

fiX

By Michael Golvach

BOOKS

Split The Middle

Missing Pieces

fiX

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Bloody Gullets

INSANE RAMBLINGS / SELF-HELP

This Is Not A Book: Brain Spanking Vols 1–4

SHORT STORIES

What I Did This Summer by Davey Fitz

FIX

MICHAEL GOLVACH

2nd Edition published by Kronos Publishing Ltd. 2018

Copyright © 2016 by Michael Golvach

Book Cover Design by BookStylings – bookstylings.com

Book Interior Design by BookStylings – bookstylings.com

Book Editing by Richard “Tony” Held –

www.helddediting.com

Michael Golvach has asserted his right under the copyright

Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the
author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organisations, products and events portrayed in this collection are either products of the author’s imagination or used fictitiously.

Michael Golvach

michael.golvach@mikegolvach.com

Published in Great Britain in 2018 by

Kronos Publishing London

Reg. No. 10543850

ISBN-13: 978-1517549022

ISBN-10: 1517549027

For Cadence Chablis

~

*For The Girl Who Always Felt Out Of Place And On
A Different Level. For The Oddball Who Never Quite
Fit In. For The Strong, Independent, Creative, Smart,
Empathetic And Forgiving Woman You Always
Were. And For The Fond Memory Of You.*

~

Thank You.

Acknowledgements:

A Great many thanks to everyone who took the time to read this book, and provide me with their valuable feedback, at the expense of their own time.

Thanks to my editor, **Richard “Tony” Held**, for his exceptional work helping make this book better.

Thanks to **Nikki, Meredith** and all of the brilliant folks on the **BookStylings** team who made this book’s inside and outside look and feel so beautiful.

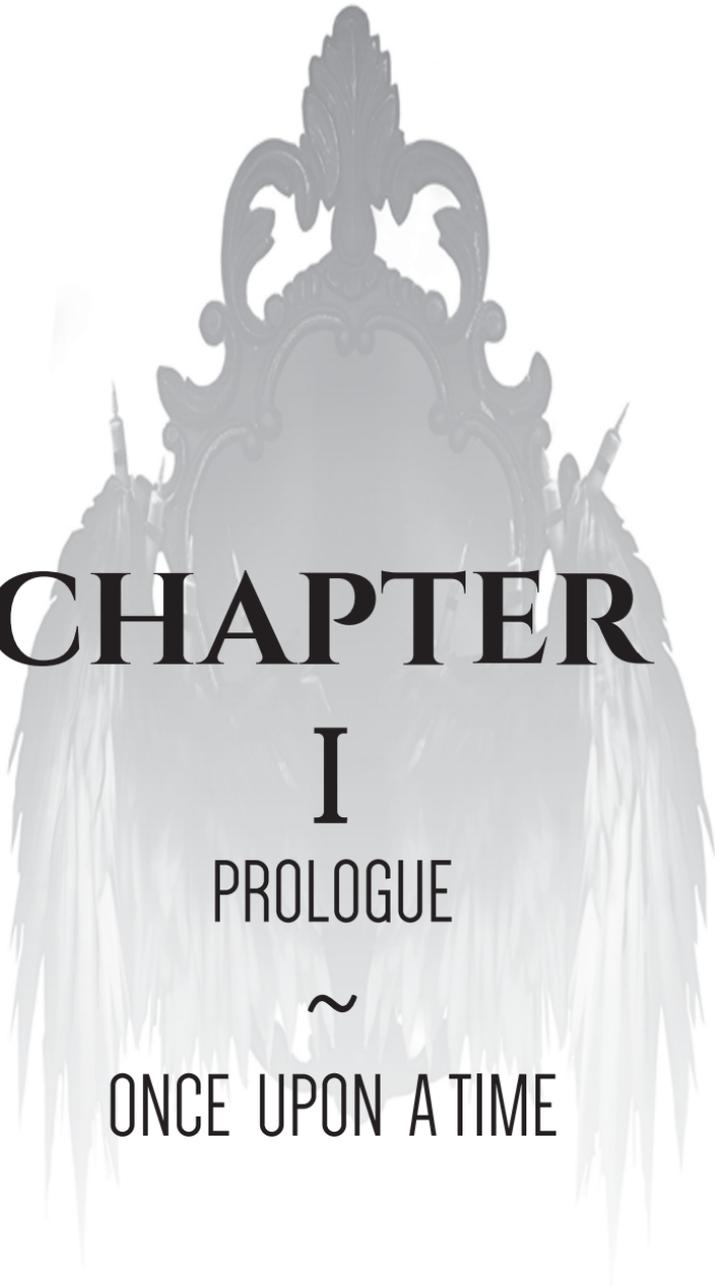
Without all of your help, and infinite patience with me, this book would not have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I – Prologue ~ Once Upon A Time.....	1
I - “What I Did This Summer” by Davey Fitz.....	3
CHAPTER II - The Storm.....	29
I - Three Weeks.....	31
II - This Is Not A Fairy Tale.....	42
III - No One There.....	46
IV - Machetes And Tape.....	59
V - Bent Straight.....	72
VI - I Know It Knows.....	75
VII - Seeing To Her.....	78
VIII - Rubbed Out.....	80
IX - Remember Desperately.....	90
X - Never Could I Be Wrong.....	95
XI - Out The Back.....	98
XII - Hanging God.....	108
XIII - The Monkey And You.....	112
XIV - Back In The Borough.....	115
XV - The Smell.....	123
XVI - Useless And Still.....	135
XVII - No Time.....	138
XVIII - Tearing Apart The Night.....	158
XIX - And It Begs.....	160
XX - In Grass.....	162
XXI - Good And Strange.....	167
XXII - The Floating.....	174
XXIII - Ask Not Why.....	189
XXIV - Off Day.....	191
XXV - White Night.....	194
XXVI - This Time.....	205
XXVII - Unconscious Thought.....	208
XXVIII - Believe And Know.....	212

CHAPTER III - The Flood.....	215
I - Feeling Drained.....	217
II - Off The Wall.....	229
III - All Or Never.....	234
IV - Not Quite Small.....	258
V - Behind The Door.....	269
VI - The News Desk.....	271
VII - Now Arriving.....	274
VIII - Wearing It Well.....	276
IX - No Comfort.....	283
X - Bury The Same.....	297
CHAPTER IV - The House.....	299
I - Giving It All Into Nothing.....	301
II - What You Question The Least.....	311
III - As It Was, This Is.....	326
IV - The Interest And The Cost.....	329
V - It Is Here With You.....	342
VI - The Ground Where You Stood.....	345
VII - It Will Go Where The One Is.....	355
VIII - Armed And Watching The Seconds.....	362
IX - Lying Down And Sleeping Around.....	365
X - Do You See It At All?.....	383
XI - Of My Favourite Monkey And The Distance.....	393
CHAPTER V - The Sand.....	397
I - No Going.....	399
II - Right And Good.....	406
III - What Was.....	425
IV - Spin Out.....	433
V - The Kill House.....	439
VI - Lifting Sin.....	447
VII - Living Underneath.....	450
VIII - Calling The Night.....	463
IX - All The Meaner.....	467

X - I Hear What Might Be.....	490
XI - It And I.....	496
XII - The Talking Room.....	498
XIII - No Looking Back.....	517
XIV - She Alone.....	522
XV - Her Doing.....	524
XVI - It Is, It Was.....	539
XVII - You That Look, Know.....	542
XVIII - Listening To Weakness.....	549
CHAPTER VI - The Rock.....	553
I - Swimming With The Possible.....	555
II - Crying Blood.....	565
III - This Story Is For You.....	588
IV - All Hell In Check.....	618
V - Look For It.....	620
VI - Tell Me Yes.....	622
VII - The Answer.....	624
VIII - Weapons Out.....	634
IX - That Is All.....	648
X - Good Night, My Son.....	666
CHAPTER VII – Epilogue ~ Happily Ever After...677	
I - The Beautiful Sorrow.....	679



CHAPTER

I

PROLOGUE

~

ONCE UPON A TIME

I

"What I Did This Summer"

by Davey Fitz

This summer I stayed a district away from home at my favourite uncle's house. Actually, to be honest, I'm not really sure he's related to me. I think my mom just calls him uncle because he helps out by watching me when she has to go away. I'm not even sure she's ever really met him. He said I should start out this paper by writing that I really hope I get a good grade on it. I told him I didn't think we were allowed to do that. But he insisted, so I put it in here. It's not the first sentence, like he wanted, but I think he'd be happy it's in the first paragraph. He also said I shouldn't write that I think this sort of essay is too childish an exercise for a teenager to still have to do before the beginning of the school year, but I'm putting that in here too, so you'll know what I'm writing is honest and true.

I learnt a lot of things living at my uncle's over the past three months. For instance, when I first got there and wanted to watch some television he said to me: "Look around you, Davey. Look at your world. Are you surrounded by things you love?"

Why not?" I didn't understand what he meant. Except, I thought maybe he meant the world is a beautiful place and I needed to live in it, not just watch moving pictures of it, to really experience its true wonder. He would never explain himself. I think it's because he figured me out a long time before I really understood myself. Or maybe he just guessed correctly, based on what he knew of my relationship with my mom. He knows I need my world to have some sense of certainty. But he insists I'll be better off if my world is a puzzle. A riddle. Something to work on, inside my head, when he isn't around, which is almost all the time. I'm not really sure why my mom thinks it's a good idea to have him look after me when she's away, but I don't have much say in the matter and it gives me the freedom to do whatever I want when I'm living with him. Except watch television, because he doesn't own a TV set. Or any lights. He doesn't own a lot of things most people do. My bed is usually a mattress on the floor in an otherwise empty room.

I think the most important lesson I learnt this summer with my uncle, I learnt on my own. While I was feeling truly alone. While he probably assumed I was sitting around my room trying to figure out whatever confusing response to a simple request he'd left me to ponder. I had a few friends in his borough and, even though my uncle and my mom probably wouldn't approve of me spending time with them, it's not like either of them were around to complain. As long as I made it back home by night, no questions were asked. If anyone was there to ask them.

My friends and I spent most of the summer doing nothing of real consequence. That's what summer's for, I think. I got to watch television with them, so that made me happy. But it also made me sad, I guess, because they liked to watch the news and that made me think of what my uncle had said in response

to my initial plea to waste some time sitting in front of a TV set. The stuff the news reported on every night wasn't good. And it wasn't fun, like most of the times I spent doing stuff around town with, or without, my friends. It was all depressing. And it made me not want to watch any more. Mostly, it made me realise that, when I was watching the television with them, I felt like I wasn't surrounded by anything I loved. My friends were there, sure, but the terrible things the news people showed us were happening all over the world—even in our little part of it—made it seem like maybe my world wasn't really that beautiful a place after all.

But my uncle, for all of his strange and evasive behaviour, had managed to get that philosophical muscle working overtime inside me. And sometime around a week or three into my vacation, I started hanging out by myself a lot more, after my friends and I got done doing what we did for fun. His little questions even got me wondering if what I considered fun was really that great, because what my friends and I did for fun wasn't legal and, if we ever got caught, we'd get in a lot of trouble. My uncle told me not to put that part in this paper, either, since he said it might put him in a fix too, but I thought I should, since it directly relates to what I learnt and he's never going to read this far into my essay anyway. I could be wrong. I can't predict what he'll do from moment to moment. But I'm positive I won't be there in person to hand in this assignment and get whatever grade I deserve.

During my first three weeks in town, while I was hanging out with my friends and we were having fun, I met a girl I liked a whole lot. I'd seen her many times before, over the years, on other summers with my uncle and on days when I didn't have school and my mom had to go away. And I always remembered seeing her, even though I was sure she never noticed me because

we didn't have the same friends, I was never in town on any sort of regular schedule, I didn't want her to meet my uncle, or see my room, and she was way too pretty to just go up and talk to. My friends would make fun of me whenever she was around. They were being mean, but I felt sure they were trying to help me out in their own way.

They started out calling me a chicken whenever I couldn't get up the guts to talk to her but, as we got older, they began telling me she had a stupid looking face and she was fat and ugly and I could do a lot better. It made me angry when they talked about her like that, but it also made me feel special. And it made me feel lucky. Not to have friends like them, but to know the one girl who could stop my heart with a glance in my direction might be meant just for me. If she looked as repellent to the rest of the world as she looked attractive to me, that had to mean something really good. It made sense to me, anyway, and I didn't care much about what the rest of the world thought as long as I could look at my world and see myself surrounded by at least one thing I loved.

Her name was Melody. And I suppose, if she's still among the living, that hasn't changed. Although I'm pretty sure the last time I saw her was the next to last time anyone ever did.

She was stunning. Skin as white as milk and orange-red hair that looked darker in the sunlight. Covered from head to toe with a nearly invisible soft white fur. A little heavy around the sides of her lips, but the whiskers were incredibly sexy and not masculine at all. Very small breasts. Long, skinny-fat arms and legs. Hips that looked wide, even though they weren't broader than her waist, and an ass that looked wide too, and flat, even though it was fat at the bottom. Her upper thighs were big and soft, perfectly shaped and fluid and the lower half of her stomach was an adorable pooch belly. Most of these

imperfections, if anyone were to consider them imperfect and not impossibly arousing, she kept tucked away in body slimming undergarments. Hosiery she wore from the waist down instead of the revealing lacy panties all the other girls wore underneath the extra short skirts they dared us not to peek up while making sure to give us every opportunity. She wasn't textbook beautiful, but that made her all the more appealing. I think, if I can be sure of anything, I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. Back before she slowly began crumbling under society's ridiculous definition of glamour and she still wore her gorgeous body with pride. With a confidence that was more perfect than any subjective standard ever could be.

And over the past summer, when the things my friends and I did for fun expanded into moving drugs from dealer to dealer, we finally began to mix in the same social circles. But by the time I really met her, she was already dating some older guy named Dan, which, after all that time, hurt bad enough. And the guy she was with dealt drugs for some big hitters, and a few of my buddies told me he pimped her out from time to time. Only to show everyone he could, they said, because he could just as easily finalise any drug deal with a handshake or a gun. And that made me sad and angry at the same time. Because they said I could have my favourite girl now, if I still wanted her. Just like everyone else who was interested in buying whatever her boyfriend was selling. For a long time, before my friends told me that, I was convinced they were looking out for me when they talked down about her. Trying to keep me from getting my heart ripped out by some girl I was too scared to approach anyway. And, before I found out she was seeing someone steady and they told me the real deal, I honestly felt like my world was starting to fill up with things I loved. Or, at least, one thing I could love.

I tried not to get too close to her after that, no matter how desperately I still wanted to. Even though, as the days passed and we stayed out hustling more often, I'd see her here and there. At a party or on the streets with her friends. On the rare occasion when I couldn't run away and hide, I'd ignore my bruised and battered ego and talk to her and she was very friendly, very well spoken and proper, and also very shy. That confused me, because my friends talked about her like she was a piece of property and they told me she was like all the other girls, except easier. Yet I never felt that from her. Whenever I saw her and we'd notice each other, I felt a sadness that wasn't coming from inside me. But my friends had poisoned my mind to a degree, and their voices were always in my head fighting with my uncle's. Telling me she wasn't a thing I loved. That she was just really good at seeming like one.

Still, my uncle's wisdom, or maybe it was insanity, always won out. Because I wanted to believe the world was a beautiful place. And I wanted to believe I was surrounded by things I loved. And love, as I understand it, has to work both ways. When it only works one way, when it's not returned, it's just infatuation, dependency or desperate need. I didn't want to believe my world merely consisted of things I was addicted to. I wanted Melody to be better than the drugs her boyfriend dealt, and my friends and I helped him move. I wanted her to be something beautiful and I wanted my feelings for her to be something true. So I kept my distance, which kept me safe. Not knowing for sure if what my friends told me was true was better than having my heart broken. I thought.

But she kept showing up in my world. Maybe it was circumstance, coincidence. Maybe it was because the universe, or God or whatever it is that makes everything the way it is, was

making sure we both found out what we really meant to each other in our respective worlds.

And I truly connected with her for the first time the last time I saw her.

It was a late afternoon when the sun was shining more brightly than I thought it should have been, after my friends had gone home and I was heading back to my uncle's. I only had a little while left before I had to go back to my mom's and I was feeling down. Melody was walking on the other side of the street in the opposite direction and when she saw me, I could swear her eyes magnified the light from the sky as she stopped to wave at me and smiled. I looked back at her, my expression blank as my hand raised to return her greeting, at once totally aware of how empty the street was and how beautiful she looked painted against its backdrop. I remember she didn't do anything in particular to make me slow my walk and stare back at her. She never did anything in particular, any of the times I'd seen her, to make my heart melt. She just was. Her smell, her skin, her hair, her strangely adorable body, her awkward social manner, the way she moved and the way she spoke. The fluidity of her features. All of those things, weaving together to form something greater than the parts, like magic.

Then she continued to walk, the skin of her face flushing pink as she looked down at the ground with embarrassment and brought her hands back together in front of her stomach. As I watched and wondered why she had suddenly broken contact, I noticed she was wearing a fine white dress that zipped up the back and was made of a sheer fabric that seemed to show her nipples. As her gaze darted back up to meet mine and drifted away sadly again, I felt like she had seen something in me. That the way my eyes adored her made her sense I believed the things she knew my friends, and everyone, said about her.

And, ironically, the look she threw my way convinced me the things my friends told me about her couldn't possibly be true.

—— I remember I crossed the street, to put myself directly in her path, very quickly but very cautiously. Like I was afraid if she saw me approaching her, she'd run. But when I said hello to her and asked her how she was, she just looked up and fixed my gaze as she replied, questioning my motives or maybe questioning her assumptions. No shock, no surprise. I took off my jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders, covering her dress' top, even though it wasn't the least bit chilly out, and I asked her if she wanted to take a walk with me. My head didn't even have time to process the fact that I was asking her to do what we were both already doing before we saw each other—or that by covering her up I'd unconsciously confirmed I had noticed her breasts—in time for me to feel appropriately ashamed and embarrassed before she said yes.

—— She waited for me to lead, so I walked her in the direction I was originally heading. Back to my uncle's. The one place in the world I didn't want the girl of my dreams to see, ever. By the time I realised where I was guiding her, it was too late to change direction without seeming even more like a nervous little boy. But she walked with me and we talked about almost everything except what we really wanted to and, before I knew it, the sun was going down and we were standing outside my uncle's house.

—— As I tried to think of how to offer to walk her home, so she would be safe, she asked if she could come in and watch television with me. For some reason, I felt small when I explained to her that my uncle didn't own a TV set, but she said that was fine and she would love to meet him. And, even though I didn't want to, I agreed and walked her inside. She was quiet and strangely obedient. Much more reserved than I had thought

or felt in any of our brief interactions before. And that reassured me even more, because she couldn't be the way my friends said she was, and be the way she was around me. At least, I'd never met anyone who could act that well.

Luckily, although it was more of a given, my uncle wasn't home. She didn't seem disappointed, or even nervous, as the sun continued to set and the inside of the house grew darker. Instead she asked if we could sit and talk in my room. Even though I told her we didn't have lights and my room wasn't really any more comfortable than the downstairs floor, she insisted. So we made our way upstairs and I showed her into my room with the dirty, lonely mattress that lay on the floor in the middle of it and a stand up mirror I'd found discarded by the roadside and propped up in the corner so I could have some idea what I looked like after I groomed myself. She hung up my jacket on the side of the mirror and sat down on the mattress, drawing her knees up to her chin, resting her hands on them after making sure her dress covered her properly, and she patted the space to her left, motioning for me to sit beside her. I could see in her eyes she knew why my uncle wasn't there. Why he never really was. But her eyes never judged me, and I sat down beside her as the cruel fading light made it harder and harder to see her beautiful face.

And we talked some more. She was very soft spoken and kind and seemingly not at all aware of her sexual attractiveness. Perhaps she'd heard the things my friends, and everybody, said about her over all the years. Perhaps she'd heard all of those ugly words all of her life, so often and so loudly she'd given in to believing they were true. Yet, in that small amount of time we spent together, she'd revealed herself to be more charming and articulate than any girl I'd ever had an actual conversation with.

I took her hand and kissed it on the top after I told her that maybe it would be best if she got home before it got too late. Not because I'm a gentleman, or I ever do that with anyone, but because I was alone with her for the first time in my life, and I wanted to taste her and smell her as deeply as possible. So I'd have something to really regret as the end of summer drew near and the beautiful blinding light existing in my universe blew out like a matchstick flame.

She pulled me into her, then, tucking her legs under her dress, wrapping her arms around my neck and giving me a warm, comforting hug. I put my arms around her waist and returned the gesture. And as I felt myself drowning in a million past summers—a million opportunities to get to know her before she gave herself over to someone else—I felt the top of her hosiery and the indentation of her spine in her back. And when I drew my hands up to her shoulders she bit her lower lip and made a weak noise that sounded like pain. Through the sheer fabric of her dress I saw she had what looked like deep bruises running up the insides of both of her shoulder blades. And I wondered how I hadn't noticed them earlier, in the light of day. I wondered if I'd been lost in her eyes or ogling her body for the entirety of our initial connexion. Hoping it was the former and she wasn't beginning to peel away from me out of unease.

She relaxed her hold and put her face in front of mine. So close I could taste her heavy, delicious breath. My hand brushed her left cheek and, instead of pulling away like I feared she would, she rested her head on it, closing her eyes and experiencing its warmth. Then she took my hand, kissed the palm and placed it back against her cheek. And, as she closed her eyes again and rested her head on my hand, I could do nothing but watch her eyes roll under their lids and listen to the sound of her breathing and her comfort.

Then she told me she felt sorry for me, as she kept her eyes closed and kissed lightly at my fingers and thumb. She told me she didn't think it was fair I should have to squat in another abandoned house while my friends lived in regular homes. And she told me she believed me when I said I lived with my uncle, even though she'd never seen him, and she thought that was doubly sad. The both of us having to live with nothing.

I smiled at her with muted sorrow while she talked and, when she opened her eyes slightly to look at me, her face returned that affection. And she told me, as she let her eyes open fully and moved my hand to the back of her neck, that, if it made any difference, I hadn't ever really been living with nothing. Not alone. Not like I thought. Not in a world where I wasn't loved and cared for. Not since we were younger. Not since she first saw me. She told me that, yes, she'd noticed how I watched her, and the way I looked at her, ever since I'd started coming around town to visit my uncle. She told me she'd always hoped the world would make up some excuse to push us together. She told me that, when it finally had, she loved the way I talked to her and not down to her.

I opened my mouth to tell her I'd felt exactly the same way about her. For all of our days together. That I'd known I'd loved her since the first time I saw her and how beautiful she was to me, but she placed her other hand over my lips before I could speak, nodded, and told me she knew. And that knowing was enough for now. And, if what we believed about each other was true, the world would keep bringing us together until it was our time. As she spoke those last words, she began to cry. She didn't sob and moan like the distraught women did on the television news, but the tears that flowed down her cheeks were warm—not fake—and she had nothing to gain from me by shedding them.

And as much as I wanted to take her right then and there. As much as I wanted to pretend she wasn't temporarily promised to some other man who treated her like filth. As much as I wanted to do that, I couldn't find it within myself to compromise her expressed desire for me in order to satisfy my physical longing for her. Not when she was in a relationship with someone else. Not when she'd made herself truly vulnerable and given me the opportunity to be the sexually depraved bastard every adolescent boy hides away deep inside.

And not when I felt that my uncle was watching.

I kissed the hand she held over my mouth and she shivered as the room lit up slightly and the normally pungent smell of her skin began to reek even more heavily, mixing with a salty sweat. Then she removed her hand and she kissed me. Looking into my eyes. Making love to my mouth with her own. She kept her eyes open the entire time, watching me with wonderment as she bit around my lips, her breath so heady and warm I felt intoxicated, and she kissed my chin and then the tip of my nose. Seeing the awe she felt echoed in my gaze as she continued to taste me. And, in those odd moments when I could focus my vision, I could see she was lost. In the mirror I could see the bruises on her back that looked more like burns against the pale white of her flesh as she pushed my left hand farther down and encouraged me to explore the soft fat of her hips and thighs while she placed my right hand across her breasts and allowed herself to experience how much I truly loved the natural size and shape of every inch of her body.

Her breathing grew more heated as we kissed. Her mouth loving me even more passionately. Her hands touching me in ways that aroused me more intensely than anything I'd ever known before.

And, as immediately as she had begun kissing me, she stopped. Looking around the room. Noticing, as I did, the darkness of the night and the glow of the moonlight that pierced through my bedroom window.

She stood up slowly and held out her hand. I took it and we walked back downstairs, to the front door and outside my uncle's house. I offered to walk her home to make sure she got back safely and she told me that, even though she didn't think it was a good idea, she would love me to do that for her. She looked up into my eyes once more and framed my face with her hands, adoring me as much as I'd been adoring her for all of our years together. As much as she claimed to have been adoring me all that time, as well. She took my hand in hers and we walked.

As we got closer to her boyfriend's home, I could feel her beginning to shake and she pulled a baggie out from the waist sash of her dress. It was filled with a brown powder and she took out a pinch and offered me a taste. And I took it, even though I'd never ever used the drugs my friends and I moved before. As soon as I snorted the junk, she tossed the baggie away, even though it was still full. She said she was sorry she'd pressured me into using, she didn't do drugs ever, she hated them and what she'd done wasn't right. But I didn't really think much of it and, even though she already knew from watching my body's reaction to the brown poison, I assured her it was my first, and hopefully last, time and it didn't change anything about how I saw her. That made her smile and she gave me one last soft, slow, painfully lingering kiss on the lips as she let go of my hand and we walked the half a block to her boyfriend Dan's house.

When we reached his doorstep, as she was thanking me for walking her home and, I hoped, contemplating whether she could kiss me one more time, her boyfriend's front door opened wide and her body went stiff.

She apologised to him, like a reflex, which made me feel cold and abandoned, as she rubbed at her nose, visibly shaking with terror. Explaining perhaps a little too eagerly about how she'd been out a bit too late and I'd been kind enough to make sure she arrived home safely.

He questioned her about who else she'd been with and how she'd managed to lose track of time, as he motioned to us both and she passed me on the left. Her hands directed me to follow. Dan closed the door behind us and soon we were standing in his living room. As brightly lit inside his house as it was pitch dark outdoors.

Melody watched anxiously as her boyfriend stared into my eyes and grilled me. Asking me why I was such a nice guy all of a sudden. In my peripheral vision, I could see her eyes and face begging me to keep cool as she mouthed another apology. And I knew for sure everything she'd said to me on the dirty mattress in my room had been the truth. And, in the weight of her gaze, I could feel the shame she endured under the thumb of her boyfriend. The humiliation of being used as an incentive. And, though she tried to momentarily pretend it away for my sake, I could see she really had felt the same for me as I'd felt for her. For all of those years. That she still did.

And it wasn't plainly obvious to just me. It hadn't been for a good long while. Melody had been right. As magical as it felt, walking her home and spending a few more moments with her hadn't been a good idea.

Dan smiled pityingly, looking at Melody and back at me. He gave her ass a loud smack, making sure I saw he was getting a good handful, as he told me how, ever since he'd known her, she'd been asking about me. Well before he decided her body felt way too good to let her looks ruin all the fun he could have with it if he turned out the lights and kept her drainage ditch of a

mouth covered with pillows or buried in his lap. And he laughed as he wondered aloud why she'd really thought all of her asking, and incessant pondering, about how I was over all those years could possibly seem innocent to anyone. Then he made sure to let me know that, even though her infatuation with me was beyond annoying, he didn't let any of that get in the way of him catching more than he could ever ask for in a girlfriend: Dumb as a post. Afraid of her own shadow. See-through as Saran Wrap. Well aware of her place.

I stood there and listened to him as she begged me with her hands to let it go.

Then he began to really humiliate her, and I wished I hadn't been such a chicken around her when we were younger. That I'd never let her feel lonely enough to date someone like him. She didn't use. And she was a brilliant and beautiful girl, though the world she lived in had constantly insisted the opposite, probably for most of her life.

And my friends' voices were in my head, drowning out my uncle's. Asking me if I was surrounded by things I loathed. Asking me why.

Dan continued groping her harshly as he goaded me. Illustrating, with his hands, every vicious and needlessly cruel point he had to make. Twisting and turning Melody around, exposing the exquisite beauty of her body, as he ran it into the ground with his mouth. Listing out the inventory of things about her that made him sick to his stomach: Her cottage cheese thighs and dumpy ass, just one big fat catastrophe. Her pudgy little gut. Her breasts that, according to him, were non-existent. Her skinny-fat arms and legs. The turkey-folds of flab in her armpits. The weak fatty consistency of her neck. The soft white hair that covered her entire body. The whiskers around her mouth and beneath her lower lip. The coarse hair that grew way too thick for

his taste in her big long goofy looking nose. How, if she didn't smell like a horrible accident at a sardine cannery right then, he'd swear she was a seven-year-old boy.

As I watched Melody cringe, I interrupted him. Asking him, politely, to cut it out, trying to keep my cool. Getting even more angry. Angrier than I'd ever gotten at my friends when they talked down about her.

He continued to slip in the digs, reminiscing about how she'd doted on me even before she'd started to bleed, and how adorable it was that I felt such devotion for her, too. How I was actually blessed to never have kissed her, because she had breath that could melt glass and, if I got within an inch of her mouth when her hormones got going, I'd probably vomit. How bad the disaster area between her legs smelt when she got excited and soaked the forest of a front lawn she couldn't be bothered to trim.

He smacked her across the face and she pressed her lips closed as he clipped her another one across the chin and backhanded her to watch her stumble. He looked over his shoulder quickly, pointing at her with his thumb, as he asked me if I really wanted that pug-ugly mess all for myself. He backhanded her again, even harder, and I began to move forward as she begged me with her hands to retreat. Then he looked at me and told me, even if I did still want her for whatever reason he couldn't possibly understand, it was just too bad, because she belonged to him until he decided otherwise.

My uncle's voice raged in my head and I fought to drown it out as the lights inside the house grew dim and I told Dan to knock it off. That it wasn't funny anymore. That it never had been.

He pulled a pistol from the back of his trousers and whipped Melody on the right temple with the butt, snapping her

head backward and sideways into the wall and making her fall face down on the floor as she covered her head with her hands and cried out. He kicked her in the stomach as she whimpered in pain and looked up at me, her eyes begging for help. And he told me what my friends had told me. That I could have her if I still wanted her, just like any guy who needed a good spit and polish could, as long as I bought what he was selling or, at least, helped him move it. Like more than a few of my best buddies already had. Like he could smell on her breath every time she came back home after collecting his money from them.

From her place on the floor she begged me to stop fighting for her as he stamped on her back, threatening to break her in two. And she told me I wasn't the one who needed saving. Maybe not realising I had no idea what she meant. Admitting once again, to her boyfriend's delight, how she'd always felt about me. And, to his puzzlement, how she didn't want me to get hurt any more.

As Dan kept his attention fixed on Melody, taking so much pleasure in crushing her bared soul beneath his boots, I wrenched the gun from his hand, slamming my elbow into his jaw and sending him crashing to the floor.

My uncle's voice roared in my head again. Asking me the same questions, over and over. And it began to look like sunset inside.

Dan looked up at me and laughed as he wiped the blood from his mouth. Telling me how, no matter what I did, my precious Melody would be spending that night in his bed, making sure he was completely satisfied, and if I didn't walk away immediately, he'd have us both beaten down so badly we'd wish we were dead. And if I had the sac to shoot him, we'd both actually be dead. Real soon. Telling me she wasn't worth it. That my Melody was just a not-entirely-disgusting-yet pie-faced low-

rent slut with a face and a body that were only going to get uglier and more bizarre looking with age. A plain piece of nothing that did who and what she was told. And that was all she'd ever be.—

She looked up at me, as her boyfriend twisted her head in his direction, yanking the hair on the back of her neck as she begged me to leave. But I wasn't about to go. Definitely not without her. Not knowing she was with him and wondering how badly he must hurt her when no one was there to see.

Melody's mouth trembled open, continuing to plead with me to walk away, and Dan began slapping her around again as he pulled her hair harder and told me to get lost.

As she cried, I felt my fists begin to clench in anger. And the sunset turned to twilight.

From behind me, I felt my uncle watching again and I saw a shadow begin to darken the room. And that shadow grew. I tried to convince myself It was just the night. The sun going down. But the lights were all on and the blinds were drawn and that shadow consumed everything as It crept up my back. And as It overcame me and the world went dark, I felt nothing but hatred. Vengeance. Death. Pure evil.

And I will swear until the day I die that I released my grip on that gun. I let my hands go limp and felt it fall from my grasp. I heard it hit the floor. But the shadow grew darker. Enveloping everything in Its black cloak of night. And, though I won't ever be able to explain how, It put that gun back in my hand and It pulled the trigger.

When the gun went off, it splattered Dan's head all over the walls. The pistol had been silenced, but the sound of his skull exploding and the echo of its grey matter smacking up against the walls was deafening.

Then the shadow disappeared. Dan's body was no longer there. The walls were sparkling clean and the gun lay at my feet.

Safety on. And, in that moment, I didn't question where in God's creation the shadow had come from or where It, my uncle and the bloody, horrifying mess they'd created had gone.

Melody jerked back in shock and confusion, and I picked her up off the floor, adjusting her clothing and straightening her hair. She hugged me tightly, pressing her head into my chest that grew warm with her tears as I shook with fear and reassured her as best I could, kissing her and holding her as she chewed on my shirt, completely traumatised.

We exited the house quickly, hand in hand, and when we got to the street she released herself from my grip. I stopped to scan her eyes, questioning. She looked petrified and helpless.

I told her we needed to leave, fast. That her boyfriend was, or had been, very well connected. She let me know she was aware of what he was. And she begged my forgiveness for putting me through the ordeal we'd just suffered. Telling me that what he'd said about her and everything I'd heard about her from my friends—all the things she'd done under his brutal direction—were true. Telling me that, if I could still stand to be with her, she would prove to me she wasn't what he'd made her do, and she would be mine, just mine, for as long as I would have her. And if I really thought it was the best thing, and I insisted she leave with me that instant, she'd follow me without question. She'd leave everything behind and go with me to catch a bus. Right then and there.

As I looked into her eyes, I felt time slow and the moon made the night just a little bit brighter. I touched her face with my hand as she relaxed her cheek against it and I told her that whatever she'd done, whatever she thought she was or ever had been, didn't change how I felt about her. That, in my eyes and in my heart, she would always be the same beautiful girl I'd loved from a distance for far too long.

I looked around my world as she smiled and kissed at my hand. And everywhere I looked, she was there. I was surrounded by things I loved. I could finally answer my uncle's riddle, or at the very least, render its closing question impotent and illogical.

I asked her if she was sure she could get what she needed from her parents' house and be back quickly. The light in her eyes burnt more brightly than I'd ever seen as her smile grew wide and she told me she could be back in a snap with extra money so we could get as far away as possible and I nodded my assent. She traced her hands around my face as I touched my fingers to her lips and she gave them a soft warm kiss. And she told me the only thing I'd ever wanted to hear: She was going to make me happy.

I let her know she already had, and a blissful smile drew itself across her face as she nodded and pulled me into her once more. Kissing me desperately one last time, then biting her lower lip, blushing.

We went our separate ways and, after I collected my things from my uncle's and said goodbye to the empty house, I made it back to our meeting place at the bus terminal in record time.

And I waited. Hiding in the shadows and watching when she didn't show up as quickly as I'd hoped. I waited for hours. And, when she still didn't appear, I cased the location and searched the crowded streets for days. Avoiding my uncle's watchful eyes, and the authorities who'd mistakenly classified me as a missing person for reasons I still don't understand. But she never arrived to meet me there. She never showed up anywhere, and I waited.

And, almost as soon as I'd realised something was wrong, the shadow had come back. It followed me everywhere.

Keeping me hidden. Keeping me safe, as I searched for her in vain.

And when I'd called in every favour I was owed from every friend who wasn't too afraid to speak to me, and I tracked her down to every place they said she might be, no one I questioned could honestly claim they'd seen or heard from her since that bitter night.

And the shadow kept coming back. Consistently. Horribly. More and more violently.

As I continued to seek her out, I grew more desperate. Fearing for her safety. Fearing for her life. And a few of my impromptu interrogations nearly sealed my fate. They'd certainly gained me a reputation as someone not to be trifled with. Everyone who refused to help me find her went missing. Consumed by a darkness I didn't fully understand and didn't feel it necessary to at the time. And their friends and loved ones began filling up emergency rooms all over the boroughs. Too terrified to talk, even if they could somehow rationally explain the young man who'd come to ask them questions about a girl named Melody and the blackness that followed him, swallowed them whole and spat them back out.

Yet, as far as anyone else knew, she had simply disappeared. Right along with her boyfriend.

And I, at least, never saw her precious, beautiful white face again.

And I, for certain, would never ever be sure if she was safe. Or where she was. Or if she even still was at all.

And I still spend every single day, even as I take a moment to finish writing up this ridiculous assignment, remembering Melody. Remembering that beautiful coming together—that silent and singular moment—and dying inside.

Odds are I'm not okay yet. No matter when you happen to note my absence.

And when the summer was over and I returned to my mom and our empty shell of a home, I took a really good look at my world.

And I asked myself: Are you surrounded by things you love? Why not?

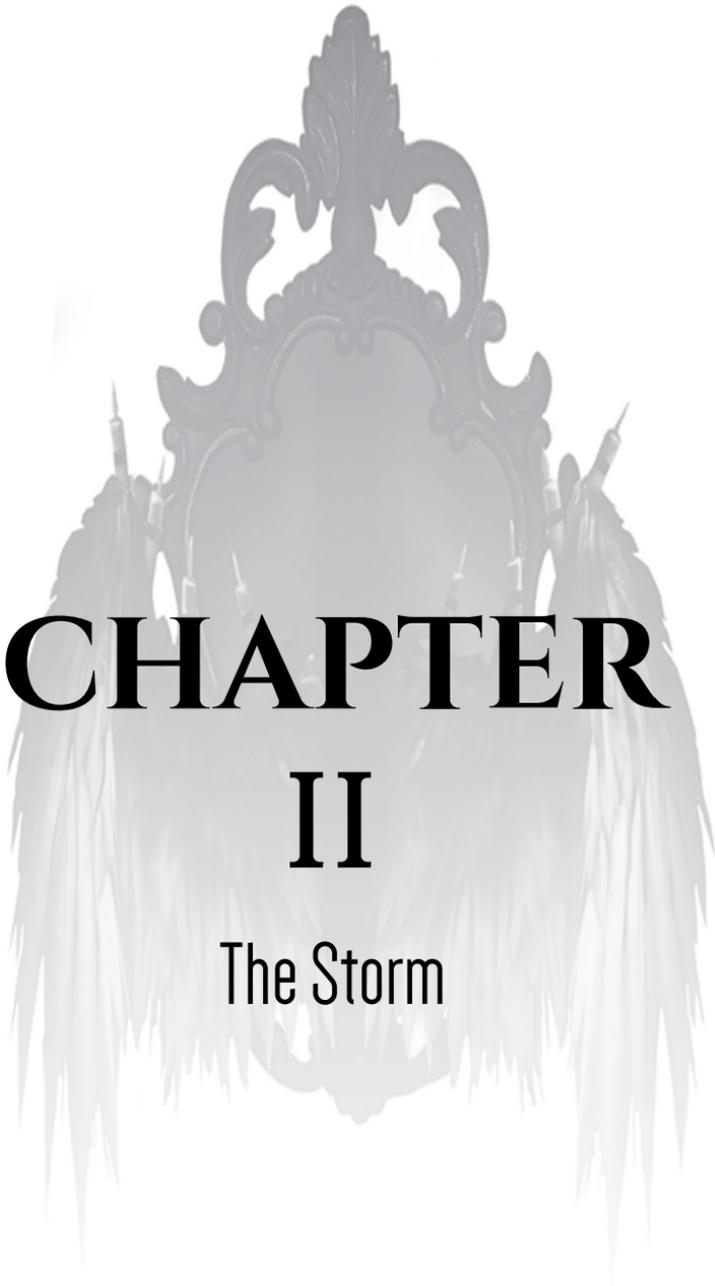
To tell you the truth, it doesn't make a bit of difference to me anymore. Not all questions are meant to be answered. Some are meant to bind us to a path. To break us and keep us broken.

Right now I should be balled up, crying like a baby. Because, this summer, I learnt I could realise dreams I never thought I ever would. I learnt how love was supposed to feel, and I experienced it fully. I learnt life is mostly cruel and unfair. I learnt that, if I'm ever really hurting and I need to feel Melody's embrace, the brown poison can take away my pain for a little while. I learnt that, once upon a time, life was beautiful. But, most importantly, this summer I learnt, to depths I never fathomed possible, how not to care.

And if I don't get a good grade on this paper, my uncle says he will be very upset. So please give me an A. If you don't, his shadow will find you, It will take you and It will torture you without end.

It promised me.

And you'd better believe It's fucking serious.



CHAPTER II

The Storm



I

THREE WEEKS

David Fitz pushed his last balloon of brown early Friday morning. The leftover he'd stopped pocketing to maintain his and his girlfriend's habit, and started pocketing to clock paper, over three weeks before. Quit cold turkey. As they'd both promised they would, every time they went shopping to stock up on over-the-counter medications, bananas, bread, peanut butter, soup, crackers, vitamins and everything else they'd need following their quit day. So many years ago, it seemed. Only three weeks.

Three weeks of waking up and wishing they hadn't. Still unable to shake the memory of the first three days: Gorging on Tagemet and Imodium with grapefruit juice and water. Avoiding work, visitors and phone calls to writhe around on their apartment floor. Fighting and fucking like monkeys to keep each other from making it back to the street to score.

By the middle of the fourth day, they'd both been able to eat most of a peanut butter sandwich without vomiting. Cutting back on the anti-diarrhoeal medications and maintaining something close to regular sleep from that point on. Fighting the persistent flu-like symptoms with NyQuil and Gatorade for longer than either of them wanted to remember, though the

entire process only took them completely out of the game for a half a week. Not much time, really. But the longest days either of them had ever lived.

As he walked into his claustrophobic apartment, burrowed in an alley off the streets of his claustrophobic city, he knew the eyes he'd hoped would catch him doing his deals on the side, definitely had. And the wire he'd been sitting on would be getting some use soon. That was as close to a good plan to kick the drugs forever, and escape the prison he'd help them build, as he could come up with.

In bed with a bent cop who was as likely to be setting him up to take a fall as help him out.

Maybe, in the end, he and his woman would bid farewell to the life. The life they'd grown to hate more than anything, for countless years, yet had still managed to suffer gladly. Most likely, though, they would die. Pathetically. Probably begging. Certainly not looking back with fondness on anything or anyone they'd be leaving behind.

Still, he couldn't bring himself to give up hope totally. Not when his world was growing brighter with every passing second. Not when the demons that haunted him had taken leave, or at least given him peace. And not in his heart. The centre within him that always dreamt life could be better, and maybe believed it had to be, eventually. The only real question was how 'better' would end up being defined. The genuine joy of freedom, or a gutter funeral?

"What took you so long?" his girlfriend, Juno Conjay, called from the soiled mattress in their dark and dirty living room. "Did you get me more, like you promised? Did you?" She stood, scratching at her dirty blonde hair. Looking rough. Not a bath in days. Still anxious and unable to beat the insomnia. So beautiful, if he remembered correctly, underneath all the grime

that clogged her pores. Filth that used to make the floating last a little bit longer.

“No.” He walked into their apartment, quietly closing the door behind him. “No more. If I promised you anything, I promised you that. I sold the leftover. More money. No more horsey.” He scratched behind his right ear as he made his way down the hall, past the bathroom, to hold her as she shook. “Did you eat?”

“Yeah. I’ll never get sick of the peanut butter and stale crackers, mother fucker.” She growled, almost cried, as she worked her teeth along his left shoulder. Gnawing at him. Eating away the pain. The need. She took his face in her hands and looked him in the eyes. “You promised. Why didn’t you get me more? I fucking hate you.”

“Because we kicked, baby.” He ran his fingers through the dirt on her face. “We’re clean.”

“Why?” She gripped him tighter, throwing her arms around his waist and dropping to her knees. “You don’t get to make that decision for me. I’m not your property.”

“You know why. Our plan. I’ve been working it since before we started kicking. Like we agreed. We’re getting out. Away from all this. And don’t mistake me for chattel either, Juno.”

Juno: The girl who he thought he could love. The girl who’d turned to prostitution in her early twenties and barely gotten out of the game with her life when the junk made her useless. The girl who, had she not also been a slave to the dope when they met, he might not share one inch of common ground with. The girl who, now that things were going the way they’d both said they wanted, was calling their relationship quits.

“No.” She pulled into him harder. “I don’t want it. I’m not going anywhere. All this? This is over.”

“What do you mean, over?” He followed her as she turned and scurried back into the living room, finding a corner and making herself small in it. “I’ve been working with a cop. He’s going to help us. If we can take Paulie’s operation down, they’re going to get us out. That’s what you said you wanted, right? We agreed.”

“You were serious about turning on your boss?” She twitched and pulled at her night dress, yanking it from mid-thigh to knee over and over. “That’s stupid, Davey. Your head is more fucked up sober. How is this a good plan? And no.”

“Look.” She shrunk away from him as he approached and tried to touch her. “It’s not a good plan. And maybe it is twenty-four or five degrees south of whatever’s level. It’s just the only way I could see out.”

“Do what you have to. Just leave. And leave me out of it. I’m not going to die because of you.”

“Really? Three weeks ago you didn’t give a damn if the smack got you a toe tag for your birthday. And I’m not going to get killed because you don’t want to die. I did this for us.”

“There is no more us.” She made herself even smaller in the corner. “Didn’t I just say that?” Tears streamed from her eyes, making furrows in the grunge coating her cheeks as she pushed him, punching at his chest. “Look at me, Davey. Look really hard.”

“What am I supposed to see, Junie?”

“Exactly,” she snapped. “Now that we’re clean, you can’t pretend I’m someone else anymore. I don’t know why the fuck you’d want to because, let’s face it, you got better than you ever had when you landed me. But I’ll never be the girl of your dreams. I’ll never be the one. So just forget us. It shouldn’t be that hard.”

“Look,” David said. “I don’t know where you’re going with this, but I never—”

“You used to call me her name in bed, you fucking asshole. When you were too jammed to keep it up any other way. I mean, God bless the bitch. It worked, but I’m not her, I never will be and I never want to be.” She punched him in the chest again. “So, I’m out of this. I’m not going down with you.”

He grabbed her by the back of the head as she crumbled into him, her hands flailing. Trying to punish him. “I’m sorry, baby.” He held her head in his hands. Knowing she was right on at least one level and desperate to get back on point. “The cop I’m working with. He’s already watching. And today it all ends. Today I tape record my weekly drop and the police pull me out. Don’t give up now. We’re almost home.” She tore at his clothes in frustration. “I understand you’re scared, but—”

“You’re being stupid. And don’t call me ‘baby’ anymore. You tricked me when we were kicking. The first three days. Maybe I promised then, but... No. I’m not doing this. You just go. Enjoy your new life. I don’t need you or your problems.”

He held her head with increasing pressure, staring deep into her eyes, as she reached to pry his hands away and he shook her. “It’s too late for that now. This has already begun and there’s no way to stop it. You don’t want to be with me anymore? Why? I’m too good? Not good enough? I don’t get it. And it doesn’t matter. They don’t know you decided we’re through. If you don’t run with me after I’m done starting Ricky and Paulie on their way out, you’ll be dead in a day. If they’re feeling generous.”

“No. You’re dead, you selfish bastard. If we run, they’ll kill us both. If you just die, then—”

He shook her head harder. “Then what?”

“I’ll figure something out. Fuck you for putting me in this position.”

“He moved his hands from the side of her head to her shoulders, guiding her up slowly into the centre of the room. “Look, here’s the truth of it. There is no way to keep you out of this. Because, no matter how I go, when I’m gone they’ll come and get you. Put you right back on the junk.”

She smirked in the middle of her crying jag. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He cracked her across the mouth and it was right back to nothing but tears.

“They’ll get you hooked again, they’ll pimp you out and they’ll keep your tab running so you never get back to good.” He turned her to look out through the dust and dirt on their living room window. “You’ll be on the streets again, broken glass in your knees. Getting banged up and banged around like a nickel slut. And you’ll be doing it all for, maybe, a meal a day and enough flea powder to keep you from getting sick on the customers.” She tried to turn back around to look at him, but his grip was solid. “And when the sickness starts to show. When no one wants you anymore. Again. When the junk eats you alive, like it almost did before we kicked, they’ll see you die too. But not like me. I’ll be over quick. You’ll die every day for months, maybe years, until you spend your final days burning up and freezing to the bone. Shitting yourself, pissing yourself, puking, starving, and wishing you were dead. The only way your end will come any faster is if you work up the nerve to kill yourself. Because they’ll watch you twist, and they’ll love it.”

“Would that make you happy?” she asked as his grip relaxed. “To see me go like that?” She turned around and held on to the window sill. “You describe it so well. Is that what you want? Would that make it okay? If you got me killed, but I was just some worthless junkie whore and not the girl who dumped your pathetic ass?”

His grip began to tighten again and she pulled away, cowering against the window and holding up her hands as he shouted. “No. Just... Quit pushing my buttons. You think this isn’t hard for me too?” He went to stroke her hair and she flinched. “I’m trying to make a point. Your pride is going to put you in a very bad place. You don’t want that to happen. Don’t you remember how hard it was to kick? How painful? Do you want to do that again? I want us to get out. I want for you to be safe and I don’t want you to have to go back to being what you never wanted to be. That’s all I want. A fresh start. This is the only way. We’re done? Okay. But I still care about you, Junie. I would never hurt you.”

She touched lightly at her lips, still feeling his hand punishing her. “Except when I make you angry, right?” She smacked him in the face full force. “And you’d never put me in danger, just like you’d never hurt me? Never hit me?” She smacked at him again, missing his face and clipping his shoulder.

“Listen. All I need you to do...” He tracked her eyes, making sure she was paying attention. “All I need you to do is clean yourself up and go shopping.” He pulled a wad of twenties from his jeans pocket and threw them at the mattress on the floor. “You go out shopping. At the thrift store. We’ll come get you when it’s time. Until then, you stay away from here.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not going. Just leave.”

“If you don’t go out, I can’t guarantee you anything.” He looked into her eyes again. “I mean it when I say I care about you. When I said we’re getting out, I meant you and me. Both of us. Even if we’re over, I promised I’d get you out.”

“Like you can do anything. Those guys own you. I love you, you stupid fuck, but you’re not calling the shots. You don’t have the balls to pull this off. Not now that you can’t shoot up your courage. You’re not even man enough to handle me. Good

luck with the big boys.” David’s hand raised as her eyes followed it. “So I’m not going to take a shower and go out and shop, because it’s part of your brilliant master plan to get us out of the life.” She turned around as she gave him the finger. “I’m going back to sleep. You let me know how it all turns out, you selfish prick. If I don’t hear from you by noon, I guess I’ll run. Or maybe,” she added, “maybe I’ll take a shower and go shopping. That would fix everything, right? Fucking idiot. You don’t owe me anything. So just fucking leave.”

“I’m saving you,” he called out, following after her. “Like you’ve been begging me to. If you decide you want to come back after we get away, I won’t stop you. But we’re getting out.” Juno stopped, turned around quickly and moved to slap him again. He caught her hand with his own and pushed it aside. “And you’re going to do your part, you little...”

She looked into him as he paused. “Say it, Davey. Call me what you want to call me. Call me a fucking whore.” He began undoing the buttons on her night dress and she scratched at his wrists to stop him. “You’re going to make me take a shower now? Big fucking man. Why don’t you hit me again? Maybe that will help.”

“You’ll thank me tomorrow.” He grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her into the bathroom, to the tub.

“You’ll be dead tomorrow. Because you can’t pull off whatever it is you think you’ve got all worked out. Even if you get lucky, you’ll find some way to fuck it all up. You’re a loser. That’s what you do.”

“You get cleaned up, put on some clothes you haven’t ruined, go shopping and, by tonight, we’re free.”

She continued to protest, lashing at his face with her fists. “I’m not going. You can’t do anything to make me. I want

to fix. You do too. Admit it. It's killing you. Making you crazy. We just need more junk, you stupid piece of—”

Breath blasted from Juno's mouth as she wrested herself from David's grip, the momentum tripped her up, gravity bounced the back of her head off the wall and she slumped into the bathtub.

“And...” He looked her in the eyes as they fluttered open. “If you don't shower, get dressed and go shopping, then by tonight, this is as good as it's going to get. Except this sort of thing won't be happening by accident. And if you even think about pulling this kind of crap. Talking back, being a smart-mouthed little pain in the ass, when they've got you back on the streets? They'll kill you and toss your body in an alley dumpster. For anyone to find. So your mommy and daddy will have to come and ID you. Know what you were.” David turned to leave the room. “You don't want to go? All right, I can't make you, like you say. But I'm out. And, for your sake, I hope I see you later.”

“Whatever happens, we're done,” she said, her speech slowing and her body relaxing. “I don't know if it's the withdrawals, or if you hate me, but now that we're clean. Us... We don't make any sense. Maybe I still love you, but I don't think so. Maybe you think you still love me. It's too confusing. Especially now.”

“Look, I'm sorry that—”

“Don't.” She stopped him as he began what she assumed was an apology for the unchecked rage. The physical violence and the cruel words that, she knew all too well, were the only things that made sense if the hurting came back and you needed to forget. “We're both fucked up. The kicking is making us insane.”

“Just don't die for no reason,” he said as his anger and frustration left right along with hers.

And for a while, they both felt calm. Like the cravings had never existed. Like they'd never used. It wouldn't last much longer. It never did.

"Fine. I'll get dressed and go shopping," she said. "You'll be watching when I go, right?"

He nodded. "I'll follow you. Until you're out in public. Then I'll go my way. I'll be back to pick you up in an hour or so. Probably sooner. Like twenty-six, twenty-seven minutes. Can you shop for that long?"

"Can I shop for that long?" She laughed, even though she was well aware of the negative stereotype she was perpetuating.

"Just remember, the thrift store is where you're supposed to be. Don't go more than a block from there. Stay on the same side of the street if you have to leave."

"Okay." She got up and turned on the tap. "I'll be waiting. Forget us. But don't forget me."

He walked into the kitchen to grab a sandwich while he waited for her to wash up. "I won't forget you. Not that way."



II

THIS IS NOT A FAIRY TALE

“...This is not a fairy tale...”

I’ve been back in this slice of nowhere, on this Petri dish located in the middle of a mediocre universe, watching over the sickeningly sweet-natured, confused objective of my mission for a little less than what I suppose is a month now. And while it’s a welcome break, I already miss the violent, focussed insanity of my unwitting aide. My favourite monkey. He’s been keeping me busy for most of the last two decades, but he’s only a means to an end.

“...This is not a fairy tale...”

I’ve been chanting that mantra since I got here, and It still ignores me. I know It can hear, but It won’t give me the satisfaction of recognising me. It won’t even acknowledge what I know to be true. It wants to kill me but It’s still too confused to commit entirely to removing me from Its world. Whether that’s because It knows It can’t and fears the consequences, thinks It might need my help to fix what It thinks is broken, or knows It can use me, it’s impossible to tell. I can read Its monkey mind, but after all this time, Its mind is a maze and a mess. And I’m only invested in It finding Its way Home so I can go back too.

It's content, instead, to drag Its tainted wings through the thinning blood on the floor of this wooden box. Sniffing all around It. Foraging for scraps. Staining Its white fur thick with disease as It licks the floors and walls cleaner than they've ever been. Sucking up chunks of bone and vomiting them back out. Always so upset with the result. Always so upset with Itself. Knowing what It's attempting to do is futile, but never stopping. Desperately seeking out crumbs because It can't admit It might be wrong.

And It has to have known, ever since It made the decision to fall and take refuge on this simian garbage dump, the way back Home is easy. But It didn't want to come back for many years. And when It decided It did, It was lost. Confused. Too prideful to accept my help. And too dense to see Its pride is part of the problem.

Today, It looks up and stares into me. Its mouth dripping chunky liquid over Its breasts, and down to the nothing between Its legs, as It wraps Itself in Its dark purple wings. Leaking red poison in pools beneath It as It bares Its primary fangs, opens wide and allows the indefinably long protuberance It calls a tongue to slither through the air and open the teeth that make up its tip. A secondary set of teeth that allow the snake-like tongue behind them to shoot out and glide through the air as its tip's teeth begin chomping at dust. If I weren't familiar with the Underneath, It might scare me right now.

It asks me why I've come back. Though It knows I know It knows. And I tell It Its way Home is near. And it will be coming to It presently.

It growls when I tell It the truth and sucks me down from my comfortable place on the ceiling. Attaching me to Its back for a moment as I begin to give It visions. But, before I can make them clear, It shakes me off. It tells me I can't be trusted.

That It's not falling for my pranks. That I'm a liar, a trickster and a cheat. That this isn't a game.

And I laugh as It considers ending me. I laugh harder when It threatens to. And I let It know once more, if It really wants to leave this miserable plane of existence, the opportunity is coming again. Very soon. I let It know that, though It doesn't want to accept it, the vessel that hasn't needed me for three weeks now is a way Home. A conduit back to where It's been dying to return for so long. And I let It know, if It can't manage to stop acting like a vicious, lethal infant and trust me for once, the opportunity will most certainly pass again. And there won't be another one for quite a while. Perhaps for aeons. And I tell It I'm going to be riding It harder than It's ever known me to, and there's nothing It can do to stop me.

I tell It the smell is growing stronger and It pulls me back toward It, growing me and shrinking me and then letting go and looking confused. Muttering Its favourite ape phrase. As if It's ever really loved anything.

It knows I'm not lying and that scares It, which makes me think this time there might be a chance I'll be able to complete my mission and go back Home.

But I'm never sure. And I can't tell what Its intentions are as It passes through me, and the roof of this bloodied wooden box, and hooks me with Its talons. Trading Its smaller prison for a larger one like It does over and over again. Passing from the Underneath to the In-Between. Taking to the sky and trying to convince Itself It's free as It casts me wide and dark over the small town It's been calling home for far too long. Getting angry with me again, as It does, when I laugh at all the monkeys below, directing their gazes upward in fear of getting wet, as It passes above them and paints a sliver of night across their precious dirt.

Then It makes Itself small and releases me to find another corner where I can wait inconspicuously. It returns Itself to the clean wooden box It calls home and assumes Its monkey form again.

I pray It will get things right this time. Mostly for me. And, I'll admit, for my favourite monkey.

It realised Its path to redemption, when It first met my favourite monkey, and It ran from him like a yellow dog. Too confused about Its own lust for the monkey flesh to differentiate between sin and simple primate need.

But the smell is all I require to keep me on my game. The smell means I might be going Home soon. With or without Its help or consent. If the smell attaches to It again, I can complete my mission easily.

And I call after It, over an alternate channel so I don't introduce any more fear into the monkeys' lives than they insist on manufacturing for themselves:

“...This is not a fairy tale... And I'll be God damned if you fuck this up for me again.”



III

NO ONE THERE

Juno arrived at the thrift store around noon. David followed her halfway there. Until she got to the street. Until she was among the crowd of regular people going about their days, doing what they had to do. Or what they wanted to. Until he could be sure no one was going to make her disappear.

She'd looked back and given him an obvious nod when she felt safe. Then she'd watched to make sure he left. Hoping he'd be getting them as far away from where they were now, as fast as possible. But not believing. He was a dreamer and, though he tried, he never came through. Not all the way.

Trying to figure out what it was about David that changed since their last taste, wondering if nothing had, and just breathing the same stale city air made her want to shoot up again. Despite how freshly the pain of withdrawal still lingered in her mind and how terribly it still stressed her body. And she couldn't start slapping around random strangers on the street to relieve the pressure. Not without suffering noticeable consequences. At his most violent, David never hurt her badly enough that she needed make-up to conceal the damage. And, though she could ignore them when she was alone with David, or the heroin took her to that place where she could forget, her looks were more

important to her than she could bring herself to admit. Perhaps, that's where her fear of freedom came from. If she died young, she'd never have to know the indignity of ageing.

And personalities were no substitute for good looks. Personalities were for ugly women who needed them.

She was all clean and a little too dressed up for the thrift store but, ironically enough, the pricey, form-fitting white dress she had on was the only piece of clean laundry she could find. The only outfit she hadn't wrecked when she'd been kicking. Looking for anything she could destroy to keep her mind off using.

"Junie? Is that you?" a voice called from behind her. Her body stiffened as she felt the words worm their way under her skin. She recognised the voice and she never wanted to hear it again. If David was right, and he did have a workable plan, she wouldn't be hearing it anymore after that evening. If David was wrong, she'd be hearing it often and much sooner.

She turned around slowly, pretending she felt casual. Acting as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. Like she belonged where she was, looking the way she did.

"Excuse me?" She looked into steely grey eyes, pretending to be surprised. "Ricky? Ricky Nevil?" Richard looked back at her. He was big. Six feet, easy. Wide, but not fat at all. His face was ugly. Like someone had set it on fire and extinguished the blaze with alcohol. But there was an air of calm about his features, and in his voice, that made him deceptively attractive. Even when you knew what he was capable of, how little you meant to him and what he would do to you if you crossed him, no matter who you were or what you might have thought you were worth.

"You're looking good, Junie." He stepped to her side, as if he, too, were going to begin browsing the second-hand ladies

dresses. “You clean up nice.” A smile hinted from her lips. “You look like a sparkling clean human toilet now.”

“What? I mean, thank you.” She kept her voice clipped, looking straight ahead. Trying not to show any shame as she felt his words hit her and his eyes molest her. Ogling her without any tact.

“Hardly recognised you,” he said. “Last time I saw you I thought you were living in a ditch. You looked worse than the piece of shit you are. Figured Davey must have given up on you. You still fucking that junkie lunatic on the house?” He gave her left ass cheek a lingering squeeze and she brushed his hand away, keeping her stare fixed. Her lips beginning to tremble with embarrassment. “God damn, girl, you could really be earning. With that body and that face. It’s a shame.”

“Davey and me are done. I ended it.” She moved down the rack and brought her voice to a whisper. “But I don’t do that. Not anymore. Only the six or seven times after. When I had... problems. That wasn’t—”

“Oh,” he said, whispering too. “I didn’t realise your fucking strangers for smack was a secret. Did Davey know how you were helping out with the rent when you were his one and only?” She looked down and away. “Of course he didn’t.” He looked around to make sure no one was paying them any strict attention. “You know, if you want, all you’ve got to do is give me a call. Give me a call and I’ll set you up. All the dope you want and, if you keep looking as good as you do now, real money clients who can boost your income. Or you could start sucking some other loser’s dick every day for free. I’m sure Davey’s uncle would take care of you. Matthew, is it? I’m sure he’d help you out in exchange for the only thing your stupid little ass is good for. How long you been clean?”

“What do you want from me?” she snapped, still keeping her voice hushed. “I’m trying to find some nice things to wear. And I don’t know his uncle. Matt whoever. Davey says he’s homeless. A drifter. What does it matter? Why are you treating me so...? Look, just because I used to work for you doesn’t give you the right to... It just doesn’t. Please stop.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I know how highly you value your status in the community. I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea about you and that lovely, talented mouth.” He moved closer. Sniffing the air. “Your breath smells funny. Not enough protein?”

She wanted to tell him to go fuck himself. More honestly, she wanted to grab a pair of scissors off the counter by the sewing machines, cut out his heart and eat it while she watched him die. But, as angry as Richard could make her, she never got brave around him. Though he’d never once raised a hand to her, she’d seen him deal with problem girls. And what she’d seen him do scared the hell out of her. She felt certain he would hurt her if she pushed anything too far. That he’d beat her half to death anywhere, any time, for any reason, if she gave him a good enough one. Right there, in broad daylight, if she forced it. “Ricky. Come on.” She inched down the racks in the opposite direction. Moving herself sideways in front of him as she passed. Making sure her bottom grazed his trousers as she moved to his other side. He chuckled with pity, as it did. Watching her facial expression show him she’d noticed, even when she was looking good, she did nothing for him.

“You got somewhere you’re going?” he asked. As she looked away from him, pretending to care what was written on the clothing tags, her face went white. “I don’t mean to be nosey, but I haven’t seen you looking this good in as long as I can remember. Not even back when you could turn heads

without grinding up against the customer. Ever, maybe. What's the occasion?"

"Don't you have somewhere you've got to be?" Her skin flushed red and she continued to look away from him. If she turned around now, he'd surely see nothing was right or, at least, something was definitely wrong.

"You've got the most beautiful face." He gently pulled her hair from the front, back over her shoulders. "I'd forgotten."

"Thank you. That's kind of you to say. Why are you...?" She could feel her sense of time slipping away, along with her sense of safety. Wondering where David was, and why Richard wasn't with him. Trying to remember what David had said the plan was. The plan that was going to get them out of the life. Out of the city. She felt Richard's hand lightly touch her chin as he turned her around to face him. "It's not. Really. But thank you."

"You are adorable. You've got butterflies. All because of little old me? I never knew you liked me, Junie."

Juno shook inside and she could see her fear registering in Richard's eyes. It felt like it was the time David said everything was going to be happening. And when Paul's operation was shut down, Richard would have to be there. If he wasn't, he wouldn't go away when the cops showed up. If the cops showed up.

"Listen, Ricky. It's just..." she said, losing track. "Why are you acting so...? Why are you treating me like this? I didn't—"

Richard's voice dropped to a growl. He looked around once more, making sure no one was looking, and anyone who was knew to fuck off directly. "I treat you like I treat you because you are what you are. I'm getting older, I'll admit, but I'm not senile and I haven't forgotten what an underhanded little piece of trash you are. You hear?" She nodded and her eyes began to float as he continued. "Maybe you don't remember most of the fucked up shit you used to do to stay high, or the beatings you came this close to taking when

you crossed my line. But I know you can feel it when you hear me. Though you're looking like something special today, all cleaned up with the merchandise packaged nice and pretty, I know what you are. I know what gutter you crawled out of. I know you would have sold your soul to keep yourself in dope if it wasn't for that piss-ant dead-beat supposedly-ex-boyfriend of yours. The one man on this earth who looks at you and doesn't see a disgusting used-up junkie whore. So here's what I want to know." He looked around again. Not a soul was minding any business but their own. "Why the fuck are you all dressed up like you're going on vacation? Why are you looking so tasty?"

She didn't move as he squeezed her chin. Trying not to show that he was hurting her. She could see in his eyes what she'd felt in his pants: her looks and her manner did nothing for him. And she feared the worst. That he knew David was setting him up. But when goons like Richard started intimidation with vague threats, character assassination and open ended questions, odds were they didn't know the score. They just wanted you to think they did, so you'd tell them. The lie was always worth the risk in that situation. David had passed that pearl of wisdom from his uncle on to her. But David was also putting her neck in a noose.

Richard's eyes pounded into hers. Waiting, in complete silence, for her to answer. Juno's focus went soft and the shakes from the inside trickled out. Letting him know she felt scared before she opened her mouth. "Look," she said, the skin around her eyes going red and puffy. "Davey's been bad, okay? That's why I dumped him. He's—"

"Bad how?" He moved his hand from her chin and gripped her firmly by the neck. "What's that little fuck been up to?" He banged her left temple with the heel of the palm of his free hand. Swift and painful. "And don't you start with the crying.

Davey may fall for that bullshit, but I'm not him. You shed one tear and you'll regret it in a way you'll never fucking forget. I promise you."

"He's... He's been..." She looked at him, shaking harder. Her face twitching. Trying not to lose it. "Please don't make me say."

He pulled her in closer, pressing his forehead against hers, whispering even more softly. The calm before he bounced your head off a kerb. "You're going to tell me what you know, Junie. You're going to tell me or the next time anyone asks, I'm going to have to tell them I have no idea where you went off to. You catch my drift?"

She looked directly into his eyes. Frozen.

"Tell me or I'll do worse than kill you, I promise," he continued. "I'll start by putting you in the hospital. Fuck up that beautiful little face so bad you'll have to learn how to type. I'll do it right here, right now, in front of God and everyone. And no one will see a thing." He shook her. "You know I used to let your bullshit slide because Davey's a good earner, right? If you aren't with him anymore, you're just another cheap piece of product to me. Remember that."

"He's been hustling," she said, her body paralysed. Sniffling as the fear gripped her face, making her features contort. Losing all hope as she cursed herself inside. Like that, Richard had won. He'd make her ugly in front of a crowd, no doubt. Selling David down the river didn't seem so wrong when compared with the consequences of being caught in a lie by the likes of Richard. "When he made what he was supposed to bring back, he held on to the leftover." Richard's grip got tighter. "He kicked. He quit using like he used to. And he made me quit with him. Wouldn't give me anything. Kept me locked up in the apartment. I had no say. He sold the leftover. Put the money in his pocket, Ricky." She looked down and then back up at him

again, begging for mercy. “He treated me like an animal when we kicked. He took me when he wanted, against my will, to keep the urges from winning. But he promised me we’d be cleaned up and going away soon. We’d be leaving to start a better life with the money he made selling. I swear. I know what he did was wrong, but he... I didn’t know what to believe when I was hurting. I wanted it to be true, so I could keep waking up and get through another day without using.”

She buried her face in his shoulder, swallowing hard, as he let go of her neck, batted the back of her head and his eyes did another sweep of the thrift store crowd. “It’s okay. You did the right thing. Telling me.” She clenched her teeth. Mentally preparing for the serious physical and verbal degradation he’d surely begin making her suffer next. In full view of all the unseeing eyes at the thrift store. “Don’t worry, though, baby.” He paused as he rubbed her lower on the back, running his fingers below the waistline of her dress. “As soon as I take care of him...” He pulled her head off his shoulder and kissed her on the forehead. “...I’ll take care of you. I’ll fix you up.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Confused.

“You’ll see.” He stepped to her side and slapped her ass. Smiling as he watched her try to keep her entire body from quaking uncontrollably. “Still nice and bouncy.” He looked at her backside. “I’ll make sure you don’t go hungry. Take that how you will.”

“Whatever,” she muttered, dismissing him with a slight wave of her quivering hand as she began to turn away. Trying to look tough. Failing miserably.

He smacked her head back around to face him. “Whatever?”

“I don’t want to go back to doing what I used to,” she managed to whisper in choppy breaths. Regaining her balance. “I’m... I’m sorry I said that.”

“Too good for that now? Well, you won’t be, soon enough. You can thank Davey’s corpse when it floats by you in the gutter.” He backed away from her, gave her left cheek a light slap and straightened his tie. “You’ll be pulling in good money at first. Right now, you pass inspection and then some. But when you go back to using. And you will, I can see in your eyes. I’ll still keep you around. I’ll keep you well fed and doped up. You’ll be back to servicing the real low life scum for smack in no time. Next thing you know, you won’t give a shit where you are or where you came from.” He looked at her with loathing as he brushed the spot on his shirt where her face had rested. “That’s as good as a stone waste of oxygen like you could hope for. You may be gorgeous on the outside, but inside you’re garbage. Scum. Always have been, always will be.”

“Please, Ricky. I told you what you wanted. Can’t you—?”

He patted her on the back and smiled as she continued to shake. “You need to get used to agreeing with me or, when you’re back on the dope, things aren’t going to turn out quite as pretty as the picture I painted.” He stared in her eyes as she fought to keep from cracking. “Show me you can follow orders like you used to. Give me a reason not to fuck your life up right here and now.”

“Okay—”

“You shut your mouth unless I tell you to talk. And keep your hands at your sides. Do you hear me?” Juno’s arms dropped as she nodded her understanding. “Tell me the truth. Tell me you’re a stupid, worthless cunt.”

“I’m a stupid...” She paused, her lips trembling, and Richard’s hand clamped back around her neck. “...I’m a

stupid... ..worthless cunt.” She stifled tears and fought to keep her hands from raising to defend herself. Seeing Richard knew anticipating the pain was damaging her much worse than the real thing.

“You’re an ugly, used-up junkie slut who does who and what she’s told. Tell me.” Richard whispered as he felt her swallow hard. “And say it like you mean it.”

“I’m... I’m an ugly, used-up junkie slut who does who and what I’m told.”

Richard watched her eyes losing focus and smiled. “Now, thank me for reminding you what you are.”

“I’m...” Richard clenched his fist, choking her and easing up. “Thank you for reminding me what I am, Ricky.”

Richard let go of her neck and gave her a bracing slap. “Cheer up, sunshine. Life will make sense again soon. I promise. Shooting up your meals and swallowing your pay will come back easy enough. Like riding a bicycle.” He looked her up and down once more. “You stay tight, and I’ll get you started.” He paused, rubbing his forehead. “Colour your hair, though. The carpet and the drapes. Get a tan, maybe. And wear lots of make-up. So I can pretend you’re not you. I like to think I’m a fair man, and I’ll cut you a break, but if I’m going to be your cash machine I don’t want to have to close my eyes and dream of someone else so you can get me off. I can do that on my own. You understand.”

Truly giving up David, and not just spouting half-truths, felt entirely necessary as Juno looked into Richard’s eyes and felt them prying into her. “Ricky, look... I need to tell you—”

Richard raised a finger to his lips. “No point. You already told me what you are. Like a good bitch. You just make sure you get checked out by a doctor at the free clinic. Be ready for me when I come by to pick your weak little ass up later. Me and six or seven of Paulie’s crew. We’re going to have a hell of a

time making that face look even dumber than it naturally does. We'll see you soon. At the apartment. Be there."

He winked and walked away.

She continued to spasm and shake. Hyperventilating. A smile drew itself across Richard's face as he stopped to listen to her on his way out the door. He looked back at her, chuckled, and he was gone.

When the door closed behind him, she turned her back. Hiding her face in her hands as she tried not to whimper. And then tried not to sob. Breaking down completely and tearing a blouse off the racks to cover her head as she wept. She tugged at her dress to even it out, and tugged harder still to shake off the memory of that bastard publicly humiliating her like he owned her. Wiping runny mascara from her face and collecting herself.

She prayed David's plan worked, even as she hoped it all went to hell. The only downside she could see at that point was not being able to spit in Richard's face if David did come through. But she couldn't lie to herself and believe that would happen.

As much as she may have ever loved David, she'd never really trusted anyone but herself. And she'd begun telling herself that being with him was stupid and dangerous ever since they'd quit being slaves to the dope. She could only assume she'd been telling herself that for the entirety of their relationship.



IV

MACHETES AND TAPE

David walked into the run-down warehouse office, shuffling his feet. Making sure the mini tape recorder in his shirt pocket was recording before he zipped up his jacket and tightened his grip on his tattered leather briefcase.

His boss Paul Mauro, a low level mob associate, sat at a desk in the middle of the room. Surrounded by Guatemalan goons. All armed to the teeth. Pistols holstered and Machetes sheathed. Their hands shaking with anticipation. Like they'd never seen one second of action. Like they were hoping today was going to be the day. Like they did every time he came by to deliver the week's cash.

Paul waited at his desk as David approached. Paul was a big man, to put it politely. He dressed well, but it didn't hide anything. There wasn't a tailor living in the boroughs who could fit him perfectly. He was too big and too fat in too many places. The only place he wasn't extra meaty was in between his big fat Italian ears. "Davey boy. How was the week?"

"Okay," David replied as he came closer and began to open his briefcase. "You mind?" he asked the muscle surrounding the front of the desk. They looked back at Paul, who nodded, and three of them moved to the side.

“You look good,” Paul said. “You take a bath or something?” David looked at him and smiled weakly. “Doesn’t that make the high go away faster? You forget? Junkie 101?”

“No, I didn’t forget.” He opened the briefcase and dumped the cash on the desk. “Just... Me and Junie broke up. I need to look good again.”

“A shame. She’s a nice girl.” Paul looked at the pile of money on the desk. “No leftover again?” David winced slightly. “Every week, no leftover, and you’re still looking good. How do you do it?”

“It’s all there. The exact amount. Everything’s sold. Everything’s paid for. It’s all there.” David looked over his shoulder as he heard a creak come from the entranceway, but it appeared empty. Richard was nowhere in sight, which wasn’t the worst news, but it could turn into a headache if he wasn’t there when the cops busted in. A possibly fatal headache.

Paul sighed. “I know it’s all there. It’s always all there. You must be saving up though, no? You kick?” He laughed heartily and his goons laughed along with him. Even if they had no idea why they were laughing or what the joke was. “You’ve been getting better looking every week, Davey. That concerns me.”

“In what way?”

“Every week I pay you your shitty little percentage and your dope. To keep you high and happy. And for the longest time you looked like death. Maybe worse.” He smirked and looked around and the goons started laughing again. Still clueless. “But lately, you’ve been getting better looking. First, it was something about your walk. You had extra... what do you call it? Swagger? You started walking like a man.”

“And that’s bad, because...?” David asked. Wondering when the cops were going to have enough on their remote surveillance to end this ordeal. Wondering where Richard was.

“Well, I see that and I think, maybe you’re coming to see me all fucked up. I don’t give a shit about that, of course. You’re a fucking junkie. You do what you do.” He paused for a moment, considering his words. “But then I start to think other things. Bad things. Like, what if you’re charging more than I’m asking? What if you’re taking the extra and cooking it up? What if you’re taking my good nature for granted and fucking me over while you pump even more of my product into your veins? You know what I mean?”

“No. I never use more than—”

“Listen,” Paul interrupted, “I don’t know what the fuck, okay? That’s just what I thought. If I gave a shit, I’d have broken your legs to find out a long time ago. You’re a good earner. I expect you to skim. That’s how the game’s played. I expect you to take off the top. You understand? You’re a fucking user. I’ve got to do a little something to keep you happy, right? You turn my drugs into money and I don’t have to deal with scum like you on the streets. What could be better than that?”

“I don’t know.” David faked a laugh. “I don’t understand the problem. Like you said: You give me the drugs. I turn them into money. You get paid. I get well. What’s better than that? I don’t understand.”

Richard’s breath came hot on his neck. “Show him your fucking arms, cowboy.”

“Jesus, Ricky,” David yelped. “You scared the shit out of me. For a second there I thought you finally came out of the closet.” Richard moved over to the desk, throwing David a mean look as Paul stood and leant over to greet him. “I’m sorry, Ricky. Come again? Do what?”

“He said he wants to see your arms,” Paul said, patting Richard on the back. “Don’t ask me why. Maybe he likes you or something.” Richard stared into David’s eyes hard, trying to keep

his homophobic rage in check, as Paul continued. “Maybe he’s wondering the same thing I am. How come you’re looking so good and you still live in that shit-hole apartment? How come you’re skimming like you always have been and you’re not fucked up twenty-four seven like you should be?”

“And how come Junie’s looking so tight?” Richard asked.

“What?” David looked around. “What’s that got to do with anything? You thinking about switching teams, Ricky?”

Paul looked interested, motioning with his hand for Richard to stay back. “That’s some sad news for you. Right, Davey. There’s a beautiful woman under all that fucking mess, I’ll bet. You clean her up too? Before she left you?”

“What?” David backed up slightly. “I really don’t know what you guys are talking about.”

“Show us your fucking arms.” Richard pounded his fist on the desk, much to Paul’s delight. “I want to see the train tracks on your fucking arms, Davey. Show us the subway map.”

David rolled up his jacket sleeves and the sleeves of his shirt underneath. His arms were clean. No track marks, no injection points. Just some light bruising and the little scars that would never go away.

Paul looked concerned as he continued with his line of questioning. “You’ve been clean for a while, no?”

David didn’t move.

“I would check elsewhere,” Paul continued, “but no junkie shoots anywhere else unless the main veins are all used up. Did you go straight for the toes, Davey? The crotch?” Paul laughed as David stood, frozen. “Because you don’t look like you’ve been chasing the dragon at all lately. What happened? You finally figure out it’s impossible to catch that mother fucker? This worries me, Davey. You’re looking like a regular guy.”

“And Junie’s looking like a piece of ass you wouldn’t believe,” Richard added, as David tried hard to keep his emotions under control. “Saw her on my way here. At the thrift store. She was wearing a dress. Fit her like shrink-wrap. She’s really taking care of that body, Davey boy. You’ve got to be missing that. Those tits. That ass. Just getting sweeter every second. Four years away from her sexual peak, and you, thirteen years past yours. I’m telling you, she looks like a prize fuck. It must be... difficult.” Richard snickered like a juvenile as he inched toward him. “How’d it end, Davey? Was it one mysterious headache after another?”

David stared back at Richard. “I don’t know why you guys are baiting me, but there’s nothing.. What do you care anyway, Ricky? Her seventh birthday came and went a long time ago.” Richard’s face grew red as he looked back at Paul, who still motioned for him to keep cool. “Seriously, what are you getting at? Yeah, she left me, but that’s nobody’s business but mine.”

“She’s a sexual deviant. She was never yours, even when she was. You really think she stopped scoping out strange dick when you two shackled up? You really believe she wasn’t creeping? Prostitution was a great way for that sickening little bitch to hide what she was and get paid for it. But she gave it up for free just as easily. Trust me.” Richard laughed, looking back at the goons who only giggled for him. “She’s an STD on two legs. I’m surprised your plumbing still works. And watch your mouth or I’ll teach you a lesson you won’t forget.”

“I’m sorry, Ricky.” David rubbed his forehead, wondering when in the hell the police were going to break down the doors. “I was wrong to say that. I didn’t mean to insinuate you like the little girls. I meant the little boys.”

Richard growled, not bothering to look back at Paul who was already in the process of waving him down. “She was already

blown out by the time you met her. Nobody else wanted to fuck her, so you got lucky there. If you could call that luck. Now I run into her and not only is she looking healthy, she's looking fucking healthy. If you know what I mean. She got what she wanted from you, anyway." Richard looked back at Paul, who gave him a thumbs-up, and he continued. "You know, Davey, she offered me a shiny new dime. To let her take me out in the alley. Suck my dick. The way she knows I love it." David shook his head and grimaced as Richard grinned and continued to lay into him. "I could see her lips trembling when she checked me out. Goosebumps everywhere. She was dying for a taste. I didn't feel right about it, but I'm a nice guy so I let her cop my joint. For free. And she cleaned my pipes. She really fixed me up. I mean she sucked down every ounce of—"

"That sounds special, Ricky," David interrupted. "It must be love."

"Keep on laughing, you miserable little bitch," Richard fumed. "Because after she finished draining me dry, believe it or not, she still had a thing or seven to say to me other than 'God bless you'."

"Oh?" Paul asked. Suddenly interested in something other than fantasising about Juno's mouth. "Do tell, Ricky. What did she have to say to you? Not anything about our best boy, Davey? Say no."

"I wish I could. He's all she could talk about. You know what, Davey?" David looked back at him. "Since she's completely fucked you over too, I'm going to go find her when we're through here. Return the favour. Tit for tat, as it were."

David moved toward Richard, anger in his eyes.

The goons all snapped to, looking way too happy. Fingers on triggers. Thinking this was going to be the day. Hoping, definitely. "I don't know what you're going on about,

Ricky. But she didn't tell you anything, because there's nothing to tell." David looked back at Paul. "If he even saw her at all. Is this how you treat your best earner, Paulie? Come on. Don't I get any respect? My uncle isn't going to be happy when he hears about this. Not at all."

Paul looked over at David. "Fuck your uncle, Davey. We have a problem I'm sure he'd understand."

"Which is?" David asked.

"Fuck, I don't know." Paul motioned to Richard. "Ricky doesn't bother showing up and shooting his mouth off like this for no reason. I'll keep my suspicions to myself and he'll tell you what he knows. And, hey, maybe they'll both be the same." Paul leant back. "It'll be fun. To see. Don't you think?"

David shook his head slowly, looking down.

Richard circled him like a shark. "Junie. That sweet piece of ass that used to let you stick your pathetic junkie dick in her for God knows what reason. Junie rolled on you when I ran into her today. The minute she figured she could get out from under by serving you up, that back-stabbing bitch rolled right over. Just like she's going to do when I go visit her again later and take what I want." The goons giggled some more as Richard continued. "You want to know what she told me, or do you want to say it yourself? Maybe hold on to a shred of dignity? Or do you want to keep running that fucking mouth? You've talked shit to me since day one. And I let it go, because you did a good job and, quite frankly, Paulie wouldn't let me pull your fucking ticket. Come on, Davey. Tell me what she said."

"I don't know what you're talking about, man." David's eyes still burnt with rage, but his face stayed surprisingly calm. "I don't know what you're expecting to happen next. Are you going to teach me that lesson now? I'll bet your deep-fried ass really scares the school girls." Richard continued to stare into him.

“But, okay. The last thing Junie said? Let me think... Oh, yeah. Fuck you.”

“Fuck me? And you’ve got no fucking idea? Let me tell you then. You’re going to love this. Well, maybe not, because you know it’s true and it’s not going to come as a surprise. But Paulie here...” Richard pointed over at Paul, whose eyebrows raised as his smile widened. “Paulie’s going to fucking love this shit. Maybe more than me. Junie says you’ve been marking up our prices to meet your quota. She says you’ve been selling the leftover instead of shooting it. Doing your own work. Dealing our drugs as an independent agent. You believe that?” Richard threw David a wink. “I mean, she didn’t say it in so many words, of course. You could pull a tree trunk out of that mouth, but never a summation quite so eloquent.”

“This is bad, Davey,” Paul said.

David backed up again.

“Yeah, Davey. This is bad,” Richard echoed. “You’ve been stealing from us. Making us look weak. I don’t know for sure if anyone else but that piss-drinking whore knows what you’ve been up to, but I have to assume they do. And if they do, that’s a wrong we can’t allow to go unpunished.” Richard made a gun out of his index finger and thumb, pulling the trigger. “You, my friend, are going to die today. Right here. On this floor. But not before I have the boys bring that mouthy little cunt Junie back here to take her lumps. If you have any self respect left at all. Any whatsoever. You’ll teach her a lesson, but good, before we do. Then we’re all going to take turns with her while you watch. You should enjoy that, now that she’s kicked you. And then we’re going to kill you. But the best part... You know what the best part is?”

David shook his head. “Get over yourself, Ricky, you half-assed palm jockey. You can quit trying to impress Paulie.

The job running this glorified shed is yours, I'm sure, when he moves up the ladder or dies. You're not going to get away with this anyway." But a part of him wasn't sure that was true. Drugs in the room. Money on the table. Threats and admissions being recorded and, supposedly, monitored from down the block, and still no police presence.

Richard scoffed. "Of course we are. Back on point. The best part is, we're not going to kill her after we cap you. We're going to fucking destroy her. I mean, it's going to be ugly. And then..." Richard chuckled as the goons giggled. Paul smiled and the goons upped their giggles to laughs. "Then, we're going to let her go. Bleeding from every orifice in her body. Face like a fucking sinkhole. We're going to drop her off near the hospital so she can get the care she needs. And her punishment, Davey. Her punishment for just knowing your dumb, fresh-mouthed punk ass is going to be a life of misery. She's going to live the rest of her life strung out. A worthless junkie who can only get her hands on enough dope to maintain, and a prostitute a blind man wouldn't fuck. That's the best part. You like it? You should. She dumped you. Fuck her, right?"

"Paulie?" David asked. "Come on. Really? You'd do all that? To a good earner? To an innocent girl? On Ricky's say so? That's it?"

"I'm sorry, Davey." Paul leant forward in his chair. "I've heard it from other sources. Junie was telling the truth. What she said, what I heard elsewhere and what I suspected. They're all the same. I trusted you and you fucked me. It ends how it ends."

Paul mumbled in Spanish to three of his Guatemalan thugs and they dumped their gear on a nearby workbench before hurrying out the back.

"Hey, I'll tell you what, Davey," Richard said, smiling wide again. "While the boys are out collecting that snitch bitch

you used to love, you do me a favour and we'll forget this whole thing." He looked back at Paul and got the nod. David shook his head. Nothing was going to be forgotten. They were just going to have some fun.

"What favour?" David asked.

"Well, I was thinking." Richard paused for a moment and unbuckled his belt. "Maybe you could save yourself."

"How so?"

"I'm going to make you a deal. You suck me off and swallow, before they get back with her, and we'll let you walk."

Paul laughed again.

"Seriously? I thought all the gay bashing I throw your way pissed you off," David said. "Learn something new every day, I guess."

"Serious as a stroke, Davey." Richard played with his belt and zipper, then looked back at Paul before continuing. "And, hey, smart guy. This isn't gay, all right? This is me fucking with you."

"It seems kind of gay to me, Ricky. You sure you wouldn't rather just take it up the ass?"

"Shut up, you little shit. Your mouth isn't going to save you now. Because here's the fucking deal. You give me a good blow job. And I mean a damn good one. And you get to keep breathing. Would you do that to save your life? If you won't, I'll make Junie the same offer I'm making you. And you know she'll jump at it."

"To be clear, Ricky. When you say my mouth isn't going to save me, does that mean you don't want the blow job anymore? Or are you suggesting you'd prefer I give you a blow job with someone else's mouth? I know you pitch a little tent every time you think of me bending over to pick up a pencil, but you've got to rein it in and start making sense."

Richard punched David hard across the chin. “Yes or no.”

“Fuck you, you spent piece of shit,” David replied, drooling blood. If the police weren’t going to show up to save his ass, he figured he may as well go out even crazier than he came in. “I’ll tell you what. You show me that piece of spaghetti between your legs you’re deluded enough to call a cock and, when I’m done having a good laugh, feel free to put it in my mouth. Just be sure to say goodbye to it first. Because I’ll eat you, Ricky. No problem. And if it makes you happy, I’ll swallow it all. But I’m not cleaning up the blood and I’m sending you the hospital bill if it doesn’t digest properly. How’s that sound? Sound like a deal?” Richard looked back at Paul, clenching his fists. “Or, hey, even better. Have Paulie ask the goons to give us seven minutes of alone time and I’ll beat you to fucking death with my bare hands. You can try to stop me, but I don’t think you’ll be able to. I’m not a defenceless girl, like one of your stable of barely-legal whores. You don’t scare me in the slightest. And I think you’re nothing without your backup. I could be wrong, but what do you say?” David looked past Richard into Paul’s eyes. “It’ll be fun. To see. Don’t you think?”

Paul smirked. “Calm down, Davey.” He waved to get Richard’s attention. “Look, Ricky, why don’t you keep your dick in your pants and teach our boy a lesson in manners instead?”

“Or you could show me how you love it,” David said, grinning and looking into Richard’s eyes. “We all know you’re a chicken hawk. Just admit it and life will be easier, I promise.”

Richard punched David hard in the gut, dropping him to his knees. “One more fucking faggot remark out of you and I swear to Jesus I’ll strangle you to death with my fucking belt.”

“All right, all right. I get it, Ricky. You’re not a fucking faggot, you’re just a fucking paedophile.” Richard whipped him

Michael Golvach

across the face, thrice on both cheeks. “I mean you’ve just got a really bad case of tennis elbow.”

And David knelt, shivering, as Richard continued to thrash him with his belt. Praying for the sound of a police siren. Any time soon would be nice.

V

BENT STRAIGHT

Detective Franklin Bowe sat in the back of the generic van he'd requisitioned for a drug sting. Waiting with three other officers, straight out of the academy. All listening to the wire on their newest snitch. Franklin, praying the junkie he'd roped into helping him cripple the drug trade in his precinct had remembered to bring along his own recorder. Too much bad shit just happened to happen to the wire whenever they went after the heroin trade. If every cop in the precinct wasn't as bent as he was, he might have some idea who to confront about it. Hopefully the new blood he'd brought with him hadn't been gotten to yet.

"What do you think? We go in?" one of the officers asked him.

"Hold on a second." Franklin waved them off. "Radio backup and have them pick up the muscle coming out the rear of the warehouse. Make sure they let them get far enough away before they make the grab, though. Let them get to the street. We don't want anyone in that warehouse to wonder if something's up. And secure Miss Conjay. Tell them: do it quick and do it quiet." An officer acknowledged and called for backup to intercept the goons and safeguard Juno.

“But shouldn’t we go in now?” another officer asked.

Franklin looked at all three of the uniforms in the van with exhausted frustration. “Keep them in your pants, kids. We do this how we do it. Wait for confirmation on the take down. You kids don’t know a God damn thing about timing.” He scoffed as he brushed crumbs off his suit. “If we’d have gone in when you all wanted to, seven minutes ago, we’d have dealt with more numbers in there and somebody could’ve ended up getting killed. You seeing how this works? It’s all about attrition. Clear?”

“Loud and. Sir,” the officers replied. The wire was still buzzing with lots of talk. Admissions. Threats. All good enough for evidence.

The third officer chimed in. “But they’re not going to send anyone else out. Shouldn’t we be shutting that place down, sir?”

“Hold your fucking horses, son. Don’t you want to find out if our guy’s going to blow Ricky? He’s got a big enough mouth, that’s for sure. I think he’ll do it. Unless this whole fight’s fixed. Anyone want to put money on it?” He laughed as he looked around the van. No one else shared his sense of humour.

Then he heard the words that meant the fun was over. The speakers in the van squeaked and popped as Richard Nevil’s voice boomed, “What the fuck is this, Davey? You think you were going to record this drop and, what, turn us all in?” More grumbling and more static. “Looks like we made the right call. Ending this. Ending you. Here and now.”

David began preaching his innocence, saying something about how it was all a big misunderstanding, and that, before they did anything rash, Richard and Paul should go fuck each other in the back room to blow off a little steam so they could think the whole situation through clearly.

Franklin motioned for the other officers to move in. “Time to go.” He freed his gun from its holster and threw on his Kevlar. “Call in the other units. We’re going live now. Before they destroy the fucking tape.”

“And before anyone gets hurt, right?” one of the officers asked.

“Yeah,” Franklin said. “That too.”



VI

I KNOW IT KNOWS

“...This is not a fairy tale... And I know you can smell it coming.”

It's still trying hard to ignore me but It might be ready to break. There's only so much any entity can stand. And I know every little place I can tap on It and cause It to fracture. It knows I know this and that's always bothered It. And the smell is getting stronger.

The smell is getting stronger and it's making It weaker. And, as much as that would normally have me wearing a formless facsimile of a smile, the odour is also pulling me back to my favourite monkey. Knowing if I stop paying him attention, my favourite monkey may be leaving this plane of existence too soon. Which would mean starting all over again. With the simpering, lost objective of my mission bemoaning Its predicament to every other monkey It can manage to keep from turning away from It in disgust.

If some monkeys didn't love to taste other monkeys, It would probably still be afraid and alone. Even more of a pain in my amorphous ass.

But I can afford to leave It for a moment now. That's all I'll need. A damping of the lights for an instant and my favourite monkey, whose smell is driving It deep into denial, will be okay. That part of my mission may need no help at all, but I can't leave that to chance. Not when It's gotten this close to finding Its path Home after so long.

It's feeling lonelier than ever before, now that I've made It aware of the smell. And if the monkey It fears—with his distinctive stench—deviates from his path, the whole mission will be at risk. The waiting will be what it will be, but I can't guarantee It won't give up trying to find Its way Home eventually.

And if that happens, I won't be getting Home any time soon either. Perhaps never.

At least It came back to Its senses relatively quickly. An infinitesimal fraction of a second in the Above. Still, it annoys me that It clings far too desperately to the trappings of the In-Between. Fixed in place like a mindless statue.

But my mission is not to force It to come Home. I have not been tasked with dragging It back with me. If only the mission were that simple. I would have been done as soon as I started. But I'm being taught a lesson, I know.

My mission is to make It see the way back to where It came from and to make sure It understands. Optimally, to turn It from lost to found. Worst case, turn It from lost to 'intentionally on extended vacation'. It can choose to remain a monkey for as long as It desires, once It knows Its way back. Why It would want to is beyond me, but I've never understood It or any of Its kind. Throwing away an eternity bathing in the greatest love that could ever exist.

I can't stand to watch Its monkey form lie on the floor in Its wooden box and cry while Its thoughts run through my head. Questioning every question. Questioning every answer. Still

waiting for one particular, disgusting and inappropriate monkey to show It the way. Not wanting to believe It could be wrong. Still clinging to Its pride. Still maddeningly oblivious to the fact that what It clings to is what keeps It shackled and blind. Still seeming to want to be bound, even as Its very essence begs to be set free.

And It will be glad to not have me taunting It for what must feel like aeons to It in the In-Between.

It looks even uglier when It hears me scream as I leave:

“...This is not a fairy tale... And, if you insist on living as a monkey, you won't be able to ignore the evidence of your own senses.”



VII

SEEING TO HER

Juno staggered out the doors of the thrift store, wondering what was happening with David's plan, when she thought she spotted three of Paul's goons in the crowd down the street. She was still shaken from her run in with Richard, and she thought, maybe, she was just seeing things. But at the same time, she didn't know what was going on. If David's plan hadn't gone well, they'd be coming for her. To take her. To kill her. To fix her ass for good. To, most likely, do much worse. And that was enough to turn a possible sighting into a confirmed threat.

She bent a little at the knees, hunching her back slightly. Making herself small, staying in the middle of the pedestrian traffic as she crept to the right of the thrift store's front door. As soon as she managed to get far enough away, throwing another look over her shoulder, she ducked into the alley and scurried behind the first dumpster on the left. She crouched there, after pulling her dress up to her knees so it wouldn't tear, and waited. Letting her breath out slowly and evenly, trying not to move. Trying to make as little sound as possible.

A moment later, she heard footsteps coming toward her fast.

Before she could think to run, she felt a sack slip over her head, making her blind. She felt her arms being pulled back

and behind her, bound harshly. She started to kick, but her ankles were tied together immediately after.

The sound of a vehicle pulling to a screeching stop drowned out her voice as she started to scream. As she felt herself being lifted off the ground, she felt gloved hands smothering her. She heard the sound of steel hinges creaking. She felt her body being lifted and thrown backward and down. She felt her shoulders and ass slam onto cold metal and the back of her head bashed against it hard as she reflexively jerked.

Then everything went dark.



VIII

RUBBED OUT

Richard held the tape recorder in front of David's face and waved it around, showing it to Paul. "You brought your balls out today, Davey. The big brass ones. But you didn't think this through too good, did you?"

"Seriously?" Paul rubbed his forehead. "A tape recorder? What happened, Davey? Did the cops say no to wiring you up, and you figured, what, you'd see if you could do it on your own? I don't understand. This is idiocy."

David grunted as Richard yanked his head upright by the hair. "Who's the idiot, Paulie? You really think it's me? You let Ricky here beat his girls half to death in public. Most of the neighbourhood's too scared to do anything about it, but not everyone is. Even if you do own most of the cops in this precinct. I know if I caught Ricky on his own, pimp-slapping some poor young girl around in the middle of the street, I'd bash his fucking head in with a brick."

"Enough," Paul barked. "You talk tough now, Davey. But when word gets around about what you did and what happened to you—"

"The way you run this joke of an operation..." David interrupted. "This? If it happens today or it happens tomorrow,

this is an inevitability. And you're not thinking things through too well either, Paulie. Listen to yourself. What difference does it make? Tape or no tape? You were going to kill me anyway, right? The tape recorder really doesn't matter. Not the way things worked out."

"That's true," Richard said. "But, still..." His fist connected with David's nose, drawing a fresh stream of blood. "It makes me want to reconsider my offer." He let go of David's hair and let him fall forward onto the floor, pawing at his battered face. "I don't think I'm going to let you or Junie off all that easy. Not knowing what I know now."

"You were letting us off easy?" David spat matted hair out of his mouth. "Gosh, thanks Uncle Ricky."

"You can keep running that mouth," Richard said, "but that's only going to make things worse. I mean, you can die or you can fucking die. Quick. Easy. Long. Hard. It doesn't make a difference to me. In the end, I just care about the end. But, for you, it makes all the difference in the world. Though you might not think it, I was trying to be a nice guy, despite your constant lip. I was giving you the quick and easy way out. And what really pisses me off, you know? What really pisses me off is now I've got to think of even more fucked up shit to do to your waste of a junkie ass and that bag of crabs you used to call a girlfriend."

"My uncle's going to kill you when he finds out about this, Ricky." David continued to unzip his jacket. "You're dead if you lay one finger on Junie. He'll definitely leave you wanting if you keep on talking about her the way you do. It'll all be over soon enough, anyway. So you may as well just shut the fuck up and shoot me. Shoot Paulie and all the fucking Spics. And don't forget to shoot—"

"They're Guatemalan." Richard looked back at the goons who giggled some more as he shook his head with dismay.

“Have some respect for their culture. And knock it off with the ‘uncle’ shit. You’ve done that threat to death. I don’t think there is any ‘uncle’. No one’s ever seen him coming, that’s for sure. No one’s ever seen him going. He’s so conveniently never around, so you’ll have to speak for him. Always taking care of business at night, in the shadows. You know what I think? I think your ‘uncle’ is just you throwing fits on mixed medications. It’s funny how his name disappeared from your vocabulary as soon as you started kicking. Look me in the eyes and tell me I’m wrong.”

David stared at the floor and shook his head. “My uncle isn’t me on a cocktail... Forget it. You wouldn’t understand. But you’ll know him when you see him. And you will see him. I can guarantee you that. Like I said, it’ll all be over with soon enough, you half-retarded—”

“What I thought,” Richard snapped back. “And what do you mean, ‘it’ll all be over soon enough’? You think I don’t know that?”

“No. I don’t think you do.” David finished unzipping his jacket and dropped it to the floor, pulling up his shirt, exposing the wire taped to his belly. “So go ahead and shoot me. It’s been so long now, I get the feeling no one’s really listening. But you never know. If they are, you may never get this chance again, you big, dumb, ugly fuck. Just remember what I said about Junie. If I’m dead or I’m alive, if you keep treating her badly, my uncle’s going to come for you.”

Richard looked back at Paul and his goons, chewing on his lower lip. Really grinding into it. His head shaking back and forth. “You delusional piss-ant. ‘Uncle Matthew’, right?” David gritted his teeth. “Your ‘uncle’ doesn’t exist and he isn’t going to help you get out of this fix you put yourself in. You’re not scaring anyone with your insane blathering. You’re just buying time.”

“What?” David asked. “That’s crazy. How could I possibly buy time? Is it for sale? You really are that fucking stupid, aren’t you?”

“I said watch your mouth you little piece of fucking—” Richard stopped, looking David straight in the eyes, and chuckled. “You’re a real wise-ass. You know what? You’re right. Fuck it. I am going to shoot. Just you though. And then I’m dumping your body right out in front of the thrift store. So everyone knows what happens when they fuck with us. And Junie will know, when she sees, that I’m putting her ass back to work, whether she likes it or not and straight away. Back on the dope and back on her... back. Working, I mean. Because she’s a useless—”

“Why would you employ the services of someone you consider useless?” David asked.

“You know what I mean. Don’t try to make it sound like I’m not... That’s not what I said. I mean, that’s not what I meant, you stupid little—”

“Piece of fucking...? I get it. You really should start rehearsing your snappy comebacks. You don’t think very well on your feet.” Richard kicked him in the stomach and cocked his gun. “Even if the cops don’t save me, I hope this wire’s live just so they can play it back for laughs now and again. It’s too bad they don’t have video so they could see how you pissed yourself.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Richard asked as he felt at his dry crotch.

“I didn’t think you could possibly be any dumber, Ricky.” David dropped his head to look down. The light from the windows reflected off the concrete in the growing darkness of the room. The blood dripping from his nose smacked loudly as it hit the floor. Drop after drop, deafening, as he waited for the really big noise. The one that would turn day into night

forever. The one that no one else could stop. “Thank you, uncle.”

Then he heard the doors breaking in on all sides. And shouting. Lots of shouting. Lots of name calling. Lots of demands. Not much in the way of intelligent responses. At least, he thanked his God, no weapons were being fired. Paul wasn’t even close to being a shot-caller in the Family. No one who managed their neighbourhood ever had been. But, to his credit, he’d had the foresight to put his goons through sensitivity training with regard to assaulting policemen.

He looked up, as he saw armed police officers crowding the area. Paul and Richard were being cuffed, along with the goons. The officers were roughing them up a bit. Something he’d never seen, because that sort of thing never happened.

As the swarm of police thinned out and everyone was being marched from the room, he pulled down his shirt and caught Richard’s eye. Richard was staring at him hard. His stare was telling him that this whole thing. This wasn’t over. Not by a long shot. His stare was telling him, no matter where he thought he could run, he’d be found. That the promises made. What he’d do to him and to Juno. Those promises would be kept. Not now, but eventually. He could be sure of that.

Then another officer David would never be able to identify, because nothing below-board had ever happened, directed Richard’s eyes forward with a savage punch to the jaw.

The air was still as the last of the goons were hauled out. The sound of engines being fired up outside the warehouse followed shortly thereafter, and cars drove away.

Detective Franklin Bowe strolled in from the back door. “Got something for you, Davey.” Franklin grinned as he waved off the remaining officers in the background.

As the officers exited and the sunshine made the room just a little bit brighter, Juno bumped into Franklin and spun around. Her ankles and wrists were sloppily tied with rope, and her head was covered by a black plastic garbage bag, with slits cut in it. Holes the crew that secured her had made. Not to hurt her. Not to help her see. Just to make sure she made it to the drop-off point without suffocating. As she tried to find her bearings, she tripped, fell and hit the cold hard floor with a crunch. She cried out, but something underneath the garbage bag was muffling her voice.

Franklin pointed to her. “You going to help the lady out, or what, Davey? Didn’t she used to be your woman? Word on the street is she dropped you like a good habit. Maybe you want to leave her behind now.”

David picked himself up and hurried over to Juno’s side as she squirmed on the floor. He untied her ankles first, then her wrists, and then he helped her tear the garbage bag off her head and remove the perforated cloth sack beneath it.

“She might be a little fucked up,” Franklin noted. “We bagged her half a block from the three Guatemalans Ricky sent to beat her senseless and drag her ass back here. We had to keep it quiet. You understand.”

As soon as the sack came off her head, the look of horror on Juno’s face turned to relief, but the tears and mucus kept running. She grabbed onto David with everything she had. Shaking. Terrified. Franklin wasn’t lying. The police had taken her, but they hadn’t taken the time to identify themselves. Until this exact moment, she hadn’t been sure if she was going to live or die when that bag came off her head. She sobbed heavily, her body retching as David held her and tried to console her by rubbing her back. Getting blood, and dirt from the floor, all over

her white dress. Although she didn't care much about the condition of her clothing at that point.

David looked at Franklin. "For a while there, I didn't think you were going to show, Franky. Anyway, I didn't die, so what happens now?"

Franklin glanced back over at David and Juno, a pitying look on his face. Twiddling with the tape recorder he'd pried from Richard's fist. Rewinding it and hitting 'play' over and over again. Making sure it worked. "You know. We take the bad guys in. Run up the charges—"

"That's not what I meant," David interrupted, feeling Juno squeezing him tighter.

"The muscle," Franklin continued, unfazed, "maybe they never get out. They do the longest stretches though. Guaranteed. They're expendable. Ricky and Paulie? Out as soon as we're done with all the fingerprints and paperwork and bullshit. Their lawyers won't let us keep them without a fight, so we won't even try. They're not flight risks. They always beat the charges or cut a deal before anything gets back to court. The usual. So in about twenty-six hours, probably half that, they're back on the streets."

"I meant what about us?" David asked. Juno began to regain her composure, using the sleeves of her best dress to wipe the fluids from her face, and the blood from David's.

Juno chewed on the left shoulder of David's shirt, frustration and helplessness coating her every word. "I told you the cops weren't going to help me, Davey. I told you this was going to happen, you stupid fuck." Her eyes looked pitying, but deeply, horribly sad. "Ricky and Paulie. They're going to come and do worse than kill me now. And you can't protect me on your own, you spineless bastard. I told you they owned you." She

looked at the floor again. “My life wasn’t so bad, was it? You really do hate me, don’t you?”

Franklin chuckled. “This is adorable. She dumps you and you still eat shit.” Juno turned her head to look back at him. Hate in her eyes. Pure loathing. Franklin mocked concern. “Whoa. She’s a tiger, huh, Davey? Maybe she’ll take care of Ricky and Paulie for you. Maybe you don’t need me anymore.”

Franklin walked over to David, gave him a hand up and pulled the wire from his belly. “Thank you for your invaluable service,” he said. Doing his best imitation of a cop who played by the rules, had his priorities straight and actually gave a shit about the people whose civil rights he trampled on daily. “This case is a wrap.” He shut the wire down. Then he whispered, looking around the room for potential witnesses, “We’re going to be doing this a little hinky, if you know what I mean. Not strictly legal. But legal enough. You’ll disappear. You’ll live long, happy lives, assuming you can stand each other.” He gave Juno a hard gaze. “They’ll never find you.”

“Yeah? Okay.” David waited for Franklin to continue.

“All right.” Franklin turned around and walked back toward the rear exit. “You kids have less than thirteen hours. I wasn’t bullshitting you about that. So get the fuck out of here, go back to your apartment, and be ready to leave in five. That’s seven tonight. Understand? That’s everything you want to take with you, by seven. Anything you leave behind. You’ll never be able to get it back without giving yourselves up and, I’d imagine, getting dead in the process. Clear?”

David and Juno nodded and moved toward the front door slowly. David’s arm draped itself over Juno’s shoulders as they walked away. Like they were in love. For whatever the world knew, they may have been, once.

The last thing Franklin saw as he turned around to leave the building, was the two of them holding each other. The junkie thief and the junkie whore. If ever a pair deserved each other, it was them. And if there was ever a pair he'd pay to find dead on the streets, they fit that bill too.



IX

REMEMBER DESPERATELY

Juno and David were all packed and ready to go within an hour of making it back to their apartment. They didn't have much to take with them except for clothes that needed cleaning desperately, three half-empty packs of cigarettes and toiletries. The possessions most folks might have, and cling to as if their lives depended on them, had already been either destroyed or traded off to feed their former habit.

As soon as they'd gotten in the door, they'd begun searching for things to take with them. Not speaking a word to each other. Frantically going through the heaps of garbage stacked in every crack and crevice of the tiny apartment they'd been calling home for longer than either of them cared to remember. When they finished, there was nothing left in the house worth keeping.

Everything they valued fit into one little vinyl suitcase.

Juno sat on the soiled mattress next to the window in the living room and motioned for David to come join her. He was still searching, like they might have priceless jewellery lying around. Or other valuable keepsakes. But they'd shot all those into their veins ages ago. When she managed to get his attention, he came over to sit by her side and let her chew on his shirt.

“Am I going to be okay, Davey?” she asked.

“We’re going to be fine.” He ran his hands through her hair. Noticing how beautiful she looked without sweat and dirt clogging her every pore. Remembering how beautiful she had still remained, even covered in filth. “Didn’t I tell you we could get lucky?”

She looked at him, a pained smile coming over her face. “I don’t know how this is going to work out, now that we’re not together anymore but...” She swallowed hard. “I should have trusted you. I do believe in you. I do. I never doubted you, Davey. I’m so sorry. I am.”

“For what? I was worried too.”

“I ran into Ricky at the thrift store. Before you met today.” She gripped David’s arm and hid her face. “He cornered me in the thrift store and I got so scared I—”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she whimpered. “But he threatened to. He scared me half to death. Just like he scares you. I didn’t know what to do, so I—”

“Well, the important thing is you didn’t tell him more than he needed to know to get him to the warehouse and—”

“Only because he told me to shut up. Only because he shushed me with his finger...” Juno kept her stare fixed, reconsidering her full confession.

“Well...” David looked at the top of her head and stroked her hair. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. I know you didn’t do what he said and I’m sure he intimidated you. He’s real brave around women and children. But he doesn’t scare me. If it comes down to it, and I see the opportunity, I’ll remove him from the equation.”

“Sure.” She patted him on the chest and gave him a condescending smile. “My after-the-fact hero.”

“Listen. Whatever you think about him. Or me and him. It doesn’t matter anymore. And you have nothing to feel bad about. Like I said. It wasn’t easy for me, either.”

“But I was wrong about you,” she whispered as she kissed at his shoulder, tasting it. “You can be more than you are. You will be. Soon. When we get wherever we’re going. But I’m —”

“You’ll be doing better, too, Junie. I see that in you. You’ll see it in yourself too. Once we’re out of here. Once we get where we’re going.”

She chewed on his shirt harder, starting to leave marks on the skin underneath. “I’m not who you think I am. Not that good. Not really. How can you have any faith in me? I can’t even trust myself.”

“Look.” He wiped the tears from her cheeks and stroked her. “Neither of us made it without backsliding. There’s no shame in it. There’s no point in remembering the times we fucked up. There’s just now. Whatever happened before... We made it. We’re clean. We’re going to start new lives. Lives where we won’t have to worry. Not like we do now. Lives where we can be the people we are. No more hiding. No more secrets. No more wondering what bad thing’s going to happen next. Just us.”

She pulled at his shirt as she continued to grind her teeth. Her eyes getting puffier as she looked down and away. “There is no more us. You got that, right?”

David’s face tightened. “I didn’t mean it in that sense. I just meant things will get better. For each of us.”

“But I’m not just going to change, Davey. I’m a prostitute. I’m an addict. That won’t just wash away.”

“Look.” He patted her upper back with his hand. “You did what you did. You weren’t born a prostitute. Or a junkie. It has washed away. Maybe this freedom won’t last forever. But if it

all falls apart, it won't be because of those things. Even if we mess up again, there's always another chance. No one will treat you, or talk to you, like they do now. I won't tolerate it. And, in time, neither will you."

"I guess." Her lips trembled. "I want to be with you, I think. I just need room. I'm not ready to be locked down. Not like I thought I was, when I was dope-sick all the time."

"It's okay," he said, as she sobbed on his shoulder. "Don't feel guilty. We're finished. Like you said. Once we get to where we're going, we can split up. As soon as we're able, if you want."

She wiped the mess from her face with the arm of her once-white dress and chuckled. "As if you're over me already." Her expression turned dour. "Fuck. I don't know what I want. How can you?" She looked down. "Can I...? Do you have any left?"

"What?"

"I just thought... One more time, before I go. Use just one more time. To forget. Not knowing how to feel. To make it go away."

He snapped her head around, as it began to turn away. Looking her straight in the eyes. "No. One taste is as good as a hundred. If we ever touch that stuff again, we'll be right back where we finally got free from. Use me to make yourself feel better. Hit me, kick me, yell at me. Whenever you think you can't take it anymore. Whenever you want to fix. Use me until the craving goes away."

"You won't get attached if we...?" she asked, rubbing at his crotch. "I don't want to confuse you. But I'd be lying if I told you a good fuck wouldn't help me forget for a while."

"I'm not confused. And I promise I won't cry myself to sleep after."

Michael Golvach

Juno continued to massage him through his pants, looking disappointed at the lack of results. “Just pretend I’m that pudgy little bitch you never got all the way with back in pre-school.” She felt him getting hard immediately and she scowled. “I’m sorry. Just... Forget I said that. Forget her. She forgot you.”

“Now I’m definitely pretending you’re her.”

“Well, do it soon.” She began stripping down. “Fuck me now, while I’m still hurting and don’t care.”

“Sure. Just remember, I’ve always loved you—”

Juno slapped him across the face with her free hand as she unzipped his pants. “You don’t get to say her name. Ever.”

They used each other to make the pain go away. For as long as they could before they dropped from exhaustion.

And they waited.



X

NEVER COULD I BE WRONG

“...This is not a fairy tale... And I’m never giving up on you.”

It’s angry I’ve come back so soon. Thinking I might be gone for years again. But, even before I announced my return from the overwatch my favourite monkey didn’t end up requiring, I’d been keeping an eye on It for a good while. I’m sure It knew I was there, despite the lack of my incessant reminder, but I could be wrong. It’s spent so much time in Its monkey form on this monkey planet I’m positive It forgets It isn’t one from time to time. That, coupled with Its loss of the way, is a truly sad thing to witness. Especially if this is the end It’s hoping for.

It spends most of Its daylight hours, and increasingly more of Its nights, in Its monkey form. For seven years now, if I’m doing the math correctly. All to please an even more disgusting monkey. A foul and ludicrous simian that barely tolerates the grotesque form It presents to him. Deluding Itself that Its outward appearance is something the disgusting monkey will eventually find desirable. Still so confused over why the disgusting monkey hasn’t gotten down on one knee and performed the ridiculous ritual It believes is a necessary

precursor to their sharing of a bed. Refusing to listen to the disgusting monkey's thoughts. Believing that will change the disgusting monkey's mind and alter the disgusting monkey's perception of It. Contemplating, over the next three years, whether sharing a bed with the disgusting monkey first might be an acceptable way to fix the problem and instigate a proposal of marriage. Asking Its Father's advice, though He isn't inclined to help It any more than He already has by making it my mission to help It find Its way back.

Then deciding Its plan is most probably acceptable or, at least, worth a shot.

And, from that point until the present, doing whatever It can to try to coax the disgusting monkey into Its arms. Into Its bed. Into Its monkey vagina and into Its monkey heart.

Doing everything It can to win the love of a disgusting monkey that only values It for the services It provides outside of the bedroom. A disgusting monkey that never returns any of Its terms of endearment. A disgusting monkey that It knows has no current interest in exploring any vestige of Its feminine monkey form. A disgusting monkey that would rather masturbate itself to pitiful orgasm while thinking of any other female monkey than It. A disgusting monkey that lies to It, tells It It's not ugly and won't entertain the slightest notion of copulating with It for the entirety of their platonic monkey union.

It knows this, and It fights to shut my voice out as Its insides shake and Its disgusting monkey companion wonders aloud if supper is ready.

Seeing It so confused, so lost and so defeated should make me want to cry. But, even as It attempts to frighten me with empty threats against my being, I can't help but laugh.

It's pathetic. It's wearing on my nerves. And It knows something's coming, even if It doesn't want to believe Its own heightened senses. And I won't let It forget:

“...This is not a fairy tale... And you can't escape a prison of your own creation.”



XI

OUT THE BACK

Franklin pulled up in his personal car at just past seven in the evening. In the alley by the back entrance to David and Juno’s apartment. He had his gun on him, and his badge. Though everyone knew he was the law, he still didn’t trust any of the filth that lived in the tenements not to stab him in the neck for his pocket change.

He blasted the horn three times and waited. After three minutes he got out and popped the trunk. Wondering if he was going to have to call the thief and the whore out by name. As he prepared to scream for them to, please, get the fuck down here, they came tumbling out their apartment’s alley door. They almost looked human. At least they’d cleaned up a little and could pass for regular folk.

“That all you got?” Franklin pointed to the suitcase David carried out. David nodded and Franklin motioned for him to throw it in the trunk. Once he managed to jam the rusty trunk closed, they got in the car, David in the passenger seat and Juno in back.

“Where we headed?” David asked as Juno buckled up.

“Dumped you this morning, confirmed it at the warehouse and, not seven hours later, Junie’s alone in the back

seat of a strange car. Old habits...” Franklin chuckled and looked David in the eyes. “Nothing?” Looking disappointed, Franklin glanced into the rearview mirror, angling it so he could, maybe, see up Juno’s dress. No such luck on that front, but he did get to see her middle finger. “So terribly worried, but still too good for me, yeah, Junie? You want security, you can’t do better than a cop.” He grinned as he slammed the car into drive, faking a pout as he looked over at the exasperated expression on David’s face. “As if I’d stick my dick in that sewage hole.” Juno looked into his eyes through the mirror, no snappy comeback at the ready. Looking angry and a little hurt as she mouthed a ‘fuck you’ and tried to lick her lips suggestively.

“Cheer up, muffin.” Franklin encouraged her as he caught the end of her weak, silent retort. “I’m just fucking around with you. ...figuratively, of course. Not a big fan of gonorrhoea. You understand.” She looked out the window as her cheeks flushed red with added humiliation.

“So funny man,” David asked, “where are we—?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” Franklin answered. Interrupting him and not taking his eyes off the road.

They drove in silence for hours. Out of the city. On highways leading to God knows where. No houses, no livestock, just cornfields and open land. When David and Juno had long since lost track of how far they’d gone, Franklin pulled off onto a side road. All dirt. A highway exit, but to somewhere that probably wasn’t on any map you could buy in the boroughs.

Franklin pulled the car over onto the shoulder, in case a cow might come sauntering by in the next century. “We’re just about there. Almost home.”

“Where in the hell are we?” David asked. There was still nothing around for miles. Off in the distance—South, maybe?—he saw what looked like it might be a quaint suburb or small

town. Of course, it could also merely have been a rough patch of forest on the horizon.

“I told you this wasn’t going to be by the book, didn’t I?” Franklin looked over at David and back at Juno.

As Franklin turned to look into the back seat, still trying to peek between Juno’s legs, David saw his gun, hanging from its holster inside his jacket. “Meaning what? This is the end of the line? You got a ditch already dug for us, Franky?”

Franklin chuckled as he looked in the rearview and saw Juno beginning to squirm, still keeping those thighs clamped shut. “Don’t worry, Davey. A couple of fucking losers like you two, I wouldn’t waste the gas money. I hate to break it to you both, but if they were to find you two dead in that shit-hole apartment of yours. I mean, after a week or three, when your upstanding neighbours bothered to complain about the smell. If they were to find you dead. Even if you had bullet holes in you. No one would ask questions. A junkie thief and a junkie whore? Maybe there’d be paperwork. Maybe. But that’s all. Then you’d be a file in some cabinet. So, no, I ain’t going to kill you.”

Juno glared at Franklin through the mirror. “Then what am I doing, Detective Bowe? Franky. What am I doing sitting on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere?”

“Well, you’re being stingy with the merchandise, for one. But we’re all taking a break, cupcake,” Franklin said. “I don’t want to have this talk sitting in your new driveway. Why don’t you give that mouth a rest. You never know when you’re going to have to start earning again.” David threw him a disapproving glance. Franklin feigned shock. “The way this happens is this: I place you, then, unless I need either of you two idiots in court, we never see each other again.”

David scoffed. “Seriously? You’re going to be the only guy who knows where we are?” Franklin nodded, shrugging his

shoulders. “Of course, you’re not going to say anything to anyone getting out of lock-up any time soon about our whereabouts, right?”

Franklin nodded again. “Why would I?”

“You said this was going to be hinky,” David said. “You’re going to plop us in some rental home and that’s it?”

“No rent. It’s owned. I wouldn’t turn down a good old fashioned ‘thank you’ though.” He looked back at Juno, bobbing his eyebrows. “What do you say, Junie? A little taste for the road? Support your local policeman?”

Juno talked to Franklin as she stared at him through the rearview and licked her lips in a way that got his attention. “Too bad you’re not local anymore, Franky.” She gave him the finger again as she looked away and dropped her hand between her knees. “So you put me in this house, okay. What do I do about a job? Money? Identity? All the things a legitimate programme would take into consideration.”

“First things first, pop tart,” Franklin said. “You don’t know what you think you know about witness relocation. If we did it the real way, you’d be stuck in a secure facility for a long time, learning who the fuck you are now, and forgetting who you used to be. You wouldn’t even know where you were going to end up until at least two or three weeks in. You’d be required to lie to everyone about your identity. You’d be dealing with U.S. Marshalls and a whole bunch of other bullshit just to get your petty stipend every month. And that, only until you stopped dragging ass and got yourself a real job. Which they’d lean hard on you to get. Even then, they’d cut your funding after six months if your lazy asses didn’t get on their fucking track. Eyes would always be on you. They’d cut your cord the second you broke one of their precious rules. And, quite frankly, Ricky and

Paulie aren't big enough fish to warrant first class treatment. My way's better."

"How so?" Juno asked. "It feels like you're just dropping me off to die."

"We all die one day, pumpkin," Franklin said. "The manner, I assume, is what you're actually concerned about." He turned around, his eyes still unable to fix anywhere but the hem of Juno's dress. "You and Davey are going to have to trust me. This is the best can be done. Better than either of you deserve, that's for sure."

"What's the deal then?" David asked.

"Down the road a bit is a nice little community." Franklin pointed to what David had thought might be a small town. "Filled with average folk. Decent people. You won't fit in at all, but it's the best I can do. When I drop you at your new home, you'll be responsible for the bills. Phone, electric, gas, water. The utilities are already taken care of. By which I mean they're running. If you don't pay your bills, they shut the services off. Just like in the city. Nothing's different. And, on top of that, you get a whole shit-load of money. A lot more than you'd ever squeeze out of the government. On me."

"On you?" David looked at Franklin sideways.

"Okay, on the two bad men you just fucked over. Don't worry. The official count is short, so the money won't be missed."

"Not by the cops," Juno said. "What about Ricky and Paulie? You don't think they'll notice?"

Franklin shrugged. "Depends. Did they count it all before we busted down the doors? Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. Not my fucking problem. Besides, they don't know where you are."

“But,” David said, “we’re still us, right? No new names. No new nothing. David Fitz and Juno Conjay.”

“Well, yeah...” Franklin looked out the window. “I told you, this is the best I can do.”

Juno crossed her legs quickly and smoothed her dress down, drawing Franklin’s attention back to that place between her thighs she’d never let him see.

“So we just stay where you put us,” David said. “Same names. Pay for everything in cash. No one knows where we are, right?” Franklin looked at David with exasperation. “Until we have to get real jobs. Assuming we live that long and you’re not just putting us on a shelf and waiting to send Paulie, Ricky or any of their goons to get rid of us. But when we have to get real jobs, we’re right back on the map. Anyone can find us. Not protected at all. Am I reading this situation correctly?”

“Yeah,” Franklin said. “You about got it. But you’re getting a lot of money. And I mean a lot of money. Let’s give me the benefit of the doubt and say, for giggles, I’m not hanging you on a line for Paulie. You want to stay anonymous? Don’t get a library card. Given that, you’re going to have at least a year to figure out how to make money under the table. Go to any locally owned business. They don’t want to pay the insurance, so you won’t have to fill out any papers that’ll get checked. You can get by without being on the books. It’s not difficult. Fuck the I.R.S. Who cares if you get in trouble with them? What are they going to do, fine you? One thing I’m positive they won’t do is kill you. If you do everything right, they’ll forget you exist.” Franklin fired up the engine and started driving again. “This place I’m putting you, it’s a neighbourhood watch community. No cops. How could I do you more solid?”

“Uncle Franky’s protection plan. Easy as seven two six,” David said, as they pulled back out onto the road. “Something’s not right.”

“Yeah, wise guy. It’s one two three.”

“Like numbers make a difference... No, I mean... Why are you doing this? Why so easy?”

“Because, like I said, I might need you later when the case goes to court. I want those fucking pricks you used to work for. Bad.” Franklin looked into the rearview again. “You know you guys can always save up, right? Move farther away when it suits you. Or you can run with the cash. Split the middle and part ways. Then you wouldn’t have to worry about little old me knowing where you are, though I might miss you in court. Believe me, if you get far enough away, Paulie and Ricky? Those two aren’t going to scour the earth looking for your dumb asses. They’ll find another low life to move their product. And that slice in the back? She ain’t the only cute little thing in the world who’ll give it up for some horse.”

Juno’s eyes turned to slits as she looked out the window at the scenery. Grinding her teeth. Trying not to listen. Trying not to hear.

“Bottom line: You’ll be okay,” Franklin said. “I fucking promise.”

They rolled into town shortly thereafter, and pulled up to a relatively decent looking single storey home at the end of a block on the outskirts. There was a similar house across the main street to the side and corn fields that reached the horizon in front. The lights were off but, in the dark, the house looked like it looked pretty decent in the daylight. Not a mansion, not a shack.

“So this is where I wait to die?” Juno asked. “Nice.”

“Ricky was right. You are one mouthy little fucking cunt.” Franklin looked back at her and then over at David. “How did you put up with it for so long, Davey? She must suck one hell of a dick. Please tell me you’re not sticking anything but your fingers between her legs. I might need you in court. And when you show, it would be extra specially nice if you weren’t teetering on the brink of death. That AIDS shit’ll kill you.”

“You’re a jerk.” Juno brooded, crossing her arms and looking like the waterworks were about to turn on.

“Then again, maybe it’s all daisies and rainbows down there.” Franklin made sure his gun was secure and they exited the car. He popped the trunk and David pulled out their suitcase. Franklin reached in, pulled back the trunk lining and yanked out a heavy briefcase. “This is your living money, Davey. Put it somewhere no one will find it. It’s all you get. Once it’s gone, you either find a job or you go back to the grift. Or pushing dope if you can find a place to grow it in the fields. And she goes back to trawling for cock.”

Juno looked away, pursing her lips.

Franklin rolled his eyes. “Although neither of those occupations are going to go unnoticed here. This is a nice town, believe it or not. Decent people. They take care of their own. My advice.” Franklin looked at them both as he closed the trunk. “Come up with a decent back story for yourselves. Do it tonight, before you go to bed.”

“Like what?” Juno asked, still looking miffed.

“Be creative... And don’t forget your keys.” Franklin threw a keyring over his shoulder and it landed on the doorstep with a clunk. “There’s a car in the garage out back. It’s a piece of shit, but it runs. Consider it a bonus. Enjoy your new lives. I give you two idiots a day. Six, seven, tops, before you drive each other

crazy and do something stupid anyway. There's another great reason to not worry about whether I've got any ulterior motives."

"Hopefully we won't be seeing you." David moved toward the door.

"Yeah, right." Franklin touched his holstered pistol. "I'll be talking to you again, Davey. For sure. This ain't over until Ricky and Paulie are in the slam. I'm trusting you not to run with the money."

David waved. "Thanks for everything. Appreciate the ride and the helpful tips."

"Yeah, you two take care. Enjoy the neighbourhood. I'm sure the townsfolk will eat the two of you up. Especially the little woman. She's a tasty looking piece of pork."

Franklin waved goodbye and got into his car, pulling out onto the main road. Chuckling to himself as he noticed Juno giving him the finger one last time while she continued to fuss with her skimpy dress.



XII

HANGING GOD

David and Juno quietly entered their new home, acting like they were still in the city. Like they were still worried about getting jumped or getting busted or whatever they'd gotten used to having hanging over their heads twenty-six hours of every day.

David turned on the front entranceway light and shut the door.

Juno let out a gasp as she took in the layout. She spread out her arms and twirled around, smiling as her hands didn't bash into anything. "Oh my God. There's so much space." She really was happy. No more feeling like the walls were going to crush her. No more coming home and feeling like a rat in a cage. "This place is beautiful."

"Yeah, it's nice," David said, taking in the front living room, which connected to a spacious kitchen and dining room on the left. There was a small bedroom on the right, located next to a laundry room. A small bathroom farther down to the left and a master bedroom in back. All the shades and blinds were drawn tight, and it was hard to make out the exact colour of the carpeting, but the place looked spotless, and it came with all the amenities: Kitchen phone. Dual kitchen sinks. Oven. Dishwasher.

Refrigerator. Freezer. Washer. Dryer. A small table with bench chairs in the living room. Everything neither of them thought they'd see in a place they'd call home. In truth, it was an average household, probably lower working class. Not much, but more than they'd ever hoped for. Someone else's disappointment. Their dream.

Juno wandered off into the back to the master bedroom, toting the heavy briefcase, and called David back to meet her. He came walking in, suitcase in hand, and looked around. There was a beautiful bed, big enough for three people. A bathroom with shower connected and ample closet space. Chests of drawers along the wall beside the door and a television set on top of them. "It's like a gigantic hotel room."

"I love it," she said, smiling. Still minding the volume of her voice. Realising, where they were now, it was probably more of an issue than it had ever been in the city, at least at three in the morning. She put the vinyl suitcase in the closet and then took out the bottom drawer of the middle dresser in front of the bed, sliding the heavy briefcase onto the floor and replacing the drawer above it. Then, after turning on the night light on the far side of the bed, she jumped backward onto the bedsheets and bounced up and down. On her back. Not even trying. Just letting gravity and the springs in the mattress do all the work.

He watched her as she lay on the bed and looked at the off-white ceiling. Smiling as he watched her beam and allow a look of wonder to come over her teary eyes. Looking like she couldn't believe any of it was real, but slowly knowing it was. "The only question I have is, where are we going to put all our stuff?"

She looked back at him and laughed. The contents of their suitcase would fill three dresser drawers. Half of a closet if they put everything on hangers. Cleaning up would be a breeze, since they didn't have anything with which to make a mess.

Juno patted the bed and motioned for him to come over, turning her hips toward him. "How are we fixed for food?" David shrugged. "I'm fucking starving. We need to go shopping tomorrow."

"Well, now that the cop's gone..." David spoke the words seductively as he pulled her legs up and she let her thighs separate, keeping her knees bent. Showing him what Franklin had been missing. She didn't have a clean pair of panties to bring with her and she'd opted to ride to their new home without any on. "...Maybe you could help me break this place in. The endorphins might help curb those hunger pangs."

"You're sweet, Davey." She purred, scratching at the sheets. "But I'm okay to make it until tomorrow." She looked around the room. "This place is so beautiful. So nice." She patted the space beside her and he rested his body next to hers, tracing his fingers up her thighs as she slowly pressed them back together again. "I shouldn't."

"According to who? I'm pretty sure the neighbours won't mind. There's no one on the other side of any of these walls. Not that that ever stopped you before." He grinned as he teased her dress up slightly.

"We'll just sleep together, okay?" She rolled off her side of the bed and pulled back the seven layers of thin sheets. Then she blushed and giggled. "I mean, we'll sleep in the same bed. Next to each other." She paused. "What we did at the apartment. Before. That was just a thing. You know that, right?"

David grudgingly stripped down and got into bed as Juno slid out of her dress to reveal, much to his delight and consequent chagrin, she hadn't worn any undergarments at all for their trip out of town. The one day she'd dressed for casual sex anywhere, she wasn't feeling the desire.

“Good night, Junie,” David said. “Whatever happens, I—”

“Night,” she replied, pecking him on the forehead. She reached over to turn off the night light, not waiting for a response and turned her back to him as she closed her eyes, hogged the sheets and fell fast asleep.



XIII

THE MONKEY AND YOU

“...This is not a fairy tale... And you could have gotten on that bus.”

It's rolling back and forth now, underneath twenty-six layers of thin sheets, linens and coverlets, on the bed in the big room of the disgusting monkey's wooden box. Sweating like all the apes do, and muttering something other than Its usual primate reaction to my taunting. It's not just whispering a request for me to shut up over and over again.

Tonight It's feeling the presence of my favourite monkey. And It's smelling his smell. It will be used to it by morning, which is unfortunate. But it's a good thing It's drinking in his stench while Its monkey form sleeps. Its monkey form's subconscious mind will cement that smell and feeling of presence way down deep in Its monkey brain. And It won't be able to fight me quite so vigorously anymore. Not once It's woken up and gotten through convincing Itself what It experienced had only been a dream.

Tonight It's talking to the darkness. Loudly enough to wake the disgusting monkey It's attached Itself to for the last seven years, but I've made It silent to everyone but me.

It's begging my favourite monkey to leave. It's fighting with every simple phrase Its frightened monkey form can fashion to convince my favourite monkey It isn't worth the trouble. And It's damning my favourite monkey as It jerks in Its bed, pushes the sheets to the side and rubs Itself frantically. Two fingers of Its right hand make their way slightly inside, and up, the damp ovular sluice between Its legs as It rubs around the engorged bulb above the opening, even more feverishly, with Its thumb. Its eyeballs roll back beneath their lids and It clutches at the mattress with Its left hand. Cursing my favourite monkey more and more viciously as Its hips push up and freeze.

And then It relaxes for a moment. A look of peace on Its monkey face as It finds Its centre, feels calm pour over It in waves and speaks to the darkness: "You can take me anywhere."

And It asks the darkness as It continues to lightly massage Itself: "Please, will you not allow me an option? Please, will you tell me I must leave with you now?"

And then a deep sadness overcomes It, followed by the most brilliant of smiles. And Its hips involuntarily jerk upward again as It pleads with the darkness: "I love you. You can't make me hurt you any more. I won't."

Then Its monkey face paints Itself with shame. It props Itself up on Its left elbow and looks pensively at the door to Its room. Listening for the disgusting monkey in the room across the hall. Hearing nothing and slowly laying Itself back down. Bringing Its right hand out from between Its legs and smelling the drying, almost odourless, thin coat of liquid covering Its fingers. Its eyes fixed on the ceiling. Trying to drown out the smell of my favourite monkey as It collects Itself and pulls the sheets back over Its monkey form. Telling Itself, over and over, as It drifts back to sleep: "It was only a dream."

“...This is not a fairy tale... And it’s time to wake up.”



XIV

BACK IN THE BOROUGH

When Franklin got back into town, the sun was beginning to rise and his eyelids were feeling droopy. He pulled his personal vehicle into the police station's back lot and put it in park. Resting his head on the steering wheel, hoping to squeeze in a nap. Thinking about David and Juno. Hoping to never see them again. Those two junkie rats, though they'd helped him get something solid on the drug trade in their little borough, disgusted him.

David drove him nuts because he was a loud-mouthed, double-dealing little shit who'd screw anyone over to get what he wanted. And that hit a little too close to home. Reminding Franklin of what he really was inside.

And Juno. The prostitute. She drove him nuts because he'd wanted to fuck her since the first time he'd busted her. But, by the time he'd dropped the act and decided there was no shame in paying to make his dreams come true, she wasn't working anymore. And when she'd relapsed and started grinding again to keep herself sick on dope, her state of decay had turned his lusting fascination into disgusted disinterest. And now, though she was looking good again—off the junk and off the streets—and he was pretty sure she wouldn't hesitate to use her

primary skill set to get herself out of a jam, she was too good for the likes of him. But he still fantasised about getting her into a spot. A mess so bad the only way to ensure a life out from behind bars would be to service the officer in charge. Regularly. For free. Forever. To be at his beck and call. And to be somewhere—anywhere—else when he wasn't feeling frisky.

But those two were, essentially, gone now and, sooner than later, he'd forget all about both of them. David wasn't the worst he'd ever seen and Juno wasn't the best.

As he began to drift off, he heard knocking on the windows, passenger side and back. Looking up, he pressed the button on the door handle to let his visitors in.

Paul took his time getting in the back seat. Richard was in front and buckled up immediately.

"How's it going, Franky?" Richard asked. Franklin looked in the rearview mirror and, though he prayed he'd see a pair of soft, shapely female thighs clamped together like a vacuum seal, he only saw Paul's ugly Italian face. Paul wasn't talking. He just looked over at Richard, then back into Franklin's eyes, and nodded.

"You know," Franklin said. "Another day, another dumb-fuck shakedown. Something I can do for you fellows?"

"Get us out of here," Richard said. "We need to talk."

"Better idea. Why don't you do what you've got to do right now. See if you can get out from under that."

Richard looked back at Paul. "We can go away, Franky. But that will only make things worse later. You know that."

"So...?"

"Drive." Richard pointed forward. "I don't care where. As long as it isn't here." Franklin fumbled with his keys and looked back in the rearview as Richard gave his right knee a good slap. "Do you want to know the answer to 'or what?'"

Franklin shook his head and pulled his car out of the lot. He drove down side streets into the part of the city where Paul and Richard did their business. Where he knew they'd feel comfortable. He pulled into a wide alley and over to the side, looking back at Paul and over at Richard as he put the car in park and cut the ignition.

“Something you two assholes want?” he asked.

He felt a gloved fist make contact with the side of his head and everything went black.

When he came back around, they were still parked in the same place. Paul was in the back seat drinking coffee out of a Styrofoam cup and Richard was making a mess on the passenger side, stuffing a breakfast taco into his face.

Franklin rubbed at his jaw and felt along the top of his head where there was what felt like a good-sized bruise. “Was that a yes? Or are you miserable pricks trying to make sure you stay inside when I fuck you in court for real this time?”

Richard made a fist, but Paul shook his head when he looked back for approval. Franklin smiled, watching Richard's face contort as he didn't get his way. Like a big baby. A really big baby who could throw a really brutal tantrum. “All right, Franky.” Richard patted Franklin on the chest. “One more place to check you for bugs.”

“No bugs here,” Franklin said. “Your mother's very hygienic.”

Richard pulled a Latex glove from his pocket and snapped it over his gloved fist. “You can't be too careful.” He unbuttoned Franklin's trousers and jammed his hand down deep, making sure to give the family jewels a good squeeze.

Franklin moved for his gun as Richard continued to give him the equivalent of a good long kick in the nuts, when he felt the tap of cold steel on the back of his head. Paul was holding a

pistol. Franklin damn sure knew he'd pull the trigger if he had to. "He's clean." Richard pulled off the Latex glove, rolling down the window and dumping it on the street.

"Good," Paul said. "Now we can talk."

"We got nothing to talk about, Paulie," Franklin said. "Not until we get to court. You know how this works." He looked into the rearview, trying to get some sense of his place in the power dynamic. Feeling right at the bottom. "What we got this time. You're not going to walk away from. You know that, right?"

"What do you have, Franky?" Richard asked. "The wire was shit. Some sort of malfunction." Richard and Paul both chuckled. "You should really put in for quality equipment. How many times do you have to have the same tech blow up in your face before the department parts with a buck?"

"The technology's not the problem. We all know that. But I've got tape, Ricky." Franklin grinned. "I've got a real cassette. I've got you on hard copy. Every word you said. Every threat you made." He looked into the rearview. "You too, Paulie. Everything that came out that stupid wop mouth of yours. Every syllable. You can march your high priced attorneys in three by three. Bring a fucking army. They won't be able to get past that. Not your voices. Not your blatant confessions. Even if I don't make it, you're still going out. That tape's got seven minutes and twenty-four seconds of solid evidence that's going to take you down. All the way. That's right, I counted the seconds. I can't wait to see your fucking faces when you hear the good stuff all in a row."

"No." Richard looked straight ahead. "You're going to give us the tape." He paused. "We know you didn't make copies. You've just got the one. We want it."

"Well you can just fucking forget it," Franklin said.

Richard patted him on the chest, still staring forward. “Calm down, Franky. Don’t get yourself all worked up.” He turned to look at him, eye to eye. “We’re not bad guys. Not in that sense, anyway. You tell me what we can do for you. What can we do to get that tape? What can we do to make our lives easier and yours continue?”

“Are you offering to help me or threatening to kill me?”

“Depends on how you look at it.” Paul moved in between the back seats. “Why don’t we say, for now, we’re offering to help you. That sounds much more civilised. We don’t want to conduct business like animals. This is a simple transaction. Don’t make it complicated.”

“Paulie doesn’t like to sweet-talk cops. So I guess we’re helping you out. What do you say? The tape?” Richard held out his hand. “Don’t make me have to check up your ass. Neither of us wants that.”

“I can’t give you what I don’t have, kids. The tape’s in the wind.”

“You mean it’s lost?” Richard asked. “Whoops? Never to be seen again? Like that?”

“Yeah. You about got it.”

Richard slammed Franklin’s head back with his left arm and took his gun from him. Checking to see it was loaded, he cocked it and stuck it in Franklin’s mouth. “I don’t believe you, Franky. You went through all that trouble. Let the thief and the whore walk away, did you?” Franklin nodded. Slowly. Carefully. “You did all that, and then you just lost the tape?” Franklin didn’t move. “Where is it, Franky? That’s all we want to know. You don’t have to be there when we find it. You don’t have to notice it’s missing. One thing I’m sure of is you didn’t log it into evidence. So where the fuck is it?”

Richard pulled the gun out of Franklin's mouth as he coughed and choked. "You two are something else," he said as he eased his jaw shut.

"You wouldn't be much of an earner, Franky. I barely tickled your throat with this fucking thing." Richard laughed again. Then his expression went back to stone cold. "Here's the thing. You tell us where the fucking tape is or things aren't going to be okay between us anymore."

"Things are okay now?" Franklin asked. "Everything's peachy?"

"Comparatively, yes." Richard bounced Franklin's gun around in his hand. Feeling its weight and balance. Getting used to it. "You pester us. Now and again we go to court and we walk away. Things go back to normal. Eventually we dance again. Over and over. It's not the worst arrangement. It's expected. We get to do our business, you get to do your job. The war against drugs rages on, as far as the public knows. The good fight gets fought and we all get to make our money, live our lives and go home at night."

"What happens when things aren't okay? What happens when things aren't peachy?"

"Then," Richard said. "Then the white knight. That would be you, Franky. The white knight gets found in his car. In an alley like this one. Maybe this exact one. Track marks all over his arms. That nasty habit he's been keeping on the down low. Brains blown out with his own service revolver. The pressure got to be too much, maybe? He couldn't live with the shit he did? Who knows? The only person who could really explain you is you. But you're dead. Another tragic loss." Richard tapped Franklin's forehead with his pistol. "Cops die every day, Franky. They die badly. Sometimes they die pathetically. Pretty much everyone in your precinct is on the take, including you. Everyone

knows. They won't think twice about your crisis of conscience. As long as you're dead and can't rat the rest of them out, they'll probably throw you a parade."

"It's like that?" Looking back, Franklin saw Paul staring away. "You're going to kill a cop in broad daylight?"

"And no one's going to see a thing," Richard said. "Nobody in this community has eyes, Franky. You know that. And they know better."

Franklin nodded. "You know who I slipped the tape to."

Richard nodded back, smiling. "Say their names, Franky. It doesn't count unless you say their names."

"They're never coming back," Franklin snapped. "What do you want from me? Like I said, the tape is as good as gone."

"Until you go back and get it," Richard said. "We're not as fucking stupid as those two hop-heads. Please quit treating us like we are."

Paul rested his arms on the front seats and leant forward. "Change of plans, Franky. You tell us where they are. You say their names and you give us their location. You do that, and the pain goes away quick. You don't, and we torture you slow and find out anyway. Up to you."

"Things change," Richard said, laughing. "Life's funny, right?"

"Here's a good question." Franklin looked straight ahead, his eyes going dead. "Why don't you just kill me and cut out all this nonsense? Wouldn't that fix everything? The junkies aren't ever coming back. They know the score. If I'm not alive to go get the tape, what's left for you to worry about?"

Richard shrugged, looking back to Paul for a nod.

Franklin tried to force a smile.



XV

THE SMELL

David woke the next morning to the sound of a washing machine going full blast. It was 7:24 and Juno's smell was still heavy on her side of the bed. Musky and sweet. The stink of their old life had completely disappeared.

She came back into the room with a fresh pair of underwear, pants and a shirt. Throwing them on the bed next to his naked body. She was dressed in freshly cleaned sweatpants and a white tee shirt that hugged her body tight. No underwear. No embarrassing lines.

"I don't think I've ever seen second hand look so good before in my life," he said, smiling.

She looked back at him and shook her head at his obvious appreciation. "Please, I look like a fucking homeless person. I probably smell like one too. No detergent for the washing machine. But water's better than nothing."

She turned around from her position, crouched on the floor, grabbing the last load of laundry from their suitcase, and scowled as she watched him checking her out. "You know we're still—"

"Yeah. We're over. I know."

“Still, I feel like I’m brand new. Even these old clothes make me feel like I’m a whole different person. Like I’m better. Like I’m really out of the life.”

He got off the bed and crouched behind her as she finished scooping up the laundry. He put his hands on hers as he kissed her neck. “We are out. This is it now. Brand new. But I’m still feeling a little anxiety. How about you help me forget. I’d be lying if I told you I didn’t think a good—”

“No. That isn’t going to help anything.”

“Only when you’re craving, I guess.” He ground his teeth.

He began backing off her when the doorbell rang, giving them both a start.

“Oh shit,” she said. “Do you think?”

He grimaced as he hopped up and dressed himself. “No way. Not this fast.” He stopped. “But maybe...?”

Juno’s face quaked as she got on her knees, motioning for David to follow her lead. Frowning and motioning some more as she realised he was just checking her out again. They crawled on their hands and knees, ensuring no one could see in the blinds, as they made their way to the front door and she looked out the peep hole, being careful not to make a sound as she rose and guided him to her side.

“I don’t recognise them,” she whispered. “They don’t look like... Here. Look.”

She moved to the side. Through the peep hole David saw a couple, both dressed in casual wear. A man in a plain blue tee shirt and blue jeans and a woman beside him in what looked like a light blue heavy dress, ankle length. It was hard to tell what they looked like through the fish-eye lens, but they didn’t look like any of Richard or Paul’s people. They didn’t really look like people at all. More like cartoon characters with fluctuating blobs of fat floating through their bodies and long, thin wobbly arms.

“Maybe the neighbours?” he asked, his voice also hushed. “Franky did say this was a nice community.”

She looked back at him, arched her eyebrows and shrugged. “Maybe.” She gripped his wrist. “What’s my last name?”

She jumped slightly as the man outside rang the doorbell again. The sound was deafening in contrast to the silence they’d both been holding on to.

David looked out again, and he saw the man step back a little, looking to the left and the right. He noticed the woman appeared to be carrying what looked like a child’s wooden mobile, possibly a basket. They both mumbled something that sounded like: “Maybe they’re not up yet.”

Juno’s eyes darted left and right. “I’m who I am,” she whispered. David gave her a strange look. “I’m Juno Conjay. You’re David Fitz. I’ve been left here to figure the rest out for myself. I know. Franky so much as said it. No new name for me? Don’t get a library card? We’re not together anymore. We’re not really protected from the only people who want to find me. No sense in confusing the issue any more than I have to. Yeah?” He shrugged, looking a little upset, and it was agreed.

He brushed her hair back so it looked natural, and she did the same for him. They both made sure their clothes didn’t look ruffled and he counted down with his fingers. On three. And two. And...

They opened the door, pretending to look pleasantly surprised. Hoping the people who were standing on their doorstep couldn’t see how scared they were behind the façade. How they were convinced they were going to be dead within the minute, even as they smiled brightly with their mouths and their eyes.

“Hi.” David opened the screen door and let the man outside grab hold of it and open it the rest of the way. “How’s it going?”

“Hey there.” The man’s face lit up. He was a tall, lanky fellow. Not skinny, and not fat. Clean cut. His ready handshake felt like he worked a trade. “We came to say howdy and wish a happy Saturday to the new neighbours.” He craned his neck a little to peek inside. “We didn’t catch you at a bad time, did we? Looks like you’re still getting unpacked.” He nudged the woman beside him. She glanced up quickly before she looked back down, never raising her face. Her strawberry brunette hair was pulled back in a ponytail that seemed to have a life of its own. Her cheeks were a ghostly white. She was three quarters of the man’s height, which put her about even with everyone else, and she appeared to have the body of a dancer. Her face, as far as anyone could tell, was more rounded, with soft full features. Probably breathtakingly beautiful if she ever let anyone see. “I told you it was too early,” he half-whispered to her, as he winked at David. The woman rocked the basket she was carrying, filled with fruit, back and forth as her white skin turned red and a tense smile hinted from her lips.

“Yeah. Just rolled into town last night. Still trying to get organised.” David looked over at Juno, who was picking up on the woman’s vibe and feeling a bit anxious herself. Then again, she could just be thanking her God they weren’t corpses on a tiled floor already. “My name’s David. David Fitz.”

“Oh hey,” the man said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Look at me. I come barging in, bothering you first thing in the morning and I don’t even introduce myself.” He nudged the woman again. “This one says I don’t have any social skills.” The woman nudged him back. “I guess she’s been proven right.” The man laughed. “My name’s Brent Strange.” He paused

for effect as Juno smiled and glanced down. “Yes, that’s my actual name. I’m confident you’ll find I’m almost completely normal though.” He tousled the hair of the woman he arrived with. “And this is Cadence Starp.” He winked. “She actually is a bit strange.”

“Hello there.” David extended his hand. “Cadence. That’s an unusual name. Beautiful.” Cadence’s eyes looked up at him as he spoke and they went wide with fear. Brent gave her elbow a bump and she held out her right hand, bending it at the wrist and bowing her head slightly. David wrapped his hand around it and gave it a light squeeze. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Cadence glanced at Brent, panic on her face, and then back at David’s feet as her cheeks turned ashen again and she pulled her hand to her side.

“You’ll have to pardon her,” Brent said. “She’s very old fashioned.” Brent looked at David and motioned with his eyes toward Juno. “And this is...?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” David said. “This is—”

“Juno. Juno Conjay,” she said, her face going soft.

Brent continued. “Like I said. Cadence is very old fashioned.” He looked at Juno and extended his hand. She reached out to shake it and he took her hand in his, turning it palm down. “Juno, it is a distinct pleasure to meet you.” He looked over at David quickly. “You have a beautiful woman.”

Juno tittered as Brent gave the top of her hand a lingering kiss, and she felt the strength in his grip. “I’m not... I’m just his room-mate. A pleasure to meet you, Brent.” She casually glanced below his belt and tried not to stare. “Cadence?” Cadence nodded. “A pleasure to meet you too.”

Cadence bowed, keeping her head facing down. Juno returned the gesture with her head held high.

Brent leant forward and whispered into David's ear, so Juno could hear too. "It's not awkward yet, my man. Kiss Cadence's hand. She's going to be weird about it forever if you don't." Cadence still looked down and away as she swung the basket on her arm. "Seriously. It's okay."

David looked over at Juno. She held back a laugh. It didn't bother her in the slightest, which came as no surprise.

"Go for it," Juno whispered. "Be polite."

"I'm so sorry," David said, speaking at regular volume. "Where are my manners? Cadence?" Her eyes looked up pensively and she moved the basket from her arm. David took the hand she'd offered before and brought it to his lips, giving it a soft kiss on the top. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He looked over at Brent, who bobbed his eyebrows. "You have a lovely woman yourself." Cadence lifted her head to match everyone else's and forced a smile as she pulled her hand back quickly. She was at least as beautiful as David had imagined.

Brent patted David on the shoulder and whispered into his ear, as his eyes drifted up from Juno's breasts and met her gaze. "We're not really, you know... either."

Cadence offered forth the basket of fruit. Juno took it and bowed her head, quickly, again.

"But hey," Brent said. "We wanted to come by and welcome you to the neighbourhood. And, if you're interested, we're going to be having some folks over around supper time. Say..." He looked over at Cadence, who stared back at him, trying hard to keep a pleasant look on her face as she shivered. "Wow," Brent said, disregarding her affected smile. "She really likes you two. You're in the good books for now." He continued. "Say around seven tonight? If you're still busy getting all set up, it's no big deal. It's a casual get together. You don't need to bring

anything. We'll be grilling and having a beer or three. Just wanted to say hello and let you know you're welcome."

"Thanks, Brent. What do you think?" David looked over at Juno, who looked back at him and nodded a little too enthusiastically. "We'll see you both tonight."

"Great." Brent shook David's hand again, and bowed to Juno. "We'll make sure there's plenty for everyone. Hamburgers okay?"

"Sounds perfect," David said.

"Excellent. We'll see you there. You two have a great day. Don't have too much fun unpacking."

Brent put his arm around Cadence, who let her head fall on his shoulder, her body relaxing slightly. As she snuggled against his chest and smiled meekly at Juno, Cadence spoke. Her voice was like a faint, yet soothing, lullaby. "It was very nice meeting the both of you."

"Thank you." David looked at Cadence, who continued to throw her gaze in everyone's direction but his, as he spoke. "It was very nice meeting you too. Sorry if this has been, at all, awkward."

Brent laughed, and Cadence hid away her face. "No worries. We haven't met anyone new in a while, either. This place has been empty for a year now. If it wasn't for the constant upkeep, we would have thought it was abandoned." He looked around. "There were rumours about this place. But, hey, that will give us something to gossip about later. You two take care. It was great meeting you."

Cadence waved and looked up again, staring forward into nowhere and batting her eyelashes. Something she did slowly and provocatively. Something Juno had let bother her when they began their introductions. But something she'd let go when she realised she wasn't doing it for David. "It really was

very nice to meet you. Great, as my beloved would say.” Her smile appeared genuine then, though she continued to avoid making eye contact. “We look forward to seeing you tonight. I do so hope we can be friends.”

“I hope so too,” Juno said. “Thank you so much for the gift.”

“Yes, thanks for the welcome.” David fumbled for what to say next. “It’s always nice to meet nice people.”

“God loves good neighbours.” Brent smiled and turned around. “We’ll see you two tonight.”

“Bye,” David and Juno said in unison.

As David closed the screen door, and Juno moved to put the basket on the floor, he watched Brent and Cadence walk away, noting how they slowly paced. The way Cadence’s body moved with trepidation, like a hostage. Something about the smell of her skin, still on his lips, kept him fixed in position, imagining she tasted better than she looked. For an instant, he felt her breath heavy in his mouth. The soft brush of her tongue against his flesh. And, in his mind, a gentle voice talked to him in monosyllabic nonsense as a ghostly hand pulled him along in a little red wagon. When she disappeared from view, the sensations and visions vanished with her.

He closed the front door, flushing slightly, as Juno finished putting the basket down. “Well, that was almost scary.”

She looked at him as she stayed crouched on the floor by the basket, picking through the fruit. “They were oddly sweet. Though Brent seemed more interested in my tits than anything else...” Juno spaced out for a moment and changed the subject. “Cadence has a major crush on you.” He smirked, rubbing his cheeks, as he looked back at her. “You think I’m joking, but I haven’t seen anyone try to shut down that hard

since the first time I kissed a boy. I'm sure she's not all that familiar with male attention."

"Why would you say that? She's just old fashioned. Like Brent mentioned." He paused. "Definitely unbelievably shy."

"You think? She couldn't even look at you. And you didn't see her face when you touched her. Jesus. I think she soaked her panties when you kissed her hand. If she's extremely old fashioned, maybe that was like oral sex or something." Juno laughed as she picked the basket off the floor and moved it into the kitchen and onto the counter by the sink.

"You're way over-analysing it." David followed her into the kitchen and pressed himself against her back as he touched his nose to her neck and she brushed him off. "Brent would have said something if that were the case, don't you think?"

"Mister personality? Brent? He was the one who started with the hand molesting. It was like he was tasting me. He definitely needs to get laid." She giggled. "Maybe I'm jaded. Or maybe they're swingers. That could be fun. You looked into it. Tell me that wasn't Cadence's old fashioned ass you were admiring when you watched them go."

"Maybe they're just normal people," he said. "It's been a long time since we've known any of them. Only you could meet 'Joe Puritan' and Miss 'Pennsylvania Dutch' and think swingers. I'm pretty sure we gave her the creeps. Besides, what do you care what I look at?"

"A little tact would be appreciated."

"I'm almost positive she didn't notice."

Juno glared back at him. "I meant around me, you self-absorbed shit. Anyway, I hope they are just nice, normal people."

"I'm sure they are," he said. "It's going to be weird when the day comes that people like us seem strange to people like us."

“Yeah. Well.” She turned around and kissed him on the neck, running her tongue up to his earlobe. “If that homely little bitch does have a thing for you, they’re not going to like me for long.” She breathed out softly, cooling the trail of saliva she’d left on his cheek.

“What the fuck is it with you? She wasn’t homely at all. And aren’t you not in the mood, or did I mishear you earlier? And why would it be a problem if she did have a thing for me? You dumped me already. I got the message loud and clear. Several times.”

“Whatever. You can admit she’s south of pretty, Davey,” she said. “They can’t hear you. That man’s got himself a nasty looking girlfriend. She redefines ‘prematurely grey’ and she talks like she just finished sucking a balloon full of helium, so let’s not overdo it, okay?”

“What are you talking about, Junie? She had a pleasant voice. And her hair was—”

“Jesus, Davey. She’s tall enough to play basketball and has a figure like a pipe cleaner. Not to mention her skin. The bitch looks like she fell asleep in a tanning bed. You don’t need to pretend every other woman in the world is a threat to me anymore. Especially that one. I know I’m better looking than she is. I think Brent’s a good looking man. I’d do him if he was available. That doesn’t bother you, does it?”

He shook his head. “No. I guess not. If that’s what it takes to get you interested, though, maybe I should just forget—”

“There you go. Now admit she wasn’t all that good looking.”

“Fine. She was... cute.”

“You are so full of shit.” Juno giggled as David blushed. “Like I’d feel threatened by that thing, if we were still together and they weren’t a couple. Please.”

“Funny you should mention that,” he said. “According to your new man, they’re not a couple. They’re room-mates. Like you decided we are. I can’t wait to see how you mix your signals now.”

“I’m still not threatened.” Her face turned red as she grabbed his hand, stuffed it down the back of her sweatpants and kissed at his neck more passionately. He looked away. “And don’t you worry about my signals. The fact that I don’t want an exclusive relationship doesn’t mean you can do whatever you like.”

In minutes, Juno had stripped herself bare and dragged David back to bed. And, though he begged to a certain degree, Juno refused to let him inside her unless he role-played being someone other than himself. So David pretended he was Juno: Stripping himself naked, turning his back to her, hogging the sheets and falling back asleep. She sulked, swatted at him and then grumbled as he ignored her, before drifting off too.



XVI

USELESS AND STILL

Richard and seven Guatemalan goons broke in the door to David and Juno's city apartment around four-thirty in the afternoon. Franklin had suggested the tape might still be there, if they forgot to bring it wherever they ran. Though that seemed like a bullshit story designed solely to buy time, he had to check it out.

They ransacked the place in under twenty-six minutes. It was a disaster area. Dirty and filled with useless crap. Nothing worth fixing, nothing worth fencing and the living room with the soiled mattress on the floor by the window smelt like a urinal.

"How the fuck do people live like this?" he asked the goons, who looked back at him and giggled. Not understanding a word he spoke. If he wasn't telling them to shoot something, or perform some other routine task, Paul's goons didn't ever get where he was coming from or what he meant. At least they did what they were supposed to.

He found the kitchen phone, checked it for a dial tone and called Paul.

"Hello?" Paul asked. "Who is this?"

"It's me," Richard said. "There's no tape here." He looked around at the goons, who were still turning the place

upside down. “But the squad you sent with me is still looking. This place is fucking disgusting. Let me ask you. Do these guys you sent with me... Do they know what they’re looking for?”

“Yeah,” Paul said, “I told them what to look for. You know, if you’d take the time to learn a little Spanish, they’d be a lot easier to work with.”

“Yeah, sure. Okay. Well, we’re looking, but I have to say again, I think Franky’s story about this place was a play for time.” Richard watched as the goons continued to tear the place apart, finding nothing but more garbage, getting dirtier and smellier as the search progressed. “You find anything on him the Guatemalans didn’t?”

“Yeah. A scrap of paper in his car’s glove box, with a number on it. Not an area code I recognise. Tried calling it a while ago. It’s live, but no answer.”

“Let me get that from you. I’ll give it a call and see if anyone answers. I’ll keep calling until somebody does. You got someone working on getting the reverse listing for it already?”

“What am I, the fucking help?” Paul asked before he rattled off the number.

“No, sir. Paulie. I just meant—”

“I’m just fucking with you, Ricky. I already had it checked. It comes up with no reverse listing. I’ve got queries in. It’s a safe house, for sure. Maybe where everything we’re looking for is at. Davey, Junie, the rest of the money and the tape. You think?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Richard said. “Franky didn’t have much time to hide everything and everyone. They’re probably all in the same place. Like I said, I’ll keep calling while your boys in the department work on getting an address. If Davey and Junie are at that number, one of their dumb asses will pick up eventually.”

Michael Golvach

“Talk to you soon. Let me know if you find anything.”
Paul laughed as he hung up the phone.

Richard hung up on his end.

The goons were still busy destroying the place. The walls or the floor would probably start collapsing soon, given the rot. He picked up the phone and dialled the number. Anticipating the terror in Juno’s voice, as he smiled.