

GREG LEVIN



a novel

It takes a real hero  
to be this despicable.

**IN WOLVES'  
CLOTHING**

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Greg Levin

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*For Sung, and the millions of children like her.*

## CHAPTER ONE

The handcuffs cut into me more than usual. These things would be tight even on a man half my size. Why the cop with his knee on my neck didn't leave more room for my wrists, I have no idea. It's not like we haven't been over this.

To my right, Barrett's lying flat on his belly just like me. Only he doesn't appear to be in much discomfort. Of course, Barrett could have his leg crushed by a steamroller and he wouldn't appear to be in much discomfort. Still, it looks like the officer who nabbed him was kind enough to let Barrett's carpal bones breathe. Barrett's lucky like that. Whether we're in Puerto Plata, Bangkok or Mumbai, the local cops always seem to take a shine to him whenever we get busted.

Barrett turns his head to face me, his right cheek pressed to the marble floor. He gives me a wink and a smile. Of course he does.

The girls. They're screaming their heads off. Many of the younger ones—eight or nine or ten years old—are crying. The ones who aren't screaming or crying are giggling or yawning or just staring at the walls. I'm guessing they're newer. They've yet to build up much of a tolerance to the morphine the pimps have been feeding them. One of these girls, she's laughing at how far the bubblegum she's pulled out of her mouth can stretch. This would be adorable if it weren't horrific.

Three of the police officers are now trying to wrangle all the girls and get them out the door of our rented mansion, where no doubt a van or small bus awaits. Not as easy a job as you'd think. These girls have learned to trust no one, especially the cops. A few of them make a break toward the pool out back, with one of the cops chasing after them the way you'd chase kittens who've escaped from a box. Another girl kicks one of the other officers in the shin and shouts, "*Pendejo!*" The bubblegum girl clutches the armrest of the black leather sofa while an officer tugs tentatively at her legs. She's still laughing, but not as much as before.

Of the remaining cops, one pretends to keep an eye on Barrett and me, one pretends to keep an eye on our cohorts Drew and Malik, and the other three tend to the two local men who helped us make this party happen. Nice hombres, if you take away the kidnapping and the pedophilia. And the resisting arrest. The shorter, fatter one takes a shot to the ribs from a cop's baton and drops. The taller, skinnier one—the one putting up more of a fight—two of his teeth just skittered across the floor and under the billiard table. It will be a while before he smiles like he smiled two days ago when we told him how many girls we wanted. Or maybe he'll luck out with a prison that has a good dentist.

Señor Gaptooth looks over at me as he gets cuffed, and I shake my head like I can't believe this is happening to us. But really I'm just concerned his blood won't wash out of the hand-woven Zapotec rug he's pinned to. Our boss, Fynn, she'll be pissed if we lose our damage deposit. Not pissed enough to change our modus operandi, though. Convincing pimps to bring their girls to us is the best way to make

them believe we are what we say we are—rich American businessmen who need to keep our perverted activities out of the public eye. After hearing what we creeps are willing to pay for a private party at a location of our choosing, even the most wary pimp will agree to our terms.

The only thing louder than Señor Gaptooth cursing at the cops right now is Drew begging them not to issue a report. Shouting and crying about how his wife is going to kill him. How he'll be forced to resign as CIO of his company if this leaks. How he'll lose his pension.

Drew's by far the best actor among us.

Malik takes a quieter approach. He has to. He's black in Acapulco. Even though the police know he didn't lay a finger on any of the girls, they're ready to treat him like a legitimate criminal if he so much as looks at them funny. If this were Haiti or Uganda, Malik would be able to relax and almost be himself. But Haiti and Uganda were last month.

After the two bruised, bloodied pimps get dragged out and all eleven girls are safely removed from the party hall, Drew stops crying. Barrett starts laughing. Malik continues to lie on the ground and keep his mouth shut. Me, I'm just hoping the three oxy pills in my pocket are intact.

The four of us stand up, still cuffed, and brush the dust and debris from our knock-off Armani and Versace and Gucci and Canali suits.

"Nice work, guys," I say to my crew. "*Gracias, agentes,*" I say to the cops who took us down.

"*Gracias a Ustedes,*" one of the cops replies. As he's removing my handcuffs, I go, "*Demasiado apretadas,*" then show him the red indents ringing my wrists.

"*Lo siento,*" he says. But I know he's not sorry. And I don't blame him. Seeing what he sees every day, he needs to inflict a little pain to feel alive—and to keep from doing much worse. Besides, I can handle the hurt. Makes the oxy go down easier.

Barrett shakes the hand of the cop who cuffed him, then turns to me and the guys. "Let's blow this shithole and grab a poolside drink somewhere."

"No way," says Drew before blowing his nose into a silk handkerchief. "Ain't worth getting whacked for a margarita. Besides, our flight's in three hours."

Malik nods. "I'm getting out of dodge and heading straight for the airport."

"Jesus, you guys are never any fun," says Barrett as he adjusts his Rolex that isn't a Rolex. He looks at me. "How about you, Zero?"

"They have margaritas in the club lounge," I say.

Barrett shakes his head. "It's not the same, man."

"You're right," I say. "It's just, I find it hard to enjoy a cocktail when I'm in the crosshairs of a rifle scope."

One of the cops walks over to the door, opens it and looks outside.

"Okay, you can go," he says in a thick Spanish accent. "I recommend you gather your bags and get to the airport."

"See?" Malik says to Barrett while pointing at the cop. "Dude knows what's up."

Barrett gives a dismissive wave. "Right," he says under his breath, "because you should always do what a Mexican cop says."

The four of us grab our carry-ons from the closet behind the bar in the game room and roll them out of the house to our taxi parked on the circular driveway. The men we were five minutes ago would never be caught dead in a yellow minivan like this, all dinged up and covered in scratches. Those guys would have demanded a stretch limo. Or a private helicopter. But the party's over now, and we're all just a bunch of Cinderellas.

"*El aeropuerto, por favor,*" I say to the driver, Mateo, as he gets out to load our bags.

"*Por supuesto,*" says Mateo. He came highly recommended, and has not disappointed. He didn't ask any questions on the way here, was right where he was supposed to be for the ride back, and just offered us each a bottle of water.

"To Mateo," says Drew, holding up his plastic bottle.

The rest of us raise our bottles and bounce them together in the back of the minivan.

Mateo blushes and grins. "*Gracias, caballeros,*" he says as he pulls away from the curb.

I down my water and tap the shoulder of Drew, who's sitting next to Malik in the row of seats in front of me and Barrett. "Another Oscar-worthy performance," I say. "I thought you were going to go full Brando and piss your pants in there."

"Who says I didn't?" Drew says. "You know, you guys could stand to up your game a bit. It wouldn't kill you to feel your character's shame."

"My character's on Zoloft," says Barrett. "He doesn't feel much of anything."

And we all laugh.

And then we don't.

Drew stares out the window, or perhaps at the swollen face reflecting back. Malik bows his head and runs his fingers along his side fade. Barrett closes his eyes and cracks his giant knuckles.

Me, I yawn. Then pop two oxy into my mouth and grind them into dust.

## CHAPTER TWO

Guadalajara.

The guys and I ogle the dozen or so pre-teen prostitutes being led into our villa by three slim, scowling men. Each of the men is wearing a different soccer jersey that looks the same. Each of the girls is wearing whatever discount-rack party dress the pimps forced them into. The room smells like Drakkar Noir and sweat mixed with Cotton Candy and fear. Some of the girls look at us and try to smile. The rest of them probably aren't aware we exist.

We offer the girls some sodas as they plop onto couches and chairs in the huge open living room. Barrett says something silly in broken Spanish and several of the girls giggle. Even one of the pimps is smiling. I pour myself a glass of tequila and wink at a ten-year-old.

The trick to looking excited when children are presented to you for sex is to remember you are saving their lives. If you don't look excited, the pimps will get suspicious. Show your anger and disgust, and you ruin everything.

I take a sip of tequila and grin at a child and would kill for an oxy. The one I ate an hour ago is losing its luster. But two on the job, that's a no-no.

For help getting into character, think about the biggest douchebag frat guy you've ever met, imagine him with several million dollars, multiply his money and demeanor by ten, and then act like *that* guy. Right up until the cops remove your handcuffs and thank you.

This mission is a little bigger than the one in Acapulco yesterday, so there are six of us. Barrett, Malik, Drew and I have been joined by Anders and Scott from Seattle, who arrived in Guadalajara two days ago to get everything set up. Anders and Scott look more refreshed than the rest of us right now because they're not finishing up a doubleheader. None of us at Operation Emancipation like doubleheaders—shooting off to a city to complete a jump immediately after finishing one in the same or similar time zone. Doubleheaders may be practical from a cost and logistics standpoint, but they're never fun. For one, fitting a second pseudo-designer suit inside a valise is next to impossible. Secondly, if you play a pedophile too often, your face might stay that way. But Fynn makes the schedule, and you don't fuck with Fynn or her schedule.

The guys and I are chatting and laughing with the girls, warming up to them slowly with a "*Qué guapa!*" here and a "*Muy bonita!*" there, making sure not to lock eyes or look at their mouths or do anything else that might invite a kiss. If one of the pimps sees any of us rejecting an advance, they'll know something's up. Fortunately, these girls, just like all the other girls in all the other cities and countries we work in, almost never make the first move. They may be smiling and giggling, but they're not. Sadly, their terror works in our favor. They think they're about to be raped for the

tenth or hundredth or thousandth time, so they aren't in any rush to get things started. They're waiting on us.

I'm not wearing a watch, what with my wrists still sore from yesterday, but the cops are a little late. We can stall only so long before the pimps will start getting nervous. And you don't want a nervous pimp. Anders and Scott may have asked them nicely the other day not to bring any weapons to the party, but the thing about pimps is you can't always trust them to respect house rules. The good news is these three clowns aren't even paying attention to us. They're too busy marveling over the size of the place, trying to fathom its value in their heads, wondering what knickknacks they might be able to nab when nobody's looking. It's not often they get to see the inside of a house on this side of town. We are in Puerta de Hierro, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the greater Guadalajara Metropolitan Area. A twenty-minute drive and a million miles away from the pimps' brothel on Avenida Chapultepec, where Anders and Scott went to arrange this party two days ago.

Another sip of tequila. Less winking and grinning. And we're running out of stupid, flirtatious phrases to say to the girls. The watch I'm not wearing tells me we should definitely be getting arrested by now. It tells me it's time for what we at OE call the tourniquet.

"Okay boys, let's get busy!" I shout with glee at the guys.

You never get used to nearly throwing up in your mouth.

I grab the hand of one of the youngest girls—she's not a day over nine—and place my other hand on the back of another girl who isn't much older. Their forced smiles fall to the floor as we head toward the wide granite staircase. The other guys follow my lead, each picking the two girls closest to them and guiding them to the stairs. We look like teachers on a field trip, collectively accounting for all the children in our charge as we tour an historic home. If only it were that simple.

In about a minute, the girls will wonder why we aren't removing any of our clothing or theirs. Our lack of sexual interest and aggression might even make some of them more uncomfortable than usual. We'll just tell them we like it slow. What we *won't* tell them is we're here to rescue them. All it takes is one doped-up eleven-year old with a confused allegiance to her pimp to ruin a perfectly planned emancipation.

In this job, you learn to ignore the urge to comfort those you're protecting.

From the middle of the staircase, I peer back at the three pimps. They're still paying us no mind, just nudging one another and giggling as they drool over the palatial environs, pointing at art and gold statuettes and other items of seemingly excessive value. What they don't know is all that stuff is just like the six of us men heading upstairs:

Fake.

As my foot lands on the second step from the top, one of the pimps yells, "CORRE!"

RUN.

He's not talking to us. I know this because he and his two colleagues are dashing for the exit.

Funny, 'cause I didn't hear any vehicles coming up the driveway, and I have a very good ear for such sounds.

Not funny, 'cause I've seen this all before. And know just what to do.

Nothing.

Our two friends nearly collide in the doorway, then disappear. My reflexes scream for me to slide down the banister. Sprint after them. Bash their faces against the concrete driveway. You learn to ignore all that, suppress your natural instincts.

"*Cálmase,*" I say to the two girls screaming on the top step as I hold them so they don't try to catch up with their captors. Barrett and the rest of the crew retain and try to calm their girls, too, but most of the girls continue shouting and crying and trying to break loose. Our Spanish, while decent, isn't quite at the level needed to cut through the collective panic and confusion of being abandoned. We're all a few Rosetta Stone lessons away from transitioning gracefully from pedophile to savior.

Outside, whatever truck or van these girls arrived in peels out and speeds off. Honking follows the screech of a distant skid.

We continue trying to tell the girls what we're usually not allowed to. That everything is going to be okay. That they're going to be taken someplace safe.

And still they cry and squirm. Some swear at us. Some pinch us, kick us, spit at us. Anyone in their shoes would do the same. They always do.

It's awful, and it's fine by us. We're not here for hugs and applause.

"Watch these two," I say to Barrett a few steps below me. "I'm gonna keep an eye out for the cops."

Barrett nods and I maneuver down the stairs through the cursing and the kicking and the tears. Through this cluster of broken children struggling to get free. None of them yet able to comprehend they already are.

One of the girls Malik is guarding on the lower steps scratches my hand as I pass. I get it. She's probably wondering why men as large as us—if we truly are here to help them—just let three guys half our size escape without a chase or even a word. And if she's not wondering that now, one day she will.

Not risking everything for these girls is the toughest part of the job. We are trained never to confront or get physical with any of the traffickers or pimps we rub shoulders with, no matter how tempting it may be. Not unless our life or that of one of the girls is in perilous danger. Like gun-to-the-head, hammer-cocked, counting-down-from-five, blood-building-up-in-the-trigger-finger type of danger. Breaking faces and ribs and teeth is solely the job of the local police forces OE partners with.

The cops who just now rolled up the driveway in four unmarked sedans, they missed their chance.

I step out the door the pimps left wide open, and show two thumbs-down to several overweight, mustached officers in shorts as they get out of their cars and head up the walkway.

"*Qué pasó?*" one of them asks, glancing all around the property, his hands out to the side.

"*Demasiado tarde,*" I say, and tell him the pimps split. I ask if he knows what might have prompted that.

Like I don't know the answer.

No matter how good OE's relationship is with the authorities in the various regions where we work, there's always the risk of at least one crooked cop tipping off the traffickers before a bust can be completed. A quick text from an officer whose wallet gets fatter every second these pimps' ramshackle slave pits stay open. That's all it takes to undo weeks or months of reconnaissance, collaboration and strategic planning. At least today the tip didn't come until after the pimps arrived, so they were forced to leave the girls behind. That's certainly better than a no-show. Still, those scumbags will no doubt reemerge within a week. Split up to start several new brothels in the city. Replace every girl they just handed over with an exact replica. Times three.

After mumbling some excuses and apologizing for the mix-up, the cop out on the walkway with me joins his men inside to peel the girls from the banister. One of the officers comes back out with a bloody nose and a bite wound on his hand. To keep from pitying him, I convince myself he's the one—the reason nobody's getting arrested today. I point at his hand and say, "That looks like it hurts," then smile and suggest he call for back-up.

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Everyone at Gate A-11 of Guadalajara International Airport is pissed off.

Everyone except us. Malik, Drew, Barrett and I couldn't care less about an hour-and-a-half delay due to heavy wind and rain back home in Los Angeles, our destination. First off, thunderstorms in LA are cause for celebration. Parades even. Our fellow passengers, many of whom are American, should all be applauding the gate agent, not shouting at her and grunting. She just helped end a deadly drought with nothing more than a microphone.

Secondly, fuck it. The gate agent could have announced that we'd be flying in a plane infested with wasps and fire ants, and still I wouldn't have been too bothered. Fuck it comes easily after you've gotten chummy with human trafficking. Roll around in the bowels of the child sex trade for a while, and everything else is Christmas morning. It's all about perspective. Whenever people say, "It could always be worse," they're right ... unless they're talking about what the Lost Girls have been through. That's where worse ends.

Fuck it is one of the biggest perks of my job. Before I joined Operation Emancipation, I was just like the dozens of people fuming at Gate A-11 right now. Flight delays would ruin my day. So would morning alarms and traffic and taxes and head colds and commercial interruptions and the mold you can't see growing on the strawberries in the middle of the plastic container they come packed in. Now? Now I can smile and whistle while walking through a pediatric cancer ward.

Drew suggests heading to one of the airport bars to wait out the delay. Malik and Barrett are down. I decline. I'd rather sit here amidst the sulking and the whining and

the grumbling. It cheers me up. I love that these people have no idea what an honor it is to have a ticket to fly somewhere. Anywhere. It's infuriating. And hilarious.

"Ma'am, if I don't get to Los Angeles by midnight, I'm going to miss my friend's bachelor party," a guy in a Dodgers jacket tells the gate agent.

Poor guy. I want to help him. I want to show him a picture of an eight-year-old Vietnamese girl whose pimp locked her in a cage and shocked her with a loose electrical wire for trying to escape his brothel.

And that lady two seats over from me on her phone complaining about how this always happens to her and how she's going to demand the airline give her some free travel vouchers, she just needs me to tell her about the ten-year-old Indian girl whose pimp shoved a hot metal rod inside her when she refused to perform oral sex on her very first client.

To make things easier, maybe I'll just ask the gate agent if I can borrow her microphone. I can put an end to everyone's misery at once. Efficiently spread the joy of fuck it. I've got tons of material to help everyone through this agonizing inconvenience, these ninety painful minutes of air conditioning and Wi-Fi and freedom. Maybe I'll open with all the seven- and eight- and nine-year-old Cambodian girls who have their virginity sold to sex tourists before getting stitched up to be sold as virgins again. And again. And again.

On second thought, it's probably better to close with that.

"Passengers waiting for flight one eighty-two," the gate agent announces over the loudspeaker, "we have an update on the estimated departure time. The storm in Los Angeles is moving more slowly than anticipated. We don't expect to start boarding until approximately eleven thirty tonight."

Three hours from now.

Shouts of profanity and protest fill the gate area, followed by an aftershock of sighs and snorts, followed by soft taps and clicks as everyone takes to social media to advertise their outrage.

It's digital pandemonium. The online exasperation and indignation is palpable. But it's not long before the people begin receiving likes and supportive comments and emojis from their friends and followers. And just like that, peace and order and sanity are restored.

Too bad. I was really starting to enjoy myself.

## CHAPTER THREE

I can't remember if I took an oxy during the flight, so I eat two. They pair nicely with the scotch.

It's good to be home.

I should be upstairs sleeping, especially since I didn't catch a single wink on the flight from Guadalajara. But there's something I have to finish first.

An eight-letter word for gradually losing one's edge.

Slipping.

I fill in each box of 27 Down with my black pen and take another sip of scotch. It's times like these I turn into God. The crossword squares fill up by themselves in a secret blurry code. A few of the answers might even be correct.

The black pleather couch makes love to me as I solve 32 Across.

A four-letter word for spouse.

Neda.

She's leaning on the banister, wearing a white T-shirt and gray sweatpants that might have fit me when I was ten. Her eyes, almond-shaped during waking hours, are half open.

"You're home?" she says, pre-dawn gravel in her voice.

"Hi, baby," I say while trying to conceal the nearly empty lowball glass in my hand. "Sorry to wake you. I'll be up in a sec."

Neda yawns and combs her hand through a shining cascade of black hair. "What time d'you get in?"

I scratch my shaved dome, feeling the perspiration forming, and say, "Uh, a little after one maybe."

Neda opens her eyes the rest of the way. "You've been here for nearly *two hours*? Why didn't—"

"Baby, I just needed to unwind a bit before bed."

Neda's eyes open wider than the manual recommends. "Why must unwinding always involve single malt and a crossword?" she asks. "You know, some men unwind by spooning their beautiful wife. Especially when they haven't seen her in four days."

I ponder the answer to 36 Across.

"Zero!" Neda shouts.

The sound knocks the pen from my fingers, and I go, "I didn't want to wake you."

"And look how that worked out for you," says Neda. "At least if you'd come up when you got home you wouldn't be getting yelled at."

I tell her not to be mad, then get up from the couch as gracefully as a man two drinks and twenty milligrams in can. “I knew if I woke you right when I got home, you’d want to talk about the mission.”

I realize this is not what God would say. I can tell by Neda’s face.

“And would that have been so horrible?” she asks. “Us actually *talking*? About something other than your dry cleaning and where you’re flying off to next?”

What I want to say is, “Yes.” What I actually say is, “Baby, come on. I don’t want to get into it.”

“I know, I know,” says Neda, pulling on the banister railing like she wants to replace it. “You never want to ‘get into it.’ I stopped asking you to ‘get into it’ a while ago, Zero, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

I tell her let’s talk about it in the morning, and she says we already are. Then she says, “You know what, forget it. Come up whenever. Or pass out on the couch. I don’t really care.”

Neda stomps up the hardwood stairs like gravity has doubled. I inhale in preparation to call out to her, but swallow the words. Neda has stormed off in similar fashion countless times before, but right now I can’t remember the protocol. Leave her alone for a while until she cools off? Go after her immediately and talk her down? Go after her immediately and just hold her? Wait a few minutes and then tear her clothes off?

There’s a good reason why I can’t remember the rules: They keep changing. I’ve tried each of the aforementioned approaches an equal number of times in the past, and was successful with each roughly half the time.

I feel like a bomb defuser who’s received minimal training. Do I snip the red wire first or the green one? Or the yellow one or the blue one? If I choose right, I’ll be a hero, saving the day and winning the heart of the princess. If I choose wrong, I’ll blow the whole goddamn kingdom to bits.

Or at least ruin breakfast.

I go with the red wire and pour another two fingers of scotch. The couch is softer than before, the crossword clues easier. If only the little boxes would stop blurring and bending, I’d be able write my answers inside them instead of somewhere over in the sports section.

The girls. They’re still screaming, only now no sound is coming out of their mouths.

I wonder how many of the girls from the two Mexico missions will stick around their safe houses long enough to be reunited with their family, or at least to learn a trade that doesn’t entail being raped thirty or more times a day. Hopefully more than half of them. Unfortunately, that would be considered a success. If only nine or ten of the girls we liberated in Acapulco and Guadalajara end up running off to find another brothel where they can get their daily fix of the drugs their previous pimp got them hooked on, victory would be ours.

You can imagine what *losing* looks like in my line of work.

Good thing I don’t lose when I’m two-and-a-half drinks and twenty milligrams in. I’m cozy and invincible. I’m satin wrapped in Kevlar. I’m—

“Zero, what the fuck are you doing?” Neda shouts from the top of the stairs.  
“Get your ass up here now and hold me!”

Damn it. I knew it was the yellow wire.

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From pedophilia, pimps and corruption to brunches, beach days and dinner parties. It's always such a painful transition.

I'm not built for civilian life. Especially in Los Angeles. But LA makes sense for me from a logistical standpoint. It provides me with relatively easy access to a major airport offering nonstop or one-stop flights to every epicenter of child sex slavery. Not exactly a selling point used by local realtors, but it's what got me to plant roots here. If you can call them roots. I'm gone three to four months a year, three to five days at a time. As for all the sunshine and hip restaurants and gorgeous people, I've learned to cope.

Besides, Neda loves it here. And I love Neda. So much so, I haven't complained once about all the time we've spent with our friends since my return from Guadalajara three days ago. But then I've had a lot of practice pretending to be someone else.

Whenever out with others, I can do pleasant. I can do content. I'm even able to muster empathy and interest on occasion. It's not as easy as doing conniving, creepy, sleazy and sinister, but sometimes you just have to leave work at the office.

I'm having a hard time with that at the birthday party I'm attending right now. Mine. I've never liked celebrating my birthday. Neda knows this, but she couldn't resist organizing something when she found out April twenty-ninth fell on a Saturday this year, and that I was actually going to be home for it. Personally, I was starting to like our seemingly annual tradition of her baking cupcakes and eating one for me naked during a video chat while I'm on the other end of the earth wearing what looks like a Brioni suit.

It beats the hell out of talking to Neda's boss, Bert, in my living room.

“How go things on the child rescue front?” Bert asks.

Bert is the principal at the public high school where Neda teaches, so at least he knows a *little* something about the unspeakable horrors kids face. Still, he always smells like Aqua Velva and bouillon cubes.

“It's going, and going,” I say, working a clenched-teeth grin.

Bert asks me when I'm heading out again, and I say tomorrow. Then I change the subject. “How 'bout you? How are things over in the hormone factory?”

“Eh, you know,” says Bert. “Pretty much business as usual. We haven't had any stabbings or drug arrests in over a month—not on school grounds anyway. So there's that.”

That's the first time Bert has ever made me laugh even a little, and he wasn't joking.

“Keep up the good work,” I say as I raise my glass to clink his.

“Speaking of good work,” says Bert, “Neda’s having a fine, fine year. Did she tell you two of her students have essays in the final round of the statewide competition?”

“Yes, she did,” I say, lying through my teeth. “I couldn’t be prouder.”

My next seven conversations more or less go the same way. Birthday greetings and a question or two about my work with OE. Where I just returned from. Where I’m heading next. How I deal with the jet lag.

Then me deflecting the attention back to them. Asking them about their job, their kids, their spouse or significant other. I act intrigued. Or at least try. It’s not as easy as acting like a millionaire sex tourist eager for an eight-year-old.

We need new friends. Or fewer.

Whenever someone I’m conversing with at parties like this tries to bring the conversation back to human trafficking, I just smile and say, “Aw, you don’t want to hear about that.” If they insist, I tell them something to help them realize I’m right.

“Well, on my last mission, we liberated a really sweet eleven-year-old girl. And her unborn child.”

Or

“I’m not sure what’s worse—when a girl finds out her mother sold her for a couple hundred dollars to a pimp, or when the girl is freed and finds out her mother doesn’t want her back.”

Or

“Some of the girls are lucky enough to get AIDS and don’t have much longer to relive everything.”

That last one I use only on the most persistent and annoying inquisitors. Most of them, after hearing it, not only stop talking to me; they finish their drink and go home.

That’s exactly what I want to do now. Except I *am* home. And I want another drink.

Barrett and Malik just arrived. A former Navy Seal and recovering coke addict, and a former Secret Service agent who got fired for punching a senator in the throat.

Finally, some people I can relate to.

As drunk as everyone is, they all part for the two giants making their way to me by the mini-bar. “Happy birthday,” says Barrett as we clasp hands and bro hug. “Ready to get arrested halfway around the world?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I say, then bro hug Malik. “Glad you two could make it.”

I pour Malik a scotch rocks. Barrett a scotch neat. I hand them each their glass and the three of us clink and sip. Barrett looks around and goes, “Drew here?” I shake my head and say Drew texted earlier saying he couldn’t make it. In unison they say, “That’s bullshit.” I remind them Drew’s got three kids and is flying out again with us tomorrow night. “I’m sure he’s busy packing, picking up Legos and making sure Stephanie doesn’t pull all her hair out,” I say.

“I don’t know how he does it,” says Malik. “Our work’s hard enough with just a wife or girlfriend. A whole damn family? Fuck that noise.” Barrett raises his glass and says, “Or husband or boyfriend.”

Through the crowd, Neda points to her empty champagne flute and smiles. I open the micro-fridge beneath the mini-bar, pull out a half-empty bottle of sparkling rosé, and fill a fresh flute nearly to the rim. Usually after three glasses, Neda goes from school teacher to freshman sorority pledge. This will be her fifth.

“Gotta bring this over to Neda,” I say to Barrett and Malik as I hold up the fizzy glass.

“Looks like she’s going to save you the trip,” says Barrett.

I turn and Neda’s wobbling toward us, like a child trying to walk in her mother’s high heels. Reminds me too much of work.

“Well, at least *one* of you is enjoying your birthday,” says Malik.

“Hi guys!” Neda shouts when she reaches us. She places her empty glass on the kitchen counter and gives Barrett and Malik each a hug. “I didn’t see you two come in!”

Barrett tells Neda she’s looking as beautiful as usual. Malik says amen.

“Oh, stop it,” says Neda, slurring. She reaches out to take the drink I poured her, and I go, “You sure?” as I draw the glass back, instantly regretting my actions. Would have been better off just breaking the champagne flute on the granite countertop and shoving one of the shards into my abdomen.

“Yup,” says Neda, landing hard on the *p*. “I’m sure. I’m fucking positive.”

I hand her the glass like I’m surrendering a pocket knife to a cop pointing a loaded Glock at my head.

Neda’s smile reappears as she turns to Barrett. “I need to steal you for a second,” she says to him. “A friend of mine’s dying to meet you. He’s gorgeous. You’re still single, right?”

Barrett smiles and with a wink says, “Always.”

Neda grabs his hand and drags him through the throng of our closest friends whose names escape me. Barrett, grinning like a jackal, glances back at us and shrugs.

Malik laughs and shakes his head. “Dude’s such a player.” Then he turns to me and says, “You seem more somber than usual. Cheer the hell up, man, it’s your birthday.”

I say I’m fine. I tell him I’ll be back to my old self once we’re getting handcuffed in Phnom Penh.

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**Thank you for reading the first three chapters of *In Wolves’ Clothing*.**

You can learn more about the book (as well as my others) by checking out the [Novels page](#) of my website, or by going to my [Amazon page](#).

Thanks again! —GL