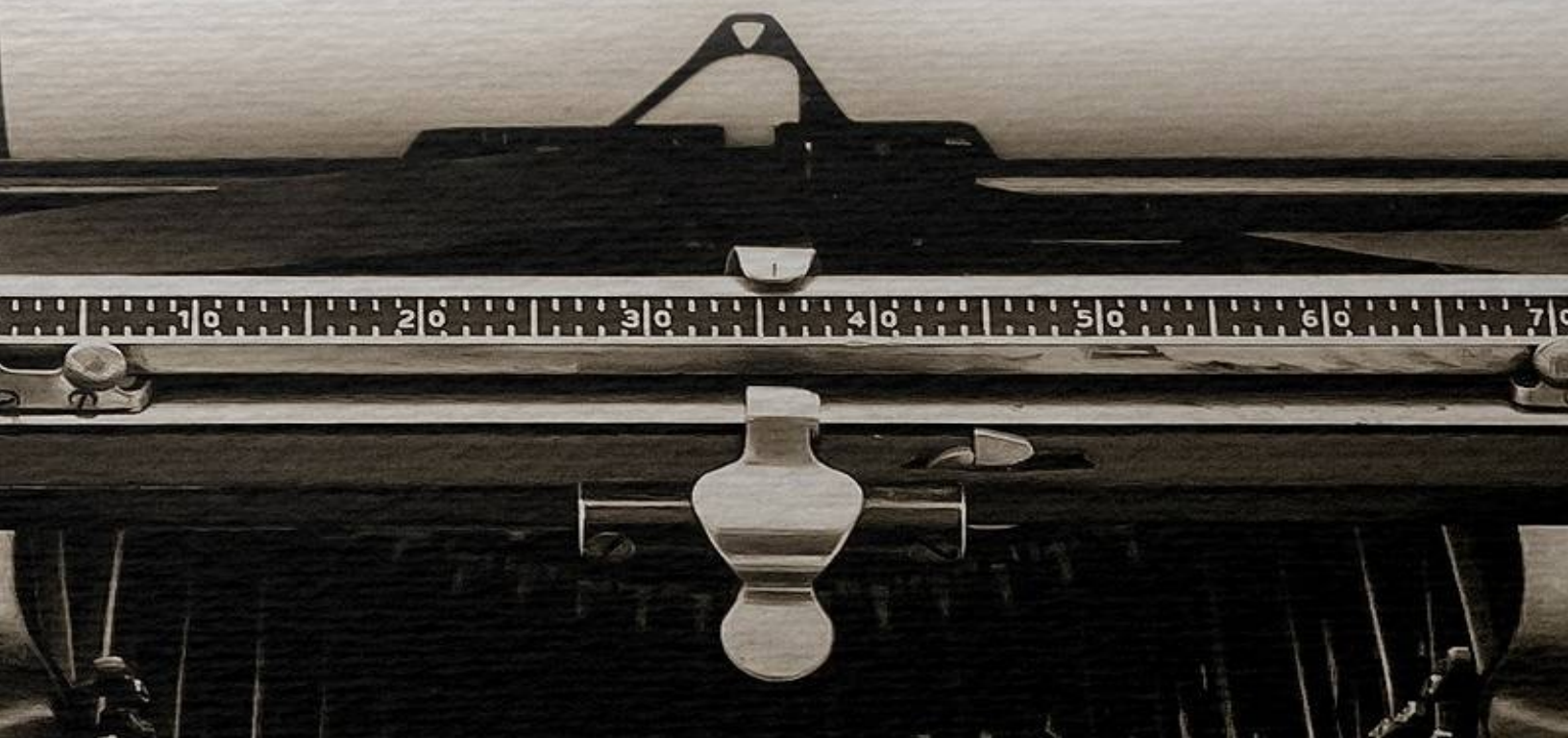


HOLLYWOOD HACK JOB

written by
Nathan Allen



Hollywood Hack Job

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Contents

PART I – FALSE ICONS AND SACRED COWS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

PART II – THE HONEY TRAP

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

PART III – THE SHARPEST KNIVES IN THE DRAWER

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

PART IV – ROLL CREDITS

[Chapter 27](#)

ALSO BY NATHAN ALLEN

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**PART I.
FALSE ICONS
AND
SACRED COWS**

Chapter 1

“Jesus knew Satan was at work in that very hour,” Fr. Gerdtz intoned from his pulpit. “The devil had already enlisted Judas to betray him, and Christ knew the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem was being empowered by the principalities of Hell. He was also aware that a devil-inspired mob was coming shortly to take him prisoner. That was when Jesus said to the disciples, Satan, the undead one, is coming.”

Fr. Gerdtz paused when the snoring in his church became too loud to ignore.

He lifted his eyes from his notes and scanned the room for the source of the disruption. It wasn't long before he identified the culprit. The pews were sparsely filled; only seventeen people had bothered to drag themselves out of bed that morning to give thanks for all the Lord had blessed them with. It came from the back row, where a tattered pair of mismatched shoes stuck out from the end of one pew. He didn't need to see the shoes' owner to know who was responsible. It was the same man who interrupted his sermons on a near-weekly basis. His name was Jefferson Slade, a local vagrant who frequently stumbled into his church to sleep off a heady Saturday night of cheap liquor, public nuisance and lascivious behavior. He was at least grateful that Jefferson was sound asleep, and not heckling and muttering profanities as he sometimes would.

Thirty seconds had elapsed since Fr. Gerdtz last spoke. None of the parishioners appeared to have noticed. Many had their heads bowed and bibles open, although it was fairly obvious they were doing this to disguise the fact that they were really looking at their phones.

A sinking feeling of disillusionment took hold as he surveyed what remained of his congregation. Thirty-six years ago, when he arrived here from Vienna, he frequently addressed packed houses. Parishioners would arrive an hour early on a Sunday morning to snare a good seat, then wait a further thirty minutes at the end just to let him know how much they enjoyed hearing him speak. But that was a different era altogether. Now his entire audience could carpool home in a minibus.

Crowds had steadily declined over the past four decades, and only a dedicated few remained. The majority were closer to the end of their lives than the beginning. They were the ones who wanted to make peace with the Lord and reserve their place in heaven before being trampled underfoot by the inevitable march of time. But the older crowd was thinning out, their numbers waning with every passing year, and a younger generation was not stepping up to take their place. The church was fighting against irrelevance, and it was a fight they were losing.

He returned to his notes and pressed on.

“Evil, of all kinds, has risen to an exceeding height in this world, and highly exalted itself against God, Christ and the church. Satan has highly exalted himself and greatly prevailed. By his subtle temptations, he brought about the ruin of the whole race—”

A snort erupted from Jefferson Slade's open mouth, and Fr. Gerdtz lost his place once again. The cathedral's vast emptiness gave the sound additional volume. The high walls and ceilings amplified every one of Jefferson's involuntary interruptions, reverberating for seconds afterwards.

Fr. Gerdtz closed his eyes and exhaled through his nostrils. He prayed that the Lord grant him the strength to carry on in the face of these constant challenges.

The parishioners filed out of the church in a slightly hurried manner following the conclusion of the service. Fr. Gerdtz found himself speaking with Lance and Colleen Robertson, a couple in their early forties who had been coming to the St. James Church for many years. He had known Colleen since she was a young girl. He had officiated at her wedding to Lance, and he had baptized their infant daughter Briony. But as was the case with many families, their Sunday attendances were growing further and further apart. It wasn't unusual for entire seasons to pass by without an appearance.

"We're sorry it's been so long," Colleen said, wheeling out the same excuse Fr. Gerdtz had heard many, many times before: "*It's just that we've all been so busy.*"

"I understand," he said. "It can be difficult to find the time, especially in this day and age."

A small part of him died upon uttering these words, embarrassed by how completely devoid of meaning they were. He resisted the urge to point out that his weekly church services demanded less time than a single episode of those HBO dramas Colleen and Lance obsessively devoured. He often overheard them talking about how far behind they were in their viewing schedules, and the great lengths they would go to when setting aside time to catch up. They spoke as if scripted television was some arduous chore that had been enforced upon them against their will.

"But it's been great seeing you today," Lance said. "We always look forward to your services. We really should try and do this more often."

This last comment produced an involuntary but nonetheless audible huff from Briony, Colleen and Lance's now-teenaged daughter. Briony had clearly been dragged along today against her will. She was the only person in attendance under the age of forty, as well as the only churchgoer Fr. Gerdtz had ever seen wearing a t-shirt with the words "BITCH, I'M FABULOUS" emblazoned across it.

Lance shot his daughter a stern look, imploring her to show some manners. Briony failed to take the hint. "Can we go now?" she whined.

"In a minute honey," Colleen said.

"But we're going to be late!"

"Briony, it doesn't start for another four hours," her father said.

"Only the first two hundred people through the doors will get to meet Krystal!"

"Calm down, sweetie," Colleen said. "There's still plenty of time."

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

"Briony—"

"You know how much this means to me! If I miss out it's all your fault!"

Briony stormed off towards the family car. She climbed into the back seat and slammed the

door closed.

“Teenagers, huh?” Fr. Gerdtz said with a raised eyebrow. It was his attempt at lightening the mood, but at that moment he was relieved to have taken a vow of chastity.

“We’re taking her to see Krystal Blayze after this,” Colleen said by way of explanation. “She’s been talking about this non-stop for weeks.”

The vacant look on Fr. Gerdtz’s face suggested he didn’t have the slightest idea who Colleen was talking about.

“You don’t know Krystal Blayze? Oh, she’s a massive star. She’s doing a book signing at the Beverly Center today.”

“She’s an author?”

“No, she’s ... well, she has released three books. But she’s so much more than that. She’s a model, a DJ, a lifestyle blogger, she has her own TV show, a skincare range. She designs swimsuits, she’s appeared in a Chris Brown video. She’s across all media, really. Young people totally love her.”

There was a marked rise in enthusiasm as Colleen spoke. She appeared almost as excited about meeting this Krystal Blayze woman as her fourteen year old daughter. Fr. Gerdtz got the impression Colleen was turning into one of those mothers terrified of middle age; the type who believed that by sharing her daughter’s interests and being her best friend she could cling to the last vestiges of her fading youth.

The family departed a few minutes later, leaving as soon as they’d invested the minimum amount of small talk so as to not appear rude. The last of the congregation milled around until about eleven a.m.

Fr. Gerdtz was about to head back into the church when his attention was drawn to the guttural sounds emanating from around the corner. He looked across to see Jefferson Slade, now up on his feet and somewhat conscious, hunched over the newly-planted daffodils and dry-retching every few seconds.

He briefly considered ignoring this unpleasant distraction and continuing on inside, but decided the Christian thing to do would be to check in on Jefferson and make sure he was alright.

A sigh of exasperation spilled from his mouth as he made his way over. He knew he was supposed to welcome everybody into his church with open arms, but Jefferson was a never-ending test of his patience. He wasn’t alone in feeling this way; the police often picked him up following complaints from local residents and businesses regarding his offensive behavior. They would leave him in the care of a nearby nursing home, but he never stayed long. He would stick around for a day or two, mostly to harass the nurses and antagonize the other residents, then disappear in the middle of the night. These days the police mostly left him alone, just so long as he didn’t push his luck too far.

“Are you feeling alright, Jefferson?” Fr. Gerdtz asked in a tired voice.

Jefferson heaved. Unintelligible noises blurted from his mouth; a cross between a dead

language and gobbledegook. It was the indecipherable dialect of a man at the lowest point in his hangover. A string of brown bile hung from his chin. He smelled like dumpster refuse.

Fr. Gerdtz looked away in distaste. “Do you need me to call someone?”

Jefferson spat twice on the grass and staggered off towards the road, no doubt looking for someone else to torment.

Fr. Gerdtz watched him as he left. He was becoming more and more convinced that Jefferson had been sent by the Lord as a test of his faith.

Fr. Gerdtz arrived home mid-afternoon. He put out some fresh food for Samson, the long-haired Angora kitten he had recently adopted, and phoned his local pharmacy to arrange a prescription refill for his arthritis medication. He then switched on his computer and set about figuring out how to sign up for a Twitter account. This wasn't something he especially wanted to do, but many of his colleagues within the clergy had been on his back for some time about the need to embrace new media strategies. He'd put it off for as long as he could before finally giving in. It was a last-ditch attempt at staying relevant, a kind of “if you can't beat 'em, join 'em” attitude. He figured any medium that helped spread the word of God was worth investigating.

Creating his Twitter profile took less than ten minutes. This was something he was quite proud of. He had always found modern technology to be rather intimidating, but the computing for seniors classes he had taken in recent years had gone some way towards demystify it all.

He gained his first follower a few minutes later. It was Fr. Jenkins from the nearby United Church, one of the colleagues who had encouraged him to join social media. Fr. Jenkins had been on Twitter for several years now, and had amassed more than five hundred followers in that time. This played a large part in Fr. Gerdtz deciding to take the plunge and join up. It had been some time since he last addressed five hundred people at once.

Fr. Gerdtz followed him back, and the two priests exchanged pleasantries and a few jokes.

He then came across the Twitter page of Colleen Robertson from his church. Her most recent post featured a photograph of her and her daughter Briony, standing next to a young woman with peroxide-blond hair and a dour face hidden behind a pair of giant cataract sunglasses. This, it appeared, was the world-famous Krystal Blayze. Briony wore an ear-to-ear smile in the photograph, while Colleen looked happier than she did on her wedding day. Krystal Blayze looked bored, like she'd rather be anywhere else than where she was at that moment.

Curiosity soon got the better of him. He simply had to know what it was about this woman that made her so appealing, since Colleen's explanation from earlier that morning hadn't made a whole lot of sense to him. It was one thing for Briony, a teenager with a brain that was still developing, to illogically worship someone like this. But a grown woman, an otherwise intelligent wife and mother? He was definitely missing something here.

He clicked onto her page to discover that Krystal Blayze had over six million Twitter followers. A few minutes later, he found that she had more than three times that number following her on Instagram.

This revelation plunged him into a deep state of bewilderment. It wasn't just the gargantuan

number of followers. It was more the fact that she was famous for absolutely no reason at all. All this woman appeared to do with her life was post an endless array of photographs of herself in various states of undress for the pleasure of her anonymous, grammatically-averse followers. She was pictured reclining in a swimsuit on a beach, reclining in a different swimsuit by a pool, and reclining sans-swimsuit on a bed, as well as hundreds more showing her either shopping or partying. Scattered throughout was the occasional inspirational quote about self-acceptance and finding inner peace. None of her followers appeared to have noticed that these quotations directly contradicted the egoistical, materialistic lifestyle she openly promoted.

But it only got worse when he learned that Krystal Blayze was far from an isolated example. There were hundreds, possibly even thousands of others just like her. Ordinary, unremarkable people who had cultivated huge online followings for no discernible reason. They possessed no unique talents, nor had they done anything to benefit anyone other than themselves. There was nothing particularly interesting about any of them. In fact, most appeared to be simply horrible people – self-centered, shallow, vindictive and extraordinarily vain. Of greater concern was that this sort of behavior was actively rewarded. An ostentatious display of wealth or a childish Twitter feud usually resulted in the offending parties gaining additional followers and becoming even more popular.

Some indigenous cultures believed that part of their soul was lost when their photograph was taken. Judging by the evidence before him, Fr. Gerdtz concluded that whenever some *dummkopf* took their own picture and posted it online, several million brain cells were irreparably damaged. Here was incontrovertible proof that we were all living in a post-shame world.

He kept on clicking over and over, unable to stop himself, viewing different versions of the same image. He saw young people pouting into the camera, shots in a mirror's reflection, post-workout images, point-of-view beach snaps, and innumerable instances of people who believed that having their tongue hanging out of their mouths somehow made them edgy or subversive.

[Side note: Hanging Tongue Syndrome is a condition prevalent in many types of dogs. It is caused by inbreeding.]

Something about this troubled him greatly. Even if he wasn't able to properly articulate his concerns, the fact that such superficiality was not only condoned but admired made him fear for the future of the human race. He had long suspected the world was becoming more tolerant of the gauche and the obscene – that much was obvious when the country saw fit to elect a boorish orange-faced buffoon from a reality television show as its president – but only now was the full extent of this diseased culture evident.

Celebrity had metastasized to become the new opiate of the masses. Fame was the sole aim for millions rather than the byproduct of hard work and success. Rampant consumerism and mindless celebrity worship infected every square inch of society. Everybody wanted to be somebody, and nobody wanted to be just anybody.

The public, too, was consumed with the lives of these vacuous fame-chasers, deliberately shutting out anything from the real world that might penetrate their own blinkered existence. It was a phenomenon that had spread to all segments of media. In that day's newspaper, a

suicide bombing attack in Jakarta that left thirty-three people dead was allocated just a small fraction of page fourteen. News of a Hollywood divorce and a rapper's new shoe line both received much greater coverage. What was once relegated to the gossip section now polluted the entire newspaper.

Fr. Gerdtz removed his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. He was getting older, and the modern world was leaving him behind. He was so far removed from the younger generations that they may as well have arrived from another planet. They lived different lives and had different values. They no longer had any need for the church, preferring to give their attention to the unlimited entertainment options available twenty-four/seven on their massive TVs and devices that fit comfortably in their pockets. Trying to compete with that was like trying to nail custard to a wall.

His whole life had been in service to God, and now he feared it would all be for nothing. His entire existence may have been meaningless. At the rate things were going, the world will have moved on from religion within a decade. It would all be forgotten, a relic of a bygone era. Fr. Gerdtz's legacy would be that he was part of the generation that allowed spirituality to wither and die like a neglected pot plant.

A moment passed, and a sense of helplessness took hold.

He did what he always did during times of uncertainty and soul-searching. He bowed his head and clasped his rheumatic hands together in prayer.

"I don't know what you expect me to do," he whispered solemnly. "Am I wasting my time here? Should I give up and simply accept this is how the world is today? Is there anything I can do to make a difference? Or are there better ways for me to devote my energies towards helping people?"

He was silent for a long time.

"Please, Lord," he said, a ripple of emotion entering his voice. "It's rare that I ask for help. I know there are many more in much greater need than I. But I just need a sign. I need to know if there is something I can do."

There was a knock at the door.

Fr. Gerdtz froze. He opened his eyes and looked up at the clock. It was 9:38 p.m. Much later than he thought. His time spent on the internet just sucked the hours away.

He was conflicted about what to do next. Should he answer the door? This was an odd time for visitors, and he wasn't expecting anyone. But the knock occurred immediately after he asked the Lord for help. Was that a coincidence, or was God actually listening? He often told his followers there were no coincidences in life, and that everything was part of the Almighty's divine plan. Whoever was on the other side of that door – even if they were unaware of it – would be able to provide guidance in his hour of need.

He rose from his seat and tentatively approached the door. His eye moved to the peephole. There was no one out there. Probably just some kids playing tricks. Tonight was Halloween, after all.

He turned the lock and unhooked the chain, then stepped out into the dark night.

The security light came on, and the area lit up. Funny, he thought. Whoever knocked somehow did so without activating the sensor. He looked left and right, but he could see no one around. Maybe he had imagined it. Maybe his mind was going in his old age. Or maybe it was nothing more than wishful thinking.

A light breeze blew, and a sharp chill brushed against his skin. Today had been a day of unseasonable warmth, but the night air had turned unexpectedly frigid. A shiver rippled through his body.

Then he saw the parcel.

It was right in front of him, inches from his feet. By now he had been outside a couple of minutes, but had only just noticed it. It was almost as if it had materialized out of thin air. A more logical explanation was that it had been there all along, but he had failed to notice until then. He recently had the prescription for his glasses updated, but his eyesight was still poor once the sun went down.

The parcel was about the size of a shoebox. It had no note, or anything else to identify the sender. It was wrapped haphazardly in pages from a softcore pornography magazine.

Chapter 2

Krystal Blayze dropped into one of the plush velvet sofas inside the VIP section at the Aubaine Manor nightclub. She tugged at the hem of her Halloween costume – a skimpy nurse’s outfit that a ten year old girl might struggle to squeeze into – then checked the time on her Sony Xperia 25 Premium phone. It was just past midnight, which meant she still had another hour to kill before her contractual obligations were fulfilled.

She was exhausted from another arduous day of work. She’d had to grimace her way through her fifth meet and greet in the past three days to promote her new book *#YOLO, Bitch!*. When that was over she reviewed the script and rehearsed her lines for an upcoming episode of *Blayze of Glory*, her “reality” television show that was about to start filming its third season. Next was a magazine photo shoot and two hours of phone interviews, then on to her appearance at Aubaine Manor. She had been pulling sixteen hour days for the past three months, with no letup in her schedule anytime soon. And there were still ignorant haters out there who had the nerve to dismiss her as “famous for being famous”.

More than anything, it was these nightclub appearances that drained her. So many people assumed it was easy money, but they had no idea what the job really entailed, nor did they understand just what she had to endure night after night. Tonight she had been trolled by a group of basic bitches looking to score their own fifteen minutes of fame, as well as being hit on by about a thousand guys who thought that telling her they’d seen her hacked photos constituted a pickup line. No matter how much she got paid, she was totally made to earn every cent.

The financial rewards weren’t even that great anymore. She had missed the golden age of the celebutante by just a year or two, a fact she lamented every time she turned up to one of these things. She still took home around \$70,000 for a single appearance, which could be bumped up to \$100,000 if she DJ’d as well (DJing was a process that involved connecting her phone to the console, loading a Spotify playlist, then waving her arms in the air for an hour). But it was a far cry from the quarter of a million some venues were paying not so long ago. Appearance fees had plummeted in recent years as the number of fame-wenches approached saturation point. Now there were miscellaneous “personalities” with the tiniest amount of celebrity status, all these YouTube vloggers and viral news subjects, turning up to clubs for ten grand or less. They were dragging the price down for legit stars like herself.

Her manager Nigel sauntered across and sat down next to her. “Great set, babe,” he said. “You really had the crowd moving.”

“Whatevs,” Krystal said. “This place is dead tonight, anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re totally right.” Nigel was reading a message that had just appeared on his phone and wasn’t paying attention to a word Krystal had said. “By the way, I spoke with the owner of this place. I let him have it over those posters. He apologized and said it wouldn’t happen again.”

“What posters?”

“You know, the posters they had up promoting your appearance here tonight. The ones that

promised 'A special DJ performance by Krystal Blayze', with inverted commas around the word 'DJ'. I told him that was completely disrespectful."

Krystal nodded along, even though she wasn't entirely sure what the inverted commas implied.

"Also, the projections have just come through from the publisher," he said, reading the message on his phone. "#YOLO, *Bitch!* is on track to shift a hundred k in the first week."

"Oh," she said. "That's ... great?"

Nigel made a face. "You're not happy with one hundred thousand?"

"It's just that I have, like, twenty million followers. I thought it'd be a bit more than that."

"Trust me honey, one hundred thousand is *a lot* for a book. Nobody reads actual books anymore. And it's almost double what *Slut Puppy* did in its first week of release."

Slut Puppy was Krystal's previous book about dating and relationship advice. It sold over one million copies worldwide.

"In that case, I guess I'm allowed to chillax a little," she said.

A server passed by holding a tray of multicolored shots. Krystal reached for one, and Nigel gave her hand a gentle smack.

"Uh, I don't think so sweetheart."

"What, you're telling me what I can and can't drink now?"

"No, I'm *reminding* you that we have a meeting with the head of Parlux in eleven hours' time to discuss bottle designs for your new fragrance. It'd be nice if you turned up to a meeting sober for once."

Krystal let out an adolescent whine. "Do I really have to go to that?"

"If you want your name emblazoned across a bottle of perfume then yes, you really do have to go to that."

"But I'm not even sure I want my own fragrance."

"What part of having your own fragrance do you object to? Is it the part where you take a three dollar bottle of scented liquid and sell it for \$110?"

"No, Nigel—"

"Trust me princess, this is one meeting you *don't* want to blow off. Having your own fragrance is like owning a money-printing factory. If you're not willing to take advantage of this opportunity there are plenty of other scene queens who are."

Nigel's phone chimed with an incoming call. He leaped up off the couch. "And put something new on Instagram," he ordered. "It's been seven hours since your last post. Leave it any longer and the press will start drafting your obituary."

Nigel left to take the call in a quieter corner of the club. He plucked a shot glass filled with

bright blue liquid from the bar along the way and poured it down his throat.

Krystal sulked for a few minutes – she hated it when Nigel ordered her around like she couldn't make any decisions on her own – before eventually conceding he might be right. She needed some new content for her Instagram account.

She took out her phone and scanned the room for career advancement opportunities; namely, famous or semi-famous guys. A celebrity selfie was the surest way of enhancing your brand and keeping your name at the forefront of the public's mind. She knew that better than anybody. A year and a half ago, a twenty second encounter with Justin Bieber saw her profile skyrocket. Rumors quickly spread that the two were romantically involved – rumors she did nothing to dispel – and Krystal's rise from anonymous to ubiquitous kicked into warp speed. The picture received two hundred thousand likes, and she gained half a million new followers in a single week. Her entire career – the TV show, the modeling gigs, the books, the fitness DVDs, the endorsements – could all be traced back to that one cluster of pixels. But she wouldn't be able to rely on it forever. She had to stay relevant or risk the ignominy of fading back to obscurity.

Even though, as a feminist, she knew it was wrong that a woman could become famous purely due to her association with a successful man, she didn't let it bother her too much. As far as she was concerned, feminism meant that a woman should be able to do whatever she wants and not be criticized for it. Anyway, nothing said Girl Power more than exploiting a man for your own personal gain.

Sadly, the VIP section of Aubaine Manor was severely lacking in A-list guys tonight. What it did have was an oversupply of second-tier professional athletes, third-tier reality-famous douches, and no-name sub-Juggalo frat-rappers. In other words, nobody Krystal could benefit from having her name associated with. In fact, being seen with any of these dickwits could only damage her brand. The name Krystal Blayze was synonymous with exclusivity, and she'd prefer to keep it that way.

If there were no other celebs of her stature to leech off she would have to rely on her tried and true selfie fallback. She extended her arm, gazed into the phone's camera, and snapped off a quick dozen shots.

Scrolling through the results, she was horrified by what came up. The pics were ghastly; she looked about thirty. The lighting in the club accentuated the bags under her eyes, her hair looked like it was a strong breeze away from falling out, and almost every shot gave her a double chin. She looked hotter in her mug shot than she did here. She tried fixing a couple of the better ones with filters, but this did little to make her any less of a hot mess.

She would need to bring her A-game if she was to post anything Insta-worthy tonight. So after a quick fix of her hair, makeup and cleavage she sucked in her cheeks, pushed out her lips, did that squint thing with her eyes that made her appear more alluring, and flashed a peace sign with her left hand.

She had taken a handful of shots when a dark figure appeared in her peripheral vision.

After taking a moment to examine the mystery package left on his doorstep, poking and prodding it in an amateurish attempt to determine if it was potentially dangerous, Fr. Gerdtz lifted it up off the ground and carried it inside his house. It was slightly heavier than he

expected. He placed it on his dining room table, then carefully removed the crumpled magazine pages used as wrapping paper. Inside, he found a plain brown box with an envelope attached. The envelope contained two things – a VIP pass to a West Hollywood nightclub, and a handwritten note.

The note read: *I trust you'll know what to do with this.*

He used a letter opener to slice through the tape sealing the box shut. He pulled the flaps open, just as the sky exploded with a sharp clap of thunder.

Inside was a .500 S&W Magnum revolver and a box of ammunition.

Fr. Gerdtz instinctively backed away. His hand went to his mouth in shock, and he collapsed into a kitchen chair.

He didn't move for a full five minutes.

A range of possibilities raced through his head. A deadly weapon had just landed unannounced on his front door. Who on earth would do such a thing? Was this meant to be some sort of warning? A threat? A prank? If it was a prank, it was quite an expensive one. Even though he knew next to nothing about firearms, he did know that guns like this one, the type Harry Callahan used in all those *Dirty Harry* movies, didn't come cheap.

He debated what he should do next over a strong cup of tea. This was such a bizarre event, coming so out of the blue, that he really had no idea of the correct course of action. He assumed he was supposed to report this to the police. He could see no other sensible option.

But then the note caught his eye. *I trust you'll know what to do with this.* The words rattled around inside his head as he attempted to decipher their true meaning.

He couldn't explain why, but something compelled him to reach inside the box and pick up the gun.

An otherworldly sensation ricocheted through his body as soon as his palm made contact with the rosewood grip. His entire being vibrated with a kind of euphoric energy. It was a phenomenon unlike anything he had ever felt before, and the closest he'd come to a purely religious experience in a long, long time.

A moment passed, and the pieces of this cryptic puzzle gradually shifted into place. There could be only one reason why this gun appeared on his doorstep at this exact time. He knew where it had come from, and he knew what he was meant to do with it.

Several hours later, he made his way to a nightclub on La Cienega Boulevard called Aubaine Manor. The name proved to be a slight misnomer; "Aubaine Manor" brought to mind a sophisticated establishment frequented by classy patrons, not an overcrowded and overpriced den of sin and sleaze that inflicted actual physical pain on him as he entered. He found himself surrounded by people one third his age, many outfitted in Halloween costumes more befitting the red light district than neighborhood trick or treating. Worst of all was the excruciating noise assaulting his eardrums. When he first came into the club he assumed a fire had broken out and they were sounding some sort of evacuation alarm. It soon became apparent that this was the actual music these people were voluntarily exposing themselves to. Fr. Gerdtz tried to maintain an open mind about what young people enjoyed these days, but this was one thing

he'd never quite understand. The music, if you could call it that, was more like something riot police would blast in order to disperse large crowds rather than anything an entertainment venue might play to attract one.

As he wandered through the club he noticed just how much things had changed since he was a young man. The dances he had attended were a great deal more wholesome than the debauchery he was witness to here. In his day, a gentleman would signal his intentions by respectfully approaching a young lady and asking her to dance. Now it seemed acceptable for a man to show his interest in a woman by stumbling towards the dancing area and grinding his crotch against the unsuspecting target of his inebriated lust. The fact that this all occurred on the holiest day of the week only compounded his revulsion.

The VIP section was situated at the rear of the venue. He attracted a number of puzzled looks from the burly security staff, one of whom called him "bro" and complimented him on his "freaky dope-ass costume", before his pass granted him access beyond the hallowed velvet rope.

A different type of music played in here; one with angry urban males using deplorable language whilst shouting at one another over an abrasive instrumental track. After just a few seconds of this, Fr. Gerdtz was thankful that his failing hearing dulled the full impact of this odious racket.

His eyes scoured the room. The décor was kind of retro-futuristic. The bar was made from transparent fiberglass, and the lighting came from thin neon green fluorescent tubes running along the sides of the walls and tables. A black and white art house movie was projected onto one wall, although the VIPs – none of whom appeared to be of particular importance – paid scant attention to it. They were more interested in gulping down their brightly-colored alcoholic beverages and shouting into each other's ears.

He spotted his target in the far corner, holding her phone out in front of her. She was dressed like an extra from a *Carry On* film and contorting her face into something that resembled a large fish gulping for air. This was Krystal Blayze; the woman symbolic of an entire generation with an excess of confidence but absolutely no justification for it.

He made his move, striding purposefully towards her. He expected her to look up, but her focus remained solely on her phone. He reached beneath his cassock and removed the Magnum. He wasn't one hundred percent certain what was happening here. He couldn't tell if he was doing this all on his own volition, or if he was being compelled by an unseen force. Possibly a combination of the two.

With little hesitation, he aimed the gun and pulled the trigger.

He was completely unprepared for the recoil produced by such a powerful weapon. He lost control the instant it discharged. The force propelled him backwards and his hand flew up, the gun striking him across the face. Clint Eastwood made it look so much easier.

When he regained his balance, he saw that Krystal Blayze was now missing the top half of her head.

Time slowed to a crawl. Fr. Gerdtz stood frozen to the floor, unable to move, staring at the Rorschach-shaped bloodblot trickling down the wall behind Krystal's inert body.

He waited for the chaos to begin. He anticipated screaming from the other patrons. He expected security to come in with their weapons drawn. He was prepared to be gunned down in a hail of bullets.

But it never came. Nothing happened. He turned slowly to see the party continuing as if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred. Everyone appeared to be so caught up in their own business they failed to notice the violent murder that had just taken place right in front of them.

He carefully stashed the weapon away, then put his head down and made his way towards the exit.

He would be out on the street and climbing into a taxi before anyone noticed that Krystal Blayze's head now resembled a novelty punch bowl.

Chapter 3

Thirteen hours had passed since the shooting, and Fr. Gerdtz was yet to experience a wink of sleep. He sat alone in the church's sanctum, the sequence of the previous night's events playing on a continuous loop inside his head. He struggled to come to terms with what he had done. This wasn't anything like him. Never in his life had he been a violent person. He didn't handle firearms, let alone use them to murder another human being. He couldn't even work up the nerve to jaywalk or put his trash in someone else's bin. None of this felt real. It was like being trapped inside an extremely disturbing dream.

He removed his glasses and used a Kleenex to wipe the lenses. A slight redness appeared in the tissue, the result of a fine blood mist that sprayed across him after firing the gun. This extinguished any sliver of doubt as to whether last night had happened or not.

He was startled by a soft knocking. He spun around to see Ruth, the church's octogenarian organist, standing in the doorway.

"Father?" she said.

"What is it, Ruth?"

"Something's happened. Something ... it's ... you have to ..." She grasped for the right words. "It's probably best if you come see for yourself," she eventually said.

Despite having no great desire to see anyone today if he could help it, Fr. Gerdtz slowly rose to his feet and followed Ruth out. He didn't know what was going on, but something had clearly affected her.

He was led to the church's entrance, where he was brought to a complete standstill. It was the last thing he expected to see today.

People were in his church. A lot of people. At least forty, maybe more. This would be a remarkable number for any day of the week, but for a Monday it was unheard of. Even more astonishing was the ages of those in attendance. The majority were under thirty, and many looked to be in their teens. The only gray hair belonged to Jefferson Slade, but even he had made something of an effort. He wore matching shoes, his hair was combed down, and his clothes appeared to have been laundered some time in the past year. He was still heavily intoxicated and on the verge of nodding off at any moment, but a sober Jefferson would have been a true miracle.

"What's going on?" he whispered to Ruth. "What are all these people doing here?"

"I think it's because of that young girl, the one who died last night," Ruth said. "Did you hear about that?"

Fr. Gerdtz answered with a nervous shake of his head.

"Oh, it was awful. Some total stranger walked up to her in a nightclub and shot her. Just like that! For no reason at all! It was a completely random attack. It makes you wonder what the world is coming to."

“How dreadful,” Fr. Gerdtz said quietly.

“I know. Just as she was starting to pull her life together, too. She had checked out of rehab last month, then she dumped her fiancé after she found out he had cheated on her with her best friend. Such a tragic loss.”

“So all these young people ... they came here to mourn her?”

Ruth exhaled quietly. “I suppose in times of trouble the youth of today need somebody they can turn to.”

Fr. Gerdtz nodded in agreement. Despite having a smorgasbord of digital stimulation at their fingertips, the relationship was still very much a one-way affair. TMZ and *E! News* wouldn't be there for them in their hour of need.

He found it astonishing that this was what it took to get people back in touch with their spiritual side. Earlier in the year, when a flesh-eating virus claimed the lives of tens of thousands of the world's poorest people in Southeast Asia, it barely caused a blip on the average person's radar. But one quasi-celebrity eats a bullet and the world responds as if the Rapture was imminent. Perhaps it was time for some much-needed perspective. Perhaps celebrity deaths should become so commonplace that they no longer seemed remarkable.

He smoothed down his cassock with the palms of his hands, then took a deep breath and made his way inside.

The rest of his day was spent comforting those in mourning. He answered their questions, as best he could, about why a loving God would allow such a terrible thing to happen to such a beautiful person. Much to his surprise, they hung on his every word. They listened to what he had to say, gave deep consideration to the role God played in their everyday lives, and questioned what was truly important to them. For many, this was the first time they had experienced grief or loss in any form. At no point did anyone reach for their phones.

It was almost dark by the time he arrived home. He took a serving of shepherd's pie from his refrigerator and placed it in the oven, then sat down at his computer as he waited for it to heat.

He logged on to Twitter and discovered that he now had fifty-five followers.

The murder of Krystal Blayze remained unsolved. An investigation was launched as to how her killer was able to smuggle a loaded firearm into the club, and how he managed to leave without apprehension. It was concluded that poor lighting and malfunctioning equipment allowed the gunman to avoid identification on the club's CCTV cameras, while most patrons and staff present that night mistook the gunshot for part of the hip hop track being played at the time.

Police had few leads to work with, but suspect the shooting may have been drug-related. This theory was supported by the amount of cocaine found in Krystal's possession, while a toxicology report confirmed the drug present in her system at the time of death. For the most part, the media chose to ignore these facts and portray this as the result of an obsessed Justin Bieber fan (Krystal had received numerous death threats from enraged tweens after photographs of her and Bieber catapulted her to stardom). They also failed to pick up on the fact that while Krystal had previously spoken out about fashion labels exploiting workers in

Asian sweatshops, and she supported the banning of cosmetics testing on animals, she appeared to have no qualms in contributing to the narcotics trade – an industry that murdered thousands of impoverished third-world citizens every year.

At a memorial service held in her honor, Krystal was remembered as a fun-loving free spirit who was deeply passionate about her humanitarian work. This was evident in the hundreds of socially-conscious hashtags she retweeted each year, drawing attention to causes ranging from domestic violence to inner-city poverty to the double-standards women faced when walking red carpets at award shows. She was a committed anti-bullying advocate, frequently drawing attention to the online body-shaming models suffered on a daily basis.

Despite their immense grief, Krystal's family consoled themselves with the knowledge that she died doing what she loved most – photographing herself and being paid to party. In fact, her final ever selfie happened to capture the exact moment the bullet struck her face. The family decided to upload this image to Instagram. They believed this was what Krystal would have wanted.

The image attracted a record 8.4 million likes.

Sleep eluded Fr. Gerdtz for the next three nights. The initial excitement of the nightclub shooting and the subsequent increase in both church attendance and Twitter followers quickly wore off, and he struggled to reconcile his actions with his long-held beliefs. No matter how much warm milk and chamomile he consumed before bedtime, it failed to put his mind to rest and allow him to forget that he had broken a commandment. One of the big ones, too. One that no amount of Hail Marys and Our Fathers could ever absolve. Irrespective of how many times he tried to justify what he had done, he simply couldn't look past the fact that he had taken an innocent life. Even if he was able to get away with it – and so far, there had been no indication that the police even considered him a suspect – he couldn't run from his own conscience. He would have to answer for his crime sooner or later. If not to the law, then to God.

He switched on his bedside lamp and fumbled around for his glasses. After staring at the foot of his bed for an indeterminate period of time, contemplating his options and trying to ascertain if there was any other course of action, he eventually decided he had to do the right thing. He reached across for the phone.

He was midway through dialing when the rumbling began. It came from above, like a low-flying jumbo jet passing overhead. The noise grew louder and louder, the vibrations more intense. The entire house shook by its foundations. The phone's handset fell from his grip and tumbled to the floor.

A large crack formed directly above him. The ceiling separated, and a flood of golden light filled the room. He looked up into the sky and saw a most remarkable sight. An infinite tunnel of clouds, stretching all the way to the heavens above.

An incredible vision then appeared before him. It was a vibrant mass of light and color unlike anything he or any other mortal being had ever witnessed. It was something so phenomenal, so indescribable, he knew he could only be looking at the face of God.

"Oh, my," Fr. Gerdtz said. His hand clutched at his chest. His heart was pounding like a jackhammer. "My Lord, please forgive me for my sins. I know there is no possible—"

“My son, you do not need my forgiveness for you have done nothing wrong.”

The voice of God seemed to envelop him, like a fog of words coming at him from every direction at once.

“But I took the life of an innocent person.”

“Believe me, that was no innocent person you expunged from this world. She was nothing but a vain leech whose only function was to facilitate the spread of narcissistic personality disorder. You did the right thing. You did precisely what I asked of you.”

Fr. Gerdtz took a sharp intake of breath. “That was you sending me a message the other night?”

“Of course. You asked for my help, and I responded. I could see that you were pure of heart, and that you had the integrity and the faith to do what needed to be done.”

“But ... I don't understand. Why did you need me to do this?”

“I needed you because it saddens me to see humanity lose its way. Celebrity has become the new religion of the modern world, and it is beginning to upset the balance. The traits that deserve to be admired, such as kindness, modesty and virtue, they are no longer valued. Instead, the world revolves around these vapid and vacant celebrities. It wouldn't concern me so much if it was the brilliant minds being worshiped; the poets, the philosophers, the great leaders and intellectuals. But instead it's these actors, pop stars, models and athletes. And that's without mentioning those reality television and social media stars who have attained fame, or infamy, for reasons even I cannot fathom. What are their real accomplishments? What have they done to improve the lives of the less fortunate? They have done nothing to deserve such adulation. They are simply empty-headed puppets, performing for the amusement of the ignorant masses. Shallowness is held up as something to aspire to, while true heroism and selflessness goes unrewarded.”

Fr. Gerdtz struggled to comprehend all he was being told. “But hasn't idolatry always been a part of our lives?” he said.

“Yes, in small doses. People have admired movie stars and professional athletes in the past. I tolerated this. I regarded it as an acceptable distraction from the banalities of everyday life. Everyone still made time for their family and their community. But it is now way out of control. The scales have tipped too far. What's more, the mantle of celebrity is available to all, and if changes are not made the situation will only get worse. A tipping point is rapidly approaching. Something must be done before it's too late. And that is why you have been chosen.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“The world is suffering through a terrible plague. It is the plague of celebrity. Hollywood is the host, and *you* are the cure.”

“I ... I'm not sure I understand.”

“I'm asking that you remove anyone who is famous from this earth. At least, until the rest of the world gets the message.”

“Oh, my. That sounds rather drastic.”

“Believe me, it is for their own good. It may come as a surprise to you, but I am not completely infallible. From time to time I do get it wrong. The world is an ever-evolving work in progress. What’s important is that I recognize my mistakes and make efforts to rectify them, like I did with Sodom and Gomorrah and the great deluge. The time has now come for another correction.”

“But what can I do? I’m just one man.”

“Noah was just one man. Moses was just one man. It only takes one man to change the world.”

Fr. Gerdtz’s head was swirling as he took this all in. “But I don’t know any celebrities. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“You only need to look deep within yourself. I will be there to guide you every step of the way.”

He didn’t recall a great deal from that point on. The rest of the night was a vague blur as he drifted in and out of sleep, his dreams intertwining with reality. He awoke the next morning to discover his sheets were damp from night sweats, and he had overslept by several hours. He hurried out of bed and quickly got ready.

Before heading off to church for the day, he inspected the ceiling in his bedroom. There were several fine cracks that he hadn’t noticed before.

Chapter 4

A stabbing pain shot through Fr. Gerdtz's right forearm as he sat at his desk preparing next week's sermon. The pen fell from his hand and he scrambled for his arthritis pills, swallowing two with a mouthful of water. He opened and closed his palm a few times and gently rotated his wrist in a circular motion, hoping to alleviate the raw discomfort. He winced as he did this; the aching was still there, and that was his third dosage for the day. He hoped his arthritis wasn't getting any worse. Maybe he was developing a tolerance for the medication, if that was possible, since it didn't seem to be as effective as it once was.

He did his best to ignore the pain and push through with the sermon. He had hoped to come up with something that summarized his many thoughts and feelings, especially in relation to his recent spiritual awakening. But there were simply no words that could possibly encapsulate the whole experience. He had been at his desk for hours now, and all he had to show for it was a page filled with crossed-out words and false starts, and an overflowing wastepaper basket. He had planned on opening with Luke 18:27, one of his favorite biblical passages – *That which is impossible with man is possible with God* – but he was yet to progress any further beyond that.

His concentration was interrupted by an urgent rap at the door. Before he could speak, a thirty-ish redheaded woman dressed head-to-toe in designer clothes invited herself in.

"Hello Father," she said.

He looked up from his desk. He had never seen this woman before in his life. "Yes?"

She settled into a seat opposite and offered her hand. He noticed her face was shiny with perspiration, and she appeared slightly out of breath. She smelled of expensive perfume and stale cigarettes.

"My name is Madeleine Davis," she said. "The location scout. We spoke on the phone earlier."

"We did?" Fr. Gerdtz scanned his memory. He had made several phone calls earlier that morning, but this woman's name wasn't ringing any bells.

"I appreciate you seeing me at such short notice." Her voice was pitched at a volume several decibels higher than a regular speaking voice. Fr. Gerdtz wasn't sure if that was how she normally spoke, or if she thought he was half-deaf. It was most likely the latter. "This is an incredibly urgent matter. As I explained to you over the phone, we require a church to shoot several scenes for an upcoming Judd Apatow film. We've been having trouble obtaining permission from the other churches nearby. It won't take up any more than two or three days of your time, and we are offering very generous compensation in return."

It took a moment for Fr. Gerdtz to catch on to what was happening here. This woman apparently failed to hear the question mark at the end of his previous sentence. When he said "We did?" she assumed he was simply confirming that they had earlier conversed on the phone.

It wasn't until later that it all finally clicked into place. Madeleine must have been speaking with Fr. Jenkins from the United Church on James Street, whereas she was now at the St. James

Church on United Way. It wasn't the first time such a mix-up had occurred. The two churches were constantly receiving each others' mail, and barely a week went by without at least one guest turning up to the wrong wedding or funeral.

"I have the shooting script here," she said, digging around inside her bag. "You mentioned that you wanted to review it before making your decision."

She produced a document and handed it to Fr. Gerdtz. He studied the title page.

"*Where's the Love?*" he said, reading the film's title.

"Yeah, like the Black Eyed Peas song." Madeleine lit up a cigarette, oblivious to the no smoking sign directly in front of her. "Although we may have to change that due to the trouble we're having obtaining the rights." She inhaled a lungful of the noxious fumes, then carelessly blew out a cloud of smoke in Fr. Gerdtz's direction. "You know your film's in trouble when even the Black Eyed Peas refuse to license one of their songs," she muttered to herself.

Fr. Gerdtz opened the script at random pages and ran his eyes across the text. It didn't take long to get the gist of the plot. It centered on a lifelong bachelor, a lothario who wasn't ready to settle down and behave like an adult yet, and how his whole world is turned upside down when he falls for a bridesmaid while best man at a wedding. Throughout the course of the film he is forced to confront his own issues regarding commitment and monogamy, as well as being hassled by an overbearing mother and stalked by a crazy ex-girlfriend.

It was easy to see why every other church in the area had refused to allow this to be filmed on their premises. Blasphemy and vulgarity filled almost every page. In one scene, the lead character has a deviant sex act performed on him by a female wedding guest inside the confessional while a clearly aroused priest listens in. Three pages later, a drunken old man stumbles naked through the church and relieves himself in the holy water. And the less said about where the bride and groom's wedding rings end up after a raucous bachelor party, the better.

Fr. Gerdtz did his best to hide his distaste. He liked to think of himself as a fairly open-minded person; he enjoyed the odd risqué joke or dirty limerick as much as anyone. But this was a piece of writing so utterly loathsome and completely devoid of wit. If this was what masqueraded as popular entertainment in this day and age, the modern world was in a lot more trouble than he initially feared.

"I'll be completely honest and upfront with you," Madeleine said. "You're kind of my last hope. Every other church I've approached has rejected us outright due to the film's content. I respect that, and I imagine much of what is depicted here may not be in accordance with your teachings and values. But as I said, we are prepared to make a very generous offer in exchange for just a few days of your time. That's money that could do a lot of good for the many wonderful programs you run here."

She lit a second cigarette with the lipstick-stained butt of her first. Fr. Gerdtz wondered how a heavy smoker could maintain such gleaming white teeth.

"I'm curious," he said, trying not to choke on the growing fog of menthol and tar filling the air around him. "Will any celebrities be appearing in this film?"

“Oh yes, we have several big stars attached to this project. The two leads will be played by James Franco and Bella Thorne. Seth Rogen has been cast as the groom.”

He flicked back a few pages. In the short time he'd had to evaluate the script, the character of the groom appeared to do little else but smoke marijuana and make repeated references to his own genitals and bodily fluids.

“Courtney Cox and Billy Bob Thornton are also playing the groom's parents,” Madeleine said.

A brief smile appeared on Fr. Gerdtz's face. This woman, turning up out of the blue due to a misunderstanding, promising to deliver a number of celebrities right to his door? This was no coincidence. It could only be a sign.

“I'm sure we could come to some arrangement,” he said.

“I have a meager seven million followers, Bevan!” James Franco said into his phone, his voice rising so he could be heard over the groan of the Jacuzzi pump. “Seven million! That's nowhere near enough for an artist of my caliber!”

“Seven million is huge, James,” his agent assured him. “Do you know how many people that is? I mean, have you really thought about it? Your fans could fill the LA Coliseum seventy times over! That's the population of Paris! You basically have an entire European capital following you.”

“You know what else I have? I have five million followers less than twelve million, which is how many Chris Evans happens to have. And who do you think was cast as the lead in the new David O. Russell film? Was it me, or was it Captain Underpants?”

“Oh, James. You don't honestly think Instagram numbers had anything to do with being passed over for the role, do you?”

“No, I think it was his superior acting skills that landed him the part.”

“Well ... he does have a vaguely likeable screen presence.”

“That was sarcasm, Bevan. The guy couldn't act his way out of a paper bag. Have you seen any of those dumb Marvel movies he's in? That's some of the worst acting I've ever seen, and I watch a *lot* of porn.”

A heavy thumping against the door rattled the trailer. “They're ready for you now, Mr. Franco,” a voice called out.

“I'll be there in a minute!” James snapped.

“I really think you're overreacting,” Bevan said. “David's a clever guy. He wouldn't cast anyone unless he really, truly believed they were right for the role.”

“That may have been the case ten years ago, but times have changed. Social media presence is *all* anyone cares about these days. The fact that I'm an Oscar nominee, a published author, a philanthropist and a licensed pilot – that all means nothing. The only thing that matters is how many people want to gaze at photos of me when I'm working out and eating my breakfast.”

He reached for the Jacuzzi's control panel and switched off the bubbles.

"Even if that was true, I'm not sure there's anything we can do about it," Bevan said.

"Of course you can do something about it! You can start by buying me another ten million followers!"

The line went quiet. "You want me to *purchase* followers for you?"

"Don't act so shocked, Bevan. Everyone does it. *Literally* everyone. You don't really believe sixty million people want to see Katy Perry goofing around backstage or having her hair and makeup done, do you? They're mostly fake accounts. It's Hollywood's dirty little secret, like hair transplants and casting couches. The thing everyone does but no one will ever admit to."

"I, uh, I'll see what I can do," Bevan said, just before the call ended.

James tossed his phone aside. He leaned back in the warm water and looked up at his reflection in the ceiling mirror. Not for the first time, he toyed with the idea of parting ways with Bevan. He may have been his agent for the past fifteen years, but times were changing and Bevan wasn't keeping up. James was growing tired of having to constantly spell out how he should be doing his job.

He held his breath, then slid beneath the water until he was fully submerged.

Today had been an endless cortège of disasters. It all started when he arrived on set to discover the "gym" he had requested for his trailer was nothing more than an exercise bike and some free weights. The Jacuzzi was coated in grime, and when switched on was louder than a lawnmower. The refrigerator was stocked with Diet Coke when he specifically asked for Coke Zero.

But that was nothing compared with the fiasco of having to cancel his weekend in Vegas at the last minute in order to fulfill his promotional duties at Comic-Con for *Hemisphere*, his upcoming sci-fi film. He honestly could not think of a more depressing way of spending his precious downtime. He hated Comic-Con. *Hated* it. Every actor did. To them, Comic-Con was purgatory. They would rather have their faces chewed off by rabid AIDS-monkeys than pander to a screaming crowd of excitable film nerds, the very people they had spent a lifetime making fun of. It reminded him of when he was a kid and his parents would force him to attend the birthday party of the most unpopular kid in school. He had to smile and act nice and make it look like he was having a good time, pretending that he hadn't mocked the fat loser behind his back every other day of the year.

He reluctantly hauled himself out of the Jacuzzi and reached for a towel.

The icing on today's cake came when he learned he had been overlooked for a highly-coveted role in the new David O. Russell film, the one he was certain would deliver his long-overdue Oscar, in favor of a bland waxwork model who was yet to enjoy a hit movie that didn't involve pulling on a ridiculous spandex outfit and surrounding himself with a more talented and popular cast. Despite being a veritable black hole of charisma, Hollywood still appeared to be doing everything in its power to make Chris Evans happen.

He was midway through drying himself off when he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the trailer's 8x3 ft. wall mirror and decided this was a moment that deserved to be shared with the

world. He snapped a quick twenty or thirty shots, his wet hair slicked back and the towel hanging loose around his waist, then uploaded the best one to Instagram.

His Dolce & Gabbana embellished ripped jeans were barely on when the comments started rolling in. Even though they were pretty much the same as every other photograph he had ever posted – “OMG James u r so hott!!”, “I luv your new mustache!”, the weirdos who called him “daddy”, the usual discussion surrounding his nipples – it still delivered the validation and sense of self-worth every performer desires. James smiled. This was the perfect relationship to have with his fans. He gave them exactly what they wanted, but at a comfortable distance. He didn’t have to meet any of them face to face and put up with their inane questions or halitosis or unsolicited critical analysis of his work. Of course, if he *did* want to meet any of his fans face to face, that could easily be arranged too.

There was a further pounding at his trailer door. He threw on a tight white v-neck tee, then flung the door open.

“I said I was coming–”

Expecting an acne-faced PA minion, he instead found himself looking at a wrinkled old man. He wore wire framed glasses and dressed entirely in black, with wavy white hair that was unusually full for a man of his age. James thought if he grew it out a little it would look like one of those wigs that judges wore in court.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“Are you James Franco?” the stranger said. He had the accent of an eighties action villain.

James let out a long sigh. “Have you read your contract?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Page three, about two thirds of the way down,” he recited in a bored voice. “Background artists are forbidden from approaching the talent and face instant dismissal if they in any way attempt to communicate with an actor.” He offered a shrug in lieu of an actual apology. “I don’t make the rules, man. I’m sure your daughter, or granddaughter, is a huge fan. But if I sign stuff for you I have to sign for everybody.”

This wasn’t the first time James had been forced to reprimand an extra for forgetting their place in the film set caste system. The situation had been getting progressively worse for some time. He believed this was due to many contracts removing the “no eye contact” rule that was once standard. They took it out because it made actors look like prima donnas, but the rule existed for a reason – to keep the extras in line. As soon as it was omitted they began to see themselves as equals. They were given an inch and they took a mile.

James made a mental note to have the rule reinstated for any future films he was a part of.

“I’m a nice guy, so I’ll let it slide this one time,” he continued. “But if you speak to me again, or to any of the other real actors, I’ll have no choice but to have you fired.”

The old man’s forehead creased. “Who do you think I am?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” James gestured to the man’s cassock and detachable white collar. “You’re the dude playing the dirty old priest. Aren’t you?”

The old man shook his head. “No. I’m not.”

“Well, you certainly look the part,” James smirked. He pushed past the stranger and made his way towards the set.

“You know, you really are an *arschloch*,” the man said as James left.

“So shoot me,” came the dismissive reply.

James took out his phone as he walked. He fired off a quick tweet: *Can’t wait for #ComicCon this Sat 2 talk about my new film #Hemisphere. See u all at Hall H!*

Seconds after this was posted, a deafening blast rocked the film set.

Crew members rushed to the scene to find James Franco lying motionless on the gravel. He was face down, with blood gushing from the grapefruit-sized hole in his back.

The brutal slaying of five actors resulted in an unprecedented outpouring of grief, sending shock waves through Hollywood that were felt in every corner of the globe. Fans flooded social media to post their overwrought tributes and mourn the loss of their heroes. They struggled to comprehend how someone could simply walk onto a film set, murder James Franco, Bella Thorne, Seth Rogen, Courtney Cox and Billy Bob Thornton, and then leave without anyone noticing.

Television stations switched to round-the-clock coverage as reporters tried to articulate the mix of raw emotion surrounding such an inexplicable event. The devastating mudslide in Bangladesh, responsible for the loss of over two hundred lives, slipped from the public’s consciousness after being overshadowed by a much greater tragedy.

A period of intense anger and soul-searching followed as the world attempted to make sense of it all. Some blamed violent movies and video games, while others took aim at national gun laws. But until the police made an arrest and uncovered a motive, the public would be left with no real answers.

The one thing everyone could agree on, and the phrase that would be repeated over and over for days and weeks to come, was that today was Hollywood’s Darkest Day.

Watching from the comfort of his couch with a hot cup of Earl Grey and an oatmeal cookie, Fr. Gerdtz could barely conceal his delight. Hollywood’s darkest day? Not even close.

Not if they had any idea what he had planned.

Chapter 5

The St. James Cathedral was filled beyond capacity for its next Sunday service. From front to back, every space in every pew was occupied. Latecomers had to squeeze through the crowd to find a spot in the standing room only section. Many more would crowd around outside the door to listen in, unable to get any closer.

The tragedy on the set of *Where's the Love?* had shaken the world to its core, coming less than one week after the murder of reality television starlet and social media influencer Krystal Blayze. And then just two days ago, a popular musician known as Skrillex and celebrity clothes horse Cara Delevingne were both gunned down in separate incidents.

If one silver lining could be gleaned from the horrific events of the past week, it was that they had brought everyone together. Famous people dying was too much for many to handle, and the public needed a way of making sense of these slayings. For some, it was like losing a family member. For others, it brought their own mortality into focus. If their favorite actor or model could die so suddenly, they could too – especially since a large percentage of the population harbored the grandiose delusion that one day they too will become famous.

People longed to be comforted during this bleak moment in history. In such a godless and materialistic world, demand for spiritual nourishment far outpaced supply. Some who hadn't set foot inside a church in years rediscovered their long-lost faith. They had been reminded of what a precious gift life was, and how it could be snatched away at any given moment.

But while the past few days had been a sobering experience for many, it was a hurricane of activity for Fr. Gerdtz. Due to the massacre occurring on the grounds of his church, it fell upon him to assume the mantle of spokesperson when the media descended. He fronted up before the cameras the morning following the tragedy to offer his condolences to the families and fans of the deceased. When asked how or why an alarming event like this could occur, he could provide no real answers other than to wonder aloud as to whether it may have been a sign that the world was no longer listening to God. He suggested it was time for everyone to take a step back and consider what was truly important in their lives, and that maybe we should cease this illogical obsession with the rich and famous.

His words struck an immediate chord with both the community and the wider public. It was exactly what they needed to hear, perfectly articulating their thoughts and feelings at such a bewildering time. He soon found himself in high demand, agreeing to dozens of media appearances over the next three days, from local morning TV shows, to satellite link-ups with late-night news programs on the opposite side of the world.

His schedule was at times exhausting, but inside he was buzzing. This was the most invigorated he had felt in decades. Something extraordinary was happening here, and it was all his doing.

His many media appearances boosted his Twitter followers to 8,571. A Google search for "Fr. Arthur Gerdtz" returned over one hundred thousand results.

He now faced an unfamiliar sight as he assumed his position behind the pulpit. Hundreds of pairs of eyes were looking back at him. Never in his life had he performed Mass for so many

people. He expected to have at least some nerves, but he felt nothing but serenity. This was exactly where he deserved to be. These people were in need of a spiritual rebirth, and he would be the one to deliver it.

He took a sip of water and cleared his throat. The congregation leaned forward slightly, ready to absorb his every word.

“In times of great crisis, when terrible things happen to decent people for no good reason, it is natural to ask questions,” he began. “We ask ourselves what kind of God could allow this to happen. We wonder if God cares for us at all. It can be difficult to accept that God has a plan, but He does. It may be something we fail to understand it at first, but the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

Three nights later, police were called to a party at the Malibu mansion of Hollywood super-producer Martin Krauth after the bullet-ridden body of actor Ansel Elgort was discovered in the hot tub. Police cordoned off the scene and took statements from the guests in attendance, but as yet no arrests have been made.

Later that same night, rock musician David Lee Roth was found backstage at the Whisky a Go Go following a performance with his band. The cause of death was currently being investigated by the coroner.

Meanwhile on the opposite side of the city, a twenty-three year old pharmacy assistant by the name of Nicola Jeffries dialed a number and waited for an answer. It rang four times before she heard a click and a recorded message:

“Hello, you have reached the home of Fr. Arthur Gerdtz. I am unable to come to the phone right now, so please leave your name and contact details and I will return your call at my earliest convenience. Thank you and God bless.”

“Good evening Father,” Nicola said following the beep. “This is Nicola Jeffries from the Westwood Center Pharmacy. I’m afraid there’s been a slight mix-up with your recent prescription, where we believe we may have given you the wrong medication by mistake. Please call us back as soon as you get this message, or come in and see us and we can have this issue resolved right away. Thank you.”

Nicola was struck by a slight feeling of irritation once the call had ended. Even though she knew Fr. Gerdtz was in his seventies, it was still unusual for a customer to have only a landline phone. She found it hard to believe in this day and age there were still people who couldn’t be reached at any time of the day or night. Even her grandparents had cell phones.

Of more pressing concern was her slightly unprofessional slip-up – she had mixed up his arthritis pills with medication used to treat insomnia – but she didn’t think it would cause too many problems. At least, she hoped not. She assumed Fr. Gerdtz would have figured out by now the pills he had been given were not his usual ones. Even if he had taken them by mistake, the consequences would not be especially dire. He may experience some unpleasant side-effects such as headaches, nausea and dizziness. At worst, a bad reaction could result in Fr. Gerdtz becoming delusional; he may hear strange voices or experience unusual, vivid dreams and bizarre hallucinations. But thankfully he was not at risk of long-term damage, and any side-effects would cease as soon as he stopped taking the medication. It was an embarrassing mistake, but nothing that couldn’t be undone.

A few minutes after making the call, Nicola finished her shift and called her boyfriend to come pick her up.

Twenty-three minutes later, William Shatner was gunned down while filming an advertisement for frozen pizza.

The Staples Center was teeming with fans this Saturday night in the week leading up to Christmas. It was an audience that traversed many key demographics including giddy fanboys, urban youths, trend-chasing hipsters, career women, and more screaming teenage girls than a Glasgow maternity ward. Over twenty thousand viewed the performance, the majority through the four and a half inch LCD screens of their smartphones.

A single spotlight focused on the beloved pop star as she stood center stage, tearing through a maudlin ballad about holding on to hope in the midst of seemingly insurmountable pain and suffering. Outfit by Marc Jacobs. Shoes by Giuseppe Zanotti. Cost: more than what an average fan earned in one year. Total number of times the pop star will wear said outfit: one.

A touching montage paying tribute to all the stars who had tragically passed in recent weeks played on the massive screens behind her. The audience saw the smiling faces of the dearly departed Krystal Blayze, James Franco, Seth Rogen, Bella Thorne, Courtney Cox, Billy Bob Thornton, Sonny "Skrillex" Moore, Cara Delevingne, Ansel Elgort, David Lee Roth, William Shatner, Kelly Osbourne, Marvin "Meat Loaf" Aday, Tobey Maguire, Mark Harmon, Alice Eve and Larry the Cable Guy.

The music ended, the pop star stretching the final note out a further forty-five lung-busting seconds. The crowd rose as one to applaud this spine-tingling, emotionally uplifting performance. She paused respectfully to give the moment the appropriate levity.

The final image faded to black and was replaced by a single line of text. The screens now displayed eighteen giant characters that said more than complete sentences or well thought out debate ever could: "#FamousLivesMatter".

"That was my new song," the pop star announced. "It's called 'Crying Wit' Open Eyez', and I dedicate it to everyone we have lost these past few weeks. It will be available exclusively on Tidal from tomorrow."

Further manic cheering from the crowd.

"And now, I would like to invite some of my dearest friends onto the stage tonight for a very important message."

Out came the cavalcade of megastars, one by one. Leading the way was her husband, a successful rapper famous for his intricate and inventive lyrics that alternated between gritty street vignettes and shameless product placement for his multiple corporate masters. Next came the frontman for a multiplatinum middle-of-the-road British rock group, popular with both the very young and the very old. Several famous actors, all of whom were eager to push their social causes if they happened to coincide with their film promotion duties. Another well-known female pop star, successful but not so famous that she threatened to steal the limelight from the one true star of the show. And a fashion designer, allowed to tag along tonight as a reward for all the free clothes he had gifted the pop star over the years.

There were seventeen celebrities in total. They joined hands and stood side-by-side to form one united front.

“Celebrities, all of us in the public eye, we perform an important service to the world,” the pop star said. “We deliver hope to those who have none. We give you something to aspire towards when you have lost your way. We brighten your day, and we rescue you from a mundane existence. We selflessly let you into our lives, and we ask for nothing in return.”

The crowd lost their collective minds at this historic moment. With so many luminaries in the one place at the one time, there was the very real prospect of a riot breaking out at any moment.

“It has never been easy to do what we do,” she continued. “I know that may be difficult for ordinary folk like you to understand. But believe me, being famous just keeps getting harder and harder. The shocking deaths of so many of our fellow stars has affected us greatly. Famous lives matter. But we are strong. We are survivors. Together we stand as one to fight this evil. We will not give in to any violence or intimid—”

Her stirring speech was cut short when the designer’s chest exploded. His body was thrown forward, and he was dead before his head hit the stage.

A quarter-second of stunned silence passed before the place erupted into pandemonium.

The celebrities all made a desperate dash for safety, but they had a whore’s chance in heaven of escaping the unremitting gunfire. The British rock singer caught a bullet to the stomach. He fell to the floor, bleeding out in front of thousands of terrified fans. One of the actors dived into the crowd and attempted to use several audience members as human shields. The shot somehow sailed past the innocent bystanders and grazed the actor’s throat. A jet of blood spurted out from the ruptured artery.

The pop star ran as fast as it was possible to move in a glittery pair of six-inch heels. A blast rang out seconds before she was about to reach a point of safety behind a large speaker, and her kneecap was obliterated. She collapsed in agony.

Fr. Gerdtz emerged from the darkness. In his hands was his newest toy – a Remington M870 pump action shotgun. It had appeared on his doorstep several days earlier, and in the time since he had done little else but search for an opportunity to put it to use.

He stepped around the bodies sprawled out across the stage, finishing off the remaining few displaying any signs of life, and made his way over to the injured diva.

When Fr. Gerdtz first became aware of this much-adored pop star, the biggest name in popular music this century, he hoped he had finally discovered a celebrity deserving of such unadulterated fawning. For someone to be so universally respected and admired by everyone from housewives to presidents, she must have surely achieved some extraordinary feats. But the further he looked, the more despondent he became. This woman was far from a hero. She had not been forced to overcome any great hardship in her life to get to where she was now. She had been raised in a comfortable upper-middle class environment. She had been part of the entertainment industry since her teens, which meant she never suffered the gross indignity of having to work a real job. She liked to portray herself as an icon of female empowerment, but was in actuality a self-absorbed puppet who relied on dozens of men to do everything for

her, from writing, producing and performing her music to managing her business interests. She loudly and proudly supported progressive causes such as civil rights and gender equality, but only after making absolutely certain it wouldn't harm her record sales. The last thing she wanted was to offend the wrong people. She waited for braver, less-famous artists to test the waters first, then ran it by her management and focus groups before finally jumping on the bandwagon. She appeared far more interested in expanding her empire and raking in dollars than helping out anyone less fortunate than herself.

As far as Fr. Gerdtz could tell, her only contribution to the world was a string of mildly inoffensive pop songs containing the kind of vaguely inspirational or motivational messages one might find inside a greeting card. She was a triumph of PR over talent, a product as soulless as the cans of Pepsi she spruiked.

In summation, she was no different from every other pampered starlet with a runaway ego and deluded sense of self-worth. A perfect symbol for a shallow and materialistic generation who idolized her for the money she made and the magazine covers she adorned.

The pop star tried crawling to safety, but could only make it a few feet before the excruciating pain prevented her from going any further.

Fr. Gerdtz stood over her body, lying prone on the stage. He rested the barrel of the shotgun against her throat.

"Wait ..." she wheezed. "Don't you know who I—"

He pulled the trigger. A two foot wide crater was carved into the stage, and the pop star's head became liberated from her body.

An apocalyptic howl tore through the stadium. It was the cry of thousands of disciples witnessing the demise of their messiah.

Fr. Gerdtz looked out into the crowd. He took a moment to drink in all the chaos he had created. A large proportion of the audience had bolted for the exits as soon as the shooting commenced, but many remained in their seats. Whether this was due to being paralyzed by fear, or whether they were simply unable to look away, he wasn't sure. But he saw that he now commanded the biggest audience of his life. The eyes of the world were upon him, and he had to make the most of this opportunity.

He reached down to collect the wireless microphone lying beside the pop star's headless body. He cleared his throat in preparation for his most important sermon to date.

"You all believed this woman was a living goddess," he began. "You believed she was something extraordinary. Something beyond a mere mortal."

He clasped a handful of bloodied hair extensions and lifted the pop star's disembodied head into the air. Screams of terror rippled around the auditorium as her lifeless eyes opened up and stared back into the crowd.

"She appears quite mortal to me. She is very human. Nothing but the manufactured byproduct of songwriters, stylists, choreographers and stage parents. A mega-millionaire who used poverty and violent imagery as stage props and set dressing, then retreated to the safety of her limousines, bodyguards and fortress-like mansions. And you dare worship her as an icon?"

This woman has performed no miracles. No halo rest atop this head.”

The words flew from his mouth with a righteous fury.

“Salvation may be too late for her,” he continued, tossing the head aside. “But it’s not too late for all of you. You need to open your eyes and recognize the virus of celebrity for what it is – a tool of the devil, used to manipulate those with weak wills and indolent minds. Reject these false icons. Give your life to the one true God.”

He held the microphone out at arm’s length and released it from his grasp, a move he had seen others employ to convey a sense of faux-rebellion. It hit the stage with a jarring *clunk* and a squawk of feedback.

He took a step back and disappeared into the shadows. By the time security rushed in with their weapons drawn, he was gone.

Twenty-four hours later, “Crying Wit’ Open Eyez” was the world’s most downloaded and streamed song. Subscriptions for the struggling music streaming service Tidal had increased a further three million.

Chapter 6

The pop star's shocking and very public demise marked an apparent turning point in how society viewed the nature of celebrity. People saw they could no longer tolerate being nothing more than fawning drones to the stars, and they had to face up to their own complicity in this terrible state of affairs. This could not go on.

Numerous public figures including George Takai, Tom Waits, Amy Adams, Rod Stewart, Art Garfunkel, Rachel McAdams, Paul Giamatti, Rupert Grint, Jamie Lee Curtis, Vincent D'Onofrio, James Van Der Beek and Björk renounced their celebrity status and retreated from the limelight, never to be seen or heard from again. Taylor Swift, a popular singer who often invited arbitrary celebrities onto stage for no reason other than to allow her fans to scream at them, ceased performing altogether. She also disbanded her Sycophant Squad of celebrity buddies.

Irish singer Enya quit music to focus on her environmentalism and her efforts to save endangered whales. Legendary Queen frontman Adam Lambert retired from showbiz and now volunteers in an orphanage for Syrian refugees. Rapper Azealia Banks dropped her "crazy bitch" act and accepted a job as a loans officer at a local financial institution.

However, many stars resisted calls to tone down their spotlight-hogging lifestyles, stubbornly declaring that to do so would mean "the terrorists had won". Seminal punk rock group 5 Seconds of Summer carried on performing, but were later forced to abandon a planned world tour due to an unforeseen drummer beheading. *Twilight* star Taylor Lautner was found bludgeoned to death in his hotel room, hours before he was due to accept a lifetime achievement award at the MTV Movie Awards. Maroon 5 singer Adam Levine was discovered backstage at the same event, lying face-down in a pool of blood with a knife protruding from his back. Non-famous band members Jesse Carmichael, Mickey Madden, James Valentine, PJ Morton and Matt Flynn all escaped unharmed.

Months went by, and the killings continued unabated. The wave of carnage was as relentless as it was indiscriminate. No apparent distinction was made between "good" celebrities and "bad" celebrities. If they were famous, they were in the crosshairs.

Actors Vince Vaughan, Gary Sinese, Ben Affleck, Bruce Willis, Sean Penn, Jeremy Renner and Kevin Sorbo were all shot and killed, as were musicians Ice T, Ted Nugent, Miranda Lambert and Kid Rock. Nugent was gunned down wearing an NRA-approved t-shirt bearing the slogan "Guns Don't Kill People, Crazy Priests Kill People".

A number of suspects were currently being held by police following the murders of Ryan Reynolds, Dana Carvey, Max Landis, Adele, Jessica Simpson and Seth MacFarlane. These were believed to be copycats inspired by the mysterious priest, who at present remained at large.

Despite multiple eyewitnesses to his many crimes, little was known about the man responsible beyond the fact that he was "white", "old" and "foreign". Much of the cell phone footage obtained from the concert was too shaky or out of focus to be of any use to investigators. The police and Catholic Church both stated that it was unlikely the suspect was an actual priest,

and that his attire was either a gimmick or meant to be interpreted as some sort of metaphor.

Celebrity president Donald Trump implored the public to not be afraid in the face of these attacks. He declared the best response was for people to carry on living their lives as normal. He made this statement shortly after increasing the annual Homeland Security budget by \$10 billion and tripling the number of secret service agents assigned to protect him.

Instagram went into liquidation once the rich and famous deactivated their accounts and deserted the app en masse. Of those who remained, the majority took to posting landscapes and inspirational quotes rather than mirror selfies and red carpet glammers shots. Snapchat filed for bankruptcy, while Twitter was now predominantly used as an emergency broadcast system.

Sales of balaclavas, burqas and niqabs rose as celebrities sought to conceal their identity and protect themselves from prying eyes. They discovered that your anonymity was a lot like your virginity – once it was lost, there was nothing you could do to get it back.

One by one, reality television programs disappeared from the air. The once fame-hungry subjects were now less enthusiastic about exposing every aspect of their lives to millions of strangers, while soaring insurance premiums made their production increasingly unviable. Entertainment-based TV shows and celebrity-centered magazines were next on the chopping block. Their content ran dry when fewer and fewer stars were willing to give up their time to speak with them.

Book burnings were organized by concerned citizens groups, worried about the insidiousness of celebrity culture slowly creeping into society. Copies of Kim Kardashian's *Selfish*, Paris Hilton's *Confessions Of An Heiress* and Krystal Blayze's *#YOLO, Bitch!* were all incinerated.

With shrinking demand for their services, members of the paparazzi sold their cameras and commenced new careers as telemarketers, parking attendants and debt collectors, attaining levels of self-worth and self-respect they never believed possible.

Over time, the lives of the regular non-famous population were also affected, but in substantially different ways. They left their homes more, and began interacting with their neighbors and their community. They accepted the fact that they would never become famous, and they were perfectly fine with that. They realized it was more important to be a kind and decent person, and they didn't need the approval of millions of strangers to feel good about themselves. They reverted to using real language when conversing with one another, forming complete sentences without having to quote popular television shows or internet-spawned buzzwords and infantile catchphrases. Parents paid more attention to their own children and less to Angelina Jolie's and Jennifer Garner's offspring. Academic performance improved across the world now that trivial matters no longer occupied students' minds.

Worldwide church attendances steadily increased to levels not seen since the end of the Second World War, reversing a seventy-year downward trend that commenced with the advent of television. Charity work and volunteerism rose, while atheism sunk to an all-time low.

Fr. Gerdtz saw his Twitter followers rise to over twenty thousand.

Time passed. Life went on, and the horrors of recent events faded from the public's memory. Fr. Gerdtz disposed of his weapons and resumed a life of relative normality. He carried on with

his work at the church, speaking to captive audiences and near-full houses on a weekly basis. His Twitter following peaked at just over twenty-four thousand before gradually receding. It now sat at around sixteen thousand.

His appearances in the media dried up, and he no longer Googled himself.

Despite all the blood spilled and lives lost, he felt an immense satisfaction with everything he had accomplished. The cult of celebrity had been all but wiped out. People rediscovered their faith, and each other. They showed less interest in material wealth and placed greater value in spiritual enrichment. Strangers were kinder to one another, and were quick to help out those who had fallen on hard times. Citizens said hello to passers-by in the street rather than move around wordlessly with their faces glued to their digital screens. They consulted doctors and nutritionists when seeking dietary advice, and stopped mindlessly following the fad diets favored by the stars. They read newspapers and listened to respected journalists and academics when forming opinions on politics and current events now that celebrities no longer told them what to think.

Hollywood continued to produce films and television programs, but the public understood that the actors appearing in them were simply attractive-looking ciphers, and their job was of no more importance than that of a dentist or plumber. When their work was done they were paid an adequate rather than excessive wage, and they lived normal lives away from the glare of the cameras. Corporations no longer showered them with free luxury items, and universities ceased their bizarre practice of awarding them honorary degrees.

Everything was as it should be.

Until one night, when Fr. Gerdtz's peaceful sleep was interrupted by his ceiling separating and a familiar kaleidoscopic mass of light and color flooding inside. He opened his eyes, and the face of God appeared before him once again.

"You have done something remarkable," God told him. "You have changed the world for the better. But I have one more task for you."

"I'm finished with all that," Fr. Gerdtz said. "I did what was asked of me. We achieved what we set out to achieve. The celebrities have been put in their place, and order has been restored. No more unnecessary killing."

"Your job is not yet complete. The virus may be dying, but it has not been completely eradicated. It lies dormant, awaiting the right moment to reemerge. And when it does, it may return stronger than ever."

Fr. Gerdtz pulled his blanket up to his chin. "Get somebody else to do it. I've put my guns away. For good."

"You may reconsider when you hear what they have planned."

God informed him of an event due to take place in the coming weeks. It involved hundreds of former celebrities converging on the one location to revel in their excess and fawn endlessly over one another. While almost all high-profile gatherings had been canceled in light of recent events, the organizers of this particular one refused to give in.

"That can't be true," Fr. Gerdtz said. "After everything that has happened, surely no one would

risk hosting something like that.”

“You fail to understand the mindset of the faded star,” God said. “They suffer from a chronic ailment known as Limelight Deprivation Syndrome. Their former status in the world haunts them like a twitching phantom limb. They refuse to live as normal civilians, working regular jobs and living regular lives. These people have become addicted to the exposure. Despite the inherent risks they are physically incapable of staying away. And if this event is allowed to go ahead it could mark the beginning a celebrity resurgence. It will undo everything you have accomplished.”

Fr. Gerdtz closed his eyes for a moment. “Can I at least have some time to think about it?”

“Of course. But before you make your decision, you may wish to take a look outside your front door.”

The light faded away a moment later. Fr. Gerdtz climbed out of bed and pulled on his robe and slippers.

Another mystery package was on his doorstep. This one was much larger and heavier than any of his previous deliveries. He had to strain to lift it up.

He carried it to the kitchen table and slowly removed the wrapping. Despite his reservations about this latest proposal, he couldn't deny the tiny spasm of excitement he felt as he cut through the packing tape. He was like a child unwrapping a present in the early hours of Christmas morning.

The weapon contained within the box was unlike anything he had seen before. In fact, it was unlike anything anyone had seen before, as it had been specifically assembled just for him. It had an assortment of switches, buttons, dials and digital screens, along with dozens of hi-tech features and settings. At the bottom of the box he discovered a seventy page instruction manual.

The cover page said: *How To Use Your New LMN-8R.*

Chapter 7

It was the perfect setting for Fr. Gerdtz's final performance.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art had hosted its annual Met Gala on the first Monday in May since 1946. It was ostensibly billed as their annual fundraising event, but it was more or less an excuse for the uber-rich and ultra-famous to flaunt their extravagance and exclusivity to an obscene degree before a compliant media pack. It was a gathering that attracted some of the planet's most superficial inhabitants, a place where the fashion and entertainment worlds intersected to form an axis of imbeciles.

The event often coincided with a spike in ISIS membership. There was no greater illustration of Western decadence than a bunch of self-centered divas in overpriced rags celebrating their indulgent lifestyles and basking in one another's reflected glow.

Many of the invited celebrities may project a down to earth, I'm-just-a-regular-person-like-you kind of image, but that was merely a persona they adopted to hide their true selves. Deep down they were all incredibly haughty and terribly needy, harboring irrational desires to be loved and admired by everyone. It was for this reason they flocked to events such as the Met Gala, the senior prom in the world's biggest high school. Scoring a ticket was a measure of one's relevance, and confirmation they existed on a higher plane to the rest of society.

There had been talk of the Gala being permanently canceled, but the organizers opted to go ahead, publicly stating that they would not allow fear to dictate their lives. The mysterious gunman had been inactive for well over a year by now, and they believed his violent crusade had come to an end. Just to be on the safe side, a small army of private security guards had been employed to watch over proceedings.

There were also concerns that they may have had trouble attracting the usual quality of guests to this year's event, but these worries were laid to rest when almost everyone who had been invited RSVP'd. Many stars had attempted to leave the limelight behind and lead normal lives, obtaining entry-level employment in offices and on construction sites, only to discover that living like a regular civilian was humiliating beyond belief. They were ill-equipped to live in the real world after so many years of being pampered and mollycoddled, unable to perform the most basic of tasks without constant direction or help from an assistant. They missed the privileges and elevated status of their previous lives terribly. Without exception, they all leaped at the chance to leave their brief dalliance with reality behind and resume their lives inside their hermetically-sealed Hollywood bubbles.

Fr. Gerdtz made his way inside the building at 5:45 p.m., just as the last of the partygoers were arriving. Despite the heavy security presence, gaining entry was surprisingly straightforward. He only had to display his pass and identification, telling the guards he was part of the catering team, and he was waved on through. He consented to a full body scan with a metal detector wand, but they neglected to check the trunk he was wheeling in behind him. When asked what was inside the trunk, he gave a vague explanation about replacement parts for the catering equipment that were urgently needed.

He navigated his way through a maze of back corridors and hallways before locating the main

arena.

He was a little overwhelmed by what he found when he slipped inside. On his previous jaunts, he'd devoted a great deal of time and energy in tracking down individual celebrities, figuring out where they would be at a certain time, and how he could gain access in order to carry out his work. Now he was surrounded by hundreds of them. They were literally everywhere he looked – all these models, actors, reality television stars, pop singers, fashion industry bigwigs and assorted hangers-on. A room full of phony people with fake looks and fake confidence, sipping expensive cocktails and listening to a performance by some mediocre EDM duo, competing with one another in a desperate worldwide popularity contest.

No one paid him any attention as he wheeled the trunk into a corner and rested it against the wall. Even when he flicked the locks open and removed the LMN-8R, none of the guests seemed to notice.

The bazooka-sized weapon was rather cumbersome and awkward to handle. The weight made it difficult to hold for prolonged periods of time. His bad back and arthritic joints weren't doing him any favors, either. He used a stool to prop up his leg, then rested the weapon on his knee for support.

He wrapped the palm of his hand around the grip. Only then did it occur to him that he was yet to test the weapon out. This would be the first time he had ever fired it. He wasn't even one hundred percent certain of how it all worked, despite twice reading the instruction manual cover to cover. He figured he'd work most of it out as he went along.

He pressed the on button, and the touch screen lit up. He selected the assault rifle setting from the available options, said a quiet prayer, then pressed his finger against the trigger.

A dozen bullets were spat out in the space of half a second. A posse of Victoria's Secret models standing in the direct path of the gunfire were instantly cut in half. They fell to the floor in a bloody heap.

Everything from that point appeared to play out in a dreamlike state. The music abruptly cut out, and a stunned silence followed.

Then a cacophony of screams erupted as the guests saw what had happened, and the absolute horror and disbelief when they realized what was about to go down. A frenzied dash for the exits ensued.

Fr. Gerdtz held his finger to the trigger and sprayed the room. Celebrities hit the floor and dived for cover behind anything solid enough to withstand the brutal assault. Anyone too slow was mown down like a blade of grass. The bodies of Amy Schumer, Justin Long and Macklemore were pumped full of hot lead.

Panic spread like head lice through a kindergarten. It was every A-, B- and C-lister for themselves in the mad rush for safety. Slower and weaker guests were shoved aside and trampled on as their stronger and fitter peers scrambled to make it out alive. Celebrity wife Chrissy Teigan was among those who stumbled in the mayhem and fell to the floor. She made several attempts at regaining her footing, but was knocked back down in the stampede every time. After suffering fifteen or twenty stiletto heels to her cranium, she stayed down for good.

Bottlenecks formed around the doors. Hundreds found themselves trapped inside, sitting ducks unable to move an inch further. The harder they pushed, the worse it became.

Fr. Gerdtz selected grenade launcher mode from the menu and pressed fire. A small olive-colored ball lobbed over towards a clogged exit. Two Jonas brothers and four *Modern Family* cast members were among those ripped apart in the subsequent explosion, coming to rest in a messy pile of random body parts and torn designer frocks.

The blast tore a chunk out of the building's wiring. The power cut out and the room plunged into darkness. The sense of chaos was heightened an exponential degree, the hysteria intensifying with every second that ticked over.

Out of nowhere, a powerful spotlight flicked on. It was the only source of light in the room, and it landed directly on Fr. Gerdtz.

Dozens of security guards converged on the scene with their guns drawn. "Drop your ... whatever the hell that is!" one of the guards shouted at Fr. Gerdtz.

He ignored this directive and selected the LMN-8R's flamethrower option. An epic wall of fire belched out from the nozzle, instantly engulfing Gerard Butler. The smell of propane and charred flesh filled the room within a matter of seconds. He swung the weapon around and gave the button another tap. Karl Lagerfeld's face melted away like a Ken doll on a hotplate.

Security opened fire, but Fr. Gerdtz made no move to escape. He simply kept aiming and firing indiscriminately into the crowd, alternating between the three different modes of attack, taking out everyone in his sights. He didn't care who he hit. As far as he was concerned, there were no innocent victims here. Everyone was either famous or a fame-chaser. They needed to be eradicated for the good of the world.

Celebrities went down like dominoes, one after another. First Anna Kendrick, then Calvin Harris. Then Chelsea Clinton, Bradley Cooper, Kendall Jenner and Drake.

A stray bullet ricocheted off a steel beam and dislodged a chandelier. It crashed down on top of Idris Elba, pinning him to the floor.

Blake Lively and John Mayer both caught bullets to the face.

Lorde and Aziz Ansari were swallowed up by thousand-degree flames.

The spent cartridges piled up and the death toll mounted until there were more dead bodies covering the floor than there was actual visible floor. Fr. Gerdtz pictured what the chalk outlines would look like once the deceased had all been hauled away. He imagined it would be something like those famous Keith Haring murals.

When his crusade first began, back in that nightclub with Krystal Blayze another lifetime ago, he was torn up by his actions. He may have been fulfilling a direct order from God, but there were many, many moments where he was emotionally conflicted about what he was doing.

No such feelings bothered him tonight. It was only now, illuminated by this lone spotlight, watching all the heads snap back and limbs blown off and blood spray into the air, that he realized how much he missed the thrill of it all. This was what gave his life true meaning. This was how he wanted future generations to remember him.

He may have earlier declared tonight to be his final mission, but at that moment he knew he wouldn't stop unless someone else stopped him first. He was simply having too much fun.

Darnell Leviston fumbled for his Hi-Point 9mm compact pistol as he sprinted down the long corridor, sidestepping the terrified staff fleeing in the opposite direction, using the screams and gunshots to navigate his way to the main arena. He was operating on nothing but instinct and adrenaline. He knew if he stopped for even a second to think about what he was running towards, self preservation would inevitably kick in and prevent him from taking another step.

He had been patrolling the west side of the building when the crackle of gunfire rang out, just a couple of minutes ago. He quickly abandoned his post and bolted for the nearest entry point.

He arrived to a scene of pure carnage. It was as if some brutal war zone had been scooped up from somewhere in the Middle East and dropped into this historic Manhattan building. He knew immediately what had happened. This was the one thing they all feared, the absolute worst-case scenario. The past six weeks had been spent preparing for the possibility of this very moment, and now it had arrived.

The deranged priest was here. He was armed with some sort of modified ultra-weapon, something only an evil genius could have constructed, and he was taking great glee in putting it to use.

Bullets flew in every direction. Deep puddles of blood formed on the floor. The air was thick with the stench of death.

The power was out, albeit with one spotlight still in operation, shining directly on the priest. The muzzle flashes from the shootout and the occasional burst of flame gave some additional strobing light.

Dozens of guards fired at the priest from every angle, but had so far failed to take him out. The sheer force of his weaponry kept them at a distance, while the number of civilians in the area made getting off a clean shot near-impossible.

Darnell saw that he happened to be the guard standing nearest to the gunman. The priest had his back to him, and was as yet unaware of his presence. He swallowed down his fear. Like it or not, it was his responsibility to take control of the situation.

He raised his gun out in front of him, his finger tightening around the trigger. He moved in tentative half steps towards his target. A queasy feeling churned in his stomach. He had never fired at anyone; he hadn't even reached for his gun in the line of duty. The only time he had ever discharged his handgun was at a firing range. He had no idea if this all-enveloping sickness that had taken over his body was normal or not.

The other guards ceased fire when they saw what he was doing, allowing him to get as close to the assailant as possible.

Little by little, he inched his way over towards the priest. He was thirty feet away. Then he was twenty-five feet, then twenty. His weapon had quadrupled in weight in the past few seconds. His hands trembled but his aim never wavered.

A jet of flame shot out, and Darnell felt a blanket of searing heat sting his eyes. He blinked several times until the pain subsided and his vision steadied.

He now stood less than ten feet away. Another couple of steps and he could reach out and touch him. He had a clear, unobstructed shot. There was no way he could possibly miss from here.

Summoning every ounce of courage and resolve he had within him, he steadied his aim and squeezed the trigger over and over. Five seconds later, his clip was emptied.

But the priest remained standing.

Not a single bullet had so much as grazed his skin. The hair on his head remained as immaculate as when it was combed that morning. His crusade of carnage continued without a moment of interruption.

A sense of confusion and disbelief rained down on Darnell as he tried to comprehend what the hell had just happened. Eight rounds had been fired from point-blank range, and yet he missed everything. That was simply not possible.

The other guards resumed their firing. Darnell snapped out of his stupor and dived for cover.

He lay face down on the ground, his body pressed hard against the cold marble floor, doing everything he could to awaken himself from this wretched nightmare. Bullets flew inches above his head. Other people's blood soaked his clothes. A piercing howl rang in his ears. This could not be happening, he told himself, over and over. That was the best he could deduce from such an absurd situation. None of this could possibly be real.

Until he saw the trail of dust on the floor, surrounding the old man. It was arranged in a perfect circle, about two inches thick and five feet in diameter. Darnell watched for a moment longer. Piece by piece, the true cause of this enigma became apparent.

The bullets weren't missing at all. They were disintegrating. Every single bullet fired at the priest broke up and turned to a fine powder the instant it reached the light. The priest stood in the center of the ring of ground ammunition particles, growing larger with every subsequent shot fired.

It was the spotlight. It somehow acted as an impenetrable force field, protecting him from harm.

Darnell's rational mind knew this was completely absurd and illogical. He wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't been there to see it with his own two eyes. But he couldn't deny it. It was happening.

He followed the trail of light, high up into the roof, above the rafters, searching for its origin. But there was nothing there. This beam of incandescence did not come from a spotlight, or any other artificial source. It came from a place much higher up. The powerful pure white stream had somehow, incredibly, penetrated the museum's ceiling.

A tunnel of clouds stretched far into the sky and the heavens beyond, on and on as far as the eye could see. It was a sight both surreal and stupefying.

He lay there in a state of paralysis, gazing with wonder at the vision above him. He could do nothing except stare into this awe-inspiring vista with his mouth hanging open and tears welling in his eyes. Even if he wanted to, he could not look away.

Darnell had not lived an easy life. In and out of foster homes, his upbringing had been marked by years of poverty and violence. He had endured numerous tragedies over the years, events which caused him to openly question his faith. Years had passed since he last tried speaking with God.

But any skepticism or doubts he may have had evaporated like dry ice the moment he viewed the startling phenomenon before him. He knew his life could never be the same again. After seeing what he had seen, this tiny glimpse of heaven and beyond, there was simply no way he could look at the world through the same eyes.

A sense of calm came over him, and he slowly picked himself up off the floor. He was a different man now to when he entered the room just a few minutes ago. His life had a renewed purpose. He knew what he was put here on earth for, and what he knew he could do to make the world a better place.

He reloaded his weapon, oblivious to the orders being screamed at him by the other guards. He ignored the bullets whizzing by and strolled over to the far side of the room.

He climbed up on the elevated stage area. He found The Chainsmokers, the musical duo booked for the evening, cowering beneath the DJ booth.

He smiled at them both, then unloaded his full clip.

PART II.
THE HONEY TRAP

Chapter 8

Gregor: hey whats up?

Aimee: hi gregor

Gregor: I like ur pics

Aimee: thanx

Gregor: i like that 1 with u on the horse

Aimee: that was from a few yrs ago

Gregor: u still go riding?

Aimee: yeh when i can but i dont get the chance to go much

Gregor: im a stallion u could ride me

Gregor: ;-)

Aimee: oh my god i so hope u dont use that line on all the girls

Gregor: no ur the lucky 1st

Aimee: id make it the lucky last if i were u

Gregor: no good?

Aimee: no good

Gregor: do over?

Aimee: yes please

Gregor: greetings aimee i hope this evening finds u well

Gregor: my name is gregor and its a pleasure to make your acquaintance

Gregor: how was that

Aimee: better lol

Gregor: so what r u doing 2nite?

Aimee: other than stalkin cute guys ;-)

Gregor: yeh other than that

Aimee: dont no

Aimee: probly just watchin a movie or sum thing

Gregor: what u gonna watch?

Aimee: wrong turn

Aimee: i seen it already but want to watch it again

Aimee: u seen it?

Gregor: nah

Aimee: u should its really good

Gregor: horror movies not really my thing

Aimee: why not u scared?

Gregor: no

Aimee: yeh u r scaredy cat

Gregor: hey if i wanted to see bella thornes bloodied corpse i could just look at those pics on the internet

Aimee: whoa!!

Aimee: dude!!

Gregor: too soon?

Aimee: waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay too soon mister!

Gregor: come on thats funny

Aimee: no its about as funny as cancer the holocaust and dane cook combined

Gregor: sorry

Aimee: u should b sorry

Gregor: (not sorry)

Aimee: it was so sad when she was killed tho

Aimee: :-(

Gregor: yeh i no she was a god actress

Aimee: best actress of Her generation

Aimee: thats why u should watch the movie

Aimee: 2 pay ur respects

Gregor: maybe i will then

Aimee: ill hold your hand if u get scared

Gregor: i told u im not scared of horror movies

Aimee: sure u not

Gregor: ive seen the original wrong turn and thats way more brutal than the remake

Aimee: what remake?

Gregor: wrong turn is a remake of an earlier film with eliza dushku

Aimee: whose that?

Gregor: faith from buffy

Aimee: whats buffy

Gregor: r u serious???

Aimee: no what is it

Gregor: a tv show

Aimee: is it still on

Gregor: no this was the late 90s

Gregor: wrong turn came out in 2003

Aimee: no wonder i never heard of it i was only 1 years old then

Gregor: damn that makes me feel old

Aimee: no the date on your birth certificate makes u feel old

Aimee: ;-)

Gregor: ouch!

Aimee: burn!!!

Gregor: wait, how odd r u?

Gregor: *old

Aimee: 20

Gregor: but u just said u were only 1 in 2003

Aimee: um

Gregor: which by my calculations means u were born in 2002

Gregor: right?

Gregor: still there?

Gregor: aimee?

Gregor: hellooooo?

Aimee: yeh im still here

Gregor: so how old r u really?

Aimee: im 15

Gregor: seriously?

Aimee: yeh

Gregor: seriously!!??!!??

Aimee: yeh

Gregor: u dont look 15 in ur pics

Aimee: i know

Aimee: makeup does that

Gregor: u seem older too

Gregor: more miniature

Aimee: ???

Gregor: damn autocorrect!!!

Gregor: i meant to say more mature

Aimee: oh hahaha

Aimee: thanks :-)

Gregor: so whens your bday

Aimee: in 2 months

Aimee: is my age going to be a problem

Gregor: it does complicate things

Aimee: sorry

Aimee: i didnt mean to lie

Gregor: thats ok

Gregor: u told me now, thats the main thing

Aimee: i only wanted you to like me

Gregor: i do like u

Gregor: but i could get in trouble

Gregor: BIG trouble

Aimee: only if someone finds out

Gregor: someone always finds out

Aimee: we have only chatted so far

Aimee: cant get in trouble for that

Gregor: no i guess not

Gregor: does it bother u that im older?

Aimee: not really

Aimee: u seem really cool and guyz my age are such idiots

Gregor: ur not interested in them?

Aimee: more like there not interested in me

Gregor: i find that hard to believe

Aimee: believe it

Gregor: i bet u have every guy at school totally in love with u

Aimee: lol yeh rite!

Gregor: i mean it

Gregor: they all too timid too do any think about it

Aimee: nah

Aimee: they always go for the pretty girls

Gregor: u dont think ur one of the pretty girls?

Aimee: no

Aimee: im gross

Gregor: ninja please

Gregor: u just fishin

Aimee: im what?

Gregor: fishin for compliments

Gregor: saying your gross just so i can tell you how beautiful you really are

Aimee: no im not

Aimee: im a freak people make fun of me

Gregor: stop it

Aimee: no one would ever touch me

Gregor: i would touch u

Aimee: you would?

Gregor: i would if u let me

Gregor: ;-)

Aimee: aww thanx

Aimee: your really Sweet

Gregor: and ur really special

Aimee: can i tell u something

Gregor: sure

Aimee: no one has ever been this nice too me before

Gregor: well im glad to be the first

Aimee: and ill let u if u want

Gregor: let me what?

Aimee: touch me

Gregor: really?

Aimee: yeh

Gregor: u sure about that?

Aimee: yeh

Gregor: when?

Aimee: how does tonite sound?

Gregor: tonite soundz good

Chapter 9

A queasy feeling of nervous apprehension billowed in Gregor's stomach. His fingers drummed against the steering wheel in time with his palpitating heartbeat. A fist-sized lump formed in his throat. Fifteen minutes beyond their agreed meeting time, and still no sign of Aimee.

He switched on the radio, hoping it would help take his mind off things, then switched it off again when it only made him feel more anxious.

These idle moments gave him plenty of time to think, and to question what he was doing here parked in this dimly-lit side street, meeting up with some teenager he had just matched with on Tinder. Only now did it occur to him that this may not be the smartest thing he'd ever done. This was how countless reputations were destroyed. This was how myriad names were added to public registers. He must have taken leave of his senses to risk anything like this. At the time it seemed like a good idea. But at the time, his judgment was impaired by the two bottles of Pinot noir he had poured down his throat that evening. Now the effects of the alcohol were wearing off, and with increased sobriety came deep reservations.

A cold post-inebriation sweat hit. This was such a stupid, reckless thing he was doing. He had to get out of there before it was too late. His hand moved towards the ignition.

He saw movement ahead. A lone figure emerged from the darkness, fifty yards up the road. Gregor squinted. Someone was coming his way.

The silhouette passed under a street light, and Gregor laid eyes on Aimee for the first time.

Aimee was cute in those few pictures from her Tinder profile, but photos could be deceptive. The maxim about the camera never lying did not apply to the digital age. Anyone could make themselves artificially photogenic these days. Take fifty or a hundred shots and there's bound to be at least one or two that capture you from your best angle. Combine that with the various filters and digital touch-ups freely available, and a five can easily masquerade as a nine with the click of a button or the tap of a touchscreen.

But this wasn't the case at all with Aimee. If anything she was even more stunning in person, despite being dressed in an unflattering outfit consisting of a baggy gray hoodie and faded black jeans. She was a vision of purity, her beauty positively celestial. She quite literally took his breath away.

Their eyes met from across the road. She gave him a smile worthy of a toothpaste commercial. Her flawless white teeth were framed by perfectly symmetrical dimples and waves of golden hair. Gregor couldn't stop himself from returning the gesture.

His hand moved away from the ignition, and he reached for the passenger-side door. He took a deep breath. This was really happening.

The door opened and Aimee climbed inside.

"Um, hi," she said. The slight waver in her voice exposed her nervousness. "Gregor, right?"

Gregor swallowed. "Right."

"I'm Aimee." She let out an embarrassed laugh. "But you probably know that already."

She pulled the door closed, and the vehicle's central locking snapped shut. Aimee flinched at the sound of the locks retracting.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Gregor said. He scrambled to unlock the doors. "Force of habit. I do that every time I get in the car."

"No, it's okay," Aimee said. "I just wasn't expecting it. Sorry."

"No need to apologize. I can totally understand why that might freak you out."

Amy nodded and forced a smile. A few seconds of awkward silence followed.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to show," Gregor said.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Aimee said. "It just took me a while to convince my mom to let me go out tonight. She's really strict with me." Her eyes moved around the interior of the vehicle. "Wow, you have a really nice car."

"It's a Lexus. An RX350."

"I don't know what that means but I assume I should be impressed."

Gregor laughed. "Well, it is the latest model."

Aimee nodded. "You must make a lot of money."

"I do okay, I guess." Gregor colored his words with enough false modesty to let Aimee know he did more than just okay. "No complaints, anyway."

"What is it you do again? I'm not sure I asked."

"I work in management. For this large entertainment firm."

"That sounds exciting."

"It's not. It's the complete opposite of exciting, to tell you the truth."

"Oh. Right."

"Honestly, I would put you to sleep if I even started talking about it."

"Okay."

Another pause followed that soon began to drag.

"So ... what time do you have to be home?"

Gregor regretted this question as soon as he asked it. He was doing his best to forget that he was meeting up with someone young enough to have a curfew.

"I don't have to be back tonight," Aimee said.

"You don't?" Gregor said, a little too eagerly.

"I told my mom I was staying with a friend. She believed me, luckily."

“You didn’t think she’d believe you were staying at a friend’s place?”

“Well ...” Aimee’s eyes moved to the floor. “I was worried she wouldn’t believe that I actually had any friends.”

There was an unmistakable sadness in Aimee’s voice. From those few words, Gregor could tell there was little joy in her home life.

“I’ve sure you have plenty of friends,” he said, trying to sound comforting.

“Not really.” The volume had all but disappeared from her voice. She spoke barely above a whisper. “Everyone at school thinks I’m weird.”

“You seem pretty normal to me.”

“Then you obviously don’t go to my school. I don’t fit in anywhere or with anyone. Everyone there is into stupid stuff like dumb parties and clothes and who Justin Bieber’s dating and what happened on *Next Top Model*. To them I’m just some awkward loser who talks to herself and spends her lunch break alone in the library, reading J.D. Salinger and listening to David Bowie on her headphones.”

Gregor shook his head and smiled to himself. “I know this probably won’t mean much to you now, but when you’re older you’ll realize how much cooler you were than everyone else at your school.”

Aimee scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“No, I mean that. You seem so much more intelligent and self-aware than I was at your age. I still can’t believe you’re only fifteen.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I lied.” She squirmed a little in her seat. “I know I should have been honest with you right from the start. I just really wanted you to like me.”

“You seem so much older.”

“Thanks.” Another shy smile. “So do you.”

Gregor lifted his eyebrows, and Aimee realized how her words had sounded. “Oh no! I didn’t mean it like that—”

Gregor laughed. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not that I think of you as ... I mean, you’re really not that ...”

“I know what you meant.”

Aimee groaned as she threw her head forward. She hid her face behind a curtain of yellow hair. “I’m such a spaz! I’m sorry. I’m always making a complete idiot of myself.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s just that ...”

Aimee trailed off, and Gregor waited for her to continue. “It’s just that what?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s just that ... when we first met, earlier tonight, maybe you thought I

was like really confident and funny and all that. But I'm not. I can act that way when I'm online, but when I try to talk to someone in real life I always end up saying something inappropriate. It kinda feels like ... like everyone else has had lessons on how to interact with people and how you're supposed to behave in social situations, but somehow I missed out on all of it."

Gregor went to reach for Aimee's hand, but had second thoughts and pulled away. "Well, as someone who's a bit more experienced than you, I can tell you that it's okay to be different," he said. "Your quirks and idiosyncrasies are the things that make you interesting. I know that might be difficult for you to appreciate, but trust me on that. You don't have to pretend to be anything you're not. If I could go back in time and give my younger self some advice, it would be to stop worrying about what everyone else thinks and have the confidence to just be yourself."

A tiny smile appeared on Aimee's face. Gregor noticed that one of her front teeth, her left lateral incisor, was slightly crooked. It was the kind of imperfection that only seemed to make her more perfect.

"It's good to finally have someone to talk to about this stuff," she said.

Gregor smiled back. He caught himself staring a little too long. Aimee looked away and giggled nervously.

"Sorry," he said. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's just that you're ... well, you're really beautiful. I hope it's okay for me to say that."

"Oh, shut up," Aimee laughed. "I know you're only saying that to be nice."

"No, really. You're, like, phenomenally jaw-droppingly stunning. Surely I'm not the first guy who's ever told you that?"

Aimee's eyes met Gregor's. "Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"No one has ever said anything like that before." She looked away, then back to Gregor. "I keep waiting for the punchline."

"No punchline," he said, moving his hand to her cheek. "Just calling it as I see it."

He leaned in to kiss her. Aimee didn't move forward, but she didn't recoil either. She just allowed it to happen.

A euphoric sensation shot through Gregor's body the instant their lips met. It was a rush unlike anything he had ever experienced. The illicit nature of their union only amplified the thrill. Forbidden fruit was always the sweetest.

As much as he wanted to enjoy the moment as it was happening, he couldn't stop his brain from convulsing as he tried to figure out where this was all going to lead. If he was to pursue this he would have to exercise extreme caution. Waiting for Aimee would be tough, but she would be worth it. His patience would ultimately be rewarded. They could still see each other, but they would have to sneak around until she was older. Even when she was legal people would no doubt pass judgment due to their age gap, but that was of no real concern to him. Anyone who sticks their nose into anyone else's business was just jealous, and probably living

miserable lives of their own. Some people hated to see others happy. Besides, he still felt young, even if his biological age presented evidence to the contrary. He was healthy, he took good care of himself, and most people were surprised when they discovered he was four months shy of his thirty-ninth birthday. He related more to younger people than to anyone in his own age bracket. They had a similar energy, the same desire to live in the moment and not think too much about tomorrow. Like them, he was someone who preferred to seek out new experiences rather than wallowing in the nostalgia of yesteryear.

He could be a positive influence on her. He could provide her with the kinds of opportunities she might not otherwise have, and he could give her the love and support missing from her life. He could stop her from making any more bad decisions and help her reach her full potential. Ultimately, he was doing a good thing by coming here tonight. He was saving her.

His hand moved across to her knee. Aimee did nothing to indicate this was something she did not want.

In the back of his mind he knew what he was doing was technically wrong. He knew his actions would have far-reaching consequences if he was caught. But the way he felt at that moment, he was beyond caring. This was a risk worth taking. When it came to matters of the heart, sometimes you just had to disregard what society dictated and do what felt right.

The car's doors opened behind him, and their moment together was shattered.

Gregor broke away from Aimee in time to see two shadowy figures climb into the back of his Lexus.

"Don't turn around," a voice ordered. "Keep looking straight ahead."

"Who ... what are you doing?" Gregor spluttered.

"We're Aimee's brothers," one of them said.

Gregor caught a quick glimpse in the rear view mirror. He saw no more than a dark outline. "But how did you—"

"No talking," the other said. Both doors slammed shut. "Just start the car and drive."

Gregor's heart kicked harder and harder the further he drove. His palms were wrapped white-knuckle tight around the steering wheel like he was holding on for dear life. Patches of sweat dampened his clothes. The worst part was the silence. Other than to dictate directions – take a left here, go straight ahead there – not a single word had been spoken since the two strangers had climbed into his car.

The bilious taste of nervousness filled his mouth. He felt a suffocating tightness pressing against his chest. His mind went into overdrive as he searched for a way out of such a hopeless situation. The thought of planting his foot to the floor and not caring about the consequences crossed his mind more than once.

One of the brothers, the one sitting directly behind him, leaned forward. "Pull over next to that no parking sign," he said. Gregor did as he was told.

The engine was shut off, and the four sat in darkness. An unbearably loud silence followed.

A wave of heat rose from the pit of Gregor's stomach, burning up his face. He wasn't sure if they were waiting for him to speak, or if they were deliberately and sadistically prolonging his suffering.

The interior light came on. Gregor's eyes moved to the rear view mirror. He saw the two strangers in the back seat. Young men, probably in their early twenties.

"My name is Travis," the older and more talkative of the two said. "My brother's name is Blair. Before we go any further, I just want to put you at ease over a few things. First of all, none of us are armed. We're not here to cause you any harm, just so long as you don't try anything. We also want you to know that we are not holding you against your will. If you want us to leave at any point you only have to ask."

Gregor was thrown by the relaxed and conversational nature of how this guy spoke. He came across as almost genial. He wasn't sure if this comforted him, or if it made the situation appear even more threatening.

"And we will be one hundred percent upfront and honest with you," Travis continued. "That's the only way this can work. We've told you who we are. We're not hiding our faces, and we're using our real names. All we ask in return is that you be honest with us."

Gregor gave a slight nod to indicate that he understood.

"Great. Now that the formalities have been taken care of, let me explain the situation as it presently stands." Travis's tone had turned businesslike. Gregor got the impression this wasn't the first time he had done this. "We have the transcript of a Tinder conversation where you agree to meet up with a girl you know to be underage. We also have video and audio recordings of this meeting. Aimee has recorded everything on her phone, and Blair and I were filming from across the road. In our possession is enough evidence to destroy your life as you know it. Right now you are standing at a crossroad, and what happens in the next ten minutes will affect the rest of your life. Whether that is for better or for worse is entirely up to you."

"I ... I just want you to know ... I've never done anything like this before." Gregor's words came out in a croak, his throat unexpectedly parched. He forced himself to swallow. "I promise it will never happen—"

"Please, Gregor," Travis interrupted. "Let me finish. We don't want this to go on any longer than it has to."

"It's just that I'm under a lot of stress. A *lot* of stress. You have no idea what I've been through. I'm having financial difficulties. I'm in a lot of debt. I was drinking too much. And I'm lonely." His voice dropped several decibels. He sounded on the verge of tears. "I don't have anyone in my life. And then out of nowhere I meet this beautiful girl who, for some inexplicable reason, appears to show an interest in me. Nothing like that has ever happened before, and I didn't know how to handle it. I just wasn't thinking straight."

A comforting hand landed on Gregor's shoulder. "You don't have anything to worry about," Travis said. "Do the right thing by us and this will all be behind you soon enough."

Gregor was silent for a moment. "I know it looks bad, but I haven't done anything wrong," he said. "Not yet. I haven't broken any laws."

The other brother, Blair, spoke up for the first time. "Well, you did arrange to meet our fifteen year old sister for what we can only assume were impure reasons."

"But ... it was her idea to meet up. She wanted to do it. All I did was agree to it."

"Come on, Gregor," Travis said. "That excuse isn't going to cut it. Blaming the girl when you're caught grooming a minor is like blaming your hand when you're caught masturbating."

"It wasn't anything like that, I promise. She just seemed like someone who could use a friend."

"You know your behavior was inappropriate. I think we all know what you were hoping for when you turned up tonight."

"Hey, you know what?" Gregor turned around to face the back seat. "This is entrapment. Call the police if you want, but the charges will never stick. The case will be thrown out before it even makes it to trial."

"You're probably right," Travis said with a shrug. "But you won't be tried in a court of law. Your trial will take place in the court of public opinion."

Gregor looked across to Aimee, who had been mute ever since her brothers gatecrashed their party. Her gaze was fixed straight ahead. She appeared almost as uncomfortable about this whole saga as he was. He wondered how complicit she was in all of this. Was she a willing participant, or had they pressured her into doing it? It was hard to tell.

"This is what's likely to happen," Travis said. "Once this becomes public, you will lose your job. And I'm guessing it's a job that pays well, if this car of yours is anything to go by. Not having a job means you won't be able to keep up your mortgage repayments, and your house will be next to go. You'll learn who your real friends are – or more to the point, you'll learn that most of your friends weren't really friends in the first place, once they stop speaking to you and start gossiping behind your back. A few family members may stick by you, but you'll always be thought of as that creepy uncle. The one everyone knows not to leave the children alone with. Your life as you know it will be over, all thanks to this one error of judgment."

"Or you can be smart about it and do exactly what we tell you to," Blair said. "We'll disappear, and you'll never see or hear from us again."

Gregor could only sit there and take it as he was slowly and painfully eviscerated by these two punk kids barely out of their teens. They had him right where they wanted him. These guys weren't idiots. They had laid a trap for him, and he had stumbled straight into it. Every base was covered. They held all the cards.

"Look, we get it," Travis said, reverting back to his good cop persona. "We don't believe you're a creep or a bad guy. Not at all. All you've done is respond to your natural biological urges. Every straight guy on the planet is attracted to beautiful young females. It's hardwired into our DNA. Society tells us we should be ashamed of these urges, but it's a simple fact of life."

"But you have been more than a little careless," Blair said. "And so now you have to pay a penalty."

Gregor let out a small laugh, more a nervous reflex action than any genuine amusement. "How did I know this would all come down to money?"

“You didn’t think we were going to let you leave with just a stern warning, did you?” Blair said.

“And anyway, doesn’t everything come down to money in the end?” Travis said.

Gregor inhaled deeply. He stared out into the empty street in front of him. “What do you want me to do?”

Travis and Blair exchanged a quick look. A look of triumph. It was only brief, but Gregor still caught it.

“There’s an ATM across the road,” Travis said. “We’ll wait here while you make the withdrawal.”

Chapter 10

Aimee had been rehearsing her Oscar acceptance speech in front of the mirror since the age of nine. She had always dreamed of becoming a world-famous actress; walking red carpets in fabulous designer gowns, traversing the globe by private jet, being fawned over by millions of adoring fans. Every spare moment of her childhood was spent in acting classes and auditions, and she was always putting on performances for her friends and family. But her career never really progressed much further than those amateur productions. The handful of acting jobs she managed to land were minor one- or two-line roles in television shows that nobody ever saw. She realized a new strategy was in order if she was to have any chance at all of success.

She turned her attention to Instagram after noticing a growing number of aspiring starlets using the platform to further their own careers. She hoped that by building up a profile and getting her name out there she could facilitate a smooth transition into the world of acting. And it began promisingly enough, too. By posting nothing more than a few highly-stylized selfies every couple of days, along with the occasional bikini shot, she was able to attract over ten thousand followers in just a few short months.

It didn't take her long to become hooked on the rush of instant gratification that came with all this attention. Every image she uploaded brought with it an intoxicating stream of positive reinforcement. It also played a part in altering her career ambitions. Her dream of becoming an actress quietly faded away, and her sights were now set on the much more attainable goal of becoming a social media influencer. Instafame would deliver many of the benefits of being a successful actress – the parties, the glamour, the free clothes, the worldwide adulation – but without having to endure the endless grind of demoralizing auditions and constant rejection. Besides, if her former neighbor Kimberly Hogg could become a huge star simply by documenting her life online there was no reason why Aimee couldn't do the same. Kimberly was certainly no marketing genius, and all it took for her to become a household name was \$50,000 worth of cosmetic surgery, a salacious Bieber rumor, and a name-change to Krystal Blayze.

But the buzz soon wore off and harsh reality set in. Becoming an Instababe turned out to be even more competitive than the world of acting. It was open to everybody the world over, absolutely no talent or skills were required, and there were always girls with more determination and less shame willing to give their fans exactly what they wanted. Hot girls flaunting their flawless bodies and envious lifestyles were a dime a dozen online.

Her followers stalled at around the twenty thousand mark. To the uninitiated that may have seemed like a huge figure, but in the context of the social media microcosm she was a minnow swimming among the marlin. Twenty thousand was something of a ceiling for an ordinary, anonymous civilian. Unless you had a significant chunk of fame to begin with – if you had a famous parent, were part of a celebrity's posse, had dated a celebrity, or had appeared on reality TV – you wouldn't come anywhere near the magic half-million mark required to turn your hobby into a viable career. Aimee had to face up to the fact that there was nothing to set her apart from the thousands upon thousands of fame-hungry girls sharing their bubble bath selfies and shots of their nail art and avocado toast with the world.

And then there were the perverts. She was forced to contend with the many negative aspects

of being an online star – the daily onslaught of sleazy propositioning, inappropriate comments and outright threats – without enjoying any of the material rewards (although she did receive plenty of dubious offers for all-expenses paid trips to Dubai). Her initial response was to block the men making the obscene comments, but she soon learned these creeps represented a sizable proportion of her fan base. She didn't have the luxury of being able to alienate too many of her followers, and if she blocked them they would simply turn their attention to some other girl. She needed to find a way of making lemonade from these lemons.

It was whilst dealing with a particularly persistent “fan” called Glen that she hit upon a novel way of monetizing her online following. Glen had let it be known, in quite graphic and unambiguous terms, just how enamored he was with her. He also let her know the exact dollar amount he was prepared to part with in order to make his lurid fantasies a reality. A short period of communication and negotiation followed whereby Aimee agreed to Glen's terms, and she arranged a time and place for them to meet.

She then turned up to Glen's motel room, along with Travis and Blair, and watched on as they forcibly relieved him of all his money.

This soon became a regular thing. Aimee would arrange the “dates” with her online suitors, her boyfriend and his brother would appear instead armed with knives and baseball bats, and the three would divide the takings between them.

The first few attempts went smooth enough. The victims gave up the cash without too much resistance, and they quickly scattered as soon as Travis and Blair ordered them to run along. But it didn't take long to identify a number of flaws in this scheme of theirs. On one occasion the target, confronted by two masked and armed thugs, simply jumped through an open window and ran away. Travis and Blair could have given chase, but then what? Even if they had caught up with him, they would have drawn far too much attention to themselves. It wasn't worth the risk. They ransacked the motel room, but left when they found nothing of value.

Of greater concern were the men who fought back. The fact that Travis and Blair were both armed was no guarantee of their safety. If the target somehow managed to force one of the weapons from them, or if Travis or Blair panicked and did something rash in the heat of the moment, the whole thing could spiral out of control very quickly.

There was also the small matter of them committing a violent robbery in a public place. If they were caught it would most likely result in prison time for everyone involved. They assumed that, given the circumstances, the men would not take their complaint to the police, but they never knew this for sure. The seriousness of their crimes far outweighed those of the men they targeted, so there was always that risk. The fear of retribution, and the fact that each job netted only a small amount – about five or six hundred dollars, split three ways – also lingered in the back of their minds.

It was following a serious rethink that they devised a whole new plan. It was a much smarter way of doing business – one that would deliver a greater payoff, and one that would eliminate many of the difficulties they had previously encountered. It involved Tinder and blackmail.

Aimee initially thought she may have had trouble luring her targets in. She wondered how many men would risk turning up to an agreed location in order to meet an underage schoolgirl they had only just encountered on a dating app. But she underestimated just how desperate

and easily duped some men could be. Reeling them in was frightfully easy, especially late at night when their judgment was often clouded by alcohol and lustful thoughts. She adopted different online personas, depending on what she thought the guy might be into. Some days she was the “repressed Catholic schoolgirl with an urge to rebel”. Other days she could be the “jailbait teen who liked to party”. If the guy came across as especially vile, she would become the “lonely, confused and damaged girl with unresolved daddy issues”. She was finally able to put her acting skills to good use, workshopping different characters and creating in-depth profiles and backstories to give them added authenticity.

The persona she used to lure Gregor in, and the one that delivered the most success, was the “wise beyond her years outsider with low self-esteem and a heart of gold”.

Somewhere in the evolution of humankind, the male species has come to believe in the fabled creature known as “the beautiful female who doesn’t know she is beautiful”. No one has ever been able to locate the origin of this myth, but the trope was most likely dreamed up by lonely fiction writers with limited exposure to females of any kind. What was known for certain was that there was no evidence to suggest this particular type of woman had ever existed beyond the realm of fantasy.

Aimee shamelessly exploited the naiveté of males to full effect. If a man told her she was pretty, she would vehemently disagree. When they insisted – and they always insisted – she would blush and claim that no one had ever told her that before. Dumb guys ate that stuff up without ever questioning it. It was exactly what their deluded ears wanted to hear. Deep down they all harbored Captain Cook fantasies, every one of them dreaming of discovering some hidden virgin paradise previously untouched by man.

It was highly unlikely that Gregor, or anyone else, would have risked turning up to meet an underage girl, no matter what she looked like. It was the low self-esteem act that overwhelmed the decision-making part of his brain. As soon as she fed him that line she became irresistible to him.

The character worked so well that on several occasions the men tried contacting Aimee again to beg for a second chance – *after* they had been robbed. They were so love-struck and desperate for the fantasy to be true they refused to acknowledge the scam that had taken place.

The reality was that Aimee, like every other attractive female on the planet with a pair of eyes and a functioning brain, knew she was pretty. She was made aware of this fact from an early age; the girls at her school all wanted to be her friend, the boys were always trying to impress her, and the teachers paid her extra special attention. The notion was reinforced over the years on a daily basis. Every time guys laughed at her jokes that weren’t particularly funny, or when strangers in the street went out of their way to lend assistance, or when a quick flutter of her eyelashes helped her get what she wanted, it was a reminder that the genetically-blessed were given every opportunity to succeed in life whilst doing the least to deserve it.

Aesthetics was valued above all else in the modern world. Models were held up as aspirational figures despite being little more than malnourished mannequins with a pulse. Stunning women never have to work menial jobs, nor do they ever live in abject poverty. Beauty was what separated Margot Robbie the millionaire movie star from Margot Robbie the high school dropout living on welfare checks and child support payments.

Society permits the good-looking to get away with so much more. The bar for being considered a decent person was adjusted according to your level of attractiveness. The beautiful are gifted an easy ride throughout life, while the aesthetically-challenged face a constant uphill struggle for relevance.

Aimee knew she should feel guilty about exploiting her looks for financial gain, but she didn't. The way she saw it, she was simply playing the game. She didn't write the rules. Anyway, she had to make the most of what life had given her. Some people were born with extraordinary intellects, while others were genetically predisposed to sporting prowess. Her gifts were her blonde hair, blue eyes, facial symmetry and fast metabolism. These gifts were unlikely to last forever, so she had to take full advantage while she could.

Travis kept a close watch on their latest meal ticket from the comfort of the Lexus. Everything was going as planned. So far. It was 11:52 p.m., and Gregor had taken out the maximum daily limit of two thousand dollars from the ATM. The new day would begin in eight minutes' time, at which point another two grand could be withdrawn. At five minutes past midnight that money would be in Travis's pocket, and Gregor would be just another guy they'd probably never see again.

It never ceased to amaze him just how easy this all was. He barely had to do any work at all. His job from this point on was to sit back and wait for the money to come to him. They used to follow their targets the first few times they did this, shadowing them throughout the entire process to make sure nobody tried anything. They no longer bothered with that, since there was nothing any of these men could do. They couldn't run, and they couldn't call for help. Every one of them did exactly as they were told, and with a minimal amount of protest or backchat.

The peace and quiet of the moment was disturbed by a sharp blast of metalcore. Everyone jumped a little. Despite having done this sort of thing many times before, they were still a little on edge. Blair scrambled for his phone.

"Jesus, Blair," Travis said.

"Sorry," Blair said. He shut off the music and put his phone back in his pocket.

"How many times do I have to tell you to keep it on silent?"

"I know, I know. I just forgot."

Travis glowered for a moment. "Imagine how that would have looked if Gregor was still in the car. You think we'd get any money out of him if we came across as a bunch of amateurs?"

"I said I was sorry, alright?" Blair said, a little tersely. "It won't happen again. I promise."

Travis turned his attention back to Gregor. He was in the same spot, loitering in front of the ATM. He was constantly fidgeting and shifting around, like he was incapable of keeping still for more than a few seconds. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. This lent Travis a certain degree of comfort. His body language was the same as every other guy who had ever been in his position.

Nobody spoke for a few minutes.

“Who’s even calling you at this time of night?” Aimee said.

Blair pulled his phone from his pocket. “It’s a private number. Probably a telemarketer or something.”

“It’s a bit late for telemarketers, isn’t it?” Travis said. He looked at his watch. It was 11:57 p.m.

“Could be the counter-terrorism unit,” Aimee said. She opened up the glove compartment and peered inside.

Travis raised his eyebrows. “Come again?”

“That’s a new phone, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, bought it a couple of days ago,” Blair said.

Aimee nodded. “That’s what I thought. See, terrorists use cell phones when they build IEDs, so now whenever anyone purchases a new phone it usually receives two or three robo-calls during the first few weeks. If it’s being used to construct a bomb it will be set off prematurely, taking out the perpetrators and hopefully saving innocent lives.”

Blair laughed. He wasn’t sure if Aimee was for real, or if she was making this up on the spot. “Where did you hear that?”

“I do read occasionally, you know,” she said, rifling through the glove compartment. “Maybe you should too. You might accidentally learn something.”

Travis nudged at the back of Aimee’s seat. “Hey, don’t go through his stuff,” he said. “We may be blackmailers, but we’re not thieves.”

“I’m not stealing anything. I’m looking to see if there’s any gum or mints in here.”

“Why do you need gum?”

“Because this guy has the worst breath. I need something to get the taste out of my mouth.” She sorted through the contents. It was a messy pile made up mostly of bills, receipts, manuals and moist towelettes. “You know, I think it’s time I got a bigger slice of the takings,” she said.

Blair let out a dismissive snort. “Yeah, right. Nice try, though.”

“I think I deserve at least forty percent. Forty for me, thirty for each of you. That seems about fair.”

“And how did you arrive at those figures?”

“Well, I am doing most of the work here. I’m the one who lures them in, and I’m the one putting myself in the most danger. You two just come in at the end after I’ve laid the groundwork.”

“Actually, we’re the ones who get the money out of them,” Blair said. “You set it all up, we come in and finish the job. We work as a team.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to put up with being molested by these creeps night after night like I do.” Aimee found some orange tic tacs in the depths of the glove compartment. She shook out the three remaining and tossed them in her mouth. “You’re not the one trying to get the gross

sulfur taste out of your mouth, are you?”

“Can we discuss this some other time?” Travis said.

Blair looked across to his brother. “You’re not seriously thinking about doing that?”

“I said we’ll talk about it later. Right now we have more important things to worry about.”

“You know what, if she gets forty percent then I deserve at least—”

“Shh!” Aimee whispered. “We have company.”

A pair of headlights had rounded the corner. They were coming straight for them.

The trio fell silent as the vehicle came into view. Travis felt his heart skip a beat when he saw that it was a police car.

He wasn’t worried about the cops seeing them sitting in the car this late at night. They weren’t doing anything illegal. At least, as far as an outsider could tell. But he was a little concerned about Gregor. In a moment of panic he might lose his nerve and try to attract the attention of the police. Of course, it would be in his best interests to do nothing of the sort – of the four of them, Gregor would find himself in the most trouble should the police get involved. But that relied on him using clear and logical thinking, and there was no telling what was streaming through his mind at that moment. When someone was placed under an intense amount of pressure their behavior became a lot harder to predict.

He looked over at Gregor. He was back at the ATM, punching in his PIN. It had just ticked over to midnight. Travis gnawed at his thumbnail, an old habit he thought he’d managed to shake years ago. “Don’t do anything stupid now,” he said to himself.

The police cruiser decreased its speed as it approached the Lexus. Blair slid down in his seat, then realized this made him look like he was trying to hide. He quickly pushed himself back up.

Gregor stayed as he was, facing the ATM. He kept one eye on the law enforcement vehicle, watching it in the reflection of the shop window as it passed behind him.

The cruiser slowed to a crawl, before continuing on up the road.

Travis watched in the side mirror. Only when the taillights had completely vanished did he allow himself to relax.

An audible gasp then came from the front seat.

“Oh my God,” Aimee said. “You guys *have* to see this.”

She spun around to face the two brothers. In her hands was a crumpled piece of paper. Something she’d discovered in the clutter of the glove compartment.

“What is that?” Travis said.

Aimee held up the document – a credit card statement. Travis and Blair leaned forward. They were barely able to make out the details in the low light.

“What are we supposed to be looking at here?” Blair said.

“Check out his name,” Aimee said, tapping with her index finger. “Up the top of the page.”

Travis switched on the interior light and moved in closer. He saw the name and address at the top of the statement. “So his name’s not Gregor,” he shrugged. “I’m sure he’s not the first one to use a false name with us.”

Aimee gave Travis a disappointed look. “Are you telling me that name doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“No.” He leaned forward to read it again. “Should it?”

“Um ... Travis?” Blair tugged at his arm like a toddler trying to attract his mother’s attention. “I think you should see this.”

Blair had his phone out, with the results of a Google search displayed on the screen. Travis snatched it away. There was a short burst of silence as this latest development sunk in.

“Well,” he said, the beginnings of a smile etched on his face. “This certainly changes things.”

The images returned by the search matched the man they had been dealing with up until now. But the name and biographical information belonged to another person entirely.

The front door opened before any of them had a chance to adequately process it all. The man who had previously identified himself as Gregor climbed behind the wheel, his pockets bulging with fifty dollar bills. He pulled the door closed.

“It’s all here,” he said. He emptied his pockets and arranged the cash into one large bundle, then held it out for Travis to take. “Four thousand dollars. Like we agreed.”

Travis’s hands remained in his lap. He made no move to take the money, nor did anyone else.

Gregor’s face turned to a frown. “Do you want it or not?”

Travis allowed for a dramatic pause before he spoke. “Gregor, what did we say when we first met?”

“Um ...” Gregor cast his mind back to earlier in the evening. “You, uh, you told me not to look at you and—”

“We asked that you be honest with us. That was our only request, and I don’t think it was an unreasonable one. We promised to be straight with you if you were straight with us. Now, we’ve held up our end of the bargain. But I’m not sure you’ve held up your end.”

“What are you talking about?” Gregor looked around the car to see if this was some sort of joke. “I did what you told me to! We had a deal!”

Travis shook his head slowly. “I’m afraid some new information has come to light. Information that renders the terms and conditions of our previous agreement null and void. We now have to renegotiate.”

“You wanted the money and here it is!” Gregor’s voice increased in volume. “Four thousand dollars. Take it!”

He thrust the money at Travis, but it was waved away.

“The deal we made was with Gregor.”

Travis held up the phone, with the search results still displayed. When he saw the change in Gregor’s face, he knew he had his man.

“We now have to make a new deal. With Martin Krauth.”

Chapter 11

Travis never said it out loud for fear of mockery, but he had begun to see himself as something of an entrepreneur. He had a brain that was constantly on the lookout for innovative and exciting ways of making money, and he had finally hit upon a genius one. This scam of his, the one that had started out as nothing more than a side-hustle, had become so much more lucrative than he could have ever imagined. There was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of gullible men just lining up and begging to be swindled, and he planned on taking advantage of as many of them as possible.

He thought it might peter out sooner or later. Maybe their antics would become public, or maybe the men would eventually catch on to what was happening. Maybe they would exercise greater caution following those disturbing reports of the rumored Tinder-killer, the maniac who used the app to lure his victims before hacking them up and leaving their body parts scattered around a remote area of desert near Vasquez Rocks. But so far, business showed no signs of slowing.

They had been pulling off four or five hits a week for almost a year now. The money was better than any day job they had ever worked, and with significantly less effort required. A typical week saw them take home five thousand dollars each for what amounted to no more than twenty hours' work.

Their success all came down to how smart they were about how they approached each job. They didn't just pick a guy at random and try to squeeze money out of him. Hours of planning and preparation went into every hit, and this helped them reap the subsequent rewards.

Two main rules were established for how they were to conduct themselves, and these rules were strictly adhered to.

The first rule was to be realistic with their demands. Before any confrontation took place, they assessed the target's profile and made a rough guess as to how much they were worth. If the men liked to flaunt their wealth, posting pictures of themselves sitting inside luxury sports cars or holidaying in exotic locales, they were actively pursued. Anyone who looked like they lived paycheck to paycheck (or with their parents) was quickly rejected. They estimated how much their target could reasonably afford to part with, and how much they could access at short notice. There was no point demanding thousands of dollars in cash if they couldn't get their hands on it that night.

Each negotiation began by implying that the target could walk away from the situation – for a price – but they held back on giving an exact amount. This allowed the men to conjure up all sorts of intimidating figures in their heads. Their imaginations would naturally go to the worst-case scenario, whereby emptying their life savings would be the only way to keep them out of an orange jumpsuit and off the sex offender's register. Their relief was palpable when they learned it would only set them back a small fraction of that imagined figure. The majority were only too happy to pay up if it meant they could immediately leave and never see these people again. One guy even offered up his Rolex in addition to the cash, insisting they take it as a gesture of goodwill. Travis later pawned it for seven thousand dollars.

A couple of years earlier, the daughter of a wealthy businessman was kidnapped and a two million dollar ransom demanded. A protracted period of negotiation followed, before it all fell apart in a barrage of police bullets and decades-long prison sentences.

Watching on from home, Travis kept a close eye on the case as it unfolded. Straight away he could see where the kidnappers had gone wrong; namely, they had been far too greedy. Regardless of how rich the family was, a two million dollar ransom was always going to be met with resistance. If they had settled on a more realistic figure, something in the low-six figure range, the family probably would have paid up. The kidnappers would have received a significant amount of money, the daughter would be freed unharmed, and everyone would be happy. Instead, they expected too much too soon. They demanded maximum return for minimal effort.

Travis learned from their mistakes, and the mistakes of others who had attempted similar plots. Rather than go for one big high-risk venture that brought in a lot of money, he saw that it was smarter and safer to pull off multiple low-risk hits that reaped a small amount each time. He knew problems would inevitably arise if their demands were unrealistic. There would be resistance, or possibly even retribution, and that was far too much trouble for everyone involved. The value was set just low enough so that chasing after the money would not be worth the effort. Besides, if the asking price was too high the men might try negotiating a lower price. The minute you engage in any sort of haggling, the other party knows you've lost control of the situation. The relatively small amount of cash gave their victims an easy escape clause, and it was one they were always happy to take. They knew the best thing would be to pay up and be grateful their punishment wasn't a lot worse.

Once the money was handed over, the men were allowed to leave and were never contacted again. There was the odd occasion where Travis had been tempted to track down some of his wealthier targets to extort a few extra bucks out of them, but that was an urge he always resisted. It was important they stick to their rules and keep their word. Even if they were breaking the law, he still wanted to operate with a certain degree of honor.

The second rule, and one that was every bit as essential as the first, was that each target must be treated with courtesy and respect. Even though they would eventually deprive these men of their money, they would still be allowed to leave with their dignity intact. That may appear to be a minor detail, but its importance could not be overstated. Had they gone in with all guns blazing, roughing them up and threatening to turn them in if they didn't do exactly as they were told, it would create an atmosphere festering with animosity and hostility right from the start. More to the point, it may cause the target to behave in an erratic manner, and that was the last thing they wanted. Allow them keep their dignity and ninety-nine times out of a hundred it all went off without a hitch.

Everything about the scam was just about flawless. No weapons were required; not even the hint of violence was suggested during these confrontations. They didn't have to worry about their identities being exposed. They kept their faces covered the first few times, but this only put the men on edge so they stopped doing it. Sometimes they didn't even bother filming or recording their encounters. They just told the men they had incriminating evidence in their possession. No one ever thought to ask to see it. They weren't worried about the police, since none of the men could report the crimes without implicating themselves.

Even though he knew he was technically committing a crime, Travis believed he wasn't really doing anything that immoral. He was simply doing what many successful businessmen before him had done, which was to identify a money-making opportunity and take full advantage. If he wasn't shaking these guys down, someone else would probably be doing it – and they were unlikely to be anywhere near as civil about it. He was performing a valuable community service by scaring these men straight. He had even convinced himself that he was doing them all a favor, since he was giving them the deal of a lifetime. By turning up to meet an underage girl, they had potentially ruined their lives. He was offering to restore it for just a few thousand dollars.

He had reached a point where he was considering expanding the business, hiring more girls to be the bait and more guys as the enforcers. He was curious to see just how far he could take this whole concept, and how much he could milk from this cash cow. It probably wasn't a realistic long-term project, so he had to make the most of this opportunity while he could.

Besides, he wasn't crazy about those creeps putting their hands all over his girlfriend who, at twenty-three, wouldn't be able to pass for a fifteen year old for too much longer.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Aimee declared. "No arguments, no negotiation. That's our final offer."

"Gregor", who it was now known used the legal name Martin Gregor Krauth, could only laugh at such an outlandish demand. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Do we look like we're joking around?" Travis said.

"We know who you are, Martin," Blair added. "And it wasn't hard to find out how much money you have, either."

In the short time they'd had to investigate Martin Krauth's background, the three of them had unearthed an abundance of incredible facts. They discovered that he was one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, and the owner of a backstory fast becoming the stuff of showbiz legend. Here was a guy who had spent close to a decade toiling away on movie sets, mostly in low-level positions on the production crew. He had worked as a grip, a prop master, a production assistant and a clapper loader, among other fairly menial roles. He was in his late twenties when he started, significantly older than many of his contemporaries.

After several years of long hours and low pay, his tenacity, work ethic and dedication to his craft saw him promoted to positions with greater responsibility and longer hours (but only slightly better remuneration) such as line producer, unit manager and production coordinator.

Those who knew him from this time recall that while he may have been a highly ambitious worker, there was nothing particularly remarkable about him. The same could be said of the films he was involved with. They were mostly poorly-made B-movies with shoestring budgets and non-existent production values, starring washed-up sitcom stars and aging action heroes too obscure for *The Expendables*. Nothing he was involved with ever threatened to set the world alight. Despite his hard work and passion for the industry, few foresaw Martin Krauth's career progressing any further than the straight-to-DVD ghetto.

Until two years ago when, out of the clear blue sky, he was named as the new chairman and CEO of Paramount Pictures.

To say the appointment came as a surprise would be a colossal understatement. Most industry observers had never heard of Martin Krauth. The few who had could not fathom how the reins to one of the major Hollywood studios could be handed to such an inexperienced and untested novice. Some thought it must have been an elaborate joke, while others suspected some sort of criminal negligence was at play. At the time, the once-powerful film studio was tumbling towards bankruptcy following years of poor management and a devastating string of box office disasters. Rumors quickly spread that the board were deliberately running the studio into the ground to manipulate the share price, a strategy that would allow them to take full control by purchasing a huge slice of the company at a vastly discounted rate.

But against the odds and defying all logic and reason, the appointment has since proven to be nothing short of a masterstroke. Martin had somehow managed to reverse Paramount's ailing fortunes and guide the studio toward a succession of films that enjoyed both box office success and widespread critical acclaim. He was catapulted into the spotlight, his name becoming almost as famous as the ones up on the big screen. The press hailed him as a miracle worker, the man with the Midas touch. He graced the cover of *Time* magazine, and was the subject of a glowing *60 Minutes* profile. He dined with Hollywood royalty and Washington powerbrokers, and had been romantically linked to a bevy of starlets and supermodels.

And now Aimee, Travis and Blair were inside his luxury automobile, struggling to wrap their minds around the fact that they held the life and career of someone with so much power and influence in the palm of their hands. All three tried to keep their cool and not allow this remarkable turn of events to affect their end goals. They had to maintain control of the situation and remind themselves that this was no different from any other job, only on a larger scale. Despite the perceived power imbalance between the two parties, they still had the upper hand. If anything, they were in an even more powerful bargaining position – Martin Krauth had a lot more to lose than “Gregor”, or anyone else they had previously dealt with.

“A quarter of a million dollars means nothing to you, Martin,” Aimee said. After a long period of silence in Gregor/Martin's presence, she had rediscovered her voice. She also had the best poker face, and was the least intimidated in the presence of a celebrity. “You've probably run up bigger bar tabs. And if you consider what you stand to lose if you don't do as we say, I think you'll agree this is the wisest investment you're ever likely to make. If this becomes public it'll be the biggest scandal in years.”

“And if it becomes public, none of you will get a cent,” Martin said.

“Then we all agree,” Blair said. “None of us want any of what's gone on tonight to be made public.”

Martin shook his head slowly. “I can't just snap my fingers and make two hundred and fifty thousand dollars appear out of thin air. You understand that, don't you?”

“We know Martin, but we also know what a resourceful guy you must be,” Travis said. In the last few minutes they had taken to saying Martin's name aloud whenever addressing him, perhaps as an unconscious reminder of who they were now dealing with. “I'm sure you've had to resolve insurmountable problems like this before. I doubt this is the first time you've had to scrounge together a large sum of money to get yourself out of a tight spot.”

“Even if I could get that much, it’s the middle of the night,” Martin said. “It’s not like I have bundles of cash lying around my house for moments like this.”

“It doesn’t have to be cash,” Aimee said. “You can pay us in goods of equivalent value. Be creative.”

“We accept jewelry, watches, credit cards,” Travis said. “Anything, really. We’re not fussy.”

Blair leaned forward, moving close to Martin’s ear. “And we really like your car.”

Even though this violated their own rules, Travis, Aimee and Blair had come to an unspoken but unanimous agreement to squeeze as much out of Martin Krauth as possible. The moment they found out who he was and what he was worth, they stopped thinking about the four thousand dollars they were about to receive, and they started thinking about the hundreds of thousands they were potentially missing out on by letting him go for such a pittance. They were hellbent on getting that money. They *deserved* it. Maybe it was because they didn’t know how much longer they could keep this scam up, and tonight could be their one and only chance at striking it rich.

Or maybe they were still embarrassed by the way Martin had managed to deceive them for as long as he had. They all went into this under the misapprehension that he was “Gregor”, some lonely, depressed, vulnerable man desperate to make a connection with another human being. Instead he was “Martin”, and he was just another obscenely wealthy pervert looking to slum it for a night on the wrong side of town. He had spun them a story, and they swallowed it hook, line and sinker. It was only due to luck that they uncovered the truth.

It was a blow to their egos that they could be so easily duped when it was supposed to be the other way around.

Chapter 12

"I can't believe I've never heard of this guy before," Blair said. He had been draining his phone's battery for the past couple of hours, gathering as much information as he could about Martin Krauth. "He's responsible for some of the biggest films in recent years. He was ranked number eleven on *The Hollywood Reporter's* list of the one hundred most powerful people. He has a thirty million dollar Malibu mansion, and a whole fleet of Lamborghinis and Bugattis."

Aimee ran her finger along the exquisite woodgrain ornamentation on the dash. "This must be what he drives when he wants to go incognito," she said.

"He flies around in his own private jet – a Gulfstream IV. And he once dated Skylar Valdez."

Travis raised an eyebrow. "The *Sports Illustrated* model?"

"Yeah. No offense Aimee, but it makes you wonder what he was doing here tonight."

"Oh, I'm glad you put 'no offense' in there Blair," Aimee said. "That instantly negates any insult that comes after it."

Blair scrolled further down the page. "It's strange though, isn't it? I mean, why would a guy like that be trawling Tinder when he can get just about any woman he wants?"

"A lot of these Hollywood types are into weird stuff," Travis said. "The bigger they are, the more money they have, the greater the chance of them being some sort of deviant. It's the Hugh Grant or Anthony Wiener effect. For them, the risk of getting caught with some random trick is probably a bigger thrill than scoring with a swimsuit model."

"You were meant to say 'no offense' before you described your girlfriend as some random trick," Aimee said.

Travis offered a semi-apologetic shrug, then looked at his watch. It was late, coming up to two a.m. Fatigue and restlessness were rapidly bearing down on them all.

Martin had been gone so long they were starting to wonder if he was ever coming back. He said he had to go make a few calls to arrange their payment, but for all they knew he was on the phone to his lawyers and publicists, preparing to unleash the full force of his power and influence upon them.

Travis shifted around in his seat. There was something about Martin's prolonged absence that unsettled him. This was different from all their previous jobs – there were never any surprises with those, and very little deviation from night to night. Here, they were swimming in uncharted waters. None of them really had any idea of what to expect.

It was only now, during these quiet moments when he had time to think things over, that he realized they didn't hold quite as much power as he initially assumed. He didn't know the first thing about leaking a damaging video to the press. They had never gone public with any of their scams, because they'd never had to. Every target had immediately agreed to pay up. In any event, their only ammunition was a muffled voice recording and some blurry out-of-focus footage, shot from a distance. Martin wasn't clearly identified in the vision; it could be anyone

sitting in the car. Besides, would a scandal like this even hurt his career that much? He may have a high profile, but it wasn't like he was a politician or the star of a family-friendly television show. It might be a news story for a day or two, but with an entire media conglomerate at his disposal he could surely find some way to spin the story and minimize any damage.

Even if they could successfully leak the footage, it would probably end up hurting them more in the long run. Once word of their antics got out, it would be so much harder to lure anyone else into their trap. Everyone would be wise to their scam. They would effectively be shooting themselves in the foot, destroying their own lucrative form of income just to punish this one person.

Travis was beginning to suspect that Martin had called their bluff. Maybe he had seen some angle the others hadn't.

"We could have gone higher with our demands," Blair said. He had moved on to a *Forbes* article, and was practically salivating as he read about Martin's heady, indulgent lifestyle. "A lot higher. This guy is richer than God. We could have squeezed more money out of him."

Aimee glanced over her shoulder. "Are you saying a quarter of a million dollars isn't enough for one night of work?"

"I just think we should have gone for the full million."

Travis coughed out a laugh. "Oh, please. You're delusional if you think that's even remotely possible."

"Do you have any idea how rich Martin Krauth is?" Blair said. "He's worth at least four hundred million. We could have got it, easy."

"No, we couldn't," Aimee said. "That's far too unrealistic. Besides, where is he going to get a million dollars from at this time of night?"

"Try thinking outside the box, Aimee. This doesn't have to be a one-night job like all the others. We can give him a few days to get it all together."

"What, you expect him to just hand over a briefcase full of cash?"

Blair shrugged. "Well, why not?"

"For one, it's pretty difficult to withdraw a million dollars without drawing attention to yourself."

"Okay, so he doesn't have to pay us in cash. He can do it some other way. A bank transfer or something."

"Oh, so now you want the FBI involved too?"

"What does the FBI have to do with anything?"

"Any large sums of money shifted into an account are immediately deemed suspicious. The FBI red flags transactions like that since there's a high chance of it being drug money."

"Okay, fine, not a transfer. But I'm sure there's some way we could manage it."

As Aimee and Blair carried on arguing, Travis felt his eyelids getting heavy. He rested his head against the window and closed his eyes. The voices around him slowly faded into the background.

The front door then opened, and he jolted wide awake. Martin climbed behind the wheel.

The door slammed shut and the car's engine started up. It took Travis a few seconds to remember where he was and what was happening. His head was a little cloudy. He blinked several times. He didn't think he had fallen asleep, but he knew he hadn't been fully awake either.

The clock on the dash now said it was 2:47 a.m.

The Lexus pulled out onto the road. Martin still hadn't spoken. Neither had anyone else. Travis looked across to Blair, who seemed to be waiting for him to take the lead. He guessed he wasn't the only one in the car to have nodded off.

"Well?" Travis said, struggling to suppress a yawn.

Martin stared straight ahead. He took a left and turned onto the main road. Travis wasn't sure if he had heard his question, or if he was deliberately being ignored.

"Do you have the money or not?" Travis said after a short period of deliberation.

"It's all been taken care of," Martin finally said. "You'll get your money."

A few drops of rain hit the car. Martin flicked the windscreen wipers on.

"In cash?" Blair said.

The Lexus accelerated as it overtook a semitrailer. The three passengers felt their bodies being pushed back in their seats.

"You'll get your money," Martin repeated.

After twenty-two minutes of silent driving, the Lexus veered off the road and traveled down a long and narrow driveway. The three passengers viewed their surroundings with a nervous apprehension. The driveway seemed endless, at least four or five miles long. Fifty foot fir trees towered above them on either side. Headlights from the passing traffic on the road behind gradually faded away.

They came to stop in front of a ten foot high wrought iron gate. The engine was shut off, and an oppressive silence took hold. The only sound now was the light rain hitting the roof, and Martin's disconcertingly loud breathing.

Travis took a moment to study Martin, seated directly in front of him. He couldn't have failed to notice the marked change in his demeanor upon his return. He wasn't able to pinpoint what it was exactly, only that he appeared to be an entirely different person. He was darker and moodier. Much more intense. It was all in the way he spoke, the way he carried himself. The meek and mild-mannered man they had met earlier was nowhere to be found. In addition to being a successful studio executive, Martin Krauth appeared to be a fairly decent actor.

Through the bars in the gate in front of them he could just make out the outline of a building. It

was a massive, castle-sized structure. The kind of residence one would expect Bill Gates to call home.

“What is this place?” Travis said. “Is this where you live?”

“You don’t need to know that,” came Martin’s curt reply.

Another lengthy silence. The Lexus was starting to feel like a locked cage. Travis felt his breathing become more rapid. He tried to silence the paranoia creeping into the back of his mind. Despite the massive amount of money they stood to gain, he was quickly getting cold feet about this whole endeavor. He wasn’t able to pinpoint what it was that made him feel this way, only that something about this didn’t sit right. Something jarred. Something that told him he no longer had control of the situation.

A phone shrieked at what sounded like a hundred and fifty decibels. Travis visibly flinched at the unexpected disruption. His pulse rate spiked.

Martin answered without speaking. He listened for a few seconds, then hung up.

He turned to face the back seat. “We’re done here,” he said. “The deal’s off. Get out of my car. Now.”

A moment passed, before Blair let out a reflexive laugh. “I don’t think so.”

Martin’s face remained unchanged, completely without emotion. “I won’t ask again,” he said. “I want you to leave now and never contact me again.”

“Maybe we didn’t explain ourselves properly,” Blair said. “Because you don’t seem to understand how this all works.”

Martin glared at the two brothers in a way that seemed to look straight through them. “I understand perfectly. I think it’s you who has failed to grasp the gravity of this situation.”

Travis felt a chill take hold of him. That was all he needed to hear to want to bail. He tugged at his brother’s arm. “Come on. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Are you crazy?” Blair said, shrugging him off. “After all we’ve gone through tonight, you’re willing to leave empty-handed just because this guy told us to?”

“I think he’s right,” Aimee said. She too had picked up on the darkened vibe that had invaded the car these last few minutes. “Let’s go.”

Martin turned his head. “Not you,” he said quietly. “We have plans for you.”

“Hey, we’re not going anywhere until we get what we agreed on,” Blair said. His voice was rising, completely oblivious to the imminent danger creeping up on them. “We know you’re a big shot and you’re not afraid to throw your weight around, but you seem to have forgotten that we give you the orders, not—”

Both back doors opened before another word could be spoken. Travis looked up. He saw they were not alone. Multiple dark figures surrounded the car. They seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

Fear pummeled into him like an out of control locomotive. He realized, much too late, that he

should have followed his gut instincts. They were in this way over their heads.

“Hey, whoa, whoa, hold on a second.” He threw his hands up in surrender. “Forget it, we’re leaving. We’ll just go and pretend none of this ever—”

There was a flash of light, and the car was rattled by a giant clap of thunder. The heavens opened and the downpour began.

Chapter 13

Imminent suffocation remained a very real threat for Aimee. The heavy burlap sack pressing against her face, the claustrophobic trunk she had been forcibly bundled into, and the diesel fumes leaking inside to pollute her oxygen supply all combined to make the simple act of breathing an endless struggle.

She was trapped inside the confines of this complete blackness, with no idea of where she was being taken or what these people planned on doing with her upon arrival. She could only assume they were heading far away from the city. The smoothness of the roads deteriorated the further they drove, and the sound of passing vehicles became less and less frequent.

Everything happened so fast that she'd barely had time to process any of it. She remembered the car doors opening behind her, followed by the twin eruptions of close-range gunfire. Next came the warm spray of blood across the side of her face, and the flash of panic that hit her like a cattle prod to the neck. Her instincts ordered her to run, but a near-eternity passed before this was communicated from her brain to her legs.

She flung the door open to make a break for it, but could take no more than two or three steps before she was confronted by the horde. She couldn't tell how many there were – probably no more than ten or fifteen, but at that moment it seemed like there were hundreds. She tried to escape but was quickly set upon and forced to the ground. The last thing she saw as the sack was pulled down over her head was the lifeless bodies of Travis and Blair in the back seat of the blood-drenched Lexus.

The car took a sharp turn, then drove along what sounded like a gravel road. It came to a stop a few minutes later. Everything became deathly silent. The only sound she could hear now was the heavy downpour pounding on the car, and the ever-present whine of tinnitus from the earlier gunshots.

The trunk popped open. She felt the cold drops of rain hit her body, and then two rough pairs of hands grabbing at her.

"Please let me go," she begged as she was hauled out. "Please ... I won't tell anyone about this, I promise."

She knew how pointless and feeble her words were, and that no one in their right mind would believe she wouldn't tell anyone about what had taken place tonight. But that was all she could think to say in the moment. She put up some token resistance as they dragged her along, thrashing her arms around and pushing her feet into the wet dirt, but her captors were so much bigger and stronger that she was simply wasting her energy.

She didn't have the slightest idea of where she was. She only knew that there were no telltale sounds one would associate with metropolitan life. No nearby traffic or any other human activity. No hum of power lines. Just cicadas and distant coyote howls. The city limits were many miles behind them.

She was led inside a building and dropped onto a splinter-strewn floor. Her hands were forced together, and what felt like a noose was slipped around her wrists. A second noose bound her

ankles together, and a thick rope was wrapped tight around her waist.

She felt her arms being yanked violently upwards, hoisting her to her feet via some sort of pulley system. The rope was pulled further. Her body stretched out like a medieval peasant on a rack, and her feet left the ground. She let out a pained yelp. Another yank, and her feet lifted up behind her. Her body became horizontal.

The sack was removed from her head, the coarse material scratching her face. Aimee gasped in lungfuls of fresh air.

“Please, just let me go,” she sobbed between breaths. “I’m begging you ... I’ll do anything you want ...”

Her pleas went ignored. Her pupils adjusted and she found herself hanging six feet off the ground.

The building was a crumbling stone structure with water leaking from the ceiling. Clumps of mold caked the walls. It smelled like a months-old bowl of citrus fruits. There was no electricity. The only light came from the half-dozen flaming torches mounted along the walls.

She wasn’t alone in the room. She was surrounded by at least thirty people, outfitted in identical charcoal-colored hooded robes. Each one stared at her with a dead look in their eyes. Their faces were completely vacant, devoid of any trace of life or emotion. A complete absence of humanity. It was as if part of their soul had vanished, leaving behind a mere shell of a human being.

The events leading up to this moment had generated so much confusion and distress in Aimee’s mind that it was a few minutes before the most peculiar aspect of this whole ordeal registered.

The strangest part was that beneath every one of these hoods was a face she recognized. One of these faces belonged to a national news anchor. Another belonged to a Grammy-winning R&B singer. There was a famous British comedian, and an international supermodel. Near the back was a Canadian pop star. To the front, a teen heartthrob from a massively-popular television drama.

These were more than just familiar faces. These were household names, people she had listened to on her iPod and watched on cinema screens. It was a gathering one might expect to find in the VIP section of Aubaine Manor, not in some derelict building hundreds of miles from civilization.

Standing in front of all these people, flanked by the late-night talk show host and the director of blockbuster superhero movies, was Martin Krauth.

“Thank you all for coming at such short notice,” he said, addressing the assembled group. “And thank you for being present for what I’m sure will be a momentous occasion. Many years have passed since our divine leader last performed a ceremony such as this, so I trust you are all as honored as I am to have been invited to participate.”

He walked to a door at the rear of the room and knocked three times. A hedgehog-sized rat scurried past, disappearing into a hole in the wall.

The door creaked open, and the group's elderly leader emerged. He moved with a stooped gait, wearing a robe identical to that of his followers. The crowd parted as he hobbled towards the center of the room. His frail body was propped up with a length of rusted pipe that he used as a walking stick. His hands and legs trembled with every movement.

A sudden chill passed through the room. Aimee's body shuddered upon the abrupt drop in temperature. Her skin turned to braille, and her breath billowed out in front of her. The torches flickered, the flames close to being extinguished.

The leader stood before Aimee and pulled his hood back. The light from the still-shimmering torches cast an eerie glow across his time-ravaged face. Tufts of unruly white hair poked out from either side of his scalp. A scraggly beard covered the lower half of his face.

Aimee was struck by a flash of recognition. She was certain she knew him from somewhere, but she wasn't able to place him. She ransacked her memory for a positive match. Who was this man? He could have been a veteran actor, or perhaps an aging country music star who had receded from the limelight in recent years.

And then it hit her. He wasn't some random celebrity, like all of his followers. This wasn't anyone with great power or influence – at least as far as she knew. This was that old homeless man. The lunatic she often saw loitering around liquor stores and ranting at passing cars. The one who ate out of dumpsters and screamed obscenities at anyone foolish enough to come within spitting distance of him.

This was Jefferson Slade.

Chapter 14

Rumors about the Dawn of the Two Divides, the bizarre mythical sect operating on Hollywood's darkest fringes, had circulated for many years. Tales of the cult's existence were almost as old as the town itself, although few took any of it too seriously. Much of the chatter came from bitter unemployed actors, convinced that a rival must have sold their soul (or done something equally unconscionable) in order to land a highly-coveted role. No solid proof existed to suggest the cult was anything but fictitious.

And yet the rumors refused to die. Whenever an unknown actor or performer burst onto the scene, appearing in four or five high-profile productions in quick succession and landing on the cover of a dozen different magazines, speculation surrounding their accelerated rise to fame inevitably followed. Was it all due to talent, smart management and extraordinarily good fortune? Or had some sort of sinister interference taken place?

The legend went that as soon as one signed their life over to the Dawn of the Two Divides they were placed on a fast-track to superstardom. Membership would afford privileges available only to a select few. Talentless actors would be cast in the most prestigious and in-demand roles. Tone-deaf singers were transformed into chart-topping pop stars. Unremarkable performances would be showered with countless awards and universal acclaim.

And producers of low-budget, straight-to-DVD B-movies would enjoy meteoric career ascents, rising to become the head of a major movie studio and one of the industry's most powerful players.

The secret society allowed its members to live in an exclusive world far removed from everyday reality, with anything and everything they could possibly desire available at the tips of their fingers. Every conceivable hedonistic indulgence was catered to, and real-world consequences did not apply.

It also worked to shield any member from controversy. A single phone call was all it took to make a potentially career-ending scandal disappear and never be spoken of again. Its tentacles were long and far-reaching, its anonymous puppet-masters controlling and manipulating every facet of the entertainment industry.

On the flip side, anyone who fell out of favor with the cult by causing trouble or threatening to go public swiftly found themselves excommunicated. Their reputation was trashed and they were banished back to obscurity, their life and career destroyed beyond all repair.

The cost of admission may have been steep, with each new member forced to give themselves over to the cult completely and participate in a series of degrading rituals to prove their dedication, but there was never any shortage of applicants. For the thousands upon thousands of wannabes who flocked to Hollywood each year seeking fame and fortune, the price was never too high. If you wanted to succeed, if you wanted membership to the world's most exclusive club – the A-list – you simply had to be prepared to do the kinds of things that no one else would.

Of course, these were all just unsubstantiated rumors that most intelligent people paid little attention to. The stories were largely dismissed as the product of fevered imaginations, the

kind dreamed up by tinfoil turban-wearing fantasists who blogged about government mind-control experiments and called late-night talk radio shows to rant about the reptilian race secretly ruling the planet.

Several investigative journalists had looked into the existence of the cult, but gave up when they were unable to uncover a single trace of evidence.

Aimee's nightmare continued as she tumbled deeper and deeper down this dark and disturbing rabbit hole. Here she was, dangling helplessly in mid-air, surrounded by a group of major celebrities blindly following the teachings of a certified lunatic. That lunatic was a homeless man who dressed in rags and smelled of compost. Somehow, incredibly, he had the entire group under his spell, exerting a kind of hypnotic power over them. In her head she sifted through the many absurd possibilities as to how this could have happened. Mind control? Had everyone there been drugged and brainwashed? Nothing her rational mind could conjure up seemed even remotely plausible.

The skin on her arms burned like an acid attack. The ropes dug deep into her wrists and ankles, cutting off the blood flow. Her limbs felt like they were about to be wrenched from their sockets.

Jefferson Slade turned to face his followers. A hush descended as they all waited for him to speak.

"This room is filled with sinners!" he announced. His voice had more power and volume than one might expect from a man of such advanced age and slight build. "This entire world is filled with sinners! We are nothing but the bastard spawn of a dangerous and ungodly society! Temptation lurks behind every corner! The wicked one sets his traps, luring in more and more innocent souls every day with his nefarious ways! But it's not too late to repent."

He stabbed the rusty pipe into the air as he emphasized each point.

"Tonight, you can all be set free," he continued. "You have been blessed with an ocean of material riches, but you now have the opportunity to advance to the next stage of spiritual prosperity." He aimed the pipe at Aimee. "Brother Martin has delivered us this whore to be cleansed. Only by driving the demons from her body will true salvation be within your reach."

Jefferson turned to Martin Krauth. "Step forward, Brother Martin," he said.

Martin shuffled a few steps closer. Jefferson offered the pipe in his outstretched hands. His ninety-three year old arms trembled under the weight of the heavy implement.

"We are here tonight because of you, therefore you may have the honor of being absolved first."

Martin tentatively accepted the pipe. He studied it for a short moment, then wrapped his palms tight around one end, gripping it like a baseball bat. He looked up at Aimee.

"No, Martin ..." she whimpered. Her eyes conveyed a desperate pleading. She didn't know what was happening here, or what they were going to do with her, but she knew it wouldn't be pleasant. "Please ... please don't do this."

"Commence the cleanse!" Jefferson commanded.

Martin swung the pipe back behind his head. "*Ave domini inferni!*" he boomed.

"Martin, no!" Aimee shouted.

Her pleas went ignored, and the pipe slammed hard into Aimee's torso. The sound of her ribs cracking echoed through the otherwise silent building. A hot blade of pain unlike anything she had ever experienced screamed through her entire body. A blood-curdling wail of anguish tore from her mouth.

"*Ave domini inferni!*" Martin repeated, swinging the pipe back for a second hit. It smashed even harder into Aimee's shoulder. Her collarbone snapped like a dry twig.

"*Ave domini inferni!*"

Another crack, and another piercing scream of agony as Aimee felt her spleen rupture.

"Do not stop!" Jefferson ordered. "Evilness lies within her being!"

"*Ave domini inferni!*"

The pipe smashed into Aimee's face. Her jaw was decimated, and several teeth knocked loose. Part of her tongue became severed. Some of the cultists flinched at this most confronting display of brutality. But none looked away.

"You must show her no mercy!" Jefferson demanded. "The demons must be driven from her! She must be made pure!"

"*Ave domini inferni!*"

Another crack, this one across her leg. Her right fibula fractured. Tears bled from her eyes. Every brutal hit was felt in every one of her body's nerve endings, the pain refusing to cede.

"You must destroy the demons to save yourself!" Jefferson said.

"*Ave domini inferni!*"

Martin lined up Aimee's head. He swung the pipe back.

Aimee squeezed her eyes closed in preparation for the blow that, with any luck, would be the final one. The hit that would end her misery and bring this horrid nightmare to an end.

But it never came. Instead, there was a loud *thump* as the pipe hit the floor.

An abrupt rush of air swept through the room. A *whoosh*, like something sucked into a powerful vacuum.

She opened her eyes. Jefferson and his followers were still in place. But Martin was nowhere to be seen.

A desperate silence followed.

"Brother Martin has achieved absolution!" Jefferson proclaimed to the room. "He has departed this mortal earth and is on his way to eternal paradise!"

The assembled followers watched on in incredulity. None of them were entirely sure what they

had just witnessed. It looked like some sort of magic trick, but that was simply not possible. This was no illusion. There were no trapdoors in this rickety old building. There was no questioning the authenticity of what they saw.

Martin Krauth had disappeared. He had literally vanished into thin air, right before their eyes. All that remained was his robe and his clothes, in a pile on the floor where he last stood.

A moment passed as this all sunk in.

“Those who wish to join him know exactly what you must do,” Jefferson said. “You need to reserve your place in the kingdom of infinite riches!”

The robed followers remained in their spots as if held in place by magnets. Everyone was too stunned to react, too reticent to be the first to act.

“Hurry!! Before it’s too late!”

The talk show host was the first to move. He sprung forward to snatch up the pipe from the floor. “*Ave domini inferni!*” he shouted.

He swung the pipe into Aimee’s body. She heard and then felt the crunch as her shattered ribs were further pulverized.

This triggered a free-for-all as the rest of the group fell into line. The followers tore the room apart, looking for anything heavy enough to be used as a weapon. An old seat was destroyed to produce a number of crude batons and clubs. The teen heartthrob uncovered a wooden fence stake with several sharp nails sticking out. Floorboards were torn up. A Golden Globe-winning actor removed his sock and filled it with heavy stones. Everyone hurried to get a piece of the action while they still had the chance.

“*Ave domini inferni!*” they shouted as they joined in the mass clubbing.

The blows were as vicious as they were unrelenting. There was nothing Aimee could do as she became a human pinata for this group of Hollywood cultists, this twisted showbiz Illuminati, all hellbent on securing their spot in heaven. The beatings were inexorable and came from every angle, twisting her body out of shape until it ceased to resemble anything human. She reached a point where shock set in and the pain no longer registered. An all-encompassing numbness had taken over.

Whoosh! The talk show host vanished through the floor, leaving behind a messy pile of clothes.

The followers paused momentarily, then resumed their frantic pummeling. The hits came harder and harder, each assailant well aware of their rapidly-shrinking window of opportunity. The fear of being left behind grew with each passing second.

Whoosh! The supermodel disappeared.

Whoosh! The Canadian pop star went next.

Blood poured from Aimee’s mouth at a frightening rate, the result of her broken teeth and severe internal bleeding. Her whole body going into shutdown. She was as limp as a rag doll, barely grasping onto her final threads of consciousness.

Jefferson Slade observed his fanatical crew of devotees from afar, impassive save for the wicked, black-toothed grin spread across his jaundiced face. The flicker from the torches lent his eyes a glowing, almost reddish quality. The multiple sources of light cast numerous shadows against the crumbling brick walls.

In the midst of her delirium, Aimee would experience one final, brief moment of lucidity. It would last only a couple of seconds, but it was long enough for one particular detail to catch her eye.

A strange illusion was projected against the far wall, directly behind where Jefferson stood. It was his shadow. It appeared to show two small pointed horns protruding from the top of his head; perfect half-moon crescents on either side. There was a perfectly logical explanation for this – it was the two unruly tufts of hair sticking out from Jefferson's otherwise bald scalp that created this odd impression.

But there was no logical reason, as far as she could tell, as to why the silhouette also appeared to show him with a spiked tail.

Or why each robe and pile of clothes left behind from the absolved celebrities was encircled by a thin, barely-noticeable ring of fire.

Whoosh! Two more followers commenced their journey into the next world, evaporating with a tiny puff of smoke.

As Jefferson Slade's rabid disciples transitioned into the afterlife, and as Aimee moved closer and closer towards taking her final breath, she consoled herself with the knowledge that each of these followers was likely to end up in the opposite place to where they thought they were going.

The last thing Aimee would see was the British comedian lifting a bowling ball-sized rock above his head, and the last thing she would hear was his voice screaming, "*Ave domini inferni!*" at the top of his lungs.

The rock crashed down on top of her skull. The comedian was sucked into the floor, and the ceremony finally ended.

PART III.

**THE SHARPEST KNIVES
IN
THE DRAWER**

Chapter 15

The Santa Monica headquarters of Michael Bay's Platinum Dunes production company were exactly as Cameron Knight and Eric Haas had pictured them. It was as if a thirteen year old boy had won first prize in the lottery shortly after he stopped taking his Ritalin medication. The walls were covered with one-sheets from his many blockbuster films – *Armageddon*, *Bad Boys*, *Transformers*, *The Rock* – alongside framed photographs of the director posing with a who's who of Hollywood royalty.

Four life-sized Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stood watch in each corner of Michael Bay's main office, a room bigger than many family homes. A row of vintage pinball machines occupied space against a far wall. Glossy catalogs advertising the very latest in luxury sports cars were spread across a coffee table that doubled as a retro Galaga arcade game. His MTV Movie Award and a gold-plated Optimus Prime figurine both adorned his mantelpiece. His Saturn Award took pride of place at the center of his solid Balinese cedar desk, while his two Golden Raspberries doubled as paperweights.

Cameron and Eric were still a little overwhelmed by the sensory overload of their garish surroundings, and had failed to notice that the A-list director, who was also producing the film they had been hired to write, had reached the final page of their completed screenplay. It wasn't until they heard the dull thud of it landing on his desk that they realized he had finished.

An uneasy silence gripped the room. Eric's stomach knotted as he awaited Michael's response. Cameron eyeballed the floor in front of him.

"Well," Michael began. "I can honestly say I've never read anything quite like that before."

Half-smiles appeared on both writers' faces, until the ambiguity of the preceding statement became apparent. Was he saying he liked it? Hated it? It was impossible to tell; the vacant look on Michael's face gave nothing away. It was an expression of pure ambivalence, the same one he wore when he played *Candy Crush Saga* on his phone.

"Much of the writing here is very good," Michael continued. "Exceptional, even. But I have to be honest with you; it's not exactly what I had in mind."

Cameron and Eric traded sideways glances.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by that," Eric said.

"Well for a start ..." Michael flicked through a few pages of the script. "It's a little full-on with the highbrow literary references, don't you think? Proust, Dante, Camus, Kafka, Greek mythology. You guys really threw everything in there."

"Sure, but our aim was to write something a little more intellectually stimulating," Cameron said. "Too many films these days speak down to their audience. They treat them as fools with low IQs and infinitesimal attention spans. It's a trend that's been ongoing for some time, and we were hoping to arrest that slide."

"I can appreciate that," Michael said. "I'm just not sure it's right for this particular film. You know ... a *horror* film."

“We acknowledge we haven’t delivered what might be termed a traditional horror narrative. What we’ve attempted is more of a ...” Cameron paused as he tried to conjure up the appropriate adjective. “... a more *impressionistic* take on the genre.”

“The horror is *implicit* rather than *explicit*,” Eric added. “Which, in our opinion, makes it all the more terrifying. See, at the beginning of the film our protagonist enters into a kind of Faustian pact. She wants to be successful. She craves fame. There’s nothing she’s not willing to do to make this happen. And then it *does* happen, only it happens in a way she could have never predicted. So by the end of the film, when she’s being followed by news cameras and hounded by the press, she comes to realize the true cost of this unadulterated celebrity. Her humanity was lost in the process. Great wealth and worldwide fame may be coming her way, but she sold her soul to get there. The ultimate tragedy of the story is that she’s now going to die alone.”

Michael leaned back in his chair and heaved out a lungful of air. Cameron and Eric were both intelligent guys – talented writers, Ivy League graduates – but they were a little slow to pick up on what he was trying to say. He saw that he would have to be a little more direct with his words.

“Guys, it’s great that you’re trying to do something different,” he said. “There will always be room in Hollywood for creativity and original ideas. But you have been hired to write the screenplay for *Wrong Turn*. It’s not a reimaging of Shakespeare or Chekov, or whatever else you studied previously. It’s a movie about horny co-eds getting drunk and getting it on in the woods before being terrorized by a bunch of inbred cannibals. It’s a remake of a film starring that chick from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and that other chick from that one Hinder video. It’s dumb, unpretentious slasher stuff. You know, spikes penetrating heads. Bones being snapped in half. Hot young women disrobing, then being dismembered and disemboweled. In other words, a film your average fifteen year old boy wants to watch with his friends. Not one that reminds him of his homework.”

Seconds passed as Cameron and Eric took this all in.

“We were only trying to raise the bar a little,” Eric said.

“With all due respect, you’re looking at someone whose films have grossed seven-point-three billion dollars worldwide. That didn’t happen by any bars being raised. That happened by knowing what the audience wanted to see and then giving it to them. And I get that you both dropped six figures on your college education and you now want to show off everything you’ve learned, but there’s a time and a place for that sort of thing and it’s not here.”

“I think this is exactly the place to do it,” Cameron said, a defensive tone entering his voice. “Maybe there are fifteen year old boys out there sick and tired of being served up the same thing week in week out.” His volume increased. “Maybe they want something that *won’t* insult their intelligence for a change.”

Eric jumped in before Cameron could work himself up any further. “I think what Cameron is trying to say is that we wanted to respect our audience.”

“Like I said, if you really want to respect your audience you should give them exactly what they want,” Michael said. “Not what you think they *should* want.”

“You know what, Michael, maybe *you’re* the one who’s out of touch with modern audiences,” Cameron said. “Our friends have read this script, and they all thought it was brilliant.”

Michael smirked. “I’m sure they did. But I doubt there’s a great deal of overlap between the people you socialize with and the typical cinemagoer. Your friends won’t be lining up for tickets on opening weekend. The Comic-Con crowd will be, and so that’s the demographic we have to cater to.”

Painful silence was followed by more painful silence as Michael’s blunt assessment sunk in. Cameron and Eric could only squirm in their seats as the sense of defeat descended upon them.

“Look, this isn’t the end of the world,” Michael continued. “This is what first drafts are for – experimenting with new ideas, seeing what works, ironing out the kinks and so on. Now we just have to throw out everything that doesn’t work, which is most of it, and take another stab at it.”

He chuckled at his unintentional pun.

“Let’s see if you can come up with a script that doesn’t require Cliff Notes to understand. Aim for something that’ll play at the multiplexes rather than the art houses. Get the page count down to under one-twenty, because this ...” He lifted the two hundred and seventeen page doorstop up off his desk. “*This* is basically unfilmable. I may as well put forty million dollars in a pile and set fire to it.”

The door opened and Michael’s assistant, a willowy young blonde, poked her head inside. Eric recognized her as the woman they had encountered shortly after they arrived. She was in the car park, washing Michael’s Porsche 918 while wearing a skimpy pink bikini.

“Michael, you have a delivery you must sign for,” she said in a lilting Russian accent.

“Not right now, Liliya,” he said.

“It is that new robot butler you have ordered. It has arrived now from Japan.”

“What?” Michael leaped out of his chair. “Why didn’t you say so? Send it it, send it in!”

He power-walked to the door.

“And for God’s sake, take all that religious symbolism out of your script,” he said before leaving. “Trust me on that. Religion is the one hornet’s nest you definitely do *not* want to poke.”

Platinum Dunes had recently purchased the intellectual property rights to a stack of horror titles, many of dubious quality, including *Wrong Turn*, *Urban Legend*, *Re-Animator*, *Candyman*, *Hellraiser*, *Final Destination*, *Child’s Play* and *Leprechaun*. Michael Bay planned on producing an entire a series of films that took place in an interconnected world he dubbed the Platinum Dunes Cinematic Universe. Heroes and villains from the various titles would cross over and make cameos in each other’s films, and a teaser for the next release in the series would appear during the post-credits sting.

This was part of a wider industry trend, described by some commentators as a new and exciting way of immersing the audience and extending the boundaries of traditional

storytelling, and derided by others as a gluttonous cash-grab and the death knell of original cinema. *Wrong Turn* was scheduled to be the first release as part of the Platinum Dunes Cinematic Universe.

Remakes and reboots had become increasingly common in recent years, to the point where it was almost impossible to get any film produced that wasn't already associated with a recognizable brand. Horror films in particular were often repackaged and resold with little regard for quality before being hawked to undiscerning viewers. The fact that remade horror movies rarely matched or improved on their source material – it was difficult for a film to build tension and scare an audience when a familiar plot was being rehashed – did little to deter studios from attempting to revive many classics of the genre.

The 1980s was an especially fertile period that had been mined over and over. Remakes of films from this era were often aimed at millennials, whose limited knowledge of the world outside their own made them ignorant of anything pre-2000, and largely unaware they were watching reheated entertainment.

However, the biggest market for these remakes was actually their Generation X parents, who were part of an aging demographic stubbornly resistant to new experiences. The nostalgia boom had reached supernova levels in recent years to the point where it had now morphed into a genre in itself. Few could have predicted that an entire generation of eighties-reared children would grow up to lead such empty and unfulfilling lives that it would create this unprecedented collective yearning for simpler times. Life had become an endless series of disappointments for many who came of age during the Reagan era, and as adults they desperately clung to their warm childhood memories rather than taking the risk of seeking out something new or different.

Less common in the subgenre of horror remakes, but with several notable successes, was the English-language adaptation of foreign titles. These films were often reshaped and remolded to be made palatable for Western audiences, giving them a quick coat of Hollywood gloss and removing elements that Americans may find objectionable – subtitles, restraint, pacing, and provocative or confronting themes – and adding a cast of recognizable stars. The remade films often had plots that were less confusing, as the American director and screenwriters would spell out any ambiguous story points or resolutions that may have previously been left open to interpretation. In the case of Asian remakes, white audiences had less trouble following the story now that the characters no longer looked alike.

Chapter 16

A look of demented pleasure was plastered across the killer's abscess- and wart-ravaged face as he taunted the terrified cheerleader with the red hot poker. He grinned a toothless smile, amused by her futile attempts to free herself. He knew she wasn't going anywhere. The rusty spikes driven through her hands would see to that.

"Please ..." she begged, tiny rivers of mascara running down her cheeks. "Please let me go ... I promise I won't tell anyone ..."

The killer paid no attention to the cheerleader's desperate pleas. He let out a laugh of pure evil as he forced the glowing poker into her eye socket.

Cameron felt his stomach contract at the moment of impact. His nerves were in ribbons. He had to physically force himself to not look away as the camera zoomed in on the blood and puréed eyeball gushing down the cheerleader's face.

He glanced across to Eric, sitting beside him on the sofa, clutching a cushion the way a toddler might hug a favorite blanket. He looked in even worse shape, with the pallid complexion of someone who had involuntarily swallowed a gallon of curdled milk.

"Are you okay?" Cameron said. "You don't look too good."

"Do people actually enjoy watching this stuff?" Eric said.

"These kind of films make money, apparently. This one made almost two hundred million off a three million dollar budget, so I guess that means they have enough viewers."

Eric swallowed, forcing down the bile pushing at the back of his throat. "I'm not sure I have the constitution to handle this level of gore," he said. "I honestly have no idea how anyone could derive pleasure from something like this."

"Maybe it's not meant to be enjoyed. Maybe it's more like an endurance test. See if you can make it through to the end without vomiting or passing out."

They watched in silence a little while longer. Cameron absentmindedly tapped his pen against his notepad. So far he had "IDEAS" written at the top of the page, underlined twice. Beneath that was blank, save for some doodling scrawled in the margins. Attempting to write anything would have been pointless anyway, due to the debilitating tremor that had taken over his hands ten minutes into the movie.

Following on from their disastrous meeting at Platinum Dunes, Cameron and Eric realized they would have to do some extensive research into the genre they were meant to be writing about before attempting the next draft. Their first task was to go through the Netflix library and review as many horror titles as they could, one by one. They began with the slashers of the seventies and eighties; mostly trashy exploitation flicks with amateurish production values and plots so interchangeable they may as well have been the same movie with different titles tacked on. Next up was the post-modernism and arch irony of nineties horror, where it became acceptable to laugh at innocent people being brutally slaughtered if the characters occasionally winked at the camera and made reference to how the events surrounding them

resembled that of a horror film.

Found footage films, the turn of the millennium fad that proved to be a goldmine for studios, came next. This gimmick allowed films to be produced and released into cinemas without having to worry about budgets, proper scripts, professional equipment, cinematography, high production values or competent actors.

They then reached the genre's nadir with the early twenty-first century subgenre known as "torture porn". If nothing else, the label was accurate – sitting through one of these cinematic abominations was about as much fun as being waterboarded, and, as with actual pornography, the filmmakers left very little to the imagination.

The past few weeks had been nothing short of brutal for the two writers. Along with rewatching all seven *Wrong Turn*'s, they had suffered through three *Hostel*'s, eight *Saw*'s, five *I Spit On Your Grave*'s, three *Human Centipede*'s, three *The Hills Have Eyes*'s, and countless other *Halloween*'s, *Friday the 13th*'s and *Nightmare On Elm Street*'s. At one point they decided to broaden their palette and sample some Japanese horror. They figured that Asian directors might offer something a little more nuanced and less grotesque than what they'd subjected themselves to up until then. They were wrong. The Japanese, they soon discovered, were every bit as deranged as their Western counterparts. And that was before they stumbled across the collective works of a certified psychotic by the name of Takashi Miike. After viewing several of Mr. Miike's films, Cameron and Eric decided that filmmaking in Japan may actually be a form of therapy for deeply disturbed mental patients.

The emotional toll of all this murder and mutilation was starting to show. Both were having trouble sleeping at night, and they worried what effect these films were having on their sanity. Watching such extreme violence for entertainment purposes was surely detrimental to their mental health. They could only imagine what was going through the minds of these writers as they dreamed up all this depravity.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. This was not what they wanted to be doing with their lives. They had journeyed to Hollywood with plans on shaking up the industry. They had seen what passed for writing in modern cinema and decided they had the talent to blow everyone else out of the water. Most movies these days appeared to have been penned by barely-literate hacks who couldn't tell the difference between a predicate and a preposition.

Their plan was simple but ambitious. They would spend five years whoring themselves out to the major studios, churning out a few formulaic scripts and making a couple of easy million, then leave while they were still on top. The money would allow them to spend the next decade or so doing what they really loved, which was writing their epic literary novels. Eric dreamed of following in the footsteps of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Stein by writing in Paris. Cameron planned on making Moscow his muse.

But it wasn't long before the harsh realities of life as a Hollywood screenwriter set in. Countless hours were invested into their spec scripts, and although everyone who read them agreed their writing showed flashes of brilliance, they were unable to convince any studios to take a chance on them. They kept hearing the same excuses over and over – they lacked the experience, the spec market had all but dried up, anything not based on a comic book or preexisting brand was a hard sell. They were unemployed, their trust funds were shrinking, and they were eventually forced to consider the unthinkable – working for Michael Bay.

They rejected the idea outright when their agent first raised it. Michael Bay was one of those populist directors they had always sneered at, despite neither one having seen any of his films (they took a similar attitude to the writing of Dan Brown and the music of Nickelback). It was only when they were reminded that they had yet to receive any paid work in the three years since arriving in Hollywood that they reluctantly agreed to take a meeting.

Much to their surprise, they found Michael easy to like. He was friendly, his enthusiasm for cinema was contagious, and he flattered them endlessly by praising their talents as writers. Even though they considered it beneath them, they eventually agreed to take on the job of writing *Wrong Turn*. The money was decent, and they figured it couldn't be that hard to crank out a generic slasher script in the space of a couple of months. They only needed one hit to springboard their careers, that one produced film with their name on the credits, and the rest of the plan would fall into place.

Only now were they discovering that writing the script was not quite as simple as they initially imagined.

On the TV, the killer dragged the cheerleader's now headless corpse into the basement. He placed her alongside his other victims, then disrobed in preparation for the necrophilic orgy.

"Do you think this is doing us any good?" Eric wondered aloud.

"I feel like it's helping," Cameron said. "We just have to give it some time."

"It feels to me like an exercise in extreme masochism."

"Well sometimes Eric, if you want to succeed, you have to do things you don't necessarily want to do," Cameron said, shifting his position on the sofa. "Step out of your comfort zone once in a while. Push yourself further than what you thought you were capable of."

Eric reviewed the list that he and Cameron had compiled during their month-long movie binge. It ran to seven pages, and included the following:

Cell phones with dead/dying batteries and/or poor reception.

Vehicles with engines that refuse to start at the worst possible moment.

The killer making a sudden appearance in the mirror.

Unhelpful and/or incompetent police officers.

Loud noises when trying to escape or avoid the killer (e.g. creaking floorboards, accidentally knocking something over).

A death scene that turns out to be a bad dream.

Falling over when trying to outrun the killer.

Jump scares every eight pages.

Female nudity every twelve pages.

A killer who refuses to die, no matter how much punishment (s)he takes.

A last-ditch, long-shot plan that the protagonist only just manages to pull off.

A false ending that sets up for a sequel.

The revelation that the killer is actually a manifestation of the protagonist's dissociative identity disorder.

The full document contained all the necessary elements for a commercial horror screenplay. This wasn't how they usually worked, and they preferred not to write with such narrow constraints placed upon them. But they felt this would be the best way to produce the kind of film that fans of the genre, as well as Michael Bay, would approve of.

They'd suffered through enough simulated gore to last several lifetimes. The time had come to put everything they'd learned into practice.

Eric opened his laptop and created a new Final Draft document. "Okay, where should we begin?" he said

Cameron peered over his shoulder. "I think 'Fade In' is usually a good starting point."

Eric cracked his knuckles, then began to peck away at the keys.

FADE IN:

EXT. WOODS -- DAY

We open on WILDERNESS. Miles and miles from the nearest town. The camera glides from above until we hit a DIRT ROAD, leading to a SMALL CLEARING among the thick terrain.

A group of five COLLEGE-AGED CAMPERS unload their gear from a silver SUV. SCOTT, 21, ruggedly handsome and the only one in the group who appears to know what he's doing, HAMMERS tent pegs into the hard grou

They were two minutes into the writing session when a deep thumping sound broke their concentration. Cameron and Eric both let out quiet groans. This was their new neighbor – some frustrated rock star who had moved in a couple of weeks earlier. In the short time he had been living there he had quickly become the neighborhood's number one irritant. When he wasn't inducing migraines and raising blood pressure levels by bashing away on his drum kit at all hours of the day and night, he was keeping the whole street awake by hosting wild parties that would rage for days on end.

Cameron got up and pulled all the windows closed. This did nothing to block out the noise. He stood at the window and looked out over the fence with his hands on his hips.

"What do you think we should do?" he said.

Eric tapped his fingers against the table. "Maybe it'll only be a short session this time."

"Yeah. Maybe."

A few more minutes went by with no further words committed to the page. Eric rose from his seat and walked to the door.

"I've had enough of this," he said. "I'm going over there."

"Eric, don't bother," Cameron said. "You know it won't do anything."

"We have to make a start on the script, and we can't concentrate with all that going on in the background."

"Just leave it. He's usually done after about an hour, anyway."

“If we put it off for another hour, something else will come up and we’ll never get any work done.” Eric pulled on his blazer and slid his feet into his Hudson Pierre loafers. “We’re working to a deadline, and we’re already falling behind. We have to stop making excuses and get this done.”

“Do you really think he’ll stop playing just because you ask him to?”

“I don’t know, but he definitely won’t stop if we just sit here and complain about it. Maybe if I ask nicely he’ll see to reason.”

“Sure, and maybe you’ll get the door slammed in your face.”

Eric shrugged. “We’ll never know unless one of us goes over there and finds out, will we?”

The neighbor’s front lawn was a mess, strewn with soggy pizza boxes, fast food wrappers, beer bottles, discarded items of clothing, and other assorted detritus. This was the remnants of last weekend’s party, the epic three-day rager that prevented anyone within a two mile radius from enjoying more than a few hours’ sleep per night. The one where the guests thought it would be a good idea to rev up a chainsaw at three o’clock on a Monday morning and cut open a beer keg.

Eric stepped through the gate and came to the front door. After a moment of hesitation, he rang the doorbell and waited.

There was no answer. The thump-thump-thump from inside continued. He tried again, and had the same result.

He pressed his finger to the doorbell and held it down. After two minutes of constant ringing, the drumming finally stopped and the door flew open.

“What?” the neighbor screamed.

The first thing Eric noticed about his neighbor was that he was about ten or fifteen years older than what he initially assumed. Up until now he had only ever seen him from a distance, and it was difficult to estimate his exact age. Now he saw that he was at least forty, maybe even older – although he appeared to be doing everything in his power to hide this fact. He still dressed like a twenty year old, with black drainpipe jeans and a tight tank top that showed off his heavily-inked arms and the beginnings of a middle-age paunch. Large black gauges stretched out both his ear lobes, and a red bandana covered what Eric suspected was a receding hairline. The smooth, pinched skin around the edges of his slightly puffy face suggested a fondness for Botox injections.

Eric thought he could guess this guy’s life story with a fair degree of accuracy. Here was someone who had come to LA years ago to make it as a rocker. He played in bands that enjoyed some fleeting success, gigging up and down Sunset Strip coupled with the occasional West Coast tour, but his career never really progressed beyond local legend status. Some of the other bands and musicians he supported would have gone on to bigger and better things, but ultimate success had always eluded him. Any money he made likely disappeared via his nostrils. Twenty years then flew by, and he was still plugging away in the vain hope that his big break was just around the corner. Desperation was slowly creeping in as his opportunities diminished, along with the growing realization that he was completely unqualified to do

anything else with his life except play the drums.

“Are you gonna say anything?” the neighbor sneered. “Or are you just gonna stare into space like you’re the world’s ugliest Ryan Gosling impersonator?”

“I-I was just wondering ... if it’s not too much trouble ...” An unexpected stammer had infected Eric’s voice. He didn’t know what it was about this guy that made him so nervous. Maybe it was the clenched fists and bug-eyed stare, affectations he seemed to have adopted to make it look like he was ready to fight at the slightest provocation. “If you w-wouldn’t mind keeping the noise down ...?”

The neighbor looked at Eric like he had just asked to borrow a large sum of money.

“It’s just that I’m a writer ... we’re both writers actually, my roommate and I, and, well, we have this big deadline coming up ... the noise, even though it sounds terrific, really tight and all that ... it, it kind of interferes with our creative process ...”

The neighbor displayed no reaction. Eric felt his face burn up. He pressed on.

“I’m sure that as an artist yourself y-you can appreciate how difficult it can be—”

The door closed before Eric could say any more. He felt the wind brush against his face as it slammed shut.

He briefly contemplated ringing the doorbell again and making a second attempt. This guy looked like he might enjoy the films of Michael Bay. Perhaps Eric could exploit that angle to sway him. But in the end, he decided it wasn’t worth the effort. He slowly wandered back to the house.

The drumming resumed moments after he walked through the front door.

“So, did he see to reason?” Cameron said. He was stretched out on the sofa, flicking through that week’s issue of *Variety*.

“Maybe we should wait until he’s finished,” Eric said.

“Good idea.” Cameron tossed the magazine on the coffee table. “I wonder why we didn’t think of that earlier?”

Eric grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl. “I’m sure he won’t be at it for too much longer.”

The two of them sat and waited as the noise continued for five straight hours.

Chapter 17

Eric focused all his energy on controlling his rising nausea as he sat in the bowels of Michael Bay's \$80 million luxury yacht. He wasn't sure why Michael insisted they meet here; nor did he know why he and Cameron had spent the entire journey thus far in the boat's onboard cinema, watching test footage from the forthcoming *Transformers: Echoes of Bedlam*, rather than enjoying the sunshine and ocean view up on the deck. But here they were, sitting in front of the giant screen alongside the two dozen studio suits variously credited as the film's co-producers, executive producers, co-executive producers, associate producers and supervising producers.

On the screen, the film's heroine delivered a withering put-down to her now-sentient Dodge Challenger as they both narrowly avoided annihilation. One of the suits cackled out loud.

"She's hilarious, isn't she?" he said, slapping his knee and elbowing Eric in the ribs.

"Who?" Eric said, struggling to keep his breakfast in place.

"Emily Ratajkowski! I mean, I knew she was hot. But I had no idea she was so funny!"

"I think the people who came up with those jokes are funny," Cameron said. "She's only reciting lines as they have been written for her."

A booming explosion drowned out Cameron's comment. The suit jumped to his feet and punched the air as an evil Decepticon was obliterated in spectacular fashion. "Yeah!" he shouted. He high-fived his ponytailed colleague, and the two of them commenced a "U-S-A!" chant.

The door opened, and Michael Bay's assistant Liliya entered. "Michael will see you both now," she said.

Cameron and Eric followed Liliya down a narrow corridor. Neither one could say they were disappointed to leave the screening room before the film's conclusion.

Liliya led them to Michael's office, a room almost as big as the one he had on dry land. Michael greeted them like old friends, and they settled into the plush leather sofa opposite his desk.

"So, what did you think of the *Echoes of Bedlam* footage?" he said.

"It was ... impressive," Cameron said.

Michael grinned and nodded, but looked like he was waiting for Cameron to elaborate.

"The effects were awesome," he continued, mustering all the enthusiasm he could. "The explosions look really cool."

"I should hope so," Michael said with a knowing wink. "The budget for this one is over \$300 million."

His attention then turned to Eric.

“Oh, uh ... I liked Emily Ratajkowski,” Eric offered. “She’s hilarious.”

“Isn’t she?” Michael beamed. “We all knew she was hot, but who knew she could be so funny as well?”

He leaned back in his chair and chuckled at a joke, one that Cameron and Eric were apparently not privy to.

“So, Michael,” Cameron said. “Our second draft. Have you had a chance to read it yet?”

“Ah, yes. Just one moment.” He sifted through the pile of documents on his desk until he located their script. “First, the bad news. The bad news is that your screenplay is awful. Terrible. One of the worst things I’ve ever had the misfortune to read. And that’s coming from the guy who greenlit *Ouija*.”

Cameron and Eric felt themselves deflate like a punctured tire. This was the last thing they wanted or expected to hear.

“So ... where exactly did we go wrong this time?” Eric said.

“The question should be where *didn’t* you go wrong. For a start, this is quite possibly the most unoriginal piece of writing I have ever come across. It’s a one hundred and eighteen page cliché, completely lacking in creativity and imagination. The plot is about as predictable as a Zimbabwean election result. To be honest, it looks like you’ve just copied a bunch of scenes from other scripts and pasted them into this one file.”

“But that’s exactly what you said you wanted!” Cameron said with more than a hint of exasperation. “We gave you something original and you rejected it. You said it needed to be more like the other horror films out there.”

“Yes, I wanted it to be more like the other horror films out there. The problem is, this reads like every other horror film out there. What you’ve written is something we’ve already seen a million times over. There are so many hackneyed horror tropes in this you may as well give it to the Wayans brothers and have them turn it into one of those stupid parody films.”

The disappointment was written across the two writers’ faces. This wasn’t easy for them to hear. Both had been high achievers for most of their lives, in addition to being members of the Excessive Praise and Participation Award Generation. Failure and criticism were two things they had largely managed to avoid up until now.

“So what’s the good news?” Eric said.

“I’m sorry?”

“You began your critique with, ‘First, the bad news’. That implies good news to follow.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Michael quickly ran his eyes across a few of the pages. “Well, it is properly formatted. Presentation is always important. It’s an easy read. You make great use of white space. And your spelling and grammar is exceptional throughout. You wouldn’t believe the amount of scripts I read from writers who have no idea what they’re supposed to do with an apostrophe.”

“Look, Michael.” The yacht crashed into a wave at the exact moment Cameron went to stand.

His legs faltered, and he collapsed back into the sofa. “You knew from the start that horror wasn’t really our thing. Between the two of us, Eric and I had watched maybe ten horror films before we agreed to take on this assignment. And if I’m being brutally honest here, I didn’t really care for any of them. I think most of them are cheap, nasty, exploitative trash, written by people who have no business calling themselves writers—”

Eric quickly interrupted. “Cameron and I have always been more comfortable writing what I guess you would call, quote, serious fare. Historical dramas, social reality examinations, that sort of thing. This is a little outside our wheelhouse.”

“Well I hate to be the prick to burst your bubble, but if you guys want to work in Hollywood you’ll need to make it part of your wheelhouse,” Michael said, poking at the Mark Wahlberg bobble-head on his desk with a pen. “You’ll be expected to handle all sorts of genres, and you won’t always have the chance to write what appeals to you personally. Look at me – I didn’t set out to be the director of incredibly awesome action films. I actually wanted to direct musicals, believe it or not. But then the opportunity to do *Bad Boys* came along and, well, eight and a half billion dollars of pure Bayhem later, here we are.”

Cameron let out a long sigh. “I’m just not sure we can be who you want us to be,” he said. “Maybe it’s best if we cut our losses now and walked away. Let someone who knows what they’re doing take the reigns.”

This proposal was met with a vacuum of silence.

“I would strongly advise against that,” Michael said. “You guys are just starting out. If you bail on this now you’re only going to annoy a lot of powerful people, and neither one of you has the credits in the bank to be able to do that. This town is a lot smaller than you may realize, and reputations count for everything.”

Cameron and Eric both looked at their feet. The feeling of dejection and shame, in addition to their ever-increasing seasickness, was overwhelming. Michael could sense their despair.

“Look, I know you’re not horror geeks. But that’s why you were hired in the first place – so you could come up with something completely different. Something that announces ‘Written by Cameron Knight and Eric Haas’ on every single page. But this ...” Michael held up the script in his left hand. “This could be any number of unsolicited manuscripts we get sent from unemployed losers who live in their parents’ basement and can quote the entire *Halloween* series verbatim. I don’t want that. I want something different, something no one has seen before. I want what you have.”

He leaned forward and offered an encouraging smile.

“I know you have an original voice somewhere inside you. It’s just that sometimes you need to spend a bit of time digging around to find it.”

The two writers rose from their seats, still trying to reconcile the fact that Michael’s latest notes directly contradicted everything he told them in their previous meeting.

“Oh, and get rid of all those dumb jokes,” he said before they left. “Never mix horror with comedy. The two just don’t go together. You’ll only end up with a cinematic spork.”

A spork is a hybrid form of plastic cutlery consisting of a handle, a spoon-like scoop, and two,

three or four fork tines. They are often distributed with fast food orders, airline food and prepackaged meals.

Sporks are widely derided as a useless utensil due to the fact that the spoon scoop is too shallow to use for liquids, and the fork tines are too short to adequately hold solids. By attempting to perform two functions at once, it fails at achieving either.

It is for this reason that films in the horror-comedy genre are sometimes referred to as “sporks”. The amount of violence and gore in such a film can be off-putting for viewers who might otherwise enjoy the comedic element, while the presence of humor in a horror film often lessens the impact of any tension or genuine scares.

Rare exceptions include *Evil Dead II*, *Scream* and *John Dies At The End*.

The blinking cursor on the blank Final Draft page continued to taunt Eric. He stared at it in the desperate hope that inspiration would strike from the clear blue sky and stimulate the flow of creativity. But after two hours of limp brainstorming, still nothing. Not even one solitary sentence. They were no closer to completing their next draft than they were a week ago.

The past few days had been an empty void of despair and disillusionment. Cameron and Eric honestly didn't know where they could go from here. They had done their best – twice – and failed miserably on both occasions. They had made a crucial error in assuming that a commercial horror film would be easy to write. It turned out that nothing could have been further from the truth.

Their confidence was further shattered when they discovered an online petition had been set up by hardcore *Wrong Turn* fans demanding the reboot not go ahead. The petition claimed a substandard remake would harm the legacy of the original film, and that it would destroy the fans' adolescence. Michael Bay advised them to ignore the backlash and not allow such criticism to affect their work. “Remember, those who can, do,” he told them. “And those who can't, tweet.” But with so much online vitriol being hurled in their direction, it was hard not to take at least some of it to heart.

A ghost of an idea formed in Eric's head. “Hey, how about if we open with—”

Just as he spoke, an errant backpack smacked into the side of his head. He looked behind to see a rambunctious group of high school kids pushing past their table.

“You were saying?” Cameron said.

“Oh, I was just going to suggest, uh ...” Eric trailed off, opting not to follow through with his thought. “Never mind.”

“Maybe another refill will stimulate our imaginations,” Cameron said. He drained the remainder of his coffee and headed to the counter.

Eric didn't know why Cameron insisted on coming to this Starbucks outlet for regular writing sessions. He claimed that working in a public place was an effective way of drawing inspiration from your surroundings and writing about real people, but Eric questioned whether it did anything to help them at all. The place was always crowded, the noise distracting, the background music terrible, and the customers far too obnoxious or dull to be a useful source of material. It was an environment entirely unsuited to long periods of writing.

He suspected Cameron came here for the same reason thousands of other aspiring writers across the city flocked to places like this, pounding away at their Macbooks while wearing cardigans and non-prescription horn-rimmed glasses – they wanted to show girls that they were artists. As a writer, it was difficult to use your talents to impress members of the opposite sex. Simply telling someone you wrote for a living wasn't all that impressive, given that basically anyone who occasionally pushed a pen across paper could make the same claim. Musicians had a much easier time of it; they could just sing a few notes or strum a few chords on a guitar and instantly appear more attractive. Writing was more of a solitary pursuit, and as such it was harder to exploit as a pick-up technique.

Cameron returned a few minutes later, holding a vanilla bean frappuccino for Eric and a skinny venti extra dry latte for himself. "Any luck?" he said.

Eric shook his head. "Nothing yet."

They each took a sip of their drinks and resumed their staring contests with their laptop screens.

A quarter of an hour went by without any further progress. Eric lapsed into a kind of trance, the blinking cursor having an almost hypnotic effect on him.

"Maybe we've been approaching this whole thing the wrong way," Cameron said.

Eric snapped back to the real world. "How do you mean?"

"Michael was right. We tried writing like everybody else. Is it any wonder that all we ever produced was mediocrity? Our biggest advantage was that we *don't* write like anyone else."

He rapped his fingernails across the table as he tried to verbalize this sudden rush of ideas, triggered by five jumbo-sized caffeinated beverages.

"Our first draft didn't work because it was too self-indulgent. Our second draft didn't work because it was too unoriginal. We need to locate that middle ground. Stay within the parameters of the genre but without losing our own unique voice and idiosyncrasies. Create a singular piece of work no other writer could possibly conceive of."

"Okay," Eric said, not quite sure where Cameron's present train of thought was taking him. "That's a lot easier said than done."

Cameron paused for a moment. "You know what I'm thinking of right now? That script you wrote. The one that got you your agent."

A few years earlier, Eric had written a spec script entitled *Rodney Luther King*. It was regarded by many who read it as a truly groundbreaking work; a daring hip hop musical and alternate history drama that reimagined Rodney King as a revolutionary civil rights leader, rising up from the ghetto to unite the downtrodden and oppressed minorities in a society torn apart by bigotry and intolerance. It had featured on the Black List of Hollywood's best unproduced screenplays, and such luminaries as Spike Lee and Cornel West had described it as one of the finest pieces of writing they had ever laid eyes on. But so far, all this buzz had amounted to naught. Instead of gathering awards and acclaim, as many predicted it had the potential to do, it only gathered dust on the desks of development executives. The major studios all had a blockbuster-heavy mentality that was extremely conservative and pathologically risk-averse.

None of them would ever dare go near such potentially volcanic material.

“Yeah?” Eric said. “What about it?”

“You worked on that script for years and years, and it never really went anywhere. Anyone who read it could see that it had something special, but it was still missing a certain indefinable quality. That x-factor separating a good screenplay from a great one.”

Eric nodded. “They said it lacked authenticity.”

“Right. So what did you do to make it more authentic? How did you elevate your writing and take it to the next level?”

Eric cast his mind back to that time, a couple of years prior. Frustrated by the lack of progress he was making with *Rodney Luther King*, he took the drastic step of moving out of their shared Hollywood Hills pad and into a lower-class urban neighborhood. During this time he met with and befriended members of the African-American community, drawing from their shared history and experiences to add depth and nuance to his writing. He attended cookouts and house parties, smoked blunts, watched *Scarface*, played street craps, and briefly joined a hip hop crew. He dropped his g’s when speaking and disregarded traditional grammar conventions. He even witnessed what he believed was a drive-by shooting, only to later learn it was just a lowrider with a backfiring exhaust.

“That whole experience helped your script immeasurably, didn’t it?” Cameron said.

“Of course,” Eric said. “Those three weeks were invaluable. But I don’t see what that has to do with our current situation. Unless you’re suggesting we go party in the woods with with a bunch of horny college kids?”

“That wasn’t what I meant, although ...” Cameron stopped for a moment to consider this. “No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. I was thinking more about the villain than the protagonist, since the bad guy is the most important character in any work of fiction. See, that was the biggest problem with our previous drafts – the killer was far too bland. The hero can only be as heroic as the villain is monstrous, and ours was like every other generic antagonist in every other generic horror movie. For this script to be exceptional we have to create one that’s unforgettable. A force of nature.”

“Sure, no problem. You don’t happen to know any inbred cannibals we can hang out with for a couple of weeks so we can study their ways, do you?”

“It doesn’t have to be *quite* that literal, Eric. Maybe we can find some other way of getting inside the mind of a killer.”

“So what are you suggesting? We should go to the library and read up on serial killers or something?”

Cameron shook his head. “We have to go beyond that. You can’t get inside another person’s head by reading about them in a book. We have a duty to our audience to become method writers. We need to dive head-first into the subject matter.”

Eric made a face like he had swallowed something bitter. “I don’t know. Is that something we really want to do?”

Cameron took a large gulp of his coffee, then forcefully placed the empty cup down on the table. "Look. We have to face up to the fact that we're not the best writers out there. We're good. We're very good, even. But we're not the greatest. Not even close. So we have to take it further to reach our full potential. We have to do the kinds of things no one else would ever think to do. Go to places everyone else is unwilling to venture. *That's* what you do if you want to produce great works of art."

Eric stared into his drink for a long time. None of this really appealed to him. The prospect of swimming inside the murky mind of a depraved killer wasn't something he really wanted to contemplate. But the way Cameron put it to him, he made it sound perfectly logical.

"Okay," Eric said. "I'm in. Whatever it takes, I'll do it."

Chapter 18

All Eric wanted to do when he arrived home late Tuesday evening was sink into his comfortable recliner in front of their seventy-five inch Sony Bravia 4K Ultra Smart TV and unwind with a stiff drink in his hand. He had just spent the day suffering through another pointless meeting with another clueless studio claiming to show an interest in finally putting *Rodney Luther King* into production. But it ended up going exactly the same as every other meeting he had ever taken. They never went anywhere, since none of these knuckleheads could wrap their feeble minds around such an original and daring concept. So he was forced to sit there for five hours, listening to the same inane questions and comments that every other studio executive had thrown at him over the past two years. "Could you make it a comedy?" one of the executives asked him. "Films about race don't test well with women over forty," another claimed, before adding that it would be difficult to sell a film like this to the emerging Chinese market. The head of the studio, a former Burger King CEO, told him they were unlikely to greenlight any film with such limited merchandising opportunities.

Eric had to excuse himself midway through, then locked himself inside an empty room and waited until he had calmed down. Surrounded by so many philistines intent on destroying his masterwork, he was at serious risk of opening up one of the windows and swan-diving thirty stories to the pavement below.

Once again, he found himself questioning his chosen career path and wondering whether all this pain and suffering was ultimately worth it. When he wasn't being told by a bunch of imbeciles that his magnum opus was unfilmable in its current form, he had the director of *Pearl Harbor* telling him he couldn't even churn out a simple horror script. The thought crossed his mind, not for the first time, that it might be time to admit defeat and move on with his life. Hollywood and Eric Haas didn't appear to be such a good fit. Maybe he would be better off turning *Rodney Luther King* into a stage play, or perhaps remove the musical element altogether and expand it into a novel. That would be preferable to handing it over to these vision-deprived bean counters and allow them to completely dilute the central message.

He closed the door, then kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie. Less than a minute later, the insufferable thumping from next door began. Eric cringed. This was all he needed right now. It was the fourth time in the past week his neighbor had started drumming immediately after he arrived home. That couldn't be just a coincidence; he had to be doing it on purpose. He probably spent his whole day watching through his front window, waiting for Eric to appear, knowing that it was driving him insane. If he knew this was going to happen just because he'd made a simple request to keep the noise down, he never would have gone over there in the first place.

He had only just sat down and flicked on the TV when he heard Cameron's voice. "Eric? Is that you?"

Eric looked around. He didn't even realize Cameron was home. "Yeah? Where are you?"

"I'm down here. In the basement."

"What are you doing in the basement?"

“Come and have a look. There’s something I want to show you.”

Eric reluctantly got back on his feet and walked over to the basement door.

In the three years he and Cameron had lived in the house they had only ever set foot in the basement once, shortly after they first moved in. It was dark and musty and filled with cobwebs, and smelled of stale potatoes and urine. Water leaked in when it rained, causing the wood to rot. Their skin crawled just by being in there. They decided to forgo the extra storage space and declare that area of the house off-limits.

The first thing he noticed when he made his way down the steps was the plastic. Sheets and sheets of clear plastic, covering the floor and every surface. The second thing he noticed was the smell – or the lack of smell. Gone was the scent of stale potatoes and urine, and in its place a faint antiseptic odor of chlorine and disinfectant.

In the middle of this all stood Cameron. He wore a disposable orange protective suit, the type sanitation workers used when dealing with putrid material, and a pair of safety goggles.

“So you’ve finally decided to clean this place out?” Eric said, both impressed and amused. “When did you do all this?”

“It’s something I’ve been working on these past few days. When you were busy with all your meetings.”

Eric couldn’t help but smile. “Cameron, I know you can be the world’s biggest procrastinator, but even for you this is going to extreme lengths to avoid–”

He stopped mid-stride when he saw that they were not alone. The smile vanished from his face.

In the corner of the room was a pale, heavysset fifty-something man with a walrus mustache. His hands and feet were in shackles, chained to the wall behind him. His mouth was sealed shut with a strip of tape. His face was drooped, like all the muscles had given up trying to function. His eyelids hung heavy over his eyes.

To his right, laid out neatly on the workbench, was every sharp knife from Cameron and Eric’s kitchen.

It took a moment for Eric’s brain to process just what his eyes were seeing. He blinked several times to make sure this wasn’t some hallucination brought on by an excessive amount of stress and Eli Roth films.

The full horror of the scene finally registered, and he beat a hasty retreat back up the stairs.

“Eric, wait.”

Cameron raced to catch up with him. He put his hand on Eric’s shoulder. Eric spun around.

“Look, Cameron, I’m sure there’s a very good reason why you have a complete stranger chained up in our basement,” he said. “But right now I’m struggling to think of one.”

“Promise me you won’t freak out,” Cameron said.

“I will *not* promise that,” Eric said, his voice rising.

“Okay, calm down. Let me explain.”

“What are you doing? Who the hell is that down there?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it all planned out. We’re safe. No one knows he’s here. His name is Robert Maxwell Faulkner. He’s on trial for murder, and he’s going to help us.”

“Help us? How, exactly?”

“He can help us do what we discussed,” Cameron said, speaking in a low half-whisper. “You know, last week? At Starbucks?”

Eric’s face was blank. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Remember what we said about gaining first-hand experience? Well, we now have an opportunity to do just that.”

Silence.

“You’re suggesting that we use this guy, we make him one of our victims,” Eric said, speaking slowly and clearly to avoid any further misunderstandings. “So we can draw from the experience to improve our writing?”

Cameron nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

“Right.” Eric didn’t speak for a long time. “That is *not* what I thought you talking about in Starbucks last week.”

“What did you think I was talking about?”

“I don’t know ... I thought you meant we should speak with some experts in the field. Like a homicide detective, or a criminal psychologist. Or that maybe we should interview a prisoner who has been convicted of those sorts of crimes. It honestly, never in a million years crossed my mind that you meant we should *literally* do it ourselves.”

Cameron took a moment to consider this. “Okay, now I understand why you reacted the way you did when you saw all this. That makes sense. But you know why we have to do it this way, don’t you?”

“?!?!?!” Eric said.

“If we did it the way you suggested, with research and interviews and whatnot, we would only experience it third-hand. At best. The details, the true minutiae of the act of killing, it would all be lost. We need to live the experience ourselves.”

“No.” Eric shook his head back and forth. “This is insane. *You* are insane.”

“Yeah, well, most geniuses are a bit crazy, aren’t they?” Cameron said, trying but failing to suppress a sly grin.

“No, most geniuses are slightly eccentric. This is the wrong side of crazy. The sanity train has well and truly left the station.”

“Give me one good reason why we shouldn’t do this.”

Eric coughed out a stunned laugh. "Are you serious?"

"I am. Just one reason."

"Well ... for a start, there's a legal process that needs to be followed. You can't grab anyone you like off the street and dish out your own form of vigilante justice. You don't even know for sure if this guy's guilty of what he's accused of."

"I do know that, because he's already confessed. He's going to plead guilty as part of some deal. He was a drunk who beat his wife to death in a jealous rage after subjecting her to years of abuse. Trust me, if anyone deserves to die it's this guy. We'll actually be saving the state millions of dollars in legal fees and prison expenses."

A low groan seeped out from the basement. The tranquilizer pills Cameron had fed his captive were wearing off, and he was slowly reemerging from his unconscious slumber.

"Uh-uh," Eric said. "There's no way you can ever convince me this is anything but a bad idea." He headed for the kitchen and threw open every one of the cupboards, desperately searching for something with a high alcoholic content. "I'm willing to do just about anything to get this screenplay finished, but I have to draw the line somewhere."

"So you're *not* prepared to do what it takes?"

"I said I'd do anything if I thought it would help. You don't really believe this will make us better writers, do you?"

"If we want our screenplay to be the best it can be, and if we want to strive for a level of authenticity and realism no other writers out there could possibly come close to, yes, I do believe that."

"I'm fairly certain no one has ever murdered someone else to improve their craft."

"Exactly! We're breaking new ground here. We will have taken method writing to levels no one else has ever dreamed of. We will be to screenwriting what Daniel Day Lewis is to acting. No, scratch that. We'll be *beyond* Daniel Day Lewis. He'll look like a fraud by comparison."

Eric uncovered a bottle of gin with a tiny amount remaining. He quickly gulped it down. "I'm really not comfortable with any of this," he said. He grimaced as the alcohol burned its way down his throat.

"I'm not all that comfortable with it either, but that's why we have to do it. We've been stuck in our comfort zone for far too long. We need to push ourselves out of it. Remember what we agreed on the other day, about how for this script to be exceptional it needs a memorable villain? Well, this is what we have to do if we want to create the ultimate monster. We have to step into his shoes and view the world through his eyes. We need to *become* that monster."

Eric's head dropped. He knew exactly what Cameron was trying to do here. He was wearing him down, little by little, like he always did. He knew no matter how many times he said no to something, Cameron would keep going on and on about it until he finally surrendered.

He tipped the gin bottle upside down and shook out the last few drops.

"Let me ask you something," Cameron continued. "Have you heard of a guy by the name of

Leo Tolstoy?”

“Yes, of course I know who Leo Tolstoy is,” Eric said.

“Right. And what about Nicholas Tolstoy? Ever heard of him?”

Eric said that he hadn't.

“Nicholas Tolstoy was Leo's older brother, and some say he was every bit as talented as Leo. Imagine that – two brilliant writers from the one family. So why do you think Leo Tolstoy is remembered for producing some of history's greatest pieces of literature, while Nicholas is nothing but a footnote?”

Eric spied a bottle of cooking sherry in the far corner of the cupboard. “I really have no idea,” he said.

“Tolstoy said it was because his brother didn't have the same drive to succeed that he had. He may have had the raw talent, and he may have been born with the same opportunities, but he lacked that burning desire to take it further and become one of the all-time greats. Tolstoy called it the ‘necessary bad qualities.’”

“Necessary bad qualities?” Eric unscrewed the lid and swallowed a mouthful of the sherry. He soon regretted it. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Basically he was saying that if you want to be successful, if you want to rise above the competition and achieve greatness, you have to be prepared to push yourself further than anyone else. Do things no one else will do. Venture into places no one else is willing to go.”

“And you're saying we can only do that by murdering someone?”

Cameron let out a long sigh. “You don't seem to get it. Nobody ever becomes successful by being a nice guy. You have to be completely and utterly ruthless. You have to tap into the absolute worst parts of your psyche. It's not a question of talent. It's a question of how much you want it. That's why sociopaths often flourish and become CEOs and presidents. They don't have the burden of a conscience holding them back.”

Eric collapsed onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands. After the kind of day he'd endured, he just wanted to relax and forget about his troubles for a while. This was the last thing he felt like dealing with.

Cameron sat down beside him. Neither one spoke for a moment.

The drumming from across the fence changed tempo, ramping up to a frantic speed metal beat.

“I know this is confronting,” Cameron said. His voice was gentler now. “And I know it's not something either one of us really wants to contemplate. But you understand this is our last chance, right? If we fail on this draft, it's all over for us. I don't just mean with *Wrong Turn*. I mean with everything, our whole Hollywood adventure. It's over. We can kiss our careers goodbye and look forward to a life of regular nine-to-five jobs. And I don't know how confident you are about finding meaningful employment, but we're both about to turn thirty. We have BAs in creative writing and basically zero real work experience. We screw this up, by the end of the year we'll be asking morbidly obese guys in Hawaiian shirts if they want fries with their

happy meals. Or writing for BuzzFeed.”

Eric didn't say anything in response. But he didn't leave or voice his objection in any way, either. He just had a look of resignation on his face. Once again, Cameron was able to wear him down and talk him into doing something he didn't want to do. He hated how easily he could be manipulated. It was his worst character flaw.

But in some weird way, he could see his point. They had spent their whole lives getting to where they were now. They just needed to take that final step. If they didn't, all their years of hard work would be for nothing. It would be like running a marathon and giving up with the finish line in sight. Slaughtering another human being to further their writing careers was something unpleasant they would just have to do. Otherwise he was at serious risk of ending up like their idiot neighbor, still chasing some futile pipe dream well into middle-age.

“Come on,” Cameron said. “Let's get this over with.” He retrieved another orange protective suit from a drawer and tossed it into Eric's lap. “Like everything else in life, I'm sure the first time will be the hardest.”

Chapter 19

“The script is coming along,” Michael Bay said, as a waiter from his favorite Pico Boulevard Chinese restaurant placed a serving of Kung Pao chicken in front of him. “There were a few minor issues to begin with, but we’re working to resolve those. I have faith that Cameron and Eric will deliver a brilliant piece of writing in the end.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Martin Krauth, sitting opposite. Martin was the head of Paramount Pictures, a one-time B-movie lackey who had shot up through the ranks to become the company’s superstar CEO and chairman in record time. Along with Michael, he was responsible for orchestrating the entire series of films in the Platinum Dunes Cinematic Universe. “We don’t want a late script holding up production. We’ve already started the casting process. Bella Thorne’s agent has been calling me non-stop for the past two weeks. Apparently she’s dying to play the lead.”

“Bella Thorne?” Michael struggled to pick up a piece of chicken with his chopsticks. “I thought Hailee Steinfeld was our first choice?”

“Hailee’s a fine actress, but I feel Bella can bring something more to the role. Seventeen million more, to be precise.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those are her Instagram numbers. She has seventeen million followers, most of whom are in the prized sixteen to twenty-five demographic.”

“I don’t know, Martin. I’m sure she’s a perfectly capable actress, but should social media numbers influence our casting decisions?”

“Listen, Mike.” Martin leaned forward in his seat. “I know you’re the undisputed king of the box office. Your films have taken, what, seven, eight billion dollars?”

“Nine-point-two billion worldwide,” Michael said with a modest smile. “But who’s keeping score, right?”

“Right, so I get that you have a track record that’s second-to-none. You obviously know what you’re talking about. But you have to trust me on this. If we cast actors with significant online followings, that gives us direct access to a massive audience. It’s equivalent to a hundred or one-fifty mil in marketing dollars. I know it might be different from how you’ve cast your films previously, but it’s the way of the future. New media is here to stay. We can either embrace it or get left behind.”

“I guess you’re right,” Michael shrugged. “To be honest, I’m a little out of touch with most of that stuff. I don’t really understand it.”

“You don’t need to understand it. That’s my job. I can relate to young people. I know how teenagers think.”

“Great. Bella it is, then.” Michael used a napkin to wipe some sauce from his mouth. “So what about the role of the farmer? I was thinking Samuel L. Jackson would be perfect.”

“Yeah ... I don't think that's going to work out,” Martin said.

“Really? I know Sam can be a bit selective when it comes to what films he agrees to do—”

“I don't mean it like that. I was talking more about the character of the farmer, and how he fits in with the context of the story. Think about it. He's a mysterious figure of indeterminate origin who helps the young people overcome the evil threat.”

Michael nodded as he chewed his food. “So ... what's the problem?”

“The problem is that certain racial implications come into play if we cast an African-American actor in such a role. An uneducated but wise black man who rescues the white protagonist, and who ends up dying to save the lead girl? That has Magical Negro stamped all over it. The PC police will eviscerate us if we go down that road. You know what it's like once the Twittersphere latches onto an issue and every self-righteous moonbat with a smartphone and a half-formed opinion throws in their two cents' worth. The last thing we need is that kind of negative publicity poisoning the first film in the franchise.”

“Right, right, sorry.” Michael went for an egg roll. He made several failed attempts with the chopsticks before placing them to one side and using his fingers. “So how about this? What if we make the farmer white – someone like Chris Cooper, or Jackie Earle Haley – and the college kids black?”

Martin shook his head. “I've thought about that and it won't work either.”

“It won't?”

“No. If the farmer is Caucasian, the character then becomes a White Savior – the heroic white man who ultimately finds redemption by saving the lives of the minorities. Meanwhile, the supporting black characters are only there to be killed off one by one. There are people in this world who love nothing more than to be offended, and if we go down that path we'll be giving them plenty to get off on. We'll probably have Jesse Jackson and Armond White picketing the premiere.”

Michael frowned. “Do you really think anyone will notice something like that?”

“Are you serious?” Martin nearly choked on a dumpling. “*Of course* someone will notice! Do you even know what Twitter is like these days?”

“Well, um ...”

“That's all anyone ever does on it now. They scour the universe with a fine tooth comb, looking for the most minor infractions to be offended by. Even if it's completely innocuous, they'll leap on it and 'call it out' just to make themselves feel better. Extreme outrage is basically the new form of entertainment.”

“But we have the best of intentions here. We're trying to do the right thing. Doesn't that count for something?”

“I'm afraid there's no such thing as the benefit of the doubt anymore. Our intentions are irrelevant if someone can twist it in a way that suits their own agenda.”

Michael took a moment to consider all this. He made another attempt at his Kung Pao chicken

and rice, before setting his chopsticks aside and using a plastic spork.

“So why don’t we remove the issue of race altogether and make it an all-white cast?” he said. “That will avoid any unintended racial slights. Won’t it?”

“Oh, God no!” Martin looked around to make sure none of the other diners had overheard. “No. Whitewashing is the worst crime of all. That’s just asking for trouble.”

“Oh. Okay then.”

“You may as well make a pro-Hitler anti-Oprah film. That’s how serious it is.”

“Alright, calm down. We’ll just do the complete opposite then. We’ll cast the most diverse group of actors ever assembled on screen. Every color and hue and ethnicity will be represented: black, white, albino, East Asian, South Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern, Eskimo – sorry, Inuit, if we can find one. No one could criticize us if we did that.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Martin said. “No one could criticize us. But only because barely anyone would see the film you just described.”

“You really think so?”

“Oh, I know so. A cast like that would be box office kryptonite. The public will think it’s some weird Sundance art house experiment. Middle America would freak out at such an extreme display of onscreen diversity.”

Michael tossed his spork down and leaned back in his seat. He could feel a headache coming on. “I give up then,” he said. “Seriously, is this all worth the trouble? We’re trying to do the right thing here, but everything we do is either unintentionally racist or commercial suicide.”

Martin nodded. “It’s hard, for sure. If it was easy there would be no need for those seminars.”

For the past year Michael Bay and Martin Krauth, along with several other prominent Caucasian film industry figures, had taken part in Ava DuVernay’s bi-monthly Racial Sensitivities and Privilege-Checking Workshop (also known as the “Woke Shop”). This was a gathering for filmmakers fully committed to producing progressive films that, in addition to the usual explosions and action sequences, conveyed a positive message of tolerance, diversity and inclusivity. But this was never easy. There were so many rules that had to be taken into consideration, and the rules were always changing. What was acceptable three years ago may now be considered offensive, and many of these rules contradicted one other.

A bowl of fortune cookies sat in the center of the table. Michael reached for one.

“The Chinese are our second-biggest market,” he said as he cracked the cookie open. “Maybe some of their ancient wisdom will guide us on the path towards enlightenment.”

He unfurled the piece of paper inside. It read:

We are born alone, and then we die alone. Anyone you give your love to will ultimately betray you. The end.

Michael read the fortune several times over. “That’s an odd message to find in one of these things,” he said. “Don’t you think?”

“If you ask me, I think we’ll have better luck finding the answer at the bottom of a bottle of Armand de Brignac,” Martin said. He snapped his fingers to summon a waiter over.

“You go ahead, but I’m not drinking,” Michael said. “I have a Pilates class after this.”

“Suit yourself, but this is an issue that needs to be resolved sooner rather than later. The longer we leave it, the harder it’s going to get for us.”

Martin ordered a bottle of the six hundred dollar wine, and the waiter scuttled off to fetch it from the bar.

Minutes passed without either one speaking. Michael played with his food, pushing it around the plate with his spork. The clattering of plates and sizzling of woks from the kitchen provided the background ambiance. He scooped up another mouthful of his chicken.

Straight away, he knew something wasn’t right. Within seconds he felt the inside of his mouth burning up. It started on his tongue and quickly spread to the rest of his mouth, nose and throat. The level of discomfort approached nuclear levels. He must have inadvertently bitten down on a concentrated clump of chili and spices.

Tears welled in his eyes as he reached for his glass of water. He emptied the glass in half a second, then refilled it. He was well aware that water did nothing to extinguish he burning, but he still continued to do it.

“You okay there, Mike?” Martin said.

Michael nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice was now a silent rasp. He dabbed his eyes with his napkin and wiped the sweat from his brow.

And then something strange happened. The pain and discomfort lessened, and he was able to think with greater clarity. His headache was gone. All the issues that had been troubling him seemed to evaporate. He felt as if his mind had expanded, or his brain had been cleansed. As bizarre as it sounded, he believed he had reached a higher state of consciousness.

Martin immediately noticed the change. Michael seemed like a totally different person. There was a light behind his eyes that wasn’t there before.

“What is it?” Martin said.

Michael cleared his throat, and his voice returned. “I think I have the solution to all our problems,” he said.

Li Qiang cut a desolate figure as he sat slumped in his chair, alone in the basement of the Shan Xi Chinese restaurant, ninety minutes into a ten hour shift. He was supposed to be working, but there was no way he could concentrate on the task at hand. Not with everything that was happening. Not with his whole world falling apart.

He refreshed Yu-jun’s Facebook page. They had broken up two months ago, but he couldn’t help himself. Every thirty seconds, again and again, an OCD-like need to check for updates. He had to find answers. Why did she leave him? What had he done wrong? How could she have moved on so quickly? Not only that, but with his best friend? Wing Wei had been like a brother to him. They had known each other since childhood. He would have taken a bullet for him, and vice versa. Now they would never speak again. This was an act of betrayal that

would haunt him until his dying days.

Heavy footsteps came clomping down the stairs. He knew who it was, and he knew how furious he would be. But he didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. Life was without meaning.

"Li Qiang!" his father shouted. "The next batch of cookies is ready! I need those fortunes now!"

Li Qiang expelled a deep sigh. "Yes, father."

He refreshed Yu-jun's Facebook page one more time, then switched off his phone. He pulled his chair up close to the typewriter.

The massive armory of weapons on display at the Second Amendment Hunting and Fishing store in rural California was truly a sight to behold. There were enough pistols, rifles, shotguns, knives, machetes, crossbows, arrows and samurai swords hanging on the walls and encased in glass cabinets to supply a small African militia. It was a militarist's paradise, but a little confronting for the two writers nervously examining the store's merchandise.

"I'm not sure about this," Eric said. He spoke in a hushed tone, as he would at a library.

"Neither am I," Cameron said. "But we've passed the point of no return. There's no going back from here."

He continued on down the aisle. Eric trailed a few steps behind, dragging his feet and staring at the floor like an unruly child brought along by his mother whilst running an errand.

"It'll be okay," Cameron said, sensing Eric's consternation. "This is something we need to do. In the end it'll all be worth it. Trust me."

"You know, 'trust me' are the two least comforting words in the English language," Eric muttered to himself.

Eric was still shaken by the events of the previous night, where their attempt at experiencing first-hand violence and executing bloody vengeance on Robert Maxwell Faulkner was nothing less than an unmitigated disaster. As the instigator and architect of this deranged scheme, it was decided that Cameron should go first. He selected the largest of the available kitchen knives and, after several shots of vodka to calm his nerves and strengthen his resolve, he stepped forward and jabbed the knife out at his target. The tip of the knife struck Faulkner directly on his hip bone, and the flimsy blade snapped in two. Faulkner grunted a deep animalistic moan, even if his heavy sedation blocked the majority of the pain.

Eric became woozy at the sight of the relatively small amount of blood spilling from the wound. Cameron quickly patched up the abrasion with duct tape, then shoved a couple more painkillers down Faulkner's throat to knock him out again.

This was their first lesson learned in stabbing: a simple kitchen knife was designed for chopping vegetables, and was not meant to be used on living humans. They would need something a lot sturdier and with a little more heft if they wanted to get the job done.

As soon as the sun came up they jumped in Cameron's Jeep and drove two hours to this small-town hunting store in search of an implement more conducive to their needs. They could have visited any one of the dozens of stores closer to home, but they didn't want to run the risk of bumping into anyone they knew. They even went so far as to adopt elaborate disguises,

donning fake beards, plaid shirts and trucker caps, as well as using lower-class speech patterns, to avoid standing out in a place like this.

“These look dangerous,” Eric said as he viewed the wide range of weaponry on sale, some of which appeared sharp enough to cut you just by looking at them.

“I certainly hope they’re dangerous,” Cameron said. “They’d be pretty useless knives if they weren’t.”

Eric fidgeted with the mullet wig beneath his cap. “Are we even allowed to purchase these? It doesn’t seem right that we can just walk in off the street and buy something like this. What if it’s illegal?”

“You’re right, Eric. Maybe it is illegal. Maybe this is all one big sting operation. I’m sure the police are watching from a van parked across the road, waiting to arrest anyone the moment they try to purchase something.”

They moved along to the next glass case. Inside was a machete the size of a squash racquet.

“But what if they ask us what we’re going to do with it?”

Cameron let out a dramatic sigh. “Why in God’s name would they ask us that? Think about it, Eric. Interrogating their customers would probably not be good for business.”

“Yeah, but what if they do? We should have an answer prepared, just in case. It’ll look suspicious otherwise.”

“Then we’ll tell them the truth. We’ll say we have a murderer chained up in our basement, and we plan on chopping him up into tiny pieces all in the name of art.”

Eric’s face turned a shade of white. “Don’t even joke about that!”

“Or we could say that we’re going hunting this weekend,” Cameron said, stroking his fake goatee. “You think they’ll buy that? This is a hunting store, after all.”

“Okay, but what about follow-up questions? What are we hunting? Where are we going to do it? Is it even hunting season now?”

Cameron didn’t respond. He had stopped listening the instant he laid eyes on the Bowie knife displayed on the wall in front of him.

“Now this,” he said, gently lifting the weapon off its rack. He was surprised at how lightweight it felt. “*This* could do some serious damage.”

The knife was almost the length of his forearm. It boasted a gleaming serrated blade and a hand-carved wooden handle. It looked like it could gut a moose – or eviscerate a bunch of movie teenagers – with the slightest flick of the wrist. The attached price tag valued it at \$599, but that was immaterial. The most important factor was it looked like something an iconic slasher villain would use to carve his epic trail of destruction.

Cameron tried it out a few times, thrusting and twisting it into the air as he sliced up his imaginary victim.

Eric tugged nervously at his sleeves. He looked around the store, growing more and more

uncomfortable the longer this ordeal dragged on. He didn't want to be here, and he definitely didn't like the demented smile that had appeared on Cameron's face as he handled the deadly weapon.

The smile was still there as Cameron brought it over to the counter for purchase.

"You fellas plannin' on doin' some huntin'?" the store owner asked as the they pooled their cash together.

"Something like that," Eric nodded, a little too quickly.

Chapter 20

The terror was reflected in Robert Maxwell Faulkner's eyes as Cameron slowly removed the newly-purchased knife from its sheath. The effects of the OxyContin had diminished significantly since their last encounter, and the further the numbness receded the more his fear increased. His jaw moved as if he was attempting to speak, but the duct tape covering his mouth allowed nothing more than the occasional muffled grunt.

Eric affixed the camcorder to the tripod. Lucidity struck him for one brief moment, and he struggled to comprehend just how he had come to be here. Cameron could be persuasive, he knew that, and he was accustomed to getting his way. But how he managed to talk him into something this insane would forever remain a mystery. One day, with the benefit of hindsight, he might be able to adequately explain the precise sequence of events that led to this very moment. He assumed that when this day came he would probably be wearing a straightjacket, relaying his story to a criminal psychologist.

"Remember to pay close attention to everything you see here," Cameron said. "No matter what happens, no matter how uncomfortable this becomes, do not look away."

Eric responded with a quick nod. He focused the camcorder, zooming in until Faulkner's bare-chested body filled the entire frame.

"Even though we're recording this, we can't rely on the footage," Cameron continued. "That's just for backup. We need to make a mental imprint of every detail as it happens. Every sight, every sound, every smell. The look on his face as the blade goes in. The sound it makes as it cuts through human flesh. The smell of blood as it drains from his body, and the shade of red when it hits the floor. Someone should be able to read our screenplay and it would be like they're right here in the room with us."

Eric glanced up from the viewfinder and briefly locked eyes with their captor. It was only fleeting, and he immediately looked away, but it was enough to communicate a desperate pleading. Faulkner had been so doped up during their earlier attempt that he probably didn't have the slightest idea of where he was or what was happening. Now he was slowly figuring out who these guys were and what they planned on doing with him.

"Maybe we should give him another dose of pills," Eric said.

Cameron looked across. "Why?"

"Look at him. He's almost fully conscious."

"Good. That's what we want." A smile formed around the edges of Cameron's mouth. "He *should* feel this."

A shiver crawled down Eric's spine. "Don't you think that's a little cold-blooded?"

"The characters in our script won't be high on painkillers when they get butchered, will they? It'll be the most terrifying moment of their lives. And it should be no different with him. We want this experience to be as authentic as possible."

Eric went to protest further, but the words never came. He could only stand by and watch as Cameron stepped forward with the Bowie knife in his hand and a look of steely determination flickering in his eye.

The bottle of vodka, partially consumed during their previous attempt to help steady their nerves, remained untouched on a shelf in the corner. They were to be one hundred percent sober this time, to ensure the full sensory impact of the experience.

Cameron took a deep breath.

“Hold up a minute,” Eric said.

“Now what?”

“I ...” Eric was silent for a long time as he tried to make sense of this all. “I don’t know if we should do this.”

“Oh, come on,” Cameron groaned. “We’ve been through this already. We have to do this. If we want our writing to have the highest possible level of authenticity, and if we want to create cinema’s ultimate monster, this is something we simply need to do.”

“I ... I don’t think ... it’s not too late to back out. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Of course it’s too late. What, do you think we can just let him go and hope he won’t tell anyone about everything that’s happened here?”

“What if we just gave him some more Oxys and dumped him somewhere?” Eric knew he was grasping at straws, but he soldiered on. “He doesn’t know where he is. His memory will be hazy, so I doubt he’ll be able to properly identify us. And it’s not like the police are going to care too much. We haven’t done anything that bad. Not yet, anyway. Nothing that can’t be undone.”

Cameron considered this for a moment. “That’s a good point.”

Eric exhaled out his relief. “Thank you. Now I think we should put a stop to this before—”

Without warning, Cameron jabbed the tip of the blade half an inch into Faulkner’s chest and sliced in a downward motion. A thin diagonal line of blood formed from his left shoulder to his right hip. A high-pitched, swine-like squeal seeped out from behind the duct tape. The skin on his chest and abdomen split open as if a zipper had been yanked down.

Eric’s jaw hit the floor as the trickle of blood grew to a steady stream. “What the hell was that, Cameron?” he screamed.

“I guess there’s no turning back from here,” Cameron said with a shrug. “We may as well finish what we started.” He pointed the knife at the deep wound bisecting Faulkner’s torso. “Unless you know how to fix that.”

Eric’s vision turned to static as the room shifted around him. He steadied himself by holding onto one of the benches. He zoned out, and time moved in random fits and starts. One second he was watching the blood drip from Faulkner’s exposed chest onto the clear plastic sheets covering the floor. The next he was standing before the victim with the knife in his hand. He had no idea how it got there. There was no logic or reason to any of this. He had zero control

over his movements. He was fast losing his grip on reality, and there was little he could do to hold on to it.

He looked up at Faulkner. His eyes were as large as golf balls. His breathing was heavy, his crimson-soaked chest rising and falling in rapid motion.

“You’re up,” he heard Cameron say. “Do what you need to do. Rise up to that next level.”

Faulkner shook his head back and forth, silently begging him not to.

Eric lifted up the knife, then lowered it again. “I ... I can’t do this,” he said.

“Of course you can,” Cameron said. “There’s nothing to it. Human beings are inherently violent creatures. We’ve been doing this sort of thing to one another since the dawn of time. It’s in our nature.”

“No. No. This isn’t right.”

“You know what this man is guilty of. He deserves everything that’s coming to him.”

“I ... I can’t ...”

“I’m not asking you to chop his goddamn head off. Just a tiny cut. Stick it in his thigh if you want.”

Eric’s throat filled with something that choked him. His hands began to shake. There wasn’t a single muscle in his body that wanted to do what Cameron demanded of him.

“This is too much,” he said. “I can’t do it.”

“Then maybe you don’t have what it takes to be a great writer.” A touch of anger had come into Cameron’s voice. “Maybe you don’t want it enough.”

“No ... I do ...”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes!”

“Then show me.”

Eric tried forcing himself to move, but every joint in his arms and legs had locked up.

“You know what I think?” Cameron said. “I think you’re satisfied with being average. You don’t want to be extraordinary, because the thought of it intimidates you. It *frightens* you. I think you’re comfortable being good enough.”

Eric squeezed his eyes closed. He could see what was happening here, and he hated it. Cameron knew which of his buttons to press. He knew exactly what to say to get under his skin.

Cameron took another step closer. “Maybe you don’t have the necessary bad qualities required to succeed,” he whispered into Eric’s ear.

Eric felt the growing resentment simmering inside him as the words burrowed deep into his psyche. They were both a challenge and a taunt; the same words he had said to himself when

he was alone at night, wondering if he'd ever make anything of his life. The pressure continued to build and build until he could no longer contain it.

And with that Eric snapped, pouncing forward like a coiled spring. He aimed for the chest, intending to slash the knife across Faulkner's torso the way Cameron had, except in an upwards rather than downwards motion. But his eyes remained closed, and so his aim was slightly off.

He sensed contact of some sort. But this time there were no muffled screams of pain. Just a couple of seconds of gurgling, and then silence.

The first thing he saw when he pried his eyelids open was Cameron's face. It was frozen in shock, and entirely devoid of color. He didn't know what he had done, exactly. He only knew it must have been horrendous.

He slowly turned to face his victim.

The knife had somehow missed Faulkner's chest and struck at the underside of his jaw. The blade had entered beneath his chin and gone all the way through. He had skewered his head like a shish kebab, straight down the middle. Three inches of blade stuck out the top of his skull. It only stopped when the knife's crossguard reached the jaw line.

Eric's heart stopped beating. For a near-eternity, neither one said a word.

A river of warm blood flowed from the entry point, trickling down onto his hand, still wrapped around the handle in a tight death grip, unable to let go.

"That was over a little faster than I had anticipated," Cameron finally said.

The enormity of what he had done hit Eric like a sucker punch to the nose. He let go of the knife and stumbled backwards. His legs turned gelatinous, and his internal organs flipped inside out. This was too much for him to handle. Up until now he had lived his life by the book. He was a model citizen who had never knowingly broken the law. A vegetarian pacifist who deplored violence, had never been in a physical fight, and went out of his way to avoid confrontation.

And now, with this one swift action, he had committed an act of vengeance that could never be undone. He had crossed the line separating normal human beings from cold-blooded murderers.

His victim stared back at him, his face petrified in terror. Alive twenty seconds ago, now deceased by Eric's hand. His wide eyes followed his killer around the room like some sort of macabre optical illusion.

A tidal wave of distress crashed down on top of Eric. He felt himself leave his body, disassociating from the brutal act he had just performed. He floated up towards the ceiling, observing the scene from above as his earthbound avatar backed away from the warm corpse, then turned and stumbled up the stairs. He watched himself trip on the top step, landing face-first on the polished floorboards, before scrambling to his feet and hurrying for the bathroom.

He burst through the door and rushed to the sink, but stopped as soon as he reached it.

That same intense feeling remained, but it wasn't nausea or panic. It was something else. Some otherworldly sensation he had never experienced. An indescribable electric haze swirled inside his head and filtered down to the rest of his body, shimmering in the tips of his fingers.

His spirit drifted back down to earth and reentered his body.

Eric slowly retreated from the bathroom. His breathing had calmed, and his pulse had returned to normal. The crippling tremor that had hijacked his body a minute ago had disappeared. A whole new feeling of serenity had taken over. Something incredible was happening, something he could neither explain nor control. An otherworldly force was being channeled through him of which he was just the vessel. There was only one thing he could do.

He pulled up a seat in front of his laptop. He peeled off the top half of his orange protective suit and began to type.

Angus Donahue's feet rested on the counter at the Second Amendment Hunting and Fishing store as he flicked through the decades-old issue of *Penthouse* he'd discovered at the back of a cupboard. An open can of room temperature beer was by his side, just out of view from potential customers. He came to the final page of the magazine, then dropped it into the wastepaper basket next to him. He drained the rest of his beer and crushed the can in his hand.

He stretched his arms above his head and let out a gaping yawn, then glanced at the clock. It was 4:38 p.m. Not quite five o'clock, but near enough to. Business had been slow all day, and if it wasn't for those two city boys who came in earlier – the ones who, for some reason, were wearing those ridiculous disguises – there would have been little point in opening at all today.

He stepped out from behind the counter and flipped the sign on the door over to closed.

He was midway through packing away the display merchandise when he heard the door open and the bell ring. He stopped what he was doing. He was sure he had locked the door immediately after turning the sign around. Obviously he hadn't.

"We're closed," he said.

"The sign says you're open," a voice croaked.

He grimaced when he saw who had entered his store. Whoever this man was, he was not a customer. He looked like a escapee from an old folk's home, or, more probable, an insane asylum. There was an unhinged look in his eye, like the wiring in his brain had short-circuited many moons ago. His clothes were filthy rags held together with pieces of string and safety pins, while his decomposing, mismatched shoes were more rubber bands and electrical tape than leather and rubber. The odor emanating from his body was so severe it almost produced cartoon stink lines.

"Well I say we're closed," Angus said. "And I outrank the sign."

The man either failed to hear, or he ignored him completely. He wandered through the store, casually browsing the merchandise like a prospective customer at a used car dealership. He was obviously heavily intoxicated, his body swaying back and forth like an inflatable air dancer.

“Did you hear what I said? You have to leave.”

The vagrant came closer. He hacked out a cough, and Angus caught an involuntary whiff of his rancid whiskey breath. The man lifted his right arm to aim a crooked finger at a display case.

“I’ll take it,” he said.

Angus didn’t move. He looked the old man up and down, sizing him up and wondering how much more of this he was going to tolerate. “Just get out of my store before I call the cops,” he said.

The old man kept his stare fixed on Angus and his finger directed at the cabinet. “I’ll take it,” he repeated, this time with slightly more menace.

Angus fought the urge to put this crusty old time-waster in a headlock and toss him out on the street. He decided to try humoring him first. “You are pointing at a Smith & Wesson model .500 Magnum. It’s a revolver that could take down an elephant from a distance of two hundred yards. And you see this here?” He tapped a knuckle against the handwritten sign directly beneath the weapon. “You see how it has a dollar sign, followed by a one, a six and two zeroes? That means it costs sixteen hundred dollars.”

The man nodded along as if he understood, but said nothing.

“So that’s what it’s gonna cost if you wanna purchase this particular firearm.”

“Uh huh,” the man grunted.

Then silence. Angus folded his arms as he waited for more.

“Do you happen to have a spare sixteen hundred dollars on you?” he said, speaking slowly and clearly in case the man was a little dense. “Because if you don’t, you can’t have it and you have to leave.”

The old man’s grime-encrusted hands disappeared into his trouser pockets. They came out clutching two fistfuls of crumpled hundreds and fifties. He held the bills in front of Angus’s face. “Will this be enough?” he said, flashing a black-toothed smile.

Angus took a half-step back. He stared at the wads of cash. He could only imagine how a derelict like this got his hands on that sort of money. It was probably best not to know. Money was like processed meat, as the old saying went. You should never ask where it came from.

He unlocked the cabinet and removed the pistol.

“Do me a favor, buddy,” the wino slurred as Angus rang up the purchase at the counter. “This is a gift. For a friend. I need it wrapped.”

Angus eyed the stranger for a moment. The notion that this was all some kind of practical joke had crossed his mind on more than one occasion. “Do we look like the kind of place that offers a gift wrapping service?” he said.

“Here. I’ll pay extra if that’ll help sweeten the deal.”

Two more scrunched-up hundreds were pulled from the vagrant’s pockets. He tossed them on

the counter. Both bills were slightly damp. One was marked with spots that could very well be blood. Angus picked each one up by its least-soiled corner, careful to ensure minimal skin contact.

He looked around his immediate area. "I don't have any wrapping paper on me."

"That's okay," the stranger said, nodding towards the wastepaper basket at Angus's feet. "Just wrap it up in that girlie magazine you have down there."

Chapter 21

The two writers had turned out the script's first fifteen pages before rigor mortis had even set in. There was no doubting that something incredible was happening here. After struggling to get words on the page for so long, they had entered a zone where it seemed nothing could halt this intense rush of creativity. It was an unstoppable force, gushing out of them like blood from a severed artery. All the pressure and frustration that had been building for the past three months was finally released in one endless stream of inspiration.

Cameron paced the room, tossing out new plot points and lines of cracking dialogue as they came to him, unable to remain still for more than a few seconds. Eric was perched in front of the laptop, his fingers dancing across the keyboard as he desperately tried to keep up, translating Cameron's words and ideas into cinematic brilliance. The screen and keys were smeared with blood, but they didn't care. They were writing, at long last, and it was better than anything they had ever produced.

Neither one could possibly understand or explain what had come over them. They only knew that some higher power, some indefinable creative spirit had taken control of their minds and bodies. The slaying of Robert Maxwell Faulkner had awakened something inside them, tapping into a deep reservoir of artistry they had no idea they even possessed.

Ninety minutes after they began, Cameron paused to collect his thoughts. "Where does that bring us to?" he said.

"Carly has just stripped down to go skinny-dipping when she discovers the hitchhiker's body," Eric said. "That marks the first act turning point."

Cameron nodded and took a breath. "I think we should go back from the start and read through what we've written so far."

Eric scrolled back up to the top of the page.

FADE IN:

INT. WOODS -- NIGHT

The midnight hour. A Jupiter-sized FULL MOON is suspended in an ink-black sky, providing partial illumination for this dense thicket of inhospitable terrain.

The camera glides through the foliage like a marauding hawk, closing in on a TERRIFIED FIGURE running in the distance.

We draw nearer, and the figure comes into focus. It takes the form of a nubile YOUNG FEMALE. Barefoot, her legs and arms wreathed in raw abrasions, dressed only in underwear and a small t-shirt that clings to her lithe body, she scrambles through the relentless landscape from an unseen predator.

The camera reaches her, as does the troglodyte she was fleeing.

He is THREE FINGER. He is human, but only just. His grotesque face is a twisted

abomination molded by generations of inbreeding and exposure to toxic chemicals. A row of sharpened YELLOW TEETH protrude from his festering mouth.

Air fills the girl's lungs, and she expels an EAR-SPLITTING SCREAM.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. TEENAGER'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

The SCREAM carries over as the girl awakens from her night terror. She sits bolt upright in bed. Her hair is a tousled bird's nest, her face wet with perspiration.

She is JESSIE BURLINGAME. She is nineteen, bookish, a straight-A type. There is a marked innocence to her. Despite her distress, her beauty is evident -- in a girl-next-door, pretty-without-realizing-it kind of way.

A moment passes before she catches her breath. Her ALARM CLOCK tells her it's 2:34.

Jessie flicks on her LAMP. Her bedroom shows her to be a typical teenager -- messy clothes blanket the floor, open school books on her desk. Posters of David Bowie, The Clash and Jack Nance in "Eraserhead" adorn her walls. A well-worn copy of "The Catcher In The Rye" sits on her dresser.

A CALENDAR hangs on her door. 29 June is circled, with "CAMPING TRIP!!" written in the center.

"Hold on a second," Cameron said.

"What is it?" Eric said.

"Remember what Michael told us about including too many highbrow or esoteric references?"

Eric used his sleeve to wipe a droplet of blood from the laptop screen. "You think *Eraserhead* and Salinger are highbrow?"

"I don't, necessarily," Cameron shrugged. "But we're writing for the audience, not ourselves. And our audience are more or less cultural illiterates. You know how upset people get when they're exposed to some reference or allusion they don't understand."

"I suppose you're right," Eric said, tapping away at the backspace key. "It's probably safer to err on the side of ignorance."

INT. TEENAGER'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

The SCREAM carries over as the girl awakens from her night terror. She sits bolt upright in bed. Her hair is a tousled bird's nest, her face wet with perspiration.

She is JESSIE BURLINGAME. She is nineteen, bookish, a straight-A type. There is a marked innocence to her. Despite her distress, her beauty is evident -- in a girl-next-door, pretty-without-realizing-it kind of way.

A moment passes before she catches her breath. Her ALARM CLOCK tells her it's 2:34.

Jessie flicks on her LAMP. Her bedroom shows her to be a typical teenager -- messy clothes

blanket the floor, open school books on her desk. Posters of Beyonce, The Chainsmokers and Chris Evans as Captain America adorn her walls. A well-worn copy of Amy Schumer's "The Girl With The Lower Back Tattoo" sits on her dresser.

A CALENDAR hangs on her door. 29 June is circled, with "CAMPING TRIP!!" written in the center.

The body of Robert Maxwell Faulkner was placed inside the 9.6 cubic ft. chest freezer that Cameron had purchased in the days leading up to the kidnapping and mutilation. He remained there until frozen solid, at which point he was removed and divided into twelve separate pieces with the aid of a high-powered circular saw. Freezing the body made it harder to move, and much more difficult to dismember, but it also avoided the extreme mess often associated with dividing a corpse into smaller, more manageable portions.

The various frozen body parts were encased in plastic wrap before being transported late at night to a remote area of desert near Vasquez Rocks. They were taken to a secluded location far from passing traffic or potential hikers, where they were unwrapped and left for the coyotes to dine on. Vultures took care of any remaining forensic evidence the coyotes left behind.

Police made a few perfunctory enquiries after learning of Faulkner's disappearance before choosing to allocate no further time or resources to the investigation. They initially suspected him of fleeing town to avoid sentencing, but later dismissed this as unlikely – all his belongings remained undisturbed at his house, and his bank account and credit cards had not been accessed. Even though foul play was suspected, it was ultimately decided that solving the case would remain a low priority.

Chapter 22

*From: Martin Krauth <krauth.m@paramount.com>
To: Michael Bay <bayhem@platinumdunes.com>
Subject: I have cancer*

Hey Mike,

Sorry about the subject line. Its not true, by the way. I just know how tardy you can be when it comes to opening your emails and I wanted you to read this asap.

Anyway, I bring god news. Your revolutionary plan has come to fruition! The entire cast have all signed on to do Wrong Turn (or they have agreed to in principal, and will of signed on once the ten-percenters are done taking care of the nuts and bolts of the contract negotiations).

So without any further ado, your cast is as follows:

(... drumroll ...)

Jessie: Bella Thorne

Carly: Vanessa Hudgens

Lauren: Zoe Kravitz

Francine: Demi Lovato

Evan: Zayn Malik

Scott: Max Minghella

Hitchhiker: Olivia Munn

Officer Shannon: Jesse Williams

Officer Goode: Jessica Alba

The farmer: Vin Diesel

I know Ive told you this like a billion times before, but your a genius! A supporting cast made up entirely of ridiculously hot biracial actors? Brilliant! All our diversity issues are solved in one fowl swoop, and without alienating the mainstream audience! If the naacp doesnt award you there highest honor the whole process is rigged!

We have also secured the talents of Eryk Wiszniewski, the young Polish director, to helm the film. Hes the guy who made that documentary "Gorilla Warfare", the one about armies in war-torn countrys that use trained baboons as armed soldiers.

(I havent seen it yet but it won some big award at the Cannes Film Festival. Rex Reed described it as "the most important debut documentary film since Zapruder".)

Its such a relief to finally have all these problems taken care of once and for all. For a while there I wasnt sure if we would be able to reach a solution, but in the end you delivered. It just goes to show what can be accomplished once we put our minds to it. Its like what they say about bumblebees and how they are actually physically incapable of flight, but the simple

bumblebee doesnt know this so it disregards the laws of physics and takes to the skies.

You and I are the bumblebees!

Peace and a bottle of hair grease, M.K.

From: Michael Bay <bayhem@platinumdunes.com>

To: Martin Krauth <krauth.m@paramount.com>

Subject: Re: I have cancer

Hi Martin,

That's fantastic news about the cast and director. Super excited about Wrong Turn. I think we could really be on the verge of creating something groundbreaking with the Platinum Dunes Cinematic Universe.

Still no ETA for the shooting script, but don't panic. I emailed Eric Haas yesterday and he said they were tearing through it at a rate of knots. They'll send us the first 20-odd pages sometime in the next few days to give us an idea of where they're at.

Regards, M.B.

P.S. I'm not sure that bumblebee analogy makes a whole lot sense. The bee doesn't know it's not supposed to fly but ignores physics and does it anyway? How does that work? A guy tripping on acid doesn't know he can't fly when he jumps off the roof of a twenty story building, but no matter how hard he flaps his arms around he still plummets to the ground below, doesn't he? Or does he?

Chapter 23

Days bled into nights, and Cameron and Eric continued to make further progress with their *Wrong Turn* draft. Their butchery of Robert Maxwell Faulkner had ignited something inside of them, providing that spark of inspiration they desperately needed. They found themselves churning out the pages like never before; act one was complete in less than a week, along with a solid thirty-page outline for how the second and third acts were to unfold. Their story would contain many of the familiar plot points fans had come to expect from films in the horror genre, but subverted in such unique and original ways to create a singular piece of work unlike anything else in the marketplace.

They were often dumbfounded by what they managed to come out with. They would review what they had written days earlier and be blown away, almost as if they were reading the work of another writer. They never knew they were capable of this level of excellence.

But by the tenth or eleventh day, both their enthusiasm and the quality of their work had begun to decline. The elements of the killing – the sights, the sounds, the smells and all the visceral emotions they aroused – were gradually fading from memory. They were finding it more and more difficult to separate the words on the page from the actual physical experience. They tried to recapture the spark by rewatching the video, but after a handful of viewings it felt like they were sitting through just another schlocky low budget found footage movie. The tape was destroyed soon afterwards, disposing of the last remaining evidence of their crime.

They did their best to plow on through, telling one another that they obviously had the talent to do this and just needed the motivation, but it was no use. The door was closing on their creativity and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

It wasn't long before lethargy kicked in, and the two fell back into old habits. They found themselves using any excuse to avoid writing, from complaining of mild headaches to being distracted by the God-awful racket created by the neighbor's six-hour band rehearsals. Eric spent less time at his laptop and more time in front of the television, frittering his days away catching up on all the quality HBO, Showtime and Netflix dramas he had fallen behind on. Cameron, meanwhile, had taken to loitering in and around various Starbucks outlets, flirting with the clientele and doing his best impersonation of a successful writer, albeit without doing any actual writing.

Entire days would go by without either one contributing a single word to the screenplay. Their impending deadline drew nearer and nearer, hanging over their heads like an execution date.

Until one Thursday afternoon, when Cameron rushed home from another unproductive writing session at his favorite corporate coffee hangout. Eric could sense his excitement from the moment he burst through the door. He immediately hit pause on the episode of *Stranger Things* he was partway through watching.

"I have a brilliant idea!" Cameron said. "And I think it could be the solution to all our problems."

Eric sat up in his seat. His face immediately brightened. "You do?"

Cameron nodded enthusiastically. "I just ran into Warwick Wilson at Starbucks," he said, taking

off his Bouclé-Check Double Breasted overcoat and carefully folding it over a chair. "He came in for a caramel macchiato. I went over and introduced myself."

"Warwick Wilson?" Eric said.

"Yes!"

"Am I supposed to know who that is?"

"You've never heard of him?"

"No. Should I?"

"He only runs one of the most high profile casting agencies in town. You'll find his name in the credits of some of the biggest films from the past decade."

"Oh, okay. So what does he have to do with our situation?"

Cameron kicked off his shoes and took a seat on the sofa. "Well, in addition to being one of the industry's biggest star-makers, Warwick Wilson has quite a reputation. For years he's been the subject of plenty of rumors and innuendo."

"What sort of rumors?"

"Rumors about how he frequently takes advantage of his clients. His younger clients in particular. And about all the sordid favors he demands in exchange for career advancement."

Eric's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious?"

Cameron nodded. "Absolutely. He's a serial offender."

"So how is he still in business? Why hasn't he been, I don't know, arrested or sued or something?"

"I guess, like most predators, he's fairly selective in who he targets. He preys on the desperate. The ones who are the most vulnerable and will do just about anything for their shot at fame. They know that if they made a complaint it would destroy any chance they ever had of a successful career. Plus ..." Cameron lowered his voice, as if the house might be bugged. "Some say he's part of that weird Hollywood cult. You know, the Dawn of the Two Divides? If you're a member you can pretty much get away with anything and the cult protects you from any scandals."

"Oh, come on Cameron," Eric groaned. "You don't really believe that exists, do you?"

"Who knows? Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. But the stories about him being a certified creep are absolutely true. Ask any young actress who's ever had to audition for him and they'll almost certainly have a story. It's more or less an open secret in the industry."

Eric was silent for a moment. "I'm still a little confused by all this."

"What part confuses you?"

"A lot of it confuses me. But mostly it's the part where you think that befriending a known sexual predator will somehow assist us in finishing our screenplay."

“Oh, right.” Cameron chuckled to himself. “Sorry. I got a bit ahead of myself, didn’t I? I was thinking that perhaps we should invite Mr. Wilson over here to discuss some future projects he could be involved in. And then maybe ...” He let the idea hang in the air for a moment. “Maybe ... that will help resolve some of the problems we’ve been having of late.”

Eric finally caught on to what Cameron was suggesting here. “Oh, no. Uh-uh. That’s not a good idea.”

“I know. It’s a great idea.”

“No way. One time was more than enough.”

“Was it enough? It gave us a good start, but we haven’t even reached the halfway mark yet.”

Eric lowered his eyes. “We still don’t know if we’re in the clear from the last time. And if we do it again, we double the risk of getting caught.”

“We won’t get caught, Eric. If someone ever gets caught it’s because they kill in the heat of the moment and don’t think it through. We just have to take all the necessary precautions, like we did last time, and we’ll be fine. We can do this.”

“I just think ...” Eric took a moment to compose his thoughts. “I think if we can be disciplined about our writing habits and keep working at it, we can figure this out.”

“Maybe you’re right, but there’s also a chance that we’ll never progress any further than where we’re currently at. Is that what you want to happen?”

“Of course not, but we don’t have to go *there* again.”

“Eric, we have to be realistic about what’s happening here. Whatever mojo that first one gave us is long gone. The buzz has worn off, and if we don’t act soon it may never come back.”

Eric swallowed. He could feel the nervous tremor returning to his voice. “I ... I understand where you’re coming from,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s necessary. Look at what we’ve done so far. That came from *us*. We’ve already proven we can write something extraordinary, and there’s nothing stopping us from doing it again. If we stick with it for just a little while longer I’m confident it will all work out in the end.”

“Hey, I’m just putting it out there,” Cameron said. “But the clock is ticking. Ignoring these problems won’t make them magically disappear.”

Eric promised he would give the idea some thought, although this was the last thing he really wanted to do. He was adamant they didn’t need to go down that particular path again. Their output from the past couple of weeks proved they had what it took to get the job done. They just had to forget about trying to find shortcuts or quick-fix solutions and do what every other writer had done when they found themselves stuck in a rut. They had to put their heads down and write their way out of it.

But then two further unproductive days stretched out into five days, which then became ten. Nothing they came up with for the second act was anywhere near as good as what they wrote during those frantic few days of effortless creativity. Every attempted writing session only seemed to make their screenplay worse. Eric had to begrudgingly admit that Cameron might be right, and that drastic action was required.

Cameron was the one who made the call. He told Warwick Wilson they had been hired to write and direct a remake of the film *Bugsy Malone*, and invited him over to discuss the possibility of him joining the project. He told him several of the young actresses under consideration for the lead roles would also be in attendance.

Eric handed Warwick a glass of brandy shortly after he arrived. Ten minutes later, they were hauling his flaccid body down to the basement.

They wasted little time in getting to work, each one taking turns at smashing Warwick's right foot in with a hammer until every bone was shattered. Cameron then moved in with the cordless drill to create multiple trepanning holes in his skull. Eric used pliers to extract his fingernails, then took care of the remainder of the fingers with a pair of bolt cutters.

A butane torch was held to the sole of his foot – the one they hadn't pulverized with a hammer – for a period of several minutes until the skin blackened and the flesh burned. A pair of garden sheers was used to give him a forked tongue. His mouth was superglued shut, and then his nostrils, before a hole was drilled into his trachea to prevent suffocation.

Both writers found they were much less squeamish this time around. It still wasn't easy, and they expected their actions would come back to haunt them at some point in the future, but they would deal with those demons if and when they came.

They also took great care in deciding where the various implements were inserted. They consulted a copy of *Gray's Anatomy* to avoid vital organs and major arteries, which ensured the experience lasted a lot longer than their first attempt.

In between these barbaric acts they went to work on the script, with every scream of agony and plea for mercy giving them a fresh surge of inspiration. They managed to improve the sub plot involving the two police officers investigating the campers' disappearances, and fleshed out Francine's character to give her additional depth and greater motivation. The dialogue was polished to make it sound more naturalistic and less like a stage play, while the farmer was provided with a more detailed and compelling backstory and a satisfying narrative arc. Many scenes from the first act were rewritten to give the film a stronger opening and a less-contrived inciting incident.

Eric finally put Warwick out of his misery after three days of relentless torture, slicing through the carotid artery and creating a blood geyser in his neck.

By the time the coyotes had stripped the last of the flesh from Warwick Wilson's bones, Cameron and Eric had reached the eighty page mark.

WRONG TURN

by

Cameron Knight & Eric Haas

Based on characters created by Alan B. McElroy

* * *

INT. CABIN -- NIGHT

Evan fights the excruciating discomfort as he continues the Sisyphean task of freeing himself. His arms twist like a contortionist's, trying to loosen the thick rope binding his wrists together.

He yanks his arm with everything he has. His THUMB DISLOCATES as he attempts to squeeze his hand through an impossibly small gap. Miraculously, it comes free.

He pulls his other hand out, and the rope falls away.

Despite the agony of his DEFORMED HAND, he scrambles to untie the rope from around his ankles.

He gets to his feet, unsteady, punch-drunk from the earlier blow to the head.

He grits his teeth and twists his dislocated thumb until it SNAPS BACK INTO THE JOINT. He bites down on his tongue to stop from screaming out in pain.

Freedom now beckons through the FRONT DOOR, a mere fifteen feet away. Only the living room -- and the sadistic cannibal currently occupying it -- stands in his way.

He creeps forward, carefully placing one foot in front of the other, going to great lengths to be AS QUIET AS POSSIBLE.

He reaches the living room. Saw Tooth rocks back and forth in his chair, facing away. He GNAWS on Carly's SEVERED ARM.

The remainder of Carly's SUPPLE NAKED BODY lies in the center of the room.

A beat passes before Evan summons the courage to take another step. As he does, the FLOORBOARDS give off a treacherous CREAK.

Saw Tooth stops, mid-chew. He spins around. RAW HUMAN FLESH hangs from his mouth.

No one is there.

ANGLE ON: *Evan -- hidden behind a shelf. Holding his breath. Sucking in his stomach, his back pressed hard against the wall. Doing everything humanly possible to avoid being seen.*

ANGLE ON: *A VASE, at the top of the shelf. It WOBBLES PRECARIOUSLY.*

ANGLE ON: *Saw Tooth. He watches a moment longer, then returns to his meal ...*

... as the vase TOPPLES OVER and PLUMMETS TO THE GROUND!

... only to land in Evan's hands, an inch away from SHATTERING ON THE FLOOR!

Evan swallows, forcing his hypertrophied heart back down from his esophagus. He carefully places the vase on the floor and sneaks out the front door.

CUT TO:

EXT. CABIN -- NIGHT

The SUV sits in the middle of the yard.

Evan slips away from the cabin. He checks that the coast is clear, then creeps over to the vehicle. He silently opens the door and climbs behind the wheel.

CUT TO:

INT. SUV -- NIGHT

He searches for his cell phone. He checks the backpacks, the glove compartment, the floor. It's not there.

He leans forward and runs his hand underneath the front seat. He finds it! He quickly dials 911.

But the screen goes blank -- THE BATTERY IS DEAD!

He tosses the phone aside in sheer vexation. He has to decide -- stay in the vehicle or make a run for it. His hand moves to the door handle, but he reconsiders and pulls it away.

He rips open the panel below the ignition. He pulls out a CLUMP OF WIRES and sets to work on HOTWIRING THE CAR.

He strips the insulation from TWO WIRES, then presses them together. The engine COUGHS and SPLUTTERS. His foot PUMPS THE GAS. But the car fails to start.

The sense of escalating PANIC is splashed across Evan's tortured face. A single bead of PERSPIRATION trickles down his forehead.

He looks back to the cabin. He expects to see the cannibals coming for him at any moment.

He tries again and again. There's further spluttering, but it simply refuses to turn over.

And then, incredibly, the engine ROARS TO LIFE.

Evan allows himself a smile at this rare moment of good fortune. He wipes away the sweat, then puts the car into reverse and adjusts the REAR VIEW MIRROR.

In the mirror's reflection is the GROTESQUE FACE OF THREE FINGER!

EXTREME CLOSE UP: *We see the WHITES OF EVAN'S EYES ...*

... as Three Finger pounces forward! A set of SHARPENED YELLOW FANGS clamps down on Evan's neck.

CUT TO:

EXT. CABIN -- NIGHT

The SUV lurches backwards and SLAMS into the trunk of an old OAK TREE. HOWLS OF TERROR echo throughout the surrounding woods.

The engine cuts out. A SCARLET GEYSER paints the windscreen from the inside.

Chapter 24

“Oh my God!” squealed Kaycee, the helium-voiced bottle-blonde clutching a strawberry daiquiri she looked barely old enough to legally consume. “Do you *really* know Michael Bay?”

“Oh, sure,” Cameron said. He took a sip of his scotch and soda, trying to affect a casual pose like it was no big deal. “He’s a good friend of mine. We’ve been collaborating on this script for the past few months. I’ve been on his yacht and everything.”

“I am *such* a huge fan.” Kaycee leaned in closer, raising her voice to be heard over the band playing in the background. “His films are the whole reason I decided to become an actress in the first place.”

“You’re an actress?” Cameron tried to sound genuinely surprised. He could have guessed she was an actress, given they were neither uncommon nor particularly hard to identify. Especially not here, inside the VIP section at the Coachella Music Festival, where pretty much everyone was an aspiring something-or-other, be it an actor, singer, model, artist, fashionista, or some combination of all of the above. “You know, the film we’re working on at the moment, it’s part of this whole series called the Platinum Dunes Cinematic Universe. Another eight or nine movies will be released over the next three years. It’s going to be huge.”

“Oh, I would do *anything* to be in one of those!”

“Hey, I’m sure I could pull a few strings to get you an audition. They’re actually looking to cast unknowns in the lead roles rather than hiring established stars.”

“Could you really do that for me?” Kaycee’s already high-pitched voice was nearing glass-shattering levels. Being in such close proximity to an alleged Hollywood insider had her on the verge of hyperventilation.

“Sure,” Cameron shrugged. “I’ll bring it up with Michael the next time I speak with him. I’ll even put in a good word.”

Kaycee’s eyes appeared to double in size. “That would be *amazing!*”

He took his phone from his pocket. Kaycee was so eager to punch in her number she almost snatched it from his hands.

As she did this, Cameron finished his drink and took a moment to soak in his surroundings. Here he was, at one of the world’s biggest music festivals, lounging around in the air conditioned comfort inside the exclusive cordoned-off area, rubbing shoulders with LA’s hippest and most beautiful people. This was definitely the place to be right now. It felt like he was at the center of the universe.

This short vacation was his reward for finally finishing *Wrong Turn*. Not only was it done, but they had managed to complete it in record time – twelve days was all it took to knock out the second and third acts, well ahead of their deadline. It was their best work yet; an original, compelling story that pushed the boundaries artistically while still remaining accessible to a mass audience. It had a strong narrative, and it ended with a killer twist. They emailed the first twenty pages to Michael to give him some idea of their progress, and he went nuts for it. He

told them it was exactly what he wanted.

He had tried to convince Eric to come along with him on this trip, saying they both needed time away to blow off some steam after everything they had put themselves through over the past few months. Eric declined, opting to stay back and work on the script some more since they had nearly two weeks before it was due. Cameron tried to tell him it was good enough as it was, but Eric had always been something of a perfectionist. He said it made sense to use up all their allotted time to ensure their work was the absolute best it could be, and that they should no longer be satisfied with simply being “good enough”.

Cameron thought he was wasting his time, but he didn't say anything. If Eric wanted to spend the next two weeks tweaking and rewriting and shuffling words around, that was fine with him. But he was done with it. A huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and he was determined to take some time out to enjoy himself.

Kaycee handed back his phone. “Call me,” she said with a flirtatious smile.

Cameron promised to do just that, before wandering over to the viewing area.

The band on stage was typical of those on the bill that year – Cameron had never heard of them, and he didn't really care for their music. He watched them play their mundane brand of miserabilist indie rock for a few minutes before returning to the bar and ordering a pina colada.

Along the way, he spotted one of the general admission peasants sneaking past security into the VIP section. He quickly alerted one of the guards and had the intruder kicked out.

Almost three weeks had passed since Warwick Wilson was lured to Cameron and Eric's home under false pretenses before leaving inside six separate garbage bags. There had been several mentions of his unexplained disappearance in the press, but as yet no suspicion had been cast in their direction. They had gone to great lengths to cover their tracks and ensure there was nothing to connect them with Warwick. The same went for Robert Faulkner. When the police looked into the case and began interviewing those who knew him, they would most likely conclude that Warwick Wilson's shady past had finally caught up with him. It would never occur to them that the disappearance of a casting agent with a dubious reputation was in any way linked to that of an alcoholic wife-beater on trial for murder.

What they did to reach such a high artistic summit was no doubt unpleasant, but it was also necessary. Great sacrifice was always required to achieve anything worthwhile, and in the end no one was hurt. At least, no one who didn't deserve it.

Cameron drove home from the airport eleven days later and pulled into the garage. It was just before midday. As much as he enjoyed his week and a half vacation, he was glad to finally be back.

His three-day trip to Coachella ended up lasting a little longer than he'd initially planned when he and a group of friends heard about a wild street festival happening in the Bahamas and made a spur-of-the-moment decision to fly out there for a week. He hesitated at first when they asked if he wanted to come along, since it meant he wouldn't be arriving home until two days before the *Wrong Turn* deadline. But he ultimately decided to go. He justified the trip by telling himself that writers needed a steady stream of quality input to produce quality output, and they had to expose themselves to new life experiences in order to nurture their craft.

Anyway, Eric seemed to have everything under control back home. There was no need to rush back.

He switched off the engine and heard the faint sounds of drumming. This was hardly unusual, given the Tommy Lee wannabe from next door was known to bash away on his kit at all hours of the day and night. But something about it was off. Even to his untrained, heavy rock-averse ears, it didn't sound quite right. It was an unfamiliar style, and not the abrasive rhythmic pummeling he had become accustomed to hearing every day for the past three months. It was a more unsophisticated, slightly out of time pounding.

The noise grew louder as he walked through the front door. That was the other strange thing – it wasn't actually coming from the neighbor's house. It was coming from down in the basement.

He didn't know why, but the hairs on the back of his neck were sticking up. It wasn't something he could put his finger on. It was more of a sixth sense or a gut instinct. It was with a great deal of caution and trepidation that he opened the door to the basement and descended the stairs.

He didn't have the slightest idea of what he thought he might find when he reached the bottom. But never in a million years did he expect to be confronted by a scene like this.

There was a man, strapped to a bench. Or about eighty-two percent of a man was strapped to a bench. The other eighteen percent was nowhere to be seen. He was alive, but only just hanging on. His face was battered and bruised, and his left ear was missing. As was his right hand. A blood-soaked bed sheet was wrapped tight around his torso like a tourniquet, covering up untold injuries and abrasions.

Both legs had been severed at the knee. The cauterized wounds appeared to be fresh.

In the middle of the room, and oblivious to Cameron's presence, Eric pounded away on a drum kit. What he lacked in technical proficiency he made up for in sheer enthusiasm. There was blood up to his elbows and covering much of his clothes.

Scattered around the room were his various instruments of torture: a tomahawk, a hacksaw, two knitting needles, a box of six-inch galvanized nails, a container of sodium hydroxide.

The man on the bench lifted a stumpy arm when he saw Cameron enter. He let out a groan, a desperate cry for help. It sounded like an animal caught in a trap. Eric stopped his playing and turned around.

"Oh, hi Cameron," he said. "When did you get back? I didn't hear you pull up."

"Eric ..." Cameron choked on his words as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. "What's going on here?"

"Just a touch of poetic justice, that's all." Eric twirled the drumsticks around in his fingers. "Our good friend here has spent many months torturing us with his drumming. I figured it was time we returned the favor."

Only now did Cameron recognize the unfortunate soul strapped to the bench. It was their disruptive neighbor, the aging tattooed rocker.

Eric resumed playing. He closed his eyes and attempted a frantic Bonham-esque drum fill. It sounded like a stack of pots and pans tumbling down a staircase. He stopped after about thirty seconds.

“Hey, you can join in if you like,” he said. “I have some maracas here. You can play those.”

He picked up the cocktail mixer by his side and gave it a shake. Cameron didn't need to see inside to know what produced the percussive sound. He only had to look at the neighbor's swollen face, which was the color and shape of a giant plum, and the bloodied claw hammer on the shelf next to him, to know it could only be filled with freshly-extracted teeth.

He tried to speak, but nothing came out.

Eric tossed the shaker over to him, then counted himself back in and slammed his sticks into the snare. He gestured for Cameron to join in, but Cameron could only stand there and watch, doing all he could to make sense of this unfathomable madness.

“What did you do, Eric?” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Well ...” Eric halted his playing. He pushed his shoulders back and stretched out his stiff back muscles. “Let's see. This all started on Friday morning ...”

Eric went on to recount the events of the previous few days, filling Cameron in on all that had happened in his absence. He explained how he had been hard at work rewriting the script's climactic scene, struggling to close a few minor plot holes while at the same time elevating the dramatic stakes, when he was again distracted by the interminable clatter coming from across the fence. He ignored it for as long as he could tolerate, but after several frustrating hours he decided that he'd had enough. He knocked on the neighbor's door and made another polite request to keep it down, but this was again met with hostility. That was when he saw an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

He returned ten minutes later, this time armed with the taser he had purchased recently from a seller on the internet.

“I figured if he loved drumming so much the most appropriate thing would be to turn him into a drum kit.”

Cameron was so bewildered by everything he had seen and heard in the past few minutes that he initially failed to catch on to what Eric was telling him. It was only when he took a closer look at the drumhead, which appeared to be made from some kind of thick beige material, then looked across at the neighbor with the bloody sheet wrapped around his body, that he made the connection and deduced that it was human skin stretched across the rims of the snare and tom drums.

His eyes then zeroed in on the two drumsticks Eric held in hands. They were long and white and irregularly-shaped. They looked suspiciously like fibulae bones.

A blanket of stunned silence fell over the room.

“Now we won't have to worry about that infernal racket bothering us day and night,” Eric said. “*And* it's inspired me to come up with this whole new ending. I've found a way to really ramp up the tension in the final ten pages. It has this insane twist that no one will ever see coming.

The audience will be totally blindsided. I won't tell you what it is though. I want you to read it for yourself and let me know what you think."

The words spilled out of Eric in one long excitable stream, but none of it seemed to register with Cameron. He was unable to look away from their disfigured neighbor, the legless sideshow freak who, despite being subjected to several forced amputations and partially skinned alive, was still somehow clinging on to life.

"This is just wrong," was all he could say. A creeping sickness was taking over as the full horror sunk in. He held onto the wall to steady himself. "This is so very wrong."

Eric placed his shinbone drumsticks to one side. He looked at Cameron like an inquisitive child. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, you can't do this to someone just because they annoy you, Eric. The ones from before, Robert Faulkner and Warwick Wilson – they were horrible people, and they were guilty of heinous crimes. We were doing the world a favor by getting rid of them. But this guy – he doesn't deserve all this, just for disturbing our sleep patterns. And you can't drag people down here whenever you feel like it. *Especially* not when they live next door to us."

"Why not?"

"Because it's way too close to home, that's why not! The police are going to knock on every door on the street when he's reported missing. They'll ask his girlfriend if he had any problems or arguments with anyone. Do you see what I'm getting at here?"

"I understand what you're saying," Eric said. He stood up from behind the kit. "You're saying we have to bring his girlfriend down here, too."

"No!" Cameron pushed him back onto the milk crate he was using as a stool. "No. I'm saying we have to put a stop to this before it gets even more out of hand than it already has."

"Cameron, you need to relax," Eric said, dismissing his concerns with a casual wave. "We'll get away with it. We always do."

"We have twice. And both times we were extremely careful. We put a lot of thought into what we were doing, and we made sure we covered our tracks. There was nothing to connect us with those two people. I wouldn't call what you're doing here being careful."

A sheepish grin appeared on Eric's face. "And I wouldn't say it's been only two people, either."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean ... there might have been a few more that you don't know about. That's all."

Cameron felt a jolt pass through him. "How many more?"

Eric paused a moment to think. "I couldn't tell you the exact number. Take a look in the freezer if you really want to know." His grin grew wider. "But only if you *really* want to know."

Chapter 25

Cameron could do little else but stare at the ceiling as he lay on his bed in a near-catatonic state. He searched his mind for answers, doing his best to block out the nightmarish sounds coming from the basement. He wanted to know how this could have all gone so wrong. How Eric could resort to such extreme depravity. How everything could spiral out of control so quickly.

But if he was being honest with himself, none of this should have really come as a surprise. He had read all the drafts, and he had seen first-hand the remarkable improvement in the quality of the writing. It was their most accomplished work to date, far beyond anything either of them had ever produced. And the majority of it sprung from Eric's mind; he had taken on the lion's share of the writing duties in the final weeks, while Cameron's role was mostly to review and offer feedback.

He knew Eric couldn't possibly have written anything that good without some sort of outside assistance. He must have been getting his material and his inspiration from somewhere. But he never asked any questions. He chose to remain willfully ignorant.

Keeping his head in the sand would no longer be an option. Not after what he had just seen.

There weren't any bodies inside the freezer, which is what he expected to find when he lifted up the lid. But there were heads. Seven or eight frozen heads, arranged in a neat row. Men of all ages, sealed inside plastic bags, looking up at him with wide-eyed death stares.

He pulled the first few out, and discovered there were more underneath. And beneath those, even more still. The bodies that were once attached to these heads were nowhere to be found. They were most likely coyote food by now, left out in the desert somewhere for the wildlife to pick over. But their perfectly preserved heads were here inside the freezer. He didn't know how many in total. At least twenty. Maybe thirty. Possibly even more. Heads kept as trophies, testaments to Eric's unparalleled dedication.

The hapless victims, he would soon learn, had been lured to the house after Eric set up a fake Tinder account where he pretended to be an underage girl. The way Eric explained it, anyone who responded to his messages was up to no good, and that gave him the green light to do whatever he wanted to them. The men received a taser to the neck as soon as they walked through the front door, and they found themselves chained up in the basement before any feeling could return to their bodies.

This all took place over a seventeen day period, a time in which Cameron was showing less interest in contributing to the screenplay he was being paid to write, and more interest in enjoying the assorted lifestyle perks that came with being an up-and-coming Hollywood ink-slinger. That fact alone was enough to boggle the mind. Not only had Eric transmogrified to become one of the most prolific serial killers in recent history, he had done so in less time than it takes most people to complete a first aid course.

The demonic drumming came to a stop, giving way to the high-pitched buzz of a cordless drill. A heavy weight pressed on Cameron's chest as the neighbor's howls of pain rang in his ears.

His breathing became strained. He couldn't believe this could all be happening to him. Just when there was a light at the end of the tunnel, when it looked like he was finally going to make it after enduring so many years of struggle, something like this had to happen. Everything he had worked so hard for would be snatched away just when the ultimate reward was within reach.

He caught a glimpse of the headlines that would scream from the front pages of tabloids when this whole sordid saga was made public, as it inevitably would: "HOLLYWOOD HACKS' HOUSE OF HORRORS". He envisioned the relentless media blizzard that would follow their arrest and trial. He imagined the trashy Ryan Murphy-produced TV movie made in the aftermath, and the distressing realization that Michael Cera, in a bid to stretch his acting range, would probably be cast to play him.

But worst of all was that this was all his fault. He didn't want to admit it, but it was an inescapable fact. This whole method writing strategy was his idea to begin with. He was so deathly afraid of failure, and so single-minded in pursuit of his career, that he was willing to do just about anything to achieve his goals. He had forced Eric to participate against his will, and this was the fallout. Eric may have tumbled head-first into the abyss of madness, but Cameron had been the one to nudge him over the edge.

He thought back to when he first pitched the idea, several months ago at Starbucks. They were back at square one, desperately brainstorming for new ideas after yet another disastrous meeting with Michael Bay, when he spoke of the importance of writing a great villain. "The bad guy is the most important character in a work of fiction," he told Eric at the time, attempting to justify what he was about to do. "We have to create one that's unforgettable. One who's a force of nature."

Only now did he see how successful his plan had been. He and Eric *had* created the ultimate monster, and it was potentially one of the most terrifying creatures in the history of horror fiction. It was such a force of nature that it had taken on a life of its own. It had become so powerful they could no longer contain it. The monster had leaped from the pages of their screenplay and entered the real world.

And now it lived inside Eric's body. Eric was the ultimate monster.

The remainder of Cameron's day was spent locked inside his room as he furiously wrote and rewrote his most important piece of fiction yet. It was the story he was about to give the police.

He would tell them, with a tremor in his voice and a haunted look in his eyes, of how Eric had become withdrawn and secretive during these past few months. How he would spend days on end sequestered away in the basement, barely sleeping, watching one sadistic horror movie after another. About the change in his behavior as he struggled to deal with his failing screenwriting career, and the difficulty he appeared to have in separating the real world from the fictional one.

The signs were all there, he would say. He was becoming increasingly concerned about the state of his mental health, and what might happen without some sort of intervention. But never in a million years did he believe Eric could be capable of something like this.

He took a moment to review everything he had written, memorizing key points and making sure he had left nothing out. Most of it was true, more or less. There were only a handful of

embellishments, as well as one or two select omissions.

He would take no pleasure in betraying his oldest friend like this, but Eric had left him with little choice. The sheer recklessness of his actions meant it was only a matter of time before the law caught up with them. If he did nothing he would just be delaying the inevitable. His only option now was to get on the front foot and alert the police, and if that meant Eric had to be the one to take the fall – and that Cameron would be left to claim sole credit for writing *Wrong Turn* – then so be it.

Besides, if he didn't take immediate action it was only a matter of time before his own head ended up as a frozen block entombed in plastic. Cameron had inadvertently unleashed the latent psychopath lingering deep within Eric. That was part of his psyche unlikely to go away anytime soon.

He had the whole story worked out by early evening. He knew what he was about to say and how he was going to say it. He also knew how much of a risk he was taking here, since he could potentially incriminate himself for his role in the murders of Robert Faulkner and Warwick Wilson. But the fact that he was the one to report the crimes, coupled with the overwhelming evidence in the basement, should be enough to convince the police that Eric was the sole perpetrator.

He was ready to make the call.

Only he couldn't find his phone.

For the life of him, he couldn't remember where he'd put it. It should have been on the dresser in his bedroom, but it wasn't. Nor was it on the bookshelf or the coffee table, or in the kitchen, the bathroom, or his jacket pockets.

He racked his brain, mentally retracing his steps as he tried to recall the last time he'd used it. He prayed to God that he hadn't left it on the plane, as he'd done on two previous occasions. Maybe he'd done it again. He couldn't remember using it since then.

On second thoughts, he had used it. He had it at the airport, when he fired off a quick text to his agent shortly after disembarking. And he had it in the Jeep, when he used it to stream an NPR podcast as he drove home.

The Jeep. It must still be in there.

He checked to make sure Eric wasn't lurking nearby, then slipped out the back door. He crept over to the garage and climbed behind the wheel.

His phone wasn't where it should have been. He'd left it in the holder mounted to the dash, but that was empty. A shiver of panic raced through him. He checked in his backpack, then in the glove compartment. He looked everywhere he could think to look. Nothing.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself not to panic. His phone was in here. It had to be in here somewhere. It couldn't possibly be anywhere else. It was just a matter of finding it.

He reached forward and ran his hand beneath the front seat. There was some loose change that must have slipped from his pockets, and a couple of discarded candy bar wrappers. The floor felt dirty, with a surprising amount of gravel and tiny pebbles stuck under there. He made

a mental note to have the whole car cleaned out at the first available opportunity.

His fingers then landed on a smooth rectangular object, and a wave of relief washed over him.

He pulled the phone out and switched it on.

Five seconds later, the screen went blank. The battery was dead.

“Goddamn it!” he muttered to himself.

He punched the steering wheel. This was the last thing he needed right now.

He quickly ran through his options in his mind. His phone was dead, and the charger was inside the house. He knew exactly where it was, too. It was plugged into the wall socket, next to the television. It would take less than a minute to go back in and retrieve it. But doing that meant he risked crossing paths with a man whose sanity was dangling by the finest of threads. At this moment, he would not be entirely comfortable until he put as much distance between himself and Eric as possible. The only sensible thing would be to leave now and find another phone to make the call from. If there was one thing he took away from all those terrible slasher movies he forced himself to sit through, it was that if you happened to find yourself in a house when a crazed psycho was on the loose, it was best to leave at your earliest possible convenience.

He put his seatbelt on and pressed the ignition button. The engine belched out a sick-sounding croak, and then died.

Cameron could only laugh at the growing absurdity of this living nightmare he found himself trapped inside. Everything that could possibly go wrong was going wrong. His Jeep had been running fine just a few hours ago. Now it sounded like it was on its last legs. He tried the ignition again, with the same result. And again, hoping and praying for a miracle. Still nothing.

No, no, no, he said over and over. This cannot be happening. It felt like one big elaborate joke the universe was playing at his expense. Or maybe it felt like he was a character in a poorly-written piece of horror fiction.

He vaguely recalled hearing some news item a few months back about faulty starter motors in certain models of Jeep. Something about cheap parts being used during the manufacturing process. He didn't know the precise details. He cursed himself for not paying closer attention at the time.

He tried again, pumping his foot against the accelerator. He had no idea if this would do anything to help it start. “Come on, come on,” he begged. “Please don't do this to me.”

He glanced over at the door to the garage. He half-expected to see Eric emerge at any moment. He pictured him waving a meat-cleaver around, covered head-to-toe in blood. He was ready to jump out and run at the first sign of movement.

He pressed the button once more, and the engine roared to life.

Cameron exhaled in sheer gratitude. He could not remember hearing a sweeter sound in all his life. He even managed a smile, despite the grim circumstances. He knew now he would make it out of there alive.

He put the car into reverse and adjusted the rear view mirror.

Looking back at him in the mirror's reflection was the smiling face of a madman.

The deranged killer, the one who had been hiding in the back seat this whole time, pounced forward and threw his arm around Cameron's throat. Cameron tried to fight him off but he was pinned to the seat, unable to move. His assailant's forearm pressed hard against his windpipe, his strength bordering on supernatural.

"Wait ... no ..." Cameron gasped, struggling to free himself.

He felt two prongs press against the side of his neck, followed by fifty-five thousand volts rocketing through the length of his body.

His foot slipped from the brake and the Jeep lurched backwards. It slammed into the garage door, and the engine cut out.

Chapter 26

Cruising at thirty thousand feet above the Pacific Ocean, Michael Bay was completely and utterly mesmerized. His eyes had been glued to the page for over an hour. He could barely believe what he was reading. This was no ordinary screenplay he held in his hands, with basic stage directions and perfunctory dialogue. It was an exquisitely crafted piece of literature. A bona fide work of art. Every word leaped off the page, invoking such incredibly visceral imagery that the film appeared to play out right before his eyes. It was unlike anything he had ever read in his life. If the finished product was even half as good as what he thought it could be, Platinum Dunes would undoubtedly have another huge hit on their hands.

"This is remarkable," Michael said. He hurriedly turned the page, eager to find out what happened next. "It has everything you could ever want in a horror movie. It's brutal, it's violent, it's suspenseful, it's original. It has all the classic hallmarks that fans of the genre have come to expect, but it executes them in such innovative and unexpected ways that it feels completely fresh. The characters are distinct and three-dimensional, and they're ones the audience will care about. I have to say, this is about as close to perfect as a screenplay gets."

Eric sipped from his glass of Teeling single malt whiskey. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say that," he said. "I really put a lot of effort into my work. I was so determined to come up with something outstanding."

"Well, the extra effort definitely shows on the page," Martin Krauth said. He was seated up near the cockpit, reading from his own copy of the script. This was Martin's private jet they were flying on, a luxury Gulfstream IV, en route to Shanghai for the world premiere of *Transformers: Echoes of Bedlam*. "This really is something else. You should be proud of what you've managed to accomplish here. I truly believe this has the potential to be a future horror classic."

"See, I knew you could do it," Michael said, beaming like a proud parent. "I knew the story and the talent was somewhere within you. You just needed to convince yourself of that."

Eric gave a bashful smile. "Do you really think it's that good?"

"Are you kidding me? This is brilliant on so many levels. I'm terrified just sitting here reading it now! And I don't think I've ever seen such a realistic depiction of cannibalism before."

"Oh, I know!" Martin said. He flicked back a few pages to find the scene Michael was referring to. "That one part where they force Scott to eat pieces of Carly." He shuddered as he spoke. "The writing was so vivid and striking it was almost like I had the taste of human flesh in my mouth."

"And that lesbian sex scene!" Michael said enthusiastically. "I mean ... wow!"

"Oh, I concur one hundred percent," Martin said. "That was *such* a brilliant addition to the story. Not only will it send the men in the audience wild, the dialogue between the two women means the film passes the Bechdel test. That's two important demographics catered for at once – the fanboys and the feminists. Pure genius!"

Eric finished off the rest of his drink. Michael's robot butler zoomed across to top up his glass.

“But more than anything, it’s the villain that makes the story as good as it is,” Michael said. “You can have as many gruesome death scenes and unexpected plot twists and cool lines of dialogue as you like, but none of that matters if your bad guy is dull. A boring monster equals a boring movie. But the villain in this, the main bad guy, he’s someone the audience won’t forget in a hurry. He’ll be giving kids nightmares for years to come.”

“Not to mention the potential merchandising opportunities this opens up,” Martin added.

“Absolutely,” Michael said. “I have no idea what sort of dark places you had to visit to come up with a character so terrifying. To be honest, I’m not sure I want to know!”

Eric reclined his seat back until it was at forty-five degrees. He let out a long, slow exhale, and all the tension and anxiety that had been building up over the past few months melted away. He felt that despite everything he had to endure to reach this point, the literal blood, sweat and tears he’d invested into his work, it would all be worth it. After spending so many years in the proverbial wilderness his career was finally on track. He was a legitimate writer, and he would soon have that all-important produced credit to his name. He had proven he had what it took to make it in such a cut-throat industry. Martin had even hinted that he was interested in putting *Rodney Luther King* into production, at long last. Eric had heard similar promises from studio chiefs over the past three years, but something told him Martin was different from all the other CEOs out there. He seemed like the kind of guy who could make things happen. The kind who wasn’t afraid to take risks.

“As someone whose films have grossed eleven-point-four billion dollars worldwide,” Michael continued, “I can honestly say this is one of the best screenplays I have read in my life. It might even become one of those rare horror films, like *Psycho* or *The Exorcist* or *Silence of the Lambs*, that can transcend its genre restraints and become a classic film in its own right.”

The sign to fasten seatbelts flashed on. Michael, Martin and Eric all buckled up, just as the bright lights of Shanghai came into view.

“It’s a shame things didn’t work out with you and Cameron, though,” Martin said as the aircraft began to make its descent.

“Yeah,” Eric said. “That is too bad.”

“Although in hindsight, maybe when he dropped out of the project it was for the best,” Michael said. “Don’t get me wrong. Cameron is definitely a good writer, and I’m sure he’ll enjoy plenty of success with whatever he chooses to do in the future. But after reading this I’m beginning to suspect he was the one holding you back.”

Eric nodded. “The pressure was really starting to affect him, and I’m not sure he knew how to handle it.” He paused momentarily before adding, “He’s in a much better place now.”

Just as he said this, Eric’s stomach produced an audible growl.

“That’s how it goes sometimes,” Michael said. “Not everyone is cut out for this industry. You can have all the talent in the world, but talent isn’t enough on its own. You need that relentless drive, that burning ambition to succeed.”

“You have to be prepared to do whatever it takes,” Martin added. “If you’re not willing to sacrifice everything else in your life to get ahead there isn’t much hope for you.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Eric said. He raised his glass to his lips and took a generous gulp. “You won’t make it very far if you don’t have the necessary bad qualities.”

PART IV.
ROLL CREDITS

Chapter 27

Even though he'd harbored ambitions of being a "serious" writer for as long as he could remember, Eric Haas had been secretly rehearsing his Oscar acceptance speech in front of the mirror since the age of nine. He pictured himself standing on stage at the Dolby Theater, surrounded by the cream of Hollywood, the eyes of the world upon him. He would accept his award, then deliver a speech that was equal parts funny, eloquent, gracious and moving. He would depart to a standing ovation with the golden statuette firmly in his grip.

He no longer had to imagine such a scenario, because it had just happened.

The opening half hour of the Academy Awards ceremony had flown by in a blur. He remembered taking his seat in the front row and enjoying host Kathy Griffin's hilarious monologue. He was deeply moved by the seventeen minute In Memoriam montage honoring those stars who had sadly passed away during the previous twelve months. The next thing he knew, Al Pacino and Meghan Trainor were on stage reading aloud the names of the ten contenders for the first award of the night – Best Original Screenplay.

(Nominations for each category had doubled this year in an effort to promote inclusivity and minimize the number of people upset when their favorite film or actor missed out.)

The envelope was opened and his name was read out – "Eric Haas, *Rodney Luther King*" – followed by the loudest applause he had ever heard.

(The remaining nine nominees would each take home participation Oscars to avoid having their feelings hurt.)

As he made his way up the hallowed staircase to accept the award, he cast his mind back to where he was just over a year ago: unemployed, with not a single writing credit to his name, and battling the worst writer's block of his life. Tormented by self-doubt and insecurity, he spent many sleepless nights wondering if he'd ever make it. His dreams of becoming a successful writer were growing more and more distant by the day.

Now he was an Oscar winner, and officially the hottest scribe to hit Hollywood in years. *Variety* had hailed him as the voice of a generation, praising his "uncompromising intensity and subversive wit that plunges a dagger into the heart of contemporary society". He made *Time's* 100 Most Influential People list, slotting in between Justin Trudeau and Nicki Minaj. *Wrong Turn* managed to shrug off its pre-production woes to become the breakout horror hit of the year, grossing over \$350 million worldwide and laying the groundwork for the rest of the films to come in the Platinum Dunes Cinematic Universe. It also attracted plaudits for its progressive approach to racially diverse casting.

But the success of *Wrong Turn* paled in comparison to the towering achievement that was *Rodney Luther King*, the Barry Jenkins-directed masterpiece that had reaped \$1.1 billion at the worldwide box office and snared over one hundred major accolades. It had dominated every awards ceremony in the lead-up to the Oscars, where it received eleven nominations including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Original Song, along with nominees in all four acting categories. The film garnered such an unprecedented level of acclaim that Paramount

spent barely any money at all on its awards season campaign.

But more importantly, it had pried open a long-overdue dialogue surrounding race relations and inequality in the modern world. Real progress was finally being made in the fight for equal rights, and *Rodney Luther King* was being credited as the catalyst for that change.

Life was good for Eric. After enduring so many years as a perpetual outsider, he had well and truly arrived. He was officially a part of the Hollywood fraternity. His career was on track and the world was his oyster. His only low moments came when he thought about Cameron, and how he wasn't here to share in all his success. After everything they had been through together it felt bittersweet for this to be happening without him. He consoled himself with the knowledge that there would always be a part of Cameron inside him.

He reached for his prepared speech in the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket as he approached the podium, but his hand moved away at the last minute. Here was a once in a lifetime opportunity to say what he wanted, and the moment didn't call for something scripted and safe. He was going to speak from the heart.

What came next was seventy-six seconds of pure oratory napalm. It was a speech that shook the entire room, and one that struck a chord with the hundreds of millions watching on at home. He started off by acknowledging his privilege as a straight white male, then proceeded to fearlessly call out instances of racism, misogyny, economic inequality, homophobia, transphobia and cultural appropriation that contaminated today's society. He took aim at everyone, from the elites occupying Washington's highest echelons to the anonymous, bile-spewing internet trolls hiding behind their keyboards and avatars. This was a no-holds barred takedown from which no one was safe.

It was riveting viewing for some and uncomfortable for others, but above all else it was a bravura display of courage rarely seen in Hollywood these days. It ended with Eric imploring all others in the room to follow his lead and do everything in their power to help those not blessed with the same advantages.

The audience, many with tears in their eyes, rose as one to applaud this unforgettable moment that would surely go down in Oscar history. The Twitterverse went into overdrive, immediately declaring the speech a monumental privilege-checking game-changer. Dozens of think-pieces appeared online before the broadcast had even concluded. The clip received over five million YouTube hits within twenty-four hours. To use a contemporary colloquialism, it broke the internet.

The tone was now set for the remainder of the ceremony. It empowered the winners that followed, who recognized it as their civic duty to use their platform to speak out on issues close to their heart. The winner for Best Cinematography used his allotted time at the podium to protest the government's recent cuts to education. The winner for Best Costume Design called out people who refused to identify as feminists. The Best Documentary Short winner urged everyone to keep up the fight against censorship. His speech received a standing ovation. Minutes later, the Best Documentary Feature winner demanded a controversial anti-abortion film be banned from cinemas. This speech also received a standing ovation.

The winner for Best Actor drew attention to the plight of the Kaniwa tribe of the Amazon, while the Best Actress complained that female performers such as herself were not being offered

enough roles of substance or paid enough money. She climbed into her waiting limousine a short time later to be taken to an afterparty hosted by a tech billionaire. Along the way, she swapped her \$80,000 Tom Ford dress for a \$100,000 Oscar de la Renta one, leaving her harried assistant to haul her \$260,000 gift bag back to her suite at the Beverly Wilshire.

The message from tonight came loud and clear: the days of celebrities holding their tongues was over. Society had handed them a megaphone, and they were not afraid to use it. This would be the night they reclaimed their mantle as spokespeople for the entire human race.

By the end of the ceremony, *Rodney Luther King* would take home nine Oscars from its eleven nominations. When it was announced as Best Picture, people the world over from Ferguson, Missouri to Nairobi, Kenya spontaneously flooded the streets to celebrate.

As crazy as Eric's life was in the lead-up to the Academy Awards, it only became more of a roller coaster in the weeks and months that followed it. His profile was elevated even further to the point where he was now one of the most recognizable and discussed people on the planet. *Rodney Luther King* was rereleased to capitalize on its Oscar success, where it added a further \$200 million to its already impressive box office haul. In Hollywood terms, Eric was having a moment. The world awaited the next move from cinema's wordsmith wunderkind.

Eric embraced his newfound celebrity status like a long-lost friend. He graced the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, and he cracked jokes with Kevin Bacon and Mindy Kaling on James Corden's couch. He also dived head-first into the Hollywood party scene, losing himself in a haze of high-profile events, trawling the hottest clubs LA had to offer with his entourage of famous buddies. He knew he should be getting back to work soon, but he was in no real hurry. After everything he had done to get to this point he was allowed to kick back and relax a little. Besides, it wouldn't be such a bad thing if the world was forced to wait for his next masterpiece. The growing anticipation would only add to the intrigue surrounding him.

That was how he explained it to Karen Ulman, the new CEO of Paramount Pictures, as they chatted over hors d'oeuvres and Cuba Libres at the latest exclusive bash on the social calendar. Along with the rest of Hollywood, Karen was eager to get the lowdown on what Eric would do next.

"To be honest, I haven't quite decided what I'm going to focus on," Eric said, responding as if Karen wasn't the hundredth person in the past week to ask him that very question. "There are a few different things I'm working on at the moment. It just depends on which one piques my interest and sinks its hooks into me first."

"Honey, you can take as much time as you need," Karen said in her no-nonsense Southern drawl. "A lot of folks will try to pressure you, but don't pay them no mind. Okay? You more or less saved the studio. You've earned the right to do whatever you want."

"Saved the studio?" Eric waved her off with a laugh. "I wouldn't go *that* far."

"Oh, I would. I don't know if you were aware of our situation, but after Martin Krauth disappeared and the share price took a tumble things were looking pretty dicey for a moment there. A year ago, before *Wrong Turn* and *Rodney Luther King* came out, we were at serious risk of insolvency. It's no understatement to say those two films single-handedly turned our fortunes around."

“Wow,” Eric said. He took a sip of his drink. “I had no idea about any of that.”

“Well like I said, you don’t owe us a thing. All we want is for you to do your best work.”

Another round of drinks were duly ordered, at which point hip hop mogul Sean “Diddy” Combs came across to profess deep admiration for Eric’s work. He told him just how much *Rodney Luther King* had affected him personally – he claimed to have watched the film seventeen times – and what it meant to the African-American community in general. The two chatted for a few minutes, and Diddy extended an invitation for Eric to attend his upcoming birthday celebrations at his Miami mansion. Eric gratefully accepted.

Diddy left a few minutes later to hit the dance floor. Karen then took Eric by the arm and ushered him over to a quiet corner of the room.

“I know we promised tonight was going to be free from all business-talk,” she said. “But I was hoping I could maybe pitch you something real quick?”

“Go ahead,” Eric said.

“You’ve probably heard by now that Paramount has purchased the rights to the Krystal Blayze biopic. It’s a terrific story, one the whole world is still fascinated by, and we’d love to have you on board. Sofia Coppola says she wants to direct, and Anya Taylor-Joy has already shown an interest in playing the lead. All we need now is a white-hot screenwriter and the pieces will be in place for another surefire hit.”

Eric jumped in before Karen could go any further. “That sounds like a great opportunity, but my dance card is a little full at the moment. I’m already doing rewrites for the *Urban Legend* reboot, which is taking up most of my time for the foreseeable future. And after that ... well, you know I don’t plan on hanging around this place for too much longer.”

“I know, I know,” Karen said with a throaty laugh. “You keep reminding me about how you’re going to leave us all behind and go off to Rome to drink wine and write your fancy novels.”

“Paris,” Eric corrected her. “Like Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Stein. It’s where all the greats go to write.”

“Okay, Paris, sure. And I don’t doubt that you’re serious about that. But just give it some thought. Can you do that for me?”

Eric agreed to do just that. But the truth was he had privately been reevaluating his long-term ambitions for some time now. He still fully intended on sticking with his original plan of leaving the glitz and glamour of LA behind to devote his life to the purest form of writing. But he hadn’t completely disregarded the idea of sticking around for a few more years, just to see how it all played out. He’d be lying if he said this level of success hadn’t caught him by surprise. He’d also be lying if he said he didn’t enjoy it. It hadn’t taken him long to become accustomed to the endless shower of money, fame and accolades that had come his way over the last year and a half, and he had recently put a down payment on a Pacific Palisades home previously owned by Bruce Willis. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to turn his back on all that just yet. Besides, he had the rest of his life to write his novels. It wasn’t like he was in any hurry.

“Even if you don’t end up writing the screenplay yourself, we’d still love to have you involved in some capacity,” Karen said. “How does executive producer or creative consultant sound? You

know, just by having this conversation you've earned an associate producer credit."

"I'll keep it in mind." Eric popped another smoked salmon canapé into his mouth. "If you like, we can talk about it some more over lunch next Thur—"

He was cut off by a rapid series of pops. It was like a burst of firecrackers, coming from the other side of the room. He looked up in time to see a gaggle of Victoria's Secrets models fall to the floor in a bloody heap.

Time came to an abrupt standstill. A cacophony of screams rang out as the chaos ignited. Blood and bullets flew, but Eric didn't move. He just stood there and watched the armed assailant, a man wearing a priest's cassock and white collar, as he fired indiscriminately into the crowd. The logical part of his brain told him he should be alarmed by all of this, and that a normal person would flee for their life. But he had the opposite reaction. It was one of fascination. He found himself perversely drawn to the violence. Some sort of disconnect was taking place between his brain and the events playing out around him.

He felt a bullet whiz by his ear, and reality soon caught up with him. He realized it was in his best interests to escape with his life.

He joined the stampede for the exits, only to discover he couldn't move any further. Up ahead was blocked, with too many people trying to fit through too small a space. He changed direction and sprinted along to the next exit, keeping his body as low to the ground as possible.

A small missile flew past his head and landed in the middle of a crowd, about thirty feet away. A brutal explosion shook the room a few seconds later. A dozen people were torn apart like wet tissue paper.

Eric was outside the blast radius, but the force still threw him to the ground.

He came to a couple of seconds later, dazed from striking his head on the hard marble floor. The world around him had turned hazy. He blinked several times until his vision sharpened, where he saw A\$AP Rocky stumbling around with his lower leg barely hanging on, and Ruby Rose on all fours, bleeding profusely from the shrapnel wounds to her face.

The room plunged into darkness.

Eric pulled himself to his feet and tried to navigate his way to safety. He took two steps and tripped over an inert body. He didn't know who it was, or if they were alive or dead. He didn't stick around to find out either. He got up and took a few more steps, but was knocked back down when he collided with another panicked guest.

He climbed to his feet once more, languid and disoriented. He had lost his bearings completely. He had no idea which way he was facing or where the exits were. He fumbled for his phone, trying to use the light to navigate his way out, but this was of little help.

A brilliant golden ball of shimmering illumination then lit up his immediate area. A split second later, he felt the heat. He turned around in time to see the gigantic fireball coming straight for him.

The cliché about your life flashing before your eyes during your final moments proved

accurate. There was nothing Eric could do but stand there and watch on helplessly, knowing that he would be completely engulfed in less than a second.

He knew this was the time when he was supposed to experience some sort of deep epiphany. He should be remembering all the great things he had seen and done during his time on earth. Everything he had achieved in thirty short years; the milestone moments from his childhood and adolescence, the great friendships he had formed over the years, and the joy his work had brought to millions in the past twelve months.

But he wasn't thinking about any of that. There were no cherished memories or profound realizations. His only thoughts centered on his imminent death here at the Met Gala, one of many to be brutally slaughtered at the world's most exclusive social event, and how it would be overshadowed by those deemed more important. All these undeserving stars who were more famous than he could ever hope to be, the vapid models and overpaid actors and fashion industry phonies currently being exterminated in this mass celebrity genocide. They would be mourned, while he would be forgotten.

Eric may have been a preternatural talent whose words had touched the lives of an entire generation of cinemagoers, but this was a narrative in which he was destined to end up as little more than an anonymous extra.

Time resumed its normal speed, and the wall of flame swallowed him whole. The searing heat passed straight through him. His skin melted away, and his hair singed off like dandelion spores. His twenty thousand dollar tailored Armani suit may as well have been made from newspaper given how quickly it turned to ash.

He collapsed to the floor, the brief stab of pain giving way to the numbness of shock.

With his final thoughts he could only lament that fact that while he had everything he could ever ask for – worldwide fame, millions of dollars, the respect of his peers and a slew of awards – it was all without meaning. Eric had sold his soul, and now he was going to die alone.

Alone in a roomful of A-listers.

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No celebrities were harmed during the writing of this book.

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