Un-locked Holmes:

Sherlock Stories

an anthology
**Un-locked Holmes:**

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**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacky Castaneda:</td>
<td>Unstrung</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Ramirez:</td>
<td>Dahlia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Anne Mendoza:</td>
<td>(untitled)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelby Scharmann:</td>
<td>A Study in Sports</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilee Crumrine:</td>
<td>(untitled 2.0)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Miller:</td>
<td>Thriller at the Theater</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittney Britt:</td>
<td>Searching for Dom</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca Ayala:</td>
<td>Mae and Bianca</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin Fisk:</td>
<td>FrontPage Byline</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam Machado:</td>
<td>Better Living through Better Alloys</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie Rosenthal:</td>
<td>Sincerely, L</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Troli:</td>
<td>Detective Story</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gus Sjobeck:</td>
<td>A Song about Silence</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa Carroll:</td>
<td>The Case of the Road Patrol XK</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outline:

I. Part 1: Geppetto
   A. Geppetto summons Blue Fairy after done with puppet
      a. Has been working on it for years
      b. Has been trying to summon fairy for even longer
   B. Blue Fairy makes a deal with him
      a. She’ll make the puppet come to life and do Geppetto’s bidding if in 10 years he doesn’t make any significant progress with his plan then the puppet will become inanimate again
   C. Puppet comes to life
      a. Like Disney with the blue/white light

II. Part 2: The mystery (5-10 years later)
   A. Kidnap of barmaid
      a. Detective: maid’s brother, the blacksmith’s apprentice
      b. At first thinks it’s just a kidnapping, people have been disappearing for the past month
   B. Skinned remains all over town from people that had been kidnapped throughout the course of this past month…Geppetto main suspect but nowhere to be found
      a. Sawdust and splinters found at scenes
      b. Other suspect is Stromboli
      c. Antonio begins to worry his sister might be kidnapped by the Skin Carver
   C. Antonio gets the guts to go to Geppetto’s workshop
      a. Trying to confront him before it’s too late
b. Geppetto found dead, face partially skinned as if someone left when they heard Antonio come in
   i. Geppetto also looks bloated and disfigured so it’s clear he died a while ago

III. Part 3: Pinocchio

A. Detective searches workhouse, following trail of blood drips
   a. Ominous feeling of being watched
   b. Antonio notices there are no footprints anywhere
   c. Antonio also notices there are no signs of struggle anywhere
      i. The dust is still intact and without any marks of being moved recently

B. Bright light scene but turns out Pinocchio was summoning Blue Fairy now that he’s covered in real people skin to be a real boy
   a. Blue Fairy saying no because her decision was set and done the year before after he killed Jiminy (“He was getting in the way”)
   b. Pinocchio spots Antonio and goes to attack him

C. Description of Pinocchio covered in skin and yelling at blue fairy…just needs to cover his huge nose (explain why skinning Geppetto’s face)

D. Blue Fairy is a fairy for humans not puppets freezes Pinocchio before attack Antonio

E. Deal to stop Pinocchio in exchange of making detective wooden boy

F. Detective becomes Pinocchio, three dolls greet him into his new life

There was no moonlight in the dusty warehouse. The only indication of life in the lonely carpenter’s workshop was a soft rhythmic hammering. He wiped the salty droplets off the caterpillars on his face. The man had been at work on his latest creation for the past year, the final
step in his destiny. Sleep had been a foreign visitor periodically. Newspaper clippings covered the dusty room. They had laughed at him, yes they had. Those bastards were going to pay dearly.

Geppetto caressed the marionette, his life’s work had finally come down to this. Tonight, was the night. The night of the Blue Fairy. Tonight he would get his revenge. They had locked him up, tortured his soul, and for what? “BAH!” he let out as he remembered the night they had locked him up in that white cell. Raving idiot, they said. Psychotic, they had said. No more. His time had come at last and no one could stand in his way any longer.

“Blue Fairy, I am thou servant, thou eternal slave,” he chanted as he bent over the empty puppet shell. “I give my blood, my life, and my soul upon thee. I pray, visit this dumb old man on thou festive night.” He waited in the dark room. He had prayed to her every Blue Night for the past twenty three years without success but tonight, tonight felt different.

***  ***  ***

Antonio walked into the village’s tavern. The smell of mead and beer mixed with the humid aroma the shop had always had as far as he could remember. His sister had turned their childhood home into this sanctuary after their father had passed away a few years before. He scanned the room for the town’s beauty.

Golden locks bobbed behind the counter, yelling orders at a boy Antonio didn’t recognise. “How about you calm down for a second and celebrate with me?”

“Antonio!!!” Brinda’s golden mane smothered his face, when she pulled back her youth was apparent. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean? I always visit.”

“Yea but since when do you come in during business hours? TYLER!!!” A loud crash emanated from across the room quickly transforming her into the angry boss Antonio had once known. “DO NOT TOUCH THAT!!! I’m sorry, I’ll be right back.”

It was true, Antonio rarely visited his sister in her pride and joy. The reality was, he hated that she had defaced their home. He had said he was fine with it and even worked under his
younger sister’s watch the first year it opened but had taken an apprenticeship with the blacksmith the first chance he got. As he watched her sweep the glass under the dim light, he saw their mother singing to the birds out the kitchen window. Although he had been young at their mother’s passing, he clearly remembered how her smile had enveloped him. Brinda had inherited that same kind smile.

“Sorry, it’s one of Stromboli’s boys,” she breathed pouring her brother a drink.

“Huh. Didn’t know carnies took on regular jobs, thanks.”

“Well, it’s not like I had a choice taking him on. I needed a new hand after Collodi disappeared and Stromboli promised to introduce me to a wine maker in Florence.”

“They still haven’t found Collodi?”

“No…I don’t know what they’re playing at,” She again sharply transformed into the bar matron the town knew, although she was young she had already gained the village’s respect. “It’s been 3 weeks and it’s not like he wasn’t the first one now was he? What the fuck do they think we are? A bunch of morons?!”

“Calm down, Brinda,” Antonio stood up. “Listen, we’ll celebrate tomorrow. Signor Mazzanti already gave me the day off. What do you say?”

“See you tomorrow then.” He leaned over and kissed his sister’s cheek and left the musty tavern for the world outside.

*** *** ***

Antonio woke up the early the next morning…INSERT MORNING HERE

“Good morning, is my sister in?” The Great Stromboli’s English boy stared back at him, his Italian wasn’t very good. “Is. My. Sister. In. There?”

“Oh…uh…I…uh…thought she left with you.”

“What?”

“I-I thought she went upstairs at first but she wasn’t there so I, uh, assumed she went with you.” The boy fidgeted.
“Did anyone else stop by after me?”

“Stromboli but he was just making sure I was there and I, uh, was.” With that he wished the boy a good day and began his search. It wasn’t like Brinda to forget about their meetings at all. In fact, she was always telling Antonio how he should follow through on more of his promises.

Antonio walked down the village’s main commercial area, drowning out the good mornings as he peeked into the various shops hoping his sister was in one of them. You’re over reacting, Antonio, he thought to himself. She’s probably trying to surprise you. The thought calmed him yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a lie.

*** *** ***

“GEPETTO OPEN UP!!!” Antonio banged on the wooden door. That bastard had it coming. How could such a disgusting man be allowed to walk free was beyond his imagination. If it wasn’t Stromboli, it had to be him. He continued raping on the door, the booming echo from the inside matching his heartbeat. “YOU COWARD!!! YOU TOOK MY SISTER!!!!”

Finally he decided it was enough, he knocked the door down swiftly with his boot. Dust sprinkled. The anger powered him to walk into the darkness, stumbling over his feet. The entrance gave way to the main living area, candle light revealing the bloody scene. The stale air filled his nostrils and lungs, claustrophobia was all that this place had to offer. “Signor Geppetto!!!” He hollered at the stale wood. Shelves surrounded the small living room. Unfinished doll prototypes and snow globes littered the decaying wood. Glass covering what seemed to be the most precious and delicate artifacts. He walked on, more hesitantly now. There was clearly something wrong.

“Signor? I just want to talk,” he began, more calmly now. “I swear.” The room gave way to the kitchen, or what once was a kitchen. Newspaper clippings covered the cabinets like a mad wallpaper. He looked at the newspapers with his now shaky hand. They fell apart with dust as if no one had lived in the shack for years.

Looking up, he saw that a body awkwardly lay on the table. No not Brinda, anything but her. “Signor?”
He approached it cautiously, tiptoeing as to not awake the unfinished projects in the former room. His eyes closed in case it was who he thought the thin body was. He braved to open one eye and took a deep breath of the stifling air. It was a man’s body. Not Brinda then. Something wasn’t right. The body lay too tautly.

Antonio extended his shaky hand, his heart pounding against his throat. He gave the shoulder a slight shake and discovered the truth: Geppetto couldn’t have been the Skin Carver, he was dead.

The Skin Carver had been here and left the grim project. But where did he go? The candles were burning, he had to be in here. The bloody tool lay by the old carpenter’s face. Antonio turned the face…it was just as he thought. Half the skin was lifted off the old man’s face. If it wasn’t Stromboli and Geppetto was lying, half skinned on the table, who was the Skin Carver?

Shuffling was heard from the hallway to the left. Dust flew. It was him, Antonio was sure of it.

**** ****

“No, my decision is final.” The feminine voice said. Antonio tried squinting through the light. The wooden frame of a boy stood with its back to the doorway. The stench came from it, Antonio guessed. The thing was wearing boy’s clothes as if it were a villager.

“NO!!! YOU SAID YOU WOULD TURN ME!!!” A cold screech shook Antonio’s ears. Numbness tingled his hands, toes, and every follicle. The thing, it spoke.

“I said I would think about it,” the soothing female voice said. “And my decision is no. Summon me again and I will make things worse for you.”

“I’ve done half the work for you already!!!”

“What you did was a selfish idiocy, Pinocchio.”

Antonio gasped, the thing was covered in scraps of bloody skin. The fat hung like pasta strands. He then noticed it kept touching its face, it had been gluing the skin to itself with wax. His head turned in disgust. That’s when the cold, slimy hands touched him.
“I said who are you?!?” Its face dripped with fresh blood, uneven patches of different shades of skin covered everything but its long stick of a nose. The stench was him. Its clothes were covered in grime and dry blood. It was as if someone had buried it and dug it back up.

“I-I..whateyou..?” Antonio sputtered before his knees collapse. Then thing had tackled him down its hard, wooden legs against his throat told him the battle was lost before it had even started.

“I thought I heard something,” the coldness filled Antonio’s stomach. Its fingers were sharp, jagged things. He tried screaming but the sound wouldn’t come. He’d lost it the minute he recognized Brinda’s golden locks from under the thing’s hat. No one in the village had dared touch them except for him. He reached for them but then thing quickly slapped the small motion down, letting a lump of yellow fat onto Antonio’s arm. “I could kill you but I don’t like being wasteful.”

Its head swayed, as if thinking.
“Greetings from California, The Golden State.” That was all the postcard said, apart from the lipstick stain and my address, but I knew whom it was from the moment I received it. Elizabeth told me she’d write me once she settled down and got herself situated in Los Angeles, but this postcard is all I’ve received in the five years since she left me. I look at it everyday, with its now worn edges and the impression of her lips fading, and I’m taken back to my last memory of her. It was early in the morning, the sun had just risen, and I was still in bed—her side was cold. I caught her in the doorway with her suitcase in one hand and train ticket in the other. A yellow taxicab was idling outside when she looked up at me with those sparkling blue eyes of her’s and uttered, “Goodbye, Marky.”

I had proposed to her a week before when I graduated from the police academy, but she refused. She said she didn’t want to be somebody’s wife; she didn’t want to be a nurse anymore. She wanted to become a film star in Hollywood and she could. She was the most beautiful, charismatic thing I had ever seen, and I accepted that I would have just held her back from the life that she wanted. I was doing okay for a while after she left, but then I became obsessed with knowing where she was, how she was doing, and if she still thought about me. Then when I got the postcard in the mail one day, I up and decided to drop everything and look for her.

I eventually found my way to Los Angeles in some hope of finding her and rekindling our relationship, but I never was able to find her amidst the hustle and bustle. In the city where you come to either be a star or start over, I decided to make something of myself. I started working out of my apartment as a private detective, and although all of my cases involved following cheating spouses, I made an honest living. I listened to the police scanner in my free time and would find myself at the scenes of crimes amongst the sleaze-ball reporters trying to get a lead on a story, especially those brutal slayings of movie industry men. I became such a regular that the cops began to recognize me. I’d give them my opinions on the case, but they didn’t appreciate some average Joe telling them how to do their jobs. Every weekend I found myself in the theater, hoping I’d see her up on the screen, but she never appeared. She was still out there. She was going to be a big star, and I would find her.

* 

I let the phone ring twice before I answered, “Mark Hansen, private detective, how can I help you?”
“Marky?” said the fragile voice on the other end. The voice was so familiar. It was her, it had to be her. She sounded so different—broken, not the bubbly girl I used to know.

“Elizabeth? Oh my… I can’t believe its you! I’ve been looking—“

“Yes... I know. I called your parents’ back home and they told me you were here, that you’ve been gone for nearly four years now.”

“I came here to find you. I dropped everything to come find you.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” she snapped. “I need your help. I’m in a lot of trouble, Marky.”

“Okay, yes, I’ll do whatever you need me to do. Where are you? What’s going on?”

“I’m at the Biltmore Hotel on Olive Street. I’ll tell you everything once you get here. Please hurry, I don’t think I can stay here for very much longer.”

“Okay, okay I’ll be right there. And Elizabeth?”

“What, Marky?”

“I’m sure glad to hear your voice again.”

“Please hurry.”

“I love—“ The line went dead. “I love you.” *

I ran I fast as my legs could carry me. The Biltmore was only four blocks away from my apartment on Spring Street. I’d find her and get her out of there, and take her back to my place. That would be the safest thing to do, wouldn’t it? God, I couldn’t believe it was actually her. I wondered what kind of trouble she was in.

I finally reached the hotel, exhausted and dripping with sweat. I entered the lobby and searched around for Elizabeth. I went to the man at the front desk, “I’m looking for a woman.”

“Aren’t we all, sir?” he replied snidely.

“Listen here. I’m looking for a dame about this tall, porcelain skin, raven black hair, blue eyes. She may have used the phone, say, not even 10 minutes ago.”

“Oh yes… I remember her, beautiful gal. She your’s?” He kept moving about the front desk between flipping through the guest ledger and organizing room keys. He was really starting to try my patience. I just wanted him to tell me where I could find her.
“Yes, well, not exactly. Could you please just tell me where she went?”

“Didn’t think so—a gal like that? Ha. She went into the bar just across the room there.”

“Thank you so much for your help,” I told him as snidely as he had replied to me previously.

I entered the dim room, the air thick with smoke and depravity. I found her sitting at the bar, cigarette in hand, situated between two older businessmen in pinstriped suits. They were taking shots. As she threw her head back laughing, her eyes locked with mine. She wiped her mouth and started to rise from her seat. Elizabeth excused herself from her drinking partners saying, “Gentlemen, while I have very much enjoyed our little time together, regrettably I must be going now. Remember my name, Dahlia Short, because I’m gonna be a big star;” and blew each of them a kiss. Then she turned to me she said, “Let’s go;” and walked past me out of the bar, into the lobby, and out to the front of the hotel. I hailed a cab and we rode back to my apartment.

* 

“I see you work out of your apartment. Are you a private dick or a pervert?” she laughed as she cleared the papers, photographs, and a woman’s slip from my desk.

“I happen to be a private detective. Elizabeth, what sort of trouble are you in? You sounded so…grave over the phone but you seem just fine now.”

“Dahlia, everyone calls me Dahlia. You know like that movie, The Blue Dahlia. ‘Miss Dahlia Short,’ now that’s a movie star name, not like the mousy little Elizabeth I used to be.”

“Okay, Dahlia. Could you please just tell me what’s going on?”

“Do you have anything to drink?” She asked as her searching eyes scanned my cluttered room.

“Yes. I do. When did you become such a heavy drinker?” I said as I searched the back of the cabinet for a full bottle among all of the empties.

“It keeps me sane, but I guess I could ask you that very same question.”

“I guess you could. It also keeps me sane. So you were telling me…?”

“Alright, alright I’ll get to it.” Ignoring the glass I set out for her, she takes a shot. Clearing her throat and taking a deep breath, she begins, “So I haven’t been so successful since I came to town. There’s this place, this kind of club with a boarding house, which takes in girls down on their luck and helps them out as they get their feet on the ground. Well, I’ve been staying there on and off for years, and I kind of
built up this debt, but I was gonna pay it.” She took another shot straight from the bottle. I’ve been going to screen-test after screen-test and always hearing ‘no,’ and ‘you’re not what we’re looking for.’ At the last one I had been to this director said that although I wasn’t right for the part he was casting right now, he really liked me and wants me as the leading lady in his next project and that he’s gonna make me a big star. I’m gonna be famous, Marky!” She beamed, waving her arms and I couldn’t help but share in her excitement. “Anyway, I signed a contract with Mr. Landry, that’s the director, and I asked him if he could give me an advance on some money, you know to pay off my debt. He said it didn’t work like that, something about waiting for investors and the studio, but I had already told the owner of the boarding house that I’d pay him the five hundred dollars I owed him by the end of the month.” She took yet another shot. “So, I told Dennis, the boarding house owner, I couldn’t get the money and he said that was all fine, but then he forced himself on me and told me I could pay in another way. Well I managed to push him off of me, scratched his face, and ran out of there. He said he’d find me and that I’d pay for what I’d done.”

“That’s quite… that’s quite a story. Do you think this guy is really going to come after you?”

“Yes. And if not he himself, it’ll be his men. I need to you to hide me, Marky. Keep me safe, while you go and get my things from the house. One of the other girls there will help you.”

“Well, you can stay here. No one will find you here. You will be safe, I’ll make sure of it.”

“Oh, Marky, thank you so much. I don’t know what I would have done without you!”

“Where is this boarding house? And what is your friend’s name?” I asked, trying to find my hat. “I can go get your things now.”

“It’s in Chinatown. On Hill Avenue above the Grand Star Jazz Club. Go into the club and ask for Lindy. What ever you do don’t mention my name, either of them.”

“Got it. Now just stay here, keep quiet, and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I will. And Marky?” she said, stopping me in my tracks with her sweet tone. “Well, I just wanted to tell you that I did think of you. I thought of you everyday. You are the nicest man I have ever met, and I only sent the one postcard because I thought it’d be easier for me to let go of you and move on.”

“It’s okay Eliz—I mean Dahlia. You don’t have to explain now. We can talk about it when I come back.”

She nodded and smiled innocently before draining the rest of the bottle. “Goodbye Marky.”
I stood outside and looked up at the building and its flashing marquee that read, “The Grand Star Jazz Club.” All these years in the city and I had never been to this part of town. As I stood there looking through the doorway, I could see that the club was already full of life, from the band to the dancing women to the men at the bar. Just then a rather large brute of a man appeared before me, “What’s your business here?”

“Just thought I’d come in for a drink, that’s all.”

“You look like a cop. Are you a cop?”

“Can’t say I am. Actually I’m looking for Lindy, she should be expecting me.”

“Name?”

“Chandler Moseley.”

“Uh huh. Stay here,” and he turned away and walked towards a door at the back of the club. I let out the air I had held in to puff out my chest after he went through the door. I thought it would help me look more intimidating. The brute emerged from the door again and waved me back.

As I walked through the club to the door at the back, I felt the eyes of everyone in the club follow me. I said thank you to the brute and walked through the door into what seemed to a dressing room. In front of the mirror stood a gorgeous blonde inspecting herself from head to foot.

“Lindy?”

“Darling! I’ve been waiting for you all night. I thought you’d never come see me again,” she bellowed as she threw her arms around my neck in an embrace and whispered in my ear, “Play along.” She pulled away from me and awaited my reply. I racked my brain for an inconspicuous answer.

“Honey, you know I couldn’t stay away. You’ve been on my mind since we met last.” She smiled and then pointed to a burlap sack underneath the dressing table.

“Your flowery words will do you no good. You missed my act! Hmm, how could you ever make it up to me? I know—you can wash my dirty laundry. Now get out!” She laughed as I picked up the sack and mouthed a thank you. I headed back towards the door into the club, but Lindy stopped me and pointed to another door. I nodded and escaped out the other door.
I found myself in the alley behind the club, lit by a solitary street lamp. I proceeded down towards the street when I heard the voice of the brute behind me. “Sorry about this,” he said, followed with a blow to the back of my head.

* 

I awoke in a sweat with my head pounding. When my vision cleared, I realized I was back in my apartment. I checked the time on my watch—2 in the afternoon. What happened? I looked around the space and the place was just as I had left it. I called out for Elizabeth, but received no answer. I got to my feet and searched the space. I tripped over the burlap sac filled with Elizabeth’s belongings. When I opened the bathroom door, I saw a horrific scene. The tub was filled with blood; a plywood board laid across the top, what seemed to be medical tools were strewn on the floor. I immediately felt sick and stuck my head in the toilet. You have to get out of here, leave now!

I began to put on fresh clothes, when I heard a knock on the door. Shit. It’s all right. Keep your cool, you’ll be fine. I crept towards the door, looked through the peephole, and then opened the door. Three police officers stood before me.

“Hello, are you Mark Hansen?”

“Yes. How can I help you officers?”

“Sir, we need to search your apartment.”

“What? What’s going on?”

“Mr. Hansen we have reason to believe a Miss Elizabeth Short, or Dahlia, was staying with you and we’re looking for evidence.”

“She was, but she’s not here now. Evidence? Can I implore you further on what’s going on?”

“Mr. Hansen, another man was found brutally murdered this morning as the work of The Black Dahlia and you were that person she was seen with.”

“What? Who?”

“Miss Elizabeth Short is the Black Dahlia. She’s murdered several men in the entertainment industry. Let’s see, that director Landry, some talent manager, and now this club owner, Dennis Holker. Not that they were the best of men, but it’s still murder.” He squinted at me, and his eyes then widened with
recognition. “Hey, aren’t you that private detective that likes to hang around the crime scenes and tell us how to do our jobs?”

“Oh my god. I…My Elizabeth would never have done such a thing. How could she?”

“Let me guess, you were in love with her? You’re lucky you never crossed her or you would have been a victim. Well, Mr. Hansen we still need to search the apartment for evidence.”

“W-where is she?”

“Oh, she turned herself in and told us everything. She said it was time for her big break, that she’ll be a big star now. She’ll go down as one of the most brutal murderers in history. Now sir, will you please move aside so we can search the apartment now?”

As they pushed past me into the apartment, I began to remember my conversation with Elizabeth. *Dahlia, everyone calls me Dahlia... I’m gonna be famous, Marky!* The woman I had longed for and searched for all of these years was this murderous monster…

But I still loved her, my beautiful Black Dahlia.
I tripped on my way up the steps of the Library of Congress. That’s what I get for scanning my Twitter feed while juggling a stack of books underneath my iPad. No bad news, the world was as calm as it could be. Imperfect, but no worse than yesterday…except that my fingers felt like ice. I stopped at the top to preen myself. While most people were shaking the sleep from their eyes as they clambered out of bed at this hour, I was shaking the morning fog off my coat. A hush settled upon my ears as the doors softly closed behind me and shut out the rest of the outside world.

The carpet muffled the steps of my heels and my usual spot greeted me. Being in the back was the best since few passed here. The temperature in the room was perfect, so I shrugged my coat off. My hands steadied my posture as I gripped the velvety soft chair cushion. I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. It was cozy enough to sleep.

I inhaled to settle my heartbeat. Exhale. I inhaled the scent of paper and ink. Exhale. I inhaled and my eyes felt the cool of momentary darkness. Exhale. I opened my eyes and set to work.

Row upon row of books greeted me, personalized only by the names and colors on their spines. I sauntered down the first aisle. Just a few more finishing touches and all my years of research would finally yield a completed dissertation. The prospect of success put a little skip in my step and suddenly the sun’s rays filtering through the windows felt a lot warmer.

I practically floated down the aisles as I returned everything. All that remained now was to adjust a few of the dates to account for current events and it would be complete. I had spent years doing research on the political system in Iran and why contemporary global society was finally ready to bring an end to decades of stalemate. Convincing my advisor had been difficult because he never thought there would be a good time to make peace with Iran. But that’s where he was wrong. Timing is everything and today was finally my time.
I could already picture it. Once I finished the PhD program at Stanford, I could move back home to DC and get married. My fiancée and I had agreed on both parties being financially secure before we tied the knot. He already had a job in foreign service and was currently stationed in Iran finishing the legacy of his father. I had less fortune in our field. Being a woman in diplomacy studies was a tough sell, particularly without the “credibility” that a degree exuded. I wasn’t taken seriously by employers since I had little experience, no family ties, and no one wanted to hire someone with only a bachelors degree. Too many powerful men ran this town and I didn’t have the tools to fight it. So, I left DC in a heartbeat for one of the one of the most respected institutions in the country, the world even. Prestige, check. All that stood between me and showing those power-mongers that I could offer solutions to one of the biggest diplomacy challenges in the world was my advisor’s approval of dissertation.

As I was getting ready to email him my final draft, my iPhone vibrated from a BBC News alert. I shrugged it off without checking. Typing out all my gratitude, which words could never fully express, took me about fifteen minutes. Just as I was about to hit “send” and feel the relief of completion settle in, my phone vibrated from another news alert. My brows furrowed as I fished my phone out of my purse. The alerts were fairly close, so they were most likely updates.

After reading the first of the headlines, my heart sank: *U.S. plot to carry drone strikes on Iran foiled by domestic surveillance.*

The second one was even worse: *Iranian mullahs leave talks and plan to retaliate swiftly.*

In an effort to defy fate, I switched one of my tabs to a State Department live stream interview. Maybe the headlines weren’t up-to-date and further developments were pending. There could still be diplomatic options on the table. Cayden could still be safe working in Iran. My dissertation could still be right. I clung to my last hope, updates from the United States government itself. I found safety in the national seal on the podium where the update was being held. It soon became apparent that the live stream was an even worse idea.
“The situation has escalated further than ever between Iran and the United States. While we do not know the nature of the leak, the American public can be rest assured that any attack from Iran will be met with immediate and proportional retaliation. We highly advise any Americans in Iran leave the country immediately or find their way to the closest Western embassy in light of the riots in the streets,” straight from the mouth of the Secretary of State.

My head was in my hands before I knew what else to do. My breathing grew ragged as the stress set in. There was no way that my dissertation would be approved at this point. Everything I argued for would be a moot point, incorrect. But I had to get it together, there was no way I would allow any of the people around me to see me break down and cry. I had to contact Cayden and make sure that he was safe. As I was about to start a Skype call, a request from him popped up on my iPad.

“Mezzanie, how are you feeling? Have you eaten?”

It was just like him to focus on me first. I waved his questions away with a stream of my own.

“Never mind that right now. How about you? What’s happening at the embassy? Were you able to make it back in time before things got violent outside? When are you coming home?”

“There have been rioters in the streets nearby, but security has been increased. I’ve had word that staff may try to sneak us out in a few days to some planes that run continually, but we don’t have set dates. Listen, Mezzanie, your dissertation-“

“That isn’t important right now!” But he knew that was a lie. I blinked back tears of frustration at my lost work and allowed tears of worry to slowly slide down my face.

“Oh, but it is,” he promised. “All the research you’ve done, you’re more of an expert about bilateral talks with Iran than I am. This is exactly why you have to be the one to talk to the head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Don Helmsly. There’s been a lot of talk here about how the drone attack wasn’t…authorized.”

“Do you think that someone set him up?”
“Well, let’s just say that a drone strike during peace talks with one of our longest adversaries was not one of the cards our hand was willing to play,” he suggested. Cayden sometimes couldn’t be frank with me since I didn’t have the security clearance to know all the intel that he did. Damn that PhD stipulation.

“But what’s the point of going after him? Hasn’t the damage been done?”

“I’ve been in contact with some of the government officials down here. If we could somehow prove that this wasn’t a premeditated attack, we might be able to get by and call this nothing more than a hiccup. Then you could be the very first person to write about how it fits into the rest of our relations. This could be great for you, Mezzanie, we just need to figure it out.”

“What do you want me to look for? I don’t think Helmsly will come and see some lowly graduate student, especially not right now,” I rolled my eyes in sarcasm.

“I thought about it. I have an old chum over at his office who runs his appointments. They can squeeze you in if they know it’s for me. Then you can give Helmsly a piece of your mind.” His privilege rubbed me the wrong way even though he didn’t mean anything by it, but I knew that now was not the time to correct him on it.

“Mezzanie, I have to go now. There’s a lot we need debriefing on and-

“I get it,” I interrupted, “Top-secret. I guess I can keep doing more dirty work over here while you go save the world over there.”

“With any luck, we’ll both be saving it together.”

I had no idea what I was supposed to ask Senator Helmsly, but Cayden would not have sent me his way without a reason. He knew what the senator would be in for if I had the chance to hound him. Time moved a lot faster after I realized Cayden’s safety was riding on my actions. Thirty minutes after my call, Cayden texted me the address of Helmsly’s office. He had been moved since his promotion as chairman to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the records online were still pending.
I wondered if his interns didn’t have PhDs or if they were just too swamped to change something so important. An everyday citizen is supposed to have the right to access their congresspeople, yet here I was about to have a doctorate and still needed connections to find it. That was the problem in this city, too many connections and not enough people to connect to. So everything was recycled: names, jobs, news, everything. Even Cayden, for all his intellectual merit, was still the successful result of two politically powerful families united in marriage and culminating in a son who continued his father’s work. He had still been in graduate school when they offered him the position and all of his work was left pending. I never would have agreed to marry him had it not been for how passionate he was about his work. Privilege or not, the man centered his life on improving foreign policy and here he was right now, risking it all for his country.

As it turns out, his “old chum” was actually a female whose exceptionally high voice squeaked even louder when I mentioned Cayden. The plaque in front of her read Loretta Daniels.

“I haven’t heard from him in a while!” she gushed, “How is he doing?”

“Not very well given what transpired this morning. Would you be so kind as to-“

“One second, darling, I have to take this,” Loretta told me as she answered her cell phone in a hushed voice as she turned away from me. “Not right now, Sharpton, but just make sure the Straits are clear.” She then turned back to me as if nothing had happened. “OH, of course! How could I possibly forget he was still in Iran? It must be why he’s taken so long to get back to all my messages that I’ve left him,” she sighed wistfully, “God, he was so attractive back in graduate school. It was such a pity he had to leave so early. I heard he got engaged to some shrew after that. So, what can I do for you, dear?”

Even before her, I didn’t like the way she carried herself as I had walked in. The acrylic talons on her short, stubby fingers were too long to allow her to type at a speed no higher than perhaps 35 words per minute and they clacked the keyboard mercilessly. She was chewing gum that snapped on occasion when the typing ceased only long enough for her breathing to rattle out
of her. The pack of cigarettes that peeked out of her purse only confirmed by suspicious. Camel, they were the cheap ones, too. At least Cayden had the class to moderately smoke only Cubans. Forty-five seconds from the doorway to her receptionist desk and I had already wanted to leave.

“I need to see Senator Helmsly,” I demanded through gritted teeth, “Cayden says it’s urgent.”

“The Senator isn’t available right now. Are you Cayden’s assistant?”

“I’m his fiancé,” I said slowly, trying to contain my anger. The fake bubbly tone in her voice disappeared as her face slackened. Three minutes with her, wasted.

“Oh. Well, you’ll just have to come another time. The senator is busy, in case you didn’t hear the news from this morning,” she told me icily. “I don’t know what sort of ivory tower you think you live in, but people here are working. And you can’t just waste their precious time on whatever projects you’re doing. His job is worth a lot more than yours,” she told me as she began to type once more.

“What I’m pursuing is bigger than anything you’ll ever hope to achieve.”

“He’s. Not. In,” she told me through gritted teeth. From this close, her makeup irritated me. She had winged it out too far and she looked far too awake to be natural. The shade of bright pink that rimmed her eyes was several tones too light to make her obviously bleached, bottle-blonde hair. I was just about to open my mouth once more when the cameras began flashing. I turned just in time to see the senator duck into his office amidst the barrage of reporters who came clamoring in to this receptionist office. They were chattering on top of one another like animals in a pack who refused to give up even when their prey was already getting away. But reporters must have been taught some sort of code of chivalry, for none of them were trailing Senator Helmsly close enough to dart in with him. Too bad for them they were in the presence of a hungry lioness. I ducked in behind him before he could close the door shut.

“Jesus Christ! Get out of my office! I won’t answer any questions about Iran.”
“You will, Senator,” I told him as I sat myself down opposite his desk. Thirty seconds to close the door and cross the threshold. I crossed my legs.

“I can have security here in an instant. Reporters aren’t immune to a lawsuit if your damn right to free speech violates my right to privacy on private property!”

“Two things, Senator: one, trespassing and free speech don’t have to be mutually exclusive. Two, I’m not a reporter.”

“Then who the hell are you?”

“Mezzanie Sinclaire, fiancé of Cayden Matthews.”

Helmsly swore, and I knew it wasn’t because of my namesake. He slicked his jet black hair back and paced for a bit. Clearly, he was trying to remember if Cayden had been engaged recently. When his memory had failed him, he turned to his smart phone. Just like a cheap shot to rely on an outside source when this was something he should have recalled, the headlines had been focused on us for weeks when we went public. But what was I to expect? This man didn’t have a PhD, let alone a bachelors degree. Helmsly had never even finished college. Instead, he ran as a good southern boy with the catchy drawl and clean-cut looks with moral values. He raised his eyebrows at his screen. It was then that I realized that his brows were even more sculpted than mine. My excuse was that I didn’t have the time to go and get them done, too busy doing research. Clearly, having an abundance of time was the plague in this office.

It angered me that Helmslys only sat down once I had validated my legitimacy through my fiancé. He would only humor me out of a favor for the name of another. Names, damn them. Why my work couldn’t speak for itself, when I had already been published in several journals, was beyond me. But he probably didn’t both to read them. Helmsly told me nothing of use, he knew nothing about the authorization of a drone strike, no bill in the House had ever been approved by him, and no votes were taken to allow it. Helmsly was a dead end.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Sinclaire, but that is all I can tell you. You are welcome to sit here and recollect your thoughts—“
“Senator, I hope you understand the type of danger you’re allowing American citizens to be in with your carelessness,” I told him callously as I got up.

“Ms. Sinclaire, you don’t understand,” he sighed as my back turned to him, “There are people in this city who could make you fall to your knees, no matter how strong you think you are.” I scoffed and left his office.

Loretta was gone when I got back out, thank God. But I couldn’t help but notice that her phone was lying in her open purse. Her use of the word Straits earlier made me curious. Pocketing it, I slipped out quickly and made my way to Gerry’s. *****

Gerry had been a friend of mine when I was finishing my undergraduate degree and his computer skills had only gotten better with age. He let me into his apartment where I set the phone down in front of the both of us.

“I need to figure out where the last call came from. I think our foreign policy depends on it.”

“So dramatic, Mezz,” he yawned as he ruffled his long brown hair. It was always unkempt and went well with his scraggly beard. If I didn’t know him personally, I would have called the cops on the hobo occupying one of the most lavish apartments in DC. But he had the money, the NSA paid him well. “I can’t just hack into a private citizen’s phone, no warrant, no nothing. She has some Fifth Amendment rights, Mezz, even if she is a bitch.”

“How about probable cause, Gerry? She was talking about keeping the Straits clear. You know what that sounds like to me? The Straits of Tehran by Iran. And she mentioned speaking to a Sharpton. You know who that sounds like? Abe Sharpton, of Sharpton Industries: one of the biggest arms suppliers in the world.”

“Why would a receptionist be talking to an arms supplier about Iranian waterways?”

I raised my eyebrows at him without trying to seem condescending, but it was difficult. A look of realization dawned on his face and that was when he agreed to hack the phone. It took a few minutes, but Gerry was able to trace the number and then retrieve all of the text messages that
had been exchanged over the last few days. Right in front of us was a transcript of proof: Sharpton and Loretta were lovers. I cringed at the thought of her getting near anyone. Even worse, however, was that Loretta had incriminating photos of Helmsly that she had taken by forcing herself into his office.

More of the texts surfaced and reaffirmed my suspicions. Sharpton had organized the strikes. He bypassed the committee completely by bribing some officials. Everything was in place for him to sell arms to both countries once they went to war.

I had everything I needed. Daniels and Sharpton were about to be tried for extortion. Tensions would cool. My dissertation would be fine. Cayden would be safe. And Helmslys, as incompetent as he was…would be innocent.

Names ran this city. Just as Cayden’s family name had gotten him his career and Helmsly’s name made him seem competent, I had a name, too. The name of the Strait was what triggered my memory and made me suspect her. Names could be clean, but they could also be sullied. I had everything I needed to make a name for myself and bring down the names of the pompous abusers who thought the could get away with it.
A Study in Sports

He was at it again. The rapid pacing followed by long intermittent pauses at the window was a very normal routine these days. In between cases Samuel Higgins kept himself occupied by doing a lot of nothing. This consisted of long naps on the couch and staring out the window with an empty yet puzzling look in his eye. I had tried to get him to take up a constructive hobby, such as ballroom dancing, in hopes that he would meet a woman. My American self preferred sports to more refined hobbies, but British people liked to ballroom dance, right? I finally convinced him to take a class if I agreed to go with him. The first time in the Hugo Happenstance Dance Academy was Higgins’ last. He managed to step on 6 different women’s feet, only one of which was his partner’s. From then on Higgins was content to pace in the sitting room for hours and I gave up my pleas for him to find a hobby. I preferred it when he was in his room, because at least I could hear him typing away on his keyboard. Whenever I heard that keyboard, which was more often than not, might I add, I knew that he was researching something and would soon share his fact finding with me.

Today this was not the case, and his nervous energy was wearing thin on me. I looked out the window to see a beautiful spring morning, the sun was shining and a light breeze rustled through the oak that guarded the entrance to our Los Angeles apartment. It was then that I decided a nice walk was in order. Besides, I needed to stretch my knee. Ever since that freak injury it was never the same. I flashed back to that moment when the linebacker blindsided me and landed on my leg. I could still hear the bone snapping like a dry twig. I shuddered as I returned to reality, and was lacing up my sneakers when Higgins asked, “Fancy a friend on your stroll?” I was hesitant to agree just because I wanted some alone time, but I figured he needed to get out just as badly as I did. You could say our relationship was a bit odd. I used to be on the fast track to the NFL, but during my senior year of college I shattered my knee and was never the same. I bounced around from college to college as a quarterback coach due to my photographic memory and ability to read a defense, but had since retired. Higgins had come to America in a foreign exchange
program from Britain and liked it so much that he decided to apply for citizenship and stay. He had just passed his test last fall, and as he put it, “I can’t see how any halfwit couldn’t pass that test.” He was a strange man, and I never did understand his need for daily tea and his colloquial dialect. At any rate the way in which we had met had also been a complete chance. We had both answered the same apartment listing and now shared a flat on 16th and Baker Street. To my surprise he had grown fond of basketball and we had been to several games in the past year that we had lived together. He had tried to turn me on to soccer, but I was sad to say I did not enjoy the sport.

As we exited the building Higgins grabbed a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* and stopped almost immediately in his tracks. So much for my walk, I thought. “Yes?” I asked him. The reply was delayed. “It seems as if our expertise may be needed soon”, Higgins replied somewhat smugly. “Let me see that,” I exclaimed as I grabbed for the Sunday edition. He pulled it away but I got a glance at the face of embroiled Dodger Owner Frank McCourt near the bottom of the page. I asked, “What did McCourt do wrong now?” “Not McCourt...” he trailed off, “Dr. Buss is dead, and I think that someone will want us to make sure that this was not murder.” Ever since moving in together we had made quite the detective team, or rather he made quite the detective team. His observational and deductive reasoning skills were unparalleled. We had investigated on the Kobe Bryant Rape Case, and Lamar Odom’s “off court troubles” so we were more than familiar with L.A. sports scene. Sure I enjoyed the adventure and drama, but he did all of the real work.

“Dr. Buss? Dead?! I can’t believe that.” I was in shock, Dr. Buss was the beloved owner of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team and responsible for the long time success of the team. “You go ahead with your stroll, my dear Williams; I think I should stay home just in case. Don’t be long,” He said with the familiar gleam in his eye as he bounded up the steps back up to our 2nd story flat. Before my surgically repaired knee could take me two blocks, I heard the wail of police sirens headed in my direction. I decided that I would cut my walk short and turn around as soon as I reached the Staples Center. I never made it that far. One hundred yards from the basketball arena
media vans blocked traffic and interviews were being conducted. As I approached the place was a media frenzy, reporters and camera men were running about trying to establish a connection, I hadn’t seen anything like this since the Lakers had won their 3-peat a decade prior. KCAL9, CBS, ABC, and KTLA5 all had vans on the scene. I decided then it was time to head home, but not before I overheard the attractive Channel 7 reporter, “The death of Lakers Jerry Buss comes as a surprise to his friends, family, and team. He was a great leader with a vision of success, which will be carried on by his children. We haven’t heard the official cause of death but we can’t help but wonder if there was any foul play involved.” After she signed off I waved to her and motioned her over. As she approached I got lost in her soft blue eyes and almost forgot the question I had for her, “um uh, have you heard any names of possible suspects by chance?” She replied, “I have heard that Donald Sterling and the trio of Boston Celtics owner’s part of the Boston Basketball Partners L.L.C., H. Irving Grousbeck, Wycliffe Grousbeck and Steve Pagliuca. Are possible suspects, but that is all speculation. You know I don’t normally give information out like that, you are lucky you are cute,” She caught me off guard and I mustered a weak smile and thanked her for her help then headed back to our Baker street flat to see what Higgins had found.

On my walk home I pondered what the blue eyed brown haired beauty had said. Once I had made it up the stairs I knew we were on the case, I couldn’t believe that Dr. Jerry Buss really had been murdered. Higgins was a human whirlwind, and the kitchen table was littered with his debris consisting of police reports and the morning paper. “Detective not-so-Sharpe stopped by,” Higgins informed me. “We need to act immediately! There is no time to waste; I think Dr. Buss’ death was no accident.” “You can’t be serious,” I said. “What makes you think that? You haven’t anything to base that off of.” ”Wrong again Williams, Dr. Sharpe says it was natural causes, so naturally it was murder,” Higgins yelled over his shoulder as he was already out the door. I mean those two certainly had their differences, but Higgins was really ahead of himself on this one, nevertheless I couldn’t help but have the feeling that he was right, he hadn’t been wrong yet. We hopped in a cab and he began to explain, “First of all Williams, you really need to read the paper
more often, and second of all you don’t just die of an allergic reaction as an owner of an NBA team, there are too many people around you at all times for that to happen. Think about it, if he did die of something he was allergic to don’t you suppose someone would have had an Epidural shot nearby? Of course they would have, had he had any know allergies, but since no one did, there was nothing that Dr. Buss was allergic to. He was indeed poisoned” Higgins said that so simply that it unnerved me. “You know Higgins, your cold logic is quite scary,” I said. He gave me a simple smile as thanks for my compliment. The rest of the taxi ride Higgins explained to me the plan to go interview for the coaching position of the Los Angeles Clippers. Donald Sterling had always been a controversial owner of the Clippers, and had publicly proclaimed his jealousy of Dr. Buss’ success with the Lakers. I assumed that Sterling was at the top of his list of suspects. Of course I was to be the coach and Higgins my agent in this charade. “Thanks for the heads up on this,” I whispered under my breath as we reached Sterling’s office. “Quit complaining, you’ve done this before it should be easy,” came Higgins simple retort.

I had never had the privilege of watching Higgins investigate before, and so as much as I had to play my part, I really wanted to observe his methods. I was surprised, however, that for the majority of the interview Higgins sat quietly and looked disinterested. At one point during the interview Sterling asked Higgins a question that caught him off guard, “Mr. Higgins, what exactly is your client willing to sign for, and can we wrap this up today?” Apparently I had been telling Sterling what he wanted to hear. Higgins sat quietly for a moment and then answered coldly, “My client still has several other interviews to attend, and we aren’t sure that the Clippers are the best fit right now. Also, how could hire a coach and announce that to the press so soon after your esteemed colleague’s death?” I could have sworn I saw an imperceptible smirk cross Sterling’s face but I blinked and it was gone just as quickly. As the interview was wrapping up, I was beginning to think of it as a waste of time, because we didn’t learn anything of importance, Higgins entered into a harsh, loud, and painful coughing fit. Sterling turned around to grab him a water bottle out of the mini-fridge, and instantaneously Higgins’ arm shot out and swooped up
Sterling’s cell phone right off of the desk and replaced it with an identical one. How he knew what type of phone that Sterling had is beyond me, but I had since stopped questioning Higgins. As we left the office, Higgins’ was deep in concentration searching through Sterling’s cell phone. Once back in our apartment I fixed lunch and was about to ask Higgins what he had discovered when he promptly told me he was leaving as he slipped out the door. He was never one to rest, and was no doubt investigating a lead that he had found on Sterling’s phone.

“Williams!” I awoke with a start when Higgins yelled my name and slammed the door. “I haven’t seen a case like this in some time!” He was really excited and now he was pacing just as fast as his mind was racing. “At first I thought that Sterling was our man, but no, his alibi checks out, so naturally I looked into a few of the Second-in-command with the Lakers, but nothing promising, this case is a true match for my wits.” As he paused for a breath I threw in a guess, “What about the owners of the Celtics? The two franchises’ have a history of rivalry and it has been renewed in the past few years...” I trailed off as Higgins began to shake his head. As usual he dismissed my input, “You really are a simpleton Williams, besides, I already checked into and there is no way they could be the culprits.” It is best not to speak when Higgins is trying to solve a case; I have learned that the hard way on many occasions. The rest of the night did not produce anything other than frantic pacing, so I went to bed.

The next morning I woke up to a flurry of activity. Higgins was all worked up, the pacing was almost frenetic, his hair was going every which way, and just as suddenly he stopped as if he had worked out the problem he was solving in his head, and before I could say a word he was out the door. I started in on breakfast but the phone rang before I could finish. I answered and it was Higgins on the other end barking instructions to me, “Williams, we don’t have a moment to lose, go to the 3697 La Cordoba Avenue you will already have an appointment with Dr. Armstrong, I need you to see that patient log. Specifically 3 days ago from the 13th.” The line went dead before I had a chance to respond.
Upon reaching Dr. Armstrong’s office I had not yet figured out how to get look at those pages on the log without arousing suspicion. Eventually I decided to use the Higgins method. When I was signing in I went for the cough attack, and lo and behold it worked! The nurse at the front desk went to get me a water bottle, and I had a few quick moments to scan the log, but it was more than enough time for my amazing memory. After I left I immediately called Higgins and he gave me instructions to head to Sterling’s and to bring, I quote, “that bumbling baboon Sharpe”.

As Sharpe and I were in the car heading towards Sterling’s office, I asked him about the nature of his relationship with Higgins, “What is the real reason that you and Higgins hate each other?” He glared at me and then told me something that I had not expected to hear, “We were once friends you know, but one night after we had just closed a case we were out at the bar and we both had our eye on the same girl. We agreed that whoever she chose could have her, no hard feelings, well she chose me and Higgins did not like this and hasn’t forgiven me. I mean it isn’t my fault, he just isn’t smooth with women”. I had a to say he was right, Higgins just did not know how to talk to women, he had an answer for everything except the opposite sex. The rest of the ride was in silence and before long we made it to the office. As we clambered out of the squad car Higgins came up to us and inquired about the lists. I replied, “Higgins you must be insane, there was no Donald Sterling on that list.” He feigned surprise and replied “Really? Oh no, what shall we do?” then he switched his tone and the conversation was once again serious, “Can you tell me if any name stood out to you?” When I couldn’t, Higgins became quite disappointed, “You are better than that my dear Williams. Tell me; was there a Frank McCourt on that list?” Immediately I knew there was, how could I have missed it? “Yes there was!” came my reply. “Good then we are in business,” Returned Higgins as he headed for the front door to Sterling’s office. He laid out the plan as we headed up the elevator. Sharpe was to take Sterling down to the station for questioning, while Higgins and I were to hide and wait in Sterling’s office.

After we had positioned ourselves in Sterling’s office, and just as my eyes had adjusted to the deep darkness of the office and the constant ticking of the clock had become nothing but
background noise we began to wait. What Sharpe had said to me in the car really got me thinking, and so I whispered to Higgins, “Higgins, Sharpe told me that you guys aren’t friends because of a woman. I didn’t know that you were such a player.” I was beginning to wonder if he didn’t hear me when he whispered back, “That was the first and the last time. Females are fickle creatures and they can’t be trusted with anything, especially emotions and feelings.” I must admit it pained me to hear him say those things, but I hadn’t really expected anything less from him. I was trying to think of a response when I heard footsteps, and the turn of the knob, the door slowly creaked open and the lights were flicked on. Light flooded the room, but Higgins under the desk and me behind the cabinet were unseen by the visitor. The single envelope on the desk was the bait and we were just waiting for our culprit to grab it. When I saw him grab that envelope I lunged after him and in midair I saw the shock Frank McCourt’s his face, he recovered faster than I expected and he bolted out of the office turning over chairs in his wake. The chase was on.

Higgins was off after McCourt and I was not far behind. I knew it would be a struggle keeping up with my knee so I headed for the nearest elevator in an attempt to head him off. Unfortunately for us, McCourt was slightly smarter than going for the elevator and I heard the slamming of the emergency exit doors and feet pounding down the stairs. I decided then to jump in the elevator and hoped that the elevator was quicker than the stairs when descending five floors. I stared at the numbers signaling which floor I was on and stared a hole right through them convinced this would make the elevator move faster. Ding went the bell of the elevator and slammed the door to the stairwell. The next few seconds seemed to take an eternity, McCourt and I locked eyes as he continued for the door and I leaped towards him. I had played quarterback in the NFL, but linebacker was my favorite position, I didn’t have the size or the speed to play the position, but I loved to hit people. Before McCourt could get his hands on the door I made a touchdown saving tackle on the goal line, or rather a murderer saving tackle at the door.

To my astonishment there was a thank you note inside the envelope, and Higgins began to read, “Frank, it was a pleasure doing business with you; you are a sneaky and ruthless man. I’m
gad I wasn’t on the receiving end. Enclosed is your payment.”  When he had finished reading, Sharpe had returned and thrown McCourt into cuffs and then Higgins and I followed him downtown to the station. As the two murderers sat in different interrogation rooms Higgins began to answer the questions Sharpe and I had for him and fill in the blanks as only he could.

I started with the questions, “How on earth did you get from Donald Sterling to Frank McCourt?” “It was quite simple really,” came Higgins even reply. “I checked the phone log from Sterling’s phone; I noticed he had called the same number multiple times on the 13th, and a few times in the dead of the night. Then I just had a friend trace the number to McCourt.”

“Surely you had to know more, this could just be one sports owner talking to another” challenged a still skeptical Sharpe. “Naturally!” was Higgins response. “I looked at the police reports you had given and determined that his death could have been from being poisoned. Buss was taking multiple painkillers, and so slipping him another pill would not be a problem. This is where Dr. Armstrong came in. Dr. Buss and McCourt both went to Dr. Armstrong and so McCourt could have had access to Dr. Buss’ report if he tried hard enough. Knowing this, it is not a large leap to conclude that McCourt had the means to commit this murder.”

“What about motive?” I cut in, “McCourt is lacking motive.” Higgins couldn’t get the words out of his mouth fast enough, “On the contrary my dear Williams, you see McCourt was pressed for money and in jeopardy of losing ownership over the Dodgers. Sterling hated playing second fiddle to Buss and the Lakers all these years so he hired McCourt to the tune of the 30 million dollars that McCourt needed to retain ownership of the Dodgers.” “How did you know that McCourt would poison Dr. Buss?” I pressed further. “Well of course he had the knowledge of Dr. Buss’ large medicine cabinet because of the common thread of Dr. Armstrong. It is irrelevant whether he knew from snooping or from genuine concern at first. Either way this knowledge benefitted him when Dr. Sterling approached the embroiled McCourt with his sinister plan,” Higgins answered.
After Higgins had finished filling Sharpe and I in, Sharpe grudgingly thanked Higgins for his help and we went our separate ways. Unbelievable I thought to myself on the cab ride home, the lengths that people will go to win are definitely extreme. I had been around it during my own playing career, but the scheming in this case took the price of winning to a new level, and so goes the Study in Sports.
Chapter 1

In court room 221B was the case against Greg Sanders. He was being tried for the murder of his wife and teenage daughter. The case was approaching its closing arguments, tomorrow would be the final statements. It wasn't looking very good for Greg, many assumed he was guilty, including me, his lawyer. Greg had called 911 the night his family was assaulted, claiming to have awoken to the screams of his wife and daughter, only to be knocked out and stabbed by a man. His son had been taken that night as well. Although the missing child was still a mystery, the rest was pretty clear. Greg had murdered his wife and daughter, stabbing himself superficially, and then called 911. It was the perfect crime.

Greg Sanders was my first client as a prosecutor. He came to me after hearing of my reputation as a Los Angeles District Attorney. I wouldn't have thought of that as a selling point, as a DA anyone who sat at the prosecution's table was guilty. However, after ten years of working for the state, I had to leave. Tyrese Wilborn made it impossible for me to trust the legal system. I had tried him for the rape of a teenage girl he claimed to have never known. His younger girlfriend, who had statutory rape charges against him, insisted their relationship was consensual. Her parents had filed the charges out of anger, not because he had hurt her. I didn't listen. She was confused; many rape victims were, engaging in self-blame and recanting. I pursued Tyrese, using his history as a rapist against him. Tyrese was found guilty and sentenced to six years in prison. While there another inmate killed him. I found out a month later he was innocent. Telling his parents that I caused his death and faced no penalty made me lose all faith. How could the system have failed so horribly?
Chapter 2

I first really sat down with Greg after arraignment. He was a mess in the courtroom, but in the cell he fell apart before my eyes. “Please! Please! You have to help me find my son!” He grabbed onto me, practically pulling me down, begging me to help him. The guard noticed and was about to come in, until I waved him off. I was used to taking abuse in the jails, this is where I normally came to tell someone they were screwed and I was generously offering them a deal, one they normally told me to shove up my ass. “Sit down. Take a breath. I am going to do my best to find your son. Tell me what happened that night, but leave out any incriminating evidence. I can’t have you perjuring yourself.”

“I didn’t do it.” They never did. “That’s why I am here Greg, to defend you. As you know, you are being tried for the murder of your wife and daughter, if you didn’t do it who did?”

“I don’t know! I just want my son Max. Please!” He dissolved into a puddle on the table. I left. This was getting nowhere. I was going to have to work this case from scratch.

Chapter 3

Greg Sanders wasn’t going to be any help. I had my fair share of paralegals like him. They were like little puppies following after me trying to impress me, instead just making a mess pissing all over my shoes. It was time to start thinking about this case as if I were a prosecutor. If Greg really was innocent, then his son was kidnapped. I checked into Max’s missing person file. There wasn’t much there, and from the looks of it, no one was putting time into it either. I Googled surrounding schools in the area. It was a long shot for the kidnapper to stay local, but it was a starting point. I wrote down all the schools within a 25-mile radius. The next day I started
calling each one to see if they had recently acquired any students mid year matching Max’s
description. My next step was to check out the neighborhood. If this was a random attack then
maybe it wasn’t the first time there had been burglaries, kidnapping, or murder.

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Since joining the other side I’d lost a lot of friends. Not many people could understand
how I could undo my life’s work. All my friends were in the justice system, and on the team that
worked to defend the people. Throughout the past year only Skip had kept in touch. He
understood how hard the Tyrese case was for me; he’d been the leading cop helping to gather
evidence. The case shook him, making him more cautious in his investigations, but he didn’t quit
the force. I went to Skip with this case.

“How you doing John?”

“Okay, Skip, okay. Not sure how I’m feeling about this new prosecution business. My
mind doesn’t work like the snakes I went up against in court. How about yourself? Amy and the
girls doing good? How old is Kendra, six now?”

“Eight. Time does fly doesn’t it?”

“Shit man, I remember when she was born!”

“Yup. As much as I love shooting the breeze with you John, what’s up? Sanders case got
you stuck?”
“Kind of. I’m looking into the neighborhood. If this was a string of burglars, maybe they escalated. I need something to go off of. Right now I just have a dad who won’t stop crying for his missing son. Do you know of any robberies in that area?”

“Nah, that’s a great area. Quite well off, worst we get in those parts is a noise complaint.”

“Shit. Thanks Skip. How ‘bout the kid? Any headway in his disappearance?”

“No one’s working that. Department has it pinned on the dad. Pretty sure he killed that boy too.”

“Thanks Skip.”

“Anytime John.”

**Chapter 4**

I had 50 schools left to call. I got one pissed of secretary after another, hoping they actually got up to receive the fax of Max’s picture. I couldn’t trust secretaries though, so just in case I was also emailing the principal. Some of these principals got back to me rather fast. That was the nice thing about the Internet, it gave quick results. The others I would have to wait for. I would give them a few days and then head over on foot. It’s hard to ignore someone when they won’t leave your office.

A week later I had called and emailed over 500 schools. The phone calls were endless. I expanded my search since I was getting nowhere. The farther schools were the ones I hoped would give me something, and finally one did. A woman from a school about two hours out called me. She had a boy who she thought might be Max. She wasn’t sure, but I was willing to make the
drive. I left as soon as I got the call, calling the prison on the way to let George know that I had a lead on his kid.

The school was in a small town, the kind where everyone knows each other. This could be promising, it's hard to hide a kid in a small community. When I pulled up to the school, the principal was waiting for me. "Carl came to us just this year and he does look a lot like the picture you sent me, but I'm not sure if he's the kid you're looking for. He has a great family." That was not what I wanted to hear, but I wanted to see the kid anyways. This was all I needed. With this kid I could finish the case and start the paperwork to get George out and his son reunited. "Where's the boy?" She took me to him. This was not Max. Not even close. How this woman could have even thought it was Max was beyond me.

Chapter 5

The drive home felt long. I was dreading telling George I hadn't found his kid. I wanted to get it over with though. I didn't have to say anything, he knew the second he saw me. I was just about to tell him I was sorry about the trip being a bust when I heard him mumble something. I wasn't quite sure if he was talking to himself or me. I waited to see if he was going to indicate whom the mumble was for. Nothing. "What was that?"

"I remembered more."

"What?"

"I was hoping I would get my son back and it wouldn't matter."

"Okay, but we didn't so spill." Right when I was starting to feel for this guy he pissed me off. No wonder prosecutors were so cranky, trusting your client was impossible. Obviously sharing information is always a good idea, especially with your lawyer, the one who is trying to get you off not one but two murder charges.
“That night there was three people. There were two men and a woman. One guy was the ringleader. He was calling all the shots. The other was the one doing all the hurting. He went to stab my wife another time when the leader yelled, ‘That’s enough!’ The other guy laughed and slit my wife’s throat. This really enraged the leader, but then the girl came in with my son saying ‘let’s go.’”

“You just randomly remembered this and didn’t think to call me right away to share this? Like this wouldn’t be helpful in your case?”

“I remembered it in a dream the other night. I thought this would be the woman who took my son, I didn’t think any of it would matter once I had him.”

“You would still be facing murder charges even if we found your son. Your son isn’t the one who is suspected of killing your wife and child!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry to me. It’s not my ass that will rot in jail. It’s yours. Maybe it’s time you start acting like you give a damn about your innocence. If you don’t care, how do you expect a jury to care?” He just nodded. “Anything else I should know?”

“. . . I recognized the voice.”
“So you know who it is? Not only do you know more details, but also you know who did it. Thanks bud, make me earn my pay when you could have built a great case for yourself.”

“I just remembered all this. I wasn’t hiding it. His name is Justin. He’s one of the neighborhood boys. He had a crush on my wife. He started coming over just to say hi to my wife. It was creeping me out so I told him to stop coming by. I never thought he would come and try to kill my family. I thought it was an innocent Mrs. Robinson crush.”

“Well thanks for sharing.”

Chapter 6

I went to see Justin at his house. He answered the door. “Hello Justin? I am here to ask you some questions regarding the murders of the Sanders women.” Instantly his demeanor changed. His eyes narrowed and his hands turned into balled fists.

“What do you want from me? I don’t know anything. I barely even knew them.”

I put my hands up. “Slow down there, buddy. I just wanted to know if you saw or heard anything that night.” Kid was way too defensive to not know something.

“The cops asked my folks the same thing that night. No. We didn’t see or hear anything.”

Sure you didn’t. Two people get brutally murdered and no one hears anything.

“Were you home?”
“Not when it happened. I was at prom. I came home after though. Police were everywhere.”

“Okay. Don’t go anywhere in the next few days, I might need a statement.”

“Sure, whatever.”

I called the school. They did in fact have prom the night of the murders. They said Justin bought tickets and two teacher chaperones even remembered seeing him there with a group of kids. I didn’t trust him, but he had an alibi. Back to square one, yet again.

Chapter 7

I wasn’t a heavy drinker, but these days I was in need of something to help me relax. I grabbed a bottle of whiskey and turned on the TV. It was always junk but I wanted the noise. Sanders’ case was killing me. I felt like I kept hitting dead ends. Right when I thought I found something it slipped through my fingers. The neighborhood boy should have been a shoe in. I thought for sure he would be the one. He was so jumpy and defensive when I saw him. Who stayed at prom these days? Probably ditched halfway through to get drunk and high. Maybe drunk enough to murder. I needed to talk to him again. The next time I went to his house, Justin’s mother answered the door. “Is Justin available?”

“Oh no sweetie. He’s gone. He left a few days ago, said he was going fishing up in the mountains for a few days. Did you want to leave a message for him love?”

“Was this a planned trip? Or did he just head out on a whim?”
“Oh dear was it a surprise! Came home to find a note. Kids will be kids, won’t they?” She chuckled. Apparently it was funny that her child had no respect for her.

“That is true.” I forced a smile. “I really need to get in touch with him. Do you know whom he went with? Or could I maybe see your phone bill to see who he might have called to hang out with?” I was hoping this lady was just as naïve with my request as she was with her son.

“Sure sweetie! Wait right here I’ll go grab it inside. I think he went with Sean. Do you want his number too hunny?”

“That would be wonderful ma’am. Thank you.” Jeez this lady was dumber than a doorknob. It was no wonder her son got away with murder, she probably handed him the knife and told him to have a good night. After she gave me the papers I headed back to the office.

Chapter 8

Sea Kazinski was a sociopath. He had theft and vandalism charges on his juvenile record, and according to his neighbors had a tendency of lighting cats’ tails on fire. Sean’s teachers in school feared him, they said there was something in his eyes that wasn’t right. Justin became friends with Sean in middle school. Sean had just moved into the neighborhood and used his charismatic personality to befriend the loner Justin. The two became inseparable with Lettie joining the group in high school as Sean’s girlfriend, at least she was up until prom. The teachers assumed it was prom drama that caused the breakup, but I thought a kidnapping and a couple murders would do the trick just the same.

Sean and Lettie were the first people Justin called after I left him a few days ago. Both conversations were quick. I imagined it was Justin freaking out with Sean reassuring him
everything would be okay. Lettie's call was probably to make sure the kid's body was buried well, or to make sure she stashed him. At this point I was speculating, however I would bet my DA career that Sean was the one who killed the wife and daughter. He got off on the violence, probably laughed. That's why Justin had to say enough. He loved Mrs. Sanders, Sean loved the violence. Even though I figured Sean was the guilty one, I wasn't quite ready to turn him over to the authorities.

Chapter 9

Lettie wasn't home. I knocked a few times but nothing. Just as I was about to leave her neighbor, an elderly lady came up the walk with groceries. Time to play nice and hopefully get some information. "Here let me help you with those."

"Why thank you, young man."

"I was here to see Lettie, do you happen to know where she may be?"

"She left a few days ago with that new kid of hers. She was so happy to finally get him back. State took him away from her while she was in the foster home. Now that she's been out awhile and got herself her own place she got her boy back. He is just darling and she's such a sweet mom to him."

"That's so great! Well thank you Miss, I will have to stop by when she gets back."

"They had big bags, it might be a few days."

"That's okay, I'll check back later. Have a good day Ma'am."
I dialed Skip the second I was down the stairs. “Skip. I need you to run financials on Lettie Carmichael.”

“Who the hell is that? Is this for that Sanders case? Man maybe this prosecutor business isn’t for you. I thought it might be better but—“

“Skip, I just need the records. Please.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll send them over in just a minute. Don’t have to be snappy with me.”

Chapter 10

In courtroom 221B it was time for closing arguments. The district attorney had just finished and it was my turn to stand up and deliver the most important part of the court case. These would be the last words the jury heard from me before deliberating on what sentence they thought George deserved. As a DA this was my favorite part of the case, I knew I had slam-dunked the verdict and this was my way to gloat. Today wasn’t any different on the other side.

“This isn’t my first time in a court room, but it is my first time sitting in the prosecutor’s chair and the first time I have worked to really, truly find the truth. I want to tell you a story about a man named Tyrese. Tyrese was a victim. He was the victim of a girl who went to the police telling them she was brutally beat and raped by him. Tyrese was convicted of the crime and sent to prison where he was murdered. Tyrese was not the one who raped this girl, it was her long time abusive boyfriend. The justice system failed Tyrese. An innocent man had his life taken away from him by the legal system, and by me personally. I had to tell his parents that their son was innocent, but would not be coming home from prison. Why didn’t the law save him? The truth is the eyes of the law are human eyes, yours and mine, and we make mistakes. The police made a
mistake. The same mistake I made with Tyrese, they didn’t listen. George Sanders is a victim here. He lost his family. His son was kidnapped and his wife and daughter were slaughtered right before his eyes. He was stabbed, knocked unconscious and then blamed for the nightmare he awoke to. George Sanders did not murder his family.” The doors to the courtroom opened and a little boy yelled, “Daddy!” George Sanders leapt up, “Max!” The courtroom exploded, “Objection!”

“Order! Order!”

I knew the DA and Judge were going to be pissed. I didn’t care. It was worth it. I found the truth and I finally felt good again. It had been so long since I felt I could really smile. I would never forget Tyrese but there would never be another innocent man dying in jail due to me.
Thriller at the Theater

- Protagonists
  - Detective: Reagan
    - In her early 20’s
    - She works at a theater in a wealthy part of town to support herself while she begins to take online courses on criminology.
    - First person
    - Reliable narrator, inquisitive. Barely gets by.
    - She recognizes the mystery is surreal, but is too involved to get out.
    - She believes that she can solve it; she has motivation from beginning her criminology courses and thinks she can do it, but she doesn’t actually have the capabilities yet. She doesn’t have the knowledge or power
    - Detective style: easy sleuthing—questioning people, setting up cameras
  - Boswell: Parker
    - Reagan’s wealthy roommate who is uninterested in doing anything productive for his future
    - Freeloads off of his parents, has no job
    - Urges Reagan to quit when the mystery get serious

I. Introduction
a. Reagan introduces the audience to the upper-class neighborhood lifestyle and the theater she works at
   i. Specifically speaks about Parker, who is from a wealthy family and has no drive and motivation for anything in his life
b. Reagan gives a historical tour of the theater to a family, a couple, and a man by himself
   i. After the tour is over and they all leave, she checks the locked box office to find the register open with all of the money on the floor
   ii. No money is stolen, but she doesn’t understand how the register was opened in an empty office
   iii. Intrigued, she begins to investigate

II. The Missing Money
a. Parker visits the theater that night to aid Reagan in her investigation
   i. They put most of the money on a back table, and a small amount in the register for experimenting. They return the register to its position to try out different scenarios
      1. They experiment with slamming the box office door, slamming the register open, and pushing it backwards, but nothing causes the money to scatter to the ground
   ii. They find no explanation for what happened and give up.
   iii. When they turn to return the rest of the money to the register, it is gone. They check the floor, drawers, their pockets, etc., but it’s gone. The money that was in the register is still there.
   iv. Reagan decides to look again in the morning, hoping it fell somewhere, as opposed to being due to a supernatural force
b. Reagan calls the theater owner, leaves a voicemail explaining what happened and asking what they should do.
   i. She decides to wait until he calls back before doing anything about it, assuming it is still in the office
   ii. They lock up and head back

III. The Missing Memory
a. Reagan returns in the morning to look for the money again, and it’s all back in the register
   i. Calls the theater owner, leaving a voicemail inquiring if it was a joke or if he found it. She expresses relief that everything is back to normal and apologizes for the events
   ii. Calls Parker and leaves a voicemail telling him that the money is back, and they should see if there are security tapes anywhere in the lobby that show what happened
b. Parker comes by after she gets off of work
   i. His eyes are a little bloodshot, and his hands are bruised. Reagan asks if he’s alright, and he explains that he and his dad got in an argument, and that he’ll be fine.
   ii. He doesn’t remember the money incident, and doesn’t remember going there the night before, although he does remember walking her back to the apartment
   iii. Reagan gets ahold of the security tapes to find that they show her locking up and meeting Parker like a typical day, instead of the half an hour they spent tinkering with the register
   iv. Reagan recognizes that this is like a mystery novel, and she has to figure out what happened; she can’t control her curiosity
   v. Reagan calls the theater owner a third time, but it goes to voicemail yet again

IV. The Return Tour
   a. Reagan is giving another tour the next day, when she notices something odd
      i. All of the people from in this group look similar to the group from the other day, but something is different about each of them
         1. The lonely man is back

V. The Scattered Money
   a. There is a performance that night, and Reagan thinks she keeps seeing the lonely man, but isn’t sure
   b. After the performance is underway, Reagan goes back to the box office to find some of the money from the register scattered on the floor
      i. She counts the money to make sure nothing was stolen, only to find that the amount of money on the floor is the exact amount that was on the floor the other night
      ii. Calls theater owner, still no answer. She’s worried because nobody has heard from him recently
      iii. Parker comes by after she gets off, still confused. She explains that she thinks something supernatural is occurring and that the owner is missing. He tells her to stop thinking about it all, it’s probably nothing

VI. The Found Phone
   a. Reagan and Parker return to their apartment
      i. Their apartment door is unlocked
         1. They go in together, Parker grabs an umbrella from the stand by the door for self-defense (not a notable detail, but I don’t want him to be a wuss)
         2. Everything is clear, nothing is stolen
         3. They call 911. There is no evidence of a break-in
         4. Later that night, Reagan finds the theater owner’s phone in her room. She has to figure out what is going on, she can’t help it. She
fears that it is getting dangerous, but she thinks there is an external force controlling her

VII. The Sleuthing
   a. Reagan sets up a camera of her own, hidden in the box office to catch the money scattering phenomenon.
   b. She inquires all co-workers about any word from the owner, and if they have seen anything suspicious.
      i. They think she’s going crazy and needs to take time off of work.
   c. Does anybody know who the lonely man is from the tour groups?
      i. Nobody knows or recognizes him.
   d. Reagan asks neighbors if anyone suspicious broke into their apartment earlier.
      i. “No one out of the ordinary”.

VIII. The Results
   a. The camera reveals that Parker had been sneaking in with one of the keys.
      i. She can’t figure out his motive.
   b. Nobody knows where the owner is.
   c. There is no word about the lonely man.
   d. Reagan believes it was Parker that “broke into” their apartment and put the phone on her bed.

IX. The Confusion
   a. Why did Parker continue to scatter the money and act like he wasn’t aware of what was happening? What did he want with the money?
   b. What happened to the owner? None of the workers have seen or spoken to him since the day of the first incident.
   c. Who is the suspicious man from the tour groups?
   d. Why did Parker put the theater owner’s cell phone on Reagan’s bed if he wants her to drop the case?

X. The Confrontation: She catches Parker in the act and asks why he’s doing it
   a. Parker has been involved in a drug scandal, and owes a lot of money to the lonely man from the tour groups, Xavier. His parents recently cut him off when they found out he’s been using drugs, and he doesn’t have enough money to pay Xavier back. Parker told Xavier that he planned to steal it all from Reagan, but she didn’t have enough. However, she was so caught up in the theater mystery, she never realized she was stolen from. He then told Xavier he would get more from her work, and that he knew the place well and could get in. He went to steal the money the first afternoon during the tour (that Xavier and some of his people went to as a distraction), but heard someone walking towards the office, got spooked, and ran. This person turned out to be the owner. Parker tried to help Reagan figure out the register situation later that night, and that was when he stole the money. However, he felt it was too obvious, and returned it late that night and planned to convince her none of it had ever happened. In order to do this, he manipulated the security tapes as well. Parker later found out that Xavier stuck around to steal money from the owner, because he was angry that he interfered with Parker stealing the money, but murdered him when he showed signs of struggle instead of compliance. He kept the phone to scare Parker and up the ante by threatening Reagan’s life as well. Xavier showed up in the tour group again, but with his people in disguise. However, this time he was there so he could make sure nobody knew about the owner and assure there was no evidence of his death. That night during the performance, Parker failed to steal the money yet again, this time because Reagan had come by. Xavier made Parker take him back to his apartment to see if there were any valuables of hers to take, but she didn’t have any money or anything.
valuable. He placed the owner’s phone in her room as a threat to Parker that he would kill her next.

b. Reagan believes Xavier has been keeping Parker alive to assure that he got his money back, but was willing to kill anyone standing in the way, including the two of them after he was paid.

XI. The End

a. After connecting the dots, Reagan tells Parker that they need to leave the theater immediately. Now that they both knew he had murdered the owner, they were sure he would murder them as well to keep them quiet.

b. They are hastily closing the door to the box office when Xavier and one of his men show up to take the money and kill them. The henchman first hits Parker’s head against the wall to knock him out, and is strangling Reagan as Xavier takes all of the money in the register. She comes to behind the theater with the other three to see that Parker is dead beside her, and she is next.

Scenes

I. b. ii.

After I thanked the group for coming, I walked back to the office to return to my post. When I unlocked and opened the door, I found the money from the register scattered everywhere on the ground. I checked to be sure the office was empty, and locked the door behind me in case someone was hiding in the lobby. Scared, I crouched on the ground away from view of the windows to count the money.

“Eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three…” I muttered. “It’s all here…” Why would someone break into the office and leave the money on the floor? I felt my eyes widen as I realized that the door had been locked. How could someone have done this through a locked door…unless it was something paranormal? Maybe it was just a joke that Mr. Grand was playing on me? Either way, I was going to figure out what happened.

Want to play Watson tonight? Meet me at the theater when I get off tonight. –I texted Parker.

I stood up and grabbed a large mag light by my feet to check that the lobby was empty. I was completely alone.
At nine o’clock that night, I clocked out. Parker was already waiting by the entrance to the theater.

“Good evening, my dear Watson.”

“Good evening, Sherlock. To what do I owe this pleasure?” I hadn’t told him about the situation yet, because I knew he would tell me to let Mr. Grand handle it, but I didn’t want to be fooled by his pranks.

“I was leading a tour group earlier today, when something strange happened in the box office.” I explained as we walked to the office door. “After I left the group, I came back to the office—which was locked as always, might I add—and the register had been broken into! The catch is that nothing was stolen, all of the money was left on the floor of the office.”

“Oh, and what are we supposed to do about it? If someone has been trying to break in, just tell Mr. Grand. You don’t get paid enough to deal with this.” We stepped inside the office and closed the door behind us. Parker looked at me quizzically, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Well that’s the problem. I think Mr. Grand may have done it as a prank, so I want to catch him. I mean, nobody else could have gotten into a locked room to do this—it’s impossible. That or it’s a ghost, and I’d really rather it be Mr. Grand.”

“Reagan, how far are you into your criminology courses? I think it’s getting to your head.”

“Maybe. But I propose we find a way for the register to have opened by itself, and the money to scatter around on the ground.” I said as I bundled up most of the money, leaving a small amount to experiment with. I put the rest on a table behind us. “I mean, surely there’s some physics explanation for this, right? So I have three different tests we can conduct. The first is the force of the box office door slamming.” I opened the office door, and swung it backwards as hard as I could. To my dismay, the register stayed put.

“Let me try, I’m a bit stronger than you,” Parker said, patting my back. He opened the door and stepped out of the office. He pushed the door in as hard as he could, shaking the walls a little. He opened the door back up and peeked in, asking, “Did it work?” I shook my head, no.
“Shit, I really thought that was going to work,” I said, “I have a couple other ideas though. Maybe slamming the register door too hard breaks it and makes it pop back out?” Parker raised his eyebrows, but gave it a shot anyways. I pressed the button, and he prepared to slam it.

“If I break this, it’s your fault,” he told me. He swung it back in hard, but it stayed closed.

“If you have any ideas, don’t be afraid to spitball them! Otherwise, I have one other thought. Push the register back into the wall really hard, maybe that’ll make it open again and the money fly out.”

He slammed the register into the back wall, and it opened a little bit, but not enough. I put the register back where it was, and found a mark on the back from the wall.

“That couldn’t have been it, there wasn’t a mark here before…” I trailed off.

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much. Honestly, nothing was even stolen, right? Don’t even tell Mr. Grand. Let’s go home.” He opened the door and began to walk to the front of the theater. I turned around to put the bundled money back in the register, but it was gone.

“It wasn’t Mr. Grand!”

“What are you saying? Come on, let’s go.” Parker shouted from the front doors.

“Come back! The money is missing!” I yelled. He jogged back in, confused. “I had put it on the back table…nobody else was in here…what happened?! Maybe it is paranormal…”

“Be realistic, Reagan. Let’s just look around, maybe it fell. This place is a mess anyways.”

We searched in cabinets, on the floor, under the tables, and in boxes, but we couldn’t find it anywhere. I turned out my pockets, and Parker turned out his.

“We should give up and go home,” he told me. “Look again in the morning, I’m sure it wasn’t stolen. It probably just fell somewhere.”

I dialed Mr. Grand’s number, but he didn’t pick up. After the beep, I said, “Hi Mr. Grand, it’s Reagan. I’m sorry it’s late, I just wanted to let you know that earlier I found a bunch of money from the register on the ground in the locked box office, but none of it was stolen, so I didn’t think it was going to be a big deal. Anyways, I was playing around with the register tonight to see if I
could recreate what happened, and I set aside the money but it’s gone! I mean, I didn’t take it, so I’m sure it just fell somewhere and I can’t find it. I’m really sorry this happened, if you could just call me back and tell me if there’s anything specific you’d like me to do about it, that would be great. Have a good evening.”

X.

I hid in a corner of the lobby, listening to Parker repeatedly count out the money, lose count, and start over. Come on, he’s your roommate, I told myself. You’re going to have to face him sooner or later. Better do it now while you can. I took the small pocket knife out of my backpack, and hesitantly stepped towards the box office as quietly as I could.

“Parker?” I whispered once I was close to the door. The counting stopped, and everything was still. There wasn’t a single sound in the theater other than my breathing, so I held my breath. Finally I heard him step slowly towards the door. He stopped, and I held the small knife in front of me, my heart pounding in my ears. I live with him, he’s harmless. Unless he murdered Mr. Grand, of course. I watched the handle to the door turn slowly, and he pushed the door open a crack, hiding himself from view. I let out a breath, and said, “Parker, it’s me. Why are you doing this?”

He pushed the door open all the way, so I could see barely see him in the dim light of the box office and the street lights shining in through the front doors. He looked like a madman. His eyes were red, there were bruises on his hands and arms, and cuts on his face.

“Jesus, Reagan. You need to get out of here. This isn’t a joke, you need to leave.”

“Why are you stealing the money?! What the hell is going on with you? What happened?” I said. My words echoed throughout the theater lobby. Parker looked down at his feet, and shuffled a little.

“Come inside at least,” He held the door open for me, but I refused to step inside. “Don’t worry, I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“Did you kill Mr. Grand?”
“No! I may have got myself into a mess, but I’m not a murderer!” I reluctantly stepped inside, and he closed and locked the door behind me. The hair on the back of my neck was standing, and my knuckles were white around the pocket knife. “Put that down, Reagan.”

“I don’t think I will. Tell me what happened.”

“I got into a little mishap with someone.” He stopped there, I waited for him to continue to talk, but he looked down and shook his head.

“The man from the tours, isn’t it?” He nodded. “Okay, well what does he want?”

“Money.”

“For?”

He paused before saying, “Drugs.”

“Just tell me what’s happening, Parker.”

“I owe so much money, Reagan. His name is Xavier. My parents found out that I’ve been doing drugs and cut me off, so I don’t have the money to pay him back. I stole from you, and I don’t think you even noticed. By the way, sorry about that. But it wasn’t enough, so I figured I could steal from here. I’ve watched you lock up and put things away for the longest time, so I figured it would be easy. Xavier and some of his people took the tour to distract you while I snuck in, but Mr. Grand was coming so I dropped everything and ran, locking the door behind me. I wanted you to be at the tour so none of the blame could be on you. Anyways, when I got your voicemail, I assured Xavier I could get it that night, and he gave me another chance. I took the money that night, but came back at midnight to return it because I was afraid it was too obvious and I messed around with the security tapes. I hadn’t gotten in a fight with my dad, Xavier punished me for putting it back. Anyways, apparently Xavier was angry that Mr. Grand got in the way, so he stuck around to steal the money straight from him, but he ended up murdering him. I didn’t know he came back a second time, but I reckon it was to clean up any evidence, because he killed him here. During the performance that night, I tried to steal the money again, but this time,
you came around. So Xavier forced me to take him back to our apartment to steal any valuables, and he must have put Mr. Grand’s phone on your bed as a threat, I’m not really sure.”
“Searching for Dom”

*I was supposed to get married today.*

I wrote the words, willing them out of my system. I waited for something more to come. More words. Tears. But nothing came. Everything was in that sentence. I watched the cursor blinking at the end of the sentence. Sat at the cherry wood desk in my sister’s office, arms folded. I glanced down at the taskbar on the screen at the date. May 8th.

“Kelsea?” I jumped at my sister’s voice. She leaned against the doorway. “How long have you been sitting here?” Melanie was in her pajamas, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

I looked at the time. I couldn’t remember when I had woken up from the nightmare, what time I walked to the office and sat at the desk in the dark, only the laptop and the streetlights shining through the cracks in the blinds. Hours had passed, but it didn’t matter. “I don’t know,” I told her. I closed the laptop and spun the chair toward the doorway to face her. “Today’s the day, Mel.”

I caught her eye for just a second. Melanie looked down at her feet. “I know,” she said. She put her hands in the pockets of her sweats and walked into the room only a couple of steps.

I buried my face in my hands, letting the tears fall. “Where could he be, Mel? What happened?”

“I’m sorry, Kelsea,” she said, walking over and kneeling at my feet, “I don’t know.” She put her hands on my knees.

“People don’t just disappear without a word,” I said. I looked up at her.

She stared back into my eyes, tears brimming. “It hasn’t been long, Kelsea. You could start looking for Dom again. To take it into your own hands. The police may have given up but that doesn’t mean you have to.”

I nodded slowly. She squeezed my hands for a moment and stood up. “I’ll make some coffee,” she said and left the office.
I turned the chair to look out the window. A yellow glow had started to peak through the blinds. I got up and pulled them open, and stood to watch the sunrise pour its light over the city.

*

I walked into Corduroy’s, the bar where I first met my fiancé Dominic five years ago, and the last place he’d been seen before he disappeared. I stood in the doorway for just a moment, breathing in the familiar smell of hops and vodka and looking around at the undergraduates drinking Irish car bombs and blowjobs and other ridiculous drinks. I locked eyes with Eddie, standing behind the bar with a cocktail mixer in hand. Dom and Eddie had been best friends since they were younger, and Eddie was the one that had introduced us. “Kelsea?” he said just loud enough for me to hear over the dance music coming from surround sound speakers. I took off my sweater and draped it around the back of a barstool.

“Hi, Eddie. How are you?” I said, taking my seat.

“Good, Kelsea. It’s good to see you.” He put down the shaker and reached over the bar to give me a hug. “How are you doing?” he asked, pulling away and picking up the mixer. He shook it for a minute, then poured the drink in a martini glass and placed it in front of the girl a couple of seats away, sitting with her friends and laughing.

“For a girl that was supposed to get married today, I think I’m doing pretty well.” I looked down the bar at the girls, laughing and smiling, and I wished I could switch places with them for just a moment. “Can you get me what they’re having?”

Eddie nodded slowly and made the drink. I took it down in one try.

I watched Eddie as he worked the busy bar, and imagined him standing next to Dom as his best man. “Another?” Eddie poured me a drink and went back to a customer. I drank it faster than the first. He walked back over after he finished, and opened his mouth to speak when I cut him off.

“Ed, do you remember that night?” I asked quickly.

“Kelsea,” he said, shaking his head and turning around to wash the cocktail mixers. “I remember that he stayed here for a couple hours, had a couple drinks and left.”
“There’s nothing else?”

He turned around, sponge and mixer in hand, and shook his head.

“It’s okay,” I said. I looked down into the empty martini glass and asked for a refill.

I drank one cocktail after another until I couldn’t lift my head from the table and tears poured down my cheeks like a waterfall. Eddie closed up and called a cab, and when it was only a minute away he threw my arm over his shoulder and dragged me to the door.

“I just want to find out what happened to him, Eddie,” I heard myself slur.

“I do too, Kelsea.” He sighed. Eddie let my arm go and helped me lean against the doorway. He shifted his weight uncomfortably. “I saw him with a woman that night.”

My eyes widened and I tried to focus on his face. “What do you mean?”

He looked past me, avoiding my eyes. “He was sitting at the bar, then he went to go talk to her. It seemed like he knew her. He bought her a drink and they talked, and then he came back to the bar for a little while until he left,” his words went fast and blurred together. “I didn’t ask him about it that night because nothing happened. But the next day he was gone and I didn’t know what to say to you about it after that. I told the cops but…”

I stopped listening. I had never considered before that moment that maybe he’d just left, that maybe there was someone else. But it didn’t make sense. I wanted to hit Eddie, but I was too dizzy to even stand. I leaned back on the molding of the doorway, holding on to steady myself.

“Do you know her name?” I leaned my head back against the molding and closed my eyes.

“I—I heard him say Jasper, but—”

“That’s fine, Eddie.”

The cab pulled up and I let Eddie help me into it. He held the door open as I plugged in the seatbelt. “I’m sor—”

“It’s okay, Eddie,” I cut him off. “You’re okay.”

He nodded and shut the door after buckled myself in. I looked through the rearview mirror and watched his blurry figure shrink away.
I unlocked the apartment door and pushed it open, pushing aside a small pile of junk mail lying on the floor. I flipped on the light and took in the sight of the apartment I hadn’t been in since Dom’s disappearance. I pulled my keys from the sticky lock and set them and my purse down gingerly on the tall table where Dom used to leave his ties.

I went through and turned on every single light in the tiny apartment we had shared. His laptop was on the bedside table where he’d always left it. I ripped the charger from the wall and grabbed the laptop, taking them both to the living room. I plugged it in and turned it on. Having the same password for everything made it easy to access his iCloud and find his contacts.

Jasper. (768) 213-4067.

I stared at the name for a while, and after I punched it in my phone I stared at it even longer before I hit the call button. It rang once and I prayed for a man to answer. Rang twice.

“Hello?” her voice came through the speaker and into my ear.

I wasn’t prepared for this.

“Hello?”

“I’m looking for a woman named Jasper.” The words came out garbled and low, but I knew she understood them by the silence that followed.

“You must be Kelsea,” she said. She breathed softly into the phone. “Only Dom called me Jasper. My first name’s Daisy.”

I held the phone to my ear but all I could hear was my own heartbeat.

“Are you still there? Hello?”

I cleared my throat. “I thought you were a guy,” was the only thing that came to mind. “When he talked about Jasper I always thought he was talking about a guy.”

She laughed and I felt the blood run up to my cheeks and flush with anger. “He called me by my last name, and even after I got married it just kind of stuck.”

I almost dropped the phone. “You’re married?”
“Yeah. It was right before you started dating and a little after I graduated. I was a semester ahead of Dom. I guess that’s why I never met you, because I moved out of the city and got pregnant right after that. But I always saw his posts of you on FaceBook.”

I took a deep breath. “But you saw him the night before he disappeared.”

She sighed. “I know. I think about it all the time,” she said. I could hear the sound of tinkling music through her end, the sounds some baby toys make. “My husband and I were out, taking a night off from the kids and I ran into Dom. I hadn’t seen him in a really long time so he bought me a drink and sat with my husband and I for a while. He was checking his phone a lot, told me he was meeting his brother at the bar.”

My heart dropped. “Dominic doesn’t have a brother, Daisy,” I said louder than I’d intended.

“I’m sorry, maybe I heard him wrong,” she said. “But I would swear on my life that he said his brother.”

I didn’t say anything. I heard a wailing of a baby and Daisy had to go, told me she was sorry about all of it and if I needed anything from her to call her back.

I put my phone on the coffee table and sat there for almost an hour. Dom didn’t have a brother. I was his fiancée, and I knew for a fact Dom didn’t have a brother. I had met every single cousin, aunt, his mom, his grandmothers and grandfather. He was an only child.

I picked up my phone again. This time the person I was looking for was in my contacts. I hit call. It only rang once.

“Hello?” Dom’s mother said.

“Hi Sheila, it’s Kelsea.”

“Oh, my love, how are you doing?” she asked, her voice breaking. “I thought about you both all day yesterday.”

I didn’t want to think about the wedding that would’ve been. “I’m okay. Sheila, were you going to meet Dom the night he disappeared?”
She inhaled audibly. “No honey, why do you—?”

“It’s just that I talked to someone that saw Dom that night, that said he was going to meet his brother at the bar, and I just think they might have heard him wrong. That maybe he said he was going to meet his mother.”

There was no sound on the other end. Not a breath, not the sound of a television. My heart began to pound in my ears again.

“Did he have a brother?”

Nothing.

“Sheila? Are you still there?”

“Who said Dom was going to see him?” she finally asked, so low that I could barely hear her.

“A friend. Sheila? Dom had a brother?”

She sighed. “I had a son before Dominic. His half-brother. Lucas.” Her words got softer as she went on. “I was so young, Kelsea. I couldn’t take care of him and my parents had kicked me out.” Her voice broke.

“You gave him up for adoption?”

Sheila cleared her throat. “Yes.”

“Did Dom ever meet him? Why wouldn’t he tell me if he knew him?”

Her words came out slowly, as if each thought of her first son caused her immense pain. “Lucas contacted Dominic, wanting to be in his life. And it worked for them for a while. Until Dom had to bail him out of jail for drug use and they fought, and what little relationship they’d patched together broke apart.” She sighed again, more heavily than the first time. “It all happened so long before he met you.”

I lied down on the couch and breathed deeply, trying to stop the pounding of my head. “Would you have any idea where he is, Sheila? Lucas, I mean?” I rubbed my forehead with one hand and held the phone to my ear with the other. “Maybe he knows what happened to Dom.”
“He contacted me a couple years back. He was staying in homeless shelters then. But I haven’t heard from him since.” I heard her sniffle.

“I’m sorry, Sheila, I—”


I told her I would, promised. I lay there for a while after hanging up, still holding my phone and rubbing my forehead. I tried to sleep, told myself I would search for Lucas tomorrow. But I didn’t shut my eyes that night, and I watched the sun rise over the city for the second morning in a row.

*

I spent the next week and the week after that visiting the six homeless shelters in the city and the other two in a twenty-mile radius. Over and over, shelter after shelter, I asked workers and volunteers for help. One volunteer at a shelter in the middle of the city said he’d seen a homeless guy named Lucas around, the right age for Dom’s brother and mean as hell, but that he’d gotten in a fight and he hadn’t be allowed back at that shelter for more than a year. After that I took to the streets, arming myself to search places like the abandoned trash company building and our city’s very own Skid Row. Still nothing.

I’d come back to our apartment every night, looking for anything that could help me find Dom’s half-brother, any hint among Dom’s things that could possibly be connected to Lucas. There was nothing there. I had called Sheila back for Lucas’s last name, and searched him up online. Nothing. I had nothing to go off of, and it was getting harder and harder to keep searching.

I opened the door after a long day of walking the city and saw the lamp in the front room casting shadows of the furniture on the wall. I mentally kicked myself, assuming I had left it on since last night, and went to turn it off. I froze. Sitting in Dom’s favorite chair was a man in a black coat and jeans, too new for him to seem homeless. They were Dom’s clothes. Lucas looked
so much like him, but his wavy brown hair peaked out over his ears in a way Dom’s never had, and his eyes were an icy blue, not hazel.

“You’ve been looking for me, Kelsea,” Lucas said, looking up at me and moving his hands from his lap to the armrests. “So I’m here.”

Fear froze the words in my mouth, but I forced them out. “How did you get in?”

He pulled a handful of keys out of his coat pocket. “I know they found his bloody cell phone and wallet in the alley by the bar, but I made sure to keep these. Just in case.” He jingled them in his hand and tossed them on to the coffee table.

“How did you know?” I asked. “How’d you know I was looking for you?”

“You were at my company, love,” he said. I realized he was talking about the old trash company building. He twisted a button on his coat and rubbed his nose. “I saw you.”

I stood, staring into his eyes. My heart was racing but I kept my breathing steady. “Where’s Dom?”

Lucas smiled. He leaned in as if telling a secret, and whispered, “I threw him away, Kelsea. Just like I was thrown away. The way out mother threw me away, but kept him. He’s gone now, though. Trash.” He laughed softly, leaning back into the chair.

I thought I had prepared myself enough to hear Lucas tell me he killed Dom, I had been expecting it. But you’re never prepared for these things.

I bolted for the door. I’d left my purse on the table by the door with Dom’s handgun inside. Lucas jumped up from the chair and reached me faster than I’d hoped. He lunged for me but only knocked me to my knees. I was just close enough to the table to knock it over. I brought it down, spilling my purse and all its contents. The gun was in reach. I grabbed it and turned a round. He was hunched over behind me. I pointed the gun at his chest.

“You’re not going to kill me, Kelsea,” Lucas sneered.

“I don’t know about that,” I said, rising to my feet. “I’m sure I have it in me. But what I really want is for you to call the cops, and tell them what you’ve done and where I can find
Dominic’s body.” I kicked my phone over to him. He leaned over, reaching for the phone. He sprang up, lunged for me again. I fired the gun. POP. POP. He kept coming at me. My head hit the floor. Everything went black.

* 

I woke up in the hospital, my sister reading aloud an article from her phone. “Mel?”

She looked up instantaneously. “Oh my god, Kelsea.” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “You’re okay. Everything’s okay.”

“What happened?” The tubes in my nose made it difficult to speak.

“You’ve been out for a couple days.” Melanie shifted her weight in the chair. “Do you remember anything at all?”

“Lucas was in the apartment. Dominic’s brother.”

She looked down at my hand and took it in hers, and looked back up at me. “You killed him.”

I looked away. The whiteness of the hospital room was blinding. I squeezed her hand. “He killed Dom,” I told her.

Tears started to spill out of her eyes, but she smiled. “No, Kelsea. No, he didn’t.” Her voice broke. “Dom’s alive.”

* 

Lucas had held Dominic captive since the night he left the bar. He’d kept him tied up and chained inside an old dumpster. The police went to investigate the day after I had killed Lucas, and found him there. The first time I saw my fiancé he was lying in a hospital bed, sleeping. I sat on the edge of the bed, not wanting to wake him. When Dom finally opened his eyes, he smiled and began to cry. I held him and kissed him, cried along with him.

“I’m glad you didn’t give up on me,” he finally said.

“I love you, Dom,” I told him. “I had to find you. I needed to know what happened to you.”
We sat and talked the entire night. His face was long and thin, but he was still the same man even through everything. I promised him that I’d never lose him again.

“I’m sorry I missed our wedding,” he said, rubbing circles on the back of my hand with his thumb. “Will you still marry me?”

I started to cry again, but I smiled and laughed softly. “Yes, Dominic,” I said, “I’ll still marry you.”
Bianca and Mae

Mae notices Lizzie Constantino and another girl passing a piece of scratch paper back and forth. When one of them reads what the other wrote, she looks over at Bianca and snickers. Mae wonders what the hell they are laughing about, and prays that Bianca keeps her cool and ignores their chuckling. The principle warned Bianca about getting involved in another fight at school; one more strike, and she’s out for good.

The bell rings and everyone stampedes out of the classroom for lunchtime. Lizzie purposely bumps her shoulder against Bianca’s. Before Bianca has a chance to react, Mae grabs onto her cardigan and pulls her away. Mae tries to think of reasons why Lizzie is trying to pick a fight with Bianca all of a sudden; Bianca and Lizzie haven’t spoken since Bianca dumped Lizzie’s brother after he got expelled for selling drugs on campus two years ago.

While Mae is rummaging through her locker to find her lunch, she hears a loud crash coming from another row of lockers. She fears the worst and rushes over to see what is going on. Lizzie is on the ground getting punched in the face by Bianca. Mae hurries to pull Bianca off before a teacher sees the fight, but one of the English teachers catches sight and puts an end to the brawl.

“The both of you to the principle’s office now!”

Mae follows the two girls but the teacher holds her back. “Not you, kid. Go have lunch.”

By the end of the day, Mae gets a text message from Bianca saying: You don’t have to wait for me after school. I got kicked out :P

***

Mae gets home from school and her mom already has dinner prepared. They both sit down to eat and Mae’s mom asks if anything special happened at school today. Mae shakes her head and continues to take bites of the dry meat loaf. Mae never tells her mom about Bianca’s fights at school; it will only make her mom dislike Bianca even more.
They both finish eating and Mae helps her mom wash the dishes. She goes to her bedroom and starts working on homework. At 8 p.m., Mae hears a tap at her window. She opens it quietly and asks Mae what is going on.

“Can you sneak out?” asks Mae.

“I’m not supposed to be out this late.” Whispers Mae. “Why?”

“I have to go pick up some fake I.D.’s from a guy in Echo Park. There is a bus heading over there in half an hour.”

Mae panics at the thought of heading towards downtown Los Angeles so late at night. She immediately wishes Bianca good night and tries closing the window on her, but she pushes through and jumps into Mae’s room. Bianca takes a couple of Mae’s pillows and stuffs them under the covers to make it look like she is sleeping.

“See,” says Bianca, “she won’t even know you’re out.”

Mae visualizes a picture of both of them sitting on a dark bus ride that could accidentally drop them off anywhere.

“Please Mae? Please?” says Bianca as she gets on her knees and begs.

“Fine,” caves Mae.

Mae walks out of her room to check if her mom is asleep. She comes back in and turns off all the lights. Both girls hop out the window and onto a bus going to Echo Park. When they get off the bus, the girls walk half a mile past the Echo Park Lake and reach a small house with several Harley Davidsons parked outside. Mae stops in her tracks and asks Bianca who are the people they are getting the fake I.D.’s from.

“They’re these really cool biker dudes I met at a concert last weekend.” Responds Bianca Mae turns around and starts heading back to the bus stop. Bianca stops her.

“Where are you going?”

“Home! I can’t believe I actually followed you here.”

“Don’t be such a nerd” yells Bianca, “I’m trying to make our lives more interesting here.”
Mae realizes that if she leaves, she would have to ride the bus back by herself. She isn’t carrying enough money to take a cab, so she keeps walking towards the house with Bianca.

A tall bearded man in his early thirties answers the door.

“Who are you?” He asks.

“I’m Bianca. Chucky around?”

The man looks the girls over for a minute and lets them in.

Mae stares at the design on the back of the man’s leather jacket; “Los Chupacabras Los Angeles Chapter” in green, with a cartoon of a rat like creature standing on its hind legs. In the living room, there are six other guys wearing the same leather jackets with tattoos of the logo on their forearms. The man tells one of the women at the bar to call Chucky.

Chucky walks into the living room with his friend Henry and Mae is relieved to see that they are significantly younger than the other men in the crew. Chucky takes an envelope out of his back pocket and tosses it across the room to Bianca. Bianca hands an I.D. to Mae and they both look them over; Mae is surprised to see that her real name and yearbook picture is on the card.

“How much?”

“It’s covered.” Chucky answers. Henry leans in and whispers something in his ear. The girls start making their way towards the door, but the man that lets them in blocks the exit. Chucky asks, “Me and my friend are wondering if we can take you girls out tonight and try out those new I.D.’s?”

Mae shakes her head. “We live out in the valley and need to get back. We got school in the morning.”

“Did you drive here?” Asks Henry

“No,” says Bianca, “we took the bus. But if you guys want, you can at least give us a ride home.”

Mae feels like shoving Bianca against a wall after her suggestion, but chooses to just glare at her instead. The girls wait outside while Chucky and Henry look for their keys.
“Bianca, I don’t think this is a good idea. We barely know them.”

“Don’t worry about it Mae. Live a little.”

The guys come out and start their motorcyles. Bianca hops on Chucky’s bike and rides off. Henry hands Mae a helmet. She looks at it without knowing which direction the helmet is supposed to face and Henry laughs and buckles it on her head.

“You ever been on a bike before?” he asks

“Never.”

She gets on the bike and holds on tight to his torso. She closes her eyes for most of the ride home. He drops her off two blocks away from her house and turns off his bike to not wake up any of the neighbors.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to buy you a drink?” he asks

“I’m sure,” responds Mae, “I can buy my own now.”

Before she walks away he hands her a flyer.

“I play guitar for this band. If you change your mind about the drink, you can catch me at the show tomorrow.” Mae folds the flyer and tucks it in her back pocket.

Mae walks home and crawls into her room. She falls asleep without calling Bianca to see if she is okay.

***

The next day, Mae wakes up to the sound of her cell-phone vibrating. She answers the call and hears Bianca’s mom on the line. She asks if Bianca had slept over at Mae’s house because she wasn’t in her room this morning. Bianca gets up and looks around her room to see if Bianca had snuck in last minute, but sees no sign of her. Bianca’s mom tells her that she has been calling Bianca all morning but she doesn’t answer her cell-phone.

“When you see her at school today, tell her to call me.” She says

Mae is surprised to find out that no one notified her that Bianca was expelled from school. “Don’t worry, I’ll tell her.” Responds Mae.
The mom hangs up and Mae dials Bianca’s number. Mae gives up after the third try and starts getting ready for school, hoping Bianca will text her by the end of the day to hangout.

At school, Mae rushes up to Lizzie as they walk out of class. She asks her why she made Bianca fight her yesterday, but Lizzie ignores her and keeps walking away.

“Hey I’m talking to you!” says Mae as she follows Lizzie through the corridor, “Why did you want to fight with Mae so bad?”

Lizzie finally comes to a stop and turns to Mae “Bianca is a rat.”

“What are you talking about?” asks Mae

Lizzie answers seriously, “My brother told me that Bianca ratted him out to the school for selling drugs. I wanted her to strike out a third time, so I made her hit me.”

There is nothing Mae hates more than when someone lies to her. She knows Bianca is not a tattletale, and in the event she were to rat someone out, she would tell Mae about it. She tells Mae everything.

“Mae, you’re a good girl. You shouldn’t be hanging around with chicks like that.” Says Lizzie patting Mae’s shoulder.

Mae watches Lizzie walk away and tries to imagine Bianca sitting at the principle’s office on her own accord, just to tattle on her ex-boyfriend. The image is so absurd that Mae feels like she’s been had just thinking about it. Mae’s phone starts vibrating and she checks it to see if it’s Bianca calling. She sees it’s Bianca’s mom and tucks her phone away in her pocket. She feels a piece of paper and takes it out. She sees the flier Henry gave her.

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At 10 p.m., Mae turns off the lights in her room and sneaks out of the house. She calls a taxicab to pick her up at the usual two blocks away from her home. She gives the taxi driver the flyer and he drops her off at The Smell in Downtown Los Angeles; a small warehouse in the LA fashion district where bikers and punk bands celebrate their individuality, get drunk, and vomit outside. Mae is less worried about her own safety going to The Smell and more worried about
where Bianca is. She knows Bianca’s mom gives her daughter a lot of free rein and acknowledges that Bianca is a strong girl that can defend herself anywhere. But never has Bianca been so reckless as to disappear and not let anyone know.

The driver parks outside The Smell and asks “Are you sure you want me to drop you off here kid?”

Mae notices the row of Harley’s parked outside. “Yeah, this looks like the place.” She shows her fake I.D. at the door and the bouncer laughs at the piece of plastic before letting her in. The music is loud, and Mae cannot get a good view of the stage. She walks over to the makeshift bar in the back and stands on one of the bar stools.

“Hey kid! Are you going to order anything or what?” says the bartender. Mae recognizes her from the house in Echo Park. Mae asks her if she has seen Bianca. The woman says she does not know anyone named Bianca.

“Do you know Chucky?” Yells Mae over the loud music.

“He isn’t here.” Says the woman.

Mae looks over at the stage. She recognizes Henry on the guitar. Under the light, she notices how lanky he looks jumping around on stage. She thinks he looks like a fool trying to looks so cool with his biker jacket and Mohawk.

The mosh pit at the center of the room keeps her at the bar. She orders a Long Island iced tea and waits for the band to finish playing.

At the end of the last song, Henry jumps into the crowd and surfs until he gets dropped in the middle of the audience. Mae pushes through the hot and sweaty crowd until she is able to grab a hold of Henry’s Chupacabras jacket.

“You came!” says Henry hugging Mae in the middle of everyone.

Mae holds back and asks if he knew where Bianca was.

He shakes his head. She grabs him by the shoulder and they walk through the mob to talk privately.
“Where did Chucky drop off Bianca?” Mae asks outside

Henry doesn’t answer and is busy high fiving all the people leaving The Smell.

Mae gets annoyed and pushes him. “I’m asking you a question?”

Henry leans in to steal a kiss. Mae jumps back and dodges his face and gets grossed out after taking a whiff of Henry’s bad breadth and the stink of alcohol. Mae asks him where is Chucky one more time. He tells her that he doesn’t know what she is talking about. Chucky dropped her off at home last night.

“No he didn’t” says Mae.

Henry starts walking back into the venue and Mae grabs him and pushes his back against the wall. She was surprised how easy it was to do that.

“If I let you buy me a drink, will you tell me where my friend is?”

“You’re going to get the both of us in trouble,” responds Henry.

“I promise I won’t tell anyone you told me.”

The two walk over to his motorcycle and ride off. They park outside a dive bar in Echo Park. Henry orders two beers and tells Mae to sit down in a dark corner next to a jukebox. When Henry brings the beers to the table, he slides a dime bag across the table.

“You know what this is?” he asks Mae.

“That’s marijuana. Duh.”

“Nope. This is synthetic marijuana. Your friend got the bright idea to sell $2,000 worth of this fake stuff to Chucky’s girlfriend. She paid Bianca with Chucky’s money. When the crew figured out it was fake, your friend didn’t want to give the money back.”

Mae took a closer look at the small baggie. Why would Bianca be dealing when she dumped her own boyfriend for selling drugs? Bianca wishes Henry never told her anything.

“Look,” she says, “I asked you where she was not what she was doing.”

Henry chugs his beer and says, “She’s at Chucky’s. He is gonna keep her there until he gets his money back.”
Mae’s body tenses up as she tries to hold back tears forming from the impossibility of being able to scrounge up $2,000. Her voice starts to quiver and she asks Henry where Chucky lives.

“He lives in an apartment building across the street from the house where we met.” Mae tells Henry to take her, but he is scared. He writes a room number on a napkin and gives it to her.

“Go tomorrow in the afternoon” he says. “Chucky goes to work, but his girlfriend is usually there. She doesn’t know who you are, so you’re gonna have to get her attention to answer the door.”

Mae gets up without finishing her beer. He grabs her wrist and tells her that she hasn’t touched the beer he bought her. She frees herself from his grasp and tells him to drive her home.

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At 11:30 in the morning, Mae tells her mom she is going with Bianca to watch a matinee movie. Her mom gives her some cash before she walks out the door and tells her to be safe. Mae walks to the bus stop and catches a ride to Echo Park. Mae thinks it’s ironic how two days ago she wasn’t willing to get on the bus by herself, but over the course of two days, she is able to get on it herself without any pushiness from Bianca.

Mae gets off and walks past the Echo Park Lake again. She hears the loud rumbling of a motorcycle and hides behind a car. As the biker rides off, she recognizes the logo on the jacket and waits until she can no longer hear the noise from the motorcycle.

She keeps walking and sees the apartment building. Mae goes inside and starts looking for the room on the napkin. She gets to room 62 and covers the peephole with her finger before knocking on the door.

“Who is it?” says a girl’s voice from inside.

“It’s an emergency!” screams Mae, “I need help!”
The girl doesn’t answer the door. Mae doesn’t know what she is going to do if no one answers the door. Should she just call the cops? If she calls the cops, will they take Bianca away for dealing?

Finally, Mae hears the door unlatch. The door opens and Lizzie Constantino is standing on the other side. She slams the door in Mae’s face, but Mae manages to thrust herself against the door and smack it against Lizzie’s head. Mae jumps on top of Lizzie and asks her where Bianca is.

“Fuck you!” screams Lizzie.

Mae punches her in the face and asks her again, but she spits at Mae. Mae keeps punching her until the jabs pierce the skin on her knuckles. Mae leaves Lizzie lying on the floor and looks through the rooms in the apartment. She opens the door to the master bedroom and sees Bianca handcuffed to one of the bedposts. Bianca starts to squirm and Mae peels the tape off her mouth.

“Mae! Get me out of here Mae!”

“Where’s the key?”

“She has it!”

Mae walks out and grabs a knife in the kitchen. She finds Lizzie crawling out the door. Mae grabs her foot and drags her back into the apartment, stepping on her back so she will stay put. Mae slams the door shut and sits on Lizzie’s back as she holds the knife against her throat.

“Where is the key to the handcuffs?” asks Mae

“I don’t know!”

Mae pulls the knife closer to Lizzie’s neck and pricks a bit of her skin.

“Okay! Okay! It’s on top of the TV!”

Mae grabs the key, runs to the room, and lets Bianca free. They hug tightly and Bianca starts crying.

“Holy Shit, dude! You found me!”

“I had to find you. You’re my best friend.”
Bianca shakes her wrists to relieve the stress of being handcuffed. She sees Lizzie on the ground and runs out the room to kick her in the stomach. She keeps kicking until Mae makes her stop for fear that Lizzie will tell her boyfriend who had beaten her up.

Bianca takes a minute to catch her breadth. “You dumb whore! You think you could pin it on me!”

Mae hears Bianca and realizes that Lizzie had ripped off her own boyfriend. Instead of being angry, she feels a sense of relief knowing that Henry was wrong and her friend wasn’t a dealer.

Bianca leans over Lizzie and says, “Since I’m not a rat, I’m going to let this slide. But if I ever hear that you step foot at school again, you’re joining your brother in jail.”

Mae and Bianca walk out of the apartment and leave Lizzie crying on the floor. Mae takes out her cell phone and tells Bianca to call her mother and tell her she is safe. Outside the complex, Bianca calls her mom and Mae wonders what time the next bus to the valley is going to pull up. She looks across the street and notices Henry’s bike is parked outside the biker house. When Bianca gets off the phone, they cross the street and look for Henry to give them a ride. The next day at school, Lizzie never showed up to class.
Much to my disappointment, the second year of my college career began with a late start. Time management had never been one of my strong suits so my determination was steadfast that sophomore year would see a change in behavior. I set the alarm for 7:00 A.M., allowing me enough time to get ready and be at my 8:45 philosophy class fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. Instead, I awoke with a start at 7:45 to the sound of my roommate's music, which she plays every morning while getting ready for class. The words and rhythm were so familiar; some new pop song that had been overplayed on the radio for the last several weeks. As I anxiously climbed out of my warm bed, I discovered my only clean bath towel lay dripping wet on our tile floor. Focusing my thoughts so as to avoid an outrageous outburst, I slowly turned around to question my roommate.

Keeping my anger in check, I calmly asked, "Sara, why is my towel wet"? Using her compact mirror to meticulously apply her makeup, Sara finally took a moment to look up at me and reply to my question.

"All of my towels were dirty, so I figured it was okay to borrow yours," Sara said with such innocence. I could not believe how inconsiderate she was, thinking it was okay to use my towel. This may not seem like a huge problem in the scheme of things, but you had to know the history of Sara.

"That was my only clean towel," I said as I could feel my anger rising. “There were many other reasonable options you could have chosen to solve your towel crisis. One, you could have done laundry last night before you went to bed, knowing that you needed towels. Two, you could have asked to borrow a towel from one of your friends. If neither of those options worked, you could have asked me last night, and just maybe I could have accommodated you. Now, I am the one without a clean, dry towel. You never think about your actions and how they affect others. Your only concern is whatever satisfies you and your desires at the time. Before you do something like this again, think about the consequences to others, several steps ahead."
"Okay, whatever, Casey," Sara said casually. So off she went, with her guiltless smile, leaving me to stare at the wet mess she had blatantly left behind. Not to mention, I had no dry towel for the quick shower I was about to take.

"You are unbelievable," I inaudibly muttered under my breath. Luckily, I had a couple of clean, small, hand towels in my closet that I could substitute for my full-sized towel. The awkwardness facing me, as I approached the community shower with nothing more than three hand towels, was not what I expected for my new approach to sophomore year. I rushed to get ready and amazingly was out the door by 8:25. The bike ride from my dorm took almost fifteen minutes and then there was the parking issue. I bounced into my seat just three seconds before the professor walked in. Class was relatively boring, as is philosophy in general, so I spent the entire period thinking about my roommate and the long list of her insensitive, self-centered tendencies.

I thought how Sara and her personality could be perfectly defined just by examining her group of friends. These were the type of girls that spent their weekends shopping for new skirts and heels; the latest fashions that would catch the eye of every male on campus. Dating, partying and flirting were the courses they enrolled in; studying and learning were not part of their make-up. They had little substance and were, in my opinion, dumber than a sack of oranges. The only reasonable explanation for their acceptance into college was their ‘daddies' connections’. To Sara’s credit, she may have looked and acted like one of them, but she was actually very intelligent. However, Sara had a tendency to minimize situations and she always wanted to be in control. This was evident in our morning confrontation.

My personality was different than that of my roommate and her friends. I was born, Casey Merrill: a driven, logical, antisocial person. Being a journalism major, I spent most of my time reading articles in the library or on my computer. I loved the investigative process associated with getting the truth out there. Freshman were not allowed to be on staff at the school newspaper, the Badger Times, but this year held the promise of my being a junior member.
Class ended and I raced to the first staff meeting of the year. The staff numbered about thirty, and wanting to be visible at the front of the room, I arrived early. A huge group arrived just after me and the meeting started promptly.

Tammy, the editor in chief, seemed to have it all together and was somebody I admired. She reminded me of a modern day Lois Lane, with her intense attention to detail. "There are many more of you than last year,” Tammy began. “I want you to know that you will be competing against each other to get your stories published. Many will discover what you think to be incredible stories, but rest assured, they won't be." She continued, "I'm not here to be your friend, I am here to put out the best possible news. Go out and find that story and we will see if you have what it takes to make it on this staff."

I was so inspired, that I immediately started searching for a story, one that would put me on top. I had been on my high school newspaper, but this was so different. That staff was really small and the newspaper never made it outside the walls of our school. Stories I wrote, about the food in the cafeteria, would never cut it at this level. The Badger Times was actually read religiously by the local townspeople.

A few days passed and I failed to come across any stories with real potential. There were a few that were pretty interesting, one about bike thefts at school, but four other staffers were chasing that lead. I knew I needed to come up with something unique. A few days later, I came across something, but was it interesting enough to be newsworthy? Sara's friends, the ones that could easily hold a conversation with a bowl of fruit, were pregnant! All five of them and they swore they had no idea how it happened. Stupidity was not the reason for their shock you see, they were convinced they had taken steps to ensure this would never happen. To be truthful, under the circumstances, I did find it uncanny that five friends unknowingly became pregnant at the same time. The journalistic investigator in me began to question the entire situation.

It seemed like a deliberate conspiracy of sorts, possibly involving the group of sleazy guys they hung around. Those guys were immature enough to think this might be a really funny joke to
play on these unsuspecting girls. Ironically, the funny thing was, they hadn’t thought about the consequences. They would be just as responsible for those babies as the girls.

I started off by questioning the girls: Fiona, Makayla, Katie, Melanie, and Michelle. Fiona figured it happened the last night she was with Ryan, a wide receiver on the football team. She had been having a serious sexual relationship with him over the last month. Confident Ryan would not be forthcoming, I decided to just come right out and ask him if he deliberately impregnated Fiona.

Later that day, I met up with Ryan as he was walking off the field after practice. “Can I ask you a couple of questions,” I inquired, hesitation in my voice. He was a pretty intimidating guy, reaching about 6’2” and weighing roughly 240 pounds.

"What do you want," he asked me with disdain in his voice?

I planted my feet firmly on the track turf and pressed on. "I wanted to ask you about Fiona. Did you know she is pregnant? Are you the father? Did you deliberately get her pregnant? All of her closest friends are also pregnant.”

"Was that last part a question,” Ryan demanded. "I don’t know what you are trying to insinuate, but one, I barely found out she was pregnant. Two, as to the rest of her friends, I'm not sure how they got pregnant. If they are anything like Fiona, it should not be that surprising. She is pretty free with her body. I've gotta go take a shower, but I need to say that none of this is your business and you should really find something better to do with your time!"

My brain wanted to believe that all of them becoming pregnant at the same time was just a coincidence. The Pregnant Five, which I started calling them, probably were not all that responsible when it came to having sex. However, my gut told me that it was not a coincidence. I did not believe in coincidences. There had to be a darker mystery in there somewhere, or was this just my need for a sensational story. I needed more information about the P5 before I could be sure.
After a long day, I returned to my dorm room. Sara was sitting on her bed studying, probably for the first time in her life. "Sara, can I ask you a couple of questions about your friends," I said as I laid my backpack on top of my gray elephant pillow.

"Sure," she said with a soft tone in her voice.

“I know you are pretty shaken up about your friends being pregnant and I know they are confused as to how this happened. I am trying to piece this all together, but I need a little more information. Do you all of your friends practice safe sex?”

“They typically do and they all use birth control. The fact that every one of them is pregnant has really freaked me out. Somebody must have targeted them and done something. The football guys we hang out with are not the nicest people, so I'm thinking maybe they did something. Also, recently we have all gotten pretty wasted at some frat parties with some chemistry students and haven’t remembered much the next morning.”

"I'm trying to prove something like that happened, because that is where the facts are directing me, but there are still some pieces missing. Thanks for the information, maybe it will help me solve the mystery.”

"Please let me know if there is any way I can help you. I really want to know what happened," she said with a serious look on her face.

I spent most of the weekend searching out the rest of Ryan's football buddies, who I believed to be responsible. P5, and Sara, usually hung around the same five guys. I figured the reason Sara wasn’t pregnant was because she felt she was too good for any of the guys at our school and only dated the older locals. I could only reach two of the other four that weekend, but since they had a similar response to Ryan's I was no further along in my investigation. All the while I kept thinking how big this story could be in the newspaper. I would get so much recognition for the story if it got published.

My life became consumed trying to figure this out. I started looking into the fraternities and the chemistry students. The bags under my eyes were getting dark and heavy, and I began
questioning the amount of time spent on a story that did not guarantee success. My grades were suffering, so I decided to take the week off from the case, to gather my thoughts and focus on other things, like my grades.

After a long week, I ended Saturday night at the library, studying hard for the chemistry test I had on Monday morning. It had been a really long day and all I wanted to do was go back to my room and lay down. I entered my dorm hall and walked down the hall to the left where my room was located. As I approached the door, I saw that it was unlocked and wide open. Sara and I were tenacious about locking our door and taking our keys everywhere, and we most certainly did not leave our door open. Neither of us were too comfortable with leaving the door open in fear of someone stealing any of our possessions. I approached the door slowly, not knowing what to expect, pushing it ever so gently. The old hinges creaked violently and consistently as the door opened wider.

"Sara?" I asked. No one answered. The room was pitch black. The silence made me extremely uncomfortable. Hurriedly and cautiously, I moved my finger over to the light switch. As light entered the room, my eyes searched for an intruder, but no one was there. My desk was exactly as I had left it when I went to the library. Everything seemed to be in order, until I started taking a closer look around. The detail was so minor that anyone else would have missed it, but to me it was as obvious as if I had witnessed someone actually removing it from my room. My journal, the notebook in which I had written every single detail of the case, had been taken. The person responsible must have known I was investigating and stole it so that none of the statements I had collected could be used against them.

Immediately, I called campus security. Two pudgy men took their time getting to my room, arriving almost 45 minutes after I placed the call. They examined the lock, but did not see any sign of forced entry. They checked the window, but there was no sign of entry. Besides, the likelihood of someone entering through the window was practically nil, considering we lived on the fourth floor. Spiderman would have been the only one who had the ability to get into our room
and I honestly had no idea why Peter Parker would want my journal. Campus security was virtually no help and basically wasted two hours of my time. Exactly thirty three minutes after the dumb rent-a-cops left, a light bulb turned on in my head. I figured out the person responsible for the Pregnant Five.

The next morning I called to set up a meeting with the Dean. His secretary let me speak with him directly. As he listened attentively, I laid out my story.

"Can you come in at three o'clock this afternoon," he asked.

"I have class until 3:15, but I can meet with you immediately after," I said.

"Come straight from class and ask the alleged suspect to meet us here as well."

English class dragged on and began to feel like it would never end. I began counting the minutes as they ticked by slower than a snail in a marathon. Time could not have moved any slower if I had been watching the sand fall through an hourglass. The professor rambled on and my nerves were getting the best of me, to the point I was tapping my fingers on my desk. Students around me were getting irritated and started staring. Finally, class ended! I basically sprinted to the Dean's office.

The secretary, Mrs. Hollingsworth, was in a state of shock as I threw open the door and gasped for air. She told me to go straight in, but I took a couple moments to catch my breath and gather my thoughts. Then, I made my way into the office.

Sitting in a chair in front of his desk was a very familiar face. The Dean greeted me as I walked in and Sara turned around, looking at me with an alarmed expression on her face.

"Thanks for meeting with me, Dean Richards," I said. "As I told you over the phone, there has been a disturbing set of 'coincidences.' I quoted with my fingers, "on campus, involving five girls. I have been investigating their pregnancies over the last few weeks. Last night however, the journal with all my information regarding the case was stolen. My intuition led me to a suspect that I later confirmed late last night, after talking to one of the pregnant girls, Michelle."
Sara's face was stone cold as I re-counted my theory. Either she had no idea what was happening, or she was trying to hide the guilt deep inside of her. I continued on with my story.

"Since it was obvious that no one broke into our room, only one person could have stolen my journal. I sought out Michelle because I was trying to figure out how and why Sara made sure that all five of those girls became pregnant. Knowing that most of them don't use prophylactics very often, I examined Michelle's birth control. Someone had replaced her pills with vitamin tablets. This evidence was not enough to bring Sara into your office, however. I had no real proof that this act was directly related to Sara, even though all of her friends had the same problem with their birth control pills. She was the only one whose pills were still intact”.

"In my previous interview with Katie," I continued, "she said that her boyfriend, Todd, had a former sexual relationship with Sara. I asked the others about this relationship and they all said that it was a big problem for their little group, for a while. The group of girls argued amongst each other about Todd being with Katie. They argued whether or not it was acceptable for Katie to date Todd, since he had a prior history with Sara. Eventually, when they sided with Katie, Sara became furious. Every single one of them, including Katie, said Sara got over it within a few days. Apparently not, as she decided to enact an elaborate scheme for vengeance. She probably would have gotten away with it, if she had not decided to steal my journal. All of this evidence is circumstantial, but I think it is enough to prove that she is guilty."

The Dean looked at Sara and asked her, "Do you want to say anything to defend yourself?” She slumped down in the chair, looking at her feet, with a look of remorse. Sara was caught and she had nothing to say. I expected Sara to lash out, but she did not seem angry with me. She appeared to be racking her brain to determine the possible consequences of her actions.

The university expelled Sara. The likelihood of her getting into another school was slim to none, especially if she was convicted and locked up in a prison. Criminal and civil charges were filed against her by each of the girls.
My article made it onto the front page. It was the only thing people could talk about for weeks, making me the ‘big woman on campus’ for a while. I received recognition from the Dean and the President of the college for my hard work and investigative skills. Following my short lived notoriety, I continued my life like any other time, searching for one story line at a time.
Officially, Madison N. McAuley was a dead man. He was long, long gone, having succumbed to acute alcohol poisoning sometime during the morning of 1 November 2032, in Pacific Palisades, California, at the age of 34. He left no next of kin that could be reached to discuss his will or reappropriation of his meagre estate. In short: Madison McAuley was forgotten by everyone, or should have been. He had left no legacy, or friends, nothing other than a short obituary in the local papers and a couple of half-empty bottles of very strong liquor on a lonely stretch of sand not far from Pacific Coast Highway.

This was troublesome for the following reasons. Firstly, trying to find any sort of noteworthy information on this Madison N. McAuley was enormously difficult because, by all accounts, he was unremarkable to the rest of the world - not known for his quirks of personality, except, perhaps, that his drunkenness occasionally irritated his neighbors.

Secondly, he was responsible for the murders of six people in 2066.

The man who alerted myself and my colleague, Nicky Townsend, to the very strange matter of Mr. McAuley was a tall, grave guy named Ramsey. He described himself, if I recall correctly, as one of the newer junior detectives at the LAPD. He looked it, with a strong jaw but a hangdog-in-the-making face that suggested more than a few sleepless nights in recent times. He didn’t look comfortable in our office at all, and before ever taking a seat he stressed to us that he was not seeking our assistance in any official capacity. Townsend, himself a tall and grave guy who wasn’t overly fond of formalities (but still went through the motions anyway) politely but directly acknowledged this and went through the customary procedure of informing the client that yes, everything would be perfectly confidential within reason, and that we would attempt to stay as far away from the LAPD as much as the case allowed, should it ever even reach that point.
Now slightly more at ease, but still quite unsure that he should even be there, Ramsey sat down and stated his case. “What do either of you know about the murder of Tim Dorrans two weeks ago? You know who he was?”

“Dorrans was an H+ tycoon,” I said.

“A big one,” continued Townsend. “Dorrans Medical is due to roll out a new line of implants in February. Hyper-reactive pupils with programmable UIs and cloud connectivity. Fancy stuff; expensive, but due to make eyes like yours and mine obsolete pretty soon, Ramsey,” he mused, tapping his eyelid.

Ramsey’s eyes flickered, and very briefly you could see tiny blue pulses illuminate his own irises. “February is - was - the new launch date after they fast-tracked the initial batch. Dorrans’ company has halted production for the consumer models indefinitely after he was killed. I’m sure you can see where I’m going with this, gentlemen; someone wanted to delay the release of the implants.”

“So where do we come in, detective?” I asked. “The way I see it, either some disgruntled anti-refit was radical enough to go after Dorrans in a bad way, and actually succeeded, or - at worst - it’s corporate spying gone wrong. As it stands, Dorrans Medical are the only ones with access to all the important stuff pertaining to their research.”

“That’s rather the problem, Mr. Carroll: it’s not about research. Officially, the LAPD isn’t looking into corporate espionage or research theft. We think - and if anybody asks, you didn’t hear any of this from me, of course - that we might be after a serial killer. Dorrans isn’t the first guy at a refit company to be killed like this. Not by any means. Whoever killed him deactivated all his augs first. Including his eyes.”

“I can’t imagine why,” I muttered.

“There have been others. At other companies, too. Senior engineers, programmers, public relations officials… hell, even aesthetic design leads in charge of making the prosthetics look pretty. Dorrans makes it six in the last eight months. This name has been involved with all of
them.” He promptly produced a weathered piece of notepaper with the name MADISON N. MCAULEY scratched on it.

I took the paper and stared at the name, not recognizing it. “Couldn’t you have looked at a phone book, detective?”

“I did. The victims’ phone books, in fact. Address logs, email contacts, even the memos on their refrigerators. I was the one who saw that this name was showing up everywhere, so when I noticed, I had my guys pull every background check they could. The most relevant searches we’ve done have turned up an elderly woman in Irvine and a dead man from Pacific Palisades, thirty years ago. No known associates or living family for either.”

“Someone’s going under an assumed name, then,” suggested Townsend.

“Most likely, though I’d wager he’s hiding behind more than just one alias at this point. It doesn’t matter. What worries me is this Madison McAuley is now actively choosing to make himself known.” Ramsey delved into his pocket again, retrieving a USB key. He looked uncomfortable again.

“My email logs. Personal ones. I first received a message from McAuley five days ago. I already tried to trace where the message was sent from, but he’s using a throwaway address, and the message was bounced through several different proxies.”

I took the USB stick and plugged it into my tablet, transferred the logs onto my desk display so Townsend could see. Every message was comprised of an attached image, some of an apartment block, others of interiors, a view from a window, a living room - presumably Ramsey’s - and the same four lines of text:

DET. RAMSEY
FOR YOUR OWN SAKE
DO NOT INVESTIGATE FURTHER

*
At Ramsey’s insistence, we took the case. The guy was a little rattled, and almost certain that we he was being watched, at home and at his department. However, even knowing that this was a possibility, he instructed us to canvas the streets outside his apartment building to see who was surveilling him. The job was simple: identify who Madison McAuley was (or whomever might have been working for him), and where he was taking pictures from. However, a daylong watch of the intersection yielded nothing. Wherever McAuley was keeping a watch on Ramsey from, he was doing so discreetly, quickly. He seemed to be good at carrying out his business and leaving before anyone could notice.

At the end of my watch, I let Townsend take over and went home, wondering why McAuley bothered to send the same warning, over and over, for so long. Ramsey was clearly a little fazed, but not so much that he would hold off on running his lead into the ground. Soon, everyone would be searching for this mystery figure - so why the continual slaps on the wrist for Ramsey if they weren’t going to deter him?

I got my answer as I opened the front door to my apartment and came face to face, or silhouette to silhouette, with none other than Madison McAuley.

“I would much rather you stopped looking for me, Mr. Carroll.”

Irrespective of the very concerning fact that he was lurking in my darkened apartment - and possibly had been most of the day - he cut a frustrated figure leaning against my kitchen counter. He had bitten into a piece of fruit (I saw it was a mandarin orange, as I flicked on the lights) and consequently wore a look of mild distaste on his face. McAuley was an older fellow, slim, with short-cut greying hair and little else in the way of noteworthy descriptors. He wore a simple navy sweater and business slacks, so I couldn’t see if he had any major augments. The innocuous-looking type, but purposefully so.

“I would also recommend buying your fruit elsewhere.” McAuley finished off the mandarin, dusted his palms, and resumed his place at the counter. “As I understand it, we have some things to discuss.”
“Do we, now? I don’t normally discuss things with serial killers who install themselves in my apartment while I’m gone.” I tossed my keys and coat on the counter and brushed past him, opening the fridge. “Orange juice?”

“No, thank you. I don’t like how processed the stuff is nowadays. I really must stress that I disagree with your choice of supermarket, Mr Carroll. With respect to your question, however, I think we certainly do have things to discuss. It’s only natural; after all, you’ve been looking for me, and I simply do not wish to be found.”

“You have a very roundabout way of trying to stay hidden,” I said, gesturing toward the expanse of the kitchen with the juice bottle.

“That’s true! Though I would say that the important distinction to make here is that I can accept being known about, not being found. Presence is paramount, but I find it’s far more effective when it’s implied. To a degree, some people - very few - know I exist. They know what I’m trying to achieve. No one should ever know where I am, however. Or, to be more precise, where I will be next. The idea that one man carving his way through a slew of augments can be stopped by probabilities and armed entourages of more augments must be defied. Destroyed, in fact.”

“There’s only so far a natural working on his own can get. You will be stopped,” I said, lamely.

“Who will stop me? My actions, Mr. Carroll, carry a momentum that can’t be stopped,” replied McAuley with a smile. “Consider this visit a warning, if you like. I consider it a statement of intent. Ultimately, this is all much bigger than you and I, or your friend Mr. Townsend, or poor Ramsey over at the LAPD - so insistent, that one - or Tim Dorrans.”

“Do tell me, what is this about, then?”

“We, the real humans, still exist. Flesh and blood still exists. They won’t be replaced by whatever new exoskeleton or artificial eye or neural enhancement is touted as our future. Naturals may not be as fast, or as perceptive, or stronger than refits - but if pushed, we will play to our
strengths to survive. What I’m doing is showing that augments won’t save us. The future is not dictated by the add-ons that make us…’more’.”

With that, McAuley grabbed my arm and jerked me forward, simultaneously applying his foot to the side of my right knee with a force that a man in his sort of shape shouldn’t have been able to conjure. It buckled, and I dropped to the floor as the artificial nerve pathways in my leg began to scream.

“AKP-61s have a minor structural defect in the inner knee. Better living through better alloys, indeed.” And so, as calmly as he had entered, McAuley stepped over me and the shattered glass of juice and strode out of my apartment, back into the cool L.A. evening.

The next morning, my knee in slightly shakier shape, we called in Ramsey to bring in whatever personal logs and files of off-the-record casework he had compiled on McAuley over the last few days.

“I’ve kept my apartment secure, of course. But there have never been signs of forced entry through the windows, and I’m the only one who knows the numerical key for the door. Unless he might have access to the building’s master key,” considered the junior detective, tapping his thumbs furiously on his phone.

“Or he could be hacking the door,” Townsend suggested. “But he wouldn’t be able to do so easily in broad daylight.”

Ramsey looked up from his phone and shook his head. “Too many people would be in the halls. They’d notice. And nothing inside the apartment has been tampered with, as far as I can see. No microcameras, no bugs. No token to indicate he paid me a visit, like some killers like to do.” He looked back down to the screen, grimaced, and got up from his chair. “I have to get back to the station. I’m expecting another warning email today; let me know if you guys can find anything before then.”
When he had gone, Townsend turned and glared at me. “You should have said something, damn you. It’s no coincidence that this guy shows up in your apartment a day after we start looking into him.”

“I needed you to stay there, in case he tried sneaking into Ramsey’s place again,” I said curtly. The stakeout wasn’t of any use either way, though, as Nicky had reported no one standing on the corners of the quiet intersection outside of Ramsey’s building.

“He could have just killed you to send a message to Ramsey.”

“But he didn’t,” I replied, again wondering - maybe a little perversely this time - why McAuley was playing so coy. “It would have been excessive, but you have to admit, it would have gotten the message across to our detective friend. ‘Stop digging’.”

“If McAuley’s arrogant enough to let us keep digging, he’ll be caught,” said Townsend, hauling a box onto his desk. “I wouldn’t blame Dorrans if he hadn’t seen him coming from a mile away - I mean, Jesus, I bet there would be at least a thousand other people who would have liked to have a crack at him - but this is personal. You don’t shadow a guy like this without making it personal.”

Suddenly, for a split second, the room seemed to simultaneously drain of all sound and erupt into light - a powerful, ghastly light, the box of files on Nicky’s desk somewhere at the center of it all. Then it all fell dim again.

*  

I was jolted awake by a dash of water to the face. The fire sprinklers, bless them, had been triggered by the blast. The dull, crackling sound of a fire mixed with the sputtering of jets of water, each flowering from unseen stalks embedded in the ceiling to fight off the orange luminance that had already eaten the front portion of the office.

It had all gone terribly, terribly wrong.

As I tried to clamber to my feet, my right leg nearly gave way again. Shrapnel had torn through the outer layers of the prosthesis and created dozens of small tears in the subdermal
weave, exposing the already wobbly inner workings of the knee and upper thigh. They weren’t waterproof. Using my left arm, I shuffled out of my coat and swung it around to use as a makeshift wrap around the leg. Mobility here was key. Most of my right side was covered in shrapnel and glass wounds (both tiny ones and others less so), and I was fairly certain that my arm was broken. But when faced with a burning building, a short-circuited, non-functional leg would mean dead weight. The leg was still responsive, surprisingly, insofar as its metal joints could remain functional after having other, very sharp pieces of metal lodged into them, so I had to make do. Clumsily, I applied my makeshift tourniquet to my knee, used my left arm to shove off from the side of my desk, and moved on.

Taking stock of the office, still partly in flames in spite of the automatic sprinklers’ best efforts, I couldn’t see if Townsend had survived. I assumed he wouldn’t have, given his proximity to the box, but he knew it was a bomb and had already begun to turn away when it finally went off. There was a chance he survived. It hadn’t exploded directly on opening; there was a delay of perhaps a second or two, no more, but a delay all the same. If all else failed, large swathes of Nicky’s body had subdermal augments of their own - military grade plating, tough stuff, maybe even resilient enough to keep him alive if he reacted quickly enough. There had to be a chance.

As it stood, however, I was betting that our research had a better chance of surviving than Townsend ever did. Limping towards the front, I saw that the majority of the desks and computers near the entrance had been shredded, so what was left of our research would be limited to whatever we had already scanned and uploaded to remote servers, or personal computers. The latter were soon to be ruined by either the fire or the water, but our habit of compartmentalizing and having redundancies when it came to information looked like it would pay off.

McAuley, though, undoubtedly would have known this. Setting our offices alight was a tactical move - but it wasn’t meant to destroy whatever we had collected on him.

Soon enough, I knew to what end the bombing had been carried out when two men burst into the office’s front doors, skipped effortlessly over the flames blocking their path, and calmly
levelled their automatics at me. One of them was McAuley. The other one, closer to me, was Ramsey - now wearing work overalls, his face partially obscured by a cap, but just as grave as it ever was. McAuley must have had leverage on the poor guy, somehow.

I hurled myself to my left to reach a desk for cover as they let rip. I didn’t have a weapon to fire back with, and I felt the duo’s hail of bullets carve their way through the remnants of my leg.

In the momentary gaps between the searing bursts of pain - brief moments of surreal lucidity - I knew why McAuley’s bomb hadn’t targeted our information. I knew why he was using Ramsey. This wasn’t meant to be a clinical kill. He wasn’t coaxing any of us out to play, and he had never meant to; he wanted to exterminate us. He was going to make an example of us.

At that moment, from behind the desk, I could just catch a glimpse of Ramsey’s upper body as he began to approach me. He stopped, then wheeled around - ready to fire on McAuley, I imagine - and the gunfire erupted again. McAuley, I could hear, had slumped to the floor. And so too did the junior detective, contorted awkwardly a few feet from me, blood flowing from multiple gunshotss to the chest. He looked at me almost apologetically, and then the tiny blue pulses stopped.

I looked away, to my left, and for the first time, I got a proper look at another body, not McAuley’s, but charred and ever-so-slightly slumped against the far wall.

It was Nicky Townsend. His augments hadn’t saved him.
Jonah Wood wakes up every morning at precisely 0530 hours, puts on a pot of coffee, and prepares two over-medium eggs and a single piece of wheat toast. He sits down at the kitchen table opposite from the window, to the right of the telephone book for Boston, Massachusetts. He lives in New Jersey. After eating and cleaning his dishes, he goes to his room and undresses to take a shower, folding his flannel pajama bottoms on the foot of his bed. He showers for eight minutes, gets dressed and rides his bike down the street to his job at the local grocery mart. He enjoys the company of his coworkers. They occasionally ask him about the time he spent overseas, but he won’t say much, just that yes, he’s killed people. And L. He talks a lot about L.

He gets home at 1815 hours and eats dinner. Starting at 1900 hours he makes exactly forty phone calls. He figures his best bet is to start with the largest city in Massachusetts. Some people answer, listen for a minute or so, apologize and say they can’t help him. Those names are crossed out. Some go to voicemail; he underlines those names to call back next week. Most people hang up as soon as he mentions the Army. Anyone who claims to know something about L is circled. He hasn’t circled any names yet.

* 

The first poem came on October 23, a Wednesday. It was the week of his twenty-third birthday. Jonah did not often receive mail. This was the first letter he had received in the three months he had been deployed. He stared at the thin, white envelope that had his name written neatly across the front, no return address. The penmanship was unfamiliar to him. The envelope contained a single piece of lined paper with just four lines of script:

*Lightning paints the sky dark red*

*Thunder brings comfort*

*In the midst of a rain storm*

*You make a difference. Sincerely, L*
Jonah looked at this for a long time. He turned the page over: blank. No name, no explanation, just lines. His eyes left the page and began surveying the room. He didn’t have many friends on base. Or at home, for that matter. His gaze stopped on Private Lucas Springer, who hadn’t shaved yet this morning. Generally Jonah liked him; he admired his ebullience and the symmetry of his bootlaces. He was laughing.

Jonah got up from his bunk and advanced toward him, grabbing Springer by his shirt collar and shoving him against the wall of the barracks.

“You think this is funny?” Jonah asked.

“Hey, calm down, Woody. I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Springer responded breaking Jonah’s grip.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about,” Jonah spat, pressing the letter into Springer’s chest. He looked down and read the note twice.

“Woody, I didn’t write this, honest. I don’t even know what the hell that means.”

“Then who did?” He spoke to the other men in the room, who turned to watch. “Are one of you fucking with me? Because I don’t get mail?” They continued to stare.

“Hey man, just relax, okay? I don’t think it’s meant to mess with you, maybe someone back home just wanted to send you something nice.” Jonah grabbed the note back and walked outside. He examined the envelope again and noticed a postage stamp. It was sent from a post office in Massachusetts. He didn’t know anyone in Massachusetts. Jonah read it one last time, crumpled the paper and stuffed in his pocket.

But the poems continued. He was deployed for twelve months, and for the next thirty-four weeks, he received an envelope every week containing exactly one poem. They varied in length and subject, but each one ended with the same six words: You make a difference. Sincerely L. Some were happy, others were sad; some were about love and others about not much of anything. There were also some that Jonah didn’t understand. He liked them all, though. If nothing else, it was nice that someone cared enough to write his name and address on an envelope. Jonah kept one
in his pillow, another in his shirt pocket, and one taped to the bathroom mirror. He kept every one after the first, which he had since smoothed out and stored in his left boot.

*

The week of June 18th Jonah did not receive any mail. He went to the unit office and asked the clerk if there had been a mistake. She said no. Jonah told her that was impossible. He asked if he could check the back myself. She said no, and that she was sorry.

There was no mail for him the week of June 25th. Or July 2nd.

*

His bus arrived back on base in the States on July 17th. He grabbed his things and started towards the barracks, walking past Private Springer, who held his arms tightly around his mother and younger sister. Jonah dropped his C-Bag on the foot of his bed and lied down. He dialed nine digits into his cellphone. It went to voicemail. “Mom? It’s me. I’m home, well back in Jersey. Hope you are well.” He would not get a call back.

*

Jonah last spoke to his parents four days after his eighteenth birthday, the night he told them he wanted to drop out of college and enlist in the Army. His mother cupped her face in her hands. His father yelled. Military careers are for idiots with nothing else going for them, his father had said. He wanted Jonah to be a lawyer. Jonah said stuffy business attorneys are the idiots; they waste their lives trying to win all the wrong battles. He said fighting for his country is a cause he believed in and would gladly give his life for. His father said that he would be wasting his life in the Army for a pointless war that didn’t concern him. He said Jonah just didn’t want to work for anything, that he was lazy and unmotivated, he always had been, and he would not tolerate a deadbeat living under his roof anymore. Jonah threw his glass of water at the wall and it shattered. Before the night was out he packed his bag and left. His mother cried, and said nothing.

*
Jonah knew nothing about L aside from the state in which she lived. He really didn’t know L was a she, either, but he couldn’t imagine a man’s handwriting flowing in the same way that L’s did. It didn’t matter, he supposed. Whoever it was, L had given him someone to keep fighting for. He needed to find that person, to thank them.

* 

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mr. Lemmings, my name is Private Jonah Woods. I served in Afghanistan for the U.S. Army—” Dial tone.

It is a Thursday. By now he has called almost half of the people with surnames beginning with L in Boston. On his twenty-seventh phone call of the day, an older woman answers the phone.

“Hello, Ms. Lemont, my name is Private Jonah Woods. I served in Afghanistan for the U.S. Army last year. And before you hang up, I promise I am not asking you for money,” he begins. He explains the oddity of his situation, as he always does to the few that give him the time to do so. Ms. Anne Lemont listens to every word.

“Mr. Woods, I don’t know if I could be of much help, but I may know something.”

“Is that right?”

“Now I suppose this could be a long shot, but I once met a creative writing professor that teaches at Emerson College, and he spoke about a young woman in his class that had chosen to send poetry to a soldier. I know it’s not much to go off of…”

“No, that is great news!” Jonah says. She says that is all she knows. He asks if she has the professor’s contact information, but she only knows his first name. He says that is enough, thanks her, and hangs up. He smiles and circles Anne Lemont in the phone book.

* 

Today is Friday. Jonah wakes up at 0530 hours, puts on a pot of coffee, and prepares two over-medium eggs and a single piece of wheat toast. He grabs his coat and a duffle bag and walks
to the bus station. He takes the bus to the Amtrak station in Charleston and rides the train to Boston, arriving at 1540 hours. His hand is in his pocket, clutching two pieces of paper. The first is the bus schedule, since he has never been to Boston before. The second is one of L’s poems. This one reads

_I fear that_

_fearing the unknown_

_is much like receiving an invitation to my own birthday_

_that welcomes years forty through ninety_

_and shoos away the reckless twenties_

_You make a difference. Sincerely, L_

He walks past the engraved sign that reads “Emerson College” and stops a young man running down the sidewalk in a sweatshirt and basketball shorts. Jonah asks if he could direct him to the building with the Writing Department offices, and the student points towards a tall brick building and continues running. Jonah walks up the steps of the building and to the main office front desk.

“Hi, I am looking for someone in this department named Sean. He is a creative writing professor, I believe.”

“Okay, let’s see,” she starts while looking through a stack of files. Jonah raises his eyebrow and looks at his watch. “What does this pertain to?”

“I’m trying to get in touch with someone, and Sean may be able to help me,” Jonah says.

“His office is upstairs and to the left, room 252.” She handed him a business card with the professor’s first and last name. “He may already be gone for the weekend, though.” Jonah nods and leaves, walking quickly in the direction of the office.

He tries the door, but it is locked. A man was starting to walk out of the building.

“Excuse me,” Jonah shouts down the hall, looking at the business card, “Sean Bernard?” The man waved his hand.
“Sorry, I’m leaving for the day. I’ll be back in my office on Monday.”

But Jonah ran after him. “Sir, I’m sure you’re busy, but if I could have just a moment of your time—“

Sean continues walking. “I’m sorry but if this is about my intro class I’m afraid it is full for next semester, you will have to wait and enroll in fall.”

“Sir, I’m not a student here. I’m looking for a student of yours. She saved my life.”

Sean stopped.

“Oh my god, you’re the soldier?” Jonah explains the situation further.

“Elizabeth Talley was a student of mine last semester. She is a sweet girl. All of my Creative Writing 101 students have to send a poem to someone anonymously, but most students just drop it in a mailbox or something. Miss Talley, on the other hand, was very adamant about sending it overseas to show support for troops. She got in contact with Adopt a Soldier and picked your name off of a list. I had no idea she continued sending them for so long, though.”

“Do you have any idea why she stopped?”

“Unfortunately I don’t. I haven’t seen her since she took my class last spring.”

“Do you know where I could find her?”

“I don’t. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

*

He arrived at a porch step and knocked three times. A woman answered.

“Hello, my name is Private Jonah Wood and I looking for a young lady named Elizabeth Talley. She lives under this residence, correct?”

The woman’s eyes widen.

“Please, ma’am, don’t be alarmed. I just need to thank her, if you don’t mind. She has been a tremendous help to me in the past year.”

“Oh dear… come on in.”

He sat on the edge of the green loveseat.
“My daughter, Liz, passed away this June.”

Jonah’s face did not move. He did not say a word. He clenched his fist. She asked if he was okay. He wanted to know what day. “June 13.” That was the week of the last letter he received from her. He asked what had happened to her. “She was in a car accident. Drunk driver.”

She made them some tea. They sat and talked for a long while. L’s mother showed him baby pictures and talked about L, and Jonah talked about his parents and about his time in Afghanistan. It was dark outside now. He thought that it was time to leave. She said he was welcome back anytime.

He walked to the bus stop alone, wondering if L was walking with him.
I yawned rather deeply looking out toward the musty and quickly darkening skyline of Los Angeles, my two junior detectives were late once again. I should have figured it was too good to be true that those two would treat me to a birthday dinner. I let loose a frustrated sigh as I turned toward the door to Magioni’s Italian Restaurant, my dusty light brown trench coat fluttering a bit in a swift ocean breeze. I smiled and walked up to the Hostess, she looked about as thin as the Christmas tree from the Charlie Brown special. The woman smiled and awaited my approach before I felt a tapping on my shoulder; I smirked and turned around to see the cheery face of my Junior Detective Stanley Strange.

“Stanny… Twenty minutes late as usual…”, I rolled my eyes. Stanley was every portrayal of your standard nerd and more, sporting large circular glasses, greasy black hair combed back in an attempt to look suave and mysterious. The twenty year old’s face marred with acne and scars from popping them, a lean structure on his cheeks and nose narrowed his face and made him look like a discount Dracula. His body was lean to match and his scrawny frame was accentuated by a fashion sense that mirrored by own.

Stanley gazed at me with his hazel eyes, a calm and smug expression on his face. I ceased my smile and cleared my throat, “So… Where is Gonzalez? Parking the car?” Stanley nodded and slid his hands into his black coat, “Yeah parking is crazy…” I nodded and moved to inquire about being served. As we sat down, I looked around and spotted my other Junior Detective, Maria Gonzalez, walking in. Stanley waved over with another one of those odd and creepy smiles as Maria moved to sit down across from me. She smiled at me and nodded her head, “Sorry for being late Mr. Fletcher, A lot of traffic.” I nodded my head simply observing her manner, she had been working more than a few cases lately and it showed. Maria was a pretty woman, about twenty-three years of age with a more athletic build. She wore a light blue dress with sunflowers etched onto it, however it was wrinkled and stained in a few places.
Maria smiled a bit and let out a giggle at Stanley’s odd look before sighing again and looking toward me with a confident, but tired smile. “Mr. Fletcher I was wondering if I could get an advance on my check… I have been working on the case from the Department you recommended, the one for the man you thought was a drug dealer, Juan Carlos.” I nodded my head, “Oh? I thought I had it pinned on the guy, glad you turned something up I didn’t. See… You are learning after all.” I chuckled as the waitress came by asking for my order. I silently snickered to myself, how brash of Maria to simply ask for an advance on her check, no “Happy Birthday” at all.

For the next half hour we simply spoke of family and future plans. The food soon arrived and we took our time eating, as if frightened to finish and get thrust back out into the working world. After a short while, I looked back to Maria, “Listen… If you are having money problems again--- I can forward you a pay advance.” I smiled at her before startling to the sound of her phone going off. Maria startled and looked to her purse, quickly fumbling around and pulling it out. She blinked, her eyes lighting up, “Oh--- I---I need to get going… I’m sorry Mr. Fletcher.” Quickly gathering her purse before giving me a swift hug, “Right--- Right… Don’t worry about it.” I said before I caught a whiff of the cheap perfume she was wearing, which nearly made me want to gag. My eyes followed her over to Stanley, the boy hugging her with a smile on his face before she tapped on his back, likely a signal that the hug had been going on for too long. Stanley startled and let out an embarrassed blush before nodding and letting her go, “Right—Sorry… Sorry…”

Maria swiftly made her way out of the establishment before I looked to Stanley, “Alright… Pony up… You pay $35 and I’ll pay the rest, sound good?” Stanley nodded and sighed looking a bit down, “Yeah—Yeah…” I arched an eyebrow, “Something wrong? Or are you just worried about her new boyfriend?” Stanley blinked as if taken off guard, “R—Really? That’s who it was?” I nodded, “You could tell if you looked into her eyes… She was excited.” I chuckled, quite happy for her at this juncture, she needed some happiness and relief.
As the waitress came around to take the check, Stanley and I walked out into the dark and overcast weather, merely listening to the strangely calming effect of distant honking horns and the sound of cars before I looked to Stanley, “Suppose you’ll be needing a ride?” Stanley let in a deep breath and fumbled his hands around his pockets, “No… I’ll likely take the bus…” I raised an eyebrow, “Really? Our spoiled brat who never leaves his comfort zone wants to take public transportation? Well good on you then, See you tomorrow. “ Stanley smiled, “See you Monday, old man.”

The next morning I woke up and struggled to get to my feet. Wearing nothing but my underwear, I made my way to the bathroom. As I looked at myself in my mirror, I couldn’t help but laugh at how old I looked. I was considered tall at about six feet four and rather bulky, however for an ex-Linebacker I had wished I would keep my looks, or at the very least my hair which was now rapidly receding. I yawned before hearing my phone ring. Stumbling from the bathroom like a zombie in an old movie I inhaled deeply expecting a call for a case.

I nearly dropped the phone as I went to answer it groggily, “Hello, Arnold Fletcher, P.I” and was greeted by the voice of my old partner and friend, Ernest Morgan, an aspiring Police Detective and Lieutenant of the force. “Arnie… Just wanted to say happy birthday before I get to the bad news…” I coughed and cleared my throat. “What bad news Ernie?” The man wasted no time in his response, “She--- Was shot once in the back of the neck, it seems she died quickly afterward…” I moved to hang my phone up. I stumbled backward into the edge of my shabby grey sofa, tripping and falling on my back into the cushions. I lay there with some tears rolling down my face for what seemed to be hours, I could only wonder why someone would kill her, whether or not it was an accident, or God forbid it was related to one of the cases.
It was nearly afternoon by the time I decided to get off my couch, slowly stumbling my way into the shower where I continued to think. I thought about the Devil case that she had specifically mentioned by name. It involved an ex-Cartel member named Juan Carlos who was suspected of smuggling in drugs for various consumers in the LA area. I could only wonder if she had been killed to cover up any leads to the evidence. I sighed and exited my shower to get dressed.

Exiting my apartment I moved to unlock the door to my Mercedes Benz, as I climbed in. When I arrived at Stanley’s place I nearly sprinted to the door. I rang the doorbell and shouted for him. Finally after about three minutes he unlocked the door and poked his head out to look at me, “Mr. Fletcher?” He said in a tired voice, however there seemed to be a sort of reluctant fear in his voice as well. I paid no heed to it as I opened his door, revealing his rather geeky looking clothes and I nearly commanded, “Get your jacket, we’re going.” Stanley blinked and looked at me confused, “For what?” I sighed heavily and looked at him, “Maria… Was shot and killed last night. I have a lead that you and I need to follow up on.” Stanley blinked his eyes widening, the boy darting his gaze around in disbelief, “M—Maria—Died?” He stated, looking pale. Stanley looked more determined and sped back inside to change, emerging with more casual clothes.

As we left his house, I noticed that the boy was indeed taking the death rather hard. I reached over moving to pat his knee, “Hey… It’ll be ok. I know this hits close to home and she was a great friend to both of us… But let’s get through this and solve it… For her.” I blinked and smiled before noticing gauze wrapped around his right hand, “What happened to the hand?” He sighed, “Public transportation happened…” The boy sighed out in frustration and shook his head looking glum as ever, “A man was following me from the bus stop and pulled a knife on me asking for my wallet, I handed it over but flinched and he stabbed at my hand… Cut it a bit--- I’ll be fine.” I grumbled, “Did you file a police report?” Stanley shook his head, “I’m getting around
to it… Went to the hospital last night to have it looked at but… they said it was nothing to worry about.”

On the way to Maria’s apartment I took the time to explain to him the case I believed to be connected to her murder. Carefully explain every detail about what she and I had gathered on Juan Carlos. Despite visibly fuming at points, Stanley was listening rather well and despite what was happening, I felt he was ready to help me in this case. Pulling up to the apartment complex about four squad cars had a section of parking lot near the eastern most bloc of apartments cordoned off. Stanley and I exited the car and moved toward the row of officers. It was then when a fifth squad car pulled in and I sighed with relief seeing Ernie get out of the car. Ernie was wearing his police uniform and looked slightly more aged than the last I saw him, an average man with green eyes and a golden blonde set of hair. The man’s muscular build and quick mind solved the two of us many a case back when I worked with the force.

Ernie looked at me and nodded before moving to open the back driver’s side door of his cruiser, out in handcuffs came a man well dressed with a collar shirt and khaki pants. Sporting a full head of hair enough to make my balding self jealous, he was a rugged looking man, likely from Central America. I approached with a less than pleased expression lining my face, “Juan Carlos…” I sized him up with my hands clenched to my sides, figuring that I would likely break his nose off if he started playing me; I was not willing to mess around today. The man mumbled before speaking in a Central American accent, “Yeah--- The hell am I under arrest for?” I glared in mild annoyance, as if expecting him to just admit to it. “How about murder?” The man looked up with a confused glance. I continued, “There was a woman who lived here, Maria Gonzalez, who was shot in the back of the head last night in this parking lot. She was investigating a drug ring ran by you.” The man startled and looked at me as if he was rather hard hit by the news as well, “M—Maria? You--- Mean my Maria Gonzalez?” Tears began to well up in his eyes, “Why is she--- What happened?!” he shouted. I narrowed my gaze and moved a bit closer, moving to intimidate the man, “Your Mar---“ I stopped and my eyes widened, catching a familiar scent.
The man startled back a bit but stopped standing firm despite his face looking like he would burst into tears at any moment. I held my head high and moved to look down at him, just trying to instill enough fear in him. It wasn’t too long until Ernie came back around, “Arnie--- We found drugs in the apartment, heroine and cocaine. The place also seems to be in shambles… Likely a fight.” I looked down toward the asphalt in Ernie’s direction and nodded before looking back to Juan, “A man of your description was seen leaving the area last night according to what Ernie told me, plus… I smell her perfume on you.” I nodded at Ernie, “You can take him to station, Ernie.” The man looked frantic, “No! I met her at a bar once, she wanted to talk to me! She—She was stunning and we hit it off right away!” He struggled getting pulled away by Ernie and back into the cruiser. Ernie sighed looking at me as I nodded toward him. “Mind if Stanley and I look around the apartment?” Ernie nodded and moved back to his cruiser to pull out of the parking lot and to the station.

I motioned to Stanley, “Come on… We’re going to look around.” Stanley nodded with a glum expression. “That bastard…” he muttered in a frustrated tone. I sighed and didn’t speak as we ascended the stairs to her apartment. Opening the door a few investigators were sifting through some of the broken furniture, a few bags of cocaine were prevalently placed in an evidence bin. “Hey Stanley, Go look around the bathroom, see if you can’t find some of that perfume for evidence. Stanley nodded quickly and moved toward the bathroom to scavenge around.

As I entered the bedroom I was rather astonished how tidy it was compared to the rest of the apartment. The blinds were closed save for the small creases in the wooden blinds that allowed the beams of sunlight to hit the ground in patterned intervals. Moving toward the blinds I moved to pull the blinds up to let more light in the room I looked down at the alleyway, which was her view. I moved to trace my gaze along the bags and dumpsters before I saw something peculiar. I moved swiftly out of the room and out the door past the talking and slacking investigators before I moved to walk around the building and approach the various garbage bags and the dumpsters themselves. Moving a few of the trash bags I discovered it, the body of a Latino man with his neck cut at the
throat. I noticed the dried blood around the neck as I looked around for any other clues, before spotting a bloody handprint on the dumpster. I nodded; it made sense this man’s killer wouldn’t be able to cover his tracks in the dark before running away. I moved to look around the dumpster before I spotted a knife, with blood coating the edge of the blade and also strangely the hilt as well.

I paled, looking down to the man’s murder weapon and the small handprint on the dumpster. Once more I swallowed hard and moved to the body, taking it and dragging it away from the trash bags. I looked toward the bags and slowly set the man down before spotting a snub nose revolver lying near the feet of the body. I moved over to the weapon, and found no blood on it. I soon slid my fingers around to check how much ammo was in the gun and upon opening the chamber I found five rounds. I gulped and my face reddened, simply dropping the gun as it clacked back onto the ground, the jingle of ammunition falling out echoing throughout the alley. I grew angry, knowing that this man was without question Maria’s killer. The clues were in front of me as I walked out of the alley, pale as Casper the Friendly Ghost. I walked over to my car, my hands shuddering as I unlocked the door and moved to simply plop in. I quickly moved to my glove box to take a notepad and a pen I had hidden away in there and began jotting down my theories.

After about fifteen minutes, Stanley finally came down to the car and moved to enter the passenger door, “Found the perfume and explained its relevance to one of the Investigators… “ I nodded, “Good work… We’re heading to the station.” Stanley nodded still looking more than down and out of it, “What did you learn, Mr. Fletcher?” I started the engine after a few turns of the key as the dying car I drove sprang back into life, “Nothing in the apartment that Lt. Morgan and his team didn’t already see… Save for that the bedroom was unhampered with, making it rather unlikely that our friend Mr. Carlos was the killer… If they had an argument and he shot her like I originally believed then most likely it would have been a bit cleaner in the living room and a bit messier in the bedroom.” I moved to turn onto the street, some jerk off honking as he came
barreling down the street in his Charger, “Fucking piece of---!!!” I stopped myself and breathed before I changed lanes and headed toward the station, “Anyway--- It’s my belief that whoever killed Maria likely did so after Mr. Carlos left the house.” Stanley blinked as if renewed fear and anger was released into his mind, “So--- That bastard is still out there?” I nodded, “Perhaps… Perhaps not…”

Once we arrived at the station we quickly exited the car and approached the doors, “Now let me talk to Ernie… Just stay quiet.” Stanley nodded quickly as we approached the front desk, “Bert! I’m here to see Ernie.” The policeman nodded and gestured in the direction of Ernie’s office. I sped off with my young protégé in tow, opening the door quickly to Ernie’s office. “Ernie---“ Ernie was on the phone, “Right-- I’ll talk to him now.” Hanging up the phone Ernie let out a frustrated sigh, “Arnie… Why didn’t you call in you found a body? We combed that alleyway a bit in the morning and didn’t find anything. The body was recently moved---“ I lurched forward to lean my left hand on his desk, “Did you I.D. the corpse?” Ernie nods, “A known criminal enforcer, named Andre Ruiz. Killed with a sharp weapon wound to the throat, likely a knife we found nearby.” I nodded with a stone cold look on my face, “Well… I know what happened… To both of them, Maria and Mr. Vargas…” Stanley perked up curious and was about to speak before remembering not to. “Maria and Juan were dating and doing drugs with one another.” Ernie canted his head, “Alright… But where is this Vargas guy coming in?” I cleared my throat, “Most likely, Juan Carlos was stealing the Cartel’s drug inventory. Someone found out and sent Vargas to follow Juan. Most likely as Juan was leaving last night, and Maria accompanied him. Allowing Vargas time to ransack her apartment to look for the drugs. However Maria must have come back while he was doing so and ran out of the apartment for help, so he chased after her and killed her.”

Ernie nodded, “Alright… Well that makes sense. Still though--- The culprit is dead, but you said you knew what happened to both of them?” I nodded as Stanley fidgeted around like he had to unleash the Niagara Falls in the bathroom, “Mr. Fletcher, Can I please—Go to the
bathroom?” I shook my head as Ernie arched a brow, “Let the kid go to the bathroom Arnie, He’s what? 20? ” Stanley nodded before I spoke up, “Don’t let Mr. Vargas’ killer walk away now Ernie.” Ernie stood up nearly knocking his chair over as I wheeled around to take Stanley by the bicep and throw him into a chair. Stanley wheeled around and wailed, “The fuck Fletcher?!” I motioned for Ernie to get back up and he moved to the door to call for some support. Three officers entered and they had moved to handcuff the screaming and now sobbing Stanley and haul him off to a holding cell.

Ernie moved to straighten his uniform before sitting back in his chair, “Ok--- So you going to tell me why I had the kid arrested?” I nodded my head and sat at the seat across from Ernie. “Stanley cared immensely for Maria, almost a little too much… At dinner last night I mentioned she likely had a boyfriend and he seemed a bit concerned… What was more, he wanted to use public transportation to get home, for a rich kid who has been spoiled his entire life, that should have been a red flag.” I adjusted in the seat to a more comfortable position. “When rummaging around in the alleyway, I noticed the knife had blood coated on the hilt, likely not from the deceased Vargas. Also a bloody print that seemed to be from someone’s right hand, the print was small so I soon started to suspect…” Ernie nodded, “That kid of yours had a pretty big patch up job going on with his right hand.” I nodded with a smile, “Exactly… Most likely what happened is that Stanley walked to Maria’s and got there rather late. He must have seen her door open and heard shouting and assumed there was a problem and likely waited in the alleyway, scared…” I sighed and looked down. “Mr. Vargas must have made his way down the alleyway to escape where Stanley attempted to jump him. Since the gun had no blood on it, most likely it had been put in Vargas’ pocket.” Ernie sighed and just looked at me while I continued. “Vargas pulled a knife at some point and cut Stanley’s hand… Somehow Stanley must’ve took the knife and cut his throat… Likely he panicked realizing what had happened and attempted to cover it up.” Ernie blinked, “He seemed pretty glum about it… Why act it up if he knew what happened? Why not come forward?” I shrugged my shoulders, “He panicked, he is young and likely assumed he would
get punished for it… Even when I picked him up today he seemed nervous and jumpy, likely far more worried about being caught than anything else.”

Ernie started to type a recollection of what I had just stated into his computer. Ernie smiled at me, “So Arnie, I still haven’t replaced you as a partner… You think you might come back to the force?” I laughed and rolled my eyes, “We’ll see Ernie… Let me have some time to properly mourn Maria… “ Ernie nodded and smiled. “Best of luck Arnie… I know that this isn’t easy… But you did good.” I nodded and let out a smile, “Hey, She deserves the truth, even the man that killed her does… That’s what justice is.”
A Song About Silence

Art remained silent. When Paul was in a bad way, silence always seemed to be better than the alternative—besides, Art had not a single confrontational bone in his body, so this response method suited him. As a result, Art simply watched over the top of his book—a collection of theoretical discourses on the concept of infinity—as Paul sat on the couch and played his guitar.

Paul’s fingers ran smooth over the strings. Art noted that the sound of his playing had grown increasingly professional. Paul, clearly, disagreed. As he played, his movements became more and more forcefully exaggerated. He would start a song, follow it to see where it went, hit a bad chord, and punctuate his mistake with a succession of intentional bad chords. At the peak of his frustration, he threw down his guitar, stomped across the living room, and slammed his bedroom door behind him.

Art knew he would see no more of Paul that night. He waited about ten minutes for Paul to prove him wrong, and then he pulled his phone out of his pocket and found the number for Greg Sutherland, the owner of Sutherland’s. “Hey Greg, this is Art…it looks like we won’t be able to perform tonight…Yeah, Paul’s feeling a bit under the weather…He does seem to get the bug a lot, doesn’t he?…Really sorry about all this…Okay. Thanks. Bye.” Art hung up.

Satisfied, at least in part, Art returned to his book.

* * *

On the way to work, their silence presumed. Paul let Art out at the funeral home, and then drove north, towards the factory. He watched the sky slide from an oily black to a pale blue as the sun made for the horizon, and he wondered how the sun dealt with the monotony of its day, always rising and setting, rising and setting, never really going anywhere, never breaking from the chains of physics, which held it in the sky for an eternity. What does the sun do when it tires of oppression and yearns for freedom?
He had to laugh at himself, sardonically, for being so poetic. Only poets and songwriters talked to the sun, and while he wished he could be professionally recognized as the latter, he had to submit to being a self-proclaimed member of the former. These thoughts naturally led him to Cecil Jacobson, although Paul would have been more than happy to permanently eliminate the record company executive’s name from his memory.

I’ll think of something else, he decided. When nothing immediately came to mind, he thought, well, why shouldn’t I think of that bastard, who wouldn’t know a good musician even if said musician played the music of God into the two misshapen holes on the side of his fat face that he called ears? It was any wonder that he still had a job, let alone a good one, a noble one; he should have been the gatekeeper for beautiful music, but instead he kicked beautiful music to the curb, and left it there to die.

(But what if he was right?)

* * *

Paul went to see April Robinson, the factory’s HR, before his shift started, to see about his vacation hours, an excuse he made every morning so that he could visit her. Her office was in the business half of the building, next to the office of Richard Cory, who owned the factory. Everyone knew, though it was never publicly stated, that Richard Cory also owned most of the town of Milton, a large town in its own right but a pimple on a flea compared to the nearby Manhattan and Brooklyn. Still, that was more than Paul owned, and this Paul noted each time he saw the other man, always in a different three-piece suit.

Paul passed Richard Cory’s office just as the door opened, and the man himself walked out with another man in a three-piece suit. Paul’s secondhand clothes paled in comparison.

It was evident that the two men were in the process of wrapping up their conversation. “You’re a money-hungry son-of-a-bitch, you know that?” Richard Cory spat at the other man.

“No need to be sore about it, Richie,” the other man said, as he smiled, not kindly. “It’s just business. I’ll be expecting my money within the month.” He walked off.
Richard Cory stared after him. A sad and introspective crease grew on his forehead, making him look eighty instead of forty. All at once he noticed that Paul was staring at him. He frowned, but said nothing. Eventually, he laughed socially. “Guess everybody owes somebody, huh?” Without waiting for a response, he returned to his office, shutting the door behind him.

Paul stepped into April’s office. She looked up from her computer and smiled. “Hello Paul,” she said. “I’m starting to think I can expect you like clockwork.”

“Hello April. You didn’t happen to hear that argument in the hall, did you?”

“Between Richard and Mr. Greystone? How could I not?”

“Who’s Greystone?”

“He’s one of Richard’s investors, I’m pretty sure. They’re pretty good friends.”

Some friend, Paul thought.

*   *   *

Richard Cory decided to leave his office earlier than usual. His head hurt, so he took two aspirin on his way home. He knew the house would be empty; his wife, Cecilia, spent most of every day shopping in Manhattan with her friend Dottie, and his son, Jacob, was at school. He pulled up to the house, let himself in, and flopped onto his made bed, burying his head in his pillow.

“I hate my life,” he whispered into the linen. A futile gesture, certainly. No one ever heard his confessions. He was not a religious man. He did not trust shrinks. He had tried to talk to his wife about it, but she didn’t know what he meant—and in her ignorance, she clung to what she knew, assuring him that he need not concern himself with such dismal thoughts. “But this is life!” he said to himself after she left him alone.

Once, almost by accident, he brought it up to Jacob. The boy was doing math homework in the game room, sprawled out on the suede couch, and when Richard Cory walked by the doorway, he decided to offer his help, however limited that help might be. Jacob sat up and made room for his father. They looked at Jacob’s textbook together, which puzzled both of them but which
especially puzzled Richard Cory, because he didn’t remember learning this kind of math when he was in school. He watched Jacob work through some of the problems, and as he watched, he felt tingling at the base of his spine, a familiar feeling which suggested a wave of existentialist thought would soon wash over his consciousness. “Jacob?” he asked. “Yeah Dad?” “Do you ever…feel like people focus too much on the wrong things?” “What do you mean?” “Well, like all this math. Is it really all that important? Who says it’s important? Why don’t you get to say that it’s not important?” Jacob looked up at his father, his mouth slightly open. “I guess ‘cuz I’m just a kid.”

They worked a bit longer on Jacob’s homework, but soon it was too much for Richard Cory to handle, and so he left. And that had been the only time he felt that anyone had remotely understood him.

He dozed for a bit. When he woke up, he felt groggy, but he also knew what he needed to do. He put on his coat, climbed in his car, and drove off to the bank.

* * *

When Paul read the front page of the paper that next morning, the blood drained out of his face, turning it ghastly white. It said: **MULTI-MILLIONAIRE RICHARD CORY FOUND SHOT TO DEATH IN DEN.** Art, seeing Paul’s reaction, took a peek at the headline himself. “That’s too bad,” he said.

Paul shook his head forcefully. “So what?” Art asked. “It’s sad, but it happens. Right?”

“You don’t understand,” Paul pleaded. “I saw him yesterday. He was arguing with one of his investors about money.” He frantically skimmed the article.

“So? Rich guys argue with other rich guys all the time.”

Paul continued reading. “Ha!” he said, finally. “Listen to this: ‘A large sum of money was found to be missing from Cory’s bank account. This, and the lack of a suicide note, are the only clues found to suggest that Cory was murdered.’” Paul looked up at Art. “Don’t you see? This investor **must** have murdered him! Here’s what I’m thinking: Richard Cory owes this investor money; Richard Cory withdraws the money from the bank, calls Greystone, and waits for him to
show; when he does show, they discuss the deal in Richard Cory’s bedroom, and the discussion goes poorly, ending in Richard Cory’s death; and then Greystone tries to frame the situation as if it were a suicide. What else could have happened?”

Art read the article over Paul’s shoulder. “They found the gun in his hand, and he only had one bullet hole, in his temple. Could be an actual suicide.”

“Why would a multi-millionaire, a guy who has everything, commit suicide? And then, what happened to the money? No, Art, Richard Cory was murdered. And we know something the police don’t know.”

Art shrugged. “So let’s tell them, if you’re so sure.”

Paul thought it over awhile. “I think we should investigate this thing ourselves.”

“Paul, I get that you’re excited over this, but we can’t just put ourselves in the middle of this thing.”

“Yes we can.”

* * *

That next afternoon, Art found himself sitting in his usual chair in the foyer of the funeral home, thinking about what Paul had said. He was so lost in thought that he missed greeting Cecilia Cory and the young Jacob Cory as they walked through the front door, and it wasn’t until they had reached the front counter that Art noticed their presence and made his way over to them. His usual order of introduction could not be executed, and so he waited for Rebecca, their receptionist, to tell them to have a seat and wait for Robert, their financial advisor, to be ready for Mrs. Cory’s scheduled appointment. He introduced himself, shaking hands with Mrs. Cory and giving Jacob a knowing nod, and then he led them to the foyer chairs. He asked Mrs. Cory how she was handling everything, and she said, well, that it hadn’t really hit her yet, it was far too early, but that she had cried a great deal the night before. Art noted, aloud, that not many grieving families began making funeral arrangements this soon after the date of death, and she revealed, with slight embarrassment, that she preferred to confront this tragedy in her life head-on, by not giving it time
to infect her life in too negative a way. Art further noted—this time, to himself—that Mrs. Cory was probably not a passionate woman.

Robert interrupted their conversation, politely, and asked Mrs. Cory to follow him to his office. Art offered to keep Jacob company. For a short while, he and Jacob sat in a precipitate silence, punctuated occasionally by casual eye contact, and then Art asked, “What was your father like?”

Jacob spent a while thinking before answering. “He was...a sad guy. He didn’t really care about the money he made. It didn’t, like, change him, like it changes a lot of people. But it made him sad. I don’t think he liked being rich. He didn’t have lots of friends, and I never really saw him smile. Ever see, like, on the nature channel, a pack of wolves chasing down a snow hare? I get the feeling my dad felt a lot like the snow hare.”

Art was genuinely surprised by the answer—not because he expected Richard Cory to be some other way, but because he expected this boy of twelve to give him a well-fluffed account of his father, the way most grieving families chose to describe their loved ones. He speculated that there weren’t many twelve-year-olds—or people—like Jacob Cory.

* * *

Two days later, Paul and Art followed Greystone in Paul’s used Hyundai. Paul had no reservations about this plan; Art had many. April, after an adequate amount of flirtatious persuasion, had given Paul Greystone’s address and allowed him to take the day off of work. Art had also asked for the day off, although his argument held less gusto, possibly because his HR was male, but mostly because he wasn’t convinced of Paul’s plan.

Greystone lived in Manhattan, in a luxury condo on the top floor of a high-rise building. They parked nearby and waited for Greystone to leave the lobby of the building and hail a taxi. Then they followed him across town, to a private elementary school on the East Side, where he picked up a little girl who was presumably his daughter. From there, they took a long jaunt over to the Bronx. As they drove further along, Paul said, “I guess this means we’re going to the zoo.”
The taxi dropped Greystone and his daughter off near the front entrance to the zoo. As Greystone paid the driver, Paul found somewhere to park, and they held themselves back, waiting for Greystone to purchase their tickets before they went and bought their own.

They followed Greystone through the monkey house, past the aviary exhibits, and alongside the giraffe habitat. When Greystone and his daughter stopped to sit at a bench near the gorilla forest, Paul and Art did the same. When they continued on, so did Paul and Art. Paul was just about to turn to Art and make some comment praising their trailing abilities when Greystone stopped, hesitated, turned, looked, and pointed directly at his shadows and asked, plaintively, “Now, why are you following us?”

* * *

“I’ve never argued with Richie about money in all of my life!” Greystone declared, offended. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”


Greystone seemed perplexed at Paul’s certainty, and eventually, after running a lap through his memory reserves, he exclaimed, “Oh! I know what you’re thinking of. Richie and I did a football poll this year, just the two of us, and I won, so I went to his office to rub in his face that I knew football more intricately than he did. The money that I won was a pittance, a fart in a hurricane, compared to the money that disappeared that evening.”

“So that means…”

“I didn’t kill Richie. But thanks for believing in me, you two horse-faced sons of swine. Get out of my face before you ruin any more of my daughter’s unforgettable trip to the zoo with her father.”

* * *

Homeward bound, they remained silent. Art could tell that Paul was thinking, but he could only guess at what that thinking might entail. Eventually, Paul decided to speak. “Where do we go from here, Art?”
Art could contain his frustration no longer. “Pull this god-forsaken car over,” he said, livid, and when Paul hesitated, Art screamed hysterically, “PAUL!?”

Paul pulled the car over right before a small bridge. Art threw open his door and stomped off towards the bridge. Under the bridge, the water of a large stream flowed choppily, turbulently. Paul followed, albeit with some hesitation.

“I can’t believe you’re still going on with all this, Paul. I’m sick of this. Paul, Paul, Paul…listen to me. Listen. There is no murderer, because Richard Cory wasn’t murdered. The man was depressed. I got that straight from his son. He was freaking depressed. Just like you. He was a mess, just like you. He was a man, just like you. See him as a person, not a thing. He was not some case for you to solve. He was a human being. He had feelings. He was not a machine. He committed suicide. You’re delusional, Paul. You can’t see the world for what it really is because you’re depressed, you aren’t getting the life you wanted, you feel cheated because you have a college degree, which you can’t use, and a talent, which no one with authority recognizes yet, and a job that pays horribly for miserable work. But guess what? That isn’t what’s important. You’re losing sight of the forest for a view of the trees. Our friendship is important. Life, in its observed form, is important. The money, the titles, the authority…it means nothing when you think of the people, the music, the love.” Art began to cry. The confrontation proved too much for him.

Paul stared at his friend, dumbfounded. He wrapped his arms around his friend and squeezed. “My friend,” he whispered.

* * *

Richard Cory closed his eyes. He felt the weight of the .45 Browning in his hand, and it felt like the weight of death itself, an intangible measure made tangible by the beating in his chest, his heart looking for a way out of its prison, hoping to live even after the brain died, knowing that death was not the answer, but the brain had made up its mind, this was going to happen, the money had already burned, the ashes scattered in the heart of the incinerator, where its curse could never infect the heart of his son, who had far too much more to live for than the pursuit of money-
happiness, when a world of happy-happiness held none of the vile morality that money-happiness surrounded itself with, and so his son was safe, but just to make sure, Richard Cory stuck the muzzle of the .45 at his temple and pulled the trigger.

* * *

A month passed.

Paul stared down at Richard Cory’s headstone, a slab of grey and white marble surrounded by beautiful green grass, the letters etched neatly by a man of his craft. Paul smiled.

He and Art had performed a total of eighteen times at Sutherland’s in the past month, and their reception by the bar flies was favorable. Paul had come to believe that his audience mattered far more than people like Cecil Jacobson. These were the people whose feelings, hopes, and beliefs yearned for the music Paul played. And Paul was ready to give it to them.

The day after Art confronted him, he went into April’s office and quit. When he left, he kissed April on the cheek and said, “Never again will I let myself give up on music.”

We’re not so different, you and I, Paul said to the headstone.

Quietly, Paul pulled a small notepad out of his satchel, sat cross-legged on the grass in front of Richard Cory’s headstone, and began writing a song about silence.
The Case of the Road Patrol XK

I am Tom McCarroll. I’ve lived a rather ordinary life. My parents had four children, myself being the eldest, and then subsequently divorced as per the normal trend in society. I grew up in an average sized city, went to school, graduated, and went to study at a university. The most eccentric thing about me was that I had never done anything eccentric. I don’t have any stories from my youth of skinny-dipping with friends in the country club pool, conducting hilarious pranks on unsuspecting victims, staying up past 11:30pm to sneak out with a lover, or even speeding on the freeway. I color inside of the lines. And the monotony was slowly killing me. Every dull day chipped away another piece of me, until I met the world’s most interesting man and foremost expert in crime: Gerard Mason.

Oh, I apologize if I misled you before, narrating is not my strong suit, Mason is not a perpetrator of crime, but rather together we go to great lengths to see justice is obtained when the police fall short. He is a master of logic and deduction and I never cease to be amazed at his abilities and insight into human nature. His biography seems rather like a hodgepodge of several different men’s lives and I have spent an exorbitant amount of time trying to piece together his life’s puzzle.

Through a little sleuthing of my own, I have learned that as a teenager Mason was forcibly kicked out of several boarding schools for poor attendance and disrespecting the instructors. I can only imagine the incredible adventures he had playing hooky and the brilliant
deductions he had made as a child to offend those nuns. Some years later he was living in South America, learning the native languages and traditions. Then, I learned by googling him, he competed on the bobsled team for the United States Virgin Islands in the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. When I asked him about this he shook his head and started telling me how I should go ‘scrambling’ with him that day. I know him well enough to not press the matter any further. He continues to be obsessed with working out and fitness. At first I thought it was a lifelong habit, then I found and old photo of Mason from his childhood. He wasn’t always the strong, tan, muscular, and intimidating man he is now. He was a rather fat child. Something must have happened to him to change that habit. Again, I have not had the nerve to pry further into his past.

He is now the greatest private detective, or ‘consulting detective’ as he frequently corrects people, in the country. His knowledge seem limitless. The number of cases he has solved in a matter of minutes would stagger any officer of the law. And I have had the privilege to work alongside him and chronicle our adventures through the years. One case in particular stands out to me: The Case of the Road Patrol XK. It began like any other normal Tuesday morning… well, normal is a subjective word.

“What are you doing?” I asked, cocking my head at the sight I had just walked in on.

“Ashtanga yoga,” he said without moving or opening his eyes. He was on the floor with his legs straight up in the air, balancing dangerously close to his collection of authentic South American weaponry.

“I really wish you would wear some pants in the morning,” I reminded him. He continued with his peculiar body contortions, that my bad knees would never allow.
I don’t know why I still act surprised; it was not unusual to wake up to a display one of Mason’s new obsessions. Just last week I got to witness him cutting up fresh elk meat after he had taken up hunting live game. I walked into the kitchen.

“Any new cases today?” I asked as I got out the bread and eggs.

“Nothing interesting,” he said, “I’m so bored, why can’t people commit more creative crimes!”

“You should be happy that the neighborhood is safe and criminal masterminds don’t come out every day. You need a new hobby, maybe—”

“Drug dealing!” he suggested a little too eagerly for my taste.

“No,” I said stirring the small pan of scrambled eggs, “I was thinking something a little less destructive and dangerous”.

“But last night I figured out the perfect system that would fix the problems those bumbling fools are having right now… if they only realized that the distribution—” he started to explain.

I never got to hear the end of his explanation. I jumped at the sound of a loud squeaky door hinge, thinking someone might be breaking into our apartment. I looked at Mason to see him picking up his phone. Turning to the door I noticed no signs of moment. I turned my gaze back to my peculiar roommate.

“New ringtone,” he said smiling, obviously proud of the fright he caused me. He opened the phone and put it on speaker.

“Hello?” the quiet voice whispered tentatively, “Is the detective Gerard Mason?”
He answered, “Yes, now do you have something interesting to say, maybe in an audible tone?” he said rolling his eyes and looking at me. I gave him my characteristic look of disapproval and he added, “How can I help you?”

The quiet voice said, “I’m in big trouble and I don’t know who else to turn to,” Mason’s interest piqued slightly, “the police tell me I’m imagining things and to forget about it, but I know something very mysterious and terrible is happening.” Mason’s unhealthy love for trouble has gotten us into some pretty sticky situations and I had a feeling this was going to be another one.

“Come to my office immediately,” Mason stated, hanging up the phone and beginning to put on his pants.

“You should really have given our address at least. I’ll start the coffee for the client when they arrive” I said as I got up from the kitchen table.

“I would wait, they won’t be here for a couple hours,” he said straightening his shirt in the mirror.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Why, they were getting on a train in Santa Monica,” he stated matter-of-factly, “I overheard over the call the whistle of a 450X locomotive. There is only one station that has that train to LA at 8:30 in the morning”.

I should have been surprised, but I wasn’t.

“While we’re waiting, have I ever told you about my first case?”

“You mean The Case of the Missing Antelope?”

“No, that came later. I was nineteen and working in construction on the east coast. You really haven’t heard that story?
“No, I definitely have not, was it an abduction? A murder?” I said, thoroughly intrigued to hear more about Mason’s mysterious past.

“No Tom, this was the beginning, someone stole from me!”

I transcribed his story for you in the following section:

“I was nineteen and living in Massachusetts at the time. I thought I needed money to buy a plane ticket to Thailand. So I took a job as an apprentice for a master carpenter named George. He was 52 years old, and walked with a limp after he fell off a roof and hit his head on a gas valve. But he was still one of the smartest people I have known. No one could build a house or fix a wall like George. I remember it was the middle of May. We were working on a house in Hanover, Massachusetts on 40744 Chestnut Street. The neighborhood was filled with huge, expensive homes and rich families. Old George needed help closing in a basement two-car garage to make an extra room. The family was nice enough. The husband was a doctor and the wife an attorney. They had two kids, one a little girl, and the other a teenage boy adopted from China. The parents gave us only one rule: we couldn’t go into the house while they weren’t home. I was happy to oblige since I needed the money. So every day for almost two weeks I parked my shiny, blue Chevy Camaro in the street filled with all my tools I might need for the day. My favorite was a brand new radar detector: a Road Patrol XK with dual superheterodyne circuits. It was a gift from my girlfriend at the time.

Don’t give me that look Tom, you can’t be that surprised I had a girlfriend at some point. I haven’t always lived with you.

Anyway, it was worth about $300 and I could drive as fast as I wanted to and not get pulled over by the cops. On the second to last day of the job I drove to work like normal, with
the windows rolled down, enjoying the fresh air. At 2:30 in the afternoon George and I took our daily coffee break down the street. When we got back, I was finishing up my portion of the wall. The kids walked by us after they got home from school. The bus stop was just at the end of the street. At about 3 o’clock George said it was time to call it a day and I was glad. We only had one more day before the job would be done. When I got to my car however, I quickly noticed the radar detector was missing. I couldn’t believe someone would take it right out of my car. I was outraged. I had to find it. I even asked the son if he had seen anyone hanging around the driveway that day. When that conversation yielded nothing, I called the police. I got to the station thinking that they could solve all my problems. Every officer I talked to brushed me off and shook their heads saying that it would be impossible to find my radar detector. Needless to say that was my first experience with the reality of the ineffectiveness of the police.

George put his large, callused hands on my shoulders and said, “You need to retrace your steps Mason.”

“I can’t go back and walk…”

“No, you need to go over everything that happened in here,” he said tapping my forehead.

I was lying awake in bed that night and I could not sleep, so I took George’s advice. I kept going over the events of the day, analyzing every moment in my head trying to find a clue: I remembered getting to work in my Camaro, walking down the curved driveway to the left side of the split-level house. I went threw the single red door to the two-car garage. I remembered George and I went to lunch at 2:30 and got back just before the school bus. I remember seeing the kids walk up the six steps into the house. I remember the son peeking his head in to the garage, then again, then again… He looked at us three times in 20 minutes. I was working right
near the door and at the time I assumed he was just a curious kid. I didn’t even think twice about that before.

When I went back to work at 7:30am the next day, I could not get a suspicious feeling out of my gut. Why would anyone poke his or her head in three times? He was watching me. I had a weird feeling about this kid. I wanted to go in his room and check it out.

George and I finished the job that morning and packed up the tools. It was finally my chance. George watched the front door for the parents to get back from work and I entered the house to do my first sleuthing. The son’s bedroom was at the end of the hall. Even though the kids were at school and the parents at work, I walked quietly, my breathing barely audible. When I got to the door, I noticed it was locked with a deadbolt. What fifteen-year-old kid needed a deadbolt on his door? I looked around for the next option. Next to the door, ninety degrees to the right, was a small linen closet with towels and sheets. I ran my hand along the back of the closet at about eye level. I know people, I know what they do, and they do not want to carry a key. They want to hide it close by. I took my hand and ran it lightly along the inside of the door casing: up the left side, across the top, and down the right. Before I got to the bottom, my fingers felt a small nail. On that nail was a key. And I opened the bedroom door.

It was a typical teenage boys room at first glance: a complete disaster. But that lock told me there was something more in the room. I started looking in the large wooden dresser. I went through all the drawers and found nothing, except for some socks. I was beginning to feel my own pulse racing, time was running out. I had to hurry and get out of the house before the family got home. I decided to check one last place, under the bed. I bent over and saw a bright red duffle bag. I pulled it out with some effort, hunched over it and unzipped the bag. Inside
was my radar detector, along with eight others and a car stereo. I was shocked. I had actually found it.

I took the bag out to show George.

He looked at me and laughed, “You’re a regular Sherlock Holmes!”

I knew I couldn’t show the kid’s parents without telling them I was in the house, much less in the bedroom, so I locked the door, put the key back, and took the whole bag. I always wondered what his reaction was when he found everything in place except that duffle.

The construction job was only going to take a couple weeks and with the money I was going to become a yoga instructor in Thailand. Instead I decided to become a detective. So here I am now.”

I will never completely understand Gerard Mason. And I will never understand how we can be such compatible roommates and partners in crime. As I look around the room I see the various items from our exploits. I finally understood why he kept that old, rickety radar detector.

Mason sat back and looked at the clock. “The client should be here in three, two, one…”

There was a quiet knock at the door. “I’ll get it”, I said.

And the rest of this story is for another day.