

**Madonnas: A Novel**

by

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## Abstract

*Madonnas* is a story about trauma, addiction, and deception. Following a stint in a drug rehabilitation centre, Norrin Wilfrit falls in league with a group of scam artists who claim to be able to summon the ghosts of loved ones – for a price. Plagued by memories of abandonment, Norrin struggles to reconcile his actions as he becomes entrenched in the lives of his newfound family. When an old friend from his past appears, Norrin must choose between a life of destruction or healing. *Madonnas* explores how the genre of crime-thriller can ask the big questions: fate over free will, the influence of maternal figures, and perception of reality.

## Acknowledgements

Vir my ma, Paula. This work is dedicated to her memory.

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## Chapter 1

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.

Thadie has been in my dream lately and I'm not really sure why. It's weird because the dream has always been the same for the last thirteen years regardless of how much I drink or don't. I'm a kid again—back in Malawi. Back in the alabaster mansion that's skirting the midnight jungle outside. Back in the hallway that stretches beyond measure before morphing into a pinhole of greyness. Hyenas are barking somewhere beyond the perimeter wall outside, but they never show. The walls are covered in elongated, wooden masks that Ma got from the market. I can't bear to look at them. There are black and white photos of people that I can't make out, but I suspect it's Pa's family. Ma's rushing down the hall. It's hard to tell just how far back the pinhole hallway goes so Ma's always kind of just running in place for a while. She's got that black coat on too—the one with the brooch of a Springbok.

“Get down! There's a bat in the house,” she yells. Eventually she catches up with me and cradles my head in her arm as we sink against the wall. We're huddled together and it's too tight. I can barely breathe between the barking noises coming from away and the smell of Pa's pipe tobacco still lingering on Ma. Her sweater is course but fuzzy and irritating against my cheek. “Keep your head down and look at the floor, okay?”

“What's going on?” Thadie says. She's a kid again too and suddenly huddled in Ma's other arm. What is she doing here?

The hyenas stop without warning.

“There’s a bat in the house. Stay down,” Ma says. I can’t see her, but I can feel her breath on my scalp.

Then silence.

Then a gunshot.

\* \* \*

Breathe in. Hold it for three seconds. Breathe out. Now settle.

This is the third time in five years that I’m waiting here, my ass numbing to the cracked plastic seat of the bus-stop across the street from Allan’s house. Allan. Would he remember me? Allan—an old fella with a thick moustache and super hairy arms that almost swallow his silver strapped watch. It’s been two years since I last saw him, not that he remembered me then either. That’s what’s great about Allan. He forgets. That’s important if you want an accurate reading from the local mediums. Once they recognize you, they start to craft your future in hopes that you’ll keep coming back for more. Most people only visit a medium once in their lifetime. These days (unless you’re really damaged) the novelty of the experience hits a lot quicker than, say, ten years ago. That’s why there’s not a lot of mediums around. Ten years ago, they were just everywhere, if you knew where to look. All over in the outports, in the kitchens of grandmothers with burnt-orange dyed hair wearing thin yellow dresses. These gals had ten-plus kids and a fair share of low-key scandals. They kept the industry running. Later they moved to the flea-markets and the yellow pages. These days it’s down to a handful of b’ys. Granted, there are a few young bloods coming up; emotionally damaged twenty-year-olds with music notes tattooed on the backs of their necks. They mostly do live readings on social media. I am wary of them. Too many “ums” and eyes darting about as they (embarrassingly) try to hatch up a lie. Other than that, these days it’s Madame Rose, Geoff Corsair, Steven Butt, Wendy the Wise, Shannon Hort and Allan.

I've always known it was going to end like this. Even before Ma sent me here. For a long time, I thought the hours before I die were going to be these big moments of spiritual awakening. Then in my early twenties I figured it would be an especially depressing few hours of tears and an emotional meltdown. But now, here at the end of it all, it's just nothing. I feel nothing. No happiness. No sadness. Nothing. But I'm lucky. I am so nightmarishly aware of the void in that I can't even be bothered by it anymore. Lucky. But there's still hope for me yet. There's a chance that Allan will tune into the conscious universe. That in the moments to come—despite the odds, despite thousands of years of science and false prophecies—Allan will flip those cards and the hairs on both of our arms will spike with goosebumps as we hopelessly try to ingest the magnitude of the universe coalescing in his tarot reading. Perhaps the gods will be here tonight and give me cause to keep on living. Or not. Whatever.

Allan opens the door and judging by his expression, it doesn't seem like he gets a lot of clients dressed like me. It's a big day and I want to look my best. So, I wear the black suit and white shirt with the red tie I wore to Grampa Keith's funeral.

“Looking sharp, bud,” Allan says, nodding his head. I can imagine Allan cringing at all types of teenagers and maladjusted adults sporting gold chains and souped-up Civics or their counterparts who nosedive into the pavement with an airborne skateboard flailing close behind. Oh Allan. He's so perfect in this moment, all lined up square with the rustic door frame he must have built himself. Nothing but night suburbia and a full moon spread across the snowbanks as Allan smiles and extends his hand. A good omen.

“Tanner?” he says, brow furrowed. He clearly doesn't recognize me, maybe it's the clean-shaven face or the haircut. Tanner is this eve's alias. I've also been Steve and of course, myself (Norrin).

“Yessir” I say with the air of a good-natured young man. “Sure am! How are ya?” Allan shakes my hand like we’re old buddies. Old baymen love this shit. That good neighbour aesthetic. Lots of small towners do.

“Come in, come in,” he says as I step into a time capsule from nineteen forty something. Stucko ceilings, carpet everywhere and a lingering of boiled cabbage wafts in the air. This is the real deal. Around the corner two older women with curled hair watch Wheel of Fortune at full volume on a CRT TV. Pictures of kids and grandkids in graduation garb holding degrees are all around them. Allan walks me past them and towards the basement, leading the way.

“Down here now, luh. Needs some peace and quiet for this sort of thing,” he says as one of the older women hollers from the living room. “Give it up now!” Allan waves the unseen woman away. I follow him into near darkness with just a single orange light coming from below. The stairs are more like slats hastily assembled and never finished. They creak and groan and I imagine a thousand close calls from kids and grandparents who nearly make an early trip to heaven with one misstep. “Down this way, watch your step,” he says from the darkness below.

Downstairs is filled with (surprise!) more carpet. This stuff’s shorter though and marked with wood shavings from the adjacent wood stove and wood pile stacked in the corner. A single bulb hangs from the middle of the concrete basement. Allan’s got all his tarot stuff set up on a circular table made out of oak. It reeks of varnish. I can see my swirling, polished reflection in it. “Have a seat,” Allan says. For a moment I’m reminded of my dream and the flooded basement where my distorted face looks at me. This is a good omen. “Have you ever had a reading done before?” he says, adjusting his glasses and clasping his fingers together. I take a moment to stop myself, to defend against the urge to lose my shit.



“Yes, Allan! With you, you stupid, stupid bastard! Twice! You’ve read my shit twice! How can you not remember me!” But I don’t do any of that, and I painfully look to the floor and say “No, sir. First time tonight. But there’s a first time for everything eh? Or so they say.” Brutal. I hate myself. Allan purses his lips and nods.

“Very well, young fella. Well, I’ll get to it then,” he says before going on to explain the usual bullshit about energy, chakras, and astrology. I know this game. I don’t need to listen. Just nod and smile. It’d be a lot easier if I wasn’t stone cold sober. Even now I can feel the premonitions of numbness and the shakes winding down my fingers. The last two years have been a blur of uppers, downers, K, dope, blow, vodka, molly, ritz and whatever else I can get my hands on. Despite the onset of ever-nearing withdrawal, I’m staying sober. If there’s any hope of saving my life tonight, I need to be present in the moment to appreciate it.

“So, what will it be then?” Allan says, hands still clasped.

“Huh?”

“What would you like to start with?” I guess I’m still a little high after all. I didn’t even hear him stop the opening spiel.

“Um, I just want my past, present and future, please.”

“Very well, young fella,” he says as he shuffles the cards. I’m reminded of what feels like a lifetime of these moments. Hours of infomercial-call-in-style readings. An entire life wasted in dingy flea markets with the worst type of tarot reader. An eternity spent on a smartphone in the downstairs bathroom of some dude’s house—flipping through virtual tarot cards with hopes of a real future. It’s all flashing before me now. A good omen none the less. Allan reaches out his hands. “You’re going to need to hold my hands, bud. It’s the only way to get a decent reading.” I lay my

fingers over his as he closes his eyes and tilts his head up. Allan begins his silent incantation, his bottom lip dropping and stiffening like a goldfish out of its bowl. It's going to go on like this for a minute or two. I wonder what he's thinking about. Broccoli prices? The Habs? Christmas lights? Glow in the dark paint? It could be anything. Finally, he opens his eyes and fake-shivers before reaching for the deck of cards.

“First card. This will indicate your past.” He flips it. “The Five of Swords.” Allan “hmmmmms” and strokes his chin. “Yes, well. This is not a good one,” he says as he meets my eyes. “This card indicates strife and disaster. Or self sabotage and deception. What I can tell is that something very difficult must have happened in your past. Something painful. I sense loss—a great loss in your life.” This is strike one for me and Allan.

“Yes. But I don't want to talk about it if that's alright,” I say, still locked into his sight.

“Very well. Let's move on then. Your present.” Allan flips the second card. “The Six of Swords. Yes. This indicates a changing of times: an overcoming of hardships and a time to relax. This is a good thing. It means that you're going to find some peace.”

“Oh. Well. That's great, man. Super.” That's strike two for me and Allan. He cocks his head and furrows his brow.

“Okay, well it doesn't sound like you're very enthused by this news?”

“No, for real, I am! I'm just a little sleepy, I don't sleep much but yeah, glad to hear the good news!”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, dude. Please. Continue.” Allan flips the final card—my future. “The Six of Wands! Excellent,” Allan says before pausing in anticipation of my response. That, unfortunately, is strike three of three for me and Allan.

“This is good, the Six of Wand’s indicate—”

“Good fortune, success, triumph, fame, recognition: should I go on?” I say sharply.

“Excuse me?” Allan once again cocks his head and furrows his brow.

“I know what it means, Allan. Do you know why I know what it means?”

“I’m sorry,” Allan says as he clasps his hands and ever so slightly pulls back from the table.

“I said, do you know how I know what the Six of Wands means for one’s future?”

“I really, I think we’re done here then,” he says as he reaches for the cards.

“Because you have given me the same fucking reading three times in a row!” I’m on my feet now, hollering. My head starts to ache, like blood is pooling in my forehead. I feel nauseas and lightheaded. Allan urgently places his cards back into its case, but not before I snatch one from the deck. He tries to grab it.

“I’m keeping this! As evidence!”

“I think you should leave,” Allan says as I crumple the card and jam it into my coat pocket.

“Fine.”

\* \* \*

Out in the street I can still hear Allan cursing at me from the front step, his wife or whatever standing by his side and tsk-tsking. Allan’s trajectory of increasing confidence started slow in the

basement. No eye contact as he quickly but neatly tidied all his shit into a little metal poker case with the inside foam removed. From there he began popping in little insults at “what my generation is like” and “how we have so much,” shit like that, before venturing into more hostile accusations. His voice is far away now. I imagine Allan sliding comfortably into a manly confidence befitting a father as neighbours gawk and kids giggle while he shouts “If I ever sees your face again, I’ll fuck you up, son!”

“That’s fine, Allan. Enjoy the attention. I’m sorry I put you in that position.”

As I dredge down Hatcher Street, skulking under the periodic glow of the streetlights, I think about the suicide hotline for a minute. I’ve actually never called – mostly just dialed the number and hung up after a few rings. I can’t imagine what doing that gig must be like. Call after call of suicide cases, each one as unique as they are simultaneously the same. The irony of pulling someone back from the brink and then the both of you dying anyway. Conservation of life to be monetized and sent to the dregs of a call centre in a strip mall. Team building exercises and subcultures of manga-nerds and goth girls in their mid-thirties who live in basement apartments, flipping between reality TV and managerial aspirations. Naw, I can’t do that. I’m not giving anyone the chance to save me. No need of it. I’ll make a better go of it next time. I promise.

\* \* \*

It’s an hour walk to the tracks. I gulp down a small handful of pills along the way. Doesn’t matter what they are anymore, they’ll do the job. Forgotten train cars plastered in graffiti slope this way and that along the edges of the train tracks. The nightmare of peering inside one and seeing someone in the darkest, most unfathomable depths of their life will haunt you for the rest of your life. I speak from experience and dare not look. But those lost souls have long since been evicted by hordes of cops over the last year and a half.

The train tracks are buried deep enough in the old part of town that no one will bother me here. Kids and hard cases used to come here to shoot up in the summer. For a minute there it got pretty heavy: cops here all the time to bag up transients and valedictorians who OD'd on purpose (or not). Eventually those poor zombies wound up elsewhere, mostly in the woods up behind the O'Keefe's farm. Not that you could really call it a farm but that's what most people considered it. Either that or in hotel bathrooms, alleyways or at home in the bathtub. Transcendence needs no formality. It just happens. But I'm going to walk the tracks for old times' sake. Ken blew his brains out here nearly seven years ago. Not that I knew him. But I know why he wanted to walk these specific tracks. Fuck it. I suppose if it's good enough for Ken, it's good enough for me.

This place hasn't changed at all. Blond grass claws out from under a fragile sheet of snow. Rusted tracks lead nowhere and the outline of (miraculously) still-green trees on the side also leads nowhere. I pop another handful of pills into my mouth and wash it down with a pocket flask of Tequila. I always drink Tequila when I go out. It's quiet. And for that I am thankful, so much so that it dawns on me that this moment is the greatest miracle of my life. If only I could care. Oh well. I throw another fistful of pills into my gullet and wash it down. The crunch of snow periodically stops and is replaced by the hollow tap of my shoe on the brown metal tracks. I think about Ma when she was still very young, younger than I am now. She's sitting by a plastic table in a motel room by a window overlooking the pool. She exhales a cloud of cigarette smoke from her blood-red lipstick-smacked lips. I blow my own plume of February cold into the ongoing night and take another handful of pills. The full moon is directly above me and though it can't shine the way ahead, I'm thankful she's here too. I think about Malawi at night and being asleep in the backseat of a double-cab Ford Truck. Ma and Pa sat in silence up front as we pulled into the gas station. What a sight of holiness. The station light above us gleamed neon. Metal on metal squawked as Pa got out of the truck, making his way to the gas pump. Unfiltered blasting galaxies and stars were everywhere. I got

out and sat in the pan, quietly bewildered while Ma smoked, unaware I had even left the car. I had never seen the night sky like that. Around us, in every direction, unending bushveld that seemed to stretch as far as the polka dotted sky above us. It was as though that gas station, with its neon “open” sign and overhead floodlights, was the only thing in the universe.

Now I can feel my fingers go completely numb in an instant. I feel my stomach rise and settle. It’s hard to tell the difference between the high pitch buzzing in my ears and the long whoosh of the wind in the trees that suddenly sounds like a lingering single note of a string quartet. I’m on the ground now, though I can’t remember falling. I feel cold vomit on my cheek, though I can’t remember throwing up. Everything is going slow. Everything is going numb. Everything is over now. My eyes are heavy and it’s hard to think. For a moment I turn to face the sky. What I’m looking at—I couldn’t tell you. Multicolored splotches appear and disappear against the black sky. Diagonal shapes—neon like the gas station’s “open” sign appear and shatter. Hexagrams, ovals and cylindrical shadows peter out into the galaxy. I can feel my last ounce of soul and strength race to my heart and give me a last bump of movement, enough to turn toward the rusted track that my face is lying on. An orange tabby cat darts across the tracks and into the woods on the other side. It doesn’t notice me. I can just barely look into the blackness ahead, the trees exploding in green under an ocean-blue moon. I think about apples. I think about traffic and telephone poles. I think about Thadie. I think about a stray dog digging through garbage. I think about a canopy of leaves and a machine gun that’s wet with rain. I think about Grandma Juliet’s liver spots and the small red radio she kept by her bedside. I think about a cheeseburger in the beach sand. I think about my Pa, holding his head in his hands. I think about a pile of cocktail umbrellas stacked on a weathered pool table. I think about an oak tree and the sun slipping through its branches. I’ll do better next time. I promise.

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.

## Chapter 2

Grandma Juliet had a near death experience once; and I mean it when I say near death because she died the day after it happened. Me and Grandpa Keith were the only ones there at the end. We stepped out for a minute when she had “the experience.” Stepped out for coffee, which was strange considering Grampa Kieth never touched the stuff. Grandma Juliet nearly died while we were out, somehow surviving cardiac arrest until she passed the next day. She went on and on about what happened when she died the first time. She said she left her body, that she was standing over herself and felt confused as to how this could be happening. Then, as she looked up, she was suddenly in an unnaturally perfect grass field with an unnaturally blue sky overhead. A few feet away she saw a white picket fence with everyone she ever knew just standing about and chatting, all of them herded in this perfect white pen. As she approached the gate, she felt an uneasiness about her. She attributed that to the fact that she was perfectly conscious: hence why it couldn’t have been a dream, she said. As she approached the gate, her great uncle made his way to greet her. He wore a brown tweed jacket and round tortoiseshell glasses, his bald head gleaming in the sunlight. It was at that moment that Grandma Juliet knew that she had to make a choice. Be at peace or continue suffering. She was a miserable old woman and I’m not one bit surprised that she decided to stay another day in this world, just to guilt trip me and Grandpa Keith for a little while longer. She raved on about the experience—continually swearing that it wasn’t a dream, that she had been to the other side—until she was no more. I never had anything like that when I almost crossed over. I don’t remember anything other than nothingness before a beam of flashlight moved left to right repeatedly. Then the fluorescent inside of an ambulance and two celebrity-beautiful paramedics fussing over their equipment.

\* \* \*



Everything's white walls and white ceilings. White garbage cans and white tennis shoes that come and go as they please. White paint is chipping off the radiator. White soap and white bathroom tiles. White bedsheets with puny white balls of cotton, the result of extensive over-washing and budget cuts. Color is in the margins: yellow in the cracks of the bathroom tiles, blackish-brown stains behind white doors, and near-brown bedside tables. There's sunlight on the windowsill, sunlight morphed green from the window pane's reflection. I guess it's sunlight? It sure looks like it but exactly why it looks so green is beyond me. The white chipped paint on the iron bed I'm lying on is just barely hanging on, ready to be peeled off by the gust of a closing door or hooked onto a Christmas sweater and carried away.

My white hospital gown is damp around my belly, chest and armpits. A lady in scrubs is close by. It's only when I register her that I feel my whole body at once. There's a buzzing in my ears and I can't taste anything except coagulated spit. That's when I smell it. A stinging chlorine or peroxide smell, though it doesn't smell sanitary. It's a meld of chemical and organic burning that emits from my body when I take it this far. It's the marker that I am, without a doubt, in the beginning stages of full-blown alcohol withdrawal. Some things are worse than death. I try to swallow but the muscles in my throat are swollen and the pain of them moving is so unbearable that I nearly pass out. I reach for the nurse who brings a water-soaked sponge on a stick to my mouth before dabbing my lips.

"Try not to swallow there now," she says as I nod in agreement. Her hair is short: chin-length with bangs and clearly dyed blonde. She's in her mid-fifties it seems.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Hospi—"

"Just nod yes or no, my love," she interrupts as I nod and mouth the words "hospital."

“Almost. You’re in the recovery centre.”

“Okay,” I mouth before the cooling sensation of water runs down my lips. My thirst is indescribable and nothing can possibly be more important, necessary or addictive than these few strands of liquid. Despite my better judgement, I try to swallow again. The nurse tries to stop me but it’s too late. The pain is worse than before. The inside of my throat feels like two serrated sheets of metal bludgeoning against each other at top speed. Every muscle in my body compacts together as I grit my teeth and desperately try to hold on to the sensation of coolness left behind from the water droplets running down my esophagus.

“Try not to swallow anything, Okay? I really need you to try and rest,” she says, her clammy hand turned and resting on my forehead.

“Rest,” I just barely whisper and nod off again.

\* \* \*

There are two types of therapists in this world. The first is bright and bubbly. They tactically use words like “safe” and “conducive,” “decisive” and “positive” in their improvisational conversation. They come with nose rings and faux-hawks, knuckle tattoos and t-shirts that might say something like “Edinburgh Bike club.” They’re easily mistaken for cool youth pastors in a Christian rock band. I don’t mind them; what’s so bad about someone trying to do some good in the world? I don’t blame them for that. Although I suspect these are deeply unhappy people in need of therapy themselves. Unless, of course, they turn into the second kind of therapist. These come in comb-overs and pastels (always pastels) and only function on autopilot. I don’t blame these guys either. It must take a lot of moxie to keep saving those dwindling lights when your own is just barely hanging on. Dr. Philpott is the latter of these two types of therapists.

We sit across from each other in those plastic chairs from high school. The type that turn crystal white when you yank on them right before they crack off altogether. It's been three days on suicide watch, but it's a waste really because I'm pretty much ready to get out of here and get a job or something. I'd tell Dr. Philpott that if he'd actually believe me. The drama is over now. I feel ashamed and embarrassed that I brought it this far again. So, I humor Dr. Philpott and tell him what he wants to hear: that I feel empty inside and that my mother abandoned me and that it really fucked me up. He tells me it's about more than that.

"What was your life like before that day?" he says, clasping his hands. Best to divert. No need to drag this out. I tell him that this is my first time in therapy. It's not. First timers don't usually have to stay and deal with this fruitless exercise in deconstructing the human experience. Most of the time therapists just want to know the basics, to either establish a home base for future sessions or let the patient get it out. Sometimes even just talking about it helps. I play my part in this performance, as does Dr. Philpott, and in just thirty minutes I'm out of there and back to my room. A.A.'s next and that one's a real tearjerker. Yesterday Shaun told us about his first time using. He was ten years old when his brother drowned in a river somewhere in Saskatchewan. He was from a farming family and they grew up harder and faster than most others. The day he learned his brother died; his dad took him for a drive to calm his nerves. They made their way to a shack-like place where a young guy with a goatee sat in an adjacent car. Shaun's dad told him to wait in the car as he popped over into the passenger seat of the other car. Poor Shaun. He waited, running his fingers over the occasional grooves on the gearshift and watching the broken digital numbers on the car's radio screen. His dad wasn't gone long before he clunked back in the car with Shaun. The truck wobbled like a seesaw before settling down. Shaun's dad poured a screwhead's size of cocaine onto his pinky and told Shaun to snort it. It would help with the pain he said. Shaun sniffed it all and felt

a wet burning in the back of his throat. He was high for the first time and ten years old, immediately jerking upright at the sound of the other car speeding away.

\* \* \*

These nights are hell. Just the nights though. Daytime withdrawal doesn't last long for me. Maybe just a day or two; I'm real lucky like that. But not at night. Night withdrawal comes with nightmarish sleep that happens in short, half hour jolts. I have the same dream, over and over. Malawi and the liminal space of the forever hallway. Ma creeping up, barking hyenas and a sudden whoosh of tobacco smoke. Then I wake up and feel my heart stop in my chest. My sweat smells like sulfur and my hair feels scraggly and brittle. It's going to be at least another hour before the nurse comes with more benzos.

Two days later and I'm permitted to wander around the halls. There's not much to do here. Most of the board games are missing pieces and the sole gaming console has no controllers. I eat a lot of cheese-whiz out of the jar and stare out of the kitchen window at the duck pond nearby. I think about nothing and everything at once, feeling placid and purposeless. But despite it all, I feel like things might be okay if I stick with it. The withdrawal is starting to pass and I'm starting to get an appetite again. I'll get a job and stay busy. I'll try again and find something other than the cards to focus on. No more. I'm done with fortunes and destiny, done with drinking and dead weight. I'll get a job and stay busy. Stay busy.

\* \* \*

Therapy and A.A. are starting to wind down. There's only so much responsibility that the therapists and staff are willing to bear in keeping us delinquents out of the morgue. Like baby birds nearing their time to leave the nest, we are being taught the valuable skills of mindfulness and

reaching out. These will be our tools as we spread our wings and find our place in the universe – or relapse and blow our brains out in a motel bathroom, whichever comes first.

I don't cause any shit with anyone and there's benefits to that. The best one is sitting in the waiting room with the normal people until my therapy session. None of the other suicide cases take this offer. They can't bear to be around well-adjusted people. I get that. But I enjoy sitting here with the moms and grandmas. Their kids are first timers in the recovery centre but they won't stay long. Maybe a night or two but definitely no longer than that. Their kids scare me because they are still in the first trimester of their self destruction. They don't really grasp the horrors of what's to come, yet they seem more destroyed than the veteran suicide cases. I hope they make it. I'd say something that might encourage them but it would be of no use. They're on their own path now. Not even mom and grandma can help them now.

Sitting out here makes me feel like I'm slowly assimilating back into the normal world. Dr. Philpott suggests manifesting who I want to be in the future. All I want right now is to be a normal mc-normalson-everyday-normal-person. I'm manifesting it by blending in with these moms in the waiting room. These normal moms with their fucked-up kids and their pastel husbands who work for the school board. If I blend in enough, if I am unseen here, then I'll be okay, and okay is enough for now. This is my safe space. Well, almost. There's an imposter here, I can tell. He's sitting to my left, two empty seats between us. A dusty looking guy, maybe my age. He's skinny but the way he leans forward in his chair coupled with the way he's obnoxiously chewing gum lets me know that he'd knock someone the fuck out if he had to. Scruffy beard and a shredded-up ball cap with some unknown company logo on it, a stretched out unwashed brown T-shirt and mud encrusted sneakers. Oh yeah, he's not supposed to be here.

I try to ignore him, try to think about places that are hiring. Maybe back to Tim's? Or maybe the library needs a delivery driver? Of course, then I'd have to try and renew my license. I try to think about an ad I saw for a single room apartment by the airport. God, I hope that's still available. I try and try to think but I can't concentrate with this guy in my peripherals. He snaps his gum and runs his hand through his greasy hair before putting his cap back on. I consider taking a seat away from him—somewhere where he's not in my line of sight—but that might draw attention to me and I definitely don't want that. I cross my legs and position myself towards a mom in a sweatshirt and jeans. She scans through her phone and catches me looking at her. She smiles and I smile back before pretending to look at the clock overhead.

“Something wrong?” the scruffy man says.

“What?”

“Is something wrong? You keep looking at me?”

“I'm sorry. I was looking at the reception desk behind you,” I say, my voice cracking mid-sentence.

“No, you weren't. You were looking right at me.”

“Oh, Okay. Sorry,” I say as I maneuver myself completely out of his line of sight. The mom in the sweatshirt frowns at me before returning to her phone. My heart races and I think about going back to my room. If I had any sense, I'd stop myself, but instead I turn and quickly look at the scruffy man again. He's staring right at me.

“I'm sorry, have I offended you or something?” He pops his tongue in his cheek and shakes his head.

“Nope.”

“Okay,” I say as I look anywhere but at him or the mom in the sweatshirt. I settle on a magazine cover with a picture-perfect cabin on the cover. From over my shoulder, I hear him again.

“Its just that you got a bit of a weird smell to ya. That’s all.”

“What?”

“A weird smell. You got like, an acidic smell to ya.”

“Well, I’m very sick, so I’m—”

“What, like a drug addict?” he says before I can finish. The mom across from me casually packs her things and makes her way to the furthest reach of the waiting room.

“Can you please stop?” I say under my breath, leaning in towards the man without making eye contact. He scrunches his face and waves me off.

“What, you’re worried about Mudder over there, are ya?” he says, gesturing to the sweatshirt mom. She pretends she doesn’t hear him despite making the slightest of eye contact with us both.

“I’m just waiting for my session. I don’t want any trouble.”

“Yeah, I know that. I’m just saying you smell weird,” he says. I take a moment. Stay calm. Stay still. It’s only a second before mindfulness goes out the window.

“You’re very rude, you know that?” My heart is racing and my mouth feels dry. The man shakes his head and chuckles behind a closed lip smile.

“Buddy, you’re the one with mental problems, not me.”

“You are a—you’re a real fuck you know that?!” My voice cracks mid-sentence again. The scruffy man starts to laugh even louder. Everyone turns their attention to us. I start to imagine them

filming us, sending the footage to their friends and family with the caption “B’ys in the mental acting mental lol.”

“Whatever, buddy,” the scruffy man says before pulling his ball cap over his eyes and leaning back in his chair. My blood is boiling. I imagine different ways of attacking him. Then I imagine him mercilessly beating me in front of everyone before security takes him away. Then I’d be stuck here even longer. There’s no way Philpott will sign off on me if I have a black eye. So, I fume and fantasize about beating the scruffy man. I imagine myself standing over him like that picture of Muhammad Ali standing over his defeated opponent. I imagine the scruffy man begging for forgiveness, pleading for his life. These visions of conquest are dashed by my inherent fear of the man, fear of a reality where I am lying toothless on the tile floor while he is escorted off the property. I don’t get daytime withdrawal anymore, but it’s coming on now. My fingers go numb with pins and needles. I can feel a ball of vomit clawing its way up my esophagus. I stay calm and try to stand—wobbling and holding onto the chair. I take a small breath and calmly walk past the man. He’s still hidden under his ballcap, as though he’s sleeping. He takes no notice of me as I pass him. I’m almost at the front desk when I hear him over my shoulder:

“Good talk, bud. Take ‘er easy.”



## Chapter 3

One week in and I can feel my patience for this place waning. Maybe patience isn't the right word. Maybe it's fear that masks as impatience: fear of the outside world and the anticipation of real life. This place is kind of like a halfway house in that it's cold hard sobriety and a schedule of meetings: A.A, therapy, and positive productive behavior. Well, it's like that at first but now it's more like an unending series of HR meetings. It's just all this premeditated and by-the-book positivity that feels so insincere to me. The only thing that could be worse are the pep cheers that feel-good shift supervisors make you do in the early morning of working at a Super Centre. Corporate management is blind to artificial enthusiasm's lethal effects on the human spirit.

The outside world is indifferent and it's easy to forget that when you get too comfortable with recovery centres and rehab. When you're in the depths of addiction and your body is at war with itself, this type of coddling can feel like a safety blanket. But after enough trips you don't want to leave and when you do, the indifferent outside hits a lot harder.

I linger on thoughts of real life: sitting and lying down, then sitting and lying down in my bed. It's another hour until A.A. and I can't stand making small talk with anyone in the common room. I stare outside the window at the duck pond nearby and wonder where the ducks go in winter. I have enough cash for about two week's stay at a cheap Airbnb or hotel. Then I guess I'll try and crash with some friends. But I need a job ASAP. I need to get out of here.

\* \* \*

This is Melissa's first time at A.A. Well, first time at *this* particular meeting. She has, without a doubt, attended uncountable sessions of therapy and A.A. You can read it on her face. The sunken

eyes, the poorly done tattoo of an indecipherable name above her eyebrow, the one rotten tooth just barely grazing her false smile. Melissa tells us about the extreme trauma of her childhood. She smiles through it, the picture of positive thinking and hope for another day. The brutality of her life makes me quiver. I start to feel hot, then chilly, then hot again. Melissa makes occasional eye contact with me that I return with as much of a chipper smile and nod as I can muster. Nausea swirls in my stomach as I mouth the words “excuse me” and make my way out of the room. Melissa takes no notice. Thank God.

I forget where the bathroom is and open a closet door instead. Then past the kitchen where (for a split second) I see an abandoned bowl of oatmeal that makes me even sicker. I start to accept that I might not make it. It wouldn't be the first time I hurled up my shit in a public place. Finally, I see the men's room sign and nearly fall through the door. I make my way into a stall with a ring of urine around the bottom base of the toilet. The toilet seat clanks as I lift it and fall to my knees. A few drops of saliva fall into the still water before I vomit a large batch of bile and cheese whiz. It's only a few moments before it passes. Exhausted, I take a seat against the stall door. I wipe my mouth with my hand and close my eyes. Relief. Just a bit of a panic attack, I think. This was certainly not withdrawal: that type of nausea is never a one-and-done. I enjoy the peace and tranquility of my settling stomach when the door whines as it swings open. Heavy boots trudge along the tile floor as a man's voice mumbles the words to Johnny Cash's Ring of Fire. I hear the tap running as he starts to whistle the melody instead. Peering through the crack in the doorframe, I can see the scruffy man from a few days ago. He washes his hands and stares into the mirror, pressing down his wispy beard and adjusting his hat before making his way to the urinal. He whistles as he pisses, unaware that I'm watching him from the nearby stall. It dawns on me how it would look if he caught me. Worse yet, how would he react? I stay as quiet as possible and sit on the toilet, carefully breathing through my mouth in case my wheezing nose attracts his attention. A few moments later I can hear him washing

his hands. He stops whistling and walks past the door. He's only in my line of sight through the slit between the stall door and stall wall for a split second, just long enough for us to make a few seconds of eye contact before he exits the bathroom. I wait in the stall for almost two hours before I return to my room.

\* \* \*

A new guy showed up last night. This is good. This means that they'll want to get me out of here and make room for the new batch. Too bad for the recovery centre though—the man is a fucking nightmare. He came in after midnight, hollering and screaming. Naturally I avoid him, though I can't help but observe him when I can. He fried up an entire pack of bacon this morning. That's when I noticed his horrid tattoos, the most notable being the bulldog on his forearm. He slicks back his long white hair and watches nineties action movies in the common room whilst complaining about the centre's no smoking policy. He had nothing to say during A.A. except that the world is full of pussies and that he's voting for Ed Noseworthy this year, whoever that is. Bulldog tattoo man is going to hit withdrawal soon and I sure as fuck don't want to be here when that happens. It's a shame too. Everyone here, patient and staff alike, are all genuinely good people despite the pitfalls that led them here. They don't deserve what's coming.

I wait in my room for the nurse to come get me and take me to therapy. I haven't seen the scruffy guy from the waiting room yet. But I can't risk getting caught up in a conversation with him. It's one thing to know that you're mentally ill and another not to do anything about it. The cards, the drugs and booze, the mediums, the agoraphobia: I know all these things inside and out, like ingredients in a recipe. I know what triggers what. I know that things don't have to be this way. I know that with commitment and mindfulness comes the unlocking of the purpose-driven self. If I could just take it to heart, I wouldn't keep ending up in places like this. Oh well. Maybe next time.

“Dr. Philpott is ready for you now,” the nurse says, appearing in the door.

“Oh. Okay, I’m coming.”

“Just letting you know,” she chirps before leaving again.

\* \* \*

The smell of burnt toast and coffee lingers in the hallway as I make my way to Philpott’s office. I catch a glimpse of Melissa and Shaun watching Time Cop in the common room. It almost feels like a family lives here. Melissa is my fuck-up sister and Shaun is my uncle who wasted his life in a bar under the overpass. The nurses and Dr. Philpott are my mom and dad. We live here in this sterile facility that forbids take-out because one time someone smuggled weed in through a pizza delivery service. We have board games with missing pieces that Melissa forces everyone except me to play. I never leave my room for this very reason. We have movie night and eat oatmeal breakfast together. We go through insomnia, hallucinations, and confessions together as the benzodiazepines lull us to sleep. A happy family for a week or two and then never to see each other again.

Into the waiting room and scruffy man is lounging in a chair, reading a magazine on cottage life. He takes no notice of me, thank God for that. Philpott’s office door is closed. That’s not normal. He always leaves it open just a tinge, just enough to warrant a knock despite the fact that he sees you approaching from a mile away. The nurse notes the closed door and knocks.

“Just a second,” as she pokes her head in the door. I try to look anywhere but at the scruffy man. The nurse says something to Philpott as I eye the brown waves of water damage on the ceiling tiles. I focus hard enough to ignore what they are talking about, even though they’re quick about it. Just before she closes the door, I can see Bulldog Tattoo wearing a pair of Pit Viper Sunglasses and

a Ski-Doo jacket. He's sitting across from Philpott and urgently tapping his foot. Dr. Philpott makes worried eye contact with me as the door slams shut.

"He's just going to be a few more minutes, my love. You want to wait here for a sec?" the nurse suggests. Thirty percent of my brain is dedicated to not looking over at the scruffy man.

"Oh, no. I'll just go back to my room, thanks."

"Well maybe you should just have a seat here, so I don't have to come get you again?"

I crack and look over at him. He's totally invested in the magazine, nodding his head as he turns the page.

"Okay. Yup that's fine," I say, though I certainly don't mean it.

"Perfect, he'll just be a second." She returns to the front kiosk and then into a backroom. I take a seat as far away from the scruffy man as possible, folding my arms and closing my eyes with the hopes that I might be left undisturbed. This place is even better than a hospital for that kind of meditative state where you're half present and half somewhere else. Dolphins sleep like that, always half and half so they don't drown when they sleep. Hospitals used to make me nervous and at times terrified. Pa was a doctor in Malawi, but I never saw that hospital and I always imagined the worst of the worst that must have happened in there. He was never home—always at work, always angry. Therapists can't help but gorge themselves on this detail of my shallow life. But now hospitals bring me a sense of peace in knowing that I am only a few feet from where life-saving miracles might occur. Cardiac arrest, broken femurs, gestational diabetes: it's all going to be fine. No one is going to let you die in the waiting room. You're going to be okay. And like a dolphin, I am half asleep and half awake.

“Hey,” the scruffy man mutters, his voice like a javelin tearing through the fluffy, pink, throw pillow that is my complacency. I ignore him and keep my eyes closed. “Hey, buddy,” he tries again. I keep my eyes closed.

“Yo! My man!”

“What!” I bark louder than I want to as I open my eyes. He’s hunched over with his hands clasped and motions towards the seat next to him.

“No thanks, I’m fine here.”

“I’m not going to bite ya, b’y. Just got a question for ya,” he semi-whispers. My heart is racing again, though I’m sure no one else sees it. The only thing keeping me steady is knowing that the anticipation of this interaction is over now. It’s happening. I just have to deal with it. I make a point to sigh as loud as possible before making my way over and taking a seat next to him. It’s quiet for a minute as he observes me in a way that I can only describe as a mix between intrigued and amused.

“What?” I shrug, staring at the floor.

“You know what.”

“No. I don’t”

“C’man, yes you do,” he groans, leaning back in his chair.

“Sorry, I’m not sure—”

“You were watching me in the bathroom. Yesterday.”

“Oh, my God.” I try to keep my voice down as I scan the room. The only other person here is a dad-bod guy in a beer shirt and jeans, scrolling through his phone. He takes no notice of me and

my terrible new friend. The heat of this moment is agonizing. Am I so easily preyed upon? Is this dude on the victory lap of a high-school education spent terrorizing the nerds? I can't seem to find any logic in this guy, though his confidence might be a clue. Maybe he is just a dick and truly has no idea that he is.

"I guess that's normal for someone like you though, right? You in here with all the other nutcases or whatever."

"Why are you doing this?"

"What? Razzing ya?"

"Yes! God! What is your problem?" My eyes must be glossed over by now, though I dare not rub them. The scruffy guy nods and strokes his flimsy beard, contemplating for a moment before piping up again.

"You ever talk to a guy in here by the name of Chris Pike?"

"I don't know who that is," I scoff.

"Yeah. Figures."

"Am I suppose to know who that is?" The words are barely out of my mouth when a solid *whomp* echoes from Philpott's office before going quiet again. Everyone in the waiting room stares at the door for a moment before going back to their phones. Scruffy man turns back to me.

"What's your name, partner?"

"Norrin. Norrin Wilfrit." I hate telling people my name. A lot of the kids from my generation got those stupid names: names like "Kitt" from Knight Rider or "Rhifhel" pronounced "Rifle." Scruffy guy nods with his tongue in his cheek.

“Good to meet you, Norrin. I’m Sonny.” We shake hands. Well, he shakes mine and I realize just how frail I’ve become over the last two years. “And look, man. I’m sorry if I’m coming off antagonistic or something of the sort. I’m sure you’re going through a rough patch or whatever.”

“It’s fine.” It’s not. I wonder what is taking Philpott so long. It seems clear to me that Sonny is just as fucked as I am albeit in his own unique way. I just want to get out of this conversation but I can sense him waiting for me to say something that’s coded with a peace offering. So I do.

“So, this guy, Pope—”

“Pike.”

“Yeah. I guess he’s your friend?” I’m already wishing that I hadn’t engaged him any further. Sonny gleams at the ceiling as he ponders.

“Yeah, sort of.” He suddenly turns to me. “I can’t really talk about it.”

“Cool. Sorry I asked.” I say, folding my arms and staring at the clock.

“What about you?” He too eyes the clock before turning back to me.

“Ha! You don’t want to hear it.”

“No, tell me! I want to know!” His voice is like a kid asking about a baseball card. I take my eyes off the clock and meet his gaze.

“I tried to poison myself.”

“Jeez-zus!” He exhales.

“Yep.”

“With what?”



“Rat poison and Tequila.”

“That’s fucking crazy, dude,” he says between loud laughter. “You are nuts! Wayyyy better ways to go than that.”

“Oh yeah, what do you recommend?” I’m caught off guard at how quick he is to answer.

“Easy. Toaster in the bathtub. No chance you’d survive and end up a vegetable.”

“Nah. I don’t want the last thing I see to be my weird goblin body,” I snicker. Sonny laughs and I can feel my shoulders soften and the near permanent clenching of my jaw relax. Sonny folds his arms and clicks his tongue before turning to me.

“You know, I got a good feeling about you Norrin.”

“Well, that’s good.” I can’t think of anything else funny to say.

“And my good feelings are often good.”

“Okay.”

“You know, you look like you need a job. You want a job?” he says with an air of modesty.

“Maybe. Like what?”

“Landscaping. Can’t pay you much but I can do room and board.”

“Oh yeah?” Naturally I’m wary of this man but I am also wary of my instincts. They lie to me often. They tell me that I should take this deal and bail when something better comes along. I have to learn to stop listening to my conscience because it always ends up starting out fine before eventually taking me to the abyss of Kickers and heavy drinking. That’s when I end up squatting in a drug den with a mattress on the ground, staring through the fleecy blankets with a print of a wolf

howling at the moon thumbtacked to the windows. Heroine chic, the ultimate contrast to the pastel curtains of the “live, laugh, love” generation. I wish I wouldn’t listen to this voice telling me to take the deal and save what little money I have left. Statistically speaking, I am going to make the wrong decision here.

“Yeah, man. Summer’s around the corner. Whaddya say?” Sonny shrugs.

“Well, I can’t leave until they discharge me.”

“Oh. I thought you was here voluntarily.”

“Nope.”

“And they just let you chill in the waiting room?” Sonny leans in. “Can’t you just, run away?”

“Yeah, but then they’d just bring me back and I’d be here for even longer. But listen, they like me here. That’s why they trust me in here and I’m, like, ninety-nine percent sure the therapist is going to okay me this afternoon anyway.” I motion to Philpott’s door as Sonny purses his lips. At that moment, Philpott’s door flies open. Bulldog Tattoo man storms out of the office. He curses belligerently, turning to Philpott and pointing at him as he hurls insults.

“Holy shit!” Sonny is ecstatic, his crooked teeth glaring in the fluorescent light. A beefy security guard makes his way to Bulldog Tattoo. The guard restrains him just as he turns his head to me. My heart races.

“The fuck you looking at, bitch?!” Bulldog Tattoo spits. Sonny’s still in his glee as the security guard shuffles Bulldog into the hallway. The commotion extends to my stomach. I start to feel weak and see spots in my peripherals as the nurse approaches me. She places her hand on my back and helps me to my seat. I watch Sonny hop a few steps down the hall to get a better sight of Bulldog being led down the corridor.

“Norrin,” the nurse coos. “There’s a phone call for you.” Her eyes are inviting and my nausea starts to simmer down.

“That’s weird.” I don’t know why I’m telling her this but it is weird. I can’t think of anyone who would call.

## Chapter 4

I put the phone to my ear and absorb the sound of her asthma wheeze. She says something but I can't hear it on account of Bulldog Tattoo's belligerent yelling that grows less and less vigorous in the adjacent hallway.

"I thought we had a deal, man." It's Thadie. Every year she calls and every year I forget that it's coming. Her voice is caked in a homemade confidence that has taken her a lifetime to perfect. We share a special bond that I wish would erode. We went to high school together but we never actually talked to each other. Even after Robbie. Robbie sold drugs down in "the court" which was basically a trailer park. I am unsure as to why it was called the court. Thadie was a real keener. She never came to the dances, never hung out with the girls. No one knew anything about her other than she was going to be a doctor, which is funny because she lost her license a year into her residency. She doesn't know that I know that.

Robbie would meet you by the stop sign across from his trailer. He was skinny enough that his basketball jersey hung off him like a decommissioned ship's sail. He always wore a hat, but everyone always suspected it was because he went bald at fifteen. That happens sometimes, but more so in our shit bucket high school in Botwood. I used to meet Robbie by the stop sign every week but this one-time Thadie was there too. I think she's two years younger than me so she must have been fifteen or so. Poor Thadie—erratically tapping her shoe against the bottom steel pole of the sign and nervously exhaling. She never said a word to me, just a polite nod before turning to the stop sign and eyeing it. What a moment for someone buying drugs for the first time, definitely some kind of upper to help her stay up and study, but I've never asked her. I can only imagine all the

scenarios running through her head while a big fucking answer printed on a red octagon stood right in front of her.

Robbie collected us twenty minutes later. It was only a five-minute walk from the stop sign and past the coffee coloured and off-white trailers with shitty plastic swing sets and broken-down Pontiacs to his own off-white trailer with a broken-down Pontiac Sunfire. You had to wait in the kitchen and hand Robbie a piece of paper with your purchase written on it. Robbie believed that the CIA was listening in on him, you see, and there's nothing more unhinged and taxing in this life than hanging out at a dealer's house let alone one like Robbie. So, I never bothered to argue with him on the matter. That and he always carried a buck knife in his oversized back pocket that often fell out on the walks to the trailer. Poor Thadie, she just stood there with me and kept her eyes on the peeling linoleum floor. Robbie's mom left him the trailer which still sported every incarnation of Jesus memorabilia possible: Clocks, bead curtains, candles, fridge magnets and more. God knows what waited beyond the kitchen. But Thadie just kept her head down. That was until Robbie walked in with a twelve-gauge shot gun and pointed it at me. He was just fucking around though. No big deal.

“Check this out, luh. Beauty ain't it,” he said. His voice was battered in a nasally tone that made him sound like he was underwater. Robbie turned the gun to the beaded curtain separating the kitchen and living room. Thadie was frozen, expressionless, as Robbie cocked and pulled the trigger. No bullet though. I didn't think there would be, but you could never tell with Robbie. Thadie jumped ten feet anyway. In her defense, it was a very loud click for a trigger to make. Robbie handed me a sandwich baggy of weed and Thadie a pill botte of what must have been Adderall.

“Thank-you-have-a-good-day-thank-you,” Thadie said as she politely rushed out of the trailer. I did too. I hate talking to dealers especially Robbie because he would often times test out his

rap career on his clients and that shit was as brutal as it gets. So, I started running through something nice to say as I made my way towards her. Thadie had just past the stop sign when I caught up to her. Only a second later and we both turned back to the sound of screeching tires coming from the trailer park just in time to see Robbie peeling out of the driveway at maximum speed. In a split second he blasted across the tarmac and slammed into the telephone pole adjacent to the driveway in his neighbour's trailer. The horn blared as dust and smoke rallied around the twisted machine. Thadie bolted. I dropped out of school the next day. Robbie was dead.

I didn't see Thadie again until many years later. After she botched her medical career, she opened up one of those dreadful wellness clinics that rich people go to when they have too much money. But say what you will, she made a fortune of it. So much so that she eventually opened up the resort to the less financially inclined addicts of her hometown. That only happened once. Some guy ended up offing himself under her care which didn't bode well for her already fragile medical career. But that's where I met her again, and that's where she started transposing this false connection onto us. We never spoke about Robbie or what happened that day, but I sure as shit know that it's what binds us. Well, what binds her to me. She never had friends and neither did I. I still don't. But the difference is that I don't super give a fuck about that and Thadie does. So she demands a connection to me. And I just can't bring myself to nurture it or cut it loose. All I can do is endure it now. She's the picture of spiritual retreats, healing sessions, protests, and TV appearances on late night talk shows: travelling the world with promises of survival. There's a die-hard social media following to prove it too. Thadie does it all and yet she still makes the time to call me every year just as the Newfoundland Winter comes to an end.

"We had a deal," she tries again. It's hard to not focus on the commotion outside, but I'll always owe Thadie my begrudging attention.

“I’m sorry. I. I just hit the wall.” I’m lying. I just don’t know how to tell her that it’s not that I hit bottom, it’s that there is no bottom to hit in the first place. That’s just how it goes sometimes. It’s not a big deal. Whatever.

“Jesus, Norrin, are you even doing the box breathing?” The ruckus outside suddenly stops as she speaks. I try to get a peek into the hallway while keeping the phone in ear shot. “Hello? Norrin?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I say. The hallway is empty although I hear the squeak of running shoes on linoleum just further down.

“Have you tried the box breathing?”

“Yeah.” I turn back to the reception desk.

“And it’s not helping?”

“Yeah, it’s helping.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just really tired.” My words slide under her wheeze as a silence takes over.

“Do you remember when we were in Switzerland?” Oh no. She’s going into the story about the wellness retreat of 2007. Long story short is that we got lost in the woods and Thadie led us back to the trail. Mind you, we were in no real danger other than the Messiah complex that Thadie adopted that day: a complex she thinks is perceived as humble. I try to speak but am overruled by the start of the story. Thadie goes on again as though I have forgotten the whole thing. She drones on and I picture her lounging behind a glass desk in a downtown corner office with pastel wallpaper and vintage neon-red coffee tables: modern millennial chic. Finally, the whine of a man yelping breaks through from the hallway. I try to interrupt Thadie and hang up but she just keeps on with

this story I've heard a thousand times. Finally, a security guard turns the corner, his hands covered in blood. There's no tension in his face despite the panic of people rushing around him in the background. The security guard ignores me and leans into the reception.

"Fucking Christ," he mutters, wiping his brow with the back of his blood-stained hand.

"Code White?" The nurse is already dialing something into the phone as she speaks.

"Code White."

"What's a Code White?" I say to the two of them.

"Hey, are you listening?" I try to ignore Thadie's voice as the nurse tells me to hang up.

"Hey Thadie, I gotta—"

"Listen, don't stop the box—"

"I have to go, T. I'll call you tomorrow." Her voice peters out with something as I hang up. The nurse instructs me to go back to my room. "I'm suppose to get released today" I try, consciously keeping my voice low and non-threatening. The nurse's dwindling patience reveals itself in the subconscious clenching of her teeth that only the truly observant of body language decoders can see. The security guard rolls his eyes as he turns back into the hallway.

"Dr. Phillipott will see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes, but I was hoping—"

She turns to a microphone. Her voice echoes through the building.

"Code White. All security please report to reception."

\* \* \*



Turns out that Bulldog Tattoo threatened Philpott and bit the hand of the security guard who was escorting him out. Because of that, not only did I miss my appointment but Philpott's gone on stress leave now. So now I'm back in my room, waiting on AA, waiting on a fucking miracle, lying on this bed and staring into the light fixture above me. How much of my life have I spent staring into this very particular style of light fixture that the b'ys call a "titty light." If you ever find yourself in this part of the world, take notice of them. It's absurd to think that anyone could not see a woman's breast in it and even more absurd that someone could so unceremoniously craft this glass ceiling boob: one metallic nipple placed perfectly in the middle of a low orange glow. These must have been designed for addicts. It's like they knew that all the dried up, sore pocked coke-fiends who lie down on soiled or chemically sterilized mattresses in hospitals and halfway houses would stare for hours at these glowing titties, wondering about death and money and liquor store mark ups. What a stupid joke. I can't wait to get out of here.

\* \* \*

"I'm really sorry Norrin, but I think you should stay for a little while longer." Philpott's been gone for three days so now they've got this new asshole. He's covered in Harry Potter tattoos with dangling earlobes from an emo-kid phase of inch long ear stretchers. I clasp my hands, nod politely and keep eye contact.

"Okay. I understand. I was just really hoping to get out today. You know, and Dr. Philpott knows this, but I have been—"

"I think you're just telling me what I want to hear." What do I say back to that? He's right, and he knows that I know that. I can feel my hands go numb as my face involuntarily scrunches for just a moment before sliding back into a controlled exercise of maintaining, maintaining, maintaining. I try to hold it in: hatred for this entitled asshole who is more concerned with his own

complex of tough love than what I need right now. I imagine him with his beautiful wife and their beautiful matching mountain bikes. I imagine his SUV and the brown cargo shorts he wears, his beard fully fleshed out and a box set of Dave Matthews CDs next to a laminated Rolling Stone poster next to a picture of him posing with a guide on his first trip scaling Mount Fuji. Everything is perfect for him and he spreads his perfection unto all of us fuckups with no restraint or thought.

“I assure you I’m not.”

“You are though,” he nods. I can’t think of anything to say. Everything in me is in damage control. If I freak out, I’ll be stuck here even longer.

“Okay well. I guess. Okay. Well, what now?”

“Just take it one day at a time. Keep up with AA and guided meditation and we’ll go from there.”

“Okay. Okay, thank you doctor.” I extend my hand to shake his, but he doesn’t see me as he closes his laptop and checks his phone. I pull my hand back quickly. “Am I done then?”

“Yep! I’ll check in again with you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Okay that’s good then. Okay, thanks.” I make my way to the door when he pipes up from behind me.

“I know you are unhappy about being here, Norrin. But I’m just trying to give you some genuine help. Same goes for everyone here.” Without warning, I feel as though my slate is violently wiped clean of all hesitation. I paint my psychic canvas in blood. My body and mind synchronize and I feel saliva pooling in my mouth as I turn towards him.

“You fucking piece of shit motherfucker!”

“Okay, that’s enough now.”

“Where were you six months ago when that missus killed herself?!”

“I’m going to call security if you don’t calm down.” I whack the plastic chair over as I approach him, watching but not reacting to his hand reaching for what I assume is the button to call security. My hands wave around as I unload. I’ve got a bad habit of pointing at people when I reach this state of blind-rage-nirvana.

“She begged you to let her stay! She begged you! And you threw her out on the street! And now you won’t let me go when I need to go! You fucking asshole! I hope you choke in hell you fucking asshole!” Words like music pour out of me, sending chemicals rushing about my brain like supernovas filling the cosmos with blood red. I don’t even feel the security guard grip me just above my elbow. My mouth motors indecipherably as the good doctor stares at his desk while I’m whisked away effortlessly by the guard from yesterday.

## Chapter 5

I'm doing pretty good but it's hard to stop thinking about the cards. Even now, sleep doesn't come and lights out is at nine. This room is starting to feel like home. I'm starting to congeal into the abrasive fabric of these over washed sheets. I'm starting to recognize the faces in the water damaged corner above my bed. It's easier to give into thoughts of the cards again. I've been up and down the path of why I need it or why I don't too many times to count. Sometimes I feel like a moron for thinking that there's something magical to it. But I dare not speak of destiny and fate out loud. When you say things out loud, they get meaning, and I don't want to be wrong about that. I imagine the five of pentacles card flipping up. It means adversity. Then the high priestess card. That means intuition. Already I can see myself when they let me out of here. I can see myself fishing a cigarette out of a beer bottle at three AM. I can see myself sifting through potential futures on a tarot app—analysing the ten of swords through its cracked screen.

“Thought you were supposed to be out of here by now?” Sonny says as I lurch into the waiting room. It's just me and him and these magazines that shine on the centre creases where they've been bent a thousand times. The stillness of the air in the waiting room is lost on me today. On a normal day I would almost savour the mopey air of an underfunded waiting room.

“Yeah,” I say, leaving one seat open between us as I sit next to Sonny. It's only been one day of antipsychotics, the kind Dr. Philpott insisted were a last resort, but even a day is enough to slip into the fog of these types of medications. I'm somewhere between the lines now, somewhere inside myself. Not happy or sad—just there—autopilot on.

“Well here, take this.” Sonny hands me a small business card. On it are numbers and letters that mean nothing to me. The card falls onto the ground and I’ve got a bitter taste in the back of my throat. Sonny snaps his fingers at me. “Hey, dude.”

“Oh fuck, I’m sorry, man. I’m on these new pills and, yeah.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” Sonny quips. I reach for the card and focus on it. “Dick and Goreman Landscaping Limited. 1(709) 337 – 3737.”

“Look man I don’t know when I’m getting out of here so you should probably find someone else for your thing.” I hand him back the card.

“Keep it, but are you sure? It probably won’t be much longer until you’re out I’d imagine.”

“I don’t know man.” A moment of nausea wades in and out as I lean my head back over the chair and stare into the void of a speckled drop ceiling and fluorescent light. Sonny nods and smooths his wispy beard.

“Well, that’s too bad. Not in the cards I guess.”

“Ha!”

“What?” A moment passes and I almost feel a tinge of life zapping me. Sonny frowns and I start to feel the bitter taste in my throat move to my tongue.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me!”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Fuck off b’y, I won’t tell nobody.” Sonny’s staring right at me. I sit up and meet his gaze for a moment as the nausea of the pills comes and goes.

“Cards. Like Tarot cards.”

“Yeah. Okay. Tarot cards.”

“It’s just like, or well it *was* like, you know, like a whole thing for me or whatever.”

“Like what?” Sonny says, leaning in closer. For the first time I notice his teeth: crooked, off-white, canines just a tinge longer than you’d expect them to be.

“Oh man. It’s not an interesting story. I just like getting my fortune read.”

“By who? Like a Medium?”

“Yeah, or like, online readings or phone apps or—man, what are we even talking about here? Why do you care?” Images of the six of wands and the nine of swords appear and dissipate in my mind as Sonny straightens up in his chair.

“Well, I suppose that’s why you’re in the crazy house.” Sonny says as the reception nurse glares at him. A moment later and the new doctor’s door opens. He guides a lanky guy with a bowl cut out of his office.

“See you tomorrow,” he says to the guy while gesturing for me to enter his office.

“My turn, I guess. Anyway, good talking to you, Sonny. Sorry about the job shit,” I say as I rise from my seat.

“Hey, no problem, my man.”

“Cool.” I’m about to walk away when Sonny grabs my arm.

“Hey. Before you go. What’s your aunt’s name? or your uncle or whatever?”

“What?”

“Do you have an aunt or an uncle?” he says, sarcastically enunciating his syllables.

“What are you talking about?”

“Everything okay, Norrin?” The doctor says, leaning out of his office doorway. Me and Sonny both stare at him for a moment before Sonny turns back to me with a rigid look on his face.

“Just answer the fucking question! God!”

“Man, I didn’t really know my family, okay? I spent most of my life with my nan and pop and that’s like, my whole family pretty much. I think I had a great aunt, Mabel? Or Maple? I don’t know, I never met her. And my mom and dad but we don’t talk.” I can feel the doctor’s eyes on the back of my head. Sonny lets go of my arm and nods, pursing his lips.

“Mabel it is.”

\* \* \*

The first week of Quetiapine is like skipping time except not in a fun way like acid or mushrooms. Sonny’s voice is still ringing in my ear when I’m in Philpott’s replacement’s office. He nods and taps a pen caked in glitter against his snaggletooth. He goes on about something but all I can pick out are “mhm’s” and “healing” The rest of it is some kind of muffled questioning. He’s hard to ignore despite the drone of his slow and steady bullshit. His brown and yellow rugby shirt gleams in the hospital grey and eggshell white all around us. I nod as he speaks, turning my head for just a second, when I’m suddenly in A.A.

“Huh?” I say to the fresh faces of the recovery centre, though they are all just blobs of color: indescribable in the blend of purples and whites of the posters all around us, a Monet in real time.

“What’s that, Norrin?” the group leader says.

“Am I getting out today?” I mumble. The group goes silent for a moment as everyone eyes him for a response. He frowns and says something to me, but I’m caught up in the shabby painting that covers the entire back wall: a tree under a rainbow, each branch with the words “hope, trust, love, gratitude, God.” The group leader sounds as though he is in another room.

“Do you want to go lie down, maybe?” he echoes. I turn to respond to him but I’m gone again, now in the common room. Everything here is peach coloured. New faces I’ve never seen are sitting around on the couches and loveseat, watching “The Shawshank Redemption.” An old guy with a beer hat and a beer belly does his best Morgan Freeman impression. Everyone laughs. In the brain fog he looks like a windup toy you’d find in a Christmas Cracker. I think about Christmas in Africa and the serrated glow of tinsel on a fake tree. Is it Christmas now? No. That was months ago. Right? I examine the room—colors everywhere! Maybe it is Christmas. I lean in close to a woman who’s got the portrait of a baby tattooed on her forearm.

“Hey, is it Christmas?”

“Man, fuck off, quit fucking with me,” she drones as everyone turns their attention to Tim Robbins on screen, standing in the rain.

\* \* \*

It’s midnight when my body finally starts to sync up with the Quetiapine. This bed feels familiar now and the absence of movement beyond the window makes it feel like time’s stopped altogether. It’s only a few hours until the boredom starts, though. They don’t let you bring



cellphones with you when you check in. Voluntary or involuntary, everyone has to surrender their phones to the front desk. You get ‘em back when you check out. Last time I was here I taped mine to my thigh and kept at the online tarot apps when I couldn’t sleep. But that doesn’t matter now anyway. I pawned my phone a couple months ago. Fuck, I wish I had it now. I’d google all the beautiful places I’ll never see, imagining myself napping under the broke-down awning on a beachfront house in Malawi as the sun sets red on the water. I’d google “Japan neon Tokyo city street night” and try to connect with a parallel dimension where I’m glaring at the brilliance of a glowing Sega sign as masked salarymen rush around me. I need only tap into the psychic connection between me and the *other me* whose silk jacket slides across his forearm while he sips from a mountainside stream. I’ve never seen an actual castle. I’d google that and imagine myself stalking up the spiral staircase while a thunderstorm rages outside. Anywhere but this tiny, castrated, sterilized bedroom. Despite the boredom, it’s actually kind of soothing to lie here in this rickety old bed and watch the streetlight outside flicker. The snow is melting faster than I can remember in previous years. Bugs swirl around the light, unphased by the moments of darkness that instantly appear. To me it’s just a second, but to them it’s a solid portion of their lives. Even in the pit of nothingness, they hold fast for the light and gorge themselves in its low-sodium glow for just a moment before it’s sudden absence. Earlier today the nurse told me that I’ll be getting a roommate tomorrow, which is probably the second worst thing to happen next to being in withdrawal. I royally fucked up by yelling at the new doctor. They’re never going to let me go.

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.

\* \* \*

I'm at that part of the dream where I'm scrunched up against Ma's sweater. She's hollering about the bat and pressing down on me. I feel like I'm about to crumble when three knocks wake me.

The sun is on my face but I dare not turn over, even as the nurse calls my name. The thought of conversing with whoever I'll be bunking with is too much to bear.

"Norrin? There's someone here from your aunt's estate to see you," the nurse says. It almost feels like it could be true. I turn over as a woman with a dark suit, partially orange afro and messenger bag stands by the nurse, her expression empty.

"Hey kid," she says, though she looks much younger than me, too young to address me as "kid."

"Hey?" I try, sitting upright, eyeing them both. The nurse clasps her hands and gestures towards me.

"Well, I'll leave you to it then."

"Thank you, sweetie," the woman says as she bows her head with her eyes closed.

"Not a problem." The nurse waves at me and leaves and a part of me knows I'll never see her again. We wait in silence as the strange woman follows the echoes of the nurses' footsteps with her eyes. A moment of silence passes when she relaxes her shoulders.

"Pack your shit, we're leaving."

"Hold on now, are you friends with Sonny, because I'm—"

"I'm here on behalf of your aunt, Mabel."

“I don’t have an aunt, Mabel,” I say, folding my hands around my forearms. The woman takes a second and pulls a clipboard from her messenger bag. She flips through the pages and mouths something that I can’t make out.

“Mabel Brown: Seventy-one years old. Husband: Gary. Sister: Juliet Brown.”

“Well, I—”

“Hey! Stop. What I need from you right now is for you to pack your things. You are being placed in the custody of your aunt Mabel and so help me God, if you say one more thing that is not directly connected to you packing your shit, I’m just going to walk right out that door. You got it?” Between the slight pauses of my racing heart, I can hear the birds outside.

“Okay.”

\* \* \*

At the reception desk the strange woman signs a volley of forms while I scan the room for Sonny who is nowhere to be seen. How is this happening? Why is this happening? I imagine Sonny as some kind of eccentric billionaire looking for cheap unpaid labor. Is this how people get drafted into cults? Do they just pick them up outside of the nuthouse, never to be heard from again? Oh God, what if this is some type of elaborate human trafficking thing? The nurse presses the strange woman about her hair and how she keeps it so “fresh.” I feel bad for the strange woman. Having to field this monochrome nurse’s innocently offensive gestures of friendship must be taxing. But the strange woman just smiles, dots the T’s and I’s and turns back to me.

“All set then! You ready to go home, Norrin?” the strange woman asks, her hands folded over her messenger bag. I eye the nurse who stares at me like I’m a dog that just got adopted.

“Yeah. Let’s go see Aunt Mabel.”

“Excellent! Well, we’ll miss you and we wish you luck!” the nurse says before explaining to me the details of my release. I am to be placed into the custody of my aunt, who could not be here today and is represented by her lawyer. I am to take my medication every day as prescribed and check in once a month with Dr. Philpott, when he returns. All fine and dandy. I sign the form and the nurse hands me a plastic bag with the suit I wore when they brought me in. It’s an awkward should-we-hug-or-not goodbye with the reception staff and then I’m ushered off, following the strange woman into the lobby as the nurses wave in unison behind me.

I walk just a few inches behind the woman as we approach the front doors.

“Hey, I didn’t catch your name?” I try, nearly tripping on the threshold of linoleum turned tile floor.

“Just keep walking please,” she says before holding the door open for me. I’m confused as to what’s happening but the Quetiapine spikes my brain with static that keeps me from absorbing reality. The sun hits like a sledgehammer. For all the good the recovery centre tries to do, they don’t take a lot of time to get their patients in the sunlight, which is extra fucked considering how little sunlight we get here anyway. My forehead burns as I shield my eyes and tuck in behind the bag with my suit in it. The strange woman hurries ahead of me towards a black SUV caked in dirt.

“Are we going in—”

“Left side,” she says from back on, gesturing to the passenger’s side door as she enters the driver’s seat. I can’t see anything with the sun in my eyes until I approach the passenger’s side. A young-looking girl with two thick braids and a grey hood eyes me from the front seat. Sonny is in the back seat. He salutes me with two fingers and motions to the backseat door.

It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the inside of the car. The two women in front don't acknowledge me at all.

"How's it hanging', cowboy?" Sonny gleams.

"What is going on here?" I say. The hooded girl scoffs while staring into the emptiness of the parking lot.

"Landscaping," Sonny says. I raise my suit bag and make a partition between the front and back seat while keeping my voice low.

"Who are these people?"

"We can hear you," the driver says. Sonny takes a moment.

"They're landscapers." The sound of the two women shifting in their leather seats lingers for a moment.

"Landscapers. Right. Are you being serious right now?"

"Yes, we're landscapers, get in the car," the driver barks as she starts the engine. I look at Sonny as he tilts his head and shrugs.

"Now or never."

"How do you know all this shit about my aunt?"

"Just googled it. Thought I'd do you a favour and get you out."

"You expect me to believe that you googled your way into getting an involuntarily committed suicide case released to a total stranger?" It's only when I say it out loud that it dawns on me how bizarre this situation really is. I look about the vehicle. It's pristine: cool, textured leather

with polished wood paneling, stainless steel accents, and not a single fingerprint to be seen. This is money. I guess it's the strange lawyer woman's car? Though the hooded girl and Sonny seem out of place. This whole thing seems out of place.

"Hey, you need a job, I need a labourer, so I made it happen." An uneasy ripple shoots up my spine and I back out of the car, glancing back at the centre.

"Nah, man. This is sketchy," I say with my palms outstretched and holding my bag between my thumb and forefinger.

"Told ya he wouldn't bite," the hooded girl grunts.

"Shut the fuck up," Sonny says before turning back to me. "Don't mind her, she's had a miserable life and never got over it."

"Yeah, look who's talking," she chuckles. I back away and place my hand on the door.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this." I close the door and start walking back towards the centre. Behind me I can hear the car move and carefully pull up closer. The clank of a car door opening makes me want to turn but I start walking faster instead.

"Hey," Sonny barks. I can see my reflection in the window of the centre's front door. It looks distorted and warped. In the upper left corner of the door, I can see Sonny's reflection. He's leaning out of the car's open door. I can't help but turn around and meet his gaze. We stare at each other for a moment before he speaks.

"Just over a week ago you were eating rat poison. Is that where you want to end up again?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes!”

“Okay, because if you go back in there, that’s all that’s waiting for you man.”

“Oh my God, whatever. You don’t know anything about me.” My voice cracks as I point at him. Sonny’s expression sinks into a grimace.

“I know that you can’t survive another trip to the hospital. And I know that you know that too.” I take a shaky breath and listen to the sounds of faraway car horns and engines. Sonny’s voice drops to a steady low.

“I’m trying to help you, dude.”

“It’s just that, I don’t know. How do I know you’re not a serial killer or some shit?” Sweat beads down my forehead. Sonny raises his chin an inch.

## Chapter 6

“Sweet Caroline” is playing on the radio as we turn past where the old Grace Hospital used to be. I keep track of my breathing and my hands, careful not to appear nervous lest this car gets pulled over and I get a face-first ticket into the nearest ditch. The song is just about to hit the chorus when the hooded girl turns off the radio.

“Hey! What the fuck, that’s the best part!” Sonny yells as he leans in over the centre console, reaching for the radio dial. The hooded girl slaps his hand.

“That’s a creepy-ass song, dude.”

“What? Why?” Sonny hollers as I catch the driver eyeing me in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, you don’t know the story?”

“What story? No?” Sonny says as the hooded girl shakes her head.

“Man, he wrote that shit about a twelve-year-old girl—JFK’s kid and we’re all singing that shit like it’s not even weird.”

“Whatever, that’s not true,” Sonny says, taken aback but trying not show it.

“It is though. Look it up. He’s, like, talking about hands touching hands and shit like that. It’s creepy shit, dude,” the driver adds. Sonny turns to me.

“What do you think? You think that’s true?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe?” I gulp. Sonny waves me off and sits back in his chair.

“Whatever, man, it’s still a good song.”



“Well, I’m not listening to it.” The driver says before everyone goes quiet. The sounds of the occasional blinkers and the SUV’s studded tires on the tarmac echo around us. I’m staring out the window as we stop at a red light. Outside on a chain-link fence marking the perimeter of a construction site are at least a hundred posters; each poster pasted with the face of a golden-age Hollywood type guy. He’s got thick white hair and an almost handle-bar moustache that covers his top lip, kind of like Grampa Keith’s. The sun shines through the fence and thin poster board, casting a chain link shadow over all of his faces. Each poster reads: “Newfoundland first. Newfoundland strong. Elect Ed Noseworthy.”

The light changes and we move forward in silence as I scramble for something to say.

“I didn’t catch your names?” No one says anything when the hooded girl raises her sharp-knuckled hand.

“Chappie,” she says, lowering her arm.

“Abiona,” the driver adds immediately afterwards. Sonny takes his hat off and readjusts it.

“Relax dude. If we were going to kill you, we’d have done it by now.”

“I am relaxed. Do I not seem relaxed to you?”

“No, you don’t. I got something for that though.” Sonny pulls a metal cigarette case from his pocket. On the front of it is a tacky picture of an eye inside a moon inside a triangle: the type of anonymous stoner paraphernalia they sell in dying strip-mall boutiques. For a moment I look at Sonny in a different light. Is he just another happy-go-lucky idiot with bad taste and a stupid temper? God, he might be the worst kind of bayman: the type that destroys lives and patio furniture, a chip on his shoulder and an eight ball up his nose.

“Sonny! Don’t be at that now,” Chappie says. Sonny pulls a joint from the case and baptizes it.

“What? Better now than later. Better ask for forgiveness than permission.”

“Just open the window,” Abiona says, keeping her eyes on the road. We’re almost out of the city now. Downtown gives way to the indistinguishable subdivisions of grey plastic clapboard houses with gravel driveways. Swing sets on dead yellow grass peak out from the backyards as we drive past. Ed Noseworthy’s posters are everywhere, even as we make our way onto the highway.

“Where are we going?”

“Southern Shore,” Sonny says as he sparks a joint. “About a two-hour drive.”

“Two and a half,” Chappie insists, leaning her head against the passenger side window.

Sonny takes a small hit of the joint and hands it to me.

“Is this weed?” I say, inspecting the unnaturally slow burn.

“Out the window! Out the window, dude!” Abiona shouts darting her eyes from the rearview mirror and back onto the road.

“Oh shit! Sorry!” I hold the joint closer to the window. “Is this weed though?” A moment passes as Sonny mulls his bottom lip and nods his head left to right.

“Yeah. I’d say so.”

“You’d say so?” My instincts tell me that I’m okay, which is bad because my instincts are not to be trusted. Whatever it is, it smells like weed so I take a puff and blow it out of the window. It tastes like weed and I start to think that these guys might not have a serious drug problem or know

one when they see one. Especially if a crummy joint in a lame-ass cigarette case is a big deal to them. I try to hand the joint back to Sonny but he casually shakes his head.

“Naw, bro, I don’t smoke anymore.”

“Well, what the fuck am I smoking it for?”

“You’re full of bad medicine.” Sonny motions to the joint with his eyes. “That’ll help get it out of you.”

“What? Man, what are you talking about?”

“Yeah well.” Sonny leans back in his seat. “There’s some extra herbal remedies in that thing,” he says as he dips his hat over his eyes.

“Like what?”

“Low dose of LSD and the house blend of mushrooms. That and some ketamine. Don’t worry you won’t be conscious for most of it.” It’s as if his listing of these unfortunately familiar ingredients activates them. In the rearview mirror, I can see Abiona staring at me—her three eyes swirling in blazing orange spirals. Panic. Terror. What have I done?! I turn to my window but outside is gone altogether. Only the emptiness of deep space and a single traffic light with Ed Noseworthy’s poster on it remains as we shuttle through the void. I watch as we move at lightspeed through the Milky Way and past the Andromeda Galaxy. I press my hands up against the glass and watch as my fingers pass through it, leaving a ripple effect that wobbles through the glass. I pull my hands back in the car and watch as a black hole bends reality around its axis far in the distance. Sublime! I swallow a pool of coagulated spit and feel myself getting woozy. Tunnel vision sets in my peripherals as I turn towards Sonny who is not there anymore. It’s hard to make out exactly what I’m looking at. It looks like some sort of leather cylinder with course black hair at the top—each

strand of it so thick that it looks like rebar. It's only when it turns to face me that I truly comprehend what I'm seeing. Terror like a tsunami smothers me from top to bottom. I feel my organs shift around inside my body, as though they are trying to escape. I feel my eyeballs quiver and I can't breathe. Where Sonny should be is a massive, horrific bat blanketed in its enormous dark wings. As it turns to face me its ears extend and fold against the roof of the car. Its flat nose steams with hot air as its solid gold eyes reflect my warped face in them. This is too much. I'm fading. Tunnel vision starts to close in around him as he slowly turns his head towards me, stone faced with solid gold eyeballs that pierce. I feel my breath leave my body as he winks at me. Everything goes dark.

\* \* \*

I'm in the void now. There's no atoms or molecules, no pavement or pay stubs, no redwoods or parking lots. Only the aftereffects of a consciousness that died aeons ago (and that is nothing either). In a split second I hear Thadie's voice whispering my name as though she's right next to me.

My lashes are glued together with eye gunk as I come to in the back of the SUV. The cabin light is the first thing I see before I sit up in the backseat. We're parked in a field somewhere that stretches for miles before disappearing into the horizon. Sonny, Abiona and Chappie are sitting on the bonnet, laughing and passing a flask around. The sun is starting to set as it casts an orange halo around the three of them. I can smell the sour of my sweat-stained body and my foot cracks as I shuffle towards the door and open it. The wet grass tucks into my pant leg as I step out of the car. A battle worn fury comes over me when I see him standing there, smoking a cigarette and carrying on.

"Hey, look who's awake," Chappie says with a mouth full of whatever's in the flask.

“How ya feeling bud?” Sonny says. It’s like I’m still lost in the void as I watch myself march towards him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” I belt as Abiona and Chappie look at each other with a oh-here-it-comes gleam on their faces. For a moment I feel like an idiot: mindless, ugly. No matter. Something else is driving my body now. I watch from inside myself as I push Sonny. “You fucking asshole! What kind of thing is that to do to another person?!” Another push and Sonny almost falls into the yellow grass.

“Relax. I was just trying to detox yo—”

“Detox?! What the hell are you talking about? Acid and mushrooms are detox to you?”

“Don’t forget the K,” Chappie says, holding in her giggles as Abiona discreetly shushes her. Sonny shoots her a look and turns back to me as I press closer to him. He’s nearly completely silhouetted in the setting sun, outlined in a worn T-shirt and tattered ball cap. I don’t know if it’s the laced doobie or the leftover Quetiapine, but everything feels slow-mo as I take a swing at Sonny. Even as my fist approaches his face, I know that I don’t want this. I want to stop and holster my emotions, but it’s too late. My body has come too far in this moment and I feel Sonny’s chin cut into my fist as it breaks into his face. Time stands still for a moment before Sonny starts pacing and holding his face and yelping “Fuck, motherfuck! God damn!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, man,” I try. Sonny keeps pacing and cursing before unexpectedly twisting in my direction with a punch straight to the stomach. My breath is crushed and vomit hurries up my esophagus. I fall to my knees and hold my stomach as Abiona and Chappie laugh in the background.

“Yeah. Not so nice now, is it?” Sonny quips, shaking out the strain in his fist. Some long dormant muscle memory is awakened in me as I dig my feet into the ground, bracing myself but also readying myself. He’s in my sights. I rush forward, only for Sonny to grab me and throw me to the ground. He comes down with me and I can feel his shirt stretch before the seam around his collar rips. His knee is like an anvil on my chest as his fist pops me in the face—quick and striking, like a stray cat batting at a mouse. It feels more like instants of uncomfortable pressure than a full-on punch. Too much adrenaline burns up the effect, like a comet breaking down in the atmosphere. Between each strike, I can see Abiona and Chappie behind Sonny’s back, watching without expression.

“You done?” he says, heaving and blood red in the final moments of the sunset.

“Yep.” Blood tastes like metal.

\* \* \*

It’s a quiet ride for the next half hour. Everyone is staring out of their respective window. Another few meters of pavement pass when Abiona turns into a dirt road. We rumble across the increasingly unkempt terrain until the trail disappears altogether: the air getting packed, humid and wet on my skin. It’s almost pitch black now. The two beams of the SUV’s luxury LED headlights shine into nothingness, though Abiona seems unfazed by our uncharted position. Finally, the grass gives way and we pass into a wooded area. These trees are wilder than the ones I know. At first it seems like their branches point upward, but they soon start to taper inward and blend into a patchwork of an extending archway. Abiona slows down a tinge as we meander down the tube of woods. A few feet more and I can see a faint green glow at the end of the wooded tunnel.

“You know. I’ll never get tired of this drive,” Chappie says. No one responds. My face stings like acid and my guts grumble as my body tries to sort out the assault of chemicals on an empty

stomach. It's fine though. I've had worse. I can see my reflection in the window which makes it difficult to really admire the otherworldliness of this tube of trees. It seems impossible to think they could grow like this without some human intervention. I turn to Sonny who's possibly asleep under the brim of his hat. He wobbles undisturbed as we hit a small bump. I turn back to stare into the forest. At any moment I expect to see a set of glowing eyes, which is just as well, really.

The green light ahead of us grows dimmer and eventually turns white as we exit the archway of trees and turn into a massive field surrounded by forest.

"Christ, I'm hungry," Abiona says, flexing her grip on the steering wheel. In the centre of the field is a massive two-story Victorian bungalow with two looming French doors under an awning. Two RVs and a smaller camper are parked between the house and the treeline. The larger RVs are pointed at the archway of trees like two castle walls defending the centre. We move through the centre gate of the RVs and approach the house, passing a weathered pickup truck, when I hear the low grumble and sputter of some ancient sounding machine.

"What is that sound?"

"Generator," Sonny says from beneath the shade of his ballcap. "No power out this far."

"Cool." Dust settles around the car as we stop a few meters from the front door. We exit the car and everyone but me stretches or yawns. Most of the lights inside are turned off except for the porch light and a single light on the very top floor. My eyes take a second to adjust to the glow coming from the top floor room when I notice the outline of someone peering at us from the corner of the top window. They hold the curtain open just enough for us to see a sliver of each other. A cigarette cherry casts a dull orange hue around the figure, though it's not enough to make out any features of their face. It's almost like I can feel the vibrations from the figure's smoke sizzle in my chest. A moment later the figure disappears back into the room as the light dims into a

smaller, more concentrated orange. It's only then that I really notice the freckled skyline of stars beyond the house. Something is different about them. They seem deeper and there's a light purple smear pasted across the centre of the brightest star clusters, like when you leave a TV on for days and the shade of an image gets permanently burned onto the screen. Dead pixels in the making.

"C'mon, I'll show you to your room," Chappie says as she moves towards the door.

"Get him something to eat too, will ya," Sonny says as he approaches the RV closest to the pickup and peels off his ripped T-shirt.

"Yes, Master," Chappie says with an air of sarcasm.

"I'm going to bed, see ya bright and early," Sonny says from back-on as he walks into the RV. I can feel an apology on my lips when Sonny slams the RV door. I debate going up there and talking to him for a second when a patch of wind blows over my battered cheek. The stings remind me of earlier today. Fuck him. Actually, I don't mean that. I am drained. I've never been in a fight before and even though it all happened in what felt like an instant, everything in me is on cooldown until further notice. I met the real Sonny in that instant and I can feel his regret circling my own. I think.

"C'mon, new guy," Abiona says as her and Chappie walk towards the front door.

\* \* \*

We enter into a large, unlit porch area with two hallways to my left and right respectively. An Oakwood staircase leading upstairs juts out from the left hallway that Chappie is walking towards. I make sure to keep some space between us. Every doorway feels ripe for nefarious eyes that might be monitoring me.



“What is this place?” My voice echoes through the building as Abiona and Chappie shush me in unison.

“You’ll wake up the others!” Abiona whispers.

“Shit! Sorry,” I muster. Chappie nods in the direction of the hallway adjacent to the staircase.

“C’mon this way.” She grabs a flashlight and starts down the hall.

“Get some sleep, new guy; busy day tomorrow,” Abiona says as she heads towards the opposite hallway. I follow Chappie and glance up the stairs as we pass them. A green runner with intricate patterns of gold and red line each step. I can just barely see the blocky shadow of the upstairs where the staircase winds left before we pass into the hallway.

Moonlight blasts through the windows, casting a series of rectangular shadows where the mullions separate each pane of glass. Shadows fall over various framed pictures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Chappie glances back at me and smirks.

“Don’t worry, we ain’t Jesus freaks or nothing.” She keeps her voice low. “Used to be a convent in the fifties when the whole town was resettled. After that St. Brides and Cape St. Mary’s looked after her for a while, but when the city refused to give it historical status it was abandoned.” Chappie stops in her tracks and turns back to me. “Now it’s got the likes of us.” She keeps walking and I follow behind her. Outside the window I can see the RV that Sonny went into and the pickup beside it.

“How come Sonny doesn’t stay in here?”

“Ah, he’s just full of shit,” Chappie scoffs. Eventually we make it to the furthest door at the end of the hallway. Chappie opens the door to a small room fit for a monk. I’m instantly reminded of the recovery centre room. Same metal bed with cracking paint, same egg-shell white walls, ceiling

and floor, and the same droopy, sterilized atmosphere of prescription comfort. “Here ya go,” Chappie says as I enter the room, placing my suit bag on the dresser and taking a seat on the bed. I sag into the mattress as it deflates under my weight.

“Cozy.”

“Yeah, sure, man,” Chappie sniffs, lingering in the doorway. She points into the direction we came from. “Not next door but the door after that is the bathroom. We’re on a well system so don’t flush unless you absolutely have to. Oh! And in the dresser drawer are some clothes and work clothes for tomorrow.”

“Alright. Thanks a lot.”

“Sure. And feel free to wander around. Just be quiet because there are other people here too. We hit the road at six so I suggest you save the exploring until after work.”

“Oh yeah, about that. So, I’m just going to be honest with you. I’ve never done any landscaping stuff in my life and I was just—”

“Don’t worry. Sonny will show you the ropes. It’s not rocket science.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Oh! And, yeah.” Chappie points to a brown paper bag on the dresser. “Ham sandwich and a bag of chips. Bottled water under the desk. Don’t drink the tap water.”

“Oh my God, thank you,” I say, taking a moment to wrangle myself out of the sunk-in mattress before making my way to the table. Nothing on the planet could look as appealing as this shabby little sandwich, diagonally cut and wrapped in plastic wrap with beads of moisture collected around the edges of it. I tear into it and savour the lukewarm softness of cheese against the texture

and coldness of ham and margarine: so good it almost feels like it's reactivated the doomed joint from earlier. That's when I remember the trip. A ripple of breathless goosebumps rush over me as I turn to Chappie. "Are there drugs in this?" My heart races as Chappie grins before breaking into a cackle.

"No, dude. That was just Sonny trying to get the hospital drugs out of you."

"Okay well, that doesn't make any sense. Like, drugs don't remove drugs."

"Hey, man. I don't think it makes sense either," Chappie says with her hands raised in defense before nodding towards the sandwich. "But that's just good old-fashioned ham and cheese, bro."

"Okay good." I take another bite and sink back into the bed.

"Alright. You need anything else?"

"Naw, I'm good."

"Cool. I'll see you tomorrow at six," Chappie says as she closes the door. The squeak of her footsteps on the tile floor grows quieter until it's gone, leaving me in silence. I take another bite of the sandwich and stare out the window into the dark forest surrounding the field.

This room must have once belonged to a nun who had hopes and dreams and purpose. I imagine her small set of clothes that she must have kept in the dresser, neatly folded and every sock accounted for. There's nothing on the dresser top now except a bag of ketchup chips. I imagine how at one time there must have been a bible and maybe a picture of her parents. On the wall directly across from the bed is a crucifix whose silver Jesus sparkles in the moonlight. I wonder what the nun thought of it. Did she stare into the hungry shine of Jesus's body and think to herself how lucky she is to be here, at one with the Lord. Saved. Chosen. Dutiful: a soldier in God's army. She must

have had purpose too. Purpose—is that what she was here for? Did she fall asleep as the crucifix’s hot white glow beamed onto her, resting without a care in the world? Did she twist and turn as she moaned through a wet dream that she forgot as soon as she woke? Or is it all just a series of coincidences that led her into a life of service to abstract nothings. How many have laid here and stared at silver Jesus? I am just another one. Am I the last? I lay my head on an uncomfortably plump pillow and stare into the bare ceiling. On the nightstand next to me is a lamp with a beige lampshade that doesn’t turn on as I press the button attached to its cord. Next to it is a picture of the Virgin Mary. She’s got her usual vacant expression and a literal burning heart painted onto her chest. Other than moonlight Jesus, the only other source of light is the red glow from the numbers on a digital alarm clock under the broken lamp. Outside I can hear the distant sputtering of the generator shutting down and the thump of a door closing a few seconds afterwards. Quiet like this has a texture; heartbeats are wild. I stare into the empty ceiling and trace the cracks running along the crown moulding. Honestly, I’m kind of missing the titty light fixture in my room at the recovery centre right now.

\* \* \*

3 AM blinks on the alarm clock. My mind is racing with images of myself in a ditch, or tied up and gagged, or hanging from a meat-hook. It’s hitting me now. This is all too weird; something’s not right. I tiptoe to the window and peer behind the curtain. I can see the edge of Sonny’s RV and the beginnings of the trail that lead to the archway of trees. My breathing feels loud. They might hear me, but this is my only chance.

With my shoes in hand, I take slow and deliberate steps down the moonlit hallway, glancing back and forth at the RV outside on my left and the portraits of Jesus on my right. Jesus’s eyes seem to follow me. It’s hard to say whether that’s some of the leftover mushrooms/LSD combo in

Sonny's joint or divine intervention. I can see the pickup on my left just as I'm about to enter into the porch. It's now or never.

The plod of my heels feels loud. I hope they can't pick up on my vibrations. I peer up towards the staircase and take a moment to listen for movement. The staggered exhale from my clogged nostril is all I can hear and there's no light or motion coming from anywhere. I scan about the room and catch my reflection in the mirror by the door, though I can only look for a second. The terror of thinking I might see someone standing behind me in the reflection is enough to send a shril of nausea and goosebumps through me. If I don't look, there's nothing there. Keep walking.

There's a metal latch on the front door. I can hear the microscopic thud of my fingers as I grip the latch and feel the coolness of the metal. Patience. Slowly. Turn the latch slowly. The grind of metal on metal is like a fingernail stroking a piece of leather. Slowly, until the sudden clack of the door unlocking echoes into the hallway. My heart stops. My breath stops. My blood stops. Frozen. I turn my head as slow as I turned the latch to scan around the room and up the stairs. A lifetime could pass in the few seconds that I study the darkness for even the slightest sign of movement. But nothing. Now's my chance. I turn back to the door and open it, slower than I did the latch. No rush if it means getting out of here. I stop turning the handle as soon as I feel its vibrations and scan about the porch again. It takes almost a minute of turning the handle in small increments until the door opens without a sound. I purse my lips and take a full breath that I exhale as slowly as I turned the doorknob. One more quick scan and I tiptoe out of the house, closing the door behind me but careful not to latch it shut completely.

My heart is hammering but my head is clear. No sign of life from the RV and no indication of movement in the treeline or the field. My mouth is dry and I can feel a sticky dampness in the roof of my mouth. The truck is dead ahead. Here we go. God, please let the fucking keys be in there.

I can imagine them sitting on the front dash, as shiny as the silver Jesus in my room. They're in there. I know it. And if not, well, I guess I'm running. Shoes in hand, I walk on the balls of my feet and take the three steps down the porch. My eyes dart towards the camper and back to the truck as I slip my sneakers on. One last breath. In through the mouth. Hold for three seconds. Out through the almost whistling nostrils. I nod and take a single step.

"If you're hoping to take the truck, you're shit out of luck," a woman's voice declares from behind me. The truck is just right there as I close my eyes and feel all motivation and hope drain out of me like rain rushing down a mountainside. Her voice is thick with a French accent. "Sonny keeps the keys with him at all times," she says as the crack of a match being lit makes me turn towards her. Sitting a few feet to the right of the door is an older woman smoking a cigarette. She takes a long drag, the glow of her cigarette cherry casting a momentary light around her. Her face is long and pale with whip straight black hair. The image of Morticia Addams pops in my mind.

"I. I was just going to—"

"If you want to leave, then take the SUV," the woman barks as she throws me a set of car keys that I catch with both hands. "I only ask that you take it back to the rental agency, the one by the mall. Just leave it there and go. I'll call ahead and tell them you're dropping it off." She sits back in her chair and takes her eyes off me. I inspect the set of keys that aren't keys at all: just a rectangle with a silver edge on one end and an imbedded logo encased on both sides. This sudden luxury feels empty and I don't know why. It's like I've been handed a participation trophy and am being ushered off stage to make room for the winners.

"Do you work with everyone here too?" I whimper.

"Yes, obviously," she says, ashing her cigarette into a momentary breeze.

“Yeah. Yeah, I suppose so.” The onyx SUV is parked on my far right. A blade of light cascades off of the side of the hood, unwelcome and impersonal. Most luxury accessories hit me like that. But I’ve lost the game I didn’t even know I was playing with this strange woman and am just about to move towards the car, when she pipes up again.

“Smoke before you go?” she says, pointing a crumpled pack of cigarettes at me.

“Sure,” I gruff as I make my way towards the awning, my unseen hands fidgeting in my pockets. The woman gestures to a lawn chair next to her.

“Sit,” she says, handing me a cigarette and a lighter. I slouch into the chair and light up a crooked cigarette. The coolness of springtime and stale smoke tunnels down my throat. Even if this shit is drugged, I don’t care. This lady certainly doesn’t seem to give a fuck about anything.

“Thanks,” I say, passing back the lighter that she stuffs into the pocket of her fuzzy brown sweater. We sit in silence for a moment while the wind passes through the blossoming leaves of the forest perimeter. It blows back at us and hastens the burning of our cigarettes. I peer at her in my peripheral vision and then back into the darkness, thinking of something to say.

“Can I ask you something?” she finally says.

“I guess.”

“Why are you here?” she asks as she exhales smoke.

“I, I guess for work. Sonny said he needed a hand and could offer room and board. I guess I don’t have anywhere to go either.”

“Hmph. That’s not why.”

“Um. Well. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Why not the truth?” she says, turning to me with a closed-lipped smile.

“I am telling you the truth,” I try. She turns her attention back to the sky.

“Well let me ask this then. Why are you leaving?” Her voice is low and longing and I can’t tell if it’s because of her accent or something else.

“Honestly. I’m scared that you guys are going to kill me or something.”

“You think we’re a cult or something?”

“Lady. You can’t tell me that you really think this is all normal?” A moment passes before she starts into a low chuckle.

“I suppose so. But you’re still not telling the truth.”

“About what?”

“Why are you leaving?”

“I just told you tha—”

“That’s not why,” she says, low enough that I almost can’t hear her.

“What?”

“I said: That’s not why you’re leaving.” For a moment I catch a glimpse of movement coming from Sonny’s RV, which upon closer inspection is just a leaf that’s stuck in the corner of the vehicle’s window. Another breeze sees it violently flapping before blowing away into the night.

“I don’t know. I think it’s in my nature to run.”

“You remind me of someone I used to know,” she says with her head aimed at the stars.

“I hope that’s a good thing.”



“It used to be.” Her voice fades into a whisper as she speaks. A part of me wants to comfort her: ease her down with all the psycho-babble that I’ve picked up from a lifetime of therapy and trauma. But I don’t have to know this woman to pick up that it would be a fruitless exercise.

“My name’s Norrin,” I say as I extend my hand. She eyes my gesture for a second before cupping my fingers and shaking my hand. Another breeze waltzes through the trees as she purses her lips and exhales a beam of grey smoke.

“Anjelica. Pleased to meet you.”

## Chapter 7

Cold showers are a godsend when you're going through withdrawal. Your body starts to overheat when it's purging, which makes for brain melting intensity. I kind of miss that right now. This particular cold shower feels like it's bashing against me with every drop. I got about an hour's sleep after a heart to heart with Anjelica. Well, maybe heart to heart isn't the best way to describe it. We sat outside and smoked while she berated the city for not having a decent fish and chips shop despite being "a completely fish saturated people," as she put it. Saucy people like that make me nervous and on edge, but it was nice to be in the presence of an outsider who didn't seem very interested in me. Still, I only got an hour's sleep before Chappie came banging on my door and ordered me into the shower, saying "that homeless guy smell is bad for business." I watch the water funnel into the drain and feel like a month's worth of toxicity is being washed away. This is the first step in getting back to living. I mean it when I say that I want to try. Christ knows it won't last but for now I'm going to try. I want to be a normal guy with a shit job and a warm bed. I'll live in my dreams and shut my brain off while I'm at work. Nod and smile: whatever it takes to get back to being alone in my room without the fear of where my next meal is coming from.

"Breakfast! C'mon," Chappie echoes from the hallway. I turn off the tap and the pipes in the house groan and shake in the ceiling above me. It's going to pop. Fuck, it's coming. I watch the ceiling and imagine it blasting open as hot steam fills the room while mangled copper pipes jut this way and that. The pipes continue to rattle but nothing else happens. I don't bother to dry off as I hustle into a pair of pants. My shirt gets stuck on the wet part of my shoulder as Chappie barges in. She's wearing an expensive black suit with an unmade tie. eyeballing me like I'm a moron before turning to the ancient sink by the door. She twists the hot water tap which quells the pipes before turning back to me. "I told you! Always turn the tap on when you flush or turn off the hot water!"

“There is no hot water! And, uh, no you never.”

“Yes, I did!” Her eyes are like spears but I know she didn’t tell me anything about the pipes.

“Okay. Well. Okay. But you didn’t tell me, no offence,” I say, staring at the tile floor with my hands clasped in front of me. Chappie squints and stares about the room as she runs her tongue over her teeth.

“Well, I’m telling you now!” she barks as she slams the door and grumbles down the hallway. If I ever had a sister, I guess this is how the nuclear family bathroom debacle would go down; sitcom relatability that my parents must have secretly envied before they shipped me off to Newfoundland.

\* \* \*

Still dripping, I step into a kitchen not unlike Grandma Juliet’s. A French press steams next to a stainless-steel kettle. Ceramic dishes with images of Humpty Dumpty are spread across a long, blonde-coloured table as Sonny sets a plate down at each spot. The sun cascades off of the bright yellow walls and the snow-white oven that still has those spiral elements. Red curtains are drawn back but still beam a shard of crimson onto Abiona who is tying Chappie’s tie for her in the opposite corner of the room. Abiona has a baby bump that I’ve not noticed until right now: small, but definitely a baby bump. I don’t stare too long in fear that she might snap at me again. Chappie scrunches her face and tilts her chin upwards as Abiona undoes the tie and starts over.

“It’s fine!” Chappie whines as Abiona eyeballs the tie.

“It’s got to look a certain way. Just let me do it.”

“Whatever,” Chappie says as she bites into a piece of toast. Sonny stands over the sink by the window, pouring bacon grease into a mason jar with a cigarette balanced between his lips. The

sun cakes him in orange despite the shadow cast over his face from his ballcap. Anjelica is seated back on to me at the head of the table, ashing a cigarette into a mostly eaten grapefruit. She scans through a laptop that I try not to stare at, though I catch a couple of Social Media profiles.

“Sit,” she says, gesturing towards the chair adjacent to her. I feel like I’m in a Wes Anderson movie. This hodgepodge band of blue-collar drones are as eclectic and unique as the bohemia of the convent’s kitchen. On the wall behind Anjelica is a picture of Jesus with his hand outstretched. Chappie and Abiona’s dark suits strike out against the honey-yellow paint job behind them. Sonny’s cigarette smoke skates across the tiled wall that is only on the left side of the room. A set of fifties era paintings with kids playing hopscotch and jump rope hang about the room—each one creepier than the last. Sonny catches a glimpse of me as I take a seat next to Anjelica.

“Oh hey,” he mumbles with a cigarette in his mouth. “Bacon?” he says as a twiggly girl with a green army jacket walks into the room from behind Chappie and Abiona.

“Yes, please,” she says as she reaches for an extra crispy piece placed on the counter.

“Not you. The new guy,” Sonny says, gesturing to me with the beak of his cap. The girl doesn’t respond to him. She cracks the piece of bacon in half and tosses a piece towards me as she takes a seat next to Abiona, crossing her legs in a lotus position.

“Hey, I’m Darlin,” she says, crunching on the bacon and tucking her long blonde hair behind her ears.

“Norrin,” I reply as she salutes me before wiping her hands on her jacket. She reaches for a boiled egg that sits in a bowl in the centre of the table when Abiona starts sniffing the air.

“Damn, girl! You stink!”

“That’s the eggs, man.”

“No, that’s you and that new shit you’re growing,” Sonny adds from the sink. Another guy with metal-wire glasses, black hair and a short black beard walks in from the hallway behind me. He takes a seat next to Anjelica and nods at me.

“Yes, now! Hey, new guy. I was wondering when Sonny was bringing you in. So how you finding it?” he says.

“Uh, how am I finding what?”

“The house!” he says, peeling an egg and popping the shells on the plate in front of him.

“Pretty good. Pretty creepy.”

“Yeah. Not bad, eh?”

“Yeah,” I say, as I bite into a piece of toast. The guy nods and reaches for another egg. Sonny places a few strips of bacon in front of him and then a few more on Anjelica’s plate.

“I’m John but b’ys call me J.R.,” he says, reaching across the table with his hand outstretched.

“Norrin. Good to meet you,” I say as we shake hands. I reach for an egg and start peeling off the shell between bites of toast and bacon.

“There, perfect!” Abiona says, inspecting Chappie’s tie from left to right.

“Okay, dope,” Chappie blurts as she turns her attention towards another piece of toast. J.R. shuffles over to Anjelica and scans the laptop screen with her. A few moments pass when his eyes widen. Anjelica chuckles under her breath with her tongue in cheek, saying: “Yeah. It’s something.” J.R. shakes his head and leans back in his chair before crunching on a piece of bacon. This guy is certainly the odd man out. Everyone here looks like the type that gets followed by mall security.

Everyone but J.R. He's got the vibe of a hockey dad—the type that's right at home in a depressing management job and cursed with the personality of a double-double coffee. Even the low tone of his voice oozes with paternal instinct and well-adjusted boredom.

“Alright, let's roll out,” Sonny hollers. The whole crew except Anjelica make for their bags while scarfing down whatever's in their hand. Sonny whips a blue jacket at me that reads “Dick and Gorman's Landscaping INC.” “C'mon. We're in the truck today,” he says as he slides into his matching blue jacket, chewing on a piece of toast. I follow behind him into the hallway as the crew rolls out of the kitchen, wisps of bacon and coffee trailing behind them. Anjelica stays behind. She's turned back on to us and facing the inside of the kitchen. The back of her head shines with long black hair that hangs like a curtain over the kitchen chair.

\* \* \*

Everyone hustles out of the front door like we're late for school: everyone except for J.R. and Darlin. Abiona and Chappie make for the SUV while Sonny motions for me to follow him to the truck.

“J.R. and Darlin not coming?” I say as Sonny opens the driver's side door. It creaks and whines as he hops in before rolling down the window and lurching his head out of the truck.

“Hey!” he hollers towards Chappie and Abiona. Chappie revs the SUV as Abiona leans out of the window.

“What?”

“Don't be carrying nothing, okay?”

“Don't worry, dad, I'll be careful,” Abiona quips as she rolls her eyes and pops back into the passenger side of the SUV. Sonny shuffles into the driver's seat next to me and shakes his head. My

feet crunch under a mess of cigarette packs and fast-food wrappers that are smooshed together with dirt and muck all over the floor. Sonny starts the engine.

“That fucking baby got me drove,” he says as we move towards the archway of trees.

“Are you like, the dad?”

“What?”

“Abiona. She got a baby right?” I say as Sonny balances the steering wheel with his knees, lighting up a cigarette. “Actually, never mind. That’s none of my business. Sorry, I, I don’t mean to pry or whatever.”

“Naw, man, it’s fine. But no. It’s not mine. I can’t have kids. I am still a kid, for Christ’s sake,” he mumbles with the cigarette perched on his lips.

“Cool. Cool,” I say, patting my legs and staring out of the window. The sunlight is serrated against the forest treeline as we make our way down the archway of trees with the SUV a few feet behind us. I’m nervous but also just so tired. It’s been at least two days with maybe eight hours sleep. My eyeballs ache and my head feels heavy. My mind flashes with images of Anjelica, the crucifix on my bedroom wall, the Humpty Dumpty dishware, and the cigarette ash in a half-eaten grapefruit.

“Are J.R. and Darlin not coming?” I try again. Sonny puffs on his cigarette.

“Naw they run this whole unit from homebase,” he says with his eyes on the road.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Hmph.” Sonny turns to me for a second before returning to the road and tilting his chin up. “You look tired, man. We got a bit of a drive, take a nap.”

“I’m alright,” I say, eyes closed and running my hand through my hair. Sonny takes a long haul of his cigarette and purses his lips as he blows smoke out the window.

“It’s fine, man. I won’t tell on you.” The archway of trees gives way to a dirt road carved into an open field. A cloudless day lies ahead of us as we move through the tall, unkempt grass and towards the pothole-ridden road a few hundred feet away.

“Okay. I’ll just rest my eyes for a bit,” I say, leaning my head against the window. I peer into the long stretches of yellow-green grass as the truck wobbles along, closing my eyes and falling asleep to the rhythm of crunching metal and gravel.

\* \* \*

The truck comes to a sudden halt that jars me awake. For the second time in a row, I haven’t dreamt of Malawi. This must be healing at work. We’re parked outside a metal gate with ornate spikes perched on each pole. On each side of the gate are walls of thick manicured brush that hide everything on the other side. Much like the convent, the road is hidden in a patchwork of thick forest and the lane is long enough that no destination is in sight.

“C’mon, give me a hand, luh,” Sonny says as he hops out of the truck and walks towards two outdoor garbage bins. I follow a few feet behind him. He grabs two full garbage bags, handing me one while keeping the other. “Throw these in the back.”

“Okay. But like, doesn’t the city pick up trash?”

“Yeah well, you know,” he says flicking a garbage bag into the pan of the truck before placing his hands on his hips and squinting into the sunlight behind me. “We’re just helping them out a tinge.”



“Sure dude, whatever,” I say, yawning and throwing the other bag into the pan. We hop back in the truck and I yawn again.

“Hold on,” Sonny says as he digs through his front pocket. He shuffles around and scrunches his face before pulling out a tiny orange pill case. “There we go.” He snaps the case open and hands me an unmarked white pill. I hold it up in the light, right in the centre of two iron bars ahead. The bars blur into stripes of black as I focus on the pill, looking for some marking that’s not there.

“Dude, is this speed?” I say as Sonny mulls his head back and forth, chewing on the inside of his lip.

“Like, ninety-nine percent. It’ll help keep you energized.”

“Yeah, I know what speed does. You seriously think I’m going to put anything you hand me in my body after last time?”

“Oh, poor baby, what a tragedy,” he says rolling his eyes. “Here, I’ll do one too if it makes you feel better.” He takes the pill from my hand and swallows it while handing me another.

“Fine,” I mutter as I throw it down my gullet. Sonny presses the button on an intercom adjacent to the gate. A bored voice crackles through the speaker.

“Hello.”

“Hey, I’ve got a work order for lawncare and yard work,” Sonny says, turning towards me and winking. I’m not sure why he winks at me and I turn my attention back to the path ahead of us. We must be somewhere in Portugal Cove judging from the look of the road behind us, though I can’t remember ever being here before.

“Yeah, sure. You know where to go?”

“Yessir.”

“Okay.” The gate opens almost immediately after the voice is done, grinding against the dirt as the unseen motor squeals. Sonny starts the truck and we move forward into the winding path ahead.

“By the way,” Sonny says, staring at the road. “Don’t use your real name.”

“Okay? Why not?”

“Just don’t. Trust me.”

\* \* \*

We meander down the path, past the thicket of trees as Sonny pops a piece of gum. The woods surrounding us feel sinister, like eyes are watching us. They remind me of the convent, but that feeling passes when we turn the corner to a massive Tudor-style house. Dark wooden beams and triangular roofs slouch over a white paint job that looks like icing sugar from far away. Flower beds with trees mummified in garbage bags line a winding cobblestone path that leads to the massive front doors, also made of dark wood, regal and intricate.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Sonny says.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What? You don’t like it?”

“Meh. There’s an insincerity to it.”

“Very well then, milord,” Sonny says as he parks the truck in the lane adjacent to the house.

It feels like I'm in a model or something. The house is like a medieval picture book of King Arthur come to life. I've never seen a Tudor-style house in person and it's of no surprise to me that I am overcome with disappointment at the artificiality of it all. This place is like a boy's Lego set. It's forced authenticity without reference, though I guess there's a charm to it. I can't imagine what type of zealous boomer concocted this bold attempt at antiquity.

Sonny pops out of the driver's side and motions for me to follow him to the pan of the truck. There he lifts two backpack sprayers with a dark orange liquid sloshing around in their plastic containers. "C'mon," he says as we make our way towards the side of the building. Sonny opens the latch to a brown wooden gate and snaps the gum he's chewing on. We pass into an alley-type area with a brick wall to our right and the white wall of the house to our left. Vines run up the criss-cross of thin wooden slats that reach the roof. "All fake," Sonny says as I feel the waxy texture of the leaves.

Down the alleyway Sonny opens another latched door that leads into a massive, almost field-like garden (the type you'd see in a movie about Marie Antionette) real boujee. Intricate pathways lead up and down as they snake around patches of flowers and trees all covered in black garbage bags: a maze with no walls. Rusted green fountains with statues of horses and what I think are Cherubs are placed in each corner of the garden. A thirty-foot statue of a naked Roman-looking guy watches from the centre of the garden. The speed is kicking in now and I'm itching to get to work.

"Alright. What are we doing?" I say, licking the sweat from my lips.

"Take off all the bags and put 'em in the garbage can by the door," Sonny says as he gestures to a bin next to a kitchen door behind us. "After that we'll give 'em a spray."

"Good enough."

“Alright then. Let’s get at it. You take right and I’ll take left,” Sonny says as we move in different directions.

It takes about forty minutes for me to get all the bags on my side of the garden. Each unmasking reveals a line of shrub-like trees or an empty patch of flower beds. The only thing that is alive are the trees and bugs that scurry about the dirt and garbage bags. I struggle to keep all the bags under my arms as I make my way back to the garbage can by the kitchen door, periodically dropping a bag which I run to collect. Sonny has already started spraying his side of the garden by the time I make it to the garbage bin. I don’t feel outdone or whatever. I’ve never been one for manual labour anyway. Most of the jobs I’ve had were fast food or overnights at a super centre. I couldn’t have given less of a fuck about any job I’ve ever had and it goes to show; I’ve been fired for stealing and not showing up at least fifteen times, no joke. But this time is different. Maybe it’s the speed, but I’m going to try and do good here. I’m going to do my job and keep my head down. This is day one of normal life and it’s not so bad.

A large bay window overlooks the garden from the left side of the kitchen door. I can barely see anything inside on account of the glare coming from behind me. I squint and cup my hands over the glass. Inside I can make out a rustic, open-concept kitchen with a large marble island in the middle. Beyond that is covered in darkness. I focus my eyes on the space-age refrigerator and oak-coloured countertops. I can see my shadow bouncing off of the concrete floor inside when a man with blond hair and a pony tail walks into the kitchen. He’s laughing and waving his arms about as I jump back and dip into the cover of the kitchen door. I stare back through the eye-level window on the upper half of the door, careful to stay out of sight. The man continues to laugh and talk as he takes two bottles of water from the fridge. He turns to the hallway where he came from when Abiona walks into the room, laughing and smiling. Neither of them notices me as I duck to the left

and watch from the small window. Abiona takes a seat at the kitchen island as Chappie walks in and stands by the hallway. Her hands are clasped in front of her and it dawns on me that her black suit is meant to be a uniform. Abiona and the pony-tailed man laugh as they wave their hands about when a polite but stern voice startles me.

“What are you doing here?” says a cleanshaven man in shorts and a blue polo shirt. His hair is neat and tidy: parted in the middle with brown roots growing under his bleached blond mop.

“I, I’m sorry. There’s someone that—” I say as I turn back to the kitchen door window. Abiona and the pony-tailed man are just leaving the kitchen as I turn back to the strange man.

“Are you spying on me?” he says as he takes a step closer.

“Uh. No. I’m here with Dick and Goreman.” I point to the tag on my shirt as he inspects it. It’s only then that I notice that he’s slightly grinding his teeth and scratching the inside of his thumb with his forefinger. If you’ve ever been around a coke-fiend, then you know this type of combination as a precursor to a full on, life shattering addiction. The man stares at me, cocking his head from side to side, when Sonny makes his way next to me.

“Hey, Steve. How ya doing?” he says, still smacking on his gum. “We’re just getting the ball rolling here now. Won’t be long.”

“Who’s this guy?” Steve says as he eyeballs me up and down.

“New guy, he’s cool.”

“He’s spying on my husband.”

“Who? This guy?” Sonny says with a painfully false look of bewilderment. “Naw, he’s just looking for the garage, aren’t ya Mikey?”

“Mikey?” I say, scrunching my face when I remember that Sonny asked me to not use my real name. “Oh! Yeah.” I turn to Steve whose stone-cold expression is now matched by his hands on his hips.

“Yeah, I’m just looking for a bucket.”

“A bucket,” the man says as me and Sonny nod.

“I’ll go get you one,” he says as he makes his way towards the direction we came from.

Sonny grabs me by the arm and marches me towards the garden.

“Fuck. I’m sorry, dude,” I try.

“It’s fine. Just stay out these people’s way. They’re not themselves.”

“Okay. But listen. I just saw Abiona in there,” I say as Sonny stops us both in our tracks.

Sonny looks up into the cloudless day and takes a deep breath.

“Listen, man. Just do what I ask you to do and don’t worry about anything else.”

“Yeah but—”

“Hey. Just give it some time, and I’ll explain everything.” Sonny places his hand on my shoulder. “I asked you to come work with me for a reason and I promise you that you won’t regret it.” A moment passes and I look down at the cobblestone path below us. My legs are ready to book it out of here. I’m somewhere in the Cove. I can make it out of here. I’m all for adventure and fun but it’s been two days of this madness. But I know what’s on the other side of this. A halfway house, flipping burgers, night shifts on the back of the truck, unending looks of pity from people with their shit together. If I were eighteen, I might still have the luxury of coping with that weight in the midst of everything else that’s wrong with me. But I’m creeping on thirty. I can’t keep fucking everything

up and letting myself ruin my life. I need to pick a lane or I'll just end up offing myself and knowing that without fearing it is why I have to try.

“Alright, man. It’s just. Like, what kind of company is this?” I say, meeting his gaze.

“It’s where you belong. You just don’t know it yet.”

“That’s a fucking weird thing to say, man,” I say as Sonny chuckles under his breath.

“I suppose so, man. But you’re a weird fucking guy, too.”

“Yeah. Well, I can’t argue with you there,” I say as I turn my attention to anywhere but him.

“Just go spray the shit,” Sonny says as he hands me the sprayer on his back. I slide it over my shoulders as Sonny hands me a bottle of cologne. “Spray this right after you’re done.” The bottle is shaped like a sea-shell with a chemical-coloured blue liquid inside.

“You serious?”

“Yeah, bro. These fucking people don’t give a shit about any of this stuff. So long as it looks nice and smells good.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Cool,” Sonny says as he walks away from the garden.

“Hey! Where you going?” I holler at him. He keeps his back turned to me, his arm waving as he shouts.

“I’ve got some shit to take care of. I’ll be back in an hour-ish. Just spray the shit.”

\* \* \*

I make my way up and down the winding pathways, spraying everything with cologne and poison. Sonny left no other instructions and Steven hasn't returned with a bucket. Thank God because I am ninety percent sure that dude is going through some sort of serious drug problem. Must be nice to be rich and sick. I'll never know. I cover every last inch of the garden, at times making pools of pesticide in the dirt that I top off with cologne. Nothing is left unsprayed. The sun starts to bake the plants around me and I can feel the vapour of chemicals subtly sting my nostrils. Sonny didn't wear a mask or give me one, so I guess it's safe. But I am without a doubt starting to feel a numbing high not unlike Ketamine. I spray the last few drops of pesticides and cologne on a shrub that looks as fake as the vines going up the wall before I take a seat on the plinth of the centre statue. I sit under the colossal dick of the muscular Romanesque figure and admire my handywork. The falsehood of this garden doesn't seem so bad anymore. Maybe it was never so bad and the high from the pesticide is helping me see that. I'm so buried in my own self-awareness that beauty only ever dawns on me when I'm too stoned to appreciate it. A brush of springtime air ushers the chemical aroma towards the house. The sound wanders like a crashing wave from far away. It's a shame that the fountains are empty. I can only imagine what this place will look like in the summer. Maybe I'll try and appreciate it more without the use of pesticide and speed. A crow passes overhead as Sonny appears in the faraway corner of the garden, waving his hand and shrieking with a cattle whistle.

"C'mon. Grab the shit, we're done for today," he hollers. I'm almost sad to go and I hope there are more gardens to be done.

\* \* \*



We move past the alleyway and back into the front area of the house. In the corner of my eye, I can see Steve watching us from the top window before disappearing back into the house. I keep my eye on the window as I hop in the passenger seat while Sonny takes the driver seat.

“That dude is wapped on coke,” I say, pointing at the empty window. Sonny gazes up at it from under the flipped down sun visor.

“Ah, Steve’s a good guy. Cut him some slack.” Sonny starts up the truck and puts it in reverse before pulling ahead into the laneway. I lean my hand out of the car window and cup the air as we wind along the path, my heartbeat in sync with the wobbling truck. We stop in front of the gate as Sonny presses a button on the intercom. The gates open a moment later and we move onto the dark pavement that is so typical of Portugal Cove Road.

We drive in silence and I keep cupping my hand in the folds of wind as we shuttle down the highway. Sonny turns on the radio. He scans through a blurt of different channels before stopping on the tail end of a Mr. Movie Phone voice that says “Newfoundland Strong. Newfoundland proud. Ed Noseworthy, twenty thirty-three.” Almost instantly, Sonny snaps the radio dial off and reaches for his cigarettes.

“Remember when the radio used to play music?” he mumbles between a drag.

“Man, I don’t think people really listen to the radio anymore.”

“Yeah, well. At least you don’t got to pay for it.”

“It’s not even about pay—” I try when the generic ring of a cellphone cuts in. Sonny does a double take toward the glove box before placing his hand on his forehead.

“Oh fuck.”

“What?” I say reaching for the glove box. Sonny bats my hand away.

“Leave it. Just wait.” The ring stops and the sound of the highway passing by us sounds louder than usual. Sonny periodically eyes the glove box when the ring starts again.

“Fuck!” Sonny barks as he urgently cuts off of the road, the truck lurching off the tarmac and onto the dirt shoulder. An SUV blares its horn as it speeds away while a middle-aged man gives us the finger between unidentifiable cursing.

“Jesus! What are you doing?” I snap. Sonny ignores me and reaches for the glove box, hauling it open and taking a small flip phone. He opens the phone, his lips just barely mouthing whatever he’s reading before he snaps it shut again. He looks into the sky before backing up the truck to face the highway.

“Everything Okay?” I say as Sonny scans the traffic. A few cars pass and the highway is clear as Sonny motors back in the direction we came from.

Sonny curses God and Abiona and Darlin and everything else as we barrel down the highway. I dare not enrage him further and I try to look as relaxed as possible. It’s not that I’m afraid of him. I’ve met a lot worse than Sonny and I’ve been in worse places than this truck. But I know that look on his face. It’s a look of stupid anger. The type of anger that simmers for weeks before it gets unloaded on a cashier or a fast-food chain manager: a childish, entitled form of release that I can’t stand to humor. We take a turn off onto a smaller highway and approach the welcome sign for Bay Bulls.

“Dude, where are we going?” I try, against my better judgement.

“You’ll see. Can’t miss it.” Sonny grips the steering wheel and decreases speed as we turn onto a side road. I can see exactly which house he’s talking about miles before we’re even close. A

McMansion hell-house made for the cover of an in-flight magazine watches from a hill, every urban-grey layer of it visible to the small town carrying on below. We turn onto the gravel pit road that's a straight shot to the front entrance of the house. Sonny guns it and I grip the edges of my seat.

Dust settles around the truck as we come to a jarring halt. Sonny turns to me as he clicks out of his seat belt. "Stay in the truck."

"What's going on, man?"

"Just stay in the truck," he says, slamming the truck door and running around the back of the house. I immediately look for the keys. They're gone. There's no sign of life anywhere despite the four luxury vehicles parked in the cul-de-sac driveway of the house. That's when I notice the black SUV that Abiona and Chappie took this morning. I'm not as scared as I am confused. Is this ever going to make sense? If they wanted to hurt me, they would have done that last night, right? Why bring me all the way out here just to get me on yard work? Why would anyone want anything to do with me at all for that matter? I have no money or anything worth killing me over. As I stare at the empty window frames of this unbridled perfection of bad taste, I know one thing. Whatever's going on here, the answer is in that house.

\* \* \*

I'm fast as I hop out of the truck, looking this way and that as I approach the back wall of the house. I peer around the corner and see another smaller apartment situated to the left. A dribble of water echoes from the right. As I move towards the sound of the water, I stay vigilant and keep my breaths in a steady rhythm. I should be scared but I'm committed to being one hundred percent present in this moment as I approach.

A swimming pool with a massive awning spread from the house to just over its centre borders the back of the property. Another step closer as the beat of the dripping water is broken by the sharp but indistinguishable voice of a woman. I freeze in my tracks before approaching the back end of the awning attached to the house. A set of three sliding glass doors line the wall. The first one is open and I recognize Chappie's long, black braids as she stands back-on to me. I creep closer and see the legs of a woman lying on the tile floor inside the building. A few steps more and I see Sonny perched over her chest and listening to her heart. Abiona stands adjacent to the scene with her hands on her head and her mouth hanging open.

"How long till the maid gets back?" Sonny barks at Abiona.

"Hour. Maybe two. I don't know." She catches me in her peripheral vision as I walk further into the room. "What the hell you doing here?!" she snaps as Sonny looks up. On the floor and frothing at the mouth is a celebrity-beautiful woman wearing yoga pants and a tank top. Sonny approaches me with his head cocked.

"Man! I told you to stay—" he tries when it dawns on me who the woman is.

"Holy shit! Is that Jennifer, the chef lady from TV? What the fuck, guys?!" I squelch, backing up and out of the house as Sonny carefully treads closer, his hands open palmed and outstretched.

"Bro, it's not what it looks like."

"I told you this guy is going to fuck us!" Abiona adds as Sonny shushes her before turning back to me. But it's too late.

"This is too far, man. Even for me," I say. My breath is getting heavy.

"Chappie," Abiona says as she glances at her. Chappie looks at me without any expression as she starts walking towards me.

“Whoa. What’s going on here. I don’t want to cause any shit. I’m sorry...”

“Chappie, back off!” Sonny blurts. Chappie eyes him, clenching her jaw as she stops in her tracks and turns to me.

“Okay. Well. Okay. Thanks for the opportunity. But I don’t want to cause any more problems for you guys. Thank you,” I plead as I turn my back and walk towards the pool. I hope they can’t see me bracing my neck, my skin on fire with the anticipation of my head crashing open. Breathe. Walk. Breathe. My footsteps tap along the concrete surrounding the pool when Sonny’s voice strikes me.

“Your name is Norrin Wilfrit. You grew up in Central Africa and when you were thirteen, you were shipped off to live with your grandparents. History of depression, suicidal ideation, and drug abuse. Should I go on?” Everything goes still except for the dripping water that shimmies around in the crystal blue swimming pool. I turn and face him. He’s standing with his hands at his sides and without expression. For a moment I can smell pipe tobacco. It saunters away in a instant as a myriad of indiscernible faces flush through my mind like a stack of cards.

“Who are you?” I say as we stand facing each other under the corrugated awning. A cloud rolls over the sun that sets the summer blue of the pool into a crystal black.

“Someone like you. Well. Mostly.” Sonny takes a step closer.

“Stop.”

“Sonny, what the fuck are you doing?” Chappie hollers, wide eyed and sweaty.

“She’s in trouble over here,” Abiona shouts from inside. Sonny ignores them and keeps walking towards me.

“But what’s most interesting is that you’ve got a bonafide addiction to tarot readings and mediums and, well, all types of spiritual shit, right?”

“Please. What do you want?” I try as Sonny finally stops. A moment passes as he nods his head and looks me in my eyes.

“I want you to join us, Norrin. We’re opportunists, I guess you could say—agents of organized chaos that restructure destiny for a price. But I guess the less enlightened might refer to us as conmen.”

“Jesus Christ! Sonny! What are you doing, man!?” Chappie yells. I’m still totally confused but the anxiety of it all is wearing me down. I can’t fight back.

“Is that why you were at the recovery centre? Looking for fuck ups to join you?” I muster. Sonny’s face goes limp as he stares into the pool.

“No. It’s not,” he says before turning back to me. “But I told you back then. I got a good feeling about you, cowboy.” His aura is pulsing and radiates sublime toxicity. “Now that lady in there is going to die if we don’t get her some help. I’m sorry you’re in this position, man. I was hoping to ease you into it all, but shit’s gone wild now. So will you help us?” The look on his face is young and hopeful. I haven’t seen this look on his face before. I turn to Chappie who shrugs as she rolls her eyes and walks back into the house.

“Alright. What do I do?”

\* \* \*

Sonny holds the woman’s head up as Abiona pulls an adrenaline shot from her purse. She reads the label, mouthing the words.

“How the fuck did this happen?” Sonny snaps.

“The chocolates. She ate all of them,” Chappie replies as she paces about the room with her hands in her hair. Sonny shakes his head and looks down at the delirious woman.

“Jesus Christ. How far out is Darlin?”

“Fifteen minutes, but we can’t wait that long,” Abiona says as she takes the cap off of the shot.

“Are you sure you know how to do this?” Sonny pleads from under his ballcap. Abiona aims the pen over the unconscious woman’s heart.

“What’s to know? Just jam the fucking thing in her heart like on Pulp Fiction.”

“That’s a movie, Ab! We’re fucked. I know it. We’re fucked,” Chappie yelps as she paces about the room. Sonny looks at me with his lips sealed. A moment passes, then he nods at Abiona. I watch her from back on as she raises the pen to the sky before bringing it down with full force. Just like in Pulp Fiction, a thud of flesh on flesh raises the woman back to life. She blasts upright with a caveman yell before running straight out of the room and into the pool. Sonny and Chappie race in after her as the woman splashes about incoherently. Abiona glares at me before throwing her hands up in relief.

“Welcome to the team. I guess. You should’ve stayed in the fucking truck.”

\* \* \*

Sonny and Chappie lead the distraught woman back into the house and seat her next to a tiki bar. They wrap a blanket around her as Abiona rushes towards her with a glass of water. The woman glances about the room at all of us and then back at Abiona.

“Who are all these people, Sasha?” she says.

“Amanda went for help when you passed out,” Abiona starts as Chappie chimes in.

“They were driving by and I asked them for help.” The woman goes silent for a moment and looks at the ground.

“I heard him.”

“Who? Jennifer, you’re scaring me,” Abiona says with her arm wrapped around the woman. Jennifer stares at us all for a moment longer then back at the ground.

“My father.” The room goes silent when Jennifer perks up again. “Mother Begonia. I need to see her immediately.” Jennifer rushes to her feet and demands her cellphone. I stay back against the glass window as Abiona calms the frantic woman and helps her take a seat. Chappie goes for another glass of water as Sonny glimpses at me for a split second.

“Listen. I’ve got my doctor friend coming over. She’ll look you over and then we’ll call Mother Begonia,” Abiona says in a soothing tone as she holds her baby bump in one hand with the other resting on Jennifer’s shoulder.

“Where’s the maid? I need something dry. Tanzeen? Tanzeen,” Jennifer tries as Abiona continues to hush her.

“She’s stepped out, Jen. She’ll be back any minute. Just try and relax, please.” A moment passes when Jennifer nods and takes a deep breath.

“There. Good. In and out,” Abiona starts.

“Thank you, Sasha,” Jennifer whimpers as she turns her attention to me and Sonny. “And you too, gentleman. Please if there’s anything—”



“Why don’t we bid these gentlemen adieu while we wait for my friend? Yes?” Abiona interjects. Jennifer bites her lip and nods before taking another sip of water.

“Yes. Thank you, please reach out to my assistant if you—”

“No need. Just happy to help,” Sonny says as he makes for the glass door, gesturing for me to follow him. “Take care now.” Sonny tips his hat to the women and ushers me out alongside him. We leave and make our way past the pool as a volley of “thank you” lingers behind us.

We walk in silence as our feet crunch the gravel of the front yard. We approach the truck, Sonny leading and flaring his nostrils between periodic sighs. I don’t even notice a new luxury SUV in the driveway until Darlin hops out of the driver’s side and starts walking towards us. She looks completely different, her grungy army jacket and greasy hair traded in for a set of McMansion grey leisure wear and a doctor’s bag at her side. We meet halfway between the cars and the house. Sonny’s not even a foot away from her when he points his finger an inch from her face.

“You fucked up.”

“Oh, I fucked up? It’s not my job to keep track of what she’s eating. That’s suppose to be your gig.”

“Just fix this. Make sure she doesn’t go to a hospital.”

“This would never have happened if John was here,” Darlin says, staring Sonny down. He’s quiet for a second before relaxing his body.

“Just fix this please.”

“You got it,” Darlin snaps before turning to me with a smile and a wave. Sonny brushes past her and makes his way towards the truck. I feel like I’m a kid again and watching my aunt and uncle fight. Darlin leans in my ear and I can feel her cool breath.

“I hope you got a firm constitution, pilgrim. No room for yellow-bellies on the prairie, am I right?” she whispers before continuing on to the house.

I make my way to the passenger’s side of the truck and hop in. Sonny stares into the sun, gently grinding his teeth and shaking his head.

“You, okay?” I try. Sonny pulls a cigarette pack from his pocket and offers me one. “Sure.” I light it up and exhale out the window as Sonny does the same.

“You want to go for a beer? I could use a beer.”

## Chapter 8

We keep a steady pace as we shuttle down the highway. Now would be a shit time to attract any police attention. That woman was almost certainly a TV chef. A famous one at that. Not famous enough for someone like me to give a fuck, but famous enough to know her name and face. She's the kind of homegrown wholesome that you'd see on a morning talk show's diet segment; the type of show they play on the TVs in hospital waiting rooms. Flashes of superstar Jennifer-the-lady-on-TV—frothing at the mouth with Sonny standing over her—roulette through my mind. Maybe I'm coming down off the speed or maybe I'm getting rapidly desensitized to the goings on of "Dick and Goreman's Landscaping." It feels like time is speeding up in my mind. Each moment is untethered to reason and expectation, and wholly inarticulate. Sonny readjusts his sweat-stained ball cap every few seconds before turning off the highway back to St. John's. We make our way downtown and park directly in front of some Irish pub. He kills the engine and turns to me, still rife with stress. "You want to go for a beer?"

"Look, man. I'll be honest with you. I'm confused about a lot of this but I get it, somewhat. You're, like, stealing from the upper class and that I get. But what if I say no? You're really just going to let me walk away? Do you think that because I tried to off myself, I don't value my life? Please. I need—"

"You won't say no," he says with his eyes on me. I wipe my nose and look out into the familiar mash of brown and orange downtown. I just feel so full. Full of emotion and toast and speed and bones and fatigue and dried spit in the corner of my mouth. I need to purge myself. That's what I need. I need to let go of all of this.

Sonny's phone starts to ring. He mutes it as he lights a cigarette. "You want to know what I do? My role in all this shit?"

"What?"

"I make sure everything is exactly where it needs to be," he says between puffs, before hopping out of the truck and pointing his finger at me. "And I never make a mistake. C'mon, I'll buy ya a beer. You earned it." He walks around the front of the truck and into the bar, barely keeping me in his sight. The ignition doesn't have a key and I almost consider looking for a spare that might be hidden somewhere. But I don't do any of that. I follow him inside.

We sit in the farthest back booth. Sonny takes a long swig from a pint before stretching out on his side of the enclosure. The low hum of some Irish diddy plays in the background as though it's been on a loop all these years. I'm almost startled when he pipes up from beneath his cap. "So. What do you know about the dangers of fraudulent psychics?" The music stops a moment later and I manage to contain most of my laughter. I've always kept a tally of life's precious moments. They hurt extra bad when you try to bury them. This one might be an exception to the rule. Sonny grins and chuckles too, one white canine tooth flashing in the tungsten light of the copper dome above us. We both take a drink as a fresh Irish ballad plays behind us.

"I'm not sure how to answer that."

"Well. How 'bout you let me tell you something that happened to me a long time ago?"

\* \* \*

Sonny never really had a job in his life. There was always a way around it: scamming the elderly, stealing copper piping or catalytic converters, and of course the big one—selling coke. He was twenty-three when he found a loophole in the "save our streets" fifty-fifty lottery that was

meant to alleviate the city's contribution to the growing homeless population. It was done under a private investor who skirted the paperwork usually associated with that sort of thing. So, Sonny found a fault in the fine print—something to exploit if you had the patience to do the work—and before you know it, he was off to Reykjavik with five thousand Canadian dollars in hand. That's where he met Anjelica.

She was running a small-time scam in a remote village known for its steady stream of the disgustingly rich that came in search of meaning after financial excess. They came with fresh divorces, cancer diagnoses, dead cats, existential boredom and loneliness; all of them in search of answers from behind the curtain, answers from some far away sanctuary of ancient knowledge forgotten in the spirit of total consumerism. That's where Anjelica came in.

“It was more than her look, though,” Sonny says, and I get what he means. “People make a split-second decision every minute of their lives. It's all about appearances but it's also about having that special something.” Anjelica, who at that time went by Moira Dubois, knew that about herself. She had “it.” For a year she swindled thousands of dollars as a clairvoyant. She was the real deal and you knew it as soon as you sat across from her. Granted, it didn't really matter what she said considering how tired the affluent hopefuls scaling the mountain path would be after a three-day hike. Anjelica set up shop in a carefully crafted yurt on the south-side of the mountain. She popped a green contact lens in one eye, a perfect companion to her other eye which is naturally blue. She dyed parts of her white hair black, but kept just enough of it white as to appear appropriately dishevelled from the unbearable weight of the universe's secrets. Anyone can craft this experience if you really put the time into it. Maybe not quite as well as Anjelica, but well enough. The real talent is knowing how to go the extra mile. Anjelica stuck to the vague, cold reading that any fortune teller will give you. But it works a lot better when you poison your subjects with a low dose of

mushrooms; just enough to believe a little harder and pay a little extra. Voila. Appearance, exhaustion and hallucinogens equal enough to make an easy five thousand dollars if you know what you're doing. Sonny almost fell for it. Almost. But you can only really scam someone if they want something. They need to want. They need to crave money, life, connection, nostalgia. Someone like Sonny. Well, I don't think he works that way.

"I'm on the outside, you see," he says. "Anjelica's like that too. She knows that there's nothing to know. Hence why we're in the know." So, they teamed up and took the show on the road, picking up other opportunists—Abiona, Chappie, Darlin and J.R—along the way. Images of Anjelica and the pictures I've seen of Reykjavik pulse through my mind. I try to imagine myself scaling the frozen mountain path and rubbing my forearms for warmth. I try to imagine the bitterness of a younger Anjelica's mushroom tea and how it is that Sonny convinced her to let a stranger like him in on her scam. I debate asking him. But I have so many questions and I don't know where to start.

"Well," Sonny says as he sniffs. "What do you make of it?"

"So what? You get them high and then what? How does Anjelica come into it?"

"Mother Begonia," he says, correcting me with his gaze. "We find their weakness. Same as any clairvoyant. Except we're organized. We got it down to the ABCs. Case study: Curtis Trussell-Coolidge."

"Am I suppose to know who that is?"

"Meh," he says between sips of beer. "I guess not, but you might have."

"Well, what about him?"

"Fuck, I hate that you can't smoke inside," Sonny says before starting on Curtis.

\* \* \*

Curtis was one of the first big ones. He was a semi-well-to-do lawyer: no kids, divorced, and a nasty gambling habit that he managed to keep at bay. J.R. picked him. That's what J.R. does. He infiltrates. Bank accounts, credit scores, ads and, most importantly, social media are all at the mercy of someone like J.R. Sonny goes on as a young guy with a comb-over and a portly double chin walks in with a mandolin under his arm. The guy takes a seat in the corner closest to the window, next to a scaly bald man in an oversized shirt.

“People craft their perfect selves online. Everyone wants that gratification, everybody wants to be who they are in the digital world,” Sonny says, leaning in and watching over his shoulder. “The fella with the glasses, J.R. That's what he and I do. Mostly he, now, I'll admit that. But like I said, I make sure things are where they best be.”

“Okay,” I say. The scaly bald man rattles on a bodhran while the young guy takes out a mandolin and runs a scale up the fretboard.

“Everything is ours to mold so long as we can stay one step away from the law and both feet in the terabytes of their personal data.”

“Is that how you know about me?” I say. Sonny nods with his eyes closed and goes on to explain how J.R. hits you long before Anjelica. He preys on your digital window to the modern world. “Case and point is Curtis,” Sonny says as the band begins a terrible Irish jam. “We started with his weakness.” He leads me through a story about Curtis: forty-five, medium build, green eyes, grey hair, his gambling addiction and the young women who he messaged on the regular. They never did write back. Not till Abiona. All it took was a week of targeted ads and access to his bank account, which J.R. easily acquired through a sketchy porn subscription. Soon Curtis was playing a rigged game, masterminded by J.R. from anywhere in the world, losing and winning by J.R.'s design.

The irony of a white-bread guy like J.R. manning the digital nexus of someone's life is weird and uncomfortable. I can barely hear Sonny over the increasing intensity of the band. It gets worse when a drunk man with a knotted beard starts stomping his feet along to the song. Sonny doesn't take any notice and goes on about a catfishing scam they pulled on Curtis. Abiona's first big role. She came on to him with wide eyes and carved out lingerie that made Curtis hot. She kept her chill and never asked him for anything but his screen time. Then came the suggestion. Mother Begonia. The band stops and the few people in the bar start clapping. Sonny stops his story and claps along before leaning in and continuing. "Without ever even meeting the poor bastard, Abiona steered him towards her. Not even a week before he was meeting with Mother Begonia in a hotel room suite." I almost feel like this could have been me if I had any money. But I wouldn't blame Sonny if he trapped me. I'd deserve it. Sonny laughs with an air of satisfaction as he continues about the psychic readings designed to match Curtis's financial and romantic gains that gave Sonny and Darlin ample time to break into his house and drug all his food with a specially crafted recipe of LSD, cocaine, speed and mushrooms. Naturally, every person gets a diet made specific for them.

"In the case of Curtis, who survived off TV dinners and takeout, it would be a half-gram dose of Psilocybin azurescens and a tinge of speed for breakfast. For lunch, a quarter-gram of blow to cut the high down. Supper was another gram of mushrooms mixed with a fraction of DMT to speed along the magical thinking of his subconscious mind. "That's where we really perfected it. Darlin really came into her own with Curtis," Sonny says, nodding his head as the band starts up again. "Technological, psychological and existential control: crafting a destiny of big wins and big love around the corner." That's how they led Curtis into their trap.

J.R. kept Curtis in a hole of fake ads and winnings. Curtis jumped for joy, manic as he was finally winning in life and love. Abiona whisked his imagination away with dreams of sex and



affluence. After a month of all this, just as Mother Begonia had promised, Curtis finally met with Abiona. She, who steered him towards Mother Begonia's second promise: the Big Win. Curtis funnelled his entire one point three-million-dollar fortune on what he was convinced was his big win, the one that he was destined for; the promise of Mother Begonia, made after multiple two-hour-long sessions of mind reading and tarot. And why wouldn't he? For a month, J.R. had been carefully controlling the odds while a stoned, paranoid Curtis collected his winnings. One last game, one big bet to win it all.

"It wasn't even an hour after the deposit and we were gone, son. Disappeared without a trace." Sonny gloats as he chugs the rest of his beer. It was all gone for Curtis; every cent he had to his name, lost to an untraceable bank account. There was nothing to be done for Curtis after that.

"That's fucking insane," I say, too late to stop myself.

"Well," Sonny says, wiping his wispy moustache. "If you'd seen the man's search history, you might not be so forgiving of him."

"Oh."

"We're not bad people, Norrin. There are no bad people. Bad things, like good things, are concepts we made up to explain the world. The reality is that bad things, like good things, flow in and out of the universe at random. We're just controlling that flow."

"I suppose so." The sun is setting in the window near the entrance on the bar.

"What if I say no? You going to kill me?" The bar goes silent as the band stops for just a moment before whirling back into a terrible chorus. A skipper at the bar nods along as the few daytime drunks get to their feet and start dancing. Sonny shakes his head, staring down at the table.

"I told you. I already know what you're going to say."

\* \* \*

It's a mostly silent ride back to the convent, save for the occasional road rage between Sonny and the elderly drivers plodding down the highway. We turn off the pavement and mosey down the archway of trees. Sonny continues chain smoking. He offers me a cigarette every now and then, seemingly forgetting each time I say,

"No thanks." The only person I've ever seen smoke this much is Grampa Keith. He always said that smoking was good for you, that it warded off Alzheimer's. It's a cloudy night as we approach the convent. The generator clanks and sputters in the distance as we make our way in the door, immediately greeted by the sting of something like onions and cough syrup. Sonny doesn't even flinch as we walk in.

"Um, should I tell everyone?" I say, stopping Sonny in his tracks as he walks towards the kitchen.

"Tell 'em what?"

"That I know?"

"Know what?"

"Jesus, dude! That I know about what really goes on around here! What else would I be talking about?"

"They know, man. They knew before you knew," Sonny says, walking towards the kitchen and stopping in the doorway. "You want a chicken sandwich or something?"

"Naw, dude. I think I'm going to catch some sleep. It's been a day."

"Suit yourself," Sonny says as he walks into the kitchen. My stomach grumbles as if on cue.

“Actually, maybe just a piece of cheese or something would be good.”

“Yeah, dude. We got cheese.” We make our way into the kitchen to find Darlin seated by the honey-yellow wall, her tongue hanging out and her eyes focused on the toenail she’s clipping.

“What up?” she says, her eyes still on her toes. Sonny doesn’t turn his attention to her either as he makes his way to the fridge.

“Everything sorted out?” he says, pulling a half-eaten chicken carcass and bottle of mayonnaise from the fridge. I regret turning down the sandwich but it’d be weird to pipe up about it now. So, I settle for the block of cheese that Sonny throws me.

“All good. She wants to see Begonia tomorrow, though. Says she heard her dad’s voice,” Darlin says, taking her eyes off her toe and turning to me. “You look like shit.” Darlin goes back to her toes as Sonny starts layering chicken and mayo on a piece of bread before biting into it.

“Well, I guess maybe that’s a blessing in disguise,” he says with a mouth full of sandwich, chewing and exhaling. It’s disgusting. People that eat like that remind me of the plugs that used to sell molly down by the tennis courts. Fuck, I hated them. I can’t stand anyone with a chip on their shoulder let alone the feral dealers with tiger tattoos running down their neck. They always give me shit because they know I’ll take it and they do it all while they chew with their damn mouths open. Sonny seems disgusting and obvious in this moment.

“Aye, I got a new batch of dreadnaughts in the can over there,” Darlin says. Sonny reaches for a mason jar with a label that has a series of numbers I can’t quite make out. He eyes it as he eats, shaking it around before turning to me.

“You want some?” Sonny asks as I scarf down a piece of moist pizza mozzarella. Darlin almost immediately stops cutting her nails and looks up at Sonny. “Yes, yes, I know, the blood thing” he says, rolling his eyes.

“What blood type are you?” Darlin says, her eyes aimed at me.

“O positive.”

“Astrological sign?”

“Cancer.”

“Ah too bad,” she says as the metal of the nail clippers clacks, a sliver of pinky nail shooting beside her. “You’ll just sleep through it.”

“You’ll probably sleep for like, a few hours. Just warning you,” Sonny chirps. This is probably the best news I’ve heard all day. Now that the excitement has dulled down, I can feel the speed making its rounds in my bloodstream again. I’ll likely be awake for hours. I need sleep. No. I’m craving sleep. I reach for the jar and pull a sliver of a purple and orange tab.

“Good luck, bro,” Sonny says. He takes a piece as well. “We’re on different paths now.” Sonny has another bite of chicken as Darlin suddenly walks towards me. Without an ounce of hesitation, she cradles the back of my head and kisses me, her lips like two fresh apple slices wisping over my bottom lip for just a moment. My body is frozen in place with confusion as she pulls back, stroking her chin like a beard. Something this sweet can’t be for nothing. This must be her idea of a joke.

“Hmmm,” she says, pursing her lips and pondering. “You probably got, maybe, twenty minutes until you’re lights out.” She lingers a second longer before casually walking out of the room and into the hallway behind her. Wow. I turn to Sonny who’s shaking his head.

“She’s fucked, dude. Don’t mind her.”

“Sure. Ok. Well. I’ll see you in the morning,” I say with a half-assed salute as I make my way into the foyer.

“More like the afternoon,” he hollers from the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Just over an hour of tossing and turning and staring at the silver crucifix on my wall passes. The speed is still blasting in my brain and the acid is a no show. Figures. People always underestimate my tolerance. Maybe it’s because I’ve been lucky enough to avoid the sunken eyes and sores associated with my level of drug use. The only shame I have to show for it all are the vertical scars running down my left arm. That was a bad year, possibly even worse than this one. The digital clock reads 2:37 when there’s a knock at the door. It creaks open with Abiona standing in the doorway.

“Hey,” she whispers, tilting her chin up. Her voice is uncharacteristically smooth and for the first time I hear her speaking without contempt.

“Hey. Everything Ok?” I sit up straight, like I’m a kid again and suggesting to the adults that I’m a real prim and proper boy. Abiona enters the room and absently looks around like she’s never been in here before.

“Oh, yeah. Just figured I’d come and see how you’re doing.”

“Oh. I’m fine.”

“Cool, Cool,” she says placing her hands in her pockets and loitering around the dresser, her eyes looking anywhere but at me. Uncomfortable seconds go by and I scramble through a bunch of benign pleasantries to ask her. Maybe something about the baby? No. Not that.

“Can I help you with something?” I try as she runs her finger over the mahogany edge of the dresser. She’s back on to me, silent and looking down into the corner of the dresser mirror in front of her.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been tough on you,” she says before turning around to face me. “You see why though, right?”

“You care about these people.”

“Exactly. And someone like you—anyone can be a danger to that,” she says, placing her hand on her baby bump.

“I understand.”

“Hm.” Abiona flares her nostrils and walks over to the crucifix. She takes a moment to inspect it before shaking her head.

“Sonny tell you what we do when shit gets too hot?”

“No.”

“We bail.” Her voice is like a hammer as she turns towards me again. “We disappear without a trace.” My breath feels flimsy as she leers. “And I mean it when I say without a trace.” The room feels deflated. A pin could drop and shatter the silence but I’m just about done with proving myself today.

“If you want me to go. I’ll go,” I say, leaning forward to meet her. Abiona snorts as she laughs.

“It’s cool. Sonny trusts you. I trust Sonny. Chain of trust, right?”

“Can I just be honest with you?” I’m on autopilot again. Someone else is behind the wheel and I regret saying anything.

“Of course,” Abiona says, her shoulders relaxing.

“Ok, so. I don’t have anywhere to go. I don’t have anyone waiting for me. I have nothing. And I don’t even know what that fucking has to do with anything you’re saying. But I’m just telling you. So. There.”

“Fair enough. I think,” Abiona says after a pause. I’m not all too sure where she’s at with me in this moment and I still can’t think of anything to say to her other than something about the baby, which I can just tell is a bad idea. “Get some sleep,” she says after a while, making her way out of the room before stopping in the doorway again. “If you can.” She winks at me before disappearing into the hallway, her bare feet thudding on the tile floor.

“I’ll try,” I whisper to no one. Outside the window and in the corner of my eye, I catch someone sitting on the bonnet of the pickup truck. It only takes a second before I make out the figure’s ballcap and gangly arms as Sonny. He’s resting his chin on his crossed arms and his tucked-up legs, staring out into the stretches of star-pocked sky that aren’t hidden in the clouds.

\* \* \*

I make my way outside and approach the truck. People would pay for this view. The forest circling the massive field is striped in blue moonlight that spills out of a dark purple sky. A lighter purple galaxy from aeons past looks like a tear in space. It feels like all those pockets of different

sized stars freckled above us must have spilled from it. Couple that with Sonny and the beater truck surrounded by vintage RVs on the ground: well, it's a mainlander's picture-perfect Instagram post. Makes me think this time when I was a kid when Ma and Pa took me to lake Malawi. That was a good memory. Sonny's back on to me and doesn't hear me approaching. Or maybe he just doesn't care.

"Hey," I try, to no response. It's only when I hop onto the bonnet next to him that he notices me. He's stoned out of his gourd, staring into the abyss above with that childish absent look of bewilderment on his face.

"Hey, man. Is John with you?" he says, almost slurring. I'm not envious of his high despite the amazing sleep that's coming his way. Humoring drug addicts when you're sober is some pretty taxing shit, and it makes you consider your own actions when you're on the other side of the trip. Still. Sonny is wide-eyed and genuine and I can sense a befuddled trust that he is offering me in this moment of innocence and stupefaction.

"I don't know who John is," I say, curbing my condescension.

"Figures," Sonny says, turning his attention back to the sky. The grass rattles in the wind as the clouds pass by, revealing the deeper cosmos. "Christ, my fucking mind is swimming, dude."

"I don't feel anything."

"What? Seriously?"

"Stone sober," I say with a shrug as Sonny nods, leaning back on his elbows.

"Well, you must not know your blood type."



“Even so, how the fuck does that work?” A moment passes as Sonny dips into thought before shaking his head.

“No idea.”

“Right.” I feel like there’s something he wants to say that’s just not sparking as he almost opens and closes his mouth, pondering as much as someone that high can ponder. He rubs his head before breaking out into a slow, closed-mouth laugh that swells into a hearty cackle. I don’t really think it’s that funny at all, but it’s hard not to laugh and pretty soon I’m full-on howling too. My face starts to pain from laughing and for a split second I think about how sad that is. Our hysterics simmer into a giggle as Sonny starts patting around his pockets, presumably looking for his smokes.

“Fuck. You got a smoke?”

“Naw. I don’t smoke, man.”

“Ah, right,” he says, giving up and getting back to the sky above us. The air feels clear and rich. I’ve never really been one for nature. It feels base, like something that needs to be built on. Animals are wild because they don’t build on it. But in this moment, with the swishing grass and the pulsing universe around me, I feel full. Full but calm.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, my eyes also glued on the sky. Sonny nods. “Who was the guy you were visiting at the recovery centre? I can’t remember his name now? Is that John?”

“No. That’s not John,” Sonny says right before he takes a deep breath and exhales into a passing gust of wind. “Maybe we can talk about that another time.” Sonny smiles as he turns to me. I never know how to react to a smile as false and hurt as the one I see on his face.

“Well, I got a question for you then,” he says, gazing into the purple tear above us.

“Sure.”

“How do you end up in Newfoundland from Africa?”

“Well. It’s a whole thing to be honest.” I’ve fielded this question a thousand times before. Sometimes I just outright lie and say whatever ends the conversation fastest. Other times I like to go into the excruciating details. I’m not sure where to go this time though, and to some extent I try and let go of crafting this story for Sonny.

“Like what?” he tries.

“My grandparents on my Ma’s side are from here.”

“Hmph,” Sonny snorts as he leans back with satisfaction, like I’ve just confirmed something he won’t tell.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me.” The grass wades back and forth as Sonny meets my eye.

“You’re obviously not ready to talk about it.”

“About what?” I know what he means and it dawns on me then that he knows that too. Sonny hunches over again and tucks his chin over his knees.

“Your high school records state that your nan and pop were your legal guardians until you dropped out of highschool.”

“Oh. Well. I didn’t know you had that type of information.”

“Yes, you did. I told you what we do. You just don’t want to talk about it. That’s fine, bro. When you’re ready.” Everything goes quiet. The awkwardness is biting at me, but I can’t sense anything like that coming over Sonny. Ahead the grass is whipping back and forth in waves. The moon is bright enough that I can see the entirety of the field up to the point where the perimeter of forest starts again. This feels weird but right. The whipping grass makes for violent swirls but they don’t feel threatening. It’s almost hypnotizing.

“She promised I could come home when things settled down.”

“Who? Your mom?” Sonny says without looking at me.

“Yeah. First it was six months. Then that turned into a year. Then that turned into years. Weekly phone calls turned into Birthday phone calls that turned into “Happy Birthday!” DM’s on my socials. Then they just stopped altogether.

“Shit, bro. That’s rough.”

“Ah, it’s Okay. You get used to it.”

“Well for what it’s worth my mother was a psycho too,” Sonny says, which makes me wonder what he’s been hearing because I don’t really feel like I painted Ma as a psycho.

“I just don’t want to be another guy with mommy issues you know?”

“Then don’t be.” Beads of sweat roll down his temple as he exhales. His pupils are completely dilated. He’s buzzing. Lucky. I wish I was.

We stare up at the sky when the long blades of grass ahead of us start to shake under the weight of something hidden approaching us—snaking through the grass and turning it dark as it bends. I freeze. Everything ahead of us is placid save for an oncoming line of grass being trampled

this way and that. Sonny's leaning forward, like he's trying to see what it is, but I can't see his face to be sure. My heart races with images of a fox or a coyote preparing to lunge at us from the cover of the long grass. My pounding heart echoes in my chest and my fingers feel like pins and needles. The parting thoroughway of grass is ten feet away, now five, now three feet. My instincts take over as I hold my breath and brace myself. I look to Sonny. He's as calm as a slack jawed cow in the late afternoon. Finally, the grass gives way. I can't accept what I see and almost forget myself—who I am, where I am and the world itself—as it saunters out of the field: An orange tabby cat walking on its hind legs, parting the grass in its way and approaching the truck. Standing upright it's only an inch shorter than the long blades of yellow grass. Without hesitation, it casually walks closer.

“Good evening chaps,” the cat says in an utterly cliché British accent. What the fuck is going on? When something like this happens—when reality gets ripped from under your feet in a split second—the brain can't cope. So, it just ignores it. It pretends it's fine, like how we see our nose all the time except that our brain chooses to ignore it. Like that but on an existential, subatomic, super-conscious level. Sonny is dripping with sweat, his mouth hanging open with a toothy smile as the cat walks closer like it doesn't have a care in the world.

“Sonny. What is happening?” I try, frozen in place. The cat bows before us as I turn to Sonny who starts laughing hysterically, holding his head in his hands as his face grows red.

“What the fuck!?” he bellows through long hurls of laughter. The cat stays bowed.

“No need for any formality, gentleman. But I do ask that you address me as Mr. Bowring,” the cat says, unphased by Sonny. Am I high? I must be. Right?

“I don't understand,” I say again as Mr. Bowring turns his attention towards me.

“Just here for your reading, Mr. Wilfrit.”

“What?”

“Let me show you, then.” Mr. Bowring hops onto the front end of the truck as I urgently shuffle backwards towards the windshield. Sonny’s laughter starts to simmer as he wipes the tears from his eyes. The sky around us starts to fast forward and the clouds hurry away. At the same time the moon literally rewinds its orbit so that it’s positioned with Mr. Bowring perfectly in its centre. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. I can’t understand what I’m seeing. The cat’s eyes glow greenish-yellow as its paws morph into hands with four fingers a piece. It’s only when I see the cat inspecting me that I notice my heaving chest and the drool running down my chin. Sonny sits expressionless to my left, almost looking past the cat from this angle. “No need to be afraid Mr. Wilfrit. No harm shall come unto you on my account, sir,” the cat says with an absurd air of dignity.

“Do I know you?” I immediately sputter. Mr. Bowring furrows his brow.

“I should think not. But maybe in a different way than you can perceive, my good man.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Sonny mutters, his lips barely moving. Mr. Bowring eyes Sonny suspiciously before seating himself in a lotus position, his tail swaying back and forth in the full moon behind him.

“Let us begin then.” From out of nowhere he produces two, seven-inch tarot cards and places them on the hood of the truck in front of us, each facing down. I’ve seen this particular pack a thousand times; the kind with the oak-coloured portal and the all-seeing eye in a triangle situated in the middle. I’m on autopilot, but something’s different. I feel like I’m not in control, like this has happened before, like I’m watching myself from somewhere else while my body acts on its own. “That’s quite normal,” Mr. Bowring adds to my horror. Can he hear me? Am I talking out loud? “Who wants to go first?” he smirks.

“Me,” I say, as if on cue.

“Very well,” the cat says as he picks up the card in front of me and studies it. His eyes widen and settle as he places it face up in front of me. “As expected,” he whimpers. I’ve never seen this card before: a kind of portal like thing with hundreds and hundreds of eyeballs passing through it.

“The thousand eyes,” the cat says, nodding and purring.

“What does that mean?” I try.

“Oh, you’re a smart lad. You’ll figure it out. Now how about Mr. Sonny,” the cat says as it turns towards the stoned death man sitting to my left. It only dawns on me now that I don’t even know Sonny’s full name. Sonny glances at me with a vacant expression and then back at Mr. Bowring. “Ready?” the cat says as Sonny nods. Mr. Bowring picks up the card and instantly places it in front of him. “Lighthouse reversed. Tsk, tsk,” the cat says as it taps the card. It depicts a lighthouse upside-down and underwater, its beam shining into the murky darkness of the ocean with the unlit sky above water. “Ah. You two are quite something,” the cat says, nodding and stroking its whiskers like a beard. “Quite something indeed. Well. It’s been quite fun and all, but I will be on my way then,” he suddenly says as the cards disintegrate into sand.

“Wait, what?” I try as Sonny furrows his brow.

“Yes. Time is something that is very important to me you see. I manage it with care and precision, even if it may not seem so,” the cat says as he stands upright again, dusting himself off while his hands morph back into paws.

“Where are you going? What is happening?!” I press as the moon fast forwards before our eyes, shifting back to where it was just a few minutes before. “Sonny! Are you seeing this? Say

something.” Sonny nods, wide-eyed and slow. “Please. What is happening!” I scramble as the cat places its paws on its hips and sighs.

“If you were anyone else, I’d tell you to stop being so afraid. But. Well. So it goes.”

“What?”

“Au revoir, mon ami,” Mr. Bowring says as he starts to dissipate into orange sand that is taken by the wind and scattered against the familiar purple sky. My breath goes back to normal and I can feel the gravity of my body again.

“What the hell just happened!?” I say as I turn to Sonny who is not there anymore. My confusion is as vast as the emptiness around me. It’s always in the moments when you’re not looking that life sneaks up on you. It’s when dark matter crowds in your spirit that the super-psychonauts break through and bend at their will. My eyes are heavy. My heart is heavy.

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.

## Chapter 9

I'm in the darkness again. Alive without body, all spirit and no guts. Nothing ever existed here. Nothing until Chappie's blunt voice snaps me awake. She's the first thing I see as I come to, still on the bonnet of Sonny's pickup as a cloudy day's sun momentarily blinds me.

"What time is it?" I ask, shielding my eyes. Darlin is standing behind Chappie and chewing on a sheath of straw.

"Three o'clock. Come on, lets go, lets go," she says as she claps her hands while herding me off the truck.

The cat.

What the fuck was that? I was sober, I know it! I've had my moments, no doubt, but last night was something else; something unlike anything and I just can't for the life of me explain it.

"Aye," Chappie barks from the driver's seat of the truck. "We're going for a run, you wanna come with?" My stomach grumbles before I have a chance to say no.

"Can we hit up a McDonalds or something?" I say as Darlin makes a retching sound.

"Poison. Soulless, plastic poison," Darlin grunts from the passenger's seat as Chappie starts the truck. Darlin's slouched down with her legs tucked against the front dash. I remember when I was young that there was this kid who got his legs crushed in a car accident doing that. I consider telling her this but I really just want a damn cheeseburger right about now.

"Whatever, man," Chappie says to Darlin before turning to me. "Yeah, come on, we'll get ya some nuggies, my baby."



“I’ll have a black coffee,” Darlin huffs as I make my way to the back seat of the truck. Chappie pulls away and I enjoy the healing bursts of wind on my skin and in my hair. For a car bonnet on a cloudy night, not to mention that *cat-thing* or hallucination or whatever, I actually got some rest for once.

\* \* \*

We’re about a twenty-minute drive from a McDonalds (where I have the most delicious burger of my life) as we approach a jagged beach area with a small fishing stage. Parked in front of the stage is one of those oversized ass-hat trucks and a battle-damaged hatchback with a missing side mirror.

“Whoa. Hold up now,” Darlin says from the passenger’s seat as we near the vehicles.

“What?” Chappie says, looking back between her and the dilapidated building.

“I don’t know, man. I just got a real bad feeling about this all of a sudden.” Darlin has her hands outstretched like she’s feeling for something in the air as she scans her surroundings. Chappie just frowns and shakes her head.

“Looks normal to me.” The truck comes to a stop as Chappie hops out and makes her way to the pan.

“Do I want to know what we’re doing here?” I say as Darlin turns to face me. She eyes me real serious, like a parent about to warn you about the dangers of fire.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Norrin,” she starts with a ridiculous air of dignity. “We are here to buy an assortment of illegal substances.”

“Oh, good,” I say without trying to bury my sarcasm. The truck wobbles as Chappie digs around in the pan before making her way to the stage with a small duffel bag in hand. She flips her black hood up over her head, her two long braids poking out under her ears like curved horns.

“So how was the trip? I bet you slept some good,” Darlin starts again, still staring at me as Chappie enters the fishing stage. I did sleep well. Another dreamless night. I can’t express how good it is not to dream. For the first time in my life, Malawi is feeling more like another life than mine. Seeing is believing, even in your mind, and a lifetime of seeing it all every night has worn me down in ways I didn’t even know existed.

“Hey, guys. You should come see this,” Chappie hollers from inside the stage.

Darlin rushes ahead of me and has already turned the corner into the stage as I make my way. In a split second, I am transported back to that day as I behold the sight before me.

“Oh my God!” Darlin pops, her hands on her head and pacing about the room. Chappie does the same and for the first time I can feel a sense of dread lingering around them. Five or six bullet holes are drilled in the walls around us. Two unmoving bodies clad in black hoodies are slouched against the back wall while another guy lies face up on the floor—his eyes wide open and motionless. Pools of blood are gathered around them, so still that I can see my reflection in the puddle of the guy lying on his back when I approach him. He’s a youngish looking guy in a basketball sweater with two large duffel bags and a black bookbag beside him. His eyes are sunken in and he has a knife tattooed on the left side of his face. I think I might have even seen this guy before. Maybe at the recovery centre, the first time around. I’m not sure though.

“Don’t touch anything!” Chappie yelps as she approaches the body closest to me. I can’t take my eyes off the guy in front of me. Flashes of police sirens appear in my mind. I can’t help but

glance about the room as if there was someone ready to jump out and arrest us all. Everything in me tells me to run but I just can't.

"They're dead," Darlin says from behind us. Chappie haunches down in front of the body ahead of her, shaking her head.

"Brutal."

"Did you know him?" I try. She keeps her eye on the body before grabbing one of the duffel bags. "Not really. His name is Rodney. He seemed like a good kid though," she says as she turns to me. "Are you okay?"

"Hey guys, check it," Darlin rings from behind me before I can say anything. She's bent over one of the guys slouched against the wall. She's holding his head upright by his hair and his jaw like a puppet, pointing him towards me and Chappie.

"Guess I should've worn my brown pants today, dorpdie dorpdie," she says, mocking his voice and moving his jaw as though he's talking. What a fucking maniac. I don't know her, granted. But I don't think Darlin has a great grip on reality anymore. I've seen it firsthand: people like her, completely burnt out from DMT and mushrooms. She's fucked in the head.

"Don't touch him, you moron!" Chappie barks as she picks up another duffel bag. Darlin drops the man's face and waves Chappie off.

"Chillout, captain grumpy. They're dead, see!" she says as she boots the man in his shin.

"Grab a bag and let's go," Chappie says as Darlin begrudgingly grabs one of the bags and starts for the door. I'm almost nauseas. Bodies that are transformed through violence become something beyond belief. Like an exploding planet, or a skinned dog, or the absolute bottom of the

ocean; dead bodies are nature's abnormalities that are too absurd to comprehend when they die like this.

"You guys are sick," I say.

"Whatever, Mr. Moral Fibre," Darlin says as she readjusts a duffel bag over her shoulder.

"That's enough. Let's go," Chappie barks as Darlin brushes past me. She taps her forehead with her forefinger as she walks backwards saying, "It's just atoms moving atoms, man. When you going to wake up!?"

"Shut up. Both of you!" Chappie hollers from outside the fishing stage as Darlin disappears around the corner after her. I'm alone in the room for a moment. Dead silence doesn't feel dead. Not to me.

\* \* \*

Training day. Here we go. Everyone's in position. Me and Sonny run surveillance on Jennifer's house from a patch of woods that's about five-hundred meters away. My thoughts are still at the fishing stage. The young guy's face passes through my mind's eye and then to the plastic skeleton that Mr. Dorsit had in the corner of his classroom. Whatever. I try to wrangle my thoughts back to the moment and the task before us. Sonny's lying next to me, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. We're covered in camouflaged netting, lying on our stomachs like we're navy seals and watching the massive bay-window that gives us full view of Jennifer's living room. Not that we need it. J.R. and Sonny have spent the last four weeks carefully placing hidden cameras in specific sections of the house. J.R. made a point to brag about them before we left; carefully opening a small plastic briefcase and describing, in detail, the semantics of an array of near pin-sized cameras available only to the most skilled clientele of the dark web. I'm almost more amazed that someone as

white-bread as J.R. can navigate the world of hidden servers and underhanded web browsing. Nineties spy movies have greatly misinformed me on the dress code of an actual hacker. I'm on camera duty, watching the live feed of Jennifer's ostentatious living room from a cell phone designated solely for this purpose. Sonny's got a six-foot potato gun with a dead bluejay in the barrel. Jennifer's late father really liked bluejays. We've each got a little ear-piece with J. R's voice buzzing through it periodically, though only Sonny has a microphone with which to communicate to home base. On the phone I can see Abiona and Jennifer sipping tea on an enormous sectional. They laugh and throw their hands about like they're old friends. I've got to hand it to Abiona. She could get an Oscar for this performance.

"Here we go, everyone," J.R. chimes through the headpiece as a cab pulls down the straight lane leading to the house. On the phone I can see who I assume is Jennifer's maid presumably informing her that someone has arrived.

"You know, I'm almost surprised that one of you guys aren't posing as her maid," I say to Sonny who is eyeing the bay window through a makeshift scope.

"Not always easy to get that close. We've had luck with it in the past but it's hard. Tanzeen's been with her for many years now," Sonny says, his eyes still glued on the scope. A moment passes as Sonny shimmies around in the net. "Chappie told me about Rodney and yesterday."

"Oh," I say, unsure of what else he wants me to say. Sonny takes his eye off the scope and looks at me.

"You, okay?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

“Yeah.”

“Because if you’re not sure, you have to tell me,” he says with his eyebrows raised like he’s lecturing me.

“Have you ever seen a dead body?” I say, as intentionally sharp as I can muster. Sonny nearly smiles as he turns his head back to the potato gun scope.

“People die everyday. I try not to be the cause,” he says. He’s earnest at least and there’s a softness to the way he’s talking that doesn’t fit with the things he says. I turn my eye back to the cellphone-monitor-rig as Anjelica emerges from a cab parked in front of the house. She makes her way to the front door. The maid ushers her inside as the cab pulls away. Even from this far away, I can sense her. Like an otherworldly presence: incarnate, something unlike myself, something that’s once in a lifetime.

“A-one, we’re rolling,” J.R. says in all of our ears. Abiona looks up at the camera in the living room for a split second and just barely nods before turning back to Jennifer and rising to greet their guest. Anjelica walks into the frame of the camera as Jennifer and Abiona each take a turn hugging her. I can’t hear their voices, but I don’t need to. I’ve seen it all a thousand times through the years of calling into infomercial-style tarot readings, instant tarot apps on my phone, terribly inauthentic mediums with faces full of piercings and Jack Skellington tattoos at the flea market. The list is endless. Their techniques may vary but they all flow from the same body of bullshit that I couldn’t say no to for so many years. First comes the greeting, which is either enthusiastic or mysteriously aloof. Judging by Anjelica’s body language, it looks like she’s gone for the latter. A shitty medium won’t have a personality. That’s a no-no. People want a grand experience with their fortune-telling. When they don’t get it, it’s harder to take whatever bullshit they see in the cards seriously. Next I imagine Anjelica will get straight to the point. People don’t want to hear your story when they’re

paying their life's savings for a glimpse into their own future. It looks like Anjelica is doing just that. She takes a seat by the coffee table while the maid draws the curtains before clicking on the few lamps surrounding them. Sonny's view is blocked but that's okay. The bird just has to go through the window. It doesn't matter where. It's about the timing, not the placement. Jennifer says something to the maid and she leaves as Abiona takes a seat next to Jennifer with Anjelica sitting directly across from her.

"Lemme see," Sonny says as he leans in closer to the screen in my hands. It's only then that I can hear voices other than J.R. coming from his earpiece.

"Can you hear them?" I say as Sonny scans the black and white grid before looking up at me.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry, man. Turn the dial in your earpiece until it clicks. That's audio. I'm sorry bro, I forgot to tell you that."

"No worries," I say as I turn the dial. Anjelica's raspy French accent is all I can hear.

"Alright. We've made a lot of progress, no?" Anjelica says as she cups the woman's hands. Abiona is seated next to Jennifer with her hand on her dear friend's shoulder, nodding in unison with her before Jennifer turns back to Mother Begonia. "But I believe that we are reaching a new shift in his spirit. Do you feel it Jennifer?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I can feel you, dad. I can feel you!" Jennifer exclaims as a quick stream of tears rolls down her eyes.

"Very well," Mother Begonia starts as she settles back into the couch. "I want us all to close our eyes." Classic. It's a balancing act when it comes to a reading. Too much or too little and your patsy won't believe. It's all about finding that sweet spot. And eyes closed means one less of the human senses to fool. Everyone closes their eyes as Mother Begonia leads them into a rhythm of

breathing not unlike the box-breathing they tell you to practice at the recovery centre. A minute of this passes and if I didn't know any better, I'd say that this was the real deal. That is until Abiona turns to the camera and winks.

"That's my cue," Sonny says as he rolls over to the potato gun and takes aim. "Lemme know as soon as she blinks again. It's about the timing remember, so don't hesitate."

"I can feel something," Mother Begonia says, tensing her shoulders in unison with Jennifer.

"Dad! Dad, are you here!" Jennifer exclaims, her eyes still closed.

"He's close!" The lamps in the house start to flicker and Jennifer is almost rocking back and forth with each breath.

"Get ready!" Anjelica almost shouts as the chaos heightens. Just a moment longer and Abiona winks into the camera.

"Now!" I bark as Sonny instantly pulls the trigger. A muted blast that sounds more like a pop is followed by a momentary burst of feathers as the bluejay blasts out of the cannon, sailing through the sky. A lifetime passes as I watch it arc in the distance before the faraway smash of glass is coupled with the immediate smash in my ear piece. Sonny urgently rolls back towards me as we watch the screen. Everyone in the room screams. Everyone but Anjelica.

"What was that?! What was that?!" Jennifer yelps as she and Abiona duck behind the back of the couch. They peer over the edge behind them where the camera can't see when Abiona cautiously approaches the scene. Abiona is just barely off screen with only the left side of her body visible. A moment of silence passes as Jennifer watches from over the back of the sectional.

"It's a bird. It's a bluejay," Abiona says with another Oscar worthy performance. Without a word, Jennifer runs into Mother Begonia's arms and weeps uncontrollably. I actually feel kind of



heartbroken too. This feels real. Why does this feel real? Sonny sparks up a cigarette and takes a long drag as he rolls over and lies on his back.

“We got ‘em, home base,” he says into the mouthpiece before exhaling a plume of smoke.

“Good job, everyone. Let’s wrap it up,” J.R. replies in all of our ears. Sonny closes his eyes and relaxes his body.

“That’s an easy five K right there.” On the screen I watch as Abiona, Jennifer and Mother Begonia sink into a group hug. It’s hard to pick out the syllables in Jennifer’s weeping praises. Jennifer, clearly embarrassed, starts to collect herself as Mother Begonia stares into the camera. It’s like she’s looking right at me.

## Chapter 10

“It’s a delicate balance. We want to keep them high but not so much that they OD or lose their shit completely,” Chappie says as she leads me down into the convent basement. “Unfortunately, that means cataloguing. I fucking hate cataloguing. But we all get our turn.” We enter a windowless basement with stone walls. I wonder what they used to do in here when this place was still a convent? A refurbished washer and dryer sit in the far corner with bags of trash, collected into two separate bins, at the opposite end of the room.

“So, what do I do?” This place doesn’t look so unlike the basements of the Gower Street house parties circa early two-thousands. Not that I really remember any of that.

“Simple,” she says, handing me a pen and a worn exercise book. “Each bag got a D or J. “D” for Delaney, “J” for Jennifer. Anything that had food in it, mark it down with how many units per bag. The point is that we want to know who’s eating what and how much of it so that we know how much to dose their diet.”

“Can I ask a question?”

“Okay, what?”

“What happens when someone does OD?” The room falls silent for a moment as Chappie ponders.

“Well. That’s only happened once TBH,” she says, eyeing me with a near grin. “That’s why you need to be real careful when you’re logging this shit.”

“Got it.” I’m in a perpetual state of disbelief that I jam down into my stomach where it can erode. Or not. Whatever.

“Oh. And wear these. for God’s sake,” Chappie says, handing me a set of dish gloves before disappearing up the rickety steps.

\* \* \*

An hour later and I’m only on Jennifer’s second bag. I can’t speak for Delaney’s yet, but Jennifer’s garbage is mostly empty yogurt and bottled water containers. That and one box of empty chocolates. The cheap kind you get at the drug store. You’d think that someone who makes a living showing people how to cook would have a more varied diet than this. I guess she probably hates cooking for herself if she’s cooking all day. But still (and not that I would ever watch a cooking show) she’s been on hiatus for nearly a year since her father’s death. Strange to think that this is all she eats when her days consist of grief and drug induced paranoia. Actually, I take it back. Maybe that’s exactly the diet someone in her position would have.

Sonny pops in through the door upstairs just as I start on the bag labeled “D.” I can only see the tip of his boot on the step behind me as he hollers: “C’mon. We’re going to be late.”

“For what?”

“You got a doc appointment, remember? Every week?” Holy shit, has it been a week already? I mean it when I say that time has sped up around here.

“What about the trash?”

“Leave it, we’ll get to it later.”

“Good enough,” I say, leaving behind the partially torn bag.

\* \* \*

We roll into town and pass by the ever-growing coverage of Ed Noseworthy posters. It's an especially foggy day on the Southern Shore and it feels like we're bringing it along with us as we approach the recovery centre.

"Man, I totally forgot to ask you. What was happening with that cat—thing? I mean, I've never experienced anything like that in my life," I say as we pull into the furthest parking spot from the door.

"What the fuck you talking about?" Sonny says as he shuts off the engine. I am almost afraid to go any further.

"You don't remember that? Seriously? We were out on the truck. You were tripping. A cat, like a talking cat came out of the grass and gave us a tarot reading?"

"What?" Sonny pulls the key from the ignition and eyes me like I've lost my mind.

"You were there!"

"No, man. I was in the trailer all night. Didn't feel nothing after either. Fucking Darlin. she was just using us as guinea pigs. I'm telling ya, don't trust her," he says.

I can't believe it. Sonny was there. I was there. It was real. I've had too many trips into hallucinatory psychosis to not know that what happened with that cat was real.

"I don't know what to say. Really."

"Don't say nothing and go get this doctor shit over and done with. We got a gig to run after this," Sonny says, rolling down the window and lighting up a smoke.

\* \* \*

I've changed. Places like Philpott's office used to make me feel safe, even if they did sometimes feel like a prison. At least I was where the doctors are. At least I was in the custody of someone other than myself; alleviating the responsibility of my body onto some other sucker who cares. But that's all gone now. Dr. Philpott looks as though he is incapable of anything but his office feels like something out of time, like another dimension. The muted greys—part of the ship, part of the décor, are a marvel of function and fashion, doling out prescriptions and involuntary institutionalization.

“How is your aunt?” Philpott asks. His expression is placid and his hands are folded neatly over each other. I give him some version of “yes everything is fine.” Everything is fine, just fine.

“Are the pills working?”

“Yes, everything is fine.”

“Are you feeling like you might harm yourself or others?”

“No. Everything is fine.”

“Well, I'm glad to hear that you are doing so fine.”

“Yes, everything is fine.”

Smile and nod and say yes. Everything is fine. Make a toothy smile, people like it when you do that. Let them be the parent and you be the son they never had. Let them have the responsibility. Whatever.

“Thank you for your time, Dr. Philpott. I'll see you next week Dr. Philpott. I'm on the path to a brighter tomorrow, Dr. Philpott. Thank you, Dr. Philpott.”

\* \* \*

I'm still somewhere else in my mind as I close the door to Philpott's office and holy shit! She's just standing there, literally right there in the waiting room, closest to the first row of chairs across from the front desk. Thadie. Thadie's here. It's like seeing a knife on a swing set or a diamond in a shoebox. She waves like this isn't a big deal. She hasn't aged a day either and she still rocks the buzz cut with the bleached blonde dye job. I'm at a loss for words. Partly because Sonny's out in the truck waiting for me, but also because of something else I can't quite articulate.

"Hey, stranger," she says, passive and kind of shrugging.

"Thadie. Whoa. What are you doing here?" I say as I approach her. She hugs me and it feels warm. I bitch about her too much. This feels good. I'm an idiot for neglecting my friend. Thadie. She's here. Oh, thank God.

"I'm in town on business and figured I'd check up on you. You're a hard man to get a hold of these days you know."

"But like, how did you know I'd be here?"

"It's not as insidious as you think, Nor. I just called the front desk and told them who I am and our history and she gave me your aunt's number which, by the way, does not work. Anyway, I called back and she said—"

"Okay I get it."

"Well, can we talk, like, do you want to go for coffee or something?" She's almost slouching in front of me. I wouldn't even mind this right now. But Sonny's waiting and these are two worlds that I don't want colliding.

"I really have to go right now, my rides here and, well, you know."

“Well, I’m here for a while. Can we get together later? I’m here for you, shithead. Do you need a place to stay?” There’s this line that Thadie crosses where things feel totally disingenuous. I don’t even know how she gets there because it’s not like she’s saying anything bad. I guess you just have to know her.

“I’m good. I got a job. I’m okay.” I almost want to say that everything’s fine. “But you didn’t just come here to see me, did you?”

“Well like I said I’m on business. We’re doing an outreach seminar for at risk youth. You should come by sometime.”

“I don’t know, T. I don’t super love that stuff and I don’t even have a phone or anything. So. Yeah.”

“Fine whatever, but you’re not getting rid of me that easily, buster,” she winks with a unexamined and patronizing tone. It’s good to see her but I don’t know. I can’t chart my relationship with this person. But at least she’s doing okay. Thadie never does public appearances for free anymore. She stopped doing that a few years back. She’s getting paid to be here. I won’t ask but I already know it. Outside I can hear Sonny blast the horn. It’s only when I look behind Thadie that I can see Sonny pulling up closer to the door and pointing at his arm where a watch would be if he wore one.

“Listen, I gotta jet. It was nice to see you though,” I try, waiting for her to let me pass.

“Are you serious? Dude you can’t seriously be dodging me when I made it all the way here to see you?”

“I’m, I’m really busy right now, T,” I say, my eyes darting between her and Sonny in the truck.

“No way. I’m not abandoning you now.” This is the vortex of Thadie. She demands your attention regardless of your circumstance and I am truly amazed that she hasn’t broken down the formula of our friendship yet. Or maybe she has and she’s just playing the fool, like she doesn’t know I’m just going to give in. But this isn’t a time to fight. If she knew what I was up to: well, I don’t want to go there. “Listen. There’s a protest on Wednesday. Have you seen this guy, Ed Noseworthy? You know who that is?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Fine, you want to meet there?” She’s always had a boner for politics and she loves throwing that around. It’s best not to indulge her.

“Well, if you can spare the time Mr. Rushypants,” Thadie says with her hands on her hips. Behind her, in the parking lot, I can see Sonny pop open the truck door before hopping out and slouching against the bonnet.

“That’s fine, that’s fine. I’ll be there. What time?” I blurt.

“Two PM. At the Newfoundland Hotel,” she says, forcing her gaze onto mine. Her brown eyes are almost piercing, like they’ve been glossed and laminated, endless and almost intrusively unbreakable.

“I’ll be there,” I say, staring right back at her.

“You’ll be there?”

“I’ll be there.” We match each other’s gaze for a moment before she covers me in a hug. Damn it feels good. If I could love someone more than myself, I’d love Thadie. But that’s old news and doesn’t matter as I see Sonny start to make his way over here. “Gotta go, T, I’ll see ya Wednesday,” I say as I kiss her with a peck on the forehead while making my way to the front door.



“Do you know how to get there? Do you need a ride?” she tries. I wander away, then turn back towards her with a volley of, “No, I’m good. So nice to see you. You look great! See you soon.” She’s still going on about something as I make my way into the parking lot. Sonny stops walking towards me and makes his way back to the truck. I hop in the passenger’s side as he starts the engine.

“About time. Who you gabbing with?”

“Just one of the nurses,” I say as I click my seatbelt on.

\* \* \*

We’re just past Mount Scio before turning onto an utterly neglected road with only enough room for one vehicle at a time. In all my years living here, I’ve never been up this way. Me and Sonny bounce as we crush over unending potholes that crater the road. Finally, the asphalt road turns into dirt and we muddle up a semi-wooded stretch. Maybe ten minutes pass before we stop in front of a horizontal gate that reaches just above the bonnet of the truck. In the centre of it is a sign saying, “Trespassers shot on sight.”

“In the belly of the beast,” Sonny says between cigarette draws, turning to me with a manic expression: half joking, half not.

“Where are we?” I know we’re not far from the city and in whatever direction we go, we’ll eventually hit woods. But this area isn’t as much wooded as it is nearly tropical, which is just weird. The woods ahead are wild and green with large leafy plants mixed in a collection of firs, birch and other (virtually Jurassic-looking) plants.

“This place, my friend, is the so-called compound of Paul Piercy,” Sonny says with an air of confidence that almost sounds sarcastic. I can’t believe my ears.

“No way! Are you serious?!”

Paul Piercy was a big deal comedian in the late nineties. Not big enough to break through into the American market, save for a few throwaway roles in straight-to-DVD collections, but big enough to make waves wherever he went. In the 2000s he settled into a recurring gig on a Canadian sketch comedy show that ran for a few seasons. After that he went silent before reemerging with an extra hundred pounds and a full-blown Q-Anon conspiracy mentality. These days you’ll find him online, running a disturbingly successful podcast supercharged with theories beyond even the deepest flat-earth and Bigfoot lore. I had thought him merely a myth. Damn.

“Got to walk it from here,” Sonny says as he hops out of the truck. He grabs a black duffel bag from the backseat and makes his way onto the path. I follow suit and keep next to him as we enter its unnatural lushness. The air feels extra humid under the cover of these large leaves and I regret wearing a button-up shirt. Summer brings out the worst in my asthma, though I’ve long since gone without a puffer. I regret that now, living with the worst chain-smoker since Grampa Keith. We’re about a hundred feet in when I notice the retro style surveillance cameras positioned in the trees.

“What about those?” I whisper, nudging Sonny and gesturing to one of the cameras, careful not to make eye contact.

“Relax. He’s not even seeing a live feed,” Sonny says as he flips off the camera. “See. Nothing.”

“If you say so.”

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“It’s just hard to believe that you could have so much control over such a paranoid nutcase, that’s all,” I say as we crunch along the dirt path. Sonny laughs.

“Dude. He is the easiest,” he says as we approach another horizontal gate about a few hundred feet ahead. “People like Paul are all show: all this security shit is just a front. They’ll let pretty much anyone who looks and talks like them into their circle.”

“Yeah, but like, his food? His internet?”

“His internet?”

“You know what I mean.”

“He doesn’t need all the hands-on that Jen and the Delaneys do. He takes this shit of his own volition,” Sonny says as he pats the duffle bag filled with what I can only imagine is a veteran assortment of stimulants. “J.R. literally set up his security system on account of that he doesn’t trust any registered company in fear that they’re spying on him for the government. And he rails more coke and mushrooms than any amount we could get into him through his diet. A dream customer if I ever knew one.”

“Well. I suppose that’s nice.”

“And you know all this conspiracy shit he talks about on his podcast?”

“Not really, no.”

“Yes, but you know of it right? Like, you’re aware he has a podcast?”

“Yeah, Okay.”

“Yeah, well guess who makes all that shit up?” We’re close to the gate when the muffled sound of a familiar tune wanders down the path.

“Oh, my god. Are you serious? How? Well, I guess Anjelica does her thing,” I say. Sonny’s beaming, clearly a proud dad of his despicable handywork.

“Targeted ads. We hook him there and lead him down the rabbit hole. All these assholes want something specific; you see. Something they can’t get in reality, so they turn to answers from God or the internet. Jennifer wants to talk to her dead dad. California Delaney wants to know the stock market while his husband has a perpetual panic attack. Paul, all he wants is some bullshit to spout on his little show. The more fucked up, the better. We narrow down on his social media and he just eats it up. Easy Peasy”

“Are you suppose to be God and the internet then?” I say with a full air of satisfaction that Sonny doesn’t respond to.

\* \* \*

We make our way past the gate and across the gravel driveway towards a gigantic, single floor cabin-type place. A handful of metal dog pens, each with a sleeping German shepherd are positioned to the left of the front door. They are only just in my peripherals when the dogs jump to life, mindlessly barking and tearing at their gates with bared canines. My muscles tense involuntarily and I try to hide my heavy breathing from Sonny, who doesn’t seem affected by the dogs at all. By the time we reach the front door I can hear the low thud of “Mississippi Queen” coming from inside the house and mixing with the fury of the dogs. Sonny pops a piece of gum and knocks at the door while I try not to look directly at the dogs. A moment passes when the door opens by a fraction, a leathery looking man just hinging in the crack of the doorway.

“Who’s this?” the man says, gesturing to me with his eyes.

“He’s with me,” Sonny says as the man continues to eyeball me. He snorts and closes the door. Sonny winks at me; the sound of multiple locks clanging and twisting reverberates from behind the door before it swings open.

“Come in b’ys,” Paul Piercy says, scratching his nose and gesturing to the inside of his house. He’s skinny with a large belly and a scraggly beard, dressed completely in black with a black ballcap that reads, “Ed Noseworthy. Newfoundland Strong.” We enter into an all-wooden foyer with a bear skin rug at our feet. A cloud of smoke wafts ahead of us, down the hallway and into the unlit doorways. Grampa Keith would have liked this place. It’s got the “old skipper” charm to it. The lightly peeling vinyl floor, the over filled coat rack, the moose antlers perched above the hallway frame; this is the whole package. I’m surprised that someone like Paul would be so traditional, considering his whole mainlander shtick. But then again, maybe that was just for show. He gestures for us to follow him to the kitchen that’s as cozy as the convent’s apron-toting, apple-pie kind of way. We follow Paul out the backdoor and into a huge mud-ridden grass field where he’s got a makeshift shooting range built on the edge closest to us. I make sure to keep Sonny between me and Paul. There’s just no way I can trust this dude. His hat says enough.

Paul doesn’t say a word as he approaches the furthest of three homemade shooting booths. Me and Sonny trample over thick patches of grass growing between the pools of muck. We’re like two polite businessmen, standing a few feet from Paul with our hands folded in front of us as he picks up a hunting rifle. He points it down the field—aiming at a series of cans randomly placed about the area—and furrows his brow back and forth before closing one eye.

“You hear about Rodney?” he says before BOOM! The gun obliterates a faraway can. I flinch at the sound and almost cover my ears. Neither Sonny nor Paul does. The already humid air is layered with the scent of gunpowder as the blast echoes away. The smell of gunpowder makes me

nauseous. Same with Tobacco smoke. Therapists tell me it's because of what happened that night in Malawi. Therapists say all kinds of things though, and I've long since made a habit of ignoring their banal analyzations. Paul cocks the rifle again and licks his lips as he takes aim.

“Yep. Doesn't affect me though,” Sonny says as he chucks the duffel bag towards Paul. BOOM! He fires again. I try everything to resist going there. To Malawi. To Ma. I won't do it. I keep my focus on Paul. He's calm, relaxed, like he's sucking on his dentures when he fires another shot.

“Dammit!” he yelps before laying the rifle against the booth wall and turning his attention to us. For one of Anjelica's victims, and the so-called most gullible at that, this guy looks pretty sober. That thought goes right out the window as he opens the duffel bag at his feet and rips open a plastic brick stuffed with thoroughbred Florida Snow. He scoops a drop into his pinky and inhales it without any reaction.

“You want some?” he says. Before I can say anything, Sonny pipes up with, “I got a piss test coming up.”

“What about your friend?” Paul says, gesturing to me with his brows. “You ever say anything?”

“I'm on parole.”

“That fucking sucks,” Paul says with a chuckle before leaning next to the rifle and turning his attention back to Sonny. “Figured Rodney meant there was a drought coming.”

“Maybe for some. Not so much for others,” Sonny says as he slides his hands into his jean pockets. “No price changes.”

“Well, good. Because you’re bleeding me dry as it is.” Paul picks up the rifle and aims it again. He takes a second before shaking his head and turning back towards me and Sonny. “You know, she said that someone close to me was going to die soon.” He casually waves the rifle just to my left side as he speaks. All I can see is the rifle, like a metronome moving back and forth as everything else blurs behind it.

“Who said that?” Sonny says.

“Mother Begonia.” The words are barely out of his mouth when Paul immediately turns and fires back into the field of cans. This time I do jump, though Paul doesn’t see and Sonny ignores me.

“Didn’t realize that Rodney was that close to you,” Sonny says.

“Well.” Paul lowers the rifle—mulling his jaw back and forth. “I guess he wasn’t that close. But she did say that someone was going to die soon.” Paul takes aim at the cans again, this time focusing on his target and adjusting his posture.

“Boy, let me tell ya. She’s in the know. I’ve never seen nothing like it,” he says before blasting another can to pieces.

## Chapter 11

Wednesday rolls around and Sonny takes less convincing than I anticipated. He loans me the truck for an afternoon with the stipulation that I fill it up when I get back, handing me a one-hundred-dollar bill. He must think I'm stupid not to see that he's testing me, confirming that I'm not going to run, his mastery over me complete. I don't care. I let people use me all the time, so long as I get what I want.

It feels good to be behind the wheel again. It's been so long since I've driven a car. I can go anywhere in the world with this rusty Chev gargoyle. I could even juggernaut through the damn guardrail and into the lake if I wanted. Fuck it. The world is mine or whatever. But first I need to fulfill my promise.

\* \* \*

The sky looms with rain as I make my way through the hotel parking lot where Ed Noseworthy is holding a rally. A few people in the crowd already have some type of rain jacket ready alongside their protest signs. A woman with bangs and a tracksuit holds a sign that says "No hate in our home." Another sign that sticks out of the crowd ahead reads "Ovaries before brovaries." The tension is ready to snap; you can feel it in the murmuring crowd's energy. I can see the back of Thadie's head as I approach the far edge of the crowd. It's a good turnout for a mob. I can't even see the entrance of the hotel. Thadie spots me and waves as I hustle past a few stragglers. I catch up to her as she tries to peer past the crowd.

"Looks like he's a no-show," she says before checking her phone.

"Who?"



“Ed.”

“Oh.”

“Figures,” Thadie says as she scans about the crowd again. “Coward.” She nuzzles into her long wool coat and it hits me just how out of place it feels to see her here. “C’mon, lets get a coffee.”

We make our way towards the parking lot where a few volunteers have set up a booth with free coffee. Thadie complains about the irrational weather and tells me a story about some mainlander foolish enough to bring an umbrella here. I tell her that everyone knows umbrellas are useless in Newfoundland and losing your umbrella in the wind is more of a right of passage than kissing the cod, in my opinion. But she knows that. We take a seat on two unoccupied lawn chairs and sip coffee as we comb through stories of the past, both funny and sad. We never talk about that day that Robbie slammed into a telephone pole. We never do. Those conversations had their time many years ago.

“You still have the dream?” Thadie says between sips of coffee.

“Not lately.”

“Well, cheers to that,” she says as we clink our Styrofoam cups together. It goes quiet for a moment as the muttering crowd hustles about us.

“Are you happy here?” she says without looking at me.

“I don’t know. This is home. But I don’t know if I’m wired to have the potential to be happy,” I say. Thadie eyes me up and down with a sarcastic look of judgement.

“Well, you sure don’t look like you want to be here.”

“How so?”

“You just look—I don’t know. Like you’re sticking out or something.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” I say before she elbows me in the ribs.

“Yeah, you’re a real rebel,” she says, rolling her eyes and sipping her coffee. A few drips of rain start to fall but it doesn’t seem like she notices. She keeps her focus on the crowd, her eyes darting from sign to sign. “Look at these people. They still have a chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. They want things to be better for their kids. They still got the spirit to fight.”

“Well, you seem like you haven’t lost your edge.”

“Yeah, but that’s different.”

“How so?” I try before Thadie goes quiet.

“You ever think about quitting the drugs and maybe coming on the road with me?” She doesn’t think that’s an insulting thing to say to someone like me. Despite all her years of campaigning for the down-trodden, she still has this uppity attitude about those of us who choose to self destruct of our own volition. But I’m not the type to start any shit with anyone. Besides, I know she’s just trying to care for me in her own way.

“I got a good job. I’m doing good.”

“Are you still using?”

“Whatever, T. I don’t want to talk about this shit anymore.” I instinctively feel like I better get my debate shoes ready. Like muscle memory, I start stacking insults and a collection of her mistakes on the tip of my tongue. Thadie doesn’t say anything for a minute.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Well now you’re just using group therapy talk on me.”

“I’m not, Norrin,” she says, turning to me with a calm earnestness that feels uncomfortable. Though that’s on me for falling into a lifetime of company devoid of anything earnest.

“Here, I got you this,” she says handing me a pocket-sized flip phone. “You mentioned you don’t have one.” My heart swells. No drug or tarot card in the whole world could be so sweet as this phone. It dawns on me just how isolated it feels to be without a phone; without a SOS at your fingertips, if need be; without a portal to the super-transmission of ten-second media and hip-hop feuds, astronomically high casualty reports and recipes behind a pay wall.

“Thank you, T. I don’t know what to say. Really.”

“It’s cool,” she says before a hug. She smells like bubble-gum and I’m taken back to when we were kids. “I’m here for two more weeks. Stay in touch?”

“Of course, T.” The words are barely out of my mouth as the sky opens up and hammers us with thick rain. Thadie is all smiles as she ducks her head into her coat while everyone around us scurries for cover.

\* \* \*

I've decided to keep the phone a secret from Sonny. Not that I don't trust him. I just need to know that I still have some control over my situation. At least until I can convince the b'ys to cut me in on the deal. Despite all I know and how close I am, I'm still just getting room and board.

Sonny parks the truck a good distance from Jennifer's as we watch the live feed of her living room. We've got the surveillance phone rigged up to the dash like a monitor. All we're missing is the popcorn, though Sonny seems happy chain-smoking. I pity his poor headset microphone that he coats with second hand smoke with each exhale. On screen we watch as Jennifer lays her hands into Mother Begonia's. The shades are drawn and it is almost necessary to watch in thermal vision were it not for the few candles placed about the room. They both close their eyes as Anjelica begins.

"I want you to focus. Focus on my energy. Match it. Try and match it." Anjelica is good but I still can't help thinking I've seen it all before. Jennifer relaxes her shoulders and exhales slowly. She's extremely pale and her lips almost look blue, though I don't know if that's just the camera. How many weeks of poisoning has she undergone? For the first time I start to consider the long-term side effects of the victims that Sonny leaves in his wake.

"Focus, Jen, focus," Anjelica says as she narrows her brow. Jen follows suit. What Jen doesn't know is that Anjelica has a micro-amp built into her false tooth; an amp just loud enough to echo in Anjelica's mouth as it mimics the voice of Jen's late father. It's AI replication at it's finest. Just a word or two will do. I'll admit that it's a pretty wily idea, even crude. But there's no need for anything complex considering that Jen is riding on a two-and-a-half-gram spike in her mushroom intake. Her defences are worn away completely and I wonder how much longer this will go on for? How many weeks and dollars are we planning to drain? I debate asking Sonny but we're just about to get to the best part of the performance. A few moments pass before Anjelica's eyes shoot open and roll in the back of her head. Jennifer recoils, hurrying back a few inches towards the couch

behind her, eyes glued to Mother Begonia. Anjelica slowly opens her mouth and closes her eyes again.

“Jen. Sweetheart, I’m here.” The sound of Jennifer’s father reverberates from Anjelica’s tooth. Jennifer doesn’t react, though I swear I can see her eyes quiver.

“Dad. Dad, are you there?” she tries with hesitation. Anjelica is motionless for a few seconds before snapping back to life, her one blue and one green eye back in place. She adjusts her body as though she was only now returning to it.

“I need to sit down,” Anjelica whimpers as she makes for the couch behind her. Jennifer immediately rushes to her side.

“Are you alright? I heard him!”

“Who?”

“My father. His voice! You had his voice!”

“Then he is closer than I thought,” Anjelica says, reaching for a glass of water that she chugs. Jennifer stares ahead into the carpet.

“I can’t believe it,” she says, blinded in her astonishment. Anjelica lays her hand on Jennifer’s and the two make eye contact.

“Believe it.” The air is hot with fraud, but it feels so real. Even to me watching it from all the way over here. I have to remind myself that Jennifer is getting what she wants more than anything. She’ll never know this is all fake. Even if we bleed her dry, she will spend the rest of her life with the certainty that her father is waiting for her on the other side. People spend their lives looking for that assurance. They ruin their lives and cheat on their wives. They sell their mother’s necklaces and take

vows of silence in the Alps to get that assurance. Jennifer is getting it too. What's money compared to eternity? Sonny flicks his cigarette butt out the window and talks into his headset.

“Alright kiddos, let's pack it up.”

“All good on my end,” J.R. rings in our earpieces when Anjelica pipes up.

“I think I can bring him here.” The words are barely out of her mouth when Sonny perks up and scans the camera.

“Hold up. What's she saying?” he says into the mouthpiece.

“Not sure. Not in the script,” J.R. replies as Sonny focuses on the camera. Anjelica nods her head as she leans back on the couch and relaxes into it.

“I can't be sure. But I think I can bring him into the room.”

“What the fuck is she saying?” J.R. chirps. Sonny shakes his head before readjusting his hat. We all sit and listen as Anjelica explains the deal, J.R. frantically chattering every now and then. Sonny sits back and watches without any expression.

“We don't have a plan for this?” J.R. tries before Sonny suddenly cuts him off, saying: “I know that. Do you think I don't know that?” Sonny stares out the window while Anjelica promises to bring back the ghost of Jennifer's father for one last chance to say goodbye.

“The toll on my body is extreme, child,” Anjelica says with Jennifer's hand in hers. “To bring forth the dead requires a spirit close to the plane of reality. Your father is that. But it also requires an immense amount of psychic energy.”

“What do you need from me?” Jennifer pleads with her head bowed onto Anjelica's hand. Her voice is shaky with tears. Anjelica sits upright with her head held high.

“To do what you ask will drain me of all my power. Though I’ve never been so close to a spirit before,” she says before turning to face Jennifer. “I shall grant you this gift, my friend. But it won’t come cheap.”

## Chapter 12

I try to make small talk with Sonny as we drive home but he doesn't bite. We sit in silence for most of the drive except when he periodically scans through the radio before giving up on it. Everything is quiet on the comms too. I don't see the big deal. Is tricking Jennifer into seeing a ghost really that out of the question? Is it so far removed from wild evangelicals talking in tongues or the image of Christ miraculously appearing on a piece of burnt toast? Maybe I'm overthinking this.

I'm the last to arrive for breakfast. The silence persists. Everyone is gathered around the kitchen table layered with untouched coffee, fruit, and a stack of bagels. Everyone is looking at the ground or out the window except Sonny, who's perched on the counter and fiddling with his cigarette. Anjelica helms the table, sipping coffee without the dark cloud over her that seems to be circling everyone else.

"Is everything okay?" I try. A moment passes when Abiona pipes up.

"Tell him."

"Have a seat, Norrin," Anjelica says. I take a seat adjacent to her.

"What is it?" No one is looking at me and I fear that I have somehow fucked everything up. Of course I did. I always do.

"I'll be up-front with you Norrin. Since you haven't been with us for as long as the others, I thought it best to discuss it with everyone else first."

"Okay. Have I done something? I really am sorry, I never meant ..."



“She’s dying,” Darlin blurts, her eyes on the table as she urgently taps her foot. No one reacts. I turn to Sonny first who casually puffs on his cigarette, then he ashes it in the sink.

“Are you serious? Are you sure?”

“It’s true. I’ve seen her chart,” J.R. says as he adjusts his glasses and pours himself a cup of coffee.

“How long have you known?” Chappie says to J.R., who shrugs without saying a word.  
“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I don’t know what to say,” I try just before Abiona slams her fist on the table. She grits her teeth and points at Sonny and Anjelica.

“It’s those fucking cigarettes you two smoke!”

“Foolish child!” Anjelica blasts. “My mother smoked for most of her life and she lived to be a hundred and three.”

“Even so! Why are you doing this? We’re suppose to be a family! Why are you leaving us?”

“I am old, Abi. I don’t have much time and I wish to spend it with my sisters in Cassis. Besides, I am not leaving you with nothing. You heard what I said last night.”

“How the fuck are we going to pull that off, Anj?” Chappie asks as she snaps her gum.

“We’ll find a way,” Sonny adds.

“I am not worried about how we will accomplish this task,” Anjelica says between sips of coffee. “And I am sorry I didn’t consult you on this matter. I had to do this on my own.”

“Clearly,” Chappie says as Abiona rises from her chair to stretch her back before sitting again. Anjelica sighs and places her hands on the table.

“Jennifer is ready for our final act. We have her in our control. But even so, she will need something big to warrant ten million dollars.”

“Ten million!” Darlin nearly spits out her coffee. Everyone follows suit with their own exclamations of shock and desire. All I can think about is where I fit into all this. I’m privy to the game, but I’m not a part of the crew. I feel like I’m in high school again: loitering, unseen around the circle of the socially adept, pretending that I’m in on the joke. I mull over whether I should ask about my role in this plan, but my gut tells me to wait.

“That’s more than we hit in the last three years, Anj,” J.R. says.

“I wasn’t lying when I told Jennifer that this is the end for me. If I am to go out, I will go out with something to pass onto all of you. You—all of you—are my children.” Anjelica turns her eyes to Sonny. They share a glance for just a second before she turns back to everyone else. “It’s time for you all to find your own path.”

“I can’t listen to this fucking bullshit anymore,” Abiona says before storming out of the room. Chappie is quick to follow behind her. Only Sonny seems unaffected by it all.

“Norrin,” Anjelica says, suddenly turning to me. “Come with me, I want to talk to you in private.”

“Me?”

“Yes, come follow me,” Anjelica commands as she rises from her seat and exits the room into the foyer. “The rest of you get to work.”

“You’re up, cowboy,” Sonny says, tipping his hat in my direction.

\* \* \*

I follow Anjelica into the back of the convent before we exit into the field outside. The fog on the Southern Shore is perpetually thick: thick enough that I can only see the short grass right in front of me as I follow behind Anjelica. Her black hair waves across her army green jacket while the edge of her yellow dress slides back and forth against her black boots. Everything is overcast in the mist and it doesn’t take long before the convent isn’t visible anymore.

“Look,” Anjelica says as we walk deeper into the fog. Slowly but surely, we come into view of a rusted ship’s anchor, the type you get a tattoo of when you’re in your mid-twenties. It’s tipped over onto one side with a few links left in its massive iron chain. This thing looks like it slipped out of another universe, like Stonehenge or Mars. Anjelica stops in front of it and lights up a smoke, offering me one that I politely decline.

“Should you be smoking?” I try as Anjelica rolls her eyes.

“Please. Spare me your advice.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? Why do you always apologize for everything?”

“I don’t know. I just do.”

“Typical of people in this part of the world.” She flicks her ash into the surrounding fog before pointing at the anchor with her cigarette. “Look at this thing. I love it. Why is it here? What is its purpose? Who knows?”

“I guess so.” If there’s one thing that I’ll remember about Anjelica, it’s the sincere small talk.

“Has Sonny told you much about John?”

“No, I don’t think so?” It’s only a moment later that I recall Sonny saying that name on the night we took those dreadnaughts, though I’m not sure.

“John is his older brother,” she says, ashing her cigarette and turning to me. “Him and Sonny used to run together. All of us use to run together, you see.”

“He’s never mentioned him.”

“I suppose that’s not surprising either.”

“What happened to him?” The words are barely out of my mouth when Anjelica flicks her cigarette into the anchor.

“He had enough. So, he left. Simple as that,” she says as she lights up another smoke.

“Why are you telling me this?” I’m quick to make assumptions and a part of me races between flashes of prison and a moonlit castle. Is this where she cuts me in? I don’t even know what I’d do with a lot of money if I had it. All I can picture in my mind is a duffel bag full of cash. How sad is that?

“Sonny is the youngest of three,” she says before turning to me, then back at the anchor.

“Now he’s alone.”

“Maybe I will have a smoke then,” I say. She doesn’t respond and keeps her eye on the anchor.

“I remember when I first met John and Sonny. This was many, many years ago now. John was smooth—so smooth with his words—and good to look at too. Sonny was young; stupid and always drinking too much as boys tend to do. The kind you learn to love. Not like John,” Anjelica

says with a sigh. "But then again, I suppose they're all like that. Nonetheless—" she says, turning to me again with an apologetic look on her face. "We all found our way." She looks back at the anchor with her tongue pressed into her bottom lip and shaking her head. "For now." I can see a wall of reflective tears build in her eyes. She wipes them away before they can stream down her face.

"I'm sorry, Anjelica."

"Did I not just ask you to stop with your apologies?"

"Oh. Sorry. Shit, I did it again," I say, hoping she picks up that I'm joking. She doesn't. The fog starts to build on our clothes and I can feel my pant legs getting wet. Anjelica flicks her cigarette butt against the anchor. It bounces off of it and lands in the grass next to a few other wet cigarette butts.

"I'm cutting you in, Norrin. Not as much as the others. You'll need to earn that. But one million in cash. If you want it." Her face is expressionless as she says it, like it's not even a big deal or like she says shit like that all the time. I can't even register what she's saying. One million. One million! I see the duffel bag, then other cliches of opulence: the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, a haunted mansion. One million. One. Million. I've never had more than a thousand dollars to my name my whole life. A million could be a unicorn as far as I'm concerned.

"Well?" Anjelica snaps.

"I, I, of course." Keep it cool. Stay calm. Don't be weird about it.

"Good boy." Anjelica nods before cracking her knuckles one by one. "But I want you to stay with Sonny." She turns to me with a smile and tenderness in her expression that is eerie. "He's a good boy. He'll never show it, but he is a good one. You can be rich Norrin. But I want you to stay

with him. And if he pushes you away, then that's that. Then you go your own way. But I still want you to try."

\* \* \*

It's a clear night with no sign of the moon. Me and Sonny come in from the outermost edge of the Delaneys' mansion, scaling the walls furthest from their enormous Anglo-Chinois Garden. We pass by the naked Roman statue and as we approach the backdoor, I can't help but feel like I'm outside of time. The mystery of such a garden at night is like being in a dream. Blotches of green walls and shadowy trees guide us. Even the statue seems bewildered: his eyes cast in shadow and his grey mouth, shoulders, and forearms dimly lit by the few stars about the sky. Sonny trips the security light hanging under the gutter near the door where I watched Abiona and the ponytailed man just a few days before. No matter. J.R. has cut their camera feed and both California and Steven Delaney are high enough to sleep through an apocalypse. But it's good to be safe and we can't risk any unaccounted-for eyes seeing us enter through the front door.

"Alright. Let's go," Sonny says, gesturing to the back door that unlocks at J.R.'s automated command.

We're on a code red. J.R. came with the news about an hour after Anjelica's offer. Steven Delaney has been googling: "food drug testing, drug testing St. John's, how to tell if your food has been drugged." That led to a surprise visit from their dear friend Sasha, aka Abiona, who spiked the upstairs mouthwash with a cocktail of Ketamine and heroin, a Darlin special. This gives me and Sonny time to switch their food with clean substitutes, at least until we can figure out what to do about Steven.

Me and Sonny creep into the kitchen overlooking the garden. This place looks like it was built by a 1500s French peasant with monarchy wealth but no style. Everything is made of wood and

copper and what I assume are fifties-era appliances. This place is Nan's kitchen, de-aged by a hundred years. Fucking mainlanders: nothing worse than when they try to match Newfoundland authenticity. Hence why I would never bother with it myself.

I've got two plastic cooler boxes with me that contain clean food.

"Switch 'em out. I'll go switch the mouthwash back," Sonny whispers before turning to the kitchen camera in the corner with a nod.

"You got it," I say as he disappears into a dark room.

I start on all the condiments first. Mayonnaise, dijon mustard, relish, all the normal stuff. Except of course if you were to ingest a certain mix of these particular condiments, you'd probably OD in ten minutes. Hence why the trash logs and hours of footage of the Delaneys eating is so very crucial to this plan. I can't help but admire the precision. We're doing God's work here. Next, I move onto the frozen foods. Steak in unmarked packaging, lamb, carrots, an unmarked pack of meat with a V printed on it. Everything is unmarked and I wonder if the super rich have some other kind of grocery store that don't carry brand-name foods. I'll know for sure soon. As I turn to the bread box I catch the glimmer of a photo on the retro-style fridge. It's California and Steven on vacation, somewhere with canals and a gondola in the background. California has his arm around Steven as they pose for the camera. Their teeth are almost comically white against their toasted skin. They both wear these absolutely dreadful combinations of polo shirts and khaki shorts that you always see billionaires wearing. I can't for the life of me understand how generic the super rich become when they can have anything. Still, for a second, I picture me and Sonny and Abiona and Chappie posing for a picture that Darlin or J.R. takes. I picture us sharing kebabs in South Korea under the neon hues reflected in the street-trash and pothole puddles of a single lane bazaar. I

imagine us tucking under umbrellas outside the Louvre and tripping on mushrooms in the Scottish Highlands. Hell, if it means wearing the fucking khaki shorts, that's fine too. I guess.

I'm done loading food into the containers and try to make out where Sonny is in the darkness. I can't see anything of what I think must be the living room. All of a sudden, I feel a chill run down my spine. It feels like something's watching, but then I remember that J.R. is watching us from the security cameras and if someone was about, he would do something. Right? I don't have my earpiece and neither does Sonny and I consider how he would alert us if something was up. Sonny's been too long. He was just supposed to switch the mouthwash. Against my better judgement, I make my way into the living room. But like I've said before, my instincts are fucked. It's okay not to trust them.

I feel my way around the walls. My eyes are adjusted to the darkness but it's still too dark to really make out anything other than the outline of barstools and sculptures in abstract shapes. I make my way up the stairs to my immediate right, carefully tiptoeing up the carpet runner. Picture frames line the wall, though I can't see anyone but myself in their glare. I try not to stare into them, fearing I might see another face behind me. I'm almost at the top of the stairs when I see Sonny, frozen in his tracks and staring directly ahead of him. I'm just about to open my mouth and say something when he reaches his hand out and gestures for me to stop. His eyes stay dead ahead. I'm somewhere between terrified and prepared. My flight-or-fight response kicks in. Sonny keeps pushing his hand towards me as if he's pushing me away. I creep closer. I'm about ten feet from Sonny when I see what he's staring at. Standing in the doorway right in front of him is California Delaney: butt naked, chiselled with a wrestler's body, and his eyes closed. His long blonde hair is strewn about his shoulders like an aging Fabio knockoff and I can't help but admire his beauty. He's asleep and gently wobbling in the doorway with his mouth just barely hanging open. He's almost



snoring, taking deep breaths that linger around his lips as he inhales and exhales, his eyeballs racing around behind closed eyelids. Me and Sonny look at each other and then back at him. We're trapped. Move and he wakes up. It feels like we could stay here for the rest of our lives, staring at each other in the quietest standoff of all time.

"Muhhhh," California mumbles like a caveman as he scratches his belly, his hand just barely grazing his circumcised dick and lopsided balls. Sonny flinches and gestures for us to move slowly. California stays asleep, just barely swaying when he "muhhh's" again. Sonny walks on the balls of his feet, taking almost comically large steps as he sways his arms and makes his way towards me. He quickens his pace when we hear Steven's groggy voice say, "babe, what are you doing?" Sonny points in the direction of the stairs behind me. It's not even a microsecond as I turn back down the stairs, also walking on the balls of my feet and making my way to the kitchen.

"Is someone there?" Steven cautiously hollers from upstairs as me and Sonny grab the cooler boxes. Sonny takes a second to listen for footsteps before turning to me and mouthing the words "Go now." We hurry out of the kitchen.

I activate the trip light as I move ahead outside. I want to turn to Sonny but I know he'll just curse me and order me forward. We zoom through the midsummer-magical garden that doesn't feel so scary anymore. I dare not turn back. I dare not subject myself to the death of a million-dollar dream that would be all over Steven Delaney's face if he recognizes me from a couple of days before. I hop over the few mounds of soon-to-blossom flower beds, zigzagging through the evergreen trees that I loaded with poison and cologne. I can hear the plod of Sonny's footsteps and the rustling of his body against the leaves behind me. I hop the fence first, then Sonny hands me each cooler box. This happens without any prior discussion of how to maneuver. Sonny passes the

last cooler box to me before throwing himself over the gate. As we sprint towards the truck, we can hear Steven in the far distance yelling, “Hello? Who’s there?”

We’re parked on the side of the road next to a mom-and-pop café. There’s no sign of life anywhere except for a few squirrels running past the dumpster tucked behind the building. Sonny stops laughing before rolling down the truck window and lighting up a smoke. I expect him to offer me one as well, but he doesn’t. He settles in the driver’s seat, laying his head against the headrest and tipping his cap upwards as he exhales. My face hurts from laughing. It’s amazing how near-disaster breeds humor.

“Boy, you see the giant pecker on he?” Sonny says between a puff and a leftover giggle.

“I tried not to look, to be honest.”

“Guess he wants to be looking like that statue, no doubt.”

“Who knows man. Also, and I never thought I’d actually say this, but he really looks better with the ponytail than without it.”

“Yeah, I’d rather have no hair than have that haircut,” Sonny says. We both start into another fit of laughter that simmers as he starts the truck. “You know, I think I just had an idea about how we can get ourselves a ghost for Miss Jennifer.”

## Chapter 13

“I don’t see any other way. We’re going to have to get him in a fat suit,” Sonny says to JR whilst pointing at me with his beer. We’re all gathered on the front step and under a new moon as Sonny relays his plan to bring Jennifer’s father back from the dead. J.R. objects to the whole thing, pacing about the stoop and insisting that a hologram projection is our only course of action.

“You’ll have your gadgets but it won’t be enough,” Sonny says. J.R. shakes his head and takes a seat against the wall facing the RVs. Sonny’s head is bowed and dipped under the peak of his hat as he leans on the stoop railing. “We’ll need some sort of projection but I’m telling you, it won’t be enough.”

“She’ll believe a hologram, bro. We all know that we’ve never kept anyone this consistently high before. I don’t really see how this is a problem,” Darlin says as she wings a rock into the forest before looking in the direction of the crescent moon above her. “Jennifer is my masterpiece. Fully complicit to my design.” She’s turned back-on to me, which is good. I don’t want to see the manic expression that I imagine she has on her face. I’m finding my footing in this group, but I am someone who likes routine. Darlin is chaos and how far it extends, I can’t speculate.

“She needs to feel something. A body,” Sonny tries as J.R. shakes his head, visibly holding back his dissatisfaction.

“No, she doesn’t. You just want to see Norrin in a fat suit because you’re a pervert,” Chappie adds as everyone except Anjelica laughs. She’s hidden under a large sunhat and possibly asleep in her chair, considering she hasn’t said a word since we’ve been out here.

“Look. If you want me in the suit, I’ll get in the suit,” I try. Sonny kind of scowls at me but I’ve got their attention. “But prosthetic stuff never looks real. She’ll know, right? Have you guys ever seen a movie with a prosthetic suit? You can always tell.”

“No, Sonny’s right,” Anjelica suddenly blurts from under her sunhat. “She needs to feel a body. She needs to feel his presence if we plan to make it meaningful.” She sits up straight and sizes me up and down before slouching back in her chair. “What do you think, J.R.?” Everyone turns to him. J.R. sighs before removing his glasses and wiping them with his shirt. The moonlight bounces off his dark hair so it glints purple. In this moment all I can see is the worn-down voice of reason, ready to give in. But he chose this life. This is not a place for common sense.

“Well. Her father was a large man, which works for us in that we can shape his face better with silicone than makeup,” J.R. says as he approaches me before inspecting my face between his thumb and forefinger. “And you do sort of look like him. It’s going to be a fair bit of work though.” Sonny lights up a smoke and there’s a can-do vibe spilling out into the night. Anjelica doesn’t react. Sonny hasn’t spoken to her in two days. No one addresses it.

\* \* \*

Thadie’s blonde buzz cut is hard to miss as I approach the coffee shop window. I’m a hundred percent sure she got the idea from a Doja Cat video. My skin feels like it’s sizzling—it’s that hot—and I can’t help but think that it never used to be like this. I swear we used to have cooler summers when I was a kid. I wipe my brow and walk into the shop as a bell on the door jingles. Hipster-chic to the core. The dishes, the hanging plants, the nose rings, beanies and throat tattoos: it’s all here like it got plucked right out of downtown Seattle. Not that I’ve ever been there. It’s been a while since I’ve been where regular folks are found. There’s a middle-aged woman with short brown hair and a sleeveless turtleneck sitting across from Thadie. The woman waves as though she

knows me. I wave back and smile, though I can already sense I've made a mistake coming here. Thadie turns to me.

“Hey! There you are!” she says as she stands to hug me.

“Hey, T,” I say as we take our seats. Thadie gestures to the woman across from her and takes a small bow.

“Norrin, this is Terri-Lynn. She's the mother of a young man who took his own life. Terri-Lynn, this is Norrin. He's been through the program before.” I shake Terri Lynn's hand and we exchange our how-do-you-do's as I take a seat. I'm all smiles but I'm holding the weight of the earth in anger over my head. It takes everything in me to focus my outrage anywhere but into this disingenuous, overpriced, shitty coffee house. I have told Thadie a thousand times that I don't want to be a part of this sort of thing. What happened to me is not something I share lightly or with anyone. What happened to me is now a nightmare attached to my DNA. All the therapy and mindfulness in the world can't undo it or set it right. You'd think Thadie would understand or at least that she would fucking listen to me when I tell her I don't want to do this. Sometimes I think it's not because she's stupid or forgetful; it's that she just doesn't care. But I keep it in and smile like I'm at a job interview. Smile and nod. Give them what they want and get out.

“Oh, you poor child,” Terry-Lynn starts as she leans in closer to me.

“Yes, it was something,” I say without the patience to look her in her eyes. Thadie lays her hand on my shoulder as I search for something to say that can get me out of this.

“It's people like Norrin and myself who continue on for the rest of us,” Thadie says as we lock eyes. I feel like my pupils are shaking and hope she can see what I'm feeling but I know she

won't. She just keeps on smiling. "I thought maybe you could share your experience with the program with Terri-Lynn and maybe—"

"I'm sorry. I can't do this. It was nice to meet you, but I can't," I say to Terri-Lynn with my hands up. I keep my eye on the door and as I walk away, Thadie's apologies to Terri-Lynn ringing in my peripherals, I hear her chair move. Everyone in the shop is looking at me, eyeing me up and down and trying to hide it. My embarrassment is absolute and I feel stupid and ugly.

The sound of the door shutting and then opening again echoes behind me as I hop over the sidewalk and onto George Street. It's the pedestrian mall and everyone's out in their stupid little flower shirts and nice hair cuts, holding hands and smiling with all their perfect little memories in the making. I feel simultaneously ashamed and proud of myself, hoping to ruin their stupid day in any way I can. Thadie's voice lunges from behind me.

"Hey, asshole," she tries but I keep walking. I'm not doing this. "Hey, I'm talking to you!" She grabs my arm just as I approach a hot dog stand. I'm spun around and I can see the fury in her dilated pupils, which is confusing because what does she have to be mad about?

"What?" I say though that's not what I want to say.

"What do you mean what? You totally embarrassed me in front of Terri-Lynn!"

"I have told you time and time again. I do not want to be a part of this thing. You are just so fucking selfish that you don't remember or you don't care, I don't even know!"

"Whatever, Norrin. You said you don't want to do public appearances. This is just talking to someone who could use our help."

"It's the same fucking thing, T." My hands are waving about as the passing families—with dads carrying their kids on their shoulders and moms in Coachella hats and face-sized sunglasses—

stare at us before scurrying away. Thadie is yelling back at me when I direct us into a doorway of a closed down weed shop next to an alley.

“If you’d try and help someone else instead of putting all that fucking poison in your body, maybe you’d feel better,” she says without any restraint at all. I feel like one of those old Disney cartoons where the kettle steams so hard, it bends and bulges around the edges.

“You are the most selfish person I’ve ever met,” I say, walking away from her and into the alley. I know this place. I’ve hurled my guts up in this alley more than I can remember. Steam and the stink of rotten food and urine linger between the graffitied walls as Thadie yells from behind me.

“You’re pathetic sometimes, you know? Always throwing yourself a pity party, acting like a wounded puppy so people will feel bad for you,” she barks. I already know that I’m making a mistake as I turn around and say what I’ve been thinking for seventeen years.

“You know what?” I say, taking a step closer. “You know what? You are so fucking unaware of yourself that you don’t even see how desperate you look when you do this whole thing—this thing where you try so hard not to be a mediocre nobody. It’s actually pathetic you know that? You’re pathetic.” I feel like I’ve just decapitated my best friend. I shouldn’t have said that. Not even a split second goes by and I know I shouldn’t have said that. Thadie doesn’t say anything. She just stares at me without any expression. I am gutless. My blood rage is settling and I know that what she said is true. That’s why I cut her like this. Because she’s right and it hurts. So now I hurt her back. Except she doesn’t deserve this.

“I have to go. I’ll catch up with you later,” she says as she walks into the sunlight and the crowd of fresh faces. I don’t say anything, even though I want to. I want to say I’m sorry but I don’t. Maybe I don’t regret what I said. Maybe she needs to grow up and accept that harsh truth too. Why

do I have to be ugly and she gets to be beautiful? But as I walk further into the familiar alleyway, it dawns on me how pathetic I really am to think something like that.

\* \* \*

“What are we doing here?” I say to Sonny as he shuts off the truck. The digital clock on the dashboard reads 2:45 am as Sonny surveys the scene in the side and rearview mirrors. We’re parked downhill from the Delaneys’ mansion, on the side closest to the back of the garden hedge wall. Sonny flicks a cigarette out the window and pops a piece of gum in his mouth.

“If I tell you, you won’t want to do it.”

“I thought we all agreed that the Delaneys were over with? Anjelica made it pretty clear that it’s too risky after—”

“Man, what’s she, your mother? Fuck what she thinks. I got one last thing I want to take care of. So, you coming?” he says with his hand on the door handle. This must be what an older, stupider brother is like. I know this is about Anjelica leaving and I want to say that to him. But to what end? He’s just going to do what he wants to do anyway. I’m just along for the ride. So I tell him that I’ll go with him, and I do it with the same guilty conscience that will tear at me in the late hours. Besides. I’m sure J.R. will be watching.

We hop the metal gate outside the hedge wall before hopping over that too. Sonny’s got a small duffel bag over his shoulder, with a crowbar just peeking out of the zipper. It’s dark in the midsummer night’s garden. We stay in the shadows. All I can see are the silhouettes of trees, stone cherubs, and stone horses posed triumphantly with their hooves flailing in the air. We turn the corner of one hedge and come into view of the massive statue in the centre of the garden. Sonny’s eyes gleam as he stares at it, his sharp canine in full view.



“That’s what we’re here for, daddyO,” he says.

“What? What do you mean?”

“We’re going to knock it down,” Sonny says, keeping his eyes on the statue. It’s the first time I see him with a look this unhinged. I feel like I’m not even here, like he’s in another world and I’m just watching. I feel like the tag-along friend in a movie, the extra that gets killed by a werewolf without getting any lines to show for it.

“Sonny,” I say, moving into his eyeline. “J.R. will see this on the camera.”

“Naw, he’s disconnected now that we’re done. Don’t worry, their feed is on a loop, the Delaneys can’t see us.”

“Still, man. Why are we doing this?”

“Because. These guys are fucking terrible people. You got any idea how much California and Steven took from their friends and family to make it with crypto? C’mon man, you don’t care about people like this?”

“I thought you said Steven was alright?”

“God dammit, dude. Just give me a hand, will you?” he says as he opens the bag. Inside it I can see an array of metal poles, hammers, and spikes. At this point, I don’t think I can hold it back any longer.

“Is this about Anjelica leaving?” I say. Sonny takes a second before he smiles and continues to dig through the clanging metal in the bag.

“I can see where you’re going with this. You can decide what you want. But honestly, for me anyway,” he says, pointing at his chest. “I just really hate this fucking statue.” Sonny gently shrugs

before pulling out a sharp metal spike and a sledgehammer alongside a crow bar. He sets them to his side and looks back at the statue.

“Okay, I’ll hold the spike onto the ankles. You give it a good one or two smacks and down she comes.” He squints as he sizes up the statue before returning to the bag.

“Is this about John?” I try. Everything goes quiet as Sonny stops rummaging, his head pointed down and hidden behind the brim of his hat.

“What did you say?” he says sharply. I know that tone in his voice. I don’t want to say anything back to him and I feel his presence turn dark. I’ve been here before, with coked out dealers in shabby basements and parked cars in a Wal-Mart parking lot. I’ve always had a lot of patience with people so I never really understand people with short fuses. That’s until they snap, of course. Then their temper gets real direct. But whatever happens, happens. Cowering doesn’t work. Standing up to them doesn’t work. They’re going to do what they’re going to do and there’s nothing anyone can say to bring that type of anger down. So, I choose. But there’s no thought behind it, not a conscious one anyway.

“I know about your brother. Anjelica told me,” I say, fully expecting a fist at any moment. I brace myself but not in a way that he can pick up on. But he doesn’t do anything. He just shakes his head, hat still pointed down and just the logo of “Westwood Lumber” facing me.

“Don’t ever talk to me about my brothers, you hear me?” he says, still sharp but with restraint.

“I’m sorry,” And I am. What was I expecting him to say? That his brother left and now he feels whatever about it?

“You going to help me or what?” he says, looking at me again with a boyishness about him.

“Okay.” I suppose this is the least I can do for my transgression. I start to think about how often I’ve misjudged Sonny and what that says about me. But I’m starting to get sketched out being here too. The quicker we move, the better.

“Alright, well grab that sledgehammer.” We both start to move towards the equipment when Steven’s voice rings out from the back step with a “who’s there?” Me and Sonny go still. My heart is in my throat and I can feel my pulse throughout my body. Sonny seems perfectly chill as he motions to the path we came from. He quietly places the sledgehammer and crow bar back into the bag. The sound of their microscopic clanks is deafening and I feel the noise of the tools hitting each other inside my chest.

“I’ve got a weapon!” Steven shouts from somewhere closer. Sonny gestures to the path behind me and creeps past me. A flashlight beams just a few feet from where Sonny was just a moment ago. I don’t linger. Follow Sonny. I’m conscious of every step, keeping my eye on him as he crouch-walks ahead of me. Breathe. In and out. Step by step. We’re hustling down the furthest back pathway—the one against the back gate—when the ray of a flashlight strikes us from ahead.

“Stop! Stop right there!” Steven screams. Sonny goes still and I follow suit. I can’t see Steven in the blinding flare of bright yellow as his voice gets louder and closer. I raise my hands as does Sonny. Steven shines the light to our feet. He looks like a zombie: completely drained of any color except for his blue lips, wielding a golfclub, and wearing shorts and a bathrobe. His soaking designer slippers squelch as he takes a step closer.

“You! The gardener!” Steven says with wide eyes and raising the golf club and smiling. “I knew it. I knew it!”

“Hey man, we’re just out here picking up some gear we left behind,” Sonny tries, cocking his head.

“Yeah dude. We just didn’t want to bother you.” I add. Steven screams something that I can’t make out as his spit flies across the stone walkway.

“Stop trying to confuse me!” he says, manic and wild. It dawns on me that he hasn’t had any doped-up food for at least a week. He must be in full-on withdrawal from God knows what Darlin dosed him with. By the looks of it, his mind is breaking. He probably hasn’t slept in at least two days and judging from his complexion, he hasn’t seen the sun in as long either. “You’ve been spying on me,” he says as he takes a step closer, swinging the golf club. He’s at least twenty feet away from me but I react to the club anyway.

“Take it easy. We don’t want any trouble. Let’s just call the police,” Sonny tries. Steven just keeps on coming, each step squelching with the poison and cologne-soaked slippers. Little bits of dirt from the patches I’ve been spraying over the weeks are caked around his feet.

“The devil sent you!” he says, licking his lips as sweat streams down his pale forehead.

“Please. Please, stop,” I try, consciously keeping my voice as low as possible. But it’s no good. Steven swings at Sonny and misses. Sonny dodges him, sliding to the left as the golf club passes short of his ribs. With Sonny out of the way, I have a perfect view of Steven as he trips over himself and slams the back of his head against the edge of a miniature marble bench placed against the garden hedge. The noise of his breaking skull drills into the air before he falls faceup onto the ground. Blood quietly pools around his head. Everything in me narrows down to this moment. Life is only before or after this moment. I’ve seen more dead bodies that anyone like me should have. Norm and Sarah, who both OD’d a few years back. Grandma Juliet and Grampa Keith. The plugs from a few days ago. But this, this is something different. This is my fault. Oh god. This is my fault! My breaths are jagged and my head is ringing. Sonny just stares at him. Steven’s dead eyes lay open, gazing above us into the sky. We don’t speak for what feels like a long time. This is the end of the

world. I'll never be able to take this back. I'll never not be ugly again. Nothing will ever be whole for as long as I live.

“C’mon. We have to go,” Sonny says, like we’re leaving the mall. I can’t move. All I can do is stand here and stare at this body of eternity, his eyes like they’re still alive in his lifeless body of flesh. I don’t even register the first few times that Sonny is shaking me. He’s saying something but I can’t hear anything other than a volley of vowel sounds, like I’ve been hit with a flashbang grenade. It’s only when I see a single tear running down Sonny’s face that I come to. “We have to go, Norrin,” he says, his voice cracking on my name. I feel like my body is leaving without me as we hurry down the path, stepping over the onyx pool of blood. We make our way to the lowest side of the back wall. All I can see in my mind are the stars reflected in Steven’s dead eyes.

## Chapter 14

“You fucking idiots,” J.R. bellows as he paces about the kitchen. “You fucking, stupid fucking morons. We’re all fucked now. We’re fucked! We’re all going to jail!” J.R. runs his hands through his hair over and over as the rising sun beams on all of us through the kitchen window. Me and Sonny sit next to each other against the honey yellow wall with Anjelica at the head of the table on the opposite end. Even now, even with a man dead because of us, I still feel like I’m in high school: me and Sonny sitting outside the principal’s office. I am almost ashamed of this callousness, and I quickly hush it away. Anjelica peels an orange, totally calm like nothing has even happened. Chappie sits across from me with her head in her hands. All I can think of is Steven’s dead body and swarms of police taking pictures and cataloging the scene. I picture flies buzzing around as they zip him up in a body bag. Then I picture a tray of eggshell white gruel that I’ll be eating in prison for the rest of my life.

“It was an accident,” Sonny says with his tongue in his cheek and his arms crossed. “Not the first client we ever lost. It happens.” The words are barely out of his mouth as Chappie and J.R. look to me and then quickly look away. They must think I haven’t suspected that things have gone too far before. I have. But I’ve never said it out loud or heard anyone else say it out loud and that changes things. We—I—have crossed the line and there’s no going back. I just never thought it would feel like this. I met a guy once who used to run with a gang-like entity. We met in my first stint in rehab. That’s where I learnt that TV isn’t always the most accurate representation of gang members. Sure, there are a lot of hardened, vicious, bald-headed enforcers out there, but you rarely see the normal people who get sucked into the vortex of organized crime: some through drug addictions, others through gambling, and some just get transformed in prison. A lot of them are hard-tickets, but a lot

of them are the type that might have a Pokémon card collection. I guess I've officially become something like the latter.

“Any word from Abiona?” Anjelica finally says. J.R. shakes his head as he checks his phone. We're lucky in that California texted Abiona—or Sasha as he knows her—early this morning with the words, “SOS, come immediately. Stevens had an accident. SOS SOS SOS.” It's been four hours since she and Darlin left for the Delaneys and we haven't heard anything.

“Listen. I'll admit it was a bad call,” Sonny starts. “But we're not on camera. I made sure they had a loop playing from a different night.”

“Yes, but now when they check the feed and see that nothing's there, then they'll know someone's been hijacking their signal!” Chappie blurts before returning her head to her hands.

“Can they trace it?” Anjelica says to J.R.

“No. It's impossible. But still. We're dealing with a lot of unknowns here. Who knows what the police can find?”

“We're so fucked,” Chappie starts when J.R.'s phone rings. He answers it before it even hits the second ring. I keep my eye on Sonny who's ducked under his hat as per usual while J.R. is between a recurring volley of “Aha's” and “Okay's.” He finally hangs up the phone and places it in his pocket with a long sigh.

“That was Abi.”

“And?” Chappie says from behind her hands.

“And as far as she can tell, neither the police or California suspect any foul play.”

“Foul play, what are you talking like that for?” Sonny tries before he’s shushed by Chappie. J.R. continues, leaning on the counter behind him.

“They will run a tox screen on him though. And they’re going to see everything that’s in his body.”

“So what?” Sonny says again. I can feel everyone biting their tongue and sparing him the lashing that we both deserve. For the first time since I’ve been here, I can feel a thread unravelling. Sonny starts listing on his fingers. “One: all the food in the Delaney house is clean. Two: There is no footage anywhere of me or Norrin. Three: We have no paper trail, no traceable bank accounts, no cellphones. You really think the local police are going to invest thousands of dollars on what couldn’t look more like a deranged man that slipped and fell?”

“Shut up!” Anjelica suddenly barks. Everyone goes quiet as she lounges back in her chair. “We are lucky. Sonny is right. They have no leads to follow. But none the less, eyes are looking now,” she says before lighting up a smoke. “We’re speeding up the plan.”

\* \* \*

Sonny’s sitting on the bonnet of the truck and throwing rocks into the orange horizon ahead of him. His shirt is pasted onto his skin, sweat stains around his pits and his lower back, as I approach. Hot days like this make me anxious. I think it’s because I get dehydrated so easily and that can cause anxiety: learnt that one in AA. Boozing causes dehydration that causes anxiety. I pop up next to Sonny who doesn’t take any notice of me.

“You, okay?” I try. He nods and chucks another stone into the field. It whooshes for a second as it passes through the long sea of grass before thudding twice.

“Yeah. I just feel bad.”



“Well man. That guy is dead. To be honest I can’t believe you’re so chill about that,” I say as Sonny turns to me with his head cocked and one eyebrow raised.

“Really? You’ve seen more dead people than anyone I reckon.”

“That was different.”

“How so?”

“Because I wasn’t part of the killing part.”

“I don’t think that’s true. There’s the killer and the killed and the almost-killed. They all play their part in it. Not saying it’s right or whatever, just saying, that’s all. Besides. I didn’t want him to get hurt. You know that, right?” he says, looking at me and then back into the field ahead of us.

“But he did get hurt. He died. Because we were out there trying to knock down a fucking statue.”

“What you want me to do about it, huh? What’d you think this life is, all just fun and games tricking these morons? Sometimes things get fucked up and if you can’t handle that, then maybe I was wrong about you.” His words are blunt and the type I’ve spent most of my life scurrying away from. I’m about to tell him that I don’t care when he pipes up with “I’m sorry, man,” before throwing another rock into the sea of grass.

“It’s alright.”

“I don’t know,” he says shaking his head and readjusting his hat. “I’m sorry what I said about John, too. I just don’t want to talk about that.” He sighs and looks out into the horizon, running his tongue around the inside of his lips. “You’re nothing like him anyway. No one could be

like him. I just thought that you'd be a good fit for us, that's all. What with all the tarot stuff and what not. That and. Actually, nothing."

"No tell me."

"Nah, it's stupid."

"What, c'mon?" I say, almost nudging him in the ribs which I decide against at the last moment. Sonny tilts his head up and looks down on me.

"Isn't it obvious? You're an outsider. Like us. But we don't say that to each other because it's weird."

"I guess so." I think about a lifetime of looking in on normality. I've never really had friends. I never went to parties or snuck out with girlfriends. I never went to dances or Christmas parties. Any party I did go to was just to score some blow. All I can remember after a particularly isolated high-school experience are bad decisions and bad acquaintances, endless cycles working between fast-food joints and overnights at Walmart. Everyday was just getting stoned and drunk alone, watching TV and waiting to fall asleep. "I was hoping for a more normal life when I left rehab," I say without thinking of what that could even look like.

"Fuck that, bro. For what? Spend your life watching TV and jerking off some fuckhead boss until you die in a nursing home with a diaper full of shit. Fuck that, not for me," he says before chucking a rock. I take one from the little pile between us and throw it just across the edge of the grass.

"Well, some people might think that pretty childish of you."

"Yeah, well. They aren't raking in ten million dollars in two weeks, are they?"

“I suppose.” A welcome breeze scuttles past us and I can feel the sweat all over me cool.

“Did Anjelica ask you to babysit me after she’s gone in exchange for a cut?” Sonny says under his breath, still looking ahead into the field. My natural inclination is to lie but I know that Sonny already knows the answer to his question.

“She did,” I say.

“Figures.” A moment passes as we both admire the soon-to-set sun. “Well, since we’re all being right honest here, who’s that girl you’ve been sketching off to see all the time?”

“Ah. Nobody, just some girl,” I say, holding back my terror at his inquisition and trying to be conscious of my body language. I know Sonny can read me, but I don’t think he knows that I know.

“What, like a girlfriend?”

“No, no. Not in a million years. She’s just a friend.”

“Ha!” Sonny blurts. “I know you. You aren’t the type to make friends, no offence,” he says as he sends another rock flying. I’ve got a good eye for people’s real meaning. Well, most of the time anyway. No one at the convent seems to have any life outside of it. Other than the occasional conversation with the odd drug dealer or “client” (client sounds better than victim), no one here talks to anyone else. Even Abiona seems to be pregnant through immaculate conception or something. What a perfect family. The epitome of “ride or die.” Then I remember that Anjelica will be out of the picture soon. What then? I’d like to think that we’ll stick together. I mean, why else would Anjelica ask me to stick with Sonny? It dawns on me that she might be passing the reigns onto him and that I’m just too stupid to not have picked up on that. It seems that a life outside of

this world doesn't exist for them. Maybe this is a cult after all? But one thing's for sure. There's no way they're going to make an exception for me, and I think Sonny knows that I know that.

“She's just an old friend from a long time ago. But don't worry, me and her are done now anyway.”

“Alright,” Sonny says, nodding, with his bottom lip curled over the top. “You've never told anyone what goes on around here, right?” The nonchalant drone of his voice sends thrills of worry down my spine as I silently commit to never see Thadie again.

“Obviously not, man. I'm not that stupid.”

“Good,” he says, turning to me with a piercing look. “Because that wouldn't be good.” It's almost playful the way he says it and it doesn't feel like intimidation more so than a fact of life.

“Of course,” I say with a nod. Sonny smiles and takes a deep breath that he exhales slowly before hopping off the truck. He slaps my knee and starts walking towards the convent. “C'mon I'll get ya a beer.”

\* \* \*

A week passes as we prepare to bring forth the dead. Each day starts with Abiona vomiting in the bathroom down the hall, her morning sickness in full effect. I can't help but be worried for her, though she seems content lounging on the front deck and in the makeshift living room that looks strikingly similar to the recovery centre's common area. Even so, something's off. She doesn't berate me or Sonny anymore. Nor does she speak a word to Anjelica, save for when they both attend Jennifer's weekly tarot reading. California Delaney left for Vancouver a few days ago to bury Steven's body, which frees up a lot of her time as well. No word about a police investigation into Steven's “accident” either. Sonny has absolved himself of any wrong doing. But in the end, he was

right. No evidence means no suspicion. For now, I guess. Me and Sonny spend evenings on the bonnet of his truck or in the kitchen, talking about aliens, God, jungle cats, time travel, anything at all. Darlin and Chappie join in every now and then. The only thing we never talk about is where we come from. That suits me fine. I haven't dreamt about it for three weeks now.

Other than the weekly visit to Philpott's office and the occasional drug-run with Chappie and Darlin, I pretty much spend my days getting fitted for the fat suit. It arrives in pieces: a weird foam suit with a silicone skin so intricate that the veins in it look like they're actually coursing with blood. Despite the skin's cold leathery feel, the inside is irritating to the touch, like over washed spandex. Everyone hustles about the house except for me, J.R. and Sonny. We are confined to what I can only describe as J.R.'s tech room, a dainty mother superior's office with blood red carpet and wood paneling. J.R.'s got a few laptops with a live feed of various rooms in Jennifer's house playing on a desk in the far back of the room. The left side of the room is the polar opposite. On a fold out desk are silicone body parts, face molds, and bottles of a white, milky paste. J.R. and Sonny argue over the semantics of the fat suit whilst I sit for hours watching the surprisingly large amount of footage of Jennifer's late father. In a way, it's all up to me to seal the deal. So, I study his movements, his voice, anything and everything. Between my studies I sit for hours as J.R. slathers me with the strange gel, molding the ice-cold silicone body onto mine before scraping it all off and starting over. I watch in the mirror as I transform back and forth between myself and Jennifer's father. With each of J.R.'s attempts, I get one step closer to becoming him. Sometimes I get lost in his mind. I fantasize about being a father and create false memories of business meetings and ball games, supper around the table, and bored sex with my bored wife. Artificial memories of growing up in the eighties and trying on shoes at the mall—my kids running around the store—flash before me as I look past the silicone edges of my round cheeks that are just slightly in my view. Every now

and then, a memory of Thadie pops in my head. I urgently try to push it away faster than J.R. can tear the suit off my body. She hasn't called or texted in a week.

\* \* \*

I can't imagine how amazing it must be to own a car. All my life it has been out of the question. So, I savour every minute of the two-and-a-half-hour drive from the convent to the city. The washer at the convent is busted and it's on me to make the drive to town to get an assortment of bolts and a motor. I've even got my "Dick and Goreman's" work coat on, which makes me feel like a regular dude and not the untethered man-baby I've become. The truck grumbles along the highway and smells like damp wood and cigarette smoke. Every now and then I get lost in the flat spaces of trees along the side of the road as I dip into a valley, only to be struck by the endless slopes of forest on the other end of its peak. I don't think people who own vehicles appreciate their luck. These trips down the Southern Shore will never feel like home; nothing can feel like that. But it sure is beautiful. Enough to never want to leave. Thadie texted me last night with "Can we talk??" It didn't take much to convince Sonny to let me do a supply run while he and J.R. bickered over the suit and everything else. I run over what I'm going to say and what I suppose she'll say, but I'm only half-thinking of it. I don't want to waste the tranquility of this lonesome road.

I'm happy to meet her at the airport because it would be super great if we could leave on good terms. The weight of everything that is going on is only really hitting me now as I enter through the revolving door in the departures area. There's something about communal buildings like this, or a library, or a mall that really make my life feel devoid of reason and sanity. That feeling is really hitting me now. I'm getting the fear. I shouldn't have smoked that joint before coming here. The whirl of everyone rolling suitcases and the mish-mash of pant suits, polos, yoga pants, burkas, beer shirts, and ball caps feels unbearably loud. That is until the barrage of the intercom. It takes me

a second of sitting in a chair near the car rental stall to catch my breath before making my way to the restaurant.

Thadie waves at me with a wide-brimmed smile as I approach the front of the restaurant. Everyone is saddled nearly on top of each other and I feel like I can't help but zoom in on the disgusting crumbs of danishes in their coffee and their open mouths as they laugh.

"Are you okay?" Thadie says with one eyebrow raised.

"Can we just sit by the window please? I'm sorry, I just feel like I'm having a panic attack or something."

"Yeah sure, man."

We make our way to a giant window overlooking the runway. The pavement looks like it's steaming and I can see the damp spots in the vests of the baggage guys filling the plane.

"Look. I got a flight at three-thirty but I just wanted to talk."

"Oh. You're leaving?" I say, secretly pleased with that news.

"Just for three days but I'll be back again on Wednesday for another week or so. But I just. I just want to say I'm sorry, Norrin. I just want you to be okay." The plane outside starts its engine as the retractable walkway drives away. It feels like it's just me and T in here. Everyone else is just furniture. I am a terrible person. I know that. I don't even think it's so bad that I'm like this. Could be a lot worse really. But even so, Thadie has never given up on me. She's always been my friend despite my rejection.

"I'm sorry too. I know that you're just trying to help. That's all you ever do. You just help," I say. She doesn't say anything back, just smiles and looks out at the plane.

“Hey, you remember Mackenzie Miller?” she says out of nowhere.

“Um. Maybe?”

“Sure, you do. She was like a ghost whisperer, tarot lady or something?”

“Oh yeah, I remember.” Images of Anjelica flash in my mind as I remember Mackenzie. She came from a super rich family but got into all kinds of shit in high school. When her parents died, she went nuts and started throwing these lavish parties. I didn’t hear tell of her after I dropped out of high school other than she was really into ghosts and shit like that. Anjelica would have loved her.

“Well guess what?” Thadie says with a satisfied look on her face.

“Okay what?”

“She’s like, a Gospel mega-star now. Like. A millionaire preacher woman.”

“No way!” And I genuinely mean that I am amazed at the ingenuity of that woman because she was dumb as nails.

“How do you know that?”

“I saw it for myself. Drove past one of her mega churches when I was in Texas last and saw her face on the billboard. So, I googled her and there it was.”

“That’s so nuts,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Don’t take my word for it. Look it up.” The intercom buzzes with an update as the plane outside starts revving up. “Remember when she shit her pants in Mr. Dorsit’s homeroom?” It only takes her a second before she breaks into a whirl of laughter that she hides with her hand.



“How could I forget,” I say, which just makes her laugh even more. She tries to say something but can’t get it out and it’s not long till her laugh infects me and I start howling too.

Eventually I get tired enough that my panic attack winds down and me and Thadie reminisce about our younger days. I try not to think about appreciating it too much. Nostalgia is the tinder of depression. I want to be present in the moment without thinking about it. I’m sick of cataloguing the commercial breaks of happiness in my life.

We talk about Ed Noseworthy and Newfoundland politics but I really don’t care. I know that makes me a bad person but I really just want to be here with her right now. We both look in the direction of the intercom as it calls out Thadie’s flight number.

“That’s me. I’ll see you when I get back?” she says, almost lowering her head.

“Of course!” I say as I hug her. She smells like bubble-gum. She’s smelt like bubble-gum for as long as I’ve known her. It makes me feel like a kid again: hopeful and poised for something better. All the way on the drive over here I kept having that feeling where you imagine yourself veering off a cliff or smashing through the guard rail on the highway. It’s actually a pretty common experience. The French call it l'appel du vide or “the call of the void.” Funny how you can get so close to the edge and have it seem so normal to cross it.

“Hey, T,” I say, grabbing her arm as she prepares to leave. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“What?” she says, expecting anything at all. It’s almost like my throat is trying to close up so that I can’t talk. Like a defense mechanism.

“I don’t really live with my Aunt Mabel.”

\* \* \*

Sonny's mid-spiel about some type of rattlesnake he read about as we motor down the highway. The sun blasts in our direction and we both dip our sun-visors. This is our last drop to Paul Piercy before he heads out to the mainland for some kind of wacko-nutcase rally or whatever. The shitty thing is that our meet has to coincide with his final meet with Mother Begonia. I should be worrying about my acting chops, as far as Paul thinks, me and Sonny have never met Anjelica. I should be worrying about that but all I can think about is Thadie. I told her everything. She's always been one to interrupt with some kind of half-thought-out solution but this time she didn't. She just stood there, her mouth hanging open in disbelief as I told her everything right there by the airport window overlooking the tarmac. The only thing I didn't tell her was about Steven Delaney's death. I can't bring myself to call it murder, even if my mind skirts the thought every now and then. The ten million dollars and the names of Jennifer and Paul stay a secret too. But saying it all out loud to her made it abundantly clear that I am on a path marked by wolves. I feel both terrified and powerful. I am in tune with the universe, finally, I think.

"Hey? Are you listening?" Sonny says as we approach downtown.

"Yeah," I lie as Sonny judges my answer before going on again about some guy that was getting high off rattlesnake poison. Thadie promised she wouldn't tell. She's kept most of my secrets for as long as I've known her. Maybe that's why I told her. Or maybe I want this to end and I know she will do what I can't. No. That's not it. A part of me feels like I made a mistake telling her. that she will tell someone. But as I stare out into the streets of homeless men at the traffic lights, I don't regret telling her. She might be self righteous, but she's no Judas.

Paul leads me and Sonny down a dimly lit stairway with wood paneled walls. In my bookbag I've got a large brick of blow that I pray will be the last one I ever deliver. The air changes from sticky into underground cool as we turn into an unfinished basement. There are wooden beams and

building materials lying about. This is the kind of place you'd break into if you needed somewhere to shoot up: a windowless, unfinished job-site with a concrete floor. The room is divided into one large room and one smaller room by unfinished plywood walls with house wrap pasted on. In the middle of the main room are two couches facing each other, a coffee table between them, and some leftover two-by-fours stacked about the place. On the side farthest from me is a loveseat with an older, handsome-looking guy slouched in it. It takes me a moment before I realize that it's none other than Newfie Jesus himself, Ed Noseworthy. Figures that he'd be hanging out with someone like Paul. Anjelica is chain-smoking on one of the couches. She's wearing a dark pair of retro-chic sunglasses, her head tilted upwards as she exhales smoke into the beam of light coming from a nearby work lamp. Ed Noseworthy rails a line before shooting his head up and closing his eyes as we approach. Anjelica turns her head towards us before turning her attention back to the ceiling without a word.

"Boys, meet Mother Begonia," Paul says as he gestures towards her before taking a seat on the couch opposite her. We go through the how-do-you-dos as Sonny leans in Paul's ear, asking him if we can conduct our business in private.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," Anjelica pops, her eyes still on the ceiling.

"Yes now. Just pass that over here and I'll wire you tonight," Paul says with his eyes on my bag. Sonny unzips it and hands him a brick that he inspects in the light. Me and Sonny politely nod in the direction of Ed who does the same for us when Paul pipes up. "Best kind, b'ys. Thanks again."

"Not a problem," Sonny says as he looks at me before gesturing to the stairway. "Have a good trip, man," I say. We start for the door when Ed Noseworthy finally speaks.

“Hold up now. I didn’t catch your names there?” he says with a grandfatherly smile. Me and Sonny look at each other. He introduces himself as Trevor and me as his buddy Mike. Ed slouches in his chair and sips from a whiskey glass. Anjelica seems like she’s not even listening. “You boys want to do a line?” he says as the ice in his glass clinks. Before we can answer Paul tells him that we don’t mix business and pleasure. “Well, we’ve got a world-renowned fortune teller right here? What do you say, Paulie, let the boys have a look, luh.”

“Monsieur, you are confused,” Anjelica starts. “I’m not a cheap conjurer of tricks. I provide an experience of this universe. It takes weeks to open a connection between me and a client’s pathway.” She turns to us and eyes us up and down. “Besides. I doubt either of these gentlemen can afford me.” Paul slaps his leg and turns to me and Sonny with his head cocked.

“What do you say, boys? It’s on the house.”

“I think we’re good, but thanks anyway,” Sonny says as he starts to walk away again. I’m just about to follow him when Anjelica turns to me.

“What about you? The skinny one. Mr. Blonde,” Anjelica says, pointing at me with her half-smoked cigarette.

“Oh. No thanks. I’m fine,” I try as she waves me off.

“Nonsense. C’mon, have a seat,” she says. I look to Sonny for some kind of reassurance but he just ever so slightly shrugs and gestures to the couch with the brim of his hat. I feel like I can hear my footsteps echo in my chest as I take a seat next to Paul and face Mother Begonia. Paul smells like pipe tobacco—the kind Grampa Keith used to smoke—which makes me feel a little more settled. On the shiny oak table in front of me is a line of leftover blow, a mirror, a pencil, and

a stack of worn tarot cards. They've got what looks like a medieval drawing of a cat's head on them. Trust me when I say, I have never seen a pack like this in my life and I have seen them all.

"I can only offer you a basic tarot reading. That's about it," she says from behind her dark sunglasses.

"That's fine."

"Have you had a reading before?"

"No, this is my first." I wonder if Abiona would be proud of my performance.

"And your name you said was?" Anjelica says, lingering on the last word and expertly shuffling the cards.

"Mike."

"Ah yes, Mike. Okay then mister Mike. I want you to place your hand on the tarot deck in front of you and close your eyes."

"Alright," I say, slipping into the motions of what feels like a lifetime ago. I place my hands on the deck and close my eyes.

"Follow my breathing," Anjelica says as she places her hand on mine. Her touch is cold but soft, like satin or fresh snow. I can feel her pulse beating in sync with mine. My mind is blank. Well, as blank as it can be. But no thoughts rush through my head as my breathing almost instinctively starts matching her own. "Breathe in. Breathe out." Her breath is ice cold as it brushes past me.

"Alright. Open," she says. As I open my eyes, I feel the calm that Thadie has tried and failed to replicate for her whole life. "Now, your past," Anjelica says as she flips the first card. "The Five of Swords. Destruction, no?" All I can see in her dark glasses is a distorted image of myself as smoke

slowly billows from her nose. My mind is arrested. I can't think of anything other than focusing in on her. It's like I'm trapped in her rhythm. I feel my stomach drop and I don't know why. Even the work lamp's light seems to have a subtle green tinge to it all of a sudden.

"Your second. Your present." Anjelica flips up the cards again. "The Six of Swords. You are in transition. You're changing into something else, something better." Her voice is almost like a whisper. Everyone else is staring at her without a word. Even Ed, who seems to keep his demeanor intact at all times, is silently on the edge of his seat. I turn to Sonny who stares right at me before scratching his cheek and looking into the corner of the room. "You ready for the last?" she says. I nod and try to talk but it feels like my body is on standby and without feeling. Anjelica flips the final card.

"The Six of Wands. Your future. It means triumph," she says, leaning back in her chair. The air is charged with something that I can't explain. No one says anything, even though nothing really seems to have happened to warrant this type of zombification. I am a bubble gently coasting in the summer's air. I feel no need to think of anything other than the now. Anjelica snaps her fingers and everyone except Sonny seems to pop back into reality.

"I feel strange," Ed Noseworthy says as he massages his temples.

"We are treading the line between the veil," Anjelica says as she blows a smoke ring into the air. All of a sudden Ed's face goes just a slight shade paler.

"You're giving me the heebie-jeebies, missus," Ed almost whimpers. Anjelica chuckles as Paul starts with a "Hey, no need of that now Ed."

"No, b'y. This is all devil worship and the likes of that," Ed replies as him and Paul start into a low-grumble of arguing. I turn to Sonny (who's standing with his hands in his pockets) when it

dawns on me that the reading Anjelica just gave me was the exact one that Allan gave me three times in a row, the last being a few weeks ago. I immediately turn to Anjelica. Goosebumps run down my arms as Mother Begonia smiles before taking a puff of her cigarette.

## Chapter 15

Me and Sonny decide to hit up the McDonalds breakfast menu to cheer us up, though neither of us say it. It's even foggier than usual today. The headlights of the truck barely even make a dent in the cloud ahead as we pass along this lonesome highway that I've come to love so much. Abiona left in the night. She made off with the rental SUV and most of the money in the basement safe: something I didn't even know existed until it was emptied. I never heard her leaving either, though I seriously doubt she left completely undetected. This whole day has been weird.

Chappie came to my door at five a.m. with the news, simply saying, "Abi's gone. She's not coming back. You're on trash detail today," before wandering back down the hallway. I only got the full story from Sonny at breakfast. Not that it was a usual breakfast. Everyone seemingly stayed in bed this morning. Sonny was the only one in the kitchen, perched on the counter and smoking a cigarette like he always does. He didn't go into specifics on who saw what, just that we're down most of the cash and that she's gone and not coming back. After Sonny caught me up on what happened we decided on something greasy for breakfast.

As we approached his truck, I saw a letter folded in half with the word "John" written on it and placed in the truck's windshield wiper. Sonny snatched it and read it in a few seconds, his expression as vacant as the kitchen we came from. When I asked him what it said he just replied "nothing important" before ripping it up and tossing the pieces to the wind.

\* \* \*

We're taking a break from molding the fat suit to work on Anjelica's part in the plan. J.R. has me, Sonny and Anjelica gathered in an empty room upstairs. It bums me out being in here. I don't



know why really. The walls are baby blue with white trim and intricate crown mouldings. The wooden slat floor is painted purple and it seems strange that a group of nuns would paint it this colour. Anjelica is seated in a wooden chair against the wall with the only window to her left. From this angle, she kind of looks like one of the old paintings in the Delaney house, those old colonial style American Gothic paintings. Sonny is in the middle of the room on a ladder, unfastening the latch of the titty light fixture above him.

“Alright. You sure you want to do this?” J.R. says to Anjelica as he crouches down beside her.

“Yes, yes. Just do it,” Anjelica says in her usual passive-aggressive tone. Everyone is at some kind of emotional extreme today. No one dares to mention Abiona. All day I’ve felt like I’m being hammered with the compulsion to bring her up. Even if it goes badly, at least it’s out in the open and I can let it go. But I’m finding my footing here and if no one else is bringing it up, I guess I won’t either.

“Because we can do this a lot better with holograms,” J.R. continues.

“Enough with the fucking holograms,” Sonny barks with a screwdriver between his teeth. J.R. just barely shakes his head. He stares out the window before turning back to Anjelica.

“Alright, this is how it works okay?” he says as Sonny steps down from the ladder with the fixture in hand. J.R. pulls from his pocket what looks like a toilet-paper roll wrapped in duct tape with two wires poking out the top of it. It’s a sinister looking thing. Like something the Unabomber would have. The sight of it makes me shudder, though I keep my body language in check. “This thing is like a flashbang,” J.R. says, holding the device up in front of her. “Except it’s maybe an eighth of the strength of a military grade one.”

“Okay, yes. Fine,” Anjelica says with a sigh.

“We’ll trigger it remotely when you give us the signal and it should temporarily disorientate Jennifer and hopefully give us a window to get Norrin in position.”

“This will dampen the sound,” Sonny says as he passes her a cloak. J.R. helps her into it. She looks frail the way they’re treating her, and I’m surprised she’s even accepting of their help.

“We have two cloaks, okay?” J.R. says with a second cloak in hand. “Make sure you take the one with the red lining and not the other one. Yours has a protective lining for the sound and flash. Jennifer’s doesn’t. So, you have to be absolutely—”

“For Christ’s sakes, I’m not a child, let’s get on with it,” she snaps all in one breath.

“Very well, then,” J.R. says after a moment. He hands Sonny the device and takes a seat against the wall by the door. Sonny starts up the ladder and places it into the light fixture before screwing the lamp back on.

“How’s being a ghost?” Anjelica says to me as she pulls the padded hood over her head. For a moment I think she’s taking a jab at me.

“What do you mean?” I say, testing the waters.

“Jennifer’s father. The suit. Not your fragile ego.” She crosses her legs and cracks her knuckles and even though I can’t see her face under her hood, I can tell she’s scowling.

“It’s good to be dead, I guess.” I can see J.R. in my peripherals shaking his head and Sonny hiding a smile as he approaches Anjelica.

“Make sure you keep your head down. Don’t look at the light whatever you do,” he says with a cautious tone I’ve never heard before. Anjelica nods as me, Sonny, and J.R. leave the room.

We're standing in the hallway as J.R. starts to close the door to the room, popping his head in one more time with a "are you sure you want to do this?" Anjelica immediately scolds him for it. The door clicks shut as J.R. looks at me and Sonny with a shielded air of concern.

"We're not doing the hologram," Sonny says sharply. J.R. eyes him for a moment before he starts.

"Alright, here we go," he shouts as he pulls an ancient looking flip-phone from his pocket. "We ready?" he shouts again as he flips the phone open.

"Ready," Anjelica hollers from behind the closed door.

"Okay and three, two, one." BOOM. A muffled pop that sounds like a gunshot is accompanied by a flash of light that outlines the seams of the door. Everyone is still for a moment. J.R. has a look of guilt chiselled into his face that Sonny, unsurprisingly, does not. I almost want to ask him why he looks so calm, but I know he'll just say "I never make a mistake," or something like that with his usual unapologetic air of confidence. J.R. cautiously opens the door and we all peer inside, almost over the shoulders of each other.

"Anj? You, okay?" J.R. says to the hooded figure sitting by the wall.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," Anjelica says to my immediate relief as she pulls down her hood. The room smells like gunpowder and the light fixture has a black ring of soot layering its inside. I can feel everyone's eyes on the left arm of Anjelica's cloak where a single shard of glass from the light fixture has sliced it. Anjelica looks at us with a stiff upper lip as she frowns.

"We'll figure it out," Sonny says in an unnaturally pleasant tone.

“Can someone bring me a cigarette please?” Anjelica spits as she gets to her feet. I think Grampa Keith would have really liked her. But then again, he probably wouldn’t think highly of this level of fraud.

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Silver Jesus is shiny with moonlight as I scroll through the generic news feed built into the phone that Thadie gave me. These late-night hours of lying in my bed and scrolling through my phone like a regular asshole are soothing, though I dare not return to any type of social media since I’ve met J.R. If this was a year ago, I’d be into my fifth hour of online tarot readings. My head would be pounding and my eyes watering from not blinking. Just goes to show you how far I’ve come because it’s not even remotely nagging at me. I’m about to call it a night when there’s a faint knock at the door. I immediately assume it is Chappie come to yell at me. I don’t hesitate for a second as I shove the phone under my pillow.

“Come in,” I say as the door opens and Anjelica appears. For a moment I am almost terrified at the sight of her. Her bony face is white as snow which makes her black eyes and jet-black hair look darker. Even her nightgown looks like something from the 1800s. She hasn’t shown any sign of illness since she announced her terminal status. I hate myself for thinking that she’s lying. But seeing her now, there’s no denying that her cheek bones are a little sharper, her lips a little paler, and the fierce blue of her eyes a little duller.

“Come with me,” she says before heading back down the hallway. For a moment I am sure I’m dreaming. I take a second to get a grip on reality before following her, shaking it off and slipping into a pair of jeans lying on the floor.

We’re just about halfway down the hallway when I catch up to her.

“What’s going on?” I say as we approach the main hall of the building. I can only think that this is about Abiona, but exactly how I don’t know. Part of me hopes that this is my official induction ceremony, though I doubt that they would do something so cheesy. I’m prone to magical thinking.

The hallway is dead quiet and dark with the outlines of cabinets, doorways and staircases. Only the shiny crucifixes stand out in the blackness. Anjelica shushes me and tells me that there’s something requiring my urgent attention as we approach J.R.’s tech/fat-suit room and the basement entrance right next to it. We stop by the heavy wooden door of the makeshift tech-room as Anjelica unlocks the door. I wonder for how long they’ve been locking it. As we enter, I’m taken aback by the sight of the suit in the far-left corner. In the dark it looks like a bulging, naked, headless corpse with no genitals. Anjelica doesn’t react to it as she flicks on a corner lamp and gestures for me to sit by the wall of laptops. She takes a seat next to me and turns on the smaller laptop.

“You going to tell me what we’re doing here?” I say as the laptop whizzes to life, casting a blue hue onto our faces.

“I want you to explain something to me, Norrin,” she says as she places a thumb drive in the side of the laptop. I don’t know if I’m just tired or what but I can’t for the life of me see where this is going. It’s only a second longer when a voice recorder starts playing on screen. Anjelica lights up a smoke and leans back in her chair with her legs crossed. I hear Thadie’s voice between what sounds like the rustle of fabric against a microphone.

“Norrin! This is nuts, man. I don’t know what you want me to say? I think you should tell the police and get away from these people,” Thadie says from the screen.

“I know how it sounds, T. I really do,” my voice mumbles back from the laptop speakers. “But this is the only type of life I can have. This is my chance. I know you don’t understand that but

I'm telling you this because I trust you." My blood feels like it's freezing in my veins. Vomit is running up my esophagus as I realize that this is the conversation I had with Thadie at the airport.

"I guess. You can always trust me, Norrin. But please just be careful," Thadie's voice whimpers. I turn to Anjelica, who's staring at the screen.

"You'll keep my secret, right? Like always, right?" my voice continues. I can't take another word and I want to slam the laptop shut. But now is not a time to panic. Or maybe it is. Though I still take my time as I patiently move my fingers over the track pad and exit out of the media player on the screen. The screen goes black for a split second before reverting to the usual CCTV of Jennifer's house that's broken into four squares. In the top left I can see Jennifer asleep on the living room couch.

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.

"What now?" I say with a gruff whisper. Anjelica takes a long haul of her cigarette and exhales onto the square where Jennifer is sleeping. Smoke bashes against the screen and ripples into the unventilated room.

"Why would you tell her?" she says, calm as ever.

"I, I, I've always told her everything," I say with my eyes on the red shag carpet below me.

"You didn't tell her about Steven or Jennifer. Why tell her at all then?"

"I don't know, Anjelica, I guess—"

“Stop lying. You haven’t stopped lying to me since the first night you got here,” she snaps. I search my thoughts for something to say but I just feel like I want to cry. How pathetic is that?

“Have you been recording me this whole time?”

“Of course not,” she says as she leans into the table to ash her cigarette. “Your jacket. Your work jacket has a microphone in the collar so that we could hear the Delaneys when they spoke to you and Sonny. You are just too stupid to think about that.”

“Do the others know?” The room falls quiet except for the gentle buzz of the laptop as Anjelica shakes her head.

“No.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll make you a trade, Norrin. Because I want you to do well. I’ll keep this conversation to myself if you can answer me truthfully,” she says with another puff. I wish I could understand what she wants. I am telling her the truth so what does she want? “So. Deal?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now tell me. Why did you tell her?” Anjelica snuffs her cigarette and crosses her arms as she blows out a final plume of smoke. I think of all kinds of excuses. Fear. Weakness. Love. Stupidity. But they all just sound like the same version of each other. I can feel Anjelica’s patience pressing down on me and I blurt out the first thing that comes into my mind. I keep my eyes on the carpet but my heart is back in Malawi. It has always been in Malawi.

“Ma came running into the hall. I don’t remember everything, I can’t even remember anything before the hallway. But she came running and screaming about a bat in the house. And

then she huddled with me in the hallway. I was, I was so scared. I kept imagining the bat—imagining it flying in streaks across the room. All I could picture was its fangs and it biting Ma and me, kept imagining blood and biting and tearing and its wings and its sound.” The pool of blood outside the Malawi mansion jackknives my mind. Dad’s tobacco pipe laying in its dark wooden box jackknives my mind. I can feel tears that have never stopped sliding down my face.

“But it was all a lie. There was no bat it was all a lie. What really happened was that there was a gunman outside in the driveway. He followed Pa home and stopped him at the front gate of that fucking stupid house. He put a gun in Pa’s face. The man was a disgruntled patient of my Dad’s, someone who wasn’t well. Ma watched from the window as he pulled the trigger and shot Pa in the head. Then she ran into the house and hid in the hallway with me.” My breath feels like it’s weighted, like a lump between my throat and my chest. I almost turn to Anjelica but my head feels too heavy to look anywhere but at the carpet as tear after tear soaks into it. I’m so pathetic. I deserve everything that happens to me.

“Go on,” she says, almost whispering.

“I never saw my father a lot. And I needed my mother. But she—she was on a different path. She didn’t want me anymore after that. So she sent me away.” My headache is full blown at this point and my nose is tickled by the snot I keep wiping away. Still, I keep my eyes on the carpet. I let it out. It’s been so long. I’m so tired.

“Stupid boy, that’s not true,” Anjelica says with her head cocked. “Men don’t understand what it is to be a mother. You’re all just boys who grow old, you never grow up. I’m sure your mother loved you. Boy, have you considered what she was going through? Grow up. Take some responsibility. She’s gone and many years have passed.” Anjelica’s words slosh around the room—in my grasp for a second and then gone again. I know she’s right. I’ve known this for a long time. But I



just don't care enough to bother with healing. Life is simple when you are weak. I just want to feel good. I don't care how that is. But I wipe my eyes anyway and take a deep breath.

"I suppose so," I say. Anjelica nods and purses her lips.

"Where is she now?"

"She died a few years ago. She got remarried and had another family too. They took care of everything."

A long silence sits with us as I wipe my tears. My vision is blurry with moisture and the red of the shag carpet is without detail and out of focus.

"Norrin," she finally says. My eyes are closed when I feel her warm hand on my knee. I sigh as I look at her, though I can't tell if it's relief or fear or what. Anjelica's expression is vacant except for the hint of a furrowed brow. "I will keep what you have done between us."

"Okay," I say, completely exhausted.

"Tomorrow. You will go find your friend. Tell her that you can never see her again."

\* \* \*

I don't waste a god-damn second getting downtown. Nobody said a word as I peeled out of the convent in Sonny's truck. Thadie agreed to meet at some bar downtown that I've never heard of and I really wish we could just meet at a park or something. It's lunch time so the daytime drunks are just getting to the slots and I really don't want to be around anyone right now.

I'm speed walking along the furthest part of downtown before the highway, on that throwaway street with all the antique stores. Thadie's leaning against the wall of a gardening store as cars rush by a few feet in front of her.

“T! Hey!” I say with a false optimism as I approach. It’s only as she turns to face me that I notice her cigarette. In all the years I’ve known Thadie, I have never seen her smoke. She waves without saying a word as I stand with my back turned to the street. “What the fuck is this?” I say, gesturing to the cigarette.

“There’s someone you need to talk to,” she says whilst throwing down and stomping out the smoke. It darkens her white tennis shoe.

“I told you. I’m okay. But I need to talk to you.”

“I did some digging on your little cult," she snaps. For a moment I can sense us wandering down a path of growing disaster, but I’m not resigning myself to that and I keep my cool.

“You promised me—”

“I know, but—”

“No. You promised me!”

“I didn’t talk to any police or anything like that. No one knows anything, okay?”

“So, what do you know? I told you everything.”

“Well, your friends aren’t the only people with access to information,” she says, leaning in closer to me. For a second it sounds like she’s enjoying this, like it’s a game. That’s what my instincts tell me so I naturally avoid that thought.

“Okay well, what?”

“Your friend, Seamus. How much has he told you about himself?”

“Who the fuck is Seamus?” I say almost under my breath as I lean in closer to her.

“There’s someone you should meet,” she replies with her eyes locked onto me.

\* \* \*

We’re in the furthest back table of a small, sketchy bar just around the corner of the gardening shop. The whole place is bay-town maximalism. The wood paneled walls are barely visible against the shelves of bottled ships, oars, and framed photos of men in toques. It’s like a bayman’s look-and-find with the star attraction being the bar that is completely covered in glued-on bottlecaps. Sitting across from me is a man who’s clearly seen better days. It’s almost impossible to see his face under the hood of his dark raincoat, massive unkempt beard, and matted hair. Thadie sits to my left and pushes a pint towards him. He hurriedly drinks from it. His beard is wet with beads of beer as he turns to Thadie.

“What do you want me to say then?” he says with a deep creaking voice that almost sounds like he’s slurring. Thadie leans in closer to the table and turns to me while gesturing to the guy with an open palm.

“Norrin, this is Chris Pike. His brothers are John and Seamus Pike,” she says with a matter-of-factness about her. I’m almost shocked to hear those names come from Thadie. My mind rushes with worry of how much she knows. Steven Delaney, Jennifer, the dealers at the fishing stage: it feels like there is no end to my undoing. The man ahead of me doesn’t seem like he even knows where he is. He just stares at the table and runs his lips inside his mouth, like he’s sucking on an invisible thumb.

“Why would you bring him here?” I say to Thadie as I lean into her ear.

“You know him?” she whispers back. Before I can say anything, the man takes another glug of his pint and pipes up:

“You’re not running with that old witch, are ya?” he grumbles. Me and Thadie look at each other for a moment before gently leaning closer to him.

“I remember you,” he says before wagging his finger in my direction and pointing at me. I think he’s smiling too, though I can’t see any part of his mouth or jaw beneath his beard. “You were at the centre.” The memory of Sonny in the waiting room flashes before me as I remember him asking about Chris Pike. Though I can’t remember actually seeing this guy there. He would have been hard to miss but, then again, Quetiapine is a hell of a drug. You can trust me on that one.

“So, he was there to see you? Sonny?”

“Yes. He’s looking for Johnny.”

“So, you know Anjelica,” I say. The name seems like it disgusts him as he starts forcefully closing his eyes and shuffling around in his seat.

“I don’t talk to me brothers.”

“But you know her?” I can sense his patience or interest waning as he casually looks at the door behind me.

“You got any ritz er wa?” he says as Thadie moves into his eyeline.

“Hey. I got a hundred bucks for you. Just tell him what you told me, okay?” she says more sternly than she should. The man nods and closes his eyes before going quiet and taking another large gulp.

“T, can I talk to you alone?” I try as she directs my attention back to the man.

“Please, Chris. I’ll give you—”

“That old witch is a fucking snake,” he blurts. A few droplets of his spit graze my cheek. “Fools, foolishness. They are running with her since some time ago. Now she’s gone and pushed poor old Johnny out and Seamus feels bad for it now. He comes looking for Johnny and he asks me “where’s Johnny?” but I told you—” he says, rising to his feet and hurriedly wagging his finger at Thadie. “I told you and I told Seamus! I don’t be talking to me brothers!” His chest is heaving. The few drunks at the bar and the ladies playing the waps cautiously look at us, then look away again.

“That’s alright, thank you,” Thadie says in a soothing tone. The man takes his seat in a flash before chugging the rest of his beer and slamming it on the table.

“One hundred,” he barks.

“One hundred,” Thadie says as she takes a bill out of her white leather purse. The man snatches it out of her hand in an instant before slamming past my shoulder and walking out of the bar. We both instinctively wait until he’s gone before Thadie starts up.

“Norrin, I—”

“How did you find him?” I can’t wait one more second for this formality to come to an end. She sighs and straightens a coaster in front of her.

“I just followed the breadcrumbs, okay? From the number listed as Aunt Mabel all the way down to a set of fake names that eventually led to a man named Seamus Pike: thirty-three, multiple arrest warrants for breaking and entering and assault.” The way she says “assault” makes me think of when he beat the shit out of me on the first day I met him. That didn’t seem weird at all when it happened, but now I can’t help remembering it as something fucked up.

“I know all that, T.” I didn’t. “But I told you, this is what I want. After I do what I have to do, then I’ll never have to worry about money ever again. Don’t you want that for me?”

“Norrin, you are hurting people,” she says like she’s got a knife in her back.

“Not more than they deserve. These aren’t good people, T.”

“And you’re the judge of that are you?”

“I’m not doing this with you. We had a deal. You promised you would keep this a secret.”

My voice feels like it’s a wisp, like what I’m saying can be dashed with a breath. Thadie looks down at the coaster she’s fiddling with before looking up at me.

“What if you get hurt?” she says, wide-eyed. My mind goes still. I forego piecing together the words and let them come naturally.

“T. I love you. I don’t think we would ever have even known each other if it wasn’t for what happened to us. And I guess, on some level, I’m glad it did. Because I got to know you.”

“Norrin, I—”

“But we’ve let what happened to us control our lives for too long. You made something out of yourself. And now it’s time for me to move on and find my own path.”

“Yeah, but this is not the way. You know that, I know you do. You’re not a bad person.”

“I am. I am a bad person. You’re just too stubborn to see that.” I’ve never said that to anyone in my life. It feels good. It feels good to say it out loud.

“You’re not!” You’re not going to conv—”

“Just stop please.” We both go quiet as the whirls and alarms of the slot machines fill one side of the room while the groggy banter of the barflies fills the other. “I think, I think this is where we part ways.”

“What do you mean, part ways?”

“I don’t think we should see each other again,” I say with bated breath.

“What? So, you’re just never going to talk to me again?” she says, straightening up and outraged.

“It’s not safe for us to talk anymore,” I try with as soothing a tone as I can muster.

“Oh please,” she says, rolling her eyes and waving me off. “Would you listen to yourself?”

“You said it yourself. These people are not on the level.”

“This is ridiculous.” She reaches for her purse and keeps her eyes anywhere but on me. She’s about to leave when I grab her arm. It already feels like a mistake.

“Take your fucking hand off me,” she says as she tries to pry my hand off. No one in the bar reacts.

“Please. Don’t let it end this way. Please just try and understand,” I say before letting her arm go. She eyes me with a fury that I have never seen. It hurts. But it has to be this way. It just has to be this way.

“You want me to stay out of your life? Fine. I’ll stay out of it. Have fun becoming the wealthy prick you all of a sudden seem to despise,” she barks before grabbing her coat and purse and storming out of the bar. I feel like I’ve had my foot amputated or something. I feel like I’ve crossed over and there’s no turning back anymore. My mouth starts to water with the anticipation of unending pints that I’ll waterfall into my gullet. I approach an empty stool on the far left of the bar. This is going to be an expensive day but that’s alright. I can afford it.

## Chapter 16

No one accounted for my nerves when they molded the suit to my body. I've had this suit on for maybe a hundred times but all of a sudden it seems weird. My skin feels like pins and needles beneath the abrasive texture of the suit's inner lining and I feel like I'm going to piss myself at any moment. It doesn't help that it's pouring rain outside, the type that gusts from every direction and soaks your underwear and socks. This is partially by design. Heavy rain helps set the mood and the b'ys have picked this Wednesday for its forecast, though we would have rolled even without the blitz outside.

“Stop touching it, you're going to tear it,” Sonny whispers, slapping my hand away from the edge of my prosthetic jowls. I can't stop scratching at it. I can feel the microscopic fibres of the suit's lining jabbing at my pores. I'm nervous and excited. I haven't been excited or nervous about anything since I was eighteen years old. It's one hundred percent on account of a decade of heavy drug use. I don't care how many nature retreats and spiritual awakenings you've enjoyed; nothing feels better than being high and if you don't believe that, then you've never really been high.

“It just itches so much, man,” I try, sneaking in one last scratch as Sonny shushes me louder than he should. We've been waiting in Jennifer's dining room for the last half hour. On the side closest to Sonny are two almost medieval looking wooden doors that open into the living room where Mother Begonia will raise the dead.

Everything is in play.

Tanzeen's off on the second day of her measly three-day vacation. In the room across from this one the chandelier above the séance circle is wired with the makeshift flashbang. Anjelica insisted that she and Jennifer stand in the rain and focus their energies on the storm outside, giving



me and Sonny just enough time to sneak in through the back door. When the séance is on the cusp of its intensity, Anjelica will give Sonny the signal to cut the power and set off the flashbang.

And then it's me.

And then I become resurrected and embrace her.

Sonny's got his eye on the phone-monitor, waiting for Anjelica and Jennifer to enter. I'm pacing. This room is not like the rest of the house. I don't know if Jennifer bought or built this place but I assume the latter on account of its false-minimalist McMansion structure and design. Every room is painted grey and fashioned from some version of "Live, Laugh, Love," store-bought driftwood sculptures, stainless steel everything, titty lights, and gravel driveways. Only this room stands out. It's got that lonely widower vibe. Brooding antiquity filled with dark wood, a grandfather clock and copper accents that watch over the marble busts of naked women and the Virgin Mary. Next to a ridiculously long dining table is a series of ten-foot windows overlooking the field outside, each one with massive red curtains drawn shut. The plummeting rain beats against the windows, making black splotchy shadows on the curtains. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that the windows could cave at any moment.

"Ah, Jesus," Sonny says with a sigh as he strokes his wispy beard, eyes on the phone. "C'mon b'ys. What's going on here?" he says to himself. I pass by the impossibly long dining table towards the grandfather clock on the opposite side of the windows. It feels like if I keep moving, I'll stop thinking and that's all that matters right now. I try as hard as I can to keep thoughts of the immediate future out of my mind. If I can just stay in the moment, if I can stay in sync with the plan, maybe we'll make it out of here. I'll have enough money to finally start living my life. Maybe we'll all stick together when Anjelica's gone. Yeah. I think we will. I think Sonny will keep us together and that thought is keeping me grounded right now.

“Here, take one of these,” Sonny says, handing me a small white pill.

“What is this?” I say, inspecting it as if I might not take it.

“Just something to help you focus.”

“Man, you got any gear? A line would do me better right now, to be honest,” I say, handing him back the pill. He insists that doing a line right now will damage the suit and that I might as well take the pill which I do in a single gulp. Sonny turns back to the phone, I keep pacing. I plod back to the wall of windows in the corner furthest from Sonny and notice that the curtain is just half covering the window. As I approach to close it all the way, I see myself—or Jennifer’s father—in the glare of the rain-pocked window. I’ve seen myself in the mirror with the suit on a few times now, but something’s different this time.

Every time I’ve gazed into this man’s face, I’ve only ever admired the intricate details of his veins, the patches of slightly different-coloured skin around his hairy chest and forearms, the flawless folds of his drooping double chin, and the perfectly crafted horseshoe of hair around his bald head. But now, in the reflection of this window, I can only see the surface level of this man and the grandfather clock skirting the dining table behind me. I tuck in the white button up shirt that keeps getting untucked by my false beer belly as I stare into the glare of the windowpane.

In the mirror at the convent, I saw a perfect father who was adored by his daughter so much that she would spend nearly half of her net worth to bring him back just one more time. Now, all I see is a lonely fool, an injustice to the memory of a good man. In a moment I am accosted by the thought that I am corrupted beyond return. But I push the thought out of my head and straighten up my back when I catch a glimpse of movement in the soaking field outside. I shift out of sight just as I spot Anjelica, Jennifer and J.R. running towards the house. No one sees me as I turn to Sonny. I feel the surge of destiny.

“They’re coming. It’s on. Here we go,” I say as I rush towards him. I can feel the tension in the air evaporating as adrenaline and Sonny’s little white pill take effect. I take a deep breath and exhale, just like they teach you to do at the recovery centre.

“Here we go,” Sonny says as he hands me an earbud that I’ve been instructed to keep near my ear without inserting it into the prosthetic lining. I take a place next to Sonny as we watch the grid of CCTV. In the living room we watch as a hooded Anjelica and Jennifer enter the house with J.R. close behind them. “Alright listen. Are you ready? Cos this is it now,” Sonny says. The light from the curtains turns his eyes almost neon green and for reasons I don’t understand, I can feel them charging me with the moxie to do what has to be done.

“I’m ready,” I say with a nod. Sonny nods back and keeps one eye on the camera as he whispers.

“Remember. As soon as I get the signal, I’m going to pop the detonator and disorientate her. You have two seconds to walk through the door in front of you. You got it?” Sonny’s voice rings around me but all I can focus on are the two women on the screen as they remove their hoods and hug. “You got it?” Sonny tries again. I snap back into it.

“I got it.”

“Alright. Stay focused, okay?”

“I’m focused,” I say as quietly as I can.

“When you’re out there, just stay in character. Don’t say anything. Just hold her. Let her get it all out.”

“I’m ready, man.” We’ve gone through the plan a thousand times now, but it still feels like we’re walking a thin line here. Whatever. I can do this. I can pull this off. Besides, all I have to do is

stand there and be her miracle and when the time is just right, J.R. will hit her with a sedative administered through a makeshift dart gun. As I stare at the screen and the two women holding hands, I focus on J.R, keeping my eye on his coat pocket where I assume he's holding the sedative.

"It's just a sedative right? She's not going to get hurt?" I say without taking my eyes off the screen. That is until Sonny lays his hand on my shoulder.

"We don't get paid until the job is done. We're not going to hurt her, okay? You have to trust me," he lulls with a matter-of-factness. I nod and I turn back to the screen, watching as the three before me move out of the camera's sight.

"Chappie. We're moving in," he says into a microphone fastened to the front of his coat.

"A-one," she creaks in my earbud as we watch the screen. Jennifer leads Anjelica and J.R. into the dark living room. The room is lit with candles strewn about the cabinets and the grand piano in the back of the room. The curtains are drawn and the couches moved out of the way. In the centre of the room is a pentagram made of salt lines. Made up runes are also shaped in salt around the circle bordering the pentagram: a perfect design of faux-occult derision that Jennifer will never know.

"Just like we practiced, my dear," Anjelica says to Jennifer. Their voices are layered with static and just barely rise over the sound of the rain bouldering against the windows.

"Thank you, Mother," Jennifer says as she raises her hood. Anjelica nods as she raises her hood. She gestures to the far edge of the pentagram. Jennifer hugs Anjelica one more time before taking a seat at the base of the pentagram, her back turned to the door that I am to appear from.

"My associate, Dr. St. Croix, will be here if anything goes wrong," Anjelica assures as she gestures to J.R. who's looking dad-comfy in a white polo shirt, dress pants, white running shoes and

a green bomber jacket. Now that I see him in this light, I can't help but think that he probably would have made a good doctor.

“No harm will come to you, I promise. I've known Mother Begonia a long time. You are safe in her hands,” he says from somewhere off camera. The beating rain is hypnotizing and the damp coldness of the room feels sticky on the parts of my skin not covered in the suit.

“Are you ready?” Anjelica buzzes. Jennifer nods her head as silence overtakes the room. The hooded figures go quiet, the rain keeps hammering. I can hear my breath echo in my throat and ears. The acidic sting of the silicone pierces my nose and reminds me of the worst parts of late-night withdrawal sweats. Sonny almost whistles as he sighs, his whole body rising and settling as Anjelica takes a lotus position with her hands outstretched and palms facing upwards. Sonny shoots me a look from the corner of his eye before turning back to the screen. For the first time since I've known him, I can sense his fear. Life happens when you don't look for it. But this is different.

The air is charged and it sends a flurry of goosebumps down my arms. I feel something almost like a presence; I can't explain it. It's not a thing. It's, it's something else that's beyond and simultaneously not beyond. I'm covered in goosebumps. My whole life has been quietly moving towards this moment. Everything is alive. The dark room and the dark oak walls and the dining table are onyx against the carmine red spreading from the towering windows to my left. The marble busts look away. The rain clobbers against the glass as I turn a wary eye back to the screen. Anjelica begins an incantation. Her delivery is immaculate, her voice ringing with low register vowels that ride along a subtle rhythm of descending and ascending notes. The rain grows stronger against the windows before settling. My pulse rattles down my fingers and it feels like there's blood pooling in the tips. Even Sonny is breathing in rapid bursts, almost hyperventilating when Anjelica invokes the damned

and departed. I can feel the air pushing out of my nostrils, pressing against my artificial jowls. I remind myself that this is not real.

“Henry Price! Hear me!” Anjelica starts between the beating rain and symphonic chanting. “Hear me! Shade of the underworld, behold the beckoning of the acolyte. Behold! Dialos mortnetum kanhatoth Belial! Behold the passageway between time and space. Hear me, Henry Price! Come forth! Behold the acolyte and come forth!”

“I, I can feel him,” Jennifer barks over Anjelica’s wailing. Sonny turns to me with his jaw clenched.

“It’s time. Just like we rehearsed, okay?” he says, staring right into my eyes.

“A-one,” I say, still locked in. Sonny is stone faced save for the slight flaring of his nostrils as he breathes.

“There is no God, Norrin. There’s just what we make of it.” His voice is monotone but as direct as the green eyes that he’s holding me with.

“Can’t win ‘em all,” I say with a careful smile as I hand Sonny back my earpiece and walk away from him. I’m focused on the door leading into the living room with Jennifer and Mother Begonia. My energy is sheathed though my intention is armed and ready as I stand before the massive wooden double doors.

“Chappie, get ready,” Sonny says. On the other side of the door, I can hear Mother Begonia’s voice rise in intensity. The rain sounds like it’s rising with her voice but my blood is running so hot, I can’t tell for sure.

“Here we go, on your marks!” Sonny says, raising his voice beyond a whisper. I turn back to Sonny one last time. He’s staring at the phone monitor in one hand with a detonator flip-phone in

the other when he turns to me. We don't need to speak. A look is enough as I turn my attention back to the door. My mind is clear. Everything in me is focused on the oak door ahead. Sonny starts, and I feel like every syllable he says could be packaged in its own infinite universe.

“Three,” he says as Mother Begonia shouts, “Come forth.” All I know is that there was never a moment that I stopped believing in the cards. Destiny is real. It must be.

“Two,” from Sonny and “I command you!” from Anjelica. There is a reason for what happened to me. I lived for a reason. Sonny is wrong.

“One.” I could have spared Thadie those bullets. She could have been spared. But it will be different this time. I'm ready now. I'm ready and I'm moving to transcendence.

A moment of silence passes before a bulldozing bang rapps against the door, with a flash of hot white light in its inch-long seams. Free of my former self, I turn the knob without hesitation.

“Here we go,” I whisper before walking into the blackness ahead.

\* \* \*

For a moment I'm not sure what I'm seeing. J.R. is on his knees in the centre of the pentagram about thirty to forty feet from me. He's screaming almost indecipherable volleys of “fuck” as he cradles Jennifer's head and shoulders in his arms.

“Get me my bag! My bag!” he yells towards the furthest edge of the wall where Anjelica is standing, completely frozen in place with her hood pulled down. Her face is drained of any color and her eyes are wide, quivering.

J.R. starts pointing and hollering towards the bag in the corner and I see his arms and white polo shirt smeared in blood. I'm floating towards the scene. I'm a mirage that's just casually passing

by. There's Sonny, running past me and heading for the bag. J.R. and Sonny spit insults at each other like they're speaking in tongues. I approach Jennifer. She lays in the smeared pentagram, the back of her hooded head in J.R.'s arms. Multiple streams of blood gush around her body as Sonny crouches on the other side of her with a brown medical bag. A weightless step towards the scene and I notice shattered crystals glittering all around the room. The chandelier. On the ceiling, a black ring from the flashbang is caked around the silver bars and a few leftover crystals are still swinging.

“Get the gauze! C'mon!” J.R. barks as he pulls the makeshift dart gun from his pocket. He's pulling the dart from it as I come into full view of Jennifer's face. Between the darkness of blood gushing from her throat I can see a three-inch-long crystal jutting out of her neck. Her voice gurgles in descending underwatery octaves as her eyes dart frantically around the room. Everyone is muted by the ringing in my ears and the thrashing of my heart and pulse.

Chappie barges through the living room door and screams. It sounds like it's coming from a galaxy away. An eternity might pass as I stare at Jennifer's washed-out complexion. Then her eyes settle on me. Her breathing intensifies but she keeps her eyes on me. She reaches her hand out towards me and says something that I can't make out between her gurgling and the screaming all around us.

I lower myself to my knees. I take her hand in mine and look to Anjelica in the corner of the room, still silent and staring right at me. I turn back to Jennifer and feel the pressure of her hand against my prosthetic cheek. Her piercing eyes suddenly dilate as she smiles. She tries to say something again but it only comes out as a low guttural vowel sound that shoots even more blood from her throat. She doesn't even notice J.R. as he gently pushes the sedative into her arm. Jennifer cups my face, unblinking and beaming with joy as she beholds me. I place my hand on hers and match her gaze. Her hand is ice cold, soaked with sweat and blood. I can feel the smallest amount of



pressure as she almost squeezes my hand. Everyone in the room goes quiet and huddles around her. Everyone except Anjelica. Jennifer's mouth opens like she's about to say something when her hand goes limp. Her mouth stays open and her eyes look past me as I feel another life pass by. Godly silence and rain take hold as I lay her hand down. There is no resistance at all as I peel her father's face from mine and hold it in my bloodstained fingers. I look down at her holy expression of joy and peace and I am become changed forever as a dream of mortality possesses me.

"Oh my God. Oh my God," Chappie starts, desperation on her face. She runs her hands through her long black hair. For the first time since I've known her, she hasn't put it in braids. J.R. lays his finger on Jennifer's wrist and checks her pulse.

"She's gone," J.R. says as Sonny gets to his feet and charges back and forth about the room, his footsteps creaking along the wooden floor. He's got his back turned away from everyone, readjusting his hat as he wipes his brow.

"It was just supposed to flash. Why the fuck did it explode?!" he barks with his back still turned to us. J.R. takes a seat in the pool of blood next to Jennifer and closes her eyes. "Well?" Sonny strikes again as he turns towards us.

"I don't know. You rigged it up to the chandelier, Sonny." J.R. says, calmer than I'd expect.

"You built the damn thing! You said it was about an eighth of an actual flashbang. You said that it wouldn't explode!"

"Don't you put this all on me! This! All of this was your idea," J.R. snaps, his finger pointed at Sonny. I keep my eyes on the smiling corpse. She got her wish. She saw her dad. It was the last thing she ever saw. Why am I feeling relieved? Why am I feeling like we did good? J.R. and Sonny

start a rage of insults as Chappie tries to diffuse them. I stare at the morbid holiness in front of me. Jennifer's face is almost completely blue now, her lips like two stones in the Atlantic.

"Come back to me, Norrin," Anjelica says, suddenly at my side. Her green and blue eyes look wild and contradict her soothing voice. "It's over," she says to me with a nod before rising to her feet. "It's over," she bellows as Sonny and J.R. stop arguing. Everyone turns their attention to Anjelica. "Everyone take off your clothes and bag them," she says as she removes her robe. "Grab the cameras and the food and wipe down any fingerprints," she says as everyone starts to hustle. "Someone call Darlin and tell her to start wiping the hard drives. We're leaving tonight."

\* \* \*

J.R., Sonny and Anjelica gathered all the cameras and left in the truck twenty minutes ago. Now there's just me and Chappie. I'm in the kitchen piling Jennifer's tainted yogurts and bottles of water into a plastic bag before starting on the fat suit. Tearing it off my body feels biblical. I am reborn as I scrape the layers of silicone off of my face and into a trash bag. As I emerge from the foam belly, I can feel the cool air hitting my sweat-stained skin. I throw the fragments of silicone and foam into the bag and can't help but feel like I'm throwing away something else, like the suit has absorbed something of myself that I can't articulate. Chappie emerges in the doorway in her underwear with two plastic bags.

"You got it all?" she says with a weight in her tone.

"Yep."

"Alright let's go."

We head out of the back door and the pouring rain strikes against every part of my exposed skin. We leave Jennifer exactly as she is and sneak around the poolside door. The rain is hitting the

pool so hard that it's difficult to tell if the beams of water blasting from it are coming from the pool or the sky.

The gravel of the front yard makes a snapping sound with every shot of rain as we run to the SUV. She pops the back and we throw the garbage bags in and hop in the car. Chappie takes the driver's seat and rings out her hair before closing the door as I take the passenger's side.

"Oh my God," she sighs as she drops her forehead on the steering wheel. I want to tell her it's okay, that we're going to be fine. I don't even care about the money anymore. That was all torn away with the suit. All that matters is that we stick together. I open my mouth to speak just as Chappie starts the engine. As she peels out of the driveway, I take one last look at the McMansion. Beyond those walls will be a mystery of unending stories and theories that will be passed around high school sleepovers for generations.

\* \* \*

"We should speed up," I say to Chappie as we rumble down the highway. She grits her teeth and cocks her head back before turning to me with a dampened fury.

"We are two people in our underwear with a car full of poisoned food. Do you seriously want us to get pulled over right now?" she says before turning back to the road. Even with the wipers on full speed it's still hard to see out of the windshield. For the rest of the drive we sit in silence, save for the squeal of Chappie periodically squeezing the leather cover on the wheel. I'm racing with futures that may or may not come to pass. I imagine myself in a snow-fucked cabin with a roaring fireplace and a Husky dog. I imagine myself in prison, never leaving my cell and resigned to a life of reading and living in my imagination. I imagine myself reborn in 1981, riding down this same lost highway on an autumn afternoon, behind the wheel of a blood-red Dodge and Thadie in the passenger seat next to me. A vision of me and Sonny grilling steaks on a beach in Tijuana flashes

before me as the SUV hydroplanes for just a moment. A thousand realities come and go as we blast through puddles of water that blanket the treeline to our side. The road is blurry in the rain but this vehicle is built to withstand this type of weather. I hope.

We pass through the archway of trees leading to the convent and approach the RVs. Outside I can see someone in a yellow raincoat loading a box into one of the campers. It's only as Chappie makes a jarring stop next to Sonny's truck that I recognize Darlin's blond locks peeking out of the raincoat hood. Chappie immediately pops out of the car and plods through the mud towards the house. I take a moment to gather myself, the downpour blasting in my ears when I open the car door. My damp boxers get re-soaked in an instant. I walk a few feet behind Chappie. She's got her arms crossed and her head down low as Darlin turns her attention to Chappie with a wolf whistle.

"Do you know what is happening?!" Chappie barks at Darlin.

"Obviously, why do you think I'm putting this shit in the camper?"

"Well, why are you acting like everything is fine?!"

"Hey, you're the one standing in the rain in your underwear." Not even an instant of sloshing rain passes before Chappie slaps her across her face with a string of water following her hand. Darlin slowly inches her head back towards Chappie with a deranged smile that would once have sent ripples of worry down my spine.

"You're turning me on, sugar," Darlin says with a grin.

"This is not the time," I holler. The volume of my voice is muffled by the rain and they both turn and look at me before turning back to each other. Chappie points her sharp finger at Darlin.

"When this is over, we are done. You hear me?" she snaps. Darlin spits at Chappie's feet before turning back to the camper. These moments of wild hearts come out in the most desperate of

times; wolves snapping at each other in the shade of an apocalypse. Chappie hurries past me into the house. I look back at Darlin who's got her back to me.

"Hey, Darlin," I shout through the water. She turns to me with her head raised, blunt and yellow in the grey sky and green grass. "You want to go out some time?" I say with an air of confidence that sneaks up from somewhere else. Darlin eyes me up and down with a vacant expression before saying "Sure," and walking into the camper.

\* \* \*

The clothes spread across my bedroom floor look cold and stained in sweat. I really am a man-child. I haven't washed anything since we fixed the washer. Why am I thinking about this now? Why can't I just be in the moment? Even with the world crumbling around me I feel calm, like I've been here before. The only thing I can think to wear is the black suit that I wore on the night I tried to end it all. It's still in the flimsy suit bag that the recovery centre put it in, still hanging on the dresser side where I left it weeks ago.

Grampa Keith taught me how to do up a tie. I'm glad he did because no one knows how to tie a tie anymore and everyone wears those tacky clip-on ones. It brings me great pride as I watch myself in the dresser mirror and maneuver each silky fold to perfection. This suit still fits me well. But I am different now. My hair is long and scruffy and almost bleached blonde from days of working in the Delaneys' garden. Neither J.R. or Sonny shave so I've resigned myself to the small amount of stubble I'm barely able to grow. But there's something else. Jennifer's dying gleam. Then Thadie. Then a time when I was eight and saw a dead dog on the highway. My path is marked by death. I've never admitted it until now. I've never really even thought about it that way, to tell you the truth. I can't tell you what destiny is but I can feel it here on the last day of the universe.

The silhouette of raindrops sprinkle across the portraits of Jesus and the Virgin Mary hanging in the hallway. So many footsteps have wandered down this hallway and now my unpolished dress shoes are the last. Outside the hallway window I can see Chappie, wearing her usual black hoodie and braids and loading boxes into the camper.

I can hear a louder than normal muffle of voices coming from past the kitchen, almost like shouting or a movie playing in another room. I walk into the kitchen and jump at the unexpected sight of Anjelica sitting on the counter where Sonny sits every morning. She's staring out into the rain and watching Chappie and Darlin load the camper.

"Where's Sonny?" I say, half present and half listening to the strange chatter coming from the hallway on the other end of the kitchen. Anjelica keeps her eyes on the window.

"I might try and quit smoking," she says almost under her breath.

"Are you okay?" She doesn't react for a moment before scratching her cheek and turning to me.

"I have failed you, Norrin."

"What do you mean? Look I know things are—"

"You have a choice," she blurts. "You can continue down that hallway or you can leave now."

"What are you talking about," I try as she throws me the keys to the SUV.

"Your choice. It has always been your choice. There is no one tending the light at the end of the tunnel. You need to understand that." The arguing coming from the hallway gets louder as the door to the tech room opens just an inch. I can only barely make out the elongated triangle of light

coming from inside the room where the door is just slightly ajar. Although I am transformed, my instincts tell me to leave it and I wonder if they are still not to be trusted. Without any thought I put the SUV keys in my pocket and approach the hallway. Behind me I can hear Anjelica's wispy voice say,

“Au revoir mon ami.”

I'm just a few feet from the door when I hear Thadie's voice pleading, saying “If it weren't for you, I'd be lost, Nor.” My heart stops and I freeze in my tracks. Images of Thadie at Sonny's mercy flush through my mind. I linger on the thought of Sonny and the single tear he cried on the night that Steven Delaney smashed his skull open. The better part of Sonny rappels through my thoughts: the late nights and long conversations, the long silences as we drove to town in the full whirl of the lingering Southern Shore fog. It's only when I take a single step forward that Thadie's voice stops and gives way to my own recorded voice that buzzes with “this is my chance, T. We're going to hit it big and when the heat dies down, I'll come find you. I promise.”

“Oh,” I whisper to myself as I realize what is happening. I want to run. I want to run right back to the recovery centre and never leave again. I'll beg them to institutionalize me for life. I'll do whatever it takes to stay locked up in the tiny room they have for me. I'll go to every AA meet, every therapy session. I'll pump my whole body full of whatever anti-psychotic they give me. But I don't. Without any real thought, I walk into the tech room, empty save for J.R., Sonny, and the single laptop playing the recording of me and Thadie.

“How did you find it?” I say to the two men who stand with solemn looks on their faces. Sonny shakes his head and turns to face the laptop as he places his hands on the table.

“Anjelica forgot to delete the imbedded file. I found it wiping all the data,” J.R. says as he shuts the laptop and looks at the floor.

“You fucking, prick,” Sonny says with no effort, still turned back on to me.

“I made a mistake,” I try without any coating of shame. This life has been one of straightforward ruthlessness. But I mean it when I say that I am transformed. So much so that somewhere between walking out of Jennifer’s dining room and into the seance, I made an unspoken bond to be strong.

“You think this is all going to be fine?” Sonny says as he swings around to face me. “You think that bitch is going to keep her mouth shut?” He takes a step closer as I take a step back.

“I’m sorry, I know I—”

“How could you do this to us?” he says, waving his hands about. J.R. is motionless with his eyes aimed at the ground as Sonny approaches me. “After everything I’ve done for you. I gave you a job, a life, family, purpose. And this is what I get for it.”

“What about John? Is that what you did for him too?” My words are like a sword that strikes at the heart of this beast. J.R. looks up at me, eyes wide with disbelief. I fully expect a round two of Sonny versus Norrin. But he just laughs instead.

“You’ve got some balls on you now. You’re welcome for that too.”

“So, what now?”

“I won’t betray you because I’m not a fucking snake,” he sneers. He’s almost face to face with me: “But a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. Whatever it takes.”

“Please don’t hurt her. She doesn’t deserve this. This is my fault, not hers. You know that, right?”



“Like I said. A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. John used to say that. I wish I listened to him.” Sonny’s eyes are nuclear, but I hold my ground. I’m not letting Thadie down ever again. Without warning J.R. lunges at Sonny, grabbing him by the shirt and tossing him into the corner opposite the door. J.R.’s eyes are full of conviction as he lays his leg on Sonny’s chest, pinning him down. He turns to me with the word “run.” Sonny swings and plants his fist into J.R.’s chin. He seems totally unaffected despite the blood gushing out of his mouth.

“You fat shit! What the fuck are you doing?” Sonny screams with strands of spit hanging from his raw exposed canine. J.R. keeps his knee down on him as he shoves Sonny back onto the ground.

“Norrin. Run,” he bursts and I immediately careen out of the room.

I’m at light speed as I rush down the hallway, the sounds of scuffling behind me growing duller with each moment. I hurry past the kitchen; there’s no sign of Anjelica. Pass the foyer and out the front door, my feet slosh through the mud as the unrelenting downpour nails me.

“What’s going on?” Chappie yells with a box in her hand. I turn to look at her for just a moment, her brow furrowed as water drips down over her raised hood. Though my body keeps moving towards the SUV, my heart stays with her for a moment. I’ll never see her again.

I throw myself into the driver’s seat of the SUV whilst keeping my eye on the door. My hands are unsteady and I miss the ignition over and over before finally jamming it in. I rev the engine as Chappie and Darlin rush towards me with indecipherable shouting. My body feels like a slab of meat without organs or blood. Like a cooked steak, just meat without any thought or ambition, bones or cavities. I swing the SUV around. Mud, gunk and green grass fly around the vehicle. In the rearview mirror I watch as Chappie and Darlin give up the chase, stopped in their tracks with their arms at their sides and watching me drive away forever.

I gun it through the archway of trees so fast that the ever-growing branches feel like they're grasping at the truck, trying to hold me back. The vehicle rocks side to side when I fly over the small bump between the archway and the field. The weight of the SUV feels planetary as it slams back onto the ground. I can't see anything in the side mirrors on account of all the mud. Even the windshield wipers struggle to keep up with the pounding rain. I look in the rearview mirror, fully expecting to see Sonny's truck blast through the archway behind me. I'm almost at the end of the field and about to turn onto the tarmac when I check the rearview mirror one more time. I see nothing but a green hue in the blurriness of water rushing down and washing away the mud on the back window.

The engine screams as I power down the fog-striped highway. Steam rises off the pavement and it's hard to tell it apart from the never-ending fog. The speedometer reads 120. I juggernaut through the puddles and valleys of this otherworldly highway. I hydroplane now and then and it sends a thrill of anxiety before settling along with the vehicle. Thadie. I think about the time she broke her arm playing tag and how no one signed her cast. I wish so much that I did, that I could have done one decent thing by her. Even that damn hiking retreat she hosted as part of her first healing seminar, the one where she led us out of the forest, I wish I was there again. I'd never admit it to her, but I admired her so much in that moment. She was so far from the scared little girl Robbie terrified with a shotgun. I've only ever been jealous of her and afraid of my own inability to dream her dream. But this will be different. This is where I make my stand. Every now and then I scan the rearview mirror for Sonny but nothing is ever there. I pull my phone from my pocket and yell "call T," into the A.I.

“Dialing. T,” the phone responds. It rings for a few minutes before going to voicemail. I hang up and try over and over. It keeps going to voicemail. Finally, I give in and try to keep as calm as possible as I leave a message.

“T. Please call me back. Where are you? Please, listen to me. Call me back asap. We need to leave. If you hear this before I get to you, then get on the first plane out of here,” I plead as urgency overtakes my voice. “I’m not fucking around here Thadie. You are in danger. Please call me back.” I hang up the phone and feel it slip out of my fingers and drop at my feet.

“Fuck!” I say between my clenched jaw as I reach for it with one hand while keeping my eye on the road. I hydroplane again, losing control this time before just barely straightening up as a silver car rushes by me with its horn blaring. I keep the SUV at 120, darting glances between the rearview mirror and the road. The only thing I can feel on the floor is the rubber mat. I take a quick peek at the floor and then back at the nearly washed-out road ahead. Another peek as I see the phone by my left foot. My eyes dart back and forth between the phone and the road as I reach for it and miss it every time. Finally, I keep my eyes on the phone as I stretch towards it with my fingers. It glows with the words “Incoming call from T.” I stretch so hard it feels like my fingers are going to dislocate when I finally grasp it. My eyes are still on the “T” on the screen when an unbearably close horn blares somewhere around me. As I turn my eyes to the road, my guts ride up into my chest. I see the grill of a transport truck flash a few feet before me.

It’s funny how life slows down in the centrefold of disaster. Time crumbles away and the world is like a painting: still and observable with every atom in the universe plodding along the path of eternity and primed for endless observation. I feel as though I can count every shard of the SUV’s windshield as it shatters in slow motion. I could draw a hundred sketches of the transport truck’s plastic headlight bending before it snaps. I could tie a thousand sheaths of the long green grass that

grows at the convent around each metal bar of the transport truck's grill before it smashes against the front end of the luxury SUV. I could count every tree that the fog reveals. I could catalogue every millisecond of my organs shifting around my body as the SUV perpetually rolls in the air. I could collect every drop of rain in a jar and plant them all in the Sahara if I wanted. The roof grazes the pavement, then the wheels, then the roof and the wheels again. Even the oncoming airbag could be deflated and refilled with weed smoke before this vehicle's next airborne twirl. Lifetimes in a moment. Eternities in an instant. This is destiny in the blink of an eye. And then, nothing.

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.

\* \* \*

I must be dead. I can see only darkness, though I have no eyes. I can feel the empty cold of nothingness, though I have no body. I can smell, hear and taste the illusion of the void, yet I have no vessel by which this could be happening through. This must be where all dreams return to. Finally, I can see dull white spots appear in the far distance. A few seconds later they turn into stars. Orange and purple nebulas instantly appear behind them and expand into giant webs with coagulated, floating grey dust in their centre. From behind me I can hear colossal footsteps that shake the universe. If I had a body, it would be crushed under the foot of a thousand-foot-tall Roman statue, the one from the Delaneys' garden, slowly striding across the void. His colossal figure walks above me and then past me, leaving a trail of stardust behind him. Each step makes the crushing sound of earth being pulverized. Yet there is no earth to warrant the quake. A thousand more nebulas and distant galaxies appear before me as the colossus approaches them, paying no heed to my lost spirit. Behind me I can hear heavy breathing echoing through the cosmos. As I turn

towards the sound, I can only see ultimate darkness and a small purple dot aeons away. I try to focus my non-existent eyes, squinting in the void when the dot casually slides towards me. As it approaches it morphs into a cafeteria table with a ten-year-old Thadie sitting under it and hyperventilating. Ripples of dark water spindle along the legs of the table. It stops just a few feet ahead of me. Thadie's staring at the endless stretch of deep space below her. As I float towards her, she turns her attention to me. Her eyes widen with fear and she goes completely still. I reach out for her and suddenly see my arm and my hand. Except this is not my arm and this is not my hand. Below me I can see a reflection in the black pool of space, but it's not mine. For a second it feels as if I disappeared altogether, as though my existence waded in and out of reality like a quiet wave. My eyes adjust to the horror. My reflection is of a human-sized bat. Blackened wings are slid together under my arms. My face is surrounded by a moat of coarse black hair that tapers off where my horned ears raise into the empty void. If I could cry, If I could think or comprehend anything other than the paralysis of this terror, I would see it through the reflection of the solid gold eyes staring back at me from the black pool of space. I move my hand to the right as the reflection follows suit—my wing unfurling proportionately to my reach. I try moving again, turning my beastly head from side to side in a desperate attempt to divorce myself from the figure before me.

“Please. Please don't,” Thadie whimpers from under the table. I try to speak but nothing comes out. I take a step closer and notice my clawed feet as Thadie urgently slides backwards and into the table leg. My heart quivers with a cosmic love and fear. I reach out to her but she just covers her face with her hands and shakes her head, snot and tears smooshing together between her face and hands.

“It's me! Thadie, it's Norrin,” I try but nothing comes out.

“I want my mom. Holy mother protect me,” she cries between her fingers. Not even a moment passes when I hear the crushing echo of something like a Tsunami wave coming from behind me. As I turn towards it, I am blinded by an atomic white light that blankets the entire universe.

## Chapter 17

I can't remember what my Ma's face looks like anymore. Grandma Juliet had some pictures of her from when she was a kid, but the person in those pictures is a stranger. I don't blame my mom for sending me to Newfoundland. She just couldn't be a mother anymore, not after what happened. I think she sent me here because she loved me, because she wanted me to be away from what she had become. What I can remember about her is her dark brown eyes. She was short and always dressed to the nines. Even if she was just going to gas up the truck, she'd be looking like it was Church Sunday. I can sense her. Here in the blast of hot white light that covers every atom of the galaxy, I can sense her. A second later and the light shifts to the side, revealing a woman with a ponytail and wearing a paramedic's uniform. She puts a small flashlight back into her pocket as she lays her fingers on my pulse.

"Can you hear me?" she says as I come to and recognize the boxy urgency of the inside of an ambulance. "Hey, can you hear me?" she tries again as she looks into my pupils. I'm weightless and my mind is buzzing. My ears are ringing and the musty metallic taste of the ambulance is on the tip of my tongue. I try to sit up but the surge of pain running up my back nails me back onto the stretcher. "Okay, you have to stay still, my love," the woman says, easing me down. An image of Sonny watching the rising sun from the hood of his truck appears in my mind. My heart races, vomit runs up my esophagus. I see Thadie's face.

"My phone!" I say, blasting upright and without concern for the pain spearing my back.

"Please, sir. You have to—"

"I need my phone!" The ambulance rolls to a slow stop and through the back window I can see a concrete canopy slowly taking over the sky as we roll under it.

“We’re at the hospital now. You’ll be alright,” the paramedic says again. It’s like I’m in the company of some alien species. She’s an evolved agent of functionality, painfully trying to communicate with us lesser beings who must still sleep by the fire and feed on raw meat.

“Please. Please, lady. I just want my phone,” I say, feeling unwanted tears stacking behind my eyes. “Please, I need to call my friend, it’s extremely important, please—”

“Here,” she says just before reaching for a small plastic bag with my smashed-up cellphone in it.

“Thank you,” I slur as I pull it from the bag. I slide my finger over it and it sparks to life. I can see my swollen face in the glare of the screen. My left eye is buried under a lump of purple flesh and there’s a white suture running diagonally up my forehead, though it’s hard to see any details between the spiderweb of the broken screen.

“You can call your friend afterwards, hun. We have to get you to the doctor,” the paramedic says. The back door of the ambulance opens. I am nearly blinded by the moody grey sunlight shooting into the vehicle. A blocky guy with a nose ring stands by the door and reaches for the end of the stretcher. A flush of queasy anticipation conjures thoughts of hospital smells and cold flimsy hospital gowns. They’ll never release me now. That’s fine but I need to get to Thadie. Then they can lock me away, but I need to see Thadie first.

“Sonny’s coming for her,” I say to the paramedic who takes no heed, pressing me down again with her soothing, straightforward tone.

“I have to go,” I say, pushing back. She steadies her grip on my shoulders.

“Give me a hand here,” she says to the guy behind her and he holds me down. In the corner of my eye, I can see the woman reaching for a syringe placed in a fabric holster near the back of the



passenger's seat. I focus on it: every painted line of the volume markings is perfectly visible, as are the small flakes of rubber missing from the plunger tip. A fire inside me burns away every increment of pain as I wrench myself out of the grip of the nose ring man. His hands and hairy forearms try to pin me but I squirm out of his grasp and into the street.

“Jesus Christ, man, c’mon!” the nose-ring guy bellows from behind me. But my eye is on the road ahead as I make the right-hand turn onto Lemarchant. I dare not turn back but I doubt he’ll chase me very far.

The rain has left tire-sized puddles every few feet along the pavement. I pass by them, hurrying down Lemarchant when I catch my reflection in a crater of water. My face is swollen, purple and bulbous. But there’s no time for this right now. I keep hustling into the blackened horizon. My body stings with each stride of my left leg. The only thing that keeps the pain at bay is moving forward, putting my weight on my right leg. It’s agonizing as I hop the fence behind the demolished Grace hospital and duck into the thicket of bushes in the back garden of the house closest to the empty lot. A squirrel watches me for a second before scurrying away. A backyard, tiny patches of greenery. No sign of life. Just a mowed lawn and a deck with a wriggle fence railing. Breathe. Hold it. In and out. Just like they teach at the recovery centre. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I move back further into the thicket, up against a chain-link fence overlooking another backyard before pulling the phone out. “Incoming Call from T” flashes on the mangled screen.

Thank fucking God.

I can’t answer the phone fast enough.

“Thadie! Thadie! Where are you? Did you get my message?” A rabble of voices chanting and shouting on the other end prod through the phone speaker.

“Norrin? Can you hear me?” Thadie finally shouts.

“T! Where are you?”

“I can’t hear you. It’s too loud.”

“Listen you ha—”

“I’m sorry I missed your call. Is everything alright?”

“Where are you?” The longer I stand against this fence, the quicker my adrenaline. Pulsing surges of overwhelming pain possess me. Thadie says something but I can’t focus on anything. I feel woozy and the thicket in front of me starts swirling, a mash of greenery. I slide down the fence and sit down in the grass.

“Norrin? Norrin, I can’t hear you,” Thadie says, her voice echoing. “I’ll text you afterwards, Okay? I’m at the Ed Noseworthy protest by the hotel.” Somewhere my body must be activating its emergency fuel. It helps me gather my wits. Thadie’s yelling something I can almost make out when her voice is suddenly replaced with an erratic muffle like someone running their fingers across a microphone.

“Thadie?” I’m rising to my feet.

“Sorry, it’s getting crazy here,” she shouts louder than before. “Meet me here at the hotel if you can and be careful. People here are freaking out. I gotta go though, the cops are showing up.” She hangs up. The sky is nearly black. I usually like this kind of weather and I recall the awkward moments of telling that to grocery store clerks when they make chit chat about it. There’s still hope. The hotel isn’t far.

Find Thadie.

Get help.

And then what? It doesn't matter, I guess. I can't register what Sonny will do when he finds her. IF he finds her. Then it dawns on me that Anjelica might reel him in, that they'll just disappear before the police find Jennifer's dead body in a cultist robe in the centre of a pentagram. Tanzeen will tell the police about Mother Begonia and they'll put it together. Yes. That's what will happen and Sonny must know that. They'll have no time to go after Thadie. They need to disappear now. It's going to be okay. I got time.

Find Thadie.

Get help.

It's not far down the hill to the hotel and the downward slope of the railing along the sidewalk helps me keep my weight off my left foot. Ahead of me is the rain-soaked street of a downtown neighbourhood with a single abandoned house jutting out against the on-street parking signs. I'm actually pretty fast limping down these stairs if I use my upper body to shimmy down the railing. The houses on the opposite side of the street give way to an overgrown, empty lot with a rusted utility trailer in the middle of it. Beyond it is Signal Hill. Every time I see it, I'm reminded of the first picture I ever saw of Cabot Tower. Ma showed me a picture of it when she told me that I was going to live with Grandma. She figured I'd like the castle.

\* \* \*

It's complete and total chaos long before I even get to the hotel. The whole damn city looks like it came out. Everyone is furious in the street. Cars are backed up all the way down Duckworth. They're jamming their horns. Protesters scream at each other and shake their signs that jut into the dark sky. Police corral the crowd, edging in with their shields as the massive throng pushes towards

the hotel entrance. Furious bodies march along the sidewalks with brightly coloured placards that read “No Hate In My Home,” “Fuck Tyranny.” Bearish men with ballcaps, sunglasses, and T-shirts with pictures of machine guns stalk the perimeter of the protesters. Police begin to kettle the crowd, hustling everyone out of the road. In all of the years I’ve lived here, I’ve never seen anything like this. The world has caught up with us after all. Oh well.

I feel like I’m sliding through a series of tight caverns as I snake through the crowd, keeping my eye targeted for Thadie’s golden buzzcut amongst the rabble. The crowd is pulsing and take no notice of me as elbows and backs press against my swollen face. My body stings. Everything is a sea of brown, blond, and ballcaps. No sign of her. From out of nowhere I hear a whoosh that sounds like a bedsheet blowing in the wind when a human sized bat flies across the horizon—passing by the far side of the hotel and around its corner. Pins and needles blast down my fingertips and my breath gets caught in my throat. I’m breaking. Too much. I can’t keep it straight anymore. How many times have I tested this border into madness? The worst thing is that I am suddenly comforted by the thought of letting go. The crowd pushes me back and forth; I stumble forward with the wave. They are a vision of heads bobbing along the horizon of the hotel where Ed Noseworthy is approaching a podium. I could let go now. Just let the swell of bodies lead me wherever. But then I see her. Ahead is Thadie, chanting something I can’t make out and raging in unison with the woman whose boy was shot. They’re a ways away from me and as soon as I make my way towards them, they get taken by the flood of people. And I’m swung away from them by the force of another current. I’m thrown to my knees and face down on the pavement. The ankles and sneakers of the crowd nail me over and over. My left leg feels like a thousand shards of crystal have been shot into it when his voice cuts through the uproar.

“You don’t look too good, cowboy,” Sonny says, low and gruff. He’s standing near my temple, his hand outstretched and wearing an eggshell white shirt with his “Dick and Goreman” jacket on. What other choice do I have? I clasp his hand and he pulls me to my feet; calm, collected, same old Sonny, no matter what. But I’m at my limit now. I’m cooked. I can’t fight anymore. But I’ll do what I can. “What happened to you?” Sonny says, standing his ground as the mob shuffles around him.

“Car trouble,” I say. Sonny smiles and then a timid laugh. Ed starts into the microphone behind me, “Thank you to my supporters for being here.” A wave of booing surrounds him as he continues. Sonny and I look around us. People are throwing shoes and garbage and are promptly blocked by cops in riot gear.

“Look at these lowly people out here,” Ed continues to more boos. “So mad. Why are you so mad? See this is why what we’re doing here is so important, because the left is so mad all the time. Really sad, really pathetic.” A sea of angry shouting follows him. Sonny shoves the crowd away from us. Ed continues behind us as the mob starts to boil. I don’t turn my head too far from Sonny as I search the herd for Thadie.

“Sonny, please. Are you here because of why I think you’re here?” I say, my throat aching and dry. Sonny looks at me with an air of kindness that feels like a breath of oxygen in the vacuum of space. Without a doubt they tracked Thadie through her unapologetically loud social media presence. That’s step one in finding Mother Begonia’s clients. I wish I could freeze time and stay here in this crowd, even if it is a nightmare. No one can save me and Thadie, even if we wanted.

“I’m sorry, Norrin. She won’t feel any pain, I promise you,” Sonny says. He puts his hand on my shoulder. That’s when I see the syringe in the breast pocket inside of his coat. Ed is roaring

behind me. The force of his voice coming from the speakers tickles the back part of my neck where I can still feel sensation.

“There’s no need of all this ruckus, go on home now. You’re clearly not fit to be at it so go on home now the lot of you,” Ed shouts.

“Please don’t do this,” I whisper, though I know wholeheartedly that he made up his mind the second he heard the tape. He takes his hand off of my shoulder and places it over the syringe but I can’t bring myself to stop groveling. I don’t know what’s in it but I know it’s lethal.

“We can just go. Please forgive me, man. I know I fucked up but we can just go.” Sonny sighs as he studies my face before checking the crowd for Thadie. I am powerless. I am a child to him: useless, no good, not even worth considering, unequipped to handle business. I am just his little buddy, even now. Sonny shakes his head with his tongue pressed against his bottom lip.

“I do forgive you, Norrin. And I’m sorry for how I acted at the convent. Really, I am. I was just mad, but I wasn’t going to hurt you.”

“Sonny, just—”

“You can come back with us, I promise. We’ll start over without Anjelica this time. Me and you and Chappie and Darlin and J.R—the whole works of us. We’ll figure out a new plan, we always do.”

“Really? You mean it?” I say, weak and pitifully enthusiastic. Sonny smiles like he’s buying me a puppy. He adjusts his hat.

“Of course, man. We stick together,” he says, falling silent for a second before looking at the ground and saying, “but she has to go. I’m really sorry, bud. But there’s no other way.” Even now I

still cling to the dream. Hit it big and retire young. Find Thadie after and figure it out then. Even now, I lie to myself.

“What about everyone else’s opinion? Anjelica wou—”

“It’s decided. I’m sorry.” The sea of people gently sways us like we’re just past the shoreline of the beach that I’d imagined we’d all run away to with our ten million. I follow Sonny’s eyes as he looks into the crowd. Thadie suddenly reappears a short distance away from us, still shouting at Ed alongside the other protesters.

“I’m not going to let you do this,” I say. My teeth are feeling like they’re going to snap, I’m gritting them so hard.

“You’re in no condition to do anything, my friend,” he says with a solemn look on his face as he reaches for the syringe. “Look,” he says, towering over my mangled body and staring into my eyes. “One day, we’re going to look back on all of this and you’re going to thank me.” Sonny hides the syringe in his fist with the plunger going up his coat and the needle sticking out between his knuckles like a claw. Maybe this is for the best. Maybe this is just how it’s supposed to be. Maybe this is inevitable, and I never had a choice in my life anyway. I am powerless against the universe. Yeah. That’s it.

“She won’t feel any pain. You promise?” I say, deflated and with my eyes on the dark pavement below me.

“It’s instantaneous. She won’t even know it. You have my word,” he says. His voice is soothing and familial. For a moment I’m back on the night that we saw the cat that read our fortunes. Sonny was blunted then, more concerned with the galaxy beneath his waking life than the troubles of the mortal world. That’s where I wish I could stay if it worked that way.

“Sonny,”

“Yeah?”

“Can I tell you something?”

“Of course,” Sonny says with his head raised and the peak of his cap covering the pale circle of the sun. This is a dream within a dream, I think. I am all around and bound to nothing. Yeah, that’s it. I’m just about to say something I’ve wanted to say to Sonny since the first moment I met him when a gunshot from somewhere by the stage echoes in the air. The fury of the booing and rabble turns to screams as the mob stampedes past me. Everyone scrambles. Everyone panics. Ed runs from the stage as security and police swarm the ground. Batons make contact with bones. People scream other people’s names as they crash into each other and fall to the ground. A voice is blaring from a megaphone somewhere. But I don’t really register any of it inside this bubble of choice surrounding me and Sonny. I am somewhere else again. Watching myself from inside myself, like I’ve been here before and done this a thousand times in some other life. I watch from inside myself as Sonny steadies himself in the charging mass, loosening his grip on the syringe enough for me to grab it. I watch from inside myself as I raise it into the sky and jam it into his chest. I watch from inside myself as I push the plunger down. I watch from inside myself as his eyes widen and settle before he collapses onto me. The needle cracks off and the plastic case of the syringe falls to the ground as bodies rush all around us. He’s heavy. I have to steady myself as I hold him upright. I have to lean onto my battered left leg to support his weight but that’s okay. I don’t even feel the pain anymore. Hordes of terrified faces rush past me as Sonny’s head rests on my shoulder. I can feel the cool of his breath slow with each moment. The faces that rush past me are insane with horror. They are from all walks of life, genders, and ethnicities: all suddenly bound by a fate made by



violent men. They pass before me in one second intervals. In the splotches of the running mass. Sonny's breathing slows to a trickle in my ear.

"Can you see that?" he whispers. Then he's gone.

I lay him down as carefully as I can while the crowd around us starts to thin. No one pays any attention to us. They just run. I look around for Thadie but she's nowhere to be seen in the thinning hordes of panic. I crouch down alongside Sonny, this last great horror I must endure. Looking at him now, I can see a bit of his brother Chris in him. Two policemen are detaining a woman a few hundred feet away from me and the crowd has almost vanished. Sonny's hat comes off as I roll him onto his side and pull a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his coat pocket. I walk away, towards Signal Hill before turning to face him one last time. He's lying on his side and back on to me. No one even notices him.

\* \* \*

The walk up the hill feels effortless. I just need to be near water. Everything in me is telling me to go to the water. A few cars are about but nobody else is here. Sirens grow fainter in the valley behind me. I keep walking uphill. Cabot Tower appears in my mind for a moment. Signal Hill is the first place in Newfoundland Grampa Keith ever brought me. The first thing we did after leaving the airport was to go see the castle from the pictures that Mom showed me. I was so amazed by it back then. I'd never seen a castle and at the time I thought that nothing could be more exciting. It feels good to be walking this path again. I don't even need to hold on to the railing as I mosey up past George's Pond. I don't feel any pain at all anymore.

The fog is as thick as ever after a day of heavy rain. I can't see anything in the otherworldly density of it, other than the cracked pavement and steel guardrail in my immediate proximity. Each

step uphill leads to another step and that's just fine. I'm fine just walking here. I'm fine just putting one foot in front of the other. I'll be by the water soon. That's what I need.

I make my way up the shrouded path that leads from the road towards the cliff overlooking the Atlantic. Warning signs appear and disappear in the fog as I approach and pass right by them. A few years ago, a woman jumped from this cliff with her six-month-old baby. Since then, they've had a security guard here at all times. I am alone here though. Everyone in the city has been absorbed by the chaos in the valley behind me. The wind is calm but present between the earth and the grey sky. The short green grass sways this way and that with rain-drenched dandelions. The stone walkway to the top of the cliff is hilly and winding. I float along its path. Beyond the series of wooden stumps on the edge of the walkway is the cliff where that woman and her son came unto the end of the world.

My left leg refuses to bend. It takes a bit of coaxing but it eventually buckles enough for me to sit a few feet from the edge. I can't see anything other than the white fog ahead of me, but I know there's an ocean out there that goes as far as the eye can see. My damp hair feels good on my swollen eye. The cold air rushing across my exposed shins is soft and inviting. The air is fresh and it's cleaning out my lungs. I breathe it in and exhale. The grass feels good on my palms and the stinging in my leg and waist is gone altogether. Even the sirens are too far to reach me now. It's just me and the winter's wind that haunts this cliff. Suits me just fine. Everything is exactly where it needs to be. Everything is happening exactly the same way it has happened for countless lifetimes.

The overcast sky leaves beads of moisture along the stubble on my face and inside my nose. I reach inside my coat for Sonny's smokes and feel something like a business card in my breast pocket. Goosebumps run down my spine and arms as I pull out a scrunched-up tarot card. It's the one I stole from Allan in what feels like another lifetime ago. It's face down as I hold it against the

sky ahead, purple with a smiling half-moon on the front. For a second, I consider turning it over to see what my fortune holds. But that sort of thing doesn't matter anymore and I throw it into the fog ahead of me. It twirls in the wind before passing over the cliff edge and disappearing into the ocean below. The wind is like music here. It's sounds like a cello, a low drone that swells and curves as it dips into the lower octaves. Nothing could be more perfect than this.

I light up a smoke and sit in the dream. One last time I feel hot smoke in my lungs before placing the half-smoked cigarette on the grass next to me. One last time. One last time I close my eyes and remember her. Breathe in. Breathe out. One last time as I get to my feet and take the few steps towards the edge. In the corner of my eye, I see a flash of movement. I'm so tired but I still manage to chuckle at the sight of it. In the grass a few feet to my left is an orange tabby cat just sitting there and staring at me. He slow-blinks and licks his paw before looking back at me. The wind hurries past him, blowing his fur this way and that. It almost seems like he might blow away at any moment. But he just sits there with his eyes on me.

The end.

This is it.

Oh well.