

BEFORE YOU SAY YOU'RE LEAVING

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## ABSTRACT

Before You Say You're Leaving is a collection of four short fictions that explores human reactions to loss, isolation, and loneliness. The stories follow their protagonists as they navigate and interpret grief in their own way. By examining these different characters' reactions to an event of loss, whether it be the loss of a loved one, a relationship, or an established sense of selfhood, the collection is meant to explore how people create meaning in their own lives through close relationships, and how or whether that meaning can be reinterpreted or re-established after the event of loss.

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## BEFORE YOU SAY YOU'RE LEAVING

Overnight, a patch of wildflowers bloomed in the alley outside their apartment, iridescent blue over a square of dirt. He opened the window and let cold morning air blow against his face. He had a headache.

Layer by layer, Sam began to remove his clothes. First the jacket, the shirt, belt on the kitchen counter. He felt at the loose, empty fabric for coins, keys, his lighter, his wallet, dutifully removing them, placing them on the counter beside the belt. He looked down at himself, thinking, This is your body. This is you in underwear and socks.

A car honked its horn outside. He heard the ringing bell of a streetcar from the St. Clair line, one block due south.

The clothes went from a pile on the kitchen floor straight into a garbage bag, undergarments and all. Hands on his soft hips, he stood between the sink and the island. It was early May and his skin was pale. He'd been waiting at the hospital all night. The skin on his face was greasy and his fingers, when flexed, felt tight. He hadn't slept.

The clock on the radio read 9:33 am. He had some time before he needed to be back.

He picked up his phone from the counter, plugged it in, and dialed his father.

He answered on the first ring. "Hey, Sam."

"Hi."

"Any news?"

Sam's eyes wandered over the island and across the small apartment to the living room wall. A few plants trailed over a wooden board set across the radiator. "No. She hasn't woken up yet. They're monitoring her heart."

He heard his father let out a long sigh. "Her heart?"

"The stuff she took, the doctor told me it slows down your heart. It can stop all of a sudden."

"What did she take?"

"Benzodiazepines. Ativan."

There was silence for a moment on the other end of the line. Sam leaned on the island, hoping he'd pronounced the name of the drug properly. The air from the window moved over his bare ass.

"I think there was a bed bug," he said.

"A bed bug."

"It came out of the sheet at the top of her bed, near her head."

"At the hospital?"

"Yeah. I killed it. There was blood on the sheet." Sam heard the sound of papers shuffling.

"Did you say anything?"

"She hasn't woken up yet."

"To the nurse," his dad said. "The hospital people."

"Oh. I didn't want to worry anybody. That kind of thing, I figure it's a big deal for them."

"I think—they'd worry about that. Yeah."

Sam yawned. He seemed full of yawns. "I put all my clothes in a garbage bag. I'll run them through the dryer later."

"A few times. I think that's a good idea."

"Just to be safe. I really feel dirty."

Someone said something from across the room on the other end. He heard his dad answer in the affirmative. "Listen, I'm going to have to let you go."

"Okay."

"I have a meeting."

"I haven't called Mom yet."

"Give your mom a call. Love you."

"Love you too."

He was exhausted. The nurse had asked him to bring a change of clothes for Michelle, pyjamas, an overnight bag. She was at the hospital with only her nightie. For a moment he stared at his phone, debating whether or not to call his mother. He fiddled with the charger. His mother would worry. Nobody had been able to tell him how long it would be until she woke up or how long she would be required to stay. He decided to call his mother when he had more to tell her.

Michelle had fallen against the bathroom window ledge as he guided her, half-conscious, to the toilet, knocking over a potted plant. Now, he tip-toed carefully over the dirt spilled across the black and white tile. A bubbly blue foam of vomited pills floated on the water in the toilet bowl. He sat down to pee. Shards of cracked clay on the floor, the little aloe plant sprawled pathetically in the midst of all the dirt, its roots exposed. The shoe prints of the paramedics stamped here and there. In his exhaustion he thought the aloe would begin to move, like a worm. It would writhe and wiggle away. It looked naked.

He dropped the aloe in the garbage on his way to bed.

The night before, he'd burst into tears in front of the police officer tasked with finding out what happened.

"I went to bed. I heard her come home. She sat down in the kitchen."

They were standing in the front hall of the apartment. The officer's manner was stiff, abrupt, her hair pulled back tight into a short ponytail. "You went home from the bar before she did?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She wanted to stay and have another drink. I wanted to go home. I went home."

"When you heard her come back—how did you know something was wrong?"

"We were arguing when we were out." He looked over to the bathroom, where two paramedics were kneeling over his unconscious girlfriend, alternating between speaking into walkie-talkies and loudly repeating her name, as if she could hear them. "It's not—she doesn't usually let things go like that."

He couldn't tell whether the officer's hair was wet or if it was gel making it shiny.

"Has she done this before?"

"No. She's threatened to."

The paramedics had lifted Michelle up onto a stretcher and were wheeling it past Sam and the officer, out the front door.

"She's gonna be fine," one of them said to Sam. "See?" He pinched the skin between her breasts so hard that she lifted her head and winced.

That was when Sam began to cry.

He dreamed Michelle was looking up at him from the bathroom floor, trying to scream but not making a sound.

When he woke up it was late in the afternoon. There was rain on the bedroom window. His phone lit up with a text message.

### **Nina**

Wanna get coffee later?

Nina was Sam's ex. The message wasn't unusual. Before he met Michelle, Sam and Nina were together on and off for three years. They still met every few weeks to catch up. He tapped out a response.

Maybe. I'm going to be downtown in a few hours? I'll let you know.

He took a shower and swept up the floor in the bathroom before packing a bag and going back to the hospital.

It was a Sunday and an evening service was getting out at the little Catholic church on the corner of Vaughan and St. Clair Avenue. Sam made his way to the subway through the crowd forming on the sidewalk out front. The bells were ringing and a light mist collected on the shoulders of the churchgoers. There seemed to be much to talk about. The smell of the inside of the church, of dust and carpet and extinguished candles, asserted itself on the street through the open doors, mingling with the smells of damp concrete and rain and smoking oil rising up from any of the number of Caribbean barbecue restaurants that dotted the neighbourhood. Three tiny nuns in full habit were huddled together, speaking quickly, quietly to one another. As they stepped out of the way to let him pass, Sam caught the eye of the smallest one. She smiled a slow, wrinkled smile at him and bowed her head.

When he reached Mount Sinai, the woman at the front desk informed him that Michelle had been moved to a room on a locked floor. Michelle Walker. Room 683-B.

A security guard in a yellow jacket was sitting on a chair outside the door. Sam explained his situation.

"Is she awake?"

The guard peeked in. "Not right now." He jerked his chin, gesturing inside. See for yourself. Something about this soldierly movement didn't suit him.

Sam poked his head around the door frame. She was lying on her back, asleep, an IV bag hovering over her left shoulder, cords spilling out of the neck hole of her gown.

He turned back to the guard and patted the bag he'd brought with him. "This is her backpack."

The guard was young, maybe twenty, with short blond hair and acne. A tag over his heart read "Tim." He looked confused. "What's in it?"

"Clothes, her computer, a toothbrush. Her phone charger."

"I'm going to have to check it."

Sam presented the bag for inspection. Tim stood up and emptied it, item by item, onto his chair. He held up a bottle of Advil and looked at Sam with a raised eyebrow.

"I didn't check to see what was in there before I packed it, so—"

Tim started a separate pile on the chair, beginning with the Advil.

"Anything like this I'm going to have to keep it," he said. His voice carried an air of performed authority, like he knew how he was supposed to act in his security guard's uniform but hadn't yet gotten the hang of it. "Anything sharp. Anything she could hurt herself with."

"Will she get it back?"

"Once she's done with the psych eval they'll decide if she can have it back or not." He shrugged his shoulders. "You can ask them about it."

Sam watched as Tim sorted. Safety pins and a lighter were out. The phone charger was in. Sam wanted to ask about the risk of potential strangulation that the charger presented but thought better of it.

A small, elderly woman in a hospital gown limped down the hall, stopping to look inside each room as she went. When she came to Michelle's room she looked up at Sam.

"Excuse me, sir," she said.

He cleared his throat. "Hi."

Tim looked up from his task.

"I want to leave." The woman looked like she was in physical pain.

Sam winced. "I'm sorry."

"Please can you let me out?"

"I'm sorry," Sam said. "I can't."

"C'mon Barbara." Tim, putting down the backpack. "Let's go back to bed."

“I need to leave,” she said. She turned around and continued down the hall.

Tim watched her walk away and gestured to Sam with the backpack. “Make sure you lock this stuff up if you guys leave the room.”

“Lock it up?”

“She’ll take pretty much anything if it’s laying around. We had to start hiding the towels and blankets.”

“Oh.”

Tim knelt down and went back to his task. “You’re the boyfriend?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“Tim.”

“I saw your name tag. I’m Sam.”

Tim turned and gave Sam a shy nod.

“Has she woken up at all?” Sam asked.

“She’s been sort of in and out for the last few hours from what I’ve seen.” Tim pulled his arm out of the bag clutching a handful of tampons and threw them back inside as fast as possible. “I—uh—the nurse should be by soon. He can fill you in.”

“Is it okay if I go in?”

“Go ahead. I’m almost done here.”

Sam entered the room and sat down. In her sleep, Michelle looked afraid. He listened to her breath. Something behind her was beeping a steady pulse. There was a curtain that split the room in two. The rustling and murmuring of the other occupant spilled into Michelle’s half of the room. Now and then Sam could make out the tinny, thin sound of a sitcom laugh track through headphones.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

## **Nina**

I’ll be doing work at board as hell all afternoon. Stop by if you’re in the neighbourhood!

Board as Hell was a board game café a few blocks from the hospital. He was preparing a response when the nurse came in. He introduced himself as Carlo. Sam put his phone away.

Carlo didn't wear an undershirt. The baby-blue of his scrubs accentuated the absence, framing the thick stubble on his chest and lower neck. His body, the outline of which was clear through the thin fabric, looked like it had once been in very good shape. The skin of his face bore the mottled scarring of severe teenage acne and he was balding. In spite of this, he was attractive. Sam guessed he was in his early thirties.

"You the boyfriend?"

Sam wondered what it meant to be defined as *the boyfriend*. "Yeah. Sam."

"Pleasure." Carlo had a strong handshake. His hands were wide and rough.

"Can you tell me anything?" Sam asked. "What are those things sticking out of her shirt?"

"That's the heart monitor." Carlo busied his hands by checking that every bit of tape on Michelle's body was secure before pulling back the pages of a clipboard. He kept a pencil behind his ear. "Benzos make your heart slow right down and sometimes it can stop like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "So this thing here sends a message to the nurse's station if that happens."

The doctor had already explained this phenomenon to Sam but Carlo's explanation had the effect of making him picture the heart pumping in Michelle's chest and what it would look like if it suddenly stopped.

When Carlo finished flicking IV bags with his index finger and checking the tape and the wires, he applied sanitizer to his hands, massaging it in. "She's lucky you know. Benzos are unpredictable." He looked at the chart again. "Was there alcohol involved?"

"Yes. I told the police—doesn't it say?"

"Says here alcohol *may* have been ingested." He took the pencil from behind his ear and amended the chart. "Even luckier, then. Listen, I've got to scoot. Security guard's gotta stay 'til psych confirms she's not gonna do this again or try to run when she wakes up."

"What do I do if she wakes up?"

"If you're here, you can let one of us know at the nurse's desk. I doubt it will be for a while, though. She might be in and out until it's all out of her system, but until it's all gone she probably won't remember anything even if she wakes up. We're trying to speed up the process with the drip here." He motioned to an IV bag. "If you want my advice, I'd go home and get some rest. Come back tomorrow."

Sam nodded. He felt the need to perform a stability that he didn't believe was real.

“Does she have family?”

Sam winced. “I’m not sure they’d be—it’s complicated. Yes, she does. I want to leave it up to her whether she decides to tell them about this or not.”

“Okay. If you need anything, let whoever’s on duty know. I’ll be here ’til later tonight.”

“Thank you,” Sam said, sitting back down.

He hadn’t realized he’d been standing. The fragility of life wasn’t something to which he’d given much thought before now. At twenty-four, he knew Michelle’s heart as the thing he heard when he put his head on her chest. It was not something with a finite lifespan. There had never been any need to check on it because he took it for granted that it would always be there. Everything about her now looked fragile. Her eyes moved under their lids. Her skin looked thin and pale.

He looked down at his own hands, clasped together in front of him. He felt fragile too, and afraid.

He stood again and placed her backpack behind the chair. On his way out the door, he nodded to Tim, who looked up from his phone as he approached.

“Do I need to sign out or anything?” he asked.

“It’s a locked floor so just tell the desk you’re leaving. They’ll buzz you out.”

“Thanks.”

He walked out onto University and headed south. The rain had stopped but the sky and its reflection in all the street-facing windows remained a milky June grey.

He pulled out his phone and sent a message to Nina.

You still around?

Daylight was just beginning to fade. He passed the Opera House and, across from it, the glassy Shangri-La Hotel, with its statue out front like a flock of small birds forever taking off, stuck in a state of leaving. Gingko and red maple trees sat solemn as anything else in the street after the rain. Sam felt a little short of breath. The soil in the tulip beds that were cut into the concrete of the median was soaked black.

He stopped at a convenience store on University and picked up a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. It had been awhile since he last smoked. He needed something to do with his hands to ground him.

## Nina

Yup! Setting up.

This was not an area of Toronto he frequented. He passed businesspeople in work clothes, financial traders with slick hair, shoppers dragging large bags just off the concrete, all making their way home for the day. Most of the cars in the street were new and gleamed as they crept across the grid, sneaking into spaces in front of orange and dull-green taxicabs, tour buses, Greyhound buses, and delivery trucks. Drivers either talked into cell phones or sat silently next to their passengers. Signal lights blinked and chimed to pedestrians at each road crossing, mingling with the constant waving and crashing of dense traffic: now a growling engine accelerating, a jackhammer, an electric saw from a construction site a few blocks east, now a siren approaching, the hydraulic release of a bus door opening, a couple arguing on the other side of the road. Always the rhythmic metallic chug of streetcars from Spadina, like a marching band heralding their approach, the bells ringing twice, daintily. He felt tiny among all this. These sounds, like citizens of the city themselves.

He made a right on Dundas and continued west to the café, which was across from the AGO, where Nina worked. The wooden floor creaked when he stepped inside. His back was sweaty from the walk. Nina was already sitting down at a table by the window fiddling with the implements of a Scrabble board, her jacket draped over the low back of her low-backed chair. She wore an oversized white wool sweater, pilled all over and darkened to a yellowish grey around the wrists, with faded jeans and formerly off-white Chuck Taylors that had also been darkened to a yellowish colour. She smiled and got up to hug him when she saw him walk in. She smelled a little like patchouli.

He ordered a coffee and sat down. It felt strange to be doing something that seemed more or less normal.

“Pick your letters,” Nina said, handing him the bag.

He held the weight of the bag in his hand and shook it. “I don’t really feel like playing.”

“Indulge me.”

“I have to tell you something.”

“Pick your letters and tell me while you’re doing it.”

Sam picked seven tiles out of the bag, placing them in a row along his rack with no spaces in between. *BEQISAV*.

He took a breath. “Michelle tried to kill herself last night.”

“Sam.”

“Do you go first or do I?”

“Sam. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Who goes first?”

“We draw tiles—”

“Highest or lowest?”

“—closest to *A*—what happened?”

He picked a tile out of the bag and spoke quickly. “We were at a bar and we decided that we should break up. She stayed and I went home. Both of us thought it was a good idea to break up. It was a mutual thing. When she came home, I was in bed. I went out to the kitchen because it got all weirdly quiet out there—I picked an L here by the way—so I asked her what happened and she told me she’d taken a bunch of pills. I called 9-1-1 and waited for them while she was passing out. I got to ride in the back of a cop car.” He handed the bag to Nina. “You pick.”

“Is she okay?”

“I think so. She’s not awake yet. They’re monitoring her heart, but they told me she’s stable.” Something about spending time in the hospital compelled him to use the vocabulary of medicine. *Monitoring. Stable.* He let out a nervous chuckle at the look on Nina’s face and immediately felt guilty. “She’s got these wires coming out of her chest. It’s freaky.”

“Are *you* okay?”

“Have you picked yet?”

She held up a blank tile. “You’re first. Are you okay?”

He struggled to find the language to express how he was feeling. “I guess I’m still processing? It’s—I dunno. It’s heavy. I’m exhausted from thinking about it.”

He placed four letters in the centre of the board.

“*Base*,” Nina said. “Twelve points with the double word score.”

She jotted the score down on a notepad and took a sip of coffee while Sam sifted four new tiles from the bag: two E’s, a T, and an I.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“With us? I don’t know. I haven’t really talked to anybody there other than the nurse. They do a psych evaluation and if she’s not a risk to herself, I guess they let her out. Once she’s okay.”

“You said you broke up.”

“Yeah. I guess that complicates things.”

Nina placed her letters down. “*Plane.*”

“How much?”

“Eight. Double letter on *N.*”

Sam held the bag out for her. She placed it down beside her rack and grabbed his hand in both of hers from across the table. She said his name.

“Sam.”

She was forcing him to look at her, staring at him. All of a sudden he had the sense that she might cry.

“I’m really sorry this happened to you,” she said.

He fiddled with a cuticle on his free hand. “It didn’t really *happen* to me.”

“It did, though.”

“I’m fine.”

She let go of his hand. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“I’m not being an idiot.”

“If you’re avoiding, you’re being an idiot.”

“Look,” he said, backing up a little in his chair. “I don’t know how I feel. I feel drained.”

“But not fine.”

Her face projected an authentic kindness that made Sam feel at once exposed and loved. He felt cared for. This made him uncomfortable.

“I don’t want it to be about me. And I don’t want you to pity me.” He took a breath.

“When I was waiting for the ambulance, she had this look. I can’t stop thinking about it. She’s on the floor looking up at me and she can’t talk, opening and closing her mouth like she wants to speak but can’t.”

Nina squeezed her mug tightly with both hands.

“It’s like I watched her die but she’s not dead. Then I saw her in the hospital today and she had the same look. I’ve never seen anybody look so helpless.”

Nina reached across the table again and clasped his hand. “What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s your turn.”

He fiddled with his tiles. “I really don’t feel like playing.”

“What do you want to do?” She squeezed his hand.

He realized he hadn’t eaten since that morning. “Do you want to come to my place? We can get dinner and watch a movie or something. I just don’t want to have to think.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

It was dark out. They took the subway from St. Patrick up to St. Clair West and took the stairs at the back entrance of the station, which was located on the edge of a wooded area on a narrow two-lane street. Rush hour was long over when they surfaced; everything was still and quiet. It smelled like water and wood. The night was humid and the trees around them sagged under the weight of stubborn raindrops that still clung to the leaves. Now and then a drip fell on the sidewalk ahead of them as they walked.

They picked up roti at Albert’s on the corner of Vaughan. Nina insisted on paying. They watched *Sunset Boulevard* and ate with plastic utensils, their plates on pillows, cross-legged on the floor in front of the couch. It was hot in the apartment. Nina took her sweater off while Sam was in the kitchen, smoking out the window where Michelle normally smoked. The wildflowers he’d spotted in the morning were still there, closed up for the night.

They fell asleep on the couch. Sam’s head was on Nina’s chest, listening to her heart.

The sun woke them the next morning. They hadn’t moved.

“Shit,” Nina said, looking at the time on her phone. “I have to go to work.”

They left together, stepping around the garbage bag full of clothes to get their shoes on. The sun was bright and it was already hot. They walked past the church on the corner of Vaughan, the doors of which were closed. Sam rode south on the subway, getting off at Queen’s Park and leaving Nina, and walked the rest of the way to the hospital.

Tim was sitting at the door of Michelle’s room.

“Have you been here all night?” Sam asked.

“Someone took over for the night shift.”

“Oh. Good. Is she awake?”

Tim poked his head in. “See for yourself.”

Sam put his hands in his pockets and walked in.

Before he entered the room he picked up the damp smell of a hospital meal. Michelle was sitting upright in her bed, trying to peel an orange.

“Hi baby,” she said, her bottom lip seriously trembling.

He sat down. “Hi.”

For a moment he could feel the silence in the air. Her eyes were red and swollen underneath from crying, making her look much older than she was. He felt much older too.

“What happened to me?”

He took the orange from her, setting it down on the food tray, and held her hand. Tears were running down her cheeks.

“Have you talked to the nurses?”

“Just whoever brought the food in.” She pointed to where Tim sat behind the door. “And him.”

“That’s Tim.”

Sam did his best to explain what had happened, trying to be gentle. Her hands trembled. She would forget things and he would repeat them. He left out what had instigated the fight.

“I dreamed that you were dead,” she hiccupped, choking through tears that didn’t seem to stop. “I dreamed I was crying and crying and nobody could hear me.”

There was nothing he could say, so he said, “I’m here.”

He asked what they gave her for breakfast.

“An orange, some juice, a muffin. Cereal? And tea.”

“Do you feel like eating?”

“Just this,” she gestured to the orange. “Can you peel it? My fingers are all fucky.”

He dug the nail of his index finger into the orange and peeled away the bitter skin, exposing the fruit piece by piece until only the flesh remained. He handed her the segments one by one and watched her eat them slowly, with both hands, like a child, something about the act making her seem more like herself, someone he knew.

## URSUS

The kitchen table is covered with casserole dishes and cold salads, dessert squares, trays of sandwiches without their crusts, all shrouded in plastic wrap. For the first time in more than a week the house sits quiet. Marilynne rests with a cup of tea, listening to ice churn in the refrigerator.

She does not do well with idle time. Once the paramedics had left with Arthur's body she did the laundry and ironed his shirts. She'd only just changed the sheets, so she made the bed without changing them again. There will still be church every Sunday, the same service, and choir twice a week. Phone calls at regular intervals to her older sister in Florida, to family friends, to the Bellecks and Donna Joyce. The table still set with knives on the right, forks on the left, and dinner plates warmed in the oven. She does her best to avoid unpleasant conversation.

Sitting alone at the kitchen table, she searches for a memory or a feeling somewhere that will make her feel more deeply. What would she think of herself, looking in on this scene through the kitchen window? Would she judge a tearless widow? Moments pass in thinking, the tea goes cold in the palm of her hand.

The estate must be dealt with. Drawers must be emptied. Her sons are co-executors of the will. She does not care to understand holding companies or money kept in trust, has no knowledge of the vagaries of estate taxes, of land holdings or property transfers. She has never had to manage a stock portfolio. Adam and Joe will deal with these things. To Marilynne they are just titles on a page, papers to sign and date with a witness present. Her sons are working professionals. They hold degrees from good schools in business and in law, respectively. They do their best to explain before handing her a pen, but she feels most useful ironing the shirts and the pants before she brings them to the Goodwill.

With no one to speak to, her mind wanders. Joe's daughter will be starting high school in the fall. The day before Joe started high school, Marilynne had made a roast and they ate in the dining room, the table set with china and the good silver. She watched Arthur, across the table in his red sweater, as he served the meat and drank cranberry juice. Both of the boys were very sweet that night. Arthur let them each have an extra butter tart for dessert. It had rained that day and a leak sprang up between the dining room and the living room, as if a seam had opened up in the ceiling. She had to get up from the table to get a bucket from under the kitchen sink. The

boys didn't seem to notice until the rain stopped and Arthur announced that he would call to have the roof fixed in the morning.

The next day, she packs the funeral leftovers and some groceries into the trunk of her car and drives down the hill, out of Sudbury, northeast to Lake Wanapitei. Their cottage once belonged to Arthur's mother; for the time being it belongs only to Marilynne. Once the will is executed, the ownership will transfer to Adam, her youngest. She has made the trip to the boathouse a thousand times but rarely has she made it on her own. She finds herself worried she'll make a wrong turn on these familiar roads, carved as they all are out of the same ancient rock, with rust staining every roadside steep. Once in awhile she glimpses an inuksuk built of stray stones.

Her role was always to sit in the passenger side of the boat organizing things while Arthur unloaded the car for the trip across the lake. Today she unravels the knots that his hands tied, locates the key under the pilot's chair where he left it, and takes it slow out of the bay, uneasy on the water, abiding by the crippled signs stuck into the shore that read "No Wake." Her lifejacket is pulled tight. Once she hits open water, she feels the chop of the surface and looks back to check that things are balanced.

They had once pulled a drowning man out of the black water. She could call to mind the way every muscle in his body seemed to twitch underneath his skin in the dull twilight and the smell of early spring, of ash, that came off of him, as she took the wheel and Arthur wrapped him in a towel, his boat already gone.

Arthur's book lies dog-eared inside the cottage on his bedside table. She turns on the propane, unpacks the boat, fills the fridge. Pickles from last summer made from Arthur's garden cucumbers, a frozen Tupperware container with leftover beef short-ribs inside: his favourite. She did not bring the ribs out of sentimentality, though now it occurs to her that maybe she did. After the better part of a life spent in union his became hers and her favourites became his. Everything was theirs. It never occurred to her to do just what she wanted to do just when she wanted to do it.

She lays down a placemat and cutlery for herself and eats half a sandwich for lunch, half an orange, and a few baby carrots, saving the remainder for tomorrow.

The corner of the sunroom closest to the water is the only place where she can get reception on the old cellular phone. She calls Joe to let him know she's gotten across the lake safely. He asks, Has she had trouble with the propane? With the boat? How did she make out carrying her groceries up from the dock? She tells him not to worry.

The outgoing message on Adam's machine sounds hurried, like he recorded it on his way to a meeting. He'd like her to buy a new cell phone and learn to send text messages. She leaves a message about her nice trip across the lake, not expecting to hear back.

In the evening she takes the canoe out on the water. The crests of little waves shine yellow-white through her tinted lenses like bits of broken glass in the drooping sun. Poplar trees pepper the shoreline. Poplars with their arrowhead leaves nodding toward the ground, silver birch, white and red pine, maple, spruce. A turkey vulture flies overhead.

Arthur paddled through this bay as a boy and it was here that they taught their own children to water-ski and to fish. Marilynne would stay back when he and the boys went out to hunt for partridges, turkeys sometimes. She recalls his mournful face as he returned to the cottage after shooting a moose for the first time. The next year he sold his guns and started the vegetable garden.

She makes her way a little further from the shore, almost out of the bay, and takes a moment to adjust her lifejacket. The water laps gently on the rocks, idly, as if setting the tone for the world's sleep. Even this far out, she can hear the evergreens rustling inland, swaying into one another and cracking. A loon calls from somewhere off to her left. She balances the paddle over the sides of the canoe and lets the water take her.

The sun is almost down over the tree-line to the west, powerful pink with broad strokes of cloud around it washed with colour. Due south, the stacks from an iron refinery are just visible, like toothpicks rising out of the horizon, and, eastward in the sky, the night's first stars.

Turning back to reach the dock before dark falls, she stops. A loon has come topside two feet to her right. She could reach out and touch its white-spotted coat. A companion breaks out of the inky water after it and paddles to its side. The three of them bob together in silence for a moment before she dips her paddle back in the water and both birds go under, leaving her alone in the sunset.

The next morning she finds a pair of Arthur's glasses in the top drawer of the vanity near the bed. The frames are heavy in her hands. One arm is broken, but she tries them on. The glasses feel rough on her skin.

There are buttons and pins from the United Way, the Kiwanis Club, the Lion's Club, the Sudbury United Church. A box containing cuff links and handkerchiefs, ironed and starched, things that she can't account for out here where his best shirt was cotton-flannel and plaid. Comic books that belonged to the boys, board games. A comb and more than a few worn-down shaving brushes.

After lunch she decides to walk Arthur's trail. It was a hobby project that he returned to year after year. Each spring he added a new branch or two, wading through the blackflies and the mosquitoes that hide out in the cedars, returning in the evening covered in sweat and chips of wood, smelling like chainsaw exhaust.

She notes the stumps of trees cut down earlier in the summer, others that have been marked for cutting. The piles of sawdust here and there remind her of what has become difficult to accept and yet impossible for her to forget: only weeks ago, her husband was a living man with the capacity to enact change on the earth.

On the walk back, the second half of a loop, she slips on a root and twists her ankle, falling to the ground. Resting for a moment on a rock to examine the ankle, she decides she will ice it when she gets back. There is a sudden rustling in the trees to her left; the felt presence of another life. A black bear emerges, hunched and proud, with sun splintering over its fur, uneven through the canopy.

Marilynne finds herself unable to move. She is aware of a sock hanging from her fingertips, the hair on the back of her neck, the breeze that suddenly picks up from the lake and causes the aspens around her to flutter their leaves like fishing lures and the bear's ears to twitch. All of the peripheral things, though her attention is focused directly in front of her on the creature now staring back into her eyes, now testing its weight in the dirt. A squirrel jumps from one tree to another over her head and the bear raises its eyes to the sky, exposing the soft fur of its neck, letting out a breath. The throb in her ankle is gone. The bear takes a few steps over to the heavy trunk of a maple and uses it for support to stand on its hind legs, flaunting its full size, running its claws through the bark as if scratching an itch.

The whole scene plays itself out before her in deep focus, her eyes and mind unable to fix themselves on any particular detail. Not the way the claws dig so deeply into the tree's skin with so little effort, nor the air on her naked foot, nor the bead of sweat making the slow journey down from her armpit to her waistband. A slip into geologic time.

By the time she realizes that she has not been afraid, the bear is gone, leaving only its paw prints on the forest floor, a few marks on the base of a maple tree. Leaving her to become part of the living scenery. She is surprised to find she has been breathing.

At the back of the cottage there is a slight decline that leads to a clearing. Years of fallen spruce needles have left the ground mostly damp and spongy, and the soil acidic. Favouring her good ankle, she walks down through a break in the trees. Blueberry shrubs cover the ground, lending the clearing a bright green smell that cuts through the damp spice of the forest. She slumps to her knees and begins tugging at the tiny berries, one by one. Though the picking season is nearly over there are still enough left for a pie or two.

Arthur used to take their little fishing boat and pick all day on Fire Island and when he came home, she would make pie. He had picking spots on the island he never gave away to anyone. He would tell the grandkids how he had watched the island set on fire from a strike of lightning, and how the smoke reached all the way over to their place on the mainland and how it smelled like fire for days. The fire made the soil rich in a way that made the berries grow better there than anywhere else on the lake. He couldn't explain why.

She doesn't know how often she'll be back here once Adam takes it over. There's been talk of a water trampoline and a television. Her grandkids want an internet connection. She might be buying blueberries from stands on the side of the road, with prices scrawled on poster-board next to a van with an open trunk. She can't decide whether she will miss the picking or not. Her knees tend to get sore quicker than they used to.

When she gets back, the sun is low in the sky, about as low as it gets before it begins to set, and the interior of the cottage is blanketed in white light reflected off the lake. She pulls two pie shells out of the freezer and fills them with the berries she's picked along with a sprinkle of sugar. Tomorrow morning she'll leave. She'll make the trip across the lake and back home, past the marina still called Tony's, though Tony is long dead, past Chimney Island, bearing the name of the one remaining piece of the cabin that used to sit there.

When the pies are baked and cooled she cuts a piece from one and eats it by a candle light in the kitchen, covering the rest in tinfoil.

In the morning, after packing everything into the boat, Marilynne makes time for one last errand. She brings with her one of the pies wrapped in a grocery bag. Still limping a bit, she walks Arthur's trail until she reaches the rock where she'd sat down the previous day. She turns off the main path and takes ten deliberate steps into the uncut brush before stopping, looks around, absorbing the sounds of the forest, the rustling of leaves and the shiver of evergreen needles. She takes the pie out of the grocery bag and places it gently on the forest floor. For a moment she watches the sugar, sprinkled over the crust, sparkling in the dappled sun. Then she turns and walks back the way she came, off of the trail, then to the dock, then into the boat and the open water.

## TRACES OF THE SUN

The sun is waning. The chalky horizon clouds wash out into blue as a calm and yellow light grazes the high sky. Three flags ripple and crack in the jerky breeze outside West Collegiate High School, where Merella Blair graduated eight years ago today. It is late in the summer. The bushier trees droop, having grown lush. Tall weeds bend and skate against the ground each time the wind picks up and the flags suddenly tighten.

Merella drives a Civic through the neighbourhood where she grew up, looking for faces she recognizes in the cars pulling out of the freshly sealed driveways. Every lawn is closely mown. She used to mow the grass in front of her mother's house on days like this.

She lights a cigarette and opens her window to let some air in, making for the highway and for less restrictive speed limits. The sun is invisible now over the horizon but it continues to cast a dim light over everything in view. She turns on the radio and quickly flicks it off. Halfway through her cigarette there's a rumbling in her bowels.

The birds have mostly gone to sleep. A few holdouts still chirp in the groaning horse chestnuts and the maples that line the streets. It smells of mulch and hot tar. By now most drivers have switched on their headlights. Big branches in the willow trees sway, monolithic, and the leaves twinkle below.

The highway has four lanes and no divider.

Merella switches on her headlights. In the suburbs the streetlamps have just lit up one by one down every street. Small children are being put to bed. She removes her seatbelt and stretches out her chest, feeling her ribs crack a bit. The driver's side window is still down though she finished her cigarette a while ago.

There are no more birds singing, only the hum of power lines and the smack of a tennis ball in the distance. At the school, the aluminum rings holding the flags' rigging in place shiver against the hollow steel of their parent poles. The sun has hit some special angle in the clouds and for a moment it shines bright and pink somewhere off where it can't be seen.

Merella floors the accelerator and without a tremor in her body merges over the twin yellow lines into the lane on her left, into oncoming traffic.

The eastern sky is bright and baby blue dotted with puffs of cloud in cursive.

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A bird chirps through a break in the thunder. Len opens her eyes. It is still dark. She looks around her room from her desk to the bump in the sheets beside her.

Merella is lying on the pullout in the living room, laptop open on her thighs, her suitcase open on the ground beneath a pile of dirty clothes, her paintings in a stack underneath the open window. Lou Reed's *Berlin* plays on a loop, tinny and small through the speakers. It's four in the morning when Len walks by with her bare feet sticking on the hardwood.

"I'm working," says Merella without looking up.

"Just peeing."

"How's it going with Gavin in there?"

Len stretches her toes as she sits on the toilet. "He's still asleep."

"I can hear him."

The toilet flushes. Then Len leans in the doorway of the living room with her hands on the top of the frame. "What are you working on?"

"Article I'm supposed to've finished by yesterday." She closes the tab on her browser where she's been reading the Wikipedia page for Iceland.

"You got an extension on it or what?"

"No it's just late. Hoping they still pay me."

"Just finish it today. Sure you'll be fine."

Merella finally looks up to see Len in an old t-shirt from The Who's '84 tour. "That's the idea."

"You feeling alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Don't I look alright?"

"Berlin is your sad music."

"I'm fine."

On her way back to her room, Len looks in the freezer. The bottle of Stolichnaya that had been half-full when she went to bed is now nearly gone.

That afternoon, Merella sits on the hood of her car with an Ativan melting under her tongue. The air is thick and humid and the sun has turned every exposed surface into a griddle. Every moment or two she shifts and the car's exterior burns her butt cheeks through the black tights she's wearing. She watches ants scurrying around over the etiolated white lines and the

generations of oil stains that pockmark the asphalt. One near her left foot is struggling to drag the carcass of a large fly from under her car.

Her cigarette tastes hot. Its filter is squishy.

Squiggly heat writhes upward off the pavement. She checks her watch; the girl's late. There's grunting and laughing and tennis ball-slapping from the court behind her. She slides off the hood and walks around to the passenger side of the car. The door handle sears her fingers. The dead air inside is so hot it makes her feel sick. She holds her breath and reaches into the glove compartment, pulling out a mickey of vodka. She pours it down her throat, wincing as it goes down thick and hot from the car. Her lips go numb and she lights another cigarette.

A year before, there had been nearly six months when she self-identified as a non-smoker. She was good at it. She went on the Patch and counted her days as little victories, squirmed and bit her nails through cravings. She went online and looked at inspirational quotes for smokers when she was overwhelmed. When Brendan's father got cancer, she had resisted the urge to smoke when she sat at his bedside; Brendan never seemed to be around. She'd fought the urge to run out and suck back a whole cigarette in one breath, rubbed on her Patch like rubbing the belly of a Buddha. She hadn't smoked, even when it dawned on her that she'd been tasked with caring for a dying old man she barely knew, or when she found herself praying with Brendan's mother and sister, and taking her turn spoon-feeding baby food to this poor man who already looked like a corpse. It wasn't until weeks after that she gave in.

She still holds on to the clawing feeling of a nicotine craving that goes unheeded. There were e-cigarettes she could smoke around the house. She got into the flavours: blueberry and cherry and grape, mint, vanilla - dozens of them. She tried them all. The tobacco flavour was the worst one, if only for the insult of its pretending to taste like a cigarette. She always had a naggy feeling in the back of her mind that she wouldn't ever really quit, that some day she would start smoking again. She and Len called it Smoker's Brain, the part of her that wanted to forget to buy gum or patches, the voice that sometimes whispered, sometimes screamed: give in. She struggled to maintain the shaky truce between her Smoker's Brain and her rational brain.

Her Smoker's Brain was most active when she was drinking. The voice could be drowned out—she could forget about it altogether for days. Then she would drink and she saw blackness, literally dark, putrid blackness, her Smoker's Brain churning out flashes of evil in her possessed mind. She scratched herself and bit her nails raw and grinded her teeth. Her skin

always seemed dry and greasy at the same time. She would wake up with a sore jaw. The ease of being a smoker—being able to give in to a craving when she wanted to, not being forced to *care so much*—that was the most appealing thing.

The girl finally comes, fifteen minutes late. Merella knows her from high school, but doesn't really recognize her when she rolls down her window. She's driving an SUV and Merella, standing now, has to look up at her.

"Been awhile since I've been here," the girl says from behind aviator sunglasses.

Merella sort of grunts in recognition. "You have it?"

"Here." Sara holds up a bottle of Valium. "Hundred bucks."

Merella hands her the money.

Sara nods her head. "We should get a beer sometime. Catch up?"

"Yeah. I'd like that."

"I gotta go get my kids though. Give me a call, 'kay?"

Merella nods and watches her drive away. She walks back around the car, taking three pills out of the bottle, and swallows them down with more hot vodka from the glove compartment.

She hadn't smoked when she scraped the shit out of the bedpan and it splashed back up onto her from the toilet. Or when he coughed up blood and she had to wipe it off of his chin.

Merella pulls her car into the driveway of her house, next to Brendan's. The sound of compressed snow crunching under the wheels makes her shudder, like running a popsicle stick along her tongue. A subtle cruelty of winter. She's been taking vitamin-D pills and seeing her therapist regularly. She's been painting and actually getting work done. Since the funeral, Brendan hasn't been home much and she knows he's keeping busy instead of coping. Tonight she's making dinner and they'll watch a movie or something. February has been cold.

She takes the steps up the walk slowly, a bag of groceries in each hand. Her key in the lock sets off a chain reaction inside the house. Once the door is open, she hears the stirring of clothes, quick footsteps trying to be soft. Her recognition of the scene is not immediate. She puts the bags down. The foyer opens into the living room where a few lamps are burning, lighting either side. It is only when she walks down the hall on the right that she picks up frantic whispering on the thickness of the air.

"Hello?"

There is a light in her room at the end of the hall. Her stomach sinks in anticipation. She knows what she is about to see. Flashes of skin, forsaken buttons. Her cheeks feel hot—the only thing that really registers. They must be beet red, her cheeks. No words in the moment. What would she say, anyway? Brendan’s erection is clearly visible under his jeans, his belt undone. The other face she does not recognize. The woman’s face, looking up from the struggle of pulling on her pants.

She left the groceries at the door, she remembers. She’s making him dinner.

“Oh.” It escapes her mouth, without willing the sound. Her power of speech has been stolen from her. She simply turns around and walks down the hallway, back the way she came. Past the bags and out the door, into her car. She hears Brendan’s voice yelling after her, but she can’t respond and she doesn’t bother turning back. The tires crunch beneath her. He’s standing in the open doorway watching her pull away. He doesn’t run after her.

There is a cigarette shop beside the liquor store and she buys two packs of Belmont Milds and a lighter. It’s too cold to put the windows down all the way. Only a crack. Smoke mixes with her hot breath until she imagines she is almost invisible through the glass. When she gets back to the house the bottle is about halfway done and she parks crookedly in the driveway. Brendan’s car is gone. She catches her foot on a grocery bag in the foyer and throws her coat down in the living room, not bothering to get a cup. Ash on the carpet, putting her butts out in the wood of Brendan’s coffee table. She watches a Dawson’s Creek marathon until she passes out, the vodka still open in her hand.

A current of cool air whisks across the porch, breaking the soggy heat. Merella stares into the street wearing tortoiseshell Jackie Os from the dollar store, though the sun has just about gone down. It is her move.

“*Lair.*”

“Four points.”

“It’s all I got.”

“After five minutes of deliberation.”

“It was that or rail.”

“Or liar.”

Gavin has been sitting silently next to Len, looking at his letters. “Obsequious.”

“You have seven tiles.”

“I just wanted to say it. It’s a nice one to wrap your lips around. If I had seven more different ones I could do it. *Obsequious*.”

Merella lights a cigarette. “What does obsequious mean?”

“Obedient. Like sycophantic.”

“How do you know that?”

“I read? Len knows what it means.”

Silence from Merella. She taps the ash from her cigarette into the can at her feet and continues to tap it in annoyance after the ash is gone.

“Gavin is obsequious to my vagina.” Len chuckles at her own joke. “Gavin treats my vagina obsequiously.”

“Here—*Absent*. Eight points plus the triple letter score on the B, so fourteen. Mark it.”

“Whose move is it?”

“Yours. Ella just went, I went, it’s your turn.”

Merella picks up the tea-lights sitting on the window ledge and lights them individually, in sequence from left to right, managing to set each one back down, lit for a second, before the wind blows it out again. There are three candles. She continues to ash her cigarette every other candle or so into the can. In this fashion she lights the cycle of three candles and returns again to the first. She is deep in concentration.

“When’s Gavin leaving?” she asks.

“Hm?”

“He’s going to leave at some point, right?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.” Len shifts in her chair.

“It’s just this place only has one *real* bedroom and three people is sort of crowded. I’m just wondering when he’s going. Doesn’t he have to go back home?”

“We’ll talk about this later, Ella.”

“I mean he’s not paying rent, is he? It’s been a week now he’s been here.”

“You realize I’m sitting directly across the table from you.”

“Yes *thank you*, I realize where you are Gavin.”

“Ella, c’mon.”

“I’m gonna go, I think,” Gavin says.

“No don’t, it’s not her house. She doesn’t mean it.”

“I know what she means. I should go. I’ll call you later okay?” Gavin gets up and walks off the porch.

There is a ginkgo tree between the porch and the street and the martian leaves wave in the evening wind. It is almost completely dark now, only traces of the sun left around the horizon line. Len gets up and walks loudly inside leaving Merella with her cigarette, staring at the Scrabble board from behind her sunglasses.

Boxes. Boxes all around her, labelled for the rooms they belong to. Labelled *Handle With Care*. Labelled *Books*. Merella doesn’t have this much stuff but somehow the stuff she has fits into this many boxes. The pullout in Len’s living room is pushed in and there seems to be more space than ever before. Tomorrow is her last day here, before Gavin moves in. She hasn’t thought much about where she’ll stay. She’s rented a U-Haul for tomorrow evening but she might just leave it on the street somewhere.

She’s not packed her paintings. A stack of them leans against the couch and she sits cross-legged before it. This represents her life’s work, this stack. A foot and a half of oil on canvas. The bottle of Stolichnaya on the floor beside her is sitting in a pool of its own condensation. Now and then she takes a gulp.

Each of these paintings represents at least a month’s worth of effort. Some have been displayed in galleries around town, some she hates. There are only one or two that she really loves, of which she can say she’s actually proud. She sold some of the really nice ones here and there so the collection is not complete. The rest are superfluous and it frustrates her to look at them. But every once in awhile she will pull them all out and review them, take stock of the work she’s done.

She takes each one individually and arranges them in a circle around her, leaning them up against the boxes in clockwise order from oldest to newest. In the older canvases she can see herself mimicking the work of painters she admires, taking their ideas and repurposing them to make them her own. She sees herself messing around with form and with colour, with abstractions and with the kind of weird, awkward stuff you only do when you’re struggling to find your identity. One of them has a black pyre up the middle of it, a tower of ash, where she held it over a fire for no reason other than to see if it would look cool.

She looks at it now and winces, sipping vodka cross-legged on the hardwood. It all embarrasses her, alone in this room. She gets up to open a window and lights a cigarette, thinking Len won't mind. Not that she gives a shit; she won't be here after tomorrow.

There is one painting at the end of the circle that she loves and she stares at it. She doesn't believe sometimes that she painted it, that she created something that has satisfied her. Its brush strokes seem foreign, the image itself something that she would be drawn to in a gallery. The painting is alien to her. It's one of the ones from a brief period of productivity before Brendan left. She doesn't understand it and she doesn't think she ever will. There is something in her attachment to it that keeps her at a distance, like she can never see it fully. The others laying circled around her, she can say without a doubt what they are, what they represent. She can point out what is wrong with them and what she likes. She can break them all down to their bare elements, into contours and lines and shading and the vague outline of a woman's body through chaos. But this piece of cotton with chemicals spread unevenly on top seems to evade any attempt she makes to trap it and pin it down. It is something she has only ever experienced with this one painting, the one she likes the best, and when she's done with her cigarette, she puts it out through the centre of the thing.

## THE WEAKEST KIND OF FRUIT

### Chapter 1

Wallace Forsyth, the General Director, sat behind a wide desk of rich, dark wood, the sort of desk that is meant to project the power of the body sitting behind it. It was early on a sunny morning in late spring when Gordon Douglas walked in to find Forsyth with a thick file folder open on his desk.

The General Director looked up with a start and stood to greet his guest. “Agent Douglas, Agent Douglas, welcome welcome, sit sit!”

Gordon flinched. His boss was simultaneously gesturing outward with both arms, Nixon-style, and patting his tie down on his shirt. The tie, like his suit was thin, black and crisp: the shirt was rumpled, white. His frizzled hair was also white, and thinning at the top, brushed rather than combed when it was styled at all. A bright-pink pocket square, which Gordon hated, jutted out from his breast pocket. He was incapable of being quiet in any way and seemed to never stop moving.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Certainly is, certainly. How are you enjoying this *beautiful* spring weather, hmm?”

Forsyth gestured at the pink saucer of magnolias in full bloom on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows behind him.

“Yeah it’s, uh, nice.”

“We’ll be complaining about the heat in no time here, eh, Gordie?” He smiled broadly and smacked his desk. “Listen. Why has old G. D. Forsyth brought me to the big office. I can see you’re thinking it. Let’s get down to business – that’s why we’re here! I’ve been perusing your file. You’ve been with us a long time, oh let’s see how long exactly...?”

He made a show of flipping through the file in front of him.

Gordon spoke calmly. “Sixteen years this fall.”

“*Sixteen* years in the field, Gordon. Wheeew. That is remarkable.”

“Thank you,” he nodded.

“Don’t thank *me*! Look at me. Look! I’m *chained* to this desk here.”

Forsyth began pulling on his left arm as if the arm were indeed chained to the desk, a comically agonized look on his face. He was in the habit of performing elaborate stage flourishes as he spoke. Gordon had once seen him, at an early morning meeting that provided more of an audience than this one, stand on a table to recite Queen Elizabeth's speech to the troops at Tilbury.

Gordon hated these stupid meetings and check-ups. He tried to keep his head down and his mouth shut as much as possible. Better to keep the thing moving along than to say the wrong thing and offend Forsyth, or, worse, get him on a tangent.

"The field, Gordon. I long for it. I've memorized a quote from a poem I adore and I often use it to describe the experience of my longing to others. 'As the presence of those we love is as a double life, so absence, in its anxious longing and sense of vacancy, is as a foretaste of death.' A foretaste of *death*. This is how I feel being out of the field. Are you familiar with the work of Ms. Jameson?"

"Should I be?"

"Oh, Gordon. It will change the very makeup of your soul. Maybe I'll put some on the agency book club list for next year. But! I digress. Where were we? Yes, yes. Sixteen years. Remarkable. But let's be honest with ourselves, we're getting a little long in the tooth for this kind of work aren't we?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Forsyth raised his hand. "No. No. No. Before you say it – before you *think* it, Gordon – I'm not taking you out of the field. You stay where you are. No change there. I wouldn't dream of it. You're a hell of an asset out there Gordon and I want to keep it that way. Unless...you do want to continue your field work?"

Gordon perked up. "Why would I—? Yes. Of course I do."

"Probably don't want to be a desk jockey like me, eh?"

"I think...to be honest..."

Forsyth gave him a questioning look. "Let's be honest then."

"No, I don't want to be a desk jockey. Can I speak freely?"

"Be my guest."

“Sir, if I’m working here and I’m not in the shit, I might as well blow my fucking brains out the back of my head. Or you can take my gun and do it for me because it’s going to happen either way.”

“Fantastic! Let’s talk about shifting your role on the field team here.”

Gordon squirmed. “*Shifting role*, what is this?”

“I’m going to assign you an agent for training.”

“Wha—”

The General Director cleared his throat. “Yes.”

“If I may—” Gordon cut himself off. He took a series of long, deep breaths and sat back in his chair. “If I may, *sir*, I don’t know think I’m ready, as an agent, for that kind of supervisory role on the field team.”

“Well, if you like, Agent Douglas, the alternative is a transition to the *shackles*,” Forsyth held up his arm, “of a desk such as this one. And look, Gordon, tell me this isn’t a hell of a desk.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the desk.”

“Behold my desk, Gordon! This is a desk with a capital D. There’s nothing wrong with this desk or this job. I still get my kicks one way or another. But let me be clear – you have a choice here.”

The fluorescents hummed overhead as Gordon ran this over in his mind. There was no choice. Maybe they’d let him go back to work after he put in some time as a schoolmarm. Then again, maybe not. Maybe he’d be teaching for the rest of his career. In that case, he might end up putting a gun in his mouth after all.

He could just make out his silhouette in the glass behind the General Director. His own body language told him he’d been defeated.

“I joined in the first place to work in the field. If teaching is my only option to continue on in the field, then I don’t see any alternative.”

The General Director raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure you don’t want to think on it for a while?” he asked.

“Yes. Let’s get this over with.”

“Splendid then!” The General Director held down a button on his desktop phone console. “Carol can you send her in?”

“Are we doing this *now*?”

“Yes, Gordon, we want to get you started right away. I am *excited* by this. I think you ought to be excited as well. Training the agency’s next generation of young minds! Noble. Important. Work.”

“Can we at least discuss financial—”

“Yes, yes of course, we can talk about that later, hmm?—Look!” Forsyth shot up out of his chair. “Come in, come in! Agent Douglas, this right here is the lovely, the fresh-faced, the *brilliant*, Agent Evelyn Putt.”

He ran around the desk to greet her.

She was in her mid-twenties with red hair and bone-white skin, her cheekbones peppered with freckles. The black pantsuit she wore was less of a pantsuit and more of a regular suit, with pants rather than a skirt and a white blouse underneath that was buttoned all the way to the top. Gordon noticed the side of her mouth jerk back slightly as Forsyth spoke the word “lovely.” She offered her hand, which Gordon took without bothering to stand.

“Evelyn,” she said.

“Yeah, hi.”

Gordon noted her firm handshake and slumped back down. She took the empty seat next to him.

“You have a beautiful office, sir,” she said, taking in the flowering trees behind the director.

Gordon popped a stick of gum from his shirt pocket into his mouth then stretched out the wrapper between his hands and stared down at it.

“Yes, it’s wonderful, wonderful,” Forsyth began. “Gordon, Agent Putt is one of our most promising young agents.”

“Yeah I bet.”

“Beg pardon?”

Gordon didn’t look up. “Nothing.”

“Wonderful. Let’s not waste time. I have your assignment here.” He picked up a stack of two slim folders from the pile of detritus on his desk and held them between both hands. “You’ll be working more or less as partners.”

Gordon looked up. “Partners? Sir, with no offence to Evelyn here – this is bullshit. I’ve been in the field since she was in middle school.”

“Maybe you’ll learn something then, Gordon. Agent Putt, you will defer to Agent Douglas as your senior. Agent Douglas, I want you to take every opportunity to acclimatize Agent Putt here to the field. Here’s an idea. Putt, ask Douglas a question.”

She opened her mouth and closed it. “Excuse me?”

Forsyth nodded, grinning and showing his teeth.

“Sir?”

“Go ahead! Ask Agent Douglas a question. Remember: there are *no bad questions*.”

She scratched at her scalp nervously. “What, uh, do we do with receipts—”

Forsyth continued to nod from across the desk.

“—receipts from meals and that kind of thing?”

Forsyth smacked his desk yet again. Putt flinched.

“Wonderful! They don’t teach you that at training,” he laughed to himself. “Agent Douglas? What *do* we do with receipts from meals and that kind of thing?”

Gordon kept his eyes on the gum wrapper that he was now carefully folding.

“We save our itemized receipts and we bring them to accounting after each assignment,” he mumbled.

“How do you like to save yours?” Forsyth asked. The way he continued to hold the case files, just out of reach of the agents, slightly aloft, reminded Gordon of the way a dog owner holds a treat before their dog performs a trick. “Do you keep them in your wallet? Maybe a binder? Do you have a file folder that you keep in your car?”

“Receipts?” Gordon smacked his gum loudly as he spoke. “I keep them in my wallet.”

“Why’s that?”

“A folder or a binder can be big. If you’re trying to pack light, which we are, that won’t work. And if someone searches your car and finds a binder full of receipts they can track your movements and establish a timeline based on your whereabouts.” He paused for dramatic effect, chewing with his mouth open, before looking directly at Agent Putt. “Then they’d probably torture you for information and kill you.”

“Oh that’s *good*,” Forsyth said. “May I ask a follow-up?”

“It’s your office.”

“Agent Putt?”

“Of course, Sir.”

“Don’t mind if I do then. Agent Douglas, how long does it usually take for you to be reimbursed for your field expenses?” He folded his hands and stared over them inquisitively.

Gordon crossed his legs. “Hard to say. Depends who handles them. If it’s Jennifer then I’d say maybe a week you get a cheque. If it’s Ray? Anywhere from a week to three or four.”

“So maybe it’s best if Agent Putt here brings her receipts to Jennifer then?”

“If you really need the fast food money back for something, yeah.”

Forsyth dropped the case files on his desk and leaned back in his chair with a satisfied look on his face.

“Agent Putt. This man,” he jabbed with his forefinger in Gordon’s direction, “this man is a *wellspring* of field knowledge. I suggest you take full advantage of this unique opportunity to learn from a master of the craft.”

“I hope to, Sir.”

The gum wrapper was now a ball.

“Now.” Forsyth shuffled the case files. “The assignment is a simple kill job. All the relevant info is in here. Off you go.”

## Chapter 2

The young man’s hands trembled in the low blue light, wet with the juice of an onion. The other man, the man who held the gun, spoke only to hurry him, but when he spoke the quiver in the young man’s hands became more pronounced. Every now and then came a flicker from overhead, from the lone halogen bulb in a cheap industrial fixture. They stood in the corner of a larger room, the rest of which was in darkness. The young man squinted. A rickety ventilation fan wheezed. The fixture was suspended from the ceiling by two lengths of dust-choked chain. It did not sway.

Unwashed and frail, his hair matted down with grease, the young man looked much older than his twenty-two years. His eyes darted all around, scanning for some expected threat that, tonight, wouldn’t come.

A full, home-sized kitchen had been built in the corner of the room in which the two men stood. In the young man's immediate line of sight were a stove, a refrigerator, a drip coffee maker, a sink with running hot and cold water, a yellow-handled restaurant-grade chef's knife, a two-pound packet of ground beef, cutting boards of various standard sizes, cabinets made of cheap wood that were well stocked with dry ingredients and canned non-perishables, two large carrots, a head of celery, and a plastic mesh bag of cooking onions, a microwave oven, a kettle that sat on the stove, a dog-eared hardcover copy of Marcella Hazan's *Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking*, stained and crusty, open to the page bearing the recipe for Homemade Tagliatelle with Bolognese Meat Sauce, a yellow handled restaurant-grade serrated bread knife, a red ceramic dutch oven in which olive oil was being heated, a bottle of white wine with no vintage on the label, milk. The yellow-handled restaurant-grade paring knife was not in plain view. Behind him, where an island might be placed in a normal kitchen, was a tall dining room table. The other man stood between the young man and this table.

The young man dropped the chopped onions in the oil and stirred with a wooden spoon. He chopped the carrot and celery while he waited for the onions to become translucent, then he added the carrot and the celery. Over the sizzle in the pot and the constant drone of the fan a door slammed somewhere off in the bowels of the building. He wiped sweat from his brow with his forearm.

"Now," he said, "I need to add the meat."

He opened the packet of beef and emptied it into the pot, letting the blood from the bottom of the package drip off before breaking it up with the back of the wooden spoon, adding salt and grinding in pepper. He washed his hands with dish soap. The man with the gun leaned back on the edge of the table and it creaked against the floor. The mixture bubbled and spat grease onto the stove. The recipe called for a 3:1 ratio of ground chuck to ground pork but concessions were made, as they always were, without the young man's input. He worked with what he was given.

Both of them waited while first the milk and then the wine bubbled off. The young man wiped the counter with a rank cloth that hung over the faucet. His clothes were covered in different greases and sauces from using them to wipe his own hands covered in onion or garlic or the juice of raw meat. When he wasn't in this kitchen with a gun to his back he would smell these things on his clothes, like a porous wooden cutting board retains the smells of the things

cut on its surface. A clean white apron was draped over his dirty t-shirt and jeans. This was new. The apron had a small pocket in the front just large enough to hold a meat thermometer or the handle of a spatula or to conceal the yellow handle of a paring knife.

“I’m going to open this can of tomatoes,” the young man said.

He brought the sauce, now a bright red, down from the boil to simmer lazily. He and the other man had three hours to kill.

“Do I make the tagliatelle or do we have dry pasta?” he asked. He didn’t turn around.

“Follow the recipe.”

He heard the sound of the guard’s lips cracking as he opened them to speak.

“Are you thirsty?”

“Yes.”

He opened the cupboard farthest to the right and extracted two glasses, filling them with water from the cold tap, and placed one on the counter to his right. The other he brought to his own mouth.

“Thank you,” the guard said.

The young man got a bag of 00-flour and four eggs and set them on the counter in front of him. He used a big bowl rather than the countertop for mixing the dough, which he did with his hands. When the eggs were incorporated into the flour he rolled it all up into a big ball and stopped. He looked up. The pasta machine was on the top shelf of the cupboard to the far left. He opened the cupboard and stood on the tips of his toes to reach for the machine. The knife poked against his groin. In trying to reach the machine he pushed it further into the cupboard. The other man was significantly taller.

“Can I get a stool?” he asked.

“No stool.”

He sighed loudly. “Could you get the machine down for me then? I can’t reach that high.”

The other man was silent for a moment. He took a step toward the counter. The young man was careful not to turn his head too far to look at the other man. He saw the guard put his gun in the front of his pants underneath his belt. The young man’s right hand hovered over his own thighs, near his groin. When the guard reached up the young man noticed dandruff on his back. He wore a black suit with a black shirt underneath. Though the other man was tall, he had

to work in order to stretch his arms and torso up to reach the machine, pulling the muscles and the skin on the sides of his body tight.

The young man pierced the yellow-handled paring knife into the unprotected flesh on the lower right side of the guard's torso once, then twice, then over and over again. The guard let out a breathy moan. At one point, the lower part of the blade got stuck, momentarily, in the layers of the suit. The young man counted every strike, each with its own dull thump, as he moved in no particular pattern across the soft flesh of the man's lower back to the left side, though the body had slumped over the counter well before the first ten blows had been dealt, before the sound turned wet and the handle of the blade grew sticky. He slipped on the pool of blood that flowed down the fabric of the guard's pants. When his thumb was sore from anchoring the knife in his fist, he drove the blade down between the man's ribs with a grunt and left it there, its restaurant-quality yellow handle smeared with a deep, rich red.

The sauce bubbled and spat onto the stove.

The young man wiped the blood on his hands on the clean white apron before washing them with dish soap and ditching the apron. He grabbed the handgun from the other man's belt and wiped the sweat and tears from his face with his t-shirt. His footsteps left a trail of blood across the room that got less and less distinct as he approached the door. By the time he left the room his shoes no longer stuck to the floor.

### **Chapter Three**

Gordon exchanged a wave with Forsyth's secretary as he and Putt walked out of the office. Putt squeezed her dossier to her chest like she was trying to strangle it.

"They give you an office?" Gordon asked.

She seemed caught off guard. "No? Not yet at least. I came in today for the first time for this meeting."

Gordon shook his head, unsure what he'd done to deserve this.

"You can hang out in mine for the time being I guess."

They made a few turns and eventually made their way to a long hallway of closed doors, each one finished with the same textured false wood, making the space look like a hotel rather than an office. Gordon slid his key into one of the doors at the end of the hall and they entered.

He tried to avoid his office as much as possible. Inside were two chairs facing a small desk with a little window above it. A calendar from the year before hung beside the window. The furniture was rigid and clean looking, modern, but cheap. The surface of the desk was bare except for a dead cactus and a single framed photo.

Putt scanned the room with a puzzled look on her face.

“I’m not in here much,” Gordon said, throwing his dossier on the desk. “Except to do paperwork when I have it.” He nodded at Putt. “Yours will be the same sort of deal.”

He took the picture frame and put it in the desk drawer, and caught her following his movements. He didn’t want her asking about his personal life. He picked up the cactus and tossed it in the trashcan for good measure.

“We should go.” He turned to leave and stopped. “You ever do a job like this before?”

“I served four years in the military before I went to school. But I didn’t see action.”

He nodded. “No action. Have you ever had to kill anybody, is what I was asking.”

“Oh,” she said, sheepish. “No, I haven’t.”

Typical. Obviously the agency had loosened the requirements for agents entering the field since he’d become an agent, Gordon thought. A dozen or so life or death scenarios flashed through his head. He wondered how responsible he was for her survival. Who was culpable if she got killed on his watch? Maybe he could just shoot her and be done with it.

Putt spoke up. “You’re not going to have to hold my hand through it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That’s pretty much what I’m worried about, yeah.”

He locked the office door on their way out.

“They even issue you a gun yet?”

She flashed him a goofy smile and shook her head.

He wasn’t amused. “Christ,” he said.

Gordon squinted through a set of binoculars, across a narrow strip of tall swaying grass, at the Hilton Garden Inn. The building was stuccoed a dusty taupe, barely standing out behind the dried grass and cattails that separated the hotel from the carpool lot in which they were parked. It was mid-day; a shadow was just beginning to creep over the east side of the building.

Gordon lowered his binoculars and slumped back. “Target’s name?”

“Lloyd Manners.”

“Occupation.”

She took a deep breath. This was their third time through this routine.

“Philanthropist. Independently wealthy.”

A gust of wind whistled through the crack in the passenger side door and whipped the grass back and forth. Patches of shadow floated across the asphalt around them as cumulonimbus tore across the sky.

“There’s a can of peanuts in the glove box.”

She stared. “Would you like them?”

“Yes, I would like some peanuts. Would you prefer it if I reached over you and grabbed them myself?”

She popped the latch and rummaged around. “I’ve never seen so many napkins in one place.”

“You never know.”

She passed over the jar.

“And...?” Gordon said.

“And what?”

He poured peanuts into his cupped hand. “Philanthropist, independently wealthy, and...?”

“And child sex trafficker, drug peddler, murderer, bad guy.”

He held out the open bag.

“I’m good,” she said, undoing the top button of her shirt. “Can we crack a window in here? I’m starting to schvitz through this jacket.”

He brought the binoculars back up to his eyes. “Imagine being a parent and naming your baby boy, Lloyd? No wonder he turned to a life of crime.”

She flipped through the file on her lap. “Says here Lloyd Manners the third.”

Gordon chewed louder.

“Can I ask what you’re looking at?” Putt said.

He handed her the binoculars. “Room on the top floor at the end of the building is where he’s booked. Five floors up you wouldn’t expect the windows to open, would you? Those ones do. And there’s a balcony. You see anything?”

She scrunched her face and turned up her nose when she looked through the lenses. A bit like a squirrel, Gordon thought.

“Looks like a camera on the corner of the building,” she said. “Not necessarily pointed at that balcony though.”

“It isn’t.”

“Glass is tinted. Is it bulletproof?”

Gordon made a clicking sound out of the side of his mouth. “You got it.”

“Why would the windows of a hotel room off the 401 be bulletproof?”

“Hey,” he jostled the peanuts around in his fist. “You’re the student.”

Putt brought the binoculars down to chest height. “I’m an Agent.”

“Junior Agent.”

“Is it a normal thing for hotels to do that with VIP rooms?”

He shook his head. “Not at a stopover hotel like this one. What’s their main clientele, a place like this? Conferences, people who don’t wanna pay for a room closer to the airport, maybe an office Christmas party. Not many high rollers coming through Brampton and staying the night.”

“So what?” she asked.

“Does it say anything in there about Lloyd staying at this hotel?”

She passed back the binoculars and licked her middle digit before flipping through the pages.

“Doesn’t say anything,” she said. “What’s your theory?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have one.”

They both stared straight ahead. Gordon tracked a red-winged blackbird as it arced over the grass and perched on a single tall blade, which bent under the bird’s weight. Together they bobbed up and down with the wind.

“Well,” she said, finally. “The buildings of these kinds of hotels aren’t usually owned by the parent company. They’ll lease the name and renovate the building to fit what a Hilton Garden Inn is supposed to look like.”

“So who owns the building?”

“If it’s owned by Manners that would explain the glass. Maybe he had it specially outfitted.”

Gordon shook the nuts in his fist. “It really doesn’t say in there who owns it? If he owns the building and he’s not just staying here this could be a little more difficult.”

She flipped through the dossier again. “No, nothing.”

“Bullshit. Give it here.” He glanced through the relevant pages before giving up and throwing the folder back onto Putt’s lap with a sigh. “That’s not good. I don’t like that.”

He turned the keys in the ignition to turn the battery on and rolled the windows down an inch.

“Nice catch,” he said.

## **Chapter Four**

The young man ran until he reached the woods, hunched forward, his head darting left and right to look over his shoulder. Light from a waxing gibbous moon illuminated the earth in front of him, casting a long, faint shadow across the wet grass. Just inside the treeline, he stopped. He was out of breath and he gulped in the moist air. The vegetation around him smelled sweet and green. He did not know how long he had been kept in the basement with the dust and the grease and the mouse shit on the stained bare mattress. Even the dirt underneath his feet smelled fresh.

From where he stood he could see the floodlights at the back of the building over the door from which he’d made his escape, though their light wasn’t bright enough to reach the woods. He looked up at the starless sky. It was a clear night, no clouds. He concentrated his attention on the buzz of traffic somewhere off on the other side of the building. He was in the city then, he thought.

A shallow stream trickled a few paces into the woods. He squatted down and cupped some water in his hands before letting it fall back through his fingers. He splashed water on his face over and over again. Once he felt satisfied, he sat back with his legs out in front of him, toes up. He was glad to have had the sense to steal a pair of work boots on his way out.

He picked up the gun from the ground beside him and aimed between his feet, one eye closed, as if he could see in the dark. It was heavier than he’d expected it to be when he’d taken it, more solid. The grip on the handle had a distinct feeling, unlike anything he had ever felt in his hands before. Finding what he thought must be the safety, he switched it off and then back on, and pulled back the hammer with his thumb and forefinger. It clicked. He did not know what

the click meant. There was another button on the side and he pushed it, releasing the clip into his lap and directly onto a testicle. He winced as he picked it up and inspected it. The clip should tell him how many bullets were loaded in the gun, he knew, but he could not figure out where to look for this information. He turned it around in his hands, looking at the bottom, the sides, and the top, which showed a single bullet. His knowledge of handguns was from movies; he expected to look at the clip and know right away whether it was fully loaded or not. There was no way for him to tell whether this expectation was wrong or if he was simply too stupid to figure it out. He lined the clip up with the handle once more and pushed it back in place. This action was very satisfying.

He had time, he thought. Nobody ever came down to the kitchen while he was cooking other than the man who was there to keep him from running away, and he was dead. It would be a few hours at least before anyone realized he'd escaped. He got to his feet and began to walk slowly along the perimeter of the forest, circling around to head in the direction of the sound of traffic, staying out of sight just inside the trees.

Once he reached the other side of the building he froze. There were a few men in the driveway unloading boxes from a truck. He was careful not to make a sound as he squeezed the gun in his hand. None of the faces were recognizable. This was no surprise. They had gone out of their way to keep him from seeing anyone. Other than the man with the gun and one or two other people he'd glimpsed by mistake, he hadn't met anybody else. He turned and began to make his way into the forest.

There was no way for him to measure the time it took to reach the other side of the trees. He'd lived so long in that room without any concept of time that he was grateful just to be moving, to walk in one direction and not be stopped by a wall. At one point he came to a chain-link fence and followed it along for a few metres before finding a break large enough to crawl underneath.

The sound of cars grew louder and louder until he realized that he was approaching a highway. He placed the gun in his back pocket and came out of the trees underneath an overpass where a fire was set with two men sitting around it, their shadows flickering on the concrete of the bridge's graffiti-spotted girders. There was a rope stretched out behind one of the men, between a girder and a tree, with a tarp draped over it, forming a makeshift tent. They looked up as he approached, squinting to make out his face over the light of the fire.

“Any luck?” the older of the two asked him. He had a long, chunky beard.

The young man did not respond.

“Raymond?” the man asked again, rising from his seat.

The young man stopped. “Do you have water?” he asked.

Standing now, the bearded man shielded his hand over his eyes to get a better look. They stared at each other for a moment before the bearded man looked at his companion and nodded in the direction of the young man. The other man, still seated, held out a large plastic jug and the young man grabbed it, careful not to get too close.

“Thought you were Raymond,” the bearded man said. “Where’d you come from?”

He said nothing.

“You alright?”

He brought the jug down to his chest and wiped his mouth. “Other side of the forest...that way,” he said quietly, pointing into the trees.

The men looked at each other and back at the young man.

“Are you hungry?” the bearded man asked.

He nodded.

The bearded man got to his feet again and began rummaging through a backpack behind his seat. “We have some bread here. Afraid that’s all I can give you.”

The young man approached tentatively as the bearded man held out two crusty slices of whole wheat bread, careful again not to get too close. He took them and thanked the bearded man before peeling off a piece of crust with his teeth.

The other by the fire spoke up. He wore a hat.

“You can sit down and join us if you like.”

Chewing seemed to take forever. “Thank you,” the young man said, sitting down next to the bearded man.

A metallic thump sounded on the sandy earth behind him.

The bearded man looked at the ground, then back up at the young man, who was frozen to the spot, realizing what it was that had fallen. The man’s eyes, which before had been kind, were suddenly dark, wild, barely visible over the beard that concealed all his other features.

“What is that?” the man asked, turning to face the young man..

The young man picked the gun up off the ground and held it in the palm of his hand. He did not reply.

“You plan on using that tonight, boy?”

The wooden pallets in the fire crackled louder and spat as the bearded man stared him down. The young man focused his attention on the fire and chewed his bread.

“Answer me.”

He lunged at the boy and grabbed him by the throat. He was strong and big and smelled like unwashed clothes and piss and the sharp rotting sweat in his beard. The young man fired once into the man’s body and it went heavy and still. He sensed the man become an inanimate object as his weight shifted. He rolled over, out from underneath the bearded man, and scrambled to stand up, looking over the fire at the other with the hat. The man was shivering. He said nothing as the young man pointed with the gun. The young man felt his bottom lip begin to tremble uncontrollably and his tear ducts begin to fill. He was being guided through the motions; he wanted to drop the gun, which shook in his hand, to eat the bread, tossed onto the ground in the scuffle. He was thirsty and wanted to drink. Instead he squeezed the grip and fired over the flames and wiped the tears off his chin.

## **Chapter Five**

“Doin’ okay?”

The lighting in the Hilton Garden Inn was fluorescent and horrible. Gordon sat upright in a booth in the hotel’s restaurant, the Garden Grille and Bar, with a half-finished cheeseburger and fries on the table in front of him, momentarily mesmerized by the repeating pattern of burgundies and oranges on the carpet.

The server tried again, this time with a little more urgency. “Doin’ okay?”

He shook himself out of it. “Great.” He tapped his glass, which was halfway-full. “Can I get another Coke?”

She smiled. “Of course.”

He dipped a fry in the burger juice congealing on the plate and chewed. There wasn’t much to surveil from here. In contrast to the dark, dull colour of the carpet, the upholstery on the booth in which he was sitting was a washed out green, nearly white, like it had forgotten it was

supposed to be green. There were cameras mounted to the ceiling at the room's entrances and exits, one in the hallway leading to the bathroom, and another in the corner of the bar area. A few sad bird of paradise palm trees were scattered around the dining room in an effort to brighten the place up, their leaves simultaneously droopy, flaccid, and dry. Rooms like this one made him feel depressed.

"Fuuuuuck this," he mumbled to himself.

A voice sounded in his ear. "What?"

"Don't worry about it. Talking to myself." He heard the sound of a page flipping somewhere near Putt's mic.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Hotels like this freak me out."

"Why's that?"

He picked at a fingernail. "Makes me feel like a chimp. Decorated the same, laid out the same – if there's a Hilton a town over from here it looks just like this one. People are too easy. It depresses me." He paused. "Malls too."

"All the better to spot if Manners has made any modifications to the floor plan."

She was right, he knew. "I'm not going to find anything in here."

"Wel—"

"*Shh*," he interrupted. "Waitress."

The server took the Coke off her tray and placed it in on a fresh coaster in front of him.

"Thanks," he said.

Putt spoke into the earpiece. "Buddy up."

He winced through a polite-customer smile and cleared his throat. Buddy up. Fuck you, buddy up.

"How long have you been working here?" he asked.

The server smiled back with a practiced and patient smile. "Four-five years?"

She was in her late-thirties, Gordon guessed, her light brown hair tied up in a tight bun the size of a fist. The manner in which she spoke was short but not gruff, friendly but distanced. Her uniform – white blouse, ugly green patterned vest, unflattering black trousers with heavy pleats, non-slip black shoes – was ironed and pressed, the blouse tucked into the pants, the shoes polished. The only distinguishing item she wore was a thin gold chain around her neck bearing a

small cross – this usually hung under her blouse, but it seemed to him that she hadn't looked in the mirror in a while, considering the way it stuck out above her top button at a jaunty angle. Though she obviously took pains to make sure everything was in perfect order, she could not hide the faded black fabric of her pants or the slight yellowing of the shirt or the hint of cigarette smoke below the smell of her perfume and hairspray. A career server, he guessed.

"I was a server for a long time," he lied. "You like working here?"

Her smile became noticeably more genuine at the mention of his past employment.

"Great, actually."

"Corporate gig. What's that like? Good money I bet."

"Money's great," she began, smacking her gum. "We get a lot of conferences and that kind of thing coming through and those guys are big tippers."

"Big or nothing at all I bet."

She laughed. "Exactly."

"What's the management like?"

A pause. "Good. A little weird sometimes but good."

"Weird like how?" He raised his eyebrows in interest.

"The restaurant managers are great. But the owner's a big shot, comes through every now and then and has weird room service requests for the kitchen. Orders these big platters of food he never eats. Likes to be," she gave him a look, "*entertained*."

Gordon laughed and raised his glass. "Got it. I think I know the type."

She laughed again. "He's here right now actually. We're all just waiting on that room service order. Kitchen's placing bets on what it'll be."

"Sounds like endless fun. I'm Don by the way."

"Cathy."

"Nice to meet you Cathy." He flashed his teeth.

"You too. Can I get you anything else?"

"Just the cheque I think."

"You got it."

She smacked her gum and walked away.

"You like that? We're buddies now, me and Cathy."

"Bingo," Putt said in his ear.

“I’m gonna go check out this fancy room he’s got.”

He heard another page flip. “I’ll be here,” she said.

“What’re you doing, reading?”

“Yes. The manual for your car.”

He ate another fry. “Breathtaking.”

## Chapter Six

Evelyn Putt was bored. Already, she’d broken the rules by getting out of the car to sneak two cigarettes. She worried that another would make the smell impossible to hide from Gordon once he came back from the hotel. They didn’t know each other well enough for her to trust him not to report her, even for something minor like leaving a vehicle during a surveillance operation. Normally she figured a guy like that wouldn’t give a shit, but he seemed to be set on punishing her whenever he got the chance. It wasn’t her fault he didn’t want to be here.

The earpiece had been quiet since he’d left the table. She knew this was a good sign but still it made her uneasy. He was probably in Manners’ room.

The pages of the manual snapped back and forth with each gust that blew through the windows, which she’d rolled all the way down. The floor was covered in what looked like sand. Stray pieces of yellow grass poked out from underneath the mats. The interior smelled as if someone had spilled a dairy product on the upholstery at some point. Some salt-crusted pocket change here and there told her Gordon hadn’t cleaned his car since at least the winter. This was no surprise.

She wondered about his home life. He didn’t wear a wedding band but she’d noticed his habit of flicking his thumb against the underside of his ring finger, spinning an invisible ring. It was something Evelyn’s mother did incessantly, even now, as a widow, when she no longer wore a ring. Evelyn had memories of her mother’s left hand on the steering wheel of her Volvo, that finger flicking away, the smell of hairspray, and her mother’s eyes in the rear-view mirror checking back to make sure Evelyn was still there. Perhaps Gordon, too, was a widower. Statistically much more likely it was divorce, though. Still, the way he’d put that picture of the woman into the desk in his office was telling. She pegged him for the kind of guy more likely to throw a picture of his ex-wife into the garbage along with that poor cactus.

Evelyn didn't even know if he had kids. Probably not. She'd seen no pictures, no kid-related items in the glove-box or the other places in the car where she'd snooped. Every parent she knew talked about their kids constantly. Even if the parent was a little guarded like he was, she'd have expected to hear something about a pick-up time or an offhand comment about some aspect of his kid's life. Also, while the suit he wore was well cut and seemed expensive, it didn't look new, so she figured his weight and build had stayed pretty much consistent. If his lunch order in the Hilton today was an accurate representation of his normal diet, he had plenty of free time to spend at the gym.

Cars came and went sporadically from the lot as she watched in the mirror, people getting out, reconfiguring seating plans, moving things around in the trunk. She guessed at their stories too. Commuters. Divorced parents meeting in the middle to exchange children. College kids on road trips getting out to stretch their legs, their cars packed to the gills. These normal people coming and going, living their lives, made her feel separated from normal life, like she was observing from above. She'd just started this job, Evelyn thought, and already she felt like an alien. How many years had Gordon been in the field? Fifteen? Twenty? What did that feel like? Maybe Gordon's wife had wanted to do normal things.

She shivered and pushed her aviator sunglasses back up the bridge of her nose.

"Fuck it," she said under her breath.

She hit the mute button on her mic and got out of the car to light a cigarette. Leaning against the hood, engulfed in the buzzing chorus of traffic from the highway, Evelyn stared at the empty stucco of the Hilton Garden Inn. If Gordon wanted to give her shit he could go ahead. He was in there having all the fun.

Overhead, patches of blue sky were being overtaken by darkening clouds, which were moving faster now than before, mobilizing for a storm. She turned her collar up and held her jacket closed while she smoked.

The asphalt ended a metre or so from the spot in front of the car, after which it turned into pea gravel. The ground declined sharply into the gully that separated the carpool lot from the parking lot of the Hilton. Knotted with plastic bags and water bottles, fast food containers and discarded undergarments, there was a chain-link fence situated at the foot of the ravine, its base obscured by tall weeds, cattails and a clotted stream of black runoff water, exactly at the middle point before the ground sloped back up again into gravel and became the Hilton lot.

Something moved on the other side of the fence, in the periphery of her vision.

It was hard to make out through the thicket of grass, but there was a figure walking slowly along the fence about fifty metres to her right, near the end of the lot in which she was standing. She took a look behind her – there was a lull in the carpool activity. The figure inched along toward a break in the fence about halfway between the end of the lot and where Evelyn stood. The fence clinked softly. She watched as hands pried the broken fence apart and a man's head poked through, looking tentatively left and right, before the rest of him followed. He looked to be in his early twenties, frighteningly thin, with short, greasy brown hair, an oversized yellow t-shirt stained all over with mud and filthy wet jeans caked to his legs.

Keeping an eye on him, Evelyn backed around to the other side of the car and pretended she hadn't seen him. She didn't think he'd noticed her but she wanted to be safe. She had no gun, after all.

The man continued in the same direction along the fence, sloshing his boots through the weeds. He was skittish, like an injured animal, looking off in every direction and hunched over as if he was trying to protect himself from something. He seemed harmless enough, scared. She decided to risk it and took a step forward as he reached the stretch of fence adjacent to Gordon's car. Noticing her, he jumped and stopped in his tracks.

"Hi," Evelyn said.

The man stood silently, staring at her with a desperate fear in his eyes that would have communicated mania if he didn't look so defeated. She was struck by how ill he looked. His skin was yellow, his cheeks sunken, with dark shadows under the eyes. His hair was patchy and sparse. He was shivering.

She spoke again, dropping her cigarette to the ground and stepping forward. "Do you need help?"

He looked around him, nodding unevenly, with a trembling lower lip.

"My name is Evelyn," she told him, putting her hands up in front of her, palms out, and gesturing toward the car. "I have food and water. Are you thirsty?"

He nodded.

She reached into the open window and pulled out a bottle of water.

"Here." She took a step toward him, holding it out.

When it became clear he wasn't going to come to her, she nodded in understanding and made a show of getting down on one knee and rolling the bottle across the asphalt.

He scooped it up and sipped, cautiously.

She took off her sunglasses. "I work in law enforcement. Are you in danger?"

He nodded.

"I understand," she said, speaking as clearly as possible. "I can make sure you'll be safe, okay? Okay. I'm going to get something for you to eat out of the car, I want you to stay right here. Can you do that for me?"

He clutched the water bottle tightly and nodded again.

Evelyn grabbed the sandwich that was meant to be her lunch. She looked up before turning back around in his direction. A deep rumble of thunder drummed across the sky as the air grew suddenly chilly and the wind shifted northwest, thrusting the wall of greenery against the fence, which clang and rattle against its posts and made ripples in the water at the man's feet. She handed him the sandwich.

"It's about to rain," she said, her voice just shy of a shout to carry over the wind, her eyes on the sky.

She held out her hand. "Do you want to get in my car? You'll be dry."

He gripped the sandwich to his chest and looked up at the sky.

"I have no reason to hurt you, you can trust me. I've just given you my lunch."

"Okay," he whispered, finally, and reached for her hand.

She helped him into the back seat and got the windows up just as the first drops of rain burst against the windshield. The smell of him was overpowering. As a curtain of water descended over the car, Evelyn watched in silence as he ate, wondering what she was going to do with him, what he was running from.

Meanwhile, a man in a black plastic poncho watched the car from the other side of the fence, his fingers clutching the links.

## **Chapter Seven**

To get to the main lobby from the Garden Grille and Bar Gordon was forced to walk down a short flight of stairs and along a narrow, meandering hallway until he reached an

anteroom with a door on the left labelled Conference Room One, across from which were three more doorways, none of them marked. Up until this point, the management staff of the Hilton had posted helpful tin arrows from the dollar store with the word “Lobby” printed on them to help guide guests, but across from Conference Room One, they had neglected to do this, leaving lobby-seeking guests to make a choice of their own.

Gordon chewed his gum and stared at his three options, Conference Room One at his back. The entranceway on the right led to another hall that ended in an emergency exit: he could see the exit itself at the end of the hall from where he stood. In the middle was the only one of the three opening that had an actual door. Option three veered sharply to the left in the direction of the rest of the building. Or so he thought – it was difficult to determine in which direction he was looking after getting all mixed up on the way from the restaurant.

He walked through the third doorway, the one on the left, and followed the corridor until he came out on one side of the lobby with the hotel’s main entrance directly in front of him. The elevators were to his right, at the opposite end of the room from the front desk. A matted beige carpet with a massive Hilton insignia in the middle of it, fading to white in high traffic areas, took up most of the room’s floor space. Each corner had a sitting area in which no one sat: brownish chairs and loveseats set around low coffee tables, a few magazines and brochures fanned over their surfaces, each table with its own vase of artificial flowers on top. A few people, mostly Hilton staff, milled about.

Gordon straightened his tie and approached the concierge at the front desk, flashing her what he hoped was a charming smile.

She smiled back, stiffly.

“Welcome to the Hilton Garden Inn. What can I do for you today?”

Her hair was pulled back into an uncomfortably tight looking bun that tugged at the skin of her face. Her concierge uniform was similar to those worn by flight attendants but without the addition of an ascot: a black jacket with padded shoulders, a Hilton-branded nametag, a powder blue button-down shirt with two buttons undone below a heavily starched collar and a pencil skirt that ended just below the knee. Gordon found it difficult to determine if her tone of voice was overly polite or sarcastic.

“Hi there,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Trisha. How can I help you?”

“Trisha. I’m Kyle. Listen, I was wondering if you could do me a favour.” He flashed her a conspiratorial grin. “It’s my first day – I’m the new hire for the supervisory security position? And – God, this is embarrassing – I seem to have gotten a little mixed up? I came in by the restaurant and I’m having trouble finding the security office. They gave me instructions but I must have lost them. Geez, I feel like an idiot.”

“Oh of course. It happens to the best of us around here.”

He nodded, his cheeks beginning to get sore from smiling, and forced a laugh. “I bet it does.”

“And on your first day!” She looked at him sideways like she was scolding him.

He threw his hands up. “I know! I’m trying to make a good impression.”

Trisha took out a notepad from somewhere under the desk.

“It’ll be fine. What you’re going to do,” she began, “is go to the elevators over there and go down to the bottom floor, then—”

“Can I use the stairs instead? I try to avoid elevators.”

“Yes, the stairs are there to the left of the elevators.” She pointed with her pen. “And good for you for staying active.”

He shrugged. “Thanks. You only get one body, right?”

“Right! So – once you get to the bottom of the stairs you’re going to go straight...” She drew a line on the notepad. “...Okay? and then hang a right at the second hallway...here...and then the security office will be the door straight ahead at the end of the hall.”

She handed him the piece of paper.

“Trisha,” he said, holding the paper to his chest and backing away. “You are a life saver. I owe you one.”

She waved. “Any time!”

He turned on his heels and headed for the stairs. He checked for cameras – none in the stairwell. Maybe he’d get lucky after all, he thought. If he got the opportunity he could complete the job today and go home early. The prospect of taking Manners out today on his own, not having to worry about Putt getting cold feet, was appealing. His earpiece had been silent for a while, which was fine by him. She could take a nap in the car for all he cared, as long as she didn’t interfere with his work.

He took the stairs slowly, hugging the walls in case he'd missed a camera, careful not to make too much noise. As he approached the second to last flight, he heard a door open and clang shut on the bottom floor. He continued down the stairs, picking up his pace and settling into a more casual step. He couldn't believe his luck: the man walking up the stairs toward him wore a security uniform, complete with a squared baseball cap and a mock flak-jacket. Gordon was surprised to see a gun on the man's belt – heavy duty stuff for hotel security staff.

He gave the security guard a friendly nod as he passed by, taking the stairs at a brisk pace now. The guard, puzzled, was just turning around for a second look when Gordon grabbed his legs out from under him. He pulled the guard, arms flailing, down the stairs by his legs and swung around to position himself behind the man. Cradling the guard's head in his lap, Gordon wrapped one of his arms around the man's neck and pushed down on the top of his head with the other. In a matter of seconds the guard lost consciousness.

He dragged the body the rest of the way down the stairs and looked around for a spot to hide him before deciding the space underneath the stairs at the bottom would do. By the time he woke up Gordon would be long gone. Just in case, he removed the handcuffs from the guard's belt and snapped them on his wrists behind his back.

The guard had a lanyard with an ID badge hanging around his neck; Gordon put it on. He then placed the man's gun in the outside pocket of his jacket and walked as casually as possible out of the stairwell.

The door to the security office, it turned out, was located next to the hotel's boiler room, at the end of a series of doors spaced out along the length of another hallway. It was lit from overhead by fluorescent light. From the outside, the only thing setting the brushed metal door of the security office apart from the others was a serious-looking lock mechanism, controlled, he assumed, by the card reader on the right-hand side of the door.

He listened outside the door for a moment before swiping the guard's badge. A green LED flashed and Gordon walked in.

A wall of displays flashed in front of him. Each camera in the hotel seemed to have its own screen, each of them broadcasting simultaneously to this room. Most were stagnant shots of obscure corners of the building, but some tracked side to side, others vertically; one of them, broadcasting from what looked like the roof, somehow seemed to be handheld, zooming in and out on a bellhop's face. People milled around, stood still, exercised. It appeared that some of the

individual rooms had their own cameras. He had never seen anything like this before. It occurred to Gordon that this was not standard for any hotel.

He was so taken aback by what he saw that he didn't register the person sitting in an office chair in front of him, staring.

"The fuck are you?"

He cleared his throat. "I'm, uh... Kyle. The new supervisory security hire."

She furrowed her brow. "I didn't hear anything about a new supervisor."

"It's my first day. Sorry I'm late. I got lost."

"I saw." She gestured to the screens in front of her, not convinced. "You always have a big greasy lunch at a new job before you start?"

Shit, he thought, she'd been watching him. He decided to embrace it.

"I like to get the lay of the land before I get to work, yeah," he said. He started moving around the room, touching things. "Which is why I went and spoke to Cathy in the Garden Grille and Bar even though the burger was shit, why I then went and braved Trisha's perfume at the front desk. I like to know who it is I'm going to be working with. And *you*, on the other hand," he paused for a moment, looking her up and down. "I don't remember being told that I would be reporting today to the fucking dungeon troll who sits down here and watches the monitors. Show some respect for your new superior and introduce yourself to me like a civilized person before you tell me, without mincing your words, exactly to whom it is that I will be reporting and where it is that I can find him, because I've been all around this shit hole today and I haven't found a single person worth wasting my breath on."

A long silence fell on the room as Gordon and the woman stared at each other. The fans in the computer block whirred. After a beat she finally spoke in a wavering voice.

"If you're supervising you'll probably report to Ray, the head of security."

"Finally. Where can I find Ray?"

"Last I looked he was up on the top floor with the owner, Mr. Manners."

She typed a command into one of the keyboards in front of her and the view from a single camera was magnified to fill up the whole screen. It was a stationary shot of the door to what Gordon assumed was Manners' room: 5108.

"You can go up there if you want, or you can stay here 'til he comes back down."

"No cameras in that room then?"

She laughed. “Not that one. It’s the owner’s private room – no one else stays in there.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t ask what kind of weird shit goes down up there.”

“Good.” He fiddled with the badge around his neck. “How many guards on duty at any given time?”

“Ten? Maybe fifteen if it’s a big day? With the system down here I keep telling them we don’t need that many but—”

“You never told me your name,” Gordon cut in.

“Oola.”

“Where can I find a cup of coffee around here, Oola?”

She swivelled around in her chair. “Go back out the way you came and take the first door on the left. That’s the break room, coffee machine’s in there.”

He turned to walk out. Before he had the chance to grab the knob, the door opened, startling him. On the other side of the doorway, a man standing nearly seven feet tall with a shaved head stared down at him, a satisfied grin on his face, flanked by two security guards with their guns drawn. Trisha stood between the guards behind the giant, a satisfied grin on her sour face.

“Ahh, good. Boys,” he clapped his hands together. “This is *Kyle*. Our new supervisory security hire.”