. Green. It plays its game as cool terror washes over her, followed by seething rage. The thought that Trish isn't serious gets shoved aside by the harsh reality that she is.

The door opens. The room is gross. Pulling back the covers, she inspects the sheets. No bugs, but the pillows are questionable. She pinches apart the lumps in one before throwing it back down. Grabbing her phone and wallet, she races down the stairs and strides out the front door. She hasn't eaten all day; she doesn't want to, but she knows she must. Huddled in her hoodie, she trudges past a flooded gutter that's clogged with litter.

She nears a bar with an old-timey sign of a smiling fish wearing a gold crown. The sounds of drunken revelry spill into the street. She cuts across quickly to avoid it. The rain comes harder now. In her hurry, she clips a sandwich board and sends it skidding.

The sign reads:

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.

She stares at it. Two months with counselors who had talked her through the program. They'd even brought meetings into the facility. But a social worker from the Agency had taken her aside right at the beginning and spelled it out. Anonymity only goes so far. Intelligence personnel can't rely on it. Ever. Even attending is a risk. Speaking? Out of the question. The social worker had armed her with substitutes instead. Mental drills and thought-control tricks.

Sadie blinks rain from her lashes and sees a glowing neon cross above the door. A priest steps out, steady in the downpour. He rights the fallen board.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see it."

"Don't be sorry." He wipes the rain off his sleeve. "Come in and dry off."

Sadie hugs her hoodie tighter.

"I can't," she says.

He pauses, as if he knows not to push too hard.

"We've got AA in here and a supper. I brought sweet potato casserole. You don't have to be in AA to join in."

Her throat locks. She shakes her head and says, “I just … can’t.”

He waits. No judgment. No impatience. Just quiet rain between them.

It’s like he knows.

The words are out before she can stop them. “I know about AA … uh, sort of…” She points at the sign.

Her laugh comes out jagged and misplaced.

“Not that it matters,” she goes on. “Forget it.”

“Sure, it matters,” he says gently. “First step is always the hardest.”

Sadie flinches and shakes her head too quickly.

“I’m not here for that. I was just passing by. Wrong place, wrong time. Sorry. Story of my life.”

“You look like you’ve been carrying something heavy,” he says softly.

Her eyes flick up, sharp.

“Who isn’t?” she snaps. She instantly backpedals. Her voice is softer and almost apologetic. “Sorry. I just … I can’t explain. Not to anyone. Not right now.”

He nods once.

“Fair enough.”

Sadie’s shoulders ease. She swipes at her wet cheek.

“I should go.”

“Promise me you’ll eat,” he says with quiet authority. “There’s a diner by the bus station. Open all night. Get something warm in you.”

She nods while already moving away.

“Thanks.”

“Every saint has a past,” he calls after her. “Every sinner, a future.”

Sadie doesn’t look back.

Casserole and salvation. They just can’t help themselves.

Her pulse is hammering. Her head is a mess. She told him nothing. She’s sure of it. But … she’s convinced he made her. It’s because she’s falling apart.

Or maybe he’s working for Trish. She does stuff like that—all the time. Sadie’s family could not be more vulnerable. And she’s the one who has put them in danger.

It’s all her fault.

Sadie keeps her head down and trudges through the rain. Her sneakers slap through puddles until the bus station’s fluorescent glow appears. The diner next door has some tired truckers and scattered insomniacs. She pushes the door open. A blast of greasy warmth and frying onions hits her face.

A waitress with her hair piled high gestures toward a booth by the window. Sadie slides in and peels off her hoodie. She stares at the rain dripping down the glass. The clink of dishes and the low hum of country music make her feel even worse.

“What can I get you, hon?” the waitress asks.

Sadie blurts the first thing she sees on the laminated menu. “Cheeseburger. Fries. A Coke, too. Please.”

The waitress nods and walks off, leaving Sadie twisting her paper napkin. She catches her reflection in the glass. Her hair is stringy, and her eyes are ringed red. Her face looks raw. Exposed.

Don’t look too long. Don’t think too hard.

She tries to steady her breathing, but her chest won’t unclench.

The plate arrives. She forces herself to eat. *Chew. Swallow. Repeat*. The food tastes like nothing, but she eats. She keeps her hands busy and her head down.

The waitress slides her bill onto the table, but it isn’t just a receipt—it’s tucked inside a clean, unaddressed envelope.

“Man of the cloth dropped this off for you,” the waitress says.

Sadie’s eyes lock onto it. Her brows draw together, a small knot tightening beneath her ribs. She reaches out, her fingertips dragging the

envelope across the sticky Formica toward her. When she slides her thumb under the flap, her stomach does a slow, heavy roll.

She pulls out the slip, and with it, a folded piece of lined paper filled with tight, disciplined handwriting. Her hand trembles, sending a tiny, persistent flutter through the paper as she focuses on the first line.

You were so careful not to say anything.

That told me everything.

I walked the same ground you're on now. Different bosses. Same work. I barely made it out.

My sponsor saved me. Used to be my informant. He taught me how to stay alive, one step at a time.

I was a dead man walking.

Takes one to know one.

He still runs a meeting. Online. Safe if you do it right. Buy a burner. Dial in, don't use the app. Number and meeting ID are on the back. His handle is Anon381. If you're not ready to speak, just listen. If you are ready, he'll know what to do.

If I'm right about you, tell him Father Jim sent you. Then burn this letter.

If I'm wrong, burn this letter anyway. +FJ

Sadie crushes the letter in her hand. Heat climbs her neck.

His informant saved him?

She swallows a bitter taste.

Some ex-Bureau washout playing savior.

Her jaw aches from how hard her teeth are clenched. Sanctimonious, drumming-up-drama prick.

Pathetic.

She squeezes the crushed paper tighter, her fingernails biting into her palm. Absolute next-level virtue signaling from a dinosaur.

What a complete loser.

A sudden wave of cold sweat breaks across her collarbone.

Her lungs refuse to expand. She can’t get a breath in. Her vision smudges at the edges. The diner’s fluorescent lights hum too loudly, vibrating inside her skull.

Go turn the Brazilian Einstein. Do this, no, do that. Burn the letter. Blah, blah, blah.

Every order lands like a hand on the back of her neck, pushing. And her whole body does what it always does when something pushes—it locks. Refuses. Slams every door at once.

She squeezes her eyes shut.

Stop. That’s the PDA. Just chill.

She forces a long, ragged breath through her nose, counting down from five until the room stops tilting and her chest finally loosens.

Slowly, she coaxes her hand open. Her palm is damp. Using the heel of her hand, she smooths out the crushed, wrinkled paper against the tabletop, pressing out the creases until the text is legible again. She slides it back into the envelope and tucks it deep into her inner pocket.

She drops a few bills next to her half-empty plate and stands.

When she steps outside, she pulls her hood low. The rain has tapered off into a cold, clinging mist, but her head feels heavy, pressurized by the low sky. She doesn’t hesitate. She walks straight toward the harsh neon glow of the convenience store next to the bus terminal.

Inside, under the buzzing white lights, she points to the cheapest burner hanging on the rack behind the register. She buys a pack of Marlboros and a

lighter. She slides cash across the counter. The kid behind the register barely looks at her.

Walking back to the hotel past the bar, she feels the pull. The absolute promise that if she just has a few, everything will be all right. She snaps into gymnast mode and walks the last stretch as if it were a balance beam. One foot in front of the other. Deviation forbidden.

Back at the Value Comfort, the hall stinks of gross human activity that hasn't ever been properly cleaned or ventilated. A door down the hall bangs open. Laughter spills out. Sadie lets herself into her room. She throws the bolt and dumps the burner on the desk. She paces and wrings her hands.

She lights a cigarette, a habit she had picked up in treatment. Maybe it'll help. She gags, stubs it out, and keeps pacing. It was better with the other addicts. Some of them really got her. Some of them just wanted to fuck her. Wasn't going to happen. At intake, her counselor had warned her: "Finding someone in here is like buying a car in a junkyard."

Treatment had drilled it into her. She's in the terminal phase of addiction. Addiction doesn't plateau. Without recovery, it only ends one way—in jails, institutions, or death. She remembers the counselor's voice.

It will kill you.

It won't care that you're smart, or strong, or different.

Okay, fine.

She presses her palms to her eyes.

What did they say?

AA isn't perfect. God-talk. Slogans and coffee breath. But it works.

Over and over, they hammered that. Then that creepy Agency social worker had told her she couldn't do AA.

Her breath comes ragged. She tries the mental stuff the social worker told her to do.

Engage the prefrontal cortex. Force logic.

She squeezes her eyes closed and tries the grounding math. Count backward from a thousand by sevens.

A thousand, nine hundred ninety-three, nine hundred eighty-six...

It's not working. The numbers blur and dissolve. All she can feel is the need to drink.

She takes her work phone into the bathroom, leaves it on the sink, and turns on the fan. She shuts the door on its roar, sits down on the bed, and stares at the burner.

Sadie rips open the burner's packaging with her teeth. Fingers trembling, she slots in the prepaid SIM and plugs the phone in. The cheap plastic thing hums to life. She dials the number from the letter and punches in the meeting ID.

Her jeans are still damp from the rain. She sits cross-legged on the bed, knees bouncing, the phone pressed to her ear. A tinny chime. Then voices, overlapping, apologizing, going quiet. Someone reads the Preamble. Someone else talks about picking up a white chip after relapsing.

They ask if there are newcomers. Her thumb hesitates over the keypad. Then she presses *9.

"I've got a hand up from a caller ending in 0613," a rough voice says. "Go ahead, friend. Star six to unmute."

Sadie swallows hard and presses *6.

"I'm in hell," she says flatly. "I'm messing up my life and putting my family at risk. I black out when I drink. When I use. I can't stop. Satan's running the show. Satan with tits and teeth."

She laughs.

"I want to die. That's all," she adds.

"Thank you," the group replies in unison. "Keep coming back."

She almost hangs up. Humiliated.

Then the rough voice comes back on the line. "Caller ending in 0613, don't go anywhere after we close. I'll be giving you a call."

Her pulse jumps. He can see her number.

The meeting drags on. Other voices share. She half-listens, the phone hot against her ear. When the closing prayer ends, she hangs up and stares at the burner in her hand.

It rings.

Her thumb hovers. It twitches. She forces herself to answer.

“Okay,” says the voice from the meeting. “At least you picked up. That’s a start.”

Sadie fights the urge to hang up. She manages, “Hey.”

“This is Anon381. Well … call me Charlie. What should I call you?”

Sadie hesitates. Her eyes sweep the depressing, dimly lit room. They land on a dog-eared, laminated placard propped on the nightstand next to a plastic ice bucket. It features a faded cartoon halo.

BE AN ANGEL TO THE ENVIRONMENT!
PLEASE USE OUR RECYCLING!
HANG TOWELS TO REUSE. LEAVE USED TOWELS IN THE BATHTUB, AND WE WILL REPLACE THEM!

So cheery.

“Father Jim sent me,” she says. “You can call me Angel.”

There’s silence and then a low chuckle.

“Okay, Angel,” the voice says. “Nice to meet you. He actually sent me a text a little while ago, giving me a heads-up that you might be dialing in. That old bastard still saving strays, huh? He saved me once, too.”

Something in Sadie loosens.

“The way he puts it, you saved him,” she says.

“Does he now?”

“Anyway, I don’t know why I’m even doing this,” she blurts. “I’m … I’m not supposed to talk. To anyone. About anything.”

Charlie lets the silence stretch.

Then he says, steady and sharp, “Girl, you don’t have to believe this, but I’ve been where you are.”

Her stomach flips. She swallows.

Don’t fall for it. If that priest is working for Trish, then so is this guy.

“I’m not sure—”

“That tone. Every word’s half-loaded, like you’re checking it for landmines before you let it out. That’s the sound of somebody who’s being worked. Being run. Played like a piece on the board. I know it. I used to talk the same way when the Feds were running me.”

Sadie goes utterly still.

Charlie continues, calm now. “It’s like a leash, right? Even when they’re not yanking it, you still feel it. Doesn’t feel good. Fucks everything up. And you don’t even remember what it felt like to run free.”

She rubs her neck. Then it slips out before she can stop it.

“Yes.”

It’s as if he reached down her throat and pulled the truth out barehanded.

“God, yes,” she sobs.

“And that’s the only difference between you and me right now, Angel,” Charlie says. “I’m free. Really free. I cut the leash. You can hear it in my voice. No handler. No gang. No bottle. No dealer. Nobody owns me. That’s why you called. ’Cause you want that, and you can *hear* that I have that.”

Sadie’s chest heaves. She can feel it in her gut. He’s right.

That’s not what’s important right now.

What’s important is her nephew. If she picks up again, she blows the job—and Trish will make him pay. She *will* do it. Sadie has no doubt about it. Trish will make it really bad. She’ll scare him first. She’ll do it in front of her brother, too.

Sadie shudders. She presses her forehead against her knees.

“How do I do this?” she whispers.

“One day at a time,” Charlie says. “It’s ugly, and it’s hard, but it’s the only way.”

Sadie feels the smallest spark of possibility. That she might breathe the way he’s breathing now. The way normal people get to breathe. Free people.

She kills it.

“I don’t think it’s going to work for me. I know what you’re going to say, but really … it’s … Things are so messed up right now.”

Charlie doesn’t miss a beat.

“Yeah. I know that drill. Gang had me wrapped tight. Then the Feds dug into me for intel. Same collar. Different leash. What a mess. There were killings. They threatened my family and killed my homeboy. I was their fucking circus bear. Dancing on command. You get used to editing every word out of your mouth. Never showing weakness. Never telling the truth. Master liar. Sound right?”

Sadie’s eyes sting. This guy knows the game. That, or he’s working hard to sell her that idea.

“You’re thinking about hanging up on me, aren’t you? I’d want to hang up, too, if someone got too close too fast. Thing is, Father Jim only sends me the last-gaspers. So we don’t have a lot of time to play the ‘can you trust me’ game. All that touchy-feely shit. If I’m reading you right, girl, you are *way* up shit creek. No paddles. Big fucking rapids ahead. Pickin’ up speed.”

Last-gaspers.

She’s heard the phrase before. The physicians at the treatment center had said it differently, but it meant the same thing. People a few breaths from dying. They had looked so genuinely concerned over her lab results.

Sadie pinches the bridge of her nose.

“Yeah, sounds about right.”

He continues, “But let me tell you something, Angel. It’s one thing to lie all the time to others. But lying to yourself? Those whispers that you can handle it? That’ll kill you faster than the dope or the street. I OD’d at twenty-six. Woke up cuffed to a hospital bed with cops at the door. The gang had already written me off as dead. Small army of nuns set to work on me. Tough ladies. Hooked me back up to source. Saved my life. That was my gift. You don’t always get a second shot. You got one right now.”

She presses her palm against her sternum. It feels like a last-ditch attempt at holding her chest together.

“I don’t even know what the real me is anymore.”

“Yeah, I didn’t either,” Charlie says. His voice isn’t soft. It’s matter-of-fact. “The steps gave me that. Gave me something to stand on. Made me face the hard stuff. Made me admit I was an addict and powerless. That’s Step One. You do that, and you stop dying for one day.”

Her laugh barely makes it out this time.

“Powerless?” she snorts. “I’ve flipped people who swore they’d never betray their family. Their country. Don’t tell me I’m powerless.”

“I’m telling you,” Charlie says, sharper now, “you’re powerless over the bottle, the pill, and the pipe. You think you run it, but it runs you. Just like my set ran me. Just like your bosses run you now. That’s the disease. It’s not about booze or gangs. It’s about losing yourself.”

Sadie bites her lip and shakes.

“I black out,” she admits. “I don’t remember nights. I wake up with people I don’t know. I’ve wrecked ops. And I still think I can control it.”

“That’s how I knew,” Charlie says. “I used to think if I just stuck to beer, or only used with the homies, I was fine. Then I was smoking rocks off a piece of foil in a stolen car. And all the while I was telling myself I had control. Until the paramedics brought me back.”

“I can’t do this anymore.” Her voice cracks. “But I can’t stop. Like, I can’t.”

“You don’t gotta stop forever. You stop today. You don’t pick up today. Tomorrow, you do the same. And you let other people carry you till you can walk. That’s how it works.”

Sadie closes her eyes. The fan whirrs from the bathroom. The burner’s cord digs into her cheek.

“I don’t deserve it. Not after what I’ve done.”

“Bullshit,” Charlie says flatly. “You don’t get clean ’cause you deserve it. You get clean ’cause you’re dying. Deserve’s got nothing to do with it. Grace don’t care if you’re a priest or a gangbanger or a spook. You either take the help or you don’t.”

Her tears come hot and sudden.

“You don’t even know me,” she gets out.

“I know enough,” he says. “I know you’re one of us. I can hear it in your voice. And I know Father Jim doesn’t send just anyone my way. So here’s the deal. You keep calling me. I’ll sponsor you. We’ll do the steps. One by one. No shortcuts. And if you follow through, Angel, you’ll get free. Not perfect. But free.”

Sadie wipes her face with the back of her sleeve.

Charlie keeps talking.

“You want war stories, I got ’em. Blood on my hands. Shit I’ll never forget. And I still get up in the morning. I kiss my wife, go to work, and thank God I’m not who I used to be. You can have that, too. But only if you want it bad enough.”

Sadie forces the words out.

“I want it.”

“Good.” Charlie exhales. “Then you keep that burner close. You call me instead of picking up. Doesn’t matter if it’s three in the morning. You call.”

Her hand shakes as she grips the phone tighter.

“Okay.”

“Alright then,” Charlie says, and for the first time, his voice softens. “Welcome, Angel. You ain’t alone anymore.”

Sadie hangs up.

It’s late. She grabs the lighter and goes into the bathroom. The fluorescent light flickers above her. It’s a sickly yellow. She flicks the lighter and holds the flame under Father Jim’s letter.

As the paper blackens, the words jump out at her. *If I’m right about you.* Ink bleeds as flames lick it down to brittle ash. She drops it into the sink and runs the tap until the remains dissolve into a gray smear. The smell of scorched paper sends her straight back into the past.

China. Sichuan Province. The underground lab.

Her cover had been a Belarusian biomedical engineer. It was an identity she wore like skin. She was smooth and precise. Full of technical fluency and quiet gravitas.

The target: Haoyu Wu. Biochemist and entomologist. Born in Hong Kong to parents sent from the mainland as Party officials. A prodigy so desperate to belong that he would design pathogens to tilt the balance of nations.

He was easy. Too easy. All she had to do was amplify the loneliness already hollowing him out.

A weekend away in Tengchong, down near the Myanmar border. Hot springs and mist. Their bodies steaming in the water while the vents hissed around them. He had been giddy. Bold enough to request time off from the lab. He was certain that his brilliance made him untouchable.

He grinned on the jet like a man in ecstasy. But it wasn’t ecstasy. It was her. She had already rewired his circuits and left him dopamine-starved. His serotonin blunted. She worked him until his only relief was her gaze. Her voice. Her touch.

He was polite even while unraveling. Thanking waitresses and pretending to enjoy food that his body rejected. His eyes always darted

around. Frantic. Frightened. Anchored only when she reached across the table.

Then the tinfoil. He had lined their hotel shower with it. Sealed them inside a mirrored cocoon. He dragged her in with a bottle of baijiu in hand.

They stood barefoot in their underwear under the bright, crinkling foil.

His face had been sharp with resolve. Tears streamed as he whispered, “It’s a population control measure. A big one. You must have realized by now.”

She played docile. Blinked. Whispered, “Are you sure?”

“I’m a biochemist.” A breath caught in his throat, almost a laugh. “I’m an entomologist. I’ve spent my life studying how vectors become weapons.”

An aerosol virus. The opening gambit. Natural viruses die fast in the open air. What they’d made had been tweaked to linger.

And the “main play” was something bigger. Something only he was building.

His voice slurred, but his terror was crystalline.

“It looks like a reset.”

He swigged hard and pointed at her chest with the neck of the bottle.

“They want to cull the herd. We have to stop them,” he said.

Then the proposal. Four carats, shaking between his fingers as he said, “We need to look the part. Will you marry me?”

She let him slide the ring on and whispered, “Yes.” She made it as real as it could be.

He had wept into her collarbone.

“I know you love me. I know you’re good.”

And then, softer, he said, “But I also know you’re not Belarusian.”

The way he said it. It was gentle and amused. Resigned. He knew what she was doing. A prodigy unraveling, but not stupid. Never stupid.

She had smiled through the guilt and fed him enough to keep him upright. She maintained the performance until Trish was happy.

And then he was gone. Dead.

The military-industrial complex can always use next-gen biologicals. The same contractors that claim to build biodefenses are always circling like vultures over anything this lethal. The aerosol work alone was worth bringing him out.

But the insects were something else. That work existed in fragments. Some in the lab. Some in his notes. The rest in his head.

She had delivered him alive. Somewhere between the handoff and the debriefing, someone had decided that was a problem.

Another service stepped in. Maybe Mossad, maybe the French. Trish wouldn't say who. They didn't just assassinate him. They scrubbed his existence and corrupted his research to ensure it could never be replicated.

And Haoyu? Disposable. A necessary casualty in a shadow war to keep the apocalypse in check. She should have known he was never going to walk out alive.

Sadie braces her hands on the cheap hotel sink. Her chest is heaving. The fan whirrs louder. The mirror is cracked. Her reflection is splintered.

She leans closer, and her breath fogs the glass.

"Never again."

The fog from her words fades almost instantly.

Good. It's better that way.

She already knows it's a lie.

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SIXTEEN

Nancy’s glare sharpens behind her reading glasses.

“Ms. Temple was readmitted last night.”

“Hm. I see. Thank you for informing me, Nancy,” Adrian says. He clasps his hands loosely and leans in a fraction of an inch, giving her his full, respectful attention.

“No need to thank me. It’s my job.”

“Of course. Of course. You are quite efficient at it, Nancy.”

“That’s enough with the excessive flattery.”

“Just being positive.”

“That’s great. If you want to be useful, someone dumped her meal tray on the floor. I haven’t had it cleaned up.”

It is always better to have Nancy on your side.

“I got it,” he says.

In the janitor’s closet, he finds a broom and dustpan. Then he sees the coveralls hanging in the back. Gray. The same kind she wore the night she robbed the medication room.

The nymph.

He has the photo from the stairwell on his phone. A young woman, twenty-five at most, glancing back over her shoulder. He has looked at it every night since.

He’s searched for her. Club after club, dry ice rolling across the dance floors, strobes cutting through the haze. He’s checked every face. Wrong jaw. Wrong hair. Too tall. Too soft. A thousand faces, and none of them hers.

She’s a ghost.

He takes the broom and dustpan and heads for the calming rooms.

Ms. Temple is in one of the new ones. The modern padded room. Very humane. Very safe. Womblike, even. Dim, soothing lights.

She sits up on the small bed. Gray curls piled on her head. Prim features. A kind face.

“Welcome back, Ms. Temple.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lowell,” she says, and lifts her hospital gown.

He waits, unbothered, until she lets it fall.

Today she looks smaller. Her family only brings her in when she stops eating. They still won’t say the uncle’s name.

He sweeps up the spilled tray. Green Jell-O for dessert.

“Mr. Chin is back, did you know? We had a nice talk about Cinderella at breakfast,” Ms. Temple says.

“Oh?”

“He told me about the older version of the story. The more powerful one. Ye Xian. Chinese, from the Tang dynasty.”

“Mm, is that so?”

“Yes. He said it’s the story of being saved from a family that doesn’t treat you right. From people who use you to meet their own needs. In the old one, the stepmother is stoned to death.” She smooths her gown over her knees. “He said Disney kept the shoe and lost the stones. That the power went out of her once she became a theme-park princess.”

Adrian keeps sweeping. They are a good match here in the calming room.

He can only think of those coveralls.

This is a magnificent opportunity.

He can't reenact that night without the nymph. But a reenactment doesn't need the original. Only someone to stand in her place.

One person acts out the event. The others feel it before they understand it. Voice, breath, posture. The body gets there first.

"Ms. Temple, we've known each other for quite some time now, haven't we?"

"Yes, Doctor," she says, pleased.

He leans closer, eyes on hers. "Tell me. Do you trust me?"

Her eyes widen, and she nods. "With all my heart, Doctor. You know that."

They laugh at the same moment.

Mirror neurons.

"Excellent," he says. "I'll be back before you know it."

He strides back to the janitor's closet. His fingers graze the coveralls. Desire hits him instantly.

It's working already.

He bundles them under his arm and hurries back. Why hadn't he thought of this sooner?

She watches him glide in.

"Ms. Temple, we're going to try something a little different today. I thought we might do some shadow work."

"Oh yes. You've always said the power of the shadow is very great." She swings her legs on the bed like a little girl.

"It certainly is." He holds up the coveralls. "These will fit you nicely. You won't have to take off your gown. Just slip them on over top."

He motions for her to stand.

"One might say that any healing in our horrible world can only be done by owning our shadows, Ms. Temple."

She would consent to anything he asked. She already has.

She hops off the bed. “Do you want me to wear these?”

“Yes, please.”

She steps into the coveralls and zips them up. “Now what would you like me to do, Doctor?”

The same current he felt the night of the robbery creeps up through him. His perception tilts. The room blurs at the edges.

In the dim light, in the coveralls, she could be anyone. She could be the nymph.

He thumbs open the photo from the stairwell. Just to be sure.

This will be so good for both of them.

“We’ll now engage with a shadow theme,” Adrian says.

“Theme?”

“A very simple arrangement. I only want to do this if you’re perfectly at ease.”

“What kind of arrangement?”

She’s so eager to get it right. So endearing.

“Would you like to play a robber? And I’ll try to stop you. Does that feel safe?”

She thinks about it, nods, and smiles.

He smiles back. His voice stays level. “Wonderful. When you’re ready, say something like ‘Give me what I want’ and grab my arm. Is that okay?”

“Are you sure?” she asks. “It seems…”

“I’ll only be sure if you’re sure. We can stop anytime. This is playful shadow work. If it stops being fun, we stop. So, are you comfortable with the robber theme?”

Another nod. Another smile. “Oh yes, Doctor. I am.”

“Excellent.” He takes a deep breath. “Let us begin, shall we?”

Ms. Temple walks up to him and clutches his arm.

“Give me what I want!” she says in her best robber voice.

Her eyes go wide, lit from the same current. Something in him gives way. He drops to his knees with a cry.

The door opens. She lets go of his arm.

“Is everything okay?”

It’s Kirks.

Ms. Temple frowns. “I didn’t really attack him, Dr. Kirkpatrick. We’re just in a theme. He asked me to. Shadow work.”

She scurries back onto the bed in her coveralls.

Adrian stands. Kirks’s eyes flick down, then back up.

“I see. Dr. Lowell is wanted at the nursing station. I’ll just borrow him.”

“Great work, Ms. Temple.” Adrian smiles at her on his way out.

Kirks puts a hand on Adrian’s back and ushers him out of the calming room.

“It’s not good news, I’m afraid, Adrian.” He motions to an empty room. “Would you like to take a seat?”

His tone is condescending and grating. Kirks absolutely ruined a perfect reenactment.

Adrian stays standing. “Just say it.”

It’s about the department head position.

“What, here in the hall?”

“Yes, here in the hall.”

Let him have his glory.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this.” Kirks hesitates. “Your mother has passed away.”

The words nearly knock him over. He leans on the wall. All he can feel is the dampness on his pant leg growing cool. He straightens, and Kirks grips both his shoulders to steady him.

“Do you have someone to lean on?”

“Yes, thank you.” Adrian steps out of reach. “I didn’t know she was so unwell.”

“Sometimes they go quickly like that. I’ve got your patients covered. Take the week off.”

Of course. Kirks has everything under control, as always.

Adrian gathers his things from his office. No wait for the elevator today. He has the whole car to himself.

She’s gone.

He clutches his briefcase with both hands. A sharp sensation of falling cuts through him. He gasps. The briefcase hits the floor, and he grabs for the handrail.

The elevator lurches to a stop.

The doors open at his parking level. He picks up his briefcase and walks to his Hyundai.

Then he stops.

He didn’t even ask where she was.

Did she make it to the hospital?

Why didn’t the care aide service call his cell? He takes out his phone.

They did.

And so did she.

Adrian whimpers. He didn’t even hear it ring.

They were in another world, the two of them.

He plays the latest voicemail from the care aide. Her body is at the house. The undertakers are on the way.

He hopes someone held Mother’s hand.

That’s why she kept calling. She was dying, and she needed him. And he wasn’t there.

Adrian punches himself in the face.

He unlocks the car, slides in, and starts it. Warm blood trickles down his lip and into his throat. It drips onto his lap.

He eases out of the space and rolls toward the gate. Stops.

The barricade lifts.

Maybe if I reverse, it won't be true. Maybe I can get her back.

It doesn't work that way. He knows that.

He forces himself to drive forward into a world without her.

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SEVENTEEN

Time slips and stutters. Her eyes crack open. She's naked. There's a man beside her, and a piercing pain in her head. There's hot, lime-sour vomit in the back of her throat.

A flash from last night—a bartender smashing limes, screaming "Pinga Power!"

The vomit wants out. There's a blazer with four golden rings on each arm draped over the desk chair. *He's a pilot*. He's also large, super still, and lying on her arm. She slides free carefully and sits up. The stationery pad on the bedside phone table says GRAND AUGUSTA HOTEL.

She looks over by the door. Her wheelie bags are there. Her work phone is on the table. She grabs it and pushes off the bed. The floor is tilting. She leans on walls and furniture to get to the bathroom and picks her clothes up along the way.

The bathroom is black marble everything. She should be at the apartment already.

She looks at her phone. Her heart lurches.

A missed call from Trish. Below it, her camera roll, filled with photos from the day before.

The first ones are from LAX. That's where she started drinking. She opens her mouth to vomit in the sink. Nothing comes. Her esophagus has

probably dissolved. She sees a lot of flesh on her phone. Mostly hers. Sadie covers her eyes and moans. Flashes. Tangled limbs. Someone's laugh. Too many hands. There had been cocaine. She looks down. There are traces of it between her tits.

She swipes up what's left on her finger. She rubs it on her gums before she sits down and pees. She closes her eyes and whimpers. She remembers someone licking her eyeball while she screeched, "I'm blind. I'm blind drunk," and then laughed and screeched some more.

Warmth floods up through her, heavy and slow. Her limbs turn to sand. Not coke. Not only coke. Fentanyl. *Not now*. The pilot is too still. *He's warm, though.*

Your nephew, her mind barks.

He doesn't get to die because you can't stand up straight.

She dresses, collects everything, and checks the pilot's pulse. He has one. That's good enough.

She needs to talk to Charlie. No burner.

Shit.

She can't think about that now. She can barely walk to the elevator. Her wheelie bags sink into the overly plush carpet. Her head hums louder than the elevator music. She wishes it would keep going. Down, into some other dimension where none of this is happening.

The doors open to the lobby. She pushes sunglasses onto her face and extends the handles on her bags. Using them like rolling crutches, she wobbles out through the lobby doors.

A blast of bright light and cool air hits her.

She gets into a cab and tells the driver where near the university she needs to go. The city assaults her through the glass: bright facades, motorbikes threading impossible gaps, vendors shouting under striped awnings.

Just get to the apartment and check in with Trish.

There are sex videos on her work phone.

Work phone, Sadie. Trish has seen it all.

They autoplay a tiny bit as she deletes them. The cabbie hears a moan. She turns the volume down. There she is, making all the right moves. Making all the right sounds. Sadie cringes.

Oh God. Your nephew is on the line and you're doing some Hansel and Gretel thing—leaving breadcrumbs so you know what the hell happened.

"These drivers are crazy *louco*!" The cabbie swerves around a motorbike. The car judders over cobblestones. He tailgates, lurches, and stomps on the brakes. Rubber squeals on steep-hill starts and fast, skidding stops.

"Yes, crazy *louco*."

The vomit changes its mind.

It wants out now.

Sadie clamps her jaw. Her breath is shallow. She's willing her stomach quiet. The cab jerks to a stop. She shoves bills at the driver and wrangles her bags. She half runs to the hulking apartment block and stabs the intercom. Her Portuguese flows smoothly. The lock buzzes, and the attendant presses keys into her hand. Seventeenth floor. The elevator grinds upward.

From the seventeenth, it would be so simple. One step out the window. In her state, she wouldn't feel a thing.

Her phone flashes the moment she opens the door. It's Trish. Two words.

About time.

It's okay. She made it. She's here in Brazil. She's perfect for the job. *Perfect.*

Trish will be happy. No trouble. No problems. She brings in her bags and locks the door.

The apartment is still. Sadie is not.

Sadie is a dysregulated hurricane.

She needs to talk to Charlie. The burner is gone, somewhere on the floor of a hotel room she barely remembers. She could dial in on the work phone. Trish would hear every word. She collapses face down on the sofa.

A thin relief tries to unfurl. That changes its mind, too. Sadie sits up. Stands. She's jumping out of her skin. This is the worst thing about coming down: waiting for sleep. It won't come. Not without downers, and she's not doing them. She needs to clear her head. If she works like this, she'll ruin everything. For real. *Everything.* Her nephew. She gulps water.

You're a mess. You need to rehydrate, eat, and sleep, she reminds herself.

She paces, forcing her gaze to objects. A sunburst mosaic of tiles in the shower. A tiny coffee carafe with its matching thimble cups. A clay water filter. A hand-knit doily dressing the propane tank. Domestic.

Quaint.

Somebody knitted that doily. Somebody lives here. Or did.

The Agency doesn't own apartments like this. It borrows them. A cousin of a cousin. A widow who needs the rent. Someone who owes someone a favor.

Or someone who didn't get a say.

She doesn't want to know which.

The fridge hums. It's empty. She orders *feijoada*. Brazilian comfort food. She flicks on the TV and waits.

Plan the approach. Get your head in the game.

She is here for one thing. The encryption key to João Marcelo's drone navigation system. Brilliant. They call him the "Brazilian Einstein." The poster boy for every up-and-coming techno-revolutionary and their army of hackers. He turned down glossy chairs at Stanford and fat American grants, even a promised push for a Turing Award.

Said no to all of it.

He's been clear. He won't be used for violence at the hands of the military.

The soft touch has failed. Now comes the hard touch … in the softest package. She pinches her thigh.

You. That's you.

The soft-hard touch.

Her food arrives. Sadie dishes some onto a plate and drops back onto the sofa in front of the TV.

Her eyes keep straying to the one window that opens. No balcony. Fine. A kitchen chair would do. She could fit through that gap if she turned one shoulder first.

Too easy.

She flips from the news to a *novela.* A Brazilian soap opera.

The attendant downstairs had been watching it. So had the doorman. *Novelas* everywhere, whole national psychodramas packaged in hour-long doses. Unlike American soaps, these have endings. Always love, honor, lust, and betrayal. But they always end with hope.

She won't see that part.

She'll be long gone.

Sadie eats what she can. She lets the beans soak up the alcohol, the drugs, the rest of it. Then she slides into a fitful sleep.

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EIGHTEEN

Rain falls hard over Seattle. Umbrellas gather in a circle around a hole in the ground. Adrian stands in the front row. His collar is damp. He doesn't mind that his shoes are sinking into the mud. He wants to feel himself anchored here and fixed in place.

His mother's death has shattered the dam that kept his father's suicide sealed away. Both losses swirl around him like floodwater, but he remains above them. Untouchable. As if the self who feels has stepped away and left Adrian with this stranger's body in the rain.

The casket rests on its straps. The wood has been polished smooth. It's gleaming even under this wet sky. It had looked better in the cathedral. She wanted this. A Christian burial. She had raged at God after her husband's suicide. Left the church in fury. Called priests liars and fools. But in the end, she still wanted to go to heaven.

We all do.

A priest steps forward. Rain plasters his white hair to his head. His stole clings to his shoulders. His voice is strong all the same. A voice that has said these words a hundred times.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

He speaks with assurance, in a rhythm carved out of centuries of belief. Adrian envies it and despises it.

Adrian listens patiently. When the prayers end, the priest gestures to him. The rain is louder now. Mourners shift as water drips from their umbrellas. Adrian steps forward with folded pages in his hand. He had worked on this eulogy night after night. Cut lines. Added new ones. She hadn't written him out of the will after all. He is the primary beneficiary. A very rich man. *Wealthy*, they'd call it.

He looks at the small crowd. The priest. His aunt, in her black coat, her face as stiff as it is pale. A handful of distant cousins who didn't really know her. The maître d' and other staffers from the Metropolitan Club.

Adrian begins.

"She was my mother. She was the person who gave me life. Every breath I draw began with her. She was the foundation beneath my feet."

His aunt shifts, and her eyes narrow, but Adrian presses on.

"She was fierce. Yes, some people might say she was hard. But I say she was strong. She had known sorrow, and still rose to face the world without fear. She taught me to endure. She taught me to survive. She showed me how to carry myself when everything falls apart. And things do fall apart in this life."

His aunt stiffens. Adrian feels her stare burning through him. She's the younger sister. She got tortured first, before he did. She would tell a very different story.

He keeps going.

"She taught me truth. Not a comfortable truth, but the real truth about life. She did not hide her pain. She did not sugarcoat the world. She told me things others would have hidden. And in her way, she gave me courage. Courage to face whatever came."

He lifts his chin and looks up through the falling rain.

“She was not perfect. She was flawed, as all of us are flawed. But she was my mother. And what I remember is her teaching me how to fight. Teaching me all about what the world does to us. What I remember most of all is her teaching me how to make it through.”

His aunt looks down now. Her mouth is a hard line.

“She leaves behind a son who owes her everything. I am that son. And I will carry her with me. Every step, every breath, and every word I speak is marked by her. If there is a heaven, she is in it now, and if there is not, she lives on through me. May she rest in peace.”

Adrian is done. He folds the paper slowly and slips it into his coat pocket. Rain and tears are indistinguishable on his face. The silence that follows is profound. The priest bows his head and begins the committal. The mourners shift again. His aunt stares at him in disbelief.

The straps creak. The casket begins to lower into the earth. Adrian steps forward.

He touches the wet wood.

“Goodbye, Mother.”

Then he steps back.

Soil clatters down. It’s black against the polished chestnut surface. A thud and then another thud. The ground is swallowing her. He doesn’t want her to go down there alone. Still, she goes.

The service ends. People drift away, black umbrellas tilted against the rain. Adrian stands alone for a long time as the grave fills. The grass around it has already been flattened by footsteps.

He’s in a fog. It’s a suspended and debilitated state. He hasn’t been able to eat or sleep. The psychologist in him is awed by it. So this is what grief does to a human being. He’d hoped the ritual would bring closure.

It has not.

His phone buzzes. He pulls it out with wet fingers. A text lights up on the screen.

Reminder: Therapeutic Reenactment tonight, 7:00 p.m.

He stares at it. The glow of the screen cuts through the gray rain.

Tonight.

The next act is already waiting.

He should cancel.

He looks over at the fresh grave beside his father’s.

No, he’ll go. This is good. He needs it. Because part of him—a big part of him—wants to lie down in that grave beside them. He would stay down there in the dirt. In the cold.

In the dark. Forever.

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NINETEEN

Sadie slides into a cab and asks for the University of São Paulo. The driver nods but says nothing. Fine by her. She doesn't need conversation. She needs João. If she can reach him, and if she can get close enough, the key will follow.

Walled mansions give way to a sprawl of shacks hammered together from billboards. Upside-down politicians beam down at her as the cab rattles past. Pinching his nose, the cabbie steers with his knees and shifts gears.

A short ride later, he drops her at a palatial stone building ringed with gardens. The university's main entrance. She passes the façade, then squat concrete blocks with recessed windows. All the way to the Escola Politécnica, where she finds the white-and-blue, 1950s-style Institute of Telecommunications.

Good. Now, where is he?

The air smells of chalk and ambition. A student glides past. Her face is lit with purpose. There's a small smile like she's already in on life's secret. Sadie locates João's office.

Empty.

A note's taped to the door—

At the protest.

Beneath it, a scrawled math riddle.

Great. Later.

The hallways echo. They're deserted. The doors are closed tight.

The math riddle tugs at her. Her head still feels packed with cotton. *No math today*. She drifts back toward the exit and brushes past a few students.

The women wear little makeup. They wear pale high-rise jeans and sneakers. Their hair either falls in long, easy waves or is twisted up in careless buns. Their hands are in motion and voices bright. Their laughter spills out in bursts. Their lightness seems to radiate. Everyone's tuned into the same frequency.

The men look relaxed, unarmored. Grounded in their bodies. Smiling as if nothing is chasing them. No visible strain in the air. No sharp edges of tension.

Sadie stiffens as she passes. She, on the other hand, is uptight and brittle. She's still carrying herself as if that cell phone were wedged between her cheeks. The Abundant Harvest clench. Perfect.

How can they be so at ease?

Because they don't live your nightmare life.

She's going to botch this job, and her nephew will pay.

The campus feels emptied out, and her nerves are close to snapping. She needs to generate charm, not this.

Good vibes, Sadie.

In a courtyard, glitter and cardboard scraps litter the ground. Two janitors are sweeping.

"What's going on?" she asks.

"The protest," one says as he leans on his broom. "They just left."

"Avenida Paulista?" she guesses.

"Yes, of course."

“But where are they starting from?”

Both shrug.

“If it is God’s will, you will find them,” he says, resting his chin on his hands at the top of the broom.

The other, a woman folding up a table, nods.

“Go with God. You will find them,” she adds.

Brazilians tell everyone to go with God.

“Thank you,” Sadie says. “You as well.”

Sadie flags down another taxi. The driver shakes his head at Avenida Paulista. Closest he’ll go is the subway. She gets in.

“*Desgraçados,*” the cabbie hisses, cursing various world leaders. On one wrist, he’s got eight bright prayer ribbons dangling.

“They’re killing Brazil. My family. My neighbors,” he says in a voice muffled by his mask.

Sadie scans the streets for protesters. They pass a market. There are hundreds of people with little shopping carts that have been painted in neon colors.

“Oh, sir. I don’t know what to say.” Her voice is quiet.

He shakes his head.

“Don’t say anything. Just raise a fist for me. I’m sorry I can’t get you closer. I’m not feeling well. I have to drive. We need the money,” he says with a shudder as he coughs into his mask.

His desperation is getting to her. She forces her shoulders down from her ears and takes a breath. He drops her by a subway station next to a cemetery. She gives him 800 US. He bursts into tears and pounds the steering wheel.

“May Our Lady protect you,” he finally cries. “Go with God.”

Sculpted stone angel heads peer down from the cemetery wall. Statues guarding the dead. Buckets of flowers spill color along the perimeter. Sadie walks past the swirl of petals. She descends into the cool of the subway.

The platform is packed. Sadie wedges in with a group of teens. In the car, one slides his hand higher on the bar so she can grip. He sways to a rhythm and brushes a man behind him.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the teen says.

“Not at all, my son. Good for you for marching,” the man answers with a smile.

The teens tumble out at her stop, and Sadie follows. She climbs the last steps and surfaces into sensory chaos. She freezes.

Drums pounding. Loudspeakers screaming against chants. Tear gas already in the air. Horses stamping. A police radio squawking. Mania.

The mirrored towers bounce everything back, doubling the noise and the fury.

Sadie scans for USP shirts. Nothing. She looks left and right. The teens are gone.

A current of protesters is splitting around her like water around a rock. Pro-president activists in elbow pads and gloves march in lines. Mounted police edge into the crowd. A horse rears. People scatter, shrieking.

Where are they—left or right?

She tries the street-lady’s yes-no trick.

Left?

Silence. She adds the preamble.

For the greatest good, left?

Her body tips back.

Must be right.

She cuts right and zigzags through the packed crowd. Some chants sound like a party. Some sound like a threat. Then she catches a flash of green in the crowd. A T-shirt. USP? She pushes closer with her heart thumping.

Bull’s-eye. Green USP shirts.

She moves toward them, but the crowd overwhelms her. A wall of bodies surges and pushes her sideways into a knot of chanting workers. She raises her fist with theirs, mouthing along. She's blending until she can peel free.

A mounted officer pushes through on a horse. They're both sweating and wild-eyed. Sadie gets knocked down, but a protester pulls her up. She edges forward again.

A sudden crush forms around a loudspeaker truck. She's pressed flat. Her ribs are squeezed tight. She holds her position until the crowd changes direction and the current carries her to the other side.

She takes a breath and scans again. More green shirts. She drifts closer casually. She's just any other marcher.

And there he is.

João Marcelo.

She threads through and finds space on his right. He notices her. She tries Portuguese.

"I want to march with you." Her voice trembles. "*Algorithm of Empire.* I feel so drawn to you. To your work."

João turns and stares at her. His eyes sharpen. He answers in English.

"I can tell you're American."

Tell him you're Canadian. Swedish?

She decides to admit it.

"Yes, I'm American."

He grips her elbow firmly and leans in.

"I hate Americans," he says, tightening his fingers. "Go away."

"Please," Sadie pleads, "let me explain."

"Let me guess—another offer I cannot refuse?" he jeers. "Another invitation to be raped by your ravenous demon country? Are you the foreplay this time?"

He shoves her arm aside.

“March somewhere else. Not here.”

Not good. Sadie edges back. A young woman in a green shirt grabs her hand and raises it high in the chant.

“Don’t listen to him,” the girl says, smiling. “You can march with us.”

Sadie nods and then gently slips her hand free. She’s trembling. Can’t lose her. The girl is a way in. She forces herself to be casual.

“You are a student?” the girl asks, searching for the English.

“Yes,” Sadie answers.

“What you study?” the girl presses while tilting her head.

“Ritual,” Sadie says. She’s trying to sound steady, but her eyes keep flicking back toward João.

“Our rituals?” the girl asks.

“Yes, some.” Sadie nods.

“Which ones?” the girl asks again.

“A few. Right now, the fusion of Mother Mary with Iemanjá, your goddess of the sea,” Sadie says.

“Ah, yes. Beautiful. Iemanjá.” The girl’s face lights up. “Not only our goddess. She is for everyone, no?”

“Yes. For everyone. Very beautiful,” Sadie says, forcing warmth into her voice.

“Strong women.” The girl’s voice softens. “But this is not ritual. This is just our way of life, no?”

“Yes. That’s what makes it so rich,” Sadie says.

“Rich?” The girl laughs. “Hm. Strange time to study, no?”

“Yes. Strange and exciting,” Sadie says, straining for casual.

The girl brightens.

“I take you up the coast to see sculptures of Iemanjá. Jeep. Open air. *Vento*—uh—windy, I mean,” she says with a grin.

Sadie smiles and nods. Her legs are shaking. Her vagina begins to object to all the walking. It’s aching and sore from the pilot and his friends.

Were condoms used?

No answer. She clamps down on the thought and focuses on the girl instead.

“I’m hearing chants about the Amazon?” Sadie asks.

“Yes. The fires,” the girl says. “When the trees are gone, only beef ranches.”

“The fires are big?”

“Yes. The trees will not live. The forest will be gone.”

Sadie sneaks a glance at João. He’s still close, but still unreachable. Her body thrums with hypervigilance. She can’t sustain this mask of ease forever. It’ll be a long march. Her vagina declares it’s done.

Sadie raises her fist and orders her vagina to *just shut up and keep moving.*

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TWENTY

The moment Trish steps into Laurel Park, she wonders why she didn't start coming to the races sooner. The clothes alone are worth it. She struts past betting screens and a bar to the grassy lawn beside the track.

Four large white tents host a pre-race party beneath their peaked canvas tops. Trish heads over. She finds the party cordoned off with golden velvet ropes and a track attendant.

He holds up a hand.

"Invitation only."

Trish pulls out a hundred-dollar bill.

"Here's mine."

The attendant takes it. He unfastens the bright brass coupler and waves her through.

"I'm afraid I'm out of heel stoppers for you, ma'am."

Trish regrets the stilettos immediately. Heels sinking into the grass with every step. Not a good look. She leans into her toes and manages. The fashion is on full display. Women in colorful dresses with wide-brimmed hats that are feathered and ribboned. Men in crisp linen suits with silk pocket squares.

She surveys the horses lined up in the parade ring. Chestnut, bay, and black coats gleam under the afternoon sun.

Now to pick the right horse.

A dapple gray named Lightning Bolt struts forward with ears pricked. Nostrils flaring and tail high.

“Isn’t he stunning?” Trish asks the woman beside her, who is wearing an off-the-shoulder pink dress.

The woman turns away coldly and adjusts her feathered hat. She laughs with her friends and sends pink chiffon billowing directly into Trish’s face.

A waiter passes with a tray of bubbly. Trish takes one.

Fine. I’ll get a closer look at the horses.

She steps, teeters, and loses both a shoe and the champagne. More giggles follow as she bends to yank the stiletto out of the sod. She pointedly ignores them and slips it back on.

She scans for the waiter but can’t see him through the power couples that are gliding past in styled symbiosis. She’s carried things for this country that none of these lightweights could even look at. And still, they swerve away like she’s contagious.

There’s no chance of mingling here anyway. Nobody mingles anymore. It reeks of desperation. Besides, the pre-race party is wrapping up.

Trish hobbles until she finds the waiter, grabs another glass, downs it, and smacks it back on the tray.

“I want to bet,” Trish says, eyeing the curved building near the track.

The waiter steadies the tray.

“That’s for our platinum elite guests. You’re not a member. You can bet back inside the main pavilion, ma’am.”

Trish trudges toward the pavilion. How does he know she’s not a member? What kind of place is this anyway?

The racetrack turns grubby fast. Gum-crusted concrete. Sticky floors. Old beer. Greedy faces shove toward the betting booths.

Grimy.

She arrives at the betting window and yanks the envelope from her bag. *Dave won't know*. She shoves the thick brick of cash—forty grand in hundreds—under the glass.

"Lightning Bolt to win."

The attendant's eyebrows go up. He stares at the stack and then signals a floor supervisor before looking back at her. The line behind her groans as he begins feeding the bills into the counting machine.

"Ma'am, for a cash wager this size, I need ID and a taxpayer identification number. Federal regulation."

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

He doesn't smile. Trish slides over her latest fake ID and recites the matching Social Security number. He types the information into his terminal.

"Crystal Reign," he says.

She nods.

Before he prints the ticket, a man in a sharp suit appears in the booth. A VIP host. He slides a sleek black lanyard under the glass along with her betting slip.

"Miss Reign," the host says. "A wager of this caliber entitles you to our platinum amenities. If you'd prefer not to stand with the general public, there's a private entrance just that way." He points behind her.

She smiles.

Trish's heels click against the worn-out concrete floor as she strides toward the VIP area. There it is: a vibrant red door with an attendant. She flashes her pass, and he opens the door.

Pockmarked concrete turns to polished marble. Instead of loud, raw yelling, the room is full of quiet, expensive chitchat over glass flutes. The harsh overhead glare is gone, replaced by dim, polite lighting, and even the air smells like it's been filtered and scented to hide the trash underneath.

The pink-dress brigade sweeps past Trish. One of them looks her up and down.

“Who let that in here?” she asks her friend, barely bothering to lower her voice.

They want a reaction. They want to size her up and see her shrink. Let them look. Trish grabs a drink from a passing tray and watches them move to a corner table. Every time the group leader opens her mouth, her little crowd squeals on cue. It’s high school all over again. The cool kids icing out the foster kid. Same game, just with more expensive shoes.

She downs the drink and heads for the restroom.

In the ladies’ room, Trish wrestles down the PTSD response that happens every time she uses the toilet. Nothing was off limits in Russia. Heat floods her face. It’s worse in public places. The floor tiles aren’t helping, either. They’re the exact same ivory grid style as the ones in that posh Alps resort clinic after her release. Was that the third hospital they dumped her in? She can’t remember.

The memory shatters as the pink brigade spills into the restroom, their loud, drunk laughter bouncing off the walls.

“What is she wearing? Did she get dressed in the dark?” the leader sneers.

“That dress is hideous,” another one chimes in.

“And look at the shoes,” a third adds, giggling.

Mafia wives. Probably carrying. They’re drunk, bored, and looking for an easy target to kick.

Wrong target. Trish’s hand slides into her Dior purse, her fingers finding the familiar, textured grip of her SIG Sauer P365. It’s small, light, and does the job.

Her phone buzzes against her knuckles.

Dave.

No time.

Trish pushes the stall door open and shoulders right through the middle of the pink group, her SIG held low inside the purse. She moves too fast for their sluggish, alcohol-soaked brains to track. One woman yelps. Another stumbles back against the sinks.

Trish grabs the heavy brass handle of the restroom door, jerks it open, and slips out into the hall.

Behind her, their voices chase her. Screaming. Cursing. Calling her disgusting for skipping the sink.

Good.

Let them be disgusted.

She makes it to the open-air observation deck, the breeze cutting the tension, and swipes the screen.

“Yeah, Dave.”

“Trish. We need the encryption key now. There’s been a development. Can you deliver?”

“Forty-eight hours,” she says, watching the grandstand lights blink on above the track. “You’ll have it.”

“Good. It’s important.”

He hangs up.

Thanks for the tip, Dave. Otherwise, she would’ve thought they were just exchanging recipes.

Trish dials the girl. She picks up on the first ring.

“Sadie,” Trish says.

“Trish, I—”

“Save it. I need the key now. Twenty-four hours.”

“That’s—”

“A yes. Your nephew. You know what happens if you don’t.”

Silence.

“You’ll have it.”

“Good,” Trish says. “Now move.”

Phone down. She exhales slowly, like a release valve. She orders a drink from a waiter. A mint julep appears, the silver cup cold and sweating.

Perfect.

She lets the glass linger against her lips, then takes a deep swig. There's sweet bourbon, then a cool bite of mint. Down on the track, Lightning Bolt stamps. His muscles are alive under his glossy hide. He's ready to run.

The excitement swells. Laughter and chatter are cresting around her, but it's not contagious. She's not here for them. She never is. She sets the drink down and straightens her shoulders. She feels the vibration in her veins.

The bell rings. The gates fly open. On the track, Lightning Bolt is true to his name. Purple and yellow silks. Mirrored goggles. Jockey welded to horse. One body. One purpose. Pure power. Pure speed.

That's how it's done.

The ground quivers as the pack closes in. Hooves drum. A blur of color, animal, sweat, and dirt tears past. The ice in her drink trembles with the roar of the crowd.

The pink brigade has wandered out to the deck. Her hand drifts into the purse. Her thumb brushes the SIG. Her eyes flick to the lady in the pink dress.

Pretty thing. Wonder what part of town she calls home, and who's waiting for her … or not.

Final stretch. The field opens up. It's all muscle and noise now. Lightning Bolt drives forward—sweat-slick and stretched full out. His hooves are pounding the dirt. He surges. It's neck and neck.

Then …

… he edges clear and hits the wire first.

Pleasure rises hot under Trish's skin. Her cheeks flush. Her lips twitch.

It's about time Sadie started doing what's she's told.

Trish holds the reins and the whip. Everything moves when she says move. Everything stops when she says stop.

Power made flesh.

Lightning on command.

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TWENTY-ONE

The subway car screeches around a dark curve, the overhead fluorescents flickering out for a brief, breathless second. Sadie leans against the rattling glass and rethinks her approach. João was raised by his grandmother. They're close. If Sadie can get to her, she can get to him.

Done.

Sadie swallows hard.

Back at the apartment, she pulls up the care home. Gated. One manned entrance for cars and foot traffic alike.

Her mind flickers to her nephew's face.

The grandmother is the leverage. Same as him.

Just get this done, Sadie.

She shakes her head.

This is so wrong. What else can she do?

Nothing in her bags looks official. She needs a suit. Instead, she packed for grad-student cover: bikinis, jeans, sundresses, and strappy tops.

She searches the apartment for clothes. There's nothing she can use. It would be nice to have station support, but Trish wants them kept out. Fine by Sadie. Station people trigger her PDA and waste time anyway.

She yanks a hanger too hard, and a blouse slides to the floor.

White, with light blue stripes.

Her breath catches.

Andrea’s blouse.

Or one exactly like it.

She remembers Andrea in it. She remembers her laughing with her sleeves rolled to the elbows. Singing along to music. Sadie presses the fabric to her face. It smells like nothing. Like someone else’s detergent.

She flings the blouse away like it burns her skin.

She tears through the closet, ripping hangers and yanking open drawers. Her breath is ragged. Her hands are shaking. She’s desperate for anything that looks official.

A soft knock at the door. Sadie jolts.

She opens it.

“My child, are you all right?” A small, watery-eyed old woman stands in the doorway.

“Yes, sorry to be so noisy.”

“Can I help you? I live across the hall. I’m Esmeralda.”

“I’m Laura. That is so kind of you. The airline lost my bags. I have an important meeting. Do you have any business clothes?”

Esmeralda’s eyes brighten.

“Of course. I used to be a lawyer. Come. I’ll fetch them for you.”

Sadie waits in the hall. Esmeralda returns with a blue seventies suit.

“It’s lovely. May I borrow it?”

“Of course.” Esmeralda starts to hand the suit over, then pauses. Her eyes narrow with interest. “Why do you want it, may I ask? What sort of meeting?”

She’s not just kind but nosy. The sort who collects gossip the way others collect mail.

Sadie forces a smile. “I’m a lawyer too. I have an urgent matter to discuss with someone.”

Esmeralda studies her. “And who is this someone?”

Sadie hesitates. Esmeralda doesn’t move. Only waits.

“It’s a personal matter.”

Esmeralda shakes her head. Her lips are pursed.

“No,” she insists. “You do not get a lawyer’s suit for a personal matter. Who is it?”

Sadie keeps her smile tight. “It’s sensitive.”

“I am old, not stupid. Sensitive for who?”

Sadie feels heat rise up her neck.

“I need to speak with Graça Marcelo,” she says, lowering her voice.

Esmeralda’s eyes sharpen. She holds the suit back against her chest.

“Graça is my friend. Why would you need to see her?”

Of course she is.

If Sadie had the time, hydration, or moral clarity to chase down the coincidence, she would.

She doesn’t.

Sadie pushes on.

“Because her grandson refuses to speak with us. He has ignored calls and evaded every formal outreach. Cross-border process is slow. My clients’ hands are tied, but he must hear us.”

“Your clients?”

“A US technology conglomerate.” Sadie chooses each word with care. “Powerful. Frustrated. And just between us—” She glances down the empty hall. “If João does not comply, I worry for his safety.”

Esmeralda’s fingers tighten around the hanger.

“João is reckless, but he is not a criminal,” she scolds. “He is brilliant. Too brilliant for his own good. Always was. I knew him when he was a boy. I watched that intelligence sour into arrogance.”

She shakes her head. Sadie’s got her.

“Still, he is devoted to Graça. He brings her flowers. Calls every day. Shows respect. He has her heart, even while he breaks it.”

Esmeralda lets out a dry laugh, then hardens.

“He carries on like John the Baptist. Shouting in the wilderness. Telling kings their business. And you know how that ends.” She pulls the hanger across her neck.

She studies Sadie again, searching her face.

“I need to come with you.”

“What?” Sadie asks. She tilts her head. “Why?”

“To act as counsel. If the situation is as you say, she needs me there.” Esmeralda’s voice softens. “Graça will be relieved to see you. She has tried everything to steer him back onto the right path. He’s always on the news. She already knows it’s very serious with João. She will listen to you. But she will need me to steady her.”

Sadie nods. There’s no time to argue.

“You’re right. I’ll need you there. Thank you. Let me change.”

“Use my guest room.”

Sadie quickly puts on the suit. It’s a little tight, but it fits. Esmeralda is waiting when Sadie comes out. She’s buttoned into a dark suit of her own. She has a small bowl in her hand.

“May I?” she asks, raising the bowl.

“We really need to get going,” Sadie says.

“This will not take long. We must. We are wrestling principalities and powers, my child.”

Esmeralda widens her stance. Commanding.

“Okay.”

She dips two fingers into the bowl. Water, green with crushed leaves. Rosemary and something astringent.

“Candomblé,” she says. “We prayed to the saints, but it was the Orixás who heard us. I always used this before difficult trials, when facing people with too much power. It protected me then. It will protect us now.”

The touch is firm and professional.

“Your ankles, so the earth holds you. Your throat, so truth cannot be stolen. Your mind, so it stays clear. And here,” she says as her palm rests flat on Sadie’s chest. “Your heart. So it does not betray you.”

Sadie’s pulse slows. Her breath deepens.

Esmeralda steps back, sets the bowl down, then catches Sadie’s wrist. Her grip is unexpectedly strong.

“It is done. We shall go.”

“Thank you,” Sadie says, clearing her throat.

Esmeralda’s eyes turn into sharp slivers.

“You are welcome, my child. It was timely. You were an empty house. Hollow. That is how darkness enters first, even when you think you are doing good.”

Sadie swallows.

“You are sealed now,” Esmeralda says evenly as her hand moves to Sadie’s sternum. “But you must come home, into yourself. If you leave yourself empty like that, something else will come. And it will not leave.”

Sadie nods. She doesn’t trust her voice.

Esmeralda pats her hand.

“Now. We go to Graça. She will be glad to see me with you. We go with God, with Jesus and Mary, and with the Orixás. May they open the road before our feet.”

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TWENTY-TWO

Adrian perches on the metal bench in the cold and cramped cell. It reeks of vomit and urine. Dim light creates jagged shadows across peeling walls. A drunk snores on the floor. Another mutters into his sleeve.

Adrian hugs his elbows tight. He had been in the middle of a therapeutic reenactment when the police crashed in. Hauled off like some deviant. Adrian rubs his jaw.

What humiliating body cam footage is there?

He exhales heavily. No one can find out about this.

One drunk stirs. Adrian quickly looks away. *Don't get caught staring. Not in here.* He will simply tell the judge it was all consensual and there was no violation of any law he knew of. They will have to let him go.

One of his cellmates looks far too calm, as though being here suits him. He's young. *Perhaps he is high*. The kid is wearing black jeans and boots. He's got a black shirt on with a blue geometric maze across his scrawny chest. He can't be more than twenty.

He gives Adrian a long look and smirks.

"Bruh, what's with the shorts? You look like a naughty schoolboy." He chuckles at his own joke.

Adrian flushes. Yes, the outfit. Arrested in the middle of role play. Still in the short pants. They should have let him change. Oh, the cops had a

good time with that.

“It’s a long story,” Adrian mutters.

“Good. I like long stories,” the kid says easily and leans back against the wall with his arms behind his head. “We have time.”

The drunk rolls over, exposing a pallid underbelly. Adrian smooths out his shorts.

“I was doing a therapeutic reenactment. A very expensive one. Nothing untoward. The police interrupted it.”

The kid tilts his head.

“Enactment?”

“Reenactment, yes.”

“That sounds like bullshit, but all right. Why the costume?”

Adrian squirms.

“It doesn’t matter. The whole thing failed before the police even broke it up.”

“Why?”

“Because there was a key player missing. Without her, it doesn’t work. The facilitator suggested the costume.”

The kid snorts and says, “So find her. Let me guess, is she dead?”

“No. Just … gone. I don’t know who she is. I’m trying to recreate a random thing that happened. All I’ve got is a low-quality photo pulled from video.”

“Why are you here?” Adrian asks.

“Panic attack,” the kid says.

“That’s not what this place is for.”

“Tell them that. I was outside a club. Couldn’t breathe, couldn’t answer fast enough. They thought I was high and disorderly.”

“Had you been drinking?”

“No. I just couldn’t get my air back.”

“And?”

“And now I’m sobering up from nothing.”

“How unfortunate.” Adrian almost laughs.

The kid smirks.

“Yeah, sucks for me.” His smirk sharpens. “Lucky for you. That happens to be my lane.”

“What?”

The kid comes close and whispers, “I’m a hacker, schoolboy. I track people for sport … and cash. I could find your missing player.”

Adrian leans in and asks, “You can find her?”

“Of course. That’s easy. The price is the hard part.”

“Is it? How much?”

The kid eyes him up. “For you? Thirty thousand.”

Adrian doesn’t hesitate. He’s rich. This is fate. He thrusts out his hand.

“Deal.”

The kid clasps it quickly as his grin widens.

“Tim,” he says. “Tinman online. No heart. All code. I’ll get you what you want, schoolboy.”

Before Adrian can ask for more details, the bars rattle. A guard appears, holding trays. He shoves them inside and sneers.

“Breakfast.”

He turns his glare on Adrian.

“And you’re bailed, Lowell.”

Adrian points to himself.

“Bailed?”

The guard rolls his eyes.

“Yes, someone came and bailed out the perv,” he says, swinging the cell door open with mock ceremony.

Adrian turns to Tim. “I need your contact.”

Then he looks at the guard. “Can I borrow a pen?”

Tim is already tearing into the food. His mouth is overflowing. He mumbles an email address. Adrian scrawls it on his forearm.

The guard plucks the pen out of Adrian's hand.

"Anything else for the dregs of society?" the guard asks flatly.

"No, thank you," Adrian says. "That will be all."

In the foyer, Kirks stands waiting. He's dressed in a brown blazer.

What the hell is he doing here?

"I'll be outside." He walks out.

Adrian signs for his belongings. The schoolboy cap, keys, phone, and wallet. He asks about getting his real clothing returned.

The clerk responds humorlessly, "We'll get to work on it right away."

Adrian walks outside to find Kirks waiting by a cab.

"Thank you for this, but how did you know I was here?"

"The reenactment firm is one of Evelyn's. They called her," Kirks says calmly.

Adrian frowns.

"Who?" he asks.

"Evelyn Wormwood—from our professional development day?" Kirks says with a trace of irritation.

Adrian just blinks. No idea who he's talking about.

Kirks fills the silence. "She wrote *The Body Captive?* Used to be our director? Before your time. Influencer?"

Influencer? What the hell does that even mean? That hag from PD Day?

Adrian stammers, "Why on earth would that woman know I was here?" Then the thought slams into him. He's been set up. "Kirks … what exactly is going on here?"

"Adrian, nothing is going on. You've just buried your mother. You've been through a lot. Evelyn's contractor notified her of the police shutting down your session last night. That's all."

Adrian's thoughts stumble as he mumbles, "Oh, right, yes, she did say—"

"I've called you a cab. I just want to make sure you're okay. So, let's get you home," he says as he looks absentmindedly at his watch. He nods toward his car, where his family waits inside. "Adrian, I've got to leave you. The fare is paid. I'm off to church."

Adrian sits down in the back of the cab, and Kirks closes the door for him.

Off to church, are they? That's where Kirks gets his self-righteousness topped up for the week. Must indoctrinate the young.

Jung was only a schoolboy when he had his vision of God shitting on the church. How profound. Is Jung speaking to him from the grave? Adrian punches himself in the face. Enough with that silliness.

"You okay, sir?"

The cheap plastic seats are cracked, with the foam showing. The edges of the cracks and the exposed foam are darkened with dirt. You would think someone making their livelihood off ferrying people about would take a little more pride in the state of their vehicle.

"Yes, thank you."

He recites his mother's address. Now his address. She wouldn't mind him coming home like this. His attire would make her laugh. It was always so good when she would laugh in a fun way. She had a great sense of humor. The cabbie pulls away and begins the drive to the mansion.

So, that was Evelyn Wormwood at PD Day. He's read *The Body Captive*. Complete garbage.

"Hey!" Adrian pounds on the plexiglass divider. "Why are you heading to 99?"

"I-5 is too slow right now. Construction."

Now he remembers who she is. She's ancient. Wormwood built her reputation arguing that psychiatry was stolen from medicine in the

nineteenth century. That it had been reshaped into a tool of control. Diagnosis, she claimed, became the new master's whip. A way for the powerful to keep their houses in order and call the disobedient sick.

Adrian remembers hearing about those ideas when he was at university. He had no interest in being a revolutionary. He just wanted a job that paid well enough to move far away from his mother. Another country would have worked. He had big plans back then.

The prison job put him a few states away, but then he came back.

Now they cut over to 99 and cross the bridge.

He didn't get very far, did he? They begin to overtake the dozy Sunday drivers. Judging by Wormwood slumming it at their PD Day, royalties must be low. Not much of an influencer. Serves her right.

What's the matter—no one lining up to buy a thirty-dollar book of nonsense?

Besides, all of that has come full circle. It's the crazies cracking the whip these days.

Adrian drags the skin behind his knee over a jagged ridge in the seat, back and forth, feeling the tendon jump underneath like a thick guitar string.

Does everyone know who she is?

Obviously, Kirks set this up. Of course he did. He couldn't find a way to get one up on him, and so he outsourced to that hag.

Adrian presses harder and finally draws blood. He shuffles to the side, positioning for the other leg. The cabbie glances at him in the rearview.

Adrian moans as he cuts the other leg. Blood beads up. The cabbie stares. Adrian forces a smile.

"Everything okay, sir?"

"Yes, yes, thank you."

Adrian's restless. He fishes out his phone, and his thumb does its usual hovering over Psymedis. The little lifeline. It'll sort everything out. He taps

it.

ACCOUNT LOCKED

Your professional access has been temporarily suspended pending credential review. A reportable incident has been associated with your license profile.

See: RCW 18.130.180 — Unprofessional Conduct.

Adrian stares at the notification. Blood rushes hot to his ears. A law meant for predators. Degenerates. And they dare apply it to him? He slams the phone face down. His breath is ragged.

This was Kirks.

The cabbie glances back at the sound.

“You sure you’re all right back there?”

Adrian forces a smile and says, “Yes. Perfectly fine.”

Why on earth is the cabbie asking him that every five minutes?

He turns to the window and presses his temple against the cool glass. Does this mean some technical chain reaction is happening with his license? Has it been revoked? Can they do that? All the “In Sessions” he’s done with the wretched thing. He’d become a bit reckless. Who’s going to be privy to his innermost workings now?

They pull up to the mansion.

“Wow, sir. Nice big house.”

“Yes, it is.”

Adrian gets out of the cab and looks back at the bloody smears he left. He slams the door.

Once the cab pulls away, Adrian storms around the overgrown garden and picks up a nice big stick. He finds his favorite fairy. She looks

delighted. He kicks her over, finds the house key beneath her, and smashes her pretty little head apart with one blow.

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TWENTY-THREE

Sadie's eyes snap open. For a split second, she feels blissful, weightless, and completely at ease.

Then reality slams into her.

The pain arrives like a high-speed collision, forcing a gasp through her teeth as she scrapes her dry tongue off the roof of her mouth. She is propped half-upright against the headboard, naked from the waist up.

She has a soccer ball keychain in her hand. She pulls on the keychain. It's a flash drive. Her phone is dead. There's a broken tube of lipstick beside her. She's written on her stomach with it.

KILL

A red X is dragged through the word.

Sadie moans.

There are pills scattered about. Midazolam. *Holy shit. So strong.*

The king of benzos. She moves to get out of bed and finds the melted lipstick underneath her. The color is Berry Bad. Sadie needs to plug in the phone and figure out what happened.

This time, there is not even a whiff of the night before. This is a total blackout. Sadie picks up all the pills she can find, throws them in the toilet

and flushes. She finds the charger in the bathroom and plugs the phone in by the sofa. She showers and washes the lipstick message off her body.

No kill? Don't kill? Who, me?

What happened last night?

Nothing comes back. No smells. No flashes. No fragments. Just a blank whirring in her head. She promises herself no more. Never again. Not a drop. Not ever. Not a pill. Never.

Heart jackhammering. Walls are closing in. Water sounds metallic. Nothing looks right. Nothing feels right. She's not right.

The apartment is freezing. She dries off as much as possible and wraps a towel around herself. The soccer ball flash drive must be the encryption key.

This is good. You got what Trish wanted. Calm down.

So what—she took a few pills. Her attempts to calm herself fail. She looks at the phone. It's charged enough to power on. Please don't be full of messed-up photos. Or videos.

She powers it on. There's a lone alert from the airline. Her flight from São Paulo to Los Angeles starts boarding in ninety minutes. There's still time. Sadie throws on some clothes, leaves the bags, grabs Laura's documents, and heads to the elevator. It's taking too long to arrive at her floor. She hurls herself into the stairwell. Seventeen floors spiral down. Her vision is lurching. By the street, her legs give out. She stumbles and slams into a wall before she rights herself again.

There's a cab stand at the corner. She waves frantically. A taxi pulls up.

"Airport. Very fast, please."

"Yes, miss."

The phone dies again.

"Can I plug my phone in?"

"Yes." He gestures to a socket.

She plugs it in. Her heart is still galloping. She checks her mail and texts. All clear. Trish is going to meet her in LA. Direct flight. The relief is there. It’s knocking politely at the door, but the chemicals in her system won’t let it through.

The driver weaves through traffic like a racecar pro. He flashes his brights and honks as he runs reds. She braces herself in the seat.

Somewhere in the blur of lights and speed, a memory flickers.

The lady across the hall. The seniors’ home. The grandmother.

Then João. Smiling. Drinking.

A fun ride in his car.

Then nothing.

The cab slides into the straight stretch toward the airport. They both relax a little.

The driver’s eyes find hers in the rearview.

“You okay, young lady?”

“No. Not really,” Sadie says as she stares back. “No, I’m not.”

His eyes are kind. His silence is heavier than words. She imagines his life. A warm house, people who love him, food waiting, and someone in his bed. How has she made such a ruin of her own?

“Be tranquil,” he says gently. “Be at peace. Life makes demands, yes. But we must try.”

She forces the words through a tightening throat.

“We must. Thank you.”

At the terminal, she hands him 500 US. His eyes widen.

“No bags?”

“No bags. Thank you.”

“Go with God.”

“You as well.”

She checks in as Laura. First class. Security grins at the soccer ball keychain. She breathes easier.

A delay.

They send her to the exclusive lounge.

Inside, the light is soft. The air is filled with the smell of good coffee. She plugs her phone back in and checks everything again. Clean. Nothing strange. João just parties hard. Like, hard.

Her shoulders unclench. A sigh escapes.

A lounge attendant appears with a tray.

“Coffee?”

She nods. He offers a miniature bottle of mint liqueur to go with it.

“No, thank you.”

“Sugar?”

“Yes, please. Do you have aspirin?”

He nods and returns with a packet. She takes two and sips the coffee. It’s strong but sweet. The milk is frothed rich and creamy.

After the aspirin kicks in and smooths the edges, she wants to talk to Charlie.

She finds the attendant. Cash in his palm—an extra hundred—and he runs his own card on the vending machine and hands her a tablet. She can’t use the work phone. Trish can’t know. The Agency can’t know. They practically demanded she stay away from AA.

But Sadie needs to get real. This is out of hand, and it can’t keep going.

She pulls up the meeting list and downloads Zoom.

Her video flashes on.

No!

Panic spikes. She fumbles through the settings, scrolling and tapping. Nothing makes sense. She puts her thumb over the camera and tries again. She curses under her breath. Every button she presses only makes her more unsure. Finally, she shuts the camera off.

That took way too long.

Breakfast arrives. Hot cheese rolls, fresh orange juice, and more coffee. She eats slowly. Forces it down.

Relax.

The tablet isn't registered to her. She's fine.

Just breathe.

She scrolls. She logs into meeting after meeting. She's scanning names for *Anon381*. She knows better, though. That was a close-up of her face for well over a second. And her location. That info in the right hands makes her totally trackable.

Okay, get over it.

She's tired of playing dodge the camera anyway. They're everywhere now.

In different meetings, a man named Harry talks about stealing from his dad. A woman named Dawn talks about relapsing before she even picked up the drink. Then Phillip talks. It's about switching from coke to crack and meeting the devil himself. His voice shakes, but he finds his higher power in the group.

And then—*Anon381*.

Yes!

She types quickly, and they set up a chat. Charlie's at work. Might have to bail. Sadie blurts out that she's in crisis.

Charlie's chat pings.

Anon381: Private room. Now.

A link follows**.**

She hesitates. A VoIP app would be safer. Or not. They're all hackable.

The lounge attendant comes back with a pack of plastic earbuds. Sadie tears them open and plugs them into the tablet. She grabs her work phone and drops it face down beside the lounge's wall speaker, where chill music

is humming low and constant. Let the mic suck up jazz flute instead of her voice.

Hand trembling, she clicks on the link. Voice only, it'll be fine. She jams the buds into her ears. The line opens.

Finally.

Charlie's voice floods in. It's rough and alive.

"Angel. I got you."

She lets out a long and trembling exhale. She tells him as much as she can without names. The blackout. The pills. The threats. The way she can't stop. The way she isn't sure she wants to stay alive. It feels like she's talking about someone else. Like she's narrating a nightmare.

"Angel," he says. His voice is like gravel underfoot.

"It's bad. I…" Her words won't come out. "I don't know what to do. It … might be better if I…"

"Hey, hey. Stop. Listen to me. I was there. Gun in my mouth. OD. Narcan. Suicide by cop, more than once. I crawled out. You can crawl out, too. You're not dead yet. You're just bleeding. I got you."

"I…" Sadie wipes her face. "I don't feel anything anymore, Charlie," she sobs, "like ever."

"You will. I swear to God, you will. I went years flatlined inside. Nothing. Then one day, a few years in, it cracked. Rage came first, then grief, and then finally real feeling. It's ugly as hell, but it comes back. You're twenty-eight, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Christ, you're a kid. You got time. You just gotta hold the line right now. One day at a time. One step. Eat your breakfast. Get on the plane. Get off the plane. That's it."

"Okay."

A muffled voice cuts in on his end. Charlie curses under his breath.

“Shit. Angel, I gotta go. All hands. There’s been a school shooting. Mass casualties. I’m on duty.”

Her heart seizes.

“Oh, God.”

“Yeah. It’s the second one this month. But listen. Don’t you dare check out on me. You hear me? If you off yourself, I’ll come find you, revive you, and beat the shit out of you.”

A broken laugh escapes her.

“Okay,” she says.

“Good. Call me anytime. Doesn’t matter when. I’ll answer. We’re not done, you and me.”

“Thank you, Charlie.”

“Stay alive. That’s your only job today. Stay alive.”

The line goes dead. It’s replaced by the hollow whining of the lounge’s music. Sadie clutches herself tight. *It’s going to be okay.* She’s going to get Trish what she wants and put this all behind her.

The flight is announced. Sadie wipes the tablet and leaves it on her lounge seat with another hundred. She decides to use the posh restroom before the flight. She stops dead in her tracks to look at a poster.

STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING.
USE THE HAND SIGNALS.

Wow, could society make less of an effort?

Yes, that’s what underpaid airport security guards are trained for—spotting hand signals on teenagers and effectively taking down their captors. She boards the plane and turns down everything from the flight attendant. No mimosa. No newspaper.

“No, thank you.”

Sadie puts her sleep mask on and gets horizontal. It's a miracle she woke up. It's a miracle she made her flight. It's a miracle she has the key.

Before she lets herself go under, she wipes the soccer ball with sanitizer and tucks it in her crotch. She gives the soccer ball a little clench. *Thank you, God.* Then sleep takes her.

Eleven hours later, Sadie wakes to a steaming towel and checks on the soccer ball. *Still there*. She accepts the towel and makes her way to the lavatory. The mirror startles her. Her reflection flinches at the same time that she does.

Is that her?

She breathes in, holds it, and lets it go slow. Then she returns to her seat. The flight attendant has already brought the seat upright. A hot cup of coffee awaits. It's time. The plane glides down and touches the runway like it's been trained to do.

Trish is waiting. Her black blazer is buttoned, its lapels perfectly crisp, and her posture is stiff enough to suggest she is wearing body armor underneath. She checks her watch—and notes the exact second of Sadie's arrival. Without a word, she leads Sadie away from the throngs of tourists and the rumble of luggage wheels, guiding them toward the shuttered car rental desks at the dead end of the terminal. They sit on two cold, metal-framed chairs, the only sound the hum of a distant floor-buffer.

Sadie hands her the key. Her hand trembles.

"Thank you," Trish says.

She's cool. Composed. Almost reptilian.

Her tone lowers.

"I crossed a line. Threatening your family. I know," she says as she adjusts the cuff of her jacket. The movement is slightly restricted by the stiff armor plates beneath her shirt. "It was leverage, just that. I wouldn't have touched them. I'm sorry. It *won't* happen again."

Sadie says nothing. Her jaw tightens.

“I wish I could send you on your way. I pushed for someone else to take this. There is no one else. One more task, then you’re done.”

“Trish—”

“It can’t be helped. This isn’t fun for me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

A pause. It’s deliberate.

Sadie looks down.

“This is not just another assignment. It’s a long game. An important one. Years in the making. And it must move to the next stage now.”

“I just need some time.”

“You’ll get it. After this.” Trish leans in. Her voice turns smooth and coaxing. “This op is top priority. Headquarters is sending this straight to the West Wing. That’s the level we’re at.”

Sadie draws a breath that shakes on the way in.

Trish makes eye contact.

“Remember why you joined the team. Not everyone can do this. Ninety-nine percent of the world wouldn’t last five minutes in your shoes. But you can do this work. You’re good at it,” Trish says and tilts her head, as if she’s admiring her. “You *are* the best. That’s why the director himself asked for you on this.”

Sadie scratches her neck.

“Trish, I don’t know—”

“Do this,” Trish says as her eyes hold onto Sadie’s. “Then it’s over. You walk away clean. And you’ll know you held the line against people who’d tear this country apart if given half a chance. Real harm, Sadie.”

She signals to two nearby personnel. They move efficiently and guide Sadie through the terminal. They lead her into the back of a waiting SUV with privacy glass. Trish follows.

They drive. Sadie stares out the window. She’s never been to LA before. Well, past LAX.

The air conditioning blasts. Outside, everything burns.

Boarded storefronts. Tent fires under the overpasses. National Guard trucks idling at intersections. Clinics with lines down the block. A half-collapsed billboard warns of curfews.

From the plane, she had seen smoke spread across the horizon in thick gray ribbons.

“This place is a powder keg,” Trish mutters as she watches the city peel past. “After the election? Boom.”

She smirks.

Trish has had plenty of work done. Whatever they did to her lips pulls at the smirk. It twists it into something even trickier.

Sadie says nothing. She leans against the window and wills herself out of the vehicle.

“You’ll need to get checked over at Los Alamitos,” Trish continues.

So that’s where we’re headed—the joint forces base.

“After that, you’ll be close protection for a big-shot writer. File’s at the base. Then some rest. Sorry. It’s the best I could do. We’ve got to move on this.”

Sadie still says nothing. Last night stays dark. Curtain down, house lights off.

The driver does what he can, but this is LA.

Closed gun stores. REPENT NOW signs. Ash drifting.

The smoke curls around charred palm trees. They pass through three armed gates. The guards are tense.

Her parents flicker into being. They’re statues in the front seat—stiff and silent. It’s just like the ride home after the problem test.

Her mother’s stone face is there again. Her voice is flat.

“They’ll try to pour their darkness into you,” this illusion mother says. “Don’t let them, Sadie.”

Her father nods once.

“These people are villains. Do you hear me? Do you hear us? Get your head in the game. You’re too good for this.”

And then they’re gone.

Sadie sits upright and swallows.

Get a read on this shit.

She wonders if she can do the yes-no thing while seated. Trish is facing away.

Sadie tries it out, and it’s working. Yes is a slight curve forward. No pulls the shoulders back.

Yes, her brother and nephew are safe.

No, she didn’t kill anyone in Brazil.

No, she didn’t hurt the grandmother. Or João.

As they approach what looks like the entrance to an underground facility, Trish smooths the sleeve of her jacket. She turns to face Sadie square on.

“Is there anything I should know about the op you just completed?” Her voice is clipped and formal. “Before you debrief?”

She locks eyes with Sadie.

Sadie keeps her tone flat. “No.”

Trish nods briskly. Just once.

“Good,” she says. “Get some rest. We’re counting on you, as always.”

The door lock clicks. Sadie exits the vehicle.

The guard can’t be older than seventeen. That blank but bright-eyed look. She used to have it.

She clears two airlocks. Each one tightens the hairs on her neck. Trish wants her out of the way. This debrief feels like the pretext.

In the elevator, she poses the real question for the yes-no to answer. It’s silent and precise.

Do I leave this place alive?

There’s no answer. Maybe the elevator’s dropping too fast. Or maybe the calculation is still running. Like some cosmic roulette wheel spinning in the dark.

She’s alone, but on camera.

Where’s the answer?

Does the body know?

Can it lie?

The elevator stops. Doors slide open. Personnel are waiting behind the glass. Lab coats. In the hall, biowarfare suits, face masks, and sidearms. A voice crackles from the ceiling PA.

“Let’s get you decontaminated and into debrief.”

Or disappeared. Depends who you ask.

Sadie asks the body again. *Do I leave alive?* She wants the no. A clean no. Enough of this. She pictures herself dropping a few of them right there in front of the glass. *Why not? Dirty Harry. John Wick. Better yet, Sarah Connor. Come on, body. Say no.*

She lurches forward. Stumbles. Recovers. The intake team jumps.

There it is. The answer’s yes.

Worse than no.

Fine. Let’s get on with it.

She adjusts her body language. Wipes away anything threatening. Nothing to see here. Compliant. Safe. Proud.

Walk like you believe it, Sadie.

This is a hero walk. The only one you’re going to get. You outplayed the Brazilian Einstein.

They probably don’t know who that is. It’s above their clearance, but who cares?

Strut, Sadie.

Too hard. Pull it back.

Too soft. Give it some edge.

There. Just right.

Left-right-left. Perfect.

Coming in for debrief. Fighting for freedom. Winning.

Sure.

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TWENTY-FOUR

Adrian sits with his legs crossed in the stiff visitor's chair across from Kirks. He's trying his best to look unimpressed. He isn't surprised about the "early retirement or dismissal" choice. That's how institutions work. A new head comes in, trims the garden, and lops off anything that might grow taller than him. What surprises Adrian is Kirks himself. He's calm. Sure and precise. Even his hands look arranged. Adrian straightens his tie and forces stillness into his own body. He needs Kirks to see that this speed bump will not faze him. Not in the slightest.

The office, too, has been arranged. No doubt by corporate decorators who specialize in moods. This one is called Zen intimidation. A calm veneer over sharpened edges. A shrine to a Kirks who never existed until now.

Glass walls for "transparency," eco-green paint, and two identical fake plants flanking the desk. And at the center, a framed photo of a wife, children, and a golden retriever. They're all staring straight into the lens, as if daring him to scoff. Adrian does. He snorts loud enough to draw a glance from one of the guards waiting by the door.

Kirks blathers on about conduct, Ms. Temple, and boundaries. Kirks points to a report. Years of Big Tech surveillance, all on Adrian. The Psymedis entries are surely in there. Raw material for a miniseries, really. It would get top ratings. Adrian's story is, after all, scintillating.

Look at that boring family. They look like they've been carved out of soap.

Then Kirks slips the words in casually, like an afterthought.

Haloperidol. Missing vials.

As if Adrian needs to be reminded.

Yes, they have cameras, of course. Footage. Evidence. Everyone dips into supplies. Nancy probably takes something every other shift. But no, it's Adrian they go after.

His eyes land on the glass bowl at the edge of the desk. Blue discs. As shiny as pebbles in a stream. A placard underneath.

SMILEBRITE WHITENING CANDIES—TRY TWO!

He takes three. Why not? If he's going to be paraded out, he'll at least have a nice, bright smile. The candy crunches between his molars, oddly bitter at first, but then syrupy sweet. He chews louder than necessary and ignores Kirks's pointed look.

Kirks slides a disposable plastic pen across the desk.

Adrian grips the pen. He forces a flourish onto the paper, but the line breaks, scratches, and skips. His signature comes out half-formed. More of a plea than a name. The pen feels cheap and insulting. He digs the point harder into the paper, as if pressure could restore dignity.

"You can keep that. Can't be too careful."

Kirks pumps sanitizer onto his palms. He steeples his fingers.

"You damaged patients. You damaged staff. You pursued your own agenda at their expense. There will be no reference. Not from here. Not from anywhere."

Adrian wants to laugh. As if his name doesn't speak for itself. As if a career's worth of innovation can be erased by one careerist in a cheap suit. He rolls another candy on his tongue. Let Kirks believe the calm.

“Security,” Kirks says softly.

The two guards detach themselves from the door.

There, on Kirks’s face, is the same look that dentist gave him so many years ago.

Pity.

Adrian tries to spit in Kirks’s face. Only a wet dribble slides down his chin.

They take his parking pass and escort him through the sterile halls. They deposit him at his beat-up Hyundai. Those security guards were a bit rough. Must be overcompensating. He checks the rearview mirror to adjust his tie. That’s when he sees it.

His lips, gums, and tongue. They’re stained deep cobalt. Not a subtle tint but a garish coating. A blue smear runs down his chin.

The spit.

Kirks saw. The guards saw.

The whitening candies. He looks like a clown. A carnival freak. A drunk who swallowed ink. He bares his teeth, and they glow blue at him.

Grotesque.

The barrier won’t lift. He waits, blue-mouthed, until a guard buzzes him out.

He drives up from the underground. His heart is thumping.

And of course, there she is. Evelyn Wormwood. Waiting at the curb.

“My, my,” she croons, “don’t you look completely mad with that blue, blue mouth.”

He lowers the window.

“Lady, you’re out of line.”

She wobbles on her feet. Her arms are out like a tightrope walker’s.

“Look at me. On the line. Will I run out? Will I fall? Over or under?”

Her syllables squeak like a child’s toy. She moonwalks a few steps. Her hair jerks with the motion.

“Backwards now. Where’s the line? Here? Here?”

She claps and jabs a finger at her chest. Her movements are sharp and broken. She’s like a puppet with its strings cut.

“I am the line. The line is in me. Boundless line is mine!” she hisses. “I’ll never run out of it, but it looks like you have.”

She straightens. Her voice is flat now. “Poor boy. You’re empty. I’m endless.” She pulls a kazoo from her coat pocket.

Adrian rolls the window up. His hands are shaking on the wheel. *Ugly hag. White hair like frayed rope*. He revs the car. The engine coughs like a lawnmower. He could end her right here. He doesn’t.

In the rearview, she curtsies and waves madly.

“Farewell! All hail the Basement King! May your pain swallow you whole!”

Her shriek ricochets away, down the block. It’s punctuated by the flat, idiot honk of a kazoo.

Adrian smirks, though his jaw quivers just a touch. *Let her cackle*. He pats the cash in his pocket.

Safe. Secure. The kid will come through.

Thirty thousand to start his scrawny savant on the real business at hand. Finding his nymph. Nothing will stop him now.

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TWENTY-FIVE

Sadie slips out from beneath the luxurious sheets and tiptoes to the lower-level French doors. This is like something out of a movie.

The Agency loves staging reality.

Fake break-ins. Fake kidnappings. Fake families. Even fake armies. You name it, they can fake it.

She used to think it was exaggerated for the screen. Now she knows better. They thought of *everything*. Scared the hell out of Carter Blaize with a staged abduction, then dropped her in the middle of his life.

All she has to do is stay close and earn his trust. Then she can pry loose the leverage they need.

On paper, she's Ellie Tanner, the bodyguard Carter hired himself through a boutique security firm his people already vetted.

That's the trick of it. He believes he's in control.

He isn't.

Sadie, his cameras, and even his panic room all loop back to the task force now. DHS-led and CIA-embedded. This isn't active surveillance. It's full occupation.

Carter has too much ideological capital. The White House is about to make a massive withdrawal. Trish spelled it out. Get quality leverage, and

she walks away. No more ops. Just gone. Retired. She clings to that promise like oxygen.

The debrief?

Ugly doesn't begin to cover it.

It lasted two weeks.

They didn't just throw the institutional fossils at her. No, they flew in the A-Team. Contractors from all over, with billion-dollar contracts and NDAs thick enough to stop a bullet. Firms with bland names like healthy breakfast cereals. Every one of them was drooling over the same prize: her. The shiny new feather in their cap.

They cycled through like a bad talent show. Mr. Empathy, Dr. Clinical, Ms. Hardass, and even the "Let's keep this casual" guy. Different costumes. Same script. Always circling back to the same line, like they thought she wouldn't notice.

You worked with Marcelo.

You sympathized.

You went soft. Didn't you?

You are quite the revolutionary yourself. Aren't you?

They said it straight. They said it sideways. They said it wrapped in velvet and then in razor wire. Hours of it. She gave them nothing. Which wasn't that hard. Her memory of what happened after the car ride still hasn't come back. Not even a fragment. A clean blackout. So, she leaned on the one thing that sounded solid. João's grandmother had put him in his place. Grandmothers can. She repeated it once, twice, and again, until the line calcified into something that resembled a fact.

But it wasn't just them and their questions. The room was full of machines. First came the polygraph. They ran her voice through software that claimed it could pick up lies from tremors no ear could hear. They filmed her face in high-def to replay it frame by frame. They froze every half-second flinch of a lip or the twitch of an eye.

Infrared cameras, too. To track the flush around her eyes and the bloom of blood beneath her skin. They kept shifting the questions and throwing in memory tests. They had her recount details backward. They would put fragments out of order.

Sadie kept herself level. That yes-no trick—getting her body in sync with her mind, or maybe the other way around—saved her. She slowed her breath and fixed her eyes. She rode the physiological waves until they flattened out. The needles ticked. The software spat out graphs. The thermal cameras filmed. But none of it pinned anything on her.

So, they finished the debrief and set her loose on her last op.

Great.

The mansion itself is every inch Los Feliz. Hilltop views stretch out over haze, the ocean barely visible as a faint, distant sliver. Glass walls and stone floors. Terraced gardens where palms lean over cactus beds. You can smell fresh eucalyptus and oleander in the air. A pool. A tennis court. A koi pond cut to perfect geometry. It's all expensive and curated.

The golden ratio type of life.

And above all that, the noise. Los Angeles never lets you forget its appetite for drama. Helicopters pass in shifts, from fire crews to news birds, the LAPD, and even the paparazzi. The city smells of jasmine and smoke. It's always on the edge of another disaster.

Sadie's work phone is in her room next to a background noise machine. She walks over to the waterfall that feeds the koi pond.

Privacy assured.

She puts in her earbuds. On her new burner, she signs into an online AA meeting. One of the big ones. Charlie said he'd log into it.

The screen fills. Dozens of faces. And then more. Close to a hundred by the time the logins taper off. Kitchens, bedrooms, cars, and hospital beds. Every continent lit up in little squares.

Then she spots him. Anon381. She opens a private chat. His reply is instant.

Anon381: We'll connect once it wraps.

Fine. She stays muted and keeps her camera off. She's listening. People start sharing. Nobody names the wars, the fires, the riots, the heat domes, or the floods. They don't have to. It's all there between the lines.

Different voices and different faces. All circling the same words.

I'm afraid. I'm afraid. I'm afraid.

The meeting ends and the burner rings.

"Charlie?" Relief washes through her.

"The one and only." He laughs, his voice full of life. "That you, Angel?"

"Yeah."

"Good. What's goin' on?"

"I haven't picked up since we last talked," she says while twirling a strand of hair.

"Well, look at you. Two weeks, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's solid. How you feelin'?"

Sadie lets out a long, shuddering exhale. She's read Charlie in on the whole CIA thing, the Andrea thing. The PDA. Her whole life, pretty much. On one hand, it feels good. On the other, it's causing more stress. She rubs her temples, her knuckle pressing into the dull ache behind her eyes.

"Like I'm drowning," she whispers. "Trish was waiting for me at the terminal. She … she actually apologized to me, Charlie. Then she hit me with the hook. One more op, and then I'm done. Off the leash."

She lets out a dry, humorless laugh.

"Yeah, they're experts with the hooks," Charlie says.

She gets close to the phone and whispers. “They’ve got me. And like, they totally own me.” She winces. “I was so stupid.”

“The girl I’ve gotten to know does not seem stupid at all. They’re just good at laying traps. Yo, that’s all they do.”

“Yeah. And what’s worse is that I’m just an asset to them, not Agency. Not officially.” She watches the waterfall. “They gave me some training initially. Promised me I’d go staff. But I’m not. It was just a line. So there’s no protection for me when it goes bad—and it’s gone so bad. At first I thought it would be easier to walk away that way.”

“Nah. Nothin’ is easy with these guys.” His tone cools a touch. “Okay, so you’re still in the cage.”

“Yeah.”

“Right. So what’s the question?”

Sadie blurts, “Duh, Charlie. How do I get out? I’m—”

“Trapped.”

Sadie swallows.

“Yeah, I am,” she admits and blinks back tears.

“God,” he says. As if that’s the whole answer.

“Charlie.”

“Girl, you think I’m playin’? You think I got this new life on my own?”

“It’s just—”

“Listen, you said it yourself, you’re surrounded. It’s almost the spooks’ creed, all right? When getting out, you have two choices.”

“I know, I’ve heard it. You either eat your gun or find God,” Sadie sighs. “But that’s super old school.”

“My last sponsee called God the intelligent fabric of the universe. He found the fabric. He wrapped himself in it. He got out. You can too. Trust me, kid. He was in deeper than you.”

“So he’s out, and he’s totally okay now?”

“I’ll be straight with you.”

“Okay.”

“They killed him.”

“Well, why are you telling me this? It obviously didn’t work!”

“Listen, there are worse things than dying. He got free. He died a free man. They did it when he was walking his dog. It was quick. They deemed it a heart attack. Natural causes.”

“How do you know it was a hit, then?”

“’Cuz at that level, even the coroners are bought and paid for.”

“So, no justice for him.”

“Justice is not our business anymore. That’s God’s business.”

“Oh, here we go with God again,” Sadie mutters.

“Damn right. Your God, not mine. Nature, Buddha, Jesus—I don’t care. Just not *you*. And, they say nature, but I’m not sure nature really cuts it.”

She tries to pivot.

“Can I tell you about a dream I had last night?”

Charlie barks a laugh and says, “As much as I’d love to, nope.”

“Why not?”

“’Cuz it’s a detour. Dreams, therapy, and Enneagrams. That stuff’s all fine later. But right now? You’re bleeding out. First, stop the bleeding. Then you can read your tea leaves. You tracking me?”

“… Yeah.”

“Good. And listen. Don’t think I don’t get it. Feds tried to flip me. Squeezed me hard. Even sent me to Supermax. If I’d talked, I’d be dead. My family, too. That’s the tightrope, Angel. I know what it feels like to walk it. I’m not making light of what you’re carrying.”

“Okay.”

“First thing’s time between you and the dope—between you and the booze. Space. That’s oxygen.”

“Yeah.”

“Dream analysis doesn’t get us sober. Didn’t for me.”

“Okay.”

“Didn’t stop me picking scabs off my face and eating ’em to get high.”

“Gross, Charlie.”

“Didn’t stop me robbing people who cared about me. And I’m lucky. With the fentanyl and the nitazenes out there, I wouldn’t’ve lasted ten seconds. You kids are swimming in poison.”

Sadie rubs her neck. She knows he’s right.

“Yeah.”

“Right. So let’s go back. Step One. Remember that? The Brazil shit we talked about?”

Sadie hesitates. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Tell me again. What was it like?”

“Like I couldn’t control anything. At all.”

“Good. That’s powerlessness. That’s Step One.”

“Right.”

“And now Step Two. Higher power.”

“Ugh.”

“I know. But you’re too busy being *your own* higher power.”

“I am?”

“Yep. You’ve been carrying the world on your back since you were twelve.”

“Because of Andrea,” she says softly.

He doesn’t miss anything.

“Yeah,” he states quietly. “You think you shoulda saved her.”

“I *am* the reason—”

“Stop. You were a kid. Kids can’t read people. That’s why the predators win. That guilt? That’s you playing God. That’s why Step Two’s a big one for you.”

“Come to believe in a power greater than myself?”

“That’s the one.” His tone warms. “You gotta let go, kid.”

Sadie groans. “I don’t know, Charlie.”

Charlie is quiet for a moment.

“You prayin’?” he finally asks.

“What?”

“You heard me. You prayin’?”

“No … Should I?”

“Yes. Don’t bullshit me. You should pray.”

“How?”

“Like the book says.”

“What does it say?”

“That’s homework, grasshopper.” He laughs. “Read it.”

“… Fine.”

“Good. Hey, I gotta bounce. Me and Sally are picking up our new bed.”

“Oh, nice.”

“Yeah. She likes it stiff. I like it soft. We bought one with zones. Her side’s a forty-five. Mine’s a ten.”

“Ten? That’s like a marshmallow.”

“I know! Delicate flower over here. Might’ve gone too soft.” He laughs. “What do you think?”

“It’ll be cloud-like.”

“See? Already better problems. That’s my life today. Not ‘Who can I rob?’ Not ‘What can I shoot in my arm?’ Just ‘Did I go too soft on a mattress?’ That’s the miracle, Angel.”

“I get it.”

“And you can have it too. That’s why I’m here.”

She blurts, “Why, though? Why are you helping me?”

“’Cuz someone helped me. That’s the whole gig. Pass it on.” His voice lifts. “Now I’m gettin’ the stink eye from Sally. Laters.”

“Laters.”

They end the call. Sadie checks the time. She's got at least twenty minutes. Just do it. How hard can it be?

She walks around a little and looks up online how to pray AA style.

There's a bunch of options. They all emphasize no personal requests. Just pray for others.

Simple enough.

She should be a prayer expert after Abundant Harvest. She gazes around the beautifully landscaped gardens.

There's a gardener out now. He's spraying something. She waves and he waves back. *Maybe just pretend you're still on the phone.* Okay, what to pray to. The water? She turns her attention to a nice pink clematis climbing up a nearby wall instead.

Good enough. Let's do this.

In a hushed voice, Sadie quietly addresses whatever higher power is listening.

"Oh, Higher Power." She stops, looks around, smirks, and laughs.

This is so stupid.

She closes her eyes, starts to fold her hands into a prayer position, but changes her mind and shoves them into her pockets.

"Higher Power, can you, like, fix Trish? She's seriously not living her best life and bringing everyone else down with her."

She looks hard at the pink clematis. That's not really enough. Why should Trish live her best life after ruining Sadie's?

"So, Higher Power, if you could just take her out of the equation, that'd be great. Okay, thanks, bye."

Should she cross herself? Or *namaste* or something? Too easy.

Sadie walks back through the French double doors, across her kitchen and into her room. She stashes the background noise machine and finishes dressing for work.

Someone knocks. A woman’s voice is at the door. It’s warm and professional.

“I’m Carter’s assistant. Been meaning to connect. Finally carved out a little space to drop a hello.”

Sadie opens the door.

The woman is stunning, because of course she is. Tailored blouse. Hazel-brown eyes flecked with gold. The whole thing is polished and expensive and deeply annoying.

Sadie is suddenly grateful for the bodyguard get-up. Black-on-black. Tough. Sleek. Kind of impressive, actually.

At least she looks the part.

“Hello,” Sadie manages.

The woman smiles.

“Sorry. Things are mad busy around here. I’m Paige.”

“Ellie,” Sadie says, returning the smile.

“Nice to meet you,” Paige says, but her thumbs are flying across her phone. “I’m syncing Mr. Blaize’s calendar to yours.”

She glances up with sharp eyes and asks, “You’re not armed, are you?”

“Not inside the house,” Sadie says.

“But you have it here?” A tilt of her head.

“Yes.”

“Good. That was the arrangement. Strange times.”

“Strange times,” Sadie echoes.

“Did you vote?”

“I did. Did you?”

Paige starts to nod, but then shakes her head. “Yes … but let’s not discuss.”

Sadie mirrors her tone. “Yes. Let’s not discuss.”

Paige laughs. “You an actor too?”

“No.” Sadie can’t help but laugh back. “So, you are one for sure, though. Right?”

Dimples. Ridiculous.

“Guilty as charged,” Paige says. They fall into step and drift toward the kitchen.

Paige clocks the vitamins lined up on the counter.

“Health kick?”

“Yeah.”

“Totally. The body’s a temple.”

“So,” Sadie teases, “would I know your work?”

“Doubt it.” Paige grins and shakes her head. “Stage only. You might know my parents from film, but I’m staying in theater as long as I want. A debut says everything, so I’m choosy. I thought you might be an actor too.”

“Nope.”

“Wow. You come off like a pro.”

“Really?” Sadie feels heat creep into her cheeks.

“Yes. The way we’re talking, it feels like we’re already doing an exercise,” Paige says. Her eyes glimmer.

Sadie tips her head. “Oh?”

“It’s very Meisner.”

Sadie blinks.

“Meisner?”

“Sanford Meisner. Technique. Acting.”

Sadie never took drama. Only gymnastics.

“What’s it for?”

“Here, let me give you the tour, and then I’ll just show you, okay? Actually, this is great. I would love, love, love a non-actor to work with. Someone real.”

“Real?” Sadie asks.

“Everyone here’s an actor.”

Sadie bats her lashes dramatically.

“Isn’t life just one big stage?”

“Yes. Exactly.” Paige flashes a dazzling smile.

They move through the eight thousand square feet. Skylights. Chic earth tones. Custom furniture that somehow looks both solid and careless.

“This is insane,” Sadie murmurs.

Paige leads her to the security room. It’s a wall of feeds blinking.

“He’s earned it,” she says. “He’s an icon.”

“I’ll bet,” Sadie says as she assesses each screen.

“I had to beg for these cameras,” Paige adds and taps her phone. “Giving you access. FYI, your quarters are private. So are mine and his.”

“Got it.”

Sadie cringes. Langley already has access to everything and is probably watching them right now.

Paige continues, “The only way he agreed to a bodyguard was on the condition that he gets one day private. You’ll need a day off. Shall we schedule?”

“Sure. So why a bodyguard?”

Paige’s tone softens as she looks through her synced calendar and says, “Things got weird last week.”

“Weird?”

“Really scary people got in. He had to take shelter in the safe room.”

Sadie runs a finger down the cool steel.

“Mr. Blaize opted for the heavy door,” she comments.

“Yep.” Paige punches in a code. The door yawns open. “Fridge, radio, heat, and AC. Everything you need for a romantic evening.”

“Nice wine.” Sadie chuckles. “Does he entertain here?”

“No. But he insisted on the wine. I had to stop him from doing a full steampunk theme.”

“Too much fun?”

“Way too much fun. I was like, Carter, home invasions are serious.”

“Super serious.” Sadie plays along.

Paige leans in. “So damn serious.”

Sadie’s breath hitches. She manages, “Saturday for the day off?”

Paige lingers close.

“Saturday works,” she says.

Her eyes harden.

“Just keep him safe. But leave him alone. He’s one of the most important artists alive. He’ll call if he needs you.”

Sadie nods.

“Understood.” Then, more gently, “Were you there? During the break-in?”

Paige shakes her head and her eyes get glassy.

“No. He won’t talk about it with me. He’s in over his head. He thinks because he’s had so much commercial success, he owes something back. He’s … paying it back, somehow. I was joking before, but it’s serious. So fucking serious.”

“Hey…” Sadie squeezes Paige’s wrist. “You’ve got a great safe room. State of the art.”

Paige shakes her head again.

“You and I both know these rooms are useless if the wrong people come.”

Sadie bounces on her toes and lifts her fists. Paige looks amused.

“Okay, but you’ve got me,” Sadie says. “And I’m no joke.”

“A prizefighter.” Paige cracks a smile. “Maybe we should clear the living room for a ring.”

The tension loosens. Paige’s eyes sparkle.

“Come on. Let’s do some Meisner,” she says excitedly.

Sure, anything you want.

Paige pulls out two kitchen chairs and places them face-to-face. “Sit.”

Sadie lowers herself. Her nerves are buzzing. Paige is calm and focused. It's like she's been waiting for this.

"So, how does this work?" Sadie asks.

"Repetition," Paige says. "Don't overthink it. I say something, you repeat it back from your own point of view. We just go until something breaks through. That's where the truth is."

"Sounds like therapy."

"If by therapy you mean becoming a fully integrated human being, sure. But less talking." Paige smiles. "More Meisner."

Sadie takes a deep breath and nods.

"Okay."

Paige sits straighter. Her eyes sharpen.

"You look uncomfortable."

Sadie repeats, "I look uncomfortable."

"You look uncomfortable."

"I look uncomfortable."

Sadie wriggles in her chair. The rhythm takes over.

Paige leans in. "You look haunted."

Sadie winces. "I look haunted."

"You look haunted."

"I look haunted."

"You look like you've done terrible things."

A knot forms in Sadie's throat. "I look like I've done terrible things."

"You've done terrible things."

Sadie falters. "I've done terrible things."

Hot tears sting.

"You've done terrible things."

"Wait! Is that allowed?" Sadie blinks fast. "You dropped the 'you look' part. Kind of judgy, no?"

Paige laughs and throws her head back.

“Technically no, but yes. That’s when it’s working. That was next level Meisner. That was good,” she says with a glimmer in her eyes. “Really good.”

Sadie wipes her face quickly. She tries not to show too much.

“Okay. My turn, then.” She gathers herself. “You have big eyes.”

Paige repeats, “I have big eyes.”

“You have big eyes.”

“I have big eyes.”

Sadie tilts her head and says, “You played with my heart.”

Paige echoes, “I played with your heart.”

“You played with my heart.”

“I played with your heart.”

Sadie smirks. “You got lost in the game.”

Paige’s smile wavers.

“I got lost in the game?”

Sadie nods slowly. She knows she’s pushing now. “You’re in love.”

Paige answers flatly, “I’m in love.”

“You’re in love.”

“I’m in love.”

Sadie breaks the rhythm, blurting, “You’re not that innocent.”

Paige echoes with a resigned sigh, “I’m not that innocent.”

She stops. Paige just looks at her. The exercise hangs there between them.

Sadie winces.

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist.” She offers a weak smile.

Paige is not impressed. *This is backfiring.* Which is a first.

“Not a Britney fan?” Sadie asks—half-laughing but half-apologetic.

Paige chuckles lightly. “Oh, I am. Everyone my age pretends they’re not, but they are.”

Sadie smiles.

“I knew you would be. We’re a little young for her prime, but her whole story—”

“—is kind of all of ours,” Paige finishes, but the smile is not returned.

Sadie nods and says, “Yeah. The girl who got famous, and then the world decided what she was allowed to be.”

Paige’s voice drops. “And tried to take it all away.”

“Right. So she danced anyway.”

The thread between them is gone. Sadie can’t re-establish it.

“You’ve still got a mask on.” Paige exhales slowly.

“Isn’t that the point? I thought a good actor puts on any mask they want.”

“Some do. But for others—like me—it’s about no mask. A good actor becomes a window. So people can see it all.”

“All of what? The drama?”

“Yes. And what’s behind it. The human story. Our story.”

Her tone is disappointed. Like Sadie should know this already.

Paige’s phone buzzes. She glances at it and grimaces.

“Hold that thought. I’ve got to go,” she says as she stands. She’s already shifting gears. “Have a good day. Keep him safe.”

“Thanks, Paige. You too. I got the chairs.”

The voices are already listing every way she just blew it. She tries to listen. Paige is upstairs with Carter now, in his kitchen. Sadie can’t make out what they’re saying. She brings up the surveillance cameras on her phone and selects a kitchen camera. There he is.

Well, the top of his head anyway.

She can tell already that leverage is going to be hard to get. This guy lives like a monk. A Hollywood monastic. Writes all day, trains like a semi-pro athlete, eats clean, and sleeps eight hours a night. *Fine. Easy. No problem.* She can get creative, too.

She starts sketching a plan in her head to get Trish the kompromat she wants. Agitation spikes. Her pulse races. Nausea surges. She lines up her bottles of supplements and rearranges them. She's chasing symmetry.

What was all that with Paige? It was real. Or was it? It doesn't matter.

So what if Paige is amazing? That whole Britney thing was stupid.

Besides, she's not here to flirt. She's here to get Trish off her back. For good.

And guess what? You don't get to date, or crush on hotties, or form meaningful relationships with other human beings.

Why? Because you mangle them. You're cursed. You put people in harm's way.

She keeps rearranging the kitchen chairs, but no matter how many times she adjusts them, it's not right.

And she's not dumb enough to believe Trish has really backed off. That apology at the airport? Empty. Trish can't back off. She's a dog with a bone. Gnawing and gnawing. Sadie knows it. She feels it.

Her chest locks. Her ribcage retracts until she can't pull air.

The terror of Trish races up through her gut like acid. Charlie's voice slams into her head. *Let go. Higher power. You're not God.*

What the fuck does Charlie know? He's an ex-thug. Narcan'd back to life in some piss-stinking alley.

She lunges for the French doors and tears them open. Air. She needs air. The smell hits her immediately. It's paint. Wide-eyed, she looks around. Almost the whole lawn is painted. That's what the gardener was spraying—green paint. All the grass is dead. It's the same here as everywhere, *super ugly and gross*.

This world is condemned, and so is she. She's made a deal with the devil and ruined her life. Now she's dragging everyone down with her. She collapses onto her knees on the toxic grass and clasps her hands together. Tears stream down her face as she begs for God's help. The big, super-

powerful God. The God with a capital G. She needs the omnipotent, unstoppable, and fierce God she's heard about.

"God," she cries out like a child, "I'm in deep trouble."

She sobs.

"I need a way out of this mess. Please, please, please, God. *Help me*."

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TWENTY-SIX

Trish has sprung for the full upgrade package. If they're going to make her hold Sadie's hand through this task force op in LA, she may as well take advantage of what LA does best—looking good.

With surgical precision.

She knows that zookeeper's type. She's going to be it.

Cathy, the stylist, stripped out her extensions. Lectured her on the cheap bonds that had been frying what remains of her hair. Then she sold her on the newest invisible set. The best other people's money can buy.

Trish doesn't care about the cost or how the new hair gets attached. Go ahead and use upholstery tacks, just as long as it stays put. She let them melt her face off with a chemical peel. First time. They swore she'd be radiant and glowing in a few days. Better be. Because when she walks into that zoo again, she intends to look like his perfect match.

She's in a luxe suite just steps from the medi-spa. Hotel towels drape over every mirror. She won't look until she's ready. One of her foster moms used to say, "Beauty isn't pretty."

She was right.

She rubs her temples and tries to loosen the headache that Dave's complicated assignments always bring. Who's in the mix? FBI brass, Homeland Security muscle, and of course, the Agency. They're too late.

Five years too late, to be precise. Carter Blaize has already sparked a revolution. The man's got reach—real reach. Now he's rattled the president. Trish chuckles. The whole machine is scrambling to seize the narrative, but from his perch high on the mountain, Blaize is already laughing at them.

He has positioned himself well. She'd almost admire him … if he weren't on the wrong side. He's one of those true believers who mistake destruction for progress.

And that makes him dangerous.

The most dangerous adversaries aren't the ones who hate America; they're the ones who claim to love it and pretend to know how to "fix" it.

They can't kill him. He'd be an instant martyr. They'll discredit him instead. Ruin the myth. Flog him in the public square, nice and loud.

DHS has already pulled the immigration file. Carter Blaize wasn't even born Carter Blaize. He'd traded his birth name for something clean, bright, American. And somewhere in that file is a box he checked wrong.

Carter Blaize. A movie-poster name. A name built to sell a revolution.

Naturalized citizens are useful that way.

Vulnerable to exile.

They'll denaturalize and deport his ass.

That's how it's done now. Cheaper and cleaner. And it plays well worldwide.

This is her most public op yet. Her golden ticket out. Deliver Blaize's head on a platter, and they'll happily sign off on her retirement.

Sadie's using a burner for AA. Blaize's place is practically a reality-show set, wall-to-wall cameras. One of them caught her by the koi pond. The techs missed it. Trish didn't. She'll keep this one for herself. She can track it on her personal cell. Off-book leverage is always worth having. You never know when you'll need it.

Trish's birth dad drank. Beer cans lined the counter like they were part of the décor. After her mom left, whiskey bottles showed up. He sank

deeper into his chair. Kept his eyes fixed on the TV and his jaw slack. The remote stayed clenched in his fist like it mattered more than her. When he spoke, it was to complain about nothing in particular. He always wore the same gray T-shirt that had been stretched thin at the collar.

Thanks to Trish's experience with state-run Russian hospitality, she understands her dad now. That place of horrors put Trish on conversational terms with Viktor Frankl. A spiritual experience no one wants. All that insight is wasted on Trish. In fact, it's about as useful as tits on a bull. She doesn't give a damn about the intrinsic nature of man or life. She just wants a quiet mansion to lick her wounds in private.

In better digs than Dad.

She needs to speed things up. She fires off a secure message to Sadie.

ETA?

There's a pause before Sadie replies.

Soon.

Trish frowns and types.

Define soon.

Sadie's answer is immediate.

Working it. Amateurs rush. You taught me that.

Trish exhales hard through her nose and stabs the screen with her thumb.

The Los Alamitos team flagged your file. They think you're holding back. I had to answer to them and say you weren't. That you were stable. Don't make me a liar.

Dots flicker. Vanish. Flicker again.

Finally, Sadie writes.

I'll deliver. Trust me.

Trish's jaw locks as she types back.

This isn't about trust. DHS holds point on this, and HQ has elevated this to primary. Director's staff is getting nightly briefs. Orders are clear. No delay. Move.

Then nothing. A long silence.

Trish's thumbs hover over the keyboard. She shouldn't have sent that last bit. Sadie's PDA is like Kevlar—push too hard, and she just hardens.

She backpedals and types.

You've got this. You're the best. We know you'll deliver. Tell me how I can help.

She pauses before sending, staring at the screen.

You're begging, Trish. Sadie's got the upper hand, and she knows it.

She sends the message anyway. Then hurls the phone onto the bed. How is it that everyone and their dog *always* gets a leg up on her? Her face twists, and the tender new skin cracks. She paces. Her feet are thudding like war drums. Then the scream rips from her throat. It's primal. Volcanic. She grabs a fistful of her own hair and yanks it out, barely registering the pain. Glasses shatter against the far wall. A chair goes airborne.

Her lungs seize. She chokes, staggers, and nearly faints. She rights the overturned chair and collapses into it with trembling hands. Her breath is raspy and splintered.

She sits still for a moment. Sweat is prickling her skin.

A soft knock at the door.

Finally, lunch.

"Just leave it," Trish calls out flatly.

"Sorry, ma'am," comes a hesitant reply. "The front desk said the card on file for your suite was declined. They asked me to collect another form of payment before I leave the cart."

Trish flips open her wallet. She selects a new gold card. Annalise Pucker. What a name.

Well, Annalise, let's see what you're good for.

She yanks open the door. The young man on the other side startles and wedges the room service cart between them like a shield.

"Apologies, ma'am," he stammers, tugging at his vest.

Trish hisses, "Just run this one."

He takes the card gingerly and backs off like she's radioactive. The name discrepancy doesn't even register. It's not that kind of world anymore. The chip is the only identity that matters.

"This won't take long," he mumbles.

Down the hall, a child clutches her mother's hand.

"Mommy," she whispers, "that lady looks scary."

Her mother glances back and says, "Sometimes people just look scary, sweetheart. I'm sure she's perfectly nice."

Inside the doorway, Trish waits with her arms crossed. Her eyes are boring into the machine. In this moment, her lunch depends on a blinking cursor. Champagne and caviar—held hostage by a sliver of code. She hopes her hair purchase cleared all right.

At last, the machine chirps. A slip prints. The server tosses it on the cart and bolts. He mutters a quick goodbye.

Finally.

Trish wheels the cart in. Caviar glistens. Champagne sparkles. She sits, dips a spoon, and lets the brine roll over her tongue. Her shoulders lower. Sadie will deliver. The money's there. Five more gold cards in her wallet. The hair will happen. Real hair. "Humanely Cultivated," Cathy had promised. Not that it matters, as long as it looks fabulous.

Trish thinks of Cathy. Fake tan, fake bleach-blonde hair, and fake tits. Big head and tiny teeth. An anatomy experiment held together by a camel toe. Her mouth never stops.

Yesterday, she'd gone on about camping.

"When my hubby suggested it, I was, like—camping?" She'd giggled as she stripped out Trish's old extensions. "But the Grand Canyon? Totally blew me away. You been?"

Trish lied. Said no. Switched the subject to hair grades.

But she had been. Years ago, with her brother Trent. Before foster care. Before everything slid off the cliff. He faked some school forms, scooped her up, and took her out west with premium stolen gear. They slept under the stars like they owned the sky.

The Canyon had been a holy place for her. A basilica of red rock and gold light. For two weeks, she believed she might survive this life. Cocooned in a sleeping bag beside her big brother, she let herself hope.

Since then, she's learned what hope really is.

The cruelest con.

Warm for a minute, then gone. It leaves you worse off than before. Hope tries to wrestle with reality and always loses.

Dad blew his brains out. Trish got handed off to foster care. Trent got shanked in prison.

Not a story you want to get into with your stylist.

Cathy, of course, was thrilled when Trish upgraded.

"It's a lot of money, I know," she chirped. "But thick, full hair? It says —I'm alive. I'm ripe. I'm fertile. I'm ready. I'm a dream girl."

Trish tilted her head and played along. "A dream girl from a fairy tale?"

"Exactly!" Cathy winked. "And she meets her dream man. Mr. Right, am I right?"

"Sure," Trish murmured.

"Her knight in shining armor."

"Right." Trish smiled. Small. Practiced. "Thanks, Cathy. You're a sweetie."

Now, alone with her caviar, Trish feels an ache swell. A homesickness for something she never really had. Family. Her brother was the closest thing. Someone who really understood just how rough life can get.

She drowns the ache with champagne.

A door slams down the hall. A bath sheet slips from the mirror.

She catches her reflection.

Burned. Scalded. A big boiled shrimp in a robe. Scalp shiny and raw. Patches bleeding where she tore her hair out. The fluff on top doesn't help. She looks like hell.

Well, she has been there.

Might still be there…

She grins wide and grotesque at the mirror.

Hell's not so bad.

At least it has room service.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

The buzzing light of the motel room does little to ease the tension in Adrian's rigid frame as he hunches over his laptop. His fingers tap with quick precision. The lamp's old plastic shade, once white but now gone yellow, throws a jaundiced light across the cracked veneer table. The air smells like mildew only just overpowered by bleach—a failed attempt at sterilization that only makes the place feel more like the hospital he was forced out of.

Kirks. He's probably riding his bike in his tiny shorts.

He exhales through his teeth and steadies his hands.

Thanks to his hacker, Adrian has turned the dingy motel room in Los Angeles into a command center. A spider's web strung across cyberspace. Every strand is ready to catch her. The nymph has a name. Sadie Chandler.

"She's a spy," Tinman finally declared. He had surfaced one afternoon after weeks of digging.

"Is she now?" Adrian had let the words roll out slowly. "How intriguing."

"I should charge you double," the kid muttered. "She was hard to find. Those people have teams of erasers."

Adrian had stretched out like a satisfied cat.

“I’ll happily pay it,” he had said. “There are a few more things I’ll need.”

Tinman has set up the Schoolboy well. Adrian's money has bought what isn’t for sale. The one thing every analyst, interrogator, therapist, and jealous lover dreams of and never actually gets. Raw conversations. The holy of holies. Word-for-word chat transcripts between Sadie and her only lifeline—Anon381. Charlie. An ex-gangbanger who reinvented himself as a sponsor. A street prophet with a Big Book in one hand and redemption in the other.

Transcripts from their online meetings. No phone records. Tinman couldn’t get those. But the transcripts are more than enough. Adrian has read it all. Every word. He knows when she falls apart and when she backtracks. He knows when she tumbles into that pathetic childishness. He knows the rhythm of her withholding and how her syntax shortens under stress. He knows her the way a lab technician knows a rat in a maze. *Better, even.*

So, the government uses her as a honey trap. Geopolitical bait with a pulse. Adrian sees what’s underneath. High alcohol intake and polysubstance indulgence. Arrested development masquerading as brilliance. She thinks her pattern-seeking is intelligence. He suspects autism. She’s not complex. She’s predictable.

On paper, Sadie Chandler comes off as almost repulsive. That part was perplexing. That was until he remembered the original analysis from Psymedis. Empowered subjugation. The goal? Paradoxical arousal states. With that in mind, Sadie Chandler is perfect.

Perfect because she is pitiful.

She has attached herself to Charlie as though he were Moses, lugging his tablets of stone. Charlie, who crawled out of the gutter. Adrian almost laughs. What she doesn’t know is that Moses always had an ulterior motive.

Adrian will take over from here. He will become her Charlie. He will become her Moses.

He looks around the squalor of the room. This is just fine. His soul won't get healed in this filthy world by hiding in a hermetically sealed clinical room. Time to get dirty.

He draws the laptop toward him. The glow deepens the shadows under his eyes. The screen is full of her flailing. Her weak little appeals for direction. She clings with all her might to savior narratives. It's textbook.

The yearning for absolution was written in every chat log and fostered by every line of Charlie's crude, ex-gangbanger wisdom. Adrian smirks. The ache between his legs is sharper now. It's distracting and insistent. But it's not her that's driving it. He can say that with certainty now. It's the paradox. The twist of the moment. The confrontation with contradiction itself. That's what's making him hard. When they do finally meet, there will be an undressing.

We will strip back everything that interferes with who we are and undress our souls—layer by layer until there is nothing left but naked truth.

That's what they'll give each other. The raw material of their failures. Their filth and their brokenness. He will cradle it and rejoice in it. They both will.

AA has done the setup for him. Step Five. This is the doorway. The Big Book says it is freedom. Adrian knows better. It is exposure. It is surrender. Erotic humiliation. Step Five is the perfect striptease.

She's a bird with a broken wing that's flapping blindly. He is the hand that can keep her from crashing. Or he can crush her outright. Either way, she's his.

He sets his fingers to the keys.

"Found you," he mutters as his gaze locks onto the handle *RisingAngel999.* That's her. The name is almost too perfect. She's straining

upward, as if she could claw her way to heaven. Ironic. Pathetic and irresistible all at once.

Anon381, he types into the chat box, adopting the guise of her sponsor. Tinman is barring the real Charlie from logging into this meeting and from reaching out to her burner phone.

With Adrian's experience, this is going to be like shooting fish in a barrel. He doesn't even need to gain her trust. Charlie has it, implicitly. Not always, of course. There had been early exchanges where she pressed him hard. Charlie had sworn it up and down. He was never part of trafficking. His crew had been vicious, but even they drew the line.

He had proclaimed that only the lowest forms of humanity traffic other humans.

That was enough for her. Adrian laughs. She swallowed it whole, the way the desperate always do. She had mistaken street-boy posturing for moral fiber.

The challenge will be chatting like Charlie, but Tinman provided him with a custom AI chatbot that Adrian types into first.

Adrian stares at the blinking cursor. He types carefully. Measured.

He can feel the persona slip into place.

Anon381: Life's crazy, hey? Sometimes it feels like we're just trying to find a moment of silence.

The reply flashes back too quickly.

RisingAngel999: You good?

Adrian's stomach flips.

Shit. Too stiff.

He dives back into the chatbot, flicking through the settings. Formality down. Slang up. Syntax loosened. He growls. Why didn't the kid put together presets? This is taking too long. Charlie has a way of talking. It's clipped, but warm. A touch of street in the phrasing. He adjusts until the preview reads like a smile cracked with scar tissue. Hello, Charlie.

He tries again.

Anon381: Yeah, Angel. Livin' the dream. You?

There's a long pause. Then—

RisingAngel999: Okay. Tired of lame job for T.

Relief floods Adrian. Perfect. She bought it. He presses harder.

Anon381: Good. 'Cuz this is where we get real. You been circling Step Five, yeah? That's the corner piece you're missing. Sit with me, in person. Lay it all down. God, you, and me. That's where the poison drains out. Everything else? All the fear, all the chaos? Gone.

Her cursor flickers.

RisingAngel999: I don't know. I'm not supposed to go to meetings in person. You know that. I'm under next level scrutiny. You have no idea. They don't know about you.

Adrian scrolls the transcripts. Fast. Not once does Charlie say where he lives. Not once does she ask.

Of course not. Spies never ask the questions they'd hate to answer.

She doesn’t know.

Adrian takes a deep breath and lets the AI chatbot slide into Charlie’s easy cadence.

Anon381: Listen, Angel. Going to visit the fam in Burbank. Coming down this week anyway. So I’ll come to you. God’s timing, not mine. Step Five isn’t text or phone. Has to be face-to-face. One night. One sit-down. You spill it and you walk free. That’s the deal.

Silence. Then—

RisingAngel999: If we meet, and I do this … it’ll help? For real?

Adrian leans in and moans. He’s savoring the hook sliding in clean.

Anon381: Not just help. Transformation. Changes everything. You’ll feel again, Angel. You’ll finally stop carrying all that weight that isn’t yours. Get right with the world.

The tight swell in his pants throbs with every keystroke. She’s so close. She’s fluttering toward his hand.

Anon381: Step Five is the first time in your life you get to lay it all down and not be judged. You do this and you walk out lighter. You do this and you finally get free.

Adrian pauses. He lets the cursor blink, imagining her hesitation. Her yearning. Her need. He can almost taste it.

Anon381: You don’t need more strength, Angel. You need surrender. That’s the doorway you’ve been banging your head against. Meet me, and I’ll open it for you.

There’s a long pause. An eternity, then—

RisingAngel999: Where?

Adrian’s eyes widen. A jolt of excitement tears through him. He hammers the keys.

Anon381: Tomorrow? Solutions Now on Gower. 7 p.m.?

Adrian holds his breath.
Nothing.
Then—

RisingAngel999: Ok.

Adrian sends a thumbs-up and a string of emojis in response. Sadie follows suit. She logs off.

Adrian has Tinman push a message to her burner. A dropped pin.

Solutions Now, 6200 N. Gower Street. 7 p.m. So you don’t get lost.

Tinman confirms delivery. Adrian snaps the laptop shut with a sharp click. He jumps to his feet, fists pumping. A ragged cry tears from his throat. Tears sting his eyes. Relief, joy, and triumph get tangled together. He’s got her.

Almost.

Soon she’ll be his. His breath shudders as he recalibrates himself.

A crooked grin splits his face. He wipes his cheeks with the heel of his hand and heads outside for some air.

Stepping out of the dingy motel room, Adrian is hit with heat like a blast furnace. The sky above isn't sky anymore. It's a dirty haze that's been stitched with contrails. It's buzzing with helicopters now. He squints, but Los Angeles refuses to fall into place. It writhes instead. A mirage of glass, exhaust, and overdone suntans.

His stomach drops when he spots the Hyundai. The passenger window is blown out. Jagged teeth of glass are still clinging to the frame. He races back into the motel with dread clawing up his spine. In the nightstand drawer—*thank Christ*. The B-52 syringes are there. Haloperidol, lorazepam, and diphenhydramine. A chemical knockout punch that drops anyone, fast. They are safe and sound beside the Gideon Bible.

Bombs away.

He exhales and hurries back outside to assess the damage.

Inside the car, everything is in disarray. Shards of glass and scattered belongings. He'd chosen a princess ring from the Disney Store and a few other treasures meant for the ones who mattered. A soft Thumper plushie for Mr. Chin. All gone. The carriage set for Ms. Temple lies wrecked. Cinderella's plastic head is rolling on the floor mat like a guillotine trophy.

Adrian hears a child laughing. He notices a young mother playing with her child by the pool. *Probably on vacation*. He smiles and waves at them. The mother waves back. That is a sultry wave. A come-hither wave. She shouldn't be waving at a stranger that way while wearing a bathing suit.

A red bathing suit at that. What on earth is she thinking? She should cover up. That woman is nothing more than a hussy. Mother, indeed. She's asking to be treated poorly, just asking for it.

Adrian notices the water in the pool looks strange. It's not moving how water should move. It appears to be more chemicals than water. There's garbage spilling out of the bins and landing in the pool. A man who looks

like a twice-baked potato on a motorized wheelchair zips past … in nothing but his underpants.

Adrian looks over at the boulevard. A dog on the patch of green in the middle keeps squatting and then changes its mind. The traffic is wall-to-wall. The air is heavy with fumes. A person with a cart full of cans makes their way down the street, with a lot of noise. A driver throws a pop can into the cart. The street person, dressed in layers despite the heat, salutes and continues on their way. The air hums like bad wiring.

Hopefully, Sadie likes Seattle.

Across the boulevard, Adrian spots a Porsche dealership and designer boutiques beyond. Maybe this is a sign. Thanks to Mother, he is now a man of means. Perhaps he should start acting like it. He glances back at the Hyundai and then at the shimmering white letters of the Porsche sign.

He wipes his palms on his pants and whispers, “Cross that street, Adrian. Cross it like the man she won’t dare refuse.”

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TWENTY-EIGHT

The shower hisses and steam curls around her. Sadie tips her face into the spray. She lets the water run over her lips and down her chest. It rinses off the sweat from the workout. Her skin tingles. The heat sinks deep into her muscles. She closes her eyes and allows the pressure to drum her shoulders.

That was a seriously messed-up dream she had last night.

She'd been going down on Trish when a razor blade split her tongue.

Of course there was a razor blade.

Blood filled her mouth. Trish became the crazy lady in Seattle, pointing at the gap in her teeth.

"Quick, put it in here!"

Sadie did, and they breathed together while something huge moved through them. Ocean-ish. Old. Wrong.

Then Mary-Ellen was there, tasting like chamomile honey and murmuring about not using her body for sin, swallows flickering around her face.

Then Haoyu, dead and betrayed, pointing to the bullet hole in his head.

"Stick it in here and all will be forgiven."

Sadie did. Zap.

Then João, and she was riding him, his hands finding her hips and angling her just right, sending the first spark of an orgasm through her—

until his face kept glitching into Todd's.

With the beard.

The pleasure vanished, and the whole cult started chanting, "God, not Todd!" to a mean little harmonica riff.

Sadie had jolted awake, drenched in sweat, and immediately began a hard workout. It did the job. Good thing Paige wasn't in the dream. She wouldn't be. The connection they have, or had, is real. As real as it gets.

For a moment, she just stands there and breathes in the steam. Then the thought breaks through. She's going to do her fifth. The corners of her mouth pull into a smile before she can stop it. Tonight. Finally. She's going to get free.

The air outside the shower feels cold against her skin. She towels herself off. She steps in front of the fogged-up mirror and wipes a clear patch with her hand. Her reflection stares back. There's damp hair sticking to her temples. Her cheeks are still glowing from the run and the heat.

She looks good. Her shoulders look harder than before. Her stomach looks flatter and the curve of her hips leaner. She's stepped up her game since Los Alamitos, and the work shows.

Sadie stands up tall and flexes her arm just slightly. She studies the line of it. Strong. Ready. She lets the smile widen. Tonight is going to be big.

She did the thing. Step Four. Wrote it all out, line after line. Resentments, fears, harms done, and harms received. It felt like puking onto paper. There were pages of it. The Big Book calls it "a searching and fearless moral inventory." Sadie calls it a spreadsheet of self-loathing. Still, there it was.

Patterns had lit up for her. Andrea. That mess with her psych professor. Every botched op. Every near miss. If something was going wrong, Sadie was already moving into position and making herself the center of the storm. She always does that. If there is chaos, she steps into it. She claims it and tries to hold it together with her bare hands.

The old-timers in the meetings have a name for that. A “character defect.” Sadie had snorted out loud the first time she heard it. *Character defect?* Like she was a busted toaster with a frayed cord? *Please.* But the phrase stuck, irritating as it was, and now she gets it.

She isn’t addicted to booze. Not really. Not even the pills. Not at the core. What she’s really hooked on is control. Controlling chaos. That’s her drug of choice. She’ll eat it, breathe it, and sleep with it. Every disaster is a high waiting to happen. If she can wrestle it into order, even for five minutes, she gets that rush. And then it unravels again, and she’s right back to chasing.

That hit is unmistakable. The rush. The grip. The letdown.

She hated seeing that about herself. But once you see it, you can’t unsee it. By chasing chaos, she’s wrecking lives. Sadie’s the bad guy now. She looks in the mirror.

I am.

She turns away from her reflection.

According to Charlie, Step Five will free her. He sure made it sound that way yesterday. Like a ticket to a new life. In the rooms, they talk about it like it’s magic. It’s supposed to change everything. One woman swore it rewrote her whole existence. Past, present, and future. She had examples. Sounded legit.

Sadie shakes her head.

That can’t be the way it works. Can it?

She shrugs. It’ll be all right. Charlie will know what to do. Her nephew is fine. She’s over a month clean and sober. She’s done her fourth, and now she’s going to do her fifth. She pulls on a pair of black skinny jeans and a form-fitting white tank top. She chooses a vegan leather jacket for some edge and adds small silver hoops.

Try to stay positive.

Carter told her to take the day off. She cleared it with Trish, who actually agreed.

Trish had said, “He wants privacy? Sure. Let the emperor pretend his curtains still close.”

Since she’s meeting Charlie in Hollywood later, Sadie is going to play tourist for the day and get a taste of Los Angeles. She half-hopes Paige will be back before she leaves. Things between them are still awkward. The chemistry’s gone, and Sadie doubts it’s coming back. Paige doesn’t want it to.

Charlie keeps telling her to pray more. Make amends and try again. They’d even gone over how to frame a proper apology to Paige. When Sadie hears footsteps above, her pulse quickens. She bounds up the stairs while rehearsing.

Paige pauses in the doorway. Her eyes flick over Sadie’s outfit.

“Wow,” she says flatly. “You look different.”

Sadie forces a smile.

“Day off. You look the same as always. Which is … amazing.” A blush creeps up her cheeks before she can stop it. “Uh, how was the store?”

“Usual. Crowded. Annoying,” Paige says as she pushes groceries into the pantry like she’s still shaking off the crowd. “You?”

“I had a great workout. Listen, um…” Sadie falters and rubs the back of her neck. The apology is caught somewhere between her throat and her pride.

Paige gives her a slight side-eye. “I need to feed the fish and then get going. So do you.”

Sadie nods and pushes through the awkwardness.

“I’ve been meaning to have a serious … kind of talk with you, if that’s cool,” she says, but her words feel clumsy. Still, it has to be said. “I know you’re busy, but I just, um—”

Paige stops and turns with her arms folded.

Guard's up.

"What's up?" Paige asks.

Sadie takes a breath to center herself.

"Let's go outside. I'll help you feed the fish."

Paige studies her for a moment and then nods. They slip out to the koi pond.

This spot is so chill and beautiful.

The koi drift toward the surface. Their orange-and-white backs break the water in slow, glinting arcs.

"Why are they so big?" Sadie asks.

"Oh, Carter feeds them too much. I think they grow to the size of their, like, water. Container. Habitat? Anyway, they can get super big and live for thirty years."

The water laps up against the edges. Paige grabs the fish food from the cabinet by the French doors.

"Ellie, what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, remember when I did that Britney Spears thing during the Meisner exercise?"

"Yeah." Paige hops onto the narrow stone platform at the center of the pond. Alone. Balanced. A deliberate bit of distance.

Sadie forces Charlie's exact words out, "Well, I want to apologize for that. I wasn't ready to take off the mask."

Paige turns in a circle, empties the tin into the water, and closes it.

"Apology accepted." She tosses the tin, which lands next to the cabinet.

"All right, then," Sadie responds.

The frenzied fish turn the pond into a whirlpool. Water sloshes over the pond's edge. Paige seems to grow in stature. Her gaze is fixed on Sadie.

"What?" Paige says. "It's all right. Just like you say."

Sadie studies her. "It doesn't feel all right."

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Ellie. Carter and I adore you, and we’re just stoked to have you here.”

“Then why do you sound so, um, angry?”

“Because, Ellie, don’t act like I don’t see it. There is some serious dishonesty going on with you. I can see it.”

Sadie slips her hands into her pockets.

“You see it?”

Paige plants her hands on her hips.

“Yeah, I see it.”

Sadie shrugs nonchalantly and asks, “Dishonesty … about what?”

Paige throws up both hands in exasperation.

“About everything!”

“Everything?”

“About this whole I’m not an actor thing. You’re totally an actor. It’s obvious. Anyone can see that.”

“But I’m not.” Sadie looks down at her sneakers.

“Okay then … well … I’ve never seen anyone get so tight with Carter who wasn’t his girlfriend, and it’s freaking me out a bit, to be honest. What’s up with that? People don’t really get how fragile he is.”

One fish leaps out of the water in excitement.

“Oh my God, Paige. Chill! I’m not trying to make moves on him or something. He’s all yours.”

“Ew.” Paige snorts dismissively. “It’s not about that! He’s like an uncle to me anyway. Gross! No … it’s just that … I know you’re not being straight with me.”

“I’m not being straight with you?”

“Nope! You’re definitely not. Tell me something real for once.”

Sadie’s eyes lock on Paige. She’s so beautiful. So unguarded. Sadie aches to let it all out. To tell her the truth—not the cover. The words hover

at the edge of her lips. Her real name and her real life. But saying it would cost too much. Trish would go on a rampage.

Sadie's work phone buzzes in her back pocket. At first, she thinks it's a call, but when she pulls it out, the screen is blank. No call. No text. Just a violent, wriggling vibration that makes the phone jump against her palm.

"What the hell?"

She tightens her grip, but her hand is wet from the pond spray and nerves. The phone slips. It flips once in the air, screen flashing, and lands with a clean *plunk* in the koi pond. The fish scatter.

"Shit!"

Sadie lunges forward and her knees hit the stone edge. She leans over. Water laps against the rocks. She searches for the faint glow of the phone that's already sinking beneath the ripples.

She can't see it. She looks up at Paige, who's towering over her. This is not good. There's that knot in her throat again. *Forget the stupid phone. This is what matters. Say something, Sadie. Something real. Not cover and not deflection. Real.*

The silence stretches. Paige's eyes don't let her off the hook.

"Okay … fine."

Sadie exhales.

"I have a huge problem with drugs and alcohol, so I'm going to a meeting."

"Oh…" Paige looks stunned, then concerned. "Okay. Sorry."

There's a brief pause. She squats down and looks Sadie in the eye as she says, "I get it now."

"You get it now?"

"Yeah … I mean, I do. But let's be real—that's gotta be just the tip of the iceberg…"

Sadie tilts her head. "What do you mean?"

Paige’s smile eases back in, and her dimples cut through the tension. She leans over the pond and rests a hand on Sadie’s shoulder.

“I don’t know … I just feel like there’s a lot more under the surface with you.”

Relief hits Sadie, and her eyes flood. She stands quickly and wipes at them.

“Sorry, Paige. I, uh—yeah. Guess I’m deep and stuff. I don’t mean to change the subject, but that phone? That’s the work phone. Not waterproof at all. I gotta get it.”

She squints into the pond. Something glints below the surface. It’s a golden Oscar statue. She points at it.

“Wait. Is that a joke?”

“No. They’re real.” Paige laughs. “There’s a few down there. Some Golden Globes too.”

Sadie blinks. “They don’t, uh—”

“Deteriorate? Nope. Gold holds up.” Paige grins.

“Why does he keep them down there?”

“It’s his way of keeping perspective. The fish look after them for him. Keeps him grounded.”

“Does it work?” Sadie asks.

Paige smirks. “Most days. I kind of like his approach. Not all things need to be a display.”

“No. That’s for sure.” Sadie breaks eye contact, watching the fish.

Paige shifts her weight, her voice tightening slightly. “I don’t bask in my parents’ fame. I’m not a princess.”

Sadie gives her a blank look. “I never thought that.”

“Yes, you did,” Paige presses, calm but firm. “You didn’t say it, but you think it. And I want you to know I’m not. I’m Hollywood royalty, sure. But a princess? No. Fame’s dangerous. That’s why I’m taking my time.”

“I don’t think you’re a princess,” Sadie says. “Do you think I’m one?”

“No.” Paige doesn’t hesitate. “Definitely not.”

Sadie lets out a quick laugh. “Okay, good. Why are we so anti-princess, anyway?”

Paige rolls her eyes. “Because it could’ve been good, but it’s not.”

Sadie looks back at the koi gliding beneath them.

“Do they bite?” she asks.

“Yeah, but it tickles. Here, I got it,” Paige says as she reaches a long net in and retrieves the phone. “Yeah, it’s toast. I’ll fix it. Put it in with rice. Don’t worry. What about your car?”

Sadie shows Paige her burner.

“Look, I’m so cool, I have two phones. I booked it on this one.”

She checks. The Uber is five minutes out.

“Where is the meeting?”

“Hollywood.”

“Traffic is murder right now.”

“It’s okay. It’s not for hours. I was going to explore. I haven’t really seen it yet.”

“I can drive you,” Paige beams. She’s back to her mesmerizing self.

“It’s okay. I’m looking forward to exploring on my own. Feel the magic of LA.” Sadie laughs.

“Okay. What’s your number? To that other phone?”

Sadie gives it to her. Paige sends her a text. It’s an emoji of a koi fish.

“Just call if you need anything. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks. Have a good day,” Sadie says with her heart still hammering.

The pond glints with sunshine. The golden light sparks in Paige’s eyes. The current between them is undeniable. For once, she doesn’t need the yes-no trick. The answer’s already here.

Just stop.

Sadie, what are you doing? You're stirring chaos. Paige is a means to reach Carter. Nothing more—nothing less.

You can't afford to be real right now.

You've already made a mess of things. You need a miracle to untangle it all.

She gulps.

Fine. Charlie says he's a miracle broker.

She looks up at the Cali-mageddon sky.

Let's see what he's got.

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TWENTY-NINE

An elephant trumpets as Trish walks past. Her chin lifts. Shoulders roll back.

Yes, darling, that's right. The goddess has arrived.

Gorgeous and ready. She's here for him. The zookeeper. She's nipped over to DC yesterday, flying private. She didn't even finish her Pellegrino. Quick, like money slipped through a Swiss account. No one will know.

He needs to see the new look. Needs to know exactly what kind of woman has stepped into his orbit. But where is he? The zoo is a mess of scaffolding and parents dragging sticky-fingered kids. The smell of animals is steeped in summer heat. A toddler bumps her thigh with a melted ice cream cone, and she doesn't flinch—just stares down until the mother yanks him back. Everyone needs to stand back. She's on the hunt.

At the zebra enclosure, dust kicks up against the wooden railing. He's not there either.

She stops, catching her reflection in the dark glass of a vending machine. Her skin is glass-smooth, the aggressive chemical peel having stripped away any trace of mortality. Not a single strand of Cathy's blowout has succumbed to humidity. And the heels—gold-leaf stilettos stamped with tiny overlapping fish scales that gleam under the harsh sun—elevate her six

inches above the dirt, clicking against the concrete like shiny coins. Exactly how a dream girl should look. Exactly how a dream girl should feel.

Her zookeeper must be lonely. Arrogant men always are, especially the ones who believe themselves superior to the very country in which they operate. Living and working in a place he despises. Convinced he's smarter than the people around him. Carrying a life mission built on contempt. That's isolation. It makes companionship feel like a weakness. It also makes him crave it.

By now he must understand the futility of believing Americans will someday tire of themselves and ask to be managed. They never have. They never will. Americans would rather burn their country to the ground than surrender it to those who produce nothing and demand everything.

Her phone buzzes.

Dave.

She silences it without a glance. He can wait.

Finally, she spots him.

Simon.

He's with the primates. Of course. Their slow grooming. Their dark, knowing eyes watching from behind the bars. Still strong, despite captivity.

Trish sweeps her chestnut hair over one shoulder and steps into his line of sight. He sees her. Really sees her. And he waves. It's not the absent-minded wave for visitors. It's a gesture that carries intent. It's her time to shine.

Her phone buzzes again. Dave. She lets it ring.

Simon nods toward the staff entrance. She positions herself at the door, near a cart of dung.

Then he appears. He peels off his gloves.

"Lucky you come now," he says, his accent as rich as she remembers.

"Oh?" Trish winces at the smell and steps away from the cart.

"Yes. Yes," he says, reaching into his pocket. "Video."

He starts a video on his phone and tilts the screen so she has a good view.

“I show you now.”

On the screen, Sadie slumps across from João in a bar. She’s glassy-eyed and slurring too loud.

“I’m CIA,” she shouts, naming her branch and unit for the whole room.

She lurches up and sloshes her drink onto his lap. Then she squints into the empty glass like it holds secrets.

The straw nearly jabs her eye before she flings the glass aside, grabs her top, and rips it off.

Lemon wedges appear in her fists. She smears them across her bare chest, shrieking, “Take a good look. I’m cleansing my body of CIA poison!”

Lemons still pressed to her nipples, she blurts out everything she shouldn’t—rigged elections, embassy bombings, a string of recent assassination attempts.

Her movements turn wild, primal. She tosses the lemons aside, pounds the table, flings her hands in the air, and screams, “Math guys are so fucking hot!”

It’s like watching an animal. All of her limbs move with reckless abandon. As Trish watches, she takes in a deep breath to steady herself. The smell of ape shit fills her nose instead.

The video cuts to João Marcelo.

“I am the Brazilian Einstein,” he says while staring straight into the camera. “I will release evidence confirming everything this CIA’s top operative has revealed.”

A link flashes across the screen.

He continues, “We will also expose the trafficking network used extensively by the CIA and other intelligence agencies worldwide.”

His voice hardens, and he raises a fist. “The United States must be stopped. Justice must come now. And I have found a way for the world to rise against this darkness—”

“Yours.” The zookeeper laughs and points at Trish.

“Mine?” Trish spots the number of likes at two million. Posted forty minutes ago. She presses her lips together and backs away.

The zookeeper laughs some more.

“Wait, wait. Best part.” He thrusts the phone in front of Trish’s face.

There’s more of drunken Sadie, who steadies herself, does a backflip, picks up João’s nearly full drink, douses herself with it, and starts twerking. The likes have jumped to three million. She tries to rap. Something about João being unbuyable and broligarch losers. She caps it off with a tragic breakdance impression.

The zookeeper moves close to her and smiles.

“Americans, very bad spies—very bad.”

“I don’t know why you are showing me this. I don’t like TikTok. I don’t like any social media.”

She looks down. There is now shit all over her shoes.

“Don’t play stupid.” The accent is gone. His English is suddenly flawless. “You know why I’m showing you. You know who I am, and I know who you are,” he says, his gaze locking onto hers. “We don’t forget. We let you live for our amusement. It’s been very entertaining.” He blows her a kiss. “Aleksei sends his love.”

He gestures toward the apes. “They make better spies.”

The apes know that he’s complimenting them, and they love it. They start screaming their approval and jumping up and down. He switches into Russian. Trish can barely hear him. Something about her being at the bottom of the food chain in jail.

She backs away.

“Wait!” he shouts over the din. He holds up his phone. “I’m calling Aleksei. He wants to say hi.” He turns to the apes and howls with laughter. “You want to say hi too?”

Her phone keeps buzzing. It’s Dave. Trish storms toward the exit and answers.

“Can we pull it down?” Trish runs into a no entry sign with a detour arrow.

“No, it’s a little late for that,” he says. “I told you to stay close to her, and you’re in DC.”

The next exit is also under construction and closed off. Where’s the damn exit?

Gusts of wind tear through the zoo. They knock over most of the detour arrow signs. Trish struggles to keep her skirt from flying up as she looks around and tries to find a way out. The wind whips through her hair. It’s tugging hard on her scalp. It whips into her eyes, making it difficult to see.

“I’ll fix it,” she shouts into the wind.

Dave’s voice comes back level and clear. It’s drained of any emotion.

“No, Trish. You won’t. We’ll take it from here. Did you see the whole thing?”

She steadies herself against a railing.

“No. Not yet.”

His tone doesn’t change.

“The video’s not the only problem. The key she brought back was a Trojan horse. Data leak. Virus. Not just embarrassing. Fatal. We could not look worse. But it goes beyond that.”

“Why didn’t the—” she starts in a sharp voice.

Dave finishes for her. “Why didn’t the firewalls catch it? Why wasn’t it quarantined?” He pauses. “It was. It was isolated for inspection. Someone cleared the decoded files for transfer, and the payload woke up. It didn’t just leak files. It mapped connections. Locations, personnel, extraction routes,

live operational traffic. Everything. Our active operations are being broadcast in real time. The Hill's calling every five minutes. Allies are furious. Contractors are lawyering up. There'll be hearings before the week is out."

She reels and clutches the phone tighter.

"This is catastrophic," Dave continues, his voice as flat as stone. "You're finished. I tried. They know about the clowns in Montana."

"How?"

"Mitchell. He had photos of them from your work phone. Off-book leverage."

"Bastard! That's a bit over the top considering—"

"He didn't like finding Sadie left for dead in a storage locker. You pissed him off."

"The clowns—I, I was defending myself."

"It's done. The deal they've cut for you is that they won't prosecute, but all benefits revoked. That's not bad."

"Dave," she says, choking on his name. Her throat is raw.

"Effective immediately. Be happy. This is what you wanted, isn't it? I'm probably next, if that helps."

The line clicks dead. Her work phone goes black. No access. Locked out.

Trish finally finds a functioning exit and barrels toward it as her skirt whips in the gale. She sees a yellow cab. She throws up an arm. The driver brakes hard. His horn blares at the pedestrians he narrowly misses. She yanks the back door open and collapses inside.

"Where to?"

"Leesburg Executive, step on it."

He nods once and guns the car into traffic. Trish pulls out her personal cell. She's still tracking Sadie's burner. She checks for device activity. A

new alert pops up. Sadie has just opened a dropped pin in her map app. The tracker scrapes the metadata and displays it on her screen.

Location: 6200 N. Gower Street.
Time: 8:00 p.m.

That's tonight. Perfect.

Trish books a jet as the cab swerves past cars and pedestrians.

She'll be in LA by seven, just.

The cabbie glances at her in the mirror.

"Private is expensive." The p lands soft, the v melts toward an f. Arab. Maybe Syrian. Not old security service, unless he'd learned to wear wholesome well. Either way, he can drive. She nods, and he faces forward again.

Trish finishes watching the video and scrolls through the feeds. The White House and CIA are calling Sadie an *officer*. Trish snorts. That's rich. *Sadie was never an officer. She was an asset who was spoon-fed the line that she was part of the team.*

Still, the optics are perfect. They are firing Trish, and writing Sadie off as a heroic head case. The officer who gave too much. Broke in service.

Fine.

Trish can help that narrative along.

The best heroes are dead.

Trish opens her Prada and smiles at the sleek, matte black finish of her Glock. One perk of flying private—this little baby always comes along.

She pulls a packet of sanitizing wipes from beneath the gun and starts scraping the shit from her gold-leaf heels.

The jet is pricey, but she doesn't mind. She glances down at the stack of gold cards nestled in her leather wallet.

High cost. High reward.

She tosses the wipe out the window, shuts her bag, and gives it a little pat.

The devil always collects his tax. Just not from her.

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THIRTY

Paige rummages through the cupboards in the lower kitchen. She's searching for a bag of rice. There isn't any, so she walks upstairs to Carter's well-stocked pantry. She wants to dry out Ellie's phone that just got tossed in the koi pond.

Carter's at the stove. He's cooking and scrolling on his phone.

"Hey, I need to save a phone. Where's your rice?" Paige asks.

"You should know. You buy it." He points toward the pantry. "Closest to the fridge. Is it yours?"

"No. It's Ellie's."

"There's a jar in there, too. Ready to go. Should work. What were you two discussing over there, by the pond?"

"You saw that?"

Carter nods. He's on TikTok. It's his new favorite thing.

"Looked serious."

Paige goes coy. "You could be right."

She places the phone into the jar filled with rice. The standard procedure for drying out and saving a waterlogged phone.

"Okay, I'm going to get out of your hair," Paige announces.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Carter's eyes go wide.

"What?" Paige asks and arches an eyebrow.

Carter angles his phone toward her. “Ellie. TikTok.”

Paige leans in, and her eyebrows shoot up. “What the hell? What is she even doing?”

“I’ll send it,” Carter mutters, his thumbs already flying. He glances at the big screen on the wall. “Better yet, let’s throw it up on the TV.”

“Yeah, sure,” Paige agrees. “I’ll get my laptop.”

They get settled in the living room. Paige opens her laptop, navigating to her history to find the link Carter just messaged her, aiming to cast it to their smart TV.

She clicks it. The TV screen flickers, attempts to load the video, and then goes black.

In bold, clean white text, a message appears:

This video has been removed for violating TikTok’s Terms of Service.

Paige blinks. “Wait. What? It was just there.”

“They’re wiping it,” Carter says, staring at his phone. “Look at my TikTok feed. The original post is gone. The user account is suspended. Someone is pulling the plug.”

“Are you kidding? On everything?” Paige types furiously on her laptop, searching YouTube. “Okay, look. People are already re-uploading it. Here’s one.”

She casts the new link to the TV.

This one loads, but it’s bizarre. The video is mirrored—everything left is right, and right is left—and the audio sounds like everyone has inhaled a tiny bit of helium.

“Why does it look like that?” Carter asks, squinting at the screen.

“They pitched the audio up and flipped the video to slip past the automated takedown filters,” Paige explains, her eyes glued to the TV.

“Look at the view count. It’s gaining fifty thousand views a minute. Oh—and it’s gone.”

The screen cuts to black again. This video is no longer available.

“Damn it,” Carter mutters. “Try Twitter. Or Telegram. Someone’s got a Google Drive link. They have to.”

“Found it.” She winks. “Someone rebuilt the whole video inside a Minecraft server. The bots can’t touch it. Ready?”

“Paige, you’re a genius. Oh, I’m ready. Push play, my dear.”

They both watch drunken Ellie, or Sadie Chandler, according to the captions, who is apparently a CIA agent living in their house—rub lemon pieces on her tits. On the big screen TV. Over and over. Carter’s neglected pan of kale begins to burn, so he gets up and turns it down.

“Okay, I’m lost,” he calls from the kitchen. “This João guy—the Brazilian Einstein—what’s he actually offering?”

Paige pulls her laptop toward her and skims headlines.

“He’s exposing and doxxing all global traffickers,” she starts.

Her eyes go wide. “Wow, he’s posting proof.”

She recoils and holds a hand up to her mouth. “He says he’s selling drone strikes. To the highest bidder.”

“What? This can’t be real,” he says as he comes back to the living room.

“I’ll check Twitter.”

“I thought it’s X now.”

“Yeah, X, I meant.”

He looks at the TV. It’s paused on Ellie mid-back flip.

“What drones? Whose drones? Our drones? This is a … parody or something.”

Paige’s eyes dart all over the monitor.

“Well, I think … yeah, it is real.” She grimaces. “They can only be called on individuals.”

“What, the drone strikes?”

“Yeah.”

He scrunches his nose. “Now that, well … that’s not really a drone strike, now is it? That’s something else. That’s an assassination.”

He lets out a nervous laugh.

“Yeah, I see where he’s going with this,” Carter continues as he scratches his head. “To be honest, I’m surprised it took this long to see this kind of thing.”

“Really?”

“New kids on the block,” he says. “They’ve got something to prove.”

Paige gasps. “He’s offering ethical discounts.”

He scoffs, “Yeah, sure he is. How do those work?”

Paige is speed reading.

“Are you reading the comments?” she asks.

He nods. “Yeah. There are some seriously messed-up people loving this.”

Carter starts running his hands through his hair as he leans over Paige’s shoulder. He points on the screen.

“Okay, follow that link,” he says.

“Why?”

“I’m going to bid.”

“Carter, no, you’re not.”

“I’ll do it anonymously, of course. Just go there and tell me what’s going on.”

He returns to the kale and puts some extra-virgin olive oil on it. He makes a face and starts eating it anyway.

Paige checks the link out and chuckles.

“I think it’s out of your price range,” she says.

“Where we at?” he asks as he gives up on the kale and scrapes it into the compost.

“Already in the millions and climbing.”

“What do you mean? I’m rich. How many millions? Send Stephen and Peter a text. They must be looking at this. We can join in.”

“Uh, no, Carter.”

“No, what?”

“No, you’re *not* doing this. Ethical discount or not. Whatever that even means. I don’t even know what I’m saying right now. This is nuts. You’re not doing it.”

“Why not?” Carter points a wooden spoon at Paige.

Paige grabs the end of the spoon and pushes it away.

“Because they’ll trace it to you.”

“What if we use his system?”

Paige pushes the laptop away. “You’re not doing this, because it’s not you,” she states. “You’re a writer. Besides, who do you want to, you know, like, strike?”

“You know who. Depends. I could do a few, really.”

“Carter, this isn’t an epic space movie. I doubt the evil empire will fall because of one good shot.”

“You mean the best shot ever. This is better than a space movie. This is real.”

“I actually would prefer this to be a space movie, to be honest. I’m freaked out. Aren’t you?”

“No.” Carter frowns. “Makes me sad.”

“Sad?”

“Yeah. I used to be the Wizard of Oz. Now I’m not. Now it’s this João guy.”

“The Wizard of Oz,” she says, bemused.

“Yeah.”

She gives him a disbelieving look.

“You’re not exactly a wizard, Carter.”

“I’m not?” Carter looks hurt.

“Carter.” She crosses her arms. “The Wizard of Oz was a total fake.”

He wrinkles his nose.

“Well … that last manuscript? Junk. Why didn’t you say so?”

Paige grins.

He points at his phone. “People don’t want films anymore. They want micro-dramas on these things now, which I don’t really do.”

His face falls.

“I’m irrelevant,” he says with a sigh. “Time I face it.”

“You’re not irrelevant.”

“I’m not?”

“No,” Paige insists. “It’s the fucking Joãos that are fucking irrelevant. They’re just loud right now.”

“Wow. Tell me how you really feel,” Carter chuckles. “There’s some gusto there.”

She’s fuming.

“Well, he says he won’t have his technology used for war, but he’s a total hypocrite. He’s just making fun of war. Well, kind of. Which is…” Paige refocuses. “And so, like, yeah, you can take out some bad dudes, his way … but, like, what’s that going to do? Like that’s going to do a fucking thing! It’s useless.”

“Good point.” Carter nods. “It would turn into that whack-a-mole game.”

“Like, why don’t I just scream into a megaphone at every idiot I see? Same level of impact!”

Carter lets out a belly laugh. “Oh, Paige, I love you.”

He pauses as mischief glints in his eyes.

“But still.” He grows serious. “Your generation … Don’t take this the wrong way, but you can’t make a point.”

“What?”

“Sorry, Paige, but you can’t. All those algorithms are messing with your head. They’re watering down your…” Carter spreads his hands and looks up, searching for the words. “Your whole reason for being.” He shrugs. “At least this João guy’s making a point. I could still bid and demand they swap the live ammo for confetti. Would that make you feel better?”

Paige’s shoulders are up around her ears.

“No. Let’s just leave it. Okay? They’ve probably already shut him down anyway.” She exhales and shakes her head. “And you don’t want to be the Wizard of Oz, trust me. Too many idiots out there want to play villain billionaire puppet master. It’s lame. It’s better to just be Carter Blaize.”

He puts the wooden spoon down on the drying mat.

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. I also say I’m not going anywhere today, and I’m ordering pizza.”

“Pizza? I haven’t had pizza since you were born. We don’t eat pizza. Do we?”

As they lean against the kitchen island, Paige gazes up at the sky through the skylight. She takes in the gathering dusk.

“If things don’t go well with the drone auctions, this could be our last meal together,” she says.

Carter follows her gaze and nods.

“You might be right.”

“We’ll order pizza,” Paige says and closes the laptop. “Greasy, meaty pizza. And then we’ll watch a movie. On the big screen. And then…”

“Then what?”

“We’ll visit the Carter Blaize wine cellar…”

“And then what?” he prods.

Paige smiles. “We’ll visit the Carter Blaize medicine cabinet.”

“That’s break-in-case-of-emergency.”

“Exactly…” Paige nods. “This is definitely one of those times.”

They both look over at Ellie’s phone. Sadie to them now. It’s drying quietly on organic rice inside a jar priced for people who don’t check price tags.

“What should we do about Ellie or Sadie?”

They look at each other seriously and then both crack into smiles.

“Let’s call her Sadie.”

“Okay. Sadie, it is. I like her.”

“I like her too,” Carter says.

“I think she likes me.”

“I think she likes you, too.”

“She’s going to a meeting by the way,” Paige comments as she makes a gesture of tipping a wine glass into her mouth. “That’s what we were discussing out by the pond. She’s got addiction issues.”

She raises both eyebrows high and adds, “Clearly.”

Carter laughs. “So does most of Hollywood.”

“You should get a tax break, though,” Paige says, loosening up. “The whole federal-agent thing. You shouldn’t have to pay her salary twice.”

She thinks about it.

“Wasn’t Hearst’s butler spying on him?”

Carter chuckles and nods.

“Everyone’s butler was spying on someone,” Carter says. “That was practically the business model of old Hollywood.”

“Leno’s place,” Paige says.

“What, the secret studio?”

“Yeah. Not so secret.” Paige orders the pizza, then goes back to the laptop.

“Well, she’s just been retired. The CIA got official. Mental health.”

She taps the trackpad, bringing up the official release.

@CIA

The Central Intelligence Agency can confirm that the officer referenced in recent online media has been separated from service and is receiving care through the Agency's medical and family support programs. Out of respect for the individual's privacy and in accordance with federal health information protections, no further details regarding her condition will be disclosed.

The Agency is aware of a video circulating on social media purporting to depict statements by this former officer. A preliminary technical review has identified clear indicators of digital manipulation. The claims contained in that video do not correspond to any authorized activity, operation, or finding of the Central Intelligence Agency, and should not be regarded as credible.

We ask that the public, and members of the press, exercise appropriate caution when engaging with unverified material of this nature, particularly where it concerns the identities of intelligence personnel.

"Yep. That's a good go-to." Carter rolls his eyes.

"Didn't the powers that be try that with you once?"

"Oh, they tried it a few times."

"Hemingway," Paige says solemnly.

"That was sad," Carter says and wipes clean the cast-iron frying pan. "Sad and mean."

They put their phones down and wait for the pizza. The kitchen grows still and quiet.

Paige exhales, which breaks the silence. She adds a crooked smile and says, "She's kind of awesome."

Carter agrees, "Yeah, she is."

“But…” Paige purses her lips. “She’s kind of scary.”

Carter snorts. “Yeah, *she is*.”

“That whole ice queen thing she does?”

“Chilling,” Carter says.

“Well, we did Meisner, and she wasn’t like that.”

“No?”

“No, it was all heat and light. Like the sun.”

“The truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.”

Paige smiles. “Dumas?”

“Dickinson. Dumas would’ve turned it into a sword fight.” He swirls his drink. “But we need people like him right now. Popular and creative. Big Studio is killing all the artists. But there’s no resistance. Where are they?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “We were warned. I mean, Kubrick fled.”

“Yeah, and they exiled Welles.”

Paige watches Carter as he settles into an uncharacteristic seriousness.

His tone dips. “The gun. I don’t like the gun sitting downstairs.”

Paige nods. “I’ll get it. I’ll put it in the safe room. What movie do you want to watch?”

“You pick. Drink?” he offers.

“Yes, please. A strong one. Have you seen *Red Sparrow*?”

“Yes. Something else.”

“What about *Salt*? *Atomic Blonde*? *Hanna*?”

Carter mixes them both a drink and hands Paige hers.

“I’ve seen them all.” He sighs.

“There’s a series. *Killing Eve*?”

He shakes his head. “Seen it.”

“I know, me too.”

“It’s safe to say we’ve exhausted that genre.”

“We have. It doesn’t matter what we put on. We’ll just be scrolling anyway.”

“Wait and hope,” Carter says, raising his glass. “Dumas. All human wisdom in two words.”

They clink glasses.

Carter takes a sip. “I know what I want to watch. Sorry, I said you could pick.”

“What?” Paige asks as she flops down on the sofa.

“*The NeverEnding Story*.”

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THIRTY-ONE

Sadie makes her way around the back of the hard-to-find community center, the distraction of the city finally wearing off as her nerves kick in.

She stares at the quiet, closed door.

She is twenty minutes late, and Charlie isn't going to be impressed.

She'd spent the whole day trying to avoid this moment, chasing the city's slow-burn Cali-mageddon vibe just to keep her mind off Trish. She'd nursed a virgin mojito at some rooftop bar, pretending not to want the real thing. She'd even dragged herself to the Bradbury Building downtown—a pilgrimage she knew she shouldn't have made, knowing how much Andrea would have lost her mind seeing where they shot *Blade Runner.*

"You're going to have a *Blade Runner* life," Andrea's monotone voice echoes in her head, cutting through the residual California sunshine. "I just want to be boring. You can have the whole 'what is real' thing."

A loud whisper slices through the silence.

"Hey. Hey. Over here." The voice is coming from a hedge.

Sadie cautiously approaches.

"Just come out," she calls with her heart pounding.

"I step out, and it's locusts. No thanks," the voice snaps.

Sadie exhales hard.

It is LA.

Someone off their meds?

She crouches and parts the hedge.

It’s the old lady. The gray market hack.

The lady grins and shows off her bad teeth.

“Come in,” she says.

“What?” Sadie recoils. “No.”

“You deaf, or just slow?” Her hands shoot out. They clutch Sadie’s wrist and pull her in. The pair of them wrestle in the hedge. Sadie’s muttering curses. The lady is strong. They tussle until the lady hisses, “Stop. Much depends on this moment. Be still.”

Sadie stops resisting. The lady’s breath reeks, but her grip is iron.

“You’re that hack from Seattle,” Sadie breathes. “You drugged me. Your grape soda.”

The lady tilts her head.

“Best vintage in the alley. I’m in a lot of places. I watch. I listen,” she says. Her gaze is sharp as a knife. “And I see what’s crawling under your skin.”

Her words come in strange bursts. “Threads in your blood. Electric eyes on the walls. You feel it too, don’t you? Everything wired. Everything hungry.”

Sadie swallows. Once again, she doesn’t know if the lady is raving or really means what she’s saying.

“Doesn’t matter if you understand how you are featured on the menu,” the lady mutters and looks past her. Her eyes are darting like she’s tuned into some invisible frequency. “You’re part of the recipe anyway.”

She nods at the community center door. “The show is about to begin. Now that we’re here, dear. This is the big reveal. Watch what walks out.”

They watch hidden in the bush as a man exits and holds the door for a woman. Not just any woman. Trish. And she’s laughing.

“I could not believe my eyes when you walked in,” she says.

She’s flirting.

The man smiles and then sighs.

“Of course, I remember you and your brother, Trent. Believe it or not, he was one of my favorite people.” His tone dips somberly. “I’m sorry. Truly. For your loss.”

Their bodies angle toward each other. Their shoulders are almost touching. Not just polite. Not just friendly.

Trish nods. Her voice is steady and cool.

“Thank you. It was a long time ago. He thought you were a class act.”

The man halts mid-stride. “You know, he valued every visit you made. Prison is brutal on men like Trent. Too smart for the yard.”

And then it happens. The Botox, the fillers, and the lacquered perfection all split wide open. Trish’s face collapses. Not a pretty cry. Not a camera-ready dab at the corner of her eye. It’s a full-on breakdown. She sobs. Her shoulders are shaking. Mascara is streaking. Ugly. Raw. Clutching at him in the parking lot like she might fall.

Sadie just crouches there in the bush. Awestruck.

What the hell is this?

Trish, the reptile. The surgeon’s mannequin. Actually feeling?

And the man holding her? Sadie knows him.

It’s the doctor. The one she knocked flat in Seattle.

What is going on?

Beside her, the old lady nearly vibrates out of her skin, silently mouthing, “I know, right?”

When the sobs subside, the man presses a handkerchief into Trish’s palm.

“This isn’t chance,” he says, “us meeting like this after all these years. Let’s catch up. Have you eaten?”

Trish shakes her head and blows her nose. He pulls a fob from his pocket. A Porsche 911 GT3 RS answers with a chirp. Its black body gleams

like a predator under the lot's LED lamps.

Trish composes herself and almost purrs as he opens the passenger door for her.

"Great car."

The Porsche snarls to life, and together they vanish into the dark.

The lady hums "Here Comes the Bride." She smiles at Sadie. "A perfect match. For better or worse."

She claps her hands together briskly. It's like she's finished a chore.

"Well, I'm off."

"What? Where?" Sadie feels a little dizzy.

"I did what I came here to do," the lady says and pokes Sadie hard in the solar plexus with a long finger. "I suggest you do the same."

"What?"

The lady rolls her eyes. "You don't get it. I'll spell it out. Tonight was a trap. But the trap trapped the trappers."

Her stare intensifies.

Sadie starts a slow and knowing nod. Do *not* get owned by a gray market hack.

"Thanks, but I was up on that. What I'd like to know—"

"You're welcome." The lady's reply is clipped.

Once again, she tilts her head like she's tuned to a frequency no one else can hear. Her lips purse, like she's listening to instructions. She nods once.

She really is committed to this whole act.

She's so confident in it. Too confident.

Sadie's breath goes ragged. Her ribs feel hollow. She sees it all at once. She's been played. In a big way. It was all orchestrated. Father Jim's note, Charlie, and the hack lady are not random.

Of course, they're all working together. Probably with Trish pulling the strings. But why? It doesn't make sense.

It could be those asshole super spooks from Los Alamitos. Maybe the debrief never stopped? Does it even matter who it is? She was so dumb for getting involved with this stuff. She'll never find Andrea. She'll never be free of their stupid games.

Her knees go weak. She wants the parking lot to split open and swallow her whole. Have the asphalt close over her like a grave. She'll never stop being their slave. *Fuck this*. She's done. She'll go back to that rooftop bar. This time it won't be virgin cocktails.

The meeting doors swing wide open. It's emptying out. People drift into the lot. Their small talk and laughter carry on the night air. The lady slips on oversized sunglasses.

"See you in the ether. I'm out. Can't stand LA."

Sadie crawls out of the hedge and brushes off leaves. She tries to look casual under curious stares. Her brain still crackles. It's lit up with betrayal, while her body stumbles across the asphalt grit. She's unsteady. Suddenly, a car careens into the parking lot. It knocks over a sign and comes to a stop. The frantic male driver jumps out of the car and races toward Sadie, screaming for help.

"I need naloxone! I need Narcan now!"

Sadie's heart starts racing as she realizes what's happening. Someone is overdosing.

A woman runs toward the community center as she yells back, "We've got some inside."

"It's my sister, Zoe! She's OD'd!"

Sadie moves to the passenger side. A young woman is lying on the back seat. Her lips are blue.

The runner returns. "Okay. I've got it." She's breathing fast as she shakily opens the kit. "It's empty."

"What the fuck!" the brother screams.

Sadie’s burner died hours ago. She takes the brother’s phone, calls 911, reports the overdose, and requests assistance. The brother screams and wails, “It’s too late! It’s too fucking late!”

The hack lady suddenly appears next to Sadie.

“It’s not too late,” she mutters and hands the brother a new naloxone kit.

“Use all of it,” she instructs before vanishing.

The crowd watches in anticipation as the brother empties the vials into Zoe’s still body.

“Is it working?” a concerned onlooker asks.

The brother holds up a hand.

“Just wait,” he says.

“We need to make sure this kit is full, guys. All the time,” the runner declares.

“We will,” someone promises.

“Was that Evelyn Wormwood?” another voice asks.

“I think it was.”

Zoe sits up. Her lips are pinking up. Her eyes are wide. Her breathing is slow and heavy.

“Just stay calm, Zoe,” her brother says. “You need to take it easy.”

Zoe clumsily hoists herself out of the back seat, breathing loudly.

Her brother reaches for her. “Zoe, just relax, stay calm, and get back in the car. I’ll take you home.”

Zoe pushes her brother away and staggers off. She snatches her arm away from people trying to stop her.

“Holy fuck, that is creepy,” a guy mutters from the back of the mob.

“Zoe the Zombie,” a younger voice sneers.

“Hey, that’s low,” a woman snaps as the siren of an ambulance wails in the distance.

“Well, what else do you call that shit?” the younger guy shoots back. “I’m getting sick of this. Why bring them back?”

“It’s his sister,” a bystander mutters.

“Hey. It’s okay,” a gentle voice says. It tries to calm the murmuring crowd. “She’s okay. She’s alive.”

The ambulance pulls in and cuts the siren. Red and blue keep washing over the lot. Two paramedics step out.

One moves like he owns the ground. Swagger in his gait. A glove snap loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Alright,” he calls, “where’s the overdose?”

Sadie jolts.

That’s Charlie’s voice.

“She got her naloxone,” Sadie blurts. “Woke up and took off.”

The medic’s head turns. His eyes catch hers and hold.

“They do that,” he says with a half-smile.

Then the grin spreads across his scar-creased face.

“That you, Angel?”

His name catches in her throat.

“Charlie?”

A wide grin breaks beneath the tall pompadour. Tattoos snake up his neck and down his forearms.

“Angel,” he crows.

That voice.

Relief rushes through her so fast she almost laughs. When she does, it comes out thin and shaky, close to delirious. He must have had a last-minute shift switch.

His partner frowns, thrown by the recognition.

“Who’s this?” he asks.

“Matt, this is Angel,” Charlie says, already tugging off his gloves and tossing them into the rig.

His stance changes as he turns back to her. Softer, but bigger somehow. Protective. Proud.

“You wanna join us on break?”

Sadie nods before she can think.

“Of course.”

Doubt chases her words. *Be careful.*

Charlie thumps the side of the ambulance.

“Our chariot awaits. I’ll ride in the back with her, good buddy.”

Matt climbs into the front. “Roger that, good buddy.”

They pile into the back. Sadie slides onto the bench. Charlie stands and leans back across from her. Outside, the crowd is swelling. People have their phones raised high. Their eyes are gleaming with voyeuristic hunger. Charlie raps the glass with a knuckle and twirls his finger. Matt flips the siren to scatter them.

The ambulance lurches forward, and Sadie nearly topples. Charlie catches her with one inked hand.

“You good?” he asks and scans her face.

Her throat locks.

“I don’t know.” Her voice breaks. “I’m just … Can I plug my phone in?”

“Yeah, right there.” He points to a cable. “You don’t look that hot.”

“Yeah, and I, uh…” She’s dizzy. Disoriented.

Matt kills the siren. Charlie flashes a grin. “Didn’t see that.”

He’s what she imagined he’d look like. That’s not enough. What if he’s in on it? He’s a paramedic. That part’s true. He was so proud of that. Took him six years and a judge who believed in second chances to get his credentials. She called 911. Not from her phone, though. But spies can fake anything. Was that OD even real? She should bolt. Get out of the ambulance while she can.

Charlie cuts through her spiral.

“Yo, Angel. Talk to me. You’re scaring me.”

She powers her phone on. Her mouth is dry.

The pin is still there. She shows Charlie.

“You didn’t send that?”

Charlie snorts. “Hell no. I don’t send pins. I don’t share my location. Ever.”

Sadie thinks back to the last thing fake Charlie sent in the meeting chat. A string of emojis. Thumbs-up, sparkles, fist pump, dove.

Charlie hates the thumbs-up emoji. Hates it. Says it’s what people send when they can’t be bothered to answer like a human being. She’d sent him one once and gotten a ten-minute rant on the phone. When she saw it last night, she figured he was finally loosening up.

Her skin goes cold.

The whole chat last night. He was so pushy. That’s not Charlie’s style. It must have been Trish, or some goon she put up to it. Trish’s sick way of saying she’s got leverage. That she’s always watching.

Sadie looks at Charlie.

“Were we meeting tonight?” she asks.

Charlie shakes his head. “No. We agreed no in-person meets until you wrapped this op.”

They had. He knew how much surveillance was involved. He never would have asked her to meet.

Sadie groans. “I got played by Trish. Big time. She was chatting with me on my burner last night, pretending to be you.”

Charlie gives a low whistle.

“Damn, that bitch is like a Terminator. She set you up. Don’t worry, girl. It’s me now,” he reassures her as he looks at her. “Believe me?”

“I want to, but I just … need to make sure.”

She thinks for a bit.

She blurts out the only thing she can think to ask. “What’s your sleep number?”

He barks out a laugh.

“Ten. But you know what? That was way too soft. Felt like I was sinking in quicksand. They swapped it out, thank God. My Sally’s still rocking her forty-five, though. Like sleeping on a damn sidewalk.”

Sadie stares. It’s him.

He’s real. But still, it’s—

The ambulance whips around a corner. Sadie lurches again, and again Charlie steadies her. His grip is like rebar wrapped in tattoos.

She stands up.

“Like, how is all this happening right now?” The rig jerks through another turn. She stumbles again.

“Talk to me.” Charlie sets her back down.

She spills it all. The hedge, the trap, the hack, and the weird syncs. Charlie appearing like he stepped out of another dimension. The words tumble, collapse, and rebuild, but he just listens. He lets her drain out.

Finally, she runs out of words. “So what is all of that?”

Charlie lifts his brows and grins sideways. “That?” He shrugs. “You really wanna know?”

“Yes. Tell me.”

He leans in close. His grin grows sharper at the edges. “That’s higher power, homegirl.”

He booms it out louder, “HIGHER POWER.”

He cracks up laughing and slaps his knee. “Damn, you must be working a solid program.”

He winks and taps his chest.

“And yeah, you got one hell of a sponsor.” He shakes his head. He’s still grinning. “But it ain’t me. It’s God. Straight up. Capital G. Full effect.”

Sadie’s jaw drops a little.

Charlie roars, and the laugh rolls through the rig. “That’s right! Wild, huh? Awesome!”

“I guess. I just really wanted to do my fifth step.”

Charlie’s grin fades. He leans in again with his voice low. “Your fifth? You serious?”

“Yeah. That was the whole setup.”

Charlie shakes his head, yanks her burner off the cable and shoves it in a supply cupboard.

“That thing’s compromised. Muffle it. Now go on, Angel. We’re rolling. No one’s listening but me. Let it rip.”

Sadie stares at him.

“Right now?”

“Right fucking now. Step Five don’t wait. God don’t wait. You spill it, I’ll hold it. That’s the deal. Come on.”

She starts. Then stops.

Then everything comes pouring out. Resentments, fears, Andrea, her parents, her nephew, Haoyu, and Trish. The guilt, the rage, and the weight she’s been dragging like a corpse. Words tumble out. They’re jagged and raw.

Charlie doesn’t interrupt. He just leans back as the rig jolts corners. He has his eyes on her like she’s the only person alive.

When she finally runs dry, her voice is shredded. He just tips his head once.

“There it is. Poison’s out. You did your fifth, Angel. On the fly. Only way it was ever gonna happen for you.”

Her eyes blur with tears. “You mean it?”

Charlie grins and slaps the metal wall.

“Mean it? You just bared your soul in a goddamn ambulance at sixty miles an hour. That’s holy ground. That’s how we do.”

For a moment, it’s just the sound of the engine and the flash of city lights through the back window. Then—

Matt yells from the front, “Burritos or chicken?”

Charlie hollers back, “Burritos, man! Always burritos!” He throws Sadie a wink. “Driver picks, and Matty’s got a one-track mind. You in, Angel?”

“I’m in. Oh, and Charlie, my name’s not Angel.”

He snaps his head around in mock shock and yells, “What? Say it ain’t so.”

“I’m Sadie. Sadie Chandler.”

From the cab, Matt blurts, “Get the fuck out. No way!” His surprise is real.

Charlie leans forward.

“What’s up, Matty boy?” he asks.

“This is too good to be true,” Matt calls back. “Wait until we get there.”

Charlie slaps the metal wall again.

“Copy that. Now punch it, good buddy. I’m starving over here.”

The rig surges. Charlie throws one leg up on the bench and stretches.

“Been sitting too long. Then it’s go-time. Full tilt. Tears your body up if you don’t keep it loose. Gotta respect the temple, right?”

He grins sideways at her, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper. “Hey. Guess what I’m doin’ right now?”

Sadie is wary, but curious. “What?”

“Kissing the cosmos with my asshole.”

The old polygraph trick. The one they laughed about when she told him how lame Los Alamitos was.

He chuckles. Then a fart sneaks out.

It surprises even him. His eyes go wide, and he starts laughing harder.

“Well, damn. That was the trumpet section right there.” He smiles. “See? That’s God’s sense of humor. Don’t get too serious to laugh. He’ll make sure you don’t.”

Sadie blinks and then bursts out laughing, too. Even Matt cracks up from the driver’s seat.

Charlie wipes his eyes. He’s still chuckling. “That’s it. There you are. God don’t roll with the faint of heart, you feel me?”

Sadie gasps for air. She hasn’t laughed this hard in a long time. She nods and smiles widely. “Yeah. I feel you.”

Charlie points at her and grins.

“Good. That’s it girl. That’s happy right there. You hang onto that. Burrito time.”

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THIRTY-TWO

People can’t stop looking at them. The well-dressed couple tucked into a velvet booth at Encores Galore.

The place is a former theater from the era when Hollywood still believed movie stars were gods.

Marble columns, grand staircases, ceiling murals.

This is where America sold its dreams to the rest of the world. Trish and Adrian fit the frame like they were made for it.

They don’t speak at first. They don’t need to. The clink of silverware and the slow pour of wine are enough. The rise of candlelight between them blends with the ambiance and forms a kind of choreography. They savor their meal. Their eyes are flickering. Their gestures are mirrored. The air between them is charged with mutual attraction.

“Your brother knew,” Adrian says finally as he swirls his glass. “About you being in the CIA.”

Trish doesn’t blink as she says, “Doesn’t surprise me.”

Adrian reaches for her hand. He brushes his thumb along the knuckle.

“He was proud. Fiercely.”

Trish looks away. Her eyes are glinting.

“You were good about helping me to get him moved, but he … They got him.”

She lets out a heavy breath.

A man in a linen jacket drifts too close to their table. His phone is half-raised like he's filming them. For a second, he looks like he's about to ask for a selfie. Maybe an autograph. Instead, he falters under Trish's gaze and blushes. He scurries back to his own table, where his friends snicker and egg him on.

Adrian watches the retreat with faint amusement.

"Poor idiot. He thinks we're famous. Chained to his phone like a dog to a post."

"They all are." Trish lets out a low and humorless laugh.

"They don't even know who they're posting for."

For a moment, the glow of other people's screens flares brighter than the candles on their table.

Adrian leans back slightly. He studies her.

"Your strength," he says softly. "It's attractive."

The tension in her jaw eases.

"Thank you," she says quietly. The compliment lands. "So tell me, Adrian—what brought you to the meeting tonight?"

"A patient," he says smoothly. "Suffers from addiction, mostly. Though that's not my area. I came to give support. But the patient didn't turn up."

Trish folds her napkin carefully. "What is your area?"

Adrian smiles. It's easy and confident. The kind of smile that spreads without effort and lingers like heat.

"Stockholm syndrome. That's my corner. I'm the expert nobody quotes. Well, until recently. I stayed with it when everyone else walked away. Stockholm terrified the field because it shows us what we'd rather not see."

She leans in. "And what is that?"

He grows quiet. Then he speaks in a hush. "People metabolize violence to survive it. The border between good and evil is hair-thin, and survival often teaches you to mistake one for the other."

She goes very still. She doesn’t say a word.

Adrian breaks the silence.

“Got published, finally. A few wins. People love to quote the ‘good versus evil’ part.”

“I’m impressed.” She smiles. “That’s no small thing, Adrian.”

He watches her mouth. “You in LA long?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.” She takes a sip of wine. “I actually retired today. I was supposed to meet a source there. One last time. She didn’t show either. Then I ran into you.”

“Then let’s mark it.” Adrian raises his glass. “Let’s disappear. Napa. My car’s already pointed north.”

Trish tilts her head. “You’re full of plans.”

“True. Big plans. An amazing life. Because anything smaller starts to feel like bars closing in.”

“You’ve got a silver tongue,” she says, smirking. “Where I’m from, that gets you run out of the church potluck.”

He laughs.

“That’s fine with me.” He makes a face. “It’s usually dressed-up ravioli out of the can. No, thank you. The food is much better in Napa anyway.”

He clinks her glass. “And so is the company.”

They lean closer. Their bodies are aligned now. Their breath is syncing as if on cue. The waitress arrives with a saccharine grin and breaks the spell.

“Our famous Just Desserts. Mousse, cookie crust, and chunks of raspberry cheesecake. This is the one people post about.”

Adrian takes the first bite and feeds the next one to Trish with theatrical care. They laugh, but it’s slow and strange. It’s like they’re remembering something beautiful and extinct. Nearby tables murmur and sneak photos.

Who are they? A fallen actress and a studio head? A senator and his mistress?

They radiate the kind of intimacy that makes people lean in and say, “They’ve got something special.”

They certainly do.

The long silken curtains of Encores Galore move and sway in synchrony, as if performing a dance of their own. They scrape the plate clean. Savoring every last bite.

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THIRTY-THREE

Matt wedges the ambulance into a narrow space no ambulance has any business fitting into.

“We’re at Celestial,” he announces and nods to Charlie, who hops out to place their order. Sadie helps Matt set up some chairs and a table behind the ambulance.

Charlie is already standing in line at the busy taco truck. Strings of lights zigzag over the truck and across the lot, glittering through the smoke and noise of East LA.

The side of a building is blazed with murals of Aztec gods and saints in Dodgers caps. There’s a cosmic jaguar tearing through stars. The bright hues provide a stark contrast against the gritty asphalt and concrete.

As they sit, Matt grins and says, “Charlie always wants dinner to be an event. Says eating on the go messes with his digestion.”

Matt glances at her. Still smiling, he says, “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe I’m actually meeting you. I’m sorry to ask, but can we take a selfie?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a badass. The ultimate badass,” he gushes, bouncing his leg nervously.

“I am?”

“TikTok? João? CIA? Doxxing all those fuckers? Drones? I can’t believe I’m sitting here with you.”

Sadie groans.

“Can you let me into the back? I need to grab my cell.”

Matt nods. “Of course.”

He opens the back door of the ambulance, and she races to the cupboard, grabs the phone and sinks back into her seat. There’s nothing on it. Her stomach drops. Should she ditch this burner? It’s too late. Trish knows everything. Everyone knows everything.

Is her nephew okay?

Beside her, Matt is still rambling, his eyes wide. “I mean, seriously, I’ve never met anyone from the CIA before.”

Sadie cuts him off, her voice tight. “Can you show me what you’re talking about?”

“You haven’t seen it?”

Sadie shakes her head. “I don’t have socials on this phone. It’s just a burner. Just hang on, I’m calling my family.”

Sadie looks down at the burner. Someone will be listening.

Should she use Matt’s? They’ve probably hacked his phone already.

Just call.

Her fingers fly across the screen as she dials her brother’s number.

The line rings once. Chris picks up immediately.

“Chris, it’s me.”

“So,” Chris’s dry voice crackles through the receiver, “I didn’t realize the CIA had a ‘no-shirt’ policy, but I have to say, it’s a bold recruiting strategy.”

Sadie closes her eyes. *Oh, God.* “Chris, what is going on?”

“You need to call Mom and Dad. Right now,” Chris says, his teasing instantly dropping into a low, serious tone. “They’re watching cable news, Sadie, and Dad is about to have a stroke.”

In the background, she hears the familiar, chaotic rumble of his living room.

“Trevor, put that down,” Chris mutters, pulling the phone away for a second. “Say hi to your famous aunt.”

A little voice shouts, clear and happy: “Hi Sadie!”

Sadie’s chest tightens with a mix of relief and concern. “Hi, buddy. Chris, listen to me. I am safe. I’m completely fine. Tell them that.”

“Tell them yourself,” Chris says quietly. “They’re losing their minds, Sadie.”

“I’m dialing them the second I hang up. Love you.”

“Love you too. If a black helicopter lands in my yard, I’m telling them I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

The line clicks dead. Sadie stares at the blank screen for a split second to steel herself, then dials her parents.

Her father answers on the first ring. His voice is a frantic mix of half-scandalized and half-gleeful.

“Dad.”

“We’re so proud of you! Way to stick it to the man. But Sadie … couldn’t you have kept your shirt on?”

Her mother’s voice cuts in, as dry as chalk on a blackboard. “James, it’s fine. That’s what women of today do. It’s performance. It’s critique.”

Her father grumbles, “Still…”

Sadie closes her eyes. “Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. Listen, I’ve got to make this quick, but I’ll get a new phone soon and call you properly, okay? I’m safe.”

Her mother’s voice softens, just a touch. “You’ll survive this, sweetheart. Just don’t let them convince you that the shame is yours. They’re trying to make you wear it. It’s theirs.”

“I won’t. Love you both,” Sadie says, her throat tight. “Write this number down. You can reach me here for now, but don’t give it to anyone

else.”

“We love you, Sadie,” her mother whispers. “Be careful.”

She ends the call, the cheap phone feeling cold in her hand. For a second, she just stares at her lap, letting her mother’s words sink in. Then she turns to Matt and nods. She’s ready.

“Show me this thing.”

Matt grows reverentially solemn.

“Here—” He hands her his phone. “Brace yourself. It’s intensely awesome.”

He stops bouncing his leg up and down and lets her focus.

Sadie watches it a few times. Fragments of hazy memory surface. His promise that her family would be safe.

More pieces return. The souped-up electric car, customized to the hilt. That’s where she spilled everything. He’d flipped a switch, activating his anti-surveillance tech and turning the cabin into a sealed chamber—a Faraday bubble on wheels. No GPS ping. No transmitting bugs. No cell trace. Just pure, silent privacy.

Inside, it felt dreamlike. They were insulated from the rest of the world. Just the two of them, floating down São Paulo streets. She remembers leaning back against the vegan leather. The thrum of the motor and her throat feeling dry from how much she was saying. She gave him everything he needed. Too much.

She had pressed a hand over her mouth to stop herself. Then she dropped it.

“I solved your riddle.”

Her eyes were fixed on him.

João’s eyes had cut to her. They were bright and alive.

“The one from my office?”

Sadie had smiled.

“What message cannot be jammed?”

“Entropy,” Sadie had answered. “Randomness. The universe keeps sending it, whether we want it to or not. Can’t jam it.”

A grin had spread across his face. It was reckless and radiant. Undeniable.

“Yes. This is the proof I need. You have been sent to me by God,” he said, beaming.

“I have?”

“Yes, you have.”

He said he had the perfect plan. It was one he had been working on for most of his life.

“*Eu prometo*,” João had whispered.

“You promise?”

“I promise. Your family will be safe. I will look for your friend,” he had said and slid the soccer ball flash drive into her hand. He nuzzled her neck and murmured into her ear, “Sadie, we’re going to save the world.”

“We are?” she asked as she pulled back to look into his warm and intelligent eyes.

João nodded.

“We are,” he said and handed her the pills. “These will steady you.”

By *steady*, he must have meant completely blot out her memory.

The comments scroll faster than her eyes can track.

@NoTrialJusticeNow
Sadie Chandler—the CIA’s biggest disaster.

@JustAskingBro
Party-girl spy.

@DoomscrollHero
National security meltdown.

TikTok is stitching it into parody skits. X is weaponizing it with think-piece threads. The White House press corps is practically passing out popcorn. She's branded. Humiliated and on display.

The meme factories have gone into overdrive. Sadie's blurred face is photoshopped onto a kid behind a cardboard lemonade stand, under a scrawled sign.

TOP SECRETS—$1 A GLASS.

The woke-wellness crowd has piled on, too. Hashtags about institutional trauma and influencers pushing ten-minute guided meditations inspired by her journey. There are long Substack sermons begging people to hold space for her healing. Others want her to stand trial for treason. Everyone has an angle. All of them keep her pinned in the spotlight.

Sadie blinks at the screen. Are they really talking about *her*?

She checks inside for that old surge. The reflex to grab the wheel and control the narrative. That itch to fix it all before it spins further.

Nothing. No manic flood. No frantic rehearsal of contingencies.

That fifth step must have worked. She lets the feed keep scrolling. Their "content" can keep going. The CIA can't use her now—for anything.

There's a steady stream of outrage at the exposed massive trafficking network. The focus on the doxxed traffickers is pulling the spotlight away. Won't be long before it's all on them. Sadie lets out a long breath.

Charlie comes back grinning with his arms full.

"Alright, magical burritos and Cokes for all," he declares.

Sadie tears into hers. She lets the sauce drip down her hand. The incredible flavors saturate her tongue. She laughs mid-chew. "It's perfect."

Charlie watches the video. Sadie talks about the car, the promise, and the flash drive. *The pills*. Charlie just nods along. It's like he's piecing it together in his head, but not pushing.

After watching it a few times, Charlie asks, “So, you did all that lemon stuff and some backflips, and then blacked out?”

“Yeah.” Sadie shivers. “Like completely.”

Charlie points up at the sky and quips, “Man, I thought my guardian angel was tired.”

“I know,” Sadie says with a mouthful. She swallows and nods. “I’m so glad to be done with that.”

Then they just focus on the response and comments as they stream in. João’s in hiding. They say there is a backdoor to his backdoor. Charlie likes that. The government is on maximum damage control.

The official narratives lock into place.

@WhiteHouse
João Marcelo’s so-called revelations are part of a dangerous misinformation campaign. We will not stand idly by while a reckless actor gambles with national security and global stability.

@CIA
We take these matters with the utmost seriousness. The well-being and mental health of the frontline personnel who keep Americans safe remains of the utmost importance to this Agency.

Charlie wipes salsa off his chin.

“Permission to speak freely, Angel?” he asks with a grin. “Since your bosses just tweeted half your medical chart? Matt knows my deal. Not yours. So—”

Sadie nods. “Sure, go ahead.”

Charlie smirks. “You’re viral now.”

Sadie groans. “Agreed.”

“So, you’re officially the world’s worst spy. National disgrace.” Charlie leans back. “Wild behavior. Lack of professionalism. Caught in 4K! But look at you. Cool as a cucumber.” He cocks his head. “You know what that is?”

“I don’t know.” Sadie shrugs. “Some coping thing? Apathy? My PDA on overdrive?”

“Could be. But I think it’s Steps Six and Seven. Served fresh. That’s total humility. Grace. You’ve had your character defects removed.”

Matt winces. “Man, you’re brutal.”

“Brutal but accurate,” Charlie says, his eyes twinkling. “She’s cooked as far as Langley’s concerned. Burned. Toast. But famous toast. You don’t scrape that off. Which means she gets to live. That’s the trade. If I didn’t know better, I’d say the big guy or gal upstairs cut you a deal.”

He sniffs the air.

“This reeks of G-power. Reeks of it.”

He tips back on his chair and goes on, “Hear me out. Beats witness protection, which they wouldn’t have offered you. But still, you don’t rot in Nebraska with a fake last name—always looking over your shoulder. You just eat tacos while the internet keeps this alive and turns you into lemon merch.”

“They could have fake killed her,” Matt says. “Turned her into someone else with plastic surgery.”

Charlie shakes his head.

“No. Look at her. Sacrilege. Besides, now they have someone to pin other stuff on. She’s hot currency in the conspiracy market. Gold bars in the scapegoat market.”

Matt nods in agreement.

Sadie shakes her head and laughs.

“So, this is my life now? Bad memes?” she guesses.

“Better than where you were headed.” Charlie raises his soda in a mock toast. “God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Even if it looks like a bad TikTok stitch.”

He’s right. The Agency could still touch her. But making her disappear now would draw attention. Using her family would risk the same. She’s too visible, too useful where she is. Wrapped in the one thing she avoided at all costs—being seen.

“But look,” Matt laughs. “You’ve got some fans. I’d say more fans than haters at the moment.”

He turns his phone toward her. She takes it and scrolls through some of the comments.

@TradDadAfterDark
Finally, someone dismantles the elites—true patriot. So what if she’s a slut?

@PatriotByDesign
Someone shut her up for good.

@GeopoliticalGooner
She’s hot, but who hired her? The Russians?

@MutualAidAndChill
If she starts a commune, I’m joining.

@SliceOfSlay
She destroyed their evil network with a lemon. Queen.

@ThirdPartyThirstTrap
Sadie for President. Drain Washington.

Sadie hands him back his phone.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” she says, grinning.

“Looks like the far right and left both love you. First sign of the apocalypse,” Matt says, smirking.

Charlie leans over.

“This one’s my favorite: ‘She makes treason look like self-care.’” He licks his fingers and then jabs at the screen. “See? Internet sainthood. You’re canonized.”

A drone dips low with its red eye blinking. It buzzes off toward the hills. They all follow it with their eyes.

“So, Sadie, real talk. What’s the deal with drones?” Charlie asks.

Sadie sets her burrito down. Her eyes are slits.

“You can pretty much do anything with them. Anything. For example—”

Charlie waves her off with his mouth full. “Nope. Don’t even say it. Some things you can’t unhear.”

Matt nods quickly and says, “Yeah, same.”

A chrome-dipped lowrider car crawls past. Rap blaring from a sound system engineered for earthquakes. The guys riding in it lift their shirts up and shout for Sadie to flash them.

She deadpans, “Should I?”

Charlie snorts. “Yeah, go ahead. I’ll grab some lemons.”

Matt turns pink. She wonders what shade he would turn if she actually did it. More and more people are looking over and figuring out who she is.

She spots the hack lady commenting a lot on Matt’s phone. “Who’s she?”

“Her? Evelyn Wormwood. Massive on YouTube.” Charlie tips his chair back. “My Sally does makeup for the studios. She says Wormwood’s got some monster project cooking.”

Out of nowhere, a child's screams pierce through the air. All eyes are on the commotion as a mother struggles to control her son. The tantrum quickly turns physical. The mother retreats while those around try to avoid watching the uncomfortable scene unfold.

"Sorry. My son's autistic. It's okay, everyone."

Sadie picks up the small tub of hot sauce from Charlie's side of the table.

"Hey," he protests.

"It's cool," Sadie says as she takes the sauce over to the screaming kid's mother and gives it to her. "Here. Use this sauce on your burrito. I think it will help."

The kid quiets down, and everything returns to normal. Back at the table, Charlie whistles low. "What the hell was that?"

"What?" Sadie responds innocently.

"That," Matt adds and points a finger toward the now quiet child.

Sadie lets out a heavy sigh before answering. "Do you really want to know?"

They both nod at once.

"It was the hot sauce," she says with a shrug.

"For the kid?" Matt clarifies with eyebrows raised in disbelief.

"No, for the mom," Sadie states matter-of-factly.

Both men exchange a look.

"What?" they ask in unison.

Sadie inhales, and the words tumble out in a single breath.

"The kid knows his mom isn't happy. He wants her to be happy. She's not happy. She's … a little suicidal. Maybe homicidal. The kid feels it, and he knows the packaged stuff ruins her magical burrito. So he's making sure she doesn't use it. I saw the cashier wink at you and hand off two tubs of the homemade stuff. Obviously, they're short on cascabel peppers, so they're subbing with that nasty packaged sauce."

She pauses and looks over at the kid.

“He’s gonna be okay,” she adds, quieter. “I was that kid.”

Matt blinks. “You were?”

“Yeah. My brain doesn’t filter things out. I always felt like I was the only one actually paying attention.”

“You’re serious?” Charlie stares.

Sadie sighs and shrugs. “It’s as plain as day to me, but everyone else is completely blind to it.”

“Wow.” Charlie raises his eyebrows. “I see.”

Matt gawks.

“Is she like a prophet or something?” he whispers.

Charlie freezes and then laughs too loudly. He scans around like Matt had just yelled “bomb” at the airport.

“Matt, don’t be a fucking idiot,” he says in a low and sharp voice.

Matt doesn’t care.

“Call me an idiot again, and I’ll start telling the rookies you cried during *Lion King*.”

“I did.” Charlie relaxes a little. “Mufasa was a saint. Say it again and I’ll make you watch it with me.”

He looks at Sadie and pleads, “Don’t tell my Sally.”

“About what?” Sadie’s confused. “About *Lion King*?”

“About the taco lady flirting with me,” Charlie says. He looks worried. “Did you see me winking back, like, do you have X-ray vision too and shit?”

“No,” Sadie laughs.

“He’s a flirt.” Matt smirks.

“Matt…” Charlie warns.

“He is.” Matt smiles. “He flirts with anything. Anything with two feet and a heartbeat. Except one time when—”

“Okay, let’s not bring that up.” Charlie purses his lips. “Matt, I’m sorry. I was wrong to call you an idiot. You didn’t deserve that.”

A perfectly AA-formatted apology.

Charlie turns his attention back to Sadie. “Now I get you.”

“Now you get me?” Sadie asks in surprise.

“Yeah, I get you. I mean, I got you before, but now I *really* get you.”

“Feeling left out over here,” Matt whines.

“Aww, I get you too, good buddy,” Charlie reassures him.

“Yeah, yeah…” Matt mutters. But he’s smiling.

They each savor the last bite of their burritos. The twinkling lights strung around the Celestial Taco truck dance in the smoky air. Not too bright. Just right.

On Matt’s phone, the prediction markets and AIs are already taking bets on her numbers. The AIs chatter in their own language. The margin puts her somewhere between the Beatles and Michael Jackson. Historic, but with just enough room left over for a tragic ending. Which, of course, only makes the numbers climb higher.

For a moment, everything feels aligned. It’s like some hidden order has finally revealed itself. Then a text alert splits the calm in two. Paige. Of course. She steels herself and waits for the blow.

> Hi, Sadie. We’re wasted, lol. Respect your recovery, so we’ll stay upstairs. Key under mat by pond. Your other phone is working. Megalithic Studios wants your life rights?? Evelyn Wormwood producing?? OMFG! Parents called work phone and brother too. Carter invited them out. Come home soon. xx P+C.

Then, koi fish and heart-eyed face emojis.

Another text comes from Paige, a screenshot of her work phone. The number is blocked, but the message is unmistakable.

> I’m alive, well, and egg-o-k-egg-ay. I’m a witness, so lying low. Good twerk. Talk soon, A.

Sadie stares at the message until the letters blur.

Alive.

Andrea is alive.

Relief floods her chest, tangled with grief and fury and gratitude. Silently, she tilts the phone toward Charlie. She can't bear to hold the news alone.

He reads it and nods. His eyes shine wet with tears, but he doesn't wipe them. He crosses himself with deliberate care, bows his head, and presses his lips to the gold cross at his neck.

Sadie swallows hard.

The gesture feels too private to watch and exactly what she needs to see.

Every wrong turn, every blackout, every near miss led here. For the first time, Sadie knows she wouldn't change a thing. It's okay that she carried it. All of it. How could she not? That's how she's built.

Not optimal.

Not always reasonable.

Human.

Chaos gives way to order. Beauty and life intertwine. For one impossible second, the whole world seems to breathe with her.

Sadie's mind whispers in wonder: Is this magic or reality?

The answer comes without words.

Yes.

Yes, *yes*, *yes*.

The answer is yes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katherine grew up near the Rockies in Calgary and once lived off-grid in the Yukon's wild expanse before enlisting in the Royal Canadian Navy in 2005. As an above-water warfare specialist and ship's team diver, she navigated intense missions and the undercurrents beneath them. Sent by the Canadian Armed Forces to seminary, she became an ordained priest and now serves as a military chaplain.

Drawing from her extraordinary experiences, Katherine crafts literary satire infused with sharp humour, transforming raw intensity into stories that race at the pace of action thrillers.

Her writing is bold, cheeky, and darkly funny—her fiction probes systems of power and control with danger, bite, and zero reverence for the status quo.

This is Katherine’s second book.

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