

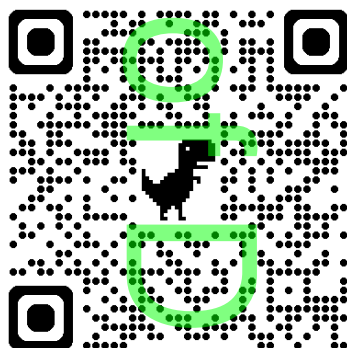
SUPERNOVA

IP of D.J. Chambers

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DJCHAMBERS.COM

Supernova

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IP of D.J. Chambers

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to anyone who has ever been damaged and abandoned, but never gave up on themselves.

SCORE

Music has a magical power to set and alter our emotional landscapes. For me, it doesn't just reflect a mood—it is the mood. The tracks on this playlist directly correspond to the writing of this novel, serving as a map of both my inspirations and my headspace. The timelines of the music and the manuscript occupy the same space in time.

This playlist wasn't built to match chapters one-to-one. It's simply what I had on while writing. If you choose to listen, let it find its own scenes.

The first track is the song I played when I opened my SoundCloud account after surviving a fentanyl overdose in March 2018. Lying alone with my dog, Bella, under the heavy weight of my own thoughts, I needed something to break the depression. One piece of music came to mind. That track led to the rest of this playlist, and the playlist ultimately led to this book.

"Popular Monster" by Falling in Reverse

"Monsters" by Empathy Test

"Us and Them" by Pink Floyd

"Uprising" by Muse

"A Million Little Pieces" by Placebo

"In The End" by Linkin Park

"Mother" by Pink Floyd

"Everybody Hurts" by REM

"Do What You Have To Do" by Sarah McLachlan

"Porcelain" by Moby

"Mad World" by Gary Jules & Michael Andrews

"Come Along" by Titiyo (Naid 2001 Remix)

"Adventure of a Lifetime" by Coldplay (Maxwell Jose
Remix)

"Sex, Drugs, Etc." by Beach Weather

"Iris" by Goo Goo Dolls

"How to Disappear Completely" by Radiohead

"Elegy" by Lisa Gerrard & Patrick Cassidy

"Eyes Without a Face" by Billy Idol

"Backseat" by Robert Christian

"Here With Me" by Dido

"Your Love Rocks" by Tesi 5

"After Dark" by MrKitty

"Outro" by M83

"Extreme Ways" by Moby (Reprise Version)

"Fake Plastic Trees" by Radiohead

"Running Up that Hill" by Kate Bush

"Svefn-g-englar" by Sigur Rós

"Kiss Me" by Le Flex

"Behind Blue Eyes" by Limp Bizkit (The Who)

"Sunny Days" by The Ambientalist

"Hurt" by Johnny Cash

"The Moby Effect – SYNTHWORX SWX"

"Mista Mista" by The Fugees

"Way Down We Go" by KALEO

"Closer" by Kings of Leon

"Precious" by Depeche Mode

"Church of the Poison Mind" by Culture Club

"Creep" by Radiohead

"He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" by The Hollies

"Older" by Isabel LaRosa

"By Your Side" by Yakar Allevici

"Nothing Compares 2 You" by Sinead O'Connor (Live, 1990)

"Grand Canyon" by Puscifer

"Amen" by Enigma (White Motive Remix)

"Two Cups of Cold Tea" by Three-Quarter Town

Listen to score on YouTube



IP of D.J. Loss

My name is David. I'm a funeral director—and a drug addict.

This is a story about attempted redemption—mine, mostly. If you're looking for a clean, easy three-act tale where everyone learns their lesson and walks into the sunset sober and forgiven, you picked up the wrong book. What you're getting is closer to a crime-scene report written by one of the suspects.

It started on an ordinary morning. I was doing what I did every day: taking inventory of the night's losses—calls, bodies, paperwork. Families who went to bed with someone breathing in the next room and woke up to a stranger from the funeral home at the door.

Then four tweakers walked into my life, and everything changed. At the time, all I saw were four problems with great legs. And about the twerker thing? Hello, Kettle—my name is Pot.

It took me a long time to understand that it was also the day my life stopped circling the drain.

Most people would call what came next a disaster. That's fair. Together, my new friends and I stumbled into the kind of mess sane people spend their whole lives avoiding. They're no angels. But they're not monsters either. They live in the same world you do—a place where perfection doesn't exist and "good enough" does most of the heavy lifting.

Before I introduce you to them, you should know why you can believe what I'm about to tell you.

First: I see things from the inside out. Anyone can lie about what they did; very few can convincingly lie about what they were thinking when they did it. That's how interrogators catch liars. How do I know? I wasn't always a funeral director.

Second: you couldn't make this shit up if you tried.

If you're wondering how I pieced it all together, I watched and I listened. That's my job. I don't know any place that strips people down to their real selves more efficiently than the arrangement offices of a funeral home. In that cramped little room, in the mix of what's said and what never makes it past their teeth, the good, the bad, and the dark all crawl out.

I've spent the last twenty-five years sitting in that delicate space where the family is confused and the clergy is still a day away. I've watched the living say goodbye to their dead so many times I stopped counting

long ago. What I carried out of those rooms built the world you're about to enter.

Let me introduce you to my friends.

First there's Joe, who I sometimes call Joey. He might be my favorite, though I'd never admit that to the others. You'll figure out why. He's smart as hell and has almost no common sense. If that sounds familiar, don't beat yourself up. He wants you to like him. That part is up to you.

Next there's Frank. Frank is harder to love. You'll see sharp edges long before you see anything soft. Give him a chance anyway; he might surprise you. Then again, he might not. Think of him like heavy machinery—worth having around, but only if you're wearing safety glasses.

Jerry will make you laugh. He has to. Your little giggle is the fuel he runs on. Without it, he'd sputter out and rust away in the dark. He's brighter than he pretends to be, and more fragile than he'll ever admit. Pay attention when he talks. He hides sharp truths in bad jokes.

Finally, there's Tom. He's the complicated one. He hasn't figured out who he wants to be when he grows up yet. He loves good advice—he mostly uses it to clean the wax out of his ears. With Tom, what you see is pretty much what you get. Take him at face value and don't push too hard on the questions he's not ready to answer.

Terry deserves an honorable mention. He doesn't stay long, but he's the spark that ignites everything that

follows. He's the guy who provided the group its soul, and a body cannot live without one.

None of my friends are going to ask you to forgive them for their sins. They may apologize once in a while, but the forgiveness they're chasing is mostly their own.

If you're still here, climb in. We've got a long way to go.

REJECTED

SATURDAY, JULY 8, 2023—SUNRISE

"Damn, that was some night," Joe says, his voice thick with the kind of satisfied exhaustion you only get from a twelve-round bout with your own bad habits. He eyes Tom with a crooked grin. "I'm honestly impressed your legs still work after all that."

"Yeah, well, it takes two or three nights before I start going loopy—unlike your career-chasing ass, Joe."

Frank chimes in. "You two bicker like a couple of old ladies. But Joe has a point, Tom. You are walking pretty good for a bro who took on the python all night. I have some roid cream under the sink if the need comes up."

As Frank and Tom horse around, wearing off the last of their machismo, Jerry and Terry sit chatting in the nook Frank calls his kitchen.

"That was fun, don't you think? It's really a lot more fun when everyone gets along like we do. Some might call it monotony, maybe. I guess I am a little more on the emotional side," Terry confides.

"I don't disagree with you, but fresh chicken thrown into the coop now and again gives a rooster a reason to crow in the morning," Jerry responds. "But I do see your point. Things do go better when I am the chief drama queen."

As the chatter begins to lull, Joe pats Frank's bed—now sporting brand-new clean sheets he just put on—signaling everyone to a central point for conversation.

"What's up, Joe?" Terry asks, the crew now all gathered.

"I just want to get sentimental, as usual. Sit down, Tom, or no more snow days for you." He continues, "You know, what we have here is good, right? I know we are all pretty fucked up. I mean, what do you expect? I don't know if you guys have ever put together what we all have in common besides an unhealthy appreciation for sex, drugs, and more sex."

Tom offers the answer that would earn him an A-plus.

"We were all mistakes."

Jerry continues the point. "Just because our families have no use for us doesn't mean we don't want each other, though, Joe. At least we have that. La mayoría de los adictos gays no."

"What?" Frank asks.

"Most people like us don't," Terry explains.

Frank interjects, "We need a family name."

Tom reaches over and grabs Terry's hand. Everyone notices the reach; only Terry notices the squeeze. No one notices the tear sliding through Tom's freckles; they wouldn't believe their eyes anyway. Terry glances over, and their eyes meet. Tom mouths, "I love you."

I don't think he saw me.

Joe jumps back in. "Look, what I'm trying to say here is that I love you guys. Even you, Terry, even if I can't figure you out."

Everyone laughs at the last one. Terry is not cynical. He's not an annoying optimist, either.

"And you never, ever will, neither," Terry says.

"Baby Jane!" Frank calls out.

Joe continues, "When I go Christmas shopping this year, I don't want to have to guess. Understand? If I'm being too nosy, just tell me. I really am asking because I want to understand things."

Frank coughs, like he always does when he wants to push back sentimentality. "I was playing in the car and pretending to drive. Fucking with the gearshift and the brake handle. I wanted to be like my dad. I knocked it out of gear. The brake was off. The car rolled back down the driveway. My sister was playing with her dolls."

Frank grabs the pipe, takes a deep inhale, and stares out the window. It's bright out there. Too bright.

"I didn't mean to run her over."

The room fills with the kind of silence that speaks volumes. Nothing needed to be said for Frank to feel the love, but Jerry crawled across the mattress, grabbed hold of Frank's neck, and gave him a tear-soaked bear hug.

No one really knows Terry. He has many hidden truths. He's living several lives, and he holds them all close to his chest. He considers his struggles to be his and his alone to fight. But soon he'll be heading to the beach for his ritual conversation with Ra, as he makes his nightly retreat. For now, he relaxes and enjoys the camaraderie, like he does most Friday nights, with his ragtag surrogate family.

Jesus. No wonder he's always such a hard-ass. I thought I had it bad.

Terry confesses, "My dad and stepmom died in a plane crash when I was four. My mom's dad took me in. He died of a heart attack when I was ten. Then I went to live with my aunt. She was poor. She didn't need another mouth to feed, but she never complained. She tucked me in every night until I had to tell her I was too old. I was sixteen. I don't remember meeting my mom when I was younger. She says she always came to check on me, but I don't remember. She invited me to her place so we could get to know each other a couple of months before I told my aunt to stop tucking me in at night. She didn't really want to get to know me; she just wanted someone to get high with." He continues, "Tom's the only person

I've ever told. My mother is not someone I want people to feel sorry for me over. She doesn't deserve the time it takes for me to say her name. I don't want to talk about it again, but I'm glad you guys know."

Wow. That was easier than I thought.

"I'm sorry, guys. This is going darker than I imagined. I didn't mean to spoil the fun. Anyway..." Joe says.

Why did I ask? How is this my business? Shit. I should go.

"I think I should go. I'm really sorry. I just feel like I want to get to know you all better. That's all. I know I love you, but sometimes I wonder why. I wonder if you are who I see, or if I see who I want you all to be, because it's safer that way."

"No, Joe. You didn't push too far, bro. I know what you're trying to do here. Let me explain something to you, since you can't seem to figure it out on your own," Frank calls out. "None of us here would tell you shit if we didn't want to. OK? So remember for the future. Say what you want. Ask what you want. If I don't want to tell you my shit, I won't. But I won't hate you for asking. *Comprende?*"

Shit, that came out strong as fuck.

"What about you, Tom? You want to tell us why you're so fucked up?" Frank reaches over and nudges his best friend in the thigh. He would never confess his

affection for the guy, but it sometimes filters through the bravado.

"Maybe next time, ass-wipe," Tom says. "What about you, Joe?"

Don't think you're walking scot-free.

"This is good shit. I'm not ready, but this is interesting. Serious up.

"I was born into a family that hated gays, hated individuality, and, most of all, hated caffeine." He pauses. "They kicked me out when I was a teenager for not measuring up. Nothing as bad as what you guys went through. I really feel terrible for asking now."

That's when Jerry chimes in. "Y'all know my shit already. I'm proud of it." Jerry wipes his hands with a sarcastic flourish, shaking off memories of abandonment and worse. "They don't deserve all this fabulousness."

It's true. Jerry shares his "shit" with anyone who will listen. He's lucky to be alive.

"You know, guys, Joe is right. Mostly. I want to prove you wrong on one thing, though, Joe."

"Frank, Tom, and Terry," Jerry can't help but giggle, "Joe. I love you guys. Thank you for loving me back."

The group of friends continues with their earlier activities, less rushed. Relaxed. But still high. And still horny. Except for Joe. Joe remains in the kitchen, taking it all in. Not the sex—the roots of love that now make sense. They're all from the same tribe. They're all as

insecure as he is. No wonder. It's starting to come together.

Four smart, kind men with insecurities that seem hard to conceive of. So beautiful. So sad.

I'll do anything to protect these guys. I really do love them. I've always wanted to have four kids.

"Are you going to watch the sunset again tonight, Terry?" Tom asks. "I might want to go with you."

"Let me know—I can pick you up. But you'll probably fall asleep again."

Please don't. I'll show you so much.

"Probably."

MISERABLE

SATURDAY, JULY 8, 2023, SUNSET

Another sun-drenched day comes to an end on Clearwater Beach. Ra begins his nightly transit into the sea, lighting up the western horizon.

I knew he wouldn't show up. He never does. He's always trying to tell me something, but he never does.

After Terry left the party, he prayed Tom would answer the text. He even called to see if that would get Tom out of whatever slumber he was using to escape his dreams, always preferring nightmares instead. Once again, Terry was alone with his thoughts, which were becoming increasingly distorted by the minute.

If he only knew how hard it is for me to keep everything working. How much the beach keeps me sane. He'd probably come with me every week. I wish he

would. I could tell him how much I really need him to be safe.

A hundred yards away, two Pinellas County sheriff's deputies watch from their Kawasaki four-wheelers.

"Looks like drugs again." The smaller one kills his engine.

"Yup." The stocky one hollers over the sound of his still-running ride. "Think you've seen enough?"

"Nah. Give it a few more minutes."

Nearby, a group of children laughs with abandon while their parents relax over local blueberry wine. Terry remains oblivious to it all—pacing, sweating, watching. For the last year, these sunsets have been his escape, a fleeting way to chase the feeling of being alive—what he remembers from his summers before meth.

The LSD kicks in. The rhythm of the waves takes on a new life. In his mind, rainbow-colored faeries chase the children.

Something bounces off his forehead. "Was that a horsefly... or Pegasus?" He laughs, loud and unrestrained, as rainbow-colored flying fish pour across the beach.

Maybe I should take a swim.

Terry looks toward the shoreline; he should have been invited in by the soothing lapping of water on the sand. Instead, he is repulsed by the wall of fire that seems to follow him wherever he looks.

A hundred yards out, the stocky deputy shakes his head. "Alright, I've seen enough, dammit." He thinks of his own seventeen-year-old son. The deputies dismount—out of shape, weighed down by their gear, sweating through their uniform blouses. They saunter toward Terry. They think they have plenty of time.

Suddenly, Terry's core begins to cook. His mind betrays him. Ever since his mother coaxed him into his first hit of ice, he's lived on the edge of a dull knife. He's overheating. Fast. Too fast. It's ninety degrees, and the thick Florida humidity keeps his sweat from cooling him.

In the distance, he sees the heavy figures of the law approaching. To his warping brain, they look like Laurel and Hardy walking into a trap.

Hey, what are you guys doing here?

"Hey—stop!" Terry's voice cracks as he points his finger, trying to save the strange men who are walking toward him. "Quicksand! Be careful! Stop! Oh no."

Terry laughs as the illusions sink without a trace. But his body can't hold his mind's attention anymore.

He's moving. He looks at the place where his feet should be, but they're not there. "Where are you taking me?" His last words come as a whisper no one can hear.

His brain has exceeded its limit. His face slams into the warm sand before he even knows he's falling. A final kaleidoscope floods his mind as his cells choke on the heat. Terry takes his last breath just as the real deputies finally step up to his body.

Laurel says to Hardy, "Damn. What a shame. He's young. I think we're about to ruin someone's weekend."

"Maybe," Hardy says. "Sometimes the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Officer Hardy was right about one thing; they would never know.

"Well, it's the ME's problem now," Officer Laurel mutters.

Thank God.

It happens fast like that sometimes—one bad trip, one indifferent world.

HURT

SUNDAY, 10:00 A.M.

"That goddamn phone. Never stops."

Gladys reaches over the man who, moments ago, had his face buried in her treasure trove.

She snaps up the receiver.

"Yeah, what?"

"Is this Ms. Orloff?" an unfamiliar voice asks.

Silence.

"This is Detective Brown with the Sheriff's Office. Is this Ms. Orloff?"

"Yeah, and I didn't do it. I got an alibi right here."

She chuckles, thinking she's clever. She slips her dentures in, wanting to sound a little more human.

"Ma'am... I have bad news. There's been an accident."

"Yeah? Well, if it involved Terry, I'd tell him I don't give a fuck."

"Ma'am... your son is dead."

"Poor thing must have a hearing problem, bless her heart," Gladys says to What'shisname. Then she returns to the call. "Like I said, I gave at the office."

Well, I guess the brat finally found himself a quiet place to sleep.

Click.

"What was that about?"

"Who told you to talk?"

She hangs up, reaches over, grabs What'shisname's head, and puts it back where it belongs.

She's the one supplying the drugs, the bed, and the air conditioning, after all.

1:00 P.M.

Joe gets a call from Gladys Orloff—not one of his favorite people, but Terry's mom.

He gives an inch; she takes a mile. Of course he said yes.

Terry kept his comings and goings on the down-low, sticking to a tight circle of friends. Joe was the most responsible of the party buddies, so he was the one Gladys called to handle the dirty work of taking care of her son's body.

She'd sign over her maternal rights to Joe in a heartbeat. She'd had enough of Terry's "betrayals"—though she could never explain what those betrayals were.

Her need for company while tweaking started Terry down this road. He served his purpose—until even she decided family ties weren't worth the trouble.

Joe's party circuit was a little bigger than Terry's. It took him a full day to remember the guy from that party last winter.

Where did I meet that funeral dude?

Then it hit. The Uber driver. The guy who Ubered at night to pay off debt. What was the name of that funeral home? Ah—call the county. Free cremations. I remember now. He'd told me about his job while I was blowing him. I laughed so hard I blew snot.

Damn. I'll find him. I need to find him.

AROUND 5:00 P.M.

Joe is already staring at his new iPhone when it starts buzzing.

Now what the fuck do I do?

Why did I pay a thousand dollars for this phone? Who gives a shit about a phone? Calm down, Joe. Deep breath.

He swipes to answer.

"Hey, Jerry, what's up?"

"Is it true?"

"Yeah, it really is that big, Jerry. Don't be jealous."

"Not funny, Joe."

Jerry had been laid off from his turnkey job with the Pasco County jail, giving him genuine street cred. He

knew when to play along. He also knew when not to. His small stature and snarky wit had tricked many a fool into underestimating him.

"You know what I mean. Terry. He's dead?" Jerry snaps. Feeling a tad sorry for snapping, he adds, "And I've seen it, Joe, remember? It's not that big."

"Maybe. And... yeah. He really is, Jerry." Joe exhales, hoping it will be his last. This is more than he can handle right now. Momma Joe is losing his balance.

"I told him not to trip on that beach. I don't think he drank a drop of water when we were chillin' at Frank's place. I always said he's a shitty host." Joe is choking up. "I'm sorry, Jerry, that wasn't fair. I'm just not myself right now."

He hopes his quick catch and apology will do its job. Jerry is very sensitive, and Joe knows that better than anyone.

The group's mother hen, Joe takes it upon himself to hold everyone's hand, even when they are doing just fine on their own.

Disaster follows Joe's friends like a tweaked-out bounty hunter, so he stays pretty busy. They refer to themselves as the gangbangers—Frank's idea, naturally.

"Hold on, Jerry—I just got a text from Frank."

Frank is pure soldier, a combat vet with a master's degree in paranoia and a lust for chemically induced peace.

— Hey, what's up with Terry's mom?

— Call me. I'm on the phone with Jerry. Let's group it. — On it, dude.

"Is he calling?"

"Yeah, I'll conference him in."

"Cool. Save my damn fingers," Jerry mutters, sarcasm dripping. Four days awake, his mood circling the drain.

Beep beep.

"Hey, Frank," Jerry and Joe say in unison.

"Hey, guys. Sup?" Frank says. "I'm gonna hit Tom up, see if he can hop in, if that's cool?"

"Good idea," Jerry replies. "Knock out three birds with one stone."

"Um, Jerry, that would be four." It's an unnecessary correction that Joe speaks before he can stop his tongue.

"Tom doesn't really count." Jerry's sarcasm falls on deaf ears this time.

AROUND 5:30 P.M.

Beep beep.

"Hey, y'all," Tom chimes in. "What's going on? Who's here?"

"Hey, Tom," Jerry says. "Joe and Frank are here, too. You good?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Where's Terry? This ain't a bash-Terry call, is it?"

"Terry is dead, dumbass," Frank snaps.

Click.

Tom hangs up the phone. He does it all the time, but this time the stakes are higher.

No, no, no, no, no. This can't be right. They're lying. No.

Tom is typically aloof. He assigns no value to things or money. He seems chill to the average observer. But what nobody sees is how far gone he already is.

Silence.

Tom is gone. He hung up on life a few years back. It isn't a good omen.

The silence that follows is short but heavy.

Sergeant Frank breaks it with a tone that allows no dissent.

"Tom's place, now!" He is in no mood to take on another dead friend.

"Jerry, need a scoop?" Joe asks before switching targets. "I know you do, Frank. I'll be there in fifteen."

Jerry shoots back, "No, I'm good. By the time your grammaw ass gets here, I could bike it twice. Meet you there."

Frank chimes in, "Make it fourteen, Joe. I'm already dressed."



The gangbangers live a life most people would never understand—especially the ones who'd never so much as walked in their shoes. They are judged, dismissed, and written off. Any man, no matter how respected he was

yesterday, becomes an instant pariah today with even a rumor of meth.

It is unfair, especially when the loudest moralizers are the same ones who drink themselves stupid every weekend. Even the opiate crowd—who'd rob their own mothers for a fix—scowls at meth-heads.

My mother was the worst sort of drunk. There was no reasoning with her toward the end of her life. We stopped trying. On the rare occasion she was sober enough to express herself clearly, she always had an opinion on druggies. They were worthless. They should be gotten rid of. The irony runs too deep to find pity. I wonder what nasty words she would throw at me if she were alive.

What the judgy will never understand is that Frank, Tom, Jerry, Joe—any of them—would take a bullet for another. No debate. No speeches. No reward required.

Show me an alkie or junkie who would do the same.

AFRAID

AROUND 5:45 P.M.

Joe and Frank walk straight in; they have no need to knock. Tom's spare key is already on Frank's keychain.

Tom is in full emotional collapse, sobbing violently and uncontrollably. Joe considers calling an ambulance, but he holds off, reminding himself he's a nurse.

Jerry sits on the couch with Tom's head in his lap, gently stroking his fire-red hair. He's uncomfortable with the intimacy—not because he doesn't care, but because he lacks the experience. Everyone is confused; none of them has ever known Tom to show his emotions. It was exactly why Jerry had made that inappropriate "three birds, one stone" joke on the phone earlier. They never expected this.

They are in uncharted territory.

Jerry looks to Frank, Tom's best friend. His eyes ask the silent question: What are we supposed to do?

Frank interprets Jerry's wide, terrified eyes and steps in. He takes his friend's hand in his own and squeezes. Fuck the rules.

"Who'd you steal those tears from, boy?"

Oh my God. I know that look.

Tom looks at his friend but says nothing; his grief won't allow words. Words are unnecessary anyway. Suddenly, all three of Tom's guardian angels pile onto the couch with him. They cry together—a quartet singing a song no one wants to hear. They cry themselves out and eventually break apart, leaving two bodies on the sofa and two on the floor: damaged outcasts leaving their private hells to return to reality.

MONDAY, 8:00 A.M.

Joe probably doesn't even know where I work yet. He hasn't called the county. Knowing him, his mind is telling him to pick up the phone while his gut screams to let dead dogs lie. He doesn't realize how numb he's becoming—the inevitable result of too much responsibility and too little help.

He has no idea I'm glancing over the medical examiner's report from the weekend. Scanning the names of the newly unwanted dead, one case leaps off the page. There is a lingering memory, vague and unfocused, just out of reach.

I move on, distracted now. Terry Orloff. Young. Too young. In my niche of the market, most of them are. I know the name. I've known a lot of names, but the hairs on my neck prickle—a cry for attention. I make a mental note and table the intrigue. Time for the morning roundup.

The meeting goes off without complication. Everyone knows what to do, what to expect. Just another week of shattered dreams and forgotten souls. Routine. Each corpse is a liability as the line grows longer at the pearly gates.

8:20 A.M.

Tentatively, I pick up the phone. In the back of my mind, a warning: Careful. Be careful. I do this all day, every day, usually numb to the filth I face. But this call feels different. Like there is something at risk. I can't put my finger on it.

Here goes. The line rings. My pulse quickens. *Fuck.*

"Hello?" A raspy, all-too-familiar voice. Nothing to see here. Just another day at the races.

"Hello, this is David from the funeral home. I'm—"

Interrupted mid-sentence. I hate that. It ruins my demeanor.

"You're calling about my boy, Terry," the voice snaps. "I don't have time for this. Call his... uh... friend Joe. 727-555-0198. He can do whatever he wants."

"OK, well, by law we need your signature surrendering your rights to—"

Click. Bitch hung up on me.

It's not every day I get hung up on—only about four times a week. Usually, the bite misses; the disrespect slides off me like butter on Teflon. But that's not what's rattling me. The man was twenty-nine. How could he have earned a response that brutally frigid?

"She's a druggie," I mutter.

ABOUT 8:50 A.M.

I stare at the new number for a beat too long, my thumb hovering over the glass. I hit dial.

No ringtone—just, "Hello, this is Joe."

"Hello, Joe. My name is David. I'm calling from the funeral home. I believe I just spoke with Ms. Orloff, but she didn't give me much time before the line... cut out."

"She hung up on you. Yeah," Joe says, his voice losing its initial sharpness. "That's Gladys. She's... it's a lot." He clears his throat, sounding suddenly flustered. "Sorry. I shouldn't talk like that. You're calling about Terry. She told you she wants me to handle the arrangements? It's just us. Terry only had the four of us. We're all he had."

"I'm truly sorry about your friend," I say, leaning into my professional cadence. "He was far too young. But Joe—because he didn't have a will, there are extra steps we have to take to do this by the book. Since you haven't

hung up on me yet, can I assume you're willing to take responsibility?"

"Absolutely. I'm a nurse. I'm used to the bureaucratic side of things."

Since you haven't hung up on me, I think. Touché.

"Good. I'm glad Terry had a friend like you," I say. "I'll need you to come to my office to pick up some documents. I have to ask, do you plan to pay for Terry's services, or will you seek financial assistance from the county?"

"How much does a service cost?"

"That question has more answers than you'd expect," I say. "It depends on the disposition—burial or cremation. If there's a cemetery involved, costs go up. The most affordable option is a simple cremation, at around \$1,000. Do you know what Terry would have wanted?"

"Definitely cremation. He mentioned it a few times. He hates bugs."

His voice cracks with pain. Grief. Exactly what I like to hear. These inflections go hand in hand with love. Love of man, not love of money.

"When you come in, Joe, I'll provide you with the paperwork for Ms. Orloff. Her signatures will need to be notarized. Do you think she'll give you any trouble?"

"As long as she doesn't have to put her underwear on, she should be fine." Joe pauses, trailing off as if he can't believe he just said that to a funeral director.

I let out an involuntary chuckle. "Good. When do you think you could come by to pick up the documents?"

Joe's voice strikes me as incredibly familiar.

"I could be there by 10:00 at the latest," Joe answers.

"Perfect. I'll expect you then. I look forward to meeting you, Joe."

"OK."

It's him. It has to be. The specific, melodic way he says his own name—it's identical to the man who left my house last winter. It has to be him.

"Can I ask you one more thing, David?"

"Of course you can."

"Do you happen to drive Uber at night sometimes?"

Oh, shit.

"I do, actually. Why do you ask?" It's a stupid question. I already know the answer. I'm starting to connect the dots.

"Just curious. I think we might have met before. I'm probably wrong..." Joe's voice drops, barely audible, a touch of humility and regret bleeding through the line.

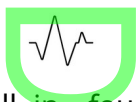
"Well, Joe, we can probably work the Uber question out at 10:00."

Did that come out sounding snarky? Probably. But I'm really good at what I do.

We hang up, leaving me with a little over an hour to kill. My mind races as the clock ticks down toward ten. If Joe is who I think he is, he isn't coming alone—a guy like that travels with an entourage, a de facto head bitch in

charge of his own mismatched gang. I can only imagine the kind of frantic, caffeine-fueled pep talk he's giving his boys right now on the short drive to Gulfport, warning them to be on their best behavior and not embarrass him in a funeral home.

I smooth down my tie, check my reflection in the glass, and wait.



At 10:09, I see a car pull in—four good-looking men tumble out. Three look haggard. One is preening like a bird of paradise.

Odd lot. Unseen behind the reflective window film, I monitor their approach with extreme interest. Looks like a tweaker parade. A face flashes into view, and a sudden shiver rides my spine. The front door swings open.

Oh, that's it. I just put my finger on it.

"Hello, I'm David," I say as they file in.

Four men to pick up one document. I should've made four copies. Snarky, but fair.

Standing before me are four men. Twenty-five, thirty? Somewhere around there. I'd invite any of them home in a heartbeat, and it would seem we all share a common interest. I need to be on my best behavior. Careful. My staff hears everything.

And Joe? I know him. He knows me. And we both know that we know.

"You look good, Joe. Considering. It's really nice to see you again. I wish the circumstances were... better."

"You are him," he says softly. He nods toward his friends, who are oddly lined up like a unified front two feet behind him. "They all know. We don't keep too many secrets from each other. I'm Joe, the responsible friend."

A small smirk creeps along his lips. And what beautiful lips they are. My inner voice is betraying me again.

"Hi, Joe. Good to see you again. Honestly, I mean that. I'm sorry it has to be here," I say, snapping back to reality. "We should discuss the documents I mentioned. It'll only take a minute."

Voices pipe up from the peanut gallery.

"Just documents?"

"A minute? Cheap date."

"Shut up."

One of the voices sounds a little bitchy. I respect that.

Joe finishes the quick introductions, then shoots his entourage a sharp look. "Stay out of trouble, ladies. Remember, funeral home." As if decorum were the norm for this crew.

I smile and ask Joe to follow me. "Excuse us, gentlemen. This won't take long, I promise."

10:14 a.m.

I close the office door and turn back to where he's standing. He steps right into my space and kisses me—quick, soft, certain.

For an instant, I freeze, like an inanimate object. Then instinct kicks in, and I get back to business. Business.

I don't tell him how good his lips feel, or about the electric jolt that just shot straight down my spine. The truth is, I started missing him the minute he walked out my bedroom door last winter. But we have serious work to do. And did I mention I am very good at what I do?

Oh, hell, forgive me; since I am trying to be completely transparent, it would be a lie to say I didn't—for one reckless second—imagine crawling across this damn table to reach him. Taste those lips again.

"We should probably discuss the matter of your friend, Joe. Let's start with any questions you have."

I explain the paperwork to Joe, answer his questions, and hold my own as well as can be expected considering the sexual tension hanging in the air.

"So, if you have any questions at all or run into any snags, just call. We good?" I ask.

"Yeah, I think so. I really don't want to have to go to Gladys' house, but, you know."

"From my short conversation with her on the phone, I would only expect the worst. It's something that has to be done, though. You know the alternative. I'll be thinking about you, Joe."

I'll be thinking about you too, David.

"Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

10:28 and 27 seconds.

My door now open, I show Joe to the sitting room where his friends have been conspiring.

"Jesus, guys. Really?" Joe's cheeks glow red. "Jazz hands?"

I try not to laugh. I fail.

"Ten o'clock tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah, see you then, David."

Joe and his friends leave me alone, staring after them, a longing burning in my chest.



"Gladys, it's Joe. I have the papers for you to sign. I have to bring a notary with me when I come for your signature on Terry's papers. I need to have the papers to the funeral home at nine-thirty in the morning. I'll be at your place at nine."

"That's kinda early, ain't it?"

"No, Gladys, that's kinda late. I'll see you at nine. If you don't answer, I'll have Frank kick the door in. Get it?"

CONNECTED

All five members of the gangbangers graduated together from St. Pete High, class of 2013. Life eventually scattered them, chasing various dreams that never quite materialized, but they reconnected a year ago in May. It wasn't planned, but it was inevitable—colliding at St. Pete Pride during a parade that served as a veritable cornucopia of the frisky. With each passing month of their club membership, their connection deepened in ways none of them yet recognized.

Joe is the most obvious place to start. He's the one who sucker-kicked my heart in my office just now, and the one I've been pining for since the night we first met. He's a walking oxymoron: complicated and transparent at the same time. Looking at him now, standing in my dated sitting room, I have to fight the urge to beg him to stay forever.

Here and now, standing in my sitting room, I want to beg him to sit in one of my very dated chairs.

By trade, Joe is a dialysis nurse, a profession that isn't exactly known for being forgiving. He serves as the group's balancing beam; they assume he'll keep them from tumbling off the cliff of inevitability, but they're fooling themselves. Joe is teetering on the edge of his own precipice, his headlights burned out. Terry told him as much the day before he died. Joe brushed the warning off then; now, it's his reality.

I have the benefit of having met Joe before, which sharpens my intuitive edge. I met Terry too, for that matter. I saw them both when they were at their most vulnerable, clothing stripped away and purposes exposed. Where Terry was there for the fun of it, Joe was there for the sake of it—a chaperone of sorts for the chaos.

It may be hard for the uninitiated to understand, but those unorthodox gatherings lead to a surprising amount of interpersonal exploration. Breaks are imperative. We're usually too high to relax, so during the intermissions, we feed, we hydrate, and we talk. What else are we going to do with our mouths? Joe was chatty that first night. He had a lot to say, and none of it was particularly optimistic.

He loves coke and can afford it, though he tinkers with meth socially. There is a hard red line between Joe and the needle, however. He spends his days sticking

lines into others but refuses to cross that threshold himself. Like many in his field, he has an unhealthy friendship with alcohol—the fastest way to reach internal silence and rinse away the third-party tragedies of the day.

He keeps an immaculate apartment and wears his heart on his sleeve, always first in line at the donate-your-soul counter. He pretends he's fine, convincing himself he can keep his flock safe without paying an emotional price. In truth, Joe is exhausted. The drugs are pushing him too far, too fast, yet they remain the glue holding his boys together.



I look at Tom—standing straight, almost at attention, ready to pounce at the slightest sign of danger.

My lobby's set to sixty-eight degrees—comfortable, even a little chilly—yet beads of sweat roll down his forehead and onto his rosy, freckled cheeks.

If Joe is the mother hen holding up the sky, Tom is the man who knows it fell long ago. He's a raw nerve wrapped in old armor. He's twenty-eight, with a shock of fiery red hair to match the slow-burning fuse running down his spine.

He carries himself with a strange, aloof detachment—standing like a statue, staring through the walls as if he's searching for a world that isn't broken. But if you look closely—as I do—you see the faint, high-frequency vibration under his skin, the permanent hum of a man

who has been hunted his entire life. If he was the hunted... who were the hunters? I'll probably never know.

Tom is a different kind of veteran. Combat didn't defeat him; he welcomed it. What nearly broke him happened in his third week of basic training.

At three o'clock one morning, while standing at a latrine urinal, he was ambushed and sexually assaulted by two fellow trainees. Their goal wasn't sex—it was domination. They wanted to break his spirit through humiliation. Tom wouldn't even recognize it as a violation until many years later.

He enlisted to escape the desolation of his childhood. To him, the danger of war was less frightening than staying home.

There was no hero's sendoff, no chestful of medals—only basic training that chewed him up, orders that sent him to kill, and a return to a civilian world he was never prepared to face.

The military didn't break Tom. It took a young man already splintered by a violently abusive father and tried to hammer him into a weapon.

He lives in what I call simple squalor—a forgotten, low-rent corner of town where the only thing of value left is his radical, reckless generosity. Tom will give you the shirt off his back, his last twenty, the keys to his car—anything—to prove to himself he doesn't care about a world that never cared about him. This might make him seem beautiful to you, but in his world it's a slow-motion

suicide note. He's paying the arsonists burning down his house, all while pretending not to know.

Then there are the drugs. Tom doesn't have Joe's six-figure budget or his clinical restraint. He snorts Joe's coke when it's around but smokes meth just to survive the dark. He uses it as a chemical shield to keep his mind from falling back into the hollow, terrifying memories of his father's fists. He blows clouds of white smoke to obscure the view of his past. If the cloud is big enough—thick enough—you can't see the other side. Tom blows dense clouds.

But the real secret—the one tearing Tom apart from the inside—is Terry. Nobody else in the group understood how deep Tom's feelings ran—not even Terry. Not even Tom, really. To the rest of the world, they were just two guys high in the dark, navigating the chaotic current of weekend hookups. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, baby.

Looking at him now, it's obvious: Tom was in love with Terry—fiercely, quietly, desperately. It was a love he'd never dare voice; he saw himself as his own specific poison and refused to pass it to the man he dreamed about on the rare nights he slept. In those dreams, Tom wasn't holding Terry. Terry was holding Tom.

Now there's no one left to hold him. His entire reason for living lies in my hands, on a stainless-steel slab in my back room. Looking at him—hands jammed into his pockets, jaw locked—I see the terrifying calculus

behind his eyes. The wall is coming down; the armor is cracked.

He's radically generous, radically destructive, and hurtling toward collapse. He's a good man, but good men don't last long when they're running on meth and a broken heart.

Then there's the center of Joe's protective gauntlet. Frank makes Tom seem relaxed. His posture is so rigid I feel bad for the air coming from the overhead vent.

He's the personification of a perfect hybrid: standing at attention for the President, at parade rest for a grouchy drill sergeant. The alpha of the pack. The self-appointed tactical commander of a squad currently missing its chaplain.

On the surface, he's the man you want next to you in a trench—imposing, clear-eyed, radiating severe, unblinking confidence. But the bloodshot eyes tell another story. I've seen that look before—on a soldier whose brother has fallen. I'm seeing it now: the slightly hollow stare, barn-owl eyes searching desperately for what isn't there, unable to grasp the truth staring back. His vision operates in a fourth dimension.

I wonder what Frank hides in his rucksack. My bet: Afghanistan, 2020—the messy, forgotten tail-end of a twenty-year mistake. There's a bull loose in the china shop inside his head. One day, the bull will escape, run for its life, pounding down a runway, chasing a C-17 that

has no intention of stopping. The bull stares into nothingness as the last hope of escape disappears into the cruel irony of a clear blue sky.

Like a piece of first-class mail marked “no such address,” he was returned to sender—back to where he started: Pinellas Park, Florida. His PTSD reveals itself with all the discretion of a Category 5 making landfall on Clearwater Beach. The VA hospital here is good—but not good enough. Frank believes the mask he’s built is thick enough to block the view of onlookers. But the monsters in his closet have sharp claws. They can climb.

Frank doesn’t just do drugs. Frank shoots speedballs. His two best friends are Life and Death, locked in a brutal war of attrition. I can see the track marks. Fuck—I can feel them. It’s why I wear long-sleeve shirts.

Ever since Frank came back from Afghanistan, chasing redemption from a place he couldn’t name, he’s felt like the man on the bottom, always looking for a way out. He wears his paranoia like a badge of honor. He never talks about it; he just lives it. To his credit, he still has a sense of humor—Sahara-dry, Sandra-Bernhard-cynical. He came home with a disability check, a chip on his shoulder, and the half-baked hopes he’d carried since high school.

Here and now, he’s trying to stay in formation. But if that wire snaps—God help whoever is in front of him.

And finally, bringing up the flank of Joe's little entourage—Jerry.

Jerry's the mouthy one. While the others try to blend into the furniture or pose like stone, Jerry can't keep his feet still or his tongue untied. He's campy—long after camp was cool. We lock eyes at the exact same moment. Synchronized judginess. His coy smile says he wants to flirt, but he knows the timing's wrong. If he were alone, he wouldn't care. But with friends who expect his ridiculousness, he holds back. No curtain to hide behind. He'll wait for a better moment. He thinks he has time.

He's already sizing up my office—the color palette, the drapes, the furnishings—checking to see if they match before sneaking a quick glance at my crotch. My slacks hide what he wants to see. I know his type. I defined his type decades ago. I've forgotten more about him than he currently knows—cliché, yes, but true. He's adorable. I like him. I'd take him home to raise if I had the spare time.

He wears his sarcasm the way my mother wore Chanel—proud, intentional, on full display. It's not that he doesn't care if he's noticed; he needs to be noticed. Something is missing in his past—a hollow space I can't quite put my finger on. Yet. I might have to donate some time to this one after all. He intrigues me.

Jerry used to work at the Pasco County jail. He took a job as a turnkey, but the administration quickly decided he belonged behind the scenes. He didn't appreciate the

demotion, and his sarcasm dripped from his crisply pressed uniform. Then came the layoffs, and his name was on the list. Not long after his departure, a bad batch slipped into the tombs—seven guards and nine inmates down for the count. Just one day in a catastrophic year. They begged him to come back. He sent his most cordial regrets.

Even knowing the dangers, he burns the candle at both ends. Drugs? He's seen the criminal element up close and personal, so he limits himself to the stuff he can reach without standing up. A trivial limitation for Jerry. A boy drawn as perfectly as he is finds himself in the middle of an all-you-can-smoke buffet without even trying. And he loves to smoke. But if the man delivering the poison suits Jerry's purposes, he'll take it however it's offered.

Jerry pretends he's the tough guy—the realist who doesn't care about anything but the next high and the next shift. He's cynical to a fault, though he'd never admit it. But the empath in me never lies; something is actively eating at him, and he can't figure out what it is. So he stays too high. I see it. He needs someone to love. He wants someone to love him. He'll tell you attachment is for super glue, not super fairies. He's a liar.

Deep down—under the smoke, under the Pasco County badge—Jerry's a man on the verge of a radical, spiritual reckoning. He doesn't know it yet. He'd laugh in my face if I told him, but the road he's on isn't leading

him to a hall of fame or a body bag. It's leading him straight to the last place on his radar.

But today, he's just a twitchy tweaker with a smart mouth and a faux-bitchy attitude, trying to survive the ghost of Terry.



While I assess the men in my lobby with my usual clinical brutality, I have to keep a few things in mind. Just because I understand their strengths and weaknesses doesn't mean I have the right to weaponize them. My lust for each of them is pounding in my chest; that's true. There's another truth, though: their friend is in my cooler, quite dead. And that should mean something, even to a fractured funeral director.

SHAME

TUESDAY, 9:00 A.M.

"Thank you, Gladys. I appreciate you doing this for Terry. I really do."

"Who's Terry? I'm going back to bed. Get the fuck outta here."

TUESDAY, 10:00 A.M.

So much for a peaceful morning.

A car alarm screeching in the parking lot yanks me out of deep concentration. It's early, and I'm already hungry—barbecue or Cuban? Shit. I leave the comfort of my office to see what the drama is about.

Oh, Jesus. Joe and his entourage. Early.

I head to the front door to welcome my midmorning groupies. "Good morning, guys. How did your quest to nail down Gladys go?"

"We couldn't find a cross," Jerry blurts out—earning even more of my respect.

So they aren't connected at the hip. CK One. Sebastian. Noir—interesting choice for morning. Chanel for Men. Good taste. I wonder what underwear they're wearing. STOP.

Tom steps forward, wary. "It's all right here. Signed, sealed, delivered." He hands me the documents.

There's tension in the air—the unspoken question floating in triplicate: What now? I can't tell which of the four is holding his tongue. My mind wanders just long enough to amplify the silence.

Joe's aura hits me all at once: brains, empathy, vulnerability, loneliness, sadness, fear—and then the fear spikes, sharp enough to flash through my own empathic space. Suddenly, a thought lands with uncomfortable clarity: we might need each other. I've never believed in the cliché that opposites attract. I'm not a magnet, and neither is Joe. But suddenly I'm on a mission. And it has absolutely nothing to do with funerals.

"Let's continue this in private," I say, gesturing toward the conference room.

My four heroes follow obediently.

Once everyone's seated, I offer coffee. "Cecile, could we get five coffees, please? All black."

"Be there in a minute," her voice floats back.

"Thank you for getting the paperwork back so quickly," I say, turning to the table. "Have you considered how you'd like to move forward?"

Joe stays quiet. Interesting.

Tom answers instead. "Look, let's cut to the chase. Me, Jerry, and Frank have seventy-six cents to our names. Joe works and makes good money, but he spends most of it paying for the stupid shit we're always begging him for—and drugs he shares like they're free." He exhales heavily. "We're shitty friends. But he sticks with us."

I catch Tom's eye and give him a subtle nod of approval. He doesn't know it, but what he just said was effective and incredibly well-timed. He wasn't insulting Joe—he was confessing a sin.

"We're going to get our heads out of our duffel bags, hopefully soon," Tom continues, "but right now we just can't come up with that kind of money."

Joe's eyes were red when they walked in, but now they're two-alarm-fire red. And leaking.

"Would you like a few minutes alone?" I ask.

"No," Joe says, clearing his throat. "I'm good."

Right on cue, Cecile knocks and enters with the coffee tray.

Cecile's coffee service offers a brief moment of respite, and I can feel Joe's emotions slowly coming back down to ground level. Finally, he breaks the silence I tend to engineer at the most appropriate times.

"What can we do if we need county services?" Joe asks.

"Honestly? It's limited. They'll pay for the cremation, but that's it. I'd have to return Terry's remains in a simple cardboard container." I pause, letting the weight of it settle. "What you do after that is your business. I just can't officially help—our relationship here is strictly professional." A beat. "If we were friends, I could..."

"Fuck that," Frank says—the first real force in his voice all morning. "I don't say much. Joe knows that. I don't ask for much." He leans forward, pinning me with a look. "I've heard about you. We all have. Especially Joe. What I know is this: you're a friend. Whether you like it or not. You're going to be our friend. Starting now."

Three mouths drop open around the table. Nothing comes out. A seemingly eternal, uncomfortable silence takes over the room, until Frank breaks it again.

As it is spoken, so it shall be.

"Besides, I like your style. When did you serve?"

"Well, Frank—thank you," I say, my pulse quickening. Dangerous ground. "'04 to '08. And there's no need to call me 'sir.' I'm not that old."

"Oh. OK. I won't call you 'sir' anymore. I didn't mean to offend, Mr. David."

The cat has my tongue for just a second. The lag has to be noticeable. But I continue, "Since we're all friends now, let's handle the legal requirements here and now." I tap my pen on the file with dramatic flair. "And we can

talk about everything else over dinner. My treat. Six-thirty. Habana Café." Please say yes.

Four heads nod. One—Jerry's—tilts at an unnecessary angle, his lips pinched into a familiar, wry smile.

On cue, Jerry, Frank, and Tom excuse themselves, all suddenly struck by a synchronized nicotine emergency.

It leaves Joe and me completely alone.

A small smile breaks across Joe's frown—just enough to send a familiar shiver straight down my spine.

"Thank you for treating us like we're normal," he says softly.

Another shiver.

"Well then, let's add to the agenda for this evening's dinner date: a discussion of a new friendship. But for now, let's get to the job at hand. It shouldn't take long," I say.

"But what can we—"

"Joe," I interrupt gently. "That's friend talk."

"Gotcha."

Yes, you do.

We finish the remaining paperwork with a final signature, a bear hug, and a handshake. The hug lingers longer than it should. The handshake releases with pure reluctance. And that tiny shock—the unmistakable static electricity that only happens when heavy sexual tension is unmasked—snaps right through me.

I walk Joe out to the smoking congregation on the porch. Pulling a cigarette of my own from my pocket, I light it. I can feel eyes on me from the window—Cecile's eyes, deep in thought.

I'm honored with three more hugs from the boys. Two come with firm handshakes; one comes with a blatant wink. Six-thirty is reconfirmed.

Off they go.

I watch the SUV pull out, wishing I knew exactly what was being said inside that car right now. If the military taught me anything, it's that better intel always leads to better results. And I want tonight's dinner to deliver serious results.



Back inside, I hand the finalized file to Cecile.

She stares at me over the counter. "Do I detect actual feelings?"

A knowing smile cracks her heavy, pancake-foundation shield as she walks away, giggling to herself. I always underestimate Cecile's intuition. That woman puts me to absolute shame; she may be the only woman I have ever truly loved. Besides my mom, of course.

IP of D.J.
AWARE

6:30 P.M.

The gang arrives exactly as planned. On time. That alone feels like a miracle.

"A table for five, please," I tell the hostess. "Somewhere quiet, if you have it."

As we wait in the lobby, Frank shifts his weight from foot to foot. "Why does waiting for a table always feel so tense, but once you're sitting down, it's totally chill?"

Jerry doesn't miss a beat. "Because no one can tell you suffer from no-ass-at-all disease when you're sitting down?"

"Oh, behave," Tom lisps, nailing a classic Austin Powers.

"Shh," Joe cuts in, nudging Tom. "She's coming back."

The hostess smiles warmly. "Your table is ready. This way, please."

As we walk, the guys' cologne choices hit me. It almost feels coordinated and completely distracts me. Sebastian. CK One. Something dark and woody I can't place. How did they know Sebastian is my absolute favorite? They probably don't think I even notice, not with the rich smells of garlic and roasting pork drifting out of the kitchen.

Once we're seated, I decide to break the ice before small talk hardens into something we can't use.

"I need to say something," I begin, catching everyone's attention. "I'm really glad you all came tonight. I know we've only just met." I sneak a quick wink across the table at Joe. "I also know that you know what I don't want you to know."

Jerry blinks. "Where's Bill?!"

Frank looks at him like he's an idiot. "Bill? David is buying. Maybe we should eat before we ask for the bill."

Jerry rolls his eyes. "Troglodyte."

I grin and lean in. "Addict to addicts—and this may be way too soon—but I feel a connection with each of you that doesn't just happen every day." I drop my gaze for a beat. Letting this much emotional noise into my life blows a hole straight through my professional boundaries. "If things go the way I think they might, I'd be honored to have you as my friends." Heat rushes to my face; it has to be cherry-red.

An hour before dinner, I'd already made up my mind. There was far too much raw street cred at this table for

coy subterfuge. Honesty was the only option—but only if all four of them showed up. They did. Looking at their faces now, it hits me: they aren't auditioning for my help. I'm the one auditioning for theirs.

My internal monologue is cut short by the server's approach. I can tell instantly she knows someone at this table besides me.

"Hello, my name is Rosa," she says, flashing a bright smile. "I'll be your server tonight. Have you had a chance to look at your menus, or do you need a few more minutes?"

"We definitely need a few more minutes," I say.

Joe picks up the cue, trying to keep us moving. "Let's figure out what we're having while we chat. I'm sure David has better things to do than spend all night with us."

"Nope. No plans," I reply a little too fast, looking Joe straight in the eyes. "I could spend all night."

The table goes still. They don't miss a thing.

Frank feigns an insulted look, stepping into the silence. "Were you thinking of ordering from the menu, David, or maybe the buffet?"

My cheeks burn. Habana Café doesn't even have a buffet. "I'm watching my figure," I shoot back. "Can I get a rain check on the buffet?"

"Oh, dear," Jerry purrs. "We are getting comfortable at this table, aren't we?"

"Try not to get too friendly, Jerry," Joe says quickly.

Tom glances around the dining room. "I've always loved buffets, but they spread way too many germs." The implication lands. I file it away. I'm still waiting for Joe to take point on the real reason we're here.

I am genuinely starting to love these men, but I haven't finished my psychological battery yet. It's time to bring up the shadow sitting at the center of the table.

"Well, guys," I say, lowering my voice. "We—"

Rosa swoops back in, cutting me off. "Have y'all had a chance to decide? Jerry?"

The familiar way she says his name explains the spike of anxiety I felt from him earlier. They know each other.

"I hope so," Jerry says, scanning the table. "I'm getting really hungry."

Is it a double entendre? With Jerry, I never know, so I don't ask.

Everyone signals their choices, and Rosa jots them down efficiently. She shoots Jerry a quick, knowing wink before disappearing toward the kitchen.

To my surprise, they let my wallet off easy. Nobody orders the Surf n' Turf.

Joe breaks the silence as soon as the menus are gone. "You're right, David. We do need to go down that road. That's why we're here. What are our options?"

Four sets of eyes land on me, all at once.

"Plenty," I say. "I can't officially sell you an urn, thanks to county rules, but I can give you one from my

fabulous overstock collection. I can also “accidentally” print some custom memorial handouts for you to keep. As far as commemorating him goes, a celebration of life can happen anywhere that actually means something—the beach, someone’s home, even a bar or a restaurant. Church is an option, or I know clergy who’ll happily do a service outside. It’s really about what you think Terry would have wanted. He’s the one being celebrated.”

Joe studies his hands. “The drum circle on Sunday nights at Madeira Beach. That was the first time all five of us were together after Pride. Terry seemed to know people there. I remember how happy he was when we all agreed to go with him.”

Across the table, Tom and Jerry choke up in unison.

Frank clears his throat, his posture tightening another notch. “Yes.” Nothing more. I let the weight of that single word sit.

The kitchen doesn’t. Rosa returns, flanked by another server balancing a massive tray.

“All right, boys and girls, dinner is ready,” Rosa says, feeling the shift in the air. “Did we interrupt something?”

“No, Rosa,” Joe answers softly. “We’re just talking about what to do for Terry’s funeral.”

The other server—Carmen—gasps. She spins and bolts back toward the kitchen, abandoning the heavy tray on its jack.

Rosa freezes. "Terry? What? Funeral? Why? Oh, Dios. No. Oh, Dios mío." She drops her order pad and tears after her coworker. "Carmen? Where did Carmen go?"

Joe stares at the abandoned food, his face falling. "I thought she knew. I really thought she knew."

The air at the table snaps. Training tells me to analyze the flight response playing out in front of me, but the legion in my chest is already drowning out the data. My own grief—usually locked behind a vault door I built specifically for work—starts to rattle its hinges.

I reach across and take Joe's hand, squeezing. For a second I'm not the funeral director. I'm just another addict holding on, afraid that if I let go, the current will rip us all away. Jerry's hand lands on Joe's from the other side, completing the chain.

Three men, one small island in the middle of a Friday-night dinner rush.

A heavy silence settles over our corner of the restaurant, broken only by distant kitchen noise and the low murmur of other diners. Forks scrape plates as we finally start to eat in an uncomfortably comfortable hush. I squeeze Joe's hand a little tighter. He looks up at me, eyes caught between hope and confusion.

What Joe can't see—because his mind is kinder than mine—is what the room is doing to me. Every clang of metal on metal, every scrape of fork on porcelain, trips a wire in my head. Most of me is a thing clawing its way up from the bottom; what's left is just enough to keep me

sitting here, pretending this is fine. I want to cry, but it's never a good time. It isn't now.

Jerry suddenly pushes his chair back. "I'ma go check on the girls. I'm coming back, so don't leave without me." His timing is a gift, a sharp little joke cutting just enough tension to let us breathe.

While he's gone, the remaining details of Terry's memorial fall into place. The last, most important piece hangs on a question no one has asked aloud.

Jerry returns right on cue, Rosa trailing behind him. Her shadowed, bloodshot eyes explain everything she doesn't say. She pulls up a chair and sits with us. A moment later, the restaurant manager appears, setting a round of drinks on the table.

"These are on the house, guys," he says quietly before slipping away.

Silence settles again until Tom cuts through it.

"Rosa, do you think it'd be OK with Sammy if we have the service on Sunday night? At the drum circle?"

Rosa wipes her face. "Sammy? No. No problemo. Sammy doesn't want this problem. ¿Verás?" She taps her own chest: This is my problem.

Joe, still sick with guilt over the surprise, mouths a small, I thought you knew. Rosa squeezes his shoulder as she stands—the universal shorthand for You're forgiven—then turns back toward the kitchen to find Carmen.

Dinner winds down. The bill is paid, the last necessary words are said, and the mood turns slow and heavy as we drift out into the parking lot. By Joe's Mercedes SUV, I say my goodbyes while the boys pile into their seats.

Except Joe. He lingers by the driver's-side door.

"Thank you, David," he says quietly.

"Seriously, Joe, don't mention it. I honestly enjoyed this time with all of you."

"Forgive me if I seem sentimental," he murmurs, looking down at the pavement, "but you kinda filled in for me tonight. In a good way." He cuts himself off, clearly thinking he's already said too much.

"Are you going to be OK tonight?" I ask.

"I think so. Yeah, I'll be fine."

"I'll text you my address," I say, stepping closer. "Just let me know if I should expect you." Before he can respond, I press a quick, gentle peck to his cheek, turn on my heel, and walk into the humid Florida night.

Don't trust them, David. You know what happens.

My apprehension is valid. Meth often alters our perspective. What seems right is usually wrong.

I text Joe my address.

One thing is certain now in a way it wasn't this morning: Terry had a hell of a lot of people who truly loved him. Whatever Gladys failed to give him, the rest of them are trying like hell to make up for.

STRESSED

9:40 P.M.

Back home. Alone. Again.

A sharp knock rattles the front door.

I've been giving the kitchen a quick cosmetic once-over. I'd decided it probably wouldn't be Joe—no text, and showing up unannounced would be a flagrant violation of gay protocol. Now I'm knee-deep in cleaning products and not dressed to receive anyone.

I open the door, trying to remember which past transgression currently needs a shower.

It's Joe.

Shit.

My mind races. What am I even going to talk about? I'm already irritable. I hate it when things slide sideways like this.

"Oh—Joe. I didn't expect you to come. Come in."

"I'm sorry," he says, hovering at the threshold. "I should've texted. I wanted to see your place, so I did a quick drive-by. Once I was out here, I figured I'd take a chance. It's rude. I can go."

I shouldn't have texted him my address. Now every word out of my mouth could be the hammer falling. I don't invite strangers into my home unless I intend to hurt them. I can't hurt this one. He is off-limits.

"No. Stay. Please." I offer a small smile, just enough to take the edge off. "I was just cleaning up the kitchen because I found myself alone. Can I get you something to drink? Sweet tea, lemonade, or 7Up?"

Joe studies me. "Nothing harder?"

"Not tonight."

"Tea's fine."

"Be right back."

In the kitchen, my heart feels like it's about to punch through my sternum. Does he see the sweat on my forehead? Shit. Can he already see through my bullshit? Breathe, David. Just breathe.

I walk back out and hand him his glass. Against every survival instinct and every anti-intimacy rule in my playbook, I look him in the eye.

"Joe, I invited you here for a reason," I say. "But maybe not the one you think."

He pulls a small baggie of cocaine from his pocket and offers it with a familiar motion, the quiet invitation

we all recognize—a little shake, a questioning look. Every cell in my body screams yes. God, that would feel good.

I shake my head.

"Go ahead," I tell him, nodding at the baggie. "I just want to stay clearheaded for a minute."

He doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just watches me.

"Look... I know we don't really know each other," I say, my voice finally steadying. "And it's probably not my place to say this, but I'm going to anyway. If you want me to shut up, say the word."

He gives one small nod.

"I've always been able to feel people," I tell him. "It's a bit of a curse. I was an interrogator in the Army—I can read bullshit in real time. But it's more than that. I can feel exactly what you're feeling right now, Joe. I see the lies. I see the sadness. I feel the deceit. And right now, I know you're barely holding on."

His eyes flicker.

"You're trying to play the stoic hero, holding everybody else up through a massive crisis," I continue. "And you're fucking it up. You're trying to rescue drowning men without the proper tools. You're going to drown with them unless you stop and take a breath. You need to decompress before it's too late."

Joe's eyes are the ultimate tell—darting, calculating, scanning the room for exits. He's deciding whether to accept what I've just put on the table or slap me and bolt. I've seen that exact brand of panic before.

To his credit, he stays.

I move from my chair to the sofa, leaving a respectful stretch of cushion between us. I reach over and take his hand. My nerves vanish. This is my house. My terms. If my instincts are wrong, I'm willing to pay the price. With just the two of us here, I don't have to perform.

I still don't trust the moment completely, so I keep my delivery careful and controlled.

"Look at me?" I ask.

He does.

"You've been on my mind, on and off, since the night we met," I say. "I wanted you to be the person at the other end of every Uber ride. When I called about Terry and heard your voice, I thought it was you. I wasn't sure, but the details lined up. Terry. You. The connection. I prayed I was right."

I draw a slow breath.

"This may sound stupid, but I sensed something back then. I still do. I like you, Joe. I think you're genuinely good. The truth is, I don't like people much. I don't trust them. It's incredibly hard for me to like anyone—I meet people in the worst places. The good ones don't usually show up where I work, or even where I play."

And then it comes out—too fast, too naked. It shocks me, but it feels spectacular. My voice cracks just a little.

"I didn't invite you here for drugs or sex tonight," I say. "I invited you because I think you need someone to show you kindness, for once."

(Joe) Oh, yeah? Wait 'til you see what these hands can do.

"What's funny?" I ask.

"Nothing, sorry, nose itches," Joe replies, a wry smile forming at the corner of his lips.

I can feel myself slipping—too honest, too exposed. The smart, clinical half of my brain tells me to shut the hell up. I ignore it.

My confession does something strange to the room. It isn't the jagged, noisy meth fog I'm used to; it's softer. A quiet. A total calm. For once, the internal chorus falls silent.

When Joe finally answers, the weight of every syllable lands in my chest.

"I know what you mean, David," he whispers. "I think about you all the time. I'm just so used to being rejected for actually having goals. Everybody else just wants to get off and get out. I thought you were different, but I was too afraid of being wrong to talk to you."

Tears spill over. I don't interrupt.

"The disappointments just add up, David. I'm tired. I'm so fucking tired, man. All I want is a friend I can talk to when I don't have all the answers. Someone I can actually trust when I hate myself too much to take my

own advice. I hate this life, but I don't even remember how to be real anymore.

One slip at work, just one violation of trust, and it's over."

He wipes his face with the back of his hand.

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost everything. And I have two entirely different 'everything's,' David. They don't mix. I love my job. I love my friends. But if I try to stay loyal to both, I'll lose them both. It's a horrible place to be. You know what they say about women—can't live with them, can't live without them. Cocaine is like my woman."

He actually giggles, cheeks flushing. "I can definitely live without women, though."

Then he goes quiet.

The silence feels distinctly sacred. I let him keep it, holding my tongue—which is not my natural gift.

I want to hug him so badly.

Don't. Not yet.

"Why did you really invite me here tonight?" Joe asks suddenly, pinning me with his gaze. "Don't lie to me. Tell me the truth."

"Because I want to sleep with you," I say. "But no nudity, please."

Shit, did you really just say that? Asshole.

His eyes flicker. Something soft moves behind them.

"I need to feel worth holding," I tell him. "And I want to hold on to you. Maybe cry with you. The truth is, I need your help, too."

I swallow. "I want you in my bed tonight. That's all. You won't offend me if you choose to leave. I know I come on strong sometimes. If you go, it'll probably break my heart. But..."

The words run out.

Joe nods once, a fragile little smile tugging at his mouth. "Is it OK if we shower in the nude?" he asks.

We don't say much after that.

We are tired. Lost. Dying in our own separate ways.

So we go to bed.

We spoon.

Damn, you smell nice. You always smell good.

We sleep.

For the first time in a long time, we are found.

CURIOUS

"Joe... Joe..." I shake him gently, trying to pull him up from wherever his dreams have taken him.

I forgot to ask about his work schedule last night. The oversight is starting to make me anxious.

He blinks, slowly returning to the land of the living. He squints up at me against the morning light. "What time do you have to be at work?"

"I don't," he mutters, rolling over. "It's my day off."

Then a jolt of electricity hits his brain. He realizes he's talking to someone who shouldn't be standing next to his pillow. He bolts upright.

"Wait. What? Why are you here?"

"Well, because I live here, I guess..."

"Oh God... David?" Joe rubs his face, shoulders dropping. "I... oh, wow. OK. I remember now. Sorry. My brain was a bit foggy for a minute. Did I snore?"

"Yeah. I couldn't sleep a wink," I banter. "But I didn't trust you enough to leave you alone in my bedroom, so I soldiered on right here." I let the tease hang for a second before turning serious. "Hey. You awake enough for something honest?"

Joe nods, pinning me with his gaze. "Yes."

"I'm really glad you stayed," I say. "I'm really glad you're here right now." I hold his eyes. "Don't make a fool of me. Please."

Joe blinks, a smirk tugging at his lips. "What? You thought I'd take your... You're fucking with me. Asshole. I'm actively grieving. I'm vulnerable. You should absolutely know better. Where can I send a formal complaint?"

"Dial 727 I don't give a fuck," I reply, smiling.

His grin falters for a split second, reading the room, then breaks into a broad, toothy smile. "David... I won't make a fool out of you."

He leans back against the headboard, eyeing the suit hanging from the hanger in my hand. "Do you have to work today? Of course you do. You have a real job." His tone turns half-wistful. "I wish you didn't. I could honestly lie here all day. How long do I have to get the hell out of your house?"

"There's a key on the night table," I say, nodding toward the wood. "Use it to lock up when you leave. Take your time. I need to finish getting ready. I'll make a pot of coffee if you're interested."

"Mind if I get a bump from your baggie, for shits and giggles?" I add casually. "Left my stash at work..."

"No, of course not. Take what you want. I have plenty more." Then confusion wipes the grin off his face. "Wait. A key? A key to your house?"

He's still catching up to the level of intimacy we skipped last night. "You don't even know me, David. Why would you trust me like that?"

"I know where you work," I shoot back, cutting off his logic. "Seriously, stay until I get home if you want. Then I can personally make sure your pockets are empty before you leave. Oh, and if you do stay, make sure my dinner's warm and ready by 5:30."

Joe rolls his eyes and tosses a pillow at me. "You are effing ridiculous, mister. Go make the coffee. Leave me in peace."

"Keep talking to me like that, and I'll leave you in pieces."

His face goes slack. For a second, I wonder if my mortuary humor crossed a line too fast, too soon.

Then he smirks. "I left my rubber sheets at home."

Nope. Not too far at all.



Coffee is made. Suit jacket on. I do a final check in the mirror.

On my way back to the kitchen, the familiar sizzle of butter and the unmistakable scent of fried eggs and bacon confirm Joe is out of bed.

"Good morning, sir," Joe says, turning from the stove. "I thought I'd whip you up something to eat. Can't have you leave for the tombs on an empty stomach."

I freeze in the doorway and stare. "Um, I see. Weren't you wearing underwear the last time I saw you?"

"Yeah, but I like fresh undies in the morning," he says, completely unbothered. "Didn't bring a change, so... But hey, this apron fits perfectly. Seriously, if it bothers you, I can go put my dirty clothes back on..."

Every part of me says I should tell him to put on some pants. Instead, I choose to fully enjoy the domestic absurdity.

"Oh, hell no," I say. "Who am I to judge? Honestly, you don't even have to wear the apron if you don't want to."

I sit at the small table, watching him move around my kitchen like it's his. He pours two mugs.

"How do you take your coffee?" he asks.

"Cream, no sugar," I say, pretending to be annoyed by the service.

"Here you go, sweetheart. Just like you like it," he purrs, sliding into the chair across from me. He rests his chin in his hands and just looks at me.

I take a bite. "Penny for your thoughts."

"What will you do when I get tired of you?" he asks softly.

I nearly choke on my eggs. The weight of the question hits harder than it has any right to. I manage to

swallow and stand, carrying my empty plate to the dishwasher just to get out from under his eyes. I rinse it, take a slow sip of the last of my coffee.

"If I were to fall out of the graces of a man with your assets," I say, "I'd probably join the priesthood."

Joe barks out a laugh. "Would you like another bump before you head out, Daddy?"

I can't help laughing with him. It's a phenomenal line.

"Yes," I say, walking back over to him. "But first, I could use a kiss, if you have one to spare. I hear you give them out freely in strangers' offices sometimes."

"Oh. Oh, no you didn't."

He definitely has one to spare, and it is spectacular.

As I finally walk out to my car, I silently take stock of the morning's blessings. What began in total grief and confusion has somehow turned into easy, ridiculous domestic comfort in the span of ninety minutes.

I know I am in trouble. Even the blind could see the giddiness dripping off my shoulders. As I back out of the driveway, I start to worry I might be happy.

Joe texts me before I reach the stop sign at the end of my street: See you tonight, Daddy.

As if on cue, "I Will Be Your Father Figure" starts playing on the radio.

"I'm only ten years older than you, bitch!" I text back.

On the drive to work, the irony hits me like a wave. Is it possible I'm finding a reason to live because a man died? I don't let the question ruin the moment, but I don't pretend it isn't there.

Full disclosure, dear reader: I haven't exactly been rooting for a long life lately. Not for a while. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Joe might end up being one of the reasons I don't pull the trigger on myself.

I know that is a terrifying amount of weight to place on anyone's shoulders. But I also know this: when you've lived as long as I have in rooms full of the nearly dead, you learn that sometimes the thing that keeps you here is just one person, on one ordinary morning, making eggs in your kitchen in nothing but an apron and clean underwear, who has nothing left to lose.

BALANCED

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12, 2023 – 2:30 P.M.

I finally get a much-needed break from the day's drama. A breather. A chance to touch base with Joe.

I resist the urge to text him. It's the modern way, but it feels cold, and I have no interest in sounding cold to this particular man. I want him to hear my voice.

I hit call.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Joe. It's me, David."

"Oh, well, hello," he says, warmth bleeding straight through the line. "Haven't you had enough of me for one year? Oh, now I have your cell number."

"Not hardly," I say. "And yeah, it felt only fair, since I've had yours for a couple of days now."

"Good point. What can I do for you, sweetie dahling?" he purrs. "Oh, I'm sorry, is it too soon?"

"Probably," I admit. "You should wait at least another day before engaging in the whole term-of-endearment thing. But I like your choice, so feel free to start using it tomorrow at two."

"AM or PM?"

"I'll let you decide. It's a test."

"Oooh, I love tests, Patsy."

"Too far," I deadpan. "Hey, I'm calling because I got an invite from Jerry for drinks after work. I think I should go. Rosa's going to be there—probably wants to talk about the drum circle and such. Wanted to see if you'd like to join."

There's a tiny pause on the line. I can hear the gears turning.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Joe says, "but honestly, I could use some time to go over new developments in my head. It's been a complicated couple of days, and I haven't had any alone time. Besides, I don't want to intrude. Since Jerry didn't invite me, he may have things to discuss that would be easier if I weren't there."

"You would know better than I do," I say. "And I won't take it the wrong way at all. I believe you. You deserve some time to process. I fully support your mental health. You're going to need it if you let me into your life."

I lower my voice just a hair. "Is there anything I should know going into this? Jerry scares me a little."

Joe chuckles. "Not really. Just don't try to bullshit him. You can't bullshit a bullshitter, my daddy used to say. Oh,

I think I just caught on. He won't go all drama queen on you in public. He usually saves that kind of behavior for when he's flanked by Tom and Frank."

"Noted."

"I believe the modern-day version would be 'heard,'" he adds, "but you are an old man, so..."

"Old?" I scoff. "I've told you already, I'm only ten years older than you. That's not old—that's wise. Bitch."

"David?"

"Yeah?"

His tone shifts—lighter volume, heavier weight.

"Don't ghost me when this is all done."

The request lands deeper than I want it to. He isn't joking. I can hear the history in that one sentence.

"Ha ha ha," I say, buying myself half a second. "I'll buy a leash and collar tonight if you want. Something cute. I look good in purple. You like purple?"

"I do, actually. My favorite color," he says. I can hear the smile now. "See you tomorrow?"

"God willing and the creek don't rise," I answer. "Have a good introspection, Joe. I'll fill you in tomorrow."

"Oh, David, one more thing—when he invites himself over to your house to get high, you should probably say 'no.'"

"Heard. Have a good day, Nurse Betty."

Laughter. Then the soft click of the call ending.

For the first time in recent memory, I don't secretly blush at the sting of what used to feel like rejection. I

don't assume the worst, don't immediately translate "I need some alone time" into "I'm done with you."

Growth is a strange, inconvenient thing.

IP of D.J. Chambers

IP of D.J.
BRAVE

7:30 P.M.

I smell the pizza the second I round the corner from my house.

To get to the Tavern, I have to walk right past the screened door of the pizza kitchen. It's always propped open, always tempting locals to abandon their own meal prep. It's the absolute best advertising money can't buy.

I can almost taste the cold Guinness before my hand even touches the Tavern's heavy front door. I push through a thick cloud of cigarette smoke, pull it open, and step inside.

I'm in. And I beat them here. Good.

"Hey, David, how you doin'?" Tarra calls from behind the bar.

"Super, Tarra. You?"

"You're here, so I'm great. Usual table in the corner?"

"You only love me for my tips," I tease. "If it's available."

"It's always available for you, David. No one else wants to sit all the way back there anyway. Alone tonight?"

"Nope. Party of three. One boy, one girl. Both Hispanic. You'll know them when they walk in."

Tarra arches an eyebrow. "Did you actually say 'girl'?"

"Watch it, Tarra. You don't want me seducing your husband again."

She laughs, flicking a rag at me. "Go hide in your corner."

I genuinely love this place. I almost couldn't believe it when Jerry suggested it—it's not too expensive, the atmosphere is great, and it's wonderfully subdued. None of that matches the frantic Jerry I've painted in my head. His being late, however, fits him perfectly. Maybe Rosa took a little longer to put on her face.

Oh—there they are.

"Hi, David. Is it OK if I call you David? Oh, no, please don't get up. I put my skirt on the exact same way you do," Jerry says, not missing a beat as they reach the table. "You remember Rosa? Her husband is the drum circle leader, so I drugged her and forced her to come with me."

"He didn't drug me. He dragged me," Rosa cuts in smoothly. Uh-oh. Rosa's keeping up. This could get fun. "His daddy is Mexicano; he no can help it. Hola, Daveed,

nice to see you again.” Now she’s a Cubana mercilessly making fun of a Mexicano accent. Who is this woman? I think I love her.

“Good to see you too, Rosa. Really,” I say, gesturing for them to sit. “I thought you’d left Habana—you weren’t there the last couple of times I stopped in for lunch.”

“Oh, nooo,” Rosa replies, pulling out a chair. “I just moved to the night shift. More money, you know? I’m from Cuba—we absolutely love the dollars.”

“You don’t have to be from Cuba to love dollars, Rosa. When I finally get enough of them, I’m going to make a dress out of them just for you,” Jerry says, shooting me a blatant, coy look.

I deliberately ignore his stare and glance down at the menus. “Have you both been here before?” I ask, and then immediately undermine my own play. “I live just around the corner, so I come here a lot. I love this place. I was really happy when you suggested it, Jerry.”

The second the words leave my mouth, my face does its trademark move—glowing bright cherry red.

“My first time here. It smells so good,” Rosa says, rescuing me from myself. I return her warm smile. She feels like a heavy blanket on a cool night. I’ve never spent time with her socially before, and I’m realizing I’ve been seriously missing out. There’s definitely more than one drum circle in my future.

"I've been here a couple of times, Papi," Jerry chimes in. "It's alright. It's pretty cheap. I just didn't want you to have to work your Uber job tonight."

Bitch. I wonder if Joe would be into a throuple.

"Aw, Jerry, you like Mr. David too much, I think," Rosa laughs.

David se ve mejor con vaqueros.

"That's OK, Rosa. Mister David likes Jerry too much, too," I shoot back. "Not like that, Jerry—more like a beloved son who happens to be on the spectrum."

Rosa blinks. "What does that mean?"

Te lo diré más tarde, Rosa. Right now, though, I think they serve alcohol in this place?

As Jerry cranes his neck, desperately scanning for our server, I let out a sharp whistle. "Tarra!"

"At your service, me lord. What would you have me do, sir?" Tarra answers, appearing instantly at the edge of the table.

Ah, ¿así que es así?

Jerry drops into a mock expression of total surrender. He'll be a good boy now. For at least an hour. Probably much less.

Once the orders are in and our immediate needs are handled, I steer the conversation exactly where I intended. The mood around the table grows visibly heavier, the clink of pint glasses and distant bar banter setting a strange, rhythmic backdrop.

"So, Rosa," I say, turning to her, "your husband is the leader of the drum circle. I'm really glad you could come tonight. Have you mentioned the situation to him yet?"

"Yes, I have," she says, her tone shifting to something more formal. "He's OK with it for sure. He and Terry weren't best friends, but he understood the problems Terry lived with. Sammy knows Terry's mama, so he knows a lot. He said he'll do it, but he wants to keep it mellow—not sad. Just more low music."

"That's perfect, Rosa," I say, nodding. "If things are too sad, no one gets a chance to think about why we're there. We need to lift up Terry's life, not bury it in the sand."

Jerry cuts in, the playful façade dropping completely. "Why would you say that, David? You only met him once. Did you even talk to him? Did you see him again after your party?"

"No, Jerry. I only met him that one night," I answer. "He seemed adventurous but deeply grounded. And I won't sugarcoat things for your benefit. I can't see things any other way than the way I know them to be. I refuse to reinterpret reality just to make it the way you want it to be."

"That's not how I meant it, David," Jerry says quietly, staring down at his hands. "It's just... you just put into words exactly what I've been trying to say. I don't want to be sad and boring for the rest of my life just because of Terry."

I soften, realizing the edge in my voice. "I'm sorry. I misread your feelings."

"That's OK. Everyone does. All the time." Jerry takes a slow breath, then looks up at me with a seriousness that catches me off guard. "Sometimes I try way too hard to show people who don't matter how little they mean to me. Sometimes I'm completely lying about it. I don't want you to hate me because of my persona, David. I think you are going to be the one who saves my friends. So don't leave us, OK? They really need you."

Rosa looks between us, puzzled. "Wait. You told me you were perfect, Jerry. How can you want Mister David to save you?"

"I said he would save my friends, Rosa."

Mi angelito perfecto.

"Sí, you said that," Rosa murmurs, her eyes never leaving my face. "But tonight, I think he will start by saving you, too."

"Hold up, you guys," I say, raising my hands to cool the air. "I'm not here to save anyone. I don't know nearly enough about any of you to save you. I have to save myself first. I am no angel, believe me. We all have our faults, and we're all making stupid decisions every single day."

I stop. The weight of what they're asking—and of what I've already stepped into—hits me square in the chest.

How much of myself can I actually afford to give these boys? I'm already far too deep in their world. If I'm being fully honest, I invited myself in. Have I screwed up catastrophically, or is this somehow the point—that I'm meant to be a micro-savior for a band of broken misfits?

Standing this close to the edge of my own precipice, can I even tolerate the added responsibility? Every survival instinct I have left screams at me to back off. Cool my jets. Walk away before I get swallowed whole by their grief.

But there's another voice—louder, steadier, cutting clean through the internal noise.

DO IT, DAVID.

Is it God? Is it Satan? It's incredibly hard to tell the difference when both speak fluent guilt.

Either way, one baseline truth remains: I have to risk my own soul to find out. Screw the devil. I rebuke thee.

I look directly at Jerry and let my defenses drop. "I'm sorry," I say. "I stepped into this role intentionally and knowingly. You are my responsibility now. And I'm yours. I'm officially offering you the job of keeping me real. I can get a balloon head pretty easily when left to my own devices. Keep your hairpins handy, OK?"

Jerry beams, his entire face lighting up. "Right on. I got you. You really are a good Papi." He turns to Rosa, the triumphant smirk sliding back into place. "I think I'll keep this one, Rosa."

"Oh, I don't know, Jerry," Rosa teases, eyes dancing. "He seems a little secondhand. You sure you don't want to go to Family Dollar to pick out a brand-new one instead?"

Estoy seguro.

Entonces estoy de acuerdo," Rosa says, raising her glass.

Hacia el futuro.

And just like that, I'm in significantly deeper than I ever meant to be—and exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Sí, al futuro.

CONTENT

9:30 P.M.

The night winds down on a phenomenal tapas-style meal. Black cherry riblets, crab cakes, lobster and shrimp sliders, a Gorgonzola pear salad, and the obligatory Margherita pizza—something I personally require on the regular.

I pick up the tab with my company card, casual as a man grabbing the mail. Jerry and Rosa are practically licking their fingers. The look on Jerry's face when I ordered everything that was under consideration is absolutely priceless—equal parts delight and pure, shameless greed.

By the time the plates are cleared, the details are fully settled. The memorial will be a week from Saturday; we want to make sure Terry's ashes are completely ready

first. It only seems right that he should be there to witness his own sendoff.

Rosa has to scoot, but Jerry decides to stay. I promise her I'll see to it he gets home safely. She hesitates for a second—the classic *mamacita* instinct kicking in—but after another firm assurance, she finally lets us go.

Since I live a mere two blocks away, Jerry and I walk back together. And we talk.

"So, David," he purrs, cutting through the humid night air, "you wanna get high?"

"No. It's a school night," I fib. The truth is, I already took tomorrow off. But boundaries are boundaries.

"Oh. Look at you, a responsible Papi."

"Sometimes," I say.

We reach my porch, and I turn to him, dropping the banter for a second. "Look, Jerry, I'll lay it out for you. I think you're a genuinely good guy. I love your wit. You crack me up, and I love that your sarcasm is your ultimate shield. You intrigue me.

"I'll admit, I even had a fleeting thought earlier about the three of us becoming a trio. But I'm not willing to start on the wrong footing with you or your friends. I refuse to be the outsider who disrupts your entire dynamic. Do I make sense?"

By the time I finish my little speech, I'm unlocking the front door.

I am completely alone with Jerry.

In my house.

Where my bed is.

Jerry shoots me a knowing look as he steps inside. "You know, Papi, it is entirely possible to get high and not have sex."

Bitch. He reads me like a damn book.

"Is it?" I ask, flipping on the lamps.

We settle into the living room, put on some music, and let the night unwind. I cue up a SoundCloud mix based on *Radiohead*. Of course the tracklist kicks off with "Creep." Why wouldn't it?

"So, Jerry, what was it really like working in that jail?" I ask, resisting the urge to skip the song. "Oop—hold that thought."

My phone buzzes in my hand.

"Hello, Joe. How's it hanging?"

"About down to my knees," Joe's voice echoes through the line. "What are you up to?"

"Just got home. Sitting here with Jerry, actually. Having a bit of a come-to-Jesus talk."

"Really." Joe pauses. "Would three make a crowd?"

"Not for me. Let me ask the room."

Before I can even translate, Jerry calls from the sofa, loud enough to carry. "Of course he can join us, Papi! He'll protect me."

I look over, indignant. "From what?"

The twinkle in Jerry's eye says he's absolutely pulling my chain. I stick my tongue out at him. Thankfully, he

doesn't walk through the sexual door I just mindlessly left wide open.

"Jerry wants you to come over," I say into the phone. "He claims he's a little scared of me."

"Odd. Seems backward," Joe laughs. "I'll be there in two minutes."

I blink. "What? How?"

"I was just down the street at Target," he explains. "Decided to head your way just in case I got lucky and found you home."

"I think you're definitely going to get lucky, Joe," Jerry shouts. I made the mistake of leaving the call on speaker.

"See you in a minute," I say quickly, hanging up to cut off the commentary.

"Do you think he actually heard me?" Jerry asks, grinning.

"He heard you loud and clear. So did I. Really, bitch?"

A sharp knock hits the front door.

"I wonder who that could possibly be?" I say dryly.

"Santa Claus, perhaps?"

I shake my head. It never ends with him. I might honestly have to adopt this boy.

I swing the door open.

"Hi, boys! Santa Claus is here," Joe exclaims, marching straight past me into the house. What? How?

Oh, never mind.

Joe is holding a chilled bottle of Riesling.

I absolutely love Riesling.

How did he even know that? Oh, never mind.

The next few moments hit me like a ball and chain. Joe heads straight into the kitchen, returning a moment later with three wineglasses and a corkscrew. He doesn't even have to ask where they are.

Jerry sees it instantly.

He watches Joe move around my kitchen with the ease of someone who's been here before. Very recently.

I can practically hear Jerry's thoughts as his face cycles through a rapid-fire loop of expressions: knowing, judging, resenting, and respecting—all in the exact same second.

My stomach settles almost as fast as it was disrupted.

I realize, right then, that I have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.

I'm not used to that feeling—actually feeling good about my own behavior.

"So, what were you bitches saying about me behind my back?" Joe asks playfully, pouring the wine before eyeing the loaded glass bowl in the ashtray. He flashes me a quick look of concern.

"Settle down, Mary. Do you like my outfit?" Jerry cuts in, yanking the tension out of the room by its roots. Just like that, all is perfectly OK in my little world.

Is this how real friends act? Trust? Silent conversations carried entirely through a single glance? I wouldn't know. I don't typically have any.

With the pouring of the wine, Joe completely settles the mood. A brief pocket of quiet lands before we steer back to the mission.

"So, what did you guys decide about the memorial service?" Joe asks.

Before we can dive in, my phone buzzes again.

"It's Frank," I say. "Hey, guys, talk amongst yourselves for a second. Frank is texting."

They toss me two coordinated nods and a playful wink.

Frank: David? Frank. Hope it's not too late.

David: Not at all. How are you? Can I call you?

Frank: Yeah, no sweat. I'm here.

David: Gimme a sec.

I hit dial. He answers on the first ring.

"Hey."

"Hey. Hi, Frank. What's going on? How are you? I was actually thinking about you earlier."

"I'm not gay, David. I don't play that way," Frank says, his laugh surprisingly light through the earpiece.

Then his tone turns serious. "Yeah, so me and Tom want to talk to you. In person. We have some shit to get off our chests. You think you could make that happen for us?"

"God, I'm glad you asked, Frank. When do you want to hook up—shit, I mean connect? I could meet tomorrow. Anytime."

Damn, David, foot-in-mouth disease strikes again.

"Hold up, I'll ask him," Frank says. Away from the phone, I hear: "Tom, what time tomorrow? Huh? He thinks it's a hookup! Yeah, just David. I'll ask."

He comes back on the line. "How about eleven?"

"Perfect. Where?"

"You sure? Shouldn't you be working at eleven?" Frank asks, suddenly remembering it's a weekday.

"I'm sure. I took tomorrow off," I answer.

"How about your place? You got a place, right?" Frank asks, with a sincerity that tugs at something in my chest.

"I do. I'll text you the address. Just us three, right?"

"Yeah, that'd be best, I think," he says.

"I'll be here. You like Margherita pizza?"

"Yeah."

"OK. See ya then."

"Cool, Dave. See ya then."

I hang up and set the phone on the table.

Joe eyes me instantly. "What was that all about?"

"Don't know. Guess I'll find out tomorrow. Should I have my gun handy?"

Jerry snorts. "They wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Cool. What do you think we're going to talk about then?"

"You," Joe says coyly, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Why? What did I do?" I ask.

Joe tilts his head. "Throuple, huh?"

Aw, shit. They have me completely dead to rights.

We laugh, joke, and talk until a little after 1:00 a.m., a real, undeniable camaraderie knitting itself between the three of us. I don't get the chance to hear about Jerry's life as a jailer tonight, but there will be time for that later. God willing, and the creek don't rise.

By the time we wrap up, Jerry is already waiting in the passenger seat of Joe's Mercedes. Joe lingers behind on my porch. I can tell he desperately wants to say something, but he's actively doubting his place.

"Penny for your thoughts, sweetcheeks," I say, handing him the exact permission he's looking for.

"Don't worry about tomorrow," Joe says softly, stepping closer. "They probably just want to tell you how they'll carve you into tiny pieces if you ever dare to hurt Jerry or me. Just let them talk. Their tongues are much sharper than their knives."

He pauses, holding my gaze.

"I really like you, David," he continues. "You make a lot of time for people you've only just met. Just... make sure you're not trying to buy our loyalty. We don't work that way."

The warning is gentle, but it lands like a weight.

Before I can respond, he pulls me into a firm bear hug, presses a quick kiss to my lips, and whispers a final good night.

For once, when the door closes behind him, the silence in my house feels less like absence and more like possibility.

UNEASY

THURSDAY, 11:00 A.M.

With military precision that's highly uncommon for a couple of addicts, a car pulls into my driveway at exactly 10:59 a.m. One minute later, a sharp knock hits my front door.

I swing it open. "Gentlemen," I say, injecting a bit of misplaced formality into the air on purpose.

Frank steps past me, a faint smirk on his face. "Who you calling a gentleman? Sir."

"Thanks for letting us swing by," Tom adds, stoic as ever, contributing perfectly to the sudden playfulness between Frank and me.

"No worries, man. I'm glad you reached out," I say, closing the door behind them. "I'm sure there's a hell of a

lot for us to talk about. How about we sit down, and I'll just let you guys do the talking. I'll listen.

"Oh—one thing. I already ordered a pizza. It should be here in about an hour. I hope you'll stay to share it; I don't exactly want to get fat eating the whole thing alone."

We settle in the living room. Frank leans back, sizing me up with that familiar, rigid intensity.

He opens the interrogation. "Dude. What was your rank?"

"Corporal."

"MOS?"

"Seventy-six Yankee," I reply. "Supply."

From the other end of the sofa, Tom lets out a quiet, gravelly sound. "Yup."

Nope.

Supply. The ultimate low-radar smokescreen. It works like a charm.

The truth is a Pandora's box of classified human-intelligence work—a 35M background full of interrogation tactics and psychological mapping that I have no intention of dragging into this living room. If I tell Frank I was trained to dismantle a man's defenses from the inside out, his tactical alarms will trip and he'll see me as an immediate threat.

They don't need to know about the boxes I've sat in. Supply keeps it boring. Supply keeps it safe.

Frank's head snaps left, glaring at his buddy. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Tom doesn't flinch. "Nothing. Just yup."

"OK, whatever," Frank mutters, swinging his focus right back to me. "He's always been a man of few words, but lately he's been even quieter."

"Understandable," I say softly. "Everyone copes in their own specific way."

I try to catch Tom's gaze. I get it—just a brief, half-second glimpse—but I'm grateful for it. I don't know Tom's full story yet, but the kid is carrying a massive, heavy number on his back.

"So, David," Frank says, clearly the designated speaker for the duo. "What gives?"

It's exactly the baseline question I expected. "Be a bit more specific?"

"Joe and you... well, you know. The party. Then it turns out we gotta come directly to you to handle Terry. It's a big damn coincidence, if coincidence is even a real thing."

Before I can answer, a minor interruption cuts the air—and ends up helping everyone. Tom gives me the unspoken, shifting signal only addicts recognize.

Without a word, I open the side drawer of the coffee table, make a quiet withdrawal from my stash, and hand it over to him. I point to the clean glass ashtray. Fire clicks. He nods his thanks. I nod back, "There are some rags by the kitchen sink, why don't you dampen one up."

Frank watches the exchange, waiting. "Can I finish now?"

He looks over at Tom.

Tom nods, exhaling a thin stream of smoke before catching my eye again. Was that a faint smile on his face? I'll be damned.

"Sir, we don't mean any disrespect," Frank continues, his voice dropping into a lower register. "But what's your game here? Why are you stepping up for us like this?" He nods once, clearing the floor for me to answer.

"Because I'm tired," I say, letting the professional veneer drop completely. "I'm lonely. And I've got absolutely nothing left to lose.

"My intuition tells me you assholes are worth the effort. There's no ulterior motive, Frank. I completely get it if you're skeptical. So am I. Never trust a meth-head, right?"

From the peanut gallery on the couch, Tom mutters, "Told ya."

"He did, too," Frank admits, leaning forward. "But I'm not that easy to convince, David. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt for now.

"But you hurt my friends... and I'll kill you. I don't mean I'll just hurt you—I mean I will literally kill you."

I don't blink. I look Frank right in his bloodshot eyes.

"Frank, I assure you, killing me would be my absolute first choice, given a choice," I say evenly. "I've been hurt quite enough for one lifetime."

The room goes completely still.

Tom pipes up from his corner, breaking the freeze. "We'll have to share war stories sometime, Mister David."

Frank's neck audibly pops as his head whips left again. "What the fuck, dude?"

"Enough with the tribunal, Frank," Tom says, setting the lighter down. "You said you'd give him a chance. Let's just chill, man. I actually like him."

Frank swings back to face me, shaking his head. "He don't like nobody."

A sudden, reflexive smile cracks across all three of our faces.

"Can I ask you guys a few things now?" I say, gently reclaiming the floor.

"It's your place, shoot," Frank says, picking up the lighter. "And so is this." He passes the ashtray back to me.

"You're both Army?"

Two firm nods.

"I'm not entirely ready for the real war stories yet," I say, tapping the glass. "Too soon for gloom and doom. But look—man to man, there's no reason for us not to be entirely square with each other. Bullshit won't get past any of us. We're all paying way too much attention."

"That's straight," Tom says.

I take a breath and start the real confession.

"I had heavy feelings for Joe when we first met at my house," I tell them. "He told me last night he felt the

same way. By a terrible, chaotic act of fate, here we all are.

"Last night, I also learned a lot more about Jerry. Surprising things. I liked him yesterday, but I honestly like him even more today."

I clear my throat, letting things get a little messy.

"I usually hate sentimental garbage," I admit, "but clearly that's what I am. No sense hiding it—I couldn't if I tried. I know exactly what you see when you look at me.

"But right now, all I want is to be accepted into your little circle. Why? Because you're the most genuine thing I've felt in years. I need you guys. I think, given the chance, we all have a specific role to play here—to keep each other from dipping too far below the surface and never coming back."

I reach forward for the ashtray, suddenly feeling like my spine needs a back brace.

"The truth is, I'm only just starting to know what living is supposed to feel like," I say. "And right as that happens, you guys show up on my doorstep. I don't believe in coincidences either, Frank."

A sudden, thunderous knock hits the front door.

"PIZZA!" Tom shouts at the top of his lungs.

"Damn, Tom!" I laugh, my heart jumping. He's so loud and emphatic it sounds like he hasn't eaten in a week. Knowing his situation, he very well may not have.

Frank's tactical reflexes fire instantly at the shout. He jumps, completely dropping what he's holding right out of his hand.

It doesn't break—thankfully, I have a thick, soft rug—but the fibers now sport a small, charred black burn spot right in the center of the weave.

I look at the mark, then at the two men on my sofa.

Life goes on.

And so do Tom, Frank, and me.

OPTIMISTIC

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2023 – 2:00 P.M.

“That went better than expected,” Frank says, breaking the heavy silence in the back seat.

“Told you I had a good feeling about this dude,” Tom mutters, staring out the window. “He’s old, but he seems cool.”

Frank shifts his weight, leaning closer. “I wonder what he’s packing?”

Who’s packing? Where? My chest tightens. My eyes jump to the street, scanning for a threat. Then my brain catches up.

“Oh. Dave’s junk. Jesus Christ, Frank—every damn time,” I complain, letting out a rare, ragged chuckle. “You’re so predictable. That’s probably why that bullet found your ass in the first place. Scar-cheek. Ha. Still... cool scar, you dumbass.”

"You want me to suffocate you with this ass?" Frank shoots back, glancing down at his phone as the Uber slows to a crawl. "This is where I leave you. I got some meditating needs doing."

"Meditating. That's funny, dude. We both know your brand of meditation requires a torch and a pipe and a large jar of Vaseline."

"No, I mean I'm gonna catch some z's, so don't be fantasizing about this trunk." He grabs his crotch playfully.

Frank pops the door open, then leans back into the car to look at the driver. "Thanks, beautiful. My friend Tom here thinks you're hot, by the way."

My blood spikes. Do I know her? Why the hell is he talking to her like that?

"Don't fall and break your neck, OK, Frank?" I shout after him, trying to hide the sudden jolt of anxiety.

"Love you, man. See you next go-around." The door slams shut.

Why don't you just tell him you want to be alone, dude? Pussy.

I catch two eyes sizing me up in the rearview mirror. Hmm.

"You're cute—" I glance at the little screen on the dash. "Brandi. But you don't exactly have the right moving parts for me."

I don't get it. Why do chicks dig me so much? Even the smart ones. I'll never understand it.

"What, the fact that I love gingers isn't enough?" she says, easing up to the curb in front of my building. "I think we're here."

"Yup. This is it. Lovely place, isn't it? I got lucky." I study the block before opening the door. The sidewalk is still cracked and crumbling, the paint on the building still peeling. Who are those bitches on the corner? They don't live there. Sketchy hoes.

Brandi peers out her window, then back at me. "Lovely might not be the right word, sir. Maybe 'still standing against all odds' is better."

"Is that your best pick-up line? Needs work. Thanks for the ride, Brandi. Don't wait up for the tip."

Shit. Exactly three bucks left until Friday. Oh well. She deserves it. Poof. Easy come, easy go.

I stomp up the stairs to my apartment, hands digging into empty pockets. I'm completely out of smokes. Maybe there's a stray butt left in the ashtray. I am just so fucking tired.

I punch in my four-digit code, push the door open, shuffle to the sofa, and collapse, staring up at the ceiling.

Nice sheets. Whatever. What to listen to? Doja Cat. Yeah, that works. God, it feels good to finally lie down.

A sudden weight lands on my chest, followed by a low, steady rumble.

"Hey, Kitty. How's my little girl?" I scratch under her chin. "Daddy had a good day. But he needs some serious loving."

She purrs louder.

"You purr like that for all the boys? Do you have time to talk? I could really use a good listener right now."

Kitty shifts and releases a small, toxic cloud.

"Did you just fart? Phew."

"Well, now that you've relieved some pressure of your own, I guess you do have time for Daddy." I scratch behind her ears, fingers moving on autopilot.

"Remember when I told you Uncle Terry died?" I say softly. "I met someone new today who knew him too. Seems cool. Bit full of himself. But he's a retard meth-head, so what can you do?"

Yeah, baby. Just like Daddy, smart-ass.

"You think you could climb out of the dumpster, baby?"

She blinks. She's a cat. Of course she can climb out of a dumpster.

"What if I fill it with catnip first? Hmmm... Daddy wouldn't do that to you, baby."

Outside, a car's exhaust backfires.

"What the fuck was that?!"

My whole body jerks. Kitty and the empty glass on the side table both hit the floor. Jesus. I need a softer floor. It's just that damn Mustang down the street again.

"I didn't mean to scare you, baby," I mutter to the air. She's already gone. "Damn, girl. You gotta start eating better or something. Why are you so stinky?"

I sit on the edge of the couch, head in my hands. Tears start pushing up before I can stop them.

"So anyway... I really miss Uncle Terry."

I know, I know. Broken record. Move on already.

"Remember who steals your Cat Chow," I grumble at my own brain.

"You're the only one I've told, really," I tell Kitty, whether she's listening or not. "No one else knows what I would've done just to have him to myself. Just once."

"You know, cat... life is a total bitch. You're lucky you can't have babies. Well, your babies are lucky you can't have babies. Who cares anyway? Love is for the lucky."

Nah. Love is for losers.

"I'm both," I whisper. "Where is my love? Where is my damn love!"

"I'm not yelling at you, baby." The tears finally erupt, ten years of self-loathing boiling up all at once. "I'm yelling with you. Meow you too."

A jagged sob shakes my chest. My gaze lands on the shards at my feet.

"Shit. That was my only real glass."

Where the hell are the Kleenex? Fuck. Need to blow my goddamn nose.

"You hungry, baby? Let Daddy feed you."

I drag myself to the pantry and pour kibble into her bowl.

"I need some sleep, OK? OK, baby. Why can't you talk? Oh well. I tried. Here. Eat."

"I'm going to bed. You'll leave me alone if you know what's good for you. Eat, baby. Come keep Daddy warm when you're done, OK? Please?"

The dream

Gunfire. Deafening, rhythmic, ripping through the air.

"Who the fuck is shooting at us?"

"Where is it coming from?" I scream, hitting the dirt.

"Over there, Sergeant—your nine o'clock, halfway up the ridge!"

"Permission to engage, sir?"

"Don't ask! Smoke their asses!"

"Thank you, sir! Sir? Sir?"

The sky twists, turning a sick, bruised shade of purple.

"Andrews, check on Lewi!"

"It ain't good, Sarge! It ain't good at all!"

"Holy SHIT, look who made the party! Over there, Hog!"

"Damn, Sarge, they're getting the smoke fucked straight out of their asses!"

"Yeah! Send them my regards! Pigs!"

"Say hello to Allah for us!"

"Shut up, Andrews—you know we don't discriminate against religious fanatics 'round here!"

"Yeah, I know... but Lewi ain't here to yell at us no more."

"Fuck, dude. Not another one. I actually liked this one."

"He was alright."

"Grab his tags. Let's get out of the muck."

"Wait! Where are you going? No, please, don't take me there..."

"Hey, Dad. I'm home."

"So?" a booming voice roars from the shadows of the cabin.

"You all right, Dad? What's wrong?"

"You better get your ass out of those fancy clothes. That wood ain't gonna chop itself. Put some on the fire. Fucking cold in here."

Maybe if you weren't buck naked and completely lit, you wouldn't be so cold, asshole.

"Yeah, Dad. Gimme a minute, OK? Gotta take a dump."

"You got forty-five seconds," his heavy footsteps rattle the floorboards, his shadow towering over me. "You can shit in the woods. I don't wanna smell that while I'm taking care of business. Get your ass to work."

"Fucking useless pig!"

"What? What did you call—"

"Where the fuck are you taking me now?"

"You don't understand, Terry. Please, look at me. I need to tell you something."

"Terry, stop. Why are you standing so close to the edge? Please back up, Terry, please."

"I don't want to share you. I only want you. I just want you. Terry?"

"Where are you going? Why are you jumping, Terry? Don't jump—"

"TERRY! NO!"

I bolt upright in the dark, gasping for air, my T-shirt drenched in cold, sticky sweat.

Oh God. Not again.

I peel the wet sheets from my blistering skin. I can't hear anything except the massive thudding in my ears.

Thump-ump. Thump-ump. Thump-ump.

I'm running out of clean drawers.

INSECURE

NOT SURE WHEN
MY HOUSE

The phone in my hand suddenly buzzes, cutting straight through the hyper-focused static in my brain. I slide it open, jaw tight, energy vibrating at a completely different frequency than it was a few hours ago.

"Whazzzzzzzz uuuuuupppp?" I drawl into the receiver, unable to keep the manic grin off my face.

"David?" Joe's voice is hesitant on the other end.

"Who may I say is calling?"

"Um, it's Joe," he says after a pause. "If this is a bad time..."

"Don't be ridiculous, baby. It's me, silly."

"You sure?" Joe asks, his nurse instincts probably clocking the elevation in my voice. "You sound... different."

"Part of the package," I say, pacing a tight circle across my soft living-room rug. "Tonight, I'm a total all-you-can-eat buffet. Have you eaten yet?"

"No," he admits. "That's actually why I was calling."

"You miss me, don't you? I'd love some company right about now. Come over. We can cook something together."

"Yeah, OK. I'll come by," Joe says, still guarded. "Not sure if I'll stay the night, though."

"You wouldn't dare break my heart this early in the game, would you?"

Somehow, the gravity of the situation finally takes hold. My hand drags down my face—it's a nervous tic that only shows up when my id and superego are trying to kill each other. The ego never gets a word in.

I am about to expose my dangerous side—the bad part—to the first man I've felt anything real for since high school.

But first, I need a shower because I have lube all over my face.

"No promises, David," Joe says. "Nope. Not gonna make no promises."

"That would make a good song," I laugh, my mind already darting toward the stereo. "I'll put some music on. I'm leaving the front door unlocked for you. See you soon, babe."

I end the call and toss the phone onto the sofa.

Shit. Joe is coming over.

I did not anticipate this.

I try to assess the state of the room, but my situational awareness is fried by cascades of euphoria. My transmission isn't in overdrive anymore; I'm running sixty in second gear.

Music. The music has to be absolutely perfect.

I rush over to the stereo. Halfway there, a wave of panic hits. Clothes. I need to put on some clothes.

I tear toward the bedroom, detouring to the bathroom to freshen up my teeth, my pits, and my face. Finally, all spritzed and reasonably presentable. All I need are some sexy undies.

"What goes up must come down," my brain whispers as I catch my reflection in the mirror.

Whoop.

I run a brush through my hair one more time and look down at my feet. *Shit*. Toenails. I make a mental note to get my hooves pedicured.

Damn. Damn. Damn. Everything is moving too fast.

Lines. We need fresh lines ready on the glass table before he walks through the door.

I sprint back to the living room, pull out the stash, and get to work. Bam. Three beautiful, thick rails of pure burning bliss laid out in perfect parallel. The bowl resting nicely in the ashtray. Damp cloth in place. Lights properly dimmed. Music perfect.

Dinner is served.

I grab a random magazine from the stack, throw it open on my lap, and force myself to sit down on the couch. Breathe, David. Look casual. Reading. Ready.

The front door slowly swings open, and Joe steps into the testing grounds like a nervous angel assessing the legions.

I look up from the pages, feigning surprise. "Oh, hey, babe. I wasn't expecting you."

Joe stops in his tracks, locking eyes with me. "Oh, yeah? Will you always be this obvious when you're lying to me? That smile looks good on you."

"Thanks," I say, tossing the magazine aside and standing to greet him. "Give us a kiss, baby. Please."

He steps into my space, presses his lips to mine for a brief second, then pulls back, pouting.

"You are a psychologist's dream come true, David."

"Aw. Thanks, baby. I'm really glad you came over," I say, gesturing toward the coffee table. "May I offer you a line?"

Joe eyes the glass. "Would you hate me if I asked for two?"

"If that's what it takes to get you on your knees, hell, have all three," I grin, ear to ear.

He leans down, handles the mirror with practiced ease, and exhales heavily as he sinks back into the cushions. The expression of a tortured man takes over his face as he decides one line at a time is more than enough.

"So, what's the occasion tonight?" he asks. "Anything special? I won't be intruding on anything, will I? I'm not really looking to be a third wheel."

"No. I had no plans until you called. No company is coming," I assure him, taking my place on the sofa—way too close. "I just really needed to blow off a little steam after the afternoon tribunal. I may have been going a little overboard on the pharmaceuticals before you called."

Joe's eyes widen as the ice starts snaking up his brain. "Whoooof. Good stuff, David. You'll definitely have to introduce me to your guy."

"That can easily be arranged, but definitely not tonight. He's already off work. Besides, I don't want to slow the flow."

Joe blinks, head tilting. "What flow?"

"Who are you calling Flo? My name is David."

Joe bursts out laughing, shaking his head as his own high starts to catch up to mine. He takes the second line.

"Whew. Really good," he says. "This side of you is quite entertaining, Davie. Maybe a little too entertaining, but I'm sure I'll catch up with your crazy energy soon enough. Why is it so warm in here?"

"Lock the door, would you please? I don't want any of my acquaintances walking in on us. Oh—I turned the heat on before you arrived. I didn't want you to be too comfortable in those clothes."

As Joe turns the deadbolt, he says, "There's lube on the doorknob."

His expression gives me nothing. I can't tell if he's annoyed or amused.

"Sorry. Dude who left that mess is tied up in the shed out back."

"I have some good cocaine, if he's hot," Joe deadpans. "You can tell him I made it myself."

I resist laughing too hard. This is still reconnaissance.

"Speaking of cooking, you do look warm. I can go grab that apron for you," I offer.

Joe wipes a thin bead of sweat from his forehead. "Maybe just a paper towel for now?"

It looks like my demons are going to have to sharpen their knives for this one.

"Damn. I'm fresh out."

"Oh, well. I guess my choices are limited," Joe smirks, catching the play immediately. "Just go grab that apron, then."

"Sweet. Wanna see my Calvins first?"

Joe's eyes darken playfully. "Oh, David. Calvins are my absolute favorite. Mind if I try them on a little later?"

I excuse myself and head to the bedroom. When I come back, Joe really is in need of my apron.

"My, my, looks like Publix had a special on sausage and eggs," I say.

Joe lets out a soft laugh, leaning his head back against the sofa. "Oh, behave."

In two seconds flat, I change into a new outfit that matches his perfectly.

Two men in their birthday suits.

What could possibly go wrong?

FRIDAY MORNING.

Sunlight cuts through the blinds with just enough force to pry my eyelids open as the alarm rings on my bedside table. Unfortunately, reality returned with the dawn. We both have to work today.

My workday starts early. Joe doesn't go in until three. At least he can stay tangled in my sheets for a few more hours.

I kiss him on the forehead. When he stirs, still barely coherent, I whisper, "Get some rest. Gotta go. Love ya."

He mumbles something that might be a word, then sinks back into the pillow.

As for me, I need a very strong cup of black coffee—with a coke chaser—to get me through the door.

DRAINED

FRIDAY, 12:30 P.M.

I am buried in the usual, unglamorous chaos of a funeral director serving the lower half of the local tax bracket.

I don't want to come off as too cynical; I certainly handle more than my fair share of normal, quiet grief. But the families I serve tend to exist at either extreme of a very strange spectrum. Some claim absolute poverty—sometimes rightfully, sometimes not even close.

I've had a family of twelve siblings and half-siblings sit around my conference table and collectively swear they didn't have five dollars to their name. Not a single cent. Yet those are always the precious angels who demand the works: full embalming, an open-casket public viewing, a massive church service, a prime burial plot, and a top-of-the-line everything. Oh, and while I'm

at it, can I throw in a free grave, too? I don't even own a cemetery.

It is almost always from this specific group of professional "victims" that the actual threats emerge.

I'll never forget the time I denied a request from a young woman calling from a hundred and fifty miles away. She wasn't directly involved in the funeral arrangements, but she decided to offer her three cents anyway. The call started out like so many others, but her voice didn't sound angry—just chillingly cold.

She suggested it'd be a very good idea for me to arrange a private viewing for her extended family at my personal expense. I calmly explained that the county assistance program didn't cover the services she was demanding, and I reminded her that her mother's current husband had already finalized and signed the paperwork.

She snapped back, "I didn't ask about any goddamn county assistance. I told you I want to see my mom when I get to town."

I firmly declined due to legal and ethical restrictions.

She paused for a beat, then whispered, "How 'bout I come to your house tonight while you're sleeping and burn it down with you inside it? Then your family won't get to see your dumb ass either."

Operating entirely on instinct, I informed her that my family wouldn't even notice my death, and then I filled her in on my sleeping habits—just to save her

some time, since she'd obviously need to arrange long-distance transportation from Naples.

The moment I hung up on who I figured was a sociopath-in-training, I called my contact at the sheriff's office—a sharp detective who frequently helps me tie up loose legal ends. I supplied her with the caller's details. An hour later, she rang my line back. She had already contacted the state to have my residential address completely removed from the public record, so my new friend wouldn't be able to find it on the state's website. She suggested I keep my eyes open for a week or two. Her cohorts down in Collier County were actively working on a felony warrant, but my new fan was still at large.

It turns out the girl had just been released on parole for arson. I guess she had already completed her training. Her parole is now very much in question.

But, to be entirely fair, about half of my clients are just good, blue-collar, underpaid families trying to survive a tight budget. That is where I truly shine. I am always happy to work with them, assuming their expectations remain realistic and holistic. I help where I can.

I didn't get into this business to get rich. I got into it to save my own soul.

2:15 P.M.

"David, you have a call on line two," Cecile's voice cuts through the intercom.

"Thank you, Cecile." I punch the flashing button. "This is David."

"Hey, David. Frank here," his voice booms through the receiver. "You OK to talk?"

"Sure, Frank. I have a few minutes."

"Hey, man, you wanna hook up with us this weekend? Get a little bromance going with me and Tom? You know, male bonding and shit."

I smile, leaning back in my desk chair. "Uh, I certainly get your meaning, Frank. I'll have to get back to you on that. I'm not saying no; I just can't say yes quite yet. Work stuff."

"Not saying no... cool, man. Just let me know ASAP. Gotta get the crib—uh, my place—ready."

I let out a loud laugh. "I know what a crib means, you freak. I'll get back to you just as soon as the universe lets me."

"Word."

"What does that even mean, 'word'?"

"Shut up."

"Bye, Frank. Talk later."

I disconnect the line and immediately dial Joe's number, expecting it to go straight to voicemail. To my surprise, he answers on the third ring.

"Hey, sweetie," I say, testing the waters. "Can I call you sweetie? Hey, you got a quick minute?"

"A few. And no, you absolutely cannot," Joe teases, though his voice is warm. "What's up?"

"Frank just called and invited me to party with him and Tom tomorrow night."

"You should definitely go," Joe says without hesitation. "Jerry and I are invited, too. But Frank wants you to get to the house before we do. We're all down with the plan."

I pause, a sudden wave of professional caution hitting me. "You sure about that? I mean, I know I was completely out of line last night. I don't wanna be sending mixed signals to the group."

"David, listen to me," Joe says, his tone turning grounded and firm. "I don't suffer from jealousy. I hate jealousy. It destroys people. Just go have some fun until I get there, and then I'll personally kick your ass in front of everybody."

"You mean kiss my ass," I counter, hanging up before he can fire back.

I shoot him a string of appropriate emojis just to clarify my actual emotions. Hunger can be a highly unattractive trait, so I delay responding to Frank's text—even though I strongly suspect he and Joe have already shared full battlefield intelligence.

4:30 P.M.

I finally pick up my phone and dial Frank.

"Hey, Dave," Frank answers on the first ring.

"What time?" I ask, skipping the pleasantries.

"Bout nine?"

"That works. Text me the location."

"Wilco," Frank says, his tone dripping with sudden, wicked amusement. "By the way, sir? Calvins are my absolute favorite, too."

The line goes completely dead. The bastard hung up on me.

Turnabout is fair play, David.

I stare at the silent receiver, my face flushing. I am definitely going to need to have a talk with Nurse Betty about personal boundaries. Tales from the bedroom are a no-no for me.

But hell. People change.

IP of D.J. INFERIOR

6:00 P.M.

I have an incredible amount of logistical prep to handle before this weekend's get-together. To keep my racing brain on track, I sit down and compile an exact checklist:

- Manscape.
- Pack proper chemicals.
- Calvins.
- Jockstrap. Toothbrush. Lube. Blue pills.
- Get some damn sleep.

By the time I finish prepping my bag, it's ten past seven. I collapse onto the bed. Good night.

Good night.



Across town, Tom's phone buzzes on the nightstand. The caller ID flashes a familiar name: Frank.

Tom slides it open, his voice thick with exhaustion. "Frank."

"How are you, Tom?" Frank's voice booms through the line, vibrating with a strange, frantic energy. "Did you actually get some good sleep?"

"I slept great, man. Miss Kitty purred me right through the worst of it."

"So, listen up, asshole," Frank continues, refusing to let Tom's cynicism break his operational flow. "We're having the party tomorrow night at my place. You know the drill. Nothing fancy, but it's good enough for government work. Dave's coming. Be on your best behavior. Don't bring any unnecessary attitude with you."

Frank pauses, clearing his throat.

"Look, you know, I actually like this guy," Tom responds. "Don't worry about me sucking the wind out of your shindig. I promise I'll do my best. And besides, I like the way he fills out his Calvins, too. So you can stop being a dick." He laughs. "Did you get that, Frank? Sucking the wind and stop being a dick in the same sentence?"

"Tom, calm the hell down, man. I know you've got the hots for the coach. Don't worry, I'll give you plenty of room to embarrass yourself with Joe. Plus, I want to see how flexible he is for a corporal. Most of them are usually tight-asses. To be honest, I want to see him when

he gets excited. I'm thinking I might try to sneak up on him from behind at some point. See if he's paranoid, like you."

Tom lets out a sustained burst of laughter, causing Frank to smile. He's glad there's now one around to catch it.

"Just make sure you keep a close eye on Joe," Frank warns. "He claims he doesn't play the jealousy routine, but you never know when that ugly monster will rear its head."

"Good point, bro. You don't think that's all there is to the guy, do you? Just a point?"

"It's bruh now," Frank corrects him. "They changed the terminology yesterday. Trust me, if all David was packing was a pencil, Joe would have complained to high heaven about how neglected his ass is feeling."

"Oh, yeah," Tom laughs, the tension easing. "Joe did mention something to me about dat ass, too, now that you say it. No complaints about the inventory, so I must be all clear for a tactical insertion."

"Well, Tom, thanks to your tactical fantasies, I guess we have a good deal of recon ahead of us. You got any green, or will you need me to cover another ride? Oh, that reminds me, I plan to call in your debt tomorrow, just to show Dave how much of a man you aren't."

Tom shrugs off the insult by taking it as a compliment.

"What time do you want me there?"

"Nine o'clock, bruh. Joe and Jerry won't be arriving until eleven. I know, I know... I'm basically the dog they forgot to put down. See you tomorrow, man. Luv ya."

Frank kills the connection, feeling good about tomorrow night's strategy. In truth, he's so proud of what he believes he has pulled off that he feels giddy, but the crash is coming fast. He's too tired. Maybe just a short nap to clear the eyes...

THE NIGHTMARE

Sleep finally comes to Frank's place. It's been days, and he feels the weight of the emotional chains brought on by the events of the last couple of weeks pull him into his pillow.

The individual links of the chains slowly come into focus; they are unlike any restraints Frank has seen in his own personal theater of war. Suddenly, he's alone in a featureless room, wearing nothing but his own racing thoughts and the heavy metal wrapped around his limbs.

What the hell is this place? Why am I in chains? Nice chains, though... Where are my clothes? Why the fuck am I wearing combat boots?

"Oh, shit. Who's there? I can hear you moving. Wait... how many of you are in here? What the fuck do you want from me?"

"Don't worry, Frank. We're here to protect you. You must be so cold. Are you cold, Frank? Don't be

frightened, Frank. It's just us. No, Frank, I don't mean you and me..."

"Small, so small."

It really is pretty small, Frank. But you're cold. That's normal.

"How the fuck do you know what I'm thinking?!" Frank roars, his posture straining against the beautiful links of gold and silver. "Who the fuck are you? I can't see you! I'm going to kill you!"

Can I be frank with you, Frank? Come on, that was a good one. I tried.

The truth is, I'm you, Frank. You don't really want to kill me. All our old buddies are right here with me. You remember them, don't you? The ones you left behind?

Stop squirming, Frank, you're only going to hurt yourself. I SAID STOP IT!

Oh, I'm sorry, Frank. I didn't mean to yell at us. You're cold. I forgot. Let me warm us up.

"Fuck you!" Frank screams.

He's crying now, streaming tears, weeping like an infant, thick snot running out of his nose. A heavy stench fills the room—the choking smell of burning sulfur. It takes over the air, everywhere at once.

Here, Frank. This will help.

Suddenly, Frank finds himself swimming in a warm ocean of blood. There's a waterfall pouring; it cascades down his face, washes over his chest, pools in his groin, and fills his combat boots.

Warm. So warm.

No, Frank, don't go. Stay in here with us. I didn't mean it, Frank! Frank!

Frank bolts awake in the dark, his heart hammering against his ribs.

The illusion dissolves. He's soaking wet; he's pissed himself in his sleep. He doesn't care. He lies back on the mattress, closes his eyes, and lets himself enjoy the rare relief of hot tears running down his cheeks.

IP of D.J.
SCARED

FRIDAY, 7:45 P.M.

I have the address pulled up on my dashboard. What I need right now is a little boost in baseline self-confidence.

The truth is, I am scared to death about this party. How can Joey claim he doesn't feel jealousy? That's the exact same lie I've been telling my own reflection for thirty years. Am I about to do to us what I've already done to more than three thousand other souls since I blew the doors off my own closet? Am I just tossing a crystal decanter against a brick wall, expecting it to be in one piece when I stoop down to pick it up off the floor?

My desire for Frank and Tom is purely primal. One of my eyes sees them as real people with complex, damaged souls, while the other sees two twenty-four-ounce tomahawk ribeyes.

Jerry is the flawless twink every older gay man secretly pines for but immediately brushes off for fear of rejection. Fortunately, I don't have to fear rejection tonight. The connection is already underway. Somehow, I get more than my fair share of 'chicken'.

Joe, on the other hand, is the charming rock resting on the bottom of the pool. He's just light enough to rescue in the water, but far too heavy to hold onto once you reach open air.

Tonight, the glutton in me wants to devour them all. Am I coveting my own demise? Am I satisfying anything beyond my own sick pride? Right now, none of those questions is taking center stage. I'm preparing for total debauchery. Surely everything will work out in the end.

One way or another, it always does.

9:00 P.M.

As I stand on Frank's front porch, working up the nerve to knock, a single word fills my mind: "Fuck." Welp, here goes nothing...

"You came!" Frank yells, a wide grin spreading.

"Not yet, but he will," Tom chimes in from the living room.

Frank shoots a glare over his shoulder. "Shut up, Tom."

I step into the house, assessing the mood of the room. "Hey. Thanks for the invite, guys." I stop cold as

my eyes take in what I have been longing for for days.
“Oh... hey, Tom. Nice jock! Love the socks.”

You wouldn't believe the dirty things that were suddenly floating in my head. This was turning into something I would stand in line for.

Hell yeah.

A blurred montage of hours spins out of control: doors locking, lights fading, chemical rushes.

Oh, I'm sorry. I almost forgot—this is a private party.

Welcome back.

SUNDAY, JULY 16, 4:25 A.M.

“Sun'll be coming up soon,” Frank mutters, filling us in on the solar forecast from the edge of the mattress.

The weekend has vanished, and everyone is still in good spirits. We are exhausted, but Joey brings out a massive goody bag filled with drinks, snacks, and a stack of brand-new Calvin Klein tighty-whities—four mediums and a small.

“I brought presents, boys,” Joe says, dumping the underwear in the middle of the bed. “I need everyone to put on your undies right now.” He hands out our new

uniforms. Compliance seems mandatory; nobody objects.

Frank's place is simple but meticulously clean. Modest, yet comfortable. He clearly splurged on his bed—well, not so much the frame, but the thick, plush, high-end mattress set. We are all gathered in one pile, chilling out and chatting in our uniforms.

Joe breaks the comfortable silence, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "I have another present for you guys." He reaches into the bag and pulls out a pair of sleek pens. "DMT, anyone?"

Jerry is the first to react, bolting upright on the pillows. His eyes are twinkling, his pupils dilating to wide-alert. "Please, please, please, Papi!"

I glance over, raising an eyebrow. "Papi? I thought I was Papi."

Jerry shrugs, flashing a coy smile. "Ugh, doesn't a nice boy like me deserve two Papis?"

"Be careful," Tom grunts from the corner. "Unless you want four of them at once."

Frank nudges him. "Tom, you promised you'd be nice this weekend."

"No, I promised I'd do my best," Tom corrects.

I decide to jump in with the cool kids, even though I've never tried DMT. I need some intel, so I risk sounding lame in front of my new friends. "What exactly does DMT do?"

Tom looks up, his face deadpan. "It lets your demons out to play."

Joe smiles, holding up the vapes. "Or your angels."

We all agree to take the trip together. Jerry has already given me the lowdown.

"OK, I have two vapes," Joe begins, his authority taking over the room. "Everyone, go all in. When someone goes out, grab a pen and go. In like Flynn. You gotta move fast. I want everyone out there together."

Frank jumps up and heads toward the stereo. "Hold up, guys, I'm gonna put on some good trip tunes first."

Tom nods. "Yeah, good save, bro... bruh."

Joe ignores the chatter and reinforces Jerry's earlier instructions. I assure him I have a good grasp of the procedure. Deep-house tunes set the vibe. Everyone is comfortable, limbs overlapping to form a tight circle of contact on the mattress.

We go.

And I'm gone.

Then I'm back.

Everyone is filtering back into the room—blurry, disoriented, but back. Except for Jerry. We wait a beat, watching his chest rise and fall.

Oh. There he is. Here he comes.

Everyone is basking in the warm, heavy geometry of their own return. I stay quiet, watching their faces. I am fully awake. And scared. Very scared.

What I just saw behind my eyelids was not for the weak of heart. It was real. Too damn real. But maybe... just maybe... it was perfect. Maybe even better than perfect. I'll have to ask them later.

Jerry is the one who finally breaks the sacred silence. It's a habit he has, a defense against the quiet. He sits up, stares at the wall, and makes an announcement.

"I want to be a priest."

"You want to be a priest?"

"What?"

"You mean nun?"

WORTHWHILE

SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE

The fluorescent lights in the church basement are far too bright, and the smell of stale, cheap coffee makes my stomach do slow, nauseating flips. I grip the edges of the wooden podium, my knuckles turning white as I stare out at the sea of mismatched chairs.

I take a shaky breath and force my chin up.

"How y'all doing tonight? Good? Good. My name is Jerry, and I am an addict."

"Hi, Jerry," the room drones back in that familiar, heavy chorus.

"I've never done this before, so please be nice to me, especially to you in the corner. Texting while I'm trying to tell you something personal. Well, I never. Bless your heart."

A few quiet snickers ripple through the rows. It gives me just enough oxygen to keep going.

"So tonight, I'm here to tell you my story. Again, my name is Jerry. Please don't confuse that with 'Mary.' I'm sorry... I'm really nervous right now. Where do I even start?"

I clear my throat, staring down at the scuffed linoleum floor.

"You see, I share the same beginning as so many of you in this room. I was an unwanted child. That's not fair to say, actually. I was a terrible mistake. They kept me until I was old enough to remember how much they hated me. That's when they gave me up for adoption.

And look, I have never really gotten over the way I was used like a playground merry-go-round after that, but I try not to dwell on it. It's not the kind of memory I like to hark back on. Some mornings, I wake screaming and crying from dreams I can't remember. Most days, I'm so pissed off at the world that I wish I had a car just to run over a couple of undeserving assholes on the sidewalk. That is the real reason I take Uber, people. To save innocent lives."

More laughter erupts, warmer this time. I wipe a sudden bead of sweat from my temple.

"At any rate... I am one of the lucky ones. I survived it all, and here I am, confessing to a room full of people whose last names I'll never know. I trust you won't repeat what you're about to hear, either. Help me, Jesus."

I shift my weight and notice my shirt scratching the back of my neck. I try to ignore it, thinking it's just in my imagination.

"I've heard people ask each other a question I don't understand—usually in movies. 'Do you ever wish you could do it all over again?' All I can say to that is: hell to the no. Sorry. I'm trying to be better about cussing. Wait, I don't mean I want to cuss more. I mean I don't want to cuss anymore. My higher power spoke to me in a dream the other day. He wants me to be a priest. I'm going to check it out."

I scan the crowd, spotting a few nodding heads.

"I consider myself lucky because even though I have been walking downhill for nearly thirty years, I have found the courage to climb back up. Last month, I was living at the bottom of a pit, begging for help to get out. But I was stuck with two broken legs. Meth and men. Now, I am willing to wait while my legs get better before I start climbing for my life."

I stop, a nervous chuckle escaping.

"Oh, haha. What I just said reminds me of a movie I watched once. I don't remember what it's called. 'It rubs the lotion on its skin, else it gets the hose again.' I'm not entirely sure where that came from. My brain lives in Section 8."

I lean into the mic, letting the campy armor slip away for a fraction of a second.

"I'm talking to you guys in this smelly basement because I've made bad choices. They were my choices. I need someone to hold me accountable. Not my friends, though. They have their own shit to manage. Oh, damn. Sorry, God."

My voice cracks slightly, but I push past the lump in my throat.

"Speaking of my friends, I love them like brothers. We formed a self-destructive bond. Hard as we tried to break it over the years, we couldn't. An unknown force—something thick, like superglue—kept us together. We did everything together. Everything. I know, I know, no explicit details up here. No triggers. Aw, look at you—I read lips, honey. I think you're cute, too."

I wink at a guy in the third row before pulling myself back to the script.

"Anyway, back to my confession. A little over a week ago, a member of our group went down to the beach and never came home. It was just too much. It's the kind of thing that comes back to haunt you when the lights go out. He died right there on the sand. They say the Florida heat and the drugs were too much for his body to handle. His death hit me like a nine-point-oh earthquake. It was a shock to our collective reality."

I smile, thinking of a clean kitchen, a suit jacket, and a quiet text message.

"Losing Terry almost broke our bond. But, right in the middle of the rubble, we met a guy who is helping to

keep us real. He seems to be filling the gap. He can't take Terry's place, but he might be able to fill his shoes. I think he likes me. I hope he does. Because I don't want to run him over. Oh, I just thought of this. Sometimes he drives for Uber. Full circle. That's weird."

I grip the podium tighter, looking out at the room with a sudden sense of clarity.

"The important thing I want to tell you is that I am alive. My friends are alive. No matter what life smacks us with, we pull through. But it's only because we work as a team. We should probably all be dead. I think we would be if we had to do this alone."

I let out a long, ragged exhale, the weight of the podium holding me down.

"I'm babbling. I don't even know why I'm up here talking already. I've only been coming to these meetings for three days. I am only four days clean. But I feel like I need to talk. As if I have no choice. Like I'm being led to it. Take this to heart if you really want to do better. To get better, don't try to do it alone. It usually doesn't work out too good.

I have a massive debt to pay back. I am so glad to have your support tonight. And I am so glad to have my Higher Power—we actually just met a few days ago. I am so glad to have my friends. Any help you can offer me, I'll gladly take. Well, I could use all the help I can get.

Thank you. My name is Jerry, and I'm an addict."

"Thank you, Jerry!" The room erupts in a long, loud wave of applause that washes away all my fear.

I step down the wooden stairs, knees trembling as I slip back into my seat, my mouth so dry I want to drink the coffee.

I can feel my heart hammering against my ribs.

That was fucking hard. I mean, damn. Oh, God. Shit. Sorry, Lord.

ACCEPTED

The meeting is finally over. I survived it. I am actually alive. If my streak of luck holds, David is sitting outside in his car, ready to drive me home.

I asked David for help with my transportation needs because I am completely out of money. I am always out of money. I guess I'm finally too old to request cash in lieu of chemicals. Ugh, what am I even saying? Some habits are really hard to break.

I spot his car, jog over, and pull the passenger door open. "Oh, thank God. You actually came. One of these days, Papi, I'll finally believe you're real."

"Shut up, Jerry," David replies dryly as he shifts his new SL500 into gear. "What if someone overhears you? I have a very bad reputation to uphold. But thanks for noticing."

I lean back against the headrest as my tension is washed away by the car's sick, massaging leather seat.

"You know, David, this may be a tender topic, but did your mother ever tell you you're really weird?"

He glances over and replies, "You must have been out sick the day they were teaching manners."

"Yeah, well, I was sick a lot back in school," I mutter.

"Where to?"

I freeze, my fingers twisting the edge of my shirt. "This is embarrassing. I..."

"Spit it out, Jerry. You're a big boy now, remember?" David says, his tone settling into that steady, encouraging rhythm he uses when he's helping a guy fight his demons. "Mom and I are really proud of you, by the way."

What the hell is he talking about?

I blink; my face must show it.

David lets out a soft chuckle. "Sorry, Jerry. Bad joke. I meant Joe—your 'mother'—and me. Well, you know. You didn't answer my question, though. Where to?"

I swallow hard, my bravado returning. "Yeah, well, bad jokes aside, can I just go home with you tonight? I really don't want to be alone in my head right now. I promise I'll behave, David. No sex. No drugs. Not for me, anyway."

I glance at him, wondering if he'd actually get high right in front of me now that I'm trying to stay clean.

David doesn't hesitate. "I'll bring you back to my place. Joey will probably be there. I don't know how he'll

feel about the surprise, but I'm not going to warn him. It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Deal?"

Ten minutes later, as we walk in, David says, "Hi, honey! I'm home!"

"Hold on, I'm in the bathroom fixing my face!" Joe hollers back from down the hall.

I stay silent, bracing for the inevitable fallout of ruining their private evening. David gives me a gentle push toward the bathroom. The door is propped wide open, so I give in to his domestic stupidity. Two seconds later, I'm standing in the doorway—a defensive queen, terrified of her own imminent dethronement.

The reaction shakes me to my core.

"Hey, Jerry. What a nice surprise," Joe says, turning from the mirror with a warm, genuine smile. "David brought you here instead of dropping you back at your place? Probably best. I wouldn't want you to be alone tonight. Did you bring your pajamas?"

That does it; the dam breaks. I spend the next twenty minutes bawling my eyes out. I haven't cried like that in a long... ever. Crying has never been my thing. Maybe that's something I need to work on in therapy. To be honest, this whole tears business makes me feel incredibly unpretty. Hmm. I'll have to think about it later.

I honestly can't believe I let them watch me fall apart. My hair was a total wreck from them rubbing my head. I thought of Tom. Is this how he felt? I realized I

missed him. I wished he were here with us so I could hug him for an hour or two.

OK, I'm better. Back to the stage.

I wipe my eyes and sit on the living room sofa with Mom and Dad.

"Are you worried about tomorrow?" Joe asks.

"Not really," I say. "I never did ask—why Saturday? The drum circle is usually on Sunday night, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I fill in. "Sammy thought Saturday was much better for this. More people can make it out."

Joe nods in agreement. "And it's better for my Monday morning shift."

"Makes perfect sense," I reply.

I take a moment to assess the situation. I'm suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of contentment. It feels like my childhood blankie.

"You know, excuse my corniness, but there is nowhere I'd rather be right now than sitting between the two of you. I don't fully understand what I am feeling, but I think it's love."

It's too late, but I want to take the words back, put them back in the bin. That ship has sailed.

"Aw, Papi. We love you too."

The air around me is suddenly displaced by two men I now realize are saving my soul.

Joey's soft, worn sweatshirt brushes my cheek. It smells faintly of laundry soap and whatever expensive

cologne he pretends he doesn't wear. Then two arms reach around my shoulders and pull me in tight.

The room is still, soft music drifting low from the speakers. Conversation is unnecessary.

The silence breaks when Joey reaches over and plants a brief kiss on my lips. Pulling back, he asks, "You guys want to watch a movie?"

Jerry and I speak in sync. "Yeah."

Love is a crazy thing.

As *Fried Green Tomatoes* is cueing up, I can't help but notice Jerry is crying. Softly. To himself. I don't interrupt. I just pull Joey in a little closer and pretend like I'm not holding on for dear life.

When I woke up on David's couch, I couldn't stop thinking about Sunday's DMT experience. I made myself at home and brewed some coffee. I was starting to like the stuff.

The memories of the trip wouldn't let me go. I was on the hook for something. I had a debt to pay. The thoughts kept rolling over and over, like a distant voice calling my name.

Why, God? Who is he, anyway? What does he want with me? What am I supposed to do with this? Hey, God. Can we talk? I don't know what to do, or even who I'm supposed to be. I'm so scared. I don't want to know who I am. I don't think I want to know you either. Where were you when I needed you? Why do you give a shit about me now?

The answer kept repeating itself: "There is time. Time. More time. You still have time, Jerry."

I had a dream last night. I was standing in a room, unable to look away from the mirror because that was all there was—the whole room, nothing but mirrors.

Is that how the world sees me? Shallow? Unnecessary? Fucking useless?

Can we talk? *Who am I, Joan Rivers?*

IP of D.J. EMPTY

FLASHBACK TO FRIDAY, JULY 14, 2023

Let me take you back to last Friday night, around nine o'clock, when Papi first arrived at Frank's front door—for sex, drugs, and random music—his anxiety on full display.

Frank and Tom are not men who are easily fooled. It pisses them off when someone tries. They both have street smarts. Both of them have killed other men. And maybe women. Kids, even. They are not proud of it. They don't talk about it. They see everything, and every detail is a delicious treat—until it isn't. Alone, each is incredibly strong; together, they're impenetrable. I learned my lesson a long time ago. It would be a lie to say I didn't feel bad for him when I found out he was supposed to get to the party early. I knew what the boys were up to. I

don't think they would have hurt Dave—unless he gave them good reason.

Papi needs to earn his way into the club, and Tom and Frank are its gatekeepers; there's no way around them—he has to go through them.

Tom will tear Papi to pieces if he catches him in a lie—if the lie gives away any kind of underhanded intentions. Why? Because he's the new meat, honey. That's how street kids work. All new meat has to be checked by the testers before it reaches the buffet.

In our world, the new outranks the old in another way. Chemsex is all about discovery. Usually it's once and done—not always. Occasionally, someone gets through who can multitask. If he can do that and not forget not to walk out with the host's laptop or wallet, that makes him a keeper. If I know Tom, he'll be sitting around in nothing but a jock because it makes new people stop and stare. Tom can tell a lot about a man through his stare. But just because Tom is dressed in his favorite power suit doesn't mean he's granting full access. Yet. If the applicant fits the bill and Frank backs admission, well... let's just say Tom can be a team player.

Frank's role is to throw fuel on Papi's fire. Together, my boyz will expose any weaknesses David might be hiding. Between them, they have razor-sharp instincts and tremendous assets. Tom has an ass that sets fires in neighborhoods all over Pinellas. Frank is a true giver,

with more than enough equipment to draw in the greedy.

Before Papi is granted full access to the club, we'll see how he reacts under all that fire. It's a necessary evil we have to subject him to for our protection.



According to Tom, it began like this:

"Sit down, Dave," Frank said, gesturing to the cushions. "Make yourself at home."

David looked between the two of them, clearly out of place. "I'm feeling a little overdressed. Mind if I...?"

"Please do," Tom said.

Frank shot Tom a pointed look to shut up.

"Well, I guess I shouldn't be the odd man out in my own apartment," Frank muttered.

I can only imagine how Papi felt when he saw the unveiling. Some people faint; most drool. According to Tom, David didn't do either. He just rolled with the punches.

Frank took a seat across from Papi. "So, Dave, now that we're all in our comfort zone... you are comfortable, I assume? Can I get you something to drink?"

"No," David stammered. "You're good. I mean... I'm good."

"Well, I'm a little dry. I'll be right back."

"So, Tom, how are you? I love your freckles, by the way."

"I get that a lot. People seem to get turned on by gingers. Want to see my bush?"

"Sure, but do you have anything to smoke?"

"Oh, damn, sorry, bro. Top drawer—everything you need."

"Sweet."

Frank returns with three Pepsis and some M&Ms. "I see you two are making friends. Oh, yeah, my bad. Help yourselves to the candy—and the M&Ms."

After a few minutes of small talk, David decides to take Tom up on his offer. "I'll take a look at that bush now, Tom, if that's OK."

"I wouldn't have offered if it wasn't, silly."

After they sniffed each other's butts, the interrogation began.

"So, Dave, believe it or not, this ain't exactly easy for me," Frank said. "Especially with Tom's dumb ass staring at me. I have to ask you a question. Don't try to steal Joe and Jerry away from us, David. We don't have the tools to stop you, and we don't know how to survive on our own. We need what we have. It keeps us going. It distracts us from other ideas. Tom and I are pretty fucked up in our own heads. We can be a little too hard around the edges. We don't really know why they still hang out with us, honestly. Don't know why they haven't just pissed off by now."

"Is there an actual question in there, Frank?"

"I want to know if they say anything about us when we ain't around. We just want to know if we're still cool with them. Soldier to soldier, man. I don't feel right calling you bro yet. Does that bother you, sir?"

"No. It doesn't bother me at all. Call me whatever you want," David said. "But you can officially cut the 'sir' garbage. Soldier to soldier—I was a Corporal, remember?"

I don't know how Tom managed to keep quiet during Frank's speech. Maybe he was just the silent assessor.

"Frank. Tom. First off, you two are fine as fuck, just saying. And Tom, that jock fits your body perfectly. When Joey talks about you guys, he never says anything but good things. He worries about you both. A lot. I think he sometimes loses sleep over you. It could just be the coke, though."

See? I told you Papi can be really funny sometimes.

"Truthfully," David continued, "I think he's just as terrified of losing you as you are of losing him. And let me say one more thing to you. Man to man—and you have certainly shown me your manly sides, damn. What the hell was I saying? Oh, yeah. I will never do anything to betray your friendships. Ever. I'm the intruder in this fairy tale, and I know that. The last thing I want to do is break you guys up. I usually hate the word love, you know? But I love the way you take care of each other. More than that, I respect you. Each of you. I want to see

how this plays out. I have as much to lose as any of you. Whew, I'm stepping off my high horse now, OK?"

It was that part of the story when I almost threw up in my mouth. That was the moment I started to believe Papi might be the real thing, not just some predatory chicken hawk stuck in a rooster's cage. For a hot minute, I almost gave in to a very dangerous, ugly idea: trusting Papi.

I'll have to think about it some more. A seasoned model never counts his money before all the hands are fully on the table. It's possible Frank and Tom massaged the tale to make themselves look better. Time will expose any weeds.

Naw... I think he's keeping this one real.

According to Frank, Tom broke the silence by looking at David and smirking.

"Why don't you jump on my favorite horse instead? I named him Frank."

Frank shot back immediately, "I have a better idea—why don't you get his ginger ass first?"

And that, dear reader, was about when I was frantically begging Joe to step on the gas so we could get to the party while the gettin' was good.

Enough with the small talk, boys. Put the meat in the oven and let's go!

Hehe.

RESENTFUL

JERRY

I was lucky to finish high school. I don't know a lot of big words, but tonight big words were thrown around like candy.

I had no idea Terry had so many friends—or that so many of them were so smart. You think you know someone when most of your time together is spent completely naked. Honestly, his college friends were using words like “façade” and “duplicity.” I didn't even know what they meant until I asked Joe later. Or was it Joey? Whatever. Turns out, Terry had a whole second life he never shared with our little family of freaks.

Watching the crowd grow was almost more than I could handle. I tried to keep up my usual “too good to be real” act, but I don't know if it worked. I cried when I was supposed to. I held my head up when I needed to.

Honestly, the whole thing felt stupid. Everyone pretended he was some kind of saint, and it's hard to listen to all that noise when you know the unfiltered truth. I don't even know which Terry I liked more—the one I never met, or the one I knew like the back of my hand.

Doesn't matter, really. I loved the Terry I knew. Apparently, a lot of people loved his other side. In the end, love plus love still equals love.

"The thing about Terry is, he never once asked if I was 'OK.' Not like the therapists in the movies. He just showed up when I was three days up, eyes buzzing, and said, 'Scoot.' Then he'd wedge himself into my spot on the couch, push my feet into his lap, and put on some stupid movie he'd already seen five times. Twenty minutes in, I'd be out cold while he watched the whole thing. I used to think he did it because he was bored or horny or something. Took me a long time to realize he was just there to keep the monsters from eating me in my sleep."

My mind wandered a lot once the drum circle started. It was beautiful, don't get me wrong—perfect weather, great sunset. Even the fucking humidity gave us a break. I guess what it boils down to is I'll miss Terry. Forever.

But the thing that's messing with my head right now is—I don't want to die like that. My funeral wouldn't look like this. I'd be lucky if three, maybe four people even

showed up. Sorry if my words are coming out choppy or if I don't sound like myself—I'm crying, OK? Cut me some slack.

The point is, when I did that DMT the other night, I saw all our endings. Joey's, Tom's, Frank's, even Papi's. I love Papi. And none of our endings are pretty. They fucking suck. My mouth—damn. Sorry, God.

I don't want to end up like that. But in the trip—and this is what scares me the most—there was a voice singing. Nobody, no face—just the voice: “Never too late to change, it's never too late to change.” Over and over.

Such a beautiful voice. So beautiful, it made me throw up a little in my mouth.

Well, that funeral was fucking awesome. I want the same thing when it's my time—beat the ghosts who won't let me sleep to death with bongos and kettle drums. Hell yeah.

David was looking fine, too. Tan linen suit. Blue loafers. I wonder if he was wearing my jock under those pants. Shit. Sorry. I get carried away in my thoughts—probably the drugs.

Anyway, there were a shit-ton of people there. Mostly squares, but that's straight. At least my boy had friends. More than I ever will, but that's cool. Friends are like duffel bags: they're heavy, and they slow you down.

Terry was cool, though. Not gonna lie—he was fun to party with, too. Always the last man standing. He was really Joe's co-anchor, the glue that held us together. I don't think Joe has it in him to do the job alone. I don't think I want him to, either. He gets caught, and it's over for him. Probably need another fucking drum circle, and I don't want to be part of that.

Besides, he found the big guy—the one with all the answers. I hate when a dude comes in with all the answers; I don't trust guys like that. Trouble is, when I try to prove he's just a hanger-on, he does shit that makes me look like the idiot. I'm pretty sure Joe is really into him. Maybe they can hold each other back—fill the time

with each other instead of dreaming of tapping this fine, uh... well, you know. Fuck, I hope it works out like that.

Terry was the only one who ever told me no and lived. I remember one night on the causeway, wind cutting like razors, and I was done. I had the rig ready. He walked up, took it from my hand without saying a word, and hurled it into the dark. I swung at him—full force, fist to jaw. He just stood there, rubbed his face, and said, “You hit like a girl. Hit me again when you actually want to die.” Then he sat on the curb and lit two cigarettes. Handed me one and started talking about absolutely nothing—traffic, dumb memes, some guy’s shoes. By the time we were finished, so was the moment. I never used the needle again after that.

Don’t know where I’m going. Maybe me and Frank can steal a car and go all Thelma and Louise. I’m not sure anyone would really notice if we went missing. And Jerry—bro, can you imagine me having to call Jerry “Father”? No. That ain’t straight. I love the little bitch, though. I’d take a bullet for him any day of the week.

The man I really love, though, just got scattered in the waves. I couldn’t stay with the group for that. If I’d gotten in that water, I would’ve kept going. I’d have followed his ashes wherever they went. Wherever he went. I didn’t take one of the keepsake things. I don’t want some of his ashes. I want him.

Last week, when we were all worn out, Joe handed out the DMT—it was sick. Not like the bad sick, like the

good sick. Or so I thought. I still can't believe Joe lets Dave call him Joey, though. I tried that once; it didn't work out.

But that trip... I've had worse nightmares—trust. It felt like they were right there with me. I was on my knees, like my legs were broken. I couldn't stand up. No one tried to help me; I know they were just watching me, waiting. I didn't even care about all of that. There was a voice—a real nice singing voice. It just kept singing the same thing, over and over.

"Time... you have time..."

It was gay. I don't think I'm gay. It's just easier this way.

FRANK

I knew the drum circle thing was just a bunch of new-age sorcery.

How many people were there? Fucking too many. That's how many.

I wonder how many of them would've offered me a place to sleep when it was cold and raining. I wonder how many of them would've checked his dope for fentanyl to keep us from checking out. Probably none of them. That's the kinda shit Terry does.

Did.

I don't want to know who those people are. They thought Terry was a clean freak. Just goes to show how easy it is to fool people these days. That's why I worry about David; I wonder what secrets he's hiding. Fuck. Stupid shit. Sentimental garbage. Who cares what any of us hides, as long as there's good dick and good dope, right? What a waste.

The night it rained behind the pier, I thought I was alone. I wasn't. I had a pipe full of mystery and a head full of static, and I was ready to let the odds decide for me. Terry came out of nowhere, soaked through, grabbed the point out of my hand, and tossed it in the dumpster. "You don't get to check out on a Tuesday," he said. "Too undramatic. At least wait for a holiday." He was laughing, but his eyes weren't. He told me he outranked me that night because he was clean. It was a lie. Didn't

matter. I was alive in the morning and pissed off about it. I'm still pissed off about it.

I shouldn't even be here. I could be home rubbing out a memory or two. That's what Terry would've wanted. Least the funeral was free, thanks to dude. I think I'm gonna start calling him bro. Not bruh, though—too in. Bro is yesterday. Old. Just like that fool.

He's no fool. He's good people. Corporal. Ha. I still outrank his ass. Nice ass, though.

Feels like I did this all before. Like the whole funeral thing is just repeating itself. Nothing new to me.

But that damn voice. No one was singing on the beach tonight. Just that damned bang, bang, bang.

I'm still on edge because of it. Like a nervous wreck. I need a hit.

Ah. Better.

Why was Tom sitting by himself forty yards away? Could've used your help, Tom.

Still... that voice. Where is it coming from? In my head. It's in my head. It is too late, goddammit. It's always too late.

And why the hell was Jerry sitting in Joe's lap like that?

Fucking homos.

JOEY AND JERRY

Terry used to set two alarms every night: one for work, one for me. The work alarm was loud and angry, some awful default tone. The one for me was a song I liked—always changing, always something he knew I wouldn't hit snooze on. He'd get up, make coffee, and sit on the edge of my bed with this dumb grin until I opened my eyes. "You still here?" he'd ask, like it was a joke. Then he'd kiss my forehead and say, "Good. One more day, then." I didn't know, back then, that he was checking the dope, watching my pupils, counting my breaths while I slept. I just thought I was lucky. I was.

"Whatcha thinking about? Why so quiet, Joey?"

"Oh, now you're calling me Joey too?"

"Suits ya, ya know?"

"I always hated being called that. I just didn't have the strength to argue with David about it."

"Probably wouldn't have needed to say much. Something like, 'I prefer Joe, hun.'"

"Probably right. It's growing on me, though. I think I'll let it be."

"Yeah, bigger fish to fry. You really miss him, don'tcha?"

"You have no... I'm sorry, Jerry. I didn't mean—"

"Shhh." Jerry squeezes Joe's hand just a little harder. "You know, there is nothing you can say to me today that

I won't forgive you for by tomorrow. I know how close the two of you were. We all know how stupid you've been, trying to be the strong hero. You don't have to be the strong one all the time, you know? Sometimes it might be nice to let us help you when you need it. It might make us feel a little less guilty, and help you feel a little less angry."

"Joey?"

"Right here, as always."

"Yes, you are. We are all here, Joey. Didn't you notice?"

"Of course I did, Jerry."

"Yeah, Joey? Good. I need to tell you something."

"I heard someone singing the other night when we were tripping. It sounded like you, kinda."

"Wasn't me, Jerry," Joe says. "Did it go, 'Too late, never too late... come with us. It's not too late'? Or something like that?"

Jerry's breath hitches, his face going slack. "Yeah, exactly like that. I think you're right. It did sound like something I would say. Do I always sound like a girl when I sing?"

And the floodgates opened.

Joe's tears come hard. Jerry panics and flags down the nearest help he can find. "David! Come here. Hurry, dammit! Bring some tissues. Joey's mascara is running; it's the humidity."

David comes to the rescue, extending a hand. "A handkerchief, David? Really?" Joe snorts through his tears, grabbing the hanky anyway. "How old are you? Go away, shoo. Shoo!"

David retreats a couple of paces, but he holds his ground. He's protecting us. In that moment, the word "Papi" takes on a whole new meaning for me.

Jerry turns back, gently squeezing Joe's shoulder. "Back to you, princess. Tell me your secrets, please?"

"Yeah, I really miss him," Joe whispers, staring at his lap. "Every day, every minute of every day. Sometimes I feel empty, like there's nothing left in me to offer. Other times I feel like I'm poison."

"David! Pay attention! Joey needs another hanky."

"I'm on it," David mutters, tearing off toward his backpack. He's back in a flash. "Here you go."

"Stop," Joe chokes out. "I don't feel like laughing right now. Or smiling. Or breathing. I have to make some changes, Jerry. I can't keep doing this. I don't want that. But I don't want to lose you, and if we leave Tom and Frank alone, I don't think they'll make it. They're both so fragile. And stubborn."

"Hello, Pot? This is Kettle calling?" Jerry whispers.

Joe finally loses his battle with the sobs; his shoulders are shaking.

"David! We're going to need more hankies," Jerry snaps.

"I'm not a goddam hanky factory, dammit."

David runs and grabs his backpack, bringing it back with him this time. He rushes over like an attentive husband. "Oh, God. Is he OK? Are you OK, hun?"

"How many more of those do you have?"

Everything went as well as could be expected. Over two hundred people were in attendance. Many tears were shed. Many hands were shaken. Many lives were altered—but the proof is still to come.

The scattering ceremony went well, too. The winds cooperated. Nothing went wrong. Sammy and Rosa were amazing; they managed the crowd while I handled logistics and hanky duties. It was a good send-off.

I met Terry once, in a living room full of strangers and bad decisions. What struck me wasn't the way he flirted or laughed; it was the way he watched his friends when they weren't looking. He kept refilling glasses—not with more poison, but with water. He picked up dropped lighters, moved ashtrays before someone knocked them over, put a blanket over Jerry when he finally shut up long enough to pass out. In my line of work, I see the last version of people. With Terry, I only got a glimpse of the middle. But in that glimpse I saw the thing that keeps the others breathing when they've run out of reasons. Some men become heroes. Terry settled for being their excuse to stay.

Terry's mother didn't bother to show up. Maybe there is a God after all.

Something still bothers me. Why did the voice keep repeating, "Never too late"? What's never too late? If DMT leaves a person this confused, what's the point of it? And

what's the deal with the lights blocking my view? I don't know who was singing the words, but they were sung beautifully. If I remember later, I'll have to ask Joe.

The voice did have a point. Time does feel like it's running out.

I think I'm in love. Damn.

ROSA AND SAMMY

¿Cariño?

¿Sí?

Lo hiciste bien esta noche.

Tú también.

Te amo.

Yo también te amo.

IP of D.J. Chambers

TIRED

SUNDAY, AROUND 9:00 A.M.

JOE'S PLACE

I'm minding my own business, eyeing Joe, who's sitting alone at the kitchen table, when Papi strolls in, fresh out of the shower. I can see the need for sleep written all over his face. He's been burning a lot of crystallized fuel to keep up, and it's catching up with him fast. He plops down on a chair.

"Morning, beautiful. How long have you been up?"

Joe responds, his voice laced with contempt. "About an hour or so. Coffee's made if you want any."

I think something may be bothering Joe. He has no right to sass Papi like that.

David hesitates. "Are you ok, Joey?"

"You know, you never asked me if it's OK to call me Joey. I really don't like it. Never have. It makes me feel

like a helpless kid, David. And I am definitely not your kid."

"Oooh. OK. I apologize. It was inconsiderate of me, and I am truly sorry. OK?"

"Yeah. Whatever."

"Hey... what's really wrong here?" David pushes gently, scooching closer. "You're not this upset about the whole Joey thing. Talk to me. Please?"

From my perch on the divan in Joe's living room, I'm in clear earshot. Open-concept layout. I've never approved of the idea. No privacy for those unplanned, exhaustion-fueled drama sessions.

I take a chance and insert myself into their marital moment.

"Am I interrupting?"

Joe snaps his head toward me. "No, Jerry, you're not. You're the center of the universe; how could you possibly interrupt anything? Did we interrupt you?"

David glances at me, then back at Joe, caught in the crossfire.

"Look, I don't want to leave you like this, but if you need some alone time, I can take Jerry home right now and give you space."

"No, David. I don't want to be alone," Joe barks, his defenses flaring. "That's the fucking problem, isn't it? My problem. Yeah, maybe you should both just go. Just leave me the hell alone so I can figure out all the answers by myself. Maybe I can figure out how or when everyone

will get themselves into a pickle that good old Joe can bail you out of. Or pour water on some fucking fire you start while I sit at home, watching Days of Our Lives."

Joe's attention is on Papi, but it's me he's talking about. Me, or Tom, or Frank. We are the ones who always screw up our lives and beg Joey to come save us. Still, there's no call for him to lay this at David's feet. He has nothing to do with our wreckage. He's the one trying to help pick up the pieces. I have heard enough.

Peeshaw. You invited it, sister, so here it comes.

I only wish Papi were in California or something.

"Joe. Stop it. You love it when Papi calls you Joey. You told me so yourself. Don't you dare drag him into our personal hell. He doesn't deserve it. If you ask me, you've already tried to run him off once. So go ahead. Keep acting like a bitch and give him a perfect excuse to run away right now. Just when we are all getting comfortable with his old ass seeing us gallivant around in our birthday suits, playing toot-the-horn like a bunch of damn fools. Throw him away so he's not around to catch you when you step into your next bucket of shit. And who will be to blame when you do, huh? Me? I don't think so, sister."

Joe blinks, his mouth dropping open. "Jesus! I'm sorry..."

"Shhhh. Shhh! I have the floor. You live here, so you can talk to the walls later. You are the strongest man I have ever known, Joey. Damn... Joe."

Once again, my future as an actress is called into question as I start bawling my eyes out, unable to finish my tirade.

While Joe looks down at the table, I take a quick moment to flip Papi off.

David is standing there trying to hunch his shoulders up to cover his ears. He can really hunch them good when he's stressing. Not sure why not. He's old. Probably arthritis.

Then I notice a faint change in his expression. He takes the floor. Thank God.

"Joe, look at me. Thank you. Now listen: no one is going anywhere. You get that through your thick skull? You want us gone? You want to be alone right now? Call the fucking police."

Tu-fucking-ché.

My throat is dry and burning. I don't think Papi can see the glow of my respect through the fog of my pain.

I march over to the refrigerator and grab three cans of Diet Coke to pass around.

I muster up the nerve to try to break the ice.

"Papi, go sit down before your Metamucil starts working."

Ah-ha. There it is. The break in Joe's perimeter. Perfect timing.

Joe looks at me, his eyes wide and glassy. "Why is that, Jerry? Why does he have to sit here and see me like this?"

"Because you're in love with each other, dumbass."

By now, David is sitting on the couch, having done what he was told, like a good little Papi. It would seem he has something to say, though.

"Um, can I... can I use the restroom?"

"Oh, by the way, Joey, that last thing he said? Yeah, it's true."

I smirk, crossing my arms. My Papi just officially stepped up.

"Did you happen to bring a clean hanky today, Papi?"

"No," David says. "But I bought an apron."

Joe lets out a wet, breathless laugh, wiping his nose. "Shut up, Felicia. Move out of the way. I need a shoulder right now, and I need it unpadded."

"Oh. OK," I say, instantly backing off to give them the room. "I'm gonna go drink some of your coffee then. There's nothing better than a Diet Coke and a nice cup of coffee to get a boy going in the morning."

"You don't even like coffee, Jerry," Joe mutters, burying his face in David's bathrobe.

"Boy?" David mutters to himself.

"Oh, hunty," I call back from the kitchen counter. "It's an acquired taste."

11:00 A.M.

THE HOME OF MR. AND MRS. PAPI STEPHENS

The television is blaring in the living room. Joe and I are curled up on the couch, forcing Jerry to watch an old movie with us. He's trying to memorize lines for a

planned clothing-optional theatrical production Joe suggested. *Mommie Dearest*, of course.

"I think I will play Carol Anne; Frank can play Mommie."

Oh, Jerry, bless your heart.

Jerry's phone starts to vibrate, rattling on the glass top of his coffee table. The sound startles all three of us. He puts the call on speaker. No secrets survive this household anyway.

Frank: "Hey, girl. Whattup?"

Jerry: "Who is this?"

Frank: "Frank."

Jerry: "Frank who?"

Frank: "You know who this is, be-atch."

Jerry: "Sorry, shug, you're not in my contacts yet. It's an old phone. Had it for years. What are you getting into today?"

Frank: "Chillin' with Tom. My place. Wondering if you're doing anything we can't interrupt."

Jerry: "We're just chillin'."

Frank: "Who's we?"

Jerry: "Who do you think? Joe, David. At Joe's place."

Frank: "Wanna come over? Am I on speaker?"

Jerry: "Of course. Just me?"

Frank: "More the merrier."

Jerry: "Can't—emotions are rockin'."

Frank: "Same here."

Jerry: "Hold up." [Aside, low voice] "Yeah. I don't know—you know as much as I do; he's on speaker. We could, I guess. Why not? A change of pace might do me good."

Frank: "I can hear everything you guys are saying."

Jerry: "Hey, Frank."

Frank: "Hey, Jerry."

Frank: "Uber's gonna be there in seven minutes to scoop you."

Jerry: "You mean David?"

Frank: "No, I mean Uber. Get your asses moving."

Jerry: "How do you know it's not just my ass?"

Frank: "Because David can smell Tom from here."

"FUCK YOU!" Tom shouts from wherever he's playing with his tools.

Finally, with all chores finished, we settle into a cozy Sunday with family. *Mommie Dearest* is back at the beginning. Jerry is studying his lines. To Tom's delight, Frank has agreed to play Mommie in Jerry's stage production. Tom makes a few inquiries about wire hangers and potted plants.

I notice Joe as his attention circles the room, grasping the irony of it all. The exhaustion on his face has lifted with the mood. I also detect a tinge of anxiety, as if he's dwelling on the what-ifs instead of the what-is. I wrap my arm around him, warding off another breakdown.

It comes out as a sputter, which has no chance of surviving the company.

"So what's up, guys? Are we going to get naked and nasty again? Is that the plan?"

The second the words leave his lips, he realizes they were entirely uncalled for. A deep, heavy blush creeps up his neck, completely giving away his inner panic.

It's Tom's turn to show me up in the sass department. "Not exactly what we were thinking, Joe. But Mr. David? I did bring my tape measure with me in case you want to borrow it a little later."

His eyes are fixed on Frank, who is so entranced by the movie that he doesn't notice.

Joe leans into me and fills me in on their little secret.

"Ten and a half," he says, as if it's a shoe size.

"Eleven," Frank calmly corrects, without taking his eyes off the TV for a second.

"The number is ten and a half, David. Frank has an astigmatism."

"So y'all just want to hang out and watch *Mommie Dearest*? For real?"

Frank, again without shifting his gaze, responds, "Can we watch *Auntie Mame* when this is over?"

Tom chimes in one last time, "A chill and a chat, actually. If that passes muster with you, Joe."

"Whell... I never."

Oh, Jerry. God love you.

Joe shifts his weight, leaning in even more as he shares his thoughts with the crowd.

"You know what, that sounds nice. If Tom can survive the movie marathon. Tom?"

All eyes are on Tom, but he has nothing to say. He's dead to the world, sleeping like a baby, as if he hadn't a care in the world. I can't be sure, but he might be smiling.

"Well. Alrighty then."

Jerry mistakes Joe's quip for irritation. I know it's not, and I motion for him to let Tom sleep as Joe reclaims the mic.

"I am truly sorry for being such a bitch just now. None of you deserves that from me. I am taking my emotions out on you guys because I'm a little tired and a lot stressed. Just be aware, OK? And one more thing. David, Jerry was right about one thing earlier. Only one thing, though."

He sends a wink in Jerry's direction and looks my way, just as Jerry flips me off. Frank is oblivious to the whole performance.

"I do love you."

"I guess you were right, Tom," Frank whispers, still never shifting his gaze.



Halfway through *Auntie Mame*, Tom wakes up, instantly taking in his surroundings. It's a natural instinct born of living with trauma-induced PTSD.

"Cool! Lesbians," he yells, scanning the room for an easy laugh. "Got any beer?"

Frank doesn't even look up from the armchair. He slowly pulls the metal tape measure from his pocket. Zzzzt—snap. He lets the yellow tape slide out two feet, then slaps the lock down.

Click.

"Hey, who told him he could play with my tool?"

"No beer, Tom," Frank says, his voice flat, low, and entirely sober. "It's my tool now."

"What else is new?"

Tom's grin falters for a millisecond before he forces it back up. "What, no hospitality? Papi, you're the high-roller here. Tell me there's something to drink in this domestic paradise."

"Sit down, Tom," David says. It isn't loud, but it carries that heavy funeral-director weight. The voice that tells you the casket is officially closing and there's absolutely nothing left to negotiate.

At this point, as planned, Joe takes over.

"Tom, while you were sleeping, we made some decisions. Since you chose not to be part of the conversation, we made some choices for you."

Tom looks over at me, hoping for an alley-oop, a quick joke, a piece of old Felicia sass to break the ice. But I am just sitting on the edge of the couch, stoic. At least that's what I was aiming for, though I was new to acting.

Tom's shoulders drop. The towel he still has wrapped around his waist suddenly looks like a shroud. He slumps back onto the floor, his back hitting the wall, his long legs stretched across the carpet. "Fucking buzzkills," he mutters, but the venom is entirely gone. He sounds twelve years old.

Frank pulls the tape measure out further. Three feet. Four feet.

"What are you measuring, Frank?" Joe asks, his voice cracking in the quiet.

"Oh, I'm just trying to get a fix on the length of the skirt Tom will wear when he plays Auntie Mame."

"Da fuck?"

"Settle down, Tom," Frank says. His mood darkens.

The game is over, even if everyone else is in it for the ride.

"The distance," Frank says, eyes locked on the yellow metal tape. "Forty yards. That's exactly how far back Tom was standing on the beach last night. I measured it with my eyes. Kept looking over my shoulder to see if my flank was covered. It wasn't. He was just standing out there on the dunes like a statue. Like a target."

Tom turns his head away, staring hard at the baseboards. "I couldn't go down to the water, Frank. You know I couldn't."

"Why?" Frank snaps, and for the first time, the raw, bleeding edge of the infantryman cuts through the static. "We're a unit, Tom. We don't let a man go into the

ground alone. We stood there. Even the dude in his blue loafers stood right there. Why the fuck were you forty yards back?"

"Because if I touched the water, I wouldn't have stopped walking!" Tom screams.

The outburst hits the living room like a physical blow. Tom's hands are shaking violently now, his knuckles white against his knees. The cocky, untouchable jock is gone. The fire in his eyes is drowning in tears of fear and pent-up emotion.

"I didn't want a keepsake, Frank! I didn't want a little jar of dust to put on a shelf next to the baggies and the scales! I wanted him. I wanted the guy who kept us from checking out. I looked at the water, then at all those squares with their fucking bongos, and realized Terry's gone and nobody is checking the dope anymore. We're rolling the cylinder and pulling the trigger every single night, and the only person who gave a shit is out there floating in the Gulf."

Tom buries his face in his hands, his chest heaving. The tears come without a sound, just a violent shuddering through his massive frame.

Frank looks at Tom, and the tape measure snaps back into its plastic case with a sharp, metallic clack. Frank's hand is trembling, too. He looks down at his own palm as if he doesn't even recognize the skin.

"He checked the dope," Frank whispers, his eyes dead and hollow. "The night it rained in November. Two

years ago. I was shivering behind the dumpster by the pier, ready to take a hit of whatever the hell the local runner handed me. Terry walked straight through the pouring rain, took the pipe from my hand, and threw it into the dark. He told me he outranked me because he was clean that day. He lied, of course. He wasn't clean. But he kept me alive."

Frank looks up, his gaze moving slowly from Tom to Joe and finally landing heavily on me. The tactical defenses were gone. The fortress has surrendered.

"I'm tired, Corporal," Frank says, his voice dropping into a broken, childlike surrender. "I'm so fucking tired of clearing rooms that are already empty. I'm tired of hearing the drums sound like mortar fire. I don't want to be the last man standing in a war that ended thirty years ago."

Joe walks over from the couch, slow and deliberate, and sits on the floor next to Tom, pulling Tom's heavy, weeping shoulder into his lap. No panties, no DMT, no street talk. Just one broken anchor holding on to another.

I watch them from the couch, a solitary tear cutting a clean line through the leftover makeup on Jerry's cheek.

"Papi?"

"Yeah, Jerry?"

"Can I help Tom now?"

I nod. He crawls to where Tom lies sobbing and resumes his place as Tom's lap pillow. The last time Jerry

found himself in a situation like this, he needed saving; this time, he was the one doing the saving.

"I think the party's over," I say as I take my place on the other side of Tom. I grab his hand and hold on for dear life.

As I look around, it all becomes so clear—the beautiful, fractured, terrifyingly fragile family of freaks I have accidentally inherited was the best thing that had ever happened to me.



I looked over at David and saw him holding Tom's hand, a look on his face that told me he was never going to let go. I knew then that the same was true of me. I will never let David go. Then he looked directly at me with a smile that held more pain than I thought possible. His mouth opened, and a sound came out that I imagine would come from a father who'd just learned his wife died delivering his baby.

"The party's over. Tomorrow, we start the work."

In the corner of the room, the television screen flickered in silence, black-and-white shadows of old movie stars moving across the glass, ignored by the five men on the floor who were finally, for the first time in their lives, looking directly at the truth.

FURIOUS

INTERVENTION ON BEHALF OF TOM

Hey there, this is David.

Tom's emotional meltdown was well earned. Once he could talk again, he told the others everything. It was the kind of cleansing that has to happen before healing has any chance of beginning.

What he disclosed was too raw and too personal to share here. Just take some comfort in knowing that what you might call weakness has made room for strength to creep in. Don't expect instant gratification or a godly miracle to come next; that's not what happens. Just know: he opened a door.

At this point, I think it's safe to let you in on a secret.

Tom's confession is not a matter of fiction. The story you're reading is loosely based on reality. Details and names have been adjusted where appropriate. Everyone

deserves dignity and privacy. I'm holding on to Tom's details to respect the man those experiences belong to. I'm sure you can appreciate that.

If of D.J. Chambers

FRANK

I'm an alcoholic. I'm not like Dave. Dave is trying to fix himself. I'm not trying to fix myself. I'm just living. I'm not trying to be special. I'm just trying to be happy. I'm not trying to be a pretty good person. I'm just trying to be a person. I'm not trying to keep a good record. I'm just trying to be a person.

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gut. I'm not suggesting it's a perfect arrangement; he isn't always the easiest guy to have around, but I'm the one who brought up the whole "cohesive unit" argument. I may be a lot of things, but a hypocrite is not one of them.

Overall, it's been working out pretty good. I think I'll keep him for now. I guess he has to agree, maybe. Maybe not. I know how to bend him to my will. All it takes is a steady fix and a pair of tighty-whities. Together, our VA checks add up to more than enough to pay the bills, so we get along pretty good money-wise. I convinced him to let me take care of his finances. He kinda sucks at it. I guess to him, since he gives his shit away anyway, giving it to me instead of a street rat really makes no difference. To me, it matters a lot. He doesn't even know I have a coffee can with his name on it for a rainy-day fund.

Since the Sunday morning showdown party at Joe's, our club of hedonists has toned it down. We're not angels, and like any man on meth, we have needs that must be met. But we've cut back on everything. It seems like our boundaries have gotten tighter, and we're spending more time watching each other's backs than on our backs. Well, they would be on their backs. Or bellies. But that's beside the point.

The group's energy has shifted in ways none of us fully understands. We all seem to be living with it, though. In my case, I'm even seeing the upside. I'm not

sure how to hash that out with how I see myself. I'm working on it. The biggest eye-opener for me has been how much talking I've been doing. I don't like to talk about myself. It's embarrassing. But Jerry tells me he's going to kick my ass every time I try to shut down. He kinda scares me.

Unlike Jerry, I paid attention in school. I was a good student, I guess. B's and C's. I could've gone to tech school, been a plumber, or something. I guess I still could. It's the motivation and commitment that keep me working the dead-end grind. David mentioned something about embalming dead people. I may look into it. I hear they have the shit to make angel dust with. Could be a win-win.

We lived in West Tampa when I was growing up, close to the Air Force base. I thought guys in uniform were hot, so I looked into it. They decided I was best suited for the Army. I needed to get away from my family, so the decision was easy, really. I had no idea the geniuses you pay with your taxes would decide the Russians were a bunch of pussies for not kicking ass in Afghanistan. I never figured we would be sent to finish a job the Russians couldn't manage after nine years of hell. If 007 couldn't do it, how were we supposed to?

We lost a lot of good men over there. I lost good men. But I came back in one piece. Nothing but a painted ass cheek to show for my trouble. Well, that and a Purple Heart.

My ma is proud of me, though. She calls me Soldier Thug. I don't think she knows what thug means. She never fails to mention Arlington when we talk. She wants me to go there when my time comes. I don't see her much because sometimes I wonder how far she would go to get me there. For all the shit I pull to convince people I'm batshit, I'm really not ready to die just yet. I'd like to see Alaska. Maybe Iceland. I want to see a volcano.

What you really should know, though, is that my hell started in January of 1995. If my ma were to kill me for whatever reason? It wouldn't be her first time.

As I was saying, I paid attention in school. But I dumb myself down to protect myself. No one likes a know-it-all or a smart-ass. When you live on the edge, it's better to blend in than to stick out. It's basic stuff. It's easy to get away with shit when you convince people you don't know any better. Just act stupid. The whole forgiveness-versus-permission thing. It's not a sure-win defense, but it's a hell of a lot more effective than the alternative.

I've been rambling on to avoid telling you about the day Terry's bitch of a mother came looking for me at my place. I wasn't there. Tom was. And that's the problem. Tom can have a short fuse sometimes. It's one of his most endearing qualities.

On the Saturday after Terry's going-away party, I was working my shitty-ass job. Tom was home alone doing whatever he does when I'm not there to annoy him.

When the knock came, he didn't check the peephole to see who it was. That's not like him at all, but it's what he claims.

It was Terry's mother, Gladys shit-for-brains Orloff.

She had somehow tracked down my address. I don't really know how. Anyway, she came looking for Terry's ashes. I don't know what made her think I had them. Doesn't make sense. Tom recognized her, and he wasn't exactly happy to see the old cow.

He says she started to let herself in but he blocked the way and asked her something to the effect of:

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

He told me she gave him a nasty look and got so close he could smell her breath. He claims the conversation went something like this:

"Who the fuck is asking? You look like a goddamn ginger faggot. Where is that other guy who lives here? The hot one?"

"None of your fucking business. You have a lot of nerve showing your face around here. You really are a shady bitch, aren't you?"

"Guilty as sin. What would you know about sin? Y'all are soulless, ain't ya? So where is he?"

"That's need-to-know information, and you don't. What the hell do you want?"

Now, Tom was clean when Satan knocked. I don't mean showered. I mean a week clean. Cold turkey. That can make a man go squirrely—prone to fightin' over nothing. Only natural. It's the way it is. My boy was in no mood to take smack from that old, toothless whore.

When she told him what she wanted and tried to push her way past him, he snapped. She demanded Terry's ashes. Said she had a right to have them because she gave birth and all that shit. Tom said she was saying something else when it happened. He says he didn't hear her; he just saw her lips moving.

He claims he doesn't remember exactly how it happened. I believe him. His training just took over. He grabbed her by the throat to shut her up.

He didn't know she would break so easy. But she did. I can see her eyes fading away. I hope she had time to ask herself if it was worth it. I hope she suffered, but I guess it's not likely. That's what they say anyway.

Tom says he heard the snap. Says he still does sometimes. Says it makes him sick.

David's detective friend says she was dead before she hit the ground. Just like Terry. Funny. I really hope she suffered.

Poor David. He got stuck with the body.

GLADYS

Gladys Orloff was born in a quiet West Texas town to a wealthy family whose fortune came from oil and greed. Her father was rarely home, but when he was, he doted on Gladys. She was definitely a daddy's girl, and she grew resentful, blaming her mother's hunger for all things material for her father's endless time away.

Gladys's ability to make her victims believe they had nothing to fear was chilling. It was the same trick she would later use on social workers and cops, smiling sweetly while she sharpened the knife. Her mother never knew of Gladys's resentment until it was too late. The rat poison had already taken its course.

Gladys never married. She didn't want to lose the Orloff name and dishonor her father's memory, and she certainly didn't want any children of her own. She was an only child. Both of her parents had tried to have another baby, if for no other reason than to keep their daughter

company. Gladys didn't know her mother was pregnant, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. She had no interest in a sibling to share her father with. In Gladys's private math, love and the Orloff name were zero-sum—if anyone else touched them, she'd lost.

It was the miscarriage that made the doctors notice something was off with Mrs. Orloff. There was far too much bleeding, and her pallor was unnatural, somehow darker than it should be. Two brothers ran the remote hospital—more of a clinic, really. They were identical twins, Dr. Tim and Dr. Tom. After completing their residencies, Tim and Tom returned home to care for their community. Neither had ever seen a case of arsenic poisoning firsthand. Back then, poisoning was something that happened in crime novels, not in the bodies of women they'd watched grow up.

The revelation came when one of the nurses came on shift. While making her rounds, she came face-to-face with her cousin. She knew immediately what she was looking at; she also knew that all the nursing and all the doctoring in the world would make no difference. Ima Orloff was a dead woman breathing. The town never found a way to prove it, but a quiet verdict settled in: the Orloff house had turned on itself.

The sheriff was notified and launched an immediate investigation. In West Texas in the mid-'70s, resources were tight; the county didn't even have a coroner. The nurse's anecdotal evidence was recorded and certified.

Everyone in town suddenly had a theory, but not one of them was something the sheriff could put on paper.

The only question was how. How had Mrs. Orloff been poisoned? No one thought she'd poisoned herself; she had way too much money to spend. There was only one person left inside that house, and she was nine years old and very, very calm.

Mr. Orloff had been in the oil patch for two weeks straight, two hundred miles away. He was devastated when he heard the news. Not only had he lost his wife, but his unborn baby as well.

When he finally made it home, the first thing he had to do was see to Gladys. She had been in limbo, staying with an aunt for two days. After the obligatory hugs and kisses, Mr. Orloff sat Gladys down and asked her how she was getting along with her aunt. Then, with the help of his sister, whose womanly instincts he would now have to rely on, he explained the situation. "Mommy and your little brother won't be coming home, sweetie. They are with Jesus now. Your auntie will be taking care of you while Daddy is at work. Do you understand?"

At nine, Gladys was savvier than anyone gave her credit for. She didn't know her mom was pregnant. What she did know was that she'd gotten the two-for-one special. It was her reaction to the news that gave her away. She became giddy. She practiced that smile on cousins and neighbors first; later she'd use it on social workers, cops, and, eventually, funeral homes.

Further investigation by the sheriff confirmed the sick truth behind the death of Mrs. Orloff and her unborn son. The results were not what Gladys had hoped for. Her daddy didn't stay home to spend more time with her. Instead, she was sent to the state hospital for troubled children and then placed into the foster care system. She never saw her father again. He died in the patch when he lit a cigarette in defiance of all the rules.

What Gladys learned from the whole mess was that when people found out what you did, they didn't come closer—they vanished. She would be less sloppy in her future endeavors.



Gladys was home alone, marinating in her own filth. It was rare she didn't have a man to keep her company, or, better yet, a man with a girl of his own to drag in behind him. That's when the idea hit her.

Frank. I wonder if he has the urn. He probably does. He's hot. I wouldn't mind adding him to my conquests journal. I'll bet he'd find two little baggies and a charming playmate pretty damn tasty right about now. I could use a little young love. I think I'll pay him a visit.



Gladys checked the battery on her bike. It was almost fully charged, with plenty of juice to take her where she needed to go. Her mind wandered on the way—ten minutes of plan-making opportunity. When she reached

her destination, she set the bike against the wall, climbed the stairs, and knocked on the door she was pretty sure led to the Stud and his sex dungeon. She was utterly unconcerned about making the right choice. Gladys had no shame.

The door opened.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

It wasn't Frank.

"Who the fuck are you? Where's Frank?"

He's rude. I'd fuck him.

"You failed to answer the question. What are you doing here?"

"Boy, I think my asking where Frank is would be a clue. Head injury?"

"You are a filthy bitch. It's none of your business where Frank is. You need to leave, now."

Gladys pulled the two baggies from her pocket and waved them in the air like she was offering a treat to a dog, certain he wouldn't be able to resist a good romp.

"Are you sure about that?"

It happened so fast that she felt his hand on her neck before she saw it coming. Fear hit her hard.

I can't breathe. This isn't what—

The thought was never completed. The world went black, and Gladys Orloff was no longer wasting air.

Tom heard someone shouting. He looked around frantically to see who it was. It finally dawned on him that it was him.

Oh, fuck! What did I do? Jesus. What do I do now? Is she dead? What was that noise? She shouldn't be dead. I hardly even squeezed. I just wanted her to leave.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I'm fucked. Call David.



"Tom, calm down. OK? One second—Cecile, cancel my appointments for the rest of the day. I have to go. Tom, don't do anything. Don't touch anything. Sit on the porch, as far from her as you can. Don't draw attention to yourself. I'm calling my friend. She's a detective—a homicide detective. I'll be there in twenty-five minutes. Don't do or say a thing to anyone. Call 911 and tell them there's been an accident. Tell them exactly... Tom, are you listening? Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, David."

"Tell 911 there was an accident, that a lady is dead on the porch. Do not tell them who she is. Tell them you need the police. Do you understand, Tom?"

"I understand. What should I say when they get here?"

"Tom, listen to me carefully. Tell them nothing. Tell them someone is on the way to help. Tell them nothing else. Nothing. Tom, what are you going to tell them?"

"That I have help on the way. That's it."

"That's right. They're going to ask you questions. You answer them with 'I have help on the way.' Do not get angry. Do not answer questions. Do not show any type of attitude. Do not let them in the house."

"OK, David. Thank you. Please hurry."

"Tom, I'm in my car now, twenty minutes away."

He's not mad. 911. 911. Just the facts. Just like David said. Hurry, David. Please.

I didn't mean to, God. I didn't mean to. Oh, God. *I don't want to die in prison.*

TOM

MARION COUNTY CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION
OCALA, FLORIDA

Hi. My name is inmate number 369384. But you can call me Tom.

I'm sitting in this cell because I rid the earth of a parasite. The Orkin Man gets paid damn good money to kill pests—I got three years.

I know what you judgy bitches are thinking: Only three years for a murderer?

Yeah. Three years.

Ever hear of mitigating circumstances?

Watch some *Law & Order*. Sometimes things aren't what they seem.

The Judge seemed to like me, which was lucky.

Also, she was hot.

I feel like that's relevant.

They sent me to MCI because my lawyer worked out a deal. I didn't get real hard time, and I probably could've walked if I'd played my cards wrong.

Frank is probably pissed at me for what I did, though. He probably misses me.

I don't miss him at all.

Excuse me. I need a quick minute.

OK. I'm back. Sorry about that.

The truth is, I miss Frank so much I can barely stand the weight of my own skin. I can't sleep sometimes, 'cause of my shame. I'm ashamed to have people who seem to care about me. I should be dead. My friends saved my life. And here I sit. Proof. I didn't mean to hurt them. Sometimes I think I want to be forgotten because it's easy to be alone.

Frank won't send me my money; I have to live on the shit they feed us in here. Nothing from the commissary to take the edge off the hunger. It's cool, though—no money, no drugs. No drugs, no favors. No favors, no dramatic shower scenes. It all works out. Believe me. Shit doesn't come cheap in here.

They put me in the rehab unit. No, not they. I put myself here—for once, on purpose. But I did it for a good reason. When they called my name at my trial, I couldn't help but look back at my boys. Jerry was looking straight at me. He looked like he was dying inside. He was scared. The look on his face nearly killed me. I saw the fear, the pain. And I knew it was my fault. I did that. Something

else hit me at the same time I saw the truth. There was only one way for me to pay him back.

Terry saved my life. He gave me a reason to live. I never did my part. I never told him what I wanted. I don't know if he wanted the same thing. Hell, he probably would've just laughed if I told him I wanted to run away with him and create our own little place in the world.

Jerry was looking at me the same way I'd looked at Terry all those years. I decided I couldn't just walk away from him. I decided to do what I think he wanted me to do: save myself. I'm old enough now to be in charge.

I could be lying to myself, I know. Maybe he's being the pretty boy at a gangbanger's night out. Something tells me he's not, though.

I don't even care if he is. If they are. I owe them either way.

Gays—you can't live with them, and you can't live without them.

I can't wait to play Auntie Mame.

Well, I don't want to bore you with prison politics, so I'll let you go for now. Just know it's all good in here. I'm on the right path. I hope.

Oh. One more thing before I log off.

At least that old bug is dead.

JOE

Hi, I'm Joe. I'm an alcoholic and an addict. Validation is my drug of choice.

Growing up in a religious household meant some pretty strict conditions. No caffeine. No drugs. No cigarettes. You get the point. Basically, our moral standard was to prove that ours were better than yours.

Having homosexual tendencies was not considered high on the morality scale. I translated my "evil ways" into pure guilt. I didn't know why I liked the way boys looked but not girls. I was seven, for God's sake. How would I see it any other way? So when I was informed that I was a heathen whom God hated because of the way he made me, I saw myself as an accident. When I was exiled from my family and the church at the age of sixteen for drinking Pepsi through a straw that broke the camel's back, I gave up on trying to rationalize my situation. I was too busy trying to find a place to live.

I was lucky. My best friend's parents were reformed. They saw through the fog of unforgiveness when they read the Gospel of John. They took me in and offered me the security I needed to make it to graduation. I'm pretty smart. I did well enough academically to attend university on scholarships. With additional help from student loans, I was able to work my way toward a successful career in nursing. I pulled it off without much trouble, but those loans did come with their own scars. My father was high up in the church, and family finances would have covered my expenses. I was, and still am, frugal. I like nice things, but in a practical sense. I like my Lexus because it is nice, and it never breaks down. I'll spend \$300 on a blender because I like smoothies, and a lower-end model would likely die under the strain of my diet.

My parents never loved me. Nor did they ever love each other. My father proved that when he was discovered having a string of on-the-side lovers, male and female. He probably would've survived the females, but the boyfriend led to his excommunication and, in turn, his unemployment.

My father called me yesterday, as he often does when his finances are tight. I always send him money.

Not anymore, though.

I told him I'm broke because I am gay and spend all my money on cocaine. I told him my credit cards were all canceled. I explained that I gave all of my extra earnings

to the Church of the Poison Mind. He hung up on me. I doubt he'll call anymore; there would be nothing in it for him, after all.

My mother died of cancer about a year after she let Dad show me the door without a word of objection. I guess I miss her; I'm not sure, really. I forgive her, though. She was as much a slave to my father's immorality as I am.

I'm going to try to replace my drug habit with discernment and, if all goes well, a PhD in psychology. David suggests that I might be smart enough to go back to school. I hope I'm smart enough to replace my weaknesses with his strengths rather than chase strangers' approval as if it were some sort of fix.

Turnabout is fair play.

IP of D.J. Jerry's

JERRY

The DMT trip was not what I had hoped for. I wanted it to be a funky trip to the land of the delusional. Instead, I spent fifteen minutes in the land of reality. I somehow understood my purpose. It may seem funny that I came out of the dream declaring my priestly aspirations, but to me, it was no joke. To me, it was the only way out of the grave I had been digging for twelve years.

I know you're expecting a catty joke; after all, it's my nature. Here's one for you: "Just because I'm uncut doesn't mean I can't cut the crap." I hope you enjoyed it, because it'll be my last. Well, last dirty one, anyway.

I'm getting too old for theatrics. Life is becoming too real for fantasy. I needed a kick in the ass to remind me that with youth comes excuses, but growth requires wisdom. I'm not Carmen Sandiego. I'm Geraldo Pablo Esposito-Agramonte, and I have finally decided to leave my puberty behind.

I spend several hours a week sitting in a confessional, listening. I don't say a word; I just hear the confessions of strangers and watch how the pastor of the day handles the flock. I work with four priests; two of them chose wisely, and two may not have. After so many years of wading through strangers' pain, they've grown cynical. I think it's funny that my life works the other way around. I am older than Father Mike. He's been a priest for six years. He still believes he can make a difference.

Father Antonio is my mentor and a true believer. His job is to guide me through my journey in faith, at least until I take my seat on the plane that will carry me south. I chose Argentina because my grandparents were born there. I never met them. That's probably best. They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree; if they're anything like the man whose sperm led to my creation, I have no need of them. You never know, though—I could run into them while celebrating Mass and not even know it.

Every day is a struggle for me. When I struggle to understand God's teachings, or when Father Antonio calls me out, I just want to run to Joe's, get high, and forget about my future. Maybe I'm just crazy. Maybe I took one drug too many. I don't know. All I can say is that every time I am five seconds from giving up, a force overwhelms me. It's a force I don't feel comfortable saying no to. I really don't think saying no would be of any use. Whoever is pushing me forward is a cunning SOB.

Sorry, God. Thank you, God.

¡Gracias a Dios todopoderoso!

Now, let me tell you about Tom's day in court.

If of D.J. Chambers

INSPIRED

A few days ago, they held a hearing. They called it an arraignment.

Tom has a public defender. We were all there to show our support, except David. He had to work, and he said he didn't think it was his place to be there, since he wasn't sure he'd earned full family rights yet. He's not as smart as he thinks he is, and Joe's feelings were hurt.

We met in a small office to talk. Tom's lawyer didn't seem to like us. I could tell he was being a little judgy. It's a courthouse; I figured that was normal.

"What do you call a lawyer at the bottom of the sea? A good start." I couldn't help it; I laughed.

Tom's lawyer whispered something. I don't know what he said. I couldn't see his mouth from my angle. I read lips, and when Tom leaned over and asked the idiot a question, I saw, "What, you don't approve of my friends?"

The lawyer answered so that we could all hear, "It's not that, Tom, it's just that what we need to discuss is very personal. I don't want you to feel a need to filter your answers. You have to be completely open and honest, or I won't be able to help you."

"I have no secrets," Tom said, his voice flat and firm. "This is my family—not just a bunch of friends. They're all smarter than me anyway. I want them in the room."

"OK, Tom. But I have one strict condition," the lawyer said, shifting his gaze to the rest of us. "No input. No interruptions."

Then he looked at us and added, "Unless I address you, please don't interrupt us, OK?"

Terms accepted, bitch. Move along.

We all nodded. He returned his attention to Tom.

That's when he pulled the papers out of his briefcase.

"The State's investigation shows that Ms. Orloff was a very heavy user of prescription opiates and street methamphetamine. The postmortem showed clear signs of severe deterioration of her bones as a result. This is what we refer to as a mitigating circumstance. Do you know what mitigating means, Tom?"

Tom blinked. "I think so. It reduces my time, right?"

"It can. What we want to convince the judge of is that without Ms. Orloff's weakened bones, you probably wouldn't have broken her neck the way you did. That

means the reason she died was as much or more due to her behavior as it was due to yours. Understand?"

"I think so."

"There's one more thing, Tom, and this is where you have to tell the truth. Did you intend to kill Ms. Orloff?"

Tom's voice was no longer calm.

"No! She was sick! She said things that made me sick. She wanted me to get high and fuck her. She wanted to fuck Frank. She said she wanted Terry's ashes, but she didn't give a fuck about Terry. She's Satan."

Tears were streaming down his face, but he was holding it together pretty well, considering.

"Let me break it down clearly." The lawyer looked at all of us now. "The State is asking for manslaughter, not murder. That still means up to fifteen years. I intend to ask for leniency in the sentence if you are found guilty, because of how everything happened. Do you understand what we're trying to do?"

I couldn't help myself. I immediately broke the condition and opened my mouth. "So Tom's not a murderer?"

"No. No, he is not," the lawyer clarified, shooting me a warning look.

"That's the worst we can do, Tom. I think I can do much better than that, but it won't be a walk in the park. I believe what you're telling me. Now I need you to tell me everything that led up to this situation."

Tom let it all out. He gave a seven-minute confession about the drugs, Terry, Gladys, us, and his shoe size. Everything.

"Thank you, Tom. I appreciate that. Now, let's see what we can do with this. I'm fairly confident we can resolve this in a way that you won't go to prison. You might have to do some jail time depending on the judge. We'll figure all that out in a few minutes."

"I'm going to argue that your actions were not intentional—that you had no intention of killing Ms. Orloff. I believe we can convince the court that what happened is excusable under the law. Basically, they have to believe it was an accident.

"I expect that will be the outcome; the evidence is on your side, Tom. But your lifestyle choices could make a jury less forgiving. I recommend that if we go to trial, we trust the judge to decide and leave a jury out of it. This case is technical, not emotional. You understand? I won't promise you anything, but if you play by my rules, we have a very good chance."

Tom nodded his unenthusiastic approval.

Back in the courtroom, they finally called Tom's name. It happened so fast. The judge asked Tom's lawyer some questions:

"In the matter of the State vs. Tomas Joseph Clark, the State has filed formal charges for manslaughter in the second degree. Mr. Collins, does your client waive the

reading of the information and his right to a speedy trial?"

"Yes on reading, no on speedy trial, Your Honor."

The judge and her assistant talked for a minute, and then she was talking to everyone again.

"So noted. How does your client plead?"

"Guilty."

Tom said it before Mr. Collins had time to take a breath.

Mr. Collins looked at Tom like his head had just rolled across the floor.

"I'll die out there."

It came out as a whisper.

"Approach, Your Honor?"

"My chambers."

In the judge's chambers, the air seemed heavy with disarray. All three participants were caught off guard by Tom's sudden cry for help. Only one of them understood why. It was time to put the rooster in its cage.

Mr. Collins spelled out his defense strategy, pointing directly to the medical examiner's report on the victim's brittle bones, and then laid out Tom's raw terror of dying from his addiction on the street. He disclosed everything he could within the limits of attorney-client privilege.

Then the judge took the lead, looking across her desk at the state prosecutor. "Alan, what are your thoughts?"

Alan rubbed his temples, looking at his case file. "Judge, if Mr. Collins pushes this to trial on an excusable homicide argument, the State has a serious proof problem with criminal intent. The freak-accident nature of the injury makes a manslaughter conviction a massive uphill battle for us. But I can't just drop a homicide case. If the defendant is actively begging for prison time to save his own life, the State is willing to negotiate. We just need time to figure out a resolution that gets him the help he needs without blowing up the sentencing guidelines."

The judge nodded, leaning back in her chair. "I am not accepting a raw guilty plea to a second-degree felony from a defendant who is clearly in active detox and terrified for his life. We are going to pass this case. Mr. Collins, I'll give you a three-month continuance to formalize a downward-departure plea agreement with the State. Alan, work with him to find a facility with a dedicated drug-rehabilitation program. Let's see how you gentlemen work it out."

Wow. Just like that, it was over. Tom's not a murderer; he's technically a manslaughterer. Hmmm. The lawyer seemed to be in a significantly better mood when we left than when we arrived. Maybe that's a good sign.

The judge gave Mr. Collins three months to come up with a plan. We'd have to go back to court to see what

would happen. The waiting sucks, but three months with Tom not in jail is better than, well... you know.

The next morning, David and Frank took Tom to Bay Pines' emergency room. I guess Tom spilled the beans there and, according to Frank—who was waiting with David in the waiting room—they didn't see him again. The nurse told them Tom would be admitted to their rehab unit. He was going to be there for a couple of weeks, at least. David said he would let Mr. Collins know.

I cried.

PRE-TRIAL HEARING, PINELLAS COUNTY JUSTICE CENTER, THREE MONTHS LATER. JUDGE ANNISE R. COOLEY, PRESIDING.

"Mr. Collins, we are here for a scheduled status conference. How are we proceeding?"

"Your Honor, the defense wishes to withdraw our previous plea of not guilty. We have reached a negotiated settlement with the State for a change of plea."

"Very well. Let's hear it, Mr. Collins."

"Thank you, Your Honor. First, I have a handwritten statement from Mr. Clark, addressed directly to the court, which I would like to submit for your consideration during sentencing. I have provided a copy to the State."

"I'll take it," Judge Cooley said, gesturing to her bailiff. "Go ahead."

"Mr. Clark checked into the inpatient rehabilitation program at Bay Pines the day following his arraignment. He fully cooperated with the clinical staff and

successfully completed sixty days of intensive treatment. He was diagnosed with severe, chronic PTSD stemming from childhood trauma, which we believe directly contributed to his involuntary, hyper-vigilant reaction to the victim's aggressive behavior.

"Furthermore, Mr. Clark has exhausted all available local VA treatment options. He applied to the Veterans Affairs' most comprehensive long-term trauma program in New York, but his application was denied solely due to these pending felony legal issues. He continues to believe, as do his doctors, that he will not be able to maintain his current stable condition without secure, institutional monitoring."

Judge Cooley looked over her glasses at the prosecutor. "Mr. Grant, is the State in possession of the defense's medical-mitigation materials?"

"We are, Your Honor," Alan Grant said, adjusting his jacket.

"All right. Your turn, Mr. Grant."

"Your Honor, given the exceptional mitigating medical circumstances and the clear lack of criminal intent, the State agrees that the statutory mandatory minimum is inapplicable here. In the interest of justice, we have negotiated a downward departure. The defendant will plead guilty to manslaughter in the second degree, with an agreed-upon cap of thirty-six months in state prison, with a specific judicial

recommendation for the FDC's intensive drug-rehabilitation program."

The door next to the judge's bench opened, and in stepped a deputy with a note that he handed directly to the judge. The note read:

—SO just located seven relatively fresh bodies on Gladys Orloff's property—likely poisonings, likely range of deaths from 24 months to 2 months.

The frown on Judge Cooley's face spoke volumes. Nobody in the gallery knew why. But that lack of knowing would have to be proven. The note was like a wrench in the spokes of clarity. Everything was about to take on a whole new set of shadows.

Judge Cooley stared at the paper for a long, agonizing beat. She looked up, her eyes cutting straight to Tom, then to the lawyers.

"Counsel, approach," she said, her voice dropping to a sharp whisper.

Mr. Collins and Alan Grant stepped up to the wooden podium. She turned the note toward them. I watched Collins's jaw drop, and Grant went entirely pale.

"Mr. Grant," the judge whispered, "is your office aware of this?"

"No, Your Honor," Grant stammered. "The Sheriff's Office must have just cracked it."

"I cannot accept a homicide plea when the victim's house is a graveyard," Judge Cooley said firmly. "We don't know what we are looking at here. I am passing this case

for exactly forty-eight hours. Mr. Grant, I want a full briefing from the Sheriff's Office on my desk by Thursday morning. If Mr. Clark is tied to any of those other bodies, this deal is dead. If he isn't, we finish this."

THREE DAYS LATER: THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Those forty-eight hours felt like forty-eight years. But as it turned out, the shadows cleared from Tom as quickly as they arrived. The State's investigation immediately showed Tom was a total non-entity in Gladys's twisted house of horrors—the toxicology reports pointed to a specific type of prescription poison Tom never had access to, and his bank records and phone logs proved he didn't even know her until a few weeks before the incident. He was just the guy who accidentally stopped a monster.

When we walked back into the courtroom on Friday, the air was entirely different. The State was satisfied, and Judge Cooley looked at Tom not as a criminal, but as a survivor.

The judge turned her sharp gaze to the defense table...

I'm sorry, I need a break. I'm going to ask Frank to take it from here. It was a rough ride, not gonna lie.

"Yeah, I got you, Jerry," I mutter, letting a slight, defensive scowl slip across my face.

I may have looked a little miffed when Jerry asked me to take over. I know I did, I could see the hurt in his eyes. I'll apologize to him later. I meant no disrespect. This is just all a little tough on me, too.

As I lean my head back, my mind starts to ask itself some questions. How did we make it to this point? Why am I sitting in a courtroom watching my best friend's life hang by a legal thread? But the question haunting me most is, "What strange force is at play here?" Tom killed a woman; that much is true. The woman he killed was no better than any of the countless targets that we took out in Afghanistan. We walked away clean then, but he won't be so lucky this time—and that's because he's choosing not to be. Maybe luck is the wrong word. Maybe the bitch is his lucky break this time.

I know what Tom is trying to do, and I wish I could hate him for it, but the truth is, I love him more. Not the sappy kind of "give me a kiss" love. I'm talking about the kind of love between two brothers who have had to depend on each other through the muck of a hell they had nothing to do with. I hate pride. I think it kills people. But I am proud of my brother right now.



Let me share the huddle talk with you. Oh, by the way—I learned a brand-new legal word today: hearsay. It basically means third-person information. It's a cool word, so I'm using it.

According to the hearsay, the counseling went something like this:

"Tom, if you plead guilty without a trial, you are going to have to serve time. You need to understand the stakes here. This isn't a good time for you to play the martyr. If you think that just because I am a public defender I am going to let you hang out to dry, you are wrong. I believe your case is worthy of a fight. I will put up that fight, but you can't be a quitter if I am going to go to bat for you."

"Yeah, bruh, I get it. And I appreciate you, I really do. But let me tell you how I see it. I'm guilty, and not just of this. I've done a lot of shitty things because that's what I always get from the world. Shit. But that's been changing. I've been running since I was a kid, and I can't do it no more, bruh. You get what I'm saying?"

"I know something today that I didn't think I'd ever know. I know I have friends who give a damn about me. I'm tired of crying, dude. I'm too old for this shit. If they leave me out here now, I'm gonna fuck it up. It's what I do. It's the only thing I'm good at, man. You tell the judge that if you want. Tell her whatever you want. But I need a break. I need a place to think and straighten my ass out. Shit. You know what I mean. No, you probably don't get that one. Point is, bruh, if they don't lock me up, I'm a dead man."

Mr. Collins stared at him for a long beat.

"I'm going to fight like hell for you, Tom. You are doing the honorable thing. Now sit back and watch what a no-good, bottom-of-the-bucket public defender can actually accomplish when he's pissed off."

Some people think they're owed respect. Most of those people can't help it because they are complete dumbasses. Some people are handed respect on a silver platter just because of some fancy title they were given. Like politicians. More dumbasses. But there are a few people out there who earn it. So, from here on out, I am officially calling Tom's lawyer Mr. Collins instead of dumbass. It's the least I can do after what he did.

That man fought for Tom like a rabid dog. I swear to you, he came back from the prosecutor's office with ten different garbage offers and told Tom not to sign a single one. He wore the State's legal system down to the ground. But the facts were on his side. Especially the shit at the end. Who knew? It didn't take any time for the cops to call the dogs off of Tom. I guess that ol' bitch really made a mess of things. Poor thing. Not.

After the agonizing legal back-and-forth and that final, breathless forty-eight-hour wait, we were finally back in the courtroom. Same judge. Same heavy air. Same everything.

"Both parties are in agreement?"

Nods from all sides.

"Very well." The judge looks directly at my boy. "Mr. Clark, do you understand and agree to the terms of your plea agreement?"

Tom stands up straight, clearing his throat. "Yes, ma'am. I mean... Your Honor."

"Ma'am is perfectly fine," she says softly.

I swear to fucking God, she actually smiled at him right then. A real, good smile. The second I saw that look cross her face, I knew deep in my gut that everything was going to be OK. I knew it even before she struck her gavel after she delivered the final decree:

"This case is hereby adjudicated. The court finds Mr. Clark guilty of the charge of manslaughter, and orders him remanded to the Florida Department of Corrections for a period of not less than twenty-four months and not more than thirty-six months. This court fully agrees to the mitigating medical circumstances as described in the plea agreement."

Then Judge Annise R. Cooley looked directly into my boy's eyes, and I swear to Jesus she had to re-tuck her wings before speaking.

"Mr. Clark, what you have presented to this court—and to me—can only be described as brave, honorable, and most importantly, healing. I will be monitoring your progress.

"I am ordering the Department of Corrections to immediately place you in the state's most intensive drug-rehabilitation program as a mandatory part of your

confinement. Do well, and I will personally advocate for your release when that twenty-fourth hard-earned month comes around. Dishonor my faith in you, however, and I will see to it that you serve the full thirty-six. You have forty-eight hours to report to...”

She took a slow, heavy breath and turned to her clerk. “Let’s take a brief recess, Jill.”

She stood up from her chair, adjusted her black robes—and her wings—one last time, and disappeared through a thick steel door behind the bench.

Just like that, my best friend in the world was saved by the system I have spent my entire life hating.

That is my official hearsay, and I am sticking to it.

IP of D.J. TRUST

NOVEMBER 2023

JOE'S PLACE

I'm taking over again, folks. David here. Let me fill you in on what's been going on.

I was thinking about what Joe was going through, and how shaky his ground had become. He had been cruising on autopilot for years, oblivious to the fact that he was heading straight toward a total personal and professional collapse. He was so sure that Tom's survival rested completely on his shoulders that he'd resigned himself to going down with the ship. He found the idea noble. But that's what happens when stress becomes so overwhelming that common sense is thrown overboard. He was acting like a captain tying himself to the mast of a boat that wasn't even taking on water.

He finally took my advice and quit his job at the dialysis clinic. He'd already admitted to me that he was on the verge of discovery—an ending that would result in his career dying with no hope of resurrection. Going broke and killing his friends with free drugs was a dead-end street. He appreciated the logic.

Since I was renting and Joe owned his place outright, we figured the wisest choice was for me to move in with him. It was pure mathematics, not a lesbian thing. I know, I dig a lot. It's only because my best friends have always been lesbians.

Living together gave Joe and me a chance to get used to each other's bad habits—you know, the things that have a tendency to annoy a man to an early grave. He gave me few reasons to take pause. Nothing unbearable. He left the cap off the toothpaste and turned the coffee maker off before I got my fill of caffeine, but I could get used to lukewarm, I guess. Hell, I might even give the iced option a chance, even if it seems backward.

I found out that he doesn't like creases in his jeans, so I started pressing them flat. Everything is finding its own equilibrium. We slowed down on the drugs, but honestly, I'm not sure I want to give them up completely. People don't use them because they're no fun. It's the aftermath of a lack of restraint that ruins the fun. I'm not ready to give up all my bad habits yet. Neither is Joe.

I know my friends' lives can be difficult for the average reader to believe, but I promise you such lives exist. That said, our version of events is unusual. Most people in our position don't have a system to lean on. I don't mean just Joe and me. I mean the five of us. Things seem to have gone sideways at the moment, only because they have. We just have to take things one day at a time and see where we can take them. Life goes on, whether we want it to or not.

I can't speak for the others. I know what they tell me, but I can't know what they are telling themselves. I'll leave their confessions to them. What I will tell you, though, is just what I know to be true.

The four young men whose lives I interrupted have their faults. I don't think they—or I, for that matter—were given a choice. We have all come a long way from our childhoods. None of them were easy. I am most surprised by the irony of truth. What I mean to say is that's what I believe these men are dealing out right now. Truth. Addiction is a monster that builds its own walls. Those walls almost always lead to lies, manipulation, and disappointment. It's easy to judge us from the outside of the fortress, but the inside has one purpose: protection. When a man finds he is constantly in need of that protection, he will do anything to preserve the barrier between himself and those who seem to be out to get him.

Don't turn this into a gay thing or a drug thing. Those external elements, once properly set aside, cannot obscure the core truth of what we built. It's possible that Joe and I have found what almost everyone wants and needs: a safe harbor where ideas, opinions, and fears are safe to discuss without fear of ridicule or abandonment. That's what makes us lucky. Gay or not. Addict or not.

OK. I am done preaching. Now let me tell you about how the shit hit the fan. And let me tell you one more thing—we are going to need a significantly bigger fan for this one.



We hadn't heard a single word from Frank in a couple of days, which is always a dangerous metric. Joe finally picked up his phone and dialed the number.

"Frank? What's going on, man?" Joe asked, his eyes immediately narrowing as he listened to the line. "You've been incredibly quiet lately. I mean... quieter than usual. Is everything all right over there?"

"Yeah, man," Frank's voice drifted through the receiver, thick and dangerously slurred. "Just... celebrating for Tom, you know? He took it pretty easy, didn't he? Looks like I might still be around when he comes home. Gets out... I mean. Yeah, gets out."

I watched as Joe's posture went completely rigid.

"Yeah, Frank. I agree. He got a good deal. Real good, buddy."

Joe began to sweat as his pulse quickened and his breath shallowed.

But you sound funny. What's going on? Are you home, or out dicking down some of your other friends?

"I'm home, man. I'm taking a little break from my PT."

"Are you sure you're OK?"

"Well," Frank mumbled, his words blending into one long string of syllables, "I could definitely use some company right about now, you know?"

"That's cool. Unlock your front door, Frank," Joe said, in a calm tone completely at odds with the expression on his face. "I'll be over in a bit."



Joe slammed the phone down and whirled around. "David!"

"Yo!"

"Grab a jacket. Now. We're going to Frank's."

"Gotcha. On it," I said. "What's wrong? What are we doing?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Joe said, his hands trembling as he grabbed his medical satchel from the coat closet.

"Call Jerry on the way. Hurry up, David. I mean it."

"I'm coming! I had to wipe my ass, Joe. I'm ready, let's go."

"Wash your damn hands first!"

"Damn, Joe. Way to call me out."

I did as I was told. It had become evident that now was a time to follow direction, not ask questions. A reversal of roles for me.

"All right, let's move."

I shut the water off and bolted for the door right behind him.

"You didn't even give me time to dry my hands, Joey."

"Let's go, use your damn pants."

As instructed, I phoned Jerry, but I had no idea what to say.

"Put him on speakerphone!" Joe shouted over the roar of the engine, throwing the car into reverse. "On speaker right now, David!"

"I'm here," Jerry's voice came through the car speakers. "What the hell is wrong? Why are you screaming, Joe?"

Joe calmed down a hair, but not much.

"You have four minutes, Jerry. Be ready, outside. Waiting. I'll fill you in when I get there. I will be pulling up to your curb in exactly four minutes and forty-one seconds, Jerry. Be standing outside and ready to move."

"What should I wear?"

Joe didn't let him finish. He simply hit the disconnect button on the steering wheel.

"Something is wrong with Frank. His voice. Not right. I think he's playing Russian roulette with the fentanyl again. If he is, he's in trouble. He doesn't know when to stop. He can control the boy and the percs, but..."

I caught a glimpse of the speedometer.

"Joe, why don't you let me take over driving duties after we collect Jerry?"

"No, you drive too slow," he snapped.

"That's my point, Joe. One-ten in a 45 is a tad conspicuous."

Jerry was waiting outside, ready to go, when we pulled up. Joe let me take the wheel, giving in to logic, and we were on our way.

"What the hell is going on, Joe?"

"Aw, shit. Hurry, Papi, can't you drive any faster?"

I think Jerry regretted the prodding when I took the next turn at 50, causing him to whack his head on the window. He kept quiet about it.

As Jerry had requested, the door was unlocked. We didn't knock. It seemed to be a developing habit.

Joe and I took in the scene with breakneck speed. Jerry was still catching up, but he was only a few seconds behind us.

Frank was slumped on the edge of the mattress. He looked up at us, his eyes glassy, pin-pricked, and entirely vacant. "Hi, studs," he whispered.

We watched his thumb hit the end of its road. The plunger was pushed. Frank was dead before we could reach him.

"He promised!"

I think it was Joey—might have been me—who yelled it.

Joe took over as his training kicked in. When I look back on the moment, I will probably admire his control. Right now, though, the situation was a matter of life and death. Ruminating would have to wait.

"David! In my satchel—Narcan. Three of them. Bring them all right now!" Joe roared, already by Frank's side, checking for a pulse and respirations. "Jerry! Look in the top drawer of his desk. More Narcan. NOW!"

"Anytime, David. Good, tear open the packages, and hand me the pumps when I tell you to."

Joe led Jerry and me through our first experience with Narcan. I hope I never have to use my newly learned skill again. Joe had already turned Frank on his side and was slapping him on the back and face. The foam stopped coming out of his mouth, and I saw his chest rise. Then he opened his eyes.

It took four doses, but we finally got him back. His first words were, "You're not naked yet?"

That's when Joe slapped his face one more time, I guess for good measure. It's a good thing it was him and not me. I wanted to use my fist.

He was confused for a while after coming out from wherever he had disappeared to. He didn't say much for the next couple of hours after Jerry calmly explained what happened.

"You fucking retarded, stupid, selfish, son-of-a-bitch piece of fucking shit! You were a dead asshole."

After his unusually “clinical” explanation, Jerry went outside to have a cigarette.

“What’s this? How...”

By now, Joe was sitting in one of Frank’s chairs. Tapping his finger on the table next to him. He remained silent, other than that haunting tap, tap, tap.

I explained what happened as best I could, not sure how much of what I was saying was being understood, or even heard.

Joey would tell me later about the thoughts running through his mind as he tapped away the minutes. He was digesting the realization that his money likely bought the drugs that almost, but for the grace of God, killed another of his friends. He and Frank were the same age on paper, but my Joey had just aged fifteen years in the turn of ten minutes’ worth of taps.

IP of D.J. COURAGEOUS

NOVEMBER 2023

Hey. It's Frank. I'm really sorry for letting you guys down. I feel a need to explain myself. Please don't mistake this for an apology or a reach for your pity. Sometimes what you see is what you get. With me, that's pretty much always. I did what I did on purpose. I knew what I was doing, and I knew the risks.

The truth is, I just wanted one more ride with the silver lady. Funny how often I convince myself it's not the last one. Not funny.

Joe finally started talking to me again over breakfast. The things he said weren't exactly friendly. He treated me like a child—tried to make me feel guilty, I guess. After he wore me down to the point where I was ready to turn and leave, that's when he said how sorry he was.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't threaten to leave, or even make like I was going to. I just thought about it.

If he thinks I'm going to let him take the fall for my stupidity, though, he's fucking nuts.

On the ride to Bay Pines, David called me a faucet. A couple of times, really. At first, I just passed it off as Alzheimer's or something. When I finally took the bait, just to shut him up, he explained himself. He was acting a little smug, but I listened. I had nothing better to do.

"Yo, chief. Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Oh, Frank, I'm so happy you asked. Think about it. What does a faucet do? You turn it on, and the water flows out, right? What are you supposed to do to the faucet when it's really cold outside?"

"You leave them running."

"Why?"

"So the pipes don't break."

David has a really nice car.

I remember quite a bit of what went on after I came to. I remember I was humiliated and pissed off. Mostly pissed off.

I remember Joe's voice. I couldn't look at him. I knew better from the way his voice was shaking. He was barking out orders, like he was on some TV hospital drama.

"Jerry, would you take the mop bucket to the bathroom and rinse it out real good, please? Bring it back, about half full, with warm water. And bring a bottle of shampoo."

"David, in that closet there, bring me some towels and a washcloth, please."

"Do what I tell you, Frank. Don't argue, just do it. Or I'll have to kill you again."

I did what I was told. I didn't overthink it or complain. I surrendered my pride to three guys who were determined to teach me a lesson.

Joe gave me a towel bath. He wiped up my face. My pits. Even my feet and my junk. He took his time, but he never said another word to me. He didn't need to; Jerry was there holding a bottle of shampoo in his hands. I think if I had argued, he would have beaten me to death with it.

David was like me. He just did what he was told. I felt exposed—like a baby at the fire station, I guess. It was nice. But I was still pissed off.

When Joe was done, he ordered Jerry to grab some of my clothes. Two of everything, he said. Except shoes. I got dressed, as instructed. Joe told me to put some deodorant on. I made a face.

"David, put some deodorant on his pits."

"No, David, I got it. Jesus, Joe."

That was when his shoulders and his face relaxed a little. I knew then that Joe would forgive me. That's what he does.

The ride to Joe's place was peaceful because no one said a word.

Once inside, Joe finally spoke to me again.

"You promised. But I know it's not that easy. But I still hate you."

They were the nicest words anyone ever said to me.

We ate. I crashed. It was after ten the next morning when I finally woke up. I wanted coffee, so I made my way to the kitchen. Joe and Jerry were shootin' the shit. They didn't bother hushing when I joined them.

"You hungry?" Joe asked.

"I could eat."

We ate; they talked. I listened.

About ten minutes later, David came in from washing his car.

"I called the crisis line. You're expected at Bay Pines this morning."

"I don't think I'm ready for all that."

Oops. Joe's pissed again.

"I have been your fucking friend, Frank! Jerry has been your friend! David wants to be your friend; he's trying to help. Look how you pay him back! Is this how you're going to treat this? Pretend it didn't happen? Everything's fine, just fine, right, Frank?"

"Go take a shower and get ready to go with David, or pack your shit and leave. And don't come back."

I wasn't pissed anymore. I figured it out.

"Do you have an extra toothbrush? My teeth feel gritty."

I am worthy.

IP of D.J. Sellers

LOVE

Bay Pines was pretty cool. They kept me in the inpatient wing, where the doors only unlock from the outside, if you get what I mean. It was a few weeks before my resentment started to wind down. More embarrassment filled the empty spaces.

I agreed to eight weeks at RTP. That's where we get to go when they trust us enough not to run. It's like basic training with prettier drill sergeants.

My shrink and my social worker both want me to go to Tennessee for another eight weeks. I think I will. But I wonder what the hell I'm gonna do in Hicksville. I know one thing I won't be doing.

The shrink thinks I'll benefit from a more focused treatment program. They tell me there's one up there that breaks down the reasons for using in a more "foundational" way.

There's another program that's even more intense, but I couldn't get into it. No room at the inn. They tried to send Tom there. I guess there are a lot of vets hiding from their past.

When they asked me if I would take a chance on Tennessee, I just thought about what Joe would say if they were asking him. So I said "yes."

I looked up and said to Mr. Wayne, "How long a walk is it?"

"Your friend David is on his way to pick you up. I understand he's driving you. Save those boots you got there."

Old people love to drive.

THE TENNESSEE RUN

The ride to Tennessee is going incredibly well. Joe is riding along. He and David cut up a lot. They act like they're on their honeymoon or something. I just sit back and watch sometimes. Then Joe always fucks up the vibe with,

"Everything OK back there? You're awfully quiet."

"No shit, Sherlock, I can't get a word in edgewise, Mom."

David almost drove off the road. I felt kinda bad, but he's a good driver. Slow, though. They must be making bank or something. They pulled up in another Mercedes. This one's a lot roomier. Thank God. Riding in the trunk of David's SL would be fucked up.

"Yo, Dave, what's with the ride? Where's your SL?"

Joe answered, because David's smug ass is too phat to talk out of.

"It's my birthday present. My ol' man thinks I should have nice toys."

"Shit! Look at who's ballin' now?"

Joe seems older now. More like David. I like the way they talk to each other.

Oh yeah... I almost forgot. I did a lot of crying, too. Sometimes I didn't even know why. But it didn't hurt, so what the hell.

We finally made it to Mountain Home. Johnson City, Tennessee. It's fucking beautiful.

"It's really nice here, guys. I think I might like it."

"Can I say something to you, Frank? Something you might not be ready to hear, but I need to say."

"Yeah, Dave. Shoot."

"Joe and I have been talking about you behind your back. We may not be the best role models when you get done doing what you need to do. I'm sorry for that. That's what makes us so grateful to you. You're willing to do what's best for yourself, despite what the world has thrown at you. At all of us.

"This is for you and you only. When you come home—and we really hope you will—we promise to do everything in our power to help you on whatever journey you choose, so long as it leads to more time with you, not less. Consider yourself loved by both of us. We

wouldn't be here if we didn't, and you know that. You're not stupid, and I know how much you hate sentimentality, because we share that trait.

"Joe, did you want to say something?"

"Yeah, thanks, butter-butt."

"Jesus, dudes!" Frank exclaimed.

Joe continues, "We're looking for a place in Ocala. We've decided to move out of Pinellas. You know, country living and all that."

Joe's doing his best not to tear up.

"Anyway, Francis, we're looking for a place that has enough room for five. So if you do want to come back, we'll make sure you have a roof over your head and a safe place to start. And if we are still using, we will never use it in front of you. Cool?"

"That's straight. I'd better get in there. I'm already ten minutes late. Love you, guys."

Bye, Frank.

IP of D.J.

DAVID

APRIL 2024

Twelve weeks after I dropped him off at Mountain Home, I was back to collect my prize. The look on Frank's face when he saw me standing there, waiting, made the whole exercise worthwhile. In a flash, I heard everything God was trying to tell me. Commitments are contrived. In His world, honor is the true measure of a man's value. I am not a religious man, but I had just received the grace of clarity that had eluded me for forty-two years. It only took one glance.

I stowed Frank's bags in the trunk before I even greeted him.

"My, my. Would you look at you. What a man you've become."

The hug seemed to come from nowhere. Frank is a lot of things. Two of those things, I just realized, are fast

and strong. I couldn't breathe for a minute. He didn't seem to be embarrassed. And that's OK. I was embarrassed enough for both of us.

As we were pulling out of the parking lot, the interrogation began.

"How's Jerry? What's Joe up to? How's work?"

"Joe and I moved to Ocala. I opened my own funeral home. Jerry is getting ready to go to seminary in Argentina."

He digested all the news from home, looking out the window as he mulled it over.

"How's Tom?"

"Tom's Tom," I said. "Tom's good. Real good."

"Hey, I'm hungry, you?"

"No, Paw, I just ate."

"Well, I'm going to stop somewhere and get a bite. You want a shake or something?"

"Hell yeah."

As we were waiting for our food in the drive-through, I asked about Frank's status.

"This might seem an odd question, Frank. Do you have a driver's license?"

"Why? Did they cancel yours because of age restrictions?"

"No, bitch. Because it would be nice if you could take the first shift. I could use a break."

"Wait. You want me to drive? I've never driven a car like this. But, hell yeah."

"It's just like other cars. Just keep it under 160, OK?"

I caught him up on the comings and goings of the clan. He asked me why we kept so much from him.

"That's need-to-know, Frank. You didn't need to know."

"How far is Bath?"

"It's about ten hours. Five plus five equals ten, if my math holds up. Wake me in five."

I don't remember much after that. I was out cold pretty quick.



The old man slept like a corpse through my tunes and three fuel stops.

I had to prod him a little to wake him up.

"Paw? Paw?" I grunted, trying to sound countrified.

David blinked, his head jerked up as he came to.

"Oh... hey, sonny. Where the hell are we?"

"Beautiful downtown Bath," I came back.

It was where I would spend my next six months.

"You gotta be shitting me."

David popped the lock and stepped out into the crisp, cold mountain air.

"You are definitely going to need a much heavier jacket, kid."

Old men...

AMEN

JOE

Hi, it's Joe again. Coming at you directly from 123 Alone Avenue. Just kidding. No... I mean, I am Joe, but I am definitely not alone. Bad joke. Let me try this again.

To be honest, I am feeling a little cynical today. A bit ungrateful, even.

David is delivering Frank to his third rehab center in five months. They are on their way to the Finger Lakes, so it'll be a while before Dave's back—and Frank too, for that matter. Six more months. Then he should be home again.

We moved to Ocala to get away from temptation, routine, and high prices. It's only by sheer coincidence that Tom is only ten minutes away. We don't see much of Jerry—not because he doesn't like us anymore; he's just

really busy with his studies. He's going to make a helluva good priest.

I miss David already. It's ironic, don't you think? The guy I looked to, because he was a meth-head, to get me through a rough patch has caused me to clean my ass up. He fell into my life twice for all the wrong reasons, and now he is my best friend. My anchor.

I never really knew what love was. Now I do.

Jerry engaged me in some Bible study the other day. I wanted to know about the whole gay angle. I think I may have come off the wrong way, because he pulled a Jerryism on me.

"Joe, that's a hard one to answer, even for a would-be priest. All I can say is that the Bible doesn't condone it at all. But keep in mind that there are parts of it you probably don't know about. It's more complicated than the Church wants you to believe. Get back to me after they give me my collar. I'll let you in on a little secret, though—if God hates queers, there are an awful lot of priests wasting their lives."

I haven't made peace with God yet. I'm not clean, either. Future considerations. My plate is pretty full right now. In a good way.

I don't think David would be where he is without me, either. This whole rebalancing hasn't been a one-way road. I've noticed him changing right along with the rest of us. We've all grown a little bit older.

Joe.



Three months down, three to go. I don't really think about getting high anymore. Except, of course, when I notice my juicy veins. And when the hot dude from the next room walks by. Oh, and when they're serving lettuce in the cafeteria. The urges don't hang on too much anymore, though. I guess that's the point of the two hundred grand you're spending on my repair bill.

I'm glad Dave and Joe decided to move to Ocala. It's where a lot of dirty old people hang out to add to their STI scorecards. No, seriously, look it up.

Speaking of old men, I guess I'm turning into one myself. One of my buddies told me I should check out a bop by George Michael. I looked him up. I think dude may have figured me out. Anyway, at first I was kind of offended, but after giving it a listen, I decided it was chill. I wanted to be sure I really liked it, so I listened to it eight times, then I found my buddy and told him, "Thank you."

I do miss my squad. It'll take some time to make up for the shit I've pulled on them, but I have plenty of time now.

Frank



Check it out.

"Mary, full of grace, Mary, full of grace, Hail, Hail, the Lord. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed, Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Thy womb, Jesus. Hail Mary! Hail Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners, Pray, pray for us; Pray, pray for us sinners, Now and at the hour of our death, The hour of our death, The hour of our death, The hour of our death, Hail Mary."

Now, read this.

"Ave Maria, Gratia plena, Maria, gratia plena, Maria, gratia plena, Ave, ave dominus, Dominus tecum, Benedicta tu in mulieribus, Et benedictus, Et benedictus fructus ventris, Ventris tuae, Jesus, Ave Maria, Ave Maria, Mater Dei, Ora pro nobis peccatoribus, Ora pro nobis, Ora, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, Nunc et in hora mortis, Et in hora mortis nostrae, Et in hora mortis nostrae, Et in hora mortis nostrae, Ave Maria."

They are both the same prayer, in English and Latin. Do you see how much more beautiful it is when it's in Latin?

That's what my mentor, Father Antonio, showed me today.

"You see, Jerry, the prayers are the same. It's like when you look in the mirror and only see yourself as inadequate, not caring that everyone else is telling you

they love you. Don't work on perfecting what you are; work to perfect who you are."

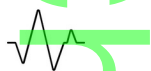
Now, when I see a rainbow, I see white instead of black.

If you think I'm trying to sell you my perfect restoration because of a hit of DMT, think again. I am not the rainbow-colored unicorn you think I am.

What I'm becoming is a man who no longer believes in unicorns.

Last week I had a dream. In it, I saw Terry and Jesus chillin' out in the garden. They were watching me. They never spoke a word. They just smiled, gave each other a high-five, and then drifted away like a cloud taking its last breath.

Jerry



So, my time is getting short.

Not like that, asshole. Three months left in lock-up. I'm new now.

Judge Cooley kept her promise. She didn't come to this meeting, but here's how I remember it:

They took me to an ugly little room, just like all the rooms in this place. The air conditioning was a joke. I

kept my hands pressed to my knees to keep them from shaking.

Officer Vance didn't even look up. She just kept typing, ignoring me almost. When she finally turned around, I almost belted out a laugh. Her glasses were so thick it looked like her eyes were popping out.

"Clark, Tomas. DC Number 3-6-9-3-8-4. Sit down, let me pull your jacket."

I kept quiet. I hadn't been spoken to. Vance clicked her mouse. She stopped typing and stared at the screen. She looked a little constipated.

"Well, ain't you a weird one."

My throat went dry, like back in high school wrestling.

"Ma'am? Is there a problem with my gain-time?"

"Shut up, Clark, I'm reading."

She turned and looked at me like an eight-legged spider.

"Your file came down from Pinellas County with a standard thirty-six-month tick. But I've got an amended sentencing order here signed by a Judge Annise R. Cooley. Signed on day fifty-nine of your post-trial window. Do you know how rare this is? Judges don't do paperwork unless they have to. This Cooley woman filed a Rule 3.800 mitigation order. She slashed your state time down to twenty-four months."

She leaned back in her chair.

"She wrote a specific addendum here stating your 'post-sentence cooperation' warranted an immediate correction of the sentencing math. What did you do, rat on the governor?"

"No, ma'am. I'm just a nice guy, I guess."

Vance let out a sharp snort and faced the green screen again.

"Well, Judge Cooley just handed you a lottery ticket. Let's look at the new math. Florida law says you serve eighty-five percent, period. On a twenty-four-month stretch, that's twenty point four months."

She seemed miffed, tapping her pen on the monitor like it shit the bed or something.

"You already did three months in the Pinellas County Jail waiting for transport. I am logging your credit for time served right... now."

She hit the Enter key with her thumb. It felt like a starter pistol going off in my chest.

"That drops your remaining time to seventeen months and change. Which means, Clark, you are no longer a long-timer. This isn't just an intake interview anymore. This is officially your conditional-release evaluation."

She yanked open her top drawer, pulled out a bright pink document, and slid it across the desk.

"Because of the judge's break, your tentative release date just pulled up fast. Sign the bottom of this form. It states you understand that if you get a single disciplinary

report—if you fight, if you fail a urinalysis, if you look at a guard wrong—Judge Cooley’s little gift goes in the trash, and we recalculate you back to the max. Understand?”

I stared at the pink paper. For the first time in three months, my fingers stopped shaking. I reached out and grabbed the cheap plastic pen tethered to her desk.

“I understand completely, Officer Vance.”

Tomas



Hey, guys. David here. I am feeling great, thanks.

Amen