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Junk Food

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
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Master of Fine Arts

in

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by

Andrew Louis Holt

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Somebody could walk into this room and say your life is on fire.

– Paul Simon, “Crazy Love, Vol. II”

CHAPTER ONE (RAFAEL)

In the summers, nobody came to La Segunda Vida Restaurant. The heat kept the usual tourist crowd in their distant Northern states, and the Tampa Bay locals stayed home under shaded porches, listening to mosquitoes tap against the screens. Their sweat mixed with the stewing bay to crust every surface with a paper-thin layer of salt.

The three-man restaurant staff spent the summers as the only human presence on Sunken Island. They'd watch the flat mangrove harbor, its surface upset only when the occasional mullet jumped insanely from the water. Every hour, even on the slowest days, the ferry from Clearwater Beach pulled empty up to the dock, Captain Sam honked the horn once and tipped his hat to the workers, and the ferry rumbled free from the slot, the engines grinding against the weight of the old metal hull. Each time, only Rafael the waiter bothered to wave back.

This morning, Rafael sat at a dirty plastic table on the dining porch with Juan the cook, eating frozen empanadas they hadn't bothered to re-heat. The frozen meat had to be sucked like a spicy Jolly Rancher, but the icy pastry crust offered a satisfying crunch. Rafael rolled an unlit cigarette back and forth in his fingers with athletic dexterity left over from his early days as a jai alai player, back in Orlando.

Rafael rarely thought about his youth, and when he did, it was in the summer. That time flickered across damaged film. There had been tragedies, of course, and mistakes, some miraculous enough that when he let himself remember too much, his vision would darken at the edges. Breathing would become difficult, and whatever minute restaurant task he was performing would become suddenly impossible. In this

way, over his many years working at the restaurant, his past had become what he imagined to be a Great Black Thing, waiting for the slightest lapse in vigilance.

Many years ago, immediately following his hasty departure from Orlando by helicopter among armed guards, he'd struggled to learn his new service industry life on Sunken Island. At first, the waitering had proven too difficult for his oversized hands. There had been enough dropped plates to constitute a firing from any restaurant that took performance into account. Luckily, the owner Bud Christensen had other more pressing problems, among them keeping Rafael safe and secluded in Clearwater. For him, this restaurant served only to employ Rafael, or in a more practical sense, imprison him. Bud was not only rich, but African-dictator wealthy – the biggest real estate mogul in Orlando. Thinking of him that way didn't quite cover it, though, the same way the President outsized his desk in the Oval Office. Rafael had never been able to imagine Bud leaning over blueprints, approving land purchases, picking out hotel room bathroom fixtures. Bud worked in real estate the way Clark Kent worked in the newspaper industry, the way Rafael waited tables: in order to wallpaper over his own series of Great Black Things, whose magnitude Rafael could probably never fathom.

Rafael adjusted to his task in the restaurant over the years, embracing his disguise until it stopped being a disguise at all. He took on the work in the same way he'd attacked the game of jai alai as a younger man. The winter tourist rushes at La Segunda Vida Restaurant slowly turned from stressful to therapeutic. Each correctly-memorized order built up neatly in his mind. Each soapy dish shone up at him, clean and white. The seabreeze air coming in across the porch tasted of toasted salt. On winter nights, Rafael

slept numbly in his tiny apartment in Clearwater Beach. Only on scorching summer days, when the customers disappeared this way, did Rafael start to grow restless. Most summers he picked up this smoking habit. Most winters he managed to quit.

Rafael lit another cigarette. Drake, the young white busboy who worked here in the summers, snoozed in the corner. His thick glasses fogged in the humidity. Juan popped in a frozen chunk of empanada, pressing a tumor sized lump into his cheek.

“My abuelita used to make these from scratch.” His lips squeaked as he sucked. “Used to try and eat them before they cooled, burned my mouth real bad.”

“Funny.”

“Did your grandmother ever cook?”

“Never met her. She’s back in Cuba, I guess.”

Juan ran his palm over his wet scalp. He’d shaved his head a couple months ago, probably to manage the heat, but ended up with a badly sunburned crown to show for the trouble. Since then his hair had begun to grow again, short and knotted thick. “That’s a shame not to know your family. I miss mine like hell.”

“I’ll bet you have a big family.” Give or take a few years, Juan was about the age Rafael had been when Bud smuggled him from Orlando and out to the Gulf Coast. That would make him young enough to be Rafael’s son. Reckless enough, too, since he’d ended up here. Customers sometimes told them that they looked alike. Racist though that might have been, Rafael liked when they said that. “What town in Mexico?”

“I’ve told you, I’m from Santa Fe.” Juan became suddenly preoccupied with his fingernails. He never really tried to be convincing about Santa Fe. The answer always

sounded rehearsed. Rafael sat back to show that no prying was meant. Any time Juan talked about his childhood, there was no question he was talking about Mexico. Probably couldn't pick out Santa Fe on a map. But in his older years, Rafael had come to understand that Great Black Things were everywhere. Nobody lived without them, except those blessed by God from birth. For everyone else, life was a careful navigation around whirlpools of regret, punctuated with time spent wallowing in their depths.

*

Last night, restless after another slow day, Rafael had looked over the intercoastal waterway through his apartment window. A fake pirate ship motored by, lit with festival lights, music echoing into his window. Rafael wished for a moment that he could still be young and athletic, dancing with the girls on the deck, and that was just enough to pull him into memory. In a fit of panic, he took apart the rattling window unit air conditioner and put it back together, somehow managing to make its rattle worse. By the time the unit was running again, the apartment walls had begun to sweat. Rafael opened the other window for ventilation. Construction noise blew in with the breeze.

Next door, work crews were near completing a giant new resort that hulked over the Clearwater Beach motels. Its exterior had been painted a squint-inducing shade of pink. Construction cranes flanked each side. Almost every week in the last year since the tall metal cranes arrived, Rafael would overhear at least one white-faced beachgoer point at the metal towers and say *Cranes, the state bird of Florida* and laugh in that forced way that people do when they've paid a small fortune for vacation. But one night at the 7-11, a drunken old man with sand fleas in his beard had told that same joke directly to Rafael,

and he couldn't resist correcting him: the state bird was, in fact, the *mockingbird*. The old man burped and asked if he was fucking with him. Rafael told him that those cranes were actually killing the state bird and other creatures, too. The old man asked if he could bum a cigarette and a lighter, then shuffled through the doors, across the parking lot and into the dark street, one in each hand, cigarette still unlit.

The last few summers, Rafael had taken up studying environmental causes in his spare time, to keep his mind busy. Some nights he stayed up past three in the morning on his rickety old Gateway desktop computer, reading about the dying creatures of the Florida wilderness. His rage surprised him with its heat. Online environmental forums proved helpful for expressing these sentiments, as did the Xanax he bought from the beach bums. Soon he began to simplify his life in accordance with nature. He started cooking and eating bait shrimp from the shop next door. His faint memories of his mother's Santeria altar, which he used to find ridiculous, led him to a local shop where he bought the necessary miniature statues, offering plates, and divination supplies to arrange in an empty corner of his apartment. In a final grasp at purity, he sold his Toyota and bought a rusty old rowboat with black tar patches along the sides. His rare days off work were spent on the water, in the inlets where the mangroves blocked the buildings from view. There, listening to waves hiss through the roots, it wasn't so hard to imagine himself a more primal man, one who rose up guiltless from the mud.

The new resort encroached on his own territory as well. On the day Rafael had first moved here, that same lot held two wooden houses and an empty sand lot where children played stick ball on weekend mornings. Once, when his summer restlessness had

begun to take hold, he'd gone down and taken a few at-bats with them, until a whirring ball narrowly missed a young boy's head and Rafael had a sudden vision, flickering as if through a broken projector, of a young man's blood-covered face.

Now, looking at this pink hotel monstrosity and hearing the buzz saws mix with the air conditioner rattle, the Great Black Thing returned all at once, and there was no escaping the truth: his life had been wasted here, and he was now a middle-aged man. His poor mother had passed away alone without him. And for that one horrifying moment, there was no denying: twenty summers ago, back home in Orlando where he could never return, Rafael had killed a young man.

Wiping away tears, Rafael spent the rest of last night typing, deleting, and re-typing an online forum post about anti-environmental politicians and land developers. The bloody young man's face flickered back and forth with images of Bud Christensen in his mind while he drafted with one pointer finger:

Corrupt, that's what they are corrupt corrupt MONSTERS and off with there heads is what I say men should be killed like they killed innocent animals, drop a man in the SWAMP and see how long he lives on his own I mean lookat that governor LOOK at him next thing you know hes gonna make a waterpark outta the everglades but drop HIM in te everglades RIGHT NOW you think hed LIVE??? hed die in a second and hed deserve it, that's what he DESERVES

Eventually the handful of Xanax pills took their effect and he fell asleep slouched over his keyboard. He awoke before dawn this morning to row himself across the water to work, where he would wait out another summer day, praying for winter to save him.

Before Juan and Drake arrived, Rafael spent the pre-dawn hours singing unintelligible old chants that might bring blood to the mind of any stranger who overheard them. He sang the songs with no more mind than anyone might hum a tune that their mother sang while they were in the womb, but always the island listened. Some mornings, when there was enough breeze to cover his voice, his songs approached screaming. Without knowing the intent, nor the language, the strange armor-faced armadillos in the bushes might still surmise that Rafael was singing to some person other than himself, someone far away from this world, to whom each word had unshakeable meaning.

*

Now the afternoon sun had reached its peak in the sky. The dining porch extended from the wooden La Segunda Vida kitchen, the only structure on Sunken Island, which was otherwise covered with nature trails and sand-dune beaches. Prickly things filled the palmetto bushes, leaving the island as inhospitable as a prehistoric swamp. According to the nature pamphlets by the counter, that was the allure. Rafael had come to understand the hypocrisy of the manicured grass around the restaurant, the packed-sand pathways cutting through the woods. The ruins of Native American dwellings on the island did fascinate him, but they mostly sat spitting distance from bright green and yellow and red playgrounds for visiting children. Two of the signs misspelled the name of the Calusa Indian Tribe – *Callusa* and *Calussa*.

Rafael reached for the lukewarm bottle of rubbing alcohol between himself and Juan, splashed some onto a soggy paper towel. They hadn't spoken since he asked about the hometown in Mexico a half hour ago. Alcohol soothed his mosquito-bitten legs,

stinging the itch away. All surfaces burned with aggressive sunlight. Rafael's shirt hung wet and unbuttoned. He scratched at thick chest hairs above his undershirt. Beside him, Juan tinkered with the broken Gameboy that a tourist family had left last winter.

Now awake, Drake swatted at the seagulls perched along the railing. Most of his swats missed by a clear foot. Every few minutes, he stopped to clean his glasses before continuing. Each bird only hopped up into the air with a few lazy wing flaps and landed again. Their hoarse calls mocked him.

"Cut it out, boy. Leave them be." Rafael's cigarette burned between his teeth.

"Rats with wings," Drake sputtered, moving onward to the next bird. His eyes, distorted to cartoonish effect through thick bifocals, displayed manic rage.

Rafael looked out over the inlet. It wouldn't have been so unreasonable for him to find a slick rat climbing from the saltwater with mutant bat wings.

"Get those bastards," Juan said, pretending to control Drake with the Gameboy. "I love this level! Taken 'em down, that's right. Left hand, right hand, left, right, jump!"

Drake reared around and slapped the Gameboy from his hands. The battery cover skittered across the deck. One of the them rolled down between the wood slats. Drake blinked his huge eyes, looking a little surprised at himself.

"You piece of gringo shit!" Juan took hold of Drake's tie and pulled him over the table until his head hung backwards off the edge. Drake swung blindly above him. His face was purple with gathered blood.

"Cut the shit, both of you. The heat has driven you mad." Rafael flicked his cigarette. The ember landed on Juan's collar, sending him into neck-slapping frenzy. Back on his feet, Drake held his wrinkled tie like an injured limb.

*

Almost a year ago now, Bud Christensen had dropped off Juan for the new cook job early in the morning, before anyone but Rafael had arrived. Rafael had been singing and scrubbing the crust off some dirty pans that the old cook, Kevin, had left on the lawn. Kevin had been fired over the phone with no notice after closing time the night before, and took a few minutes to throw the kitchen supplies off the porch before storming out to the ferry. Why he'd decided to punish Rafael for his lost job was anybody's guess.

The crust on this particular pan took extra scrubbing, enough time for nearly three rounds of his mother's old Santeria chants. Rusty metal appliances resonated every note so clearly that the whole kitchen sang with him. As he rinsed the pan and moved onto the next one, a slick black speedboat appeared from the mangroves, reflecting the red sunrise glow. The top of Bud Christensen's head peeked above the wheel. Rafael hadn't seen him in years, but Bud wasn't hard to recognize. A tan young man dozed next to him, wearing an oversized white t-shirt around his skinny frame. Rafael wiped his hands and watched the speedboat rumble up to the dock next to his tar-patched johnboat. Even from so far away, the passenger boy had the vagabond look. The type of kid to wake up on the other side of the world and ask the nearest stranger what was for breakfast.

Apparently, Bud had fired Kevin on charges of "tardiness" in the workplace, which was bullshit, since the ferry never ran on time anyway. Drake had wondered aloud

how Bud could have known anything about how the restaurant operated in the first place, since he had never visited the place himself. *This is very unlike Mr. Christensen*, he had said. Drake was apparently the son of a distant family friend, which was probably how he'd gotten this regular summer job despite being nearly blind. They didn't need a busboy anyway. Clearly, the kid didn't know the first real thing about the man. Bud had his reasons, Rafael knew. My, oh my, did he always have his reasons.

Rafael watched the new vagabond kid unload a crate of books and picture frames from the hood compartment of Bud's speedboat. His eyes sagged something awful. Yawning, he lugged them down the dock and up the porch steps. He greeted Rafael with a slight nod before making his way into the kitchen, where he slid his crate onto a shelf, sat down in the folding chair, and kicked his legs kicked up over the countertop.

Bud wore his typical black suit without a tie, two buttons undone. Rafael hadn't seen him in twenty years. His once-thinning hair had disappeared completely, skin had gone a little pinker, but otherwise he looked surprisingly youthful considering his age. Probably he was pushing seventy. Only by the way he walked was it clear that he was very tired. He didn't look up at Rafael until they were only a few steps apart in the grass out front of the dining porch. Rafael glared down at his little bald head. Pearls of sweat gathered among the liver spots. Bud made a show of clearing his throat.

"His name is Juan."

"Kevin was never late, not once in ten years."

"Be nice. Juan is a good kid."

"Kevin always wore good clothes. Combed his hair. Kevin was reliable."

“That’s enough about Kevin.” Bud pointed a wrinkly thumb at his own chest.

“You’d best leave hiring decisions to the boss.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yes, well.” Bud laughed, shook his head. “How’ya holding up?”

“You know.”

“You’re managing alright, considering?”

Rafael crossed his arms and let the silence hang between them. Sounds of adjustment echoed from the kitchen. After a few moments, the Great Black Thing began slinking out from their shared past again, filling the hot morning air. Let the old man carry its weight for a change, Rafael thought. Let him suffer a little.

“I mean, all is good with your living situation?”

“Considering.”

“Yes, well...”

Bud adjusted his pants and made his way up the porch steps into the tiny kitchen, which looked normal in proportion to such a small man. Perhaps that was why Bud had chosen this building all those years ago when he was looking for a place to discard Rafael. He’d probably never thought about how Rafael would struggle to squeeze through the doorway, how the porch floorboards would sink under his steps. Doing his best to appear nonchalant, Rafael inched just close enough to the service window to hear Bud and Juan speaking. Bud cleared his throat.

“As always, you have my number, if you need anything.”

“You betcha, Bud.” Juan spoke with boyish slack. *I’m above all this*, he seemed to be saying. *I can go with the flow*. Rafael remembered being exactly the same way at first, and for that reason the truth was unmistakable: somehow Bud Christensen had ruined Juan’s life, too. Whatever this kid had done for Bud before he came here, it was the kind of thing that needed erasing. Maybe in a year or so Rafael could help him learn to manage himself, if he’d be willing to put in the work.

“This place will be a step down from what you’re used to, but you’ll be taken care of as long as you need. You know how your bank account works, but don’t be afraid to call with any questions. Schumacher will pick up, first ring, every time.” Bud snapped his fingers. “And don’t forget your bank PIN. You can’t apply for a new one without valid identification, and we both know that’d be its own problem.”

“No problems from me, Bud. You can take *that* to the bank.” Poor kid had no idea how pathetic he sounded, trying so desperately not to care.

“Yes, well.” From around the corner of the window, just out of sight, Rafael could imagine Bud squirming. “If you change your mind in the next few days, dial me up and we’ll take you back. No questions asked. We’ll miss you back at XS.”

“You should be tired of saying that by now.”

Bud’s sigh rattled. “You don’t know how tired I am.” His voice lowered to a discretionary whisper. “Listen up, alright. You just listen right the fuck up.”

Rafael moved closer to the service window, careful not to creak the floorboards. He could imagine Bud sinking down to one knee, taking on that world-weary set of facial wrinkles that told you he was having a rough time, too.

“You must be scared right now. It’s brave, starting your life over. You’re feeling raw, vulnerable, maybe a bit angry. I can appreciate that. What I want you to do is *hold onto that feeling*. See, I’m an old man now, and I can tell you: I don’t miss my young body, don’t miss old friends. I don’t even miss my family, tell you the truth. But goddamnit, what I wouldn’t do to feel afraid again. Just once before I die, to feel *scared*.”

Rafael turned around to see the sun rising over the windswept inlet, licking each ripple with dull orange. Say what you will, he thought. Evil or not, sometimes Bud had things figured about right. A few quiet moments later, Bud emerged from the kitchen to find Rafael standing at spitting distance. In one glance, he knew that all had been heard. Bud pulled two cigars from his pocket, cut both, and handed one to Rafael. They found a spot to sit near the edge of the porch and lit them. Not a word was exchanged, no sound between them but the morning crickets.

A half hour later, both cigars now shrunk to soggy butts, Bud rose from his chair.

“May we never meet again.”

Bud hobbled down the steps and made his feeble way out to the docks. The speedboat engines shook the air as he idled through the inlet. At the edge of the mangroves, Bud drifted by Sam on his first morning ferry run into Sunken Island, carrying Drake in the cockpit. Bud raised his thin arm to salute them before he disappeared behind the mangroves.

CHAPTER TWO (HANK)

Only one road traveled through Thirsk Mountain, running one long jagged cut through the deep green Tennessee mountainsides. The scattering of houses and old burned-up barns amounted to the community of Thirsk, which overlooked an empty holler stretching twenty miles out to the nearest real town, Elizabethton, where the residents would go for their gasoline and groceries. The mail here was delivered by a local boy in his late-nineties Toyota Corolla, the water came from private wells dug into mountain springs, and for discarding their trash, Thirskans drove to the trash compactor and paid Hank McCrayes one dollar per bag.

Hank spent most days leaning against the hulking compactor and waiting for cars to pull up into the driveway, drop their bags into the opening, and give him a few singles to add to the bundle he kept in the front pocket of his denim jacket. By the end of the day, the rubber band would barely hold them together. *An Irish man's bundle*, his father used to call the banded stack of one-dollar bills he'd bring back from the compactor at night. As a child, Hank hadn't been sure what he meant by that, and when he asked his father if they were Irish, his father chewed his cheek and shook his head. "We're what you call mutts, buddy." Now, a decade later, an *Irishman's bundle* only called to mind Hank's fantastical image of Ireland, centering itself on a stone Irish castle in a field of wet green grass. Atop the highest tower, a beautiful maiden wore a flowing dress tightened around her waist, pushing up her ample cleavage against her chin. Hank had turned twenty-five last week, but had still never had sex. Only kissed one girl. Being the owner and only worker at the compactor, he spent most of his time alone.

Things went this way: every night Hank would head back to his trailer, tapping on the steering wheel of his old Ford F-150. Once inside, he'd hang his denim jacket on the nail by the front door. On his way to the back room, he'd place the day's stack of dollar bills in the hallway closet, where identical stacks had reached knee height over the past year. Then would come the microwave dinner, the hours-long porn session in his computer room, then the collapse into sleep. Often the dreams and the porn would mix so completely that he couldn't tell one from the other.

Lately, he'd been watching his favorite porn film on repeat, having downloaded it onto the external hard drive he'd bought for two hundred singles at the Target in Johnson City. In this badly scripted (but well-produced) fantasy epic, *Elixir of Life*, a curse has spread throughout a rural community. To save his folk, an unlikely dwarven hero must spread a healing antidote to the innocents of the kingdom, who are invariably young women with gaudy tattoos and belly-button piercings. They'd always find the time to have elaborate sex with him in gratitude. Each night Hank would conduct the scenes with his palm until he'd spent himself into sleep. The morning would bring a sore dick and two runny eggs eaten straight from his only skillet. By an hour after sunrise he'd stand beside compactor again, in the spot where his feet had worn the mud down to stone.

*

Today the clouds had sunk early into the holler. Hank's newspaper soaked up the moisture so that his fingers smeared the ink. Few people in their twenties read newspapers anymore, but he'd come to enjoy his freedom from screens while at work. Besides, keeping his iPhone on his person would lead to impulsive porn binges and the

awkward erections that accompanied them. Before he knew any better, he'd be taking money from customers with the cross-legged shimmy of a pubescent teenager. Enough of those moments and Hank decided to sell off his smartphone, buy a burner for calls and texts, and order a daily subscription to the *Thirsk Mountain Pioneer*.

Lately, the articles had been growing more and more violent. Today's headline read *Memphis Man Attacks Portrait* above a photograph: a dank old bar with the tables and chairs upended, the house band instruments strewn across the stage. In the back center, the elevated black and white portrait of a man, his body slim-suited, guitar slung under one arm. There was a terrible hole where his head belonged. According to the article, an armed man in a lacrosse helmet had entered this bar in Memphis and fired an entire clip from an automatic rifle into a life-sized portrait of young Johnny Cash behind the stage. Witness reactions came in two types: those who thanked God that the man was only after the picture, and those who expressed outrage at the idea that such a music legend should be disrespected. The suspect in custody, who reminded nameless, had yelled *speak no more about giants* before opening fire. Hank wondered if there would be legal grounds to ask him what he meant.

Reading these articles, Hank would sometimes catch himself suspecting that the world was falling apart. Then, he would shame himself for thinking a thought so cliché in a Southern man. The signs on Baptist churches along Elizabethton Main Street changed every week, all to the same effect: *the end is near*, one of them would say, and across the street another would reply, *you know not the hour*, pastors all bidding for eternal passing souls. Only one sign never changed, advertising the gaudy church on the end of the street,

which happened to be the only Catholic house of worship in Carter County: *Worship the Lamb today, for tomorrow the Lion cometh.*

Once upon a time, Hank's father had pastored the most popular of these local churches. Benton McCrayes still stood at the pulpit less than a year ago, as a matter of fact, but Hank had begun to think in such language, *once upon a time*, because the phrase better summed up how far away those days were. Once upon a time, Hank lived in the attic apartment of the house he'd shared with his father since childhood. Once upon a time, a while before that, when Hank was only a small boy, the two of them had moved from South Chicago down to the woods of eastern Tennessee. Once upon a time, Hank had been what he now considered a normal boy.

What little Hank remembered of Chicago amounted to the smell of mildew and the feeling of cardboard moving boxes against his tiny child fingers – smooth with a grid of papery veins underneath. He remembered his mother having a round face with tiny blue eyes and baseball cheeks, but his father told him many times that his mother in fact had walnut sized hazel eyes. That she'd had no cheeks to speak of. According to various websites Hank had read between porn binges, childhood trauma could not only delete memories but also leave incomplete fragments behind. His father told him that his mother had been addicted to heroin, a habit she and his father had picked up together, and that in her selfishness she hadn't followed him back to the path of righteousness. Therefore, his mother had to be cast off, though it broke his heart to leave her. All of this his father had told young Hank through a taut paternal smile.

The earliest clear memory that Hank held all his own, that he didn't have to ask his father about, was his first sight of the Appalachian Mountains over the dash of the dank brown Plymouth they'd taken on the long drive from Chicago. Judging by how big everything had seemed, he couldn't have been more than a few years old. They'd left Chicago under the cover of night, and the sun had risen on them sometime during the drive. Hank vaguely remembered the shift from dark to light, chill to warm. Sometime during the drive, his father had explained that he'd purchased an old building to begin a Christian mission, and a local trash compactor that they could use to pay the bills. The source of the buying money never became clear, though in hindsight it couldn't have been legal. Back then, his father spoke of their future with the breathy emotion that he later used to describe salvation. Hank remembered standing on his toes in the passenger seat, palm against the dashboard, to get his first view of their new home. The way the dark green mountains rolled smoothly up and down like an unmade bed, little Hank had no trouble imagining that they were truly entering a different world.

At least, that was how he remembered it. As far as Hank could tell, that first sight of the smoky green mountainsides began his conscious life. In adulthood, he still recalled the moment often. The rest of his childhood before that had the golden sheen of the cornfields they must have crossed in the early hours of their journey. Noticing his son's reaction to the mountains, his father turned down the gospel radio and took his eyes off the road to look at his son, delivering a truth that he would repeat for many years afterward: *son, now and forever, we have never been to Chicago*. The words came out as if through molasses, with a new fake Southern accent that suited him surprisingly well.

We have never been to Chicago. We have never been to Chicago. By the time Hank reached adolescence, his own Southern accent had developed naturally from his schoolmates, and his father's pastoral demeanor had become comfortable enough to make their old identities into dream. Only after his father passed away last year, and his Thirsk Mountain church closed down in the absence of its charismatic leader, did Hank reacquaint himself with the facts of the situation: the people of Thirsk Mountain had bought into what amounted to an impostor, an intricate lie.

Strange, that his father had died from liver disease. Hank assumed that old damage from heroin was the cause, but while cleaning their house for sale, he came across a cache of moonshine in a locked trunk under his father's bed. Other truths came forward, too, in their way: according to the end-of-life paperwork Hank filled out at a sterile State Farm insurance office in Johnson City, his father's real name hadn't been Benton McCrayes at all, but Jackson Beauchamp, and the South Side house they'd occupied in Hank's first years had likely been more of a squatter's den, given the absence of rent checks in his bank records. The insurance lady with caked-on makeup must have noticed his shock. She touched his hand. Her fake nails tickled.

"All of this can be very overwhelming. Grieving over a loved one makes paperwork seem a little silly, I know."

"Yeah, grieving."

The lady leaned forward to offer him a tissue box. Her low-cut dress revealed her freckled cleavage and the pale edge of her tan line.

"But it's very important."

“Yeah,” he said, snapping out of it. “Important.”

That night, after the long ride back from the city, he jacked himself to sleep at the thought of that thin white tan line. Only in the morning, scraping dried egg from the frying pan after breakfast, did the truth set in. Hank was now alone, with only a few scraps of his old life: a fake last name, an imperceptible Midwestern tinge in his eastern Tennessee accent, and ownership of a rusty trash compactor. For all anybody knew, he’d truly never been to Chicago. His body might as well have drifted up from the mountain dirt. In his more paranoid moments, Hank wondered if he even had official papers, and if his last name was actually Hank Beauchamp on his birth certificate, which he’d never been able to find in his father’s records.

*

In the following months, Hank learned that the compactor could easily churn out enough cash for an internet connection, a trailer on the edge of Thirsk Mountain, and groceries. The excess dollar bills piled up in his closet. Slowly, his hesitance to pursue any other interests set into a comfortable sort of paralysis. Once a month, he started buying weed from a hippie commune of old men near Cullers Mountain. The group called itself the Deep Pine Ramblers. Hank used to watch them perform as a band under the same title at local bluegrass festivals that his father dragged him to. At least, until a few years back, when the band had gotten some attention from a country music label scouting the Bristol Rhythm & Roots Festival and suddenly disappeared from the live circuit. Only later did the disappearance make sense to Hank – these old men lived on a

steady diet of marijuana and psychedelic mushrooms they grew themselves. Enough to land them all in prison should the DEA uncover their compound.

Over the last year of weekly visits, Hank also came to understand that these old men poached animals from the Cherokee National Forest for meat and furs, and that those crimes came in addition to whatever problems had chased them into the mountains in the first place. The Ramblers told him that they rarely gave weed to outsiders, but one of them, Shy Ann, had been a regular attendee at his father's church. Hank remembered the sight of him leaning against the wall at the back of the congregation each Sunday, his beard slick with grime. His father's sermons seemed to leave the old man in rapture. Shy Ann always gave a curt nod when his father finished preaching, then headed out the door until the next week, sometimes wiping away tears.

*

Hank never met Shy Ann until his father's funeral. The day had been hot and sunny enough to give the funeral an alien sort of harshness. Between their outfits and overheated skin, the congregants made a sea of black and pink. Most of the funeral was taken up by the dozen or so eulogies delivered by church members, his father's friends, community leaders, even the mayor, a squat fat man whose lips had gotten even sweatier than usual today. The mayor's voice sounded syrupy.

"Benton McCrayes was a man who gave himself wholly to the faith, as we all must give ourselves wholly to the faith. I'm a good old boy, you know, and became your mayor the way a blind rabbit might find its way to a carrot farm." The congregation laughed, pushing a hot breeze against Hank's neck. The mayor took the laugh on his

heels. His campaign for re-election was coming up. Benton McCrayes's endorsement had helped earn the mayor this position in the first place, though it was mostly a ceremonial title. Mayor Greene was the owner of the Thirsk Mountain discount grocery store that sold recently-expired food. "Some of us are born into righteousness, and some of us have to work to reach God. I think you'll all agree with me that Reverend Benton McCrayes was a man truly born into God, but no worse for the work he did to come even closer. I'll get on down to the town office tomorrow, and I'll see if there isn't anything I can do to make him a saint. The patron saint of Thirsk Mountain."

It was all Hank could do not to interrupt the mayor and tell the real truth, as far as Hank knew, about his father being Jackson Beauchamp. The heroin, the fake accent, the whole thing. But, looking at the town here in tears, it wasn't a guarantee they'd believe him. His father had gotten them to believe that a magical old man in the sky counts their mistakes. A little identity fraud was child's play in comparison. Instead, Hank faked being overheated and slipped out the side door.

Once outside, Hank came across an old man on the front steps of the church, shifting back and forth on his feet. Trying to gather nerve to enter. He recognized the man who always stood at the back of the congregation, who'd played with the Ramblers at the blues festival. Up close, his skin had the healthy layer of grease that probably came from months without showering. The stranger must have recognized him, because he walked right over. Before speaking a word, he lit a thick joint and offered it to Hank's lips.

“Sorry for your loss and all that.” The resigned way he spoke really captured the moment, Hank thought. Later he’d learn that Shy Ann always spoke that way, as if nothing was worth getting worked up about.

Hank had smoked some basement joints at high school parties, but right away he could tell this weed was something different. Instead of the harsh ashy tinge, the smoke flowed buttery over his tongue. His exhales tasted cleaner than winter breath. The high eased into his head clean and subtle, as if the euphoria had been there all along, waiting for a chance to show itself.

“Your father, damned if he wasn’t the best preacher I ever saw.”

“Should’ve heard the eulogies. Mayor might as well be sucking his dick in there.”

“Don’t know about that, but man, did your pops have some passion. Went at the faith like somebody who’d lost it once and don’t ever want to lose it again. Guy was preaching to himself most days, I’d wager. Lot of anger there, *lot* of anger,” and then, waiting for Hank to look up at him: “My name’s Shy Ann. You ever want to tell me where you and your dad really came from, I’d listen.”

In all these years, nobody had ever caught on. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hank snapped, but the new high suggested itself a little more, and it didn’t much matter, when he thought about it. “How did you know?”

“Look, I know exactly what it’s like to start over. You can tell yourself a new story to cover up the old one, but you can’t change how much white you show in your eyes, you know? Your dad, the good Reverend, he didn’t seem much of a killer,

definitely not a sex crime type, so I'd guess maybe drugs. I'm curious about the guy, that's all. Curious about *you*. But you bet I can spot a fellow runner when I see one."

Somebody called on Hank from near the church doors. About time to help carry his father's casket back down the aisle. "Damn, this weed. It's something else."

"You ever want some more, take Duller's Branch up to Black Creek. Follow the first dirt road off the left side, then take another bunch of lefts at the forks. All the rights are dead ends. From the gate, walk the path marked on the trees."

"There's no chance I'll remember that."

Shy Ann started backing away. "Oh, you won't forget. That's our best sativa you just smoked. The mist from the Smokies gives the buds a little something special. Remember: Duller to Black Creek, then all the lefts, then follow the markings."

*

His first night visiting the Ramblers camp, Hank took enough wrong turns that he didn't find their camp until long after dark. About a dozen old men sat around the fire. Exhausted, half in dream, Hank greeted Shy Ann and took a few puffs from his wooden pipe while the others stared at him, a little spooked. These seemed to be old men on the run, most of them likely from violent acts, given the roughness in their looks and what Shy Ann had called *the white in their eyes*. None of them spoke to him that first night. But eventually their gravelly voices picked up singing some folk song or another. Whatever strain of weed he'd puffed hit him in the skull and sent the blow vibrating down his skeleton, and he fell asleep on a sleeping bag.

The next morning Hank had awoken at sunrise on a bunk bed in one of their wooden shacks, smelling of campfire smoke. Before seeing him off, Shy Ann showed him their hidden marijuana plantation and gave him a pocket cloth sack of dark purple buds that smelled like cat piss. Watching over sunrise warming the colors of the woods, Shy Ann told him that their weed absorbed the natural energy of the Native American tribes that had once peppered the mountains. For this reason, all payment was refused.

At first Hank had laughed at those kinds of ideas, but the more he got to know the Ramblers and their way of life up in the mountains, the more these clichés comforted him. He imagined his future as a slow drift into the true nature of things. Perhaps there wasn't anything so wrong with keeping his routine forever – get high, collect his pay, and empty his loins at night until sleep. Within a month he'd dropped the theology classes his father had arranged for him in his last days, out at a Smith Baptist College near Bristol, where his instructor read coldly from the Bible and smelled of musty carpet. Now, each day, the green mountainsides shone brand new in the marijuana glow. At night, his sexual fantasies became so real that they could almost touch him.

In his most ambitious moments, in the nights when he couldn't sleep through the trash compactor sounds echoing in his skull, he wished for some grave physical injury to befall him, to give him some excuse to remain in his trailer forever. His father's hope for him, to be a minister, evaporated. He was holding on by a thin residual fishing line, the hook dangling from his throat. Just one shake loose, and he'd be free from acting out the expectations of his old life, which had turned out to be a grand arranged facade.

*

The compactor clunked, adjusting to the sunrise warmth. Hank read the *Thirsk Mountain Pioneer* article about the Johnny Cash portrait shooting three times. The more he read, the less sense it made to him.

About an hour after sunrise, a silver Chrysler pulled into the mud driveway of the compactor. Bill Waterson struggled out of the driver side with two garbage bags, one in each hand. The engine kept sputtering behind him. Hank recognized the shiny black trash bag in his left hand as a standard store brand bag, typical for Bill and his wife. But the white bag in his right hand showed the trademark crisscrossing strands of a reinforced Hefty, which Hank had only seen used by two customers: the Shaughnessy family who lived on the far side of the mountain, and recently single Kelly Brikley, who had taken to the rose scented variety since her divorce last year, which had shaken the town. The news of the Brikley separation had even reached Hank's father in the last days of his life at Baptist Hospital. Being the pastor who married them, the old man was hit hard with the news. Hank had been running the compactor himself for a few months by that time, and judging by the weight of the trash bags Kelly had been dropping off to him each week, she had kept their two children. His father shook his jaundiced head. "Children should have two parents," he explained, with no apparent irony. These were, incidentally, the last specific words Hank remembered his father saying.

Hank watched Bill Waterson lug each bag over to the compactor. He sniffed the artificial rose scent in the air. Bill tossed the divorced woman's bag in first, then his own. His pressed shirt had picked up too many wrinkles for the first hour of the day.

"What's the damage?" Bill asked, as if he didn't know.

Hank cleared his throat loudly and nodded at the sign above his head that read *dollar a bag*. Bill's eyes darted to the ground while he pulled out his wallet. He handed over a ten dollar note despite having a few visible singles.

"Keep the change."

"Ain't my birthday or nothing."

"Just a little extra gift, between friends."

"What you do with your dick ain't my business," Hank said, pulling the thick wad of singles from his jacket. He counted eight in change.

In the months since the divorce, Kelly looked more haggard each time she came by with her garbage. He used to say *morning, Mrs. Brikley*, but stopped after the divorce since he didn't know her maiden name. He didn't ask, because he liked the idea of another mysterious last name besides his own. Lately, Kelly had started showing a lot of white in her eyes, too, the way a horse does when sensing something dangerous. On the other hand, Bill's wife Malinda looked exactly the same every time she brought the Waterson trash in the cheap black bags, never more than a few at a time. She and Bill had no children. Dressed in expensive clothes, she always was, and sad.

"No, it's not like that, it's just..."

Hank pressed the compactor ON button that hung down near his shoulder. The gnashing machinery drowned out whatever remained of the apology, which by the frantic look of Bill's face probably didn't make much sense. Before the compactor clunked off, his Chrysler had backed down the mud driveway and continued down the road. The

sound of the engine rumbled off the mountainsides for an extra few seconds before silence returned to the holler.

CHAPTER THREE (DEBORAH)

For two years, ever since she first moved to Tampa, Deborah Tellers had been haunted by dreams of the Gasparilla Pirate Festival.

The dream always began with her naked, wandering along Bayshore Boulevard at the edge of Tampa Bay. It had all grown familiar: parade floats would slink through the crowds of revelers in the bleachers. A young suburban girl would raise her shirt for some beads, her nipples standing up in the chill rain. Skinny palm trees would hunch over the festival like ancient monks. Usually, before the end of the dream, Deborah found herself making out with a strange redhead woman. She tasted cucumber on the woman's tongue, the exact same taste she remembered in the mouth of Robbie Mengham, the first boy she'd ever kissed. Other nights, she recognized the way the woman touched her back, or the pattern of her foreign tongue along her teeth.

Some such way, the ginger girl in the dream always revealed herself to actually be someone Deborah once knew – ex-boyfriends, mostly, or relatives. Anyone with a memorable touch. This same dream had haunted her for so long now that even in waking life she had begun to wonder if each stranger around her might secretly be inhabited by another person, someone she knew intimately once and had since forgotten. Tonight's dream woman and her cucumber tongue brought Deborah back to high school, to Robbie fumbling with her buttons in the back of the Arclight Hollywood during an afternoon showing of the Anthony Anderson movie *King's Ransom*. Repulsed, she started to push her freckled hands away. Thick red fog trickled into the corners of her vision. At the end of her dreams, this same fog always seeped off the bay into the Festival to retrieve her.

Red tide, Deborah had come to call the fog, for the way it thrust her back into consciousness like dying fish onto rough sand.

Another morning, awake before dawn.

Even with her new house a full quarter mile off the water, the morning reek of Tampa Bay stunk up Deborah's room something awful. Her sheets had sponged up the humid air so fully that she had to peel them off the stubble on her legs. Tiny static lightning danced along her thighs. Real lightning answered outside the window.

She gasped putrid bay air and gagged over the side of the bed. Goddamn that realtor, taking Deborah down to this Palmetto Beach house only on sunny afternoons when the sea breeze had started blowing the stench out across the bay into the far side of Hillsborough County. The neighbors had been off at their humiliating workaday jobs those afternoons. The area had taken on a deceptive quaintness. With all the colorful shotgun houses sitting quiet under oak trees, a few fat squirrels lumbering about, Deborah had been able to believe she was standing in the place where her creativity could take hold. Only during her first night sleeping here did she notice the orange glow of steam from the power plant, and on her first morning she heard the grinding shipyard of Port Tampa, where rusted tanker ships sat in dry-docks. Mangroves grew up around the port, hiding the place from all angles except the Crosstown Expressway, which the realtor had cleverly avoided, preferring the scenic route through downtown.

Mom and Dad had warned her about those Florida property hacks before she moved from Los Angeles. Everything is a scam down there, they'd said. First you meet this nice older lady in heavy makeup, perfumed orange, then you follow her in her little

hybrid realtor car. She takes you down the roads with her face plastered all over the backs of the benches. You let her show you a "historic cigar-worker house with authentic cedar paneling, full of character and history," and next thing you know, you're waking up with shit-smelling bay breeze up your nose and rain leaking through the unsealed window onto your floor. Yesterday, Deborah found a lizard that had choked to death under her bed, an oversized cockroach halfway down its gullet.

This morning, reaching for her glass pipe in the stinky black, she realized she'd been high ten days straight. Recently her weed dealer, a computer science graduate student named Kalo with whom she'd had a one night stand her first week of classes, had been pushing a new crop of bright purple and orange buds. Somehow, and she had not believed this was possible, the stuff made her more energetic in the daytime while making her sleep better at night. The smoke tasted misty. Only in her sober moments did the silence around her life turn oppressive. Her paintings would suddenly become a sad waste of time. Keeping the high going all day and night for the last week had taken no small amount of sneakiness. The portable vape pen had been expensive, as had the eye drops that she kept replacing and the tolerance-fighting amounts of this new weed strain. Kalo told her it was called Clinch Mountain Kush, taken from a verse in the old folk song "Rye Whiskey" written by an unknown American:

Way up on Clinch Mountain

I wonder alone

I'm drunk as the Devil

So leave me alone

Kalo had played a recording of the song for her once, the first time she tried the new strain in the strange light of his house. She'd found comfort in the shrill voice of the old man singing the song, the way he wasn't afraid to scream out his emotions in all their rawness. For most of her life she'd associated folk music with loathsome hippies, but the idea of a song with an anonymous author, music that had outlived any one person... there was something to be said here about the life of the artist, about creativity, about America itself probably, but by then this wonderful new weed had airlifted her thoughts into other, stranger territory. All of this, in the name of her art.

Artists needed their addictions, she believed, and painters in particular. They needed them so they could overcome them as they exited their twenties and entered their masterful thirties and transcendent forties. By the time they held their Nobel Prizes, great artists would speak wearily of their younger days as hard-won battles. Deborah harbored a lifelong fear of needles, sensitive nose, and deathly fear of any drug with overdose potential, so this marijuana dream cycle was about as strung-out as she could make herself. The fact that just about everyone else smoked didn't hurt.

She'd been proudly off this wagon for two years strong now, ever since she left Los Angeles to take her well-funded graduate art history position at the University of Tampa, whose silver minarets shone against the downtown Tampa skyline so alluringly in the brochure that she hadn't even cared to visit before accepting. Her parents happily paid for the move. Her grandmother had retired to Tampa a few years earlier. Having someone to check in on her probably relieved her parents of some guilt. Her grandmother spent mornings volunteering at Tampa General Hospital, rocking babies from the natal

unit in her pink auxiliary volunteer vest. Afternoons, she played bridge with the church ladies. Deborah had imagined a quaint life here in Tampa. Pretty, maybe a little sad, with more than enough time and space for her to blossom, free from the baggage of Hollywood. What she'd found instead when she arrived was Southern California through a hideous filter of decay – old women with hardened boob-jobs and wet makeup caking in the humidity, and their elderly male counterparts who jogged shirtless down Bayshore with saggy lizard-chests that flapped over the muscles below.

*

Renaissance art history hadn't come naturally to her. Instead, she'd fallen into a photography habit as a teenager, when she attended the mythical Fairfax High School in West Hollywood, where all students expected stuff of legend from themselves. Gun N' Roses had gone there. The Red Hot Chili Peppers. Demi Moore. Warren Zevon. Writers. Professional athletes. Record Producers. Successful people.

Even the teachers drank up the ambition. A few kept photos of their most famous former students on the classroom walls. They pretended not to enjoy talking about them. Deborah never had any musical skill, coming as she did from a family of stark businesspeople, so as a lanky teenager she'd settled on being the one to photograph her famous friends someday. Slowly, her room in her family's small Hollywood home filled with black-and-white prints of musical icons from the 60s and 70s, a few choice ones from earlier. Her favorite was a photo of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong in the studio. Ella sang into a hanging mic while her partner stood stiffly beside her, hands

folded around his trumpet at his waist, mouth wide to form what Deborah imagined to be a gravelly vocal note. Behind thick glasses, Louis kept his eyes tightly shut.

Deborah imagined that the photographer must have basked in the religious intensity of that moment. No picture could be so moving without passion behind the lens. Some nights she stood at the end of her bed and stared into the print, her heavy old camera raised, thin arms barely able to hold the lens still. At night, when the flurry of texts from her friends quieted to nothing, and the sounds of Hollywood settled down into the clamor of bums sifting through trash cans, she'd allow herself to dream. She'd think of herself in an entourage of wildly celebrated artists, the next incarnation of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Camera in hand, she would artfully document their most intimate moments from the inside, all-access, and later generations would swoon over her portraits the way she swooned over the ones that lined the walls of her bedroom. *Her*, these artists would say to their bouncers at backstage parties, *that's Deborah. Bring her backstage, how dare you hold her up. We'd be nothing without her.*

After graduation, she didn't consider following her classmates to college. Her friends disappointed her with their practicality. None of the greats went to college. They forged their own paths, and with that in mind, Deborah sought out a great artist to photograph – she would capture one of them and tweet them the picture, and they'd be so impressed that they would bring her on for her talent, for the way she made them *look*. In order to earn the chance to shoot your Ella and Louis, you needed to catch some lesser genius unawares and then work your way to the top. That's what separated her from the others, she believed. Her ambition, her savvy.

One clear spring day, when the sun opened up a broad circle of blue above the walls of smog, Deborah sat by her window and watched the light hit her portrait of young Bob Dylan. Monochrome, arms crossed on a park bench. With her parents at work she could imagine she owned this whole Hollywood house. The other rooms would be decorated like the bedroom in her fantasy – minimal, in gentle grays and blues. While scrolling through her twitter feed, she noticed that the lead guitarist of the L.A. Snobs tweeted a picture of himself at an American Apparel next to Fairfax High. The Snobs were a transcendently ironic post-punk band who'd recently exploded onto the national scene. Deborah equipped her camera and ran to the store, which sat under the shadow of the school. Outside, paparazzi had gathered around the roped-off entrance. Deborah tried for a view of the small group of jean-jacketed people in the very back of the store. An overweight man elbowed her camera out of her hands. The strap jerked at her neck.

"Watch it!" The man swung around. Heat emanated from his face.

"I'm sorry, is..." she grabbed her camera again, more firmly. "I mean, I'd heard that Nicky Vanderburg was shopping in there today."

"Oh, he's in there, that's for sure," the man said, breathless with excitement. "We can't see him. He's probably in the back, getting pampered. Pedicure, hair styling, you name it." Drool sputtered from his bottom lip.

"It's an American Apparel. He's probably buying skinny jeans."

Just then, a decapitated TMZ tour bus approached, and a gaggle of tourists in loose t-shirts held their cell phone cameras above their heads. "Nicky!" some of them yelled, climbing over each other in a wave of pale skin and fat. "Nicky! Over here!" they

continued, until the bus driver announced their next stop – Rodeo Drive – and they disappeared down Melrose again, as quickly as they came. It occurred to Deborah that most of these people would probably return to the Midwest, Northeast, wherever they came from, and lie to their friends that they'd seen Nicky Vanderburg in the flesh. They'd read his Wikipedia page, listen to some of his songs, become fans and buy some band merchandise. In their minds, they would consider him a friend.

The fat man had returned to the entrance with the rest of his colleagues. They pushed each other for a view of nothing. Deborah looked down at her camera and up at the buildings of her old high school next door. Classes were letting out for the day. Skateboarders filled the sidewalk first, leaning back on bent knees so their hair blew in the wind just right. Behind them, packs of friends gathered in groups against graffiti walls to check their phones. A few girls looked up from their screens and pointed at the American Apparel and the group outside. They giggled to each other. *Paparazzi*, they probably thought. *Pigs*. Deborah saw her younger self in that group of girls, laughing, so proud to be above all that pettiness, to know that her own brand of fame was coming to her any day. Now, sweating among the bottom-feeders, the moment resembled a composed photograph – so clear was the lesson that the world seemed to be teaching her.

That week, she quit photography and enrolled at a small local college. She scrolled through the list of majors looking for one that seemed the least shallow. She wanted protection from the suffocating air of Los Angeles. Never again would she find herself in a crowd of pathetic celebrity-chasers. Never again would she be humiliated.

Art history had a nice academic ring to it. She spent the next four years fleeing into a world of specificity. She lugged small-print textbooks that stood strong against all mockery. She took on and cast off the occasional boyfriend, blacked out at a party or two, but always returned home to her childhood home in West Hollywood at night. She counted the years in academic steps. Within art history, she concentrated on what seemed the most unimpeachable – the study of class dynamics in the paintings of the Renaissance. Only recently, after moving to Tampa for graduate studies, had she begun to feel enough distance from that American Apparel storefront. The fear finally subsiding, she allowed her artistic urges to reappear.

She started to paint. No painters appeared on TMZ. Nobody painted pictures of shallow celebrities shopping. The fame of painters was pure, the way the fame of Ella and Louis had been pure. They *deserved* their love. Enlightened by experience, beaten down with just the right amount of failure, Deborah believed she was finally mature. Maybe now, after all this time, she could earn the name of an artist.

*

On these mornings, the bay stink covered the marijuana smoke that had coated the walls of her bungalow and seeped into the dirty clothes that covered her carpet. The stink had come in handy. Whenever her students asked about the weed smell on their papers, she could blame the bay. The lingering dank in her backpack pockets – the bay. The overwhelming sense of futility that had crept into her life, for that matter – the bay. Often she savored that despair, leaning against the chipped white concrete railing along Bayshore Boulevard at night, the water an unreflecting black void in front of her. Staring

into the darkness, she would smoke a joint and let herself drift into an artistic stupor. The famous artist Yves Klein had said that *at first there is nothing, then there is a profound nothingness, after that a blue profundity*. She knew little of his work, but the quote had earned a place in the quotes folder of her Notes app.

Any day now, a blue profundity.

She flipped on her lamp and surveyed last night's activities in the orange light. Her canvas sat on its stand, painted blue, itself propped on a pile of damp clothes. Beads and costume pirate attire had been pasted into patterns on the canvas, and below, she'd painted the word *Gasparilla* in blood red. Last night came back to her in pieces – how the blue had made her think of the bright water that real pirates had once found on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, sand shimmering untouched in the sunlight. This place had since been corrupted, she imagined, and every year Gasparilla drew fresh blood from the corpse, with its humiliating plastic beads and fake pirate hats. The bright blue, the blood red, the plastic. She'd almost wept at the rapture of the moment. She considered herself a painter, and she'd painted the canvas, but let the glued costumes violate that art in the same way that Gasparilla had been violating her dreams. Last night, the work had been historical and personal all at once, her postmodern self-portrait.

A few of the beads had fallen off overnight, and the red and blue paint had run together. For a moment, the painting looked pathetic. She quickly struggled through one more hit, mostly ash, and kept her eyes closed until her skin started humming. When she opened her eyes, the colors shone brighter. The fallen beads had tumbled in a beautifully chaotic pattern on the floor. Even better, she thought. The decay lent some authenticity.

She took joy in the idea that she'd found an obsession in Gasparilla. These costumes had been at the back of her closet, leftovers from her gig painting the faces of rich old men in Ye Mystic Krewe, the fraternity-type group that organized Gasparilla every year and ogled the bare chests of girls a quarter their age from their tacky pirate ship floats. The tip money had been excessive, more than worth the hours spent painting their wrinkles while they stared at her chest.

Unseasonal rain had fallen from overcast skies on the one Gasparilla she'd experienced. Terry Banks, the Tampa-native USF medical student she'd been hooking up with that winter, had told her that it always rained on the day of the festival. God brought rain to punish the people for their sins, he'd said. Over time Deborah learned that all natives of the city shared this belief. Floridians bowed to nature how Deborah imagined pagans might worship their vengeful gods – with reverence, fear, and no small amount of hate. Now, halfway through her first summer of falling asleep to apocalyptic thunderstorms only to dream of drunken pirates, Deborah had started to understand this strange kind of religion. Its realness haunted her.

By routine, she checked the fan email for her blog, *Gulf Coast Gunk*. She'd started the page as a way to show off some of her art, but over time she'd started covering pop-culture stories to fill her gaps in production. Her caustic art-critic voice took on a funnier vibe for those pieces, and she found herself with a small but devoted fan base among young hipsters in West Florida, plus some weed money from ad revenue.

That was until last week, when she accidentally took a picture of a Bible-thumping federal congressman leaving Mons Venus strip club one night. She'd been at a

local sex shop buying ribbed condoms for a new art project when a large entourage made its way out the back exit of Mons. Their limo waited under purple lights. She snapped a picture of the man in the center with her phone and stored the image away to await a clever Instagram caption. *Rich white man in his natural habitat* – that kind of thing. Lucky she recognized the congressman's face in an online article the next day.

Releasing the picture on her blog made her a news story in her own right. MSNBC ran the headline *Republican congressman in blog post scandal*. Deborah had even appeared in a few paragraphs of a *Time* magazine article about how millennials had shunned traditional media. In their phone interview, the chipper male reporter had asked her why she chose to blog the picture rather than sell it to a major newspaper. She pieced together an answer about the changing landscape of media, and about how she didn't want to give a story about a male congressman to an old-fashioned newspaper industry run by misogynists. She stood by the truth of her statement, though selling the story to a newspaper had not actually occurred to her. If it had, she might have done it. In an article that spread through Facebook, Jezebel called her nothing short of an internet icon. Her blog picked up tens of thousands of followers. And now, distant and invisible, they all awaited her next move. By her measure, she had a few more days to cash in on them before she'd be tossed on the internet junk pile. She scoured blogs and news stories on her free time, looking for something worth commenting on.

Deborah did her best to ignore the anxiety that she would repeat old mistakes. This was more than paparazzi nonsense – she'd uncovered a morally corrupt politician. His constituents were demanding his resignation. In the run-off to replace him, some

expected his seat to flip from Republican to Democrat. Her photo had mattered. And more than that, she could use this fame to spread her art. Every artist first needed a platform. If her blog would someday bring more eyes onto painting, her real and ancient art form, the photos would be worthwhile.

In her most passionate moments, she had started to see the whole thing – the blog, interview, photo, and yes, the paintings – as one enormous art project, injecting her true art into the chaotic loop of the internet. They'd never see her coming. Trojans, wooden horses – her work was ancient. She dared not speak the idea, or even think about the project for too long. Better to enjoy the new suspicion that everything she did was connected, that through stages her actions would all add up to something momentous.

CHAPTER FOUR (RAFAEL)

Rafael knew better than to ask Juan what he'd done to end up working at La Segunda Vida. Juan hadn't dared to ask him the same question, and probably for the same reason – Bud Christensen was the toxic center uniting their pasts. It sufficed to say that they both knew him, and more to the point, that he knew them back.

This morning, Rafael had opened the freezer chest in the kitchen looking for another frozen empanada to chew on, only to find the Costco box empty except for a few freezer-burned pieces of crust at the bottom. The box had been full yesterday morning, and they couldn't have eaten more than six between them. Rafael made a note to ask Juan without accusing him of stealing. The more immediate problem was what they would eat. Within an hour of sunrise, the heat had gotten brutal enough that tasting anything above room temperature was sickening to think of.

By later that afternoon, lounging in their usual spots again on the sunbaked deck, no customers in sight, Rafael and Juan had chilled some cans of black beans in the fridge. They ate from them with soup spoons. The beans had the consistency of tar.

"Bon appetit." Juan examined a black spoonful before turning it upside down into his mouth. "Fuck, that's awful."

"Need to get some more empanadas."

Juan dropped his spoon into the can. "Thought there were some left."

"Thought the same thing."

“I didn’t take them,” Drake said across the deck, where he sat on the railing and ate his usual peanut butter and jelly sandwich, probably made by his mother. His pasty white arms shone blinding in the sunlight.

“Shut up, Drake,” Juan mumbled, seemingly to himself.

“If you’re not getting enough food, all you have to do is ask,” Rafael said.

“If I wanted a handout, I’d call Bud.” Juan plopped the can onto the table.

“I’m sure he’d be happy to help.”

“Isn’t he always.”

Rafael sensed rough seas. Like all powerful men, Bud was talked about freely by those who didn’t know him, and carefully by those who did. The slow creep of itch spread across the back of his neck. He slapped, hard, and looked at his palm. In the center, a crushed mosquito twitched in a small circle of blood.

“Mosquitoes in the Everglades grow to be birds,” Juan said.

“Never been.”

“How can you live in Florida and never see the Everglades?”

“I’m from Orlando. Long way to the Glades.” Truth was, Rafael dreamed of the Everglades more and more each day. America’s last jungle, the last untouched piece of his soul. A true man of nature should live among the beasts.

“Orlando.” Juan shook his head.

Calling La Segunda, came a tin-laden voice.

The three men looked up at the sky.

Calling La Segunda, they heard again, louder.

"Captain Sam?" Drake hopped from the railing, confused. The way he squinted into the sun looked painful. Sweat coated his face. For that one snapshot moment, Rafael could imagine Drake falling to his knees, an acolyte before the Sun-god. Having only worked here in the summers, Drake had never heard Sam call in through the dock-master radio, which functioned in the busier months to direct visiting boats into pre-reserved dock spaces. Rafael made his way into the kitchen. Sweat from his boxers trickled down into his socks. The radio transmitter warmed in his palm.

"Sam, it's Rafael. Did you run the ferry into the sandbar again?"

"I told you that wasn't my fault. Coast Guard should have put signs up. Over."

During the long pause, Rafael smiled. Sam must have been fuming on the other end. Straightening his Navy veteran trucker hat, squeezing the boat throttle.

"You won't believe who's on the ferry right now. Go ahead, guess. Over."

"If it's another American Idol contestant, I'll break this radio. I'm not kidding."

Captain Sam let the static come through for a few seconds, probably for suspense. "The Governor! The Governor of Florida! Says he's announcing a new parks program and wants some photos on the island, press statement, the whole deal. Wants to meet you guys, too. Says he loves talking to good working men."

Juan and Drake stuck their heads through the window above the service counter.

"Governor Davidson wants to meet us?" Drake asked.

Rafael dropped the transmitter, sending it bouncing off the kitchen floor, then swinging by its cord against the lower cabinets. Juan had gone pale, staring wide-eyed down at the counter. Rafael took him calmly by the shoulder.

"Everything will be alright. Escóndete en el bosque." Rafael pointed at the wall of thick palmettos behind the restaurant. He reached into the refrigerator and tossed a bottle of water to Juan, who darted out the back door.

Rafael turned to Drake. "Listen to me. As far as you know, Juan doesn't work here. When you talk to the Governor, there is no such person as Juan Ortega." He pressed his finger between Drake's eyes. "You understand?"

Drake gaped back at him, unmoving.

Sam, over the radio: "Did you hear me? I said the Governor of Florida! There's this big mess of reporters and guys in ties and ladies in pants suits, the whole ordeal. The ferry hasn't been this packed since December!"

Rafael picked up the transmitter. "Sam, did you tell our names to the Governor?"

"I figured you'd introduce yourselves. Over."

"If he asks, only tell him about me and Drake." Rafael closed his eyes prayerfully.

"But why wouldn't Juan..." The din of his passengers crept through the speakers.

"Oh man, you don't mean... but he speaks English so well! I'd never have guessed."

Drake straightened on the other side of the counter.

Rafael pointed out the window at the porch. "Clean up."

The boy hurried around the deck, pushing in chairs and throwing away the paper plates. His toe sent the Gameboy tumbling under the table. He stared at the edge of the woods. Inside the shack, Rafael splashed water on his face from the kitchen faucet.

A few weeks earlier, the entire kitchen staff of an upscale Mexican restaurant in South Tampa had been quietly deported before a fundraising event for the Governor.

With his policy record on immigration, one photo-op of him being served by an undocumented worker would have made the newspapers. So away they were sent as a precaution, back to violent desert towns. The Spanish-language newspaper *La Gaceta* published the story, along with some local blogs Rafael frequented, but neither the *Times* or the *Tribune* took notice.

But now, beyond wanting to keep this poor Mexican kid in the country, there was a deeper fear, something that had returned with the Great Black Thing, that had lingered last year in the spicy cigar smoke between Bud and himself – the suspicion that Juan being deported would rip the top from a long-dormant volcano. Make even the smallest opening, and who knew how deep the crimes of Bud Christensen went.

*

Rafael towered next to Drake, a foot taller and more than twice his girth. The two waited on the dock for the Governor. The uncovered porch of La Segunda Vida shone in the sun behind them. Translucent plastic cups had been organized into stacks of red and white at the waiter station, the countertop at the service shack had been cleaned, and the tables had been arranged into even rows of four.

The ferry drifted into sight with uncharacteristic grace. Sam took a wide berth around the mangroves with the engines pulled back, not missing the opportunity to show off. Shadows of people rippled behind the ferry windows, fogged with sea salt. Once he reached the dock, Sam threw the rope. Rafael tied a lazy knot around the rusty metal cleat, hearing claustrophobic stress in the din of passengers. Sam came off the boat first, wiry and old, his leathery face sunken under the cap brim. He snapped to attention for

two men in suits and sunglasses, and in their wake Governor Davidson, an angular man with styled salt-and-pepper hair, an impossible smile. Then an overwhelming river of people burst from the ferry, some of them more security, others cameramen and reporters, and others still that had no clear purpose at all. Rafael thought of flies hovering around a cow's mouth. He shrunk from the camera lenses. Even with the Xanax, his hands shook.

With cameras honed and tape recorders poised, the Governor switched on.

"Thanks for the ride, Captain," he said to Sam.

An overweight man with a camera dropped to one knee while the two of them posed cheese-faced. Sam swelled his chest. Shutters clicked.

"You'll be back in an hour?" the Governor asked.

"Yessir," Sam said, pushing through the crowd to untie the knotted rope and hurry back onto the boat. The sea of companions parted, and the Governor extended his hand to Rafael. Here he was, the bastard. His palm was cool and dry.

"I'm Governor Davidson," he said.

"Rafael, sir."

Rapid-fire snaps swelled again.

"You don't have to call me sir. Just call me Teddy."

"That would make me very uncomfortable, sir."

"Rafael is an angel's name, right?" He stroked his chin with rapt attention.

"Yes, sir. My full name is Rafael San Lazaro Alessi, named first for an angel and second for the patron saint of Cuba, where my mother was born." At the mention of his mother, his throat caught. Must be the anger, he thought. About the environment.

"Catholic?"

"Uh, sure," Rafael said. "I mean, yessir."

"That's fascinating," the Governor said, already extending his hand to Drake.

"Drake Moffitt, sir. It's an honor to meet you." He grew visibly anxious in the pause. "I'm the busboy, Rafael is the waiter, and we-"

"And the cook," Rafael interrupted. "I also do the cooking."

Governor Davidson crossed his arms. "You have to cook and wait tables at the same time? That must be exhausting work." His hard blue eyes bored into Rafael.

"They don't pay me enough, sir."

The crowd followed Governor Davidson onto the dining porch. He sat at the middle table with one reporter and a crimson-haired woman who hadn't taken her eyes from her Blackberry. She whispered into the Governor's ear at least once every minute. The rest of the entourage filled the other seats. Some of them took sandwiches from brown paper bags. An older woman in a red blouse munched on a pack of Lunchables cheese sticks. Their patience was impressive. Poor souls must do this every day.

Rafael approached the Governor's table. "Anything we can do to assist you, sir? I'll have Drake bring you water right away."

The redheaded aide handed the Governor a handkerchief, which he rubbed once across his glistening forehead and returned to her, limp with sweat.

"Let's have some authentic Spanish food," the Governor said, rubbing his hands together. "I've been stuck up there in Tallahassee for too long. Maybe some Picadillo?"

He checked with his companions for support. "Picadillo," he repeated, more firmly, and handed the stack of menus back to Rafael.

Rafael retreated into the shack, past the radio transmitter and the service counter and into the kitchen. He closed the service counter window for some privacy, making the room into a tiny dark cave, then paced in tight circles, cursing to himself. What had always been familiar – the sink, counter, griddle, stove, oven, cabinets all arranged at boxy right angles – now became nothing more than a haphazard collection of mechanical parts, the maze he would have to navigate.

Picadillo was cooked in a pot, Rafael suspected. The knob on the stove gave a sticky sort of resistance as he turned it on. His hands twitched more than he had ever known them to twitch, more even than his anxiety could explain. The stale, rotten-egg smell of gas leaked into the air, but no flame. Not knowing how to light the stove turned into not knowing where to find the pots and pans, and furthermore, in a quiet moment of resignation, the inability to find even the first ingredient in Picadillo. The size of his task unraveled before him, and the kitchen grew smaller now, quieter. Rafael burst out the back door, waving his hands, hoping that Juan hadn't ventured too far away.

The edge of the woods was safely hidden from the dining porch. One of the palmettos shook. Rafael approached the quivering bush. Mosquitoes started picking at his neck and legs, as if he'd just entered electrified air.

"He wants me to make Picadillo," he whispered.

In the long pause, Rafael suspected he'd just spoken to a plant.

"You hear me? The asshole wants me to *cook*."

"Does seem quite the prick," Juan said from behind him.

Rafael jumped back, nearly toppling under his own weight.

Juan stared at the same palmetto bush. "You might want to take a step back. I think there's a possum in there."

"We're fucked."

"Calm down, buddy. They're nocturnal. I think it's sleeping."

Rafael grabbed his shoulders. "Where do you keep the recipes?"

"Up here." Juan tapped his temple, grinning, helplessness in his eyes.

"You'll have to hide in the kitchen and cook."

"Nope, his aides are watching that kitchen like bigoted little hawks." Juan might have been too nervous to realize that he was still smiling.

"Then tell me how to make Picadillo."

Juan chuckled. "I don't know how you call yourself a Cuban."

"I call myself an American." The silence after that word, American, hung heavily in the air. Juan stopped smiling.

"Lo siento," Rafael whispered.

"It's not your fault." Juan slapped at a mosquito on his neck. He pointed at the pack of Marlboros and lighter in Rafael's oversized shirt pocket. "Give me one of those. If we're going down for this, I want a smoke."

The two sucked down their cigarettes in anxious silence. Eventually, the strangeness of the day cut deeply enough for Rafael to break his unspoken rule. After today, this kid might be gone, and then he'd never get to know.

“Why did Bud bring you here?” Then, more direct: “I mean, tell me what you did. You tell me yours, I’ll tell you mine.” Immediately he that knew he’d overstepped, but making the offer relieved months of tension. It was refreshing to speak the words.

Together, they allowed enough silence to erase the question.

“Okay, then.” Juan beat cigarette ash from his pant legs. “Piccadillo. It’s not exactly a two-part recipe, but it’s pretty straightforward if you take your time.” He handed the lighter back to Rafael. “Light the stove with this. The pilot lights don't work. Set a pot of water to boil, come back with a pen and paper.”

Rafael hurried through the back door into the tiny kitchen, flicking the lighter absentmindedly on and off. By the time he identified the thick rotten-egg stench and the loud hissing stove, he had already reached his hand toward the burner and struck the lighter one more time, and he could already feel the sweep of hot air against his legs, up the front of his body, the blisters spreading in ripples across his skin, arm hairs shrinking into ash. The room turned blinding orange in his eyes. He gasped, searing heat moving within him and without, drowning in a lake of fire.

CHAPTER FIVE (HANK)

Hank picked the last of the sleep gunk from his eyes. He took a swig of water and swished around to clear the leftover dry mouth from last night. A hawk screamed from its usual perch across the way, a thicket of twigs and leaves knotted between two branches. After assuming his usual spot leaning against the compactor, he opened the *Thirsk Mountain Pioneer* to find yet another violent headline:

ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON FLORIDA GOVERNOR: Suicide Arsonist in Critical Condition.

Hank turned the page for the article.

Authorities have declined to comment on the case against the suspected eco-terrorist, identified as Rafael San Lazaro Alessi, who remains in critical condition. Some observers have speculated that the attack may be related to Governor Davidson's recent support for scaling back climate change legislation, and refusal to allow funding from the Environmental Protection Agency to state parks for research into the effects of land development on swamp ecology.

Burning down a restaurant seemed a silly way to assassinate a politician. Hank couldn't decide if the strangeness made the attempt all the more sinister, or if this terrorist was something of an idiot. Florida had the distance of a foreign country, abstract enough for these events to read as fiction. The kind of place where a man tries to burn the Governor over a patch of swamps. Listening to a car approach around the bend, sending the hiss of engine noise through the trees on the mountainside, Hank wondered who was the Governor of Tennessee, and if there was anybody who might want to kill him, too.

*

After closing the compactor down around six, Hank drove the long dirt road up to the Ramblers commune to refill his weed supply. By the time he'd taken the last few turns through the woods, the sun had sunk behind the mountains low enough that everything took on a pale shade. He stopped his truck at the rusted gate. Atop a fencepost, the wooden sign had an old firearms advertisement plastered onto its face: *no trespassing: we don't call the cops, we use Colt automatic pistols*, with a picture of a menacing black pistol. It didn't seem likely to him that the old men kept any weapons on the commune, but the sign did its job. All property in Thirsk was understood to be protected with deadly force, and nobody dared trespass, even with the smell of marijuana mixing so nicely with the high mountain air.

Hank hopped the fence and took the ten-minute walk through the woods, the day's newspaper tucked under his arm. Cross marks on trees guided the way, but by now he could probably make his walk to the commune living quarters with his eyes closed. Raindrops began to sneak through the branches. Getting an idea, Hank caught some drops on his palm and smeared the date on the newspaper, just under the headline about the Florida terrorist. He tucked the paper into the back of his pants, under his denim jacket. Near the end of his walk he began to hear the usual tomfoolery of the old men – strings being plucked, bad singing, low laughter. The burn of anticipation bubbled up in his gut. Visiting the old men was the best part of his week. Rounding the last corner, he found a campfire hissing under the rain, a frying pan on top, and nobody in sight. Their ramshackle living quarters amounted to four shacks, each with three wooden walls and

tin roofs that popped like firecrackers in the rain. At the front of each hung colored tarps: red, white, blue, and green. Hank followed the sounds to the blue tarp, which he dashed aside, pointing two fingers in a gun shape.

“Goddamnit, Hank,” Shy Ann said. “That ain’t never been funny.”

Shy Ann held small ukulele-looking instrument in his lap, while about half a dozen of the other old men lounged in bunk beds. The two with long beards, who Hank always assumed were twins, played cards cross-legged on one of the top bunks. The smallest of the residents, a tiny bald man, read a book in the corner of the shack – always the same book, a worn black hardcover with *Seneca* written on the front in gold print. Whatever had driven this little old one out here, Hank always imagined it to be somewhat more minor than the crimes of the others. This particular man kept much cleaner than his companions, his skin scrubbed a bright shade of pink. He’d never spoken in Hank’s presence, and his name, like most of theirs, was a mystery. There was the odd feeling that they might have forgotten them. The only name among them Hank knew was Shy Ann, whose real name had been William Cheyenne before he made his disappearance into the mountains, running from what must have been some awful personal failure. His accent suggested he couldn’t have been from much farther than the Carolinas, but of course accents could lie. Hank tossed him the newspaper.

“You wouldn’t know funny. You don’t even know the date.”

“Sure I do. Let’s see here.” Shy Ann opened to the front page. “July, as a matter of fact. Year of two thousand twelve. July...” his eyes met the smudge. “Damn it.”

Hank tried to hold back his laughter.

“Alright, okay. That’s pretty funny.”

“Need an eighth for the week.”

Shy Ann leaned the tiny guitar against the edge of a bunk, tossed the newspaper up to the bearded card players. It landed on top of the deck between them, messing up their arrangement. *Hey now*, one of them said. *Go fish*, said the other. Then one of the two said *fuck you*, but by then they had already separated the paper into two sections and begun to read the news of the day. As far as Hank knew, his weekly delivered papers were their only exposure to the outside world.

After only a few seconds of reading, one of the card players gasped. He separated the front-page section and tossed it down off the bunk. “Aye, buddy.” The paper landed in the tiny bald man’s lap, knocking the Seneca book onto the dirty floor. “You’re gonna wanna get a load of this.” The bald man took his time smoothing the paper flat with his palms, then picked it up gracefully. Almost immediately, his jaw fell slack. Paper crinkled in his fingers. This was the most emotion Hank had ever seen from him.

Shy Ann pushed the tarp aside and gestured grandly with one arm. “After you, young’un.” Hank followed him out into the common area, where the rain had slackened back into mist. In the middle of the shacks, the cooking pit smoked without fire. Atop the charred pile of wood, a single oversized frying pan held a pile of black food remnants. Most visits, they shared their dinner with Hank, typically stews made with meat they stored in their smokestack down near the creek. No such luck tonight. His empty gut was turning slowly acidic. As if on cue, his stomach rumbled.

“Sorry, we ate a little early tonight. Would have saved some if you’d told us you were coming,” Shy Ann said, like that was possible. He produced a wooden marijuana pipe from his oversized camouflage jacket. “Ought to help settle your stomach.”

Shy Ann led the way through layers of thin branches, swaying the leaves from his path with long graceful strokes until the pathway opened into the fading sunlight. The view from the edge overlooking the crops never failed to surprise Hank, the way the chaotic forest gave way to even lines of shaggy crops. Perched at the edge of the clearing, Shy Ann took his time lighting the pipe with a long match, peering over the rows of green and purple and letting thick clouds of pungent smoke loose from his mouth. Shy Ann smiled over his boon and passed the pipe without turning. Perhaps the sight always surprised him, too. For a while, all the two men did was pass, until Hank was high enough to imagine their appearance from afar, through the eyes of a confused wild raccoon. Beasts alternate between hungry and horny, Hank imagined. Nothing else made sense to them. Least of all two male apes, passing fire over their alien plants. Didn’t make any sense at all, when you thought about it.

“Shame about your pops.” That was what Shy Ann tended to talk about.

“It’s been almost a year. It’s not news anymore.”

“Well, there’s nothing new under the sun.”

Hank clenched his fist around the pipe. “You win some, you lose some. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. The early bird catches the worm. It’s a dog eat dog world, and I’m wearing milk bone shorts. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Nice guys finish last. I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed, but...”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. Tell me something new, then.”

“Bill Waterson is sleeping with Kelly.”

“Kelly who?”

“Used to be Kelly Brikley, now I don’t know. Kelly Somethin’. Ain’t that funny.”

“Funny as all hell. You ever hear the joke about Schrodinger?”

“But he’s probably fucking her *good*. Real hard. Calling her all kinds of horrible stuff, probably, and I bet she lets him do it. You wouldn’t believe what women let guys do to them. I’ve seen it online. There’s something they get from that kind of treatment, and I don’t know what, but maybe if I could figure it out it’d all make sense.” His whole body went from warm to hot. “But those *kids*, man. They can hear their mom and Bill in the bedroom. Bet they miss their dad. It’s gonna fuck them up real bad.” Hank hoped he wouldn’t have to explain why he was so angry, because he wasn’t sure.

“Women. Can’t live with ‘em, can’t...” Shy Ann coughed. “You ever wonder what Schrodinger looked like?”

“Who the fuck is Schrodinger?”

“No, I mean... that’s the joke.”

“It’s the joke that I don’t know Schrodinger.”

“No, it’s a one-liner. You’re curious what Schrodinger looks like, so you want to look at him. It’s like how you want to look in the box. You know, with the cat.”

“Oh.” Hank worried that this weed was laced with something, because either Shy Ann wasn’t making any sense on his own, or Hank wasn’t making any sense of Shy Ann. Most of the time the old man made sense. The guy spoke in clichés, but they made sense.

“I used to be a science teacher.”

This was the most Shy Ann had ever offered about his previous life, and it had come without prying. Getting the idea that whatever truths came next were bound to be a bummer, Hank did his best to clear the pipe with a monster hit that would give them occasion to head back. Thin ash coated the back of his throat. The fit of coughs that overtook him had a dangerous edge, pushing his lungs to the edge of shriveling. He wouldn't have been surprised to find blood on his tongue.

“I'm extremely intelligent. I'm not supposed to be out here,” Shy Ann said.

“Tell me more about the cat.” Hank led the way back to the camp.

After a few minutes of talk about scientists and radiation, the two came upon the group of Ramblers lounging around the fire. Night had come. Lanterns hung down from the tree branches, playing a red dance among the shadows. One of the two long-bearded card players strummed a banjo, and the other took up singing an old song that Hank recognized. No matter which Rambler sang, and no matter which song, their voices always had a broken edge that caught deep in their throats. Though none of them had ever cried in front of him, Hank thought they all sang on the verge of tears:

My horses ain't hungry

They won't eat your hay

So fare thee well, Polly

I'm going away

The old men watched the fire. Its flames sang to them. Each crease on their faces darkened against the light. Their deformed shadows outsized them at their backs. The

ghosts were making their appearance tonight. One night every week, Hank let himself believe such things – out here in the woods, where there was precedent. A few other old men joined from the cabins. That made nine of them now, meaning only the little bald one was missing, the pink one with the kind of pointy ears who'd read the paper earlier, the only Rambler who didn't seem to know how to play music. Most nights that one would have been sitting under a tree lantern and reading his book, but maybe tonight he'd turned in early. None of the others sang along. Interrupting the long-bearded man probably would have been a violation of his depths. There was no question, he was singing at someone specific, someone to whom he'd been lost forever. Such a beautiful night, Hank thought. A shame to be missed.

Oh, sparking is pleasure and parting is grief

And a false hearted lover is worse than a thief

They'll hug you, they'll kiss you

They'll tell you more lies

Than cross ties on a railroad

Or stars in the sky

CHAPTER SIX (DEBORAH)

Deborah let her phone alarm keep playing for a couple minutes before planting her feet on the warm floor. She'd set the alarm to play her favorite song, "Tombstone Blues" by Bob Dylan, but after a month of waking into the song out of her horrid pirate dreams, it had taken on a harsh carnival edge. Bob's nonsense lyrics had worked their way into her head so deeply that she caught herself repeating lines under her breath while walking across campus. One afternoon last week, grading papers and eating her peanut butter sandwich on a bench under the silver minarets of the University of Tampa administration building, she'd turned to the old woman sitting next to her in a long pink wool dress and said *Momma's in the fact'ry, she ain't got no shoes*, and repeated the line until the woman's mouth formed a hard frown and she left. Her own boldness made her so excited that she graded the next few papers A+ without comment, adding smiley faces.

Now, as the chorus to "Tombstone Blues" came around through her shallow phone speakers, she decided that she was probably losing her mind. But her blog would be her chance to become a contender, a figure of influence. No great people had ordinary minds. Each was diseased enough to do something impressive with their lives. This morning, her brain had sickened a little more in just the right way. The phone screen emitted blue light that threw angular shadows across the walls. She wondered if she could read them. Her nose started its daily acclimation to bay stink.

Her phone pinged, cutting off the song at *and dropping a barbell, he points to the sky...* The AP news app had pushed a notification onto her phone: *Terror suspect Rafael Alessi confirmed stable with second-degree burns at Tampa General Hospital*. This story

had made national news this week, as much for its importance as its strangeness: while the Governor of Florida ate lunch at a local island restaurant, the lone cook had set off a small explosion in the kitchen that burned the building to the ground. By all accounts the Governor had been completely unharmed, but a few reporters suffered smoke poisoning trying to save their equipment. The man who set off the explosion, Rafael Alessi, hadn't been so lucky. Unconscious and with no known relatives, Rafael couldn't respond to the rampant speculation on cable news. Authorities cited unspecific material obtained at his home that supported the motive of eco-terrorism, though public details remained sketchy. With that motive settled on, the media had moved on to what the terror attack meant for Obama and the extent to which his policies were to blame.

No pictures of Rafael had been published, and until now, nobody knew where he'd been taken after the explosion. Charges had yet to be filed. Media would not be allowed anywhere near the suspect, since the word *terrorism* was involved. Deborah remembered thinking that not much about the story made sense, but that the national coverage made her blog irrelevant on the issue.

Now, though, this man Rafael sat in a hospital bed not five miles away. No doubt news reporters would be fighting, and failing, to get inside. Especially among her new readers, nobody would care about an opinion column on the story. None of them would share a small new article on their news feeds. But a picture, that would have legs. A plan started to form in Deborah's mind, but she tried not think too far ahead while she dialed her phone, in the same way you don't envision the entirety of a painting while you're

adding brushstrokes. You watch the art reveal itself in front of you, she thought. A toddler connecting the dots of enlightenment.

Her grandmother came over the line after a fumble and some mispressed buttons. "Oh baby girl, I haven't heard from you in weeks." Her southern accent moved slick-as-butter. "How's school? I bet you're having the *biggest* time."

"Earned a silver star yesterday for vocabulary," Deborah said.

"Oh, that's wonderful, dear." She paused for a moment, probably to chew on her happiness. "But don't they usually give gold stars?"

"In college the stars are silver," Deborah said, picking through discarded piles of plastic eye-patches and skull-and-crossbones hats with her toes until she found her damp pair of Reefs. "So I was wondering, I made you some, uh," she said, then paused to blink some lingering marijuana sludge from her brain, "baked a batch of cookies, and I'm out and about thinking maybe you'd want me to bring you some for lunch."

"You know I'm rocking babies in the natal unit over at TGH through noon."

"Aw, that's too bad, seeing as I've got class this afternoon and I'm holding a tray of warm cookies here. How's about I'll bring them by right now?"

"There's a baby in my hands, so I'm not sure I can come down."

"Toss me the door code and I'll just drop them off in the break room."

While her Grandmother recited the number, Deborah shuffled through her drawer in burnt-yellow lamp light for her vape pen. "Perfect, thanks," she said, and stretched her thumb to hang up. "Love you."

"Oh, before you go, honey..."

*

By the time she'd reached her car in the driveway, she had finally begun to awaken. Her dreams had never been able to mimic the exact racket of bugs, nor the thickness of the morning air, nor the breath of a retreating thunderstorm, which tasted like warm bread. All these things formed one impossible fabric.

Deborah didn't trust people who grew up in this strange jungle, in the same way she wouldn't trust a Martian. As a little girl, she'd stayed up too late with her father watching *The Twilight Zone*, and her favorite episode had been titled "People Are Alike All Over" or something. In this episode, two astronauts crashed on Mars, and the surviving one found himself tricked into living in a mock house in a Martian zoo, labeled *Earth creature in his native habitat*. Any day now, Deborah wondered if she might wake up in a de-humidified room with minimal furnishings and white countertops, an avocado here, an expensive juicer there. *Californian in her natural habitat*, the sign would read. That's what this place had brought her to – at night she dreamed of fake pirates, and in these waking hours, driving now over the bridge to Davis Islands where Tampa General Hospital hugged the seawall, she thought of Martians.

In the neighborhood of hospital workers off Davis Boulevard, behind the visitor TGH parking garage, she pulled her old maroon Grand Am into the driveway in front of the pastel pink house where Banks had moved to begin his residency. He answered on the third ring of his doorbell, shirtless in a pair of red scrub pants. She sniffed the lavender Glade plug-ins that filled nearly every outlet in his living room. He squinted at her.

"Give me those pants," Deborah said.

Banks sniffed. "I miss you, too, but honestly, it's a little early for a hook-up."

"I'll take another pair, if you have them."

"Baby, it's not that we didn't have a great thing going last winter, because we did," he said, picking up a rehearsed tone, probably from talking to himself in the mirror, "but since you dumped me, I've been thinking a lot about myself, you know? And I think I'm better off single right now. I need to figure myself out, you know, for my career." He finished with a gusto that she found a little sad.

"Keep your pants on," Deborah said, pushing past him and bee-lining straight for his dresser. She found the pair of teal scrubs she used to wear when she slept over in their sex-filled winter, the ones that he'd deliberately shrunk in the dryer so they'd fit her figure better. She'd gained twenty pounds since then, but they'd do. The fact that he still had them brought her a twinge of guilt. Before she could be seen, she swiped his plastic TGH identification card out from his sock drawer.

Out of the corner of her eye, Banks watched her pull off the skinny jeans and shirt in the shadow of his bedroom and don the baggy scrubs. She was careful to tuck the shirt over her gut and into the pants and pull the drawstring tight. On her way out the door, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. His stubble tickled her lips.

"It's that fucking Cuban terrorist, isn't it?" Banks said, not hiding his disappointment. "That guy might never open his eyes again, you know. Maybe he tried to kill the Governor, maybe not, but it's not a joke." Banks dug his toe into his carpet, then looked away from her, out the front door and into the wet morning. "Those scrubs are the property of Tampa General Hospital."

"Glad to hear about your career, babe," she said.

Banks studied her in the scrubs. She could have sworn he noticed the shape of the ID card pressed against the scrub pocket, but if so he didn't stop her. "You'd make a decent journalist." This time, he looked her in the face.

"I'm an artist," she answered, making her way back to her Grand Am.

While she backed the car down his driveway, she pitied the admiration showing through on his puffy morning face. *He* had been the one to seduce *her*, she remembered. This broad-shouldered medical student had asked her on a date, standing in the sterile hallways of Intensive Care while she'd been visiting her grandmother after her heart attack last November. She'd never promised him anything more than a casual fling, which guys loved, goddamn *lived* for, and expecting more was his own fault. In her rearview, she watched him scratch his head in the morning light and shuffle back into his house again, closing the door carefully behind him.

The drive to TGH took her through only a few winding backstreets, surrounded with lush green yards blanketed by sprinklers, despite the thunderstorms every afternoon. Their mist shone orange in the sunrise. Growing up near the desert, she'd never imagined a world so thick with water could exist outside the rainforest.

She parked in the employee parking lot, where the hospital security never bothered to ticket. Across the hospital campus, by the front entrance, news radio towers stuck up from vans into the red sunrise sky, silhouetted against retreating thunderheads. Nobody would notice her slipping into the back door of the staff rec room, using her grandmother's code, nor would they see her swiping Banks's ID card in the Intensive Care

scanner and entering the florescent halls where Rafael Alessi, the Cuban terrorist of Tampa Bay, awaited his portrait in *Gulf Coast Gunk*.

CHAPTER SEVEN (HANK)

Hank had to borrow a lantern to make his way back to his truck. The flame cast a halo of ominous red light against the trees. Breaking twigs echoed around him. The high had faded into general numbness, and his reflexes, he knew, were shot. *Bears hate fire*, he reminded himself. *Don't drop the fire*. He swayed the lantern in front of him for confidence, but the movement only gave the trees the appearance of dancing around him, scaring him all the more. The drive home went pretty much the same way: silent, half-awake, aware of sounds shifting at his back. He cracked the windows so that the moist night air whipped around his head. One of his favorite things about marijuana was the way it traded sobriety for a different kind of awareness, amplified certain sounds and sensations that normally went unnoticed. But the daily repetition of the last year had loosened his mind into understanding that he was really only planting his feet beside the compactor and digging a deeper and deeper hole.

He worked his truck into the narrow sliver of dirt beside his trailer. When he turned off the ignition, he felt the back end shimmy. His legs lagged through the first few steps toward his front door, and only when he stopped to pull out his keys did the shifting sound in the bed of his truck become unmistakable. The suspension relieved itself. By the time he'd turned around, the little old man from the commune, the bald pink one, had stepped into the glow of his porch light. He held the hardcover book loosely under his arm. One sheet of Hank's newspaper stuck out the top.

"I can explain."

Of course, Hank thought, *now this*. It took him a few moments to notice that he was still holding his key up in front of the door lock, as if caught in the act of something shameful. Slowly, Hank let his hand fall back to his side. The old man moved the book from under one arm to under the other. His body made other minute adjustments – fingers twitching, eyes blinking, and eventually he rubbed his free palm over the entirety of his bald head. Working his way up to something.

“My name is Bud Christensen,” he said, then chewed on the words for a moment, smiling. His eyes turned glassy. “Damn, it feels good to say my name.”

“Well, Bud Christensen, go ahead and explain.”

“You’re not going to invite me inside?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

Nobody had been inside his trailer in a long time, not since the girl he asked on a date his final day of theology class. He’d watched her from the back of the musty classroom for months, masturbated to her plenty of times, and on his final day, with nothing to lose, asked her on a date out in Elizabethton. *That would be nice*, she answered, frowning. Her name was Tina. His virginity started loosening its hold. She wore too much makeup on the date, and had conditioned her hair too much, so that it sat plastered across the top of her head. They ate pizza at the parlor, talking about not much besides class, while Hank mentally rehearsed the sexual routine he hoped to perform on her after their long sweeping drive through the mountain roads back home. She let out a sigh at the sight of his trailer, despite his attempts to tidy. Hank managed a kiss, but she pushed him away when he went straight of the tiny red buttons on her cotton shirt. Then

came the long drive back to town with her in the passenger seat, wordless, with her arms tight across her chest. All of this came back to him now, at the idea of this old man coming into his domain. Defensiveness burned acidic in his chest.

Bud Christensen spread his arms. His oversized brown button-down and cheap nylon jacket spread like a cape. The book fell to ground beside him, and he took a slow spin. Somehow, this was meant to demonstrate his harmlessness.

“We give you free weed, a place to sleep whenever you want, trust you with our little secret alcove, and you won’t even let me into your trailer.”

“It’s Shy Ann gave me the weed. I don’t know you.”

“You think Shy Ann gives a shit about you? The guy’s just trying to *recruit* you. Thinks you’re not what you say you are, that maybe you’d buy into the life. The youngest one of us is pushing seventy. Shy Ann just wants somebody to do the heavy lifting.”

Hank hadn’t put the pieces together before, but this did make sense. The way Shy Ann always pushed about his past, always asked about his father. The care he took to present their way of life as a beautiful. The risk he faced inviting Hank out there in the first place. This wasn’t so much of a surprise – what took Hank off guard was the flattery that tickled his chest, the honor of being considered, even if this stranger was really just trying to explain away Shy Ann’s kindness.

“Tell me what you want, Mr. Christensen.”

“Bud, that’s what everybody calls me.” Bud approached Hank on his trailer steps, extended a soft, dry hand. His grip was shockingly firm. After a few curt shakes, he retreated and placed both hands behind his back. “I’m extremely hungry.”

The simplicity of the request put Hank at ease. Hunger had a certain vulnerable edge. Nobody who meant him harm would ask him for food. “Sorry, I don’t have anything besides chicken noodle soup. Maybe some crackers, I don’t know. Eggs.”

“Oh, sweet Lord. Chicken noodle...” Bud made an orgasmic noise from deep in his throat. “About all I’ve eaten in the last year is dried-out venison and cabbage.”

“You followed me home to ask me for food?”

“No, I have an offer to make.” A little guilty, but determined. Bud examined the outside of Hank’s trailer – off-white metal paneling shining with moisture, vertical strips of light visible through the panels of his window blinds. “I can help you.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Oh, I very much doubt that.” Bud laughed in a high birdsong register. “Once people get to know me, they unfailingly need my help.”

“I’m doing just fine on my own.”

With a sudden ferocity, Bud rushed forward so that his breath brushed Hank’s face. Though a full head shorter, his body stood boldly straight. His scowl transformed his face into a strange nightmare of hard lines. “Say that one more time. Look at me, right in the face, and say that one more fucking time.” His eyes almost made their own light in the shadow of the trailer. *You*, they seemed to repeat, *I can help you*.

“I’m doing...” but there was no point in fighting.

Bud turned soft again. He breezed over to pick up his book, all smiles. Something about this old man vibrated on an invisible frequency. “Let’s talk about it,” Bud said, gesturing to the front door of the trailer. “Over some soup.”

*

Turning on the lights in his trailer felt violating. He was showing off the cluttered storage closet of his brain. In the last year of living alone, each corner had become a familiar part of himself. The stick-on floor tiles glossed with a recent Swiffering. The television sat perched atop a makeshift stand of hardcover encyclopedias, and his armchair was covered with a clean purple sheet that hid the rough-sewn fabric. Fake wood paneling did give the walls an unavoidable tackiness, but most of the time that didn't much bother him. Hank searched for a reaction on Bud's face, but the old man had already taken a seat at the card table in the kitchen. He drummed on the table with his knuckles, impatient with hunger. His fists made no sound on the padded surface, but the metal fold-out legs creaked. Only when Hank had a visitor was he reminded of how tragic his whole place must have looked.

While the microwave rattled heat into a plastic bowl of chicken noodle, Bud studied the newspaper headline and the article below. Judging by the way he scanned the article top to bottom to top again, he'd already seen it enough to have the contents memorized. Hank recognized the front page from the paper dropped into Bud's lap that afternoon, the one about the attack on the Florida governor. Under the headline, a picture of the small wooden restaurant, charred into a husk. Bud's reading face was all angles – tight brow, sucked-in cheeks, airtight lips. In another context, he would look angry.

Hank plopped the hot bowl of soup on the table. Before he could retrieve a spoon, Bud had started to chug like from an oversized goblet, sending drops of soup all over the floor. His shirt soaked up the runoff from his chin.

“Preservatives,” Bud said. “Delicious. I’d love another bowl, please,” he added, then started reading the paper again.

Hank popped the top off another can, his last. He filled the bowl and put the microwave back to work. “Alright, but you’re using a spoon this time.”

“Rafael,” Bud mumbled. “Hang in there.”

“You mean the terrorist? You know him?” Hank made his way to the closet to deposit his stack of bills for the day. The closet door gave way to some bundles tumbling out. It took a few discrete kicks to push them back into place.

“Long time acquaintances. It’s what you’d call a long story. But he isn’t a terrorist. Wouldn’t hurt a fly.” Bud paused, reconsidered. “Not like this, at least.”

Bud returned to reading. The terrorist headline from his newspaper, Bud hiding in his truck and needing a favor from him, these things started to connect in Hank’s tired mind. He recognized the paranoid glitches of logic that usually came with smoking. There loomed the possibility that none of this was actually happening. Hank felt the need to say something, to assert his presence in the room.

“It’s a strange coincidence,” he said, not sure of his own meaning.

“Right? Who honestly tries to kill a governor with a kitchen fire? Just when you think Teddy has given up on his poll numbers, he goes and pulls this shit.” Bud slammed the paper down. “But it’s the journalists that piss me off. The word *terrorist* gets them so hard, they don’t even take a second think the whole thing through.”

“You knowing him, I think that’s what I meant.” Hank tossed the new stack of singles into the pile. “I mean, that’s the coincidence. Who is Teddy?”

“Coincidence is nothing but a series of causes and effects you aren’t privy to. The smart man doesn’t believe in coincidence. Hell, if I didn’t know Rafael Alessi, I probably wouldn’t be living in this godforsaken place, and poor old Rafael wouldn’t be... aw, damn it all,” Bud said, sounding a little sick. His hands trembled. “Say, that was quite a bit of change you had there, a regular Irishman’s—”

“Irishman’s bundle. I never understood what people meant by that.”

“Interesting question.” Bud stroked his chin for a moment, seeming to take the question seriously. “For some reason, our culture has decided that it’s now okay to joke about how poor the Irish used to be. Ever since Kennedy, at least. Maybe it’s just because Irish people are white. I mean, Asian immigrants used to be poor, too, but you can’t just go around calling them racial slurs. Did you know there’s a whole separate type of gypsy, called *Irish Travelers*? They have their own language and everything. They’re regular gypsies in a way, but there are less of them, and they speak this weird Celtic language. Nobody really pays them much mind though. They just let them be. Again, maybe because they’re white, I don’t know. But it’s *interesting*, right?”

Bud looked to Hank for confirmation, but turned away too quickly for an answer. His talking picked up speed and took on a nasal register that reminded Hank of how his theology professor used to lecture. “Sort of like back in Florida, how everybody treasures the Cuban immigrants, appreciates their presence in the culture, but then the Mexicans get deported, and everybody gets worked up about how they take *jobs* away.” Bud rose to his feet under the energy of his own voice. His hands started demonstrating the words, to nobody in particular, in much the same way Hank would pace and talk to himself when

high and alone. But to act this way in a stranger's presence, and sober – that was a whole other story. Hank tried to think of somewhere far enough for this man to come from.

“Cubans are sometimes whiter, so that would support the whole Irish theory. But it's more than that, I think. There's something else going on there, maybe to do with communism. Kennedy hated the communists, and he was Irish, and in that way it's all connected through communism. Maybe if Ireland and Mexico were communist and not just poor, their immigrants would have been treated better.”

Far, far away, Hank thought. Massachusetts, maybe. The microwave beeped the end of its cycle and ceased, leaving nothing but the sound of Bud's footsteps pacing the kitchen floor. Whatever energy vibrated in his spry body seemed to be building. Hank crossed his arms and leaned against the kitchen counter.

“Say, Bud, where are you from?”

“Florida, of course.” Bud frowned. “What did you think we're talking about?”

“You're doing most of the talking,” Hank said.

Bud paced more. “Florida has a very strange immigrant deal. See, one Mexican and one Cuban could step off the same boat in South Beach and the Cuban would be allowed to stay, political asylum being the law of the land. But the other one, the Mexican, would have to... wait a minute!” Bud spun ballerina-like on his heel, jumped into the air. “Of course! It's Juan. Rafael was trying to protect *Juan*.” Bud plopped into his chair, overwhelmed with what must have been some massive realization. The trailer floor shook under him. Back to scanning the article, newly awake.

Bud smiled up at Hank. “You’ve already proven very helpful.” He stood and removed the bowl from the microwave, sipped from it much more carefully. Something new, more proper, had been brought to life in him during this display. “But right here is where things get a little more complicated.”

They talk tricky in the concrete jungle, Hank remembered his father saying, *because they don't know what it means to live in peace*. That was when his father would repeat his favorite Bible verse to him, as he did every Sunday, when he found himself in a spiritual mood. John fourteen, verse twenty-seven: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid*. Judging by this crazy old man, maybe his father had been right.

“I had hoped you’d need money, but you seem to be all set on that.” Having finished the bowl of soup, Bud placed it on the table and took a few slow steps toward Hank, full again with intensity. “So that begs the question: what *do* you want?”

“I’m not the one in somebody else’s trailer.” But he couldn’t clear the idea from his head: his bullshit father, pointing the spatula, telling the truth. “You’re supposed to tell me what *you* want. What I want is none of your business.”

“Oh, it’s very much my business.” Bud pointed at Hank’s pocket. “Pull out your phone. Go to Google, search for XS Holdings.”

“I don’t have a smartphone.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s a personal thing.”

Bud started pacing again. Hank's inner arms started to sweat into his shirt. To busy himself, he took the bowl from the counter and started washing it out in the sink. Judging by the tilt of his head while he watched, Bud found this interesting, as well.

"Let's go use your computer instead."

"No." Hank pictured the crusty pile of tissues piled beside his desk, the slickness of lubricant on his computer mouse. The grimy depressions at the center of each letter on the keyboard, not to mention the series of pornographic bookmarks lining the top of his browser. These things didn't so much enter his thoughts as make themselves known within the back of his head, where they lived. Nobody but Hank had ever set foot in his computer room. Even the girl he'd taken on the date, Tina – he'd made his move out in the living room on the couch, nervous that she might see his computer room and somehow sense the time he spent back there each night.

"You don't have a computer?" Bud circled around Hank now, his interest like a suffocating plastic bag. "I find that hard to believe."

"None of your business."

The bowl slipped from his hands, making a horrible racket against the cheap metal of the sink. A small broken piece circled the drain. Bud presumed to lean forward over his shoulder and speak into his ear. His breath was cool. "Fine, don't look me up. It's just that you'll probably want some proof when I tell you who I am."

"You told me, your name is Bud Christensen."

"Doesn't mean you know who I am. My company XS Holdings makes me the most valuable land developer in Florida, one of the most valuable in America." Bud

turned him around by both shoulders. And there it was – that same face, the *reading* face, hardened and searching. “I’m worth more money than everyone you’ve ever met combined, times ten. Doing me a favor will change your life.” The flicker of desperation in his eyes gave Hank the confidence to answer.

“Give me a number.”

“I’m worth the neighborhood of two hundred million.”

“If that’s true, why do you need me?”

“That’s the funny part, when you think about it,” Bud answered, and backed into a spread-arm pose. “Right now, I’m just an old man in the woods. No photo ID, no credit cards, no cash, not even a phone. Naked as the day I was born, but with clothes.” All this, with a menacing smile. So much time living with those hippies, but his teeth were white as clouds. “I could get somebody up here to retrieve me, but there are matters back home that require my *immediate* attention. That’s what this all boils down to. Give me a ride to Florida, in your truck, right now, and I’ll give you *anything you want*.”

“You’re full of shit,” Hank said, because that was the kind of thing somebody should say at this moment, because none of what he was hearing followed from anything he’d ever known to be possible. This old man, he had to be jerking him. But with an impossibility suggesting itself, Hank was strangely excited.

“Told you so.” Bud glanced at the clock on wall, started tapping his foot. “Look me up on your computer, then. You do have a computer, right? Nod yes or no.”

Hank was surprised how fast he nodded.

“Good. Whatever made you nervous before – what, you’re a hacker, I’m guessing? No, hackers are smarter than you. No offense.” Slight pacing, the man couldn’t help himself. “Porn addiction? Embarrassing desktop background?” Shook himself out of his curious trance, planted his feet. “You know what, you were right, it’s none of my business. I don’t care if you have dead bodies back there. Just hurry.”

The search didn’t take long. Bud’s face on the Wikipedia page was visibly younger. Full name: William “Bud” Christensen. Founder and CEO of XS Holding Company, Orlando, Florida. Strangely small amount of biographical information, besides his birth year, 1942. Net worth: \$213 million, with a green arrow pointing upwards. Quick scrolling showed *Criticism* and *Lawsuits* making up the bulk of the page. Under the Personal Life section, the article said he hadn’t been seen in public for over a year. The particular light of the computer screen gave Hank the beginnings of an erection on reflex, so he turned off the monitor and made his way back to the kitchen.

“So, there you have it,” Bud said, arms crossed. “Now, tell me what you want.”

Hank had never needed to answer this question. Mostly, his life had been a series of decisions about what happened next. A long chain of reactions, all simple enough. Like the compactor – the easy way that even the toughest pieces of garbage flowed smoothly into its jaws, as if they were always meant to be smaller, more manageable. Why that thought suddenly reminded him of Kelly, her smell, he didn’t know.

Bud, impatient: “In case you’re curious, the answer is yes. It’s possible to buy women. No better place than Florida, really. They’re pretty cheap if you don’t care what

language they speak. English, you need a little more. French, you're talking thousands, easy." Then, after a few silent blinks: "And no, it's not a good idea. Believe me."

"I don't *know* what I want." The answer had the sound of an epiphany. Ridiculous tears lurked behind his eyes. He'd never expected to have to say something so intimate out loud, and certainly not to a stranger. "I don't want anything."

"Even better. Nothing more promising than a blank canvas." That smile again, now a little less menacing. "We're going to have a great time, you and me. Get packed."

CHAPTER EIGHT (RAFAEL)

Blue seeping into black. Bright colors laughing, jagged like broken teeth opening to swallow him whole. Black again. Beep beep beep. Machinery grinding in the back of his jaw, inside his skull. Skin sticking to wet fingertips. The voices, young and busy. Their words tugging at something attached to his groin. The machines answering.

They're saying he's the waiter from that tourist spot on Sunken Island.

I went there once with my parents. Had to take this crappy old ferry from Clearwater Beach to get out there. Waiter at the café was a big guy, kind of quiet.

This look like him?

Can't really tell, since... well, you know.

Beep beep beep. Grind.

My dad talked to him about jai alai for like an hour. Recognized him as some great player from way back. The waiter didn't want to talk, though. Got all shifty. My dad kept on yapping anyway. Got to talking about the mob. You know how he gets.

Beep beep beep. Grind.

It's like tennis for Cubans.

More like racquetball.

Shifting under his ass. Lifting, lowering, lifting, lowering.

Way more dangerous than racquetball.

More than tennis, too.

Used to be a famous hot shot, this guy. If you believe my dad.

Real famous, or Tampa famous?

Tampa famous. Miami famous, maybe.

Beep beep beep. Grind.

Well, he's real famous now.

The black starting to surround him. Swirling, loosening. Nothing he could do to stop it now, the Great Black Thing pulling. Sweat gathering inside a leather cesta glove. A long time ago, memory building around him after decades buried.

His shoulder tightens to whip the pelota and send clicks echoing off the fronton walls like insects chirping in bushes. The opponent's cesta sends a ghostly whirl through the air. The call-and-answer of jai alai. Every match, a beautiful and ancient conversation. It's a hot summer afternoon in Orlando, and the sun has beat on the outside of the walls, turning the amateur fronton into an oven. He trades tosses with his opponent at such speed that they each move by instinct, with the grace of dance steps. The echoes trickle to nothing. It takes him a few seconds to realize he has won another round. Wipes his face with a handkerchief, slips his helmet back to tuck his hair underneath. Thicker then, and darker. He is twenty years old.

In the stands, the familiar balding older man, wearing an oversized suit and spitting tobacco into an Easy Mac cup. He has been watching matches here for nearly a week now, and Rafael has begun to wonder whether the man is watching him in particular. Today another man has accompanied him – younger, taller, with a slimmer black suit. Slicked black hair. Both of them out of place in the amateur fronton. The building was once a warehouse for an air conditioning wholesaler. On the wall, a dust-caked industrial fan blows sticky air from outside. The three-walled court traps body

odor, and the missing fourth wall lacks a protective net to shield the bleachers. Spectators sometimes have to duck misfired pelotas that blast into the metal underbelly. Rafael still uses his beat-up old cesta, smelly pads, and wears his grimy jumpsuit unchanged after another day working construction. His mother hates jai alai, breaks sometimes into quiet tears at the thought that her son would play such a dangerous sport. Sure, the ball speed could reach 180 miles per hour, but only four people have ever died in America playing the sport. Earlier this afternoon, still wearing her stained hotel maid outfit, she accused him of playing just to spite her, to cause her pain. After an adolescence living in their low-ceiling apartment in the shitty part of Orlando, watching her work abusive hours and dream impossible dreams for him, maybe she was right. But the way she fought him made his blood pump harder. She is the only person he has the power to hurt. Only later will he understand the other side – with no husband, no living parents, and all her cousins still living back in Cuba, he is also the only person in the world that she loves.

By the time he finally meets the older man in the stands, the amateur games have ceased being competitions so much as chances for him to beat down strangers. So aggressive have his serves grown that he has more than once sent opponents cowering out of play. The other players have been old men, middle-aged at the youngest, meaning only to re-create their younger days playing the sport in their native countries. Among them, a few Southern white men have also picked up the game to bring exotic culture into their mid-life leisure. These men are both the worst players and the most competitive ones, their faces turning bright with effort. One man, an early-sixties retiree named Walter, wears a full-mask lacrosse helmet instead of the typical open-face jai alai gear. It's the

fastest game in the world, the man loves to remind them, like the danger is the reason for playing. The old men hurl their sagging bodies around the fronton, stumbling idiots, no match for young Rafael – wide-set but not yet heavy. Hungry. After matches, the others often go out for drinks together. Rafael has made no friends.

At the end of another day scaring his opponents off the court, he sees this wiry little man finally approach him with the slim suited companion at his side, who introduces himself as *an associate*. The little man introduces himself second – Bud Christensen – and offers him a business card and a voucher for a custom-made set of jai alai equipment at the local specialty shop. His associate speaks with a shaky German accent, telling him not to use Mr. Christensen's name at the shop. The voucher would suffice. *Consider this the beginning of a business relationship*, Bud adds, then leaves the fronton, stopping for a moment by the door to take one long disgusted look around at the three dingy walls, the long narrow court covered with matte scuff marks.

His associate would explain the details.

This will be your last day at the amateur fronton, he tells him with a German accent. One week later he'll begin with the big boys on the sleek professional court downtown, where high-rollers trade fortunes with the fervor of day laborers at a cockfight. Mr. Christensen has already made a small fortune in real estate, and enjoys gambling at the fronton, but has grown tired of betting on strangers and taking the petty winnings. He wants young talent to nurture, a champion to call his own. Mr. Christensen will offer Rafael a 50-50 split on all his winnings and hold them, *in trust* was the phrasing, so he can invest and re-invest them in his jai alai matches as well as stocks,

bonds, and real estate. *Mr. Christensen sees something in you*, the associate tells him, *and he wants to help you*. He'd take care of anything Rafael needs, whether that be practice space, equipment, even meals. Once a week, he would also deposit one hundred dollars cash into the post office box number handwritten on the back of the business card. Until the day Rafael decides to retire and collect his winnings, this will serve as his payment. *Trust fund children have much the same arrangement*, the man adds, winking.

"But I don't understand what he wants from me. It's a public game. Anybody could bet on me at the pro fronton if they want to."

"Mr. Christensen will be handling all your bets privately."

"Is that legal?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"This doesn't sound legal," he repeats, louder.

"It's very difficult to hear in this building," the man answers. "There is too much commotion." His voice echoes through the empty fronton. He hands Rafael a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill, his first payment, and Rafael finally understands his meaning.

"I'm just not sure I can trust you."

The man looks confused. "We're asking nothing of you. We're only offering support. Keep playing the game, that's all. Meet us at the pro fronton next Saturday at ten in the morning with your new gear. We'll have your matches for the day arranged." The man lingers for a moment. As his voice softens, his German accent seeps more deeply into his speech. "I know it's strange the way my boss does things, but Mr. Christensen is really a very generous man. A good person. No matter who you are, no matter where

you're from or what you've done with your life until this moment, Mr. Christensen only wants to help you." The man begins to back off, his dress shoes clicking on the floor. "Believe me," he adds, turning away now. "I would know."

Bud Christensen, CEO – XS Holdings, the business card reads. Only later will Rafael recognize the company name from his mother's paychecks and learn just how much land this man owns in Central and South Florida. Miles and miles of empty pastures and woods, a few small hotels here and there. Only later will Bud's many resorts rise medieval from the fields, set back always in the distance no matter how close you reach toward them. Even inside, their hulk will grow so overwhelming that nothing can be touched with something so frail as human hands. Years after his last match, visiting his dying mother in the shadow of one such resort, Rafael will imagine Bud concealed at the top of the highest tower, big and distant as the sky.

Many years even after that, memory will distort the past into dank monochrome. He'll remember their old house and the two of them: poor, trapped, hopeless, the summer heat an oppressive hand always pressing down on their roof. Mosquitoes and spiders gathering in gross arrangements along the walls, which his mother has no time or energy to clean after eighteen-hour shifts preparing rooms for tourists in the resort monoliths, with their engineered lagoons and transplanted palm trees. At night in his Clearwater Beach apartment, his dusty old jai alai gear will light up white from the glow of the computer screen. Next to the gear, he will keep the blood-stained murderous pelota on a baseball stand, and *goddamn Bud*, he'll think. The construction noise, *goddamn that too*. Goddamn those hotels and the tourists who fill them, working his mother to death in a

fake paradise. He will read articles about how those high-rise resorts came to be, how developers knocked down and drained thousands of acres of woodland and swamp, blanketed the land with poison. No wonder the edges of Buena Vista and Orlando always have a copy-and-paste appearance to them, as though they've been dropped from helicopters onto blank-slated green pasture. Though his mother never spoke about their move from Cuba, she must have known that they didn't truly belong there in the middle of Florida, that no humans had no business there. They should have stayed in their native home, where people understood the land. His mother could have had an honest job. No pale, fat tourists to grovel for. A husband and father for Rafael. There should have been no Orlando, no jai alai, no Bud Christensen.

The letter, written shakily in bad Spanish, saying that his mother had passed away. Signed by the Brazilian maid who'd befriended her at work.

I'm with the FBI. I don't give a damn if he's conscious.

Men in comas have rights like the rest of them.

Sleeping terrorists are still terrorists.

One night after a pro match, Bud takes Rafael out to eat at an oversized tourist restaurant near Disney World. Tropical aquariums line the walls. Rafael shoves down buttery lobster and creamy pasta before he'll have to come home to pick through his mother's meager dinner. She has noticed him growing heavier, but never suspects anything more than a changing metabolism. She doesn't see the food he gorges himself on with the extra hundred dollars each week. Tonight, she thinks he is working a late construction shift. Bud speaks mostly of jai alai at this fancy dinner. The pride the older

man seems to have in him, how he admires his skill and ambition, gives Rafael a foreign kind of satisfaction. At the end of the night, he assures Rafael that all his winnings are growing through investment, that in a year or two he'll be set for life. At the end of the night, plates caked with residue, Bud has a few extra margaritas.

"Do you know why I picked you?"

"Because I was better than the other players," Rafael says.

"No, no," Bud swats in front of him, a little drunkenly. "There are plenty of good players. It's the anger in your play, the *rage*. Every swing looks fresh for you. You're never just going with the flow of the game. You make every match your own."

"Thank you," Rafael says.

For a moment, Bud stares at him, the admiration almost overwhelming. He leans forward into his face. *You*, those eyes seem to say, menacing: *I can help you*. Then he sits back again, takes another polite sip.

"Have you ever been to Disney World?"

"Too expensive." Rafael takes a gulp of wine. "Why?"

"Do you know how Walt bought all that land?"

His associate, the German man, clears his throat. He has come along to dinner, but he has never much spoken in Rafael's presence unless asked a question by Bud. He watches his boss, wet-eyed and loyal. Rafael has never asked the man's name.

"Land?"

"Walt's company owns an excessive amount of land. Disney World has only developed about a quarter of its total property. Disneyland ran out of space, you see, and

Walt, rest his soul, wanted to make sure that would never happen again. So what better place than a bunch of woods and farmland in the middle of the Sunshine State?"

"Interesting," Rafael says, swallowing a mouthful of pasta.

"You see, your average developer follows the routine. Announces his intentions, applies for permits, tries to buy land en masse." Bud taps his temple. "But he was clever, that Walt. He never followed the rules. You know what he did instead?"

Bud allows for some silence before ribbing his associate.

"Dummies," the man says, his accent giving the *s* a serpentine hiss.

"Dummies," Bud repeats, nodding.

"Dummies?" Rafael, mouth full.

"Walt set up some dummy corporations, with all kinds of strange names. Bought the land in little harmless parcels. By the time the farmers and ranch owners noticed what was happening and tried to raise their prices, it was too late. Uncle Walt owned a giant plot of land in the middle of the state, and *bam*, those pastures become the greatest tourist destination in the goddamn world. One of the dummies was called M. T. Lott Real Estate Investments," Bud says, giggling. "M. T. Lott, get it?"

"No," Rafael says.

"Empty lot," his associate says, without much humor.

"Now, the developers of today have different obstacles. You don't get land for that cheap in Florida anymore, no matter how many dummies you use. But that's not the point, the *attitude* is the point. The point is that Walt thought ahead." Bud taps his temple. "The smart man thinks ahead. Now, tell me, Rafael. What is the obstacle of tomorrow?"

By the time Rafael realizes he was supposed to answer, Bud has downed the rest of his margarita, shaken his finger, and started up again.

“The environment. Any idiot can see that this boom will end. Get just a few more bleeding hearts in Tallahassee, and you’ll need a Bible worth of permits to build a goddamn swing set. They’ll be sending experts in to count every alligator and who-the-fuck-knows kind of endangered bird, until they can declare your land the Garden of Eden, and then it’s worthless. Your property, a glorified zoo without fences.”

“That’d be a shame, Mr. Christensen.” Rafael has never seen him so worked up. The skin over Bud’s cheeks darkens to pink. His rolled sleeves have stretched with his arm movements until they hang loose and bunched around his forearms. Maybe this is a glimpse at the real Bud, the manic in the machine.

The young German has been watching Bud, leaning close to hear his every word, oddly childlike in his admiration. His eyes have the look of an epiphany.

“The idea is to plan ahead. The idea is to be ruthless.” Bud wags his finger, drunk but coming back around. “Ruthless, just like *you*.”

The food rolls over in Rafael’s stomach. Suddenly, all at once, he feels tired enough to pass out in his chair. “Wait a minute.” He gulps lukewarm water. A few thin chips of ice dance across his tongue and fall apart. “I’m listening.”

"You see, it's my theory that Walt Disney was a very angry man. His father beat him shitless as a kid. Giddy with rage his whole life. Only men full of rage are able to go about things that way, to put fresh energy into every move."

"So you're saying I'm Walt Disney?"

Bud leans forward, finger still up. "I'm saying that your potential has been wasted for too long. Stay with me, kid. I want to make something of you."

We've tried to contact the restaurant owner, but it's only a holding company. One of those limited liability deals. The company phone number was disconnected.

The next day. Sweating, still young but with eyes no less icy, the brand-new fluorescent lights reflecting off his head and the pro fronton walls, Bud grabs him by the cheeks before the tournament and talks straight into his eyes.

"You'll face this Miami mobster's son in the finals today, no question. All his other matches are rigged, but he'll have to play you fair and square. The mobster thinks too much of his boy. Knew he would, they always do." Bud pinches Rafael tightly on the cheek. A little pain for motivation. "Have fun with this one. You want a blowout, kid. It'll be the closest you ever come to beating God."

His final opponent emerges from the benches – a pimpled kid. Bow-legged. This boy is the one, right here, the match he has waited for all day. Unspeakable fortune, just one more win away. The boy's father sits at the top of the stands, fanning himself with a thin woven flap, surrounded by aging bodyguards. He runs what remains of the mob down in Miami, shrinking since the embargo but still active enough. "They make most of their money from property fraud," Bud had told him before the match, "but I'm better than them at that. Lots of people are." The son delivers illegal bolita numbers, hidden in food deliveries. The state lottery brings in a lot more money, but it's no longer rigged, so they've returned to the old game. It's a dinosaur, bolita. More a ruin than anything, like those beach-houses they leave standing between resorts so the tourists can take pictures.

The boy slides his cesta glove onto his fingers. In the stands, Bud Christensen rubs his hands together, his balding crown shining. Tight as a screw, he leans forward on the bench and spits tobacco into the empty Easy Mac cup. That's the man at his root, Rafael thinks. The mogul with trash in his hand. The serious man who believes in games.

From his opening stance, the boy's form is all wrong. Legs too splayed, cesta so vertical that he lacks leverage. Practiced too much with men afraid of his father. Watching the other players stage losses to him today had been shameful. To keep from scoring points, Angel Mendez had resorted to serving the pelota straight into the ground to prevent the boy from fumbling returns. Whatever wad of cash the cream-suited old man at the top of the stands gave Angel, it couldn't have been worth such debasement.

To test the boy's mettle, Rafael tosses a soft serve off the wall. Kid returns the serve, but the second volley comes harder, and he misses by nearly a foot, stumbling after his own swing. The boy looks around, confused. Rafael tosses the pelota in his hand for a while before serving again, measuring its heft. Bud was right. This kid is an amateur at best. The boy takes a moment to lock eyes with his father in the stands. *I won't let you down, father*, he seems to say. More than once Rafael has imagined the faceless shape of his own father watching his matches. Stunned, he would be, at what his son has accomplished without him.

Rafael's next serve powers off the wall and passes by the boy before he manages to lift the cesta, and the following sends him off balance without even touching him. Consecutive serves grow closer and closer to the boy's body, each one too fast for him to

answer. On the next, Rafael shaves the side of the boy's helmet. He unbuttons his chinstrap and reaches to cup his ear. The serve probably made his eardrum ring.

Waiting for him to plop the helmet back onto his head, Rafael examines the boy's rich, greedy pig face under the lights. Never touched by pain, never humiliated by the grime on his mother's clothes or the sight of her chanting her ignorant prayers over Santeria trinkets on a plastic folding table. Groveling to the great invisible nothing. Desperation soils her every word. This boy's charmed life is colossal and distant to him, and in this moment Rafael wants only to touch its face, to chip the veneer. The pelota stiffens against his squeeze. A perfectly balanced stone. With shaky hands, the boy puts his helmet back on, attaches the chinstrap, and takes his awkward position. He sways back and forth on his skinny legs in his clean white pants. Rafael's shoulder muscles tighten with blind rage. He raises his cesta like a wooden scythe, and in a whip-fast blur, the pelota shrieks out. In an instant, the boy's face explodes in a thick stream of crimson. His body collapses into a jagged pile of limbs as the puddle grows, much too fast, forming thin waves of blood on the floor.

Forever, Rafael will remember this image for its sheer proportion, the idea that such a skinny frame could hold so much liquid. The boy's oversized cesta hangs limp from his rubber glove. The fronton EMTs approach him with reverence. All of them watch the mobster for some signal that his boy can be touched.

Something pulls Rafael backward, and under the echoes of screaming spectators, Bud's voice rises, yelling *hurry up, hurry up*, but just as the fronton doors open at his back, Rafael sees the father reach the group of EMTs around his son. With some mix of

fascination and dread, Rafael plants his feet. He won't leave the fronton, not until he sees what happens to the boy. Bud hurries around in front of him.

"We need to leave right now."

"I didn't mean to hurt him." The lie aches in his gut.

Bud squeezes his shoulder. "You didn't mean to kill him, anyway."

The pelota has rolled off the court near the doors, not far from Rafael's feet. Without thinking, Rafael reaches down and slides the ball carefully into the pocket of his cesta. In the center of the pelota, a perfect circle of deep red.

The father can be seen pushing wildly through the group of EMTs, his face twisted into agony. The man falls painfully into his knees and takes his son's head into his hands. One of the boy's eye sockets looks to be swollen shut, but leaking blood nonetheless. Even the smallest facial wounds bleed that way. Rafael can't see the boy's brain swelling in his fragile skull. He has no way of knowing that the kid won't survive.

"Look at me. You don't want to see what happens next over there. Goddamnit, pay attention." Bud's eyes, full of tears. The first and last time he'll see him cry.

"Do I still get all the money?" Rafael asks. "What about the money?"

"I'm sorry about this, kid. I never should have let things get so far. I didn't even need the money, not a cent of the money. I could have handed you a million right off the bat, it's just..." Bud glances over his shoulder at the commotion behind him. "I wanted to raise you up. I thought that I could give you a chance to earn your future. But I'll take care of you now, don't you worry. I'll buy a business for you to work for the rest of your

life, somewhere I can check up on you, out by the beach. Tampa, maybe? Less commotion than Miami. They won't find you there."

He's moving, I think. Around the mouth.

We pulled back on the pain drugs an hour ago. Should be with us soon.

The boy's face, the pelota with the bloody circle.

Look at his eyes, they're flickering.

The mobster's cream suit, stained deep crimson.

His cheeks are wet. Is he... crying?

The burns must hurt worse than we thought.

The fronton collapsing into white. Teeth colors again, chewing images into mush, chomping, then re-forming into three black figures, bathed in white, one standing back behind the other two. The closest, a thin woman in a slim black pant suit.

Rise and shine.

*

"Tell us your name," she said.

It was hospital room, all-white with a strip of blue accent around the wall. Across from his bed, a stock painting of sand dunes. Three suited people stared back at him, one woman and two men. The one in the back wore a pinstripe suit much more expensive than the others and rimless glasses that magnified sharp blue eyes. His thumbs typed on his smartphone, never stopping for him to look up. Busy, but poised. His phone wore a thick black case that barely fit in his palm. Next to the hospital bed, a young nurse in pink

scrubs fiddled with some of the machinery and wires. Her movements were hurried, almost confused. Her hair was a bird's nest.

"Tell us your name," the woman repeated. An intricate badge hung from her neck.

Even the nurse stopped working to listen for his reply.

"You don't have to answer that," the pinstripe man in the back said.

"I'm..." Rafael started, then took a moment to clear the dryness from his throat.

He swallowed bitter spit. "My name is Rafael San Lazaro Alessi."

The man in the back rolled his eyes. "Strike one."

"What happened to me?"

"Your victim survived unscathed," said the second man, side-by-side with her.

"It's best if you start with the atonement right now. Did you have any accomplices?"

Rafael breathed deeply. Flashes of sunlight, fire, sirens, cold hospital air. *Babalu-aye tricks you*, his mother once told him from her hospital bed, after her first heart attack. She'd clutched the small statue of the African god in his Santeria form, San Lazaro – an old man covered in sores and leaning on crutches, junkyard dogs at his feet. *Because he wants you to be like him*. "I don't know what happened." Bandages covered nearly his entire body. From under the folds came enough tubes to strangle him. *One day we all become Babalu ourselves*. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Much better, 'atta boy," said the pinstripe man. "Now, all of you." He slipped his phone under his arm, clapped twice. "I need a minute alone with my client."

The woman and other man rolled their eyes, but made their way toward the door nonetheless, as if nudged by an invisible force.

“The cop, too,” the lawyer added, pointing to an overweight police officer in the corner of the room, whom Rafael hadn’t noticed. “Statutes clearly state that no person, law enforcement or otherwise, can infringe on attorney-client privilege.”

“Oh, do you see a constitution on the wall somewhere? Did you read the PATRIOT Act?” The woman asked, a threatening edge creeping into her voice. “Are you Thomas Jefferson? Does this look like a hall of justice?”

“Doesn’t look like Guantanamo, either.”

“With charges like these, Guantanamo isn’t out of the question.”

It was concerning that the lawyer, *his* lawyer apparently, didn’t argue. He only glanced at the police officer, back at the woman, and nodded. As he turned back, his eyes locked on the nurse by the bed, still fiddling with tubes.

“You there, Houlihan. Whatever you’re doing, you’ll have to finish later.” A few seconds passed before she noticed that he was talking to her. “Go on, skedaddle. I’m sure you have other patients to poke at.” Tugging at her scrubs, she hurried to join the others leaving the room, but paused for a moment at the precipice. From her pocket, she quickly pulled out a smartphone. She held the screen up to her eyes, steady before her, squinting to read the display. The tiny camera lens pointed directly at Rafael. Turning to leave, she shouted at no one in particular, “His vitals are normal. Patient appears to be in stable condition.” Her voice sounded surprisingly low. Grizzled, even.

Once the others had left, the lawyer sat in a chair opposite the bed and began typing on his phone again. Not a word, not so much as a glance. It went on this way for a while, until Rafael cleared his throat for attention, shredding his windpipe in the process.

“There’s a cup of water on the side table,” the lawyer said.

“Aren’t you going to ask me anything?”

“Your answers would probably be useless.”

“You told them you wanted to talk to me.”

“I wanted them out of the room.”

The policeman in the corner huffed out a chuckle. The lawyer kept typing, vigorously, as if in the middle of some passionate argument.

“I don’t know who you are.”

“You don’t recognize me. Interesting.” The man fought back a smile. “I see you’re still the declarative type.”

“You don’t know the first thing about me.”

The man pocketed his phone with some reluctance and stood. His steps sent clicking echoes off the walls that brought to mind, as all such sounds had done for the last twenty years, the heat of the leather cesta glove again, the red-stained suit. The pinstriped man wrapped his fingers around the handles at the end of the hospital bed.

“My name is Schumacher, the full-time legal counsel for Mr. Bud Christensen in all his endeavors, business and personal. That makes me your lawyer. I’d give you my business card, but I’ve never found much need for one. And you, Mr. Alessi,” he said, boring his eyes into him, “I know everything about you.”

Schumacher began to shift his weight back and forth on his feet, setting the machinery of his memory into motion. “Rafael San Lazaro Alessi, born March seventeenth, nineteen seventy-one, in the small town of Guines, Cuba, only to escape

with your mother in seventy-three, leaving your father God-knows-where. Lived in Miami for a while with your mother as a toddler, then both of you moved to Orlando where the rent was cheaper. She worked as a hotel maid at one of my employer's early knock-off resorts on International Drive. You first met Mr. Christensen through a jai alai gambling racket at the fronton in town until you killed a kid at a match in ninety-three, then worked at La Segunda Vida Restaurant on Sunken Island off the coast of Pinellas County ever since. I've seen your apartment, which I'm sorry to say the state police have already turned upside down. Found a whole heap of pills, mostly downers, but no terrorist reading material to speak of." Schumacher chewed his cheek. A smile flickered into the corner of his mouth, despite himself. "As for the restaurant, it's nothing but ruins. Lucky you didn't catch the whole island on fire. Bud's employment log lists you as the manager and sole permanent employee, except the busboy. Drake's parents lawyered him up and he isn't talking, but the investigators will ask him about you. He'll be back at school in a month, once he finishes nursing the smoke poisoning. That makes for a manager, busboy, but no cook in the log. We both know what that means."

His skin stewed under the bandages, hot and liquid. "Terrorist reading material?"

"Any non-Christian religious texts, maybe the *Communist Manifesto*, *The Art of War*, obscure fiction too far off the bestseller list. Who knows. Turns out you're clean as far as publications go, but that's not everything." His tongue clicked. "Bad news, that Santeria altar. Ritual stuff gives off the scent of blood. Is it true that Santeria practitioners still believe in human sacrifices?"

"No," Rafael said. "Never did." He was relieved to answer a simple question.

“That’s not even the real problem, though. They have your computer. They read your internet posts about the Governor.”

“They can’t just break into my house without my permission. They can’t take my computer.” These people had violated him. Soiled his home. “What you’re saying, it’s impossible. There are laws.” He tried to take a more aggressive posture, but straps held his torso and arms. They cut at him. “Tell me why I should believe a word you say.”

Schumacher smiled, as if he’d been waiting. He reached into his briefcase for something round, which he tossed once and then placed on the end of the hospital bed. Rafael recognized the same old pelota from the stand on his mantle, the faded circle of blood. “Oh yes, you’re in trouble, buddy. The laundry list of charges isn’t worth naming. Only one of them matters. One count of trying to assassinate a sitting governor.”

“But I didn’t mean to... I mean, that was an accident.”

“Any idiot knows that. Nobody tries to kill a target with an old gas stove. Fuck, the Governor himself knows an accident when he sees one. So does his communications secretary, so do the press corps. But it’s too juicy.” Schumacher gazed upward, searching his memory. “*He’d die in a second and he’d deserve it*, that’s what you said in your online post a few days ago. *That’s what he deserves*. Now that this eco-terrorism angle has caught on, nobody would dare let the line out. The rest of the country might move on to something else, but Florida is a conservative state. There’s no word they’d rather hear in a politician’s mouth than terrorism. Good guys and bad guys, cowboys and Indians. Governor backs down on calling you a terrorist, he’ll be soft when he runs for president

in ten years. Keep up the story, though, and that's airtight. That's courage in the face of threats. He'll win a second term in a landslide."

All of a sudden, his burns intensified. He began to feel that he lacked skin.

"You won't tell them who you're protecting, though, will you? According to Mr. Christensen's notes on you in the log, you've gotten stubborn. No way you can run that restaurant all by your lonesome. And if you'd used the stove before, you wouldn't have started the fire. There's a missing piece. Since the other guy isn't in the log, he must be junk of some kind. Felon, maybe, or an illegal. I don't know. I'm sure you won't tell me, though, because my job has never been easy."

Rafael remembered Juan's anxious face among the palmettos. The kid was still on the island, possibly, unless he swam the few miles to shore. Maybe at low tide he could have walked to the mainland, knee-deep in mud. Illegal immigrant, sure, but that couldn't be all. Bud didn't send just anybody to La Segunda Vida, and he damn sure didn't drop them off personally. "So, Bud said I was stubborn."

"You've always been stubborn."

"I'm the cook," Rafael said, now picturing Juan sunburned on the shores of Pinellas County, or holed up in a beach motel with no place to run.

"You shouldn't lie to me," Schumacher mumbled to himself, not trying all that hard to be convincing. "Like I said," he added, louder, plopping back into his chair and taking out his phone again. "Much too loyal."

"Bud will straighten this out. Let me talk to him."

Disengaged, typing again, the lawyer mumbled, “Good luck with that. Nobody has seen Mr. Christensen in about a year. Press releases have come from yours truly.”

“A year ago. That makes sense.”

Schumacher looked up, suddenly attentive.

“Never mind.”

“If you saw Bud before that, you need to tell me.”

“I didn’t see anything. Shouldn’t you know where he is?”

“Mr. Christensen has never been in the habit of telling other people where he goes, not even me. All I remember was that we had a bit of a human resources scuffle in Orlando. Lost one of our employees, this bratty kid just up and disappeared one day. Bud went scarce for a few days, too, and then he came back to the office all different. Couldn’t keep focused. Then a week after that, *poof*. Gone. Who knows where he went. I hadn’t seemed so shaken up since, well... your incident.”

“You know about that?” Rafael tried to sound casual.

“Don’t be cute,” Schumacher answered, turning cold again.

“This kid, the one who disappeared. What was his name? What did he look like?”

This time, not even trying to sound casual.

“That,” Schumacher said, tilting his head, “is none of your business.”

It occurred to him that either Schumacher really didn’t know where Juan had ended up after disappearing from Orlando, or else maybe they both knew everything, and this was a dance Rafael didn’t know the steps to. All he knew for sure was that Juan was probably better off not found, by Schumacher or anybody.

“Argh, damn it.” Sharp pain shot up his arm. He had been flexing against his IV. A small amount of blood peeked out from around the needle tape.

Schumacher pulled a tissue from his suit pocket and dabbed the arm. “If indeed Mr. Christensen came to see you, I need to know what he said. *Please*. This is very important.” Sincerity looked awkward on him. “He might have been feeling sentimental, looking back on past mistakes. Might have given a hint where he was going.”

“Is that really what he called them? *Mistakes?*”

Mm, Schumacher mumbled, and plopped back into his chair.

The room returned to silence, save Schumacher’s fingernails clicking the phone screen. Rafael imagined himself on the witness stand of a grand wooden courtroom, someday in the near future, asserting his innocence and spinning an impossible tale of his life alone at the restaurant. And then, of course, there was Drake. In the end, there would be no point. The white kid would eventually tell them everything.

“Fuck.” Schumacher glared at his phone screen. The reflexive jerk opened sharp pain down Rafael’s back. “*Fuck!*” Schumacher screamed again, his voice taking on a German accent with the volume. *Of course*. All those years ago, the suited associate. Schumacher pitched his phone at the wall, leaving a dent in the blue strip painted around the room. The bulky case made sense now. “I should have known that wasn’t a nurse.”

“I don’t...” Rafael began.

“Shut up, just shut right up. No more from you.”

Schumacher picked up a remote and turned on the cheap hospital television mounted to the wall. The channel defaulted to news. Along the bottom strip, Rafael

recognized his own name under a heading of *Terror in Florida*. “We’ve just received word that a picture of the alleged assailant has been leaked on an internet blog titled *Gulf Coast Gunk*. We’ll show you now, but we must warn you that the image is graphic,” said a female anchor with relish, and then the screen displayed what appeared to be a bandaged man in a hospital bed. His face was scorched so dark that the whites of his eyes popped through the screen. Rafael recognized the blue strip along the back wall, and only then did he recognize himself in the burned man. Pain seared through his body in sudden waves. “The same blog reports that Alessi is conscious and speaking, and that he has refused to cooperate with authorities.” *Babalu-aye*, his mother repeated to him, kissing the old man on his blisters. *We are made, all of us, in his image*.

CHAPTER NINE (HANK)

Hank darted around his trailer preparing to leave for Florida, following Bud's instructions: find yourself a change of clothes, Bud had said, maybe a few changes of clothes, matter of fact a *suitcase*, plus your passport, toiletries, sunglasses – don't forget your sunglasses, the sun down there is goddamn *brutal* – sunscreen, and then Bud had gone off ranting about sunburn, skin damage, melanoma, et cetera, with energy approaching mania. By the time he slowed down, his final two commands sounded reasonable by association: gather all the cash you can find, and do you have a weapon?

After that last one, Bud sucked on his cheek. Hank was wrapped up thinking about what clothes he might need to bring to Florida, whether a t-shirt would suffice and if gym shorts would be comfortable on a sun-soaked beach. Bud repeated himself: *Hank, do you own a gun?* and only then did Hank remember that yes, he did have a revolver he'd bought with his father on his eighteenth birthday at Wal-Mart. His dad had been exhausted in his wrinkled suit, and what had been meant to be a touching father-son moment had unfolded like their other attempts at bonding: awkward silences, stilted conversation, and a badly-chosen Bible verse to sum up their experience. Walking back up to their house from the truck, boxed revolver now slung under Hank's shoulder: *He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.*

"Hank, are you okay?"

"Sure," Hank said.

Bud stood in the door of Hank's bedroom, regarding the open suitcase and wrinkled pile of clothes inside with profound exasperation.

"Yes, you're okay," Bud asked, "or yes, you have a gun?"

Hank opened his dresser drawer, withdrew his revolver and pack of bullets, and tossed them into the suitcase. They left fine dust residue on his fingertips.

"That's a good boy," Bud said. "Chop chop, now."

Only once the suitcase was full-up with most of his possessions did Hank realize that Bud could be shaking him down, or that he could be packing for his own kidnapping. He forced the zipper closed and rolled the suitcase cautiously out into the kitchen where Bud waited, re-reading the newspaper article about the Governor, nose almost touching the page in front of him as if to draw secret meaning from the shape of the letters. The oversized clothes hung around his tiny frame. Bud muttered in Spanish, maybe Italian, one of those singsong languages with vowels at the end of every word.

"Finally ready, princess?" Under the joke, Bud sounded considerably agitated. Standing, he folded the paper with care into the crook of his arm.

As the point-of-no-return moment arrived, Hank took silent inventory of his home. He'd never left his trailer unattended for more than a night. He thought about days passing in lonely stillness between these walls, specks of floating dust refracting golden light through the blinds. Suspense. The anticipation of disaster. This thought turned him suddenly uneasy. Forget this trip, maybe forget this whole thing.

"How long did you say we'd be gone again?"

"The drive shouldn't be more than a couple days."

"And a couple days back, for me," Hank said. "That's four days."

Bud pinched between his eyes. "I'll buy you a plane ticket back, if you want. Hell, you can take my private jet back here if you're that worried."

"But what about my truck?"

"With what I'll pay you, you can buy yourself five new trucks. Or, you know, maybe an actual house." Bud took in the kitchen and living room, as if for the first time. "Sheesh, kid, fuck your truck. Fuck your trailer, fuck this whole godforsaken town. It's depressing. If I were you, getting back would be the last thing on my mind."

"You're the one who wanted to live here."

"More like die here."

"Why here, anyway? You could have died anywhere."

Bud reached forward for the suitcase handle. "We've got two days on the road for questions. Right now, we should get moving."

"One more minute."

On instinct, Hank hurried into the back room, where his desktop PC hummed away next to a pile of smelly old books and the trashcan of crusty tissues. He tossed the bottle of KY lube into the desk drawer. His fingertips slid along the slick keys while he deleted the history on his internet browser, then typed the first few letters of his favorite pornographic sites – youp, xvi, por – to be sure the search suggestions had been fully deleted. The procedure was pointless, he knew. Government agencies could recover your whole internet history no matter what you did to hide yourself. In fact, likely they were watching you all along, for *sure* they were if you searched that question, at least – *is the government watching me*. Tracking his porn habits wasn't on the FBI priority list, and he

had never broken the law beyond smoking weed so far as he knew, but they *could* track him if they wanted to. The point was they *could*. Hank overheard Bud whistling a hurried tune in the kitchen, but he couldn't let himself be rushed. He shut down the computer carefully, then ran his fingers over his tightly-made bed, adjusted the pillows into perfect geometry. *I'll be back*, he whispered. It was true, the affection he'd developed for this bed, where he slept alone, and this computer, where he reached orgasm alone, were a little strange. On slow days at work he would miss them with a deep and primal longing.

Back in the kitchen, Hank wiped down the countertops, returned the lone bowl from the drying rack back to its place atop the single plate in his cabinet, and checked each of the stovetop knobs individually. Then, one last look – the couch, television, kitchen table, countertops, all arranged, nothing out of place to fret about in his absence. He licked his thumb, rubbed a white drop of dried soup from the table.

“Sheesh, kid. Relax.” Bud crossed his arms. “Need to spin around a few times, too? Recite the alphabet backwards?” His laugh had a nervous tinge.

“Huh?” Hank unplugged the television, just in case.

“Never mind.”

A low engine sound built outside the window. Headlights nodded past the windows, then cut out. Bud rushed over to push the blinds aside. Outside, the sounds of doors opening and slamming. The old man went straight as a pole.

“Who's outside?” Everything was very still. Hank blinked hard enough to flash colors across his vision. When they cleared, nothing had changed.

Damnit, Bud pulled back from the window. He kicked his suitcase over, bent down to start unzipping, hands shaking. Knocking began on the door. "Please tell me this thing is loaded," he said, pulling the revolver from the pile of clothes.

"Put that away," Hank said, pushing his arm stiff in front of him. The skin around his skull tightened. Bud fumbled with the gun. The knocking turned heavier, akin to pounding. Someone was trying to break inside. "Tell me who's at the door."

Bud flipped open the chamber and stared down the empty sockets. "Just my luck, the one redneck who cares about gun safety." He tossed the box of bullets at Hank, then the gun. "I don't know how to load this thing."

"Bud, who's at the fucking door?" Fumbling to catch the bullet carton, Hank heard the revving of an engine, and a muffled voice outside. He grabbed a handful of bullets, dropped the carton, and began loading.

"I know you're in there, Bud. Open up before I rip this place apart." The voice sounded familiar, but distorted with volume. Difficult to place.

After not enough time, the engine sound began again. The floor trembled underfoot. Hank began to slide on his mud-caked boots. Crashing noises, and louder engine groans. The trailer floor vibrated, turned soft. Bud grabbed onto the edge of the sink. Gravity jolted to the side, throwing Hank hard against the kitchen wall. The sound of shattering windows tingled up his neck. Above him now, Bud let himself slide down the slick plastic floor tiles. The trailer had rolled itself into an almost vertical angle. With the awe of a man facing his death, Hank watched the microwave unhook from the wall above him and freefall in horrifying slow motion. The box came crashing through the

kitchen, power cord whipping around manic, shattering the light fixture, narrowly missing his ear. The wall next to him collapsed under the crash.

Then, quiet again.

Hank and Bud had tumbled on top of each other on the wall. Everything in Hank's trailer had gathered in hideous piles around them. The blinds from the window above them now hung down at their faces. Through the opening, dark blue early-morning sky peeked above the tips of the trees. Hank closed the revolver with a discrete wrist flip, hoping the pile of bullets in his lap had come from the spilled box and not the chamber. It occurred to him that he didn't know what he was supposed to do with this gun, or who was outside. Later, he'd wonder why he pictured some otherworldly type creature in that moment, some *World of Warcraft* character with the power to control gravity. As if to correct him, a typical human shape appeared above him, standing on the edge of the kitchen window. The toes of dirty hiking boots hung over. Hank watched a single clump of mud fall through his wrecked trailer. The man looked down at them through his greasy mane of hair. He shook his face into view. Of course.

"Your trailer fucked up my truck bumper," Shy Ann said, chewing on the end of an unlit blunt. "That'll cost you."

Bud groaned. "Shit, you could've broken down the door."

"Wouldn't have been much fun." From somewhere out of view, somebody tossed Shy Ann a shotgun, which he examined for a second before pointing it down at them through his toes. The view down the barrel was bigger than the sky.

“Don’t shoot the kid, Shy. Take it easy. I’m coming.” Bud struggled to his feet, swiped his knees like a teacher beating dust from pant legs. Hank stood to follow him, bullets falling from him with a glittering sound. The back of his head throbbed.

“Hands up,” Shy Ann said, voice distorted from keeping the blunt in place. Acting out something he’d seen on television, no doubt. “Both of you.” Hank had trouble complying at the awkward angle, but did his best to look up at him with his arms out to the sides. The revolver hung limply from his right hand. “Sheesh, drop the gun. I’ve got what they call the *upper hand*. Don’t you watch *Walker, Texas Ranger*?”

“That’s been off the air for years,” Bud said.

Hank loosened his grip, but the gun left his hand a little too quickly. Bud had grabbed it high on the handle. Without looking, he pointed it up wildly and fired. From there, things went all jumbled in color and sound. Flash and *snap* near his right ear, filling his head with ringing. One of the toes of Shy Ann’s boots broke open, sending him into a one-foot balancing act on the ledge. On some kind of reflex, he fired the shotgun, now trained off to the side. The kick sent him tumbling down into the trailer. Bud pulled Hank clear just in time to watch Shy Ann fall backwards onto the sharp corner of the microwave. Impossibly, the blunt remained between his teeth, jaw now clenched tight in what must have been horrible pain. Blood poured from his foot. Hank treaded carefully around Shy Ann, careful not to step on his body, and picked up the shotgun. He had, in fact, seen *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

“There will probably be others out there,” Bud said.

“You mean the Ramblers.”

Bud snorted. “Only you call us that. It’s all shtick.”

“Huh?” Water had started to pour down on them from under the sink. The pipes must have been torn open. Hank’s life was ruined around him. The sight was oddly relieving. Maybe they’d climb out of here into a sea of gun barrels. It was better than dying in front of a computer screen with his dick in his hand.

“The whole hippies-on-the-mountain routine. The commune life, the folk songs. Shy Ann’s spiritual bullshit. It’s just to keep us entertained while we process the plants.” This seemed a strange place to explain, but Bud’s calm was comforting.

Shy Ann tried to speak, but he could only manage a thin rattling sound. Blood outlined each of his yellow teeth. Hank rested the shotgun against his shoulder, pulled a lighter from his pocket, and reached down to light the blunt. The gesture shone with his kindness, he thought, but most of all it was probably the coolest thing he’d ever done. Shy Ann coughed through a weak puff.

“I don’t get why these guys would come after you. All you did was leave.”

“Where do you think the weed goes?” Bud hopped onto the broken table and started trying to climb up the floor. “Goddamn, you’re naïve.”

Climbing out of the trailer didn’t prove too hard. They stood the table on the bottom wall and climbed out the kitchen window above, pulling themselves up by the sink. Outside, standing on the side of the trailer, Hank was shocked to see the same world he was used to seeing, the same front yard, same road, same morning dew gathering on his face. The long-beard twins leaned against an old vintage Land Rover with a badly detached bumper. A wench cable ran to the bottom of the trailer. One of them held a rifle.

Heart thumping over his ringing ears, Hank pointed the shotgun. “Drop the gun, motherfucker. Drop it right fucking *now*.”

The armed one tossed his rifle into the dirt without much hurry. He looked a little confused by this whole ordeal. The other one spoke for both of them. “Sorry ‘bout all this, Bud. You know how Shy Ann gets sometimes.”

Bud slipped the pistol into the back of his belt, under his oversized button-down. “No hard feelings, fellas. Just doing your job.” He glanced down at Shy Ann under their feet. He had passed out. One thin strand of smoke rose from the tip of his blunt.

The other twin piped up. “I’m guessing you’ll be heading down to Florida. We used to live there. Call on our Daddy if you come across him.” They both nodded, a little hopeful. Hank wondered if they were joking. They had to be eighty years old.

*

Before they left, Hank climbed back down into the trailer to get his suitcase, which had been spared most of the leaking water. Shy Ann’s blunt had gone out, and he hadn’t changed positions. There was a lot of blood mixing with the water pooled around him. He looked to have fallen right on his spine. Hank told himself that the man wasn’t dead, because people didn’t die that way, falling through windows onto microwaves.

Back outside, Hank climbed into his truck. Bud shot out each of the tires in the Land Rover and removed the keys from the ignition. The long-beards seemed not to care either way. Hank watched, listening to each gunshot echo through his blood-pumped eardrums. Only once they’d reached the mountain road and passed the burned-out barn on

the edge of Thirsk River did the past few minutes unravel in his mind. Hank cranked his window down. The cool mountain air dried the sweat on his knuckles.

Beep beep beep.

"You forgot your seatbelt," Bud said.

"Shy Ann tried to kill you."

Beep beep beep.

"It's not gonna stop until you buckle up."

"You knew they were coming."

Hank missed the buckle a few times before the seatbelt clicked into place.

"I thought they *might* be coming."

"To kill both of us."

"Look, I know they're hippies, but they're not stupid hippies. Every one of them has done some fucked up shit to get out here. Not to mention what the DEA would do.

These days, maybe even Homeland Security. They're a little *fringe*, so to speak."

"What about you? What did you do?"

"You'll want to take highway 221 to I-26," Bud said, and turned out the window, just as a cluster of trees opened to show Thirsk Mountain. Beyond him, the holler unfolded in the morning light like a green blanket ruffled under the sleep of God. Between the trees, a church steeple shot up in bracing gold.

*

Bud continued talking that same evasive way through the day, through the mountains and into the hills of South Carolina, all the way out to the hot Georgia flats,

where gas station signs shone in the approaching night. Hank asking questions, Bud answering with directions, or stupid observations.

Near the Tennessee-Carolina line, Hank asked Bud why he chose Thirsk to retire to, why not somewhere remote in Florida. Thirsk Mountain didn't even have a page on Wikipedia. Bud nodded, like maybe that was why, but didn't say anything. He then requested a tissue, which he folded carefully and slid into his back pocket.

On an empty stretch of I-95, while the sun set on South Carolina, Hank asked Bud why he supported this terrorist from the newspaper. Hank had hoped to work Bud up, to get some kind of response after another hour of silence. Instead, Bud played with the air rushing through his fingertips out the window and told a long story about a week he'd spent staying on Hilton Head Island with a twenty-two-year-old prostitute in the summer of 1995, no wait 1996, somewhere-about in the late nineties anyway, and damnit didn't her rear end massage the eyeballs just like this here golden South Carolina sunset. Angry, trying to focus on the stacks of cash or groups of women or whatever this crazy man had promised him, Hank turned up the radio, which had now settled on a jazz and classical station with a DJ whose accent meandered across the alien terrain. Bud's voice grew thin by comparison. The words *rear end* had sent all kinds of imagined internet pop-up windows into Hank's mind. They cleared to the sound of double-time swing.

After nightfall in Georgia, Bud spoke up.

"How much cash did you bring?"

Hank fingered the thick stack of bills he'd grabbed while packing. "A couple hundred," he said, and it took him a few seconds to decide that Bud wouldn't rob him

after coming all this way. Then, he remembered that he'd left those thousands of extra dollar bills in the closet of his ruined trailer. The thought was strangely satisfying.

"What do you do for all that cash, anyway?"

"I work at a trash compactor. Charge a dollar per bag."

Bud scratched his chin. "Ah, perfect!" This was some revelation. By the sound of it, he wasn't talking about the pricing. "Pull over at the next motel."

Hank flicked on his blinker at the Holiday Inn up ahead.

"No, that's a *hotel*," Bud answered.

"Great, perfect, no problem," Hank said, too exhausted to argue. A few more minutes and they came upon a backlit sign for some \$50-per-room motel off an exit labeled Perkinson, Georgia. Hank pulled a slow semicircle into the gas station by the exit ramp. *Exxon*, the sign read, with two broken letters. *E—on*.

Bud stayed inside the truck while Hank paid the weary-eyed cashier lady whose chin rested on two broad rings of fat. He returned and began pumping. The cheap motel, called the Panama Inn, loomed dark next door, lit only by the glow of the *E—on* sign. The full tank clicked off. Bud climbed out of the car.

"Get us a room with the fifty and give me the rest."

Hank handed over the cash, not bothering to ask why.

"For recreation. It's been a while," Bud said, eyeing a dumpster on the shadowy side of the gas station. "Check in and leave the door unlocked."

*

Travel brochures lined the walls of the sterile motel lobby, where an old man picked away at his laptop behind the front desk. Through reading glasses, his blue eyes looked poised to pop free from their sockets. His name tag read *Tobias* in arresting orange. Over his typing, Tobias directed him to room number five on the second floor, pausing his work only to hand over a heavy metal key with a wooden plank attached. Someone had carved a large penis into the veneer with a knife, and someone else had tried, and failed, to etch the drawing away.

“Why’s it called Panama Inn?” Hank asked while he signed the check-in paperwork. Such transactions were incomplete without small talk.

“Have a good night, mister.” Tobias returned to his typing.

One of the beds in the room lacked sheets, but Hank had no interest in going downstairs again, and goddamn that old man, he could sleep on the floor for all Hank cared. Dirt caked the tiles in the bathroom. A cockroach struggled for life near the rusty shower drain. But the water was hot, the soap fresh enough, and he washed the entire last day off himself one limb at a time until his hands settled between his legs. He hadn’t gone a full day without masturbating in many months, and the delay allowed him to finish twice, once to the fantasy of what might have happened with Tina, had that date gone some other way. The second time finishing in the shower, the memory of Tina faded, and from behind rose an altogether different fantasy, of Thirsk Mountain disintegrating into white ash from the heat of the molten ocean underneath. Each tree would burst into flame and then fall apart into an individual cloud of dust. It was a rare fantasy, one that came up whenever he didn’t have porn to watch. This vision appeared

sometimes so clearly that Hank could conduct the scene with the heat of his own hands. The compactor, his trailer, the money inside, all of them gone. A lot of people would probably die. Hank's legs shook when he finished.

Exiting the shower, he dried off with a rough towel. The release had deadened his mind just enough for sleep. But when he opened the bathroom door and followed the steam out into the dry motel air, he found Bud sitting in his underwear at the edge of the sheetless bed. A middle-aged woman in skintight purple yoga pants and heavy eyeliner massaged one of his feet while he watched the news.

"Bella, Hank." Bud didn't take his eyes off the screen. "Hank, Bella."

"Hey baby-face," Bella said, like sandpaper.

On the tiny screen, between flashing tickers, a reporter with a bright red microphone interviewed a uniformed police officer on the dark waterfront outside of a building labeled Tampa General Hospital. *STUNNING DEVELOPMENTS IN FLORIDA ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT: Doctors say suspected terrorist will live.*

"Have police uncovered Rafael San Lazaro Alessi's motivation for staging this attack on the Governor?" the reporter asked, jabbing the microphone at the officer.

"We've only just begun our investigation, ma'am," the officer answered.

"Rumors have surfaced that Alessi may have had ties to a radical internet eco-terrorist group, which has a history of violent rhetoric. Can you confirm these reports?"

"As I said, the investigation is ongoing," the officer said, and smiled.

Bud chuckled the remote overhand at the television. The plastic bounced off the glass and onto the thin grey carpet. "Oh, cut that shit out," he grumbled.

Bella stopped rubbing his feet.

“Not you, sweetheart.” Bud patted her on the head. He reached down for the remote again, but hesitated. “Just wait until I get to work on these nutcases, we’ll see what they’re saying then,” Bud said to Hank, as if he cared.

The screen cut to footage of the Governor of Florida from earlier that day. The man stood behind a podium, his family flanking him – stone-eyed wife, two fidgeting children. In his hand, he clenched a wrinkled blue button down shirt. Ash stained one of the sleeves. “The people of Florida are *strong* folks. Our state does not bow to the pressure of terrorists.” His eyes lit up blue on the screen. “My parents raised me to defend what is right, no matter the consequences. Yesterday showed just the kind of evil we face from these radicals. Never will we surrender.”

Bud swatted at the screen and picked up the hotel phone. The woman kept massaging, eyes half-closed with boredom. After a quick dial and a few seconds of ringing, Bud began to speak quietly into the receiver. By the time Hank realized that he wasn’t speaking English, not even Spanish – German, maybe? – he’d already hung up and nodded once, as if some minor item on his agenda had been settled.

Next to the sheeted bed, Bud had arranged two bright green pills and a bottle of water. “A treat from the gas station, to help you have a relaxing night,” Bud said. “If you’re interested in that kind of thing, of course.”

Hank shrugged, popped both of the bitter capsules. A little nighttime cough medicine never hurt anyone, he thought, pulling the rough motel sheets over his shoulder. The cold pillow softened around his stubbled cheek.

*

Sometime late in the night, halfway through a wonderful dream featuring two shapely golden legs parting wide, Hank got his wits about him again and none of the colors looked right. When he sat up, he tasted metal on his tongue. Bella was bent over his torso, the lamplight shining blood red off her back. His tense muscles grinded like jagged teeth. Bud smiled from the faded armchair, which floated in his vision.

He ain't working, Bud.

Keep trying.

It's no use. He can't get it up.

That makes two of us.

All else Hank could fathom was one quick exchange with Bud sometime later in the night, or possibly earlier or simultaneously, time being nothing but a buildup to nothing anyway. Both of them mostly undressed, facing each other. The motel room was sorting and re-sorting itself around them, and Bella was someplace in between them, busying herself, when Hank asked Bud what he'd wanted to ask the whole car ride, the real question, which wasn't really a question at all:

I need to know what you did to get out there, Bud.

All in good time.

You could be dangerous.

Not in the way you're thinking.

I need to know if you hurt somebody.

It's worse than that, kid. It's so much worse.

*

Morning came immediately after that, so far as Hank could tell. He awoke alone on the bed. Bud stood dressed in a set of Hank's clothes from the suitcase – a checkered button-down shirt and gym shorts. They were so large on him that his limbs didn't even cause the fabric to move. Even with the top button closed, most of his shoulders were visible. He pressed his fists above his hips.

"Rise and shine, limp dick," Bud said. Outside the unshaded window, the night had only just started to brighten into deep blue. "We've got a long way to go."

"Those clothes don't fit."

"My old ones were dirty. Never wear dirty clothes. Presentation is everything." He hiked the gym shorts up a little further and nodded.

"What happened last night?"

"That's a good one." Bud crossed the room to collect something from the suitcase on the floor. When he turned around again and saw Hank looking back at him, his expression slackened. "Oh, you're serious."

The motel sheets scratched against his butt cheeks. In the air, an unfamiliar sticky smell. No sign of anyone else in the room. "Did we have sex?"

"No, no. There was always at *least* one torso between us. At most one torso, as well, I guess." Bud chuckled a two-beat *hah hah*.

"I'm asking if I had sex with *anyone*."

"Hmm, that's surprising. Most guys with your.... *predicament* avoid talking about their performance the next day. Sort of emasculating, probably. Don't worry, almost

everybody has been there. Sexuality is complicated.” Bud took a seat on the bed, patted his thigh through the fabric. Hank shrank back, leaving him in a position he’d always associated with embarrassed girls. Bud sighed. “Figure out what you want out of life, and then you’ll get hard as a rock again, I promise.”

“I need to know if I had sex last night.”

“In strict terms, no,” Bud said. “What’s the difference?”

Of course, sex made a great deal of difference. *What if sex is the only thing I want*, he wanted to ask. Nothing mattered to him so much as sex. All people came from sex, all people worked toward sex, all people desired sex deep in their bones. Hank knew this, the way the wind always knew which way to blow. If there was one thing that he might have *wanted*, it was to lose his virginity. Not so much the experience involved, which scared the shit out of him when he thought about it. But to *have* it lost.

Instead, he said: “I guess it doesn’t matter.”

"Right, 'atta boy." Bud tossed him some jeans.

The continental breakfast was arranged along a stainless steel buffet on the lobby. The plastic-looking croissants each attracted a few bugs that hopped halfheartedly along their shiny surfaces. Hank almost vomited at the sight. Bud collected a few bagels and a pack of strawberry jam before they stepped into the heat.

"I thought that was cough medicine from the gas station.”

"You'll want to take I-95 south.”

Only a few stars shone in the pre-dawn light over the parking lot. A skinny moon was set matte against the sky. Hank appreciated that, because too many more lights might

have overwhelmed him. Disturbing images from last night bristled in his memory. He did his best to avoid them and stay in the moment, to remain between the yellow reflective lines when he found himself on the interstate again.

No words were exchanged on this last drive except between Hank and his recovering senses: hold steady, nice and easy, goddamnit this asshole better pay up, that prostitute probably had AIDS, but hey, you didn't fuck her anyway, you idiot...

After an indistinct amount of time, Bud announced that the Florida border crossing was on the other side of the upcoming bridge. The palm trees on the sides of the interstate had multiplied in the past couple hours. The sun had awakened the sky again. It stabbed at his eyes. After such a long trip, the truck had to sputter up the steep bridge over the river, which must have marked the border. As they pattered over the peak, Florida unraveled in front of Hank as a psychedelic checkerboard of sunrise-red swamp and thick green patches of land. The earth had collapsed into ancient floodwaters. Days later, he would remember how the state introduced itself to him as some primal thing, how in his drugged state he'd imagined its people concealed behind the salt-thickened mangrove leaves, perhaps in flowery shirts but with strange bush weapons between their teeth. Never had he seen a horizon so flat. As they descended the bridge, a line of black Dodge Charger state troopers came into view under the Welcome to Florida sign by the roadside, speed guns pointed at the crest. Hank rode his brakes all the way down. Only when the police finally disappeared into his rear-view did his paranoia slacken again, because they hadn't, in fact, been waiting for him.

CHAPTER TEN (DEBORAH)

From the outside, Kalo's house suggested a few months of abandonment. Green pollen dust coated the cracked stone tiles under Deborah's feet. At the top corner of the front porch, a clunky video camera whizzed into focus. She held up a middle finger to the lens before going back to refreshing her phone browser.

On the drive from the hospital, her phone had started ringing so frequently that she had trouble reading news sites for longer than a minute or two without interruption. God knew how these reporters got her cell number. So far, her photo of Rafael Alessi had leapt from her blog post onto the entire news hotlist: CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, even Aljazeera America. Probably there was some legal justification to sue the sites for not getting her permission, but that wasn't the point. Her plan was taking off. *Gulf Coast Gunk* had received a hundred thousand hits in just the last hour. *The Tampa Bay Times*, the only newspaper of value this side of *The Miami Herald*, had published an online article called "Who is Deborah Tellers?" with a blown-up picture of her from her twitter account, an old close-up of her peering off to the left in a loose beanie. The pixilation evened out her skin tone, which she appreciated. Her twitter account jumped ten thousand followers and showed no signs of slowing. Energized, almost drugged with possibility, she had sped down Dale Mabry Highway. These news sites only had the picture. None of the reporters had been in that hospital room with her. None of them knew that the suspect has some hotshot German lawyer that he *doesn't recognize*. And more than all that, none of them were there to see the sincerity in Rafael Alessi's fire-blackened face when he told those agents that he was innocent. The picture had extended her media hot streak for a

few days at most, but next came the *story* of it all. Art was a search for truth in chaos, and there was no greater chaos than the internet. Kalo had talked up his hacking skills enough times, trying to impress her, and now he'd need to pony up. Besides, a quick eighth of that strange new weed would help clear her head.

Kalo's voice punched through the intercom. "Put your phone down."

"Oh, fuck off. Not this again."

"Phone on the ground or get off my fucking porch."

Kalo lived in this old wooden-plank house in the rundown part of South Tampa, less than a mile north of MacDill Air Force Base. She couldn't tell if the proximity to the military made his paranoia better or worse, but the jet noise during military exercises was probably enough to drive anyone insane. On the night they first met, during a meet-and-greet for the incoming art history graduate students at a pub on South Howard, he'd introduced himself as an internet security specialist with enough money to pursue his real academic passion now, the "rise of biological art" in the age of internet reproduction. After a mildly charming back-and-forth under bumping pop tunes, they'd returned to this house in the vagueness of night. He'd insisted on patting her down as a safety precaution, and one thing became another until she found herself sobering up next to him in his musty bed, the cool winter air hissing through his open window screens. The sex had been average in a physical sense, but he'd whispered a dark collection of expletives near the end, culminating in something to do with tentacles. After that night, she managed his expectations in the usual way, with maybe a little more urgency than other guys, and he ended up settling into being her weed dealer. She'd always suspected his computer skills

might come in handy, and now here she was again, trying to laugh off his safety routine and ignore the way his commands reminded her of his whispering voice in her ear, his skinny frame shaking like a horrified snake.

“No need for that kind of language.” Deborah held her hands in the air, phone carefully balanced between her pointer finger and thumb. She placed it on the ground and backed away from the porch. The air hummed with sunlight. “Okay, go ahead and call the bomb squad. The one with the robots and dogs.”

The camera zoomed in and pointed down to watch the phone. For a few moments, all she heard was the afternoon buzz of cicadas. Mosquitoes rose from the overgrown yard weeds and started picking at her arms. After she’d slapped her thighs pink, the door loudly unbolted. Footsteps, then the clicks of a few manual locks before the door opened into a dark living room. Kalo stepped out: a slender figure with porcelain skin and narrow Adam’s apple. His usual Nalgene bottle of water swung from his belt on a carbineer. It clicked as he walked. Her phone started vibrating on the porch. Kalo picked it up and squinted at the screen. “Saw your handiwork this morning. Hold tight.” He retreated back into the dark, keeping the door open a crack.

The crook of her elbow has already moistened. The backs of her knees itched. She called through the door: “This whole thing is getting a little sadistic. Just let me in.” Above her, a cargo plane banked over the treetops. Hot whirlpools of wind kicked up her hair. In the bustle, she took a few steps closer to the door, and when things quieted again she could hear him typing. “I’m not letting you pat me down again.”

“Don’t get cute.” He stopped typing for a moment, pondering. “Come in.”

The living room of his house was cluttered and minimal all at once: no lamps, no tables, no furniture but one long pleather couch, shining in the light of a half dozen oversized computer monitors lined up on a desk that spanned the entire opposing wall, long enough for two desk chairs. On the floor, a sea of wires flowed messily into the kitchen, where three tall racks faced three window air conditioning units. Blackout curtains left the entire living room with only sterile blue light from the screens. Kalo's slender frame hunched over the desk at the farthest couple of monitors. When she closed the front door behind her, he held up a remote. The sound of the metal lock screwing shut behind her tickled the spot where her spine met her skull. His house had the feel of a magical dungeon, a place powered by forces she didn't understand. Fitting, maybe, for someone who sold such good pot.

"Sorry you missed that call." Kalo spun in the chair and tossed her phone back. "Checked the number. Call came from a CNN reporter named Jenn Pickell." He turned back to the screens, started scrolling through a few of them. "She graduated with a three-nine GPA at Brown, started at MSNBC as an intern but then disappeared for a year, I'm guessing rehab, since she got a little more spiritual after she came back. Married to Bobby Tullish for two years, but their marriage is probably on the rocks. No pictures together in months, and she uses her maiden name on twitter."

"Lots of professional women keep their maiden names. Get with the times."

"Marriage license says she changed it legally."

"You know, it's creepy when you do this." Deborah dropped into the other desk chair and puffed her vape pen. The draws were thinning. Low battery. "Anybody can

check social media and look up a marriage license. I'm not impressed." She was daring him now. Giving him a chance to shine. On cue, he leaned forward, typed and scrolled while she checked her inbox, which had reached a few hundred messages since she posted the picture. She'd have to sift through them eventually.

"Ah, here we go." Kalo cleared his throat. "Her checking account has only one thousand six hundred two dollars and eighty cents. That and she has about twelve thousand in debt on three credit cards."

"It's the American way."

"CNN pays shit."

"Get to the point."

"When you call her back, promise her a big story and ask her for anything: ten minutes of airtime, a byline, approval on her article, nude pictures, anything. She's desperate for a career-making story. Putty in your hands."

"I haven't been talking to reporters."

"Smart." Kalo popped open his water bottle and took a long chug.

She'd never seen him without his Nalgene. The one night they spent together, he got up to pee half a dozen times. Given that he kept it on his belt that way, even in the echoing academic halls of UT, he was probably itching for someone to ask him about it. She'd never given him the satisfaction, but she was about to ask him for help. Best to get him in a charitable mood. Plus, she was short ten bucks on the eighth.

"So what's with all the water drinking?"

Kalo smiled. "What do you mean?"

Wanting her to ask twice. “You drink more water than anybody I know.”

“Water... water is life.” Kalo leaned back in his chair just enough to put some of his face in shadow. Touched his fingertips together under his nose in an upside-down V. It was the kind of affectation so obnoxious that she had to remind herself that, all in all, Kalo was one of her favorite people in Tampa. “If you run a river through the desert, over time it’ll sprout plants, fill with fish, create a whole world from nothing. Human bodies aren’t individual beings. We’re ecosystems. Our bodies are entire worlds that have sprouted up around a river that runs from our mouths to our penises, to our... you know, *vaginas*.” The bashful way he said that word, compared to the way he’d spoken when they had sex, struck her as odd. “Life is constant motion. The world is meant to move *through* us. It’s like the internet. That’s part of why I love hacking so much. The internet is alive. There is no such thing as internet security, the same way you can’t completely block up a river. You can only slow it, divert it. I can punch holes all day.”

“Guess I should try drinking water sometime.”

Kalo crossed his arms. “You’re a real asshole.”

So much for buttering him up. But she’d admired what he said, about life and motion. Sitting still was dying. And what he said about the internet – nothing could be more inspiring than a person who loves what they do. She wasn’t sure why she had to be so mean. He was, it was true, a nice guy. “So this suspect, he’s innocent. Maybe he burned the restaurant down, I don’t know, but not on purpose. Not to kill the Governor.”

“No shit.”

“Right, right. That part is obvious. I’d be surprised if this case even got past the grand jury. But that’s not all. When this Alessi guy woke up in the hospital, there were these two law enforcement people there accusing him, a man and a woman. Secret Service, Homeland Security, FBI, CIA, something like that.”

“You just named four completely different federal agencies.”

“They were wearing suits.”

“That narrows it down.”

“Whatever, that’s not the point. There was a third person, this lawyer guy with some kind of European accent. Alessi didn’t seem to know him, but he knew Alessi very well. Fearless, talked to the two government agents like they were children. The guy had a three-thousand-dollar suit, Rolex, and get this...” She rolled the office chair closer to him, and before he could stop her, she grabbed his cell phone off his desk. In typical paranoid hacker fashion, he used this clunky device bigger than a decade-old Blackberry, so big that he carried it on his belt in a leather holster. He’d told her that these *black phones* were essentially unhackable, typically used to protect from military spies and corporate espionage. “The lawyer had one of these.”

Kalo leaned forward again, his face ghostly white in the glow. “You’re sure.”

“Positive.”

“Those things cost, like, a thousand dollars. They don’t even sell them to everybody. I had to fake IBM corporate credentials to get mine.”

“Exactly.” The drunken excitement returned to Deborah’s head. Her brain tugged at her neck by a balloon string. “That’s my question: why would the lawyer for a shitty island restaurant have a military-grade black phone?”

“Unless...”

“Unless he isn’t just the lawyer for a restaurant.”

Kalo smiled, shook his head. “So you didn’t come over here for a smoke.”

“Smoke first, then you tell me who owns La Segunda Vida Restaurant.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN (HANK)

Hank maneuvered the truck into Tampa through thick afternoon traffic. The old engine caught its breath after the long drive. Bud directed Hank to exit onto the Courtney Campbell Causeway, a narrow strip of land that cut through an inland channel of teal water. Palm trees nodded in the breeze. Signs at the exit read *Clearwater*, with a series of other arrows directing alternately to some vague destination called *Beach Cities*. Still shaking the mental shock from the night before, Hank imagined these as small clusters of skyscrapers looming over white shorelines.

Mansions and docks lined the coasts of tiny peninsulas in view of the causeway. Boats, dozens of them, traced crisscrossing lines on the unsettled water. Massive birds stabbed at the surface from the sky. A sense of occasion expanded within him. He struggled to imagine that this place and his home in Tennessee were a part of the same earth. Their drive through Florida had been a slide show of contrasting images – swamps, cow pastures, giant tourist signs with slogans like FREE ORANGE JUICE and WORLD’S LARGEST ALLIGATOR, and the massive Seminole Hard Rock Casino with its marquee displaying a quote from the Emerson, Lake, and Palmer classic rock standard: *Welcome back my friends, to the show that never ends*. I’ll be damned, Hank had thought, even Floridian Indians know their rock n’ roll.

Mid-morning they’d driven through a rural inland town called Waldo, where Bud warned Hank to slow down for no visible reason. That was, until they rounded a blind turn and the speed limit dropped by fifty miles per hour, far too quickly to brake from full speed. Beaten police cruisers waited in a long line, the cops inside aiming their speed

guns at the bend. Behind them, a half dozen vans and SUVs had been pulled over into the grass. One of the vans vomited out an entire family in vacation garb. The young daughter held an oversized snorkeling mask and flinched at her father, who glared at the police officer, his oversized Tommy Bahama shirt flapping in the breeze.

And now, not three hours later: sunshine off the water, thick palm fronds nodding in the breeze, two dolphin fins piercing the surface. Hank marveled at how Bud jumping from the back of his truck could have led him so far from home. His trailer in Tennessee, now an upturned bunch of rubble. There was no reason, really, to go back. Whatever motel nightmare orgies it might have taken along the way, this place hinted at freedom. Hank could take a new last name, maybe change professions. Fishing captain, beach lifeguard, anything he wanted. Hank let himself enjoy the idea for a few moments before he remembered that his father had tried to start over the same way. But at least his father had never been to Florida, and Hank had no plans for changing his accent.

“Next exit, there.” Bud slackened in the passenger seat.

Hank steered the pickup down a winding backstreet lined with spindly green bushes that rose from shallow water on either side, at least ten feet tall, the leaves thick and salty. A colossal slate building rose up from behind the wall of green. Rumbling around one last bend, the pickup passed a marble sign with *Grand Hyatt Hotel* carved into its white face. If this was a hotel, Hank had never seen one so majestic. The place had the remoteness of a hidden swamp embassy, something the CIA might put together in the thickets of some obscure South American nation.

After a few more jukes through mangroves, they entered a U-shaped entranceway surrounding an arrangement of palmettos and flowers. Bud hopped from the truck before it reached a full stop, catching his balance with a spry little two-step. A greasy suited man with one earring opened the driver's side door, handed Hank a valet ticket, and away he drove, the truck groaning in protest. The air stunk like wet mud and feces. The stench wafted over Hank's face and seeped into his skin, now cold from the AC in the truck. The heat was even more oppressive, the way it rose from the ground, fell from the sky, emanated from every surface. The temperature seemed worth commenting on, so Hank tried to find a word for it, but kept running into strange mental walls. Something about last night had re-aligned his mind. He had started to get caught up with the way his thoughts moved around, to wonder where each word came from and where they all went when he left them behind. *Sweltering heat*, he thought, then *ass-loosening*. He stopped at *apocalyptic heat*, a word his father might have used.

"It's damn hot," Hank said.

Bud took a deep breath. "Feels like home. Come on, now."

The icy air inside the hotel chilled the moisture under his clothes. They couldn't have been outside for more than thirty seconds, and he was already wading in sweaty underwear. The white lobby ceiling loomed distant overhead. Classical music played thinly from invisible speakers. Bud approached the reception desk.

"I thought you said your terrorist friend was in the hospital."

Bud rang the bell with a flat palm press, and out came the smiling attendant, a middle-aged woman with perfectly symmetrical crow's feet. A gap between two of her shirt buttons showed a light blue bra. Hank's pants stirred.

"There's not much I can do for him at the hospital. I'm not a doctor, but I have other ways of helping." Bud turned his attention to blue-bra woman. He rapped his knuckles on the counter. "I'll need the room number for the Governor, please."

The woman blinked once, hardened her smile.

"Yeah, I know, you can neither confirm nor deny whether the Governor is staying here, the privacy of the guests is paramount at the Hyatt, yadda yadda. Teddy always stays here. Call his room, tell him Bud Christensen needs to speak with him."

"I'm sorry sir, I can't..."

"Oh, you can. If the Governor learns that you kept me waiting, it'll make trouble." Bud peered down at her chest, the area Hank had been trying to glance without being noticed. Three inches to the left of the opening, she wore a golden name tag. "Alyssa! Wonderful name. Beautiful. I hope that I'm understood."

Alyssa disappeared into the back for a few moments, long enough for the silence between Hank and Bud to become awkward. By the time Hank had decided how to word his next question – *Would the Governor really make trouble if he didn't see you?* – she had returned and handed Bud a thick room key, apparently made of something sturdier than plastic. Some quiet moments later, Bud and Hank had boarded the elevator, all fake marble with gold fittings. Bud swiped the card and pressed a button labeled PH. Hank

had only ever known those letters to stand for Penance Hall, which had been his father's code for time-out. Bud whistled through his teeth.

"They're not idiots, you know. They can see you."

"What?"

"When you look at women's tits, they notice. Imagine if girls stared at your junk all day, everywhere you went. Tell me you wouldn't see them."

Yeah, if only. Hank's stomach flipped upside down as the elevator reached its peak and the doors opened, revealing a long hallway lined with seashell-shaped lights. Three large men waited in front of the door at the end. There were no other doors, just lights. The sight was strangely hallucinatory. Bud rocketed down the hallway, heel-toe heel-toe, as if suddenly in a hurry to deal with an urgent matter. Through some imperceptible change in Bud's demeanor, his straightened back and tightened shoulders, Hank imagined himself a dispensable follower. A member of an entourage for an important person, one cog in a forward-rolling machine.

"They're really going to let you talk to the Governor?"

"Last election, I was Teddy's largest campaign contributor."

"I didn't take you for a Republican."

Bud turned on his heel. He glanced at the men in the hallway with caution and cupped his hand around his mouth. "I did the same thing for the Democrat," he whispered, with a shy little smile. "Word to the wise."

The three men only nodded to Bud as he brought Hank into a large hotel suite. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked a vast expanse of water and flat green earth,

tapering off into the horizon in a distant layer of white mist. The boats looked like water bugs from this high. Just the sight brought that horrible stench back to Hank's mind. The hotel room was empty save a long glass table and circle of white couches. A single door led to another room. Mumbling could be heard through the wall, along with the distinctive clicking of thumbs on iPhone keyboards. Bud held his arms out to his sides and turned his palms upward so that his body took on a rearing quality. Some kind of stretch or yoga exercise. Hank couldn't tell if his shaky mind was messing with him, but the old man appeared to grow a few inches taller.

"Keep quiet, let me take the lead."

"I have no idea what we're doing."

"That's a good boy."

Hank cleared his throat. "No, I mean, when do I get the... payment?"

"All in good time," Bud said gravely, as if he were speaking of some specific and imminent moment in the future. "But right now, I need to take care of some business. We'll keep this situation under control despite them, yes we will."

Following him into the hotel suite bedroom, Hank would have thought he'd entered another building entirely. The bed had been removed, and in its place sat a heavy wooden desk, beautifully empty save a large bulk of papers, neatly stacked, some elegant pen-holders, and a wide golden name plaque reading *Governor Ted Davidson*. Behind, several framed diplomas crossed the upper wall, the largest of them from the University of Florida. Under them, a gigantic flag with a red X and a seal at its center. As far as Hank could tell, an entire office had been recreated in this hotel room. Six people in

business dress hovered around the room on phones and laptops, some of them fidgeting in chairs at a few smaller tables near the windows. Their energy seemed to circle around the man behind the desk, in shirt sleeves and a loosened tie.

It surprised Hank how precisely Governor Davidson appeared the way he had looked on the television the night before – almost as if they had met in the flesh, through the screen. The only difference was a strange unevenness of his skin, thin and patched white and pink. The texture reminded Hank of penis skin. The amount of porn he watched had made him aware of genitalia, always, and how the skin was a sensitive organ that covered all these parts. Sex itself, and masturbation, was skin on skin. Looking at people was sometimes intrusive that way for him, especially when Hank looked at schoolteachers, the elderly, priests, anyone in positions of unsexual meaning. Right now, examining the face of the Governor, Hank was staring at his sexual organ. Bud cleared his throat, and the aides all halted their work. One of them, a woman with bright red hair, caught Hank's attention. Something about her pulled at him in a strange way that made him embarrassed to look in her eyes.

"Bud! Long time, it's been. How long?" Governor Davidson asked. He seemed to be the only person in the room ignoring Bud's mismatched clothes. The aide behind him, the red-haired woman with a clipboard instead of a phone, whispered into his ear. "Ah, ten months and three days! We saw you in Orlando for that hospital fundraiser," Governor Davidson continued. "I'm sure you've been busy."

"You've been busier."

"I have a state to run! Of course I've been busy."

“Shut up, Teddy.”

Miraculously, the Governor complied. With a slight shrug, the man returned to signing the paperwork stacked in front of him. Only then did Hank notice that Bud had in fact been staring at the red-haired woman behind the Governor all along. She glared back at him, and Hank noticed that her irises were impossibly red and traced with black lines. No eyes he’d ever seen in person, but oddly familiar. Alien, almost, with her matching hair. This woman must have been burning hot to the touch. Hank rubbed his thumb and pointer finger together while the wrongness of his surroundings bared down – eyes that weren’t eyes, office that wasn’t an office, beautiful views that stunk to high heaven, and this governor who didn’t act much like a governor at all. Hank collapsed into the nearest chair under the weight of his own dizziness. His skull heated up.

“This is bullshit, Karen,” Bud said.

Heat behind his eyes, starting small and spreading through his forehead.

“If you have a complaint, you should have made an appointment.”

“The nerve!” Bud’s anger smelled sour, burning plastic creeping in among the sweet musky smell of campfire. Hank was losing himself. “Telling me to make an appointment when you’re busy spinning an innocent man into a terrorist, for what, one fucking news cycle worth of attention for Teddy? Everybody calling him a hero for one week? You better watch your ass, crossing me like this.”

The redhead woman – Karen, apparently – glared at Bud with those fire eyes, which Hank had started to recognize as familiar. His mind had gone all to hell. Her laugh sounded upside-down. “Keep threatening the Governor, and maybe you’ll end up like

that little Cuban fry-cook, too.” Her eyes, those eyes, he couldn’t tell if they were beautiful or horrifying. The place in between opened wide.

Bud cleared his throat. “Rafael is a waiter, actually.”

Governor Davidson finished signing the stack of papers. He returned his pen to the decorative holder, drummed his fingertips on the table.

Karen pointed at the center of Bud’s chest. “I was there, the guy was working in the kitchen, not that it matters. Point is an online environmental activist burned down a building with the Governor inside. You can’t expect me to let that pass.”

“Rafael can’t cook for shit. He... wait a minute...” Bud started, audibly trying to reason something out. He grumbled. His voice had fallen apart. “Shit.”

“What?” Karen, growing impatient now.

“Nothing.” Bud pointed at her through Hank’s blurring vision. “I wasn’t threatening Teddy, that’s what I’m saying. I was threatening *you*.”

The sound of the clipboard against the desk resembled a gunshot. Security guards scurried into the room, stumbling over each other, until they noticed the broken board on the floor and Karen glaring at Bud. The guards averted their eyes, straightened their ties, chased invisible nothings back in the other room. “Get the fuck out of my sight, old man,” she hissed, eyes fire and shoulders boiling with rage, and *that* was when Hank made sense of her. The way her voice broke under the strain, how she towered over the men around her. He’d seen her before, there was no question.

This women, Karen, had starred in his favorite scene in the *Elixir of Life*. Hers was the scene he jumped to on nights when he didn’t have time to watch the whole film.

Nearing the climax of the erotic feature, the hero knight has finished fucking his way through villagers to find himself within an enchanted stone castle. Through some horrible post-sex dialogue, the hero has learned that the plague originates with a witch, and that only defeating her can free the people. Inside the castle, the fire witch rises from a blinding red lagoon of molten rock. The other women in the porn, they had been pretty, large-breasted, but hollowed out and sad, covered with tattoos and excessive piercings. This fire woman, though – she is absolutely magnificent. Colossal, terrifying, end-of-days beauty. In the film, the knight reaches toward her and the camera zooms in on the space between his finger and the skin of her neck, and that is when, unaware of his body and the cold trailer walls around him, thinking only of the fire and sex and the ashy husk of his life, Hank would always let himself go.

“Does he have an *erection*?” Karen said, pointing at Hank’s lap in the chair. She looked almost to the point of gagging. Security guards hurried back into the room and dragged Hank around the corner. He’d been so close to her, to the witch – wearing a pant suit, sure, and at least ten years older, but unmistakably her. She was the closest to a real love he’d ever had. They’d shared so many nights together, and now she’d seen his erection. The moment was oddly satisfying.

One security guard, an oversized man with a circular goatee and buzz-cut head stepped in front of Hank. His figure cast a cold shadow that brought Hank to his senses just enough to notice this guard’s particular anger. The others pulled him violently upward until only the tips of his boots touched the dense carpeting. The oversized guard

cracked his knuckles. The sound echoed through Hank's skull. Thick veins swelled their way down his arm to his fist.

"That's my wife in there, you know."

"Huh?" Hank snapped out of the fantasy.

Hank heard the fist hit his face before he felt the pain. The room took itself slowly apart, and the pieces spun around him into a collage of meaningless junk. At the last moment before he lost consciousness, the strangeness of the last hour made sense all of a sudden: the whole of Florida that he'd seen, this place was junk piled high in the swamp, a society of cockroaches swirling down invisible scent trails. Of course this place made no sense. There was no sense to be made. Garbage, piled so high.

*

Just then, in no time at all, the room put itself back together, every piece back into its proper place. Except that the room wasn't the Governor's anymore. The walls and ceiling brightened and backed themselves up to make space for Hank to sit up. Soft classical music replaced the noise. A scent trail of logic returned. The lobby became familiar around him, but the last image stayed with him for another second: one lonely cockroach abandoned in a paper cup, the slick sides towering around him to open one circle of blue sky above. Hank heard thin chuckling.

"Easy, there. Don't sit up too fast."

The hand cooled the back of his neck. Bud's grin appeared much too close. Peppermint laced his breath. The woman from the reception desk hurried over with an

icepack. The button on her shirt had been fixed, though her blue bra wasn't so hard to imagine. Her name was much more distant in his mind.

Bud bit his smile away. "You got your bell rung real good."

"Alyssa," Hank said, remembering.

"Huh?" Bud turned around to see the woman holding out the crisp blue icepack. Her face had taken on the wrinkled shape of genuine concern. "Oh, right. Yeah, she's a real dame," Bud added, taking the icepack and placing it into Hank's hand, which he guided up to cover his right eye. The freeze burned his face. Only then did the other changes become clear: Bud now wore a slim black suit, which fit him shockingly well. "Thanks, sweetheart. Here, for your time." Bud reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a large wad of money. *100* was visible on the outside bill. Alyssa gaped.

"I was just trying to help."

"Precisely." Bud moved the fingers of his free hand under Hank's chin and tilted his head back and forth carefully. Still, the other hand held the rolled bills up. Alyssa rotated in Hank's vision while Bud tested his neck – up, down, side to side. She watched the money carefully. "You've given your services, and I'm offering compensation. You've made something valuable of yourself, bringing me this icepack."

"Yeah, well, you know. I'm in the hospitality business."

"Exchanging money for services is the root of all truly great civilizations." Bud talked in a sing-song murmur, as if reciting the lines of a religious service.

"How much is that?" she asked.

Bud let the roll fall into his flat palm, checking the weight. His eyes grew distant for a moment. "About ten thousand, my guess." Before she could respond, he added: "Looks like less, I know. Money stacks smaller than you'd think."

At the number, Alyssa rose carefully to her feet. Her shirt had wrinkled from the crouching. She pulled at the bottom. "You think you're funny. All the time people think that. Every day, rich guys with the jokes." She didn't go anywhere, though.

"Schumacher." A large man in a pinstripe suit approached, reached down to take the roll of bills. His shoes clicked out an even rhythm on the floor tiles as he made his way to the desk. Finally, a clear *ding* cut through the lobby. The man returned to them, *click click click*, leaving the money resting atop the attendant bell at the desk.

"Up you go," Bud said, and Hank was lifted off his feet again. Schumacher dragged him stiffly by the armpits. The three men moved as a group, Bud in front, leaving Alyssa standing in the same spot in the lobby. Just as she disappeared from view, she made a slight movement toward the desk. Then, at the sight of the elevators in front of them, Hank tried to dig his heels into the tile floor.

"I'm not going up there again."

"Oh, we're not going back to the room." The doors opened, and Bud took his place in the middle of the elevator. His frame had taken an erect posture in the slim suit. Since arriving into Hank's life the day before, Bud had now undergone a change so complete that he wondered how he'd ever been anyone else. Hank could sense the trash compactor fading away behind him, and suddenly the idea that his old life had been real at all, that Tennessee truly existed anywhere outside his mind, seemed more impossible

than anything he'd seen in the last two days. *We've never been to Chicago*, he remembered his father telling him on their first day in Tennessee. *We're from Tennessee now. Born here, raised here. We believe it, and it's the truth, you understand?* And so it was, Chicago barely existed to Hank now. Even the memories of his childhood had become the dreams of a madman. Maybe, after all, his father had been right in that way, too. And now, as Hank followed Bud into the elevator, Schumacher's hand pressing against his back, he felt submerged into a brand new element.

"When do I get paid?" Hank asked, not thinking about money or sex so much as inviting Bud to offer more proof that his life would never be the same.

Bud understood his meaning. "Oh, where we're going," he said, taking the back of Hank's palm into his soft fingers, pushing the icepack up to Hank's face again.

"Where we're going, you won't need money."

Schumacher turned a red key and pushed the roof access button.

"Then where are we going?"

"Higher," Bud answered, his stick-thin arms spread wide, as the elevator doors closed. Gravity pressed down on them while they rose up, and Hank imagined the circle of blue sky opening above him. "Higher and higher."

*

The sunlight on the rooftop stabbed at his eyes and rattled his skull. For a while, all Hank could see was white and all he understood was the brutal heat. But the horrible mud stink was fainter up here, and the breeze lighter. Even in his moment of blindness, he sensed the exact angle of the sun. Somewhere nearby, a low voice spoke in some

guttural foreign language. Hank's vision slowly adjusted to reveal a distant expanse of flat blue water, three bridges cutting across at parallels. A lone helicopter hovered in the distance. Two silhouettes came into focus in the foreground, Bud and his hulking companion. The tall man, Schumacher apparently, hung up his cell phone and continued to speak in the foreign tongue, which on examination sounded German. Bud answered in German, too. The hallucinatory mood came over Hank again, the lightness in his legs that suggested dream. Their language made it hard to tell for sure, but the two men seemed to be disagreeing about something. Bud glanced at Hank every time Schumacher spoke, and only when Schumacher turned to glare at him as well, silent and tight-faced, did Hank realize that he had been the subject of their argument.

Bud took Hank gently by both shoulders, looking up into his face. The icepack had already warmed to the point of uselessness. Hank dropped it on the rooftop.

"There's something special about you, kid. I saw it back there, in the room. The way you looked at Karen when she was yelling at me. The way you took on those security guards and didn't even flinch."

"That wasn't because... I mean, I recognized her."

"No, no, it's not about that." Bud swatted at him. "I know she did porn, everybody knows. It's kind of a joke up in Tallahassee. But don't sell yourself short, kid. You're *angry* is what I'm saying. There's *rage* inside you. I can see that. Nothing moves a man to action more than rage. No true potential but in anger, I always say."

Hank's instinct was to deny being angry. He'd never yelled at a person in his life. But the word sounded somehow right. All those nights spent alone, the days watching the

people of Thirsk Mountain ditch the waste of their lives on him. Masturbating to the idea of them burning in white heat. *Anger*. Maybe he'd known that all along. He watched the last of his surroundings clarify themselves.

"You ran a trash compactor, yes?"

"Back in Thirsk, yeah."

"Perfect. Come with me, and you'll never want for anything again."

Schumacher stood at the edge of the roof and raised one long arm into the sky.

"I don't know where we're going."

"We're going back to my compound in Orlando. I have a job for you, something a little more... suited to your experience. The position has been vacant for a year. Pays whatever you want." The helicopter in the distance banked hard toward them.

Over the sound of Bud's words, the helicopter groaned closer and closer. Turbines blew hot wind wickedly across the roof. As the helicopter descended, the noise vibrated inside his head, shattering and rearranging his thoughts into a jumble of rich textures. Whatever he'd taken last night was still sorting itself out. Schumacher boarded in front, next to the pilot, and Bud followed into the back. He slid giant headphones over his ears. A headset microphone extended from the side and pressed against his lips so that he looked to be sucking on it. Bud donned black Ray-Bans. His smile outsized the microphone, sharp and white. Suddenly everything was clear: this had been the plan all along. Hank pulled himself up next to Bud and sat, the leather wonderfully hot against the back of his neck. Bud reached out and placed identical headphones over his ears. Above the muted chopper noise, Bud spoke to him.

“Stick with me, kid. You’ll do just fine.”

Then, as the chopper let loose from the rooftop and drifted off into the wind, Hank repeated this new truth to himself: *You have never been to Tennessee, you have never been to Tennessee, you have never been to Tennessee.*

CHAPTER TWELVE (DEBORAH)

Before they had finished the joint of Clinch Mountain, Kalo had found the name for the company that owned the restaurant: *La Segunda Vida, Limited Liability Corporation*, also listed as LSVLLC. Deborah rolled an extra for the road while he looked for any other information, which ended up amounting only to the listed CEO, Rafael Alessi himself, and an address on Kennedy Boulevard near downtown Tampa. Just as the Clinch started taking hold, Deborah entered the depth behind these two details. She could rip away their surface and find some grand truth connecting them. Kalo kept a framed quotation on his wall: *Paranoia is the knowledge that everything is connected. Insanity is looking for those connections. Genius comes third.* She thought about asking him if he wrote that, but he probably did, and in this moment that would be a monumental disappointment. Better to believe that the universe had handed her this quote in this exact moment. Genius was within her grasp.

She took her time on her drive to the LSVLLC address, letting the car drift in and out of lanes on its own volition. Harsh afternoon sunlight colored the strip centers in bright pastel. The more she thought, the more the mystery before her deepened: if Alessi was the CEO, and he didn't know that lawyer, this meant that either that man wasn't his real lawyer, or someone else was in charge. Perhaps that person wanted the Governor dead, or Alessi dead, and planted a firebomb in the restaurant. Maybe he (or she!) sent this European non-lawyer to finish the job. Or maybe the real puppet master was Alessi himself, and everything up until now had been a self-sacrificial con. She passed a car dealership where two windblown giants danced erratically to the classic rock song

playing through her tin-laden car speakers. The possibilities were endless, any fiction could be true, and fuck, she was high.

Her phone navigation took her by surprise when it announced her destination approaching on the right. A paved empty lot sank between an abandoned real estate office and an indie coffee shop, where two bearded twenty-somethings in tropical shirts leaned against the outside wall for shade. The concrete pressed up roughly through her shoes as she stepped out of the car into the heat.

This couldn't be the place.

She hurried over to the curb of Kennedy Boulevard, tripping a few times over weeds that had forced themselves through the concrete. The address stenciled onto the curb matched LSVLLC. Slowly, humiliatingly, she turned back to look over the lot: brown weeds, shattered concrete, her burgundy Grand Am parked diagonally in the middle with the door still open, projecting an extended jam from a nameless 60s classic rock tune. Her energy dissipated out through a long exhale. With a shaky hand, she held her phone up in front of her and took a picture of the empty lot. Only when she looked down at the picture on the phone screen, darkened in the sunlight, did the reality become clear: in less than one minute, she'd gone from everything to nothing. No more leads. All she had left was a picture of Alessi that had already been stolen by people much more powerful than herself, and thousands of faceless internet readers who had mindlessly followed a stoned art history graduate student. She scrolled through her missed calls from dozens of reporters. If she called them back, she'd have nothing for them now but the same story about a clumsy fry cook, maybe a quick human interest piece about herself.

She'd missed a discussion section she was supposed to teach at the university today. Her professors would be furious. For the rest of the afternoon, she sat on the curb sobering up, watching the air around her turn to sunset pink, dusk blue, night black, then gold in the streetlights. She opened her inbox and started reading through her stack of emails one by one. Already, they read as artifacts of a better time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN (ARMAND)

Keeping your eyes full, that was the ticket. Occupying the senses. Eyes full of the water, nose full of salt mud, fingers busy rolling mangrove leaves into balls and then reaching to grab another from the Ziploc in the passenger seat of his Jeep. Ears overcome with the wind flying down the highway to the convenience store. The swamps and pastures spread maddeningly into a straight horizon, like God had done the math just right. Too much time looking out over the flat green and thoughts would start to creep into the gap, traumatic visions of flame and blood and white-eyed animal confusion. Waking hours were best spent down in the swamp of things. At night, he dreamed about a long line of tanker trucks in four colors. Mornings, he woke up screaming.

Leaving home was only necessary in the morning to pick up supplies from Al's Mart out near Yeehaw Junction. But entering the highway meant peeking his head clear of the bushes, a deer asking to be picked off. The road was elevated above the swamp, and the open air had a dangerously cerebral quality. He preferred the mobile home park where he had lived for almost two weeks, the gathering of trailers near a fire circle ten miles off the highway. The six other residents all had leather faces and croaky voices. They were neurotic, but they'd learned stillness. Perhaps he would, too, someday. On his most anxious nights he'd grab a blanket and sleep outside his trailer just for the calm it offered. The need to be alert out in the wild, being below the top of the food chain – it kept his mind squarely on his surroundings. Maybe one night an alligator or feral python would sneak up and consume him. That would be something close to justice. That or him burning to death. He tried his best not to think about it. Another mangrove leaf slipped

from his hands into the wind, and he picked another from his Ziploc, tried to focus on the rough texture between his fingers. The rooftop of Al's Mart came into view.

The glass front door was translucent with the remnants of old stickers advertising name brand soft drinks and tourist souvenirs for Yeehaw Junction, once a major destination for tourists to buy knockoff tickets to Disney and the carnival attractions off International Drive in Orlando. He tossed the last leaf onto the pavement and started picking salt from his beard, pulling at the thick hairs just enough for it to hurt. Inside, the store was split between the wall-to-wall refrigerators of a convenience store on the left, and on the right, a gift shop of cheap Native American apparel and plastic imitation gemstones. Behind the counter, Julie lounged with her legs propped on the countertop. Though a white girl, she kept her hair in two thin braids and wore one of the cheap Indian headbands. It had become clear that she did this of her own volition. Funny girl, she was, and pretty. Big eyes, clear skin. He wondered where she lived.

At the sound of the entry bell, she made a move to stand. Once she saw the greasy customer, she sagged back into her chair. "Morning, Armand."

Bless that girl for committing Armand to memory so quickly. He had missed the tactile pleasure of being called by his own name. "Top of the swamp to you."

"We're out of black cherry jerky."

"No big deal," he said, though in fact it was.

"We've got jalapeno and mesquite."

Each morning he bought a handful of black cherry pork jerky, a couple bananas, spring water, and a carton each of milk and orange juice. Black cherry jerky had become

the taste of his mouth. The routine was comforting, and in his experience change could stir up all kinds of things. He could see himself taking a bite out of some other flavor and the door of his memory bursting open like incinerator doors.

“When are you getting another shipment of black cherry?”

“Let me check the manifest.” Julie kept scrolling absentmindedly through her phone, eyes half closed. “Says we got a half-ton load on its way from Hong Kong. Got delayed by the worst nor’easter since the turn of the century.”

“Just answer the question.”

“God bless the souls of those poor crewmen.”

“You don’t have to be a smartass.”

“May their valor carry them into Valhalla.”

To the sound of vaguely tribal percussion playing through the speakers, he gathered everything but the jerky, then spent a few excruciating minutes choosing between the green jalapeno bags or the red mesquite ones. Eventually the colors made him start thinking of the tanker trucks in his dreams, and that raised enough panic to grab a bag of each and hurry over to the register. He handed her a fifty-dollar bill.

“I’ll take the change in internet minutes.” Armand nodded to the dusty old desktop in the corner with the sign reading \$1/minute.

“Tenth day in a row. You should really get a smartphone.”

“Those things are tracking devices, is what they are.”

“Then use the computers at the library.”

“But then I wouldn’t get to see your beautiful face.”

“Ew, gross,” Julie said, smiling a little. She probably couldn’t tell from the greasy beard growing on his face, but they were around the same age. The register chirped. She nudged the plastic bags of groceries across the counter.

“Okay, thirty bucks change since you went so easy on the jerky.” She handed him the receipt. “That’s a half hour of world wide web. Ready, go.”

At the push of the power button, the computer whirled to life and displayed the pixelated landscape of Windows 98. The old browser took thirty seconds to load Google, and even longer to load the Bank of America website, where he could check the page for his account. For the past two weeks, the transaction history showed one-hundred-dollar withdrawals at the Al’s Mart ATM every other day, each with a three-dollar and fifty cent transaction fee, making for withdrawals of \$103.50 and an otherwise spotless series of \$50,000 deposits on the first of each month stretching back for one year, all of them from LSVLLC, all of them completely untouched. The same size payments extended a full ten years before that, too, from XS Holdings. The total balance in his bank account began with a five and stretched on for a while after that. He never let himself put the sum into words. Leaving the money abstract lessened the guilt, as did refusing to spend any of it, at least until this recent series of misfortunes.

Next in his routine came the email. He navigated to the ShhMail homepage which featured a hooded person with a single finger raised to its mouth, and underneath a button reading *login to your discrete mail provider*. His inbox featured a year of daily incoming messages, and the sent folder a year of daily outgoing, all of them identical. He typed *bc@shhmail.com* into the address bar, typed a single *A* into the subject line, and left the

body of the email blank. He pushed *send* and was taken back to the inbox, with its long string of messages, all of them with a single letter *B* in the subject line. All their bodies were blank as well. No questions, no best wishes, no nonsense. Checking a box on a form, reviewing the manifest of a sinking ship.

Thirteen minutes had passed, which left seventeen minutes extra to read about Rafael Alessi. Last he'd heard they were charging him on some bullshit terrorist accusations, and he was unconscious in the hospital, probably from breathing smoke. Of course he'd started a fire, clumsy giant that he was. The police would eventually clear up the charges, he'd get some oxygen in the hospital, and he'd be back to work at some new restaurant a week later like nothing had happened. Perhaps even Rafael would be told to start sending one-letter emails to Bud Christensen as well, just to ease the anxiety. Google finally loaded again, and he typed Rafael Alessi too fast, so that the screen took a few seconds to register the letters. The image results loaded first as gray squares. Underneath, the top text result read *Picture of attempted assassin leaked on Tampa blog*. The images began to load, top to bottom. A charred human shape in a hospital bed. Bloodshot eyes stared out of the screen. Even on this hideous husk of a body, the eyes had a resigned weariness, unmistakable as the eyes of Rafael. All at once came a vision of a charred pile of burned limbs, of blackened antlers and dry scales on piles of ash. He grabbed the keyboard by its edges and squeezed until the plastic started to give way.

"Easy there, buddy. That's our only keyboard." Julie peeked over the counter just enough for her headband to come into view.

"Shut up."

In the flurry of police boats that had arrived after the restaurant caught fire, his retreat into the woods and long swim across the channel to the mainland, it had never occurred to him that Rafael had burned. Just from trying to protect him from being deported. But probably Rafael knew even more than that, or at least suspected. He remembered the uneasy look Rafael used to give him whenever Bud was mentioned, the silent hour Rafael and Bud had spent smoking cigars that first day at La Segunda Vida. The protective sound in his voice when he offered to buy him food. And now here the guy was, mutilated. This was how things ended up for Bud's exiles.

Armand remembered the same desperate attempt at fatherhood from his mother's young boyfriend back in Mexico. He'd tried to play catch with him once, the tattoos on his muscled arms slick with sweat. One morning the boyfriend and his mother were gone, and a group of hard-looking came to put him in the back of a truck with other children, some of them crying, others wide-eyed with fear. Then came the late night smuggling over the border, the teenage years picking strawberries in Plant City. When he was somewhere between fifteen and eighteen, a sweaty German-sounding man came and offered him a new job in Orlando, logging shipments for a real estate empire.

Your new name is Juan Ortega, the man told him, out of earshot from the white southern men that ran the farm. *Juan Ortega es su nome-bree. Do you understand?*

Armand nodded. None of his bosses at the farm knew he spoke English, so neither did this man. Not yet. Armand had known a Juan once – Juan Guzman, who died at fourteen, whose casket had stayed shut and picked up a thin layer of red dust before the end of the graveside mass. His casket was buried with the outline of his mother's body

left on top. The mother went home with dust on the front of her polyester dress, which looked black in shadow but blinked purple in the sun.

Almost like he knew, the stern German man kicked the soil. *From now on, Juan Ortega, you were born in Santa Fe. That is in New Mexico. Your birthday is April 5th in the year nineteen seventy-five. The means you are thirty years old. Tell me if I need to repeat myself.* Armand wondered why Americans spoke so often of birthdays, wrote them on pieces of paper in offices, but celebrated them so somberly. For a while the man watched the other workers bend their spines into arthritic knots. He pointed at them, shielded his eyes from the sun. *One day you'll thank me for picking you.*

From that day Armand lived and worked from room 554 overlooking the compound in Orlando, for nine years, until the day he quit. Bud taught him about America and money, told him parable-like stories. In the daytime, Juan counted the shipping trucks by color – green and red and blue ones into the distribution center, white ones into the warehouse in the pasture, with the smoking mountain stabbing the blue sky. At night, there were sometimes women. The German man, Schumacher, turned out to be probably the coldest person he'd ever known, not friendly, not someone to thank for anything. But everything else he told Juan on his first day was true: *Collect your money. Don't get curious. Ignore the smoking chimney. Remember that you are Juan Ortega. Avoid the police. Remember the numbers of your birthday. The police think Juan Ortega is dead. You do not want to go inside the warehouse.*

Fuck that German, fuck Bud. Rafael was a good man. Armand wished he'd spent the last decade picking strawberries. He'd have been so free of guilt. Clicking the first

image on the Al's Mart computer took him to a blog called *Gulf Coast Gunk*, which had released the picture. At the top, a picture of a girl about his age with messy hair and baggy eyes. She didn't look like much of an investigative journalist, but anybody who could get into that hospital knew what she was doing. He scrolled down into a series of posts, the most recent one a picture of a rough concrete lot with weeds peeking through the cracks. The rest of the post consisted of a short paragraph:

My search ended at the listed address for LSVLLC, which turned out to be this vacant lot. I have no other leads. Contact: gulfcoastgunk@gmail.com

Armand checked the timer. Eight minutes left. He logged into ShhMail again and opened two new message tabs at once. The computer whirred again in protest. In the first message box, he entered the blog email and typed the message:

*Subject: forget about the fire, I have something better
before you ignore this email: there was probably a lawyer named schumacher talking to rafael when you took that picture. his suit was expensive, had pinstripes. phone was big and black. he had a german accent. most likely being an asshole. if you think I'm full of shit, ask yourself how i could know that.*

listen up: lsvlcc is a dummy company set up by a developer named bud christensen. his corporation is called xs holdings. it's run from the top floor of the sunview estate hotel @ 4450 w sunview ave orlando florida. go there.

there will probably be a useful idiot in room 554. north elevators to 5th floor, then south elevators to 9th, then freight elevator to PH. code on the freight elevator and the room are both 101010. if you get caught, play sexy.

follow the white trucks.

Only one minute remained on the timer, but that would be plenty. In the other message window, he entered *bc@shhmail.com* and typed as fast as he could. His eyes bulged with anger, but the movement of his fingers was satisfying.

Subject: fuck you, bud

don't think you won't burn too

When the timer ran out, he was surprised to find Al's Mart as calm as before. The noise in his head was loud and colorful. His legs went mushy as he stood and picked up his groceries. Julie looked up at him, ready for a witty exchange of some kind, but he hurried by her without a word, out into the swamp heat. He tossed the groceries into the passenger seat, started the Jeep, and raced back down the highway. He would sleep outside again tonight, then head back to Clearwater. If this girl was as smart as she sounded, she wouldn't need more than three days.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN (HANK)

From the sky, inland Florida spread out as a sea of green and blue. Patches of buildings clustered around highways like rocks along Tennessee riverbanks. Hank sat with his back facing east, watching the coastline disappear. He tried sleeping off the rest of the head blow, but the wobbling of the helicopter made him dizzy if he closed his eyes. When he'd gotten confident enough that they weren't going to plummet into the ground, he looked inside the cabin to see Bud across from him, glancing nervously around – up, down at his feet, out either window – everywhere except straight ahead, where Schumacher was now sitting. Sometime while Hank was trying to sleep, the man had moved from the cabin to the cramped back. Schumacher stared at Bud intently. The chopper trembled under them. Hank could imagine them balanced on top of a tall spring.

Bud took off his sunglasses. "You know what, just come out with it."

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Stop it with that fascist follow-the-leader bullshit. I'm not your goddamn father. You'll be no good to me if you keep pouting."

Hank couldn't see any pouting. Schumacher looked about as stone-faced as a person could be. He'd sounded much more worked up earlier, on the rooftop. German was an angry language, though. Hank wondered why Bud chose to start this new conversation in English. Maybe he wanted Hank to understand.

"I didn't know where you were, sir."

Bud turned, a little alarmingly, to Hank. "Tell him where I was."

“Tennessee,” Hank yelled over the chopper, and pain shot through his ears, flaring up what might have been a concussion. Bud and Schumacher both flinched. The pilot coughed. Hank had forgotten they were hearing each other through the headsets, that they were speaking through microphones.

Bud nodded to Schumacher. “You heard the kid.”

“I didn’t know you were planning on expanding your properties.”

“In the Appalachians? Never. Not flat enough up there. I prefer a clean slate.”

Bud paused a second to wink at Hank, but if there was a joke, he’d missed it. “I thought I’d retired. Without this Rafael nonsense, you might have never seen me again.”

Schumacher’s fist clenched around the hand strap above the chopper door, the veins of his wrist bulging above his shirt sleeve. His anger was obvious. Hank had been looking in the wrong place. “Could have told me you were retiring, sir.”

“There were all kind of things you could have told me, too.”

“Not this again, sir. I always had your best interests.”

The chopper rotors lowered a register. With a stomach-clenching drop, they changed course for the top of a colossal building, wide and tall, with a helipad that read XS in flashing yellow lights. A red circle surrounded the letters. “I couldn’t tell you that I wasn’t coming back.” Bud shook his head. “You would have gotten emotional. Wouldn’t have let me give you the reigns of the company.”

Schumacher let go of the handle, despite their dropping altitude. He pinched the brim of his nose until his fingertips turned white.

“I’ve found ways to check in on the markets every now and then. You’ve been running the company flawlessly since I retired. I had the junior attorneys alter my ownership papers to say that if I’m not seen for longer than three years, or can’t be reached in an emergency, you’ll become acting CEO of XS indefinitely. By the time you became the boss, you’d have been doing it long enough that you couldn’t claim to be underqualified. It was a great plan until Rafael fucked it up.”

“Sir, I don’t know what to say.” Schumacher had taken the handle of the chopper again, much more gently this time, just seconds before the cabin listed hard to the right. Acid jumped up Rafael’s throat into his mouth. He swallowed hard. The sourness reminded him that he hadn’t eaten in almost twenty-four hours.

“You don’t have to say anything. We’ll get this business with Rafael handled, set up Hank with his new job, and I’ll be off again in no time.” As the chopper stabilized over the landing pad, Hank followed Bud’s eyes off the roof. Miles of resorts and attractions spread before them, and in the middle a slingshot ride split the sky. Its two skeletal metal towers cast narrow shadows into the pastures beyond, where cows the size of ants grazed in tiny groups. Bud adjusted himself in his seat. “Never thought I’d have to see Orlando again.” His eyelids had softened. His fingers trembled as he put his sunglasses back on. All of a sudden, he looked his age.

Hank dismounted the chopper in one long step. His legs gave way without the slightest resistance, but he stopped short of hitting the ground. Schumacher had wrapped his bulky arms around Hank’s stomach, and now held him in a Heimlich pose. Once he got his balance about him, he noticed a group of mostly young people in business suits

standing by the rooftop door, applauding even louder than the chopper noise. A few of them had tears in their eyes. Bud waved to them, frowning. Once the chopper blades had stopped, he muttered something inaudible. He walked briskly past the spectators, probably employees, and disappeared through the rooftop door.

*

By the time Hank had followed Schumacher through the right combination of passenger elevators and marble hallways, he'd lost any idea of where in the building they were. Their third elevator was a clunky metallic freight lift. Schumacher stood facing straight ahead, arms at near-military attention. A *ping* came from Schumacher's pocket, and he removed a large black device, not unlike the beepers that Shy Ann used to communicate with the Ramblers rather than phones – a habit that now, in hindsight, made more sense. Schumacher opened what looked like an email account on the screen, scrolled to a new message, and opened it. The text appeared to be a single letter, unreadable from a few steps away. Schumacher moved to another message, this one about a sentence long in all lowercase letters. He stared down for much longer than it could have taken to read. He sighed, and his posture loosened.

“Shit.”

“Shit what?”

“Shut up.”

The elevator doors opened to a very short hallway, much less presentable than the marble ones he'd seen in the rest of the building, which had appeared to be some kind of upscale resort. A well-worn pathway ran down the middle of its musty burgundy carpet.

Schumacher pocketed the phone and pulled Hank down to the door at the end of the hallway, made of heavy varnished wood. On the front, ornate golden numbers reflected a morphed version of the hallway: room 554.

Schumacher entered a code on the long keypad. The door sounded heavy, the way it resisted his push. Creaking echoed off the inside of the room, which proved to be cavernous: sleek white floors and ceiling and walls, except for the exterior wall, made entirely of glass overlooking an industrial set of warehouses and parking lots.

Amusement park attractions and pastures spread out in the distance. At the far end of the room was the largest bed Hank had ever seen, made with plush white sheets and oversized white pillows, and on a riser against the windows, a long glass desk with a wide computer monitor, white desk chair, white mouse and keyboard. Schumacher paced over to the windows, his dress shoes clicking in rhythm and echoing back, making for a swing-band series of clicks until he stopped at the windows. Hands behind his back, the man looked like a lord at his serfdom, which, if Hank had understood Bud in the helicopter, Schumacher was about to be.

“Mr. Christensen needs to straighten out this situation with Mr. Alessi, and then he’ll explain your new job. Feel free to get some rest in the meantime.”

“What’s this business about a job?”

“The duties aren’t much to explain, but he’ll probably want to do it himself.”

“Probably?”

“You’re not the first to hold this job.” Schumacher sounded a little sad. Without looking down, he took out his clunky phone again and rubbed its surface with his

fingertips, as if reading its braille. “It’s an important job, one of the most essential on the compound. The last occupant let us down. You’ll be paid well, much better than you probably deserve. Now, get some sleep while you wait.”

There was something ghostly in his outline against the view through the window, growing pinker by the minute as the sun disappeared behind the clouds. Suddenly the scattered miniature golf courses below, the ferris wheels, jammed-up cars on the roads, they looked like a magenta apocalypse.

“Pretty sure I’m not supposed to sleep with a concussion.”

“Then don’t sleep.” Schumacher turned around, made his way back to the door. The heel-toe rhythm started up again, this time much faster. “Really, I don’t care.”

*

Sleep came quickly, but waking up took longer. For who knew how long, he lived in blurry images of distant carnival light, set to echoing conversation.

Sir, you could have told me you sent Armand to work at the restaurant. Talking to Rafael, he must have thought he pulled one over on me.

I’d rather you not know where he is.

I wouldn’t have harmed him, sir.

I’m not sure I believe you. But don’t worry, I have a plan.

Sir, this mugshot doesn’t look anything like him. Brown skin, sure, vaguely Latino, but he’s too old. Too fat. Wouldn’t get past the witness.

Most witnesses, probably not. But ours, you’d be surprised.

But you saw the email, sir. What makes you think Armand won’t talk?

His story would sound absurd.

Absurd, sir, but true.

Doesn't make any difference. Now, to business.

“Rise and shine, Hank. I don't have much more time.”

Hank finally pried his eyes open. Groggier than before, but painfully sober. He hadn't been high in much too long, if you didn't count the strange motel drug trip, which he didn't consider a high so much as a gauntlet that left him sexually confused. His dick hadn't been hard since, nor had he thought about masturbating. Sitting up took a couple tries. He kept toppling over and popping back up.

Bud's voice: “Ah, there we go. Come over here.”

The room was dark save the dim golden light through the windows. Hank had no idea how long he'd been sleeping, but it was full-on night. The ferris wheel had started up again below. The lights on the slingshot ride had been timed to move up and down, making the shadows in the room dance. Bud sat at the desk, Schumacher hunching over the back of his chair. The glossy tiles soothed his hot bare feet. Hank had reached the desk before he realized that he was wearing only boxers. The two of them seemed unsurprised. At this point, little was left to hide.

“Let me tell you about your new job.” Bud opened a spreadsheet on the computer screen, a half-dozen columns wide and endlessly long. At the left, each row was labeled with a specific date, and each column was color-coded except the last, which was white. “Your mission, should you choose to take it, is to watch over the property from these windows here and log the shipment trucks that come onto the property each day. As you

know, I run a large and complex real estate empire, including condominiums, subdivisions, hotels, resorts, none greater than this one we're in right now." His speech was rote, like a veteran teacher giving a lesson to children. Schumacher now leaned against the back wall, arms crossed. "The main offices of my company occupy the upper areas of this resort, and underneath this window sprawls the heart of my empire. I learned a long time ago that getting my own fleet of trucks would save me money over time. Shipments come into these warehouses, and then move out to my projects across Florida. It's sometimes difficult to keep the hotel shipments, food and linens and cleaning products, separate from the corporate shipments: office supplies, building materials, secure document transfers, and plenty of other things that I won't bore you with. It's your job to be my eye in the sky. The trucks are color-coded. You just have to spend the daylight working hours, nine to five, logging the trucks based on their categories. It's very simple. Green trucks for food, red for building supplies, blue for hotel supplies, yellow trucks for miscellaneous, white trucks..." Bud paused, his voice suddenly shaky. His hand trembled on the mouse. "Well, you get the picture."

Only now, hearing this job explained, did Hank realize he'd been hoping for something much more exciting. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but I spent the last year of my life counting trash bags. This doesn't seem far off."

"I'm prepared to pay you fifty thousand dollars a month."

"You already offered me money for the drive. Hell, I didn't even come here for the money anyway. I had plenty of cash. Just wanted to get out of Tennessee." Hearing himself say this aloud, he realized that he could have just left on his own. Any one of

those mornings, adjusting his sore dick and blinking last night's buzz from his eyes, he could have decided to leave forever. Then, the real truth hit him, strange as it was: he would have never left. It had taken a deranged old man and a gunfight to chase him from a life that he'd been free to abandon all along. He'd have died decades from now, tired and sad and high, with a trailer full of garbage cash.

"You're right! Spot on," Bud said, pointing. "It's not about the money. None of this is about the money." In a flash of shadow he was on his feet, arm around Hank's shoulder. "Let me tell you why I've spent my life doing what I've done."

Schumacher sighed loudly from the corner. Bud guided Hank over to the wall of windows until his nose nearly touched it. The view took up his whole vision – light, flashing and darting in all directions. Veins of road with gold and red lines of headlights and taillights. This was probably what skydiving looked like.

"Look out over all of this. See how it comes at you in waves?" Without explaining further, it was clear what he meant: nearest to them was this collection of amusements along the clogged highway, the lights dense and multicolored. Beyond that, the lights eased into strip centers, then to looping patterns of suburban roads. Then, farther, there was the black. Pastures, probably swamps. Where they ended and the night sky began was impossible to know. The lights blotted out the stars. Bud continued without an answer: "Hundreds of years ago, this whole peninsula, all of Florida, was that black you see out there. It had been black for millions of years before that. Black since the lava cooled. Then came the floods, the ice age, who knows what else. I'm not a scientist. But someday all of this peninsula will light up. Every square inch will be ours

until it collapses back into the ocean. It's the *Human Age*, baby, and people like me are the ones on top. I'm the Tyrannosaurus Rex, the Woolly Mammoth, the goddamn biggest volcano, sprouting lava over the dead black husk. Those hippie activists say my developments are destroying the environment. If I could, I'd look every one of them right in the eye and I'd tell them *you're goddamn right I am*. It's what we're *made* for, to light up the world. You don't yell at hurricanes for cleaning out the swamps. You don't condemn an alligator for eating a deer."

Bud took a moment to catch his breath. His palm was pressed flat against the glass before him. It was dark, but Hank thought the old man had started to cry. Bud rubbed his eyes and then held his fingertips up close to his face, rubbed the tears together between one finger and thumb. "Ugh," he mumbled. "I'm too tired for this shit."

"That's a real interesting speech, Bud, and there's a good chance I understand your angle just fine. But what does this have to do with counting trucks?"

"Nothing, nothing." Bud glanced over at Schumacher, who shook his head ever-so-slightly in the dark. Wiping the tears clean from his eyes with his suit sleeve, Bud sighed. "Ah, fuck all of this." Bud's guilt was childlike. Hank remembered the bashful look his father used to give whenever his preaching voice got loud enough to make the congregation flinch. The way he'd change the subject, switch to a whisper to compensate. "But, uh, yeah... it's not about the money," Bud said quietly. "Not about the work, either. It's about the recreation. What you do when you're done counting for the day."

"And what would that be?"

“Whatever you want,” Bud said, and with that, Schumacher opened the door to the room and turned on the lights. A group of five women entered from the hall, all of them brunette, young, curvy in the right places. They wore tight getups not unlike Hooters uniforms. One of them carried a Ziploc of weed loosely in her hand. “Call these ladies a starter pack,” Bud added, now walking to the door. “I’m sure they’ll introduce themselves. For any other needs, speak to Schumacher.” The girl on the far end, short-haired with a dimple on her right cheek, rolled her eyes and giggled. She elbowed the girl next to her, a little shorter and frowning down at her own feet. These were not porn actresses, Hank realized. They were *real*, right here, in the same strange room he was. But they probably knew more than he did about what would come next. Bud cleared his throat. He was now out in the hallway, Schumacher by his side holding the door. With a long flourish, Bud took a deep bow, and the door began to close.

“May we never meet again.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN (DEBORAH)

There had been something different about the email. Most reporters had perfect grammar, for one, and went out of their way to list their professional qualifications. Their email addresses carried prestige: janepeters@bbc.com, timgluck@cnn.com, and their signoffs carried their full names and titles: managing editor, reporter-at-large, or in one especially pompous case, *The Poynter Institute Scholar of Year, 2013*. On the other hand, the spam emails had both horrible grammar and completely nonsensical syntax that took no more than a sentence to spot: *please forwith your consideration most esteemed request your attention to my ailment which many viewers will enjoy for you*.

This email had neither of those, but what it did have was purpose. She'd almost skipped the message, but reading through her inbox in the parking lot that night had become meditative, almost hypnotic – open, read, archive, repeat – and the frankness in its content had snapped her to attention. The way the writer pushed aside the terrorist angle completely and insisted on his or her own agenda. She'd needed to fill her gas tank after letting the car idle beside her so long, but after that, she had been off to Orlando as fast as her car could move. Radio off, mostly sober.

Now, she stood in the front lobby of Sunview Estate Hotel, which looked by all accounts to be your typical Orlando resort – flashy but made of cardboard, too close to the carnival nonsense of International Drive to pull off an exotic atmosphere. Her credit card would clear the cost for a night's stay. Ad revenue from all this new blog traffic would refill her account, at least for a little while. Call it a business expense. The friendly

woman at the front desk checked her in, gave a long speech about their amenities, asked if she had anyone accompanying her on this vacation, frowned when she said no.

Following the elevator routine from the email was a little humiliating. Someone might have been watching their gullible pawn and laughing at her. As she boarded the second elevator, she decided that maybe foolishness had brought her here. All the way to Orlando, late at night when she should have been home grading papers and drafting desperate apology emails to her graduate supervisor and her students for missing class this afternoon. She thought about going back downstairs, checking herself out, and going home. That was until she found the freight elevator. It was right where the email said it would be. In place of the up and down buttons, there were two buttons, labeled 1 and 0.

Now came the law-breaking part, the danger. Trespassing or worse. The drunken excitement returned. *Play sexy*, the email had said.

She looked down at her wrinkled t-shirt and jeans and resolved to do her best. She pulled the t-shirt collar down enough to show some cleavage, lowered the pants until the waist cut painfully into her hips. She'd never been especially fit, but most men seemed to admire the softness of her body. What mattered was a little aggression – giving them permission to love what porn told them to despise: a natural woman with healthy curves.

1-0-1-0-1-0. The freight doors rattled open.

The layer of deep green paint had been worked away in the middle of the elevator floor, exposing bare metal. She looked for a button to select a floor, but couldn't find one, and suddenly the freight doors slammed closed on their own, first the gate and then the heavy door that darkened the chamber. The elevator dropped a foot before barreling

upwards and sputtering to a stop. The doors reopened on a long hallway ending at a single wooden door. Deborah remembered riding the Tower of Terror once on a trip to Disneyland with her parents, who both frowned through the entire day until they resolved to leave early due to *unacceptable crowding*. The ride began with a black-and-white projection of an anxious family in a fake hallway, then a stroke of lightning that made them disappear. The image had made her strangely sad then. Here, stepping from the freight elevator, there were echoes of the same sadness. She hadn't talked to her parents in over a month. It was a strange thing, the way that hurt.

The door at the end of the hallway read 554, just as promised. The directions had brought her to precisely that room, without a single deviation, making her wonder for a moment whether that email had pulled her into its own alternate universe. If she'd been high, the thought wouldn't seem so ludicrous.

The door creaked open on its own. She flinched to run, but there was nowhere in the hallway to hide. Five women came through the door in identical outfits – green Soffe shorts and pink tank top undershirts with too-small bras. A few of them rolled their shorts as they walked, and the one in front, with an amazingly pronounced dimple on her right cheek, pushed her bra higher. They seemed to have just gotten dressed. The girl in front looked Deborah up and down as she passed. “Guy was limp as a garden hose. Here's to you having better luck. Maybe he likes heavy girls.”

The last of them left the wooden door open for Deborah to enter. “We better still get paid,” she called to the others, and hurried to catch up.

Inside the dark and high-ceilinged room, a young man sat hunched over the bed, facing out a wall of windows, slapping absentmindedly at his penis.

“I said get out,” he croaked. “Maybe we’ll try again tomorrow.” At the far end of the room, a large computer screen displayed a clunky multicolored porn site. A bottle of KY lube had fallen open and leaked shiny liquid onto the desk. In one look, the scene was familiar: guy tries to have sex, can’t get it up, thinks porn will help, makes it worse. The email had said the man in this room would be useful, and that he would be an idiot. Whoever the writer had been, he or she hadn’t been wrong yet.

“I’m on the rag anyway,” Deborah said, putting her hands in her pockets. Play casual instead, she thought. Sexy would probably freak him out. “Looks lonely in here. Just thought you’d want some company. What’s your name?”

The guy turned around. “Are you another... I mean, did someone pay you to come here?” His voice had a disarming southern drawl. Messy hair had fallen sweaty onto his forehead. His eyes were small and deep-set. Cheeks narrow. More than anything, he looked tired. Like his muscles had gotten sore from holding his face together. He pulled the fluffy white comforter over his lap.

It wasn’t clear which answer would calm him down. Somehow, she’d need to talk to him. Those were likely the first whores he’d ever seen, judging by how he wouldn’t even say *prostitute*. It seemed like he hadn’t done much with them. Pride probably bruised, vulnerable. She weighed the cost of having sex with him, if necessary.

“Come here,” she said. Carefully, she made her way over to him. This man could be dangerous. He couldn’t have been older than twenty-five. Once she’d gotten close

enough to the light through the windows, he took her in with childish admiration. His face, darkened on one side, showed unmistakable terror. So, this one was harmless. She tried to sound aggressive: “You’ve had enough for tonight. You look tired. Try to get some sleep and we’ll see about the morning. I’ll be here.”

Without a word, he climbed under the covers and assumed a fetal posture under the sheets. She sat down in the bed next to him and waited for his breathing to soften. On the low white side table, a metal pipe of weed and lighter had been tossed messily onto a bag of deep green marijuana buds. She was in the belly of the beast now. Best to stay sharp, sober. The computer screen called from across the room.

The porn video had been paused on the image of a curvy woman bent over the legs of a man, who held the camera at a sideways angle. The lighting was yellow. Amateur, apparently. Behind the porn window, a spreadsheet titled *truck log* filled the screen. Each column was colored differently, ending at a white column to the right. The other columns reached double digits on each dated row, but not the white one. Most days showed zero white trucks, only the occasional two or three.

Follow the white trucks.

Excited, she leaned forward into the screen. Her elbows slipped on the lubed-up table, sending her face down hard onto the keyboard. The desk chair rolled behind her off the raised platform. She tried to stand, but slipped on the fallen bottle of lube and ended up ass-first in a puddle. It smelled like raspberry and chemicals.

“What are you doing?” The guy had climbed out of bed. He stumbled through the dark, penis bouncing awkwardly around to the beat of his steps.

“Nothing, nothing.” With all the strength she could muster, she pulled herself up to desk-level and reopened the porn window. “Just watching a little, uh... porn.” Just before he reached her, she pushed play. A soundtrack of forced moans boomed off the walls. The floor rumbled under her slick knees. Somewhere behind these walls must have been a giant speaker system. “Homemade. Really good stuff.”

“Why are you on the ground?”

“Got a little too excited, you know.” The real action had started now. On screen, the girl’s messy ponytail bounced. The speakers blasted the sounds, from the slick motion all the way down to the rasp of the man breathing.

“I prefer the professional stuff, to be honest. Production value is everything.” His voice still sounded a bit suspicious, but he was smiling at her. Weirdly, he was also erect. “You don’t go to a movie theater to watch student short films.”

“Who goes to movie theaters anymore?”

“You don’t look like a prostitute.”

Outside these circumstances, that was always nice to hear. But this guy was onto her now. The white trucks from the email were real, and this guy knew about them. Somehow, she’d need him in the mood to talk. What she had to do presented itself. This pale, suddenly attentive penis was her only ticket to what could be the launch of her professional life. She’d handled penises for worse reasons, it was true.

“Maybe not, but I suck dick like one.”

With the help of the spilled KY, which had now soaked into her clothes and coated every surface, she slid forward to him across the raised platform. At the first

contact, his sharp intake of breath surprised her. From then on, it was all confused moans from him, mixed with the sounds of the couple in the video, who were thankfully loud enough to save her from having to fake enjoyment. They slipped and slid their way over to the bed for the main event, him following her by the hand. His movements were jerky and hurried, hands too rough and gripping her in all the wrong places. But three times he stopped to ask her if she was enjoying herself, asked if he should be doing anything different. The last time he stopped, he told her that she was more beautiful than those other girls from before, that they'd made him uncomfortable. All of this he said in a deliberate Southern cadence. She'd been fed plenty of that bullshit before, by guys she'd actually cared about, but this guy was oddly sincere.

There was enough leftover lube on her hand to finish the job onto the sheets. After a few awkward spasms, he rolled off to the side into a pile of soft pillows. She slid away and pulled some sheets over her body, reminding herself that she was not, in fact, a prostitute. This guy had said so himself, and boy, he seemed a real upstanding type. He caught his breath for a few seconds before pushing his mouth up against her ear, close enough that even his whisper was deafening.

"My name is Hank."

"Deborah. Pleased to meet you."

"That was my first time."

"Jesus."

"I'm glad it was with a girl as gorgeous as you."

Again, with the sincerity. The southern tinge: *gow-juss as you*. She'd rather he had been an asshole. "Yeah, alright there, champ." Through the silky comforter, she patted what was hopefully his leg. "I'll see you in the morning."

An engine fired above them. Out the window, a helicopter banked hard off the rooftop and set itself flat again. For a while, Deborah watched the chopper circle the resort in wider and wider circles, then pause dangerously close to the windows. In the cabin, she could make out the shadow of a tiny old bald man lingering out the side of the helicopter facing the city. For a moment, he watched the lights. When he plopped back into his seat, he signaled the pilot and the chopper banked off for the horizon, beyond the city limits. Deborah watched until its light was a red speck in a sea of black.

*

She awoke to the familiar smell of weed smoke. Haze lit up in the sunlight through the wall of windows. Earlier this morning, she could recall hearing an alarm clock and feeling lips brush her cheek. Hank sat at the computer in a bathrobe, a faded denim jacket draped over the back of the desk chair. Every few seconds, he peered out the windows over a compound of warehouses. Getting a good look at him expanded the shame from last night: in the full light, his face sported a thin layer of grease. Somehow she hadn't noticed that he also had a pretty gnarly black eye. Skin peeled at the top of his cheeks. New to Florida, maybe, and hadn't learned about sunscreen. Probably new to this whole operation, too. That could be useful.

"Ah, you're awake!" Hank bared his teeth at her. He'd probably wanted to say that to a girl for a very long time. The practice showed through.

Deborah stood, tried to let the sheets fall off her in a sensual way. She almost slipped again, had to catch herself on the bed with her knee. Damn, that stuff stayed slippery for a long time. So much for sexy. Hank stared unabashed at her body. Strange that she was the one feeling predatory right now.

“What are you doing there?”

“My new job,” he said, apparently desperate to show off. He beckoned her over with a flick of his neck. “Counting the trucks coming in. Blue, green, red, even got a white one a couple hours ago. Very important stuff for the company. I’m paid fifty grand a month, nothing fancy.” Trying the fake humility racket. Fuck, this guy was almost cute in a pitiful sort of way. “Quite an empire Mr. Christensen runs. I just call him Bud, you know. Needs to keep track of shipments from all over the world.”

“White one, huh?” Deborah leaned forward so that her right breast touched his shoulder. He leaned back into her, subtly, while she tried not to laugh. Later, she’d need a long talk with herself. This wasn’t supposed to be fun. Stay on task. *Follow the white trucks, follow the white trucks.* “Where do the white ones go?”

“Yonder.” Hank pointed off to a small warehouse by a retention pond. On top, a dozen industrial fans surrounded a towering smokestack. “Don’t much know what’s inside those. Probably coal or something.” The gaping top stared down the clear morning sky. She thought of a dormant volcano. “Want some coffee?” Hank held up an insulated pitcher. “Maid brought it up. She had the whole black-and-white French getup with the short skirt and hat. I wonder if she’s a prostitute, too. Do y’all come from some kind of company, or is it an independent contractor kind of thing?”

Deborah pulled back from his shoulder. “Coffee would be great.”

She filled a Styrofoam cup and gulped down probably the best coffee she’d ever tasted. The burning didn’t much bother her. The sharpness of pain was almost soothing. Inside the cup, three tiny bubbles clumped together and floated from one side to the other on the black surface. One of them popped. She hadn’t been this sober in a long time. “Well,” she said, and chugged down the rest of the cup. Heat pulled at her stomach. “Time to head back to hooker headquarters.”

Hank jumped up, but froze at the sight of her. She thought about letting him try to figure out how to say goodbye in this kind of situation, but the humor had faded. Without a word, he watched her put on her lube-soaked clothes. They stuck to her skin so that they hung all wrong. Hank walked up to her and kissed her on the cheek, smiled meekly. The robe showed the sunburn line across his pasty white collarbone. Quickly, she took note of the direction she’d need to take – east – and left the room, slamming the heavy door behind her. The hallway smelled like dust and raspberry.

*

The chimney warehouse had only two doors: one vertical sliding door, probably for trucks, and a green backdoor that must have been guarded. The smokestack had started spewing dark smoke. The air smelled vaguely of barbecue. She’d settled on waiting for a white truck to approach, hoping this would be one of the two-truck days she’d seen on the spreadsheet. *Follow the white trucks*, the email had said, not *go where the white trucks have been*. She’d been waiting inside a dry prickly bush for nearly an hour when she finally heard the sound of brakes relieving their air pressure. A semi truck

rumbled around the corner and stopped in front of the door. Careful to stay out of sight of the rearview, she ran up behind the truck and climbed up into a crevice below the loading grate in back of the trailer, just in time for the truck to keep moving. She hooked her legs under an axle and hung from the back grate by her arms. Her face was less than a foot from the ground. Even at such a slow speed, the pavement moving under her was terrifying. Her muscles started to burn and shake. Dull pain spread through her thigh. She strained to keep her leg hooked in the undercarriage. After a thud, the ground under her turned to smooth warehouse concrete. The truck stopped more abruptly than she expected, tossing her hard down onto the pavement. She scurried around behind a nearby stack of boxes. Surely, somebody had seen her.

The faint scent of barbecue had turned acidic. Something pungent had been cooking. Her eyes stung. She listened to the rumble of the semi for a few minutes, the whine of steering, before it finally turned off. A door opened and slammed.

“Sorry I’m a little late,” a gnarled female voice said.

“New driver, huh? Pleased to meet ‘cha, my name’s Nelson. Go ahead and grab lunch. We’ll pull the truck around outside when we’re done unloading and give you a call to pick it up. Signature and best number to reach you, right there.”

“Della. Charmed. But man, I gotta tell you, this is the smelliest cargo I’ve ever carried. It’s like a sumo wrestler took a dump on a dead dog.”

Deborah peeked up over the boxes. The warehouse was mostly empty except for the truck, some piles of cardboard boxes, and a colossal metal cube that ran from the floor to the ceiling. The tractor trailer had been backed up to face an elevated vault door

on the side of the cube, with a huge metal crank. On the other side of the warehouse, a long caged walkway on wheels waited against the wall.

Nelson took his clipboard back from the driver. Around his neck hung a dusty black gasmask. He wore thick black rubber wading pants. Arm-length rubber gloves hung over his shoulder. Della adjusted her baseball cap, pulled at her pony tail.

“This whole thing strikes me as a little strange, tell you the truth.”

Nelson peered at her for uncomfortably long. “Does it.”

“That right there, that’s the biggest goddamn furnace I’ve ever seen. I saw the chimney. And *that*,” she said, pointing at the semi truck, shaking her head with indignation, “that’s full of something that stinks to high heaven. Something I ain’t *seen*, since the trailer door was padlocked when I picked it up out at that station in the woods down south. I ain’t been given a key to open the back, and nobody at the station would tell me what’s in there.”

Nelson examined the clipboard. “You’re a driver, not...”

“And *that*,” she said, louder, pointing at the walkway, which a group of men dressed the same as Nelson had begun pushing toward the furnace. “I haven’t the slightest fucking idea what that might be, but something ain’t right here.”

Nelson tossed the clipboard. It slapped against the hard floor, sending a loud echo though the warehouse. Deborah flinched. Two of the cardboard boxes wavered on their bottoms. She barely managed to straighten them in time to keep them upright. As it turned out, they were empty. She wondered if all the stacks were. The men pushing the caged walkway had gathered enough momentum that it was now gliding silently on its

wheels to the margin between the truck and the incinerator. Nelson smiled at Della. He began to slip the long rubber gloves onto his arms.

“Do you believe in global warming, ma’am?”

“Matter of fact, I do not.”

“Figures. None of you truck drivers seem to, but I guess that’d make sense. Any case, a lot of the pollution on God’s green earth comes from landfills, bunch of other trouble comes from coal power plants. Now, this resort sucks up a whole lot of energy from the grid, and this company’s developments down south generate a helluva lot of garbage. The powers that be in this company found a solution. Bring the garbage to a central location, and burn it in a furnace for energy.” Nelson finished putting on his second glove, snapped its end against his upper arm. “Two birds, one stone.”

Della chewed on her cheeks. “Ain’t never heard of that.”

“I’m told it’s common in Europe.”

The others had finished placing the walkway against the vault door. The way they moved, doing their job so intently, Deborah thought of full sized oompa-loompas. One of them climbed into the eighteen wheeler and backed up until the trailer latched against the walkway. The vault door, the caged walkway, the truck back, they all fit perfectly.

“I’m not sure about all this.”

“You don’t have to be. You’ve got a freelance contract. You can quit any time. But this is the way of the future. Enjoy your lunch.” Nelson donned the gas mask and so did the others. Della stormed across the warehouse and out the back door. One of the masked crew turned and watched her leave, shook his head.

Deborah pulled at her greasy clothes. Had this been what the email writer wanted from her? A soft article about garbage burning wasn't the kind of world-shaking journalism to get her blog off the ground. Nobody would be interested in the artistic career of a two-bit environmental blogger. Best case, a few facebook activists would share the article among themselves. Deflated, she watched one of the other men open a gate on the side of the walkway and climb inside. The cage around the walkway extended at least ten feet high, and seemed to be made of heavily reinforced metal. She wondered if they'd had problems with dropping garbage off the side.

First, he opened the furnace door, putting his full weight into turning the crank. The heavy metal hinges gave way inward, releasing a dusty cloud of smoke into the air. Shoulders hunched, at a meandering pace, he made his way back across the walkway to the truck. He gave the others a thumbs up. When he opened the trailer, he paused for a moment before jumping frantically backward, limbs flailing, out the cage door. He fell the few feet down off the walkway and onto the concrete. The group of them had been set into some kind of panic. Another of the men slammed the gate. After the rattle ceased, an odd grumbling sound came from inside the truck.

Quiet at first, then building to full tenor. The sound was unmistakable.

But there was no way.

The walkway creaked, and the shocks on its wheels compressed. The man who'd jumped out of the cage reached into the back of his wading pants and pulled out a small black object. From inside the trailer trotted a fully-grown black bear, growling hoarsely, fur shining wet. Halfway down the walkway, the beast collapsed under its own weight.

The cries grew hoarser into silence. The bear looked to be badly injured. The man aimed the black object, a pistol, at the bear's head through a hole in the cage. The circular glass eyes of the gasmask lined up with the sights of the gun. The gunshot boomed through the warehouse. Blood exploded out the side of the animal's head.

Another of the workers patted the man on the shoulder. He pulled off his mask for a second, revealing a red sweaty face. He wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. Deborah couldn't believe it, but he was laughing.

"Guess the guys down south wanted to keep us limber."

Each worker took turns poking him in the side or slapping his back, the way office workers might laugh over a whoopee cushion.

Two of the men mounted up again and dragged the bear into the furnace. For the next ten minutes, Deborah watched through ash-stung eyes while the team of men carried dozens of animal corpses across the walkway – mostly deer, raccoons, armadillos, coyotes, the occasional adult alligator or bear that took a few of them to pull across the walkway. Multi-colored birds piled high in plastic crates.

Deborah blinked the sting from her eyes. She touched her face. There was ash on her fingertips. The air had grown caustic enough that she needed to get outside before she went blind or passed out. She eyed the door the trucker had left through, out in the open. Peripheral vision couldn't have been good though those masks. When one of the men emerged with a bobcat, its fur dyed pink from blood, Deborah snapped a few pictures with her phone. Then she recorded a full minute of video until nausea set in. She threw

up a little onto the warehouse floor, hurried over to the door and outside into the fresh humid air. She vomited more acidic coffee onto the pavement.

She stumbled, bleary, back across the property toward the resort. Near the top, a single strip of white windows reflected the sun. It was hard to tell, but she thought she could see Hank's pale figure at his desk. The way he'd talked about his job, the poor rube probably had no idea what he was part of. She had to tell him.

Dizzy, hyperventilating, she followed the directions back to the overlook room. Her oily clothes had gathered a thin layer of gray ash. A beautiful family – father, mother, two bright blonde children – fled from the hotel elevator when she entered. The children held their noses. This time, the freight elevator did not remind her of Disneyland. She entered the door code without knocking. Hank sat in the desk chair, naked, viciously masturbating to a fantasy-themed porn. Beyond him, through the windows, the chimney had begun to smoke again, darkening the thunderheads above.

“Look who came back for more.” Hank spun around. “What the...”

“There's something you'll want to know.” Deborah threw up again, coating the white floor in chunky brown. Groaning, she wiped grimy snot from her upper lip and spit ash into the vomit. “I found out what's in the white trucks.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN (RAFAEL)

The young hospital attendant was the most beautiful girl Rafael had ever seen. Her thick brown hair hung down over half her face at an angle that he found deeply erotic. Her smile hurt his pelvis. She rolled him in a wheelchair down the hallway, her body tantalizingly close to his neck. Her perfume smelled exotic, some fruit he couldn't pronounce. Earlier, when she helped to dress his peeling skin, she'd told him she was here to take him to the press conference. Rather than ask her to explain, he watched the way her body moved inside her scrubs. Curse the bandages, he thought, for blocking her soft tan palms. He didn't mind the way his skin hurt at even the slightest brush. His bandages covered his body up to his neck, pulling at his torso and the area around his loins. Pain meds left him numb enough that the constant pain throbbed dull and general in his bones. He thought of being submerged in a hot tub of muddy saltwater. He wondered if he had an erection, if that was even achievable.

Terry was her name. *Terry*.

Rafael had spent the last three days alone in his room, watching nurses move in and out. Some of them would ask him idle, meaningless questions. Schumacher left in a hurry on that first day, shortly after Rafael's picture appeared on the news. His phone chirped, and he cut the wire to the hospital room television before leaving. Court testimony needed to be *uncluttered* when possible, he'd explained, and news might only confuse Rafael, or worse, *convince him of falsehoods*. After that, watching the nurses became his only form of entertainment. He hadn't been so aroused by women in his entire adult life. Since awaking from the accident, his scalded body had somehow

brought that part of his imagination alive. His adult life in the restaurant had felt like the long delay of his end. But the days in this hospital, not knowing what awaited him, reminded him of his youth betting his life on jai alai. Most of all, he was angry again. His younger years had been anger. This attendant Terry pushing his wheelchair, with her heavy eyeliner and perfectly taut skin – she was angry, too.

His wheelchair approached wide double doors.

“Ready?” Terry whispered hotly into his ear, and pushed him around the corner into view of dozens of reporters in fold-up chairs. A few of them jumped at the sight of him, and the others followed. Camera clicks started up at all different pitches and volumes, until they evened out onto the rattle of a roulette wheel. Reporters began yelling questions, so many that he couldn’t make any of them out.

Carefully, Terry wheeled him up onto a carpeted stage, where a podium had been placed in front of the projector screen. She stopped him by the flags in the corner. Her voice in his ear again: “I’m no lawyer, but I’m pretty sure you don’t have to answer their questions. It’s up to you, though.” She hopped off the stage and hurried from the room, probably off to her next task. Adolescent longing set in.

The reporters gave up on their questions until another woman entered the room, this one in a slim black pantsuit. Rafael recognized the agent from the first day, the one who had accused him when he awoke in his bed. A familiar red-haired woman followed behind, beautiful and solemn, but he couldn’t place her. The suited woman took the podium, silencing the reporters with a single swipe of her hand. Neither of the women

acknowledged Rafael. This must have been the awkwardness of criminals during trials – being the center of activity, but invisible, seen only in stolen glances.

“Please take your seats. Let’s get down to business.” Her toes tapped behind the podium. “I’m lead agent Julia Blackenship, and behind me is Karen McGuinness, communication secretary to the Governor’s office.” Blackenship opened a binder that she’d been carrying under her arm. Whatever was written inside was too messy to read. “There have been a number of developments in the case of Rafael Alessi, including testimony from several reliable sources.” She gestured off the stage, where Drake sat in a front-row chair, flanked by his parents. The reporters snapped a few pictures while he waved timidly over his shoulder. One of the flashes hit him square in the eyes. He removed his thick glasses to wipe them clean. “This, combined with information from the former suspect’s legal team, and from the ownership of La Segunda Vida Restaurant, has led us to drop all charges against Rafael San Lazaro Alessi, effective immediately.” The reporters reacted with a wave of mutters among themselves. Still, none of them looked at Rafael. “We are now searching for a new suspect: Juan Ortega.”

Rafael glared down at his feet, bandaged and fitted with thin hospital slippers. Of course they’d found out about Juan. There was no way around it. Soon they’d hunt him down, they’d find him and deport him. Or worse, if they learned about whatever Juan had done to get himself exiled from Orlando to the restaurant, he could be jailed. And then there was always the chance that Schumacher might find him first. Who knew what he might do to protect Bud. Rafael had burned to save a doomed man.

In the crowd, Drake stared at the carpet through his glasses. His mother squeezed his shoulder. He might as well have been looking straight at Rafael, humiliated up there in his wheelchair. They both knew what the little coward had done.

“Our witness has confirmed that the suspect, Juan Ortega, was the third employee and cook at La Segunda Vida Restaurant, and that he fled at the arrival of the Governor on the premises the day of the explosion. Mr. Alessi attempted to cover for him, but inadvertently caused an explosion that put the Governor in grave danger. Ortega has several felonies on his record, and has been wanted by law enforcement for years regarding the sexual assault of a sixteen-year-old girl in Daytona Beach. Investigators had long presumed him dead after a gang shootout in Santa Fe.”

Rafael watched his feet some more, tried to move them. His skin shrieked against the bandages. Tears formed in his eyes.

“Now that we know Ortega has been residing in the Tampa Bay area, we’re asking the public to contact our anonymous hotline with any information on his recent activities or whereabouts. We’re also asking the news media to distribute this mugshot of Ortega, taken three years ago. Juan Ortega is forty-five years old, and he was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he may still have family.” With another click of the remote, an image of a man appeared on the screen: bushy eyebrows, puffed-out cheeks, hairline receded halfway back on his scalp – a middle-aged Mexican man. Not, by any means, the Juan Ortega that Rafael had known. Rafael tried to hide his shock from the cameras. In the front row, Drake squinted through his glasses.

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After the press conference concluded, a few reporters and cameramen lingered among the chairs. A tall male reporter with light coiffed hair made a few steps toward Rafael, but glanced warily at Agent Blackenship and decided better. The others mostly left Rafael alone to watch his feet and try to piece things together. The trick made sense on the surface, sure – if Bud could buy a restaurant and hide Rafael there, he shouldn't have trouble faking an identity for another of his fuck-ups. But with all that care taken, it seemed strange that Bud would leave Rafael alone this way. The old man hadn't so much as dropped a line. Keeping him out of the loop seemed more than inconsiderate – there was danger in leaving Rafael on his own to mess things up. Who knew what he might have said if they questioned him. Reporters would find a way to access him eventually. The police would ask for his story of the crime. If they found this Ortega, assuming he was real, there would be other complications. Bud hated loose ends.

So, Rafael knew what to expect: any minute now, Schumacher or some other underling would show up and take him somewhere, do something pre-planned, elaborate, and quite possibly dangerous. If the next few days played out as expected, he'd be taken to another tragic place to live out the end of his days in humiliation, just like the last twenty years. This agent and this communications secretary, these reporters stealing glances at Rafael in his wheelchair with his face uncovered but probably still horribly blistered – they didn't know that they would never see him again.

Terry glided back into the room, smiling the same way, flicking her hair over the same half of her face, and already Rafael had no reaction. Beautiful, sure. Friendly. But none of that youthful lust anymore, just the gaze of an old dying man.

“Your cousin is here to pick you up!” Terry told him. “The doctors said you’re alright to go home, so long as you have someone to help change your bandages. I know the burns hurt, but they’re actually pretty superficial. Nice new skin has started to take the place of the old. It’s amazing how the human body heals. Just amazing!” Her friendliness was easier to interpret now. The way children loved to take care of their dolls, their stuffed animals, that was how this girl treated her patients.

Rafael had no cousins that he knew of. So they had come to take him, right now. This was how it began. Terry wheeled him off the ramp and down the hallway again. Her cherry perfume wasn’t so hard to recognize anymore.

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The weather outside Tampa General Hospital had turned wrathful. Atop their poles, the American flag and the red-crossed Florida flag hopped around in pockets of changing wind. Bay waves rose into mist-swept peaks and collapsed loudly against the seawall. Towering thunderheads combined to turn the sky sunless black. In the distance, columns of rain danced over the water. Rafael smelled bitter salt and fresh rain, heard thunder mix with the buffeting of wind though the breezeways. The world was blurred into a damaged watercolor.

Terry had hurried off behind him, leaving him alone on the curb. For a few minutes, he watched two teenagers help their decrepit grandfather into the back of their family minivan, while their father folded the wheelchair into the back. None of them looked at each other, nor spoke, until they’d loaded up and made their way solemnly out of the driveway. The minivan made way for a Jeep approaching with the top removed. A

young man drove, hair and beard so shaggy that they formed one continuous black mane around his face. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes. His cheeks were overripe with sun. The driver waved at Rafael, or at someone behind him. His neck couldn't move far enough to check. Only when the young man smiled, baldly mischievous even with so much covering his face, did Rafael recognize him. Over the smile, he held a single finger to his lips. Terry rushed over from the nurses she'd been chatting with and helped Rafael into the Jeep. The young man hopped into the driver's seat again.

"Let's bolt before that fucking German gets here."

"Juan, I can't believe..."

"Armand," he said, carefully shaking his bandaged hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

Rafael didn't ask where they were going. Armand drove without speaking, down the brick road and onto the interstate southbound, shifting the old Jeep with deliberate movements. None of the joking kid from only a couple weeks ago. Not long after they left the Tampa city limits, rain started slapping their faces. Armand had to pull into an interstate gas station to fit the canvas top over the Jeep. Rafael didn't make much attempt to speak. The hissing rain, the inertia of stops and starts and turns – they took their toll on him. Rafael remembered trying to go back to work at the restaurant too quickly after having his appendix removed. He'd thrown up off the dining porch in full view of the winter rush of customers, some of whom left indignant Yelp reviews that night. Juan, or Armand, had laughed so hard he spilled a pot of gumbo. Grievous injury weakened people inside and out. That same familiar queasiness rolled around inside him now. Once

the rain cleared, the sky turned deep orange. Rafael closed his eyes, letting himself slip into that dizzy place between consciousness and sleep.

*

Rafael jerked awake on a fold-out couch with a thin mattress. The springs cut into his ass through the bandages. Bones and joints cracked audibly. His equilibrium fought the movement. There was the sense that a long time had passed.

He looked to be in the back of a two-room trailer, facing down a long hallway through the kitchen and down to the front, where a pile of wrinkled clothes and discarded beef jerky bags warmed in the sun through the window. It was bright outside. Without thinking, he stood up from the bed onto the musty brown carpeting. His feet hurt, but the pain wasn't unbearable. Holding onto the fake-wood paneling, then the kitchen countertops on either side, he found that he could walk. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught movement in the tiny bathroom. He turned to find an alien face in a mirror – no eyebrows, no hair, shiny skin splotched pink and white and brown, but smooth. His hands sent tickles of pain into his cheeks. But the eyes, they were his. No eyelashes, pupils wide with shock, but unmistakably his own, looking back at him from the face of a stranger. Not until now could he have known for sure – he would never be the same person again. The calico face gave him an uneven, menacing smile.

With his shoulder, he pushed through the spring-loaded front door of the trailer and down the steps. Judging by the slight tinge of mildness in the air, the soft light, it was morning. An uneven circle of small trailers all faced a fire pit and green-walled latrine.

Mangroves surrounded the site. Above them, two ospreys crisscrossed in the sky in some elaborate mating ritual. Their calls were the only sound.

Armand sat on a lawn chair reading the newspaper. His flip-flops had been kicked a few feet in front of him. His toes wiggled in the grass. “Whoa, look who’s up! Had to check if you were breathing a few times. You’ve been asleep for two days.”

“Last thing I remember we were in the Jeep, and...”

“Bill over there helped me carry you up. The least I could do not to wake you, seeing as you got your skin burned off for me.” Armand folded the newspaper, slapped it against his leg. “Charlie used to be an Army doctor in ‘Nam. Helped me change out your bandages.” He pointed at an old leather-skinned man out front of a forest green trailer, gnawing on chewing tobacco while he laced a hiking boot in his lap.

“Where are we?”

“Not far from Yeehaw Junction.” Armand jumped up from his lawn chair. “Take a seat, please. Don’t want to carry you again.” Rafael shuffled over and plopped into the lawn chair. The handles barely fit his hips, thin metal legs hunkered out. “Now read this article.” *The Orlando Sentinel* fell open into his lap. On the front page, a blurry blown-up picture of a younger Bud Christensen shaking hands with Governor Davidson. The headline read *REAL ESTATE MOGUL WANTED ON FELONY CHARGES: Multi-millionaire real estate developer Bud Christensen remains missing after Tampa blogger uncovers Orlando compound “mass-murdering” wildlife.*

Rafael picked up the paper. “Did you have something to do with this?”

“Believe it or not, we both did.” Armand crossed his arms. “Came across the compound back when I worked in Orlando. I wasn’t supposed to meddle, just count the trucks, but one day I got a wild hair and couldn’t help looking around. I expected maybe some weird experiments, that kind of thing. Walked in on a bunch of guys in masks carrying animal corpses into a big oven. I went straight to Bud, and either he was really good at playing dumb or he didn’t know about it either. My guess is the German set the whole scheme up behind his back. Next day, Bud takes me to that restaurant, pays me off, tells me to check in by email every day. By the looks of it, he cut and ran after that. Schumacher can be persuasive. The old man was getting tired of the playboy life anyway, maybe saw his chance to duck out and leave his work to his protégé. Must have thought the ends were all tied up, until you went and set yourself on fire.”

“So you’ve known about this for a whole year.”

“Should have spoken up sooner, I know.” Armand bit his lip. “But the longer I left it alone, the less sure I was that it even happened.”

Rafael wanted to tell him he understood. Instead, he kept reading.

Yesterday morning, Deborah Tellers of the local blog Gulf Coast Gunk posted photographs and video of workers in gas masks carrying dozens of animals into a furnace near the Sunview Estate Hotel off International Drive. The workers are said to be employees of XS Holdings, the holding company for assets owned by real estate developer Bud Christensen, who has not appeared in public in over a year.

In addition, Tellers posted screenshots of documents showing hundreds of such shipments over the past ten years, along with a corroborating story from Hank

Beauchamp, a current employee of the company. Beauchamp and Tellers have cooperated with law enforcement in the arrest of Roman Nimitz, acting CEO of XS Holdings, on charges including fraud, animal abuse, practicing law without a license, and identity theft. Nimitz had been using the mononym Schumacher and posing as the company lawyer, despite having no known legal education.

Investigators believe that Christensen and Minitz devised the furnace to dispose of wildlife on newly acquired lands further south, in order to avoid environmental obstacles to suburban developments. Nimitz is in custody but has refused to cooperate with authorities. Bud Christensen remains at large.

“The charges are only going to get worse once they get into the company records. All kinds of fraud, laundering, theft. You wouldn’t believe. Or maybe you would, I don’t know. But they’ll never catch him. The asshole got away scot-free.” Armand let him process for a moment. His toes dug into the grass where he stood.

Rafael remembered the speech Bud gave him all those years ago, at the restaurant in Orlando. “Bud will be hiding the rest of his life.” He rolled the newspaper tightly in his hands. Nobody deserved to run that long. “Believe me, kid. That’s not freedom”

“This reminds me,” Armand said, taking one tentative step closer to Rafael. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you. Bud told me about how you used to play jai alai, how you killed that two-bit gambler’s kid. Told me the old guy dressed up in white suits, played Miami Beach mobster. I get why you’d let Bud hide you away for a while until things died down. People get hotheaded, could have found you and beat your ass or worse. The guy probably had dangerous friends.”

Rafael knew what was coming. He'd never asked himself the question, not directly, but he knew it was there to be asked. Obvious to any outsider.

“Why did you keep working at that restaurant all these years? Bud must have paid you a small fortune in wages by now. Perfectly clean money, too. Laundered. You could have gone anywhere. Why did you stay?”

Rafael ran a palm over his bald head. “Because it was easier.”

EPILOGUE

At the bend of a winding road in Thirsk Mountain, Tennessee, a rusty trash compactor sits dormant in the morning fog. In front, an entire town has discarded one month of garbage bags into what has become a colossal pile.

Among their contents:

several dozen pounds of cardboard

a toaster oven

seventy tampons

an entire rector set labeled *ages seven thru ten* still in the packaging, covered in rotten banana, and in the bottom of the same bag, the gift receipt for the same rector set tucked inside a greeting card labeled *Happy Birthday, Tina* and signed *Uncle Jerry*

the corpse of a Jack Russell Terrier, named *Chip* according to its collar

the corpses of four cats, apparently unnamed

an entire happy meal

hundreds of tissues coated in the semen of thirty-seven humans

six crusty socks in the same condition, along with similarly coated paper towels,
toilet paper, receipts, bed sheets, assorted other fabrics, white t-shirts, et cetera,
amounting to nearly a dozen gallons of semen, which under the right circumstances could
technically have resulted in millions of human beings

seventeen wedding invitations

three framed pictures of couples

over seventy dollars in loose change

very few condoms

one golden ring

twelve apples

an unopened package of lean cuisine

seventeen hypodermic needles

a set of dentures, top and bottom

thirty-two toothbrushes

discarded name tags from a gathering of some kind, including: *my name is Trish*, *my name is Suzi*, *my name is Bob*, *my name is Jimmy*, *my name is John*, *my name is Alex*, *my name is Emma*, *my name is Emma*, *my name is Emma*, *my name is Blossom*. Three say *my name is Slim Shady*, and one says *my name is “ask me!!!”* with hearts instead of dots on the exclamation points – in the same bag: a broken clipboard soaked with spillage from half a liter of Diet Pepsi, and a *surprising* amount of S&M gear

the remains of a miscarriage

one hundred and two tissues wet with human tears

The pile has been put to use. Many of the garbage bags near the bottom have been ravaged open by hungry raccoons, sending loose paper waste blowing up and down the mountain. Among these papers is a suicide note on a ripped-out pink diary page, started in sincere adolescent hand but stopped after only a few sentences, the last fragment being *I'm leaving because...* and then a doodle of a pentagram, with a purple neon pen.

A hawk has found that note and used the paper to help build her nest atop a giant pine. The nest is made of dozens of discarded notes, tissues, plastic bags, and a few lightly soiled diapers for padding. Three baby hawks pick at their budding feathers and fight over morsels of discarded cheeseburger that the mother retrieved from the ground below. The nest overlooks the valley community of Thirsk Mountain, whose waste pile has reached so tall and wide that the wind has taken on a poisonous quality. The hawk keeps a hard eye on a rusty pickup truck rumbling off the road below.

A familiar pale man in a denim jacket climbs from the truck. He slams the door. The odd metallic racket scratches at her ears like talons against cold rust. The baby hawks roll over each other in fits of pain. She hunkers over them and watches the human carefully. He stares at the trash pile with his hands in the jacket pockets, takes a deep breath. Slowly, he begins to load scraps of trash into the metal trough of the giant machine below. A breeze picks up through the holler, and the human stops to listen. He scans the mountainsides until he catches sight of the hawk in her new nest. She screams down at him to keep away. Standing there, his feet seeping into the soft waste under him, the man calls back to her, but she doesn't understand.